

CONNECTED, BUT ALONE? – Not really?

A POSITION PAPER

Introduction

In Sherry Turkle's TEDx Talk entitled "Connected, but alone?", she talks about the effects that digital technology has imparted on our social capacities as individuals. She ascertains that communication technologies such as e-mail, texting, and social media platforms such as Facebook or Twitter present the illusion of 'conversation' to its users. She proceeds to comment further on how a disconnect from reality is made present given the gravity of control allowed to us in how we present ourselves through said mediums. Not only does she go on to 'warn' us about communication technology, she goes on to provide insights about how artificial intelligence or robots can also present the illusion of companionship, expressing that advancements such as these are, in her perspective, something "heartwrenching" with regards to the notion that we expect more from technology (i.e, these machines) and less from each other. Lastly, she goes on to say how the overuse of aforementioned technologies may lead us to lose a sense of solitude (one we are supposed to be using to reflect and find our true selves) resulting to further isolation.

Now while there are certainly numerous issues regarding the negative impacts of social media usage and that cases leading to social isolation is among one of them (Saxbe, 2018), there are still arguments to be made about her other claims.

Arguments

Where is the data?

Taking account both the setting and time allotted, it might be fair to adjust expectations with how objective data is presented by speakers. However, considering that her claims and arguments are centered around large portions of society (or at least large enough that it necessitated a talk to be conducted about it) no formal research and evidence were connoted to support them. While anecdotal inferences were included, those do not suffice to truly establish the impact and scale of the issue at hand.

Confining digital technology

It is also concerning how she diminishes digital technology to just social media platforms, e-mails, and texting. While other platforms are not the assumed focus, it is important to elaborate the bigger picture when forming claims about the state of communication and connectedness in society. For example, digital technology has done wonders for the field of education with the integration of various online learning platforms and tools that allow students, such as me, to utilize information better. PwDs (Persons with disabilities) are also introduced to communication technologies and assistive applications that is catered solely to their needs (Eid, 2015). These examples deserve inclusion if speaking from an objective standpoint. Although she did point out that while her remarks towards the topic may sound anti-technology, this was not the case. However, in observation, Turkle's standpoint is situated in both the fear of what is to come and in praise of what used to be. It is therefore difficult to assess whether her arguments are reliable and unbiased in encompassing all facets of the topic.

New research suggests otherwise

Turkle's talk was published on April 4, 2012 and since then a considerable amount of research regarding the matter have emerged. While Turkle was not able to present objective evidence during her presentation, therefore she is not able to provide solid defense to her points. In contrast with Turkle's point of increasing anxiety found in digital technology, Orben and Przybylski (2019) found "little substantive statistically significant negative associations between digital screen engagement and well-being in adolescents" (p. 12). Given the scope of their study, it is to be expounded upon whether these results are found to be the same for other age groups. However, this research did not only disprove Turkle's previous point, it also revealed "serious limitations and shortcomings in the science of social media to date" (Denworth, 2019). These shortcomings include the prevalent use of a method that measures only frequency and duration of usage but one which does not take into consideration the content that is being consumed and its prescribed context (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). In addition, Turkle's pessimistic view surrounding robots and artificial intelligence stems from panic more than concern, disregarding the possible positive impacts of AI in the near undecided future.

Reinvention, not replacement

Turkle found technologies capable of texting and e-mailing that hinder people from experiencing what she calls 'true' conversations. I find this claim to be shallow because it identifies these communication devices as complete substitutes to physical communication (to which any sound individual is clearly not, but merely reinventions for faster, far more convenient messaging). Not only that, but Turkle willingly ignores the existence of voice and video calls in the fray of communication done online.

Conclusion

To conclude, it is imperative to elaborate the topic of communication in society in an inclusive manner. Sherry Turkle raised important topics that need pondering, however her methods of presenting the case do not satisfy every aspect there is to communication technologies. These devices we use today are fundamentally tools that we need to survive in today's social climate, and technological progression is not something to be looked down upon but should be considered an opportunity. This is in no way a denial of technology's negative impacts but in this case, it is one thing to say that something is excessive, it is another to provide sufficient evidence that may lead to social action. They go hand in hand in creating an impactful and helpful message to other people, a message that really counts.

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