
The Social Internet: Frustrating, Enriching, but Not Lonely

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The “lonely world of cyberspace” is a curious example of the vast gap that every so often opens between an idea’s popularity among pundits (considerable) and its basis in empirical research (very little). In the past few years the *New York Times* has run multiple op-eds suggesting social media or our phones are eroding human connections (for example, Cohen 2012; Egan 2013; Foer 2013; Franzen 2011; Fredrickson 2013); the *Atlantic* ran a cover story asking, “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” (Marche 2012); Massachusetts Institute of Technology psychologist Sherry Turkle wrote a book titled *Alone Together* (2011) that is partly about social media damaging “real world” human connections; and Pope Benedict warned youngsters not to replace their real friends with virtual ones (Benedict XVI 2011, 2009). In the meantime, a growing pile of empirical research shows that, if anything, the relationship runs the other way—Internet users are more social and less isolated.

This curious “Freddy Krueger effect”—the inability of data to kill the enduring attractiveness of a theme—deserves unpacking that goes beyond an indication of its lack of empirical basis and appeal to moral panic. The Internet’s integration into sociality happened with such impressive speed that it is at once mundane, all around us, and yet also barely examined. In addition, the Internet’s qualitative and subjective impacts are harder to measure than simple indicators like use or penetration. Further, a technology as multifaceted and complex as the Internet not only will not produce a “main effect”—a single, homogeneous impact that applies to everyone and every type of use—but it may well have different consequences at systemic, individual, and historical scales. It’s possible that these are not yet fully apparent in existing empirical research.

The Internet may not make us lonelier, but it does help reconfigure our net-

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works, differentially create social winners and losers, and cause genuine tensions, especially in balancing social roles and the erosion of boundaries between work and nonwork. We can begin with the most basic question of whether, as a society, we are lonelier and more isolated than we were in the pre-Internet era. Then we can consider whether there are ways in which the *existence of the Internet* contributes to *systemic* social shifts in the structure and size of our social networks. Next, we should ponder how *Internet use* interacts with an *individual's* social experience. (Those are two different types of effects that are commonly confused: a technology could produce a systemic effect that leaves, say, everyone lonelier while also benefiting its own competent users in becoming less lonely.) At every level, though, we would also have to distinguish different uses of the Internet. Finally, we can ask why the idea of *sociality made desolate by the Internet* may be so attractive to so many pundits.

We might date the start of this discussion to August 1998, when the front page of the *New York Times* boldly proclaimed: “Sad, Lonely World Discovered in Cyberspace” (Harmon 1998). Drawing on a study by Robert Kraut and colleagues that found new Internet users reporting small increases in isolation and depression, the article referred to “troubling questions about ‘virtual’ communication and the disembodied relationships that are often formed in the vacuum of cyberspace” and warned about “shallow relationships” and “depression” (Harmon 1998). While critics quickly pointed to the study’s limitations, it generated enormous press coverage. There was no *New York Times* front-page story, however, when the study’s authors themselves reported later that the negative effects, if there were any to begin with, had dissipated over time. The empirical claims of that study may have been disproved repeatedly, but its themes of “virtual friendships” and “lonely cyberspace” dominate the discussion to this day.

Journalistic reports on the Internet tend to use spatializing metaphors that construct “cyberspace” as a separate world—like a virtual “Matrix” or a real “Zion.” (Sociologist Nathan Jurgenson coined the term “digital dualism” to refer to approaches like these that contrast the Internet with the “real” world [Jurgenson 2012].) In fact, the Internet is not *a* world; it’s part of *the* world.

To understand where these ideas of the “virtual” Internet as opposed to the “real” world come from, and why they’re wrong, we can examine some of the earlier Internet platforms and users that inspired this terminology. Many early Internet users came from a specific demographic: they tended to be white “techie” men or, less commonly, technologically proficient women. As this new technology emerged, text-based interactions dominated simply because dial-up connections didn’t allow for much else. Anonymity was accepted as a norm, so online and

off-line identities were not tightly coupled. These factors combined to facilitate experimentation with gender and other aspects of identity, developments that academics often interpreted through the lens of poststructural theory. The result was a profusion of essays on “cyberspace” as a place freed from the constraints of the body, gender, race, and nationality, a place where we could evaluate each other as “ideas.”

The notion of the Internet as a place for disembodied identities took hold in the popular imagination as well. A famous *New Yorker* cartoon depicting two canines, one seated at a terminal, was captioned, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog” (Steiner 1993). One of the best expressions of this mix of frontier/utopian/poststructural sentiment in the public sphere was John Perry Barlow’s “Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace” (1996), in which he challenged the “weary giants of flesh and steel” to leave “cyberspace” alone and proclaimed in a strong prophetic voice that “cyberspace does not lie within your borders” and “nor do you know our world.”

Soon after, though, the Internet changed. Its user base exploded and started to resemble society broadly; the technology became mundane, bandwidth expanded, and connectivity descended down to small mobile devices that we put in our pockets—and perhaps soon on our faces with Google Glass. People, bodies, and governments came back with a vengeance—though, arguably, they had never left. Even before cracks had formed in the “Internet as separate world” idea, people began to interact off-line with people they had met online. Some started putting up personal web pages that further coupled online and off-line identities, and others found that relationships forged online had real significance even if people never stood in the same room together.

Around 2004, Facebook came along, and the “social” phase of the Internet came of age. Interaction with other people, many of whom one already knew off-line, became one of the Internet’s main uses for most people. While anonymous and pseudonymous conversations continued to thrive, they too often took place under persistent identities and carried real impacts in terms of relationships, support, and, sometimes, destruction. Increasing examples of de-anonymization and surveillance also made it clear that what people typed online had many ways of finding its way back to them.

Pundits often say that “technology is just a tool”—that technology is merely what its users make of it, no more or no less. Leaving aside the kernel of truth, this is a misleading notion. Yes, a chair may be used to break a window or to sit on, but these are not equally likely outcomes of interacting with a chair. All technologies provide “affordances” (i.e., uses of technology that are made easier by design,

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materiality, and features). Most people will sit on chairs but they will not sit on desk lamps. “Sitting” is an affordance of chairs but not of lamps. Unfortunately, for many who write about technology, fear of sounding like a technological determinist (an academic bogeyman) has too often led to a swing from “technology isn’t everything” to the equally incorrect idea that “technology is almost nothing.” Technology is thoroughly entangled with structures of society, and affordances of social media has societal consequences.

Another common claim pundits make is that technology’s impacts have caused a break in human nature. The idea that “kids these days” are different due to their technology use has its basis in an ancient theme on social life—and I do mean ancient. Cicero complained that “children no longer obey their parents,” and Plato, speaking for Socrates, worried that the invention of writing would rob people of wisdom. Claude S. Fischer (1992: 79) in his history of the telephone brilliantly documents how that new technology created similar conversations and concerns, right down to denouncements of those who abused the communications device by engaging in “frivolous chatter” and “idle gossip.”

In fact, when technologies have revolutionary impacts, it’s not because they drastically alter human nature—producing “the most narcissistic kids ever!” or “the dumbest generation in history!”—but because they help structure an environment in which mundane acts (ordinary social grooming, making friends, forming relationships, or even hurling insults) can have drastically different consequences due to the affordances of the medium in which they are taking place. In other words, what’s leading to dramatic consequences is not that people or human nature has radically changed because of technology; rather, it’s that the environment in which these mundane acts are taking place has been radically altered by technology.

Social media has thus had significant impacts—not because people are necessarily doing anything online that they did not already do off-line or before the Internet but because its specific affordances alter social mechanisms that then influence outcomes. What’s changed, however, are not necessarily the things that are often cited in the current wave of moral panic. Instead, these new technologies are shaking up our lives by changing the ways we balance our social roles.

In stark contrast to those who see the Internet as a “virtual world” suitable to free-floating *identity experimentation*, I’ve found that the current *affordances* of social media platforms mean that the Internet, overall, has become *identity constraining*. Tighter coupling of online and off-line identities through the embedding of profiles in existing social networks, digitally enabled peer-to-peer and hierarchical surveillance, triangulation of abundant information, the ability to examine

persistent records of social imprints, and the erosion of practical obscurity—the notion that not everything that was public was easy to find, and hence it was protected through obscurity—have all combined to make the Internet productive of clashes between different social roles—a source of great stress for users, because everyone inhabits multiple social roles.

For instance, the joke you made on Facebook, with your friends as your imagined audience, may have been read by your conservative aunt or your boss. The little lie you told about being too tired to attend one social gathering may be revealed by a photograph of you attending another—uploaded and tagged by others. A young adult I once interviewed sighed, “Facebook is the devil,” and proceeded to recount the endless “drama” that resulted when social media postings were discovered by unwanted audiences. These days, the last thing a dog wanting to hide its canine nature would do is go online! A quick look at its friends, Fido, Lassie, Spot, Sparky, and Rover, or its Facebook “likes” for “Beggin’ Strips” and “Purina,” or a perusal of its tweets about the best trees in the neighborhood, and the game would be up.

In fact, online and off-line identity are so intertwined that Facebook “like” data can be used to predict “sexual orientation, ethnicity, religious and political views, personality traits, intelligence, happiness, use of addictive substances, parental separation, age, and gender” as well as some personality traits, with the same level of accuracy as traditional scales (Kosinski, Stillwell, and Graepel 2013: 5082). These days, if you are on the Internet, everybody knows you’re a dog.

If it creates this much pressure, why don’t people opt out? Because once a technology becomes mundane and normalized, nonparticipation has costs. People are advised to be suspicious of those without a social media presence—and they are. Employers now often expect to see one and so, increasingly, do college admissions offices. On college campuses, I routinely find 90–98 percent adoption rates. Social media is “optional”—especially for young people looking to become established socially and culturally—in the sense that not having a phone number is optional for working adults. To abandon social media is to isolate oneself outside of vital spaces for contemporary social life.

Whether we are lonelier in general or our communities are eroding are ongoing themes in American social thought. Alexis de Tocqueville worried about it. The current reincarnation can be traced to influential scholarship such as Robert D. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (2001), which argues that American communities are hollowing out, and an article by Miller McPherson, Lynn Smith-Lovin, and Matthew Brashears, “Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades” (2006), which compares a social network measure

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between 1985 and 2004 and notes a significant decline. Even the dates of those studies make it obvious that if there were erosion, it predates the Internet. Putnam put most of the blame on television. Further, the findings of McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears (2006) have been challenged (measuring network size is complex and difficult), and the evidence (in an article and analysis I wrote, which is under review) suggests that Internet users fared better in the decline, if any, in social connectedness that is suggested by these findings.

To the extent that there is social atomization, the data suggest that factors such as television viewing, increases in commute times, the hours spent at work, the rise of two-income families (hence women being less available to do the work of kinship that they traditionally shouldered), suburbanization, and the increasing isolation of teenagers within homes are most responsible. In contrast to popular media reports and punditry, the social Internet appears to be a countervailing factor. The Internet is not making us lonelier, but it does have multiple systemic effects on the size, composition, and structure of our social networks, and this is one reason the technology generates so much anxiety.

First, the Internet helps reconfigure our social networks, further tilting the balance toward people's *achieved* social networks (ties based on affinity and shared interests) and away from *ascribed* ones (ties based on family or neighborhood). Sociologist Barry Wellman talks about "networked individualism"—social network formation in which people increasingly interact as individuals rather than as members of groups (Rainie and Wellman 2012). This shift is fundamentally fueled by the rise of modern individualism and facilitated by technology. Whatever your interests, there are people out there like you. This is not an argument against the importance of place—in many instances, the people you would like to spend time with may be near you, but you may not know that they exist without an online directory of their interests.

There is a widespread misunderstanding that social media is suitable for weaker ties (people we are less close to, acquaintances) but not strong ones (close friends and family). In truth, social media supports many types of ties, including ones that would have been harder to maintain before—many immigrants cherish Facebook for a reason—rather than ties of a particular strength. It's also not true that affinity-based ties originally formed online are necessarily weak ones. Under the right circumstances, they can be strong precisely because they are chosen. A young woman from a wealthy Egyptian family explained this to me in a café near Tahrir Square soon after the Arab uprisings of 2011: "I met almost all my best friends on Twitter," she said. "My old friends and family refused to talk politics. So I went online to find political people." After extended online conversations, she

started joining street protests. It all culminated with the revolutionary eighteen days in Tahrir, where she risked her life along with people now bound to her by some of the strongest ties in her social network.

Nor is there any evidence that our (partially or fully digitally maintained) weak ties are displacing our strong ties. It is true that social media facilitates the formation of larger weak-tie networks by making them more efficient and less costly to maintain; there is no evidence, however, that these weak ties crowd out stronger ones. Weak ties may even support our strong-tie networks: if our family- and place-based ties are eroding due to the rise of individualism and other structural factors, those weaker ties may be the source from which we draw our new stronger ties. In other words, weak and strong ties are not dichotomous and do not exist in a zero-sum relationship in which one type of tie necessarily replaces another but rather often interact on a dynamic continuum of strength and mutual reinforcement.

Second, the Internet changes patterns of interaction. A persistent finding in social science has been that propinquity matters. Those with whom you interact most are likely to become those with whom you grow close, and not being plugged into new tools of social interaction decreases chances for interaction. We know that there are great variations in skill among those who use these technologies, which may impact who takes part in the new digital social commons (Hargittai 2002). For example, if the “snail mail” annual family bulletin listing the year’s trials and tribulations is now sent by e-mail, or if engagements and pregnancies are announced only on Facebook, Aunt Edna, who’s not online much, may never hear of them. No one means to exclude her, of course, but the new way to systematically contact everyone on a list excludes her because she’s not online.

Third, some people may not take to mediated communication, while others may prefer it. Face-to-face communication certainly has primal dimensions. Human faces are deeply evocative both emotionally and neurologically. Talking to disembodied voices on the phone and watching little people on television took some getting used to as well.

Because most educated people alive today are used to reading, they often overlook the difficulties of the changes they make by transferring language (a function of oral speech) to text (a visual artifact). Through years of rigorous formal schooling, they train their visual system to perform this nifty hack. The training is lengthy, difficult, and not without obstacles—for those with dyslexia, for instance.

Recognizing text on-screen as a form of interacting with a person requires a similar neural and psychological hack. Text-based social interaction works to the degree that we can evoke the same primal sense of social presence that face-to-face interaction triggers. My research suggests that, for some people, online com-

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munication just does not generate this sense of presence and that this response is not a cohort effect or a proxy for other personality variables such as extraversion. Hence some of the unease with online sociality may occur in people for whom this interaction just doesn't work at a primal level—the “cyberasocial” (Tufekci 2011; Tufekci and Brashears 2013). This unease with online sociality may constitute a third-level digital divide, after the ones for access and skill.

In contrast, some people find face-to-face interaction, with its emphasis on eye contact and the prioritizing of physical appearances, to be difficult or anxiety inducing. For them, the text-heavy digital connectivity provides a relief by transferring part of the communicative load to a medium they are more comfortable with—Joseph B. Walther (1996) terms this type of computer-mediated, text-only, but deep interaction “hyperpersonal.” Depending on where you are on the cyber-social spectrum, the prevalence of online sociality can have dramatically different effects. It can be a relief, an enhancement to your social life, or an anxious interaction that feels hollow. This variation likely helps explain the dramatic range of conversations about the topic: we don't all have the same experience of online social interaction.

Fourth, and, finally, we need to consider the role of privilege in exhortations to put down our phones in favor of face-to-face interaction. For people who move away from family while chasing jobs, or for people working long hours, or for parents juggling child care, elder care, and jobs, digitally enabled connectivity is not an option; online interactions are often the only or best form of connectivity available. Face-to-face interaction is increasingly expensive and signifies a certain amount of privilege and work-based flexibility. Declaring some forms of connectivity less real (“virtual”) can become another way for people with privilege to claim a form of cultural capital that is denied to others. Turkle (2012) published an op-ed in the *New York Times* about her phone-free summers at Cape Cod, where she walks the sands that Henry David Thoreau once trod, and on National Public Radio Turkle (February 25, 2011) criticized mothers who text while breastfeeding because, she said, this interferes with bonding. Yet most mothers don't have the luxury of downtime, and we need to understand their communications in the context of their real lives.

This topic hits on another key tension between our devices and our lives: for ever more of us, these devices are the means through which employment has taken over our nominal nonwork hours. As employees, we are increasingly expected and advised to be on call and responsive almost all the time.

Turkle (2011) also reports that kids resent the beeping phone that takes their parent away from them, and that is an important consideration. Turkle (2011:

2) similarly has a strong argument when she argues against “sociable robots” being used to babysit the elderly or children or people with disabilities—such “warehousing” is indeed dehumanizing and isolating, unlike social media, which connects us to people. We should put this anxiety about connectivity through our devices in the context of the life that Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg prescribes to ambitious females in *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013): wake up before the children and answer e-mail for hours before having breakfast with the children, go to work and work until dinner, come home for dinner, put the kids to bed, and answer e-mail for many more hours.

It’s easy to see why some people blame their devices for taking them away from social interaction and their family. This is not because the technology is antisocial but rather because it can help tether us to alienated labor around the clock.

Communications technologies are neither dehumanizing nor isolating when they provide social connectivity. When my phone beeps because my ninety-year-old grandmother in Istanbul is calling, it is anything but dehumanizing. When my high school classmates rally on Facebook to morally, physically, and, if necessary, financially support one of us during a major illness, it is anything but dehumanizing. On the contrary, without the Internet most of us would have disappeared from each other’s communities and lives. And it’s profoundly humanizing when people first meet online and convert those relationships to face-to-face friendships, as about one in five people in North America have done.

The Internet is not a world of “disembodied” and “shallow” relationships of the “virtual” kind; it is a technology that mediates and structures social connections between real people. Conceptually, empirically, and, above all, ethically, we have an obligation to end the moral panic that the Internet is making us lonely and isolated. We would be better off debating how we can use new communications technologies to combat the economic, political, and cultural forces that threaten to tear us apart.

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