

The Social Internet: Are We Shaping It or is It Shaping Us?

The Internet and its associated technologies have infiltrated our homes and saturated our society. Social scientists and engineers have long feared that the ease of Internet communication would eventually replace any need for face to face encounters. Some questioned the wisdom of heading down the information super-highway at breakneck speeds, while others worried about the technically impoverished that would be left behind in the vast wasteland without the Internet. In 1998, Kraut contended that those who spend more time online are likely to be more depressed and increasingly lonely (as cited in Matei & Rokeach, 2001, p. 552). Is society deformed in the wake of the serious side effects of too much or too little technology? The Internet reaches every corner of human social life from dating to education and from politics to religion. It's important to evaluate to what degree increased Internet communication infringes upon our normal social skills. How much distortion does the Internet place on our deep-seated social structures, our cultures, and our institutions?

One of the oldest institutions that we have used as a place of social gathering and interaction has been the church. While church membership has fallen slightly in recent years, the Internet has been a revival for religious organizations. Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville SC downloaded 80,000 Internet sermons last year from their site (Hills, 2003). Many of these surfers would probably have never set foot inside a church. According to The Barna Group, by 2010 as many as 50 million Americans will rely on the Internet as their sole religious contact (as cited in Hills, 2003). Though the Internet has the power to move more people toward religion, it is clearly moving them away from the church and away from the social setting that was important for conversation and local news in previous decades.

Just as the Internet can deliver religion to the people, it also has the capacity to deliver people to politics. Political contributions, debate, and interaction have soared in recent years. The Internet has made vast quantities of information instantly available for anyone who cares to search for it and has the potential to create a new form of electronic democracy. Yet, with all this information available, it is still incumbent upon the user to seek it out, read it, and digest it. Polat (2005) suggests that we are suffering from information overload and says we "[...] may become dependent on others to evaluate the available information" (p. 438). When confronting all this mediated technology, Wood (2001) warns us, "The most important challenge, in a world in which more and more of our messages are mediated, is to sustain a coherent sense of personal identity" (p. 7). No matter how networked anyone seems to be, there is no substitute for the self. While rampant technology can generate interest in a candidate, it alone will not be able to sustain any reasonable support.

Another major institution that has gone through some fundamental changes is education. Online courses have opened the possibility to many people that might otherwise have been prevented from attending. The scheduling is more flexible and has the ability to fit around a busy work schedule. Online courses are getting the same recognition as in-place degrees and have material that mirrors campus classes. This has removed the stigma once held that an online degree was less of a degree. Simonson (2006) reports that there is a current enrollment of 2.4 million students and 56% of the higher education institutions see online learning as part of their long-term strategy (p. viii). This has the opportunity to reach inner city and rural areas and bring in students that were previously barred from attending on site due to geographic considerations. The educational system has made deliberate and rational use of the Internet and has served its customers well and fulfilled their social needs.

Health care is another area that has placed a sane control over the technology as they have turned to discussion boards and chat rooms to provide support groups to people with limited access. Weinert (2000) connected several rural women with chronic disease to a web based network (as cited in Scharer, 2005, p. 29). According to Scharer (2005), these women felt "[...] increased feelings of social support when using online discussion boards and chat groups" (p. 29). Furthermore in 1997 Krishna et al. found that interactive telehealth interventions had significantly improved patient outcomes in 21 out of 22 studies (as cited in Scharer, 2005, p. 29). The re-socialization of our concept of medical delivery is made possible with the same technology that drives MySpace.

Though our major institutions have remained intact, personal and social contact skills have come under a radical change. Or have they? It has often been suggested that the Internet affords us a greater opportunity to meet people and socialize. It is even reasonable to assume that it would be a good tool to help overcome anxiety and shyness. However, Matei and Rokeach (2001) concluded that the propensity to form lasting ties, whether online or off-line, is rooted in a deeper set of social skills and that the medium is irrelevant (p. 560). They further insist that without social contacts outside the Internet, the probability of forming any long lasting contacts on the Internet were not very good (p. 561). The Internet neither creates social skills nor destroys them. Once again we see the Internet simply exploiting a pre-existing socialization rather than replacing the status quo.

The Internet may not add to our available social circle, but it has been lauded as a place to meet your next mate. Online dating is big business, as any Internet search of the word 'dating' will prove. Still there may be social drawbacks to Internet dating. According to Yum and Hara (2005), many people believe that the Internet has opened up relationships without the limitations

of geography. However, some key ingredients of a relationship, such as verbal cues and body language, are lost and place the Internet at a great disadvantage. It will naturally introduce some amount of trepidation and caution. If the subject has the social skills necessary to overcome these obstacles, they have a chance for success. Once again, if the subject were able to find a compatible mate online, they would also be able to succeed off-line. If you can't find a mate on the street, the Internet will not help you. The Internet is simply an extension of the socialization skills that the subject already possesses.

The Internet should cause everyone to be somewhat more guarded when meeting someone online. The possibility of them being a scam artist or stalker is a real possibility. J. Reid Meloy, a forensic psychologist warns us that any new technology has a criminal factor that will exploit it, but " [...] the Internet, with all its distance and anonymity, provided a unique vehicle for the unleashing of hidden furies" (as cited in Zeller, 2006, p. 1). Risk takers will take the risk and the careful will display the values and norms they deem appropriate. The Internet will not create a new social model for these people. However, as the subjects get younger they are open to learning new social systems and are more heavily influenced by their social environment.

MySpace.com has received a lot of attention lately, some it unwanted and much of it unfavorable. The forum where young people can meet and express themselves has opened the debate on what is appropriate for this type of venue. In 2006 Rep. Michael Fitzpatrick (R-PA) introduced the Deleting Online Predators Act. Aimed at MySpace, it pointed out the "potential danger of commercial social networking websites and chat rooms [...] accessed by child predators". Yet, while Congress was debating, Club Penguin went online with the goal of being the MySpace for the 8-12 year old set, and with 2.1 million visitors in August, 2006 it may be on its way (Gutner, 2006, p. 82). The Internet has handed down technology that began as adult

dating and chat services and is now serving it to 8 year olds. It comes, of course, with all the attendant dangers but introduced to a more defenseless crowd. This is possibly the age group that is most socially deformed by the Internet. Younger and younger children are becoming socialized by non-stop technology that was designed for adults.

The Internet has had sweeping effects on the social landscape. Religion and politics have exploited the technology for their own social goal of increased membership. It is reasonable to see that the cultures that value education the most, Health Care and Universities, have expressed some control over the medium and put it to beneficial use. Institutions, like individuals, will exploit the technology to the limit that their socialization allows. Individuals will not radically change social skills when confronted with the Internet. Those that are able to form lasting relationships off-line will be able to do so online. Those that have internalized mental barriers off-line will experience the same frustration online. However, as younger and younger children are exposed to technology that was designed for adults, and use it in the style of an adult, they will become socialized to an unrealistic setting. These deformed attitudes and distorted expectations will not transfer to a face to face relationship when they get older. Concepts such as MySpace and Club Penguin are only the most obvious illustrations of ideas that have become an entity unto themselves and created their own sociology. The only way to prevent such an onslaught may be with rational thought, or failing that an Act of Congress.

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