

Juan Pablo Zendejas, December 14th, 2022.

Friendship through Corporations

Good friends are supposed to always be with us, through thick and thin. Through pain, whether it's shared or just bore by one, or through your most stunning accomplishments in life. But rapid changes in the way we interact with technology and the design choices in the software we use to communicate are affecting our obligations to our relationships, especially in the younger generation where these changes are felt the most.

Today, Americans are feeling lonelier than ever. There has always been a trend toward loneliness, as society has progressed to individual values and self-reliance, away from groups or families. With the COVID-19 pandemic having caused a marked increase in isolation due to forced shutdowns, [Harvard](#) noted that 61% of young adults 18-25 had reported strong feelings of loneliness. And while many of these young adults use social media software to "connect" with others, it doesn't appear to be doing its job well. The software that was purportedly designed to connect us virtually is not making us feel closer to people. Yet, [Pew Research](#) found that over half of teens find and make friends online. Another half say they text with their friends daily, and even more say they at least text occasionally. Connections are happening over the information superhighway, so what is preventing these connections from curbing loneliness?

The Early Days, a Reflection

There is no doubt that technology has transformed the way we communicate, from the earliest telegraph to the latest smartphone. It seems each era brings a shift in the way that we as individuals communicate with each other, and the way we communicate with our friends. The telephone and its commonality in homes leads to teens spending long nights on the phone with friends, and now the advent of instant messages leads to long nights texting with friends. None of these technologies, however, have provided what the Internet grants: anonymity. (I suppose you could be anonymous on the telephone, but typically you share a direct call with an individual.) In many online circles, there is no need to declare yourself as the person you are in real life. You can create a new identity, and interact with others who have also created a new identity. You can also make friends with these people. Are these connections real connections? Are these friends "real" friends? These questions have been asked since the first chat rooms and bulletin boards for

the common world opened outside the halls of research institutions. But these relationship dynamics were nothing like the current relationship dynamics on the modern corporate internet. They still had a sense of individuality, and maintained some of the vestiges of in-person communication. You would interact in a common space, meeting people of similar interests, where everyone was able to converse freely. It was made up of text, not posts.

I would not consider these forms of old Internet communication the problem. They had begun the change, but they would not be what steered the change in the wrong direction. In the early days of the Internet, most of these circles were institutions like UC Berkeley running research technology for their peers, or when it spread, hobbyists running services for their community and by their community. It would not be until the explosive growth of the Internet in the commercial space that we would see how this technology could be twisted against us. Corporations had seen a potential market; and new ways to monetize content. Today, they run the internet. Google, Facebook, Amazon, and a few others are commonly referred to as “Big Tech,” in a similar vein to “Big Pharma” or “Big Oil” as groups of corporations that have a negative impact on society. These Big Tech sites have, through their intentional design choices, bred an environment that is hostile to positive means of engagement, far removed from the design of early community centric interaction.

Corporate Design and its Consequences

I for one, find online interactions more draining and anxiety inducing than interactions in person. The Internet itself is not the problem here, but it is rather a problem of culture and design that has created the anxiety I and many others feel. Social media apps like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have created this anxiety inducing environment. This is further complimented by their own suite of messaging solutions—think WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, and Discord. The community spaces and paradigms created by these apps are wildly different from the earlier days of IRC chatrooms, or current alternatives like XMPP. The separation and compartmentalization created by this corporate software leads to a hypermoderated environment where individuals are afraid of conflict or “messing up,” in stark contrast to the tighter-knit groups formed in person or on non-corporate platforms.

There has already been a lot of discussion behind the mental health effects of social media use on individuals, especially teenage youth. Although modern social media does have

positive effects, many of the negative effects like anxiety, depression, and addiction are not caused by the nature of the Internet's connectivity, but by the design imposed by these websites. Socialization need not be an addiction, but should be a healthy part of our life, not gamified by corporations. The negative effects are purely a result of this intentional design, eclipsing any of the normal positive benefits of social connection that we as people experience through normal means.

[Another editorial](#) titled "Your attention didn't collapse. It was stolen" by [Johann Hari](#) focuses on the shortening attention span of the author and his godson, and the struggles he goes through trying to understand why this is happening and how to solve it. Hari is very correct in labeling this issue as a wider societal one, and not an issue that you can solve on an individual level. What is especially telling, is his specific use of "stolen" to describe the phenomena. It is not the technology itself that has stolen our attention, but rather the creators of this technology. Sites like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram created by big tech corporations have stolen our attention. Features like always-on notifications, recommendation algorithms, likes, followers, and more were intentionally designed to increase the time people spend on the website. The more time you spend on their website, the more time the companies can make money off of.

Friendship Dynamics

With a shortened attention span, it becomes harder to focus on important complex subjects; and I think this is the root cause of my anxiety on online interactions, and the cause of a lot of separation between online friends. Online, there is no guarantee that you will ever be able to contact the person on the other side of the screen again. There are whole memes about this: look no further than "See you tomorrow! Last Online: 956 days ago" memes.



It's getting late and I don't wanna be late for school. Night dudes, see you again tomorrow. Last online: 5 years ago

Perhaps this is a dated example. But it's clear that this type of interaction is relatable and to some degree common among modern online communities. While data online is forever, people online are not. It is incredibly easy to deliberately cut off communication with another individual. In person, if there is a dispute, you may be able to ignore someone for a while. But it is a much more drastic effort to deliberately ensure you will never see another person again. With the internet, severing a relationship is a click away.

Does this type of thinking bleed into in-person interactions? [A majority](#) of teens are self-reported as being active on social media, and an even wider majority of teens are at least active on the internet in some way. In my experience, social media use and the difference in dynamics has in some ways reached the physical world. Increasingly it is common to find groups of friends where in-person meetings are set by an undertone of phone use, and even 1 on 1 interactions are still shadowed by phone usage as well. The stolen attention that we are unable to give to our friends reflects on the relationship dynamics that we are able to tolerate. Now it is not a matter of whether a friendship is useful for companionship, understanding, or differences, but whether a friendship provides more feeling than a constant spray of information from social media apps.

This is a major degradation of relationships that has had an impact on these feelings of loneliness especially in youth. The shallow relationships encouraged by tech corporations' design of social media is also encouraging the behavior that creates shallow friendships in person. It has also enabled new ways to abuse power in friendships that have not existed before. With groups also moving online, it's possible to exclude individuals from these activities with a lot more ease than trying to exclude them from in-person activities. It's worrying to see that we are letting these corporations' technology control teen's social interactions when it is clearly not designed to foster positive methods of resolving disputes in relationships.

Extending Design into its Logical Conclusion

The extension of corporate design is so-called "cancel culture." To some degree, this type of shunning and shaming has been a part of human culture as long as we have had a society. But I think that instead of technology helping to curb such impulsivities, it has instead amplified the power of these types of accusations, whether true or false. There has already been ample discussion on why cancel culture does not breed acceptance, but instead breeds toxicity and suspicion. [As noted](#) by The Insider, cancel culture creates a bandwagon effect where instead of analyzing the facts of the situation, people jump to conclusions and snap onto what they believe is right, boiling complex and nuanced situations into a retweet or a small post. Social media platforms like Twitter, with their intentionally small "microblogging" format, encourage this behavior by their design. There is no room for nuance. There are only 240 characters for you to explain your side, and an endless number of unrelated people ready to throw their own 240 characters back at you.

The Internet makes it easy to appear as an authority figure. Is it easier to trust someone you don't know when others are already talking about it? Or is it easier to attempt a conversation, research, and reach an educated understanding of the claims made against someone? This is paramount as social media and shortening attention spans make it increasingly easier to make impulsive decisions and choose the easy way out instead of considering the fine details. In the courts, it may be innocent until proven guilty, but in the minds of others, it's whatever they hear first. Social media encourages this type of antisocial behavior, and the artificial separation created by the screen can depersonalize someone and make this behavior seem justifiable instead of appearing as the lack of integrity and character it is.

Worryingly, I think this ties back into feelings of loneliness that are becoming increasingly prevalent in American youth. When your friends are online, constantly tethered to the social media machine, it becomes hard not to wonder if you will make a mistake and be the next target. Instead of a culture of personal relationships and mutual understanding and peaceful attempts to resolve mistakes, it becomes one big game that you can get brownie points from. It is my opinion that the relationships many form online are surface level not because of the medium they are in, but because of the environment in which they are formed. Social media and instant messaging have encouraged behavior that enhances loneliness and feelings of disconnection, contrary to the principles of understanding and love.

What More to be Done

What we as a society need to realize is that we have let big corporations dictate our communication in a way that no other entity has had power over before. These corporations can see, and even predict our most intimate thoughts, and not many of us give a second thought to this. Shoshana Zuboff, a Harvard professor, has [given talks](#) on what she coined as “surveillance capitalism” and how we have let it go on for 20 years. The corporations don’t intend to make a product that will improve lifestyles, but intend to make a product with people as the input and models, algorithms, data as the output to sell to other businesses.

There are still alternatives. As individuals, we do not have to be at the will and bend of the corporation’s decisions. Email, although perverted from what it was originally, is still a fairly open way to communicate free of the design choices that made social media the negative force it is today. Older protocols like IRC, and newer ones like XMPP and Matrix provide alternatives that are not designed for profit but maintained by a community that aims to put themselves, the users, first. We can choose not to use social media, but to connect directly with the people we care about to nurture healthy, understanding relationships that will move the world forward, not backwards.

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