The power of social media to burrow dramatically into our everyday lives as well as the near ubiquity of new technologies such as mobile phones has forced us all to conceptualize the digital and the physical; the on- and off-line.

And some have a bias to see the digital and the physical as separate; what I am calling **digital dualism**. Digital dualists believe that the digital world is “virtual” and the physical world “real.” This bias motivates many of the critiques of sites like Facebook and the rest of the social web and I **fundamentally think this digital dualism is a fallacy**. Instead, I want to argue that the digital and physical are increasingly meshed, and want to call this opposite perspective that implodes atoms and bits rather than holding them conceptually separate **augmented reality**.

In a 2009 post titled “Towards Theorizing An Augmented Reality,” I discussed geo-tagging (think Foursquare or Facebook Places), street view, face recognition, the Wii controller and the fact that sites like Facebook both
impact and are impacted by the physical world to argue that “digital and material realities dialectically co-construct each other.” This is opposed to the notion that the Internet is like the Matrix, where there is a “real” (Zion) that you leave when you enter the virtual space (the Matrix) - an outdated perspective as Facebook is increasingly real and our physical world increasingly digital.

I have used this perspective of augmentation to critique dualism when I see it. For instance, last year I posted a rebuttal to the digital-dualist critique of so-called “slacktivism” that claimed “real” activism is being traded for a cyber-based slacker activism. No, cyber-activism should be seen in context with physical world activism and how they interact. Taken alone, yes, much of the cyber-activism would not amount to much. But used in conjunction with offline efforts, it can be powerful. And, of course, my point is much, much easier to make with the subsequent uprisings in the Arab world that utilize both digital and physical organizing. This augmented dissent will be a topic for another post.

Recently, I have critiqued “cyborg anthropologist” Amber Case for her use of Turkle’s outdated term “second self” to describe our online presence. My critique was that conceptually splitting so-called “first” and “second” selves creates a “false binary” because “people are enmeshing their physical and digital selves to the point where the distinction is becoming increasingly irrelevant.” [I’ll offer my own take for what that digital presence should be called in a soon-to-come post.]

But the dualism keeps rolling in. There are the popular books that typically critique social media from the digital dualist perspective. Besides Turkle’s Alone Together, there is Carr’s The Shallows, Morozov’s The Net Delusion, Bauerlein’s The Dumbest Generation, Keen’s The Cult of the Amateur, Siegel’s Against the Machine, Lanier’s You Are Not a Gadget, and the list goes on (we can even include the implicit argument in the 2010 blockbuster movie The Social Network). All of these argue that the problem
with social media is that people are trading the rich, physical and real nature of face-to-face contact for the digital, virtual and trivial quality of Facebook. The critique stems from the systematic bias to see the digital and physical as separate; often as a zero-sum tradeoff where time and energy spent on one subtracts from the other. **This is digital dualism par excellence. And it is a fallacy.**

I am proposing an alternative view that states that our reality is both technological and organic, both digital and physical, all at once. We are not crossing in and out of separate digital and physical realities, ala *The Matrix*, but instead live in one reality, one that is augmented by atoms and bits. And our selves are not separated across these two spheres as some dualistic “first” and “second” self, but is instead an augmented self. A Haraway-like cyborg self comprised of a physical body as well as our digital Profile, acting in constant dialogue. Our Facebook profiles reflect who we know and what we do offline, and our offline lives are impacted by what happens on Facebook (e.g., how we might change our behaviors in order to create a more ideal documentation).

Most importantly, research demonstrates what social media users already know: we are not trading one reality for another at all, but, instead, **using sites like Facebook and others actually increase offline interaction.** This is not zero-sum dualism. As the famous *Network Society* theorist Manuel Castells stated earlier this month,

> Nobody who is on social networks everyday (and this is true for some 700 million of the 1,200 million social network users) is still the same person. It’s an online/offline interaction, not an esoteric virtual world.

None of this is to say that social media and the web should not be critiqued. Indeed, it should be, and I hope to do that work myself. However, critiques of
social media should begin with the idea of augmented reality. **Is a reality augmented by digitality a good thing?** My job with this post is not to answer that question, but to help make it possible.
The IRL Fetish

Nathan Jurgenson

The deep infiltration of digital information into our lives has created a fervor around the supposed corresponding loss of logged-off real life. Each moment is oversaturated with digital potential: Texts, status updates, photos, check-ins, tweets, and emails are just a few taps away or pushed directly to your buzzing and chirping pocket computer — anachronistically still called a “phone.” Count the folks using their devices on the train or bus or walking down the sidewalk or, worse, crossing the street oblivious to drivers who themselves are bouncing back and forth between the road and their digital distractor. Hanging out with friends and family increasingly means also hanging out with their technology. While eating, defecating, or resting in our beds, we are rubbing on our glowing rectangles, seemingly lost within the infostream.

Subscribe to The New Inquiry for $2/month and get Vol. 6 “Game of Drones” today! If the hardware has spread virally within physical space, the software is even more insidious. Thoughts, ideas, locations, photos, identities, friendships, memories, politics, and almost everything else are finding their way to social media. The power of “social” is not just a matter of the time we’re spending checking apps, nor is it the data that for-profit media companies are gathering; it’s also that the logic of the sites has burrowed far into our consciousness. Smartphones and their symbiotic social media give us a surfeit of options to tell the truth about who we are and what we are doing, and an audience for it all, reshaping norms around mass exhibitionism and voyeurism. Twitter lips and Instagram eyes: Social media is part of ourselves; the Facebook source code becomes our own code.

Predictably, this intrusion has created a backlash. Critics complain that people, especially young people, have logged on and checked out. Given the
addictive appeal of the infostream, the masses have traded real connection for the virtual. They have traded human friends for Facebook friends. Instead of being present at the dinner table, they are lost in their phones. Writer after writer laments the loss of a sense of disconnection, of boredom (now redeemed as a respite from anxious info-cravings), of sensory peace in this age of always-on information, omnipresent illuminated screens, and near-constant self-documentation. Most famously, there is Sherry Turkle, who is amassing fame for decrying the loss of real, offline connection. In the New York Times, Turkle writes that “in our rush to connect, we flee from solitude ... we seem almost willing to dispense with people altogether.” She goes on:

I spend the summers at a cottage on Cape Cod, and for decades I walked the same dunes that Thoreau once walked. Not too long ago, people walked with their heads up, looking at the water, the sky, the sand and at one another, talking. Now they often walk with their heads down, typing. Even when they are with friends, partners, children, everyone is on their own devices. So I say, look up, look at one another.

While the Cape Cod example is Kerry/Romney-level unrelatable, we can grasp her point: Without a device, we are heads up, eyes to the sky, left to ponder and appreciate. Turkle leads the chorus that insists that taking time out is becoming dangerously difficult and that we need to follow their lead and log off.

This refrain is repeated just about any time someone is forced to detether from a digital appendage. Forgetting one’s phone causes a sort of existential crisis. Having to navigate without a maps app, eating a delicious lunch and not being able to post a photograph, having a witty thought without being able to tweet forces reflection on how different our modern lives really are. To spend a moment of boredom without a glowing screen, perhaps while waiting in line at the grocery store, can propel people into a This American Life–worthy self-exploration about how profound the experience was.
Fueled by such insights into our lost “reality,” we’ve been told to resist technological intrusions and aspire to consume less information: turn off your phones, log off social media, and learn to reconnect offline. Books like Turkle’s *Alone Together*, William Powers’s *Hamlet’s Blackberry*, and the whole [Digital Sabbath movement](#) plead with us to close the Facebook tab so we can focus on one task undistracted. We should go out into the “real” world, lift our chins, and breathe deep the wonders of the offline (which, presumably, smells of Cape Cod).

But as the proliferation of such essays and books suggests, we are far from forgetting about the offline; rather we have become obsessed with being offline more than ever before. We have never appreciated a solitary stroll, a camping trip, a face-to-face chat with friends, or even our boredom better than we do now. Nothing has contributed more to our collective appreciation for being logged off and technologically disconnected than the very technologies of connection. The ease of digital distraction has made us appreciate solitude with a new intensity. We savor being face-to-face with a small group of friends or family in one place and one time far more thanks to the digital sociality that so fluidly rearranges the rules of time and space. In short, we’ve never cherished being alone, valued introspection, and treasured information disconnection more than we do now. Never has being disconnected — even if for just a moment — felt so profound.

The current obsession with the analog, the vintage, and the retro has everything to do with this fetishization of the offline. The rise of the mp3 has been coupled with a resurgence in vinyl. Vintage cameras and typewriters dot the apartments of Millennials. Digital photos are cast with the soft glow, paper borders, and scratches of Instagram’s faux-vintage filters. The ease and speed of the digital photo resists itself, creating a new appreciation for slow film photography. “[Decay porn](#)” has become a thing. At Occupy Wall Street, there was a bunch of old-time-y cameras

***
Many of us, indeed, have always been quite happy to occasionally log off and appreciate stretches of boredom or ponder printed books — even though books themselves were regarded as a deleterious distraction as they became more prevalent. But our immense self-satisfaction in disconnection is new. How proud of ourselves we are for fighting against the long reach of mobile and social technologies! One of our new hobbies is patting ourselves on the back by demonstrating how much we don’t go on Facebook. People boast about not having a profile. We have started to congratulate ourselves for keeping our phones in our pockets and fetishizing the offline as something more real to be nostalgic for. While the offline is said to be increasingly difficult to access, it is simultaneously easily obtained — if, of course, you are the “right” type of person.

Every other time I go out to eat with a group, be it family, friends, or acquaintances of whatever age, conversation routinely plunges into a discussion of when it is appropriate to pull out a phone. People boast about their self-control over not checking their device, and the table usually reaches a self-congratulatory consensus that we should all just keep it in our pants. The pinnacle of such abstinence-only smartphone education is a game that is popular to talk about (though I’ve never actually seen it played) wherein the first person at the dinner table to pull out their device has to pay the tab. Everyone usually agrees this is awesome.

What a ridiculous state of affairs this is. To obsess over the offline and deny all the ways we routinely remain disconnected is to fetishize this disconnection. Author after author pretends to be a lone voice, taking a courageous stand in support of the offline in precisely the moment it has proliferated and become over-valorized. For many, maintaining the fiction of the collective loss of the offline for everyone else is merely an attempt to construct their own personal time-outs as more special, as allowing them to rise above those social forces of distraction that have ensnared the masses. “I am real. I am the thoughtful human. You are the automaton.” I am reminded of a line from a recent essay by Sarah Nicole Prickett: that we are
“so obsessed with the real that it’s unrealistic, atavistic, and just silly.” How have we come to make the error of collectively mourning the loss of that which is proliferating?

In great part, the reason is that we have been taught to mistakenly view online as meaning not offline. The notion of the offline as real and authentic is a recent invention, corresponding with the rise of the online. If we can fix this false separation and view the digital and physical as enmeshed, we will understand that what we do while connected is inseparable from what we do when disconnected. That is, disconnection from the smartphone and social media isn’t really disconnection at all: The logic of social media follows us long after we log out. There was and is no offline; it is a lusted-after fetish object that some claim special ability to attain, and it has always been a phantom.

Digital information has long been portrayed as an elsewhere, a new and different cyberspace, a tendency I have coined the term “digital dualism” to describe: the habit of viewing the online and offline as largely distinct. The common (mis)understanding is experience is zero-sum: time spent online means less spent offline. We are either jacked into the Matrix or not; we are either looking at our devices or not. When camping, I have service or not, and when out to eat, my friend is either texting or not. The smartphone has come to be “the perfect symbol” of leaving the here and now for something digital, some other, cyber, space. To be clear, the digital and physical are not the same, but we should aim to better understand the relationship of different combinations of information, be they analog or digital, whether using the technologies of stones, transistors, or flesh and blood. Also, technically, bits are atoms, but the language can still be conceptually useful.

But this idea that we are trading the offline for the online, though it dominates how we think of the digital and the physical, is myopic. It fails to capture the plain fact that our lived reality is the result of the constant interpenetration of the online and offline. That is, we live in an augmented
reality that exists at the intersection of materiality and information, physicality and digitality, bodies and technology, atoms and bits, the off and the online. It is wrong to say “IRL” to mean offline: *Facebook is real life.*

Facebook doesn’t curtail the offline but depends on it. What is most crucial to our time spent logged on is what happened when logged off; it is the fuel that runs the engine of social media. The photos posted, the opinions expressed, the check-ins that fill our streams are often anchored by what happens when disconnected and logged-off. The Web has everything to do with reality; it comprises real people with real bodies, histories, and politics. It is the fetish objects of the offline and the disconnected that are not real.

Those who mourn the loss of the offline are blind to its prominence online. When Turkle was walking Cape Cod, she breathed in the air, felt the breeze, and watched the waves with Facebook in mind. The appreciation of this moment of so-called disconnection was, in part, a product of online connection. The stroll ultimately was understood as and came to be fodder for her op-ed, just as our own time spent not looking at Facebook becomes the status updates and photos we will post later. Turkle takes for granted not only her Cape Cod cottage but also her access to high-profile op-ed space, blinding her to others’ similar need for media to declare how meaningful our lives are.

Subscribe to *The New Inquiry* for $2/month and get Vol. 6 “Game of Drones” today. The clear distinction between the on and offline, between human and technology, is queered beyond tenability. It’s not real unless it’s on Google; pics or it didn’t happen. We aren’t friends until we are Facebook friends. We have come to understand more and more of our lives through the logic of digital connection. Social media is more than something we log into; it is something we carry within us. We can’t log off.

Solving this digital dualism also solves the contradiction: We may never fully log off, but this in no way implies the loss of the face-to-face, the slow, the
analog, the deep introspection, the long walks, or the subtle appreciation of life sans screen. We enjoy all of this more than ever before. Let’s not pretend we are in some special, elite group with access to the pure offline, turning the real into a fetish and regarding everyone else as a little less real and a little less human.

- *Fear of Screens*
- *View From Nowhere*
- *Permission Slips*