(Anti)Social Networking:

Technologies’ Negative Impact on Human Relationships

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Abstract

In recent years, online social network sites such as MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter have unmistakably become the fastest growing applications on the internet, and with good reason. With the ability to link, socialize, and interact with friends near and far, social media sites spur human social interaction to levels unmatched in history.

Despite these benefits however, there is the proverbial darker side to online social networks. These networks appear to be inhibiting the very skills and abilities they strive to promote. As a result of frequent overuse of such sites, humans are failing to connect and interact with one another in deeper, more meaningful ways required for sustained societal survival.
(Anti)Social Networking: Technologies’ Negative Impact on Human Relationships

Aristotle, the famed Greek philosopher contended that, “Man is by nature a social animal.” It is difficult to disagree that, at its most basic, fundamental level, humans depend on relationships with other humans for care, companionship, and survival of the species. Human motivation to interact with one another and the way that interaction takes place, also affects the nature of the relationship and the impact it has on each individual. Foremost, humans desire the need to belong. This innate desire is molded out of an evolutionary process that has helped humans develop the necessary skills to survive. “The likely result of this evolutionary selection would be a set of internal mechanisms that guide individual human beings into social groups and lasting relationships. These mechanisms would presumably include a tendency to orient toward other members of the species, a tendency to experience affective distress when deprived of social contact or relationships, and a tendency to feel pleasure or positive affect from social contact and relatedness” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). However to believe that every human to human interaction and relationships do not carry with them the possibility of pain, loss, or other negative impact is, at the very least, naïve. Nonetheless, despite that prospect, humans still seek to engage in those interactions and seek out positive relationships in new and technologically different ways.

Where before, people were limited to individuals and interactions within a relatively confined area, the advent of technological devices, tools, and programs, no longer restrict humans the way they once did. It can be said that no single device has transformed the way we interact with one another more, than the computer, and of course, the internet. Through the internet, people began to connect in a way seldom before realized. Asynchronous and synchronous interactions became
blurred, and humans felt as if they were communicating with someone across a table with them, despite them being across the world, and across time. Chief among these in our current world is online social networks (often considered social media). For purposes of this paper, online social networks and social media, will all be used to signify internet-enabled communication between individuals for the purposes of fostering interaction and relationships. Beginning with AOL group discussion, chat room web sites, Geocities, and the like, technology quickly fed the demand for human interaction through computers, arriving at MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, which dominate the online social network market, and to an extent, everyday life. Whether the use of social media has contributed to the collaboration of uprisings or demonstrations, or whether more and more reporting of news incorporates Twitter messages from those individuals relevant to a particular topic, we all experience the effects of online social networks. However, despite the benefits that social media has provided, these online social networks have negatively impacted how humans interact and their ability to form healthy relationships. As a result, the pervasiveness of social media has adversely affected the construct and interaction of the family unit, deteriorated the development of social skills and interactions of youth and finally, misconstrued the definition of friend, all the while thwarting and warping intimate relationships.

All in the Family

Not so long ago, it was seemed much more common for parents and children to sit together around the dinner table to discuss their day, and engage in dialogue. In fact, in a 2003 Gallup survey, 25% of surveyed families ate dinner together less than three times per week (Kiefer, 2004). The family dynamic has shifted, and as a result, so too has the focus of the importance of engaging in family interactions. A major effect on family dinners specifically, and family relationships and interactions as a whole has been the prevalence of technology. Parents are
major contributors to the lack of engagement. As Sherry Turkle highlights in her book Alone Together, “children have always competed for their parent’s attention, but this generation has experienced something new. Today, children contend with parent who are so physically close, tantalizingly so, but mentally elsewhere” (Turkle, 2011). Consider the rising amount of time individuals are spending on social media sites, from personal computers, laptops, and increasingly, mobile phones. Facebook alone reports some 800 million users, with over 100 million of them using the mobile phone feature. And since half of those users are logging in everyday, consider how much time is spent on these sites (Facebook, 2011). When the amount of time spent on this and other online social networks increases, other areas of a person’s life are bound to diminish. Parents are keenly focused on taking pictures of their children, not for posterity, but rather to quickly post them on social media sites to share with others, elicit comments, respond to those comments, and engage in lengthy, asynchronous conversation that further disassociates one from their “real” lives. In this way, is the experience of that moment shared really worth what the picture implies? Additionally, the belief that an event or a person somewhere else is more important than those you are with adds to the strain of the family unit. The main caretaker of the child is present, yet mentally absent, thinking about posts, tweets, and the like, while the relationships with the youth are sacrificed. When family dinners consist of parents on their mobile phones, or on their laptops, rather than face to face discussion and interaction with their children, it can have a neural impact as well. Consider that traditional family dinners, “not only strengthens our neural circuitry for human contact (the brain's insula and frontal lobe), but it also helps ease the stress we experience in our daily lives, protecting the medial temporal regions that control emotion and memory” (Small, 2009). Thus, with lack of human to human contact, face to face interaction, the brain’s circuitry charged with seeking that
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contact, is becoming affected. For youth, this effect could prove to further reduce their ability to socialize with other individuals in positive and meaningful ways.

Spare the Network, Spoil the Child

That is because the physical changes occurring to the brains of youth who frequently use online social networks is changing further. Oxford University neuroscientist Baroness Greenfield is concerned that the repeated exposure to these and other technologies will lead to shorter attention spans (Derbyshire, 2009). With shorter attention spans, and the rewired brain seeking the immediate fulfillment that such sites provide, what will be of human contact and relationships that take time to develop? Children will have lost those skills and will suffer socially as a result. According to 2009 Pew Research Center data, 73% of all teens accessing the internet logged onto at least one kind of online social network (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). With social media becoming the preferred method of communication, teenagers, who would otherwise be developing those social skills and abilities face to face, attempt to build that foundation through online interactions with other adolescents. Those social changes that occur in youths have been directly linked to the use of online social networks. In one such study, Dr. Larry Rosen observed 1000 adolescents who used Facebook during studying times. He discovered that teens who used Facebook most demonstrated traits of narcissism, antisocial mania and other aggressive tendencies. The most frequent users also had increased school absences. And the physical effects are equally dangerous. Rosen shows that “overuse of media and technology has a negative effect…by making them more prone to anxiety, depression…as well as making them more susceptible to future health problems (Rosen, 2011). Thus, in addition to augmenting antisocial traits and behaviors, online social networks also increased school absences and the likelihood of health problems, many of which could further impact
attendance at school, the only other major arena for teens to develop and nurture these skills. It appears that teen use of such networks both reduces the likelihood of positive social interactions via the antisocial behaviors that occurred, but also diminishes the opportunity to still practice and promote positive social interactions with fellow teens because of increased absences. Despite the negative impacts technology and online social networks have on teens and adolescents, there are benefits to the new, non-traditional form of communication that allows access to those once perceived as unwilling to interact.

**Casting the Net(work)**

In the early days of chat rooms, most of the users often found themselves in distant places, which, initially at least, coincidentally happened to be in the same chat room at the same time. Unless a true connection was made to the point that phone numbers or email addresses were exchanged, or at the very least, arrangements were made to meet again at an established date and time, those connections were lost. Interestingly, today’s online network user have developed tactics to seek out individuals online that can then be sought out offline in the future.

Researchers have discovered a trending towards the use of Facebook for both social searching, that is, finding out information about offline contacts and for social browsing, the use of online networking sites to foster new connections, sometimes with the aim of connecting offline afterwards (Moorman & Bowker, 2011). This demonstrates a translation of online networking content to offline, face to face interaction and relationships.

As was discussed earlier, online social networks break the barriers of space and time that would otherwise limit the interactions we experience with new people, but also with familiar ones. Before the likes of MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, individuals who wished to share photos, greetings, congratulations, or announcements had options that were both time consuming and
tedious. Calling everyone, emailing everyone, or even sending letters to everyone were the only real methods. Today, one person can post an announcement or a photo on their wall, or send a tweet with the information and ensure that everyone they are connected to will receive the message. Furthermore, one need not worry about forgetting to tell someone about an event. With online social networks, the all-inclusive ability to send it to everyone is convenient, and help maintain positive relationships, particularly for those “internet users [that] might be well adjusted as they report higher levels of social activity and network involvement” (Nie, 2001). But as there different levels of online users, and the extent to which they use social networks, so too are there individuals that benefit from those networks in a way they might not otherwise not be able to do so. After all, there are antisocial individuals that do not use social networks, and would not be willing to develop those skills in a traditional face to face setting. It can therefore be argued that online social networks do nothing more that serve as an outlet for those that already have developed those social skills, right?

Although it is true that convenience is a benefit of online social networks, as is the case with most any new technology, one must consider the sacrifices that arise from these new technologies. It has been argued that young people today no longer are able to write cursive or spell correctly. Because of technological advances, most realize that handwriting seems to be going the way of the dinosaur. Keyboards are fast replaces pen and paper, and thus the need to have that skill is almost entirely obsolete. Spelling is now checked by word processing programs automatically. Therefore, what is the need in knowing how to spell any word? The difference lies in why social skills are unique. Social skills, the very idea of interacting with another human appears to also be short lived. Automatic checkouts at grocery stores, online shopping, texting,
emails and the like, are slowly eroding opportunities for humans to hone the skills that to this point have led to our survival.

**130 is The Loneliest Number**

As adults today, most were coming of age at a time when online social networks were in their infancy and use was more of a novelty. As a result, face to face social interactions has not been impacted as greatly as they are today, and as such, the skills and abilities to interact face to face with others is still on average, each user has 130 “friends” (Facebook, 2011). Despite the growing number of friends in our circle, a survey by Cornell University sociologist Matthew Brashears shows that the number of “close friends” we consider has dropped over time (Potter, 2011). Think about the relationships with close friends and how they differ from other friendships. Close friendships certainly do more for our own social skill set and improve the way we are able to connect with others. And this conclusion is not only apparent to close friendships, but to all human contact. When Dr.’s Elizabeth Engelburg and Lenn Art Sjöberg researched to link between internet use and emotional intelligence, they discovered, “a very large difference in loneliness between high- and low-frequency users” (Engelberg & Sjöberg, 2004). Overall, it seems that technology is allowing for more perceived interaction, but in reality affecting our face to face, human interaction, to the point where being online can results in feelings of loneliness. In addition to causing isolation for individuals, online social networks do not result in a growing number of offline relationships. In fact, Facebook is mostly maintained to reinforce existing human relationships, rather that nurturing new ones (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2007). It can be argued that online social networks have brought us closer than ever before. It can also be argued that without these tools, we would find ourselves void of connections to distant family
and friends without the ability to instantly share our thoughts, pictures, and news.

Simultaneously however, the social interactions, and skill set utilized to engage in these relationships does not benefit our development of the social skills we desperately require to maintain the critical social relationships that exist face to face.
References


