Going off the Mobile Grid
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INTRODUCTION (MYSTERIOUS TREMORS)
I was sure it was real this time. Nothing. False alarm.
Just the clock and date glowing back at me. No text messages, no Facebook updates, no emails, No tweets.

This was the third time in as many months I have felt my phone vibrate in my pocket that turned out to be phantom.

I was killing time in the departure lounge before embarking on the next adventure; a marine conservation expedition in Andavadoka, a remote village in the South-West corner of Madagascar.

I decided to see if I was the only one with these unusual sensations and pulled out my always-on iPhone (right there by the boarding gate) and in a few taps came across "Phantom Vibration Syndrome", a phenomenon where the user perceives vibrations from a device that is not really vibrating. Sensory stimuli such as the feeling of clothing rubbing against one's leg or a muscle twitching is interpreted by a brain that has learnt to associate mobile vibrations as alerts to social communication.

According to one study in Fort Wayne, Indiana, (Drouin et al, 2012) 89% of undergraduates felt a vibration in the skin next to their pocket or assumed they heard their phone vibrating in their bag only to discover it was a phantom vibration, and they experienced it on average, once every two weeks. This is not surprising, when the smartphone plays such a central role in our internet obsessed lives. We can connect with friends across the globe, be updated on global events in real time and have the answer to any question we can think of in the palm of our hands (except perhaps "the meaning of life?" to which Google will still give 706 million results!)

In a short space of time mobile technology has revolutionised every aspect of the world we live in, from education, healthcare, commerce and global development to the way we play games, read books and even find love.

Previously, researching for this article would have taken countless hours pacing the dusty halls of a university library, scanning endless shelves for that one long forgotten musty journal issue before carefully leafing through the brittle, yellowing pages. Now an internet connection and a smartphone was all that I needed.

A literature search had become a Google search and with Google Scholar, up to date literature could be found on anything. Anytime. Anywhere. If I was to believe the marketing, I too could stand on the shoulders of giants.

SMARTPHONE – MAKING LIFE EASIER?
Technology is supposed to ease and improve our everyday lives but I was beginning to think it had got to stage where I had unwittingly allowed it to overtake mine to the extent of developing physical symptoms.

It is something that we have become so reliant on that we now cannot do without. Not even for an hour let alone a day. One Time poll, (TIME, 2014) of 5000 people across 8 countries, one in four people check their phone every 30 minutes, and one in five every 10 minutes. All for a constant fear of missing out. Missing out on something more fun, more interesting, exciting or better than what we are currently doing. Interrupting a face-to-face conversation, to check just one more time, to make sure whatever is going on elsewhere isn't better. To those using their mobile while driving, being connected is more important than their own lives.

Social media with easy real-time access to activities, events and conversations across social networks has led to the new phenomenon of Fear of Missing Out (FoMO).
It is a form of social anxiety defined as a "pervasive apprehension that others may be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent and a desire to stay continually connected with what others are doing" (Przybylski et al, 2013 p.1841).

Research psychologists, such as Rosen et al (2013), have found that technology has a complex impact on indicators of mental health. Three mood disorders, depression, dysthymia and bipolar disorder, were predicted by anxiety about not checking in with text messages and Facebook, and a more complex relationship was found with personality disorders (Rosen et al, 2013).
FoMO specifically has been negatively associated with psychological well-being with general mood and overall life satisfaction found to be lower in those high in FoMO and a driving force behind social media use (Przybylski et al, 2013). In addition, Internet addiction, a compulsive-impulsive spectrum disorder, is common in countries around the world with variants all featuring excessive use, withdrawal, tolerance and negative repercussions (Block, 2008).

I remembered the mild anxiety I felt when I heard that electricity where I was headed was generator run for only a few hours a day and even that was a prohibitively expensive luxury that few local residents could afford. Wifi access in Andavadoka is unthinkable. Mobile internet in theory was accessible, however I was informed that in practice it would load slower than travelling 50 kilometres by zebu cart, if it worked at all.
As I switched my devices to flight mode and powered down for take-off I decided to cut loose and keep them that way for nine weeks.

Even if you are not a heavy social media user, cutting the digital connection to the email inbox has been shown to increase focus, reduce stress and leads to more face-to-face interaction (Mark et al, 2012).

Internet and mobile technology use is not entirely harmful to our health when used moderately, with functional MRI studies showing enhancement in areas that control decision-making and complex reasoning when learning to search the internet (Small et al, 2009). Multi-tasking such as being mentally interrupted while on holiday and having to switch tasks to answer emails, however, has been shown to be inefficient, and often stressful (Rubinstein et al, 2001). This staccato style of thinking is also less organised and efficient ultimately leading to a "brain fog" or mental confusion, the reasons for which are unclear.

POWERING DOWN
The experience off the mobile grid was incredible and the change, immensely positive. Being "disconnected" made me *more* connected to the beautiful environment I was in. Without constant distractions of texts, emails, tweets, Facebook updates and the odd snapchat thrown in, I felt more relaxed and free.

It is true that the bond between travellers and their mobile devices have strengthened in recent times with instant information, entertainment and services readily available. Experiences can be shared in real-time to make them more fun and memorable. For me however, without the Internet, the experiences felt even more special.

Conversations were unhurried and more meaningful, even with complete strangers, some of whom after a chance encounter have become firm friends.

In the national parks, as lemurs danced cheekily across the treetops I surveyed the stunning landscape. I spotted a small chameleon in full vibrant glory, one of its eyes rotating and I am sure inspecting me as closely and carefully as I was him, before melting away into the foliage, something I am certain I would have missed if I had been trying to Instagram a selfie with a lemur.

It may have been the focussed thinking without mobile internet. Maybe it was the clean air, being physically active outdoors or falling asleep to the rhythmic waves of the Indian Ocean lapping softly on the white sand. Either way, reading emails and checking in on social media platforms could not have been further from my mind.

I was becoming rejuvenated, recharged, refreshed and able to focus.

CONCLUDING REMARKS
Rapid advancement in technology has established a technological culture that has successfully overtaken our traditions. This new culture continually presents technological developments as "solutions"; although the problems to be solved are not always clear. In other words, these solutions (billed as the "latest in modern technology") will either have a market or have one created for them. However, very few consider questioning the effects of such a rapid cultural transition to a technological culture (Shahtahmasebi & Millar 2013).

Personal experience together with initial observations as documented in the literature, suggest complex adverse outcomes with major future implications for health and social care services, as well as changes in cultural and societal norms. Some of the consequences of heavy dependence on technological "solutions" have been anxiety, depression, personality disorders, and addiction. Whilst it appears to be unthinkable to raise questions about the speed with which technological innovations are marketed, we must wonder and question whether our society is equipped to deal with a rapid increase in morbidity.

The current environment puts pressure on people to be constantly connected to social networks and consume virtual entertainment. Despite this, as individuals we can all adopt modification in our behaviour to protect our own wellbeing. For example, regular breaks from the mobile grid and engaging in sociable or non-technology related activities may well condition us to cope with anxiety.

Given that sustained break from the mobile grid may follow with the feeling of freedom, we must also question which part we want to play in this new technological culture, lead as masters, or be led as slaves of technology?

Behaviour modification does not need to be a complex process: it is as simple as hitting the off button and interacting with the surrounding environment.

Power down your electronic devices and do something with family or friends. Go for a walk, visit a museum or art gallery, read a newspaper or a book – a paper one – just disconnect from the grid for a few hours a day.

It can really help psychologically, emotionally and professionally.

It is a beautiful world out there, we just need to look up from our screens - is it ironic that you are probably reading this article on one?

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