

Effects of Technology on People:

Living F2F Conversation and Social Interaction

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For over two thousand years the spoken word has been in the process of being colonized, first by the written word, then by the printed word, and finally by the technologized word. Now, in the Age of the Internet, computer word processing, social networking, and the text message, the spoken word is in decline and at risk of disappearing if we do not react to this evolution, which is quite rapidly disconnecting us from each other as well as from ourselves and the rich inner resources that we all possess. The only solution is to re-establish living f2f conversation and interaction by talking and listening to each other more frequently. The living spoken word heard directly and not via the media or by using a machine is an endangered form of communication which must be kept alive for the sanity and well-being of ourselves and of humanity.

Prologue

Since the appearance of technology, human beings have neglected each other and themselves. Technology, together with commerce, has slowly robbed humans of their innate abilities and amputated them of their capacities. Today, far too many of us find ourselves in poor health, depressed, isolated, alienated, alcoholics, drug addicts, overweight, stressed out, overworked, and exhausted. We are spending less and less time together in living f2f conversation and interaction with our families, friends, neighbors, and colleagues and more and more time working, consuming, eating, drinking, driving our cars, watching TV, being online on the computer, sending emails and text messages. We have allowed this situation to evolve and have not been able, as of yet, to find the strength to resist. We have given up so much in exchange for the glory and never-ending development of science, technology, and commerce, but we have little or no time for a few kind words with a neighbor or a friend or simply another human being whose path we cross during our busy days. This situation is in great need of our deepest attention and wisdom in order to find solutions for more harmony, wellness, and health for human beings everywhere, and also to set a balance between our use of technology and the time we spend in conversation and social interaction with others.

This paper focuses on the decline of living f2f conversation and social interaction, deals with some of the forces that have contributed to this decline, suggests some of the reasons for this decline, and then turns toward some possible solutions. The creation of all the machines and technology, along with the endless products of consumption, are useful to us, but we have become their slaves rather than their masters. It seems perfectly possible for us to reverse this situation. The popular phrase we hear so often today, “we can do it,” can give us the strength and determination that we need in order to accomplish this important task.

The Reign of Orality

Before the spoken word appeared, human beings communicated with each other using gestures, mixtures of sounds and tones of voice, facial expressions and bodily movements. This type of communication known as proto-language, may have lasted for as long as 3,500,000 years. At the time of Homo Erectus, however, when the velar closure in the throat began to develop, the spoken word gradually became possible. Slowly the spoken word emerged sometime between 75,000 and 200,000 years ago. These dates are offered by Dr. Keith Devlin, Senior Researcher at the Center for Study of Language and Information at Stanford University in his book *The Math Gene*. For a long period of time our ancestors used the spoken word as their primary means of communication. They kept important information stored in their brains, i.e., their memories, from where they could “re-member” by “bringing it up” or “recalling it” as needed. For this purpose poetry, song, and dance helped them to remember the words because they were spoken in a certain rhythm, rhymed with each other at the end of phrases, or were spoken or sung with an accompanying movement of the body known as dance. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778), the Swiss-French philosopher in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* came to the conclusion that language began as musical imitation. For many hundreds of thousands of years human beings lived in cultures all over our world totally untouched by any knowledge of writing. All communication was conducted orally using the mouth and tongue to speak and the ears to hear. Orality is still alive and functioning in many cultures today where researchers can visit to discover and to learn about its nature and characteristics. Orality is an important and growing field for research.

The Rise of the Written Word: The Shift from Orality to Literacy Begins

It was back in the time of Ancient Greece that this long period of orality was interrupted by the appearance of the first and most important technological invention in history, the written word, ushered in and made possible by the invention of the alphabet. In order to know the meaning of the written word, it was necessary, of course, to know how to read. After a long period of time of the spoken word that used the mouth and ear to communicate, there was a shift to using the eyes for both reading and writing.

Tracing the origin and evolution of the spoken word (orality) and the location and the date when it first emerged is a most difficult task since the spoken word evaporates into the air (or possibly into the collective consciousness), once it is spoken, and is remembered only in the memories of the people who heard the words as they were spoken. For this reason it is almost impossible to say when the spoken word or language began. There is more concrete evidence available concerning the origin and evolution of the written word (literacy), the location and the date when it first emerged, and its effect on the spoken word.

From 1960 to 1980, especially in England, France, Canada, and the United States, a number of researchers published books on this important subject, which had been overlooked until that time. It was quite an exciting revelation that aroused a great deal of interest. Two extremely important researchers spent their lives studying and writing about the time and place in history when the spoken word was challenged by the emergence of the written word and the implications of this evolution.

Eric A. Havelock (1903-1988), a British born classicist who spent most of his life in the US and Canada, placed the emergence of the written word (literacy) in Greece between 700 and 400 BCE. He became deeply interested in this shift and the impact of this profound innovation

that made it possible for the Greek language to be written down and then read. In 1982 he wrote *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences*, which “deals with Greece’s technological and intellectual transition from a preliterate to a literate culture.”

Walter Ong (1912-2003), a Jesuit priest, historian, and researcher, wrote a most important book which appeared in 1982 entitled *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. He felt that the invention of writing brought “profound changes in thought processes and in personality and social structures.” This excellent book has played an important role in bringing the shift from orality to literacy to the attention of researchers and the public.

From 700 to 400 BCE, the Reign of Orality in Greece saw itself challenged by the appearance first of the alphabet and then of the written word, which can both be considered as early technologies. This situation offers a very fertile but often controversial field of study that attracts many students and scholars. It appears that some of the greatest and most important works of Classical Greece were created during the Reign of Orality and written down at a later time. For example, the blind oral poets Homer and Hesiod and the oral philosopher Socrates never wrote. Here are two incidents that illustrate the importance of the impact of that shift first on doctors and then on the Muses.

Pedro Lain Entralgo (1908-2001), a Spanish doctor, philosopher, researcher, and author, explains in his important book, *The Therapy of the Word in Classical Antiquity* (1970), how the Greek doctors at the time of Hippocrates (460-370 BCE) abandoned their age-old therapy of the word that had been used for centuries in order to begin using more “scientific” procedures such as medication, surgery, and later diet as proposed by Hippocrates, who became the Father of Western Medicine. The highly interesting therapies of the word that had to be abandoned at that time included the spoken and the sung word, voice vibrations or toning, poetry, music, chants, recitations, incantations, and prayers.

Now let us look at Greek mythology and in particular the Nine Muses who were the daughters of Zeus, the God of all Greece, and Mnemosyne, the Goddess of Memory. According to Hesiod, these nine lovely daughters were “carefree maidens of harmonious mind whose hearts yearned for song and splendid dance.” The Muses personified qualities greatly revered by the Greeks in the past and still today. Their individual names hold the clues to those qualities: Clio loved to celebrate; Euterpe was a delighter and a giver of joy; Thalia, the luxuriator, loved festivity; Melpomene was a singer; Terpsichore took delight in dancing and creative movement; Erato, the enrapturer, was extremely sensual and passionate; Polyhymnia sang many hymns, sacred songs and poetry; Urania, the heavenly, knew about astronomy and the heavens; Calliope had a heavenly voice. These lovely sisters, the Muses, inspired anyone who looked at them, sang magnificent songs “with voices lily-soft” while joyously dancing in the mountains of Greece, especially near wells, sources, and fountains where they are described by Hesiod in his *Theogony*. Hesiod was a Greek oral poet (circa 700 BCE), whose poetry was written down after writing began to be used. He spoke of the Muses’ “soft feet” that “move in the dance that rings” and “glide through the night and raise enchanting voices.” He described how “with sweet voices they speak of things that are and things that were and will be and with effortless smoothness the song flows from their mouths.” According to Hesiod, the Muses could “soothe away men’s troubles and make them forget their sorrows.”

These lovely Muses, sources of inspiration for poetry, music, dance, and all the arts, never engaged in reading and writing because these “technologies” did not yet exist. Even if they had existed, the Muses would certainly not have been attracted to activities so strangely and so completely different from their own way of living, where singing, dancing, poetry, and the spo-

ken and voiced word played such important roles. Their spontaneous creative abilities sprang from within themselves like a fountain, and they would not have seen any advantage to sitting quietly and immobile while reading the written word.



Figure 1. Baldassare Peruzzi (1481-1537), *Muses Dancing with Apollo*. This figure shows the nine Muses dancing in the mountains of Greece. They are joyfully laughing, talking, singing, and dancing all at the same time. They all know the words “by heart” and have “memorized” the steps of the dances. This type of activity, where everyone participates and no one is a spectator, was/is popular in oral cultures.

Yet the Muses who represent a very important aspect of Greek culture, the part that sings with beautiful poetic words and dances, were slowly and inevitably introduced to the written word and they were taught how to read. Eric Havelock wrote a highly interesting book on this subject: *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present*.

The appearance of the written word would transform not only the Muses but all of Greek society, and little by little it would influence the cultures of Western Civilization and beyond. Dancing and singing, instead of being activities in which all the members of a culture would engage, would slowly become performed mostly by professionals, and people would become spectators rather than participants.

The Appearance of the Printing Press and the Rise of the Book Publishing Industry

It took many centuries for reading and writing to develop and to spread all over the globe. From the time that writing emerged in Greece between 700 and 400 BCE until the 15th century, reading and writing developed slowly. First there were scrolls and then manuscripts handwritten by priests in monasteries. The spoken word continued to be used as a primary means of communication, but the written word was slowly evolving, waiting for another enormous event: the introduction of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in Germany in 1440, which would make possible the mass production of books. Elizabeth Eisenstein in her extremely interesting book, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (1983), refers to this event as an “unacknowledged revolution.” Her book tells the little-known story of how, only fifty years later, printing presses were publishing books furiously in every city of Europe. The book publishing business grew rapidly. Just about the same time that the printing press was invented, the Protes-

tant Reformation appeared and proposed a bible in every home and obligatory education. People needed to be taught how to read and write in order to read the Bible and other books which were being published all over Europe and beyond. Also at that time, the Industrial Revolution was in its early stages, and commerce began to grow. Industry and commerce, technology, and religion all joined hands to promote the mass production of books. It is easy to see that this situation had a rather stifling effect upon conversation and human interaction. Already in early Modern Europe, people were being forged by the economic and religious forces as workers who in their “free” time were readers and consumers, not wasting time, except occasionally, on conversation and social interaction.



Figure 2. This image of a solitary, silent, immobile reader was inspired by a Greek sculpture and was reproduced in Havelock (1982) to illustrate the cultural consequences of the literate revolution in Greece.

In order to grasp the importance and the enormity of these events, and to better understand the repercussions they had on living f2f conversation and sociability, some study and research needs to be undertaken. Studying history is certainly the key to understanding the present.

As civilization has advanced, human beings have engaged less and less in conversation and sociability. The economic situation expects and needs people to work, to produce, and to consume. People are not allowed to talk or socialize on the job except during very short “breaks.” Conversation is often put down and called a waste of time. It is often referred to as “gossip” or “bla-bla-bla” or other derogatory terms. The book publishing industry, the media, and technology all have a natural and understandable tendency to discourage rather than to encourage living f2f conversation and sociability, which has no value on the market place. After all, they want people to buy and use their products and see their productions.

The Industrial-Technological Revolution in the 20th and 21st Centuries: The Final Stage in the Decline of F2F Living Conversation

We are now in the midst of another formidable revolution, the Technological Revolution, which is having a very great effect on the spoken word and on people and their relations with each other. Only fifty years ago, the computer appeared on the scene. Its appearance and development is causing the Technological Revolution to move ahead at super-sonic speed as we move deeper into the 21st century. We are paying a very high price to have all these machines at our disposal. It is urgent that we evaluate this situation.

What effect has all this had upon us? In order to use all these machines, read all the books, buy all the products, and work to earn enough money to do all this, life is going faster and faster. The acceleration is bringing a generation who need to always do things “real quick.” Multi-tasking is causing us to be easily distracted. Despite all the machines for easy contact with each other, we often feel socially isolated because most of our contacts are by machine, not close warm living human contacts.

Newspapers and magazines are constantly publishing major articles on this subject. Here are a few recent titles: “Lost in E-mails: Tech Firms Face Self-made Beast”; “A Plugged-in Existence”; “Information Overload”; “Social Isolation”; “We have Created a Self Made Beast and it is Technology”; “Anti-social Networking”; “You Gotta Have Friends: A Study finds that Americans are getting lonelier”; “Social Isolation Growing Rapidly in the US.” Just this year, in February 2010, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) released a powerful CD entitled “digital_nation—life on the virtual frontier,” which dramatically shows the alienation and disconnection people are feeling everywhere on earth due to the way technology is developing. Many people are thinking, talking, or writing about the urgency of this situation. It is up to us all to seek the necessary solutions to reset a balance and to ease up this situation.

Solutions to the Situation:

Connect, Communicate, Converse with Compassion and Understanding

In order for us to move ahead to the future, we need to go back to the past, because we have forgotten, left behind, and abandoned an essential element that we need so that we can live our lives more fully and with more compassion. That element is our humanity. We need to wake up and observe first what has happened to us and then to look deep into history to see what happened to our ancestors who, over the centuries, had to endure the slow process of losing their abilities and of seeing the decline of living face-to-face conversation and social interaction as technology appeared, developed, and grew. All of us have been amputated of many of our inborn abilities and of other abilities that we have acquired during our lives. The media and especially advertising have convinced us that written or electronic communication is somehow better and more accurate than our own living spoken word. We have been convinced that somehow watching life on a screen is more interesting and exciting than living our own lives. We have become spectators, seated and immobile, and consumers, always convinced that we need something outside of ourselves. We have lost confidence in our abilities, feelings, and intuitions, and in our rich inner resources that we hardly know exist or how to find. It is clear that we need to re-become participants in life and not just observers and spectators. By connecting with each other, we may be able to realize this goal.

There are solutions to ease up this situation, which we need to consider seriously. Many philosophers and observers of life have given us important messages as to how to accomplish this task. One such recent message came in the form of a graffiti written out on a wall in Paris, France, offering this advice: *Converser, c'est le seul façon de résister* [To converse is the only way to resist]. Conversing with each other can mean exchanging ideas about creative and positive action we can take in order to resist this contemporary imperative that is shaping us into consumers, spectators, non-stop workers, and users of machines.

Today, many of us spend a tremendous amount of our time seated in front of a computer or TV screen or sending messages to each other. It is clear that we want to be in touch with each other, but most of the time our contacts are by machine and not by real-life living face-to-face

contact. Before all the technology evolved, people definitely used to spend more time together and as a result they were happier and human relations were smoother and more harmonious.

The Importance of Intercultural Communication

Today, we come into contact regularly with people not only from our own country but from all over the world and of all ages and from different walks of life, religions, and political opinions. This situation requires great sensitivity, sympathy, understanding, and tolerance. Intercultural communication skills can help us to interact more smoothly and harmoniously with people on a face-to-face basis with ease and without misunderstanding or arguments. We need to seek a deeper and more compassionate understanding of the human experience of living a life on earth in our world of today. It can be very helpful to cultivate more knowledge of the many cultures of our world, their histories, their geographies, and their current situations.

Words of Wisdom from Philosophers

The following words of wisdom can help us to realize the importance of compassion for each other. The Greek philosopher Plato (427-347 BCE) had the following words on this subject: “Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” Henry David Thoreau (1817-1872), the American philosopher, writer, and poet, also observed that “the mass of men live lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.” Aldous Huxley (1894-1963), the English novelist and author of *Brave New World*, uttered this important reflection during the last hours of his life: “Try to be a little kinder.”

Encouraging Hospitality rather than Hostility

People will converse with others if they smile and have a friendly expression. A cold, unfriendly facial expression does not invite conversation or social interaction. Therefore another solution to keeping conversation and sociability alive is to encourage whenever and however friendly and gracious relations, kindness, understanding, tolerance, politeness, and respect among human beings, regardless of their age, nationality, backgrounds, and way of life, the language they speak, their face, religious beliefs, or points of view. If we practice this mode of conduct, others will follow.

Under normal circumstances, friendly relations should exist between and among human beings. After all, we have a great deal in common with each other. For instance, we all have two legs, two arms, a body, and a head, and we all breathe, eat, sleep, and have a heart that is constantly beating. We all share the knowledge that we are not on this earth forever and that we will leave here with nothing in our hands. So it would seem perfectly reasonable for us to consider talking, conversing, and interacting with our fellow human beings more often and in a warm and friendly manner whenever the opportunity presents itself while shopping, at work, at school, in a bus, at the airport, anywhere, everywhere—but often we ignore each other. So many opportunities to meet interesting people are passed by.

Attending and Organizing Gatherings

Another important solution is that we attend, organize, and encourage gatherings, get-togethers, meetings, salons, conventions, dinners where living people can have the opportunity to meet and greet one another, to share experiences, resources, and ideas. These can be very pleasurable and unforgettable events when people “come together.”

Giving Presentations, Writing Articles, Distributing Invitations and Information about Events, and Stepping Out to Meet and Greet Our Neighbors

Some of us may be interested in giving presentations before groups on the importance of friendship, conversation, social interaction, and cordial relations among human beings. We can write articles, commentary, and booklets on these subjects for publication in newspapers, magazines, and newsletters anywhere in the world. We can distribute documentation and information (brochures, maps, flyers, etc.) at Information Booths and Welcome Centers about events and happenings in our community, neighborhood, university, etc., or in the city where we live, thereby encouraging people to step out to meet their neighbors and to discover their surroundings and participate in interesting and exciting events.

Offering Comfort and Cheering Words to Those in Need

We can also offer comfort, understanding, and support to those who are in need, are having trouble surviving, or are suffering from pain or anxiety. These people may only need a few comforting, soothing, or cheering words in order to feel much better. Human kindness and assistance is one of the best ways to help people to regain their strength and their courage in order to carry on despite difficulties.

Living f2f conversation is still alive in many places on our earth, but it is slowly being menaced by the spread of cellphones, computers, and the many communication technologies. There are examples in history showing how human beings have tried and succeeded to keep real living f2f conversation and social interaction alive despite the negative forces working toward their demise. One of these examples is the European salons that took place from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century.

European Salons: An Historical Example of Keeping F2F Conversation Alive

Salon is a French word from the Italian *salone*, meaning a living room. Living rooms are rooms that are supposed to be alive with real people and real activities. Before living rooms were invaded with machines (TVs, computers, CDs, etc.), living rooms were places where people came together to enjoy each other's company and to talk. Often, they gathered around a piano and sang. Sometimes people played cards or read aloud from a book, or told a story around the fireplace. There was a relaxed congenial atmosphere.

During the sixteenth century in Renaissance Italy, women began to hold salons in their homes where music, conversation, and literary matters were featured. Conversations could be very interesting and many people were attracted to these gatherings, which were also very pleasurable. Salons spread to neighboring France in the seventeenth century, and from there they spread all over Europe and beyond. The idea was very popular and people (mostly women but also couples, single men or women, and brothers and sisters) enjoyed having interesting gatherings in their homes and regularly held salons. For those who liked to do this, it was an extremely gratifying activity. Some salons took place once or twice a week and some even more frequently and lasted for as long as fifty years.

The European salons were attended by both women and men, of various ages and from different walks of life and cultures. In the beginning, these gatherings were called *assemblies* from the Latin verb *assimulare* [to gather together]. Salons took place in private homes and were

often organized by the woman of the house, who was most often but not always an older woman. Because women and young people were almost always present at these gatherings, people were encouraged to be polite and to not use vulgar language or behave in a vulgar manner or to engage in heated arguments about politics or religion. All the rooms in the house including bedrooms were used for these gatherings. If the hostess was elderly, had just given birth, or was not in very good health, it was perfectly permissible for her to receive people—fully dressed, of course—while reclining on her bed in her bedroom. Visitors pulled up chairs and stools and placed them around her bed. Madame de Rambouillet, one of the first women to hold a long-term salon in her home in Paris, often received people in her bedroom, which was called the *Chambre bleue* [Blue Room]. There she introduced many amazing innovations and her Blue Room became very famous. Another older woman, Madame de Deffand, hosted a very popular salon in her home in Paris for twenty-five years, although she was totally blind. A well-known French writer, François de la Rochefoucauld, although unable to walk, attended salons regularly where people sat around him in rapture listening as he read from one of his books.

Different types of activities took place at each salon, depending upon the interests of the hostess. Some were more musical, others more literary, some philosophical, or scientific, etc. But, in general, people came to talk to each other, to sing, to dance, and to play games. Writers would read from their latest books, and poets would recite their poetry. People interested in history would tell a tale from the past. Letters from travelers were read aloud. There was an intermingling of people of all ages. Unfortunately both Louis XIV and Napoleon did not favor the salons. After the French Revolution, salons slowly disappeared, although the French still have high esteem for a good conversation.

Because of their innate ingeniousness (unless it has been stifled, or never had an opportunity to emerge), many people are able to invent and innovative activities to do together with others in a group situation. All that is needed is a favorable place to meet, a friendly host or hostess to set the tone, and a group of congenial people who want to come together in a spirit of friendship and equality. Competition, criticism, and jealousy are always discouraged in favor of social harmony, conviviality, and understanding.

The primary activity of a salon or gathering is, was, and always will be to converse and to enjoy being together with others for social interaction. Conversations are mostly on subjects of importance and of consequence. Those who attend salons are always expected to greet and to exchange at least a few words with each person present. In the European salons, different activities took place in different rooms, and then everyone came together in the largest room or available space if there was a special presentation. People played games with words, letters, or playing cards. There was even a possibility for private tutoring or assistance in writing. Often, new words were invented. There was singing and dancing and music. There were surprises to bring excitement to the gathering, even practical jokes. Two people or more could leave the gathering for a walk in a nearby park or garden. Sometimes everyone would leave together to go to the countryside to visit someone's home. The number of activities was wide and varied. Relaunching salons is one of the solutions to keeping living conversation and social interaction alive.

Epilogue

There may be a “huge disconnect” today in America but there is also a “huge compassion” that we have for each other and for all of humanity. There are many imaginative solutions that we can make use of in order to restore our humanity and at the same time establish a better balance between our use of technology and the human living contact that we need to have

with each other, and which the Hawaiian word “*Aloha*” describes so beautifully. “*Alo*” means “in the living presence of” and “*ha*” means “the spirit or breath.” Perhaps we can create a new word in English to clearly describe living face-to-face conversation and social interaction that cannot be taken over by technology.

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