Thesis Proposal Draft

Over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, I have not been alone in noticing an increased dependence on the internet and the influence this dependence has had upon my daily conception of reality. So novel is this change that, in the past 15 months, whole systems of internet addiction analysis have been forced to reevaluate their models in response to this sheer increase in time spent online.[1] My laptop and smartphone have begun to feel like windows to the outside world instead of the information-exchanging tools they used to be. It appears the world of seamlessly integrated digital interfaces and their tantalizing conveniences has arrived earlier than expected.[2] Now, as the course of the pandemic changes for the better, I can't help but wonder if I will be able to go back to the normal I knew before this incredible convenience?

Nothing epitomizes convenience like justifying another ten minutes in bed as I command Alexa to get the coffee maker started. While there is a utopian promise that comes with smart home technologies, beginning with their ability to help care for the elderly and disabled,[3] I can't help but feel they will ultimately bring out the worst in me. This year, with so many internet enabled devices in my home, I have struggled to set reasonable boundaries for my online interactions and have noticed a decline in efficiency as a result (an ironic outcome considering the purpose of home automation). In response to this finding, I want to investigate the ways in which this increased adoption of smart home technology and forfeiture of privacy may negatively impact my life in the future. Overall, I plan to focus my thesis around this central question: As smart home devices become more ubiquitous and the convenience of their adoption more appealing, will the negative effects continue to worsen and in what ways?

To address this question, I aim to develop a series of short performances imagining the possible outcomes of smart home technology in the future. I will perform with a cast of

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[1] Scales for measuring Internet Addiction in Covid-19 times
https://dl-acm-org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/doi/pdf/10.1145/3434780.3436656

[2] The Machine Stops, EM Forster

[3] Transforming Smart Vehicles and Smart Homes into Private Diagnostic Spaces https://dl-acm-org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/doi/pdf/10.1145/3379310.3379325

connected devices centered around the Amazon Echo and Alexa Virtual Assistant, as these

devices already have a track record of infringing upon user privacy.[4] By imagining a

post-pandemic world in which the proliferation of smart home devices has made working from

home irresistible, the concept of 'private life' will be central to my exploration. Considering the

efforts already underway to analyze user behavior in the connected home,[5] it is worthwhile to

explore the implications of constant surveillance in our everyday lives. In my project, I hope to

build upon inspiring works, such as Lauren McCarthy's *LAUREN*[6] and John Cayley's *The*

Listeners,[7] which have begun to ask important questions about this technology.

My goal with this exploration is to create several short performances which will inspire

others to consider the tradeoffs made when using incorporating these technologies into daily

life. Formally, I am inspired by micro-play compilations, such as Caryl Churchill's *Love and*

Information[8] and the Neofuturists' *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind,*[9] and the

illustrations of Kurt Vonnegut in *Breakfast of Champions*.[10] A performance format similar to

these works will allow me to cover multiple topics related to the smart home while gaining a wide

familiarity with the inner workings of these devices. With this project I hope to gain a better

understanding of many technical topics, including but not limited to the Amazon developer tools,

mesh-networks, WiFi, Bluetooth, MQTT and HTTP, and network security. Inspired by the work

of Kate Crawford and Vladan Joler[11], I will seek to include newfound knowledge of the technical

processes behind these devices in direct conversation with their impact on user well being.

In order to realize this outcome, I will need to balance creating these performances with

both thematic and technical research. My goal is to have three short performances by the end of

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[4] The House That Spied on Me https://gizmodo.com/the-house-that-spied-on-me-1822429852

[5] Monitoring meaningful activities using small low-cost devices in a smart home https://dl-acm-org.proxy.library.nyu.edu/doi/pdf/10.1007/s00779-019-01223-2

[6] LAUREN https://lauren-mccarthy.com/LAUREN

[7] The Listeners https://vimeo.com/220632485

[8] Love and Information https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/20/theater/love-and-information-by-caryl-churchill-at-minetta-lane.html

[9] Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind https://app.mural.co/t/nyutest2663/m/nyutest2663/1612490892348/c4535d36eec0576b199d8e8ca583583dadaac7f4

[10] Breakfast of Champions Illustrations

[11] https://anatomyof.ai/

the semester, between 5 & 10 minutes each, with realized technical execution that could be replicated live and in-person. Over the course of the break and the summer, I hope to develop additional performances for any topics I still wish to pursue and integrate all performances together into a larger compilation. While cautious of remaining limitations posed by the pandemic over the summer, I would ideally seek to share this performance compilation in conjunction with my thesis presentation. Overall, this endeavor will require both creative commentary on my areas of research and technical execution using the technology available to me.