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Summer 2015 Directive – Part 1 – Me Online

First thoughts

Laptop screen, Facebook, gravatars/avatars (of friend's profiles online), mobile phone (where I tend to access these networks), invisible wires, friends, groups, sharing, creativity.

Early Experiences

I remember being introduced to BBC computers at school – black and white, small monitors with curved screens. I took Computing at school to Higher and I remember learning how to create simple programs such as listing the seven dwarves and seven chores and getting the computer to generate a different task each day for each dwarf. It was where I learnt about the internal workings of a computer, binary, file storage, disk defragmentation etc but it all seemed quite far removed from me and I wasn't sure how useful it would be in the 'real' world; it didn't fire me up with any kind of passion for computers as such or make me want to study further. These computers weren't connected to the internet.

Subsequently I learnt to type on a special kind of computer in an Office & Information Studies class with all the keys on the keyboards covered up so you had to learn to touch-type.

In my last year or so at school (around 1996/97) they got Apple Mac computers in a refurbished computer room that was bright and airy. Apple were using their rainbow apple logo at the time and it was on these I learnt about the internet and conducted very basic searches for information for some of my other classes, i.e. an image to draw in Art or researching facts for an English or History assignment. I don't remember it being 'Google' as a search engine, though it could have been.

There was also a school messenger service that was my first introduction to electronic messaging/forums and I would message friends in other years/classes with plans for meeting up later or the weekend in a very basic way (because obviously there were no mobile phones!)

During this time my Dad got a desktop computer which I would use for typing up ideas and stories (he was an accountant so used it for that with Excel). I also learnt (not sure where) how to access the internal memory of the computer using basic .Dos commands and would play around with that thinking I was very clever. I even bought some PC games but they were very basic and slow and required typing in commands to get the characters to do anything.

There was no thought (or even availability?) of getting an internet connection (and we also lived in a very rural area).

After leaving school I got a job as an Office Junior so was then using a computer for Word Processing and Spreadsheets in a formal setting away from school. I was able to type and all of my computer skills improved and I was 'the one in the know' in the office about how to get different effects in MS Word for documents etc. There was still no 'need' for the internet and I don't recall anyone mentioned it or using it at that time. This was 1997.

I then worked for a company who made information available online, however I had nothing to do with it and it seemed like some faraway, out-there place that no-one was really involved in, or at least, a select few. Most companies/services didn't have websites and so there was no real pull to use the internet.

When I went to college in 1999 we had to conduct research online and it was then I started to use the internet a bit more – because I had to and it was encouraged. I still don't remember it being Google, and it almost seemed like a bit of a drag to trek to the college library where there were less than 10 computers so as a class we took it in turns. It was at this time I got an email address for the first time though it was used in a very ad-hoc way and I didn't receive anything much, just 'forwards' and jokes from friends who were also just in the early stages of being online. The internet formed a very small portion of our time/teaching at college although as time progressed we were encouraged to use it more and of course we heard about companies using CAD.

Around this time I started going out with someone a bit older than me and he had a home computer and dial-up internet connection. I tended to use the computer at his house instead of at college and did research for fashion brands like River Island and Monsoon. My boyfriend was interested in politics and became involved and very active in online forums. It felt very intrusive because I quickly realised there was never 'an end' to these forums (even then!) as people were posting on them all the time. He became addicted to them and it put me off the whole concept of 'the internet'. This was also in the days when companies such as BT would offer 'free' internet through the night from 8pm until 8am or something similar, so he would sit up into the early hours reading and commenting on information online. I suppose this was the precursor to mobile phones that now command our attention more than they should.

Daily Routines/Now

Now I have my own laptop (but I don't generally take it out and about), and I have a smartphone and am in the 'always on' world.

I read many blogs (too many to mention) and am involved in huge online communities, all creative or related to blogging and predominantly female, where we connect with each other on Facebook and Instagram, sharing work and information and acting like any off-line community: building each other up, offering support, help, tips, resources, sympathy, etc.

It's a network of like-minded people who we each think of as friends and I think this is where the coin 'finding your tribe' stems from. Many of these people (actually most of them) I have never met and may *never* meet, as they are from all over the world such as Australia, America, South Korea, Russia, etc, yet I 'speak' and interact with them online most days (i.e. more than other friends or friends I've known for much longer and who live near to me but who I rarely see).

I guess these online connections are a step (or a few steps) on from the initial idea of the forums my ex-boyfriend was so glued to, yet I do try to ration my time on them as it can spiral out of control.

The way I manage this is only checking at certain times (early morning, late evening for example), and by turning off automatic notifications.

I haven't attended a course specifically to learn how to use the internet because that has happened organically through daily life and work requirements. I now bank online, manage things like energy accounts, TV, etc and I do shop online for certain things (books, gifts that I know people want) but I prefer to shop in person for clothes and shoes because I need to try things on and hate the hassle of sending things back.

I've noticed that certain retailers have said they are going to scale back their physical shopping environments in favour of their online spaces and click and collect desks (John Lewis) and that Marks and Spencer's now prefer you to search or order in their stores via an iPad. I'm not sure how I feel about that as I'd rather just do it from home and I fear it may alienate customers who are not able/willing to use newer technologies?

My husband and I have both fallen into the habit of 'double screening' – using our phones while watching TV. I hate it actually and have recently started turning my phone onto 'Do Not Disturb' mode in the evening otherwise you become a slave to beeps and notifications like a Pavlovian dog. I hate that every time I turn around to share the joke or what has happened in a film or TV programme, my husband has missed it as he's scrolling through Ebay or something else. When I ask him what he is doing he always replies 'nothing' which makes it even more frustrating. I tend to only respond to direct messages rather than passive activity if I'm doing something else. I think this passive activity and always turning to our phones for support – to check for messages or to see if anyone has 'liked' anything of ours, has become a problem for us as a society. I hate the almost magnetic pull of it myself, but feel a bit helpless because everything I put out there happens online and that's where the engagement is. There is also the self-imposed agony of feeling the need to 'catch –up' if you miss the original discussions and that becomes overwhelming. I would truly feel lost if I lost my phone or left the house without it for a day – if meet-up plans changed with friends then I wouldn't know! (Another modern-day issue that years ago would never occur because if you arranged to meet someone at x time, you had to be there.)

I got a free Fitbit to track fitness, weight and sleep goals but can't bear the idea of something tracking me in that way, no matter what the apparent benefits are. My husband had already bought one and said he was going to use it every day and it would be great, however he lost interest and stopped using it a few weeks in.

I think wearable textiles will have their use in certain applications – actual medical care for example or with infants/children, but for more lifestyle issues and passive use, they are not for me and they tap into the 'Big Brother' is watching mentality where I feel corporations/companies/governments already know too much about us already.

I don't read the news online and prefer to use the internet for research, information, updating my own websites, selling online (both Ebay and creative/handmade environments such as Etsy, Folksy and Society6) and for inspiration and sharing.

I have often taken part in projects where the use of social media performs an accountability function, i.e. the 100 day project where you could create your own project and hashtag, but whatever it was, you had to post each day on Instagram (for 100 days). It brought you into contact with the whole '100 day' community which I enjoyed for discovering other creatives to follow. I also took part in a sketching challenge (TinkerSketch) for the month of February this year, where the

creator posts a list of words to inspire a sketch and each day people respond by posting their sketch and using the unique hashtag of that community. It really does work for accountability!

Being a part of these kinds of communities and networks has really enriched my life and opened up new ideas and career paths for me. I rediscovered my love of drawing through the TinkerSketch challenge.

Having access to your 'tribe' also means you have access to support 24/7 because everyone is in different places and time zones so there is always someone online. Seeing someone 'like' and comment on something you've uploaded to Instagram or a private group is a great feeling that feeds into a basic human need for connection, recognition and approval. Sometimes social networks are blamed for having the opposite effect – causing depression or FOMO (fear of missing out) but I think that's why you need to be careful which groups you choose to be a part of. My favourite groups are private and involve creativity or having taken part in a specific course or programme before being able to join so it's like-minded people rather than just 'friends' or 'colleagues' that may have wildly differing views.

I also try to post positive, inspirational things only and don't get involved in discussions about politics, religion or highly controversial things online. My parents worry about 'trolls' that seem to plague sites like Twitter, but I hope that by sharing happy and positive things with the best intentions then there's little scope for being trolled (perhaps I am naïve). I've made my online activities sound rather bland perhaps, but that's not it at all. It's more about using your voice in a clever way and getting across a message without striving to shock. I hope that makes sense.

Online Identity

I use both my real name and an alias. I own the domain name of my name and at one point had an online business so it was important to use my real name. I now use the same alias across all social media and on sites like Twitter you can still use your real name too.

I find naming things very difficult and I once spent a few months thinking up a name for a new blog I wanted to start. It was up and running for a month or so and then a close friend started up a blog with a very, very similar name which really upset me. I can always use my actual name but in this instance, taking my alias name felt worse? It bothered me so much it has changed how I interact with the person in question, and another friend suggested that although copying is a form of flattery, true creative people strive to be unique. It could have been a coincidence of course, but I find that doubtful as I had shared my page where she would have seen it.

I have plans for early 2016 to change my online presence back to my own name to escape the tainted associations the alias name now holds for me. That wouldn't have happened with my own name.

The fact I have experienced this does make me concerned for more damaging/malicious identity theft online though this is the world we live in and if I want to curate my online presence that I have to put myself out there. I am however very careful about what I share in terms of images of myself and never give personal details that would particularly identify me or my husband. I have the incorrect name of the town where I live on my Facebook profile and I'm happy about that. After holidays or trips away, I share the link to my blog where I have uploaded the images rather than directly upload images to sites such as Facebook (to avoid them owning the copyright of the images

or being able to use them without my permission). It's a different situation on Pinterest/Instagram but you have to weigh up the pros/cons.

There are definitely things I would tell MO that I wouldn't share online. Like the story above with my friend and the name of my site, and probably most of the memories and stories I have already written about in the years I've been a Mass Observer: my opinions on things, how I voted in the Referendum and also in the General Election.

I am quite a private person in many ways. It feels like a bit of an oxymoron to say all that while maintaining two personal blogs and the fact I will be sending this file electronically!

Internet and the past

I have used the internet to search for old schools, the pub my Granddad ran, the places I've lived, school friends, details I needed. I find it interesting and a bit of a spiral down the rabbit hole, but often I've found the crucial information has eluded me or been disappointing when the reality is different from my memory I had.

In some ways you should never go back – even on the internet. I do appreciate the fact that poems and quotes are available online so you can enjoy them easily and quickly without having to visit a library. I recently quoted a Keat's poem in a blog post and wouldn't have known the details otherwise and perhaps wouldn't even have used it in the end as it would have proved too difficult to track down.

Many people/organisations have spent a lot of time creating and maintaining archives of information so I'm very grateful I can access that information very quickly.

It's also due to sites like Facebook that I've been able to reconnect with old school friends who I had lost touch with as the internet and its resources were not available at the time I left school and also the area I went to school in.

My life would be different without the internet, definitely. I have connected with people across the world, I've discovered creative practices and things that I love, I've set up my own business online, I've curated an online presence, learnt new skills, been part of multiple communities and made genuine friendships with people from all over the world. I've been inspired to travel to places and I've reconnected with family on the other side of the world too.

I take online courses all the time and have been able to do things like make a Roman blind by watching videos on YouTube. I stream music online while I work – right now I'm listening to Mozart. I translate things online from foreign friends and use currency conversion sites. The internet feels like a playground for the curious mind.

My main concern with it is scammers and phishing attempts, viruses, hackers stealing information from genuine companies who I have entrusted my information to (or had no choice to share information with if I wanted to buy from them or do business with them), and for the people who share so many images of their children on Facebook and personal blogs.

I don't think it is appropriate at all to post so many images of children and babies online – no to mention boring for others! These images should be sent via email to family if that is the reason for sharing, or some other means (hard copy in the post?). I hate to see it and worry that when these

children are teenagers and adults, they will have a harder time than I did having already accrued a digital footprint that they have had no control over.

I don't think that is fair or right and I would never do that to a child if I had/have any. To me, if something is online, or 'on the internet' somewhere, then it is in the public domain, accessible to all no matter what the privacy policies of sites say, and most importantly, **it can never be undone**.

That should be enough to scare anyone!

Media

I think the differences between a blog and a letter/diary is that a blog is public and is not just shared with one other person (or no-one) and cannot be retracted. I still write letters and I write by hand from the heart and include more detail and emotion than I ever would in a blogpost, or even an email.

Tweets are for fun, sharing information or promotion.

Texts are for exchanging information quickly and succinctly.

Email you can expand a bit more.

Skype/Video chat etc is for when you can't be there in person, like if family or a partner is on the other side of the world. It creates a connection that would not be possible otherwise though it can never take the place of real-life interaction.

As such I think I am more guarded in electronic communications and even in a video (as elements of 'how do I look' come into it) whereas in a letter or even a text, it feels more personal as it is intended for just that one person. The internet is for everyone and so that makes the difference.

NB. I've only recently found out about 'The Internet of Things' and what it means. The whole concept is quite scary; that inanimate household objects will have so much information on you as a person, and your preferences, and will also be very vulnerable to cyber-attack. Imagine your fridge ganging up on you or your house security system not letting you in?

Special Task: Search my name online

I did use Google for this task, and I have done this before actually, about a year ago for a creative challenge inspired by the book '642 things to write about'.

There were: 'About 488,000 results (0.58 seconds)'

Firstly, I was pleased to see that on the first page of results there was only one entry that was actually me, and it was via my blog. The others were not me, but it was interesting to see who shares my name.

On the second page there was nothing related to me and on the third page, three entries. None of the images were me which I am also pleased about.

Like last year, I was surprised by the number of other people with my name who are interested in the same (quite niche) things as me, such as textiles. Is there anything in a name that links those who share it? Maybe. I think it would be quite difficult for someone to find the 'real me' out of the

list though and the fact that there are a few people that *sound* like they could be me, it would add to the confusion. I like the idea of being active online but also slightly incognito.

Topically, in a blog group I am in, there was an assignment to write about the concept of 'PLUGGED versus UNPLUGGED' and what that means to us. I've included it here, having removed any elements that might make me identifiable. It was a very interesting discussion, particularly because it was taking place online:
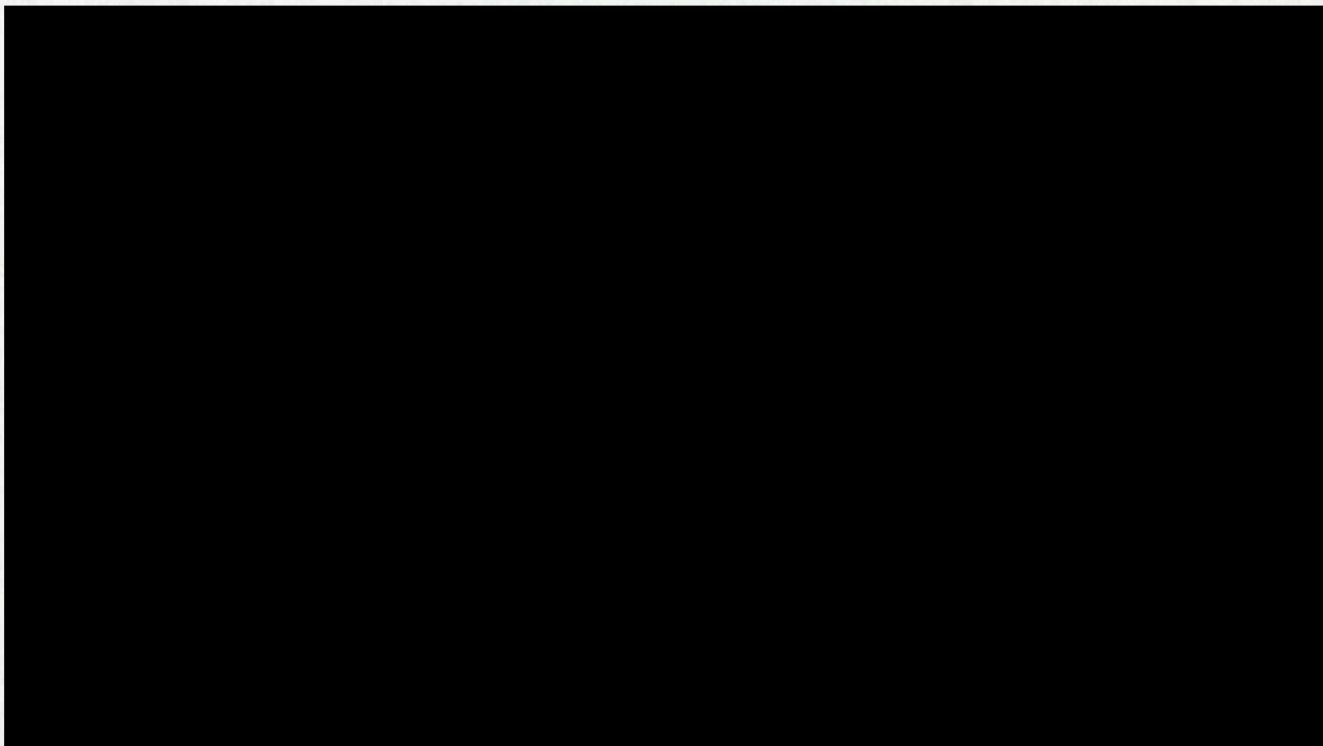
Sometimes it's hard for me to remember a time without social media, the internet, a mobile phone; that sense of being 'connected' all the time to...everything.
To remember a time when I wasn't ruled like one of Pavlov's dogs by the relentless *ping!* and *beep!* of notifications and messages via multiple interactive platforms.

Digital communication is great and it's not.

It makes life quicker and it makes life slower.

It makes me feel part of something and it makes me feel isolated.

It gives me a buzz and it zaps my energy.

I can't live without my phone; am constantly picking it up, checking my favourite social media sites (Pinterest and Instagram) and waking up to notifications stacked on top of each other in a never-ending list.

It feels like I can never reach the end.

My inbox is cluttered with newsletters that I want to read, but if I read them all I'd do nothing else. So instead they linger, colour-coded, filed, forgotten, starred in a hierarchy, gnawing at my consciousness.

I've unsubscribed from things.

I've turned off notifications from online groups.

I've got multiple folders and folders within folders.

I have rules.

But, but, the need to consume, to read, to absorb and then deal with each email in turn is so completely addictive I have to ration myself.

Just another 5 minutes…OK 15…
'If I get to the end of X task, I'll 'treat' myself to reading that long newsletter that I always enjoy…'

Really? Is that what life has become, a battle to get through the omnipresent intangible chatter of words and images on a screen?

I've read about people who have taken the final step: removed themselves from social media, do not own (have never owned?) email accounts, or even more rebelliously, have hit 'delete' on their entire inbox.

Wow. I want to be able to do that, I really do, but…I can't.
Because I might miss out on something important, something I really need to know. **FOMO** strikes again.

If you divide the volume of communications 'in' by the hours available in the day, the equation becomes impossible, the idea of 'catching up' ridiculous. So what to do?

A lot of the time I choose to remain oblivious to the news, to my Facebook feed, to the latest joke or link that I've been sent; not because I don't care, but because I can no longer *deal with* the amount of information that comes at me each day. I have to censor it and by that I mean censor myself.

I ration my exposure to the *plugged-in-always-on-world* like I'm an addict, and to do that I've found myself deploying my phone's **'Do Not Disturb'** function during the day as well as at night.

It's not that I don't like keeping in touch, it's just...sometimes it's nice to take a step back and reclaim *my* time, make time to process my own thoughts for a while. But then I add to it too through my own links when I choose to share them, through the words I share on this blog, through the act of living and interacting where the lines between reality and online become blurred.

The fast pace of the (digital) world is eroding concentration spans too, making us all less patient, and I've noticed those things in myself.

If a page doesn't load in a second or two, I don't have time to wait, and if the internet goes down for any reason – it's unthinkable really because how can you live your life effectively in the western world without the internet these days? I know people do, but when it happens to me and those around me it's like the end of the world, creating stress and prompting rage. This is the price of being plugged into technology, yet it's also given us so much.

So far I've resisted buying a Kindle in favour of a real book, and recently I've been investing in my vinyl collection rather than stream or purchase music digitally. **There is nothing wrong with those methods**, and I'm not slating them, but I like the sense of ownership, the tangible reality, the feel and smell of a book or record in my hands. And I like to take back control and 'unplug', sometimes for a whole weekend; I always feel the better for it.

For people who don't use the internet (like my Mum!), it's harder to get good deals for everyday things or even buy from or communicate with a company at all, and I think that's a bit sad. It's like forcing people to 'plug into' something that they don't want to.

So for me the plugged v unplugged debate is about **finding my own balance**, something I can be happy with and that suits my lifestyle.

That means some days completely plugged in, writing away on my laptop, researching online, instagramming teapots and sunsets while other days are spent completely unplugged while I scrapbook or draw or read or bake or wander the streets of my city feeling inspired, seeing things IRL.

It's not exactly the dream of living the '**slow movement**' that I aspire to, but it's something, it's my way, and I'm clinging to it.

(Interestingly, the novel I'm writing is set in a time not so long ago when the internet wasn't a 'thing' and most people didn't own a mobile phone. Crazy eh?)

Maybe one day I'll be brave enough to hit 'delete' on the whole plugged-in world.

Maybe I won't want to.
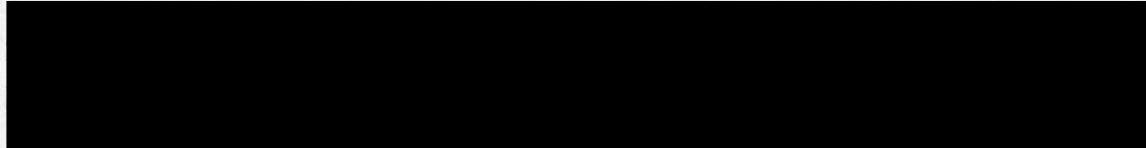
I had 17 comments in response to this and the other articles posted by the group were also very interesting.