The "Always On" Demands of Digital Technologies: Finding Space to Turn Off

Stephanie Hedge

It is mid-July 2022, and the sun beats down on my shoulders as a I pace between the bird and small mammal houses at the St. Louis Zoo, fielding a Zoom call with my dean and department chair to navigate a COVID-related staffing crisis. "We have no instructors for a quarter of our composition sections," I say with growing impatience, watching my 13-month-old son in the distance as he sees a panda for the first time. More than two years after COVID first forced my institution online, we were still feeling the repercussions—this staffing crisis was created by pandemic conditions, and I am in triage mode. My son eats an ice cream cone as I pull up documents on my phone app. "If you'd refer to the appendices in the report I prepared," I sigh into my wireless headphones, absently wiping sticky hands.

It is the time of COVID, and I am always on.

Understanding the relentless connectivity afforded by emergent digital and social medias as being "always on"—tethered by our mobile devices into a state of perpetual accessibility—is not a new idea. Sherry Turkle uses the word "tethered" to describe early technology adopters who were so connected to their digital devices and emerging internet networks that they were, effectively, cyborgs. Turkle uses the tethered framing to describe the intimacy and physicality of an invisible force in our lives—we hold the devices that connect us to our wider networks, which are alive through our interactions with them. As these devices are integrated into our lives with increasing intimacy and obligation—as they become what Rainie and Wellman describe as "body appendages" (12)—the more users are thrust into a state of being "always on," always connected.

In her germinal 2008 text *Always On*, Naomi S. Baron argues for the always on individual, the features of our mobile technologies allow us to "control the volume" of our interactions. She posits that a ringing landline phone used to be a "drop everything" signal, while digital tools allow us to *choose* the volume of our conversations: constantly checking email on a phone is a high-volume choice; muting a chat thread is a "low volume" choice, literally (31). Similarly, danah boyd opens her 2012 essay "Participating in the Always-On Lifestyle" by exploring the ways that she establishes boundaries while being always on and describes a kind of "digital sabbatical" where she sets all email messages to bounce back to the sender (71). For boyd, this strategy is an example of "artificial structures" (74) that

seek to find balance in her life between the on and the off and this sabbatical is how she controls the volume on her networks. This volume concept is important because it brings with it the reassurance that the tethered, networked, always on individual is firmly in control if they harness the digital tools available for them to exert that control.

As a digital literacies scholar and WPA, I was already "always on" before COVID, tethered to the campus networks through my laptop, my phone, my little apps. But I felt confident that I, like boyd or Baron, could control the volume of my networks—a polite fiction. But COVID put an impossible strain on this system and laid bare the lie that I was ever in control. How could I hope to control the volume of my networks when everything was turned up to 11? The early days of COVID were full of fear, grief, confusion, loss, and uncertainty, and every call, every ping, every message, every meeting, felt so necessary and crucial. We were making massive changes at rapid speed—we went from spring break one week to fully remote the next—and my instructors were teaching in a format unfamiliar to many. How could I choose to ignore the messages from the administration, who were offering what guidance they could? How could I "mute" the students who were scared, struggling, and still determined to finish out the semester?

As the WPA, I felt that I had to be the person who answered the calls. In "And So I Respond," Kaitlin Clinnin talks about the role of the writing program in/as crisis response, and the responsibility and emotional labor that falls to the writing program administrator. I felt that I had no choice but to respond (as did so many of us in this volume)—as the sole rhetoric and composition scholar at my institution, there was no one else. When the pandemic started, I was still pre-tenure, and I applied for tenure in summer 2020 (while undergoing fertility treatments and building a remote curriculum for the writing program) and the pressure of the added scrutiny of the tenure application made the volume of the crisis calls seem that much louder.

And then, the volume never got turned down. We stayed in crisis mode for weeks, then months, then years. We kept working remotely into 2021— we needed online and remote policies for the composition program; training and support for instructors; technology support for students; systems for developing belonging on a campus that students were not physically at; mental health care for students and instructors alike; and; and; and . . . The volume was stuck at 11, and being "at work" all the time, every day, became my new normal, weekends were a fiction and evenings were the best time to speak with non-traditional students. I was always at home, which meant I was also always at work. My phone stayed firmly in my hand, tethering

me inexorably to a campus that I, like my students, was both not physically at and never far from.

The trap with thinking about "always on" as a technology problem is that it is easy to blame the technology. After all, it is the affordances of technology that allow me to be tethered. Indeed, I fell into this trap when I first pitched this reflection, as I felt that I had "figured out a solution" to being always on that used the affordances of my technologies to "turn off" occasionally, reinforcing Baron and boyd's illusions of choice and volume control. I was swayed by a kind of technological determinism that sees the technology itself as the root of human behaviors and activity. We could, therefore we would. But being always on is not, inherently, a technological state: it is a social and cultural expectation, shaped and guided by the systems and institutions that we work within.

I could better understand the root of the problem when I began to think about being always on as a kind of emotional labor. The links between writing program administration and emotional labor work have been well documented—see Adams Wooten et al.'s *The Things We Carry* for a thorough exploration of this work across multiple contexts, particularly Clinnin's chapter referenced above—and this labor intersects with the demands of being "always on" in striking ways. Turkle's tethered self requires so much work to maintain. In a piece on the emotional labor of writing center directors, Rebecca Jackson, Jackie Grutsch McKinney, and Nicole I. Caswell share the experiences of "Joe," a new director. In his interviews, Joe says that he is "always on"—in this case, he means that as he walks around campus as the first tenure-track writing center director, he is constantly representing the center, and must be constantly available as a resource that is not just knowledgeable but "friendly, welcoming, and warm." Because he is using the "always on" phrase in a performative context, not technological, it highlights the inherent connection between the demands of "being on" and emotional labor—to be constantly "on" for our work networks requires a constant performing of our work selves, and for writing program administrators in particular, this constant accessibility comes with an expectation of emotional availability and crisis management.

In "The I in Internet," the first essay in her *Trick Mirror* collection, Jia Tolentino uses Erving Goffman's performance theory to explain the emotional toll of always being "on" for the virtual audience observing Turkle's tethered self, where users lack the relief of a "backstage" area to stop performing. "Worst of all," she says, "there's essentially no backstage on the internet; where the off-line audience necessarily empties out and changes over, the online audience never has to leave" (15). This is what being a WPA during the time of COVID felt like—a constant performance with no

downtime. My technology meant that I was always at work, regardless of where I was, and I felt like I had to answer every call, regardless of what I was doing. My own circumstances contributed substantially to this, thanks to a high-risk pregnancy that started in fall 2020, which meant that I spent a considerable amount of time in doctors' offices, clinics, and emergency rooms. I would answer work emails during non-stress tests, hooked up to several beeping machines. I took Zoom meetings from a hospital bed. Even as I fought to be a mother, I was always a little bit the WPA in those spaces, unable to untether myself from those networks. I could work anywhere, even a hospital bed, so I did.

I had no volume control and no backstage. And I was losing my mind. At the time, I was searching, desperately, for solutions to a problem that I could not understand as being non-technological. I knew that the constant accessibility, the constant performance as WPA, was killing me, but I blamed my phone. Maybe if I blocked out this time on my calendar, toggled this Zoom setting, set this auto-response, I would find peace. Moreover, I understood that finding this solution was a personal problem. An additional hidden trap of the technology-first framing is that the volume control metaphor implies agency and obligation from the user. If the volume was too loud, it was my fault for not being able to turn it back down. Never mind the ways that the institution was merrily stomping past any semblance of reasonable boundaries, I owned the phone, so the fault was mine for answering the call.

I had so internalized that the problem was me and my technology that, when my son was born in May 2021 and the institution did not find a replacement WPA for my parental leave, I blamed myself for continuing to do WPA work over my leave rather than the institution that failed me. In a previous draft of this piece, I wrote: "I took a meeting the same week that my son was born; I pushed a new human being out of my body and still, I was the WPA, tethered to campus through the same phone that recorded videos of my newborn." The blame here was with my phone, not the person who scheduled that meeting, and not the campus culture that expected me to attend. I couldn't see past the technology until a peer reviewer for this piece pointed out how appalling this was, and very gently told me that this was not a Taylor Swift moment: I was not the problem. It was not enough to re-frame being always on as an emotional labor or a performative problem; I needed to completely reconsider where the noise was coming from in the first place.

In "'But This is Bullshit': Enforcing Boundaries as a Pregnant WPA" (this volume), Christina M. LaVecchia writes about how the changes to her body were the catalyst for helping her to re-frame the crisis-mode work

of being a WPA during COVID—sharing her body with a new life was a reminder of the ecosystems that support and surround us, and she began to understand her WPA work as likewise part of an ecosystem. She could not solve every problem alone, and the idea that she should was "bullshit." My "technology" problem was only solved when I was able to understand the same thing: the system was broken, not me.

The thing that eventually allowed me to "turn off" was not a technological change but a work disruption. In fall 2022, I went on sabbatical and a colleague took over as WPA. In "The Joys of WPAhood," Kate Pantelides writes about the ways that parenthood "necessarily, and fruitfully, interrupts WPA work" (104), and that these interruptions create space for an "impious" change in what being a WPA can look like. For me, the interruption from my sabbatical meant a colleague—who had not weathered the eternal crisis of COVID with the volume turned to 11 and did not have the background in writing program administration that engenders sacrificial crisis response—unknowingly reestablished boundaries about when, where, and how WPA work is done, changing the systemic expectations of my role and giving me a choice about when and if I "turn off." My phone didn't need to change, my work did.

Today, I am at the zoo with my son. I will come home and keep working, but for now, my phone is silent in my purse, and together we watch the pandas play.

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