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Social Atrophy: Failure In The Flesh

Technology and the future are practically synonymous. Invoking the idea of either inspires thoughts of discoveries, advancements, inventions and conveniences. One thing that accompanies ideas of the future is the expectation of less work: less effort. Today, technology is so intertwined with the everyday human experience that it is inescapable. The concept and practice of socializing have changed with technology in the form of cell-phones, social networking sites on the internet, and online gaming communities; however, no matter how advanced technology becomes or how much it begins to resemble the human experience, there will remain a definitive difference: flesh. Human connection, much like flesh, is vulnerable, fallible and difficult. Social technology is being used as an escape from the vulnerability of in-the-flesh human connection. Social technology requires less effort in social interaction and has resulted in the underdevelopment of social skills—or social muscles—which in turn has shown great effects on the body of human identity. Just as the muscles of the human body are subject to the familiar saying “use it or lose it,” so too are the skills of socialization. Unused muscles will atrophy, eventually becoming unusable altogether and the same holds true in the human mind. Social interaction through technology has the potential to incite a collective social coma that may create a communal experience of social atrophy-- the diminishing of an individual's capacity to exercise the social skills required to build authentic connections and relationships with other individuals. U.C. Berkeley astronomer Clifford Stoll gave early warnings of some of the paralyzing effects of technology in his article, “Isolated by the Internet,” published when the internet was first becoming intertwined with social systems. Stoll foreshadowed the dangers that lie in the loss of human connection in preference of effortless technology. However, the benefits of technology are as undeniable as its negative consequences; therefore, a balance must be struck. Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist and professor of sociology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology offers a perspective on the early days of online social interaction in her article, “Who Am We?” as well as a perspective after fifteen years of research in her 2012 TEDtalk, “Connected, But Alone?”. Turkle points to two roads that may be taken when incorporating social technology into the human experience: one of increased isolation and one of a promising social future. Social atrophy produces a self-fueling cycle of dependency on technology to make up for the loss in human connection due to fear of experiencing vulnerability, resulting in a form of relationship resembling technology more than authentic human experience. Should social atrophy set in on a collective scale, the very concept of relationships and identity will shift to an extent that not even technology will be able to reverse the change. This would result in a dramatic immobilization of the greater social structure. If the authentic human experience is to be preserved, the benefits of social technology must be applied to in-the-flesh interactions in everyday life, rather than serve as an escape from the effort of connection and relationships.

The authentic human experience has always depended on one key component, other humans. As social creatures, humankind has survived because of relationship and collaboration, which are greatly affected by population and proximity. Today, such a large world-wide population coupled with the incorporation of social technology into everyday life has resulted in a redefining of connection. In many ways, there are exponentially more opportunities to connect with other individuals, even from the other side of the globe, which is an amazing accomplishment. Early internet users, as Stoll found, saw this as an avenue to a new world of interaction. Stoll states, “For all my grinching about the soul-deadening effects of the Internet, most Internet users speak positively about it. One friend tells how she found a support group for an obscure medical condition. Another tells me that his modem provides an escape from a dull world, providing a rich mixture of fantasy and role playing” (648). Finding support and adding excitement to a dull life are surely life-enhancing benefits of the internet. If these interactions were taking place in the flesh, the benefits would be acquired much the same way because the interaction and feedback from others are what constitute the experience. Moreover, the experience itself is not only an interaction with others, but an interaction with the self. Identity is formed through socialization and interaction with others to such an extreme degree that it too can be seen in the flesh as well as on the net. Turkle speaks to this aspect of internet interactions in her examination of early online gaming communities called MUDs: multi user dungeons. Being text-based, MUD users are exploring aspects of themselves rather than aspects of the other users because, though the users are all connected, the interaction is stripped of its in-the-flesh qualities. Turkle explains, “As players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (Turkle 677). As with the benefits of finding support groups and escaping the feeling of life being dull, constructing identity can occur, both in-the-flesh and on the net; however, a key difference in online interaction is anonymity. In-the-flesh interactions require a level of vulnerability and accountability for one’s identity that sometimes restricts the limits of self-exploration in a way that online interactions do not. Turkle sees this occurring in MUDs on an amplified scale stating, “The anonymity of MUDs gives people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones. MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion” (Turkle 678). While examining unexplored aspects of the self has the potential to reveal a new sense of self for the user, it also presents a dilemma. In-the-flesh interaction relies on different degrees of relationship, but it is unclear how to classify essentially anonymous online interactions. Stoll would agree that the strongest relationships an individual has have the greatest impact on their social training. Stoll describes two degrees of relationship, deep and weak social ties, stating:

Deep social ties are relationships with frequent contact, deep feelings of involvement, and broad context. Weak ties have superficial and easily broken bonds, infrequent contact, and narrow focus. Weak ties link us to information and social resources outside our close local groups. But it's the strong social ties that buffer us from stress and lead to better social interactions. (Stoll 649)

Anonymous MUD users exploring aspects of the self together are ambiguous and evade typical categorization, but add to the construction of identity nonetheless. Whether they are strong ties, weak ties, or a combination of the two, online interactions are an added appendage on the body of identity. As the internet became more intertwined with everyday life, it began to change the concept of socialization and relationship while displaying the necessity for interaction. The difference is that in-the-flesh interaction is the backbone of human experience. Social technology must be used in a way that adds to the human experience rather than being relied on to escape the difficulties of the human experience.

It would seem that the internet and social technology have become so common-place that individuals are more familiar with things like Facebook and their cell-phones than with the people they interact with in the flesh. Stoll investigates the findings of psychologists Robert Kraut and Vicki Lundmark in their research on the effects of increased internet use. Discovering the decline in social involvement and communication to correlate with increases in loneliness and depression Stoll asserts, “Paradoxically, the Internet is a social technology used for communication, yet it results in declining social involvement and psychological well-being” (650). As psychological well-being declines, the way in which relationships and interaction are approached begins to change as well. Stoll goes on to say, “Psychologists point out that the best predictor of psychological troubles is a lack of close social contacts. There’s a surprisingly close correlation between social isolation and such problems as schizophrenia and depression. Long hours spent online undercut our local social support networks; this isolation promotes psychological troubles” (651). Another self-fueling cycle begins and the first signs of social atrophy are seen. Isolation promotes loneliness, depression and psychosis, which in turn breeds more isolation. The cycle continues indefinitely; however, the individual being isolated in a virtual world had to be drawn to the technology for a reason. Perhaps in an attempt to socialize in a more effortless way that cannot be achieved in the flesh, people have turned to technology. How, then, does reaching out socially online promote isolation versus reaching out in the flesh? In his article, “Are Social Networks Messing With Your Head?,” David Disalvo reports that the cause of such isolation may not be attributed directly to the internet or usage of social technology. Rather, the cause lies in the individual’s social strength before approaching use of the internet. Disalvo explains, “We generally think of loneliness as physical isolation from other people. But that simple definition doesn’t begin to capture the condition’s pernicious nature: the deep distress people feel when they believe that their social relationships have less meaning than they should” (3). Thinking of loneliness in a broader sense than just physical isolation allows a clearer understanding of what it means to be isolated while connected to so many other internet users. In addition, it explains why people are trying to make up for lost relationships with technology. People are connected but not experiencing connection; interacting but not communicating.

Social atrophy quickly begins to develop because attempting these inauthentic interactions is much like imagining exercise. The mind can visualize going through the motions, but the body, the muscles, do not benefit in a physical way. In many ways, social technology allows users to show up at the gym just to talk about working out and leave wondering why they don’t feel any stronger. The main point here is that the internet and social technology are not to blame for this effect. Rather, it is the user's approach and intention that causes the increase in loneliness and isolation. Disalvo reports, “A connection between loneliness and social networking only emerges when the variables are flipped, and researchers study loneliness as a precursor to membership in social networks” (Disalvo 3). Technology, then, is being used as a way to deflect this loneliness instead of correct it. For an internet user who has strong social connections to begin with, the internet enhances their experience of interaction, but for an internet user who is already experiencing social atrophy, the internet provides an alternate reality altogether, a point that Turkle speaks to in her TEDtalk. Referring to her earlier article with a new perspective, Turkle reflects, “We were exploring different aspects of ourselves. And then we unplugged. I was excited. And, as a psychologist, what excited me most was the idea that we would use what we learned in the virtual world about ourselves, about our identity, to live better lives in the real world” (Turkle). Disalvo would agree that this approach is the most beneficial for the user who wants to use technology to improve their current social ties, stating, “It is not surprising that the social-networkers who fare the best are the ones who use the technology to support their existing friendships” (4). This suggests an issue with the way individuals are learning to form relationships in the flesh. As individuals become more dependent on social technologies their social muscles begin to atrophy rather than develop. The experience of social-atrophy begins to rely on technology to imitate human experience because individuals are more comfortable and familiar with this new type of social interaction, rather than being primarily concerned with relationships in-the-flesh.

Many aspects of online interaction mimic qualities of in-the-flesh interaction through communication and correspondence, but don't fulfill the human need for connection. In fact, communication through social technology actually creates more space between individuals. The skills of socialization are taught throughout childhood through in-the-flesh interactions and conversations with others, and form the body of an individual's identity. When these skills are not properly taught, the capabilities of the identity are diminished. Technology is intoxicating as it feigns an ease of the discomfort of such social-atrophy. The change in the practice and experience of conversation that technology has caused is an effect that Turkle addresses as a cautionary tale: “We use conversation with each other to learn how to have conversations with ourselves. So a flight from conversation can really matter because it can compromise our capacity for self-reflection. For kids growing up, that skill is the bedrock of development” (Turkle). Turkle's “bedrock of development” can be seen as the skeleton of the body of identity around which the social muscles are formed. When an individual's capacity for interaction is underdeveloped, they will most often look to technology to make up the difference for the sake of feeling connected to others. Brene Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work, explains connection as a fundamental component of the human experience in her 2010 TEDtalk in Houston, Texas. Brown states the following:

So where I started was with connection. Because, by the time you're a social worker for 10 years, what you realize is that connection is why we're here. It's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives. This is what it's all about. It doesn't matter whether you talk to people who work in social justice and mental health and abuse and neglect, what we know is that connection, the ability to feel connected, is – neurobiologically that's how we're wired – its why we're here. (Brown)

While technology may seem to pacify the need to feel connected and be a platform for conversation, it cannot provide the same in-the-flesh experiences that give purpose and meaning to our lives. Humans are wired for human connection while technology is wired for connection with technology; however, human relationships are much more difficult in-the-flesh and are being supplemented by the ease of social technology. This supplementation is taking place for several reasons, one of which is the diminished capacity for self-reflection.

In an attempt to better an individual's perception of the self, changes are made through technology to alter other individual's perception of them. Turkle states, “Texting, email, posting, all of these things let us present the self as we want to be. We get to edit, and that means we get to delete, and that means we get to retouch, the face, the voice, the flesh, the body” (Turkle). The desire to edit the self at any point is not something that in-the-flesh interactions accommodate as easily as technology; furthermore, the desire to retouch the self suggests a resistance to allowing authentic interaction between individuals. Brown offers an explanation of the discomfort with authenticity stating, “So very quickly I ran into this unnamed thing that absolutely unraveled connection in a way that I didn't understand or had never seen. And it turned out to be shame. And shame is really easily explained as the fear of disconnection: Is there something about me that, if other people know it or see it, that I won't be worthy of connection? The things I can tell you about it: it's universal; we all have it” (Brown). Herein is a paradox; the need for connection is disrupted by the fear of disconnection. Editing the self through technology allows an individual the opportunity to avoid the possibility of not being worthy of connection. Brown goes on to say, “The thing that underpinned this was excruciating vulnerability, this idea of, in order for connection to happen, we have to allow ourselves to be seen, really seen” (Brown). In order for the authentic experience of really being seen to occur, an individual must be willing to engage these disfavored parts of the self through in-the-flesh conversation and interaction with other individuals. Conversely, technology is the path of least resistance. Turkle would agree that the vulnerable qualities of in-the-flesh interaction are assuaged by technology stating, “I believe it's because technology appeals to us most where we are most vulnerable. And we are vulnerable. We're lonely but we're afraid of intimacy. And so from social networks to social robots, we're designing technologies that will give us the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship” (Turkle). An illusion is precisely what it is. The authentic human experience includes vulnerability and cannot be supplemented by technology in an attempt to avoid discomfort. The more the vulnerability of connection is avoided, the more individuals will understand it and teach each other how to engage with it less. Depriving this social muscle of its proper use drives the effect of social-atrophy forward, promoting the cycle of dependency on technologies to, through imitation, close the gaps of connection that they have helped create.

At this point, society is only seeing symptoms or warning signs of social-atrophy; however, it is becoming clear that social technology is dangerously close to becoming a tool in the treatment of social-atrophy; being used to induce a collective social coma. The construct of identity began to change first, as Turkle found, in the early days of online interaction. Among many other forms of online interaction, Turkle points out one of the first signs of the changestating, “On a MUD one actually gets to build character and environment and then to live within the toy situation. A MUD can become a context for discovering who one is and wishes to be. In this way, the games are laboratories for the construction of identity” (679-680). While this seemed to be a novel and inspiring experiment at the time, the negative connotations and consequences of such dissonance point to a failure in the flesh rather than in technology. Though Turkle describes the construction of identity online, Disalvo reminds us that the healthiest use of online social interaction begins with connection offline. “Indeed, face-to-face interaction appears to be the pivotal variable in social-networking effects. In a 2009 study of loneliness and Facebook membership, psychologist Laura Freberg […] found that college students who are socially connected in their face-to-face lives bring that persona online and really do derive benefits. The lonely students who used the technology became lonelier” (Disalvo 4). These findings contradict Turkle's initial assessment by suggesting the persona is constructed prior to online interaction and remains the same online as in-the flesh. Having identified a healthy identity in face-to-face life as a necessity when approaching social technology, the root of social-atrophy reveals itself to be separate from technology altogether.

After fifteen years of research, Turkle presents the first area to be examined suggesting social-atrophy begins in the self, leaving the identity body to display the symptoms. Turkle now asserts that, in order for authentic in-the-flesh connection to happen, one must practice solitude. “Solitude is where you find yourself so that you can reach out to other people and form real attachments. […] If we don't know how to be alone, we're going to be more lonely. And if we don't teach our children to be alone, they're only going to know how to be lonely” (Turkle). Individuals must learn, especially in childhood, how to cultivate a healthy identity and social connections in-the-flesh in order to reach out to others. Solitude promotes this cultivation; therefore, the cause of social-atrophy lies in the resistance to solitude, in the relationship with the self. Brown's explanation of vulnerability, a shared quality of flesh, as a necessity, begins to track the path of social-atrophy through the identity body. Brown examined two types of individuals: those with a sense of connection and those without, which can be equated to Stoll's deep and weak social ties. While examining individuals with deep social ties, Brown discovered a shared commonality stating:

They fully embraced vulnerability. They believed that what made them vulnerable made them beautiful. They didn't talk about vulnerability being comfortable, nor did they talk about it being excruciating […] They just talked about it being necessary” (Brown). Technology is not wired to fully embrace vulnerability; it is not seen as beautiful because of its imperfections. Rather, it is being used as a tool to avoid vulnerability. Technology is used to make the world less vulnerable, but “we live in a vulnerable world. And one of the ways we deal with it is we numb vulnerability. (Brown)

Social technology is being used as a tool to numb the vulnerability of in-the-flesh connection, as Turkle suggests, by editing and retouching the self. However, as Brown expresses, “You can't numb those hard feelings without numbing the other affects, our emotions. You cannot selectively numb. So when we numb those, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness. And then we are miserable […] And it becomes a dangerous cycle” (Brown). In this case, Brown could just as easily have suggested numbing those hard feelings of vulnerability and solitude by sending a couple text messages and updating a Facebook status because, as Turkle addresses, “Being alone feels like a problem that needs to be solved. And people try to solve it by connecting. But here, connection is more like a symptom than a cure. It expresses but doesn't solve, an underlying problem” (Turkle). Technology is being used to numb the vulnerability of in-the-flesh connection due to a lack of self-reflection that comes from solitude being seen as a problem, essentially inducing a collective social coma; putting the vulnerable parts of the identity body to sleep.

Technology is a driving force explicitly linked with the future; however, humankind is the driving force behind technology. Social-atrophy begins in the avoidance of the vulnerability of solitude and self-reflection. Without knowing it, social technology has been designed to ease the discomfort of social-atrophy and has consequently changed the concept and practice of self-reflection, resulting in a diminished capability to form authentic in-the-flesh connections. Should social-atrophy continue to develop in the future as steadily as technology, the consequences will become irreversible. As social technology becomes embedded in the bedrock of development of future generations, authentic in-the-flesh social skills will disappear. Having lost the knowledge of basic social rules, future generations will begin to see dramatic shifts in the greater social structure. Whether humanity will continue on this path or opt for a wiser direction is unclear, for, as Disalvo describes, “In truth, the millions of social-network users are engaged in the largest experiment in social interaction ever conducted” (Disalvo). While the experiment continues, it is clear that humanity continues to attempt perfection not only through technology but, as Brown sees it, through the raising of children. “And we perfect, most dangerously, our children. Let me tell you what we think about children. They're hardwired for struggle when they get here. […] Our job is to look and say, ‘You know what? You're imperfect, and you're hardwired for struggle, but you are worthy of love and belonging.’ That's our job. Show me a generation of kids raised like that, and we'll end the problems I think that we see today” (Brown). In order to cultivate a healthy and beneficial relationship with social technology, and in order to teach future generations how to cultivate the same, humanity must address and accept the vulnerability of in-the-flesh connection to prevent the spread of social-atrophy. Humanity must make the effort, put in the work, of getting off the internet, off of the computer, off of cell-phones, out of technology, and back into the body, back into the flesh, for the sake of preserving the authentic human experience.

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