

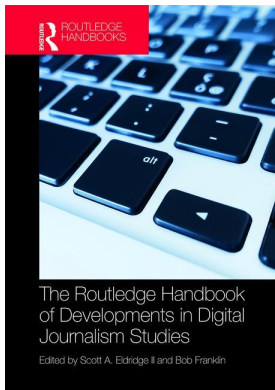
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### **Opting in and Opting Out of Media**

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# OPTING IN AND OPTING OUT OF MEDIA

*Bonnie Brennen*

## **A movement begins**

On April 9, 2017, *60 Minutes* broadcast a story on brain hacking, which is the notion that our phones, social media, and apps are being designed to program us. During the report, Anderson Cooper (2017) interviewed Silicon Valley insiders who suggested that the constant stream of distractions have been engineered to create addictive behavior. These distractions are shaping our feelings, thoughts, and actions, weakening our relationships and ruining our children's ability to concentrate and focus. The story highlighted researchers who suggested that our smartphones now keep us in a continuous state of anxiety where we feel the need to constantly touch them, check them, and interact with them. Habit-breaking apps are being designed, but ultimately the program suggested that in order to break our digital technology habit that we need to limit our use and take time away from new media. The *60 Minutes* report represents a growing trend of questioning the impact of digital technology. It is a trend that contradicts a prevailing norm in the United States that everyone should embrace new technologies and that people must have full access to digital media so that they can obtain information necessary to function in a democratic society.

While we haven't quite reached a tipping point yet, during the last few years, public calls to unplug, slow down, reject, restrict, and/or opt out of new media have become more urgent, sustained, and popular. Tech leaders Elon Musk and Bill Gates have cautioned that the development of artificial intelligence (AI) may have catastrophic results for humanity. The late renowned physicist Stephen Hawking has echoed their concerns about AI and has warned that the internet could soon "become a command center of terrorists" (Griffin, 2014). Even Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak has publicly wondered if human beings will one day become family pets for "robot overlords" (Dowd, 2017).

Signs such as "There is no app to replace your lap! Read to your child," "The use of WMDs (wireless mobile devices) is not permitted", "This is a screen-free zone", and "Talk to me – not the screen" increasingly pop up outside of coffee shops and restaurants. Digital detox retreats, vacations, and programs, designed to help break internet addictions, are becoming increasingly popular. Five star hotels, game reserves, golf resorts, spas, and camps throughout the world now promote "disconnect to reconnect" holidays, with specially designed vacation packages to help people unplug.

The Sabbath Manifesto, created by Reboot, an organization dedicated to affirming Jewish values and traditions, has developed a digital Sabbath, a weekly 24-hour period where people are encouraged to avoid technology, connect with friends and family, and give back. Journalist Andrew Sullivan (2016), a self-described early adopter of “living-in-the-web”, decided to quit digital technologies after he realized that “Every hour I spent online was not spent in the physical world. Every minute I was engrossed in a virtual interaction I was not involved in a human encounter” (ibid.). Sullivan now lives exclusively in the real world and supports a digital Sabbath to help people rebalance their lives.

*New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat (2017) has called for a digital temperance movement to help us take back control of new technology. Finding Americans “enslaved” to an online life that “breeds narcissism, alienation and depression” (ibid.), Douthat recommends creating more tech free zones where internet usage is discouraged, to help restrict and control our digital technology usage. In addition, tech executives at Twitter, Tumblr, Huffington Post, and Yahoo now recommend regular unplugging to help maintain a healthy balance between our virtual and real lives (Bilton, 2013).

Screen-free camps help children and teens break their dependence on digital technologies, and Screen Free Week, organized by the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, holds an annual celebration each May to encourage individuals, schools, and communities to take a break from technology and reconnect with family and friends. In addition, there are mobile apps designed to help people unplug from technology. For example, Digital Detach “imposes a timed detox session” (Borchers, 2015), turning off all functions of smartphones except making telephone calls and texting, while the Digital Detox app turns off every mobile device feature except dialing 911 in an emergency.

Contemporary research indicates that the level of digital inclusion in the US continues to increase and that it is becoming less dependent on education, income, race, location, age, and gender. Yet, according to a September 25, 2013, Pew Research Center report, in the US 15% of adults age 18 and above (or about 35 million people) do not use email or the internet at all. While some of these individuals find it too expensive, too difficult, or too frightening to use, 35% of those who do not use email or the internet reject it because they do not find it relevant, interesting, or integral to their lives. If the Pew Center report is correct, more than 10 million adult Americans are actively choosing not to engage with email and the internet at all (Zickuhr, 2013). In addition, a growing body of research suggests that millions more U.S. citizens are taking an active role in deciding which technologies they engage with and which ones they choose not to use.

Responding to the opting-out trend, this project focuses on academic research, news reports, and popular culture discussions about individuals who are actively making decisions regarding their use or nonuse of new technology. It also draws on insights from 79 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews that I conducted with people who indicated that they made choices about their technology usage. Potential interviewees responded to online requests and notices posted in local coffee shops and bookstores and were recommended to me by friends, colleagues, and other interviewees. The 41 men and 38 women interviewed were a culturally, geographically, and ethnically diverse group whose ages ranged between 22 and 81. At the time of the interviews, 70 of the interviewees were employed full time, four were students and five were retired. The interviews ranged from 50 minutes to two and a half hours in length, and 40 people were interviewed in person, while 39 interviews were conducted over the telephone. Ultimately, my goal with the interviews was to understand the reasons why people chose not to engage with some new technologies and how individuals made decisions regarding the technologies with which they interacted.

## Conceptual foundations

Considerable research across several disciplines has investigated the use of new technology from a digital divide perspective, framing the issue from a dichotomy of the haves versus the have-nots. The technology haves have been envisioned as living well and acquiring a vast array of technological resources. The have-nots are thought to exist in unstable environments with limited resources, unable to afford new technologies. Insisting that those who are left behind the digital revolution will become a permanent part of the underclass, digital divide researchers have maintained that the use of new technologies is integral to maintaining our economic basis and standard of living. As Mack (2001: 42) explained:

While computers and the internet are certainly no panacea for all of society's ills, these technology resources assist people in developing and improving their skills, knowledge, marketability, and income. Ironically, those who could most benefit from these resources are often foreclosed from acquiring or accessing them.

Assuming that access to new technologies is fundamental to success in the twenty-first century and that no one would voluntarily reject new technologies, digital divide researchers have sought to understand the conditions, issues, and problems restricting individuals' access to new technologies through considerations of class, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, income, education, geography, household type, and age.

Much of the digital divide research has been framed from a technological deterministic position, which has maintained that new technologies have taken us from an industrial society to an information society and are responsible for creating modern people and our modern culture. More recently, as levels of digital inclusion have continued to grow, some researchers have questioned the continued relevance, basis, or existence of a digital divide. Yet Sparks (2013) maintained that the term digital divide continues to be used because it has been equated with social, economic, and political inclusion and since its inception has had "a normative bias towards the benefits of digital inclusion" (ibid.: 30). As a prevailing perspective on the role of technology in social change, technological determinists envision the development of new technologies as creating the necessary conditions for social change and the development of our modern world. From this perspective, it is assumed that everyone should embrace digital technologies and that people must have full access to them so that they can obtain information necessary to function in a democratic society.

However, cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1974) considered technological determinism an "untenable notion" because it substituted the random autonomy of intention or "an abstract human essence" for individuals' "real social, political and economic intention" (ibid.: 124). Insisting that new communication technologies have been developed by people with specific "purposes and practices already in mind" (ibid.: 8), Williams developed a theory of cultural materialism, which restored human intention and agency to the research and development of new technologies. Cultural materialism addresses the specific creation and production of material culture within its particular historical context. Privileging human experience as a fundamental component of any cultural analysis, cultural materialism views people as active agents who help create their own culture through their individual experiences (Williams, 1977). Framed from a cultural materialist perspective, this research focuses directly on human intention and agency, suggesting that people create and use new technologies with certain social needs, purposes, and practices in mind. From this theoretical vantage point, I maintain that individuals make informed choices as to which technologies they use and which ones they reject.

While the digital divide has figured prominently in scholarly research on the usage of new media, in the last few years researchers have begun to consider some individuals' deliberate choice not to engage with new technologies. Although studies are still limited, most of this research has either framed lack of engagement with new technologies as acts of resistance, refusal, or pushback against the "evertime" (Morrison and Gomez, 2014) of constant connectivity or as a problem or pathology.

Choosing the term "media refusal" in an effort to equate the actions of those who did not use Facebook with a focused revolt of "conspicuous non-consumption" against consumer culture, Portwood-Stacer (2013: 1047) suggested that Facebook media refusal was a way that individuals crafted their own identities and remade their lives into sites of media resistance against the powerful forces of contemporary society. Similarly, Woodstock (2014) invoked the term "media resister" to represent an individual's active and thoughtful rejection of new technologies. Woodstock considered media resistance a complicated and sometimes contradictory act:

As active, elective makers of meaning, media resisters may ignore particular types of media content (such as news or popular culture), or they may refuse to adopt one new media technology but not others. And like most of us, they are not necessarily consistent.

*(ibid.: 1987)*

Similarly, Rauch (2014) has suggested that unplugging rituals to limit new media usage, like the digital Sabbath, are active resistance strategies used by individuals to exert their agency about the role of technology in their lives.

Researchers who focus on individuals who refuse, resist, or unplug consider the role of resisters as actively making choices as to their use of new media. This approach differs significantly from social science research on media resistance, which sees the use of new technology as normal, appropriate, and expected and envisions media refusal as a weakness or a problem. For example, Stieger et al. (2013) investigated the "phenomenon of virtual identity suicide" (*ibid.*: 629), which was the term they used to describe individuals who decided to stop using social media like Facebook or Twitter, while Karppi's (2011) research referred to opting out of social media as "digital suicide".

At first glance, the media resistance research may seem to illustrate Williams' theory of cultural materialism, as it restores human intention to decisions regarding which technologies individuals choose to engage with. Yet much of the resistance research focuses on individuals who base their actions out of fears regarding the influence or effects of technology. For example, Woodstock (2014) included commentary from individuals concerned about privacy issues related to new technologies tracking personal information. One of Woodstock's interviewees stated: "I became more aware that I wasn't fully in control or even fully aware how my information was being used [ . . . ] I worry about what I don't know" (*ibid.*: 1991).

This type of resistance to new technologies seems to actually be what Williams (1974) has called a "peculiar doomsday brand of technological determinism" (*ibid.*: xxvii) because it assumes that changes in our society are based solely on the development and introduction of new technologies. From my reading of the resistance research, at least some of the experiences of individuals included in the studies are not based on people making their own decisions but instead are the result of individuals reacting to the perceived power of the technology to change their lives.

## Coexistence of diverse technologies

Morrison and Gomez (2014) have suggested a five-part typology to describe people's motivations for resisting new technologies: (1) emotional dissatisfaction with them; (2) a lack of use because of religious, moral, or political reasons; (3) limiting use of technologies to save time and energy; (4) pushback due to a fear of addiction to new media; and (5) online privacy concerns.

While I found several instances where my interviewees' experiences related to this typology, much of their commentary was not clearly ranked or differentiated. In addition, the majority of the people I interviewed highlighted an additional motivational category: identity creation. They explained that their incorporation or rejection of new technologies was an important way of creating their own identities. Opting out provided them with guidance to help them actively determine what issues and concerns were of importance to them and make technology fulfill their needs and interests. Rather than viewing their actions solely as acts of resistance to technologies that are exerting power over them, these interviewees saw their actions as asserting their independence, authority, and dominance over the technology.

The diversity of option about opting in and opting out of media raised issues regarding the concept of new technology itself. When asked how they defined new technology, interviewees' responses ranged from "all mobile-based technologies", "everything using screens", "smart-phones", "social media – especially Twitter and Facebook", "everything online", "recent technologies that are better than the older ones", and "just about everything new that's not alive".

In addition to being grounded in technological determinism, much of the digital divide research has been framed around the "doctrine of supersession" (Eisenstein, 1997: 1054), a perspective through which the development of each new technology, technique, or artifact is thought to destroy the viability of the previous one. From this vantage point, it is imperative to embrace new technologies so as not to be left behind. Yet insights gathered from this research project did not support any type of a doctrine of supersession but instead illustrated what Eisenstein (1997) has referred to as a coexistence of diverse media technologies, styles, and artifacts. The individuals I interviewed consciously and actively made choices about what technologies they used. Some embraced the latest technological advances – at least some of the time – while others were cautious about adding any new technologies to their lives.

Although people's reasons for opting in and opting out were complex and multidimensional, they all supported the idea that people are comfortable mixing new and old media technologies. However, there was one older technology that all 79 people clearly preferred – reading printed books. While some individuals used their Kindles, tablets, or iPads when traveling, and others read PDFs on their computers when necessary, everyone said that they preferred reading books on paper. Comments such as "printed books are indispensable", "I love the touch, feel, and smell of books", and "to me it's the physical weight of a book that makes me happy" reinforced the findings of a 2016 study by the Pew Research Center, which found that 65% of adult Americans had read a printed book during the last year (Victor, 2016).

The resurgence and growing popularity of vinyl also illustrates the notion of a coexistence of diverse media technologies. Some people I interviewed preferred to stream music through sites like Spotify and Pandora, while others listened to their favorite songs on their iPods, tablets, phones, and computers. Some respondents spoke of their extensive CD collections, while others listened to music on their favorite FM radio stations. However, several tech-savvy interviewees spoke about rejecting digital music in favor of albums and turntables, while still others explained how they had recently returned to vinyl because electronic music became too sanitized for them. Mitch,<sup>1</sup> a 22-year-old music lover from Denver, described his enjoyment of the physical aspects of vinyl:

I felt a very strong physical and tactile sense with it that I really enjoyed. I loved the fact that halfway through I would have to flip it, and it really transformed what had been thoroughly background listening for me and into something that was very ritualistic. I listen to a lot of music to try to relax. Listening to albums was almost meditative – even simply watching the revolution of the album pleased me. I loved the sound of it as well.

Similarly, Rick, a recent graduate student in his twenties from Tennessee, began his vinyl collection because of the artwork and explained that he “loved the ephemera, the album artwork, the knowledge. I liked the idea of looking at a complete idea of what it was”. Rick maintained that buying an album is much different than purchasing an audio file or streaming music. “It’s the idea of an album that you’re buying more than just the music itself. You’re buying an experience or looking at the artwork, looking at the information and reading the lyrics. I find that more immersive”.

### **Cultural and religious beliefs**

Some of the people I interviewed opted out of new technologies because of their ethical, political, religious, or cultural beliefs. As a resident of an intentional community in the small town of Viroqua, Wisconsin, 42-year-old Lars spoke of limiting his use of new technologies in order to be more focused and present in his relationships with family and friends. While he used a smartphone in his work as a professional salesman, in his home life Lars preferred to use a landline “to initiate any kind of deep or personal conversation”. Throughout his interview he expressed concerns about the numbers of people constantly staring at their cell phones, and he found that the use of new technologies had “gone past utility into some addictive, weird, antisocial strange thing”. Lars disliked all social media but considered Twitter the “silliest of them” because it forced users to “squish your message down to like a fragment for no good reason”. Lars mentioned that his wife does not own a cell phone and that his family never watched television. His 12-year-old son was allowed to play video games on an old Mac laptop for one hour each day and to listen to an iPod Touch, which he referred to as “the gateway drug of the technology thing”.

Lars explained that as part of a back-to-the-land cultural movement, Viroqua residents sought to have more of an influence over their children’s education than was possible in public schools. They developed a school system based on the Waldorf educational philosophy of Rudolf Steiner. According to Lars, the foundation of the Waldorf system was built on the development of an organic culture, integrating intellectual learning, emotional character building, and practical physical labor in a natural setting. The school instructs all children on mindfulness; students meditate each morning, use their hands to build things and play musical instruments, and explore their environments daily. As a member of the school board and “the most anti-technology person there”, Lars said that the school has attempted “to eliminate devices from all classrooms”. While many of the families in Viroqua have not rejected the use of all new technologies, most parents enforced the school’s request to curtail all family members’ screen time after 7:30 each evening. He said that the rationale for limiting the use of new technology is that “the education is so carefully designed and it should permeate their whole entire day, and you don’t want to give them strong powerful images that will overwrite with their learning in school”.

Like Lars, who felt that his decision to restrict his family’s use of new technology was directly related to his cultural and ethical values, other individuals also view technology as something that comes second to their cultural and religious identities. For example, the Amish selectively decide which technologies are good and which are bad for their community, and they think carefully about the long-term effects that technology might have on their culture. The Amish’s

use of technologies is based on their beliefs in humility, obedience, simplicity, modesty, and their submission to the will of God (*Gelassenheit*). Technologies that do not uphold the *Gelassenheit* principles or which encourage sloth, luxury, or vanity are banned. So while automobiles are not allowed because they are viewed as a status symbol that separates family, when necessary Amish are not opposed to renting buses, traveling by train, or flying. And while they reject radio, television, computers, and movies because of the outside values they disseminate, the Amish use generators, flashlights, batteries, solar panels, and water wheels to generate electricity (Kraybill, 2001).

Many Orthodox Jews also do not watch television, play video games, use computers, or engage with popular culture. Finding electronic media contrary to their way of life, Orthodox Jews tend to shun outside mediated “distractions” in favor of spending quality time with their friends and family. Sarah, an Orthodox Jew from New York, said that her religious beliefs and values informed her family’s decisions about which new technologies they should use.

Our family is observant but not Hasidic, yet we also believe that electronic devices are not conducive to our way of life. New technologies provide people with immediate gratification, and their use encourages them to consume more and more material things. We do not want our children to be distracted by consuming things – we want them to use their minds and their imaginations to learn and to explore the world.

All four of Sarah’s children attend a Jewish day school, which is technology-free, and parents are strongly urged not to allow their children to access the internet or play video games at home. Although Sarah’s husband uses the internet and a smartphone at work, the family does not have a computer or television at home. All members of the family play musical instruments, and as Sarah noted, “all of my children love to read and write”.

Private religious schools are increasingly developing technology policies in line with their moral and ethical ideals. For example, the Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Yeshiva Elementary School (2013) includes a technology policy in its Parent Handbook based on a belief that “internet use and abuse have led to serious family and community concerns” (ibid.: 9). Yeshiva’s technology policy recommends that the family’s home computers have filters to block social networking sites and pornography, that children’s internet usage should be monitored, and that students should not have email accounts unless parents oversee them. Students do not have access to the internet at the school.

### Fears of new technologies

While fears associated directly with the use of digital technologies have been addressed in the digital divide and the resistance literature and have been a key issue in popular press articles about new technology, none of the 79 individuals I interviewed explicitly said that they were afraid of any new technologies. Instead, most of the interviewees said that opting out of some technologies has helped them to stay healthy, and they applauded their decisions to stay proactive about their technology usage. However, fears of technology may be inferred from some of the interviewees’ commentary. Some individuals addressed the potential “negative effects” of using new media continuously, suggesting that without setting boundaries, new technologies could take over people’s lives.

Rather than expressing explicit fears about what new media might be doing to them, some interviewees spoke of their ambivalence toward using them. While several people named Google Maps as their favorite app, and more than half of those interviewed reported loving their smartphones and said they would hate it if they had to give them up, several individuals felt that they would get by just fine if they had to make do without any digital technologies.



Limiting the use of new media in order to save time and energy was another theme that emerged in my interviews. For example, David, a 65-year-old retired physician from Northern California, spoke forcefully about his desire to limit his use of new technologies. David did not use social media or watch any entertainment programming on television, calling Facebook and Twitter “a time suck” and television programs “boring and stupid”. He rarely watched movies, and when he did, he went to a movie theater to watch rather than streaming them at home. He owned a smartphone, using it for calls and sending brief texts. However, he used only one app on his phone – a bicycle app that recorded his biking distance and times and allowed him to share this information with his friends. David owned a laptop but rarely used it, preferring his iPad because he used it “for consuming content, not creating it”. He reads medical journals, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* each day on his iPad and read and responded to emails. When traveling, David reads books on his iPad, but at home he only read hardback books. Overall, David felt that he managed his use of digital media appropriately in order to enhance his life and has never felt the need to take a break from it. “It doesn’t overwhelm my existence or take over my day, so I don’t feel the need to take a vacation from it”.

### Privacy concerns

Recent advances in AI have resulted in smartphone listening devices that double as personal assistants. Unless they are manually disabled, these devices are always on, waiting for a wake-up direction like “Hey, Siri” or “Alexa”. Personal assistants have continuous access to us even in our homes, a concern that has prompted technology analysts to wonder: “In a world in which these personal assistants are always listening for our voices and recording our requests, have we given up on any expectation of privacy within our own homes?” (Edwards, 2017: 28).

While the individuals I interviewed did not explicitly report that they were afraid of new technologies, several expressed their concerns related to a growing lack of privacy with the use of new technologies. Sean, a 53-year-old business owner from Seattle, said, “I am concerned that the new smartphones can trace your movements, and that intrusion into my privacy terrifies me”. In response, Sean and his wife have chosen to leave their smartphones on the kitchen counter rather than bringing them into their bedroom at night. Sean explained that privacy concerns kept him from purchasing a personal assistant like Amazon’s Echo for his home:

I may seem old school, but I consider my home my castle, and I don’t take my family’s privacy for granted. We can live without a smart utility meter, and we can turn off the lights by ourselves. The thought of anyone being able to watch my children playing or even sleeping, makes me crazy.

Sean said that after reading several news articles about businesses getting hacked that he worried about the vulnerability of his company’s online records. In response, he said that he had contracted with a privacy security firm to monitor both his personal and business bank accounts.

John, a 30-year-old technology analyst working in Washington, DC, also expressed privacy concerns, particularly as they related to online banking.

Most people take it for granted that when they access their bank accounts on their smartphones that the information is safe and protected. This is my area, and let me tell you, that’s crazy. I don’t trust mobile banking, and I don’t recommend using mobile banking. It’s not all that safe. There are too many ways that your information can be compromised. If you have to bank online, use your computer to access your accounts. Trust me, you’ll be better off in the long run.

Several other interviewees, who described themselves as “tech savvy”, echoed John’s privacy concerns. For example, Meg, a 38-year-old tech manager from San Francisco, also addressed the risks associated with disclosing personal information online:

I work in a research lab, and in that environment, I have learned a lot about techniques and technologies that are available for getting information off of the internet. This is something that we talk about a lot. I have learned about different capabilities and about the type of access that some people in our lab have. I think it is because of working in this environment that I really started to think about what that means for me as a person. And in my work environment I come into contact with lots of really brilliant engineers who know a lot about security-related issues, and I’ve seen how some of them are extremely skeptical about putting certain types of information of theirs online. I think just realizing that these people who know a tremendous amount about what’s possible and seeing them so skeptical and concerned that I realized online privacy is something I should be more aware of.

### **Developing identity, asserting dominance**

Throughout my interviews, the notion of opting in or opting out to develop a person’s identity or to assert an individual’s independence, authority, and dominance over new technologies was a continuous theme. For example, vinyl users described their rejection of digital music technologies as an integral part of their identities. It was a significant way that they defined themselves, and several interviewees said that their use of vinyl provided a “shorthand representation” of who they were. As Alexis, a 24-year-old barista from Portland, Oregon, noted:

With vinyl I am very aware of the fact that it takes effort putting it on the turntable, placing the needle on it. I feel a very strong physical and tactile sense with it that I really enjoy. I love the fact that halfway through I have to flip it. It’s something I do because that’s who I am. I collect vinyl – that’s how I identify myself.

The choice not to engage with social media was another way interviewees asserted their agency over digital media. Although Bobkowski and Smith (2013) suggested that social media “non-adopters” were less social, had fewer friends, and had “few meaningful friendships”, (ibid.: 777), Andrea, a designer at a tech company in Boston who is in her thirties, chose not to engage with Facebook or Twitter because she felt that social media encouraged superficial relationships.

I started to see that for a lot of my peers there were certain types of relationships that they would only maintain through Facebook. So there were all of these acquaintances that they would be connected to, they would be friends with on Facebook, and maybe they would never have any interaction with those people in person or even on electronic media in any way. It seemed to me to be more about the idea of maintaining a connection with these people as opposed to really getting anything meaningful or giving anything meaningful to the relationship.

First exposed to a precursor of Facebook called “Plans” as an undergraduate, Andrea felt her initial “resistance to Plans when I was in college was that it was a huge time suck”. She was worried that if she signed up for Plans that she would spend too much time on it, and she didn’t want to “waste that much time”. However, as Facebook took off, Andrea’s rationale for rejecting social media evolved because of shallow relationships that Facebook and Twitter encouraged. For

Andrea, posting pictures of food and clothing wasn't her idea of friendship, and she felt it was important for people to put effort into their relationships:

I liked the idea that if you and I were going to maintain a relationship, I was going to have to put effort in and you would have to put effort in and we both knew that, and that was somehow reinforcement that the connection was important to both of us. I liked that idea, and with Facebook it kind of undoes all of that. There's no effort required to maintain a friendship. I was just uncomfortable with that.

In the last few years, Andrea said she has become increasingly concerned with the amount of personal information that is available on social media and felt that her decision not to engage with social media helped her to retain control over the access to her personal information. Like others I interviewed, throughout her interview Andrea spoke of her choice to reject social media as a way of asserting her independence over the technology and developing her identity as an independent thinker. While she understood that her rejection of social media might have negative ramifications for her career, she felt that as an individual she had to "create and manage her personal image and identity".

Balancing new media usage was an important aspect of interviewees asserting their dominance over technology. For example, Destiny, a 25-year-old marketing manager from Philadelphia, reported being immersed in social media and tied to her cell phone and other digital technology at work. However, she said that she was careful to balance her new media use during her free time.

When my friends and I get together for dinner and drinks we always put our phones away so that we can spend time together without distractions. We have a rule that the first one who grabs their phone has to pay.

As a digital native, Destiny felt that she had no trouble managing her use of technology, and she felt that since she had to use it at work all day that she preferred to be screen-free most evenings. She suggested that her attitude toward new technology grew out of her parents' efforts to balance the family's use of technology while they were growing up, and she noted that since she has had access to digital media her entire life that she felt it was easier for her to opt out when she wanted a break.

Similarly, Ruth, an 81-year-old from Southern California who has embraced many new technologies, refuses to text. She stated that she owned an "old-fashioned" flip phone so that she had an excuse not to text, and during our conversation she explained her reasoning:

I want to see their faces when I talk with my family and friends. If I can't be with them in person, I want to hear their voices, connect with them, not merely see the top of their heads and share texts with them. I want to know what they are thinking, what they are feeling, if they are doing well, if they need anything from me. You can't get any real conversation going through texts. You just share superficial silly comments.

Recounting a recent trip to Chicago where everyone on the airplane seemed to be immersed in technology, she observed: "The airplane was so quiet. No one was talking. Everyone was looking at their phones, their iPads, their Kindles or their laptops. No one was interacting and no one was communicating. It's sad." Ruth saw her refusal to text a way of being true to herself and asserting her authority over technology. She explained that while she enjoyed keeping up with friends on Facebook and email, she insisted on maintaining face-to-face communication whenever possible with her family.

## A status symbol

In addition to creating one's identity and asserting dominance over technology, the choices that people make regarding their use or nonuse of new technologies are also evidence of using technology as a status symbol. Some people opt out because they have the money and/or power to do so. They can hire people to communicate their views with others. This is a strategy that has been used effectively in the U.S. political realm. In 2015, when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's use of a private email account and server became a partisan controversy, several politicians admitted that they did not use email. For example, Senator John McCain told MSNBC's Andrea Mitchell that he had "opted out of using email altogether" because he was afraid that he might regret sending something or that his emails might be taken out of context, while Senator Lindsey Graham admitted on NBC's *Meet the Press* that he had never sent an email. Apart from concerns that congressional leaders who were shaping new technology policy weren't using those technologies, their actions have been seen as "the ultimate status symbol – second only to sending someone to fetch your lunch" (Parker, 2015).

Framed from a cultural materialist perspective, this research reinforced Raymond Williams' understanding of the role of human agency in the development and usage of new technologies. Rather than seeing individuals who opted out of new media as unfortunate have-nots who were left behind in contemporary society, or as media resisters fighting social oppression created by new technologies, this research focused on the intentions of individuals and the specific reasons why they chose to engage with some technologies and reject others. Apart from a consistent preference to read books on paper, my research indicates that there are many reasons why individuals use some technologies and forgo others. Some interviewees opted out because of their ethical, political, religious, or cultural beliefs. Others found new technologies simple diversions that did not meet their needs or interests, and by opting out they took back their time and refocused their lives on family and community concerns. Some citizens worried about issues of privacy, rejecting new technologies out of safety concerns, while others asserted their independence, authority, and dominance over technologies while constructing their individual identities through the choices they made regarding their use of new technologies.

Finally, this research considers a quote from the St. Louis poet and filmmaker PrinceEA (2016):

I'm so tired of performing in the pageantry of vanity and conforming to this accepted form of digital insanity. Call me crazy but, I imagine a world where we smile when we have low batteries, cause that will mean we'll be one bar closer to humanity.

In his inspirational videos and talks, PrinceEA encourages people to think about their personal relationships and take control of new technology. Calling Facebook an "anti-social network" that encourages superficial interactions rather than interpersonal relationships, he suggests that our reliance on technology has made us "more selfish and separate", and he counsels people not to let technology exert power over them. While the full impact of his message is yet to be known, since 2015, PrinceEA's videos have amassed more than 500 million views on Facebook and YouTube. Ultimately, his growing influence may help to remind people that they have the ability to exert control over digital technology and that it's possible and may even be desirable to unplug when needed.

## Further reading

Raymond Williams's classic text *Television, Technology and Cultural Form* (1974) provides a nuanced understanding of the prevailing views of technology as well as an excellent discussion of the main

components of cultural materialism. Although *Television* was first published more than 40 years ago, it remains a valuable resource for understanding the continued influence of technological determinism on contemporary culture. Colin Sparks's (2013) "What is the Digital Divide and Why Is It Important?" is particularly helpful in ascertaining the continued relevance of the notion of the digital divide, while Louise Woodstock's (2014) "Media Resistance: Opportunities for Practice Theory and New Media Research" offers key insights into the media resistance movement.

### Note

- 1 When requested, interviewees' names were changed to protect their privacy. In addition, the interviewees have approved all demographic information included.

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