

Contemporary Media Forum

The Ambivalence of the Digital Natives

By John Suler

My generation invented the internet. Now we pass it down to the next generation who grew up with it – the “digital natives,” a term coined by education consultant Marc Prensky in his 2001 article “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants”. The premise of his article was that the rapid appearance of digital technology has changed the way young people think and process information. More so than their parents’ generation, they require a media-rich environment in order to learn and develop. They feel more at home in cyberspace.

Or do they? Is their attitude about this digital age of ours all that different than the generation that preceded them? Do they truly understand the potential hazards, along with the benefits, of a technologically boosted lifestyle as witnessed by their elders who remember the days before people carried the internet around with them in their pockets. Some researchers believe the pervasive preoccupation with cyberspace can inflict psychological damage on all of us, especially the young. Do young people themselves see this?

To address these questions, I designed a group interview technique that I conducted with my undergraduate students. With the help of a professional designer, I created a 10 minute video entitled *The Birth of Cyberpsychology*, which is available on YouTube. The beginning of the video consists of text that very concisely summarizes the history of the internet, leading up to the creation of cyberpsychology as a new interdisciplinary field (with my particular brand being a psychoanalytic cyberpsychology). The main portion of the video then consists of a series of quotes about technology from famous people, interspersed with 30 images that illustrate different concepts in cyberpsychology (e.g. online disinhibition, text relationships, addiction, avatars, identity management, bullying, transference, dissociation, disembodiment, virtual reality, perceived privacy, etc.). In a tipping of my hat to Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the music for the entire video is the Blue Danube Waltz.

Once the video ended, I asked the students to close their eyes, relax, clear their thoughts, and then allow images to pop into their mind – pictures that captured the meaning of “cyberspace” for them. Then I said, “What do those images remind you of in your life? What feelings or memories do you notice? Allow your mind to wander.” This type of association has been a technique in

psychoanalytic therapies that use mental imagery to encourage the surfacing of underlying, even unconscious ideation and emotions, as well as in phototherapy, a form of psychodynamic therapy that relies on clients' reactions to photographs (Suler, 1989; Weiser, 1993). After the students recorded their responses, I invited them into a group discussion about what they had experienced.

I found that the students identified, from their own experiences in cyberspace, many of the positive aspects of the internet, but also many of the worries about technology being discussed by researchers. These worries fell into three general categories: a symbiotic attachment to the internet, the dilemma of false or superficial relatedness, and distortions of reality.

Symbiotic Attachments

One of the problems of cyberspace arises from what psychoanalytic thinkers – such as Mahler, Pine, and Bergman (1975) – would describe as the disruption of separation and individuation. With the appearance of mobile devices, people can easily seek out constant connection. One never has to be alone, separated from significant others and mother-internet herself. Being alone, Turkle (2012) noted in her book *Alone Together*, feels like a problem that needs to be solved. People sleep with their phones, even experience it as part of their body that they cannot leave behind without experiencing separation anxiety. The *phantom vibration*, when we feel the phone vibrating with a notification when in fact it did not, shows how cyberspace has seeped into our physical being at an unconscious level. The device as a connection to others can become an addictive selfobject (Kohut, 1977) that must be at hand in order to feel whole. Turkle (2012) described how the compulsion to connect online to others as a way to affirm one's thoughts and feelings might inadvertently backfire: by forgetting how to self reflect in solitude, people lose track of who they are.

All of these concerns found echoes in the responses the students had to the video. Themes about anxiety-provoking symbiosis surfaced in the scenes they imagined, such as “freaking out” when seeing their phone literally glued to their hand, feeling out of control when envisioning a “huge chaotic mess of connections among millions of computers,” and experiencing different people, places and things passing through one's body “as if I didn't exist.” One student saw herself as part of the cyberspace cloud, sensing that her whole life was there, uploaded, never to be taken back. She felt herself “yearning for simplicity” and “wanting my innocence back.” The students recognized how they are becoming symbiotically dependent on garnering feedback and praise in social media. “We need the internet to tell us who we are instead of figuring it out for ourselves.” “We rely on the internet to feel important and worthy. No likes = no worth.” As if having read Turkle's (2012) book, which he had not, one student commented, “I go online when I'm in the bathroom or right before bed. These used to be times of reflection, but now I've lost perspective on myself so that I can like another picture on Instagram.” Themes of deindividuation were

common among the students, as evident in an observation about the ubiquitous selfie that, “Everyone posts the same types of photos to the point where the only thing different is the actual face in the photo.”

False and Superficial Relationships

A second problem arrives as a counterpart to the loss of self via symbiotic connect- edness: the tendency towards creating dissociated, overly controlled, imaginary, and superficial online relationships, which leads to a personal identity that fades in rich- ness, complexity, and genuineness, what Winnicott (1965) would call the defensive facade of the false self that is carefully contrived, feels dead and empty, and hides behind the appearance of being real. In their carefully designed idealized self or *hyperpersonal self* that they present online to others (Walther, 1996) – as exemplified in the narcissistically perfected selfie – people miss the opportunity to share who they truly are as revealed through spontaneity and the expression of their personal weak- nesses or flaws. In more extreme situations, they create totally contrived identities in order to lure others into a fantasy relationship, what has been called *catfishing*.

In their responses to the video, the students expressed many of these con- cerns raised by the researchers. They frequently commented on how their peers are not truly themselves in cyberspace, especially in their highly perfected selfies. “People change when they go online,” one student commented. “Their colors or personality changes, sometimes quite dramatically, they become more ego- cen- tric.” Another added that, “We want to escape reality and become what doesn’t exist. The people who hide behind false identities clearly have psychological problems.” Thinking psychoanalytically, one student remarked, “All of these things are unconscious wishes. It’s a false happiness. Maybe people should just be happy with themselves and who they really are.”

Turkle (2012) described the Goldilock’s Effect in which people multitask their in-person and online relationships so that they can be not too close, not too far, but supposedly just right in the degree of connection. They continually alternate between in-person and online conversations, and among various online contacts, as a way to micromanage their attention, avoid boredom, bypass conflict, and side- step true intimacy, while getting used to being shortchanged in conversation and interpersonal understanding. They create contacts with many people while keep- ing them all at a safe distance, Turkle (2012) said, with the many little sips of tiny text messages failing to add up to a meaningful gulp of human interaction. Strug- gling with the intrinsic human ambivalence concerning a fear of intimacy versus a need to connect, they opt for a static compromise in which they use online rela- tionships to create the illusion of companionship without the demands of authen- tic closeness. The remedy, according to Turkle, is reclaiming messy conversations as we used to know them in the in-person world, complete with awkward pauses, stumbling to find the right words, unconscious non-verbal cues, and not saying ex- actly what we mean. In some cases, people simply feel they cannot devote the time

and energy to developing genuine intimacy in online relationships (Suler, 2016). Hypnotized by the cyberspace culture that glorifies popularity through the accumulation of followers and “likes,” they strive to stack up as many contacts as they can, while giving short shrift to each one. Rather than enriching their identities in a few intimate relationships, they strive for a bigger, applauding audience. Because cyberspace seductively promises 15 minutes of fame, online intimacy feels like a distracting luxury. Paying careful, empathic attention becomes a commodity afforded to very few people, if anyone.

In their responses to the video, the students articulated these concerns in their complaints about how their peers, as a result of superficial online relatedness, consequently fail to truly interact with each other in the here-and-now. “Kids are not learning how to communicate with others in-person because they only experience communication through a computer screen or a cell phone. No one can carry on a decent face-to-face conversation anymore.” In an attempt to reverse this unsettling dilemma, some of the students have adopted a rule when dining out with friends: Turn off your phone, stack them at the end of the table, and the first one to pick up his or her device has to pay the bill.

Distortions of Reality

People online pretending to be something different or better is part of the larger distortion of reality that occurs in cyberspace. It is ironic that as communication technology advanced, making it much easier for people to get to know each other and locate valuable information, the distinction between reality and fantasy progressively blurred, as evident in so-called “reality” shows, Photoshopped images, and allegedly real-life videos on YouTube that actually turned out to be deliberately contrived. Even supposed factual information becomes skewed in its relevancy when machine intelligence relies on algorithms that steer people towards biased data. A good example is cyberchondria, when people with physical problems become unnecessarily distressed as a result of their online searches that lead not to the most pertinent information, but to websites that focus on the most extreme medical scenarios because machine algorithms ranked such sites as highest in popularity (Aiken & Kirwan, 2013).

As an extension of the human mind, cyberspace is a realm in which our inner ideas, emotions, and needs shape what we experience. We interpret the environments we enter, and especially the people we meet, based on transference reactions that distort our perceptions. A component of the online disinhibition effect is “dissociative imagination,” the tendency to think that what happens online is not real, perhaps more like a fantasy game than anything else (Suler, 2004). Simply staring into your computer screen or mobile device, allowing the physical world around you to fade away, opens the door to an altered state of consciousness, an experience that can resemble a dream state (Suler, 2016). People sense these distortions of reality, leading them to question the validity of what they experience in cyberspace. This tendency is only exacerbated by our cultural preoccupation with CGI and virtual realities that imitate real world scenarios or fabricate completely imaginary ones.

The students expressed many of these concerns in their responses to the video. “We’re losing touch with nature and the real world because we get caught up in cyberspace reality,” remarked one student. “I like to stick to things that are true and factual which is a hard thing to determine on the internet,” said another, “and just because it’s online doesn’t mean that it’s true.” Some students specifically emphasized the necessity of maintaining their ability for reality testing, as evident by such comments as, “I realize the difference between reality and the internet and keep myself grounded when reality calls,” and, “I don’t really experience an alternate reality online because I consciously choose not to. It’s very easy to get sucked in, and I don’t want to put myself in that situation.” We might also worry about digital natives who seem to lose the ability to differentiate between cyberspace and the real world, as revealed by the student who said, “I sometimes don’t realize I’m not online anymore.”

The Ambivalence of Pros as well as Cons

The students also recognized the many benefits of cyberspace, especially the ability to stay in touch with friends and family, no matter where they are. They described how the internet is a way to get positive feedback that might not be available in their offline lifestyles. “I can post a picture and have 40 people hit a button to say they like it. In real life I could never get people to openly like a picture.” It helps them reach out to other people with acts of kindness and generosity. “You never know how a quick Facebook post or text message can make someone feel better.” Cyberspace enables them to discover relationships that were otherwise geographically improbable. “I never knew that someone who lived over 1500 miles away who I met online could have such an impact on my life and be my best friend.” Even though their phones might divert their attention from here-and-now interpersonal encounters, the devices can sometimes enhance those interactions. “We run out of ideas to talk about, so we look at our phones for a few minutes, then someone says something like, ‘hey did you guys see this pic?’”

They see the digital realm as empowering them with access to worldwide knowledge, with new experiences, and previously unforeseen opportunities to develop their identities. “The internet gives everyone the opportunity to be creators of something.” “It has helped me grow into a greater multifaceted person and to develop and stretch myself as I discover interests I never knew I had.” “The invention of the computer and the internet made me the person I am.” In the minds of the students, social media gives them insights into the positive as well as negative aspects of human nature. “Cyberbullies attacked. But then came posts of kindness and support from strangers. It shows both the best and the ugliest of humanity.”

Clearly, the digital natives are expressing a love/hate relationship with the internet, not unlike the previous generation that invented this problem child. We might describe this phenomenon in terms of “splitting” (Fairbairn, 1952), the early developmental tendency to alternate between idealizing and denigrating someone or something that has a strong psychological impact on us, on which we are dependent. Our discrediting of that person or thing can quickly turn into glorification, and vice versa. Similar to the gradual evolution of the child’s perception of the parent, as we

accumulate more experience with the internet over time, we might begin to resolve that developmentally immature tendency towards splitting, to embrace and perhaps resolve our ambivalence about it by maximizing the effect of its pros on our lives while minimizing its cons. These ideas are reminiscent of the concept of the Gartner Hype Cycle (Linden & Fenn, 2003), which states that we progress through a series of stages when confronted with new technology. There is an enthusiastic surge of inflated expectations once something new appears, followed by a trough of disappointment when it does not seem to perform as well as anticipated, then finally a gradual, more realistic “slope of enlightenment” as we come to understand exactly how the new technology can be used productively given its strengths and weaknesses.

The ambivalent attitudes towards cyberspace stem from the sheer size and complexity of what it has become and what it now means in our lives. Because it offers so much information, experiences, and opportunities, regardless of one’s age, it places us all into a difficult existential dilemma. The choices of what to do and how to be online are overwhelming. “You can be anything you want to be,” said one student, “so why not make it simple and just go along with the crowd?” Another posed the question in an even simpler but just as profound form, “The real question is what we should do with all that we have.”

REFERENCES

- Aiken, M., & Kirwan, G. (2013). The psychology of cyberchondria and cyberchondria by proxy. In Power, A., & Kirwan, G. (Eds.), *Cyberpsychology and new media: A thematic reader* (pp. 158–169). New York: Psychology Press.
- Fairbairn, R. D. (1952). *Psychoanalytic studies of the personality*. London: Tavistock.
- Kohut, H. (1977). *The Restoration of the self*. Madison, CT: International Universities Press.
- Linden, A., & Fenn, J. (2003). Understanding Gartner’s hype cycles. *Strategic Analysis Report N° R-20-1971*. Gartner, Inc.
- Mahler, M., Pine, F., & Bergman, A. (1975). *The psychological birth of the human infant: Symbiosis and individuation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1–6.
- Suler, J. R. (1989). Mental imagery in psychoanalytic treatment. *Psychoanalytic Psychology*, 6(3), 343–366.
- Suler, J. R. (2004). The online disinhibition effect. *CyberPsychology and Behavior*, 7(1), 321–326.
- Suler, J. R. (2016). *Psychology of the digital age: Humans become electric*. New York: Cambridge University Press. in press.
- Turkle, S. (2012). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York: Basic Books.
- Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research*, 23(1), 3–43.
- Weiser, J. (1993). *Phototherapy techniques*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1965). *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment: Studies in the theory of emotional development*. New York: International Universities Press.

John Suler
Rider University, Lawrenceville, NJ, USA
suler@mindspring.com