Hyper-connected, yet hyper-lonely?

Home Alone

Digital Natives with a Cause? Newsletter

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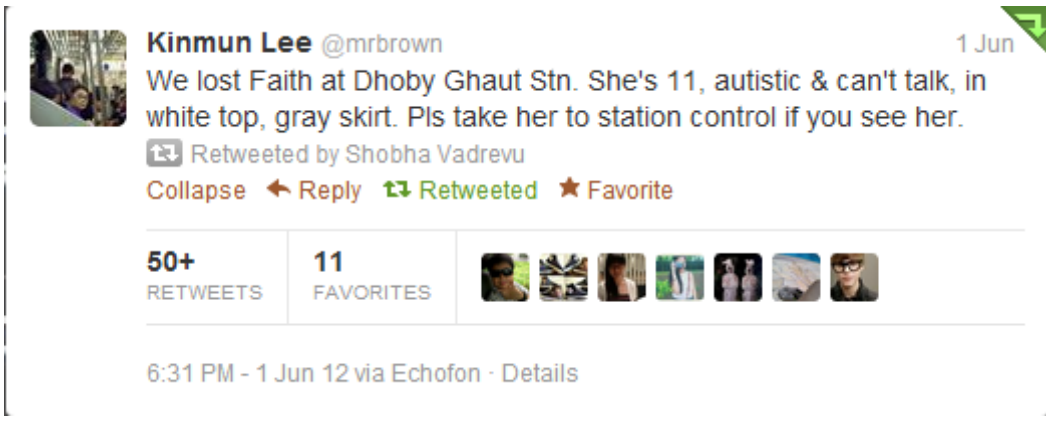
Does social media make us lonelier: both yes and no, and more besides – *Shobha Vadrevu* | **Editor's Corner**

On the 1st of June this year a very popular Singaporean blogger tweeted the following about his daughter:



Within minutes this tweet was shared on Twitter and Facebook as well, picked up by direct followers and passed on to their followers. More information came in later tweets: a photograph of the little girl, where she had last been seen, and finally, the glad tidings that she had been found. The incident made the national news, because the blogger, who goes by the online moniker "mrbrown" even though his real identity is not a secret, is extremely popular. But it was not the fact that a well-known personality had been in trouble that made the item newsworthy. What made it front-page news was the scale of the search and the phenomenon of the entire online community in this highly wired little city state being mobilised in a labour of love via their smartphones and the networks they enabled. Mrbrown may have had some very anxious moments, but that he had a nation of well-wishers on his side was a source of hope and comfort.

There is no dearth of stories like this. Against rising Internet and mobile phone penetration rates worldwide, social media has come to represent empowerment and democratisation in many fields of social life – education, commerce, the arts and even politics, to name just a few. Facebook and Twitter in particular have risen in prominence, with the former hitting 900 million users and the latter crossing 465 million users worldwide. Events like the Arab Spring in the Middle East, the 'India Against Corruption' movement, Bersih 3.0 in Malaysia, Moldova's Revolution, and similar movements have reinforced the link between the technology and the people who use them. These high-profile movements exist alongside the individual narratives of personal social connections that people experience every day. In many ways, the success of the former depends on the latter.

In their new book "Networked: The New Social Operating System", Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2012) describe the revolutions of social networks, the Internet, and the mobile phone as intersecting to form a triple revolution that has "[shifted] people's social lives away from densely knit family, neighbourhood, and group relationships toward more far-flung, less tight, more diverse personal networks" (p. 11).

Arguing for the need to look beyond a simplistic binary evaluation of 'good' or 'bad', the authors assert that the impact of the triple revolution on society is both good and bad, and more besides. Above all, theirs is a thesis based on agency: some people manage their networks better than others, different networks operate in different ways, and definitions of sociality and social currency are changing along with the technologies that support, construct and articulate them. It will come as no surprise that there are opposing schools of thought based on the structural constraints imposed by and upon all three technologies Rainie and Wellman highlight. Social networks, the Internet and the mobile phone are all subject to the conditions of their invention, evolution and implementation.

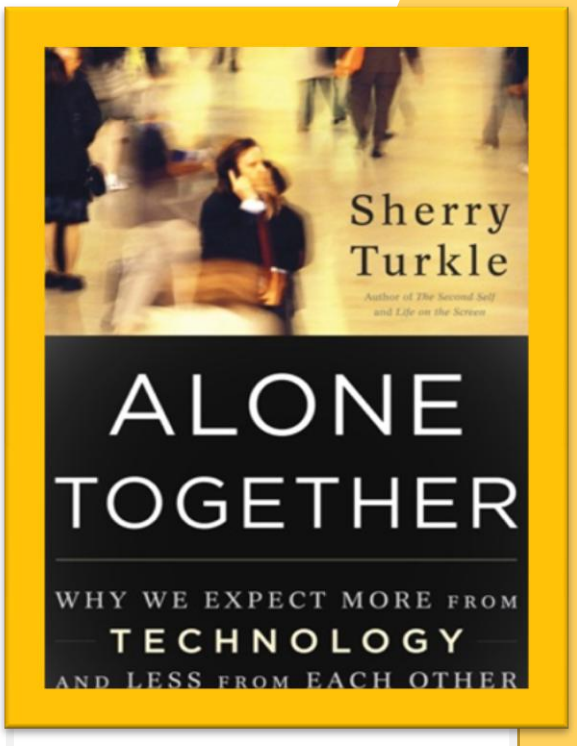
Website architecture holds a hidden curriculum that trains us in how to behave as citizens of cyberspace (Longford, 2005). It also trains us about what to expect of our cyberspace experiences. Eli Pariser (2011) tells us that we are trapped in 'filter bubbles' because our searches are being tailored for us by algorithms designed by large corporations like Facebook and Google. While these algorithms make our searches more efficient, they cut us off from the sorts of discoveries that make us more aware of the world and the people around us. Markus Prior (2007) refers to this as an efficient media environment – one in which we get only and exactly what we are seeking.

The effects of this efficiency are alarming to those who believe in the need for a unified public sphere for supporting democracy. But what does it mean at a personal level? If we are cut off from serendipitous encounters with people and information because algorithms have deemed them irrelevant for us, surely that can be a good thing because it means that we can focus more on the things and people that matter to us. Or does it mean that we enter new realms of discomfort as the technologies we use increasingly impose themselves on our psychological and social consciousness?

In "Alone Together", Sherry Turkle (2011) posits that the technologies we use are making us lonelier. While we are constantly connected, she asserts, we have never been more alone than we are now, when we are buried in our screens and have forgotten how to converse with the people around us. Her thesis has resonated with many people, finding purchase in an audience that senses that social media has had an impact on their lives and their comfort zones.

It has, but perhaps not in the way that they think. While perceptions are important, the data seems to show that something a little more complex is going on in the latest iteration of the technology-and-society relationship. Accusing Turkle of 'Digital Dualism', Nathan Jurgenson argues instead from the perspective of 'Augmented Reality'. Far from being two separate entities, the digital and the physical are increasingly getting meshed. Instead of becoming less social and lonelier because of technology, people are using social media to become more social in new ways. In an article in The Atlantic, Zeynep Tufekci disputes Turkle's theory of social media-induced loneliness, suggesting instead that if at all we are feeling any sense of displacement, it has more to do with the results of capitalism than the technology per se. Given this macro-sociological force, social media is actually proving to increase connections between people, helping them to cope with the consequences of modernity.

If all the data points to social media enabling human connections in a world where the digital and physical are increasingly inseparable, why does the trope of technology-induced loneliness endure? Part of the reason is the definition of what counts as social. Turkle describes herself as "a psychoanalytically trained psychologist. Both, by temperament and profession, I place high value on relationships of intimacy and authenticity" (p. 6). Intimacy and authenticity are problematic concepts that need to be defined, taking into account how they have evolved in the present day.



Facebook. Twitter. Second Life. Smartphones. Robotic pets. Robotic lovers.

Thirty years ago we asked what we would use computers for. Now the question is what *don't* we use them for. Now, through technology, we create, navigate, and perform our emotional lives. *Alone Together* is the result of MIT technology and society specialist Sherry Turkle's nearly fifteen-year exploration of our lives on the digital terrain. Based on interviews with hundreds of children and adults, it describes new, unsettling relationships between friends, lovers, parents, and children, and new instabilities in how we understand privacy and community, intimacy and solitude. It is a story of emotional dislocation, of risks taken unknowingly. But it is also a story of hope, for even in the places where digital saturation is greatest, there are people—especially the young—who are asking the hard questions about costs, about checks and balances, about returning to what is most sustaining about direct human connection. At the threshold of what Turkle calls "the robotic moment," our devices prompt us to recall that we have human purposes and, perhaps, to rediscover what they are.

While it is true that Facebook has changed how we use the word "friendship", the fact that it was able to do so points to the already transforming conceptualisation of the word in our modern world. The same may be said of terms like 'family', 'marriage', and 'relationships', to name a few. Anthony Giddens (1999) refers to these as 'shell institutions'. In name they appear to have remained unchanged from the past, but in reality the meanings they convey have a very different significance for people today.

We also need to think about how sites like Facebook equate with the robots that cause Turkle so much concern – she begins her book with vignettes about how these forms of artificial intelligence are being used to replicate and substitute for human contact. Are they on the same spectrum or fundamentally different within the too-broad framework of the technological?

She makes an assumptive link between the two when, after talking about robots being offered as substitutes for human attention and affection, she says that "We are offered robots and a whole world of machine-mediated relationships on networked devices" and then goes on to include emails, IM and social media (p. 11). But this is not a simple progression. There are essential ways in which these media are different in our lives than robots, even while there are also ways in which they are the same, and these convergences and divergences need to be acknowledged and analysed.

What then IS the role that social media plays in this socio-psychological landscape? Even if we accept that it doesn't make us lonelier on a macro-level, people's micro-level perceptions that they are lonely while connected are legitimate, insofar as they shape discussions and policies related to such technologies. I would like to suggest that a clue to the answer lies in the little story that I started this essay with. *Mrbrown* has access to a twitter network that starts with his more-than 60,000 followers. Anyone who has a Twitter account knows that maintaining a network of this size (even assuming some of them are bots that automatically follow accounts) takes a great deal of hard work on a daily basis. You not only have to tweet often, you have to tweet relevantly, interestingly, and in a manner that earns you many retweets. Social media has the power to increase connections and to widen the support network - but only if you have the skills to cultivate your network.

This brings us back to the question of whether social media makes people lonely. To borrow a line from Rainie and Wellman, I would argue that it does and does not, and more besides. It is a powerful tool to counter the effects of modernity for those who possess the ability to use it, and who therefore shape the way in which it is evolving. Perhaps for that very reason, it is necessary to turn our attention to the lived realities of social media. How do people cope with it on an everyday basis? How do they navigate their relationships in a modern world that is both digital and physical? What about people who don't feel that they have the ability? Is there some way in which, unbeknown to them, they are still living a life that is more social than it would have been without the technologies that they are so uncomfortable with?

As with any question worth asking, there are no easy answers. The contributions in this volume keep the debate going in an engaging manner, from applying theories of agency and structure to building on personal experiences with networked technologies.

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Shobha Vadrevu is a graduate student with the department of Communications and New Media at the National University of Singapore. Her research interests include the shaping of citizen identity through technological relationships, citizenship education, media and youth crime, and social media in the school setting. She is a mother of two teenage boys, who have provided good training in keeping an open mind, laughing loudly and often, and not sweating the small stuff. She blogs at: http://mrsv.wordpress.com/

FACETIME

Shobha Vadrevu

Thank you so much for inviting me to this group. I tried to post this link in a comment on the Connected but Alone thread but for some reason the link wasn't showing up.
Tufekci makes an excellent point about how social media "can increase connection in a world divided by the vagaries of capitalism, the disengagement of television, and the isolation of suburban sprawl".

Social Media's Small, Positive Role in Human Relationships
www.theatlantic.com
It's just one factor in modern life that can increase connection in a world divided by the vagaries of capitalism,

Nilofar Shamim Ansher

Here's a TED Talk where the speaker is 1) Afraid of new technologies like cell phones and camera 2) Is rather nostalgic about "old" technologies, such as the pocket watch 3) Believes technology takes away the magic of the moment, because we are helpless to shut them off 4) Makes a special mention of the 'natural' world as against the artifical one of technology. Please DO share your thoughts.

Shilo Shiv Suleman: Using tech to enable dreaming | Video on TED.com
www.ted.com
TED Talks Has our technology -- our cell phones and iPods and cameras -- stopped us from

Like · Comment · Unfollow Post · Share · May 21 at 8:33pm

Rodrigo Davies

Would be interested to hear any thoughts on this - an Indian group that is bringing community media to a place with almost no digital footprint: http://rodrigodavies.wordpress.com/2012/06/21/giving-voice-to-indias-silent-communities/

Giving voice to India's silent communities
rodrigodavies.wordpress.com
Chhattisgarh, a forest-dominated region of 25 million people in central India rarely makes the news headlines in India – let alone abroad. When it does, there's usually just

Noopur Lily

See, FB is not all that evil, after all!

Facebook urges users to add organ donor status - NDTVGadgets.com
gadgets.ndtv.com
Facebook announces organ donation initiative.

Philip Que-Sell

what do you say???

Sherry Turkle: Connected, but alone? | Video on TED.com
www.ted.com
TED Talks As we expect more from technology, do we expect less from each other? Sherry Turkle

Unlike · Comment · Unfollow Post · Share · April 23 at 3:15pm

Facebook & Loneliness: The Better Question

In 2008, Nick Carr's article in *The Atlantic*, *"Is Google Making Us Stupid?"*, touched off a lively and still ongoing debate about the relative merits of the Internet. http://bit.ly/J440J9

Does Facebook Cause Loneliness? Short answer, No. Why Are We Discussing this? http://bit.ly/IgFKR9

"It is strange to be known so universally and yet to be so lonely"
- Albert Einstein

Facebook isn't making us lonely, it's making us anxious. Get over it!
http://yhoo.it/KYFHNz

"Where we live doesn't just change how we live; it informs who we become. Most recently, technology promises life on the screen …Immersed in simulation, where do we live, and what do we live for?"
Sherry Turkle, Alone

Technology doesn't create loneliness, it reveals it. Once revealed, technology can help alleviate isolation and spur connection.
- Heather Taylor

Do Technologies Make Us Lonelier? Yes & No.

One sociological question. Two answers. Two approaches: Agency and structure | *Samuel Tettner*

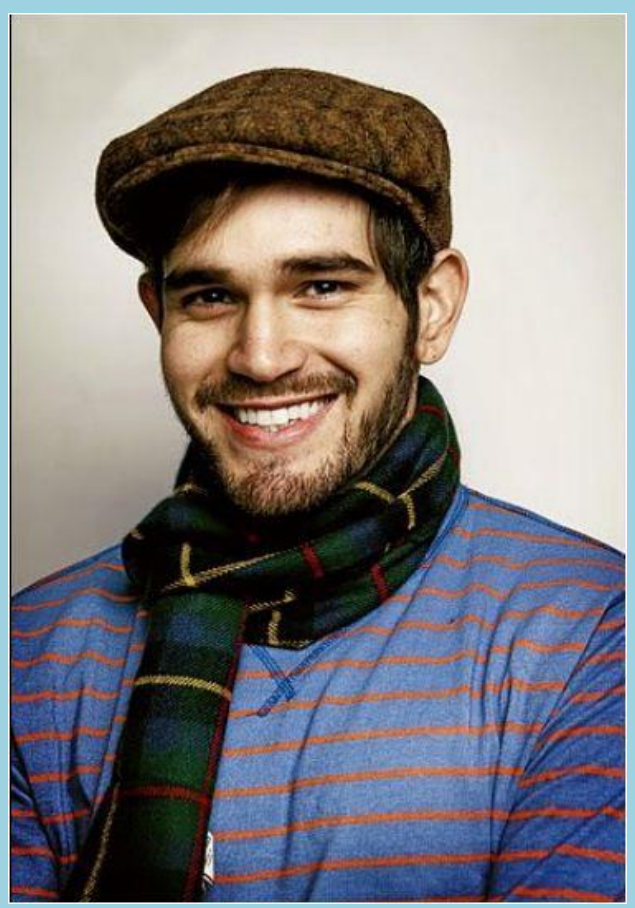
Structure: Yes, technologies make us lonelier. The experiences of individuals in society are mostly governed by forces outside of their control. These forces follow distinct and well-established patterns that structure and give meaning to the lives of individuals. Some of these structures are gender, class and ethnicity.

Technologies are obdurate, even social media and its heralded personalization and customizability have quite rigid parameters. Technologies are not malleable enough to grasp the range of structured experience of any individual. If you're in India, think of all your close relations, the aunties and brothers and uncle's nephew's brother; do they fit in with the categories Facebook provides you for family? Moreover, are all of your social links "friendships?" Don't we all have acquaintances, neighbors (the neighbor's hot niece who came to visit last summer) and quasi-friends: that childhood former-friend who is not a friend anymore but whom you add out of nostalgia? To say all of them are "friends" is outrageous!

And I just listed positive, maybe some neutral relations. What of other social relations like competing suitors for the same romantic conquest, mothers-in-law, that guy who gets into the shared bus right before you and takes your seat every day, your middle-school bully…are they all "friends," too? Whatever the opposite of being alone is, I know it must mean at least partially having a rich variety of social encounters, exchanges, quarrels, side-looks, full-frontal hugs of the squeezable kind, geriatric embraces of the delicate kind, even dynamic clashes of the punch-in-your-face kind across and within these structures. Technology does not do justice to this complexity, at least not yet.

Agency: No, technology does not make us lonely. The experiences of people in society are governed by their own will. Every person has in them the capacity to make of his/her own life whatever they wish. This is a fundamental property of humans; we have the agency for change, for growth, for betterment, for progress. The internet and social media connect directly with this of most human qualities. The internet is, for those who chose to see it like this, a vast reservoir of potential connections to learnings, exchanges and experiences. Being lonely is partly feeling like one has no connections, like one is isolated and cut-off from everything else.

This is exactly what the internet offers. Not only am I able to simultaneously talk to people from all over the world (this newsletter alone reaches readers in 4 continents / When's Australia going to get on board?) but with the whole idea of this new existence being a global one, no one is alone, ever again.



You take out your cellphone, wherever there is signal, and you are instantly part of a global network, a global community. I am writing this from a house overlooking Lake Dojran, a small lake on the border between Macedonia and Greece that supports a town of 500 people. I am writing this while also writing my Master's thesis at the same time for crying out loud – in the Netherlands! To say that technology is making us lonely is to overlook all of these connections, social connections, that people like me are being able to make, thanks to technology.

Actor-network theory: Agency and structure revisited. How to make sense of the two texts above? Is society mostly structures? Or is it mostly agency? Are there really cohesive and consistent ways of experiencing the world which are, largely outside of our control? Do we really have the power within us to create the lives we want to have? The question of loneliness changes, then: Being lonely in a society of structures means that loneliness is a condition, a situational effect of one's position in relation to grander-than-oneself themes. Being lonely in a society of agency means loneliness is a choice at best or a short-coming at worst. Those who are alone are because they either chose to be so or because they lack the necessary skills to change their condition.

In the late 1970s a third way was proposed, a way to move forward from the agency v/s structures debates that had defined European Sociology till then: Actor-network theory (ANT). ANT is a very complicated theory, and I will not open it up for scrutiny in this small piece, but one of its main tenants is that agency is not an intrinsic property of people; it is rather achieved according to one's position in a network. In this sense, people and things are "made to act" by their relations with other people and things in networks.

Another important idea of ANT is that agency is not restricted to human beings. Artifacts can also be "made to act" by their position in a network. Loneliness means a whole different thing if we can say that our iPhones, tablets and GPSs are there with us (that is, they are part of our network).

Are technologies making us lonelier?

One conclusion of seeing agency not as a primary characteristic of social life but as an effect of a network configuration is that categorical questions like "are technologies making us lonelier?" become hard to answer in the definitive. We must consider who is the "we" here, and what we mean by lonely. I am not made lonelier by technology. That is because I have been enrolled in a very particular network of urban, English speaking, mostly males and technology savvy "global" youngsters for whom the internet presents the marvelous set of growth possibilities I mentioned earlier. The house where I am staying belongs to an elderly couple, my girlfriend's grandparents. Dedo (grandpa) spends 3-4 hours on Facebook. He does so through a proxy enrollment in this network, since my girlfriend (who is also part of the network) spends hours explaining to him what each button does.

This is no easy task, it involves translations of the linguistic kind (English to Macedonian), geographical (urban to rural), social (the conception of "friend" of a 72-year-old Yugoslavia- raised man of friendship is certainly not the same of Facebook's) as well as ethical (conceptions of sharing, privacy, personal information, piracy and intellectual rights…). If we were to say that through technology Dedo is connected socially in ways he couldn't be before (he has 150 friends on Facebook, remember the town where he lives has 500) we would not be lying. However we must also mention the work that it takes for him to be enrolled in the network in which Facebook operates, both by him and by his granddaughter: He has handwritten notes on how to upload pictures and his hard drive is renamed "click here for photos". For those who aren't "in" the network, like his wife Baba (grandma), who does not have Facebook because she does not even use the computer, technology probably makes her lonelier. As "progressive" as Dedo's enrollment into the Facebook network might seem, it cannot be divorced from its relation to other perhaps more influential family or traditional networks, where gender divisions of labor in household chores still operates. Those 3-4 hours a day that Dedo spends tagging my girlfriend in gratuitous if at times embarrassing photos and making nonsensical comments on her wall, Baba cleans the house, cooks lunch and attends their kiwi fruit garden.

Crowdsourcing a Couch

We are as lonely

and as connected

as ever before.

When there were

no gadgets, the

loneliness was

invisible, unseen.

Three people |||

relative strangers ///

1) connect digitally <...>

2) record a podcast [o]

3) share it with 100s >>>

Are they connected or lonely?

Round the world jaunt **\(-.-)/**

To meet people \o/\o/\o/

Connected through the network

Facebook|Quora|Gmail|Yahoo

My sleep is secured on their distant couches (or mats).

Am I lonely or connected?

A trip across the continents

My universe expanding,

Almost entirely unplanned,

Plotted through crowdsourcing

There are no strangers I won't befriend now

I am one in many, intimate with the crowd

Sid Carter

'Alone Together.' *Really*?

Taking a cue from Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory, ***Leon Tan*** critiques Sherry Turkle's notion of the hyper-connected loners

Sherry Turkle's recent notion of being 'Alone Together' is a provocative one that departs significantly from the ideas in her much earlier book, ***Life on the Screen***. I confess, I haven't read the new book, but just watched her TED presentation, so my observations derive from that rather than from reading through the book itself.

I found the ideas presented somewhat disappointing for numerous reasons. To begin with, it makes sweeping assumptions about (human) nature and technology that remain points of contention among scholars. As an example, the philosopher Manuel DeLanda does not separate nature and technology, organic and inorganic, as Turkle does; he calls this separation 'organic chauvinism.'

While there are many insights in this notion of being alone together, for example, the identification of an *escapist tendency* (from, say, the boring circumstances of a board room meeting or killing time on a long commute) in the use of social networking technologies and platforms, Turkle's conservative turn comes with assertions that are highly problematic. Take, for example, the notion that technology is a flight from our bodies and face-to-face contact.

This assertion is easily refuted when we look at the popularity of a service such as Victoria Milan, which assists individuals who are already in relationships to arrange affairs in the 'real world' of sweat, smells, and skin to skin contact. Furthermore, if it is true that the so-called 'Arab Spring' was in part aided by technology, this furnishes us with a counter-image to Turkle's, a picture of a world where digital technologies and users are deeply embedded in physical locales, and joined by group dynamics such as solidarity and collective goals.

Then, Turkle appears to take on a moralizing tone when she says things like 'We're letting it (technology) take us places that we don't want to go.' Aside from the fact that morals are meaningless to immoralists (after Nietzsche), a position I have sympathy for, one needs to ask who precisely is this 'we' that Turkle speaks of? Is this 'we' America, or is it far vaster, 'we' who use technology, the Internet, social networks? Are those in the Arab Spring using technology going to places that 'we' don't want to go to? Are the users of Victoria Milan or any number of dating websites being taken to places and people that 'we' don't want to go to? Turkle should be very specific and spell out precisely who she means by 'we'. For there are groups with very different contexts of technology use in different regions of the world, who may well feel misrepresented by Turkle's 'we.'

Another troubling aspect of Turkle's presentation is the implicit assumption that what is done online is a 'simulation' of real life - that it is less 'authentic'. While it can easily be acknowledged that avatars and architectures in an online community like *Second Life* re-present aspects of the so-called real-world, and as such, are simulations, *conversations and ritual interactions between partners over social networks are not*. As DeLanda (2006: 55) writes, 'a technological invention that allows a conversation to take place at a distance affects its identity not by changing it into some other form of social encounter but by blurring its spatial boundaries, forcing participants to compensate for the lack of co-presence in a variety of other ways.'

While I have no argument with Turkle's suggestion that much more individual and collective reflection on how social media and other such technologies are transforming our lives, the problems I have pointed to above suggest that where it comes to the critical analysis of social media assemblages, networks of individual persons connecting with each other online, what is sorely lacking in psychology and more widely in the social sciences, is a rigorous ontology of networked social relations. Here one might look to DeLanda's assemblage theory or Bruno Latour's actor network theory.

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To a Stranger, With Love

The internet has long been associated with the desired, the dirty and the forbidden. Tales of anonymous dating and hook-ups abound in the time of personalised computing. Our cyberspaces are all geared towards connecting people to have more than just coffee and conversations. So commonplace have these ideas become, even in India, or at least in the larger metros like Bangalore where the single immigrant population is growing, that one has become jaded to these tales.

It has become a part of everyday routine for single (and often married) people to connect with strangers through their mobile interfaces, and hope for a fairy tale romance to happen. The idea has become such a regular part of our lives that even mainstream cinema has stopped exploiting it as a trope in the never-ending Indian romance saga. For those of us who have been embroiled in these digital circuits for what seems to be forever, we generally roll our eyes when people talk about finding love on the web. More chances of you being stalked or abused by a pervert, one thinks. Or, when things seem to get too maudlin, one re-tells the stories of horror and tragedy, heralding them as cautionary tales of what happens in the limbo of cyberspace.

And through all that exaggerated world-weariness that one is bound to perform on the social media platforms, something remarkable emerged recently. My friend Shobha (yes, that is her name; yes, I have her permission to put it right there), a young blogger, academic and writer, recently shared a story with me. When she was on one of her sojourns to Delhi, and because she did not have internet access on her laptop, she was frequenting a neighbourhood cybercafé. On one of those visits, she must have forgotten to clean the cache and history of her surfing, so her email address, which clearly identifies her as a female Indian user must have been saved in the browser. Subsequently, she found an email waiting for her, which she shared with me, and it made me think about our age of being alone together.

It was an email filled with hope, confessions, romance, excitement and that reality-TV moment of "Awwwness", which betrays the aspirations, the affects and the emotions that the promise of being connected offers. The man who wrote this email, recognises that this might be a shock to the recipient and so he writes, "hi frnd how r u? heeeeee i know u r shocked that who the fellow is he even i dont know about this guy, ok dont be tensed i m not bad boy i m from delhi i likes to make new but decent frnds that why i choose u."

He confirms that he got her email id from the profiles in the cybercafé but wants her to know that he "belongs to good & educated family" and hence knows "how to talk with girls"and wants to build "net frndshp". The email talks about how his fluency in English is not great, but he hopes to improve it by chatting with her and he looks forward to becoming close.

Once these niceties have been observed, he talks about things that bother him. He has been struggling to find work, has some experience but nothing substantial has worked out. In a poignant note he writes, "kuch past me treasudy ho gyi thi apna mind change karne k liye humne appko dost chuna". He then fills in details about his parents and hobbies and pleads that she not "take me in a wrong way" because he is a good boy still "bachlore & virgin", who "hates lying" and believes in "simple living & high thinking... & not do any vulgar chat". He now throws the ball in her court and with a cheerful "jai mata di", signs off hoping that this will be the beginning of a friendship where "attitude and nature matters..... Caring and Sharing matters.... Crying and laughing matter..... Meeting and Departure matters.... Staying and leaving matters....." And now that he has shared all his feelings, he is waiting for a "sweet & positive responce".

Shobha's reaction to this email, undoubtedly gendered by the kind of harassment that women users often find within social media, was one of derision, mockery and amusement. I agree with her that this is harassment. Would he have written a similar mail to a male username he found on a public access computer? Why does he have to search for this friendship only from women? There is a constant feeling of unsolicited assault of information that is a part of the social gendered roles in our country and the internet has become such a battlefield of these gendered behaviours. For a whole lot of us who this note was shared with, the spelling, the grammar, the uncouth expressions, the conservatism, the performance of goodness, were all easy objects of contempt.

However, once we had exhausted our witticisms at the expense of this stranger, there were some other thoughts that came to the fore. In our transitions to technologised modernity, is this how modern day fairy tales looks like? This idea of random strangers on the internet, meeting and falling in love and staying happily ever after invokes the enchantment and mystery that our quotidian lives are being depleted of.

Do "net frndshps" foretell of modern fairy tale romances? How many unrequited love stories are traversing through the digital realm?

Nishant Shah

Would this boy ever be able to talk like this — even if there is no response but a silence — to a woman in the communities that he lives in? Would he have been able to express vulnerability and weakness, to anybody he knows in flesh, given the hyper-masculine Delhi culture he is a part of? What investment does he have in the language that he is using in the email? What imagination does he have of the reception of this email? Would he have felt heroic, if Shobha has actually replied to him? Would he have gone home and boasted about it to his friends if he had found a female friend online? Would he have cried a little bit, in the night, silently, to not wake anybody up, if she had snubbed him? What are the promises of the internet that he has bought into which enabled him to write what he did?

I don't have any answers to these questions and no way of knowing more. But it makes me wonder how many such unrequited love stories, the equivalent of messages in a bottle cast into the ocean, are traversing through the digital realms. It makes me think about how alone somebody must be to reach out to strangers in the dark, hoping that as we extend our hands in the loneliness, there will be more than clawing monsters or empty spaces. That underneath all the grammatical massacre and typos, there is an overwhelming hope that another hand will reach out to him, hold him, let him know that he is not alone.

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Reverse Conditioning

Till 10, I thought, I was the best.
Later on, I knew I wasn't
The best was yet to come
Later on, It came and went;
In college, I feared I was the worst.

Till 10, I was a friendly boy.
In boarding I became an introvert
In college I became an e-addict
My friends became e-friends
Free time became e-time
I knew not that I had a life

I sat glued to my screen,
Never knowing the time of the day,
Wishing my e-friend ‘gud nite’;
When I stood up and stretched
to go to bed, I saw my college friend
Rush out to his first hour of class

In class, my dull brain fell asleep,
The slumber so deep even
The screaming professor couldn’t win
to snap me out of my dream.

Back in my room,
I jolt awake on drool
Stuck to my laptop screen.
I awaken.

Aswin Vijayan

Cellulars

Cellulars are so blessed,
Bored, lost individuals feel connected.
If only to a game of snake,
If only to a person faked.

Sending an SMS or a stupid forward, doesn't even require a response.
Or you could even compose mails in your 'never send' box.

Now you are busy, not lost.

You are working, not a needy cause.

You are not needy for people's attention.

You are just busy with a concept that needs immediate action.

You are isolated because you choose to be.
You are independent – everyone can see.

Anusha Ramanathan

Is the notion of talking to a stranger romanticized?

Is it?
Is that why no one
talks to strangers,
lest they fall
In love or something?

Syed Khader & Parool Sharma

Alone, Yet Together

For couples in a long distance relationship by ***Lavanya***

Ah, yes, I thought.

My partner and I have been together for about two and half years now. Our love story works its way around China, Australia, Singapore, and Europe, when my partner goes on work trips, seeing each other once in three to four months on average. So who's the middleman who helps us communicate with all the distance and different time zones?

"Hi, I'm here. At home. But ichat isn't working."
"I'm in Paris and wifi is really bleak here."
"Thank goodness for net here. Thought I'd miss you for the day."

The Internet, of course.

Of course, not to disregard phone calls and texts - we do embrace them too but it does come with costs. So, our favourites are Skype, iChat and recently an app called Pair - exclusivity to lovers is its USP as suggested by the name. Specially made for only two users, Pair positions itself as catering to couples in a long distance relationship.

The main screen is a chat box interface and the two users can upload pictures of where they are and what they are doing. One can also let the other know that they are on each others' minds by pressing the "thinking of you" button that would vibrate and let the other party know that they are being thought of no matter how far away and whatever time it is. When I feel like kissing my babe? There's a button which when pressed will lead to another screen where both parties can share a 'thumbkiss' - both thumbs find each other and when pressed together, the screen vibrates, which in Path language means 'kiss'.

One of the biggest things that people in long distance relationships experience is the lack of touch love. For us, holding each other's hands or having our hands on the other person's knee can sometimes mean so much more than words. It's amazing how Pair has tried to bridge that lack with functions like thumbkiss. It has become a platform for us to be in a touch with each other (pun intended) when we are that far away to kiss. With a little imagination and sensing, we don't feel as far away and alone.

Alone together is Turkle's theory of the new digitized area; how when given access to machines, people actually feel togetherness in mediums online but otherwise feel isolated from the everyday people and interactions around them. It's strange when you relate it to my situation with my partner, isn't it? Technology works in a reverse for us - it helps bring us much closer to each other. We get to be in touch with each other on the go, constantly. Especially on days when we don't get to Facetime or Skype to know about how our day has gone, Pair is a great way to know and be included in your partner's life, like you would if you both lived in the same city or country. An added advantage is its simplistic design.

Recently, there has been a rise in private social networking sites or apps that cater to an intimate crowd. In our case, the internet, and applications like Pair have always been the middleman - that will connect us no matter where we may be – alone, away from each other and yet together.

I'm sure there are people who become more alone or more lonely as they use the Internet, just as there are lonely people who watch a lot of late-night TV. But that doesn't mean television *causes* loneliness. As with any kind of activity, too much of it can be harmful to your health — but that goes for plenty of "real" world activities as well ***Mathew Ingram***

The modern epidemic of loneliness is less to do with the internet and more to do with our societies. When you consider the amount of time people devote to working and commuting, there just isn't much time left (to connect) ***Mark Pagel***

Facetime to Facebook

Can social cohesion be measured by the value of our social networks, asks *Nilofar Ansher*

Straight up, let me ask you something elemental: How difficult was it for you to transition from chatting with your friends in a coffee bar to having regular conversations online, to Facebook becoming your dominant form of staying in touch with them? Really, come to think of it, engaging in discussions or chit-chat online should have traumatized most of us, considering we are social creatures and we love to jump all over our conversations (and each other) – interrupting someone's train of thought, laughing, saying more with our expressions than with so many spoken words.

I guess you didn't spend a whole lot of time ruminating over the move, it seemed natural, almost inevitable. A broadband connection would have been cheaper for a family, than using your cellphone to talk to each of your friends at a time. Also, the kind of stuff you wanted to share began evolving. Instead of just talking about projects, work load or your mean boss, you had this entire 'media arsenal' at your finger tips. News, videos, cartoons, books, funny quotes and memes, songs and lyrics, photographs – the minute-by-minute updates of how your hair grows – meant moving beyond face-to-face and engaging with an interface that would allow you to share all this and much more.

For those of us who spend a minimum of eight hours in front of our PCs and frequently our phones, loneliness is not an active ingredient of our routine. There is work to be done, multiple tabs to navigate content, people and thoughts – New York Times, Paris Review and The Atlantic would be open on Mozilla; friends will be pinging me on Gmail, Facebook and Yahoo, accessible through Chrome; YouTube and Tumblr would help me explore the idea maze. Information overload is an entirely different debate, but one that runs parallel to the loneliness issue as well. We consume media content because the benchmark of what is interesting and fun has also evolved. If we don't talk about the *Kolaveri di* video going viral or share the 'Y U No' memes, we would be left sharing mundane stuff about, you guessed it, our hellish bosses or cranky siblings, or the family wedding where chicken tikka stains ruined your new dress.

And while we still do that – share the minutiae of our lives with our best friends, we don't do it so overtly online (which dominate a chunk of our attention bandwidth), and certainly not with our larger circle or network (who are conspicuously online). Historically, we are adept at maintaining different sets of friends: school, college, library partners, and music class pals, acquaintances that you meet every day on your way to religious lesson; we perform differently with each of them and the quality of information sharing also differs. *But with Facebook or other social media platforms, we face a unique situation: to have all these disparate set of friends on a single platform means the rules of social engagement and intimacy change.*

While it was alright to crack a joke within my group about my brother's romantic exploits, to do that on Facebook's Wall or tweet about it to my followers would be kind of funny, in a socially awkward way. That's just not information for public consumption. Notice that although we are quite aware of what to share with which group, the position of having several of your close friends sharing breathing space with hundreds of your acquaintances is a tricky maze to navigate. It calls for a certain level of artifice. That's the fine distinction I wanted to draw out between

the natural rhythm of social communication versus the ones that we engage online.

The spotlight is also on the nature of these interfaces. It's not rounded, like our face to face conversation would entail – eyes and expressions, gestures and body language, silences, pauses, stuttering, and the breadth of manoeuvres required to convey a detail or argue over something finely, distinctly and with clarity, elements which we still believe necessary for a satisfying conversation. Take this article for instance. I am at pains explaining the finer points of my contention by employing a range of devices or figures of speech, but I know for a fact that talking out loud with my peers would have been a less time consuming and more rewarding experience.

But social media forces us to play the game according to its rules. In textual communication, while you hear their responses, there's the uncertain element of asynchronicity. On Facebook for instance, you say something first, wait for your friends to respond, then you respond to that – it's a sequence, which is exactly how the conversation would have unfolded in that coffee bar, with the minor difference being that on Facebook, your friends might reply to your post in a minute or perhaps a week later, and you wouldn't have the joy of witnessing their cheeky smiles.

You might argue that social media has evolved its own lexicon and codes to bridge that physical divide. We now have emoticons and newer ways to re-present the Body. There is also video and voice chat, so it's like being 'in front' your friends, even if you are not 'with' them. This is the homily that sci-fi writer Isaac Asimov projected in his novel, *The Naked Sun,* where communication is done via holographic telepresence called *viewing*, as opposed to in-person *seeing.* This perspective of how 'presence' is understood is essential to how conversation thrives and ultimately, inter-personal relationships and social cohesion. I have this rather alarmist view that we are already on the trajectory depicted in *The Naked Sun*, where personal / human contact is shunned and coded out of practice.

If I play Devil's Advocate and look back at human communication 50 years ago, it would be absurd to think of having hundreds of friends whom you have instant access to. Globalization was still a nebulous concept and the only close relations we maintained were with neighbours, relatives, school and college friends, and much later, for men especially, office mates. We didn't have phones to talk to anyone for long hours, but we also didn't know anyone who was far enough as well as a good friend to have the opportunity to engage with them intimately. This is a generalization, of course.

There is no way of knowing the 'quality' of relationships back then. How did social scientists measure value between close ties and acquaintances? Can we say for sure that people back then had it better in terms of having optimal communications and a close network of ties or did they face their own set of impediments?

I guess I grew up at a time when we had the best of *all the worlds* – we were close enough to our closest friends, maintained interesting relationships with our pen friends, visited relatives every other week, and also had the novelty of the landline phone to get in touch with friends during the vacation or with a favourite cousin who has shifted to another city. Conversely, the limitations also didn't fill us with the need to know what these people did every hour or find out what movies they saw or games they played, or if their relationship is complicated or rainbowish. All of these were, in simple terms, none of our business!

Facebook users thrive in an environment where all personal remarks are subject to increasingly informal responses - by default - because of the way the interface is designed. These responses are not taught or borrowed, but mutate over time. Facebook is all about transparency and the ensuing culture of participation that underpins open systems. If you are open about your life, you engage with people more often and gradually post greater bytes of information. You don't pause to think if posting about your boredom is of any value to your friends. It's understood that the *list* will itself understand which information is of value and what can be ignored. The wall posting is seen as just that – a post, and not likened to a person in a coffee house saying something to someone. A post or a tweet has value as an item in a list that needs to be check-marked either with a Like or a smiley or a one-liner.

There is no barometer to measure and ascertain whether your presence is 'valued' in the 'corporeal' sense – you are present as a body on the other side of the screen, but only re-presented through your posts. Offline, a look, gesture or nod conveys fully well a response; silence (and in some cases, deletions) are not the usual responses to a spoken word. How do you measure the impact of a 'seen' or Like? In simple terms, Facebook does away with the offline value of courtesy or empathy. Critically, it has given rise to a new breed of conversationalist: the lurker. Offline, you do have the odd person in the group who does most of the listening and chips in with a laugh or just nods their head. However, lurking as a defined 'online' behaviour, as characterized by consistent lack of engagement, is quite peculiar to the world of Facebook (or social media).

What does it say about a system's emotional quotient when half the posts, comments and conversations pinned on The Wall are subject to only being read, scrolled over or worst, manually hidden / deleted as if the words never existed? What are the implications of subscribing to a culture of constant stimuli that has no consistent or structure response? That's the space where loneliness is born. Facebook cloaks itself as a platform that is alive and teeming with people all engaged and interconnected with one another. What I see, however, is an aggregate service, which culls our data and archives it. Our every little outpouring might be more important to the servers and algorithms than to our own network. I fear the sum total of what I am will just be a footnote in the codices of the Web. That smallness that we experience when we measure ourselves against the vastness of the universe is nothing but loneliness. If we learn to cope with that sense of insecurity on Facebook, then we are set for long term innings in the network. The question is, is the trade off worth it?

The Network Effect

Have we traded our intimate moments and relations for hyper-connectivity to our gadgets and social networks? ***Aarti Upadhyay*** explores.

Has technology made life easier or has it replaced life for us? We live in a virtual world surrounded by gadgets, we act and work like machines. We walk with our heads down busy texting and when we talk, it's mostly through our mobiles. How much do we speak to people face to face?

Social network has made connecting and sharing easy but it has failed miserably in bringing people closer. You can connect to a friend on Facebook with whom you have lost touch but there is still a difference between connecting and being close. Before technology took over our life, bonding with our loved ones was a top priority. It was considered fashionable to find some time to meet our loved ones.

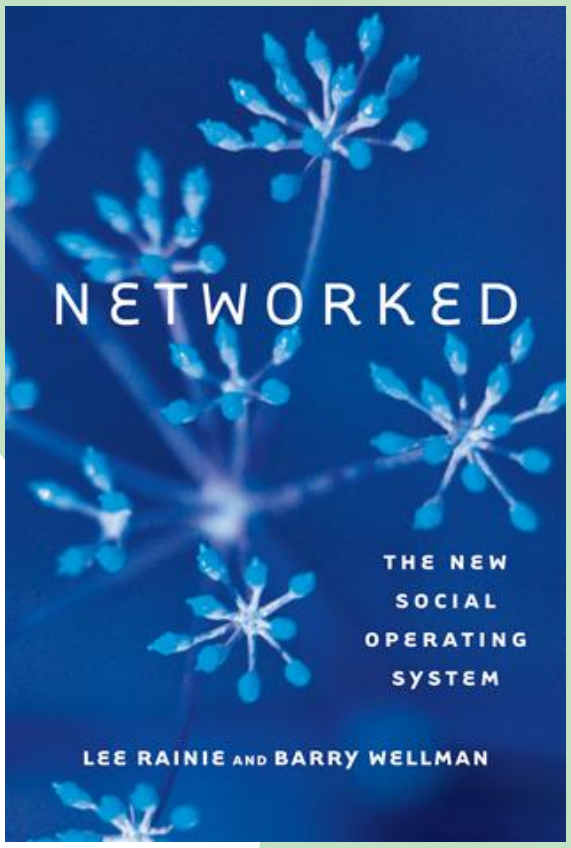
Now, we prefer video chats instead of meeting them in person even when the distance has no role to play. Human touch seems to have lost its importance, we are happy with less; the virtual world seems to be better. Facebook and high-end mobile phones help you connect with the people but can you hug a friend on Facebook? 500 million 'active' Facebook users, across the globe, confirm our urgent need to stay connected. India has registered 43 million active users on Facebook. Twitter has 100 million active users: 100 million voices echoing the same tune, where is your voice lost? How many friends can you count on in a time of crisis?

The urgency to embrace technology has made us give up on life. Instead of buying adventures and experiences, we while away our time on social networks in search of acceptance. We spend hours and hours on Facebook and Twitter; we update, we share our best pictures and we let people know how happy we are. We post and tweet even when we have nothing to say. We want to be heard, we want people to acknowledge our existence. How badly we yearn to belonging. An article published in *Daily Mail UK* by Richard Hartley Parkinson states young people in Britain who spend much of their time online feel as lonely as the elderly.

Social Network is a beautiful illusion of the real world; but is it anything more than a repository of umpteen posts? The unfortunate news of Malini Murmu, 21 year old IIM Bangalore (India) student who committed suicide after her boyfriend dumped her on Facebook, makes one question about the potential harm and the fragile existence of our generation. Facebook can take a toll on one's mental health too. 'According to three new studies, Facebook can be tough on mental health, offering an all-too-alluring medium for social comparison and ill-advised status updates. And while adding a friend on the social networking site can make people feel cheery and connected, having a lot of friends is associated with feeling worse about one's own life.'

In her book *Alone Together,* Sherry Turkle rightly sums up – 'Connecting with others must go beyond logging in and updating a status.' Why don't you call up a friend and share some good times, instead of 'connecting to the network' and feeling lonely? You may feel disconnected for a while, but it will certainly bring you closer to life. Give it a thought.

Editor Recommends



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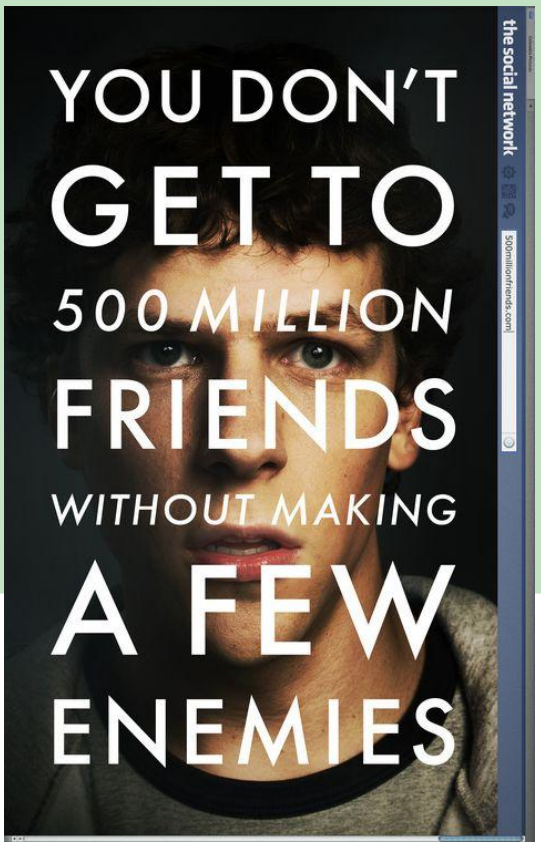
Networked: **The New Social Operating System**
by Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman

Daily life is connected life, its rhythms driven by endless email pings and responses, the chimes and beeps of continually arriving text messages, tweets and retweets, Facebook updates, pictures and videos to post and discuss. Our perpetual connectedness gives us endless opportunities to be part of the give-and-take of networking. Some worry that this new environment makes us isolated and lonely. But in *Networked*, Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman show how the large, loosely knit social circles of networked individuals expand opportunities for learning, problem solving, decision making, and personal interaction.



Genre: Drama
Release date: 2010
Runtime 120 minutes

The Social Network
Director: David Fincher

On a fall night in 2003, Harvard undergrad and computer programming genius Mark Zuckerberg sits down at his computer and heatedly begins working on a new idea. In a fury of blogging and programming, what begins in his dorm room soon becomes a global social network and a revolution in communication. A mere six years and 500 million friends later, Mark Zuckerberg is the youngest billionaire in history – leading to legal complications along the way.

Girl, Uninterrupted By Nilofer

12:10 pm

12:13 pm

12:15 pm


WOW! It's been what?
8 years since we last met?
12:20 pm


Do incorporate the changes we talked about and I'll send you the remaining details.
12:22 pm


Lover0180
Lover0180
Lover0180: I cant wait to see you!
Me: Me too! <3
sent at 12:10pm
Griever2020
Griever2020
o that's not what to me! I cant as happened!
Pop-in
BestFren4ever
BestFren4ever
Me: OMG! You should his face!
BestFren4ever: h hahahaha!!
sent at 12:15pm
24/7

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Look Out for the May 2012 Issue: Augmented Reality

Are we boldly crossing new frontiers of technology or is it just an old program recycled in new hardware? Find out in the upcoming issue!