Loneliness in the Digital Age

This week a new exhibition opened in the Museum on the Seam entitled Everyone Carries a Room Inside. The exhibition reflects a universal cry of loneliness.

Carl Rogers, the famous humanistic psychologist, believed that in modern life, people abandon the core of their self-personality and replace it with behavior patterns which, they believe, will secure them the recognition, acceptance and love of society.

He goes on to explain that this process is ultimately doomed, since no matter what they do, or how hard they work, they will not achieve their aim. They will feel alienated both from society and from themselves, and as a result, will experience loneliness.

Modern society advocates and encourages self-actualization. This is often comes with a high price in terms of our social ties. In other words, people who wish to fulfill themselves to a high degree frequently do this at the expense of their social lives.

In recent years many people believe that the Internet has provided a solution to this dilemma. With its vast array of communication channels, all available 24/7, we no longer have to choose between devoting time to our careers or to our family and friends; we can have it all, and at our convenience. Thus logically the social fabric of society should strengthen.

This, however, has not proven to be the case. Psychologists Ed Dinner and Martin Seligman (2004) cite solid evidence that young people today suffer from far higher rates of clinical depression than did the previous generation. Daniel Golman, writing as early as 1991, argued that the world is sinking steadily into a general clinical depression, and while the 20th century was characterized as the Anxiety Generation, this is fast becoming the Clinically Depressed Generation.

It is worth noting that all this is happening at a time when every dimension of economic well-being indicates an impressive increase. So what is going wrong? And how far can we blame our present state on the advent of the Internet?

Clearly the Internet itself is neither bad nor good, it is all a question of what you do with it. The Internet provides tremendous support to vast numbers of people, particularly those living in remote places, those who are house-bound, those who are isolated through infectious illness or are disabled. The Internet enables such people to break out of their isolation and communicate with the world.

In fact my own research has shown the vast impact of online communication for those people who are chronically shy or even socially phobic. The Internet releases them to form relationships with people in a way that are unable to in their daily lives.

One of the major reasons we are feeling lonely in our Internet universe is the increased stress we live under due to the way we utilize the technology. One of the most pervasive values in the modern world is “time equals money,” and this has led us to aim for ultimate efficiency.

The Internet provides us with the tools we need. Using the Internet we can simultaneously run many of the components of our lives. Thus there is no separation between home and work; we are at work all the time. This is reflected in our personal lives – here, too, there is a need to be efficient. We can be with our kids, answer the mobile phone, send and receive texts and emails. Thanks to the remote digital devices and WIFI everywhere we can manage to do everything we need to do, all at the same time. Actually, trying to be in several places at once means that in most cases we are in fact nowhere. Imagine you meet up with someone, and during your drink together he does not stop talking on his mobile phone, texting, answering email and updating his Facebook – naturally with pictures and excited comments about your meeting!

The conversation and the relationship between you will never really develop any depth, and this is the price that we are paying for our efficiency. We are losing our ability to concentrate and enjoy high-quality time with one person at a time, because that seems like a waste of time.

Another facet of this problem is that we are surrounding ourselves with more and more people, but the quality of these connections is diminishing through lack of investment. We may have hundreds of friends but we are not getting our social needs met. What seems to be happening is that all the social “advantages” of the net lead to the illusion of a socially intensive environment. This erroneous impression is especially marked among the younger generation who were born into a world replete with the Internet.

Many of these young people define friendship through the net. “I have 500 hundred friends on Facebook” they report, or, “I’m very socially active on the net.”

Increasingly the quality idea of friendship is being replaced by a quantitative one. They collect friends. It is a statistical figure that for such people reflects their social status, while not implying anything deep and serious.

In what may be seen as a paradoxical, given what we know about incidents of loneliness and depression, the common communication messages displayed on social network pages reflect happiness and achievements. Above and beyond the PR factor, there is also a strongly competitive element; “see what I’ve got (compared to you)” Notice what I bought/where I spent my vacation.

The Internet provides us with the illusion that everything is fine in our social world: we are always surrounded by friends, and we can talk to them at any time we choose, literally.

In fact my research has shown that in too many cases the introverts and those suffering from social phobia show a tendency to become addicted to the Internet and fail to attempt to make friends or even keep up friendships offline.

Yet we feel frustrated much of the time. Deep friendships and love are basic human needs, and in whatever age we live. It seems that the cry of loneliness shouting from the exhibits of the museum is more relevant than ever.

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