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The Connection Effect

In the past twenty years, we have experienced a life changing technological revolution. Instead of phones with cords and large computers desktops, we have pocket size devices, or smartphones, that can access nearly anything through the internet. Most individuals have their own smartphone that no one else operates, giving users control over what they see and who they talk to. Having the power to choose what we say and how we represent ourselves online creates the feeling of a customizable virtual world through the internet. In a speech titled, “Connected, but Alone?” Sherry Turkle, professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, speaks about technological connections and how they may influence identity development and human behavior in the real world. Connection is the concept of constantly being in contact with each other, which can now be done virtually any time and place with the use of the internet through smartphones. The web grants users access to nearly anything at any time; this virtual realm alters our perceptions of space and time, creating an environment without distance and without a running clock. In his piece, *Small Pieces Loosely Joined*, technologist and author, David Weinberger, describes the changes of space, time, self, and knowledge that the internet creates. He uses examples from a personal online experience and illustrates the differences between human interaction on the web and in the real world. The internet offers information on an endless amount of topics, giving users the opportunity to educate themselves on any subject they choose. Sifting through masses of information is a concept that Sven Birkerts, essayist and literary critic, describes as an obstacle to gaining true understanding in his piece “The Owl Has Flown.” By learning bits and pieces of information on an array of topics, we do not spend periods of time really thinking and comprehending what it is we are trying to learn. We also do not spend time looking into relationships and genuinely knowing one another. Birkerts describes vertical consciousness as intensive reading or learning that creates a depth of understanding. Spending time looking into the real meaning of something is an act of vertical engagement; therefore, by looking for a deeper meaning within information, we will gain true insight and learn self-reflection. As modern web users, we have acclimated to the fast paced, customizable, infinite space of the internet and have adapted to the luxury of having control over the web portion of our lives. Maintaining an online personality in a controlled environment alters identity development, and the constant need for connection takes away time for personal solitude. Without slowing down and searching for the deeper meaning of information on the web and in relationships, vertical consciousness will become infrequent. If we all choose to spend the majority of our time online, living in the real world will become a great challenge for society as a whole.

The web allows us to be virtually anywhere at any time on pages that are built according to our personal desires. When we are connected to the web, whether it is on a personal computer or smartphone, the pages we see are customized to fit our current needs. As internet users, we can essentially travel to any page we want to see, and search engines will pull up any topic we want to learn about. Turkle explains online navigation of smartphone users by stating, “They want to go in and out of all the places they are because the thing that matters most to them is control over where they put their attention” (Turkle). Turkle observes that, as web users, we are constantly jumping from one page or task to another. Because online space is abnormal and constantly changing, we can open and close applications and hop from one web page to another. We enjoy the fluctuating space and distance in the online world because we can enter and exit different environments at our leisure. As smartphone users, we are able to virtually visit anywhere we want, from any location, as long as there is a web connection. We choose what we want to see on our personal screens, creating a unique space for everyone. Weinberger explains his experience of internet space when he navigates through Ebay looking for a quilt to buy. By using the search bar, he is taken to a page that is only related to his current interest, quilts that are for sale. In the same space that is considered to be Ebay, many other users in many other countries are having completely different experiences, according to their personal desires (109). Although Ebay is one specific website, it is constantly transforming to fit individuals interests as well as existing on screens all over the world. Web space has no distance, yet it is present almost everywhere. The internet allows for space to become a controlled and customized variable, whereas it is a constant in the real world.

We are attracted to the controlled web environment because we can create an identity that we desire to be. We can use social networking sites to create our own personal page, choose a name, a picture, and express our thoughts and interests regularly. Just as some of us enjoy control over where we virtually travel or where we focus our attention, others delight in creating an online persona. The freedom of creating a new self on social networking sites gives us control over what we do and say in an online world, which is seemingly separate from our real world identities. Turkle describes the benefits of having an online identity when she states, “we get to retouch the face, the voice, the body” (Turkle). When we use the internet to revise our identity, we can virtually change ourselves to whoever we desire to be. Regardless of the flaws we may have, those are nonexistent on the web. Other users only know and see what we allow. When selecting a profile picture we can use photo editing applications to alter faces, bodies, and sizes to look the way we want. From teeth whitening to blemish covering, pictures on the internet are often mutated versions of the original. We are able to create an identity that fits our desires, sometimes representing characteristics that are polar opposites of our true selves. While on the web, Weinberger comes across an Ebay user named Firewife30. From his perspective, Firewife30 is a pleasant lady who makes and sells quilts. Although this may be a reflection of the real user’s identity, it may also be an alter ego of someone who is nothing like Firewife30 appears. This could be one of many identities that belong to the same user. Weinberger explains that Firewife30 is an identity that lives only within Ebay, yet the person behind the online identity is a physical being in the real world (110). We are attracted to online personas because individual qualities and words are premeditated and controlled, so others only see what we want them to see. Since we are given the freedom to customize a personality, these created online selves are written and distant from the identity of the real world person.

With a controlled and ideal version of our identity online, it almost feels wrong not to check up on activities and interactions our online persona is involved in. By acclimating to the constant availability of the internet, we can be connected to and surrounded by others all day every day, and never have to feel alone. Now that constant connection, commonly through smartphones, is so prevalent Turkle makes the statement, “Being alone feels like a problem that needs to be solved” (Turkle). When we feel alone or are not in a conversation with someone, we can escape the anxious feelings by connecting to others via the web. Whether or not we are physically alone, we may solve our loneliness by connecting with automatic listeners on the internet at any hour of the day. If we can control our virtual environment we can comfort ourselves. By filling a void with connection, we spend little time in solitude. Since connection is always an option, we typically do not want to spend time with ourselves thinking or reflecting, yet the very concept of vertical consciousness is about depth and understanding of one’s self or information. While discussing this concept of vertical consciousness Birkerts states, “Only where silence is possible can the vertical engagement take place” (75). In order to get a deep understanding and see through simple facts, Birkerts suggests that we must take a step back from the constant buzz and connection of the web. He describes vertical consciousness being fostered during periods of silence, giving individual time to think, comprehend, connect, and reflect what is on the mind. Time spent in deep thinking allows for information to resonate with us, transforming knowledge to wisdom. Solitude is not a concept that is widely valued because, as internet users, we are given control of our attention and we choose to connect. If we all fill pauses and silence with web connection, there is no experience of deep time, no true understanding.

In-depth comprehension and vertical consciousness require time and effort; however, our society is focused on speed and efficiency. In order to get tasks done in a timely manner, we communicate to one another through brief interactions online such as a text or email. Although these little connections may keep us in touch throughout the day or week, Turkle suggests, “they don’t really work for learning about each other, for really coming to know and understand each other” (Turkle). Connecting through the internet and smartphones may provide the satisfaction of always talking to someone, but it only scratches the surface of learning about the individual. Texting conversations do not allow us to have a real discussion happening in real time because virtual dialogue removes the unpredictability of personal ideas and feelings. Online communication is thought-out, revised, and lacks emotion; we are given control over what we say and who we talk to. The control advantage does not end with conversations, but applies to learning and absorbing data also. While choosing where attention is focused, we can constantly keep ourselves entertained by navigating to pages containing information we are interested in. We have unlimited access to information, but the problem lies within the organization. With so many options to choose from, we must skim readings and quickly scan pages to find what we are searching for. Although this may be a quick and efficient way, it is a deterrent to obtaining true knowledge because there is no deep time spent trying to understand the material (Birkerts, 72-73). Just as briefly covering information does not lead to wisdom, small connections between one another do not lead to deep understanding of other individuals. Sorting through masses of information does not equal true comprehension; time and thinking are necessary for vertical engagement.

Our modern lifestyle is fast-paced and focused and involves getting the maximum number of tasks done in the shortest amount of time. We all want to get things done quickly and competently, and consciously avoid spending time dawdling or pondering. In his book titled *Sabbath*, therapist and author, Wayne Muller, discusses the importance and powerful impact of slowing down and resting in our busy and often hectic lives. He makes the following statement about all of us, as a society: “In the trance of overwork, we take everything for granted. We consume things, people, and information. We do not have time to savor this life, nor to care deeply and gently for ourselves, our loved ones, or our world” (Muller 4). We are constantly on the go and functioning at top speed, taking in the maximum capacity of information in the shortest amount of time. We individually control the way we spend our time, leaving out any seemingly unnecessary information or tasks. Even during the periods of time throughout the day when we find ourselves sitting down and relaxing, more often than not we are connecting to the internet and browsing masses of information. We are checking up on our friends’ and family members’ profiles, seeing what they have been doing recently. Perhaps we are looking at photos, reading status updates, or dropping in on a conversation between others. Although we feel connected and close to those we interact with, keeping the majority of contact with others in the virtual world negatively affects our real world relationships. It decreases the amount of face-to-face conversations, and online personas often misrepresent an individual’s true character. By always moving and learning as fast as we can, we miss the opportunities to reflect or critically think about anything. It is becoming uncommon to take the time, giving into solitude, to consider the meaning of our lives, what our destiny may be, or what truly makes us happy. Throughout his writing, Birkerts explains that our society is experiencing a loss of depth in both understanding ourselves and comprehending the complexity of information. Since everything is virtually always available, it is getting harder to assign value to certain aspects of life because we are desensitized to our world (74). Without taking the time to lean in and deeply engage in relationships and information, vertical consciousness is seldom present in our lives. The lack of deep thinking results in superficial ideas and a preference for controlled virtual activity. The more time spent online, the less real-life connection we have with others. If we lose our ability to truly connect with one another, life will become dull and we will desire the virtual realm even more, creating a vicious cycle.

As the use of technology continues to be involved in different aspects of our lives, it is important for us to see the divide between the virtual realm and the real world. If we do not take time to vertically think or reflect upon ourselves, we will lose touch with our intrinsic desires and give more value to our online identities. By slowing down we can find ourselves, understand the deep meaning of information, and strengthen relationships with others. Filling silences with connection is now a common practice because the online world can be easily accessed from anywhere. Space and time take on different roles in the virtual realm, allowing us to control when and where we browse information and web pages. We can create online identities, controlling our words, appearance, and behavior. When something is not working out the way we want it to in the real world, we can escape and become someone else. Our experiences on the web are customizable and unique because we control what happens on our personal screens. By putting most of our time and effort into our existence in the online world, we may lose touch with reality. The controlled and individualized environment of the web is comforting and desirable, making our real world experiences unappealing. If we want to truly get the most out of life, we need to take a step back from constant connection, and vertically think about ourselves and the world around us.

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