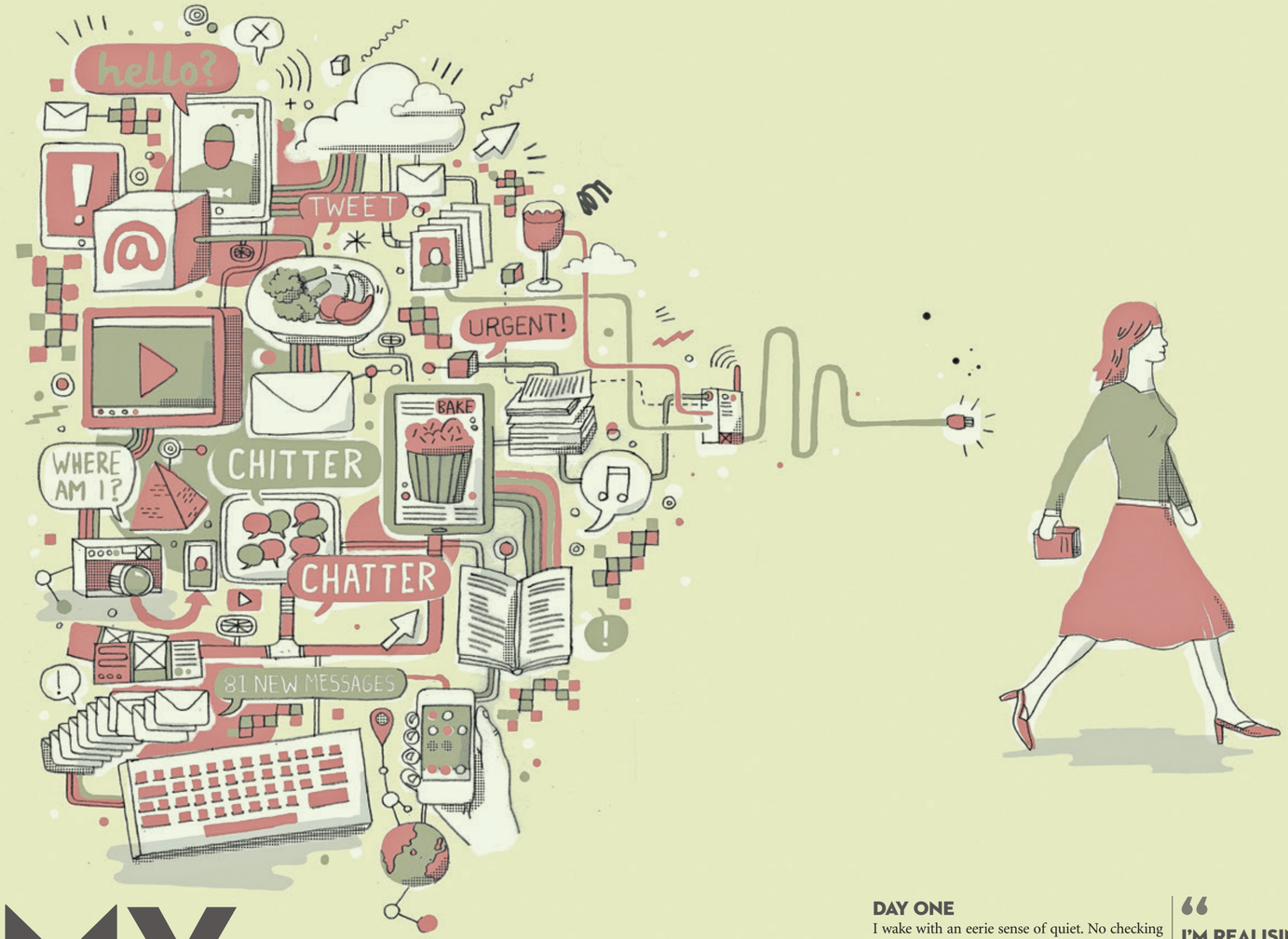

MY UNWIRED WEEK

ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES GULLIVER HANCOCK

WHEN THE NET'S YOUR SOCIAL AND WORK-LIFE SUPPORT SYSTEM, WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU FLICK THE SWITCH, EVEN BRIEFLY? BY CHARLOTTE WOOD.

Before I begin, let me get this straight: I love technology. I love the inventiveness and wildness of the internet. I love learning smart new programs like Scapple and OmmWriter, and their sassy, organic names. I love how the web connects and enlivens us, and how it makes old things vibrant again, from community gardens to farmer's markets to Freecycle.

I also love inhabiting so many different corners of the internet. As a writer, I run my entire working life by laptop, but my leisure life begins there, too. I maintain two professional websites and a couple of blogs; two Twitter accounts, three Facebook pages, a Pinterest and Spotify account. I adore Apple TV and iTunes. I have several groups of writing friends who talk almost solely by email, and I generally spend every waking moment somehow wired to the net. All my travel and socialising is arranged by email and SMS, and my extended family communicates almost entirely via Facebook. Even cooking and gardening are rarely done without an iPad beside me or an iPhone in my pocket, and I often read books in electronic format.

I've always been annoyed by hand-wringing about too much connectivity. It's usually fear-mongering by technophobic conservatives, the same folk who predicted social ruination from the steam engine and the telephone. The internet has led me to some of my richest experiences, from the poetry of Rilke to a considered ethical position on eating animals; from trips and films that have changed my life to real, enduring friendships. My aptitude with a keyboard and a search engine has been, overwhelmingly, a force for good.

But gradually, I've begun to feel a different kind of overwhelmed.

Lately, a few hours online can leave me feeling like a kid on too much sugar: hyper-stimulated, yet oddly depressed. I've resorted to internet-blocking programs like Freedom and AntiSocial to get my work done. And what used to feel energising and stimulating has become a drain. Despite its playful potential, even my beloved Twitter seems to have grown toxic, with a rising sludgy tide of hateful sexist and racist trolling.

Not only that, but I've begun to detest my online self. The "sound" of my own voice bores, sometimes even sickens me, with its constant gags and try-hard one-liners, or, more privately, its blathering, long-winded emails. There seems something grasping, even narcissistic, about my relentless need to externalise, to yap, to *connect*. The day comes when on a deep, core level, I feel abraded, turned inside out. It's time to refill the well.

I decide on an experiment: a week offline, completely. I recently took a brief Twitter sabbatical and found my mood much improved. But how would I cope with a week off *everything* – not just social media, but email, online banking, my library account, recipe sites, weather apps, the lot?

I suspect my life will barely function, but I'm interested to see what I miss and what I don't. I set up an email auto-reply and put the iPad in a cupboard. Wi-Fi and mobile data are switched off. I'm allowed offline use of my computer, the phone and voicemail, but no online activity. I may as well be camping for a week in the wilderness – except last time I did that, I could still check my emails.

DAY ONE

I wake with an eerie sense of quiet. No checking email en route to the shower, no swiping the screen for Twitter. The hours pass slowly, in a bubble of deep, not unpleasant, isolation.

My first challenge is checking the address of a shop. After a few wrong guesses I remember the Directory Assistance number – we've long been on the White and Yellow Pages do-not-deliver register – and ring the store.

Getting there is another test, as it's in a part of town I don't know well. Without Google Maps, I have to follow my nose. It's surprisingly easy.

DAY TWO

I feel as if I'm wagging school. It's a guilty pleasure, this wallowing in "free" time. I spend most of the day transcribing a long interview. Without the pinging of emails into my inbox there are no natural breaks and, instead of online natter, I take to household chores to break up the day. My husband is highly amused, snickering softly when he comes across me sorting years of clutter from a drawer.

Time passes s-l-o-w-l-y. Stray wonderings come and go without Google resolution – something I've not experienced, it seems, for decades. In online life, I would know instantly, for example, whether blood oranges have more vitamin C than normal ones, or how many novels the author Amy Witting wrote. Now, I just keep wondering.

> "I'M REALISING HOW NEEDY I AM ... WHAT IF NOBODY HAS EVEN REGISTERED MY ABSENCE?"

My productivity alarms me: the transcribing job is complete in just over half the time it would normally take. But a gnawing fear has emerged, about the urgent emails that might be waiting for me when I return. Perhaps this surge in output is temporary, to be undone by the avalanche of chaos to come.

Still, the only really troubling aspect of two days' complete disconnection is TV. Free-to-air television, without ABC iview or SBS On Demand, is dire.

DAY THREE

I'm growing used to this luxurious, expansive sense of time. But without the interruptions of email and social media, or stray minutes scooting around the internet in search of some small fact, this intensity of focus is actually a little wearing. I'm embarrassed: as a novelist, I thought I was used to long stretches of hard concentration, but it seems I'm much scattier than I realised.

On the plus side, I'm reading much more than usual: long, uninterrupted hours of peaceful reading during the day. It feels indulgent and blessed, like a return to childhood.

I phone a friend to congratulate her on her piece in an anthology. Normally I'd email, but she's delighted by the call. We have a long, meandering catch-up.

Television: still unwatchable. Back to Patrick White and Hurtle Duffield.

DAY FOUR

My email-avalanche fear is building. But I rationalise that there can't be more than 10 really urgent ones to deal with – if anything drastic was happening, people would surely phone. I'm realising how needy I am. Maybe it's not a fear of being pursued, but the opposite: what if, instead of hundreds of claims for my attention when I return, there are none? What if nobody has even registered my absence?

An SMS arrives. I feel rude ignoring it so I answer. It's my only breach of the digital ban all week, and I'm surprised at how I'm not once otherwise tempted to cheat. Could I be less dependent than I thought?

Then two "emails" from bemused friends arrive – by snail mail. One is actually a printed-out email stuck to a postcard. The other, a chatty note from a friend across the city, is addressed to me *c/- Luddites R Us*. I'm enormously cheered, for with my newfound privacy has come a subtle kind of loneliness. I miss the breezy chatter and fleeting thoughtfulness that email and social media allow. I've never believed the internet forces people away from meaningful connection, and I'm relieved to find that belief unshaken. Online talk doesn't replace in-person friendship; it's another way of expressing and exploring it, in ways that are rich and varied, funny and real.

DAY FIVE

Floored by a savage head cold, I have to cancel coffee with my sister-in-law. Years of SMS arrangements seem to have eradicated my sense of telephone etiquette: when is it too early or too late to phone? A straight-out call seems intrusive. What a strange place I've got to.

Settling back into the yawning hours of privacy, I feel a little less like I'm wagging school, and more like I've been suspended. Will I ever see my friends again?

For the first time in years, I find myself actually reading the daily newspaper, and watching entire news bulletins at night. When I buy a printed magazine for the first time in 12 months, I realise that some of what I'm missing is not actual communication, but a kind of idle entertainment. Without the internet, most of my hours are spent with my mind fully occupied. I see now that the web, social media – even email – must provide me with a sort of twilight half-engagement. I thought I was an energetic, attentively focused sort of person. To discover how much mental laziness I possess is unsettling.

DAY SIX

For the first time, my impulse on waking is not to check email but to return to my book. Triumph! With two days before wired life returns, I'm already nostalgic for this lavish sense of privacy. Will I be able to take any of it back into normal existence?

I need a couple of books, the kind I'd ordinarily buy on Kindle. Instead I take the bus (with no timetable apps, I simply have to *wait* for it – *quelle horreur!*) and visit three bookshops, none of which has the titles I want. Later, I discover I don't really need them after all. A typical week would see at least three or four online purchases – eBooks, phone apps or iTunes files – so my online ban is clearly saving me money.

I'm starting to realise, too, how much of my recent mental frazzlement is caused by the internet's instant gratification. Whether it's online shopping, or looking up a place or a word or the weather forecast, it seems there's no need to wait for anything any more. There's something surprisingly peaceful about having to sit with questions, or let them float by unanswered.

DAY SEVEN

Tomorrow my imprisonment – or is it my freedom? – ends. I spend my last day typing up notes, editing an interview and cleaning my study, all accomplished far more quickly than usual. After a laborious tussle with Directory Assistance's voice recognition service, I finally get the phone number I need to book a massage. It seems a good way to end my unwired week. A different kind of connection: silent and serene, and as old as human touch.

RETURN DAY

I'm almost scared to open my email inbox – but there are no calamities, and I've answered the important ones within an hour. Eventually I dip a toe back into social-media waters, where a few people mention my "bravery" and enviously ask how I coped. I tell them the offline world is a peaceful, enriching place – a space much easier to claim than they think. I resolve to build more offline time into my life.

But it turns out I'm not ready to leave my quiet new world just yet. After a couple of hours I close the laptop, pick up my book and head out to the park to read. GW