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Digital Loneliness

Asking Too Simple a Question about a Complex Problem

Abstract: This chapter attempts to historicize "digital loneliness." To do so, it considers two ways to historically contextualize media and loneliness. The first considers today's discussions of "digital loneliness" as the latest manifestation of the type of polarized "hopes and fears" discourse that cyclically greets new communications tools. The second approach places technology in the background and foregrounds loneliness as a cultural phenomenon that is shaped by long-term historical processes. This, arguably, points towards more fruitful ways of thinking about loneliness as a complex problem.

Keywords: loneliness, technology, modernization, privatization, other-directedness, romance

Loneliness has found its way into media discussion and governmental policy agendas. We live amidst an "epidemic of loneliness" (Killeen 1998). Previously associated with the elderly, loneliness is now prevalent among the young (Pittman and Reich 2016, 155). Over a fifth of American adults and almost a quarter of those in Britain always or often feel lonely, lacking in companionship or otherwise left out or isolated (Economist and Kaiser Family Foundation Survey, *The Economist* September 1, 2018). Social isolation has increased. Nearly half of all Britons aged over 65 rely on television or a pet as their main source of company (Davidson and Rossall 2015, 2). Between 2010 and 2019, the number of European households consisting of a single adult without children increased by almost a fifth (18.7 per cent) (Eurostat 2020).

Loneliness has potential impacts on personal well-being, public health, and political stability. Long-term loneliness can destroy health, increasing the risk of coronary disease and damaging immunity (*The Economist*, April 16, 2020). It is associated with mental health problems including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008). The European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) observed that "loneliness and social isolation correlate with feelings of vulnerability, threat and anxiety levels." Hence, loneliness is, potentially, "associated with political and social values" (Joint Research Centre 2018). Noreena Hertz, following Hannah Arendt, argues that isolated, lonely people may find purpose and self-respect through a surrender to totalitarian ideologies. For

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Hertz, the twenty-first century rise of right-wing populism can only be understood in the context of an ever lonelier world (*The Financial Times*, September 24, 2020).

The diagnosis of this epidemic has broadly coincided with the arrival of smartphones and social media. And these new media technologies are often blamed for an increase in loneliness. For many journalists and commentators, we are in the grip of digital loneliness. Conversely, there are researchers and civil society groups who advocate the use of digital technologies as tools to foster social connections and improve well-being. Digital technologies are typically cast as either a cause or a cure for loneliness. They are neither.

This chapter attempts to historicize "digital loneliness." To do so, it considers two ways to historically contextualize media and loneliness. The first considers today's discussions of "digital loneliness" as the latest manifestation of the type of polarized "hopes and fears" discourse that cyclically greets new communications tools. The second approach places technology in the background and foregrounds loneliness as a cultural phenomenon that is shaped by long-term historical processes. Arguably, this offers more fruitful ways of thinking about today's problems. Before proceeding, however, we need to take a moment to ask what loneliness is.

1 What is Loneliness?

Loneliness is complex. For a start, we can divide it into two fundamentally different phenomena. In the short term, loneliness can be positive. Hunger prompts us to eat, and loneliness can prompt us to seek company. Transient loneliness may prompt us to use social media to provide for our psychological needs, to reconnect with friends, to organize meet ups and so on. Like hunger, a brief experience of loneliness bears no resemblance to suffering it in the long term. Chronic loneliness is individually and socially destructive. It can prompt us to ignore our psychological needs. We may become "hyper-vigilant," viewing the world as a competitive, untrustworthy and threatening place. When chronically lonely we are more likely to avoid company and to experience the social interactions we do have with negativity and suspicion. Those who are chronically lonely are more likely to be victims of cyberbullying, as well as more likely to engage in aggressive online behavior (Nowland, Necka, and Cacioppo 2018, 79). Chronic loneliness is, ironically, a self-reinforcing barrier to social interaction (Nowland, Neck, and Cacioppo 2018, 76).

Social isolation is on the rise, but isolation is not the same as, and does not necessarily lead to, loneliness. A person might live alone without suffering for it. Somebody else could live surrounded by family, friends, and acquaintances

and still feel painfully left out. Isolation is not loneliness but it does make it more likely. For John Cacioppo and William Patrick, the experience of loneliness is shaped by our "mental representations and expectation of, as well as reasoning about, others" (2008, 14). The painful experience of social isolation is to some extent determined by individual perceptions. The level of social connection that satisfies our needs is peculiar to each of us and is moulded by individual psychological and genetic traits (Cacioppo and Patrick 2008, 4). Of course, loneliness is about society as much as it is about individual experience. As such, it is also a cultural phenomenon.

We can experience loneliness when there is a discrepancy between the relationships that we have and those that we imagine to constitute a normal level of connection. It may lie in the perception, not that we are isolated, but that we are isolated relative to our peers. Loneliness among young people, in America, Britain, and Japan, for example, was seen to arise more frequently from a "gap in expectations between relationships they have and those they want" (*The Economist*, September 1, 2018). Experiences of loneliness are shaped by how we perceive ourselves and others. Those perceptions, in turn, are products of the cultures that we inhabit. Loneliness is, in part, cultural and, as such, it can be better understood through historical exploration.

2 A Spiral of Hopes and Fears

In 1904, an American telephone salesman wrote that the "telephone takes from the farmer's family its sense of loneliness and isolation" Largely through its influence the "pathos and the tragedy" of farm women's lives would disappear (Fischer 1994, 99). Popular magazines emphasized the same theme, with one arguing in 1907 that, between isolated farm houses, "a sense of community life is impossible without this ready means of communication." Again, the "loneliness and insecurity" felt by farmers' wives would disappear replaced by a sense of solidarity similar to that of a small country town (Fischer 1994, 99). Claude Fischer's work reveals a view, common at the time, that the telephone had transformed the social and psychological lives of rural Americans at the turn of the century. Equally there were popular and academic accounts of the telephone that deplored the amount of time that people, and particularly women, would waste on "gossip, chitchat, and chatter" (Rakow 1992, 2; Tufekci 2014, 16).

The arrival of radio in the 1920s was accompanied by predictions that it would foster peace and a new internationalism. Christopher Morash cites, for example, the *Irish Radio Journal*, which in 1925 opined that broadcasts in Esperanto

would bring the world "a step nearer that state of existence that people have been seeking since the confusion of tongues" (2010, 186). Reverend Canon Theodore O. Wedel, College of Preachers, Washington, wrote in 1957 that the "technological triumphs of the twentieth century" had appeared to move people "out of prisons of isolation into intimate contact with one another". Travel and mass media, like radio, had banished any need to fear solitude. Yet, beneath this he discerned a paradox. Mass communication was not communication between people at all. It was a "tyranny of monologue" that only the lonely and the isolated were likely to need. He concluded that the monologue of the radio may be an anodyne for loneliness but it was "not a cure" (Wedel 1957, 71–72).

In 1961, G.L. Hindson, a British medical general practitioner exploring the relationship between television and health, reported that many people who installed a television in their homes did so because it would help them to relax and avoid boredom. Single people and the elderly thought that they would be better able to "tolerate loneliness, misfortune, or isolation if they had a television set to comfort them" (Hindson 1961, 554). Among its many perceived benefits, the television seemed to be another technology that could ease the torment of loneliness. American advertisements for television would commonly feature a "family circle" with parents and children sitting around the screen. The television was portrayed as the heart of a stable and sheltering home (Spigel 1992, 40). Optimism was not confined to advertisers. Echoing hopes for the new medium, in 1950, Irish journalist John Pudney wrote:

> Month by month there are more and more people joining the television audience of Britain. In time, this great service, which, as far as I can see, has no destructive potential about it may extend over Europe. It will do but good in fact if the whole world is linked together not only by sound but by sight. In these days, information and truth is the most valuable currency in the world; and the one currency which all men of goodwill must share. (John Pudney in *The Irish Independent*, April 25, 1950)

And, at the same time, television was being derided as a technology that would tear families apart and encourage social isolation. Paternal authority would be undermined by the domestic screen. Men would be emasculated as they became couch-bound (Spigel 1992, 63). Housewives would be distracted from their work. Children would be diverted from their lessons and dulled by the medium's passivity (Spigel 1992, 50–51).

In 2014, Zeynep Tufekci lamented that the "lonely world of cyberspace" had become the latest example of the "vast gap that every so often opens between an idea's popularity among pundits," which was considerable, and "its basis in empirical research," which was scant. *The New York Times*, she recounted, had run op-eds that social media or our phones could be eroding

human connections. *The Atlantic* had run a cover story asking if Facebook was making us lonely? MIT psychologist Sherry Turkle had published her 2011 book *Alone Together*, arguing that new media undermined personal relationships. Pope Benedict cautioned young people not to "replace their real friends with virtual ones." But, in the meantime, Tufekci countered, a "growing pile of empirical research" showed that "if anything, the relationship runs the other way – Internet users are more social and less isolated" (Tufekci 2014, 13). Of course, as is often the way in studies of media effects, we can locate a competing pile of research to show that internet users are less social and more isolated (Nowland, Necka, and Cacioppo 2018, 70–71). This pattern, present in academia, is repeated among journalists and social commentators. The internet is either a hotline to friendship or a siren song that seduces and isolates. It is rarely contemplated that it might be both at once. As we can see, this polarized reception for a new communication tool is not new. It is cyclical.

For Nancy Baym, the complaint that new communications technologies have corrupted the youth and furthered the undoing of society are a perennial social fixture since antiquity (2010, 25–26). "There is a strong tendency" she wrote, "especially when technologies are new, to view them as causal agents, entering societies as active forces of change that humans have little power to resist" (Baym 2010, 24). Here "predictable negative stories are met with predictable positive alternatives in a familiar contradictory binary" (2010, 27). As Klaus Schoenbach has suggested, what the hopes and fears dichotomy reveals to us are two underlying myths in modern cultures: a pessimistic belief in the fecklessness of media users, and an optimistic faith in the emancipatory power of technology (2001, 365). These cycles may reveal more to us about elements of our culture than they do about the effects of communications technologies.

To argue that polarized discourses may be recurring symptoms of underlying mythologies is not to dismiss concerns about how mediated communication may be connected to loneliness. Cycles of hopes and fears surround a core of long-term social transformations that are, arguably, more helpful in an attempt to understand how media are related to twenty-first century loneliness. There is a different history of media and loneliness to be told. We need to explore how media have developed in tandem with society serving structural and psychological needs. To better understand "digital loneliness" it is useful to consider how loneliness, social isolation and media have been interwoven since the eighteenth century.

3 The Novel Psychology of Domestic Privatization

Computer technologies allow us to experience simulations of reality. For Turkle, there is a risk attached to our ability to spend part of our lives engaged with virtual worlds. Slow real world people and relationships may not be able to compete with the pace of the virtual where something new is ready at the first hint of boredom (Turkle 2011, 287–288). From gaming to music to social media, change is constant. Newness is a habit. Turkle worried that people might expect a similar level of drama from their real world relationships. When real lives failed to yield comparable excitement people were even more likely to retreat into life lived through a screen. Simulation could be addictive. However, Turkle clarifies that "if there is an addiction here, it is not to a technology. It is to the habits of mind that technology allows us to practice" (Turkle 2011, 288). And these "habits of mind" long pre-date digital media.

European modernization saw the disappearance of "knowable communities." John Durham Peters recounts that "Novels, newspapers, encyclopedias and social statistics all make their decisive first appearance in the eighteenth century. All attempt to describe a social world in which first-hand acquaintance alone is no longer sufficient." These new forms of representation offered "panoramic surveys of the social horizon in varying ways." They mediated society for us and as such modern media became "means of imagining community" (Peters 1993, 565–566). Amid the disruption of modernization, new media forms also became means of imagining ourselves.

In the late 1700s, the homes of merchants and business owners became the epicenter of a profound cultural and emotional revolution. The privatization of the middle-class home was pivotal in European modernization. The bourgeois home, unlike its aristocratic predecessor, was not designed to be a venue for meetings or celebrations that served an economic or political role. It was, unprecedentedly, private. Bourgeois family life was experienced as something separate from, and independent of, both society and economy.

In reality, the experience of family in familial, rather than economic or political, terms depended upon a patriarchal capitalist society (Habermas 1989, 55). For Raymond Williams, the dependence of the private home on the structures and resources of the outside world, "created both the need [for] and the form of a new kind of 'communication'": news from "outside," from otherwise inaccessible sources.

> Already in the drama of the 1880s and 1890s (Ibsen, Chekhov) this structure had appeared: the center of dramatic interest was now for the first time the family home, but men and women stared from its windows, or waited anxiously for messages, to learn about forces, "out there", which would determine the conditions of their lives. (Williams 2003, 21)

The privatization of domestic space brought with it a new psychological and emotional experience. Privatized individuals had a new need for psychological validation through vicarious living and reflection (see Habermas 1989, 43). There was a newfound curiosity about psychology. Thinking about oneself became of way of relating to others, and vice versa. The new mindset was audience-oriented. Letters and diaries became "experiments with the subjectivity discovered in the close relationships of the conjugal family." The diary for example became a "letter addressed to the sender, and the first person narrative became a conversation with one's self addressed to another person." As Jurgen Habermas wrote, the new subjectivity, as the "innermost core of the private" was "always already oriented to an audience" (1989, 49). People made sense of themselves in dialogue, spoken or written, with others.

Initially, the personal letter provided the media substrate for this privatized, purely human subjectivity (Habermas 1989, 48). This was an age of sentimentality and letters were "containers for the 'outpourings of the heart"'. They could not simply report events, the letter was an "imprint of the soul" or a "visit of the soul." They were to be "written in the heart's blood, they practically were to be wept" (Habermas 1989, 49). Quickly transcending the personal, letters were written for wider audiences. They were borrowed and copied. Private, sentimental letters and diaries turned into fiction.

> Thus, the directly or indirectly audience-oriented subjectivity of the letter exchange or diary explained the origin of the typical genre and authentic literary achievement of that century, the domestic novel, the psychological description in autobiographical form. Its early and for a long time most influential example, *Pamela* (1740), arose directly from Richardson's intention to produce one of the popular collections of model letters. (Habermas 1989, 49)

Shortly after the publication of *Pamela*, public libraries appeared. Book clubs, subscription libraries, and reading circles became popular (Habermas 1989, 51). Following *Pamela*, and fictional works from Rousseau and Goethe, the "rest of the century reveled and felt at ease in a terrain of subjectivity barely known at its beginning" (Habermas 1989, 50). The novel became part of middle-class life.

The relationship between authors, works and readers became "intimate mutual relationships between privatized individuals who were psychologically interested in what was 'human,' in self-knowledge, and in empathy." As David Riesman observed, "to be alone with a book is to be alone in a new way." Reading provided an escape from society and offered a new space for reflection (Riesman, Glazer, and Denney 2001, 96). There was an intimate conversation

between authors, readers and fictitious characters. Habermas singles out the work of Jonathan Sterne (*Tristram Shandy*, 1759) which directly addresses the reader within the narrative as placing "a final veil over the difference between reality and illusion" (Habermas 1989, 50). Literature became a backstage that allowed privatized individuals to rehearse for reality.

> The reality as illusion that the new genre created received its proper name in English, "fiction", to shed the character of the merely fictitious. The psychological novel fashioned for the first time the kind of realism that allowed anyone to enter into the literary action as a substitute for his own, to use the relationship between the figures, between the author, the characters and the reader as substitute relationships for reality. (Habermas 1989, 50)

As people wrote to others, and read of other private lives, fiction became part of personal reality. For themselves and others, they became characters to be understood and projected through media.

As we have seen, loneliness can occupy the gap between the relationships that we have and those that we feel that we ought to have. Media may promote such loneliness. Melodramatic and psychological novels served as a salve for the newfound domestic privacy of the eighteenth century. The novel offered vivid, emotionally-heightened insights into other lives. Romantic love was installed as a literary obsession. It became a central life goal, particularly for women, to find their "soul mate" rather than to marry for position or out of convenience. The idea of love changed from companionship to something individualized and idealized. Indeed, a quest for deep, human connection was an intrinsic part of Romantic ideology (Bound Alberti 2019, 68–69). Novels created psychologically realistic visions of jeopardy and passion that could make real life look flat by comparison. The "habits of mind" that concerned Turkle, where reality is not enough, thrive through digital media but they originated in the privatization of domestic life and the psychological and emotional needs that it created.

4 Lonely, but Never Alone

The privatization of the family home created a need to turn to media for validation and social comparison. Ironically, however, part of the problem with twenty first century loneliness lies in our inability to be alone. For Turkle, people find it difficult to, and indeed are reluctant to, experience solitude, which can refresh and restore. Devices offer constant connection and endless distraction. To experience solitude, "you must be able to summon yourself by yourself; otherwise, you will only know how to be lonely" (Turkle 2011, 288). Loneliness then could be

described as failed solitude, where we are unable to achieve some degree of contentment in, and by, ourselves.

Explaining failed solitude, Turkle referred to Riesman's work in *The Lonely Crowd* (published 1950). The book's central concept is other-directedness, a type of social character predominant among professional middle classes in mid-twentieth century America. This mode of social conformity originated in mid-century transformations in work and consumption, which had become less concerned with physical material and more concerned with the management and manipulation of people. The essence of other-directedness is the need to constantly read, and adapt to, one's peers. Neil McLaughlin has emphasized the renewed salience of Riesman's analysis in an age of folksy politicians, confessional reality television and social media as an endless scramble for attention and popularity (2001, 15–16).

The other-directed society values popularity but constantly threatens ostracism. People must compete while fitting in. Polite wars of "antagonistic cooperation" are waged in the workplace and in spheres of taste and style (see Riesman, Glazer, and Denney 2001, 81). The peer-group is the constant, ever-changing moral authority that imposes conformity amid the impression of personal autonomy (Riesman, Glazer and Denney 2001, 82). Peers, however, did not need to be real to enforce conformity.

In mass media, Riesman, saw the rise of synthetic company. Mass-mediated and often entirely fictional peers became examples of what was normal. They became visions of how to be. From childhood, media would "picture the world" and "give both form and limits to . . . memory and imagination" (Riesman, Glazer, and Denney 2001, 84–85). Media represented social groups through stereotypes. Whether these representations were met with acceptance or rejection did not matter. They engendered conformity because people acted in relation to them (Riesman, Glazer and Denney 2001, 97).

Mass media are central to Riesman's vision of the other-directed society. They replaced traditional teachers and storytellers as agents of socialization (2001, 97). Importantly, new twentieth century media forms were instrumentalized. They were funded by, and designed around, the sale of advertising and the promotion of consumerism. New forms of storytelling on radio, in comics and later on in television were central aspects of the training of children as apprentice consumers (Riesman, Glazer and Denney 2001, 96–97). Media became part of how people understood the world and their place in it. They told people how they compared, how they fitted in, what was currently socially desirable and so on. Celebrities through their fame, popularity and success became exemplars in the other-directed society. Instrumentalized, mediated personalities offered models of how to be. They were, in effect, peers.

For Riesman, media shaped standards of personal performances in the same way that they standardized taste and acts of consumption. Mediated peers, for example, could undermine personal investment in pursuits and hobbies. They forced an inevitable comparison with the best of the best in fields like music, sport, and so on. This process would become internalized to the extent that a child could feel themselves in competition with the stars, even if no one else were about (Riesman, Glazer, and Denney 2001, 76). Thus, for Riesman, it was "difficult for an other-directed child to cultivate a highly personal gift." There was too "little private time to let it mature and the standards, imposed by peers immediate and mediated" were too high (Riesman, Glazer, and Denney 2001, 76). In the mid-twentieth century, people were relating to, and fitting in with, instrumentalized, mediated peers that banished effective solitude.

There is, perhaps, no better example of other-directed conformity than in the relationship between television and suburbia. The American suburbs of the 1950s were an amalgam of reality and media representation, of everyday culture and consumer capitalism. Television advertised social aspiration as much as it did consumer products. It also, in its ubiquitous representations of the suburban nuclear family, tutored audiences in what was possible, normal and desirable. Commercial representation and reality merged. As the line between "domestic economy and the commercial culture" became increasingly unclear, "Americans and their families were treated to entertainment designed to sell not only a product, but a way of life." Moreover, echoing more longstanding processes of domestic privatization, this was "a way of life that was reinforced by the design of the very houses in which they lived" (Kelly 1993, 36)

The suburban dream excluded black people, lesbian, and gay people, the elderly, the homeless, the childless and the unmarried. These people did not exist in mid-century television representations of the suburban good life, which was white, middle class, and centered around the nuclear family. Spigel, however, treats the category of "white middle class" itself as a media construction rather than as a real reflection of how people of different faiths and ethnicities experienced their "fractured and complex" identities. Nonetheless, the category is significant because " . . . it was the particular aim of the mass media – especially television – to level class and ethnic differences in order to produce a homogenous public for national advertisers" (Spigel 1992, 6). Media marketers hoped that people would fit in with peers that were imagined for them.

Social media can be taken as an arch example of other-directedness in action. They facilitate peer surveillance. They can collapse together spaces that were previously separate, opening some of our behaviors to unwanted audiences (Tufekci 2014, 17). As Joshua Meyrowitz has demonstrated, this can compromise our ability to inhabit and perform the various social roles and identities

that make up life in a modern society (1986). Social media are often, in effect, mandatory. Tufekci remarked that for many, and particularly younger people, they are only formally optional. To abandon social media would be to "isolate oneself outside of vital spaces for contemporary social life" (Tufekci 2014, 17). We may be condemned to fit in with our mediated peers. And still, none of this is anything new. It is the continuation of a well-established trajectory.

5 Friends, Time, and Money

In *Alone Together*, Turkle offered emotive descriptions of people who had to resort to, or even preferred the simulated company of robots and other machines to that of human beings. In overstretched care homes, for example, nurses and physicians saw seal-like companion robots to be better that the fleeting attention of staff, or no company at all (Turkle 2011, 109). Elderly residents related to robots as though the machines could feel and understand. Students admitted to Turkle that they would accept the company of a machine rather than a romantic partner if the machine could offer a sense of company and a "no-risk relationship" (2011, 8).

The idea that we are ready to accept the synthetic as if it were human is at the heart of what Turkle calls the "robotic moment." This describes a state of emotional and philosophical readiness where people are "willing to seriously consider robots not only as pets but as potential friends, confidants, and even romantic partners". It seems not to matter that a machine might not "know" or "understand" anything of the moments we share with them. Socially and individually, we are increasingly ready to bond with, and confide in, inanimate objects. In the "robotic moment, the performance of connection seems connection enough" (Turkle 2011, 8–9).

The robotic moment emerges, in part, from a desire for control. Smartphones and social media make staying in touch easier but they also allow us to manage our relationships. We can engage with friends and acquaintances on our own terms. We can turn to our devices to fend off loneliness and we can use them as a throttle for engagement and commitment (Turkle 2011, 13). New technologies can offer the benefits of communication without the inconveniences and obligations of the real world. Turkle explored the robotic moment in terms of "human vulnerabilities" and largely through a psychoanalytic exploration of childhood socialization (2011, 26). She revealed that, for many, machines, predictable and controllable, could feel safer than people. Once again, however, we can look to history to see that tendencies to mediate human relations through technology are longstanding and may be rooted in economics as much as in psychology.

For Adrian Franklin, loneliness is a "dominant emotional feature" of market-led societies (2012, 16). Values of freedom and choice supplant those attached to collective belonging. In his examination of loneliness in Australia, Franklin argued that the logics of the market and consumerism replace the bonds of family, community, and work (Franklin 2012). With an economic imperative for flexibility, people may wish to avoid bonds that create limits, obligations and duties. We may prefer bonds that last "until further notice" (Franklin 2012, 15–16). The choice-based logic of consumerism may apply to relationships as much as shopping.

> Consumerism now organizes our individual stance to things in general; everything, including relationships, is aestheticized and evaluated in terms of their capability to offer beauty, desire and pleasure. Everything and consequently everybody becomes disposable (or exchangeable), and the experience of being disposed of (or exchanged), the ever-present fear of immanent disposal (or replacement) and the background steady state of disposability all serve to undermine, erode and ultimately destroy human bonds. (Franklin 2012, 16)

Loneliness might then be driven, not by technology, but by the commercial colonization of everyday life.

Alison Hearn identified self-promotional behavior and self-branding as a central characteristic of the neoliberal age. Hearn attributes this to the dominance of precarious employment and flexible recruitment practices (2008). Such behavior can be found online and in real life, among friends and family as much as in attempts to find work or drum up business. The self is reduced to a "set of purely instrumental behaviors" that are circumscribed by market discourse. The predominance of such behavior promotes Machiavellian cynicism but discourages connection and trust (Hearn 2008, 206). The "branded self" is not only instrumental and performative, it is also mediated. Hearn argues that the self-promotion that we witness on social media, and the anxiety that can accompany it, have their roots in economic transformation. The 1970s, with the rise of neoliberal governance, are commonly seen as a moment when a sea change occurred in economy, work and culture (Harvey; Sennett 2006). The idea of seeing oneself as a product to be promoted is, however, older than this.

In the 1947 book, *Man for Himself*, German psychoanalyst and critical theorist, Erich Fromm, noted the emergence of a "marketing orientation" in twentieth century American society. He saw that "the package, the label, the brand name" had "become important, in people as well as in commodities" (1947, 59). Making a livelihood depended on being accepted by others. Capabilities were necessary but not sufficient for success. Being in demand required a personality. As people became concerned with being "saleable," a "personality market" emerged. Self-esteem became a product of market value. Determined by fashion and other vicissitudes of the market, it lies beyond our control. Identity and

self-esteem are provisional. We are left to find our worth in the opinions of others. Acclaim, status, and success can, temporarily, shore up fragile identities. Fromm acknowledged that "man naturally wants to be accepted by his fellows." However, "modern man wants to be accepted by everybody and therefore is afraid to deviate, in thinking, feeling, and acting, from the cultural pattern" (1947, 123). Fromm's analysis suggests that a culture valorizing a life lived in pursuit of "likes" was entrenched decades before the internet, let alone Facebook, and existed in its most rudimentary form.

At the core of the marketing orientation there is, necessarily, an emptiness. There is the absence of any kind of personal quality that cannot be changed in response to the market. Persistent character traits are likely, one day, to clash with market demand. Personal qualities, principles and peculiarities must be rooted out. Above all, Fromm wrote, "the marketing personality must be free," free that is "of all individuality" (1947, 56–7). The personality market demands that people appear authentic, while abandoning any fixed sense of self. In mid-twentieth century America, Fromm's work provides a trace of a society that demanded performance, and insisted on nothing more. It anticipates a key ingredient of Turkle's "robotic moment." Turkle announced the twenty-first century concern that people may turn to machines for the performance of a relationship. This moment, however, has been a long time in the making.

McLaughlin argues that *The Lonely Crowd* "cannot be understood apart from the dialogue between Riesman and Erich Fromm" (2001, 8). Fromm was Riesman's therapist and, later, friend. The concept of the other-directed character was, according to Riesman, '"stimulated by, and developed from, Erich Fromm's discussion of the "marketing orientation" in *Man for Himself*"' (McLaughlin 2001, 10). David Riesman was a university mentor to Turkle (Turkle 2015, 8). And, Turkle herself described *The Lonely Crowd* as the book that had most influenced her own work (*The Boston Globe*, December 19, 2015). The psychological vulnerabilities discussed by Turkle have a clear intellectual lineage in the work of Riesman and Fromm. They also have clear roots in historic, structural transformations beyond individual "human vulnerabilities."

Conclusion

Loneliness is shaped by cultural and normative expectations. Our success in coping with the pain of loneliness is influenced by how we see other people, how we think about them and what we expect from them. Over centuries of modernization, chains of economic dependence have become global, while

social relations have often contracted into the domestic sphere. Our social and economic dependencies have become detached from the places that we live. The disappearance of "knowable" communities has contributed to social isolation. As the centrifugal forces of modernization have spun families and communities apart, media have acted as connective tissue. They have become central means of connecting to, and knowing, the social world. Thus, they profoundly shape how we perceive others and what we expect from them.

Pamela, as the first sentimental novel, has been identified as the earliest origin of the television soap opera (Cantor and Pingree 1983, 20). Like so many media forms, the soap opera provides a resource that allows people to understand and contextualize their personal experiences. It is a mediated compensation for the privacy of modern domestic life. From the novel, to soap opera, to Reality TV, to Instagram, media offer opportunities for vicarious living, social comparison and personal reflection. Media can compensate for the costs of social fragmentation and help create a richer society and inner life.

Media can also create false impressions of what constitutes a "normal" level of connection. Mediated peers can influence whether we experience our real world relationships as being adequate. Brian Primack and colleagues, for example, observed that rather than offer accurate representations of reality "social media feeds are in fact highly curated by their owners." Regularly viewing "such highly idealized representations of peers' lives may elicit feelings of envy and the distorted belief that others lead happier and more successful lives" This, in turn, is likely to increase perceived social isolation (2017, 6–7). Media allow us to look into the lives of others. They also, necessarily, amplify the drama and emotion of other lives. They show us the world but they must work to maintain our interest. Richardson's *Pamela*, after all, marked the birth of a fictional form that emerged from embellished accounts of daily life.

As Nowland and colleagues have argued, the question of how the internet is used is a far more pertinent question than whether it in itself constitutes a cause of, or a cure for, loneliness. The same media that facilitate social outings for some can be a means of separation for others (see Nowland, Necka, and Cacioppo 2018, 79). How we use the internet is, obviously, connected to who we are and where we are located in an overall culture. Our culture can form a taken-for-granted background but it also carries the historical momentum of long-term movement towards privatization, commercialization and rationalization. Finally, we need to recall the difference between transient and chronic loneliness. There is a tipping point for many of us where tools for connection can become a means of anaesthetizing and perpetuating isolation.

Questions about media and loneliness are questions about a total way of life. Baym observed that "when we communicate about digital media, we are

communicating about ourselves, as individuals, groups and societies" (2010, 23). The same is true of questions about the problem of loneliness. These are questions about economics, architecture and values as much as they are queries about media. The internet can offer neither a scapegoat nor a quick fix here. If we are to successfully address complex problems like loneliness we can no longer approach them through simple questions.

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