

Disconnect to Reconnect:
The Food/Technology Metaphor in Digital Detoxing

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Abstract

The idea of “going on a digital detox” arrives as a response to a proliferation of digital technology and a concern that this addictive form of sociality erodes meaningful or authentic connection. This paper explores concerns about our relationship with digital technology through a short ethnography of Camp Grounded: a Californian digital detox retreat and summer camp for adults. At Camp Grounded, digital detoxers conceptualise consumption of technology using a food parallel. While the brief connection or “snack” of a text message might temporarily satisfy, detoxers feel that waiting for a more nutritious face-to-face encounter will ultimately be more emotionally nourishing. The paper interrogates the food/technology metaphor to unpack its analytical limitations and the questions it prompts about the future of our relationship with digital technology.

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Introduction

Social interactions are increasingly “entangled”¹ with the online world, while information societies such as the UK and US are increasingly dependent upon digital structures. Users describe feeling “overwhelmed” by digital technology (Booth, 2015, n.p.), distracted by their devices while spending time with others (Magee, 2016), and “burnout” from “an ever-accelerating conveyor belt of content” (Haber, 2013, n.p.). Digital technology is often painted as a culprit for “invading” our lives (Booth, 2015, n.p.) and contributing to exhausting normative expectations of “perpetual contact” (Bittman *et al.*, 2009).

Many journalistic articles insist on a need for readers to *disconnect* from digital technology, the ills of which are further explored by writers like Sherry Turkle (2011; 2015), Jaron Lanier (2010; 2014), or Nicholas Carr (2011). These critiques view digital communication as a loss of “authentic sociality” (Horst and Miller, 2012 p. 12), and moralise excessive and inappropriate uses of a proliferation of digital devices. Within this rhetoric, digital communication is felt to be eroding our ability to concentrate, to empathise, and to have *meaningful* conversations: ultimately threatening the qualities that make us human.

In 2015, Pew found that 89 percent of Americans used their phone during their most recent social activity (Rainie and Zickuhr, 2015, p. 4), despite 82 percent of all adults

¹ “Entanglement” is a metaphor often used to emphasise the diversity of human-computer interactions and the instability caused by society’s dependence upon digital structures (Lupton 2014, p. 41).

feeling that this is actually detrimental to the conversation (p. 22). Przybylski and Weinstein's (2013) study found that simply having a smartphone present decreases the perceived value of the conversation. OnePoll's survey in May 2016 found that four in ten respondents felt they had "not truly experienced valuable moments such as a child's first steps or graduation," because "technology got in the way."² Finally, in the summer of 2016, OfCom published a survey showing that 15 million British Internet users, or a third of those online in the UK, have already tried a digital detox.³

A detox is defined as "a process or period of time in which one abstains from or rids the body of toxic or unhealthy substances; detoxification" (Oxford Dictionary Online, n.d., n.p. a). Whilst this term is more commonly applied within a dietary context, it has been appropriated as a way for individuals to feel that they are combatting the moral dangers of modern digital technology. Taking a digital detox is described as "an important reminder that life is not meant to be lived through your cell phone" (Barnes, 2016, n.p.). Digital detox retreats are run in the UK⁴ and France, the latter of which voted for a labour law in 2016 including a "right to disconnect" from work e-mail during evenings and weekends.⁵ In California, Intrepid Travel run "digital detox tours" to India and Morocco,⁶ and Camp Grounded provides annual digital detoxes in the Mendocino forest, north of The San Francisco Bay Area. The camp is run each

² "Intrepid Travel Digital Detox Survey," at <http://www.onepoll.com/intrepid-travel-digital-detox-survey/>, accessed 22nd February 2017.

³ "The Communications Market Report," at https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0024/26826/cmr_uk_2016.pdf, accessed 22nd February 2017.

⁴ "Digital Detoxing," at <http://www.digitaldetoxing.com/>, accessed 22nd February 2017.

⁵ "French workers get 'right to disconnect' from emails out of hours," <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-38479439>, accessed 22nd February 2017.

⁶ "Intrepid Travel California," at <http://www.intrepidtravel.com/>, accessed 22nd February 2017.

year by Oakland-based company The Digital Detox, whose tagline is “disconnect to reconnect,” a phrase which I unpack below.

In recent years, American academics, practitioners, and journalists, have sought to pathologise perceived over-use of digital technology as “Internet addiction” (Reed, 2002; Young, 1996). To date, the term is not recognized by the DSM,⁷ but it is treated at the reSTART Internet Addiction Recovery Program in Washington State, and The Center for Internet Addiction in New York. The idea is commonly used in media rhetoric, and can be found in memorable headlines such as “It’s ‘digital heroin’: How screens turn kids into psychotic junkies” (Kardaras, 2016). Despite questions about its legitimacy, the concept forms an important part of the backdrop to digital detoxing. Nathan Jurgenson (2013, n.p.) terms those concerned with their “addiction” to digital technology, who attend digital detoxes, or who lament the inauthenticity of digital experiences, as “disconnectionists.” I have found this to be a useful title that encompasses this constellation of similar sentiments and behaviours.

Whether or not the disconnectionists qualify as a “movement” is uncertain. My informants have described it as such, most likely because they are invested in the cause. The Oxford Dictionary Online (Oxford Dictionary Online, n.d., n.p. b) provides definitions for movement as “A group of people working together to advance their shared political, social, or artistic ideas,” or “A campaign undertaken by a political, social, or artistic movement.” Digital detoxing certainly fulfils the first definition, but during this particular research I would not say that Camp Grounded campaigned for their cause outside of their community. From my experience, the

⁷ *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA).

“Internet addiction” thread of disconnectionist sentiments is the most controversial and assertive. Combined with examples such as digital detoxes, treatment centres, and the French labour law, the disconnectionists form a picture of widespread concern and deliberate non-use that we can safely describe as a phenomenon, and tentatively consider a fledgling movement.

Studies of digital non-use so far have been useful in identifying motives for rejecting certain social media platforms. One study of instant messenger users found that as contact lists grew, interruptions became unbearable, and individuals stopped using the service as a result (Birnholtz, 2010). Gomez *et al.* (2015) studied images that criticized ICT use, which use humour and metaphor in “more dramatic ways than texts allow.” They found that social media, and Facebook in particular, were “a prevalent focus for resistance.” Stieger *et al.*’s (2013) survey found that Facebook users stopped using the site due to “privacy concerns,” along with “fear of addiction,” “negative aspects concerning Facebook friends” (e.g., feeling pressured to add certain friends or be part of superficial conversations, and that Facebook friends are in some way not real), and “general dissatisfaction” (e.g., Facebook’s monopoly of social media, unnecessary changes in design, and wasting time on the site). Others have suggested that non-use may demonstrate an individual’s desire for self-control over their digital technology (Baumer *et al.*, 2013). Portwood-Stacer (2013) argued that abstention from Facebook is an act of performing “conspicuous non-consumption,” a choice that signals to others aspects of their identity. She also explained that while non-use can be framed as a privileged and superficial activity, individuals may view it as intensely meaningful.

While this work has begun to account for digital non-use, it has not yet led to an understanding of the values and conceptual framework at the heart of disconnectionist behaviour. This paper uses a short ethnography of the Camp Grounded community, where I attended two of the three Camp Grounded sessions that The Digital Detox ran in the summer of 2014, and followed up with eight detoxers after camp using semi-structured interviews.

Historically The San Francisco Bay Area has been intensely involved in techn-utopian and dystopian narratives. In this same area, computers have at times been seen as both “emblems of bureaucratic alienation,” and “the tools by which bureaucracy and alienation could be overthrown” (Turner, pg.13). For the protesters in the Free Speech Movement of 1960’s “computers loomed as technologies of dehumanization,” yet later they were hoped to be a liberating source where one could “enter a world of authentic identity and communal collaboration” (Turner, pg.14). *The Californian Ideology* (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996) of Silicon Valley is a cultural mixing pot of Burning Man, California communes, hippies, and an individualistic entrepreneurial value system. Camp Grounded’s geographical position alongside the technology hub of Silicon Valley and the area’s historical engagement with techn-utopian and dystopian narratives make this site both a particularly dramatic collision of ideologies and a useful crystallisation of the wider disconnectionist sentiment.

The study asked: what form does this example of digital detoxing take, and why? How do detoxers conceptualise their technology, the need for this removal, and the form it ought to take? And finally, following a digital detox, how can individuals hope to reconcile their interwoven reliance on, and anxiety about their digital devices?

Using Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2011), I argue that a long-running comparison of food and technology is the framework attendees to Camp Grounded use to understand their behaviour. I then unpack the drawbacks to this metaphor, along with the ways in which it may help us in critically examining disconnectionist fears and ideals, and the implications for our relationship with digital technology.

Background

The Digital Menu

Slavoj Žižek (2002, p. 10) writes that the “passion for the real” arrives in response to products that are deprived of their substance, “coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol.” For Žižek (2002, p. 11), virtual worlds are the best example of this paradox, “just as decaffeinated coffee smells and tastes like real coffee without being real coffee,” online spaces are seen as providing an image of reality without delivering offline experiences. Similarly, Alan Kay (1991) describes using a computer as eating the menu itself rather than what's *on* the menu, as he feels a computer can only *represent* material realities. Within these examples, there is an implied diminution of digital worlds. Despite arguments against “digital dualism” (Jurgenson, 2013, n.p.), whereby a false online/offline binary misrepresents the reality that online and offline life is intertwined, digital experiences are often seen as a poor imitation of our more “authentic” offline experiences which are more suited to “feeding” our basic human needs.

The food/technology metaphor has more recently been practically applied to the

concept of “healthy” digital usage. This advice from Daniel Sieberg’s *The Digital Diet* (2011, p. 1) neatly introduces a food metaphor that has surfaced in recent years as a part of technology critique.

Think of it like having to eat but empowering yourself to choose the best foods and mealtimes and following a steady exercise plan. The same goes for technology.

This concept that has continued to be relevant in light of today’s seemingly endless stream of digital information, creating new dangers for users of digital technology.

danah boyd explained in 2009 (n.p.):

Our bodies are programmed to consume fat and sugars because they’re rare in nature... In the same way, we’re biologically programmed to be attentive to [content] that stimulate[s]... If we’re not careful, we’re going to develop the psychological equivalent of obesity.

With a growing desire to regulate a proliferation of digital content, psychologist Jocelyn Brewer has been teaching the benefits of what she has termed “Digital Nutrition” since 2013. This framework relates not only quantity of Internet use, but the quality of the experiences that users have with digital devices (Brewer, 2016). Others are similarly exploring frameworks for “digital mindfulness” such as the “mental food plate” that helps individuals regulate their digital technology use.⁸ Brewer writes that Australian Government programs are following in a similar vein, using “digital health and wellbeing” as a component of their model for Digital Citizenship (Brewer, n.d; Sen, 2011).

⁸ A framework devised by David Ryan Polgar, at <https://www.davidpolgar.com/mental-obesity>, accessed 22nd February 2017.

The food/technology metaphor exemplifies the notion that digital information is something that users are perceived to consume, while lending us the concept of a normative quantity and quality of digital use: one that may be solidifying in cultures of digital ubiquity. It can also be used to denote value judgments about the quality of digital experiences, which are often perceived to be inauthentic. As will be shown below, this metaphor was also apparent in the field site for this study. However, its analytical limits will also be explored in this paper.

The IRL Fetish⁹

Digital anthropology seeks to discover more about human nature through the study of digital cultures. Writers within the discipline argue that the themes inherent to digital sociality are no more novel than that of offline worlds, falsely seen as “authentic humanity in its more natural and less-mediated state” (Horst and Miller, 2012, p. 12). *Digital Anthropology* by Horst and Miller (2012, p. 3) argues that researchers must not fall victim to participating in “a broader and romanticized discourse that presupposes a greater authenticity or reality to the pre digital” (p. 4). Sherry Turkle’s *Alone Together* (2011) is cited by Horst and Miller as a key example of this tendency to romanticize offline or pre-digital sociality. They argue that her work is “infused with a nostalgic lament” common in journalism, as it questions whether we lose aspects of our humanity when we repeatedly choose digitally mediated communication instead of face-to-face contact (p. 12).

⁹ This heading is taken from Nathan Jurgenson’s essay of the same name (2012).

Turkle's work has been met with similar criticism from Nathan Jurgenson in his essay *The IRL Fetish* (2012) and from Jenny Davis (2015; 2016) who exposes problems within the paper that forms the backbone of Turkle's more recent book *Reclaiming Conversation* (Uhls *et al.*, 2014).¹⁰ Turkle's work draws upon years of experience in the psychology of digital technology use, where she has witnessed its detrimental effects first-hand. Nevertheless, maintaining a distance from value judgments and emotionally charged claims is an important task for any academic studying social aspects of digital technology. Turkle's writing tends to become problematic academically when it uses imprecise terms, sweeping statements, and emotive calls to action.

However, those who dismiss Turkle outright fail to acknowledge that following Emile Durkheim (1982, p. 74), the sentiments expressed in her work reflect a social fact: surveys have found a widespread fear of digital over-reliance and technology's morally corrosive effects, and disconnectionist rhetoric is gaining traction. The concept strikes a chord; it sells books and tickets to retreats, and articulates a feeling of concern that individuals genuinely feel. Academically we may correct those who fall into the trap of "digital dualism" (Jurgenson 2013, n.p.), however, if this is a misconception, it is a prevailing one, and it may yet teach us about how we culturally interpret our digital artifacts. The existence of Camp Grounded and digital detoxes worldwide suggest that regardless of academic insistence against romanticized

¹⁰ Firstly, variables were conflated by both taking away technology and introducing a camp setting Secondly, results were based on change scores in emotional cues between a pre-test and post-test. In the control group both tests were at school, while in the experimental group, both were at camp. End scores were similar, but the experimental group had the largest change score. Davis argues that the low score in the experimental pre-test could be due to an exciting new environment, and if so, the change scores would be ineffective at predicting effects of screen-time on social skills.

discourse surrounding offline interactions, many feel strongly that certain aspects of pre-digital sociality are indeed favourable. These sentiments deserve scientific attention and a thorough and nuanced academic discussion, which may also inform both normative and technological ways to “fix” perceived problems with digital technology. Camp Grounded therefore has its part to play in this conversation. Digital detoxing exemplifies a widespread, intuitive feeling that provides the opportunity for greater understanding of the desire to *disconnect*.

Method

I attended two of the four-day Camp Grounded sessions that The Digital Detox ran in 2014: Session 2 from the 13th-16th June and Session 3 from the 20th-23rd. In keeping with the participatory traditions of ethnography, I strictly followed the rules of camp while there: my notes were handwritten, and my photography was analogue. As *work talk*¹¹ is not permitted I tried to refrain from discussing the research further than obtaining informed consent for participant observation. However, as the event was essentially a social experiment and an incredibly novel experience for everyone involved, campers’ reflections were continuous - and helpful for my field notes. One camper commented, “Camp is so meta! We’re constantly talking about camp *at* camp!”

After camp I followed up with contacts I had made via Facebook or e-mail and conducted eight in-depth semi-structured interviews in total, with the co-organizer,

¹¹ Camp Grounded also refers to your job as “your w,” removing the word “work” altogether.

one camp counsellor, two volunteers, and four campers. Of these key informants, four were women and four men.¹² They are referred to by their camp nickname, for example “Fairy Bird,” or “Pumpernickle,” while anyone else is simply referred to as “one camper,” “one counsellor,” or similar.¹³ Aside from this, I socialized with digital detoxers around San Francisco and joined them at digital detox themed events. I also talked with them online, observed the Camp Grounded Facebook group, and gleaned more information from their website. Finally I went to see Dan Hoyle’s *Each and Every Thing* in San Francisco, which was a one-man play recounting his experience of Camp Grounded the previous year.

My informants used the terms “online,” “digital,” and “virtual” interchangeably, repeating Tom Boellstorff’s terminology issue as mentioned in his chapter *Rethinking Digital Anthropology* (Horst and Miller 2012, p. 57). Similarly, this tendency of my informants to refer to various uses of the Internet, texting, video calling, and even uses of different hardware as a monolithic entity which they hoped to *disconnect* from all at once, led to my decision to use the singular term “digital technology.”

For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to italicize digital detoxing terms from which I would like to analytically distance the work, and I discuss these later in the paper.

¹² While the gender of my key informants was evenly balanced, there was a significantly greater proportion of women to men at camp, as Bubble Wrap remarked, “There’s 5 beautiful women for 1 ok looking dude.” I do not explore the gendered aspect of camp in this paper, however, it may be a potential avenue of research for future studies of digital detoxing.

¹³ My informants each requested to be referred to by their camp nickname. They may have chosen this option because it lends them relative anonymity while granting them credit for their quotes within the community.

Findings

Welcome to Camp Grounded

Upon arrival at Camp Grounded, campers are met with hugs and milk and cookies. I handed in my phone, passport, keys, and wallet in a paper bag, which was sealed and stored safely within the building and signed the various paperwork allowing myself to be in Camp Grounded's care. I marvelled at my surroundings: redwood trees towering as far as the eye could see, a river fluorescent with algae, and deer that wandered calmly around the site.

Having claimed our bunks, my pre-assigned village (Bobcat) assembled in a circle on the ground in front of our open-faced cabins, listening to the birds singing and to other villages down the footpath practicing group cheers. Our two counsellors welcomed us, set us some awkward icebreaker exercises, and then went through the camp rules, asking campers to interject with the reasons we felt they were important. Some answers were already based on the camp language or mottos they had learned from counsellors.

No technology?

Because people want to look at other people's faces.

No W [work] *talk*?

Because you're more than your job.

No age talk?

Because it's just another barrier.

It will give you assumptions about a person.

No time?

Normally my day is so portioned up, to a tight schedule.

Because it makes you confront how little control you really have.

No real names?

Because by using a nickname you can show who you really are.¹⁴ It's just souls meeting.

No drugs or alcohol?

Because drugs and alcohol make false connections.

No FOMO?¹⁵

Because wherever you are is exactly where you're supposed to be.

Fidget, who co-organized Camp Grounded with his partner, Bruce, gave a series of rousing speeches throughout the weekend. He welcomed the 300 or so campers on the Friday evening while we assembled on the main field. He invited us to close our eyes, breathe slowly, stand tall like the redwoods, and cheer on the ceremonial raising of the flag.

He told us,

At camp we do have fridges, we're not anti-technology. But we're interested in refining those tools, and using mindfulness. We're interested in *creating space*, and asking, "What do we want to fill this space with?" I'm stoked you

¹⁴ Choices of nicknames tended to be very playful, were often amusing, endearing, something they were called during childhood, or after something edible. The choice of nicknames is not explored in this paper, however, one counsellor explained to me that "Nicknames recognise that there is more to you than first appearances, there's more inside of you than that."

¹⁵ FOMO is "fear of missing out". Camp Grounded emphasises that instead we should have |"JOBI: Joy of being in."

came here to take a step back and ask, “Who am I when I’m defined by my dance moves instead of a bottom line?” So say “I’m gonna lay in a hammock and read the book I’ve been meaning to read for the past five years.” Forget to go to yoga. Wherever you are is where you’re supposed to be. Here we don’t have digital calendars; no iCalendar, it’s the *You Calendar*.

On the main field, there is an “Inbox,” where each person has a box in which to send and receive notes, presents, or tins of spam, a “human powered search” notice board, where campers can pin up a question and return later to an answer, and a “newsfeed,” a huge sheet of paper on a roller where campers write jokes, quotes, and pieces of positive affirmation.

Campers can sign up to “FOMO-Free-Playshops” which include activities like archery, rock climbing, yoga, meditation, solar carving, origami, improvised theatre, or a river walk. Fun and play is a big emphasis. “You can do disconnecting on any retreat,” Pliny the Elder explained, “but the play [at Camp Grounded] was unique, there was an interesting silliness that you can’t find in other retreats.”

Detoxers feel that their day jobs leave them smothered and overloaded with unnecessary digital information, but under-stimulated emotionally. One camper concluded, “No wonder I feel so dead sometimes, look how much is inside me! Sometimes I forget that’s in there, and that’s when I get depressed. I need to keep it *nourished* every day.” When I later attended camp in 2015, the word *vulnerable* was frequently used to describe the overt emotional vulnerability and outrageousness that one was permitted to explore and enact at camp.

Counsellors herd campers through the schedule, and are permitted watches if covered with sparkly stickers or doodles on masking tape. They negotiate the fact that campers never know what time it is by telling them that things are happening “in about the time it takes to boil an egg,” or “in about the time it takes to cook a really nice dinner for two.” The lack of time is probably one of the most dramatic changes during camp compared to everyday life, and for me, this relegation of power was utterly freeing. Similarly, Ladies and Gentlemen liked the lack of time at camp because he felt that it usually “breeds feelings of inadequacy.” Fidget explained that the choice to remove time at camp was made because “when you don’t check the time, it seems to expand.”¹⁶

On the Saturday night of the four-day detox, all Campers are silent for several hours. During this time they wear white and choose a fear to write on a piece of paper, which they can ceremoniously burn in the campfire. After this, they attend The Silent Dinner, where instead of chatting with other campers, they are encouraged to consider every single bite of the meal.

By Fidget’s closing speech, friends had been made and memories created: ones that belied the short few days we had been together.

I think this is the most interesting time in history. We’re seeing exponential growth in technology. It’s amazing and beautiful and inspiring and sometimes it’s frightening. We’re defining the rules and ethics as we go, and sometimes

¹⁶ Social science literature has explored how perceptions of time are culturally mediated (Gell 1992; Wajcman 2014).

we don't get it right. We need to think about it - do we want fear or love?

Speed or compassion? In Silicon Valley, the boardrooms can start out with a moment of gratitude, instead of a bottom line...

Next time you're at a bus stop and someone's like this (mimes looking at a phone) tell them to look around instead.

After a giant group hug, we began to collect our things. I was even beginning to feel anxious about being reunited with my phone.

Why Camp Grounded?

For detoxers the purpose of Camp Grounded is not just escapism, but a movement, as discussed above. By testing out these ways of spending time together without technology, detoxers felt they were “creating another version of what society could be” (Pliny the Elder). This reflects Portwood-Stacer's (2013) finding that abstention from Facebook is performed as an intensely meaningful act. It is important to note here that digital detoxers use digital technology once they return from a digital detox. As other studies have found, “leaving” digital technology is contextual, can hold a different meaning for each person, and is difficult to enact in a strictly binary way (Crawford *et al.*, 2016; Baumer *et al.*, 2013). Detoxers do not want to permanently leave their lives in the modern world, nor would it be fair to expect them to. Rather, the community became a place for detoxers to discuss new ways to live alongside technology after the detox has ended.

Upon returning home, many of the camp rules were still being enacted in the social

gatherings that detoxers independently organized: they still called work *my W*, and did not use phones when together. I even had my phone pushed out of my hand when I tried to surreptitiously check the time at a party. Some detoxers tried replacing a smartphone alarm with an old alarm clock, choosing to call friends rather than text, or to draw things in a notepad instead of Instagramming them. Camp Grounded encouraged campers to be more *present* by giving attention to your conversation partner instead of using a phone, but also emphasized an appreciation for one's surroundings and the importance of acknowledging privilege. The act of detoxing appeared to address personal anxieties and emotional needs, while also contributing to a much wider discourse surrounding our relationship with technology. Within the broader disconnectionist "movement," Camp Grounded was described by Fidget as "the most articulate example of what's going on."

During this research I observed that Camp Grounded attendees tended to be white, in their 20's or 30's, able bodied, well educated, and financially comfortable. I generally found that they were either "techies" for whom the experience was very novel, or "hippies," who more often worked for the camp and contributed to the playful and sometimes spiritual atmosphere. The homogeneity of the group, and their privilege, likely shapes the community's values and behaviour, but the extent to which this is true would be an extremely useful avenue for future work.

As many attendees have worked in or near Silicon Valley, they are often intimately involved with the on-going discussion around negative reception of their inventions. Fidget explained that as "techies," detoxers understood the capabilities of technology well. "You can use tech to solve problems, things like Uber or Airbnb, they enable

sharing,” he said,

But we’re not thinking of the implications. Currently we are grappling with needs versus wants, or distractions. We’re inventing loads of apps and technology that provides things that are cool, or fun, or toys, but that’s not answering the question of “What’s good for human life?” It’s about creating *balance*.

As well as often working for technology companies, and using devices as part of their working day, detoxers felt that the proliferation of digital technology in their personal lives had begun to feel inescapable. Gambit explained, “Pre-iPhone in 2008 or 2007, people had laptops, but when they weren’t at the laptop they weren’t connected.” Pumpernickle continued, “If you go into a bar, everyone’s on their phones because there’s so much anxiety.” Detoxers often used examples similar to this to illustrate that it has simply become the norm for phones and laptops to be a part of every conversation. In 2013 the U.S. Census Bureau (2013a) found that smartphone use was significantly higher in California than the US average. The same research also found that 86.7 percent of individuals were using High-Speed Internet in the San Francisco Bay Area (2013b).

“I think there’s a desire to connect with people in a refreshing way,” Pliny the Elder said, explaining that Camp Grounded was needed because it had become almost impossible to communicate with people without digital technology dominating the exchange. Use of devices, including roaming social media or gaming, was felt to be habitual, but not truly necessary, simply a case of users following the crowd, and

losing out as a result. “There’s so much more information you miss when you get a text or e-mail,” Fairy Bird explained. “I miss being able to see when I’m resonating with someone.”

What it truly means to *resonate* with someone is something that is difficult to pin down. This is similarly true for other words that detoxers commonly used, such as *connection*, or *balance*. From an etic perspective, these words are vague and can even seem meaningless. Their definitions are contextual and they rely on the listener being aware of a series of given assumptions, signalling specific things that trouble this community. For example, Facebook hopes to “connect” its users, yet digital detoxers feel it does the opposite, so the word “connection,” while a very complex term, in part emphasises strong, in-person bonding. To them, “resonate” similarly connotes a desire for a visible impact on a conversation partner that is proof of this “connection.” Finally, “balance” relies on the assumption that if one is not careful, it is easy to fall into the trap of using technology “too much” and that adjusting this will help them be healthier.

Digital detoxers’ use of language is also noteworthy in the example of the Camp Grounded tagline, “Disconnect to Reconnect.” The term phrase makes sense from an emic perspective, because in this group, the idea that something has been lost through digital use is a given; there is an assumption that to “strip away” technology may lead the individual to a truer and more authentic experience. “Disconnect” is used both in this case and in the wider “disconnectionist” rhetoric, in line with Jurgenson’s (2013) term. The phrase also demonstrates the use of a computational metaphor, which Turkle (2011, p.v; 1997, p. 255) explains can easily become a pervasive way to

understand our selves and our minds, and which Lanier (2010, p.30) warns, could be extremely problematic. Similar metaphors are used in disconnectionist rhetoric, such as emphasising a need to *unplug* from technology, notably in the titles of events “Unplug SF¹⁷” and “National Day of Unplugging,”¹⁸ which compare the user themselves to a piece of hardware. The implications of the use of computational metaphors in disconnectionist rhetoric, and these other examples of emic digital detoxing language, are worthy candidates for further study that is more focused on unravelling the ironies and complexities of their use.

The camper Goldie wrote an article reflecting on her camp experience and its impact on her digital usage. She noticed that in awkward situations, she often finds herself using her phone as a distraction or social crutch to give the impression that she is busy writing an e-mail. Detoxers often explained that they had fallen victim to over-using digital technology as a means to stave off feelings of social anxiety or loneliness, but that at its core this behaviour stemmed from problems with communicating and a need for *meaningful* relationships. Fidget similarly explained, “People feel like you can’t feel lonely, so they cloud it with more noise and media.” Detoxers felt that they had initially embraced social media and tried to use it to fulfil their needs, but that ultimately it was unsatisfying. Conversely, in the words of Pliny the Elder, Camp Grounded had begun to feel “like a village, or a tribe.”

For detoxers, it was the return to offline contact during camp that acted as a reminder of what they had really been looking for: the feeling of *resonating* with others around them in person, leading to more *meaningful* and authentic relationships. Gambit

¹⁷ Unplug SF was run by the organisers of Camp Grounded from 2013-2016.

¹⁸ A project from a company called Reboot, which is inspired by Jewish traditions.

explained that because he both worked and relaxed at his computer, he felt anxiety that he was “missing out on rich or positive or meaningful experiences.” Camp, however, provided an extreme and intense snapshot of the kind of fun, *meaning* and *connection* that could be enjoyed offline. Gambit explained, “At camp, all the hugging, and no work talk, and being outside with open, supportive people, it all helped me to open up.” Lil scrambles echoed, “I got more comfortable in my skin and with people... It was the human intimacy, looking at people, hugging people... You didn’t know their name, but you knew who they were.”

Concern about digital use was just one of the reasons that led people to Camp Grounded. A few described the digital detox concept as a useful “hook” that opened up into a range of other behaviours that they wanted to be more *intentional* about in their lives. Fidget himself repeatedly explained that Camp Grounded was “not anti-technology,” but instead “pro” incorporating more “positive” things into your life. “If you’re not anti-digital, what are you?” I asked him. He replied, “Maybe we’re pro-meaningful? Pro-intentional experience? It’s like one camper told me, ‘Camp Grounded is a meaning generator.’”

If Camp Grounded is not just about technology, further study could potentially explore where anxieties about technology sit amongst other issues in attendees’ lives. Potentially, their attendance could be better explained by feelings of dissatisfaction, loneliness, and alienation in the San Francisco Bay Area, with technology as the current popular scapegoat. Digital technology use could be one aspect of life that detoxers feel that they can target, in order to regain a sense of control and increase satisfaction within their lives.

An Omni-Digital Dilemma

Michael Pollan (2006, p. 1) writes, “As a culture we seem to have arrived at a place where whatever native wisdom we may once have possessed about eating has been replaced by confusion and anxiety.” Pollan describes America’s “national eating disorder” (ibid) as a result of *The Omnivores Dilemma*:¹⁹ “When you can eat just about anything nature has to offer... the surfeit of choice brings with it a lot of stress and leads to a kind of Manichaeian view of food, a division of nature into The Good Things to Eat, and The Bad” (p. 3-4). In the last few decades, the United States has experienced a “nutrition transition” (Popkin, 1999) in which an unprecedented abundance of food has changed the way the nation eats. With the recent ubiquity of digital technology, especially that of California and the San Francisco Bay Area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a; 2013b), a surplus of choice leads to detoxers parsing and choosing which inventions are useful, or what Fidget described as “cool and fun,” and which are actively altering their *connection* with others in negative ways.

Alexis Madrigal made the comparison between Pollan’s work and Camp Grounded in his 2013 article “*Camp Grounded*,” “*Digital Detox*,” and the Age of Techno-Anxiety (n.p.):

Processed food, Michael Pollan would tell you, is not even really food at all...

This logic has been extended to digital friendships. Processed relationships get

¹⁹ A phrase first coined by Paul Rozin (1976).

scare quotes: Facebook "friends." Processed relationships can't be as genuine or authentic or honest as real life friendships.

Following this, detoxers continually drew parallels between sugary or processed food and digital technology. Fidget explained, "We all keep choosing 'hyper-reality' ... It's like high fructose corn syrup, and you get used to it, so everything else seems boring." This repeats danah boyd's (2009, n.p.) warning of the possibility of "infobesity," just as we are drawn to fat and sugars because they are "rare in nature," so we are drawn to stimulating digital content. He continued; "Second Life is a legitimate community, but so is eating Micro Chips and drinking Coca Cola. I'm not saying it's right or wrong, but you can be more satisfied with life off of a screen."

In this way, detoxers used the food metaphor to criticize the quality of digital experiences. Similarly, detoxers specified certain quantities of digital technology use as unhealthy, comparing them to problematic eating behaviours. Several detoxers described how they often "binged" on social media, some even directly after returning from camp. I heard detoxers describe the way that information online needs "digesting properly" (Pumpernickle), or how in using social media, "I used to eat until I felt too full, but now I notice" (Ladies & Gentlemen). Just as in common examples of dieting with food, digital detoxers saw their digital use as problematic and in need of serious address. Notably, in her thesis on Weight Watchers and Overeaters Anonymous in America, Melanie Wenger (2014) explains that the latter promote a spiritual narrative, emphasizing that people overeat to numb their emotions, and that what they really need is more emotionally fulfilling relationships with others. This dietary frame of reference from American culture works in a multitude of ways to inform digital detoxers in their quest for *balanced* and *mindful* consumption of digital

technology.

Loneliness is the New Hunger

While the brief *connection* or “snack” of a text message might temporarily satisfy, detoxers feel that waiting for a more nutritious face-to-face meeting will ultimately be more *nourishing*. Sherry Turkle (2011, p. 295) writes that online contact is low risk, with little possibility for awkwardness or embarrassment, whereas face-to-face contact brings a higher emotional risk and is far more demanding. For detoxers, one should try not to reach out for low-risk, temporarily satisfying online contact, and instead make the effort for face-to-face contact (or as close to as possible); a greater social risk but ultimately more wholesome and satisfying, like eating something sweet versus waiting for a meal.

The beneficial or nurturing aspects of Camp Grounded are plentiful. The experience allows campers to feel they *resonate* with those around them, it helped Gambit “open up,” showed another camper aspects of herself that she needs to keep “*nourished*,” or allowed another to feel “more comfortable in [her] skin.” Temporarily, *connection* and validation be found online, but one is always left with the empty room once the laptop is closed, or the smartphone locked. Of course, actual world communication has isolating potential, but in this case at least, by creating a community of people to detox with - to play, to make friends, detoxers guarantee interaction with many like-minded people who are keen to attain *meaningful connection* within the parameters of their own definition of this concept. In this way they feel they are finally able to satisfy the needs they feel are otherwise not being met.

Discussion

The Food/Technology Metaphor: Analytical Limits and Benefits

The food metaphor is a useful conceptual framework for digital detoxers to understand their own behaviour. However, when considering the comparison between food and technology analytically, there are both limits to this metaphor and important questions that it points to about the future of user relationships with technology.

Daniel Sieberg's *The Digital Diet* (2011) makes reference to the fact that most have little choice in whether or not they use digital technology. Just as humans have to eat to survive, to participate in current information societies demands a certain level of digital involvement. However, there is a limit to the metaphor here, which is that physiologically humans do not rely on digital technology to stay alive, unless we are fitted with a pacemaker, or similar. We literally must eat to live, whereas digital technology has only relatively recently become part of our society.

Similarly, while Michael Pollan's view might be that processed food "is not even really food at all," (Madrigal, 2013, n.p.) it would at least keep you alive. Perhaps online contact, although felt to be qualitatively different from actual world experiences and not as *nourishing* as face-to-face communication, is better than nothing. Maintaining relationships via digital communication may also be the only option for someone with fewer resources. One final limit of the food metaphor is, of

course, that detoxers may feel that they consume digital information, but they probably would not say that they excrete it.

It is likely that there is such thing as optimum healthy usage of digital technology²⁰ even if it varies from person to person. However, if digital detoxing follows the same route as food, the collective pursuit of a healthy digital diet could potentially be problematic. Americans spend more than \$60 billion annually on the diet industry, but this success depends upon the insecurity and unhappiness of their consumers.

Similarly, there are those who stand to profit from providing a cure for perceived over-use of digital technology: running treatment programs, selling books, apps, or digital detoxes. Will disconnectionist ideas simply exacerbate anxieties about lifestyle choices unnecessarily, and without resulting in tangible improvements in the lives of those who commit to it? The responsibility to continue to study this important topic and to keep individuals scientifically informed about the benefits and drawbacks of digital technology lies with all of us who engage in this conversation.

The food/technology metaphor allows for digital detoxers to imply value judgments about digital experiences: online life is indulgent and unhealthy, while offline experiences are more demanding but ultimately better for you, like a McDonald's burger versus a hearty home-cooked meal. This appears to be an extremely useful way for digital detoxers to explain their feelings about their devices, and it is tempting to use these metaphors which are conceptually satisfying with their sensory, visual references. But will these just encourage and reinforce the notion of digital dualism?

²⁰ A recent study by Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein (2017) proposed a Goldilocks hypothesis, where moderate levels of screen time are not harmful to adolescents, but overuse can displace important activities.

Academics must listen to the way people talk about their devices with critical reflection and tread carefully in analytically discussing value judgments about digital technology.

On the other hand, there are important things that can be learned from the food/technology metaphor. Pollan (2006) emphasises the importance of food that is both environmentally friendly and free from bewildering ingredients and chemicals, and that in order to choose meaningfully, the supermarket shopper must know a product's story. Similarly in recent years technology companies have been exposed as creating "dystopian" lakes of chemical waste,²¹ encouraging unacceptable worker conditions and child labour in mining of minerals needed for components,²² and contributing to Foxconn's Chinese factory worker suicides. Their metrics tend to be based on time spent on their platform, and are made to create profit, not to enable *meaningful connection*.²³ While Pollan emphasizes the importance of understanding the journey a meal makes from field to plate, disconnectionist critique reminds us that it remains vitally important to keep talking about the problems within the technology industry, including digital designs, and who benefits and loses from those designs. By continuing this conversation, we can aspire to live in a world with technology that serves a variety of user needs, and "feeds" us - in whatever way we find meaningful.

²¹ "The dystopian lake filled by the world's tech lust" at <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20150402-the-worst-place-on-earth> accessed 22nd February 2017.

²² "Apple, Samsung and Sony under fire over child miners in Africa," at <https://www.cnet.com/uk/news/apple-samsung-and-sony-under-fire-over-child-miners-in-africa/> accessed 22nd February 2017.

²³ *Time Well Spent* is an initiative encouraging companies to alter their metrics to be based on "how much they benefit our lives," at <http://www.timewellspent.io/> accessed 22nd February 2017.

Conclusion

Digital detoxers choose to *disconnect* from being overworked and over-connected, to *reconnect* to nature, play, and to each other. This exemplifies a current social fact, whereby many users feel that digital technology use reduces their satisfaction in daily experiences and in relationships with others. Camp Grounded encourages attendees to feel as if they are finally *connecting* freely without limitation by spending time together face-to-face, using playful names, and not knowing the time: all allowing for what they feel is authentic communication and authentic dwelling. Whereas online interaction is felt to be low risk, there is a deliberate vulnerability inherent in the playfulness and emotional openness of Camp Grounded. At camp, this behaviour is rewarded with acceptance and friendship, and detoxers find this intensely validating.

Quantifying the “success” or “failure” of Camp Grounded was not my intention for this study. I think it is more important to excavate the motivations and conceptual framework at the heart of digital detoxing, in order to paint a qualitative picture of disconnectionist behaviour. Standing on the shoulders of previous studies of digital non-use (Birnholtz, 2010; Gomez *et al.*, 2015; Stieger *et al.*, 2013; Baumer *et al.*, 2013; Portwood-Stacer, 2013; Crawford *et al.*, 2016) it has begun to illustrate these very things.

Camp Grounded is not just about digital technology. The reasons why individuals attend the camp are myriad and more complicated than fears of “Internet addiction” or digital overload. Considering that they remove real names, *work talk*, watches, and alcohol, it would be more accurate to say that Camp Grounded is a detox from aspects

of modern life that they find troubling and dissatisfying. Replacing them with a natural forest setting for *connection*, contemplation, play, and enjoying healthy food, also demonstrates established Western and romantic ideals. Digital detoxing likely reinforces these ideals along with attendees' own feelings about technology, while providing the sense of belonging to a community or tribe. These sentiments are not specific to a digital era, but in this case, it is possible that a recent proliferation of digital technology has become the central culprit for the alienating aspects of modernity.

According to Colin Campbell (2005), the pendulum swings steadily between technological progress and romanticism throughout history. Similarly, Kirsten Drotner (1999) argues that modernity's linear and ever-changing nature makes its inhabitants both accustomed to loss and intensely nostalgic. The belief that both the past is always better, and that a new technology makes us less human, is as old as Plato. We could even say that fearing for our loss of humanity is one of our most human traits. Current concern around digital technology echoes previous moral panics around television, film, the telephone, the typewriter, or even print itself, and many were met with pockets of refusal and cultural counteraction.

We do not yet know enough to fully explain where the desire to *disconnect* stems from, nor where this behaviour will lead. Further in-depth studies of digital detoxing could help us understand the wider goals and the impacts of a digital detox, particularly by focusing on the values behind this behaviour and how detoxers attempt to uphold those values while navigating their digital lives after the detox itself has ended.

What are the Camp Grounded organisers' hopes for long-term impacts? How do they support attendees after the detox has ended? Do those attendees construct individual strategies to protect themselves from the lure of their devices? If so, does the food metaphor hold in this case, and do they follow "digital diets"? Aside from personal changes in use, do digital detoxers seek to actively challenge digital designs and policies that affect their wider surroundings, and if so what other initiatives do they participate in? And finally, what role does language other than the food metaphor play in their understandings and explanations of digital removal? Future work could explore the use of language in digital detoxing and disconnectionist rhetoric, such as the computational metaphor, or terms like *connection* and *balance*, to see the ways in which similar emic language acquires meaning.

In recent years, the food/technology metaphor has gained traction and is becoming a firmly established way for people to discuss digital technology use. It is informing practical frameworks to be made around beneficial usage (Brewer, n.d.) and allows people to discuss health risks and benefits of tech (boyd, 2009). For Camp Grounded, it allows attendees to conceptualise the need for a digital detox: for digital detoxers, "processed" digital relationships are not emotionally fulfilling, while face-to-face contact helps them "open up," see when they are "resonating" with someone, or feel like they were part of "a village, or a tribe." In this way, they feel they are trading online social "snacking" for offline, *nourishing* connection.

What are the implications of this food metaphor and the way that Camp Grounded use it as their conceptual framework? In recent years, concerns that our stomachs did not evolve to digest processed food high in fat and sugar have led to concepts like the

Paleo Diet.²⁴ What happens when we frame digital technology as something our minds have not evolved to use? Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2011) helps us understand this conceptual framework as resulting from a recent proliferation of digital technology, which is now being thoroughly questioned in terms of how well it meets our social and emotional needs. The food/technology metaphor and the disconnectionists deserve continued study, especially their individual post-detox strategies of digital use, as they offer a fantastic potential to tangibly aid in re-aligning the design and goals of our technology with the social needs of users.

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About the Author

Theodora Sutton is a digital anthropologist and DPhil student at the Oxford Internet Institute. She is an artist who has made sculptures and prints exploring the creativity versus futility in digital representations of the self. She's worked with artists, museums, and government services to understand the moralisation of new communication technologies.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

²⁴ The Paleo Diet is based on what a hunter-gatherer would eat; mostly meat, fish, fruit, nuts and vegetables (Cordain 2010).

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