Digital Technology – Inhibitor of or aid to relationships?

This paper investigates how digitally mediation shapes *how* we relate. The most immediate relationship is with the digital device, making it possible to control image and emotional engagement while avoiding vulnerability. Communicating with multiple invisible/anonymous audiences raises questions: "To whom am I responsible?" Are those invisible audiences real and their affirmations valid? Am I real in what I project? In order to relate well with others, adolescents need to learn to negotiate vulnerability, authenticity, affirmation, and responsibility. Digital spaces are not the best for learning. How do we practice its use so as to grow the capacities for relationships?

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Introduction

A few years ago I changed the status of Kenneth Gergen's book *The Saturated Self* in a course syllabus; I moved it from required to recommended reading. While it informed my teaching, the student had found his 1991 assessment of technology too pessimistic and too antiquated such that the text proved more of a distraction than a help. His references to the new technologies of fax machines and email they found humorous, but more importantly, they did not experience technology to be as problematic as he did. They did not bemoan the "social saturation" digital communication invited. Rather they found the ability to communicate with anyone anywhere was an essential part of their lives; it was that by which they connected to people and ideas. Likewise, they did not identify with his assessment that we are resigned to living lives of *multiphrenia*, which reflect the expectations of the diverse communities and communications rather than a cohesive sense of self.[1] "What's his problem?" they would ask. "It's not all doom and gloom."

How do we measure the impact of digital technology on our lives and the lives of young people? Should it change how we minister to adolescents and young adults who perceive digital technology as an essential element of their atmosphere? Even the theme of this conference, "Technology and Transformation" suggests that somehow something is being transformed. What is it? And is it to be welcomed or a source of worry?

In investigating these questions I have found it important to note the difference in interpretation between mature users, like Gergen, and that of younger users, like my students in their mid twenties, and even those younger. Is the difference to be attributed to generational

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[1] Kenneth J. Gergen (1991), *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books), 73-74.

distinctions between those who came to maturity before much of this technology was available and those who have grown up in the midst of it? Is it simply that those familiar with the technology are less anxious about its role in their lives?[2] Or is it that those who are not "digital natives" feel some sense of loss amidst our shift to greater dependence on technology?[3] Regardless, the responses of the younger users point to the fact that digitally mediated communication is part of our world and lives. More and more of the activities of daily living take place in digital spaces.

However, I believe the reactions of older users stem from more than simply the frustration of having to master new tools. It has to do with *how* we are engaging with one another. Digital technologies – by changing the media of communication, change the manner in which we interact with each other. Particularly, the increased dependence on digitally mediated communications – be that email, blogs, feeds, social media sites, video, texts, messaging, shared images – means we spend less time in face-to-face, real-time communication, where it is possible to see and respond to the person in front of us. In this paper I want to investigate how that change of media – from face-to-face to digital – impacts the manner in which we relate.[4] More importantly I want to focus on how predominant use of digitally mediated technologies might impact the relational capacities of adolescents who are just learning the fine-tuned skills of relating.

To assist in this discussion I turn to the works of danah boyd and Sherry Turkle, both of whom tend to be measured in their interpretations of our use of digital media. In *It's*

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[2] Neil Howe and William Strauss (2000), *Millenials Rising: The next generation* (New York: Vintage Books).

[3] The term "digital natives" was coined by Mark Prensky to indicate those who have grown up in a world where digital technology has been a given of daily life. Mark Prensky (2001), "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon*, vol. 9, no. 5 (October).

[4] An important caveat is to note that humans have been using mediated communication for millennia. With the development of written text, and certainly with the printing press, human communication has been mediated in text form, allowing the communication to endure over time and space. Digital communication has upped the ante with speed, distance, access, and volume.

Complicated: The social lives of networked teens, danah boyd argues that by and large teens use technology to understand and fit into their social worlds. Based on her research, she finds teens are not obsessed with the technology; they are obsessed with the social – connecting and fitting in with their peers. The task of fitting in, she claims, is the same task adolescents have been doing for generations even though the platforms have changed with time.[5] In *Alone Together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other,* Sherry Turkle has moved from an earlier more optimistic stance concerning technology and adolescents to a stance wherein she is worried about the impact of technology on the quality of human interactions.[6] Turkle notes the multiple ways in which technology is used to retreat from direct engagement so as to limit emotional availability and vulnerability.[7] I find these two authors together help me think about why and how adolescents engage with digital technology for the purpose of relating, and how the practices of mediated interaction potentially shape relationships.

Managing volume

Perhaps our fascination with the development of communication technology has caught our attention such that we focus on it, with all its promise for possibilities, and do not notice what I believe is an equally important change in contemporary society: the exponential expansion of the human population. To put it a bit differently, we probably would not be so impacted by digitally mediated communications if we were not trying to communicate with so

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[5] danah boyd (2014), *It's Complicated: the social lives of networked teens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 8.

[6] In her earlier writing Turkle noted the value of digital communications (web pages, social media, virtual reality) for providing opportunities for people to express their identity through media that opened users to wider and different worlds than they met face-to-face. She opined that those online spaces allowed people – notably adolescents – the chance to explore identities and express themselves freely. Sherry Turkle (1984), *Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), and (1995) *Life on Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster). She notes this change of position in the preface of Sherry Turkle (2011), *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books), xi.

[7] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 190.

many people. Whereas the human population remained relatively stable for most of human history at fewer than one billion people, in the past couple centuries the number of people on earth has grown exponentially to exceed seven billion people at the time of me writing this paper. While there are potentially robust and important discussions on what that population explosion means for justice and care (think food production and distribution, political access, health care, etc.) I want to focus this discussion on the sheer volume of people we each encounter in the course of a day, week, or month, whether face-to-face or through digitally mediated technologies.

Why is this important? Just a few hundred years ago an adolescent would have met a few hundred people in the course of his or her young life.[8] Today the average adolescent in the United States has the capacity – and sometimes the expectation – to meet that many people in the course of a single day. Even you, the reader of this paper, have hundreds if not thousands of contacts – family, friends, professional, interest based – some of them are dear and while others are barely known. Regardless, each presents some level of obligation or attention. This encounter with difference and volume is made more possible, Gergen claims, through the "technologies of social saturation," modern travel and communication.[9]

While neither Turkle nor boyd comment on the volume of connections, I believe that the retreat from direct engagement they identify is – in part – an effort to manage the sheer volume of encounters and connections in our lives. Our efforts through digitally mediated communications attempt to make up for the fact that we have limited face-to-face time with most of these connections. The technologies allow us to connect to more people by sharing more

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[8] This material is drawn from my research into the experience of adolescence in sixteenth century London. Theresa O'Keefe (2014), "Growing up Alone: The new normal of isolation in adolescents," *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, vol. 13, no. 1, 63-85.
[9] Gergen, *The Saturated Self*, 61-63.

widely (social media, online forums, blogs, feeds) or more expediently with individuals (texts, messaging, emails). However, while it helps us manage the current volume of connections it also encourages an expansion of that volume; it takes little effort to include one more recipient on an email, add one more "friend," or "follow" someone new. Yet each adds expectations – whether mailing, following, or posting – of time, attention, and interest. Within some communities there can be repercussions for not engaging with as many people as possible, as often as possible, through the various media as they become available. This is particularly true of adolescents who want to be on the same platforms as their peers, so as to feel part of the community. In the midst of the volume, speed, mobility, and plurality of connections in contemporary life, it is easy to meet multiple fascinating people and to revel in the world of possibilities. Digital technology allows us to connect with others far and wide, and to maintain connections over time with those we no longer see face-to-face. According to danah boyd, this is particularly true of contemporary adolescents, whose lives are scheduled from beginning to end of day, with almost no free, unstructured time with their age peers.[10]

However, it is difficult to be known and know others well if for no other reason than the limitations of time. In that regard digital technology should be a help, in that it allows for speedy communication with many people, even those at a great distance. But does it always help? There is certainly a place for technological communication, and unquestionably an allure to it, but the opportunities it offers are not always aids. For adolescents and young adults in the early twenty-first century, digital communication has been a part of their lives from very early and is increasingly the mode of interaction throughout their day. A 2015 study from the Pew Research Center found that 92% of teens between ages of 13-17 go on line daily, and as much as 56% multiple times a day, with African-American and Hispanic youth with the most frequent internet

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[10] boyd, *It's Complicated,* 20.

use. Pew questions how access to technology divides along racial or economic lines. The research reflects that household income does factor in whether youth have access at home to desktops or laptops, with wealthier households the most likely to have one or both. Similarly white teens have greater access to desktop and laptop computers. However, the same report found that "African-American teens are the most likely of any group of teens to have a smartphone, with 85% having access to one, compared with 71% of both white and Hispanic teens."[11] Whether this access is a good or bad is debated among various voices.[12]

In the remainder of this paper I identify briefly some of the challenges particular to digitally mediated communications and how they may affect our learning to relate well and develop robust relationships. While this is in no way an exhaustive discussion, it is impossible to consider life in this century without some consideration of these media. I name some of the problems that digital communication contributes to our efforts to relate – while seeming to solve the challenges of communication.

"I <3 my… !"

Contrary to popular presumption, boyd argues, "Most teens are not compelled by gadgetry as such – they are compelled by friendship. The gadgets are interesting to them primarily as a means to a social end."[13] It allows them to connect with peers with whom they have limited unstructured, unmonitored time face to face.[14] Given that, the first issue is our relationship with the technology itself. It is a love-hate relationship where we love the

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[11] This perhaps notes a shift in digital access along racial lines. Amanda Lenhart, "Teens, Social Media, and Technology Overview 2015," *Pew Research Center: Internet, Science, and Tech*. http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/09/teens-social-media-technology-2015/ Accessed June 23, 2015.
[12] Among the authors who see dire consequences for our digital lives is Giles Slade (2012), *The Big Disconnect: The story of technology and loneliness* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books). Also, Nicholas Carr (2010), *The Shallows: What the internet is doing to our brains* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co.).
[13] boyd, *It's Complicated*, 18.
[14] This need for free time with friends boyd found as a major driver for teen use of technology. Their time was so structured between schooling and outside activities that unlike prior generations of teens, there was little space to "meet and hang out." boyd, *It's Complicated*, 90.

technology for how and with whom it can connect us; we keep up with people's news even if we are not able to spend time with them face to face. But we hate it when it fails to work as we hope and when it pulls us in too many directions; when it pulls away from the present, and when we are ignored by others who are so pulled.

Devices themselves become the "portal" through which relationships are experienced. For some the separation from the device is felt as separation from companionship.[15] Thus the relationship with the device becomes immediate and that with people becomes mediated. Turkle writes of the device rendering us "absent" to the immediate because of our constant "tethering" to the lives of those not physically present:

> A "place" used to comprise a physical space and the people within it. What is a space if those who are physically present have their attention on the absent? At a café a block from my home, almost everyone is on a computer or a smartphone as they drink their coffee. These people are not my friends, yet somehow I miss their presence.[16]

She notes that our public spaces have become places of "social connection" but not to those physically there. The very tool designed to connect us is used as a means to avoid face-to-face contact. Even if a device sits on a table it represents potential interruptions. It pings, rings, vibrates, or glows and attention is taken from the immediate in favor of the mediated.

Furthermore the mediated formats have a tendency to flatten the difference in importance among our relationships. While boyd found that "most teens use a plethora of social media services as they navigate relationships and contexts" addressing distinct audiences on each platform, I would still argue that the modes shape the communication.[17] Texts and messaging – used for more private communications – tend to abbreviate interchanges. Whereas the more

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[15] Walsh, S.P., White, K.M., and Young R.M. (2009), "The Phone Connection: A Qualitative Exploration of how belongingness and social identification relate to mobile phone use amongst Australian youth." *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 19, no. 3, 225-240. Turkle, *Alone Together*, 248.

[16] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 155-156.

[17] boyd, *It's Complicated*, 38.

public forum (social media, blogs, and feeds) offer longer communiqués by a scattershot means of broadcasting. Frequently important relations receive the same information – and in the same format – as those less intimate. This is not to suggest we do not have some affection for all our connections, but the constant use of these media blurs the distinctions among them.[18]

Finally, if we spend most of our time in mediated relations then we advantage that format and disadvantage the skills of face-to-face relating. Simply, we become good at what we practice. We can easily become unreflective users allowing the technology and other people's expectations for it to drive how it is used. We can lose sight of our relational objectives. That which is designed to keep us connected becomes a means of disconnection from or partial attention to what is really important to us. We need to be mindful of how we differentiate among the tens, hundreds, or thousands of connections such that we nurture, and are nurtured by those few that are most important. Rather than simply avoid mediated forms of relating, we may have to develop practices around their use that actually help and do not undermine the relationships they are designed to serve.

Looking for control – avoiding vulnerability

We, by our Pavlovian response to the rings, pings, and vibrations, intimate that we welcome the intrusion. However, Turkle observes an increased aversion to the immediacy of live phone conversations.[19] She notices a shift towards preferring texts, messaging, and other forms that create space in the interaction, such that we can keep our emotional responses at a distance from the immediate exchange. The mediated space in some ways promises greater control than the face-to-face. Through texts or posts we can be selective about what we disclose;

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[18] Turkle tells the story of a man who learned of the expected birth of his brother's baby along with hundreds of others on the new father's blog post. The experience left the storyteller wondering what was wrong with his relationship with his sibling that this event did not credit a more immediate communication. The blogging brother did not see the lack of distinction as a problem. Turkle, *Alone Together*, 208.

[19] Turkle, *Alone Together* , 200.

our face is not available to give away our feelings; we can react to others invisibly. We do not

have to trust the other or ourselves. The technology creates a buffer. Turkle observed such

avoidance among adolescent girls:

> These young women prefer to deal with strong feelings from the safe haven of the Net. It gives them an alternative to processing emotions in real time. Under stress, they seek composure above all. But they do not find equanimity.[20]

Turkle repeatedly found that adolescents, in particular, used mediated forms to side-step the

immediacy and vulnerability of emotions. They claim that "texting offers protection."[21]

However the protection may be an illusion, for they create a new pressure of then appearing

constantly composed.

In these efforts we can discern two related desires. One is to present oneself flawlessly.

The other is to respond flawlessly. Yet this desire for control is illusory. In other writing boyd

argues, "these digital bodies are fundamentally coarser, making it far easier to misinterpret what

someone is expressing."[22] While the young author may be selective in what he has shared, he is

not able to see how it is interpreted. So he cannot respond immediately with corrections or

explanations. Even if the exchange is in almost-real-time – like texting or messaging – the

physical absence of the reader allows for the possibility of the intended reader to invite an unseen

third – or more – into the "private" exchange.[23] Unintended readers can read and offer their

anonymous reactions to the original posting before the originator has a chance to correct or

clarify intention. [24]

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[20] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 206.
[21] Turkle, *Alone Together,* 190.
[22] dana boyd (2008), "Why Youth <3 Social Network Sites," in *Youth, Identity and Digital Media*, David Buckingham, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 129.
[23] These audiences are what boyd calls networked publics, "the space constructed through networked technologies and the imagines community that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice." boyd, *It's Complicated*, 8.
[24] Additionally boyd warns that "persistence" and "searchability" are two elements that differentiate networked-mediated communication from unmediated. She and Turkle agree that mistakes made stay and are even searchable

The technology allows too easy an escape from the awkwardness or time consumption of face-to-face or real-time encounters. While initially attractive such avoidance means we may never overcome the awkwardness or become less self-conscious in the engagement. What seems like avoidance is only postponement; we are all awkward until we are surer of ourselves. We learn the skills of conversation in their exercise, especially in intimate settings like those among close friends and family.[25] If we limit face-to-face conversations to light-hearted or brief exchanges then the subtle and careful skills of conversation in more trying, loaded, or difficult moments remain a mystery, not only for those intimate settings but also for public engagement.[26] Finally, by avoiding the face-to-face we miss potential moments of affection and grace that can come with such encounters.

Invisible audience – to whom am I responsible?

In part the desire to present a flawless image comes from not really knowing at any given moment to whom you are communicating and the context of that communication's reception. Most adolescents – and even mature adults – imagine they know the audiences of their digitally mediated communications, even though readers and the settings in which they are reading are invisible. Adolescents and young adults usually share texts, messaging, and social media with people they know face-to-face. However, those are readable and available to countless others. In a different way, adolescents and young adults compose blogs, personal webpages, and feeds as means of identity exploration and expression, and to find audiences beyond the people they know face-to-face. Susannah Stern reports that creators usually identify themselves as their

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long after the fact, regardless of the original poster's initial intention and audience. boyd, "Why Youth <3 Social Network Sites," 126. Turkle, *Alone Together*, 169.

[25] Nicholas Burbles (1993), *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and practice* (New York: Teachers College Press), 43.

[26] In other research I have uncovered the need for trust to develop in order for potentially difficult topics to be discussed. Theresa O'Keefe (2009), "Learning to Talk: Conversation across religious difference," *Religious Education*, vol., 104, no. 2, 202-206.

primary audience; similar to anyone who has ever kept a journal or diary, they are writing themselves into self-reflection.[27] Secondarily, creators seek validation from invisible audiences. Even if they are displayed in public sites available to unknown others, adolescents perceive of their postings as private communications that should not be read by those the author hopes to exclude. [28]

While this clearly raises concern for security, I suggest it also raises questions of responsibility. Responsibility is learned within the context of relationships; relational settings foster the development of care and concern as well as communicate the particulars of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. However, invisible audiences are easier to dismiss. Stern's research shows there is a tendency among teen authors to ignore the comments of invisible critics.[29] Similarly Turkle notes that when we encounter people who do not interest us, or with whom we disagree, there is a dispatch with which we treat them such that "we invent ways of being with people that turn them into something close to things."[30] Such dismissal may also be evident in cyber-bullying, wherein the consequences of a young person's participation is not immediately seen, thus can remain invisible to the perpetrator.[31] Regular engagement with a largely invisible audience raises multiple relational questions: To what degree – if at all – am I responsible to the unseen and largely unknown audience? To whom am I responsible? How am I to learn to care

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[27] Susannah Stern (2008), "Producing Sites, Exploring Identities: Youth Online Authorship," in *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media*, David Buckingham, ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 101-103.

[28] It is in this space between private self-expression and the seeking of validation that Stern finds the technology blurs the line between public and private audiences. Stern writes: "some youth authors think of their communication as private when the people they know in real life do not see, hear, or read it, regardless of who else does." Stern, "Producing Sites, Exploring Identities," 104.

[29] Stern, "Producing Sites, Exploring Identities," 111.

[30] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 224.

[31] Shaheen Chariff (2009), *Confronting Cyber Bullying: What schools need to know to control misconduct and avoid legal consequences* (New York: Cambridge University Press). Robin Kowalski (2008), *Cyber Bullying: Bullying in the digital age* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing). Sameer Hinduja and Justin Patchin (2014), *Bullying Beyond the Schoolyard: Preventing and responding to cyberbullying* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin).

for them? Should I care, especially if they don't reciprocate that care? Do I have to listen to them when they disagree or criticize? Am I responsible if someone gets hurt?

Developing a sense of responsibility is connected with developing a sense of care for others. Care and responsibility reflect a person's capacity to move beyond immediate self interest to see and learn to attend to the needs of another. However, we need to come to know the other, who they are, what they feel, what is important to them, in order to respond appropriately. Furthermore, we develop emotional intelligence – how to read the subtlety of emotions – over time in face-to-face encounters.[32] When the other remains invisible and anonymous, these opportunities are missing. Rather, one is encouraged to reflect only on oneself – how one is perceived and validated – as the only known player in the exchange. Ongoing engagement with invisible audiences lacks the prompts for care and responsibility beyond oneself and encourages self-consciousness but not necessarily self-awareness.

Are you there? Are you real?

However, the invisible audience is not only consequential for what we respond to them, but for what they offer us. The invisible audience lacks context. We do not know from where they speak, if they are real of fictitious, or if their responses to us are authentic. Both Stern and boyd write of how important online affirmations are to young authors.[33] But how are we to know whether the affirmations or critiques are authentic? Similarly Turkle find that users frequently invest in digitally mediated persona (e.g., avatars), even unintentionally, while

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[32] James Russell, Jo-Ann Bachorowski, Jose-Miguel Fernandez-Dols (2003), "Facial and Vocal Expressions of Emotion," *Annual Review of Psychology*, vol. 54, no. 1, 329-349. James Russell (1994), "Is There Universal Recognition of Emotion from Facial Expressions? A review of the cross-cultural studies," *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 115, no 1, 102-141.

[33] Stern, "Producing Sites, Exploring Identities,"111-112. boyd, "Why Youth <3 Social Network Sites," 129.

simultaneously wondering to what extent the person behind it is real.[34] Playing to the invisible audience, while being unsure of the same audience's validity, puts us in a double-bind. We work for their validation, while questioning its real value, but are too scared to move in a new direction and risk losing what we have. We present who we believe others want us to be, while remaining unsure of whether there is real affirmation for what we present.

Avatars, profiles, blogs, feeds, and websites seem to offer something valuable, but it remains largely unconfirmed if not backed up by real people and full lives. We wonder if the exchanges are authentic representations of someone's thoughts and feelings. Are they performative efforts designed to elicit responses? Are they simply habitual and thoughtless reactions? Or are they marketing tools designed to garner market research or consumer loyalty? Their value as sincere affirmations remains questionable without confirmation in an eventual face-to-face encounter. The reality and value of the affirmation can only be tested when the anonymity ends. Humans need the love and concern of others; we need affirmation and connection. But this raises questions: Whose approval do I seek? How widely should I seek it? And should that affirmation come without challenge or critique? Do I listen only to those who easily agree? Can I dismiss those who challenge, disagree, or are unkind? If I seek out anonymous others – believing that is easier than facing the real people in my life – is their approval real? Are they real?

Am I real?

On the other side we need ask, Are our representations fully authentic? dana boyd celebrates digital sites as spaces where adolescents can explore their sense of self without the consequence of immediate reactions. She writes that websites, social media, and blogs seem to

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[34] Turkle recounts a story of a young woman who has invested five years in an online relationship because it was more affirming than her face to face relationships. However she was left wondering if the person on the other end was real. Turkle, *Alone Together*, 248-251.

allow adolescents "more control online – they can choose what information to put forward, thereby eliminating visceral reactions that might have seeped out in everyday communication."[35] Similarly Turkle notes the mediated formats invite a certain performance, in that one chooses what is made public.[36] These modes allow for editing one's real life so that they may appear more attractive to audiences. The technology also allows for designing particular persona for distinct audiences; those audiences then can remain separate and ignorant of different, conflicting persona.[37] We omit what we think will not appeal. Or we shape ourselves into what we believe people want. We can try things out in ways we never would in front of people we know. This can be liberating, especially if we are unsure of acceptance among our immediate community. Granted, as a young adolescent begins to become self-conscious of being seen by others, it is natural to try on different poses or personas to see how they feel and how others respond. Thus the possibility of limited and selective exposure and the absence of consequences are initially attractive. But if the bridge to the face-to-face world is not made, it can contribute to further isolation as she lives a fractured life, for the value of that acceptance is not felt in the interactions with the people known in real life.

Ultimately our satisfaction comes in being known fully – not partially – and accepted in that fullness. Our life's work, initiated in adolescence, is to begin to make sense of the various parts of ourselves – family, history, race, religion, ethnicity, education, socio-economic status, sexuality, talents – and see them as an integrated whole. This is a lifetime's work in that all these elements and more are constantly shifting in their importance and intensity. We are aided in that integration by living amid people who see the multiple facets and reflect them back to us.

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[35] boyd, *It's Complicated,* 129.
[36] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 180-182.
[37] Turkle offers extensive examples of users who feel their lives online are more real than their lives off line. *Alone Together*, 192-198.

By their presence they demand that we make some sense of all the facets of ourselves. Even the people of Nazareth had to ask of Jesus, "Is he not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and the brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters here with us?" (*Mark* 6: 3). It is worth noting that Jesus denies none of this. His return to Nazareth suggests that all parts of his life make up who he is and how he is understood.

Distracted from myself

Throughout this paper I have focused on the way digitally mediated communication shapes how we relate to others, but it can also shape how we relate to ourselves. The siren song of technology is that we will find connection to the wider world – people, ideas, and possibilities – and that much is very true. However, it also draws our attention away from investigating our own impressions, ideas, desires, and vulnerable self-reflection. Turkle and boyd both write of users being constantly drawn to their devices as a means of keeping current with their worlds. However the same devices that connect us with others can be a means of escaping from a deep encounter with ourselves. Presented with free time and the threat of facing our own thoughts, we reach for our devices to read feeds, watch videos, listen to music (perhaps all at once), or record our own words for distribution on our texts or blogs. The smartphone in hand feeds into and encourages our FOMO – fear of missing out. Our constant consumption of more public material offers a way to avoid engaging with our private selves. In reference to the capacity for mobile technology to "accelerate" our efforts to connect outside ourselves, Turkle writes, "Rapid cycling stabilizes into a sense of copresence. Even a simple cell phone brings us into the world of continual partial attention."[38] This continual partial attention keeps us from going deeply into any single task or idea. Instead, like a water-bug remaining buoyant on the surface by spreading

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[38] Turkle, *Alone Together*, 161.

its weight across six separate points, we skim over the top, working hard not to be drawn deeply in at any single point.

It takes the adolescent – as it does all of us – time and solitude to become aware of, then comfortable with, his thoughts, feelings, and desires. It takes even more time for him to discern how each may change over time and circumstance, to learn what endures and what is passing. By avoiding, and so remaining on the surface, of his inner world, he is more likely to remain self-conscious and not move to the deeper work of self-awareness. Self-consciousness can entrap him in focusing on other's reaction to him, what they think and like about him. The focus on their reactions can keep him from seeing what he understands and likes about himself, to come to identify what is true and enduring in him. Such is the story of a college student who had an opportunity to walk the Comino de Santiago in northern Spain. He offered this reflection on the practice of silence and the absence of technology over the course of the many days: "This is the longest time I've been with my own thoughts in my life. At home I'm lucky if five minutes pass before I check my phone. Here I can actually feel me train of thought progressing."[39]

From managing to relating

Opting out of using digital communication is not possible in the twenty-first century. It is used in just about every aspect of our lives. For today's adolescents and young adults it is increasingly the case that relationships are initiated and maintained primarily or exclusively through digital means, thus shaping the imaginative norm by which the relationship is experienced.[40] However, it has its pitfalls alongside its possibilities. In many ways the technological platforms undermine the incremental process of developing the skills of relating: learning to be vulnerable; learning to be trustworthy; learning to get over awkwardness and self-

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[39] Zachary Jason (2015), "The Voyage: Jeffrey Bloechl's philosophy class was a test of mind, heart, and body," *Boston College Magazine*, vol. 75, no. 3 (Summer), 26
[40] Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," 1-6.

consciousness; seeing how we impact others and how they impact us; developing an integrated identity. These are not all-or-nothing abilities, or a matter of being perfect. We learn these skills incrementally; first awkwardly, and then with time and practice we gain refinement, but never with a guarantee of perfection. The back and forth movements of affection, risk, vulnerability, hurt, reconciliation, renewed affection, and increased trust take time and space. They are developed within the context of real people who confront us by their realness and do not let us turn away, but encourage us with love and care to work through the difficulty to find the joy.[41] This back and forth is exactly what contributes to relationships becoming robust and intimate. To avoid the risks altogether is to avoid the prospect of knowing and being known.

For all the reasons named above, digital technology may not be the best aid for learning and developing robust relationships and the skills of relating well. Thus we need to develop practices for using the technology that limits it to what it does well. Yet the prevalence of digital communication raises question for ministry about the development of relationships. How do we practice the skills of relating? How do we lovingly confront and affirm? How do we call one another to the face-to-face with sufficient frequency such that we learn to overcome awkwardness? How do we manage difficult conversations? Do we communicate the joy of being known, mistakes and all? Do we invite that kind of knowing and vulnerability? Do we teach how to be trustworthy? To be responsible? Without some reflection, our practices around the use of digital media can make our relating more problematic instead of better. The rise and pervasiveness of digital technologies raises the stakes for our need to be very intentional about communicating and practicing the skills of relating well, for the digital settings by their nature, largely undermine those skills.

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[41] Immanuel Levinas argues that the face of the Other confronts us and makes demands, such that we encounter the infinite in them. They cannot be reduced to our ideas of them. Immanuel Levinas (1969), *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press), 87.