

2015

Attentional Commons and the Common Good: Technology and Higher Education

Amy Weldon

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections>

Augustana Digital Commons Citation

Weldon, Amy (2015) "Attentional Commons and the Common Good: Technology and Higher Education," *Intersections*: Vol. 2015: No. 42, Article 8.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/intersections/vol2015/iss42/8>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Augustana Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Intersections* by an authorized administrator of Augustana Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@augustana.edu.

Attentional Commons and the Common Good: Technology and Higher Education



Walk around any campus and you see what looks like a giant experiment in progress, with people as the unconscious subjects. And I do mean *unconscious*. Students trudge, face-down, leaping-thumbed, blind to blue shadows on the snow or cloud tracteries in the sky. They snatch up their phones

the instant class ends, as if these black boxes are little pets hungry for the touch they've been denied. *Harrumph*, we might harrumph, *kids these days*. But then we "adults" go to a faculty meeting—or conference, or family reunion—and behave just as badly, twiddling devices under the table, answering email, browsing Amazon, even playing games behind that laptop shield. We interrupt our grading or writing to bring ourselves the dopamine hit of a Facebook or email "break," even if it's only been five minutes since the last one. With our students, we're falling down a behavior-spiral like that of machine gamblers in Las Vegas,¹ seeking an eerie, unconscious state of total union with our device and the "rewards" it gives—even when that device is impoverishing us more than we can see.

"Impoverish" is a strong word, especially alongside the greater goods we claim to seek: social justice, self-realization

as doers and thinkers, equitable resource-sharing. Yet I use it deliberately here to highlight what's at stake: the stealthy sale of the common good, and the attentional spaces in which we may discern it, for private profit. The electronic devices we reach for when solitude threatens are designed to turn us into consumers of ever-more-specifically-targeted information, rather than citizens or individuals. They reduce us to fast-twitch bundles of anxiety, unfulfilled desires, and data that comes unhooked from our actual lives in order to swell the coffers of large corporations.

However, the students sitting in our classrooms right now—the most-marketed-to generation that's ever existed, and the first to know the Internet from childhood—are often more likely, as sociologist Eszter Hargittai says, to be "digital naïves rather than digital natives" (Boyd 22). Many lack the language with which to speak about their growing sense that this wired world is not all it's cracked up to be. As tech-critic and virtual-reality pioneer Jaron Lanier writes, "[t]his is one of the great illusions of our times: that you can game without being gamed" (114). Still, we can help students be mindful of how to use technology without *being used*. We can also help students regain the tolerance for complexity and the capacity for attention they'll need to build lives of meaning and service to the common good, which technology is designed to fragment.

Amy Weldon is Associate Professor of English at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa; she blogs on sustainability, spirit, and self-respect at <http://cheapskateintellectual.wordpress.com>. This essay draws on her current nonfiction book manuscript, *The Hands-On Life: How to Wake Yourself Up and Save the World*.]

Who is Watching (and Using) Whom?

"Here's a little artifact of our times," I tell my first-year students, "the iPotty. Go ahead, look it up." Screens come forth and heads go down. A stunned silence is broken by one student's quip: "because, of course, no child must ever be bored."

Yet our laughing jaunt into Wired Toddler Land has an ulterior motive: we're watching the invisible ad-trackers watching us. After looking up "iPotty" on Amazon, we surf away to Gmail or Facebook and find baby-related ads following in the sidebars. This is particularly true for my prime-childbearing-aged students, although Amazon did invite me to join Amazon Mom ("Amy Weldon, we noticed you've recently shown an interest in Baby products"). Some students then hasten to install Ghostery, a free program (which I use) that lets you turn off all the invisible data-harvesters following you around a site. Many of them have never connected the ads they see with the sites they visit and the data they feed social media just by using it, not to mention such behaviors as "checking in" at businesses, which report not only where you are but, based on the nature of the business, what you are likely to be doing there and what coupons you might use if they happened to show up in your Facebook newsfeed. These behaviors make you a more "valuable" user—meaning, more profitable for the corporations tracking you, although you usually see no direct economic benefit.

The Internet only looks "free." The "freedom" you feel while using it is, in meaningful ways, an illusion. And databases that monetize all your activity are forces for the concentration of the wealth we generate for those servers' owners by our "content"-contribution, clicks, keystrokes, and other behaviors, even if we never see a dime. The dangers of being watched and monetized are moral (the reduction of people to things, or dollar signs) and literal. Those who say, as many did after Edward Snowden's revelations about the NSA, "I have nothing to hide" are missing the point. If you object to the private self being spied on and commodified—and to the removal of our ability to make informed choices about *who* spies on and commodifies us—you should be concerned. I do use email and Facebook. I have a blog and contribute to various online journals. But I'm careful about what I feed

Facebook. I'm not LinkedIn, I don't tweet, and I'm going to be smartphone-free as long as I can (my pay-as-you-go flip phone does just fine.) Like a techno-wary Bartleby the Scrivener, I usually prefer not to.

Perhaps a couple case studies will help convince you I'm not just talking through my (tin) foil hat. In 2014, an Illinois man received an OfficeMax promotional mailing in an envelope with "Daughter Killed in a Car Crash" accidentally printed between his name and address. The company's apology couldn't console him. "Why would they have that type of information?" he asked a reporter. "Why would they need that?" (Silverman 279). They were probably following the lead of Target, which analyzes customers' data so carefully that the company "knew" a teenage girl was pregnant before her father did (Duhigg). Yet one of its own clerks—sixteen-year-old Alex Lee—found himself at the center of an unwanted publicity storm last year when a teenage girl surreptitiously took a picture of him bagging groceries and retweeted it with the admiring caption "Y00000000." And just like that, "Alex from Target" became an Internet phenomenon—and, this being the Internet, became the target of death threats and the release of his and his family's personal information.²

"The veneer of 'fun' and 'control' we feel over our Internet presences and devices is really *only* a veneer."

My point—in conversations with students, too—is that the veneer of "fun" and "control" we feel over our Internet presences and devices is really *only* a veneer. At any moment, depending on a stranger's whim (or crime, or business plan), "our" tweets, pictures, video or audio recordings, and data stop being ours, with profit that aggregates itself away from us in ever-larger heaps and other social consequences we cannot foresee or control and very likely do not want.³ Even if you're not Alex Lee, you may find your privacy shredded in another way, as your attention, focus, and capacity for non-electronic self-entertainment are scattered by a new techno-"normal" that nobody really chose.

Leaning Tech-Mindfulness

Let me answer some objections here: Can't technology be *good*? What about awareness of human and nonhuman beings and realities all over the world? What about convenience? What about enhanced research and communication? My response is, yes, a *mindful* use of technology can enable human flourishing. But the creeping *mindlessness* of technology can also turn us into consumer subjects and ease us into acceding to values that are, on closer inspection, alarmingly different than those we'd want to claim.

We in education have a regrettable tendency to drop our critical capacities and open our wallets whenever we hear the magic word *technology*. Think about your average K-12 school board, which cavils at raising teachers' salaries but pays up without a murmur to give every eight-year-old an iPad. Never mind that for children, the contact with caring humans, the texture of print on a page, and the relationships of real objects in the physical world is cognitively more nourishing than screens. Because college faculty are educated, trying to reach beyond our own limitations, we are also good liberals, in the classical sense. That is, we hate to foreclose possibilities, because we know the world's always complicated. That's good citizenship, and it's spiritual maturity. *Why mind students' screen habits?* we might murmur. *Isn't it...some new intelligence?* Yet I'd respond with a few choice words from philosopher Hannah Arendt, who was wary of the self-pacifying inner reflex that "wheedl[es] us with the voice of common sense," tempting us to refuse judgment and blinding us

"All this technology is not helping us get better at the kind of real conversation and action our beloved, beautiful, suffering world needs."

to wrongs-in-progress. In her landmark *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951), Arendt reminded us of Hitler's belief that "to succeed, a lie must be enormous." And every year, the tremendous lie that technological "progress" is unproblematically good for us gets stronger. Henry

David Thoreau spotted it as early as 1854: what good is a telegraph between Maine and Texas, he asks in *Walden*, if "Maine and Texas...have nothing important to communicate?" (Thoreau 34).

And that's the real issue. All this technology is not helping us get better at the kind of real conversation and action our beloved, beautiful, suffering world needs.⁴ That takes a type of emotional, imaginative, and cognitive capacity that is more often dissipated than reinforced by omnipresent technotainment. Rooted in the examples of those who speak truth to power and who risk death by doing so (think of Martin Luther, as well as Jesus), we as faculty shouldn't be afraid to ask inconvenient questions. Caught up in a new-tech-initiatives-centric, admissions-driven higher-ed culture, we (and our institutions) dread being called uncool. But that fear needs the sort of brisk dismissal our parents gave it when we were thirteen: what does it *matter* what other people think, if conforming to them means being false to yourself? Shouldn't we, like Socrates, be proud to be at least a *little* countercultural? Let's find our truth, and stand there, by thinking beyond the shiny cliché of the moment, and asking, *How does this really serve our mission? How does it really serve the deep needs of our students? Of human and nonhuman beings? Of the world?*

Writer Bruce Sterling challenged an audience of engineers, "A billion apps have been sold. Where's the betterness?" (Byrne). Jaron Lanier asks, "If network technology is supposed to be so good for everyone...why was there so much economic pain at once all over the developed world just as computer networking dug into every aspect of human activity, in the early 21st century?" (54). Why are so many of us more isolated, depressed, and overweight than ever before? And why is it so easy to forget that our devices—made from mined minerals, produced under poor labor conditions, run on giant servers powered and cooled by coal from Appalachian mountaintops, sent to Third World dumps to be picked over when they die—are not climate-neutral? Are we being offered clicktivism as a substitute for public action, 140-character tweets instead of voices, Facebook "friends" instead of real ones? Who profits when we take that bait? Especially as people trained in (and training others in) critical thinking, we can't be afraid to ask the

questions that may be unpopular, even if—*especially* if—they uncover power motives that are more profitably kept hidden. Nor should we seek technological “solutions” to the “problem” of real human contact, especially in the small-college classroom, which thrives on just such accidental, un-monetizable, blessedly inefficient moments of in-person conversation and discovery. Such “solutions” smooth over the cognitive friction of difference and difficulty, the space in which real learning can begin.

“Nor should we seek technological ‘solutions’ to the ‘problem’ of real human contact, especially in the small-college classroom, which thrives on just such accidental, un-monetizable, blessedly inefficient moments of in-person conversation and discovery.”

Attending to Attentional Commons

When students ask me what education is for, I tell them this: *becoming a self with something constructive to say*. This means cultivating a particular type of inner dignity and plenitude, a space for reflection and listening, inside and outside yourself, to larger voices, including that of God. It also means seeing that filling that space up with noise has individual and social costs. Hannah Arendt writes of the self as a version of the *polis*, or space of public conversation; I envision the self as gently stretched upward and outward by contact with others, expanded like clay in a potter’s hands. In *Healing the Heart of Democracy*, Parker Palmer writes that public conversational space must be sought and maintained in a world that’s always urging us to retreat to our private media bubbles or gated communities, and to subordinate our identities as citizens to identities as consumers. Philosopher Matthew Crawford, in *The World Beyond Your Head*, writes of what he calls the “attentional commons,” publicly accessible spaces of relative cognitive stillness that makes it possible for us to weave solitary thoughts or mutual conversations, choosing where our attention

goes. However, when ads fill every space over which our eyes might pass, including our computer or smartphone screens, the “attentional commons” is being sold, and the common good is suffering, since, as Crawford writes, “the question of what to attend to is a question of what to value, and this question is no longer answered for us by settled forms of social life” (5-6). Rather, corporations have rushed into the gap we might otherwise fill with private thoughts or conversation in order to glaze our eyeballs with “headline news” or makeup ads. And if this happens often enough, in enough areas of our lives (and it can, given that our phones now accompany us everywhere) then “our right not to be addressed” (13), as Crawford calls it, is violated and the moral sense that would preserve a concept of “attentional commons” and sustained attention to others, and the value of the quiet that nourishes it, never has a chance to form.

By contrast, when you pay attention to what (or who) is in front of you rather than the shadowily monetized images on your screen, you let the world beyond yourself make real demands on you, and your own self grows to meet it, in curiosity, wonder, irritation, frustration, or anywhere in between. In your experience of real emotion, you can begin to feel a deeper interest and obligation. Having seen something, and meaningfully engaged with it in a physical realm not bound to the artificial physics of cyberspace, you may begin to care for it as *it* is, not only as *you* are. And you are better equipped to see and work against the ways the apparent fun and freedom of the Internet contribute to income inequality and ecological loss.

“When ads fill every space over which our eyes might pass, including our computer or smartphone screens, the ‘attentional commons’ is being sold, and the common good is suffering.”

Introducing students to these ideas can start with creating experiences of meaningful contact with others, which starts with clearly articulated syllabus policies that define the classroom as a space where we can come together to seek a common good. Ask for cell phones

and laptops to be turned off and stowed (not left on desks), and share the studies explaining why.⁵ Address conversation practices explicitly, distinguishing acceptable disagreement from personal disrespect. (This can help many of our students get past “Midwest-nice.”⁶) I’ve found that cordoning off technology with definite times and uses (“take out your laptops now so we can post drafts of thesis sentences to our course-page forum for feedback—I’ll project them on screen and we’ll talk about them”) helps make the room a conversation-and-text-centered

space, engaging even those students who might be tempted to lean away into the screen. (This is particularly important for first-year students, excited yet uncertain about how “college class discussion” is actually *done*.) Subtly, such practices reinforce that technology is a good servant but a poor master for human beings, whose humanity is nourished by keeping a space—individually and communally—for real encounters with the world, and other beings, beyond our heads.

Endnotes

1. See anthropologist Natasha Dow Schull’s chilling *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.)
2. For analysis of trolls – especially gender-trolls – see Astra Taylor’s excellent *The People’s Platform: Taking Back Power and Culture in the Digital Age* (New York: Picador, 2015).
3. This issue is especially relevant for professors in the case of surreptitious audio or video recordings. Consider the case of Marquette University philosophy graduate student Cheryl Abbate, whose words were recorded without her knowledge or consent by an undergraduate on his smartphone, then used as out-of-context fodder in a senior professor’s political campaign. See <http://dailynous.com/2014/12/12/marquette-an-update/>.
4. For excellent discussion of conversation, emotion, and technology, see Sherry Turkle’s work, including the forthcoming *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin, 2015).

5. I share these posts with students: Dan Rockmore, “The Case for Banning Laptops in the Classroom.” *The New Yorker Online*, June 6, 2014 (<http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-case-for-banning-laptops-in-the-classroom/>); Anne Curzan, “Why I’m Asking You Not To Use Laptops,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* Lingua Franca blog, August 25, 2014 (<http://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2014/08/25/why-im-asking-you-not-to-use-laptops/>); Kelly Dickerson, “Are Smartphones Killing Our Conversation Quality?” *Livescience*, July 18, 2014 (<http://www.livescience.com/46817-smartphones-lower-conversation-quality.html>).

6. See Anne Curzan’s “The Work of Conversation,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* Lingua Franca blog, September 27, 2013 (<http://chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2013/09/27/the-work-of-conversation/>).

Works Cited

- Boyd, Danah. *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Byrne, Richard. “A Nod to Ned Ludd.” *The Baffler*. Accessed 1 November 2105, <http://www.thebaffler.com/salvos/a-nod-to-ned-ludd>.
- Crawford, Matthew. *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction*. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2015.
- Duhigg, Charles. “How Companies Know Your Secrets.” *The New York Times Magazine*, February 26, 2012.
- Lanier, Jaron. *Who Owns the Future?* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015.
- Palmer, Parker. *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.
- Silverman, Jacob. *Terms of Service: Social Media and the Price of Constant Connection*. New York: HarperCollins, 2015.
- Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden: or, Life in the Woods*. New York: Cosimo, 2009.