



A Disconnected World



Texting, chatting, networking, blogging, and posting. The evolution of communication into characters on a screen...digitized snippets, factoids, and acronyms used to express, display, inform, and explain. Even emotions have been whittled down into emoticons...a semicolon “wink” and a parenthetical “frown.” E-mail? That is soooo last decade!

Electronic communication technology has practically replaced more traditional forms. So what does this mean? What is the impact on socialization, relation, and emotional connection? Are there any negative effects? Are there public health implications?

To date, very little scientific inquiry has been directed at the sociologic, psychologic, and neurologic impact of electronic communication and social networking. Yet, no single technology since the telephone has had the potential to produce such expansive evolutionary change.

Electronic communication has revolutionized everything from business and education to casual social interaction. What negative effects, if any, have been observed?

The most-cited risk is a function of the technology itself: personal and social cues are all but absent, and can lead to the “depersonalization” of communication. While depersonalization can be an unwanted side effect of electronic communication, it is, at times, sought out for this very effect. Scientific observers have noted a gravitation toward electronic communication when the user is intentionally avoiding unwanted social interaction. The great and powerful Oz is a confident communicator...but, “pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!”

Perhaps the most critical evolutionary impact of depersonalization is occurring in children. You’ve all witnessed this curious scene: two teenagers sitting side by side texting to each other. Close enough to speak, for sure, but the teens would rather text than talk. Why?

Writing and speaking are two different neural activities.

When writing, the communicator can think about what he/she wants to say before putting pen to paper (or thumb to keypad, as it may be).

Speaking involves what you might call a “social undressing.” The curtain is pulled and the speaker is confronted with the judgments of those in the audience. Visual and verbal references are flying all around, and the communicator must react and respond in perfect symphony in order to be effective. Spoken

communication is a dance requiring a mental agility not seen in written communication. The ability to communicate orally, with all of the potential for error and embarrassment, is an important mental exercise that builds confidence and relational skills that writing—err, texting—cannot.

Susan Greenfield, a professor of synaptic pharmacology at Oxford, has written extensively on the social and biological implications of electronic social networking on the growing mind. She warns, “Real conversation in real time may eventually give way to these sanitized and easier screen dialogues, in much the same way as killing, skinning, and butchering an animal to eat has been replaced by the convenience of packages of meat on the supermarket shelf. Perhaps future generations will recoil with similar horror at the messiness, unpredictability, and immediate personal involvement of a three-dimensional, real-time interaction.”

Additional concerns have been raised about the impact of virtual communication on everything from attention span to addiction, self-identity to sensationalism, and a disordered sense of reality.

The very technology that was created to help us “connect and network” may very well be creating the ultimate evolutionary paradox.

It is time for healthcare professionals to respond to this impending public health crisis. Consider what I would call an assessment of “social connectivity” at every visit. Your history might include: How many hours a day do you spend “virtually” communicating compared with face to face? Are electronic devices allowed at the dinner table? Are you comfortable talking with peers and with adults? Do you avoid situations that require direct communication?

Consider these depersonalized communication disorders as the “textually transmitted diseases” of the 21st century!

Test, treat, and prevent! ■

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