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IDENTITY IN THE AGE OF THE INTERNET

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the increasing use of social media in everyday life. The essay explores how this now ubiquitous force affects human interaction. Decreased attention span, a need for instant gratification, and a growing epidemic of narcissism are all examined in detail, all plausibly resulting from an overuse of social media. The examination of internal effects of technology are then used to examine external, social effects that social media has had and continues to have on communication. This thesis hopes to weigh the benefits and costs of social media in order to aid in effective and healthy use of the technologies in question.

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Unless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the 'comic' magazines.

-Sterling North

The Internet is so big, so powerful and pointless that for some people it is a complete substitute for life.

-Freelance Journalist

Introduction

Computers and the social media they facilitate have created an environment in which we cannot help but be fundamentally altered by them. “Our cumulative experience with communication technologies has gradually altered behavioral and social norms” (Baron 4). Social media is not the first medium to alter the way we think and relate to one another, and it most certainly won’t be the last. One only has to look at the explosion of the automobile and the effect that growth had in shaping not only the landscape of the United States, but the world as a whole. An abandoned suburban train station is the perfect indicator that, for the sake of progress, some former “staples” get left behind. The same could be said about the railroad, naval travel, and other innovations all throughout history back to the written word and beyond. We are able to look back on these innovations and see how they have affected our ancestors, some effects of which are still readily apparent today. Social media, though, are relatively new technologies; as such, the effects of them on us as a species are just starting to come to light.

Social media have become such an integral part of our everyday lives that it is hard to find someone without an avenue of connectivity on or immediately around their person at all

times. According to a survey by the Pew Research Center in 2010, 75% of all teens ages 12 to 17 own cell phones (Lenhart). Furthermore, almost 90% of those teens who owned cell phones texted, well over half of whom texted daily. This was not only a marked increase in both categories over a similar survey taken four years prior, but the rate of texting was shown to increase as the age of the subject increased. Projections off these numbers indicate that both of those numbers have increased over the past two years to the point that nearly all teens text, almost all of whom do so daily. This is augmented by the fact that, according to a 2012 Pew Research Center survey, 83% of adult Internet users between the ages of 18 and 29 claim to use social media sites. With the increasing popularity of smartphones, access to these websites need not be confined to computers; Facebook and Twitter apps, among many others, have made it increasingly possible to stay tapped into these social media sites at all times. As popular as these platforms are, the question should no longer be “are these sites affecting how we think?” but instead “*how* are these sites affecting how we think?”

As the data shows, the most prolific use of social media occurs among younger generations. The various avenues of “connectivity [offer] new possibilities for experimenting with identity and, particularly in adolescence, the sense of free space” (Turkle, 152). The years of adolescence and into young adulthood are some of the most important in the development of character and identity. Parental guidance, education, and, perhaps most importantly, interaction with peers are all necessary aspects to developing children into who they will become for the rest of their lives. As unilaterally present as social media are in the lives of adolescents and young adults, it makes sense that these media would have a large effect on the formation of their identities. Unfortunately, it is almost certain that the effects of social media in their present form do not have a positive effect on these young minds. The Internet does not have to be as dire a problem as Sterling North claimed comic books were, but the Internet is powerful and captivating enough that, if we’re not careful, the freelance journalist’s prediction may yet be true.

Chapter 1

A Need for More Violence in Communication

Identity Through Violence

Canadian Media theorist Marshall McLuhan, in a lecture on the effect of mass media on the populace, addresses the issue of identity development in the context of what he calls “violent communication”; he states that identity, discovering who you are, is achieved through violence. “I was using violence in a rather large sense of simply... abrasive encounters” (1979). It is not physical violence that McLuhan describes, but rather the action and reaction of communication. By this, McLuhan means that identity formation requires input from others. Identity, by its very nature, requires a cooperative, and sometimes discordant, commune. That is, identity formation necessarily involves comparison with other people. After all, what are identifying features if not aspects of one’s self that can separate them from others?

This is where the idea of identity through violence enters the conversation. The violent communications McLuhan discusses were not necessarily physically violent, but they nonetheless feature a clash of one against the other. When one is forming identity, it is most commonly a maturation process. As we learn what works and what doesn’t work in social interactions, our ids are trained in social etiquette. The ego reins in the id until a socially cognizant personality can be established. The physically dominated alpha male social model is not used in the modern world, but violence is equally as viable through words. By interacting with other members of society, identity is molded to reflect our position in that society through violence.

Erik Erikson, a leading figure in the psychological discussion of identity, also believed that identity was indivisibly dependent on society. Carol Hoare summarizes his conclusion as follows:

Identity is necessarily open in that there is two-way commerce between a person's unique, individual identity and collective identities, and between both of these and societal institutions, characteristics, opportunities, deprivations, and cultural differences. (54)

With this formula for identity development, it seems as though people using social media would be more prone to identity development than their counterparts who are separated from the social media world. After all, people are connected to each other in more ways than ever before, and contact through social media is viable as long as phones are carried around in pockets.

Unfortunately, there are a few problems with the idea of social media aiding identity development. One of these problems is the quality of the actual interactions through social media. As McLuhan said, identity is formed through violence, the action and reaction involved in conversation. There is plenty of action going on, indeed more than ever before: "teenagers are writing more than ever (in texts, IMs, emails, blog posts, etc.)" (Vosloo 2). The difference is, there is no longer any reaction, so there is no longer any violence in communication. When interacting over social media, a text or instant message is sent and one is received. In this way communicating via social media is like talking, but in many ways it is not. Take this example:

Respondent 1: Do you need that photo class?

Respondent 2: I think I'll be ok, actually, but thank you

*Respondent 1: K cuz I still have it and you can pick it up if you
need*

Respondent 2: I'm good. I appreciate it though =)

Respondent 1: No problem!!

Emotions would unquestionably accompany this brief conversation. The question is how well these emotions translate into social media. The emoticon used in the fourth message is used to

reinforce the idea of gratitude; true emotions, though, don't travel from phone to phone, computer screen to computer screen, and so on. Social media does not allow for reactivity to be measured through the conventional means of tone of voice, facial cues, body language, and the like. Furthermore, the emotional constraints work in both ways, gradually decreasing emotionality in social media. Instead, all that is seen by way of reactivity is a screen. While it is possible to convey emotion with text, it is certainly much harder to do than in dialogue, and with text messaging becoming the preferred means of communication with today's youth (Lenhart 2010), the lack of violence in communication is becoming a growing epidemic.

It seems a counterintuitive statement to say that there is not enough violence in communication today. Violence seems to be everywhere in both popular and news media. This violence is dictatorial, though, in the sense that it is not interactive. McLuhan's use of violence predicates one force exerting impact over another. Watching a violent story on the news or in a movie may be an entertaining story, but it remains physically and psychologically removed from the viewer's mind.. The violence on the screen has no dynamic effect in the viewer – the viewer is only rarely at stake in the story. Similarly, interaction over social media does not produce any violence in communication. The identity-forming interactions are no longer as dynamic because they take place on a screen with no real follow up. The lack of violence, increased anonymity and lack of accountability that accompany social media interactions result in underdeveloped identities, especially prevalent when online.

These means of communicating, ones in which reactions are difficult to gauge, are not a healthy alternative to talking. The lack of violence in our communication is turning civilization into a group that lacks the ability, not just the desire, to communicate with each other face to face. Sherry Turkle, in *Alone Together*, shows this exact phenomenon in an example of a young woman who “broke up with her boyfriend online” (197). The break-up is an important milestone in that it not only teaches conflict resolution to developing minds, but it also introduces both

parties to the gravity and the emotion of the experience. Breakups are painful, but not seeing the pain it causes makes someone less likely to be gentle in following breakups or other experiences that require tact. In other words, by removing the reactive component of violence, social media are creating identities that do not care about the feelings of other people, but are rather only concerned with themselves.

From Individual to Collective Identity

Social media's effects on identity development do not stop at our interactions with others. Another problem with the idea of social media aiding identity development is that there is no longer any room for the development of our own "unique, individual identity" (Hoare 54). We are always on, always interacting with the outside world, but that means that there is no time for the development of the individual self. Baron, writing on the effects and the reason for using cell phones, says that we use mobile phones "not to share information or even say hello but to avoid being by [our]selves" (215). This is a vicious cycle that is the root of the very problem itself: we talk on our phones to avoid being lonely, but we're lonely because we're so used to always being on our phones. Instead of reading books, talking, or thinking through any number of personal inquiries, time is now spent on the phone. The time that was once spent analyzing the self is now spent checking email, texts, Facebook, and Twitter. "What is not being cultivated here is the ability to be alone and reflect on one's emotions in private. On the contrary, teenagers report discomfort when they are without their cell phones" (Turkle, 176). We are no longer interested in what we have to say or think, but rather what others are saying to and about us.

This shift in attention away from the self has contributed to an increasing sense of the collective identity. We have seen that the most popular online social media tool is Facebook, with a vast majority of young adults reporting they use the platform. Every profile is ostensibly different, and yet every profile has the exact same layout. There is no variation; the positioning of the various aspects of the profiles is uniform. In this way, every profile is more accurately just a

small postage stamp of personality on a large undercurrent of normativity. Indeed, to have a unique profile is to be “normal”.

In his lecture on media, Marshall McLuhan spoke of the nature of television, saying “the effect of that huge service environment on you, personally, is vast. The effect of the program is incidental” (1979). As if to prove McLuhan’s point, each individual difference between profiles on Facebook, the individual phones that we all carry in our pockets, the individual clever email addresses we have are really incidental. The fact that we all, almost ubiquitously, use those same services is vastly important; it shows the increasing similarity between us, a rampant lack of individuality. The practices by which we conduct ourselves are gravitating toward total repetition.

Yet the Internet has made wonderful strides towards information sharing in the modern era. Studies that would have taken weeks or even months to make it into magazines and onto coffee tables in the past, and even then only to those interested in that subject matter, can now be shared and disseminated almost instantaneously to a vast audience. Websites like Reddit and Digg have provided a platform for previously selective information to be spread to the masses, expanding the audience for these studies to a previously unimagined extent. Wikileaks demonstrated the extent to which barriers could be broken to increase transparency, levels that had seldom before been tested. In this way, the Internet is an extraordinary tool that creates better-informed citizens and greater appreciation for research, at least ideally. This wide communications network, though, has given us a false sense of autonomy. “The IT industry has established the links and servers and decides what...will be available to you” (Borgmann 17). The Internet is a vast informational resource, but it is very rarely used to establish a balanced perspective. Many times the articles available only show one side of the story. Instead of taking these findings with a grain of salt, we accept them as truth. Very often, the truth is the only thing we look for. Any time that an article doesn’t match up with a preconceived notion, new articles are sought until a satisfactory one is found.

This habitual instant gratification, when combined with the effects of the normalization of society, results in becoming a society that wants to know one thing about everything, not everything about one thing. If a subject is interesting to someone with a computer, a website with a wealth of information can be nearly instantaneously pulled up. The information may be remembered for a few days, even weeks, but less often does this interest result in reading a book that would give enough information on a subject to make a lasting impact. A parallel can be seen in Sherry Turkle's discussion about the decreasing use of the telephone. "In a call, [you] could learn too much or say too much, and things could get "out of control." A call has insufficient boundaries" (190). Aside from the frightening lack of emotional connectivity that this statement reveals, Turkle's observation shows an extreme aversion to expectation. If we know too much, we'll be asked about it. If we don't know the answer or don't know as much as it was thought we did, that could create a sense of embarrassment that many do not want to or are unable deal with.

We saw with the girl who broke up with her boyfriend online that the Internet is fostering a generation that simply does not know how to deal with cognitive dissonance. Facebook itself emerged out of just such a breakup. Spending a lifetime free of violent communication, we get used to the idea that staring at a screen affords us an out. Communication through social media rarely, if ever, forces us to confront negative reactivity, and that is a comfortable existence. The comfort zone afforded us by minimal interaction, either with knowledge or with other people, is difficult to leave, and an increasing number of young people are choosing not to. Less desire to learn more about subjects creates a vast population of people who know a little bit about subjects, but not enough that it can separate them from everyone else. In this way, many people are losing chances at developing defining characteristics, a vital part in socially fueled identity. Beyond this, though, the social media user begins to see other people, not just things, as blending into one amalgamation, the crowd. This increasing normalization, the increasingly idealized center of the bell curve, is creating a collective identity that resides at an emotional distance.

Copied Identity

In the mostly merit-oriented world that we live in, a drive towards identity formation seems inevitable. The evolution of technology in modern society to such an integral level has made identity formation more complicated than in the past. Humanity's growing lack of individuality becomes problematic for a species driven towards identity and society. In speaking of identity, Marshall McLuhan stated that Hollywood, or general stardom, is an increasingly dominant factor in identity formation (1979). The impressionistic nature of those without a fully developed identity would lead one to predict a copy-cat nature of society. McLuhan saw this in the prevalence of Star Wars and the bionic man. Advances in the field of prosthesis notwithstanding, mankind is not yet a species of bionic men and women. Still, while technology is not altering out bodies to such a degree, it very well may be altering our minds.

One very visible effect of technology is the phenomenon of the viral video. Viral videos are becoming increasingly popular in today's society, ranging from planking to Harlem shake videos and beyond. In a way, these videos are a microcosm of what social media is doing to our sense of identity. Perhaps the most obvious impact is how popular and widely viewed they are. People don't simply watch these videos, they very often make their own versions. New versions of these phenomena pop up even faster than can be viewed. This shows the fate of individuality in an otherwise uniform identity: an original idea is sucked up, copied and cheapened. What was once an original, identifying practice is now practiced by everyone, making it as far from original as possible. The identity-starved public latches on in the hope of grabbing an identifying aspect for themselves, but with so many people doing the exact same thing the practice is moot. This leaves the masses starving for individuality again, creating a self-perpetuating process. Any whiff of individuality is found and copied until it is no longer individual.

With this appropriation of identity by the masses, humanity's need to share is brought into question. As a means of preservation of the self and of identity, it would seem that eventually

people would stop sharing. The impetus, it seems, is drawn from two things: a bottled outlet for communication and a need for positive reinforcement. The first part of this impetus is a release for the natural desire to communicate. Communication is taught to us from a very early age, through language but also etiquette, rules for talking, reading, and more. Interaction is now almost confined to social media outlets, with texting “the preferred channel of basic communication between teens and their friends,” even beating out face-to-face communication (Lenhart, 2010). If something is worthy of communication, the immediate impulse is more frequently becoming to reach for a phone or computer; “things move from “I have a feeling, I want to make a call” to “I want to have a feeling, I need to make a call””(Turkle, 176). It becomes instinctual to want to share a noteworthy event that may have been caught on video. As a means of communicating the special abilities through social media, platforms like YouTube and Facebook allow for material to be distributed in a very short time.

The inherent rewards system built into social media platforms also creates a drive to submit material for the masses. Performing noteworthy actions for just a few select friends is often not enough. The popularity of platforms like YouTube and Facebook, which allow for even more praise, comes from their ability to spread the videos to as many people as possible. It’s telling that these websites, for the most part, use only positive reinforcement tools. On Facebook there is a “like” button, but no “dislike” button. On YouTube there is a thumbs up or down bar, but videos receiving overwhelmingly poor reviews can either be removed or hidden. Even the comments for each of these websites are removed from the posts easily enough that they can be ignored. The popularity of these websites should not be surprising in the least, in large part due to their lack negative reactivity. These websites allow for contributors to see only what they want to see, to see only positive reinforcement. Unfortunately, this promotes what the majority want, and in this way creates heteronormativity; they certainly don’t offer identity.

Chapter 2

The Psychological Effects of the E-Persona

Who Are We Online?

The effects of the Internet on identity are not confined to how we see ourselves. Online and text messages are regularly filled with speech that is not only much colder than in real life, but sometimes more rude as well. There aren't many people that can say they've never sent a text or late night email that they regretted later. This is a part of us that we may or may not be aware of, but it is becoming increasingly apparent that most of us do have it. This part of us is visible to the people we send rude, cold words to, and it creates a personality that is visible only on social media; an e-persona.

One of the reasons for this persona existing is the lack of responsibility that social media afford us. When there is interaction over the Internet or text message there seems to be an unwritten rule that what is said is true. The thing is, that unwritten rule is broken constantly and with increasing ease. A white lie could be believed easily enough, and even if someone wanted to check they couldn't; they're staring at a screen and not you. The screen acts as a sort of shield in the form of our Internet persona, and we can make him or her whoever we want them to be. As Sherry Turkle says, "at the screen, you have a chance to write yourself into the person you want to be," indicating the tendency to not be completely truthful online, and continues with "...and to imagine others as you wish to..., constructing them for your purposes" (188). The last point alludes to our willingness to take people at their word online when it comes to profiles. We know in the back of our minds that social media profiles are full of little lies, but we don't want to acknowledge it. After all, if you know someone else's profile is full of lies, couldn't they just as

easily know that yours is as well? It is this little lie that we tell ourselves that enables the little lies we tell everyone else.

The shields we erect in front of us don't only serve as a shield against the outside world, though; they can just as easily protect us from seeing what we don't like about ourselves in the mirror. In games such as Second Life or even Facebook profile pictures, we are able to alter ourselves to look exactly the way we want to, and that's not always an accurate representation. The avatar is a representation of yourself that you've created with the ability to remove any bad qualities about yourself you don't like. When looking at the computer screen instead of a mirror it is not our true selves looking back at us, but rather who we want to be staring back at us. The practice of changing something on the computer, the outcome of only a few clicks, is much easier than personal reflection and improvement. The increasing number of users of these sites, with a full 67% of Americans using Facebook (Duggan & Brenner 2013), as well as the seductive nature of being able to change what you want about your "self" almost as quickly as you think it, indicates that this phenomenon is not uncommon.

Attraction to a world in which you are better than your current self is not a new idea. Science fiction writing and movies have played with the idea for decades, culminating in the most recent (and perhaps most popular) version of this idea, James Cameron's *Avatar*. In this movie, the main character's consciousness is regularly transported to his very own avatar, a creature that takes part in a world entirely distinct from the human one¹. The main character, after overcoming obstacles, eventually permanently places his consciousness in the avatar, content to live out the rest of his days in his non-native world. Cameron portrays this quest as a laudable one, but that is not to say that there aren't problems with the journey. The main character constantly finds himself slacking on his daily work in the human world in favor of living in his avatar body. This is not an uncommon phenomenon for people today, either. It is very easy to get lost in the hours

¹ It's also interesting to note that the main character in *Avatar* had a disabled human body. This was part of

of browsing the Internet, playing online games, or texting friends. This seems to be a growing trend, as Lenhart et al. showed that social media use has grown over the years until cell phones and internet use are “nearly ubiquitous” (2010, 4).

Another problem that plagues Cameron’s main character is the double speak he must engage in to keep his different identities available. His ex-military side, reporting to a superior ruthlessly committed to destroying the indigenous population, constantly struggles with his avatar side that has a life with those same natives. This is not a problem confined to *Avatar*, either. Sherry Turkle uses the example of Audrey, a teen with many different social media profiles, to illustrate the very same phenomenon. Audrey describes the immersive experience of each profile; “...where she goes means stepping into who she is in any given place, and in different places, she has different pastimes and different friends” (194). This language makes it seem as though each profile encapsulates a different person altogether. This may not seem like much of a problem; after all, it isn’t uncommon to act differently with different groups of friends in real life. Unfortunately, the online persona that we think we use only within the bounds of social media is increasingly affecting our psychology, fundamentally altering how we think and act, and the change isn’t all to the good.

Our Avatars Out in the Real World

When thinking about the Internet, one of the words that most easily comes to mind is efficiency. The Internet and cell phones allow us to communicate more efficiently through email, texting, and any number of other resources; it allows us to work more efficiently with search engines and cloud databases; the Internet even allows us to shop more efficiently with, stored shipping and payment information on popular websites like Amazon. In the age of technology, speed is king. “Texting and, more broadly, netspeak are making us speed-obsessed in our interactions with others...” (Aboujaoude 150). While speed in communication and the Internet go

hand in hand, it is becoming increasingly apparent that there is a spillover effect of social media-based communication.

The second self or persona that is changing the way we think is also becoming more present in the real world. According to Steve Vosloo, children “are not able to use appropriate language in different contexts” (2). Vosloo was referring to a study in which almost two thirds of American students admitted that texting language, such as acronyms, had been used in a formal writing assignment (Lenhart et al. 2008). This is not limited to texting, though. Acronyms are used to a very large degree in media beyond just texting, such as Facebook and Twitter. The traditionally Twitter-based hashtag is being used more and more frequently in multiple other platforms. Beyond that, though, these social media staples are constantly making the jump into real life scenarios. While not common, it is not unheard of to hear people say, not just type, things like “lol”, “brb”, or even “hashtag” in everyday conversation.

While the examples above are relatively harmless in the linguistic sense to the point that some have even been added to the Oxford English Dictionary, some aspects of the second self do not transfer over to the real world nearly as well. One way in which our online persona rears its ugly head is through our decreased amount of attention. We are a culture that is becoming increasingly obsessed with speed of exchange, to the point where instant gratification is becoming the only gratification. In this world of constantly moving onto the next task, website, or text message, speed must be achieved in order to make the communication worthwhile. If a conversation doesn't seem like it is worthwhile, then it's our natural inclination to make it more efficient. This can include pulling out a phone to check messages while talking to someone, a practice that is seemingly becoming increasingly accepted, possibly detrimentally so. Sherry Turkle describes being on the other end of a conversation with someone that had their phone out, saying that she was “already being treated as if I wasn't there” (155). Using a cell phone while

driving is another major problem that has garnered enough attention to warrant legislation in all but 8 states according to www.textinganddrivingsafety.com.

Beyond just increasing the amount of communicating we do, social media has altered the way we communicate. As Elias Aboujaoude states, "...the flip side of enhanced productivity, expediency, and courage can be confusion, pain, and disorientation in the real world" (21). Courage, in this case, refers to the observation that people are less inhibited in the way they speak online. He uses the example of his friend Laurie's boss, someone whose "terse e-mails, with their brusque salutation [and] curt signature... made him seem disrespectful and critical" (19). The lack of human contact, or violence in communication, doesn't allow for the boss to see the effects of his emails, and they don't allow for mitigating body language or explanatory speech to put Laurie's mind at ease. Miscommunications lead to a seemingly less sincere relationship, as Laurie tells Aboujaoude. The normal emotional give and take of face to face communication has been replaced for the sake of efficiency, and empathy seems to be the cost.

One of the most well known and worst outcomes of social media's effect on communication is cyber bullying. Cyber bullying has a variety of definitions, but some studies, including one by Vandebosh and van Cleemput (2008), try to "distinguish cyber bullying from cyber teasing... and cyber arguing" (502), using intent to harm as a defining characteristic. As Dr. Aboujaoude is quick to point out though, "the perpetrators are more out of touch with the pain they are inflicting because it is invisible to them, and the victims cannot know if the perpetrators are truly bullying them or "just kidding"" (103). Because of the aforementioned lack of violence in online communication, both participants in a discussion can't fully grasp the emotions of the person on the other end. The lack of violence not only allows for a perpetrator to paradoxically continue sending hurtful messages, believing them to be benign, but it also allows for a perpetrator to not grasp just how much their messages hurt. Furthermore, anonymity allows for continued attacks with very little fear of consequences, creating emboldened and relentless

perpetrators that can have a huge effect on the psyche of the victim. Given that we are increasingly tethered to our communication devices, whether Internet or cell phone based, there is seemingly no escape from the hurtful actions. With almost a third of teens admitting to encounters with cyber bullies (Lenhart, 2010), this practice is far from unusual and has the chance to adversely affect a large number of children.

While social media's effects on the way we communicate online are readily visible, the effects on the way we speak to each other in the real world are understood to a lesser degree. Some people, like Dr. Aboujaoude, speculate that the changes technology has brought about in us will become visible in real life if they haven't already: "It is conceivable that the virtual psychopath will... "graduate" into something that resembles a real psychopath" (106). This seems a bit melodramatic, as there are plenty of examples of virtual personae being markedly different from their real life counterparts. Using Dr. Aboujaoude's own example from earlier, Laurie knew her boss was nicer than her emails indicated, hence her frustration with the format of his emails. Even cyber bullies, notorious for their lack of empathy, very well might not mean their gestures and anything more than cyber teasing. All this is to say that the idea of social media having a marked negative impact on face-to-face communication might be a bit premature.

At the same time that the effects of social media on face-to-face interactions are not fully understood, there is a large possibility that these media will indeed have an adverse effect on our dealings with others in real life. Tests like one led by Craig A. Anderson at Iowa State University (qtd. in Aboujaoude 104) have shown that there is a measurable increase in violence across the board as the result of playing violent video games. Immersive as these games are, they may be more indicative of the future of extended social media use than parallel studies that focus on the effects of violent television. Desensitization is thought to be the cause of the increased violence in these studies, and just as in video games, it becomes very difficult to see someone else's pain through social media interactions. With text messages, even with emoticons or other mood-

indicating elements being shown inferior to the emotionality of face-to-face communication (Kruger, 2005), one can see how the current trend of cyber bullying could evolve into something more sinister in the real world. While that is not the case at the moment, vigilance to stop the spread will become increasingly important in the coming years.

The Rise of the Second Self

Elias Aboujaoude has a story of a depressed man, Raffi, who snoops through his wife's social media accounts to find proof that she is having an affair (88-90). While Raffi doesn't find anything incriminating about his wife, he is made painfully aware of the effect that computers and the technologies associated with them have changed him. While Raffi got good news in that he found nothing nefarious in his wife's communications, he was made aware that he was capable of snooping to such a degree through his wife's personal life. Finding nothing didn't make him happier, but rather made him unhappier because of what his search drove him to.

Raffi's story is not an isolated one, and it gets at a growing trait in our human psyche: the need for instant gratification. The Internet has changed our expectations of information exchange to such a degree in part because it provides that very service. Almost as soon as you know what you want to search for, you have millions of web pages that can help you find what you need. Beyond this, the Internet is so vast and full of all different types of information that most of us are simply not used to getting what we want, at least from the Internet. Because so much time is spent on the Internet now, it is easy to see how that expectation of getting what you want when you want it can transfer over into real life and with interactions with others.

A contributing factor in the drive towards needing instant gratification is text messaging, specifically the speed with which it is accomplished. It is expected, not just desired, that text messages are returned promptly, even if that leads to sacrificing clarity. As Aboujaoude writes, "the one mortal sin in the world of texting is to ignore a text message... Everything else is forgiven, or can be cleared up with a few more hastily exchanged messages" (150). It seems that

as long as you know that someone is paying attention to you, it doesn't matter so much what exactly it is that they're saying, so much as the fact that they're saying it. This can be seen in Facebook and Twitter as well, with separate indicators of the number of times that you've been mentioned or referenced. This is why we light up when we see the now familiar notification symbol, why we immediately reach towards our pockets when we feel the slight buzz of an incoming text message, and why we get anxious when there's a lull in our network: we want to feel involved.

The desire to have people acknowledge you in cyberspace is not a one-way street. Rather, you need to interact to elicit a reaction from them. Whether this is sending a text in order to get one back, posting an interesting link so others will comment on it, or tweeting a thought that will get retweeted, we need to feed the system in order to get feedback. With as much information as we are bombarded with through the hundreds of "friends" on Facebook or people we follow on Twitter, it is easy for our statement to get lost in the crowd. In order to feed our desire to get noticed, we need to do something noticeable; many times, this comes in the form of an uninhibited contribution to the network. A gregarious email, a revealing picture, or a shocking link can all garner the attention we all so desperately want, but it doesn't take into account the reactions on the other end of the communiqué. We only care about how posting that link affects us, not how others might take it. We are slowly becoming desensitized to these events that might have shocked us years before, which is leading to people trying to outdo even those pictures. Beyond that, though, we are taking less and less consideration when it comes to other people's views and reactions, instead using social media purely for our benefit, leading to a narcissism epidemic within our culture.

Chapter 3

On Growing Narcissism

The Culture of the Individual

Solipsism is the philosophical idea that the only thing that exists in the world is your mind. The world was merely a construction of what the mind wanted to see. Social media, it seems, is creating not only this type of world but the opportunity to participate in it. “The Internet is more I-centric than ever and all about you” (Aboujaoude, 70). The Internet is becoming more and more tailored specifically for each individual user. Saved preferences on online accounts and through the technological “cloud” make it seem as if you’ve never left your computer, no matter which computer you’re using; RSS feeds allow you to pick and choose what news you want to see without having to wade through pieces you might find uninteresting or challenging; even iTunes, with its capabilities for massive libraries made up only of songs you know and love removes the need for a radio. The Internet and its associated devices allow for a creation of a world that is completely yours.

This increased comfort that is a result of the Internet and other devices may seem like a wonderful thing, and in many ways it is. Still, it’s entirely possible that the costs of this new, tailored lifestyle are more difficult to fathom than the benefits. Take iTunes, for instance; iTunes and its various Internet-based counterparts have effectively removed the experience of novel or unknown music. If you want to listen to a song, all you need to do is search for it and you can

listen to it within 5 seconds. While this sounds like a perfect scenario, it actually fosters a need for instant gratification and a removal from a collective sense of identity.²

“The downside [of individualization] is that media is no longer a collective experience but rather an individual experience. There will never again be a summer like 1967, when everyone under 40 was talking about *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* and everyone listened to the album with the songs in the same order.”

-*Twenge and Campbell, 188*

We are, as Twenge and Campbell allude to, becoming less and less communal in favor of individual comfort. We are simultaneously craving instant gratification and gratification on our schedule. Put simply, we want what we want when we want it. Technology has advanced in such a way that, as the centers of our own universe, our schedule is one that can supersede any external one that might be imposed upon us. More than that, we have become so used to this idea that anything less is a burden; so not only do we believe that our schedule can supersede an external one, but there is an increasing popularity of the mindset that our schedules actually *should* take precedence.

As discussed earlier, Marshall McLuhan claims that violence is the key to discovering identity. Violent interactions allow us to discover “how much power can I exert, [and] how much identity can I discover that I possess”(10:19-10:25). Through violent interactions, which are simply actions that garner a detectable reaction rather than actions that harm or injure another, we are told and shown exactly where our boundaries are. If we step too far out of line or, more to the

² It also creates the possibility of missing an important emergency bulletin, although that’s not so much a psychological as a practical drawback.

point, if we overestimate our abilities, these violent interactions have a tendency to remind us that we can't do whatever we want. But just as violence in communication has decreased with the rise of social media, so has the traditional checks and balances system that traditionally helped keep our ego from inflating too much. Because there is very little reactivity that can be observed by looking at a phone or computer screen, it is much more difficult for any reactions to remind of us our limitations as they have done in the past. Because we are increasingly using social media to communicate as opposed to face-to-face interactions (Lenhart, 2010), we are receiving fewer checks to our ego. While a bit of an ego is not a bad thing, the pathological use of the Internet, constant reaffirming of the feeling of power on the Internet, and a lack of social checks is resulting in bigger egos than might be considered "healthy". Our increasing obsession with ourselves is making us lose sight of everyone else around us, and it is creating a system in which those traditional checks are virtually nonexistent. As a result, the inherent narcissist in all of us is slowly becoming more and more apparent.

The Internet: A Breeding Ground for Narcissism

The metaphor of the computer screen being like a mirror was mentioned in a previous section, and the metaphor fits here as well. When we look at our online personality, we see who we want to see. That is, the avatars that we create highlight our best features, even enhance them a bit, and leave our negative qualities out completely. This can be seen in many facets of our online personalities, such as profile pictures on Facebook or Twitter that may be enhanced. By going back to the computer time and time again, we are reinforcing the idea that we do look that good, we are that cool, and we have no limitations. Furthermore, with the draw and impressive usage rates of social media sites, profiles are constantly updated and maintained to almost an obsessive level. In fact, Dr. Elias Aboujaoude conducted a test on adult Internet usage that "revealed alarming rates of online pathological behavior that cut across geographic, socioeconomic, age, and gender differences"(10). With more and more of us using the Internet

obsessively, and by extension prying and admiring our virtual selves, the roots of a growing problem of narcissism begin to become apparent.

The DSM, the traditional guide for psychological ailments, lists narcissist as exhibiting a “need for admiration” and a “lack of empathy.” As mentioned earlier, the computer screen and our electronic personalities act as a shield from other people’s feelings. This leads to actions like cyber bullying in some, a form of bullying that, because it is tied up with technology, makes it easier than ever to ignore the feelings of others. Some may claim that cyber bullying is not a widespread problem, only a collection of minor incidents. “Unfortunately, this is not so,” say Keith and Martin (2005). “On-line bullying has become very common and is particularly easy... to do.” Because their emotions can’t be read through the computer or cell phone screen, it becomes very easy to pretend that the consequences for the victimized party aren’t as severe as they actually are. While cyber bullying is restricted in the physical damage it can do, Marilyn Campbell stipulates that “even though the consequences for the victims of cyber bullying have not yet been researched, it would seem that they could be even more severe than those of face-to-face bullying” (2005). Hurtful words or pictures can have adverse consequences long after any physical scars may have healed³. Furthermore, because of the omnipresence of technology, it has become increasingly more difficult to escape bullying than before social media’s implementation. It is no longer as simple as leaving school for the day; bullies now follow their victims home in the form of the phone usually residing in the victim’s pocket.

While cyber bullying is not ubiquitous, it does speak to a larger trend in our society: social media use can result in a decreased ability to empathize with others. Actions online may not be meant to cause as much harm as they do, and they very well might be shocking to an individual offline. Still, there is no doubt that the lack of responsibility that the Internet gives us is

³ The effects can also be more than emotional. With companies increasingly including online profiles in background checks of applicants (Grasz, 2009), embarrassing pictures or videos can affect a victim of cyber bullying well past adolescence.

changing how we act online. The distinction can certainly be made between the online and real world personae in a person, but that distinction is becoming increasingly hazy to those we interact with. Taking Aboujaoude's example of his friend's frustration with her boss's lack of tact in emails, "Laurie began to read the worst into his [emails] and assume the worst about his intentions" (19), despite the fact that the actions behind them were all to Laurie's benefit. We see from this example that Laurie began associating the words written by her boss's online persona with the corporeal form of her boss, essentially creating no distinction between the two at all. This is a dangerous precedent that is unfortunately becoming more and more common, regardless of how much of a distinction remains between the two personae. Laurie's boss's actions stemmed from an inability to see past the computer screen, not any bad intentions. He was wrapped up in what he was writing, not how the email might be interpreted; his lack of empathetic forethought created a problem that would not have existed if the communication were done face to face. After all, "without alterity, there can be no empathy" (Turkle, 55).

Face to face interaction, while preferable, is in decline. This is so for a variety of reasons, but one of those reasons that cannot be overlooked is the expanding view of Internet "friends" less as friends than as groupies. Instead of having friends for the sake of having them and to enjoy mutual time together, online "friends" are now considered only in the way that they can benefit us. "Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that... we come to see others as objects to be accessed—and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing" (Turkle, 154). The cheapening of human interaction has resulted in a society where we use others in ways that only benefit us, at least online. They are there, essentially, to reaffirm to the online self how praise-worthy it actually is. Likes, retweets, cc's, and other forms of positive reinforcement are all engrained in social media, and they are the closest thing to online currency that is available. "Likes", not the original post, have become the new end-game; success is determined not by quality, but by the number of upvotes. Reddit Karma and YouTube video

views, both of which are cumulative, are prime examples of this phenomenon. Popular opinion prevails in almost all of the comment threads with negative-accruing posts being hidden, and reposts and copies of viral videos gain views just as often as original posts, if not more. As a result, originality becomes extremely rare on these sites and many others. This comes from a need for admiration; what is known to work will give success, even moderated success, more assuredly than an original idea⁴.

While Reddit and YouTube are very popular, it is almost impossible to compare them to the giant of all social media, Facebook. Boasting over 1 billion active monthly users as of September 2012 (Whittaker, 2012), Facebook is used by over two thirds of online adults, a percentage that jumps to over 80% for 18 to 29 year olds (Lenhart 2012). Aside from a difference in popularity, one of the major differences between Facebook and Reddit or YouTube is its system of social capital. Instead of an up- and down-voting system, Facebook features only an upvote feature, the “like”⁵. An arena with exclusively positive reinforcement, Facebook and the similarly constructed Twitter, with its “Favorite” and “Retweet” functions, are one of the driving forces behind the increased narcissism on the Internet today. “Web 2.0... [works] as a feedback loop, with narcissistic people seeking out ways to promote themselves on the Web and those same websites encouraging narcissism even among the more humble” (Twenge and Campbell, 107). It’s really no wonder that Facebook is so popular in today’s society: a place with only positive reinforcement for a society seeking that in spades, Facebook allows for positive reinforcement without the fear of negative consequences (within limits, although even those limits are not as strict as they could be and are seemingly ever expanding). Not only that, but

⁴ This is also a major criticism of the movie industry today. Old stories are repackaged according to what formula works, and while the studios get large amounts of capital for these repackaged ideas (in this case, real money), originality suffers.

⁵ Down-votes could effectively be given in one of two ways: liking and subsequently unliking (although this is entirely symbolic, there is no tally of “unlikes”) or posting a negative comment under the post (though this can be removed by the original poster or easily ignored). Both are different enough to qualify Facebook’s voting system different from Reddit’s or YouTube’s.

Facebook allows the user to pay attention only to the posts they want to. Unwanted posts can either be ignored or deleted with amazing ease, removing them from the consciousness of the user and protecting them from any cognitive dissonance. On Facebook, everyone is a rock star with hundreds if not thousands of fans. Meaningful interaction is sacrificed in favor of stroking the ego.

The Illusion of the Avatar

Another reason Facebook is popular, along with many online forums, is the malleability of the avatar. “On social-networking sites such as Facebook... our profile ends up as somebody else—often the fantasy of who we want to be” (Turkle, 153). Two aspects of the Internet that many critics point to are anonymity and the lack of accountability. Just as we are unable to see people on the other end of the line, they are unable to see us, affording an inherent anonymity. Still, avatars are necessary for many sites on the Internet, and just about every social media outlet requires a profile of some sort that displays some degree of personal information. The anonymity of the Internet allows a user to essentially put up whatever information they want, and since the user on the other end can’t check the verity of that information, the lack of accountability allows for users to create avatars that are anything and everything they wish they could be.

The profile picture fits into this landscape in a very interesting and dichotomous way. In theory, the profile picture is one of the main elements that removes anonymity and lack of accountability from an Internet profile. After all, for sites like Facebook and MySpace, the online friends have real world counterparts that would be able to pick out any discrepancies between a picture and the real thing. Still, this doesn’t stop people from altering their appearance. On Facebook, for example, it’s not uncommon to find “girls using “shrinking” software to appear thinner on their profile photographs” (Turkle, 183). Appearance isn’t the only thing altered on these sites, though. Likes, dislikes, about me sections and more can all be edited with no

accountability from Facebook. The only accountability would come from friends who know the truth, but they have every imperative not to ask questions, lest their own Internet lies be revealed.

Facebook and other such social media sites offer one avenue of identity manipulation, but the Internet offers even more extreme opportunities to satisfy our desire to be perfect, allowing the user nearly god-like control over their avatars. Games like Second Life or the Sims are interactive engines that allow the user full control over their created avatar. Appearance, temperament, attributes, jobs, and almost any other component of the avatar is completely up to the discretion of the user, and as a result these games could conceivably be called the height of online narcissism.

While The Sims is confined to a local console only, involving no online play, Second Life allows that very capability. Through this engine, users can have their avatars interact with other users' avatars just as in real life. Work relationships, casual outings, and even marriage are all viable outcomes of these interactions. The game truly is a second life, with one incredibly important difference: rather than being confined to whatever person was given to the user in real life, Second Life lets the user choose exactly who they want to be. In real life, even in Facebook profiles, there is at least some accountability. A short, scrawny teenager, for example, can't effectively pass himself off as a six foot Adonis on Facebook. In Second Life, on the other hand, the total lack of accountability makes that ideal not only possible, but very often a reality. Where Facebook allows the user to stretch the truth a bit, highlighting positive aspects while downplaying the negatives, engines like Second Life allow the user to effectively create a new truth altogether.

This section began with an introduction to Kantian autonomy and how the Internet has gotten us there. We've established that modern man is, in fact, the center of his own universe, perhaps to his detriment. A withdrawal from society, increasing narcissistic tendencies, and a need to utilize the god-like power over the Internet profile are just a few of the side effects

of the increasingly pathological use of the Internet that is quickly becoming the norm. Kant's assertion that being the center of the universe is a good thing hinged on the idea of self-imposed morality; humans, rational beings that they are, would be able to orient their morality with everyone else's, creating a functional society (Borgmann, 17). Unfortunately, the Internet has a tendency to negate whatever moral code a user might have. A question that Borgmann raises in his essay is this: "Can we be the center of our worlds and, if we can, how are our individual worlds to be coordinated?"(16). As narcissistic tendencies increase, it is becoming abundantly clear that we are, in fact, the centers of our own respective universes. The second half of that question, though, still remains unanswered: how do we go about coordinating communicating between, our respective universes?

Chapter 4

Living With the Internet

Are Our Online Personalities Taking Over?

The rise of social media, both in the sense of the creation of new technologies and the expansion of their use, has created a new world completely based in the virtual. Online engines like Second Life do in fact create a world in which to exist, complete with many of the amenities of real life. The virtual reality does not necessarily have to be that engrossing, either; even a nearly ubiquitous site like Facebook creates a sense of community among its members. As we've seen, though, this community is just a pale shadow of the very thing it is trying to imitate. Just as these two communities are distinct, they each have distinct personalities that belong in them. The Internet personality is, as we've seen, very different from the accompanying "real" personality. The main question we need to ask ourselves is, just like the online community, is the online personality just a shadow of its real world counterpart, or is it slowly exerting dominance?

Internet use is at an all-time high, and each year the numbers seem to be growing. This is true with other social media forms as well, as reports from the Pew Internet & American Life Project have shown. This increased use of social media allows the online persona a release, but it goes beyond just that; the Internet is a self-perpetuating machine (Twenge & Campbell). Narcissism becomes a central characteristic in the online persona giving it a sense of superiority that most offline personae do not exhibit. When one persona dominates another, a dualistic relationship necessarily emerges: one persona takes power over another. Most often this is seen in relationships with a dominant and subservient pairing, but it can be seen in individuals as well. Robert Louis Stevenson's seminal work, *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, deals with this exact subject, specifically in Dr. Jekyll's attempt and partial failure to rein his alter ego in.

Science fiction is not the only realm in which this phenomenon occurs, either. Dissociative Identity Disorder, also known as Multiple Personality Disorder, is characterized by a “dominant personality [that] can remain in control” (Swartz) for extended periods of time.⁶ It isn’t uncommon to hear people complain that they lost hours and hours lost on the Internet, and perhaps this is part of the reason why.

The increasing prominence of the Internet personality is understandable beyond just an unconscious power shift. It’s easy to see why we might want to spend more time on the Internet as our alternate persona. After all, the Internet is “bolder, stronger, and more efficient than the real-life original... It spurs action and confers bravery... and can even serve as an incentive to become more assertive, effective, and efficient offline”(Aboujaoude, 20-21). We can be whoever we want, and we are rewarded without much fear of rejection. Being the center of the world, after all, is an attractive offer. Unfortunately, it creates a sense of narcissism that is not altogether healthy. Narcissus, from which the word narcissism comes from, suffered the tragic fate of dying from starvation, brought about by staring at his reflection in water for too long. While being starved of food as a result of Internet use is a very unrealistic possibility, the massive amount of time spent on social media outlets is starving those users of another vital resource: genuine human contact.

When there is genuine human contact, it is no surprise that a majority essentially attached to the social network occasionally falls back on what they know rather than what would be socially and culturally acceptable. Data has shown that we have become a society that texts more than it speaks, making IM rules the default. This is why a spillover effect between personalities can be seen. The most obvious example of this is the acceptance and use of IM slang in offline scenarios. The addition of some of these acronyms into the Oxford English Dictionary is one

⁶ To say that the Internet is creating a mental illness to the degree of Dissociative Identity Disorder in all of us is not the aim of the comparisons; rather, it is merely to demonstrate that there are precedents in both fiction and reality.

example, but one only needs to listen to social conversations for so long before one of these acronyms creeps in. The assimilation of Internet-based language into spoken language is a minor change, and perhaps one that could be lived with. That process is, however, indicative of a parallel process that could be much more dangerous, a transfer of mindsets. That is to say, the continued use of the Internet may cause our personalities on the web to have more sway in the real world.

In his book *The Dumbest Generation*, Mark Bauerlein discusses a popular segment of Jay Leno's show called "Jaywalking". In this segment, Jay asks trivia questions to participants on anything from geography to current world leaders and shows hilariously incorrect answers to his audience. While Bauerlein realizes that the segment is all in good fun, he says that it displays a scary reality about "teen and young adult knowledge, skills, and intellectual habits"(14). The segment is made up of largely younger participants, though people of all ages are asked questions by Leno. Bauerlein believes that this is the result of "young people" being "encased in more immediate realities that shut out conditions beyond" (13). He seems to be saying that the disproportionately wrong answers given by younger people could be another result of the increasingly powerful Internet persona, insulation from reality. If the Internet personality is effectively the center of the universe, nothing else is as important. The Internet affords exposure to only the music, gossip, news and more that you choose, but at the risk of cutting off any extraneous bit completely. We see, then, how an increase in Facebook subscriptions and a widely bemoaned decrease in newspaper subscriptions are not isolated trends, but rather inherently related; focus is slowly being shifted from the world at large to the self.

A Case for the Internet

Science fiction, especially of the dystopian variety, has often painted a very bleak picture of a future full of technology. The Singularity, the moment when machines become self-aware and more often than not use their awareness to eradicate humans, has been a hallmark of

dystopian fiction. *The Matrix*, perhaps the most well known piece of science fiction over the last 15 years, involves man's struggle for survival after the Singularity. The *Terminator* franchise deals with the retroactive prevention of this very event. Literature, too, is full of warnings away from overuse of or overdependence on technology. *Surrogates*, a comic book series that was eventually turned into a film, dealt with the many dangers of immersion in the virtual world. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick, the inspiration for the movie *Blade Runner*, highlights the problems inherent in the practice of Mercerism, an escape into technology from an increasingly bleak world with blatant religious overtones. Dick, called a prophet in the New York Times review of that very book, highlighted one possible direction in which this technologically obsessed world is headed, but the question of whether the world of Rick Deckard will soon be ours or not is still out.

For all the negatives that the social media have associated with them, they have many benefits as well. The most obvious benefit is the increased contact made readily available by it. Cell phones allow for contact with family members and acquaintances with an ease that landlines simply cannot afford. Facebook allows reconnections of old friends that very well may not have been possible otherwise, as well as acting as a virtual scrapbook that is much easier (and less expensive) than having a physical copy created. Skype and other programs allow for what could pass as face-to-face contact with someone who could be across the globe at the time. And with communication comes the dissemination of information. Viral videos sent around the office are entertaining, there's no doubt, but the sharing of information can have much more important implications. Scientific research, governmental communiqués, and the like have increased their efficiency immeasurably due to social media. Even the Arab spring movement in the spring of 2011 was aided immensely by social media, something seen two years earlier in student protests

in Iran as well.⁷ Aboujaoude also points out that “on the eve of renewed student protests later in the year, one of the first measures taken by the Iranian government was to choke off the Internet access” (20), further showing social media’s capabilities and importance to the movement.

It should also be noted that for all the negatives that are associated with social media use, it is not the first time we’ve seen them. Humans are capable of a wide variety of emotions, each of which has varying degrees. The mindsets of war, human slavery, and many other examples have put absolutely incredible lacks of empathy on display to degrees that were much worse than the majority of what is displayed on the Internet.

Furthermore, it should be noted that this is not even the first time that a new technology has garnered criticism as the end of society as we know it. Nicholas Carr brings up the comparison of the Internet and Gutenberg’s printing press, stating “like our forebears during the... Middle Ages, we find ourselves today between two technological worlds” (77). Just as the Internet and associated social media are being criticized today, Gutenberg’s printing press was thought to be an end of society as it was known.⁸ Perhaps the Gutenberg bible was the end of society as it was known then, but it ended in the favor of progress. Without the printing press, the world would be a much darker place. As Gutenberg moved from handwritten transcripts of the bible to his own famous version, we are moving from the Gutenberg bible to kingjamesbibleonline.org. The growth of social media is seemingly inevitable; the world is becoming increasingly digital around us. The question going forward is how do we reap the benefits of social media without suffering the drawbacks, and the answer is what it has been throughout history: balance.

⁷ This example shows the possibility of social media translating into real world (and violent) communication.

⁸ The criticism went so far that a man peddling books was “reportedly run out of [Paris]... on suspicion of being in league with the devil”(Carr, 70).

What Do We Do About the Internet?

Social media is undoubtedly changing the landscape of the English language⁹, but changes to the language have been occurring since its very origin. The word “awesome” is a very good example of this phenomenon. Appearing first in the 16th century as a word for inspiring awe, the word has evolved to the point that it has become “the default descriptor for anything good” (Greene, 2011). While awesome included both good and bad in its original meaning, the negative connotation was dropped completely in favor of a purely positive connotation¹⁰. While many today may describe the Internet as “awesome” meaning the more recent definition, perhaps the original definition would be more fitting.

Social media have many things wrong with them, that’s undoubtedly true; still, they have many benefits that cannot be ignored. As with everything of this dualistic nature, moderation and balance is the key. Using the Internet is not a bad thing, but using it to excess most certainly is. It is our responsibility, as a society already so deeply ingrained in this new landscape of technological advances, to find that balance. Luckily, we are not starting from scratch. We have a template from a medium that, like social media today, was thought to be a huge step in the wrong direction for humanity. It was thought that this medium would distract us from the real world in favor of another, alternative one. This medium is television. It has taken Americans years, decades even, to start making progress in the realm of overindulging in television; many Americans still watch more than 40 hours a week. Programs are beginning to emerge, though, that recommend stepping away from the television in favor of experiencing the real world. In a similar vein, programs like these tweaked to fit Internet and other social media use would go a long way in halting the negatives associated with them, but would not exclude them from our

⁹ The inclusion of acronyms like “lol”, “fyi”, and “omg” in the Oxford English Dictionary is just one example of this phenomenon, but far from the only one.

¹⁰ Interestingly it was another word that meant “awe inspiring”, awful, that evolved into a word with an only negative connotation.

lives either. With the template of television, it is possible to mitigate the effects of social media before they become rooted in too deeply.

Mediation alone is not the answer for dealing with social media, though. Unlike television, which was a completely dictatory medium, social media are interactive. In other words, by using it, it has an effect on you. The e-personality can be dangerous, not only in social terms but monetarily as well.

With the development of the Internet and its unlimited access to sex, gambling, shopping, and stock trading, there has been a subsequent rise in impulsive behavior and even new forms of impulsive behaviors.

-Eric Holander and Dan Stein¹¹

It seems that, in light of the influence that the e-persona has increasingly been afforded, actions must be taken to counteract that influence. The most logical course of action to accomplish this would be a reassertion of the “real world” persona.

The reassertion of the real world self seems to be one of discover and rediscovery. The assertion of separate entities, the real world and the Internet, is perhaps the most important step along the way. By creating this divide, the effects of social media would ideally be mitigated. While this seems like a fairly common-sense realization, the lack of awareness the Internet facilitates in us can blur the lines between real and online. Before, this was seen most frequently with computer use. Flippant remarks, impulsivity, lack of inhibitions and many more impaired faculties were associated with computer use. With cell phones essentially occupying the role of pocket computers, the line between real and the web is becoming increasingly blurred. In order to reassert the distinction between real and web, reducing social media use seems to be in order.

¹¹ From *Clinical Manual of Impulse Control Disorders*, quoted in Aboudjaoude, 121.

This was already mentioned, but the main goal would be to reassert what counts as a real world interaction.

Another possible course of action is self-reflection. Meditation, prayer, and other practices, religious and non-religious alike, often preach imperfectability as a natural part of life. They also can result in a “reduction of mind-wandering” (Brewer et al, 2011). This same study boasted the benefits of meditative practices to “nonclinical populations...such as improved attentional focus...and modification or shifts away from a distorted or exaggerated view of oneself” (Brewer, 2011). This study alone touches on the two main effects of the e-persona: impulsivity and narcissism. By focusing on the self, it seems, meditation facilitates the growth of that self, eventually reasserting its dominance over the e-persona. The imperfections that are so obsessed over in the mechanical world, that are what set humans and machines apart, are the very differences that need to be reasserted in our minds.

The Internet is a wonderful tool, but it is and should remain only that. Instead it has grown on and affected us in many ways. The Internet has affected the entire world, it seems, but it has not brought about the end of the world. While this new and awesome marvel is still development, it is important to keep our own development in mind. By combining moderation with counteractive measures, measures that would reassert the real-world self in the face of social media’s seemingly ever-expanding presence, a valuable relationship can be fostered with social media. At the current trajectory this balance seems unlikely, but a few small changes could make all the difference. The balance could very well give humanity its identity back.

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Education

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
B.A., English
Honors in English, Expected May 2013
Dean's List – Spring 2010 – Spring 2013 (expected)
Schreyer Honors College Scholar

Areas of Study

American literature, Shakespearian literature, Modernist literature, Disability literature, Science Fiction, Psychology, German language

Accepted to attend Cornell University School of Law for 2013-2016 school years

Academic Honors & Awards

Penn State University Dean's List – Spring 2010 = Spring 2013
Paterno Undergraduate Fellowship through the Penn State College of Liberal Arts, 2009-2013

- Fellowship awarded to Penn State Liberal Arts majors who demonstrate excellence in academics and extensive fellowship toward Penn State University

Professional Experiences

Siana, Bellwoar & McAndrew, LLC, Intern, January 2012 – February 2012

- Research experience in both electronic and manual media
- Writing and editing experience with professional documents
- Data entry experience

International Experience

Studied at the Philipps-Universität Marburg, Marburg, Germany, February – June 2012

- Semester abroad experience through the International Undergraduate Study Program
- Exclusively German coursework in the History of International Law, Television Studies, and German Language and Culture
- Independent living arrangements
- Extensive independent travel through Germany, France, Hungary, Italy, and Austria