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REALITY, EMOTIONALITY, AND INTIMACY IN DIGITAL SOCIAL CONNECTING: THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING SUPERCONNECTED[2]

Stvarnost, emocionalnost i intimnost pri digitalno-društvenom povezivanju: iskustvo superpovezanosti

ABSTRACT: *The below excerpt from Superconnected: The Internet, Digital Media, and Techno-Social Life focuses on what I have learned about the reality, emotionality, and intimacy of the digital experience in the course of interviewing over 200 people and reviewing related research from a number of disciplines, including Sociology, Psychology, Communication, Media Studies, and Information Science. Over and over again, those whom I have interviewed tell me that digital life is real life and is filled with activities and moments that have great meaning for them. For more on the context for these interviews, my research methodology, and the multidisciplinary research that I reviewed and synthesized, please see the second edition of Superconnected, in English or in Serbian. And please note that a third edition of Superconnected is slated to be published by Sage Publications (Thousand Oaks, CA, USA) in 2020.*

KEY WORDS: Internet, digital life, online relationships, emotionality, intimacy

APSTRAKT: *Izvod iz knjige Superpovezani: internet, digitalni mediji i tehno-društveni život govori o onome što sam saznala o stvarnosti, emocionalnosti i intimnosti digitalnih iskustava više od 200 ljudi koje sam intervjuisala kao i na osnovu analize relevantnih istraživanja iz oblasti sociologije, psihologije, komunikologije, medijskih studija i informacionih nauka koje sam sprovela.*

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2 In September of 2019, I visited Belgrade, Serbia to launch the translation of my book *Superconnected* (2017) into Serbian – *Superpovezani* (2019). I spoke about the book to many audiences, including members of the general public at the Cultural Centre of Belgrade, a group of teachers, librarians, and psychologists as part of the Digitalni Pogon conference, and as the keynote speaker for the international academic conference "New Horizons in Culture, Media, and the Arts" sponsored by the University of the Arts' Faculty of Dramatic Arts. It was a wonderful trip made more special by the opportunity to share my research into digital social connectedness with so many people from a wide variety of backgrounds. I am happy to have the opportunity to share some of my research in this volume of Sociologija as well.

Iznova i iznova su mi oni koje sam intervjuisala govorili da je digitalni život zapravo stvarni život i da je iz njihove perspektive on ispunjen veoma značajnim aktivnostima i događajima. Za više detalja o samom kontekstu ovih intervjua, istraživačkoj metodologiji i multidisciplinarnom istraživačkom pristupu molim vas pogledajte drugo izdanje moje knjige Superpovezani koje je objavljeno na engleskom i srpskom jeziku (Clio, 2019). Ovom prilikom želim da dodam da je u pripremi i treće izdanje ove knjige koje će objaviti Sage Publications (Thousand Oaks, CA, USA) tokom 2020. godine.

KLJUČNE REČI: Internet, digitalni život, onlajn veze, emocionalnost, intimnost

Reality, Presence, and Proximity

Digital life is, simply, real life. The reality of living with technology, especially in computerized/digital form, is sometimes described as an *augmented reality* (Jurgenson, 2012a), which means that digital technology has enhanced, or augmented, the environment to a significant extent. For people who live in technology-intensive societies, this happens all the time. But the truth is that even before the age of computerization, life has been augmented by technology.

From the earliest of times, human beings have created tools that would enable them to build shelters, use fire, colonize the natural world, transmit information to one another, and defend their territories—in short, to do whatever it took to survive. As is discussed in Chapter 2 of *Superconnected*, the invention of spoken and then written languages allowed people to make greater sense of the raw phenomena they encountered every day and to communicate in increasingly more abstract and complex ways across time and space. People have always used tools and technologies to build and augment their societies. In modern societies, all kinds of ICTs enable the transmission of concepts and ideas.

Online experiences, and the social connections and environments created with the assistance of digital technologies, are a critical component of modern techno-social life in which people's responses are genuine, meaningful, and often profound. When we are online, our brains and bodies think and feel and act. We may experience bodily fatigue or pain, worry or be delighted, make a friend or become involved in an altercation, strengthen a relationship or destroy one. What a person does online has an influence on the rest of one's life because it is *a part of* that life, not a separate thing. It is important, then, to think about and describe this environment in ways that highlight its realness—for example, *not* to call the face-to-face realm IRL (which means "in real life" and wrongly promotes the idea that the face-to-face sphere is more real than the digital).

In my interviews with people who find and form connections over the internet, I heard many descriptions of how unexpectedly deep and authentic these connections could become. For example, as a member of an online group dedicated to religion told me,

> I didn't come (to this online group) looking for friendship, and am surprised at how some of the regular posters have become real people to me. Some of them just have a very personal way of expressing themselves

> that I've come to recognize, and sometimes, to like very much. This has nothing to do with spelling or mental brilliance or even depth of faith, for that matter. I think what draws me to some people here is their authenticity and their willingness to be imperfect. But even the ones I don't especially like have touched my heart to the extent that I sometimes worry about them and wish I could reach through the computer and help them, somehow. In fact, now that I think about it, it is amazing how real some of these distant, unseen, frequently anonymous message board posters have become. But, of course, they *are* real! (Chayko, 2002, p. 114)

The authentic and deeply personal nature of the connections and communities that are formed in digital spaces has been a common theme throughout my research.

People also told me that they felt that they could get to know very well even those individuals whom they encountered exclusively online, absent any face-to-face interaction. In response to my request for a description of the "personal" nature of the online relationship, one young woman mused,

> How can it be personal? It *feels* like it is. If people said, "Oh, gee, do you know so and so?" I would say yes. I wouldn't say, "Oh well, I met him once." I'd say, "Oh yes, I know him." (Chayko, 2002, p. 86)

Because online social connections are so often experienced as absolutely real and deeply personal, it is but a next step to perceive digitally encountered others to be *present*.

The internet and digital media facilitate the perception and experience of proximity and presence in ways that transcend the physical. When connecting online, those with whom we connect are often perceived to be "really there." This sense that the other is "really there" is called *social presence.* According to the social presence theory advanced by communication scholars John Short, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie, a communication medium can provides its users several ways to become aware of one another's presence. They can know one another's qualities, characteristics, and inner states and begin to perceive and experience one another as socially present (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). This theory, which predated the internet and digital media, has since been updated to explain the variety of ways that people can use these technologies to be cognitively present to one another even as they are physically distant (see Chayko, 2002).

Feeling the nearness or presence of others across distances has been called *perceived proximity* (O'Leary, Wilson, & Metiu, 2014) and, when electronic media facilitates the connection, *electronic propinquity* (Korzenny, 1978; Walther & Barazova, 2008). In a large-scale international study, professors of business Michael O'Leary, Jeanne Wilson, and Anca Metiu found that colleagues working hundreds of miles apart from one another communicated as often, on average, as colleagues who were located in the same office. Additionally, colleagues separated by distance felt the same level of shared identity and sense of cognitive and affective closeness as those who worked together in the same location. Individuals at work, the researchers determined, can form strong bonds despite being separated by large distances.

Similar effects have been found when popular culture is the mediating element among physically separated people. Sharing common interests in a television show, movie, or type of music can bring about a strong sense of shared identity and community among devotees. They, too, can come to feel that they inhabit a social world with one another. Cultural products and franchises that can inspire such involvement among users have an excellent chance of popular success. Communication and media professor Henry Jenkins calls this "the art of world making" (2006, p. 21; for more on this, see Chapter 9 of *Superconnected*).

With the advent of digital and mobile technology, however, members of any group or "world" can enjoy *ambient copresence*—an ongoing but background awareness of the presence or nearness of others (Ito & Okabe, 2005, p. 264; see also Chayko, 2008, 2014; Gray et al., 2003; Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2002). Portable devices allow users to keep their channels to one another open nearly all the time if desired, checking in on one another often and even leaving "away messages." These short, frequent updates convey that one is "there" (see Park & Sundar, 2015). It is becoming common for groups of people (especially younger people) to stay in near-constant contact with one another this way via group chats, texts, and tweets (see Chayko, 2008).

Social media and blogs do much to enable a sense of presence among dispersed users. They allow the presentation of experiences and stories neatly and simply. They provide opportunities for individuals to share ideas, enter a conversation, and gain a sense of the presence of others in the conversation or group. Core members of social media and blogging communities, the most active participants in the group, are most likely to welcome new members or to monitor and enforce (formally or informally) the rules and norms of the group. Having had a stake in it the longest, they tend to take on the responsibility for safeguarding and communicating the group's collective memory and identity. But even those who lurk in the group or participate less actively help to shape it and can have their presence sensed (Chayko, 2008).

Often, ambient copresence takes place in spaces defined either formally or informally as online "hangouts"—the kind of spaces in which people can spend unstructured time with few (or no) obligations and responsibilities. Over 70% of U.S. adult internet users go online at least occasionally just to pass the time or to have fun (Rainie, 2011). They may pass the time leisurely, lurking or hanging out on a social media platform like Facebook or Twitter, checking out a discussion board, visiting a chat room, playing a game, reading a blog, spending time in a Google hangout, or some combination of these. It is possible to spend large amounts of time in such spaces, entire days and nights, just hanging out, checking out what others are doing and saying—not necessarily interacting with them but still sensing others' presence in an ambient way, feeling a sense of perceived proximity and community with them. "I just like being there," one woman told me, describing her affinity for an online hangout, "and I don't know why" (Chayko, 2008, p. 30).

Sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls these kinds of hangouts *third spaces* (1989). They are places other than homes and workplaces—the first and second spaces—

in which people spend time and relax, usually without a fixed agenda. While Oldenburg focuses on casual offline places, such as coffee shops, pubs, beauty shops, and the like, the concept is quite useful to also describe the kinds of informal online spaces in which people simply hang out. And such spaces are plentiful.

Hangouts, both physical and digital, are important because they provide a space for people to spend unstructured time in the company of others. They permit individuals to engage different aspects of their lives and identities than they do at work and at home. By spending time with those who are like-minded, simply experiencing a sense of shared identity and culture, individuals can feel known and accepted.

Presence in third spaces is optional and voluntary, and there are no requirements. In them, people can get to know one another (or not) in a low-obligation, low-pressure way. Spending time in third spaces can help people relieve everyday stresses while they make contacts and feel a sense of community. Being around others in this kind of environment can help people relax since the kinds of obligations that exist at work and at home are absent. They can also make the individual feel part of the larger society, part of the culture, connected to others.

Lurking or participating minimally, or lightly, in third spaces can provide the opportunity to be part of a larger dialogue, to gain a sense of others and their conversations. It also provides that all-important, life-affirming feeling of being "plugged into" or integrated into a society (we is discussed in greater depth in Chapter 9 of *Superconnected*). Because it is so critical for people to feel connected in this way, it is generally healthy to spend some time in third spaces, so these spaces can be seen as good or "healthy" for the society as a whole. Spending too much time in them, though, can certainly represent or lead to an unhealthy escape from offline responsibilities.

Sometimes, to be sure, people do not feel the nearness of others when they are online. They feel solitary, alone. But more often, they feel proximal and connected, part of meaningful social worlds. And, as it turns out, the brain is wired to consider these social worlds to be fully and completely real.

Emotionality and Intimacy

It is common for time spent online to have an intimate, emotionally rich dynamic. Intimacies and emotions are exchanged profusely and nearly instantaneously online. In fact, they serve as a kind of "glue" for the relationships that form there. This "emotional glue" is especially important in the absence of the "physical glue" that face-to-face interaction can provide.

Digital environments and the experiences created in them can be extremely, perhaps surprisingly, intimate. As social creatures who desire interpersonal closeness, human beings are highly creative in finding and forging intimacy, including in digital settings. While a wide variety of types of relationships can form online, spanning the spectrum of human intimacy, even the most fleeting

of relationships can be highly intimate when those involved disclose a great deal about themselves and feel that they have come to understand much about the other person as well. It is this kind of personal disclosure and understanding and the positive progression of a relationship (even if it does not turn out to be especially long term) that render it intimate and meaningful. Short-term relationships can be highly intimate, just as they can be offline.

The human need and desire to form intimate relationships is so strong that it happens all the time online, often without great difficulty. Mobile and social media play a big part in this. Since many people take cell phones with them wherever they go, they can use small bits of time to check in on others and/or provide updates, whether by Facebook or Twitter or some other social media platform. Interestingly, this is how intimacy tends to develop face-to-face as well—in the small, everyday moments of connection as much as in grand gestures and experiences. And with a device with which to connect and network always at one's side, it has never been easier to remain in constant contact with others, even a large number of others, and to find that intimacy has developed, sometimes quite unexpectedly and swiftly (see Chayko, 2002, 2008; Fortunati, 2002; Fox, 2001).

The emotions that arise in digital environments are those that sociality inspires in all of its forms. Feelings of warmth, belonging, intimacy, even excitement are commonly generated online. Fear, anger, and disgust are elicited as well. A surge of emotion often arises when two or more people feel that they "click," whether online or offline (Baker, 2005; Chayko, 2008). This feeling can be so strong and satisfying that to obtain it can be central to people's desire to use social media (Chayko, 2008; Chmiel et al., 2011).

I have termed these emotional surges *the rush of human engagement* because they are generated in and by the human engagement so often sought and found online. In my research, many described it exactly that way—as a "charge" or a "rush." People told me of crying real tears when learning of a tragedy online, experiencing a surge of excitement upon getting good news or receiving just the right text at the right time, becoming angered or enraged when a negative comment was placed on their blog, or becoming downright giddy when an online exchange became flirtatious or romantic. These waves of emotion can provide "a rush that I really can't explain," as one online connector described it to me (Chayko, 2008, p. 77). According to another,

> It's great when you find somebody that loves the book that you love. The feeling is kind of "Oh, wow!" Or "Oh, me too!" . . . I think it's cool. I think it's neat. And I like those kind of connections. And I have even tried to sort of cultivate them. . . . ["Can you describe these connections for me?" I asked.] Oh, they're definitely bonds. (Chayko, 2002, p. 70)

In short,

> Sometimes when I get back to my room I just move the mouse and go to my favorite site and check my profile, and it's like someone has left me gold or something! (Chayko, 2008, p. 62)

This rush of excitement can be similar to the rush one gets from drugs, sex, gambling, chocolate, and other things that activate the pleasure centers in the brain (for more on how this works, see Chapter 7 of *Superconnected*).

MIT internet scholar Sherry Turkle claims that people sometimes turn to information and communication technology when they *want* to feel something. They use the technology as a kind of conduit for emotion and use it to express love, hate, fear, rage—basically any mood imaginable. People also go online to moderate or to try to control their moods and emotions (see Chayko, 2008). At the same time, media companies may be trying to influence our emotions as well, whether by using algorithms to ensure that we see certain kinds of postings in our social media timelines (as occurred in the famously controversial Facebook "emotion contagion" experiment) or by encouraging us to "emote," albeit in a "nicely packaged" way (Polgar, 2017). "When these technologies have a power over our affect, or emotional life, you have ask who is doing the emoting," suggests professor of philosphy Evan Selinger. "The more that Facebook can trigger certain emotions, and if we're unclear that they're being triggered in a rather contrived way, then to some sense we are outsourcing or delegating some of our emotional life without being fully conscious with how that process of delegation is working" (in Polgar, 2017).

Emotional responses in technology use is, therefore, a complex process. Of course, all human interactions are complex, messy, unpredictable, and fraught with risk. Examples abound of sad, unfortunate, even fatal outcomes of digitally-influenced emotional responses—for example, relationships that have ended at the suggestion of online infidelity or lives that have ended when online bullying or public embarrassment became too much to take. Events that take place in a digital environment have profound consequences for people and are, again, undeniably real.

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