How Connected are We Really?

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In our modern world the amount that we are able to be connected to one another is astounding to me. At certain times, I am amazed and grateful for the connections that technology has given humanity. At other times, I am overwhelmed by the number of people with access to me through texting, calling, Facebook, or any of the other ways available to us today. I sometimes feel like I am unable to get away from all the little beeps and vibrations alerting me to new pieces of information pertaining to me. I watch my family as we sit around our kitchen counter, talking about our days while simultaneously scrolling through our texts, news feeds, and emails on our iPhones, only partially invested in our conversation about each other's lives. We have a rule in my house restricting phones from coming to the dinner table or to our rooms when we go to bed. I am truly thankful for this restriction (though I may not always remember that) as it prevents me from being completely controlled by my smartphone. This is a statement not everyone in the modern world can make. It allows me to consider how these pieces of technology allowing us to connect to anyone at anytime truly affect us. When does humanity go from using technology to advance our lives to being imprisoned by it, relying entirely on it to feel "a global connection?" I want to explore how human nature and human relationships have evolved as our interaction with technology grows and intensifies.

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By the end of 2013, two in every nine people in the world owned a smartphone, a ratio that is only increasing exponentially as we move forward in our applications of technology. As all of humanity makes this transition to a technologically-run world, we must remember to not give up everything we hold onto in favor of the new, shiny gadgets to which we now have access. The vast majority of humans own or use an electronic device allowing them to connect with people across the world at the push of a button. It is easier than ever to send a Facebook message from England to Ecuador or to hold a conference call with contributors from Alaska to Australia and everywhere in between. But is this new hyper connected world truly worth the sacrifices we must make from the old world? Are we as humanity comfortable with forgoing our ability to fully listen and to connect to each other on a personal level rather than just through the shallow methods that are provided to us with technology? Or is technology really nothing more than the next stage of evolution for man to adapt to and grow from? It is now all too common to observe families sitting together, their eyes glued to one or more screens, their mouths only being used to chew their food rather than to engage in conversations about the courses of their days.

The world has changed an extraordinary amount in the last 200 years. We have gone from having a global population of just over half a billion people to one of 7 billion. Communication has evolved from sending telegraphs to instant messaging. In 1965, Digital Equipment Corporation introduced the PDP-8, the first commercially sold minicomputer, to the general public. In 1973, Martin Cooper, the division manager at Motorola made the first ever cell phone call. Ten years later, on September 21, 1983, Motorola released the first commercially sold cell phone (*First*). The World Wide Web, created by Tim Berners-Lee, was opened up to the general public in 1991 (*History*). This was a truly historic moment as now everyone with access to a device that could connect to the World Wide Web was theoretically able to communicate with each other. In 1992, IBM released IBM Simon, the first "smartphone" – a term that wasn't even coined until 1997 (*First*). Also in 1997, SixDegree.com was launched as the first social network website. Social network interactions increased in popularity

exponentially after that, with 58 percent of the world's population, approximately four billion people, a part of one of the many social networks available on the Internet (*Christakis*, 268). Today, more people in the world have access to cell phones than sanitary, working toilets. Six billion people out of the seven billion on the planet have access to a cell phone while only four and a half billion are able to use a clean toilet on a regular basis (*Wang*). What has the world come to that digital technology is more important to us than basic things in society like having access to a sanitary toilet?

  Technology has become such an essential tool in today's world. It is truly an extension of our mental selves, and our minds have evolved as a result (*Case*). Sherry Turkle wisely observed that "Our little devices, the little devices in our pockets, are so physiologically powerful that they don't only change what we do, they change who we are" (*Turkle*). The cell phones and computers that allow us to interact with each other whenever we please give us the ability to have control over our conversations. One can decide when to acknowledge messages from others, when to respond, and how to respond without the necessity of an immediate response demanded by face to face interactions. We like the idea of being connected to one another, as long as "we are connected at a distance in amounts that we can control" (*Turkle*). Humans hold a sense of mental security when we are able to control how much we say to each other and when we say it. As naturally sociable creatures, people enjoy social interactions but are afraid of intimacy as it leaves us vulnerable to those around us. Technology has allowed us to have the social interaction we crave without forcing us to get too close to each other, giving "the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship" (*Turkle*). Constant exposure to this illusion has made people believe that our shallow online interactions truly represent the full breadth of friendship. We are no longer able to truly listen to one another, to both the interesting and boring thoughts our peers have to express. Consequently, humans may no longer know how to hold meaningful conversations with one another; feeling like no one is listening to us while simultaneously not taking the time to listen to others. We have begun to expect more support from our technology and less from each other (*Turkle*). Much of the world turns to technology as something to "listen" to them; hundreds of Facebook "friends" standing in as ears to listen when no one in the real world is capable of doing so.

  We have also begun to expect less from ourselves. The temptation of technology keeps much of humanity from remembering to step back and seek time with just themselves with no distractions preventing self-reflection. Without this time of solitude, humans lose the ability to think about many things we subconsciously reflect on when alone, such as the ability to long-term plan and develop our own identities. We adopt our online identities as our primary identities, making us feel like we are not ourselves if we are without our connection to technology (*Case*). Online, we are able to organize our appearance of our lives to the rest of the world, making the necessary tweaks to different aspects of our personas so that on the screen we may seem polished even if off the screen we are not. We can change different things about ourselves, like appearance and personality, much easier on the internet than is possible to do in our actual lives. Some go to the extreme of creating a second self online, that possesses all the physical characteristics they desire but which they may not have in the real world. They can become so consumed in the fantasy that it is real life, and thus begin to value their online persona above the identity they hold in the real world. So much of social interactions in the world today are based on how attractive humans find each other. Each person's physical appearance affects how other people initially treat them and how everyone perceives themselves, and as a consequence how people act. Having an attractive virtual avatar affects users' self-confidence;

providing them with more appreciation for the virtual self and the attention it is receiving and therefore less appreciation for their real selves (*Christakis and Fowler*, 257-263).

David Pollard and Amy Taylor are a prime example of this. In 2005, the two were married, once at a real wedding ceremony and then a second time on the virtual game "Second Life" with which they were both seriously invested. The two spent more time and effort planning their online wedding than they did on the wedding that they actually lived through. Both had felt an increased amount of respect in "Second Life" from their fellow gamers; it gave them a space to have social interactions with other players while still being able to distance themselves from others on the game, allowing them to control their social interactions with however much of a degree they pleased (*Christakis and Fowler*, 285). To a growing number of people, "Our virtual worlds may seem better than our real world, not just because of what the programmers build in to them, but because of the way we, as human beings, naturally come to behave in these new environments" (*Christakis and Fowler*, 285). It has been as these new behaviors have slowly migrated over into real life that the effects of technology on people have begun to truly show.

Further extremes to this have been taken, at least hypothetically, in movies and books as humans' fascination with technology continues to grow. Movies and books discussing ideas like the possibility of a romantic relationship between a human being and some sort of technological device have begun to surface. An increasing number of satirical books, videos and other forms of entertainment are being produced, poking fun at humans' relationships with technology. *Her*, directed by Spike Jonze, focuses on the idea of a man, Theodore, who falls in love and then develops a relationship with his new operating system, OS1. The relationship that he has with his phone (where Samantha, his OS1 resides) is not so different from the relationships that a growing majority of people in the world have with their phones as well as other pieces of technology. Theodore sleeps with his phone next to his bed, waking up to it ringing and answering it in the middle of the night several times in the movie. He always has it either in his hand or his pocket, the accompanying Bluetooth earpiece stuck into his ear for all hours of the day that he is on his smart phone. The majority of the time he spends with his friends involves some form of technology, either being discussed or used in the interactions (*Jonze*). This is a direct reference to real life; social gatherings today entail a group of people coming together and physically being with each other while everyone is engrossed in whatever they are doing on their phones. They are often not mentally with the people around them, or if they are it is for minimal periods of time. It comes as a true shock to some that "…electronics [are] not the ultimate answer to every question" and that face to face human interaction is often more fruitful than surfing the web on one's smart phone (*Milgrim*, 36). Human beings have come to forget the true extents of ourselves, expecting more and more self advancements to result from technology use and less and less inner developments to result from straight interactions with fellow humans.

So how will these relationships evolve over the next year? The next ten? Even the next thirty, the approximate amount of time it will take for a new generation to cycle through this fast paced developing world currently surrounding us? I believe that it is up to the young adults who have grown up in the digital age to set a standard of how to act and how to utilize technology so that it is still a positive and helpful tool as it continues to advance rather than a roadblock to live human interaction. We must demonstrate that technology should be integrated into our world and can be used to do some serious good, but should never replace our primary actions and social interactions with one another. We must not retreat into the screens we seem to always have in front of us and remember that life truly happens out in the real world rather than in a computer-

generated fantasy game. We must take steps to "…learn how to have a real conversation…" and relearn how to attentively listen to what other human beings in our lives have to say (*Turkle*). With this, we must also relearn how to embrace solitude and actively listen to ourselves and reflect from time to time, allowing us to once again grow through self-realization and contemplation (*Case*). We must make the switch back from expecting more from technology and begin again to expect more from each other and ourselves. If that is not something that we are able to do and able to achieve as a generation and as the world population on a grander scheme, humans will no longer be the ones controlling technology but will instead be the ones controlled by the technology we all possess.

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