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Defending our capacity for attention and empathy - Covid Call To Humanity

15-19 minutes

How can we create flourishing human relationships?

Jaron Lanier, one of the founders of virtual reality, asked the following question, "If the 'hive mind' is my audience, who am I?"

[1] The hive mind is an order in which each mental node, whether human or machine, coordinates its operations within the system as a whole, whose knowledge becomes the master identity to which each separate node must be subordinate. But do the entities that make up the hive mind of the global electronic intelligence form an actual person? Some of our digital leaders seem to think so but they also seem to have lost touch with what the word "person" means. Only by searching our hearts can we rediscover the lost wisdom of personhood. As Lanier says, "Being a person is not a pat formula, but a quest, a mystery, a leap of faith." [2] A "person" is one of those mysteries, like "consciousness", that cannot be defined, but only experienced more and more deeply.

There is also a concept of personhood built into the major social media platforms. For Facebook, a person is a collection of profile attributes such as the user's "Likes" and the groups that he or she belongs to. These and many other elements of

"behavioral surplus" (user data that has been algorithmically collected and processed) determine how content relevancy is calculated for each user. The economic model which Facebook and related platforms have implemented uses behavioral engineering techniques to maximize user predictability and generate guaranteed outcomes for the advertisers which are the source of their revenue. According to Douglas Rushkoff this behavioral control, "… is based on thwarting social contact and exploiting the resulting disorientation and despair." [3] As many peer-reviewed studies have shown [4], there is a direct correlation between the intensity of a user's social media use and his or her loneliness, depression and similar states of the soul.

Many pundits provide helpful tips to show us how to avoid digital addiction such as by enabling greyscale on our smartphones. These practices can help defend us from emotional manipulation, but unless we focus on building up the underlying personal values, we can't install permanent fixes in the only location where they can be truly effective-our minds and hearts. The following recommendations for reclaiming the face-to-face conversations we need to flourish as persons constitute one resistance practice in a much larger process of rehumanization.

Rather than tapping heart icons on Instagram posts, truly fulfilling relationships must take place in meatspace. Instead of a futile and addictive chase after screen-based social satisfaction, we can use social media to support in-person encounters. If we can strengthen our capacity for close relationships, we can recover the precious resource of our attention in a way that will permanently enrich our inner lives, rather than letting them be packaged and sold to advertisers.

Lost in the Zone

The effectiveness of online conditioning diminishes in direct proportion to a user's self-awareness. A user with sufficient cognitive resources can stand back from screen-based triggers and discern the attempt to grab his or her attention for what it is. Once detected, the hidden layer of behavioral prompts becomes apparent and they lose their power to compel. Self-control enables the capacity described by Shannon Vallor as "… an exemplary ability in technosocial contexts to choose, and ideally to desire for their own sakes, those goods and experiences that most contribute to our and others' flourishing." [5] This is the ability to regulate one's attention rather than let it be channeled by apps designed to profit from predictions about our behavior.

Instead of allowing our desires to be algorithmically shaped, self-regulating users take command of their intentions so that they are free to pursue genuine happiness. Unfortunately, many have succumbed to online manipulation so often that thoughtless acquiescence has become the default response to social media triggers. They are in a condition similar to machine gambling addicts, who can be quite lucid about their predicament, "Is it about money? No. Is it about enjoyment? No. Is it about being trapped? Yes - it is about having lost the plot as to why you are there in the first place. You are involved in a series of entrapments that you can't fully appreciate from inside them." [6] This region is often described by addicts as the "machine zone", a place where one is absorbed in a machine-generated experience so engrossing that everything beyond the screen is forgotten while the user "plays to extinction", meaning until his or her funds are exhausted.

The design principles used in machine gambling correlate directly with those used in social media: "… one-time Facebook president Sean Parker frankly admitted that Facebook was

designed to consume the maximum possible amount of users' time and consciousness … The goal was to keep users glued to the hive, chasing those [dopamine] hits while leaving a stream of raw materials in their wake." [7] Responding to online emotional triggers is often the entry point into the "flow" state, a mode of being in which we become so absorbed in an activity that our normal sense of time disappears.

Machine gamblers also experience a "flow", but it is a closed-loop, a flight from creative action which encases its victims in cocoons of pure subjectivity. They become trapped in programmed unrealities designed to undermine their autonomy and allow their emotions to be expertly played upon by the machine's designers. Social media users experience a similar dynamic, a machine-driven proxy life that often becomes compulsive. The ability to break the addiction to the flow requires the development of many inner strengths, but at the foundation of each is the conscious control of our attention.

Social media cultivates many popular illusions, but one of the most egregious is that we can have fulfilling relationships that are "frictionless", that don't require serious commitment from each partner. In the offline world, we have to learn to tolerate a certain degree of boredom, cloaked egotism, awkwardness, misunderstanding, self-deception, and many other common human ingredients if we seek true friendship. Eliminating such frictions from our relationships may also eliminate the possibility of true intimacy. Unfortunately, friendship without the sweat and muck of ordinary humanity has become the ideal in the world of social media. Yet it turns out it's hard to trust someone unless you can hear the gravel in their voice, the warmth of their hand, and the radiation of their presence. Perhaps evolution has designed us in this way for a reason. If there are no barriers to

overcome, our relationships tend to become no more than masks we slip on at appropriate intervals.

Without realizing quite how it happened, we have learned to tune out whatever falls below our interactive quality standards. If our dinner companion bores us, we can phub him or her with a guiltless smile illuminated by the serene glow of the smartphone screen. Many people seem to have lost the secret of creatively coping with moments of emptiness. Levels of boredom that would have been considered ordinary a few years ago have now become intolerable. With instant relief from uncomfortable moments always available, the temptation to escape as quickly as possible is often overwhelming. Unfortunately, by excluding ourselves from tedious situations, we also preclude several types of personal growth essential to the person we may wish to become.

For instance, consider the famous 2013 ad in which a teenager screens out an older relative talking about her cat by using the Facebook Home app. While the ad treated the teenager's boorish behavior as a smart move, Shannon Vallor highlights some of the opportunities for emotional growth the teenager might have missed:

1. **Attention Control**: The ability to listen to someone long enough to understand the meaning and context of what they are saying.

2. **Relational Understanding**: We need to seriously ask the question, "What respect does this speaker deserve?" without immediately defaulting to "none."

3. **Reflective Self-Examination**: What role am I playing in this situation? Is it the best I'm capable of?

4. **Discerning and Prudent Judgment**: What practical wisdom

does my respect for the other person call for in me? Redirecting attention to the screen simply removes a disagreeable experience from the field of attention. It teaches us nothing about how to improve a social situation through creative intervention. The teenager tossed away an opportunity to develop a key social skill.

5. **Moral Extension**: The ability to think beyond one's immediate comfort and satisfaction. [8]

Ultimately, we can only reclaim our humanity by exercising the qualities that distinguish it from the "smart" selfishness modeled by the ad.

Real Presence

One of the ways we can use our attention more productively is to give it to human beings instead of screens. The awakening selves we may harbor within us often wait in vain for a spark of genuine attention. When we are present to the person in front of us instead of the infinite scroll, a much richer set of possibilities becomes available. Cal Newport described the missing pieces as follows, "… these offline interactions are incredibly rich because they require our brains to process large amounts of information about subtle analog cues such as body language, facial expressions, and voice tone. The low-bandwidth chatter supported by many digital communication tools might offer a simulacrum of this connection, but it leaves most of our high-performance social processing networks underused‐reducing these tools' ability to satisfy our intense sociality."[9] The possible selves of our conversation partners may be anxiously waiting backstage for the chance to step out and find a previously unsuspected role to play. But this can only happen if we let them

see our real face.

Personal risk is minimized online because we need only display what we choose to, rather than what is unavoidably exposed when we are physically present. On the screen, we can only guess how much each is withholding. In person, the other's face is a mirror in which we see features of our face that are invisible to us until they are reflected back from the other. While security is a necessity when dealing with strangers, it inhibits our ability to become intimate with friends.

Once upon a time, "… people became friends by being in each other's presence, understanding all the many subtle signals, verbal and bodily, whereby another testifies to his character, emotions, and intentions, and building affection and trust in tandem." [10] When we look into the face of the other, what we sometimes discover is ourselves, but with a fresh pair of eyes that can see parts of our personality that we never noticed before, perhaps because they didn't become real until our friend shined the light of care on them. While versions of this can happen online, these tend to be more focused on finding affinities with a particular group identity, which is much different than a friend breaking open an unsuspected and unique personal quality in us.

As a well-known philosopher observed, "… by placing a screen between yourself and the friend, while retaining ultimate control over what appears to your friend, you also hide from the real encounter - denying the other the power and the freedom to challenge you in your deeper nature and to call on you here and now to take responsibility for yourself and for him." [11] In other words, the relationships we create behind the screen allow us to avoid the type of affection that can only blossom when we allow

ourselves to be challenged. Moreover, when one is so easily distracted by believable facsimiles, it's also easy to bypass real friendships. Unfortunately, facsimile friendships don't develop the personal qualities needed to build and maintain lasting relationships. Lacking these qualities, online relationships may soon become the only type that we are capable of.

Rebalancing Our Connections

Instead of rejecting social media, we can expose its embedded biases and learn how to use it to facilitate a rich, in-person social life. Digital addiction results from trying to achieve emotional validation through a machine-driven experience that can't actually affirm us as persons. We need to see the pupils of our partners' eyes and feel the tension in their fingers to know what they are actually feeling. When we watch people sitting together at a table where everyone's eyes are glued to screens we are looking at a group trying to squeeze social gratification through a pinhole. What some might try instead is to glance up and find a partner who is weary of the sterile glow.

One recommended practice that can help text messaging serve our better selves is to strictly control how and when it is used. When the smartphone is within reach throughout the day and notifications are turned on, we are always open to new messages. Not only does this tend to lead to constant distraction and reduced productivity, but it reinforces the futile cycle of trying to get our social needs met through text messages. To address this, we can turn off notifications except for emergency contacts from a select few. Then we can schedule specific and limited times during the day to respond to messages. But we should also change the nature of the messages. Instead of open-ended conversations about random topics, we should only

respond to short logistical notifications such as meeting proposals. Then we can use the time we've saved for in-person meetings with the most important people in our lives. What we may find is that a few close relationships can deliver far more social satisfaction than dozens of shallow connections.

By taking control of our messaging behavior, we cease to feed the cycle of distraction. Instead, we reserve quality attention for those few with whom we can cultivate mutual enrichment. As Shannon Vallor said, "For the ultimate engineering task is the fragile, endless, and sublime human project of using the culture we produce to make ourselves into the beings we wish to become." [12]

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1. Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2011. Kindle Edition) loc. 175.

2. *Ibid.*, loc. 182

3. Douglas Rushkoff, *Team Human*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019. Kindle Edition), p. 5.

4. A good place to begin locating some of the most relevant academic, peer-reviewed studies about the emotional impact of social media is in the "Notes" section of Shoshana Zuboff's book, The Age of Surveillance Capitalism. Full reference information for the book is contained in note 7 below.

5. Shannon Vallor, *Technology and the Virtues: A Philosophical Guide to a Future Worth Wanting*, (Oxford University Press, 2016. Kindle Edition) p. 165.

6. Natasha Dow Schull, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*, (Princeton University Press, 2012. Scribd Edition) p. 49.

7. Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, (New York: Hatchette Book Group, 2019. Kindle Edition), p. 451.

8. *Op. cit.* note 5, p. 162. In this section, I comment on each of the moral values which Vallor highlights in her commentary on the ad. The moral concepts are hers, but the comments are mine.

9. Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World*, (New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2019. Kindle Edition) p. 142.

10. Roger Scruton, "Hiding Behind the Screen," The New Atlantis, Number 28, Summer 2010. https://www.thenewatlantis.com /publications/hiding-behind-the-screen.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Op. cit.* note 5, p. 159.