they will see us waving from such great heights, come down now they'll say, but everything looks perfect from far away, come down now but we'll stay.

The Desk
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sorry for being nostalgia baited but it was kind of nice where the internet was a single, solitary, unmoving place instead of a terror that extends to everywhere. you went to this specific spot to go to the internet. when you left the spot, you left the internet. it was a place (Cal50 2023)

I saw this post by user @cal50 on Twitter as it was making the rounds in late 2023. It sat above a post of a photo of a late 90s wooden computer desk with the caption “There was a time when we respected the computer.”(Dexter, 2023) Tongue in cheek, yes, but a few things came to mind as I spent way too much time thinking about this: the idea of respecting a space, and more importantly the idea of a space as something you can *leave*. Society’s pivot to on demand, always-on consumption breaks down this barrier. Well break is too soft a word; it obliterates it. And enough time has passed since this switch to mobile, always on, where people are now reflecting on whether this was a good idea, and if we should keep accelerating down this path, or find some sort of middle ground.

Previously, going online or using the computer was an activity, you did it then you moved on and did something else. Today’s almost 5 billion smartphone users are online all the time, a lot for social reasons, many for work, some simply for entertainment. I argue that the throughline that links all these users together is a sense of obligation, we really don’t have a choice.

COMMUNICATION

To understand online socializing, we need first to solve a puzzle that was mentioned in the introduction: that social media are neither broadcast nor interpersonal media. Instead, social media entail that people spend a good deal of time monitoring what others are doing. (Schroeder, 2018)

In the 1990s, one of the names synonymous with home internet connections was AOL (American Online). AOL grew out of a company called PlayNET, an early graphical online service for Commodore 64 computers. Eventually, PlayNET licensed their software to a company called Quantum Link, who developed a port for IBM PCs and renamed themselves America Online. AOL quickly became a major player by offering an ISP for the non-technically inclined, allowing them to access Email, web browsing, message boards and more. By 1998, “AOL racked up a record 58 percent of all online and Web minutes logged by home users in its sample and, in the process, drove 39 percent of all home-based traffic to the Web last December.” (Menefee 1998)

In 1993, a man named Barry Appelman was hired by AOL to help scale their hosting and network capacity. Appelman had previously worked at IBM, developing Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol, one of the early standards that dictated how computers would connect over the internet. At AOL, alongside his more official task of building infrastructure, Appelman realized something unique about AOLs system. “With most systems of that era, an administrator might be able to tell people were logged on, but they didn't know who.

"They didn't have any central presence information," Appelman said. “Due to the way its system was constructed, AOL knew not just that people were logged on but which users they were.” (as cited in Abbruzzese 2014) This led Appelman and other engineers such as Stephen

Williams and Todd Brannam to develop what became known as the “Buddy List,” a client viewable list of users’ online/offline status. [monitoring] They wanted to use this list to develop an online messenger system, offered for free, to anyone who made an account with AOL. Eventually, this became the messaging juggernaut AIM which boasted 18 million simultaneous users at its peak. (Abbruzzese 2014)

AIM was one of, if not the first widely adopted digital social network. Lightyears ahead of any other products, AIM eventually featured file transfers, voice chat, HTML/CSS powered user profiles, and the ability to post your “status”: a line of text that with the younger audience usually consisted of song lyrics or clichéd quotes. If you were online in the US at some point between 1997 and 2008, you at the very least interacted with, or very actively used AIM in some capacity. iMessage, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, hell, even *texting* grew out of what was started on AIM. It was monitoring your friends, it was constant communication, it was synchronous while also being asynchronous. Most importantly it was a microcosm of what the internet is today.

Fast forward to 2017 and this pivotal service that defined digital communication for an entire generation of Americans died with a whimper. And now, AOL is for all intents and purposes, entirely irrelevant.

Robinson Meyer’s eulogy for AIM in *The Atlantic* explains the impact of this early social network:

> “You walk around in habitats of text, pop-up cathedrals of social language whose cornerstone is the rectangle in your pocket. The words and the alert sounds swirl around you and you know how to read them and hear them because our culture—that we made—taught you how. We were the first generation to spend two hours typing at our closest friends instead of finishing our homework, parsing and analyzing and worrying over “u were so funny in class today” or “nah lol youre pretty cool”…AIM showed us how

> to live online, for good and for ill. We all live our whole lives in text chains and group threads now. We plan every hangout, we send every news article, we proclaim every relationship in the river of text it taught us to sail. Honestly, that river has been a little scary lately. Instant messaging, once a special thrill, now sets the texture of our common life." (Meyer 2017)

The undercurrent of Meyer's piece is that the state we find ourselves in now, "instant messaging" being, for better or worse, the basis on which our lives are lived, is a natural progression from AIM being something that so many people resonated with. This thing that once required sitting at a desk on a computer to use, was so cool and so captivating that of course we now find ourselves, after intense technological development of course, wanting to always have it with us. The problem is, when you have a service or tech that everyone is always connected to, the buddy list has pivoted from a group of people that happen to be online at the same time as you, to everyone.

The asynchronous nature of AIM and first-generation instant messengers is now gone. Sure, unlike a phone call or video chat, texting and messaging do not necessitate an instant reaction, but a semi-immediate reaction is expected. Modern day messaging is at once asynchronous and synchronous, it sits in this uncomfortable middle ground of place and no place. The literal physical place of needing to be on the computer is of course gone, but also the mindset place of: "I am going to go online and talk to my friends.' After an intense AIM conversation, or even midway through, you were able to come up with a plausible either legitimate or illegitimate excuse to step away for a bit, that did not totally torpedo your social cache with the person or people you were talking to. You could leave the physical space of your computer, and the mental state of conversing intensely (or even not intensely) and go do something else for a while. I guess the other person could have called you, but you did not always have all your AIM buddy's phone numbers. For younger people, this usually meant

calling the landline house phone of whoever you were going at it with, and having to get past Cerberus in the form of parents on both ends of a phone call. Today, if you don't respond to a text in a reasonable amount of time, people jump to a conclusion such as: you have a problem with them that will cause some sort of irreparable damage, you are actively ignoring them on purpose (which, yes, this is exactly what you are doing, but that's ok!) or insert some other sort of apocalyptic thought here. Even in a low stakes interaction, not responding in a timely fashion is seen as a faux pas.

Going back to Schroeder at the top of this section, modern social media, and yes iMessage/WhatsApp/SMS texting are social media, is predicated on immediacy and monitoring. The simple act of sending someone a message and knowing that they will feel obligated to respond in a timely fashion is a form of monitoring. This is not even considering the more overt forms of monitoring that networks like Instagram are built from. And because we are always logged in, this monitoring has become the defining aspect of our lives in this era.

Meyer is right, AIM conditioned us to live our lives online. But the difference now is that we can never leave.

MEDIA (and communication)

Ever since it became socially unacceptable to leave the house without carrying a cell phone on your person, screenwriters and directors who work in the horror and thriller genres have been forced to innovate. (Graham 2009)

The effect of mobile/always on as it relates to how media is produced and presented is an evergreen discourse topic. This is something different.

Writer Rich Juzwiak made a supercut in 2009 called "No Signal (and other cellular drama)" with content of over 60 horror/thriller movies attempting to create drama while grappling with the fact that most people have a cell phone with them at all times.(Juzwiak 2009) Most

frequently, the character that could benefit from making a call or sending a text to get out of a particularly sticky situation finds that "*Whoops, I have no service!*" This was a common plot device in the early 2000s, and this lazy screenwriting practice had annoyingly long legs: *Yes, we all carry this thing with all of us all the time, but we're going to totally ignore it.*

People point to a lot of media from the 1990s as being easily resolved if only everyone had a cell phone. *Home Alone* is the gold standard example, with a plot that could have been knocked out in 30 minutes. There are multiple episodes of *Seinfeld* where characters carrying cell phones could have resolved the story in seconds: "The Chinese Restaurant," "The Stranded," "The Movie," "The Bubble Boy". Mulder and Scully had cell phones in many episodes of *The X-Files*, but imagine if they had camera phones? The truth would have been found in about 45 minutes to an hour.

When a new technology or thing becomes commonplace, quickly or not, one of the first things people grapple with is, well, this thing is here, how do we handle it? It also takes a bit of time for the thing to come into its own and have generally accepted standards. In the case of tech, even landing on a generally accepted use case or cases is not instant. The internet was of course intended to be a communications device, but it took multiple generations of working through different ways of doing to arrive where we are today. It took writers a good 10 or so years to work through the issues of modern society mandating always having a cell phone on your person.

"It was once said that a person's eyes were a window to their soul," Blair says at one point in season one, as she's forwarding messages from a stolen phone to herself. "That was before people had cellphones." (Beck 2017)

Gossip Girl, of all things, did a great job of integrating cell phones into the plot. Julie Beck in *The Atlantic* writes, "This was a show in which text messages were often major plot

points, but this was before anyone had thought to depict texts as free-floating typography in a shot (an idea widely credited to *Sherlock*), which meant there were a lot of close-ups of cell phone screens." The show, about the lives of rich teenagers on the Upper East Side, and a blog that documents their escapades, needed to integrate the technology of the time to have any shot at being believable.

> "The teens of *Gossip Girl* had codependent, toxic relationships with their phones in a way that would be intimately familiar to many people now, even those who aren't constantly living in fear of their personal lives being blogged about… And all the characters, however they may have hated the blog, still read it regularly. This is a more extreme version of how anybody today might engage in Facebook-stalking, or other digital dirt-gathering, on people in their lives, even as they might worry about what's discoverable about themselves online." (Beck 2017)

Having Serena, Blair and co mediate their conflicts while ignoring that phones existed would have been insane. They also had to work around the fact that mobile web browsers were not as robust as today, so the characters would frequently receive cell phone alerts (what were they? Texts? How? Whatever.) about the *Gossip Girl* blog dishing hot goss. Truly Ahead of its Time™.

"*Gossip Girl* was a show about ultra-privileged teens and their infinitely morphing romantic entanglements and high-society social battles. But it was also a show about lives lived in the spotlight of the internet, in the liminal era just before most of America dove headfirst into palm-sized screens." The show deftly threaded the needle on the move from desktop computing to mobile computing being dominant; the characters being "always on" was the show!

In the 14 or so years since *Gossip Girl* ended, TV and mass media has of course changed. 20-25 episode dramas like GG are all but dead, (I never watched *Riverdale*, don't @

me) and media platforms have become so fragmented that there may never be another show that has the space — and more importantly mass viewer attention — to work through post-phone or whatever is next. I really hope we get movies where people are sitting around putting on and taking off VR goggles for an extended period of time.

Come to think of it, the next tech driven drama will probably be a series of 200 vertical, short form videos.

xoxo

This is all to say that we are again at the precipice of another tech inflection point. Only this time, people do not really know what that inflection is going to be. We have not reached "post phone" yet, everything still revolves around the smartphone. Yes, software has changed, how we interact with data on these devices has changed, communication methods have of course changed, but we haven't had that get up from the desk moment.

This R&D stage of where we go from here, like many things with technology, is dominated by the extremes. There are those that want to continue full steam ahead with always on, continuing to blur the lines between online and not. AR and other wearables come to mind here. Others are calling for an end to always on, or at least a big break pump with some startups developing feature phones (aka Dumb Phones) that only allow for basic calling, SMS texting and email. Other products and services such as the newly in vogue AI voice assistants could also fall into this category.

As discussed above, how we communicate is at the heart of this issue. Is the dissolution of the place of online into our lives in general an inevitably that we not only accept but want to keep pressing forward? Younger people may be pushing back against this, albeit slightly, in the form of the return to feature phones, and interestingly the push towards more physical and personal media such as vinyl records. Interviewed by *VinylMePlease*, a record of the month club

and vinyl reseller, 24 year old Tristan Simone stated: “An album is so much more than the music — it’s the cover art, the credits, the art design, the colors, the smell of the paper, the story behind the art, etc. It’s something that I can collect, and that identifies my character.” (Griffith & Nguyen 2021) This is not to say we will totally return to records and other physical media as dominant forms, but it highlights the want for something more personalized, an alternative to the endless lists of songs on streaming services.

In *Mapping the Rise of the iPhone*, author Ginette Verstraete states that “In this process of customisation in which the user is invited to personalise the blank slate as she or he sees fit, the integration into our daily lives is greatly enhanced.” (Verstraete 2014) This idea of customization and personalization needs to be a major focus as we begin the move to the next generation of personal computing. This can allow for a melding of both worlds, those who want to be always on can continue to be, and those who want to take a step back are able to make that choice as well, without being totally left behind. Joe Hollier, the co-founder of startup Light, explains the companies rational behind making his company developing a feature phone “What we’re trying to do with the Light phone isn’t to create a dumb phone, but to create a more intentional phone — a premium, minimal phone — which isn’t inherently anti-technology, But it’s about consciously choosing how and when to use which aspects of technology that add to my quality of life.” (Mays 2023)

One size fits all is a rut we fell into with technology, not an inevitability of continuing development. Maybe we will never get up from the desk again but will simply be able to define what that desk means for ourselves.

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