

Communications Technology Synthesis

Paine, 2011

Where it is widely available, communications technology in all its forms has made possible the ability for people to be connected to other people at all times in a perpetual social exchange. Some say that communications technology, such as Facebook, Twitter, and IM tap into the very nature of our humanity, that we are in fact social beings who learn how to be and how to think through our social interactions. Others argue that in order for individuals to become fully actualized and for society as a whole to thrive, individuals must experience some measure of privacy, isolation, and solitude; ubiquitous social networking, therefore, undermines the promise of humanity.

Carefully read the following five sources, including the introductory information for each source. Then, synthesize information from at least three of the sources and incorporate it into a coherent, well-developed essay in which you present a viable definition of what it means to thrive as an individual and as a society and evaluate the influence of communications technology in fulfilling that promise.

Source A (Deresiewicz)

Source B (Brooks)

Source C (Emerson)

Source D (Delinger)

Source E (Morgan)

Source F (Maslow)

Source A

By WILLIAM DERESIEWICZ

Evolutionary psychology tells us that our brains developed to interpret complex social signals. According to David Brooks, that reliable index of the social-scientific zeitgeist, cognitive scientists tell us that "our decision-making is powerfully influenced by social context"; neuroscientists, that we have "permeable minds" that function in part through a process of "deep imitation"; psychologists, that "we are organized by our attachments"; sociologists, that our behavior is affected by "the power of social networks." The ultimate implication is that there is no mental space that is not social (contemporary social science dovetailing here with postmodern critical theory).

So it is with the current generation's experience of being alone. That is precisely the recognition implicit in the idea of solitude, which is to loneliness what idleness is to boredom. Loneliness is not the absence of company, it is grief over that absence. The lost sheep is lonely; the shepherd is not lonely. But the Internet is as powerful a machine for the production of loneliness as television is for the manufacture of boredom. If six hours of television a day creates the aptitude for boredom, the inability to sit still, a hundred text messages a day creates the aptitude for loneliness, the inability to be by yourself. Some degree of boredom and loneliness is to be expected, especially among young people, given the way our human environment has been attenuated. But technology amplifies those tendencies. You could call your schoolmates when I was a teenager, but you couldn't call them 100 times a day. You could get together with your friends when I was in college, but you couldn't always get together with them when you wanted to, for the simple reason that you couldn't always find them. 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.

Source B

Annals of Psychology

Social Animal

How the new sciences of human nature can help make sense of a life.

by David Brooks January 17, 2011

I believe we inherit a great river of knowledge, a flow of patterns coming from many sources. The information that comes from deep in the evolutionary past we call genetics. The information passed along from hundreds of years ago we call culture. The information passed along from decades ago we call family, and the information offered months ago we call education. But it is all information that flows through us. The brain is adapted to the river of knowledge and exists only as a creature in that river. Our thoughts are profoundly molded by this long historic flow, and none of us exists, self-made, in isolation from it.

“And though history has made us self-conscious in order to enhance our survival prospects, we still have deep impulses to erase the skull lines in our head and become immersed directly in the river. I’ve come to think that flourishing consists of putting yourself in situations in which you lose self-consciousness and become fused with other people, experiences, or tasks. It happens sometimes when you are lost in a hard challenge, or when an artist or a craftsman becomes one with the brush or the tool. It happens sometimes while you’re playing sports, or listening to music or lost in a story, or to some people when they feel enveloped by God’s love. And it happens most when we connect with other people. I’ve come to think that happiness isn’t really produced by conscious accomplishments. Happiness is a measure of how thickly the unconscious parts of our minds are intertwined with other people and with activities. Happiness is determined by how much information and affection flows through us covertly every day and year.”

Source C

from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Conduct of Life"

"Solitude, the safeguard of mediocrity, is to genius the stern friend, the cold, obscure shelter where moult the wings which will bear it farther than the suns and the stars. He who should inspire and lead his race must be defended from traveling with the souls of other men, from living, breathing, reading, and writing in the daily, time-worn yoke of their opinions. "In the morning - solitude;" said Pythagoras; that Nature may speak to the imagination, as she does never in company, and that her favorite may take acquaintance with those divine strengths which disclose themselves to serious and abstracted thought. 'Tis very certain that Plato, Plotinus, Archimedes, Hermes, Newton, Milton, Wordsworth, did not live in a crowd, but descended into it from time to time as benefactors: and the wise instructor will press this point of securing to the young soul in the disposition of time and the arrangements of living, periods and habits of solitude."

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Source D

FaceBook: A Thought-Destroyer Friday, December 31, 2010
Blogger, Dixie Delinger

My concern, like the writer's, is epistemological: not so much in how we communicate and therefore come to know as in what we come to know, but more than that, what we want to know. I am opposed to FaceBook's seemingly relentless altering of the human mind, which I see as the destruction of thought.

Now I know all about the 'advantages' of Facebook in reconnecting with old acquaintances, keeping up with current friends, family, etc., but it favors trivia, not exchanges of real thoughts or feelings, and the wider the circle is drawn, the thinner it gets. This is not to mention that it is going even farther than email in replacing personal letters with their attendant thought value in writing them as well as in reading them.

But what bothers me most is the implication that hundreds of 'friends' should be somehow interested by someone's 'eating a sandwich' . . . that they should want to be told that . . . a clear diminishment of their own thought as well as everyone else's and an implication that those who do not want that are too busy, too brainy, non-social elitists, technologically backward, left out or behind --- or something.

Either way, it means a change in thought and a 'sorting' of people and their minds into those who will care to know if hundreds of 'friends' are 'eating a sandwich' at the moment, and those who won't. If, as TIME magazine says, 1 of 12 people on the planet has a Facebook account, to me at least that does not bode well for the future of human thought. The Golden Ages of intellectual achievement in ideas are definitely in the past if 1/12 of all the billions of living humans find Facebook satisfying. What took hundreds of years to build can diminish like soap-suds without our notice while we are charmed to hear from 'so-and-so whom I'd not heard from in ages.'

Add to this the many articles that have been written about the utter disappearance in American society of valuing the distinctions between "truth, objectivity, science, fact and reason, and opinion, subjectivity, prejudice, feeling and irrationality" and what that is doing to democracy and its future. Here's a good one among hundreds, some of which we have seen posted here over this year: .

But Facebook, which is the epitome of subjective trivia without even opinion, feeling or irrationality, is not just a threat to democracy but to thinking itself.

Source E

Jim Morgan in response to Delinger's blog

My first question: why would you expect or even desire everyone to be serious about a social networking site? The default tone on Facebook is one of humor, and the site lends itself to brevity. No one goes to Facebook for sustained exposition, and if everyone approached it with such gravity--if we all felt that every post needs to be carefully articulated and centered on some serious topic--the site would be dragged down to some stodgy and sanctimonious realm. People just want to be friendly or funny or silly or to share things they think are interesting; should everybody have a complex about whether their posts are deep and important enough to satisfy everyone?

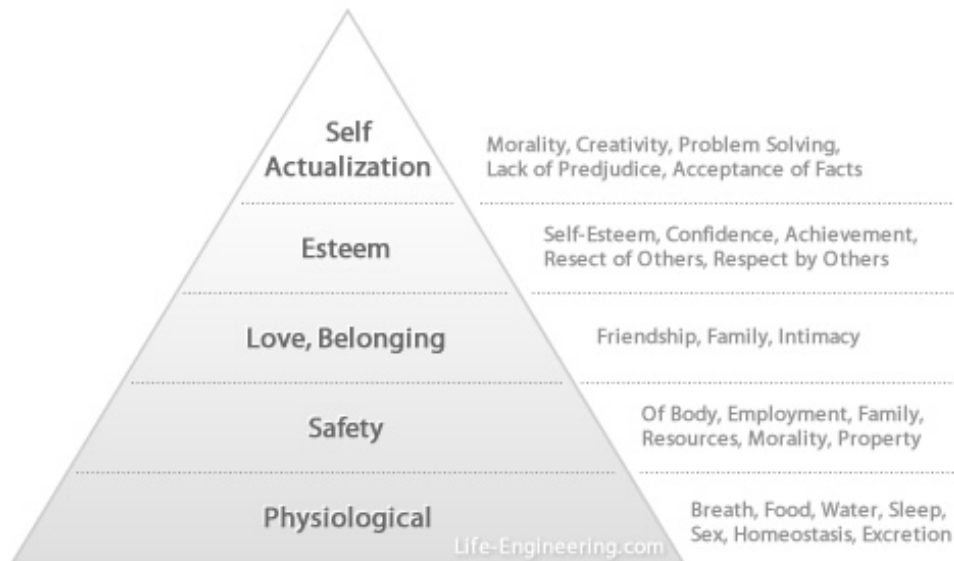
Furthermore...Don't you see that what you call "empty trivia" is the stuff of poetry? To post "I'm eating a sandwich" is profoundly ironic because it places such a simple act in such an exalted and strange context. (Look at my status, everyone! "I'm eating a sandwich." What do you think of that?) In fact, part of the humor of such missives involves the idea that *somebody just sent that out to hundreds of people, some of whom will probably be irritated by its apparent meaninglessness*. There can be charm in such absurdity and irrepressible mischief. And it's fine if one doesn't find such things funny; people's sensibilities differ.

But your question about what Facebook is doing to human thought is admittedly an important one. I don't agree that the important question is what we want to know. In that respect, people haven't changed: we want to know what we already know, and are biased toward those facts which seem to conform those beliefs. That's how people have always been, and Facebook isn't going to alter that. The important question is what Facebook is doing to our brain's ability to stick to one subject and concentrate on long sustained argument and narrative. Facebook is the most recent in a long line of social and technological crutches that have altered our capacity to preserve meaningful stories and ideas in our memory, to interact with nature, and to fully realize our potential through self-reliance. Written language, printed text, calculators, film, radio, televised images, computers, and now social networking have all brought us from a world of our ancestors who navigated across the Pacific in boats and remembered and retold the Iliad and the Odyssey to a world where nobody can use stars to get anywhere and people can't even read Homer without myriad textual supports, much less remember his epics. I've found the reading of novels to be more difficult for me each year; the instant gratification of the computer has turned my brain into a slouch, so that when I read a long novel over the summer it's analogous to running a marathon after sitting on a couch for months: I have to struggle to stay focused, turn the computer completely off so I don't compulsively check email, etc. But each of the "technological crutches" I listed above have resulted in amazing cultural rewards as well; they take away but they also give, in compensatory fashion. What are kids may be losing in memory and concentration, they may be gaining in sense of wit and irony. Probably not a good trade-off, I concede.

Source F

Mazlow's Hierarchy of Needs

The image is widely accepted as a model of Mazlow's theory; see caption for Mazlow's explanation.)



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

These basic goals are related to each other, being arranged in a hierarchy of prepotency. This means that the most prepotent goal will monopolize consciousness and will tend of itself to organize the recruitment of the various capacities of the organism. The less prepotent needs are minimized, even forgotten or denied. But when a need is fairly well satisfied, the next prepotent ('higher') need emerges, in turn to dominate the conscious life and to serve as the center of organization of behavior, since gratified needs are not active motivators.

--Abraham Mazlow