

Ever Increasing Social Isolation in Modern Life
Individualism and Modern Communication Technology
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In some areas of the world, it is now common in 2020 to see the majority of city dwellers walking down the street focused on the smart phone screens that they are holding forward in one hand. It is even possible to see individuals seated right next to one another and communicating by texting on their phones. Early childhood educators have identified a pervasive social interactive deficit in their young students due to their excessive focus on television, phone, and game screens – and not on learning how to interact socially. And the elderly are essentially more and more individually warehoused in separate rooms in nursing homes with the television droning on non-stop.

How did humanity come to this??

The Answer: Initially, Communication Convenience/Efficiency; Later, Exploited for Economic Gain and Political Control

The Originating Source: Oral Language

The Lineage: Oral Language, Image Painting, Numbers/Arithmetic, Alphabet, Writing, Copying, Maths, Science, Printing, Photography, Telegraph, Telephone, Radio, Motion Pictures, Television, Video, Mainframe Computer, Satellite Surveillance, GPS/GIS, Personal Computer, Cable and Satellite Internet, Cell Phone, Artificial Intelligence, “Smart” Phone, coming soon – Holographic Media, and eventually the “Brain Implant”

The Combined Verbal-Visual, Computational, and Data Storage/Access Capabilities Are Referred to As: Information Technology – IT

Any communication system/technology – including the initiating form in oral language – can be employed to achieve positive or negative consequences. Just so, oral language itself can be used to communicate accurate information or to deceive with disinformation and lies. Over time, human societies develop rules/regulations/punishments to discourage irresponsible/negative exploitation of IT. Overall, the problem is that IT has developed so rapidly – especially in the last fifty years – that mechanisms of social control/regulation have lagged far behind with the result that in multiple ways the integrity of modern society is threatened. One of these negative “ways” is IT’s promotion of social isolation.

The development of IT over the long term has paradoxically on the one hand supported and promoted the growth of tribes into enormous complex societies, and on the other hand encouraged individualistic/self-interested values and weakened social connectedness, interpersonal relations, and community at all levels. Why is this the case? On the positive side, more and more efficient communication and calculation makes it possible to successfully manage larger and larger groups of people who can be engaged in a great many specialized occupations. These capabilities can result in social progress – greater security and a “higher” standard of living. On the negative side, as human societies have grown from bands to city states to nations to empires, the citizens have come to know one another more and more impersonally instead of personally in many roles over lifetimes. As impersonal relations become the norm, citizens evolve to be just one step removed from strangers to one another, with the result that they are inclined to be more and more reserved and competitive rather than cooperative and helpful with one another. This condition is compounded by the fact that diversity in the citizenry in complex societies – differences in class, race, dress, language, ethnicity, religion, education, etc. – accentuates the tendency among citizens to regard other citizens in impersonal/competitive terms. In short, even in democratic societies, impersonally related citizens focus more and more on their individual success/happiness/gain – individual values, and less and less on their responsibility to cooperate with, share, and contribute to their societies – communal values.

So, as communication/information technology “advances,” it serves to bring humans together in larger and larger societies at the same time that it works to pull these same humans apart – converting personal relations into impersonal relations – cooperation into competition, communal values into individual values. And in the most recent stage of this developmental process, individualistically oriented citizens become more isolated as the electronic form of IT – with its “sifting” algorithms – draws them more and more into a narrower and narrower virtual reality rather than into a more inclusive, social interactive reality. The overall result: social interactive isolation in what otherwise seems to be a flood of virtual connectedness.

The negative consequences of increased social isolation due to evolving IT is very significant in itself. But this negative impact is greatly compounded as a result of the current failure by most representative democracies to screen information that is offered to the public on social media platforms for its reliability. Isolation with reliable information is problematic enough; but social isolation with low quality information is a recipe for generating extreme social problems.

When humans develop societies and technologies which separate and isolate individuals more and more, these isolated individuals develop a desperate need for face-to-face social interaction. And this intense need renders these isolated individuals maximally susceptible to unrestrained, alarmist, fear producing propaganda/rumor/conspiracy theories. Why? Because fear paralyses rational thought and social media offers otherwise isolated individuals the ILLUSION of their being brought together into cohesive, committed groups. And once these socially needy citizens are inside their VIRTUAL bubbles with their newly discovered “friends,” it is as much the friendship as it is the truth value of the ideology that sustains their commitment. Polarization and radicalization is a predictable follow-on in the context of the resulting sense of intense and intimate relations for the participants. For the socially isolated, the benefits of belonging and sharing in commitment to a new “movement” takes precedence while critical thinking fades into the background. And the algorithms of the capitalist form of IT both feed this narrowly identified new virtual commitment and “protect” the participants from information that might challenge their ideology. As this process proceeds, it becomes more and more likely that what begins as a focused, if fallacious, ideology [eg. progressives are out to take away your guns, open the borders to any and all non-white immigrants, replace capitalism with full-blown socialism, etc.] will have a good chance to evolve into a comprehensive conspiratorial worldview [eg. the “Deep” State, One World Order, Qanon – with Trump as the Q “Savior,” etc.].

Social isolation spells trouble for both individual and societal health. The current trend toward social isolation and ideological extremism is promoted by the combination of increasing individualistic values and an ever expanding, unreliable social media that encourages socially isolated citizens to define their worldview in terms of an unchecked, virtually constructed reality. This modern trend has a long history moving through a series of technological communication changes, the pace of which has increased dramatically in the last fifty years. Modern humans need to recognize how potentially destabilizing the current situation is and do what it takes to reverse this overall trend. Otherwise, the combination of 1) social isolation, 2) unreliable and algorithmic fed information in an increasingly virtually circumscribed reality, and 3) social, economic and political polarization have the potential to undermine the integrity of complex, democratic societies.