

The Social Networking Paradox

By Michael Karolewski

We are living in an increasingly technological world where almost everyone owns a laptop or phone (for clarification, I will be discussing those who live in the United States, as this does not apply to third-world nations). These devices allow people to stay more connected than ever before because with the push of a button they can send a text, update their Facebook status, or make a call. Many would argue that this opportunity to remain in constant communication with any number of people is making people more socialized. When taking into account my own experiences with my friends and even simply watching people's interactions, I find that this argument is flawed. While technology has created a virtual world that allows more connectivity than ever before, it is actually making people less social. David Abram wrote "Animism and the Alphabet," which showed how the evolution of the alphabetic language has distanced mankind from nature. Likewise, the progression of technology has distanced humans from each other, creating a gap between the interactions of the virtual world and face-to-face interactions, which create a much more important relationship.

One of the most common ways in which people share their stories and feelings is via a social networking site (Facebook, Twitter, and the outdated MySpace). It is very simple to post any idea that pops into your brain by updating your status or tweeting wise words of wisdom. Ideas are constantly streaming into the Internet and are collected in these networking sites where one can simply open Facebook and learn all they need about a specific person. Abram writes, "'I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything whereas men in the town do'" (Abram 34). This quote is delivered by Socrates and expresses that language is an inherently human trait, and he cannot learn by conversing with nature, as ancient men once did. His tone reflects one of disconnect with nature and shows the gap that the alphabet forged. Socrates' words reflect also the change that has marked the recent era of technological progress. No longer do people need to meet with one another to exchange ideas and thoughts. One need only turn on their computer or smart phone to access the Internet and read from any website that showcases someone's beliefs. They no longer need to meet with a stranger to learn about them, because they simply can research them on Facebook and learn more that way than through a five minute conversation. Mankind has evolved from a species enamored with nature to an intellectual species trained in the art of communication with one another to a dependent species that needs technology in order to survive.

With all the new toys and gadgets at our disposal, it is hard not to get caught up in the madness. Even I, disapproving of the effects of technology on our society, will be the first to admit that I recently received an iPhone. This hypocrisy is one of the main reasons that this is an issue that needs to be explored. Nearly everyone has a smart phone these days; it is becoming the social norm. More people are buying new devices so that they do not feel like "backwards" people, since they are expected to own a phone and a computer. This atmosphere creates a sort of dependency – walking down the street in Boston, I constantly see people staring intently at their phone with their headphones in. Since they look so preoccupied, I think that I should also become absorbed in my phone. This everyone-is-doing-it-so-I-should-too mentality encourages excessive use because people come to believe that they must always be plugged in to be normal.

It is not uncommon to hear someone say, “I lost my phone for a day and I was almost unable to function.” People place too much stock into their phones and laptops and without them they feel a sense of emptiness and vulnerability. David Abram writes: “Today we are simply unable to discern with any clarity the manner in which our own perceptions and thoughts are being shifted by our sensory involvement with electronic technologies, since any thinking that seeks to discern such a shift is itself subject to the very effect that it strives to thematize” (Abram 44). We cannot understand how much technology has infiltrated our lives and that is why it is so dangerous. People need their gadgets to feel secure because without them they feel strange and like an outcast from society, since it is the norm to have an operating phone. They do not view this recess from the virtual world as a chance to enjoy other aspects of life; they merely see it as a curse because they must deal with the dull aspects of a boring world where their only form of communication is in person and face-to-face.

Technology turns people into more solitary creatures though on the surface it appears they are becoming more socialized. “The capacity to view and even to dialogue with one’s own words after writing them down, or even in the process of writing them down, enables a new sense of autonomy and independence from others,” (Abram 42). Abram describes that as people began to use language to reflect on ideas they had written down, it allowed them a feeling of freedom and seclusion from others. So also is the effect of those who acquire the gift of technological mastery. A person can indulge in the use of the Internet and feel as if they are the master of infinite knowledge since a wealth of information can be accessed through a simple search on Google. This gives them a false sense of empowerment because they think that their access allows them independence since they do not need to ask anyone for an answer. They always have the ability to find out themselves, but they are not becoming any smarter for as soon as they look up a fact, they will forget it soon thereafter. Culture has now stressed the importance of instant gratification, so being able to call upon any source of information is seen as a great gift. Yet having the feeling that you are a better person because you are connected to the Internet is quite absurd and enhances the idea that people become increasingly fragile because if they cannot access the Web, they will feel suddenly powerless.

I will now introduce the idea of the social networking paradox. On one hand, people are becoming more socialized via a new avenue for communication – the Internet. They have the accessibility that allows them to stay in constant contact, and for this reason, it cannot be denied that they are more social with each other from behind their computer screens and phone displays. However, this form of socialization is not the key determinant of living a completely socialized life. As defined on dictionary.com, the term social means “living or disposed to live in companionship with others or in a community, rather than in isolation.” If a person leaves their house and interacts with people in the real world they are fulfilling both requirements of this definition. However, they can choose to stay in their room with their laptop or phone and simply send text messages as their way to communicate. This does not fulfill the second part of the definition because a person can remain in solitude while still being with people. It seems contradictory to believe that a person can truly have companionship with a group of people while they are lying in bed alone.

Technology also takes away from a person’s interactions with the people they are physically with. For example, when a group of friends are together it is expected that they will talk to one

another and exchange stories. However, when everyone present has a phone or computer with them, these interactions are halted by the ever more important need to surf the web and check on other people who are not there with them in the same room. People who are together will not talk to each other because they will be on Facebook reading the status of a person whom they hardly know, or obsessively sending texts to another person who cannot be bothered to respond. These people are not “living in the moment.” They are focused on being a part of the larger virtual world, and that means disconnecting themselves from the people they are surrounded by. Though they are becoming more socialized on a larger scale due to the ease with which they can communicate with a greater quantity of people, they are becoming less socialized because the quality of their interactions is reduced since they do not bond with the people they are currently with.

One of the most destructive forces that drives the social networking paradox is that people feel as though they are becoming more social even though they are not. A person begins to define their social status based on how many Facebook friends they have or how many followers they have on Twitter. It does not matter if they even know these people in real life, because in the virtual world it is quantity that counts and not quality. Just the other day, I heard someone say, “I have a friend in New York. I almost met him one time but we never got around to it.” This statement is troubling; this person has a friend whom they have never even met. A relationship that is built in solitude from behind a computer screen is odd, if not dangerous. All too often we are reminded that people can pose as whomever they want online because the Internet can allow anonymity. This is dangerous because this friend they were talking about may not be from New York and may not be who they say they are. Yet, people will constantly send messages back and forth to each other without knowing anything about the person with whom they are talking. This does not seem to bother them because the simplicity of their line of communication outweighs the necessity of actually having a decent connection.

One may argue that recent technological achievements have increased socialization because it allows friends who are separated to stay in contact (like when friends are torn apart by college). Skype is one of these tools because it allows people to come face-to-face, albeit they are not actually physically together. I agree that programs like this do reinforce socialization, if it is being used to reinforce relationships that pre-date the online interaction. If people do not have the option of being together, then this is a suitable way to remain close and to socialize with each other. If two people have the opportunity to meet up with each other in person, but choose not to because they would rather just use Skype, then that is completely different. Bonds are formed more deeply when people are together than when they are isolated yet connected in the virtual world.

It is inevitable that technology will continually evolve. It is impossible to say what new advances will be made and how it will change the way that people interact. It cannot be denied, however, that people still need to be together because humans are social creatures. This need cannot be fulfilled by living vicariously through the Internet. Just as the evolution of the alphabet distanced humans from nature, so has technology created a gap between people and their interactions with other people in the real world. If we continue to be constantly plugged-in, then we will miss out on all the wonderful things happening right before our eyes. We need to look past the allure of

the virtual world and realize that we need to live with the people we surround ourselves with and not the strangers we are looking for online.

Works Cited

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