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Social Media's Impact on Listening and Loneliness



by Charles Veenstra

Herrick Higgins, a character in Baldacci's *The Christmas Train*, explains why trains are popular at Christmas: "People get on to meet their country over the holidays. They're looking for some friendship, a warm body to talk to. People don't rush on a train, because that's not what trains are for." He goes on to defend his love for trains: "I'm not saying that riding the train will change your life, or that passenger rail will be a big moneymaker one day. But no matter how fast we feel we have to go, shouldn't there be room for a train, where you can just sit back, take a breath, and be human for a little while? Just for a little while? Is that so bad?"¹

The value of efficiency is celebrated today. Not only do people choose airplanes over trains, but they choose social media over interpersonal face-

to-face communication. Technology encourages efficiency as a central value, in a way similar to Frederick Taylor's famous work with coal-shoveling experiments many years ago.

The benefits of the new social media — Facebook, Twitter, the ubiquitous cell phone, email, etc. — are clear: social contacts, re-acquaintance with long lost relatives, security, immediate access to information, efficiency in communication, and more. The rapid advance of digital technologies is eagerly accepted with the result that as soon as a newer and faster version of gadgets comes on the market, consumers rush to the stores.

However, a few voices raise some concerns about what these new technologies are doing to relationships. For example, Carr engages the issues of what the internet is doing to our brains,² and Turkle writes about why we expect more from technology and less from each other.³ Neither of these authors is a luddite; they continue to use new technology and plan to keep up to date with the newest developments. With careful research, they indicate that we need to be aware of the impact of technology. As has been true throughout history when new communication technologies are introduced, the new digital technologies impact the way we think and communicate. In her review of Michael Bugeja's book *Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age*, Simmons writes that Bugeja claims, "new media technologies have eroded our understanding of place and identity, replaced our moral consciousness with the teachings of self-help manuals, associated citizenship with consumerism, weakened our interpersonal skills,

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and destroyed our perception of community.⁴ Bugeja uses the phrase “interpersonal divide” to describe “the social gap that develops when individuals misperceive reality because of media overconsumption and misinterpret others because of technology overuse.”⁵

My focus is what these communication technologies do to the nature of communication, particularly listening. As we consider the impact of communication technology on relationships, several issues need examination.

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Listening, defined as the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages, requires significant attention to the other. While we can listen to others via the social media, in many cases much of the nonverbal part of communication is missing; in some cases nearly all nonverbal communication is absent. Furthermore, digitized friendships are predicated on rapid response rather than reflection. Listening requires that one slow down, something that social media discourage. Building relationships, a process that requires a large amount of listening, is by its very nature an *inefficient* process.

Many years ago McLuhan asserted that “the medium is the message,” that is, the media shape the way we think.⁶ In a similar vein, Carr examines what the internet is doing to our brains; he claims that the brain adapts to the newer technology of the internet: “Never has there been a medium that, like the Net, has been programmed to so widely scatter our attention and to do it so insistently.”⁷ We are being programmed to quickly move from one thing to another: “When we go on line, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learn-

ing.”⁸ There appears little time for listening. The brain thus learns to expect quick movement from one item to another rather than slowing down to think: “There is no Sleepy Hollow in the Internet, no peaceful spot where contemplativeness can work its restorative magic.... It’s not only deep thinking that requires a calm, attentive mind. It’s also empathy and compassion.”⁹ These last two ingredients are essential to building interpersonal relationships. In order to develop compassion, one needs much time to listen to another person. American teens, on average, process 3,300 text messages each month.¹⁰ By their nature, text messages are short and insubstantial for developing empathy and the other emotions essential to the development of relationships.

In *Interpersonal Divide*, Bugeja complains about the impact of media on relationships: “Until recently, however, communication was mostly interpersonal, or face to face. People spoke plainly to each other — sometimes appropriately and sometimes, inappropriately — but usually authentically because of facial gestures, tone of voice, time of day, occasion of place, possibility of witnesses, and so on. We could read expressions of love, hate, or indifference in body language and could interpret ill intent or goodwill first hand, without needing media analysts to construe the situation or technology to process that information at ever-faster speeds.”¹¹ In essence, his claim is that social media divide persons from each other and hinder the development of community.

In “The End of Solitude” Deresiewicz writes, “If boredom is the great emotion of the TV generation, loneliness is the great emotion of the Web generation. We lost the ability to be still, our capacity for idleness. They have lost the ability to be alone, their capacity for solitude.”¹² In losing solitude, he claims, we have lost the propensity for introspection and for sustained reading and excellence: “But no real excellence, personal or social, artistic, philosophical, scientific or moral, can arise without solitude”¹³ Carr argues “the intellectual technologies that Google has pioneered promoted the speedy, superficial skimming of information and discourage any deep, prolonged engagement with a single argument, idea, or narrative Google is, quite literally, in the business of distraction.”¹⁴

Of course solitude, in which one chooses to be alone to reflect, is not the same as loneliness. Cornblatt defines loneliness as “an aversive emotional response to a perceived discrepancy between a person’s desired levels of social interaction and the contact they’re actually receiving.”¹⁵ We need to ask what the potential is for greater loneliness, given the truncated nature of relationship development due to the use of social media. This issue has been raised by several scholars.

An AARP report in 2010 reported that a little over one-third (35 %) of the survey respondents were categorized as lonely.¹⁶ Duque maintains that the number of lonely people nearly tripled in the United States over the last 20 years.¹⁷

Marche quotes Cacioppo, an expert on loneliness, who examined the relation between loneliness of subjects and their use of social media: “The greater the proportion of face-to-face interactions, the less lonely you are. The greater the proportion of online interactions the lonelier you become.”¹⁸ None of this means, of course, that media cause loneliness — one can use these media to isolate oneself, or one can use these media to help oneself meet more people face-to-face.

On loneliness, Warrel writes, “Recent studies have found that despite being more connected than ever, more people feel more alone than ever. Surprisingly, those who report feeling most alone are those you’d expect it from least: young people under 35, who are the most prolific social networkers of all. Another recent study found that 48% of respondents only had one confidant compared to a similar study 25 years ago, when people said they had about three people they could confide in. So as we have built expansive social networks online, the depth of our networks offline has decreased. So it seems that because technology makes it easier to stay in touch while keeping distance, more and more people find themselves feeling distant and never touching.”¹⁹ Loneliness does not necessarily result in greater effort to make new confidants. Instead, lonely people find it easier to turn to the internet to connect — at least in a small way — with others. “Loneliness is so great that marriage to someone we have only met on a website can seem our best hope,” writes Turkle, who adds that people have confessed to her, “People are lonely. This gives

them someplace to turn.”²⁰ However, the media do not solve this problem, partly because the physical isolation remains.

It remains because social media “offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship,” explains Turkle.²¹ Facebook allows many connections, which seem to give the impression that one can increase the number of friends. Yet, the definition of “friend” via Facebook has changed. One can “unfriend” another on Facebook with a simple click. “Connections” would be more accurate for all the contacts one has on Facebook. Most of these connections lack the depth of close friendship. In fact, several scholars have examined the possibility that Facebook results in greater loneliness.²² Marche claims that social media have produced “fears that Facebook is interfering with our real friendships, distancing us from each other, making us lonelier; and that social networking might be spreading the very isolation it seemed designed to conquer.”²³ It may well be the case that the number of “friends” on Facebook goes up while number of “real friends” goes down.

Even when people are in the physical presence of others, they often are tied to their technology at the same time. The title of Turkle’s book *Alone Together* aptly describes this phenomenon. Bugeja describes texting in the presence of others a “prescription for loneliness.”²⁴

True friendship requires listening. Listening means we observe all the starts, stumbles, and stops as two people develop intimacy together. As Warrell writes, “Yet genuine intimacy demands vulnerability and vulnerability requires courage. It requires that we lay down the masks we can so easily hide behind online, and reveal all of who we are with others.”²⁵ For “when technology engineers intimacy, relationships can be reduced to mere connections.”²⁶ Listening in a face-to-face interaction requires far more work and sensitivity than it does in an online “conversation.” Social media allow us to control what we share (and hide) to a far greater extent than is possible in face-to-face interpersonal communication. Thus, complete honesty and openness take a back seat.

A major barrier to listening is that we are “always on.” The ubiquitous cell phone interrupts at any moment. Teachers of listening are quick to ask

students to “ditch the distractions.”²⁷ When the phone interrupts conversation and distracts the recipient, those interrupted feel the negative effects of being pushed aside by someone who is not physically present. In the words of Carr: “What are smartphones if not high-tech leashes?”²⁸

Another hindrance is listening is multitasking, or at least the notion that one can do several tasks at once. A common activity involves using social media while doing other tasks. More and more, researchers are seeing that multitasking is a fiction. It limits the effectiveness in each task. “When our brain is over-taxed,” writes Carr, “we find ‘distractions more distracting.’ Experiments indicate that as we reach the limits of our working memory, it becomes harder to distinguish relevant information from irrelevant information, signal from noise. We become mindless consumers of data.”²⁹ He adds, “Try reading a book while doing a crossword puzzle; that’s the intellectual environment of the Internet.”³⁰ In other words, the attempt to multitask hinders listening.

The challenge to listening via social media is this: “You can ‘process’ people as quickly as you want to. Listening can only slow you down.... Better to have it transcribed or avoid it altogether.”³¹ This “slowing down” is the opposite of what the media encourage. Carr asserts, “the price we pay to assume technology’s power is alienation.”³²

Given these challenges with social media, particularly to listening and the development of relationships, what road should we take forward? To assume the new social media will go away is silly. Furthermore, there are huge advantages, as indicated earlier, to the new media technologies. Several suggestions seem in order.

We need to recognize what the internet has done to our brains. Carr’s book is particularly insightful. Here are just a few of his claims that we should know: we are programmed for distraction (we are plugged into an “ecosystem of interruption technologies”); the media shape the process of thought; research contradicts the assumption that multimedia would deepen comprehension and strengthen learning; there needs to be time for efficient data collection and inefficient contemplation; and we must reconsider our conceptions of memory and the power of technology to alienate, etc.

Also, as Carr points out, memory is an important element in the listening process. Yet, according to Carr, “The Web is a technology of FORGETFULNESS. What determines what we remember and what we forget? The key to memory consolidation is attentiveness.”³³ He quotes Kandel on how memory works: “For a memory to persist, the incoming information must be thoroughly and deeply processed. This is accomplished by attending to the information and associating it meaningfully and systematically with knowledge already well-established in memory.”³⁴

Listening interpersonally allows us to peel away the masks we can so easily hide behind online. Warrell notes the craving for intimacy: “Genuine intimacy demands vulnerability and vulnerability requires courage.”³⁵ She goes on to say that the human element within any relationship can never be replaced by technology, especially empathy.

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But empathy has been declining, especially since 2002, according to a University of Michigan study of more than 14,000 college students over the last thirty years. The research finds that college students today show 40% less empathy than that of students in the 1980s and 1990s.³⁶ Sara Konrath, a researcher at the university’s Institute for Social Research, says one reason may be that people are having fewer face-to-face interactions, communicating instead through social media such as Facebook and Twitter.³⁷ Clearly, listening is critical for empathy. And without empathy, relationships do not grow.

Warrell provides these seven strategies for building a *real* social network:³⁸

1. **Unplug:** Turn off your computer, put down your iPhone, step away from your iPad, and take time to engage with people, in person, with face-to-face communication.... Fifty

text messages over a day can never compare with just five minutes of open, caring and honest conversation.

2. **Become a better listener:** Too often we talk too much and listen too little. Learn to listen well and be okay with yours and others stumbles ... we connect to others through our vulnerabilities, not through our brilliance.
3. **Engage in your community:** Get involved in your local community or neighborhood ... spend some helping at a local service organization.
4. **Practice Conversation:** If you are out of practice at meeting people take small steps. Make the most of all chances for social contact ...
5. **Find Like Minds:** Join a class or find an interest group. Getting to know new people can be part of the learning process in a new class.
6. **Reconnect with long lost friends:** It's very likely they will be delighted to hear from you, and will enjoy reconnecting every bit as much as you (assuming your friendship didn't end badly).
7. **Invite people over:** ... some of the best conversations happen over a coffee or casual meal. Yes it may be a bit scary, but real connection will always demand a degree of risk and vulnerability.³⁹

These strategies are all aimed at providing opportunities to listen to others and allow relationships to grow and thus reduce loneliness. Turkle is most correct when she says, "It is from other people that we learn how to listen and bend to each other in conversation."⁴⁰

It is, therefore, obvious that before placing all the newest technologies in the classroom, we need to think about the impact on children. In the concluding words of Carr, "How sad it would be, particularly when it comes to the nurturing of our children's minds, if we were to accept without question the idea that 'human elements' are outmoded and dispensable."⁴¹

Similarly, Cacioppo recommends that social-networking sites serve as a supplement but not a re-

placement for face-to-face interactions.⁴² Cornblatt validates that recommendation: "For people who feel satisfied and loved in their day-to-day life, social media can be a reassuring extension. For those who are already lonely, Facebook status updates are just a reminder of how much better everyone else is at making friends and having fun."⁴³

How we can limit use of social media? Here are some suggestions. We should consider not being "on" 24/7. Not all of us need to carry a smart phone all the time. College professors can forbid cell phones in the classroom and can let students know when and how they can be reached — office hours are important. Email works for questions about class work, but phones are also acceptable. When a student raises a question *beyond* an assignment, the professor can set up a time to talk face-to-face. Professors do not need to text students, acknowledge them as friends on Facebook, or give out cell phone numbers quickly. People can leave messages if necessary. Furthermore, Communication professors should ask students to write journals so that the students can reflect on their communication methods and the impact on others. Any of us should schedule regular times for phone calls with family members who live far away. Only quick questions from family should be done via email.

We do not need to reject or disparage technology. Instead, we need to put it in its place and not let it diminish us. The newer technologies allow us to "dial down" human contact.⁴⁴ We need to see clearly how we are being changed by technology. Lickerman clarifies the limits of technology on relationships: "The problem ... comes when we find ourselves subtly *substituting* electronic relationships for physical ones or mistaking our electronic relationships *for* physical ones. We may feel we're connecting effectively with others via the Internet, but too much electronic-relating paradoxically engenders a sense of social isolation."⁴⁵

A most critical element in this entire discussion is the place of respect. Listening to another person in a face-to-face situation is one of the very best ways we can demonstrate full respect to the other person. It is the only way to build solid relationships and avoid loneliness.

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