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New Media Effects on Connectedness

Dr Niki Menelaou

Lecturer, Department of Journalism,

Frederick University, Cyprus.

Abstract

The paper examines social connectedness that can be achieved through the use of the New Media. It focuses on the quality of such connectedness and especially on its psychological effects on social media users as derived from research worldwide. The paper also examines the paradox of social media exclusion of the individual from the fullest kind of communication i.e. physical communication; whereas the New Media offer the revolutionary tool to connect, nullifying space and time, the visual signal that passes through a computer hardly substitutes physical presence. Finally, the need for users and especially teenage users to be educated in using social networking is highlighted.

Key words: new media, societal change, social connectedness, human psychology, senses, online communication.

1. Introduction

The primary function that the rapid emergence of the New Media has succeeded in is timely broadcasting, in the sense of making known almost at the precise moment of a happening, simultaneously and over a wide area. Broadcasting creates awareness, consciousness of events, situations, emotions, thoughts, actions and products. However the prevailing reality with the rising of the New Media is not so much broadcasting as connectedness. The entire internet is already connecting people and it is obvious that the future of this revolutionary tool lies in into finding out and employing new and various ways of bringing people together.

2. Connectedness and the digital world

Cillizza (2015) agrees with this reality and quotes Jason Goldman, the first-ever White House Chief Digital Officer since March 2015, who states that “broadcasting, simply pushing massive amounts of information out to people, has its uses, most notably getting a story, your brand (gag)

or whatever else attention. But, connectedness is the future and has almost limitless potential both for journalism and the digital world more broadly”.

2.1 Success on the Web and “Time on Site”

Before looking into the traits of connectedness, an account of how we can define success on the web is another issue that according to my opinion has to be taken into account. We know how many of us are visiting a page, reading an article, how many like an article, comment on an article and are in the position to find out whether there is an upward or downward tendency in numbers of people performing the aforementioned actions. We measure success using such criteria. Another criterion is time spent on an internet page or article or “time on site” as Cilizza (ibid) states that Jason Goldman not only names it, but classifies it as the big change in measuring success on the web. Visiting a page and reading articles means getting informed and this is the way journalism succeeds in its primary role. However spending time on a site, commenting on articles and postings and pressing the “like” or “unlike” button is not only connecting with others but transforming journalism from passive to active. Online journalism provides platforms that bring people together and allow them to interact. The way in which they come together and interact defines the degree and quality of their social connectedness on the internet. A common trait of “Connecting” on the internet is that it makes an individual feel an active member of society as his/her ideas travel past and away from the boundaries of a home, a school, a working place or any gathering place to groups, communities, countries and even the world.

2.2 Social Connectedness

Many research pieces have shown that the more connected to others individuals are, the less anxiety and depression symptoms they manifest. They note that connectedness contributes to the physical and emotional wellbeing of individuals. In turn, individuals show more understanding and compassion to others and collaborate better with others when they themselves experience care and affection. On the contrary, when people are left alone, at the margin or away from others and society, they experience isolation which makes them feel unhappy, anxious and depressed and such feelings result at times in an antisocial behavior and poor emotional and physical health. Agreeing with the aforementioned, Hutcherson, Seppala and Gross, (2008), argue that “the need for social connection is a fundamental human motive, and it is increasingly clear that feeling socially connected confers mental and physical health benefits”. However, they go on to note that in many cultures, societal changes bring about growing social distrust and alienation. A huge societal change that has taken place only recently is the rise of the New Media and social connectedness as stated above, it is therefore useful to examine whether this change has contributed to social distrust and alienation.

3. Effects on the Psychological State of New Media users.

Bearing in mind the positive effects of social connectedness described above, one could argue that since the opportunities to connect which are offered by the New Media are constantly increasing, there is a secure potential for the increasing of wellbeing among their users. However, studies have shown that this is not always the case. If we take the example of Facebook as the leading online social media platform on a worldwide scale and focus on behavioral patterns connected to social media use, we can see that it can have a profound negative effect on individuals' psychological condition. To elaborate further on the issue, research, to which the article refers below, has shown that many problems arise due to comparisons amongst users regarding styles of life and behavior on the internet, especially amongst teenagers.

3.1 Feelings of Inadequacy and Depression

One of the effects of the use of Facebook found in a study conducted by Michigan University as Savastio (2013), notes, was that frequent Facebook use causes feelings of depression and inadequacy. The research observed eighty two Facebook users over a two-week period. The results showed that that “the more time the user/subject spent on Facebook, the more his/her feelings of well-being decreased and feelings of expression increased”. The lead author of the study, Social Psychologist Ethan Kross, noted that they observed “how a person's mood fluctuated during time spent on Facebook, and concluded that whether or not they modified their Facebook usage, the outcome was measurably unchanged”. It is very interesting to note that the very tool that ensures connectedness causes depression.

3.2 Comparison with Other Users

Another effect of frequent Facebook use, as Copeland (2011)) says, was revealed by Alexander Jordan and his fellow researchers at Stanford University, was that “on occasions, Facebook users tend to compare or contrast the lives of their friends with their own, while ignoring that their friends may post the most joyous or entertaining experiences in their lives, or that these experiences could be fictitious”. Such a habit leads to low self-esteem as comparing their lives with the ones of their friends, users tend to regard themselves as inferior to others or “losers”.

3.3 Other effects on human psychology

Other effects on human psychology found by academic research include social isolation, fear of missing out, negative relationships, addiction to the use of the social media, insomnia, eating disorders and others. Williams (2012) refers to Geraint Rees and his colleagues at the University College of London who concluded that “Facebook uses the “like” and “comment” button as means of interaction, however, this interaction is too brief and does not show concern about the one who posts on his or her Facebook wall. The brief interaction is one of the reasons that cause the feeling of loneliness”. I would take this further by arguing that there are people who press the “like” button or comment on a posting just to declare their presence not only on the internet but in society as well. Especially with the “like” button, nobody knows the degree of this expression

of pleasant acceptance. By simply stating that one likes either a broadcasting or a comment, a photo or a picture without explaining the reason why he/she likes it contributes to the absence of discussion regarding why something is worth admiring. In other words, the mechanism of the “like” button excludes discussion, critical thinking. The same is going to happen if the option of the “dislike” button is offered, as it has already been announced as one of the future choices of responding on Facebook. To continue with the effects of Facebook on human psychology, social media addiction has led to the creation of a new “syndrome”, known as Fear of Missing Out, or FOMO as Rosen (2013), states. “This syndrome occurs through a user’s repetitive and obsessive status-checking of “friend” status updates and posts related to social events or celebrations resulting in a feeling of being ‘left out’”, he argues . Increased break up and divorce rates have also been associated with the use of Facebook. Couples often watch closely what their partners post on the Facebook walls of their friends and react accordingly when they suspect intimacy between “friends”. Clayton, Nagurney and Smith, (2013) surveyed 205 Facebook users aged 18–82 to determine if frequent Facebook use caused negative relationship outcomes. The results show that “a high level of Facebook usage is associated with negative relationship outcomes, and that these relationships are indeed mediated by Facebook-related conflict. This series of relationships only holds for those who are, or have been, in relatively newer relationships of 3 years or less”. Recent studies have also shown a connection between online social media such as Facebook use to emotion regulation due to addictive behavior, impulse control, and substance abuse. Results from a survey by the university undergraduates Hormes, Kearns and Timko, (2014), showed that almost 10% of the sample met criteria for what investigators describe as “disordered social networking use.” Respondents who met criteria for “Facebook addiction” also reported “statistically significant symptoms commonly linked to addiction, such as tolerance (increased Facebook use over time), withdrawal (irritability when unable to access Facebook), and cravings to access the site”. “Our findings suggest that there may be shared mechanisms underlying both substance and behavioral addictions,” Hormes, the leader of the research, added. Another negative effect of social networking as research has revealed is that it may lead to sleep deprivation. A study commissioned by Travelodge Hotels (2010) in the United Kingdom surveyed 6,000 adults to explore the nation's bedtime habits and key findings revealed that Britons have become a nation of 'Onlinea- holics'. “On average each night Britons are spending 16 minutes in bed socially networking with pals - with the peak chatting time being 9.45pm. This time spent social networking is affecting Britons sleep quota as, on average, respondents reported they were getting just six hours and 21 minutes sleep per night. (This is one hour and 39 minutes below the recommended quota of eight hours of sleep per night.)”. The research further revealed that four out of ten adults have a regular text communication with friends in bed every night. Furthermore, Science Daily (2011) refers to a study conducted by the University of Haifa which showed that the more time teenage girls spend on Facebook, the higher was their risk of developing negative body images and eating disorders. The study was conducted by Prof. Latzer, Prof. Katz and Zohar Spivak of the Faculty of Social Welfare and Health Sciences at the University of Haifa, who looked into the effects of two factors causing eating disorders in young

girls: exposure to the media and self-empowerment. The 248 girls aged 12-19 who participated in the survey were asked to provide information on their Internet and television viewing habits. The use of the Media by women often causes a drive to be thin and discontented with one's body, as images of skinny girls in advertisements, fashion sites and everywhere in the internet suggest that this is the desired icon for a modern girl and thinness is what makes young girls attractive. Surely the aforementioned effects are only a few examples of the long list of the consequences of the use of social media. One has to closely observe these consequences and find out ways to deal with the reactions of individuals who use the social media so that a balance in psychological behavior can be achieved.

4. The paradox social media exclusion of the individual from the fullest kind of communication

The users of online social media have already transformed communication and due to this transformation two major consequences have arisen; one positive and one negative; the positive one is a revolutionary one. It is the nullification of space and time that kept individuals apart before the emergence of the internet which offered the big advantage of the immediate dialogue and conversation of any person anywhere and at any point of time; the negative one is the loneliness of the very user, experienced due to the use of the online social medium as it confines the individual in himself/herself and deprives him/her of the joy of face to face interaction, collaboration and obviously live communication with others. What happens is a paradox. The very potential of global and instant communication through the internet and social networks causes the exclusion of the individual from the fullest kind of communication, the physical/bodily communication. As a result the effect of nonverbal communication is cancelled. Nonverbal communication involves kinetic communication, that is communication by bodily expressions (such as movements, postures etc), by eye expressions (showing intentions or feelings) and by facial expressions (moving facial muscles to demonstrate emotions like joy, surprise, anger, fear, wondering etc). Communication effected by nonsymbolic vocal sounds (paralanguage), as Verderbrer (1998) defines it, is also cancelled; the tone of the voice, its volume, rhythm and quality and other sounds made by individuals which may interrupt the conversation and usually imply meanings and reactions (e.g. eee preceding a phrase or sentence). Moreover, with the exclusion of physical communication the effect of the presence of the individual is also nullified (physical looks presence and clothing), the tactile perception (e.g. taps on the shoulder, hugs etc) as well as the allocation of time in communication. Another quality that is cancelled is the way in which we manage space during communication, e.g. how close we sit or stand to one another during a conversation or how we avoid approaching a person etc.

4.1 The senses and online communication

The visual signal that passes through a computer hardly substitutes physical presence, the familiarity and the warmth of a voice, a touch and an expression of a face. In other words, in the revolutionary online communication, out of the human senses, only sight (ophthalmoception)

and, where applicable, hearing (audioception) are involved while the tactile perception is excluded. However man is made to perceive his environment through senses. A complete perception of the environment or more accurately a better perception of the environment (since the environment includes optical planes, sound vibrations and components that are not conceived by human senses) may only be achieved by the simultaneous use of the five senses. Bearing this in mind, we conclude that by definition the media cancel stimuli of great importance in decoding messages. The question is who takes this seriously into account today when everything is sacrificed on the altar of the quick, robotic and incomplete way of life that the media have created and specifically the new media, the majority of which using immediate information as a tool aim solely at a temporary financial benefit?

5. Positive effects of social media use

On the contrary to what has been stated above other studies e.g. a piece of research conducted by Australian researchers, demonstrated that a number of positive psychological outcomes are related to Facebook use. Grieve et al. (2013) established that people can derive a sense of social connectedness and belongingness from the online environment. Importantly, this online social connectedness was associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety, and greater levels of subjective wellbeing. Salcito (2009), also comments on the positive effects of the wide change brought about due to connectedness opportunities offered by the New Media defining them as the ability to interact and communicate, increasing public access to different media and a bigger content variety, a decreasing potential of intervention in news organizations, new and dynamic news broadcasting methods through the multimedia technology and more sources of news for cross examining their validity and objectivity. Bearing in mind the negative and positive effects of online social networking one could argue that the nature of online social networking determines the outcomes of online social network use. In other words, the way we use social networking can determine the way it affects an individual. It is therefore time for people to learn that they can be educated in using social networking in order to benefit from their own actions or reactions to it. This is especially important for teenagers or even children accessing the internet who can be educated how to use it in order to escape from bullying and other detrimental practices. However as Kahne, Feezell and Lee (2012) argue, the teaching of new media literacy has to be equally distributed otherwise it may strengthen already existing inequalities and one has to examine whether those who participate in political and social activities have had more opportunities to be educated in the use of the new Media than those who do not participate.

6. Conclusion

The transformation in communication that took place with the emergence of the new media and social networking cannot stop with the billions of people using the internet, acting and reacting online. The freedom of expression and the joy of participating in conversations among vast numbers of individuals at the same point of time was beyond our imagination a few years ago. Many positive changes came to surface with online networking. However, amidst all the positive

changes negative effects have already been experienced by many of us. Technology is updated in an unbelievably fast rhythm. The issue to be taken into serious account is that we have to continuously study the effects of the rising technology on human behavior as the people who experience these effects today are the ones who will shape the society of tomorrow; and surely a society that is not based on healthy and firm life patterns cannot endure in time. From this point of view, the responsibility of the current generation towards the future generation is huge.

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