

Living in a digital culture: The good, the bad and the balance between the two



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Today the pervasive presence of digital technology is an integral part of our everyday life. The rapid expansion of accessible and affordable media technology, combined with near universal access to the internet is fundamentally altering the way society works. More rapidly than ever, digital technology is changing the way we access information and how we interact with one another. The accelerating velocity of digital transformations has immense implications for how we live, work and interact. As the digital world opens possibilities for radically new ways of learning, working and communicating, and while also generating cultural anxieties, it is timely to reflect and consider some of the key developments and challenges arising from living in a digital culture.

The digital environment we live in today is enveloping us. Digital technologies are present in all aspects of our lives and we use digital technologies without noticing them – they are simply a part of everything: communications, transport, retail, manufacturing, entertainment, medicine are today controlled or enabled through digital systems. These tools and platforms are transforming how we interact with our families, colleagues and communities, as well as having profound social and political impacts.

We now live in a world where the internet and digital media have, in the last two decades, shifted from being the new frontier of communication technology, to being for most people an integral part of our culture and daily life. In a report released in August 2015, by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), 'The internet was accessed every day, or almost every day, by 78% of adults (39.3 million) in Great Britain',¹ this is more than double the proportion of adults (35%) that used the internet daily

in 2006, when directly comparable records began. But what do these transformations mean for us culturally, ethically and philosophically? What experiences and opportunities does digital technology provide us with today? Where and how has the digital environment brought on new practices, possibilities and threats?

While academic research into digital culture, online communities and social networks has shown that there can be positive consequences of participation and interaction on the internet,² much of the reporting in the mainstream media about living in a digital culture and in particular the impact of 'social media' (an umbrella term used to describe internet-based communities and networks in which individuals interact, view, create and exchange content) is noticeably less positive.

Every day seems to bring with it a new warning about how digital technologies are changing social life for the worse. In recent years some of the discourse around the impact of digital technologies has approached that of a moral panic. Some commentators, such as Pinker, make hysterical predictions about the dangers of too much technology,³ that technology strips us of our ability to hold conversations,⁴ that the internet is making us stupid,⁵ and that technology will create echo chambers for negative behaviour,⁶ as well as discussions of online bullying and trolling.⁷ Although positive stories are also reported in the media, it often seems that more attention is paid by wider society to negative experiences of online interaction. These fears are unsurprising given that new advances in technology can often usher in a new age of anxiety,⁸ where our social standards and values are disturbed and people have to learn new

norms regarding appropriate uses of technologies. But how accurate are these warnings and what are the positive changes that these tools and platforms are bringing to society, is it always either good or bad?

A culture in transition: Three technology shifts

The digital literacy of the UK, and in particular our familiarity with the internet, has developed rapidly since the mid-1990s. Digital technology and media have infiltrated mainstream culture deeply, if not completely, and society is more connected, social and open to sharing than ever before. Increasingly, we use digital media in our personal lives and expect similar levels of access and participation when engaging in cultural and social activities.⁹ There is an underlying argument here that people increasingly live in a 'digital culture'. Charlie Gere articulates the extent to which our everyday lives are becoming dominated by digital technology, and how these technologies are in the process of changing us and our relationship with our environment.¹⁰ It is possible to see three technology shifts that have affected the majority of internet users, which have happened over the last two decades. Firstly, mainstream acceptance of the World Wide Web between 1994–2000 introduced many of us to email and websites for the first time. Following this mainstreaming of the web there was a shift to broadband connections. The ONS registered dramatic growth in broadband uptake between March 2001, when 0% of households with internet access had broadband connections, and 2015 when the figure reached 94%.¹¹ Broadband has fundamentally altered the benchmark of what users' systems would support. High bandwidth and always-on connections have enabled us to adapt to the idea of high media consumption, with multiple users on a single connection able to stream video and audio concurrently. The quantitative change of speed has enabled a dramatic qualitative shift in our experience of the internet.

Most recently, the spread of the smart-phones, 3G and now 4G connectivity (and the falling costs of both) have made mobile internet widely appealing, so that in 2015 the 74% of internet users included at least some mobile use in their activity.¹² Internet access on the go changes more than the availability of digital services: it changes what people can do with those services. The ever-present internet on our devices which accompany us everywhere has increased the use of the mobile internet as a social tool and one which is closely attached to personal experiences. The increasing use of social networks appears to be strongly linked to mobile use, with parallel growth curves: in 2015 UK internet users participating in social networks has grown to 61%, this is an increase from 45% in 2011. Social networking is widespread in all age groups, up to and including those aged 55 to 64, where 44% of adults reported use. Of those aged 65 and over, 15% used social networks. Social networking has become part of many adults' everyday lives. Of the 61% of adults who used social networks in the last three months, 79% did so every day or almost every day.¹³

For many of us, the shift to mobile has resulted in digital connectivity becoming integrated to a previously unforeseen degree in our everyday lives. As a consequence, social norms and behaviours are changing. This shift has introduced a variety of communication patterns at the source of a fundamental cultural transformation, as virtuality becomes an essential feature of our reality. This raises important questions in terms of our relationships, identities and practices due to the fact that we are present and absent at the same time when using digital media. At the heart of this is a deep confusion about what is virtual and what is real, and how can we be both present and absent at the same time. These technological shifts highlight the fact that living in a digital culture is based on new forms of multimodal communication and digital information processing. Therefore digital culture is distinguished by rapid transformations in the kinds of technological methods through which we encounter one another.

Social connectedness and community

When faced with new forms of digital communication there tends to be a binary response from society. On the one hand, concern is expressed that communication has become increasingly shallow and narcissistic. For many, the increased amount of digital interaction seems to threaten the very nature of our personal relationships. For others, digital media offer the promise of more opportunity for connection with more people, a route to new opportunities and to stronger relationships and more diverse connections. Let us take, for example, the concept of community within digital culture. One of the core beliefs of 'digital culture' is that digital networks encourage greater connectivity, collaboration, communication, community and participation.¹⁴ This can be exemplified by the range of digital platforms from Facebook to Twitter and YouTube, which are all filled with language that suggests a sense of community. At the heart of any community (online or offline) lie social relationships or connections, and the question that is frequently asked is whether online communities could be seen as authentic, valid and real. A closer look at what is meant by online communities might be of help in formulating a response to this question.

The terms 'online community' and 'social networking site' are often used interchangeably. However, the literature illustrates that the two can be quite different. Though a social networking site may result in an online community, not all online communities are the result of social networking sites. Social networking sites tend to be individual-focused, whereas online communities are group-focused and often based around a common interest. Therefore online communities represent social spaces where a group of people regularly interact with each other online, to share information and opinions on a common interest. Howard Rheingold was one of the earliest, and perhaps most frequently cited, supporters of online community. His book *The Virtual Community*, about his own experiences online, shares the view of online group interaction is overwhelmingly positive: 'In a virtual community we can go directly to the place

NOTES

1. ONS (2015), 'Internet Access – Households and Individuals 2015'; available at www.ons.gov.uk.
2. KYA McKenna, AS Green & MEJ Gleason, 'Relationship Formation on the Internet: What's the Big Attraction?', *Journal of Social Issues* 58.1 (2000), pp. 9–31; P Norris, 'The Bridging and Bonding Role of Online Communities', *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 7.3 (2002), pp. 3–13; S Owen & H Westcott, 'Friendship and trust in the social surveillance network', *Surveillance & Society* 11.3 (2013), pp. 311–23.
3. S Pinker, 'Can Students Have Too Much Tech?', *The New York Times* 30 Jan 2015; available at www.nytimes.com.
4. S Turkle, 'The Flight From Conversation', *The New York Times* 22 Apr 2012; available at www.nytimes.com; A Ossola, 'A New Kind of Social Anxiety in the Classroom', *The Atlantic* 14 Jan 2015; available at www.theatlantic.com/magazine.
5. N Carr, 'Is Google Making Us Stupid?', *The Atlantic Monthly* 302.1 (2008); available at www.theatlantic.com/magazine.
6. CR Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2009).
7. K Gander, 'Online trolls are psychopaths and sadists, psychologists claim', *The Independent* 18 Feb 2014; available at www.independent.co.uk; DM Law et al.,

where our favorite subjects are being discussed, then get acquainted with people who share our passions or who use words in a way we find attractive ... Your chances of making friends are magnified by orders of magnitude over the old methods of finding a peer group.¹⁵

Alternatively, there are the 'dystopian warnings', for example, that the 'real' or geographical community will be lost as a result of grouping ourselves by interest rather than by locality.¹⁶ There is also the issue of 'narrowly focussed (or narrowcast) communities',¹⁷ where people are brought together with the same narrow interests, opinions, personalities and/or prejudices in a forum where they do not encounter opinions that are contrary to their own.

It can sometimes appear, according to some reports within mainstream media regarding the use of the internet and specifically social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, that spending a lot of time online can lead to a lack of offline sociability, a lack of social cohesion and that being part of an online community is somehow dangerous. Despite the fact that the anonymity afforded by digital-mediated communication may lead to bullying, deception, abuse and radicalisation, it can also be a positive thing: virtual social spaces enabling individuals to show and to explore aspects of their personality and to share common interests. Many of the topics surrounding digital culture, online communication and online communities, whether in the mainstream media or in more academic research, present extreme binary perspectives: the internet as a safe space or as a place of nefarious activities; online communities and communication as an opportunity to meet and get to know like-minded individuals or as an exercise in dishonesty and potential harm. Both perspectives reflect a sense that digital technologies are changing the nature of our social connections. However, in reality as technologies are integrated into everyday life, they offer a nuanced mix of both positive and negative implications, something that is both enabling and disabling for society.

The experience of the majority of online community groups and social networking site users falls somewhere in the middle; most people have experienced, or have heard of, duplicity or misrepresentation online but on the whole having some form of an online social life is actually relatively normal. Digital culture exists on a spectrum and while there are internet users at each end of that scale, the majority are in the middle, balancing and blurring their online and offline lives to the best of their ability in order to obtain the benefits which come from both. Just as with offline communities and communication there are limitations and benefits.

The good, the bad and the balanced?

The tendency is to think about digital technologies deterministically, asking what they do to us individually and to society, and whether that is good or bad. On the one hand, more pessimistic perspectives highlight that living in a digital culture damages our ability to have face to face conversations degrades our capacity to think for ourselves, undermines our connections to our communities and families, and replaces meaningful

relationships with shallow narcissism. On the other hand, more optimistic outlooks suggest that living in a digital culture leads to more engaged citizens, more resources, and larger, more effective, better-connected social networks. Ultimately it is society that determines what digital culture is and what it will become, not the technology itself because we all use technology to suit our own aims.

Perhaps it is time that we start to think of digital technologies as part of our everyday lives and social contexts. When technology becomes mundane, it is hard to see them as agents of radical transformation, neither as positive or negative. Digital technologies are not good or bad but they are changing the ways we relate to each other and to ourselves in numerous, pervasive ways. For example, we find and share knowledge and resources we could not access before and we stay in contact with more people for longer and across greater distances. Occasionally we do find ourselves in bad circumstances that we would have been better off avoiding, just as we do in offline situations and environments.

We should avoid making simple comparisons, for example whether digital communication is as good as face to face communication, or whether online communities are worse than offline ones. It is not simply a question of choosing one over the other, or putting one in opposition against the other. It is more nuanced than that. As Baym points out the more important questions are around who is communicating, how they are communicating, for what purposes, in what contexts, and what their expectations are.¹⁸ Just as we need critical tools for understanding the messages within digital technology, we need to understand the social dynamics into which technologies are introduced and in which they play out. We need to think about what skills we need to be teaching and learning in order for us to better understand the quality of the quantity digital information we are encountering and experiencing. Ultimately we need to reflect about how we as society use digital technologies and think critically about our ability to make appropriate and informed decisions about our use of technology.

Conclusion

It is important to provide a means of thinking critically about the roles of digital media, in particular the internet and online communities, and the ways they are transforming everyday life. In order to make sense of these transitions in culture we need to understand what is meant by digital culture and have a critical appreciation of the changes afforded by digital technology. As we have seen in our discussion about social connectedness and community in digital culture, the debate surrounding the impact of digital technologies on society is often polarised in a way that is not helpful. It is important that we have a more nuanced and balanced perspective when we as a society reflect on how we use digital technologies and its impact on our everyday lives.

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8. M McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: New American Library, 1964).

9. C Ross, M Terras & C Royston, 'Visitors, Digital Innovation and a Squander Bug: Reflections on Digital R&D for Audience Engagement and Institutional Impact'; available at <http://mw2013.museumsandtheweb.com>.

10. C Gere, *Digital Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), p. 7.

11. ONS, 'Internet Access'.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. C Gere, *Community Without Community in Digital Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

15. H Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 11–12.

16. NK Baym, *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2000).

17. M Parsell, 'Pecious virtual communities: Identity, polarisation and the Web 2.0', *Ethics and Information Technology* 10 (2008), p. 41.

18. N Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).