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Human relations in the midst of digital connections

Carolina Abilio

Although social media services like *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, among others, have been considered revolutionary when created, changing the way in online behave and how information is distributed in the digital environment, numerous studies in recent years show that the continuous use of social media can cause negative impacts on the mental health of its members, as symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as affect sleep, attention and memory.

Developers of such applications know how to reach their audience with precision, spurring the steady consumption of new content and the ever-increasing use of apps. However, developers often do not realize the harms caused by the constant use of their products.

The fact is that if technology services do not seek to capture the full attention of their users, they may not be successful among the multitude of applications and digital services that are currently offered.

However, while there are other products also designed for the longest possible use, such as video and music streaming services, the services the encompass social media and digital communication are part of a particular ecosystem that mediates human relationships in all aspects that make up daily life, from politics to private relationships.

In addition to their privileged position as mediators, these services differ from other prior communication technologies - such as televisions, radios, and computers themselves - because they have characteristics that were not present at the time, such as the use of artificial intelligence to provide a seamless navigation experience with the least possible interruptions, modeled upon the lowest

manifestations of satisfaction and dissatisfaction of its users such as the monitoring of the deviation of our eyes from the screen. The constant presence of these services on a daily basis, 24/7 on smartphones, and their use on a large scale are some of the reasons that pressure people to use these services and participate more and more in the digital environment.

In a TED Talks lecture watched more than 4 million times worldwide, Sherry Turkle - a psychologist and human relations researcher within the digital environment -

argues that people have changed the habit of talking to simply being connected. Instead of meeting friends and talking about everyday life, they exchange countless instant messages throughout the day, containing pieces of information that, according to the author, do not amount to a

face-to-face conversation.

Another important topic is the way in which virtual communications are performed. If in real life, people maintain eye contact, learn the moments for speech and for listening to each other, and how to articulate thoughts and opinions to be understood, digital relations follow few, if any, of these rules.

People can figuratively "shout" opinions to a feed from any social media, who will always be there to listen to them, reinforcing their opinions. In instant messaging services, for example, one can control the time in which message exchanges occur - no longer in social time,

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but in any time that is established between the parties - so that one can demand attention and responses 24 hours a day. The messages that are sent, mediating the interactions in these environments, can be thought and shaped to better suit each situation, and can even be modified, deleted and edited at any minute.

In this way, the habits and skills acquired by people as social beings - conversation, the exchange of experiences, being togetherness - are being transferred to a digital context that does not yet have the same equivalence, and the consequences of this are many.

One of the clearest symptoms of exchange of socialization spaces is the isolation felt by people, even though we live in the era of the greatest possible connectivity. According to Turkle, by not practicing the ability to be with others without the intermediation and organization of social media, people lose the ability to be with themselves. Thus, when one cannot grasp one's own insecurities and anxieties, and one does not get support from close affective relationships, the ego void will be filled with more connections, more content, resulting in an instant satisfaction that will make the cycle repeat itself.

People's inability to feel complete is largely due to the emptying of relationships with peers, the inability to form meaningful bonds through the creation of fragmented relationships mediated by technology. This is particularly harmful for children and adolescents, who naturalize their use and the type of relationship established through these relationships, resulting in the increase of depression and anxiety disorders reported in recent years.

In an interview with the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper, Christian Dunker, a renowned Brazilian psychoanalyst, argues that the focus of social media on the user creates a sort of "self-inflation" in which people come to believe that their opinion matters more than it actually does. In this way, attention and time are replaced by the possibility of expressing their opinions, but only to those who already agree with it, and thus the reference of the other is lost.

Despite all these issues, many continue to use social media as the main sources of daily news. But it's not about choice: studies show that Facebook triggers the same areas of the brain as stimulant drugs like cocaine, which is more addictive than tobacco or alcohol.

Larger discussions regarding these themes and the harmfulness that social media services cause to the mental health of societies have emphasized the value of time and human relations with the added use of technology.

Founded by a former Google employee, Tristan Harris, in 2013, *Time Well Spent* is a nonprofit organization aimed at reversing the situation that is termed the "digital attention crisis." Similarly, the *Center for Humane Technology* is a coalition that brings together former

employees, researchers, creators, and people related to the information industry with the goal of "realigning technology in the best interests of humanity."

While norms and regulations are not designed to control how technology companies capture and use people's attention, it is necessary to reflect on how people's relationships are mediated by technology. It is time to use technology to guide people back to non-digital connections with our friends, partners, colleagues, family, and ourselves.



Carolina Abilio is a psychologist, master's degree student in Environment, Health and Sustainability at the University of São Paulo and researcher at CEST-USP.

Academic Coordinator: Edison Spina

This article is a result of the author's ascertainment and analysis, without compulsorily reflecting CEST's opinion.