

Chapter 6

Ethics and Experimentation in The Light Phone and Google Digital Wellbeing

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‘Sorry, one second please.’ Joe Hollier interrupts himself in a phone interview as he gives directions to his driver who is navigating the streets of New York, apparently lost. Joe is the creator of The Light Phone, a deliberately designed feature phone that aims to reduce distractions by functioning as a single-purpose device for phone calls only. As he is being interviewed by Alex, one of the authors of this chapter, Joe appears distracted. While extolling the merits of The Light Phone as a single-purpose device for distraction-free activities, Joe is providing directions to his driver. The irony of Joe’s multitasking is unacknowledged by either Joe or Alex. After directing the driver for a few minutes, Joe’s attention returns to the interview: ‘Sorry, confusing roads. . . . Alright, I’m back.’

Claims about a ‘distraction epidemic’ (Twenge 2017) caused by digital platforms and devices are part of the so-called techlash that journalists, researchers, and policymakers have levelled against the technology industry. Notable Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and developers are coming to terms with their business and design practices and their implications on users (Lewis 2017). Like many tech designers, Joe Hollier is not disillusioned by digital technology per se, but rather by the ideological and socio-economic system underpinning digital technology. This system is the ‘attention economy’ where media companies, advertisers, and technology platforms treat end-user attention as a finite commodity to compete for (Crogan and Kinsley 2012). Rather than as a fungible resource extracted from individuals, attention has also been conceived in relational terms, as constituted through collective sociotechnical conditions (Citton 2017). In addition to design strategies that challenge the attention economy, individual tactics such as being mindful of time spent on platforms and devices have been adopted by an

increasing number of social media users in North America. However, in their study of Facebook users who reported adopting such mindfulness, Baym, Wagman, and Persaud (2020, 9) state that using contemplative practices to restrict social media use cannot aggregate into structural change of the attention economy: ‘Disconnective practices may help people find balance in the trap, but it cannot set them free.’

Reckoning with social media means contending with criticisms of constant connectivity from industry, institutions, and individuals as a cultural formation and their proposals to combat it. In this chapter, we analyze how two companies—a tech start-up and a tech giant—deploy experimental practices, to understand the development of technology ethics as a response to the techlash. We examine The Light Phone, contextualizing it within Google’s wider innovation ecosystem from which it was ostensibly incubated. In particular, we consider Google Digital Wellbeing Experiments, a collection of mobile applications that ‘showcase ideas and tools that help people find a better balance with technology’ (Google, n.d.). Drawing from science and technology studies, and media and cultural studies, we analyze entrepreneurial and experimental practices as doing the ‘ethical work’ of technology workers and platforms. We examine the politics and potentialities of disconnective experiments through the aesthetic and branded registers of digital lightness. We do this by situating textual analysis (Phillipov 2013) of promotional texts about The Light Phone and Google Digital Wellbeing Experiments within the scholarly literature on tech ethics and organizational experimentation. Using a developer interview with Joe Hollier as a jumping off point, we analyze The Light Phone’s promotional website. We also analyze two experimental apps from Google’s Digital Wellbeing Collection by design and invention consultancy studio Special Projects, within the context of Google Creative Lab.

We argue that the branding of disconnection as a sensation and as a concept aestheticize materiality in varying ways, enchanting disconnection within an imaginary that protects corporations from criticisms about the techlash. The branding of disconnection through sensorially rich imagery—namely, The Light Phone—creates an aperture into an intimate world, channelling public feelings about the techlash into the forms of a life. Stewart (2007) understands these channellings as ‘ordinary affects’, which are simultaneously abstract and concrete, multiplicitous and fractious, and are less tangible yet more compelling than ideologies or symbolic meanings. The branding of disconnection through stark and stylized imagery—namely, Google Paper Phone—operates like a pinhole camera, flattening the messy vitality of the techlash into a two-dimensional object. This conceptualization of disconnection is informed by conceptual art such as Marcel Duchamp’s Readymades, which involves a *relative* devaluing of the sensorial and material qualities and a focus on the ideas conveyed by mundane objects (Cray 2014). Articulating

such variations in the aestheticization of disconnection provides a way to draw out their institutional relationalities and critique their translation of public feelings into private fictions.

We begin by reviewing the literature on feature phones, technology ethics, and experimentation. We then discuss how the aesthetics and politics of The Light Phone promotional material position disconnection as a branded sensation that is suspended between memory and fantasy. The Light Phone is a world-building device that projects the textures and sensations of disconnection onto the canvas of one's desire so pleasurably, that its brand affect seems to eclipse the need to disconnect at all. Relatedly, we discuss how Google Digital Wellbeing Experiments frame disconnection as a concept to protect the conglomerate from techlash criticisms about the personal harms of constant connection. We conclude by considering the implications for experimentation in the context of disconnection and discuss the politics of alternative paradigms of disconnection that are not based on mitigating harms or maintaining balance, but on contemplation (Odell 2019) and collectivization (Natale and Treré 2020).

EXPERIMENTS IN TECH ETHICS

We are not the first to analyze the appeal of feature phones like The Light Phone. According to Portwood-Stacer (2013), it has become fashionable in urban parts of the world, such as Brooklyn, New York, to deliberately choose a feature phone over a smartphone device. Choosing an older phone is partly performative, demonstrating an aesthetic taste with regards to phones that signify 'something socially or politically meaningful about the non-user' (Portwood-Stacer 2013, 1042). The performance of wielding a feature phone also constitutes what Monahan (2015) refers to as an 'aestheticization of resistance', where the primary goal is to draw attention to an issue at hand instead of taking specific action to further change. Thorén, Edenius, Eriksson Lundström, and Kitzmann (2017) analyze The Light Phone as producing a different dichotomy between analogue and digital. Utilizing Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the assemblage, Thorén et al. (2017, 329) argue that The Light Phone allows for a type of digital non-use or analogue connectivity that establishes new boundaries between online and offline spaces: 'The Light Phone-assemblage maintains the ruling order by keeping intact the existing smartphone assemblage through an app that potentially reduces the impulse to disconnect, dissolve and resist.'

Viewing technologized non-use as an assemblage emphasizes how The Light Phone reassembles existing heterogeneous elements (such as communicative availability, physical presence, network access) as well as generates

new subjectivities (e.g. mindful technology use). In other words, The Light Phone-assemblage appears to aim to ‘fix’ the undesirable affordances associated with the smartphone assemblage. Yet Thorén et al. (2017) focus on the nostalgic appeal of The Light Phone, labelling it as a ‘predigital’ device alongside vinyl records and cassettes, despite The Light Phone operating on the latest mobile networks. In contrast, we view The Light Phone as a progression of Silicon Valley’s performance of ethical technology production. We do not believe The Light Phone predates digital production, or is a push-back against digitization per se. We argue, instead, that The Light Phone has been developed as part of tech entrepreneurs’ and platforms’ experimentation with new ways to politicize the attention of potential customers. In other words, The Light Phone is an experiment in ‘ethical’ production for users to realize a good or better life with certain types of digital technologies.

Ethics has become a premium component in Silicon Valley’s recursive cycles of product development and public relations. Tech companies in Silicon Valley routinely hire tech workers to fill designated roles as the ethical voice of their corporation, pointing out the failings of their industry in the face of public criticisms about disinformation, racial bias, and addiction that are built into digital technologies. In their interviews with such tech workers, Metcalf, Moss, and boyd (2019) state that ethics is framed as a technical problem that can be fixed by designing better systems that will triumph in the marketplace while also serving broader goals of a more just algorithmic and data-driven world. Buffered by tech solutionism and market fundamentalism, this institutionalization of ethics ‘operate[s] inside a fraught dynamic: on the one hand, attempting to resolve critical external normative claims about the core logics of the tech industry; on the other hand, doing so while fully embedded within those logics’ (Metcalf, Moss, and boyd 2019, 450).

In contrast, The Light Phone creator Joe Hollier identifies as an artist first and a tech entrepreneur second, expressing his company’s goal of building better products through the language of artistically-driven ethics. Hollier sees his company’s products as distinct from the attention-grabbing designs associated with the advertising business model that undergirds a significant number of apps. When asked about what inspired him to create a product that is designed to be used as little as possible, Hollier stated, ‘I’ve always been a critical artist and I think I’ve always been interested in how people spend their time, how they create value from experience and gives us meaning and purpose in life.’ Hollier expresses discomfort that the major business model in the technology industry is attention retention, where budding entrepreneurs are encouraged to consider ‘how many hours or minutes would [your] users spend on your app a day?’ The metric of user attention retention is one reason why Hollier considers smartphone technology to occupy an unnecessary presence in people’s everyday lives.

Hollier came up with the idea of The Light Phone while attending an entrepreneurial programme for designers called 30 Weeks. 30 Weeks came out of Google Creative Lab, a hybridized marketing, entrepreneurial incubator, and product development division of internet industry conglomerate Alphabet Inc. Based in New York City, Google Creative Lab ‘was an early bright spot for quirky thinking inside the company’ (Wilson 2019) and launched in 2009 ‘to find a bridge between technology and traditional creative expression’ (Beer 2019). The co-founder of Google Creative Lab, Robert Wong, describes its core mission as experimentation in public relations:

Our job is to manage and steward the [Google] brand, find new ways to communicate the company’s innovations, intentions and ideals, and do work of which we can all be proud. We want people ambitious and crazy enough to think we can actually change the world. (qtd. in Iezzi 2010)

One of the notable graduates of the 30 Weeks program was Hollier. The Light Phone was developed through a partnership between Hollier, an artist, and Kaiwei Tang, a product designer who met in 30 Weeks in 2014. Reflecting about his time at 30 Weeks, Hollier reveals how the designer mentality was valued by the technology conglomerate:

[They] had a hypothesis that designers can envision the future that relates to actual users and they’re able to mock that vision up . . . in a way that would inspire the engineers, investors, and other partners you might need to make that a reality. That was . . . the model that the Google Creative Lab used.

At Google Creative Lab, designers do not strictly program or develop software; but their work still revolves around technology. The ‘technological terroir’ (Messari 2018) or local technology culture at Google Creative Lab mixes marketing, design, and technology innovation together to tell stories about the possibilities of Google inventions. One of the first projects Google Creative Lab created was the ‘Parisian Love’ Super Bowl Spot in 2009, which depicted a love story entirely made by screenshots of Google searches, which inferred the ubiquity and intimacy of Google’s presence in the romantic lives of viewers. To create the advertisement, Google recruited five students from New York-based advertising and design schools that came to be known as the ‘Google 5’. This arrangement later matured into the ‘5 initiative’ where design students work inside Google Creative Lab for a year before returning to the industry.

Google Creative Lab has been called a ‘brand development think tank’ (Ryan 2013), which matches Google’s reputation as a progressive thinking company with a change-favourable corporate culture (Steiber and Alänge

2013). The experimental nature of Google Creative Lab draws similarities to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News Lab, which Zaragova-Fuster and García-Avilés (2019) claim is part of a global innovation strategy that drives the diversity and quality of the BBC's products and services. Google Creative Lab connects the seemingly disparate professions of design, software development, and marketing together. According to Wong, Google Creative Lab adopts the workflows and practices that underpin Google software development and engineering—a non-hierarchical team structure, a prototype and iterative process to develop projects, an emphasis on user experience—and applies them to the marketing process (Iezzi 2010). Doing so has enabled Google to create a formal academy out of its own shadow, where budding Google creatives and technologists can work in awareness of popular critiques of the technology conglomerate. Caldwell (2014) calls this a 'shadow academy', where media industries reflexively emulate, incorporate, and mirror the oppositional modes scholars have used in the critique of these very industries. Whether in the form of Silicon Valley tech ethics or Google Creative Lab, the shadow academy is an example of how the industry has made media theorizing part of their brand.

The shadow academy can be seen as an extension of arts-based experimentation in organizations and as part of a broader project of corporate social responsibility. Berthoin Antal, Woodilla, and Sköldbberg (2016) inform that, since the late 1990s, artists working in different mediums have collaborated with managers in large and small, public and private organizations to undertake artistic interventions or experimentations. These initiatives are motivated by diverse objectives that range from business-oriented development of employee creativity, branding, and innovation processes, to publicly oriented cultivation of corporate values beyond profit. On the one hand, managerial discourses may instrumentalize art for conservative purposes such as the improvement of existing business functions. On the other hand, technology corporations such as Facebook have more progressive purposes, orientating art in shared workspaces as possible modes of self-expression for employees to identify with (Turner 2018). Conversely, many artists look to businesses for platforms to 'critique society and to give voice to whatever lacks a voice' (Berthoin Antal et al. 2016, 4). Many artistic movements such as Futurism and the situationists strive for transformation of the social order—even if experiments can only be realized in the most limited of contexts. For this reason, Plant (2002, 40) describes artistic experimentation as 'a propaganda of the possible'.

In this sense, artistic interventions in corporate settings emerge from frictions between conservative tendencies and transformative imperatives. Berthoin Antal et al. (2016) relate these frictions to Boltanski and Chiapello's (2007) characterization of 'the new spirit of capitalism' in post-Fordism,

where artistic critiques of capitalist systems are incorporated into those very systems in ways that feed back into capital accumulation. The artistic critique of capitalism has its roots in nineteenth-century bohemian Paris and perhaps reached its cultural apotheosis in 1960s and 1970s countercultural movements where authenticity, innovation, and creative endeavour were seen as under threat from big business and mainstream society (Boltanski and Chiapello 2007). These accounts emphasize how capitalism and its critique are not binaristic but synergistic, and that consumptive forms of resistance, in fact, drive the market economy. For example, Heath and Potter (2004) state that while slow living movements imagine a radical break from mainstream culture, they nonetheless perpetuate consumer capitalism.

While corporate collaboration may blunt the force of artistic critique, artistic interventions nonetheless retain resistive potential. Beyes and Steyaert (2011) explain that this is because the potential of such projects lies not in their overt politicization, but in their reconfiguration of the doable and sayable by creating experiential openings for instability and ambiguity. Schwab (2013, 117) maintains that artworks ‘as epistemic things can never become fully transparent’ and it is this structural incompleteness that engenders meanings and inspires politics. The Light Phone is not simply a commodity, yet not quite a work of art: it is a hybrid object of artistic intervention that is ambiguous enough to create an experiential opening into a possible world that is comfortingly familiar, yet tantalizingly phantasmic.

THE LIGHT PHONE: DISCONNECTION AS SENSATION

The Light Phone is a monochromatic mobile device with a matt e-ink display (see figure 6.1) and minimal functions that, according to its website, is ‘designed to be used as little as possible’. As a consumer electronic in its second iteration, The Light Phone II focuses on core utilities such as calls, texts, and maps, while eschewing feeds, social media, advertisements, news, and email. Its website also states that The Light Phone II ‘respects users’ time and attention’, cultivating intentional use over infinite scrolls, happiness over connection (The Light Phone, n.d.). For example, its promotional video visually depicts The Light Phone II as a choice between time on screen or life in a richly sensorial world of walking your kids to school, reading books in the warmth of sun, smelling flowers along the way, and sharing home-cooked meals with loved ones. Addressing users directly, the video asks, ‘How will you choose to spend your life today?’ and ‘Is being so connected actually making us any happier?’ Within this promotional imaginary, ‘Going Light’ is a branded lifestyle populated by racially diverse users, arts and crafts, slow food and communal meals, family and the outdoors—where the texture and



Figure 6.1 The Light Phone. *Source:* Light Phone (n.d.).

tactility of The Light Phone blend seamlessly into a nostalgic lifeworld of roller skates, ceramic mugs, Polaroids, and vinyl records.

This branding does not stand in for The Light Phone as a product per se, but for ‘Going Light’ as what Arvidsson (2006) calls a propertied frame of action that provides a context in which products are used. What branding accomplishes is the ‘making and selling of immaterial things—feelings and affects, personalities and values—rather than actual goods’ (Banet-Weiser 2012, 7). The Light Phone’s branding is a propertied frame for what Stewart (2011) refers to as atmospheric attunement—a capacity to affect and be affected—that is palpable and sensory, material yet abstract. The Light Phone’s everyday scenes of purposeful characters grounded in imagined storylines provide atmospheres ‘that push a present into a composition, an expressivity, the sense of potentiality and event’ (Stewart 2011, 452). By attuning ourselves to atmospheres built up from the resonance between branded imaginaries of Going Light, popular discourses about the techlash, dreams of escape, and plans for the future, we shape public feelings around disconnection into the forms of a life.

Going Light stretches across recollections of the past and ideas about the future, everyday losses and desires, linking mediated sensations of living well with daydreams of possible lives. Like many branded commodities, The Light Phone is a device for what Wolf (2014) calls world-building: an aesthetically cohesive imaginary world with rich, fully furnished ambiances that provide platforms for atmospheric attunement. The Light Phone builds a world screened in the faded colours of late summer, where the muted laughter of slow dinner parties drift between long hugs and pour-over coffee. This is a world of friends and family, where meaningful community trumps mediated connections, where matte and monochrome trumps smart and shiny. This is a world unburdened by smart devices, and saturated with sensory pleasures and wholesome feelings. The Light Phone's branded world is primarily mediated not through fully formed ideologies about disconnection, but through sensorial transmissions between memory and fantasy.

Seremetakis (1994) explains that sensorial cultures emerge dynamically from perception and memory, activated by shared landscapes of semantically dense objects and embodied acts. The slick groove of vinyl records, the crinkled weave of linen tablecloths, the dewy fuzz of flower petals are resonant textures saturated with meanings about authenticity, pleasure, and class that are mobilized by Going Light's brand of disconnection. These sensorially saturated yet mediated artefacts are passageways into entanglements between everyday material experience and cultural memory that make up what Stewart (2007, 2) calls ordinary affects: 'public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they're also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life.' Sensorial culture—through which Going Light is articulated—is social and collective, yet is not reducible to language. Atmospheric attunements to Going Light—that potentiate alternative configurations of time, technology, and connectivity—are mediated by brands, yet are not reducible to branding.

When Aleena, one of the authors of this chapter, first encountered The Light Phone's online promotion, she was entranced. The website's background image of fluffy clouds centred around the single word 'light' reminded her of lazy days in the park spent with her sister when they were kids; another image of dusk on an open road fringed by distant mountain ranges superimposed by the text 'buy the phone' made her think about cross-country road trip inspiration pinned on her social media. It felt like a dream, like a memory—it felt good. The Light Phone transforms the politics of disconnection—of big tech, attention economics, and the techlash—into good feelings. Ahmed (2010) offers that contemporary discourses of self-help and positive psychology often equate feeling good with happiness. Within the brand of Going Light, happiness is a form of world-making that, according to Ahmed, shapes what coheres as a world, where certain objects proximate and the right people

gather. The happiness projected by The Light Phone's world of handmade objects and authentic humans is, in Ahmed's terms, promissory. The Light Phone is not really a phone at all, but a feeling of Going Light; the ethereal pleasures of The Light Phone are derived not from actual use but from the imagined life in a promised world. Like self-help's circular logic of feeling oneself into states of happiness and New Age discourses about manifesting one's desires by channelling thoughts, beliefs, and emotions (Urban 2015), The Light Phone operates in a recursive loop in which the intoxicating imaginary of disconnection stands in for the need to disconnect at all.

Even with its US\$350 price tag and optional \$30 monthly mobile plan, for most people imbricated in social and professional structures that require constant connection, The Light Phone II remains an aspirational product. As Feldman reports in her chapter in this volume, many people see disconnected lifestyles as beyond their reach. Going Light exclusively is likely to be difficult for professionals who depend upon or value social connections in their jobs. The Light Phone's promotional imaginary operates through what Portwood-Stacer (2013) calls conspicuous non-consumption: a form of lifestyle politics drawing from consumer activism and neoliberal entrepreneurial selfhood that emphasizes creativity, empowerment, and flexibility. The Light Phone addresses users as entrepreneurs by attuning their sense of self to artistic ambitions or creative endeavours. The Light Phone falls in step with the neoliberal mantra to be creative that permeates our work, leisure, and institutions (Mould 2018). According to Hollier, creatively inclined customers were better prepared for the sudden change of lifestyle and sense of self in the absence of a smartphone:

My initial hunch [was that] artists and other creatives that kind of have a passion already, they were the ones that you know were immediately able to Go Light, so to speak, and feel that anxiety that comes with leaving the smartphone with the things they already loved. Musicians Go Light and start playing piano and they forget about Instagram. But it was a little bit harder for people who maybe don't feel like they have that calling or thing that they're always doing.

For those without a passion project or a hobby, Going Light might be a painful exercise. Hollier mentions a customer who shared that Going Light triggered an existential crisis because of a realization that they lacked any actual hobbies or specific interests to pursue. Distinct from recreation, hobbies are productive forms of leisure (Gelber 1999) that feed into vocational passion—the obligation to 'do what you love'—which underlies exploitative labour practices in creative industries (Chia 2019). While the use of display art at Facebook's corporate headquarters is intended to provide a kind of architecture for employees to see themselves as artists (Turner 2018), The

Light Phone goes one step further, acting as a kind of litmus test to separate the true creatives from the pretenders. Within this ideology of disconnective creativity, stripping away smartphone connections reveals which users are primed to access positive psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's (1990) much vaunted 'flow' state, or the psychological condition of complete absorption in an activity. These conceptions of flow and hobbies commodify creativity as human capital.

In this sense, the creative forms of disconnection evoked by The Light Phone are exclusionary by design. Like creativity, the deployment of innovation as a construct is always strategic because it places individual actors in a competitive field of action that necessitates a certain order of response (Suchman and Bishop 2000). The Light Phone's developer discourses suggest that creativity is commodified as human capital by linking it to personhood—thereby revealing a politics of disconnection that is stratified by both class and race. While The Light Phone's economic exclusion is explicit, its racial exclusion through the aesthetic of whiteness is implicit. Analyzing cultural appropriation in food media, Alang (2020) offers that the contemporary aesthetic of whiteness channels organized clutter and effortless cool; it emanates from attractive, mostly millennial people, adorned by natural materials, handling artisan objects, bathed in natural light. This is also the taken-for-granted backdrop of The Light Phone promotional video, in which atmospheres for Going Light are channelled. In his landmark analysis of Western visual culture of film, photography, and painting, Dyer (1997) states that whiteness is constructed through luminosity: a purifying lightness that is unsullied by the corporeality of dirt, blood, passion, and even movement. The Light Phone operates within this moralized aesthetic register, purifying the incongruous distractions and relentless exertions of mobile connection into a symmetrical object within an effortless world.

Notably, the moral and symbolic power of whiteness lies in its invisibility as a norm; it is defined not by presence, but by absence. Lightness, and by association, whiteness, possesses ethical and aesthetic superiority because of its apparent non-particularity, as simultaneously everything and nothing. Since the translucence and normativity of whiteness is also a negation, it lacks distinction and character. For this reason, bodies of colour are frequently mobilized in visual culture to provide contrast to the aesthetic of whiteness (Dyer 1997), while global culinary influences are appropriated without due acknowledgement of origin or racialized inequities in Western food media to inject flavour into the white pantry (Alang 2020). Similarly, the aesthetic whiteness of Going Light mobilizes bodies of colour—casting Black, Brown, and Asian actors—to add earthy flavour to an ethereal palette of muslin drapes, twilight glassware, and stretched canvas. In other words, bodies of colour set The Light Phone's catalogue of desires into motion.

Going Light mirrors the aspirational structure of whiteness as an ideal that can never be attained. Just as to be absolutely white is to be a subject without hue or properties, The Light Phone cultivates a branded ambience that provides pleasure without satisfaction. Dyer (1997) qualifies that this paradox of whiteness as normative and negative, corporeal and transcendent, is a source of its representational dynamism and productivity. Just as this paradox is an engine of desire at the perpetual edge of resolution, Going Light is couched in an ambivalence that is aspirational in its world-making, yet mundane in its monthly mobile plan. Furthermore, The Light Phone is idealistic in its design philosophy against the attention economy, yet it is pragmatic in its manufacturing choices in the global tech industry. For example, Hollier admits that ‘it’s really a struggle and we don’t have a lot of power to fully reinvent the manufacturing process or make a fair phone’. A fair phone is a telecommunication device that is built to minimize exploitative labour practices and environmental impact. Just as the paradox of whiteness is aesthetically generative, Going Light’s ambivalence is a source of productivity—an open-ended experiment with alternative modes of connection. Instead of peddling an empty promise of tech solutionism, The Light Phone was created by Hollier and co-founder Kaiwei Tang as an artistic intervention. The atmospheres and ambiances of Going Light tap into what Williams (1977) calls structures of feeling: social experiences in solution that linger at the edge of semantic availability, which do not need definition or rationalization to exert force in the world. The political force of Going Light’s ordinary affects come into relief through contrast with disconnective experiments that do not cast sensory worlds, but condense worldly sensations into seemingly universal symbols. These experiments seek not to intervene in, but to protect the attention economy.

GOOGLE DIGITAL WELLBEING EXPERIMENTS: DISCONNECTION AS CONCEPT

Introducing Digital Wellbeing Experiments: a platform to share ideas and tools that help people find a better balance with technology. Try the experiments and create your own. Together we’ll learn how to create better technology for everyone.

(Google Digital Wellbeing Experiments 2019)

Google’s Experimental apps run on the Android operating system and include Post Box that holds all mobile notifications until a time specified by the user, who is encouraged to go through them at their own pace through

an in-app interface. Another experimental app is We Flip, which is designed for in-person gatherings where everyone turns off their devices for designated periods of time to focus on face-to-face interactions. The platform cites Google researchers Aranda and Baig's (2018) research paper 'Toward "JOMO": The Joy of Missing Out and the Freedom of Disconnecting', presented at the Association for Computing Machinery's International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction with Mobile Devices and Services. The authors conducted a qualitative, mixed-methods study of mobile phone users in Zurich, Switzerland, and the San Francisco Bay Area, to 'inform opportunities for innovation in the mobile industry' (Aranda and Baig 2018, 19:2). By understanding experiences of mobile device overuse and non-use, Google's researchers hoped to innovate products and services encouraging people to moderate their usage habits in order to continue to use smartphones. In addition to time-tracking, notification management, and other tools that are built by the Android operating system as part of Google's Digital Wellbeing campaign, Experiments offers quirky apps for individuals to try, to play around with, to 'find a balance that's right for them' (Google Digital Wellbeing Experiments 2019).

Two apps by London-based design studio Special Projects stand out as encapsulations of big tech's strategy of 'experimentation' as a response to the techlash. The app Paper Phone uses an Android app to create a paper version of one's phone on a folded sheet of paper, that includes favourite contacts, maps and meetings, and even resources such as recipes and phrase books for activities like cooking and language learning. The second app Envelope is a paper sleeve that transforms the Google Pixel phone into a single-function device either for making phone calls or taking photos. This envelope must be torn open to restore the phone's original multi-functions. According to Special Projects, Envelope was inspired by basic phones with limited functions as a periodic alternative to a primary smartphone, which was also the original rationale for The Light Phone. Both Paper Phone and Envelope are visually promoted through stark minimalist aesthetics: both videos feature close-ups of the bleached whiteness of the Paper Phone and Envelope against a textureless grey studio background. The emphasis on the aesthetic and moral purity of whiteness is sharper than in The Light Phone's promotion. For example, Paper Phone and Envelope's designers appear in the promotional video wearing clinically white shirts; this sanitized monochromatic palette is punctuated only by the pastel hues of a perfectly shaped lemon framed by a terrazzo cutting board and pale pink polish of one designer's immaculately trimmed nails.

Unlike The Light Phone's sunlit vignettes of bodies of colour living, laughing, and loving, Google Experiments' studio lighting and pale protagonists provide a blank canvas for the evocation of cheeky artificiality and quirky

sanitation. Distinct from the frisson of *Going Light*'s luxuriant textures and diverse flavours, the sensations piqued by *Paper Phone* and *Envelope* are not of movement or expansion but of stillness. If *The Light Phone*'s dis-connective atmosphere is attuned through fuzzy synapses between memory and fantasy, then Google Experiments' ambience crystalizes the anxieties and ambitions of disconnection into a literal message to experiment. For example, Special Projects describe their apps as 'little concepts' and a 'little experiment' for taking a break from the digital world and finding personal balance with technology (Google Digital Wellbeing Experiments 2019). This aesthetic (of) restraint can be contextualized through conceptual art, which is understood by many critics as different from traditional art. Cray (2014) encapsulates that common understandings of conceptual art such as Marcel Duchamp's Readymades dematerializes the artefact to crystalize the idea. In other words, the urinal is decentred as an unremarkable medium for *Fountain* as an idea. This contrasts with the centrality of the materiality of other kinds of artwork.

In this sense, *Paper Phone* and *Envelope* can be interpreted as distilling the dense sensorial networks of dis-connective atmospheres into a little concept: to try a little experiment with disconnection. For example, *Envelope*'s promotional copy describes the app as designed to '*temporarily* transform your phone into a simpler, calmer device' (our emphasis). Similarly, *Envelope*'s video states that 'the idea is to try to last as long as possible, before opening the envelope and getting your old phone back'. These experiential incisions in the temporality of connection are not meant to destabilize the status quo or imagine an alternate life and world with technology. Google's Digital Wellbeing Experiments are far from the big ideas proposed, for example, by tech ethicist Tristan Harris's now infamous 141-slide presentation 'A Call to Minimize Distraction and Respect Users' Attention' to fellow Google employees (Newton 2018). Instead, *Paper Phone* and *Envelope* pitch themselves as modest conceptual tools for re-calibrating device use towards normative standards of balance and continued usage.

The dematerialization of the object in conceptual art is not absolute but relative in its devaluing of the physical aspects of an artwork to focus on its conceptual aspects (Cray 2014). Similarly, *Going Light*'s focus on the sensorially saturated atmospheres of disconnection is relative to Google's focus on the conceptual distillation of its small experiments. The variation of these strategies is instructive to understanding varying responses to the techlash. *The Light Phone* invites aspirational users to weave a personal tapestry from public dreams, fantasies, memories, and feelings about disconnection to potentially transform their relationship to digital devices. At variance with this, *Paper Phone* and *Envelope* do not weave a tapestry of dis-connective desires; instead, Special Projects has surgically sliced and cauterized the

fabric of connection to temporarily limit disconnection to an experimental lapse.

By conceptually distilling disconnection as an experiential lapse, Paper Phone and Envelope inoculate criticisms about the harms of constant connectivity and reinforce the norm of connectivity. As a disconnection strategy promoted by technology companies, Digital Wellbeing mobilizes what Mulvin (2018) describes as the language of prevention, inoculation, and hygiene. This can be seen in Google's Digital Wellbeing features on Android devices as well as Apple's Screen Time and Night Mode, which both have comparable features for tracking and restricting app usage and managing notifications to mitigate distractions. According to Mulvin, these disconnective features are a form of media prophylaxis, which emphasize harm reduction through self-care discourses that shift responsibility onto the individual without addressing the underlying cultural logics and business models of attention, engagement, and advertising.

By providing a platform for disconnective experiments and tools, Google Digital Wellbeing's message of balance through calibrated connectivity can be understood as part of Silicon Valley's integration of artistic critique of the attention economy to resist the techlash. By framing problems of constant connectivity within the language of tools for individual balance and calibration, Google Digital Wellbeing centres ethics in the world-building visions and practices of designers and technologists, not in social worlds or social contracts they develop technical systems for. These experiments rationalize the resistive potential of artistic endeavours into frameworks of organizational risk assessment. Furthermore, by incorporating and inoculating against critique about the harms of constant connection, these experiments are a way in which capitalism reshapes itself into less-objectionable forms, thus increasing resistance to similar critiques in the future (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). In other words, Digital Wellbeing is Google's latest means to manage the brand, reinforcing how digital well-being acts as a social good to instil public goodwill (Beattie and Daubs 2020). The breadth of quirky Google Digital Wellbeing Experiments reinforces that the artistic critique of the attention economy has been integrated into the platform where ethical experimentation is institutionalized as brand management.

CONCLUSION: EXPERIMENTS IN DISCONNECTION

Using the problematic of disconnective experimentation, this chapter compared The Light Phone's branded sensations of lightness with Google Digital Wellbeing's concepts of balance. Both these disconnective experiments evoke the tactility of paper and the aspirational aesthetics of whiteness.

However, while Google's experiments frame disconnection as momentary, The Light Phone experiment grounds disconnection in the mundane. Google Digital Wellbeing Experiments may have a similar look and feel as The Light Phone. They may even share similar institutional incubation pathways. But their temporal deployments and politics of disconnection are critically different. Google's experiments limit disconnection to a gimmick, thereby inoculating criticisms about the harms of constant connectivity and reinforcing the norm of connectivity. The Light Phone's artistic experimentation create experiential openings for instability and ambiguity; however, by building a luxuriant world of mediated pleasures, the racialized aspiration of Going Light becomes an end in itself, instead of a means towards pursuing alternative configurations of time, technology, and connectivity across socio-economic classes.

This chapter analyzed how the ethics and ethos of disconnective experimentation are institutionally, aesthetically, and politically imbricated. In so doing, this analysis presents a framework for the relational assessment of different disconnective experimentation. Artistic interventions operate not through overt political manifestations, but through the destabilization of dominant ways of seeing, doing, and thinking. In other words, artistic experiments such as Google Digital Wellbeing Experiments and The Light Phone should not necessarily be judged by Natale and Treré's (2020) criterion of political mobilization against cultures of connection. Instead, these experiments are more fittingly evaluated alongside Odell's (2019) call not simply for action, but for contemplation: resisting the attention economy happens first and foremost in the mind. Attention is not simply withdrawn from mobile devices and persuasive design techniques; attention must be cultivated elsewhere. Rather than Going Light or disconnecting from smart technology in a neoliberal framework of self-care, Odell demonstrates how to disengage from the profit motive that underlies the digital economy and demands our attention. For example, interacting with art and wandering through non-commercialized spaces such as public parks offer alternative sociotechnical environments that can both expand and deepen our attention.

Similarly, sensorially marked rituals of putting on records, sharing Polaroids, and brewing coffee can expand and deepen our attention. Seremetakis (1994, 13) emphasizes the political significance of everyday life in modernity for potentiating far-reaching historical transformations: 'Everyday life is also the zone of lost glances, oblique views and angles where micro-practices leak through the crevices and cracks of official cultures and memories.' In other words, the sensory structure of everyday disconnection imbricates the poetic and political. However, to resist the attention economy, these rituals and micro-practices must extend beyond cosseted branded worlds to confront the politicization of attention at the

intersection of issues of public space, environmental politics, class, and race. In particular, this politicization must challenge the techno-aestheticization of whiteness as the default setting for human creativity, flourishing, and freedom (Hamilton 2018). Ahmed (2007) offers that whiteness is an orientation—not reducible to white skin—that puts certain objects, styles, capacities, aspirations, techniques, and habits within reach. As suggested by this analysis, the techno-aestheticization of whiteness in the sensory politics of *Going Light* frames disconnection through good feelings of an easeful life. What gets left out in this imaginary of disconnection are the ordinary feelings of discomfort that entrain bodies of colour. Therefore, politicizing race in disconnection entails more than dismantling the aesthetic of whiteness in branded ambiances of the techlash; it means centring discomfort in the sensory structure of disconnection.

Experimentation in response to the techlash such as *Google Digital Wellbeing* and *The Light Phone* may seem incommensurable with the culture of connectivity, yet these and other disconnection practices emerge from and are constitutive of that culture. These experiments with disconnection are what Hesselberth (2018) calls the ‘constitutive outside’ of the culture of connectivity: material, symbolic, and strategic forces that—in their resistance—are the condition of emergence of connectivity. The potential of disconnection, according to Hesselberth, is not in the rediscovery of age-old themes such as productivity or solitude, but in the possibility of creating an outside to whatever is being disconnected from. In other words, disconnection is not revelatory because it reminds us of the benefits of time spent alone, but because of the actual action of disconnection itself: the disengagement from something. To weaken the hold that the logic of connectivity has over society and individuals, we must assess the equivocality of this constitutive outside and weigh different disconnection practices against each other to understand their connections to each other, so that we may advocate some over others.

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