Reflective Report on ICT consumption

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Introduction

ICTs play an important role in my life by providing me with connectivity, communication, access and information. In doing so they entertain, inspire, enlighten, frustrate and infuriate me. In my everyday life, I accept and manipulate the arrangements before me through connectivity to various technology and media channels (Cohen & Taylor, 1992), from the moment I wake up and check my smart phone, to the moments before I go to sleep when I shut down my laptop. Engagement with ICTs keeps me connected to friends and family, and informed on events happening in the world around me. However I also fear that my level of digital connectivity is unhealthy and beginning to take priority over my non-mediated face-to-face interactions.

Personal ICTs

The ICTs I engage with most on a daily basis are my laptop computer and phone. I often spend between 9-12 hours a day using my laptop. My activities over these hours include work, study and recreation, with recreational uses including engagement with social networks, writing and receiving emails, browsing the Internet, reading news and streaming movies or music. Some days my laptop feels like a physical extension of my own body, it's presence and impact felt in my nerves, muscles and posture, and the amount of time I spend on my computer invokes uneasy feelings for reasons including the 'unnatural' nature of staring at an artificial light source for such long periods, the negative effects on my body resulting from this static position, and the potential detriment to my interpersonal communications skills due to the majority of my exchanges now being mediated through a computer.

In transit, I often engage with my smart phone by checking emails, news, social media, weather, public transport and GPS apps, taking photos, making calls and sending texts. Since I acquired a smart phone however, the amount of traditional SMS and phonecalls I make has decreased substantially, with digital messages now reaching friends instantly, and Skype replacing phone-calls. New ICTs have substantially decreased use of traditional telecommunications channels, and I find this change an exciting one. Marvin believes that when audiences become organised around uses, the history of a new media begins, with old practices being painfully revised and group habits reformed whenever a new media is introduced (1998).

These reformed habits often eradicate the need for old media, for example I no longer own a landline telephone. However, with the introduction of each new technology, our habits do have a certain amount of 'lag' before behavioural shifts and adaptation. Examples of this are standing still when first using a mobile phone due to conditioning of location constraints of landlines, or sending SMS smart phone to smart phone based on conditioning of the functionality constraints of a mobile phone.
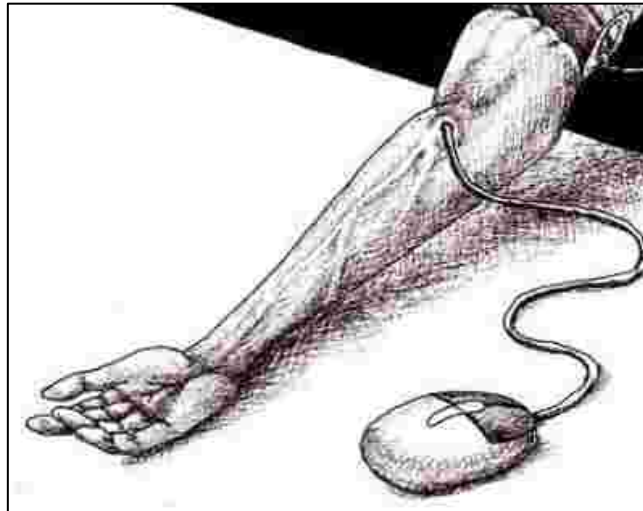
Figure i: Technology addition (Source jagonews.com)

I usually consult my smart phone when I wake up, and before I go to sleep, one reason being that I use it as my alarm clock. There has been much media coverage on engaging with ICTs first thing in the morning and last thing at night as being problematic signs of technology 'addiction' (Parker-Pope, 2010, and as visualised in Figure i). However I find it exciting and therapeutic to engage with ICTs at these times of day – to stay informed and feel 'plugged in' to a bigger network than exists outside my home. My time zone in Berlin also means that in the morning there are usually messages waiting for me from friends and family in my home country of Australia.

I worry that the majority of my interactions through ICTs is in digital 'text' format. There is a decreasing focus on aural/oral communication with ICTs, and even Skype instant messaging is becoming more common for me than video calls. This raises questions such as: Are we becoming lazier in our communications habits, opting for the most effortless option? Is the increasing ease of digital communications isolating us from non-mediated physical interactions? Is this societal withdrawal from multi-sensory communications affecting my own inter-personal communications and social skills?

What other societal and political structures are we turning away from due to this ease of digital connectivity through ICTs? (as illustrated by Figure ii).

Figure ii: Religion vs. iPhone (Source: Hugh, mailchimp.com)

Apple and me

The ICTs I use most on a daily basis – iPhone and Macbook Pro – are both Apple products. I chose these items based on features and functions, aesthetic qualities, but also the 'moral value' that society places in these products. Despite cheaper products on the market with relatively similar functions, my purchases were very much a lifestyle and 'identity' choice, and the fact I purchased these top of the range ICT products without any brand comparison is something I find worrisome. The Apple brand has a level of social, cultural and moral 'status' that monopolises the market and leads to commodification and cultural homogenization of ICT consumption. Another moral dilemma I grapple with is the real human cost of ICT consumer products based on recent reports about factory workers in China working overtime for minimal pay, in sub-standard safety conditions. Jacobsen (2002) describes his relationship with ICTs with terms such as 'enslave' and 'subservience', a deep irony considering these technologies are often sold as offering us 'liberation' and 'freedom', not to mention the slave-like conditions in which these technologies are often manufactured. I have an ongoing moral battle with these paradoxes of engagement with ICTs in daily life, including feelings of hypocrisy for my consumer choices not being fully aligned with my moral beliefs.

An example of the technological determinist approach to new ICTs, as defined by Williams (1990) can be seen clearly in Apple's marketing campaigns, which effectively

sell the 'need' for a product using a powerful technological rhetoric. This achievement is no small feat considering the inhibiting costs of Apple products, and the fact that changes to new product models are often minimal. Winner affirms that technologies are inheritably neutral (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999:12), yet there is a strange sense of moral redundancy and expectation of further consumption, once a newer model hits the market. Stoeber (2004: 483) also highlights the changing social meaning of *old* media when *new* media is diffused.

Social network overload

I have active profiles on Facebook, Flickr, LinkedIn and Instagram. I recently deleted my MySpace, Google Plus, Diaspora and Twitter accounts due to feelings of social media overload and privacy concerns, now using the highest level of privacy settings, and not accepting 'friend requests' from those I have not met offline. My privacy concerns include both social media and email service providers, with Gmail already electronically scanning private emails for keyword advertising. The functionality for government surveillance of ICTs already exists, and the FBI is currently advertising a tender for a Social Media tracking application (FedBizOps.Gov, 2012).

The social network I use most, and on a daily basis, is Facebook, a platform with which I have a love-hate relationship. Because I am an Australian expatriate and often travel for work, I find it, like Skype, an effective tool to stay in contact with new friends and family. However I worry I spend too much time on the site, using it as an unhealthy tool of procrastination and voyeurism into other peoples lives, or getting sucked into unhealthy user behaviours such as boasting about one's achievements or promoting unrealistic self-representations. Consequently, I try to actively limit the time I spend on Facebook each day with moderate success, but it seems Facebook is as difficult to quit as it is to use in moderation: I have friends who deleted their accounts but subsequently reinstated them as they could not bear missing out on their friends' (digital) lives.

Privacy and the right of non-communication

For all the benefits ICTs offer me, they have also given me feelings of claustrophobia from being contactable and traceable 24/7. My activities or location has been revealed online through posts, photos, tags or 'check ins' with or without my direct intention or

consent. There is now also a widespread assumption that communication through ICTs will be responded to immediately and no longer an excuse for no response or 'non-communication'. Whilst the initial response when using old media might have been "I wonder if my message has been received", it is now "why haven't I received a response?", the onus lying with the undependable and unpredictable human receiver, now that the medium has now reached a point of relative dependability. Increasing levels of digital connectivity bring not only digital clutter (as seen in Figure iii), but also an impingement on privacy and freedoms.
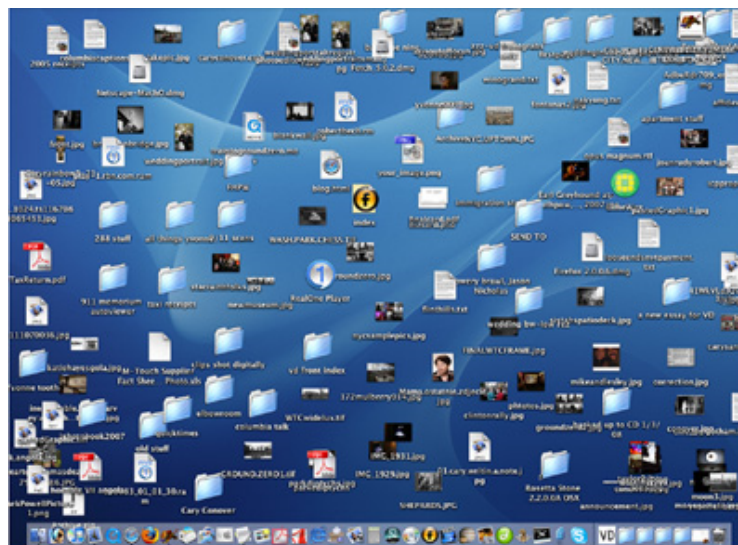
Figure iii: Desktop Clutter (Source: My Literary Quest Website)

Patience as a communication skill is also in decline – I'm sure I am not the only one who has experienced feelings of frustration, annoyance and even anger when an Internet connection has gone down temporarily or connectivity to ICTs is suddenly severed. If a phone is not answered, people now tend to ring again, leaving voicemail, text messages, frustrated and annoyed that immediate contact cannot be made. People also become concerned or offended if they do not receive a response, often sending the message again, which only adds to the communications glut and leads to feelings of being a prisoner to connectivity (or drowning in communications as visualised in Figure iv).

Figure iv: You've Got Mail (Source: clearcontext.com)

This lack of patience and quick frustration with the limits of technology affects non mediated communication, with a decreasing boredom threshold and growing need to multi-task at all times, leading to behaviours such as constant phone checking in the presence of others - an obsessive ritual of checking if digital contact had been made during the 'distraction' of face-to-face communication. Perhaps online and offline roles are in fact reversing, with the digital becoming 'real life', and offline becoming 'recreational' or 'distraction'?

After feeling like a slave to connectivity for too long, I recently experimented with going mobile phone free for three months. I rejoiced and felt liberated walking down the street without the threat of a beep or a call from someone inquiring where I was or what I was doing. It had an interesting and unexpected consequence though that Jacobsen (2002) didn't mention in his experiences of going 'tech free' – my friends became annoyed, with comments like "It's a real inconvenience!" and "It's so frustrating not being able to contact you!". I realised that we become very lazy being connected all the time, changing plans, cancelling at the last minute or texting when we should call. This experiment led me to the questions – are ICTs actually leading to a type of connectivity detrimental to social relations and behaviours? Is the choice to not adopt certain technologies, either to be uncontactable, or to not respond to personally directed communication, a selfish decision, or a right?

Media & ICTs for leisure

Work and leisure can easily become blurred, especially for a freelancer like myself. For this reason I take active precautions to separate my work and study from leisure, such as switching my Internet AirPort off while studying, or closing email and social media browser tabs while working. However the line between work and leisure ICTs use is often not so clear cut, for example I manage social networks for work, and am often contacted by work contacts through my personal accounts.

The ICTs I most enjoy using for recreational purposes are my Canon Digital SLR and iPhone cameras. Whilst I don't usually print my photos, in 2011 I featured a series of 100 photographs in a Berlin art exhibition. These images were captured on my iPhone and edited using pre-set digital filters to give a retro and analogue effect. The response to the work was interesting: many people asked me if the images had been taken with a Polaroid camera, and were disappointed when I explained they were digitally manipulated, as if they had been tricked by the ability of digital technology to so accurately replicate analogue media. The work raised interesting questions about transparency and socially acceptable practices of ICT and digital media technology, in this case through artistic practices.

A weightless society

Whilst ICTs do bring an increasing level of digital clutter, they also allow me to downsize the physical objects in my life. I no longer have the need for acquisition or collection of physical items such as books, magazines, newspapers, CDs or DVDs (as pictured in Figure v), due in part to the increasing "weightless nature of contemporary society" (Deuze, 2009:470). Over the past decade I have completely eradicated my VHS, DVD, CD and MP3 collections, now streaming movies and music entirely on demand.

I do not own a TV as my entertainment needs are completely satisfied by my viewing options on the Internet. I also find my viewing patience has been affected by being so used to choosing what media I engage with that I now have trouble passively consuming what TV dishes out to me, especially when it involves advertisements. In a sense my rejection of certain types or uses of ICTs relates to the Amish 'act of resistance' with the introduction of technology into their community (Zimmerman

Umble, 1992), of not rejecting technology completely, but taking an active stance against certain uses. However I am under no illusion that my choice of going 'TV free' is based on convenience and lifestyle, rather than a moral protest.

Figure v: In the old days vs. now (Source: facebook.com)

The fact that so many of my recreational activities are now available online has also adjusted my shopping habits, and I now purchase items such as clothing, shoes, jewellery, cosmetics and gifts online at my own convenience rather than entering an 'inconvenient' physical consumer space. I also pride myself that I have completed half of my MA without stepping foot in a library, my research happening entirely online and through the media and ICTs available in my immediate environment.

Engagements with ICTs in relation to identity

The ways I engage with ICTs on a daily basis are greatly influenced by my gender, sexuality, class and race. Highmore speaks of the masculinisation and feminisation of public and private spheres respectively, and the macro-cultural manifestations apparent in the micro-cultural 'transactions' of the everyday life (2002). Whilst I have feminist values and an 'equal' relationship with my partner, my own subconscious habits of working from my laptop on the kitchen table, or on the couch while my

partner's laptop takes dominance of the single desk in our living space, can be viewed as a feminisation of my positioning in the house. My apartment's design, layout and technological appliances (such as blenders or hairdryers) have gendered macro-cultural 'morals' in their foundations and resemble wider power structures, largely impacting on my private interactions in the home, the way I live my life and my interactions with others.

In my professional context, there is relative gender equity in use of and expectations of use of ICTs, no doubt based on a re-engendering of spheres and space that has taken place largely due to the achievements of feminist movements over the past decades. However privately and socially I tend to use technologies in a more feminised way as the 'connecter' or 'communicator', rather than my partner's more masculinised role of 'producer' or 'technician'. In terms of my leisure activities, I find ICTs such as digital photography and the online publishing of my photographs empowering, providing me with a place for creativity and self-expression so often denied to women around the world. Other examples of my gendered engagements with ICTs include my choices of ICT consumer products, in regards to size, weight and other aesthetic qualities, and the topics of conversation, levels of intimacy and language used in my communications 'texts'. Indeed I am not immune to a wider cultural phenomenon of continuing to "re-trace certain trodden paths of domesticity and ICT consumption" (Karl, 2007, paragraph 31), for reasons deeply rooted social constructions.

My ICT consumption patterns are also a reflection of my sexuality, for example my choices of entertainment, communication behaviours with different sexes, Internet search patterns, my choices or heterosexual media consumption, and even the homosexual media that I do not actively engage with. Ahmed states that, in terms of defining our sexuality through ICT and media consumption, we not only have to turn towards the objects that are given to us by a particular culture we identify with, but also that we must "turn away from objects that take us off this line" (2006: 21), for example media published by minority groups who do not necessarily fit with our own identities, values or self-representation. Social networks like Facebook also have an inherent heterosexual-bias in their design, for example the relationship update options being limited to engagement or marriage, despite the fact that gay marriage is not legal for the majority of Facebook users, or the recent controversial removal of a

photograph of a gay couple kissing due to the "violation of Facebook's terms of use" (Huffington Post, 2011).

My engagements with ICTs are also class related – the cost of items such as my laptop, phone and camera being extremely prohibitive to many sections of my own society, let alone the rest of the world, and as a young, English speaker living in an urban area I have greater access to ICTs than most on the planet. Indeed a certain level of disposable income is needed in able to enjoy the true benefits that ICTs can offer. This relation to class is also apparent in my entertainment choices – from the movies I watch and the news sources I prefer, reflecting my social positioning and self-representation through ICTs. Finally, in regards to race, I am in the extremely privileged position as a young, Caucasian Australian citizen living in a Western society where I have access to all the ICT choices, benefits and potential without threat of prejudice, discrimination or censorship, in a world full of power imbalances and inequalities in regard to ICT access and consumption.

Conclusion

I am in turn excited and terrified, inspired and exasperated, trusting and suspicious of my daily engagements with ICTs. Lefebvre speaks of our lives consisting of power structures and conformities that we often overlook due to the fact that they are so ingrained in our social and political structures of the 'everyday' (Armitage, 1999:3), and it must be acknowledged that the social, economical, cultural and political investments that influence my own use of ICTs and media consumption are both ubiquitous and constantly evolving.

This reflective report has 'lifted the veil' on my media habits, and from what factors these behaviours are constructed and influenced. As a final observation, since living in Berlin for the past few years, there has been a distinct change in my patterns of engagement with ICTs in public spaces, largely due to my limits in German language comprehension, social positioning as a foreigner and the evolving nature of my 'cultural familiarity' (as analysed by Karl, 2009). My interactions with external media and ICTs outside the home have always been channeled through my unique cultural positioning, and have therefore led to a slight disconnection from mainstream media and communications within the city. This disconnection within my environment outside

the home may be one reason for my increased interactions and engagements with ICTs, or a 'hyper-communication' in my private sphere.

Kroker believes that we are "no longer simply mediated through technology… but so utterly possessed by technology that the distinction between virtual activities and actual activities borders on incomprehensible" (as quoted in Armitage, 1999:5). The ever increasing levels of technological dependence in our digitally-connected society, and the growing role of mediated engagements with ICTs as a primary communications method, are phenomenon I experience on a personal level and daily basis, as demonstrated through my observations and reflections in this report.

Appendix

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Images

Figure i: Jagonnews.com (2011). [Image]. 'Technology addition', *Jagonews Website*. Retrieved from URL (accessed February 23) http://jagonews.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/computer_addiction.jpg

Figure ii: Hugh (2011). [Image]. 'I don't need Religion. I've got an iPhone', *Mailchimp Gallery Archive.* Retrieved from URL (accessed February 23) http://gallery.mailchimp.com/028de8672d5f9a229f15e9edf/images/iphone_1007 aCopy.1.jpg

Figure iii: myliteraryquest.com (2011). [Image]. 'Desktop Clutter', *My Literary Quest Blog*. Retrieved from URL (accessed February 23) http://myliteraryquest.files.wordpress.com/2010/09/desktop-clutter.png

Figure iv: Clearcontext.com (2010). [Image]. 'You've Got Mail', *Clear Context Website*. Retrieved from URL (accessed February 23) http://blog.clearcontext.com/images/photos/uncategorized/2007/10/25/2007_10_ 10.jpg

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