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A Brain in Our Pockets: Arendt, Thinking, and the New Media

Internet use changes our perception and our experience by affecting our sense of self and our thinking. In her work of the 1960s and into the early 1970s, Hannah Arendt explains what thinking is and discusses the consequences for society when its citizens do not think. Arendt describes thinking as a becoming two-in-one, which allows for a silent dialogue with the self. Having silent dialogue requires undistracted time alone. In this paper, I will suggest that the new media: smart phones, computers, the internet, social media, etc. can interrupt or replace the time alone needed for thinking. I will use Marshall McLuhan's 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* as a basis for describing the new media. In his book, McLuhan shows how new media serves to extend ourselves. I use this idea to suggest that technology such as cell phones (due to the addictive way they are able to configure our awareness) have disrupted Arendt's idea of the two-in-one silent dialogue. Further, I will discuss how technology has shaped the way in which we view ourselves by exploring the work of social psychologist Sherry Turkle. Turkle suggests the idea of a 'second self' that only exists as an online persona. Then this paper analyzes how and why people do create these alternate selves and how that process of second self construction also disrupts solitude. There will also be a brief discussion of developmental psychologist Erik Erikson's work to explore how the new media is affecting childhood and adolescence. I will also discuss the difference between face-to-face conversation and its digital

equivalents, and how digital conversation can decrease one's ability with the face-to-face is emblematic of how thinking has been replaced. In an effort to give credence to the new media, I also briefly discuss how these new media affect political activism through the research of Zeynep Tufekci's *Twitter and Tear Gas* which is a study of what she calls networked protest. She lays out how the internet allows activists to organize more efficiently, creating an 'adhocracy', where people take on responsibilities based on ability and willingness, as opposed to having been assigned the responsibility due to position in the movement.

Hannah Arendt quotes Cato, a Roman stoic, "Never am I more active than when I do nothing, never am I less alone than when I am by myself."¹ Arendt illustrates that the Socratic-Platonic explanation of thinking is that a person exists in the plural and not in the singular. Therefore, when we are thinking we are not truly alone; we are in the company of ourselves. Loneliness, she says, is being deserted by oneself, a temporary inability to become two-in-one in a place where there is no one else around to keep us company.² This idea of being two-in-one allows a silent dialogue with the self; what Arendt calls solitude.³ It means a person may be alone, but they are actually with someone - themselves. This shows the distinction between solitude and loneliness, with the former meaning the literal physical act of being alone and the latter being caused by loss of the internal dialogue. The issue of concern for the purpose of this paper is that solitude's corresponding activity is thinking, and when thinking is interrupted by

¹ "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy", 99

² "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy", 96

³ "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy", 98

someone or something (in this case by the consumption of the new media), the two-in-one becomes just one which, in turn, causes thinking to cease.

One of Arendt's main concerns is what happens when one is not thinking, going so far as to say there are people who are, inherently, "non-thinkers". She references Kant's distinction between thinking and knowing.⁴ Arendt explains that we have to demand of people the ability to think and to tell right from wrong regardless of their level of intelligence. Kant said, "inability to think is not [the same as] stupidity; it can be found in highly intelligent people". A prominent example of this from Arendt's earlier writings might be found in Adolf Eichmann, a high ranking Nazi, whose 1961 trial she covered in detail in a series of articles for the *New Yorker*, which later became *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. While she never outright calls him unintelligent (in fact, orchestrating some of the systems he created in the Holocaust would have involved a high degree of intelligence), she believed he was incapable of thinking for himself. During the war, he simply took the thoughts and commands of his superiors, the chain of which began with Hitler, and followed them exactly. We know that Eichmann was able to design his own original ideas: such as the clichés he dreamt up and repeated throughout the trial: "he spoke in clichés that had nothing to do with the reality of the situation, where 'mere words' would have been deeds, and where it had perhaps been the duty of a clergyman to test the 'uselessness of words.'"⁵ Arendt believed that Eichmann's lack of thinking for himself was the reason why he was able to do what he did to facilitate the Final Solution; it was not necessarily because he was a

⁴ "Thinking and Moral Considerations", 163

⁵ *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 131

sadistic anti-semite (as is often suggested about Nazis), but perhaps because he did not know how to *not* follow orders.

It is clear that non-thinking is dangerous. Arendt explains that when people are shielded from thinking about and examining rules, they hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct are in a given society. They get used to the possession of these rules even if they have not examined the content of them.

In other words, they get used to never making up their minds. If somebody then should show up who, for whatever reasons or purposes, wishes to abolish the old 'values' or virtues, [they] will find it easy enough, provided he offers a new code, and [they] will need no force and no persuasion - no proof the new values are better than the old ones - to establish it.⁶

When changes to the code are made while society is distracted by other things - such as by debilitating poverty and inflation in Weimar Germany or by hunger and fear in Stalin's Russia - it is easy for potential totalitarian leaders to take command and insert their own immoral ideas in place of basic virtues. The examples Arendt uses are that people allowed for a reversing of the "basic commandments of western morality - 'Thou shalt not kill' in the case of Hitler's Germany and 'Thou shalt not bear false testimony against thy neighbor' in the case of Stalin's Russia."⁷

We can see then, that radical change in morality has occurred before, without the use of media as we know it today. What I am suggesting is that the use of new media could make such negative change all the easier. On social media in particular, norms, (what Arendt calls "mores -- a mere set of manners, customs, conventions"⁸) can be very easily defined and observed, making it all the easier for an individual to act in

⁶ "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 178

⁷ "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 178

⁸ "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy", 54

accordance with them, even if the new norms go completely against those of the past. In *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, Arendt suggests that in Nazi Germany any sense of objective morality had been broken down into these mores which could be and had been “changed at will”.⁹ She suggests that these mores can be easily changed (or morality take this form of relativist intensity) when people are not thinking.

Part of Arendt’s conception of thinking is that its ultimate conclusion is always negative, “‘This I *can’t* do’ rather than, ‘This I *ought* not to do.”¹⁰ This conception of thinking is not one of judgement of the action because whether or not the action is moral, Arendt claims, should be self-evident. Thinking is considering whether or not one can live with herself if she commits such an act - after all, who wants to come home to a criminal? She says that since the moral implications of an action should be obvious, people who are thinking “never [doubt] that crimes [remain] crimes even if legalized” and they do not feel guilty or have a “crisis of conscience”.¹¹ They understand what is truly right from wrong and figure out to act accordingly.¹²

The idea that *you* have to live with yourself is interesting because Arendt uses it, in part, to explain that there is a two-in-one. Who exactly is it that you would have to live with? She is suggesting that there is, or that each of us should conceive of, ‘another’ that lives, acts and thinks with us. Thinking, Arendt suggests, is our having discourse with this ‘other’ and trying to determine where the two of you agree. The two have to find agreement because you can not walk away from each other.

⁹ *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, 54

¹⁰ *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, 78

¹¹ *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, 78

¹² For clarification, any cognitive process that helps you determine how to act specifically is separate from Arendt’s, and therefore our, discussion of thinking.

This is also where Arendt makes the distinctions between loneliness and solitude. Both, it seems, can happen anywhere and have little to nothing to do with other people (or lack thereof). Loneliness is simply what happens when our “other” has become inaccessible to us. Arendt therefore says that you can be lonely anywhere, under any circumstance, it “can very well overcome us in the midst of a crowd.”¹³ Solitude, on the other hand, requires a complete lack of external distraction, or at least intense focus in the face of distraction and it is necessary for thinking. It is when you become the two-in-one, a state whose “corresponding activity” is thinking. You can be drawn out of this state by having your attention taken away, by doing another activity.¹⁴ When brought into conversation, for example, the two-in-one again becomes just one.

In her 1971 essay, “Thinking and Moral Considerations”, Arendt explains the relationship of thinking to other actions; that its “chief characteristic is that it interrupts all doing, all ordinary activities no matter what they happen to be... the moment we start thinking on no matter what issue we stop everything else, and this everything else, again whatever it may happen to be interrupts the thinking process.”¹⁵ Thus, in order to think we need to remove external stimuli - thinking and the doing of any other activity are mutually exclusive.

While reading *Understanding Media* I came to realize that Marshall McLuhan’s project and mine share similar goals. We both want to understand and hopefully facilitate discussion about new technologies and media. McLuhan is not trying to

¹³ *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, 96

¹⁴ *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, 98

¹⁵ “Thinking and Moral Considerations”, 164-5

disavow or eliminate technology because that would not be feasible. He explains the gravity of the issue as follows:

The new media and technologies by which we amplify and extend ourselves constitutes huge collective surgery carried out on the social body with complete disregard for antiseptics. If the operations are needed, the inevitability of infecting the whole system during the operation has to be considered. For in operating on society with a new technology, it is not the incised area that is most affected. The area of impact and the incision is numb. It is the entire system which is changed¹⁶

What I feel needs to be understood about our cell phones and internet usage is that they are not merely “rotting our brains” as many a parent has said to child since the dawn of the screen, but that the effect on the individual has greater societal and political effects. While technology and media in themselves are neither good nor bad¹⁷, I feel (and I think so does McLuhan) that allowing the effects of both to go on unexamined is dangerous.

McLuhan is concerned with how technology affects our sense of ourselves. In *Understanding Media*, he repeatedly refers to technology as extensions of our bodies.¹⁸ He says that technology changes the equilibrium of the senses, much in the way losing a sense (such as becoming blind or deaf) would change it. For example, television combined non-visual and visual perceptions which fed the American sense for the audio-tactile. Television technology, therefore, essentially increased the input to the senses on a mass scale. To use new media technologies, says McLuhan, is to accept them as extensions of ourselves and “accept [them] into our personal system”.¹⁹

¹⁶ *Understanding Media*, 64

¹⁷ *Understanding Media*, 11

¹⁸ *Understanding Media*, 45

¹⁹ *Understanding Media*, 46

McLuhan discusses that technology compartmentalizes and extends abilities of the mind. He refers to such extensions as “self-amputations” and this idea becomes particularly pertinent to discussing the category of personal devices of which cell phones are a part. Cell phones have become about as close to a part of our bodies as they can be without having one surgically attached. McLuhan says that technology is an extension of our bodies and senses and so they become, “fixed charges on our personal energies, [also] configure the awareness and experience of each one us”.²⁰ I think his “charge on personal energy” can help explain the phenomenon of the phone circle.²¹ If we take one’s personal energy to mean a type of potentially contagious psychology²², we could perhaps say that when the phone changes your “energy” it in turn changes the “energy” of those around you. Perhaps entering into digital space gives a similar kind of social cue as that of a scared jump, causing those around you react in some equally scared way. These non-tangible, pre-social interactions are hard to quantify but are nonetheless real.

Technology’s ability to “configure awareness”, as McLuhan puts it, is important in order to explain exactly what makes technology (particularly ones as addictive as the kind I refer to) so potentially dangerous. One of the things, I think, that makes human beings remarkable is that we are able to have control over our awareness. It is one of many abilities that makes us distinct from other animals. We do not have to focus our attention on survival, so we can shift our awareness to non-essential activities. Not that shifting awareness is easy (in fact, entire traditions such as Buddhism are dedicated to

²⁰ *Understanding Media*, 21

²¹ Discussed in further detail on page 20

²² And therefore contagious behavior as well

cultivating it as a skill) but we as humans do have this ability and not using it can have negative effects. Addictive technology forces our awareness away from ideas upon which we want to focus. And the more we give in to the temptation of technology the less we exercise the “muscle” of the skill that is awareness shifting.

The term ‘media literacy’ is often described as a skill required to navigate today’s vast landscape of digital content. Does this imply that a new sort of literacy is required to properly consume the new media? In McLuhan’s chapter on movies (subtitled: *The Reel World*) he says, “the print and the photo [and] movies assume a high level of literacy in their users.”²³ He claims, “a literate audience [will follow] printed imagery line by line without questioning the logic of lineality.”²⁴ When he refers to literacy, he is speaking not of a visual literacy but of old-fashioned literacy, that of words on a page. Those skills could be and were transferred to the new visual media.

We had become used to digesting things as a narrative, so the practice of scanning a confined space (be it a page or a frame) for relevant information in a prescribed order was not at all foreign to us. The difference with internet use is that we get to choose the path the narrative follows. This is perhaps the reappearance of man as the food-gatherer; man is now an “information-gatherer... no less a nomad than his paleolithic ancestors”.²⁵ Now people are able to become involved in the finding of new information, and we are able to do it, seemingly, before any structure is ever given to us. Without thinking, we are able to non-verbally move from one piece of information to

²³ McLuhan, 285

²⁴ McLuhan, 285-286

²⁵ McLuhan, 283

another with just a keystroke or a mouse click. There is no beginning, middle or end to the story, just a practically infinite pool of information to wade through.

For this reason, surfing the internet is a different phenomena and requires a different type of 'literacy' than the media to which McLuhan refers which was available in the 1960s. The lack of narrative, I think, means that 'old-fashioned' literacy can not be applied in the way it was for older media formats. This may have something to do with the way these things were presented. Film, radio, and television were not easily paused. This meant that there was not the ability to multitask and switch focus between two or more information sources. These instances online, in particular, are when Arendtian thinking is replaced. Not only is using media something one does alone, but it is also used as a way to remove oneself from the world. This replaces the time people could spend thinking. Part of thinking is creating a story to tell yourself and use of technology removes the time to create such thoughts.

The way a computer presents written information to us is worth exploring. Today, the level of (ultimately superficial) interaction one has with a text is unprecedented in the history of media. The ability to highlight, zoom in and out, copy a line, or scroll in such a way that one reads exactly as much as they want gives one a certain sense of control and connection with the thing being consumed. But those exact mechanisms are the same ones that make any sort of authentic interaction with a piece all the harder; something more scintillating is always just a click away, a notion that seems to have been hardwired into our thinking, into our behavior patterns.

Another mechanism that affects our behavior and our relationship with information is a computer's uncanny ability to present with more than one piece of data at once. With a book, for example, it is hard to split your attention with, say, another book. But when online you can have a split screen of an article on your right and a video on your left. And the moment the video is done you can unmute the podcast you had muted in the background. I think the question of a divided attention is interesting, but equally worrying is that of an attention that shifts with the stroke of key.

The obvious effect of this is a shortened attention span, something that has been written about extensively since any form of non-verbal media was discovered. I, of course, am not the first to worry about a new technology affecting us. Heidegger apparently “[deplored] the fact that even personal letters are typewritten”²⁶ and the Greeks worried about the effect that the written word itself would have on man. However, it is one problem to not be able to focus on something for a short amount of time, it is another thing to compound that with the ability to jump from one attention-grabbing piece to another with minimal effort. What happens is that anything read, watched, listened to or written can be more or less ignored by thought immediately after due the fact that one’s awareness has been completely and unhesitatingly shifted to a new piece of information. I think this means that while we are being exposed to more information than ever before, most do not “digest” the things they read/listen to/watch/write in any meaningful way, it all ends up as ear and eye candy - fun at the time of consumption but ultimately full of empty calories. The

²⁶ Derrida, 19

practically endless amount of content may make it seem that there is the potential that “infinite analysis is on the horizon.”²⁷ I see where this might seem like a value judgement on the type of media people consume. However, while I do think the quality of our media has decreased (or at least shifted) in this information age, my question is one of quantity and means of consumption.

Another difference for digital media is the act of scrolling. Words are presented as something that arrives from seemingly nowhere out of the bottom of a computer or cell phone screen. This intuition does not happen when reading books or any writing on paper because they have a physical manifestation so the words are in the room with us long before we read them. Scrolling, especially on social media sites, also gives us a sense of infinitude that is not possible with a book or other paper media. When you read the last page of a book, that is it, you are done with it. Online, however, at the end of an article for example, there are always new places to click. And one feels in the case of social media sites that she could scroll indefinitely because content is posted so much faster than one could ever hope to read it.

In Friedrich A. Kittler’s study of the three methods of audio, visual and written information storage, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, he quotes from a journal written by someone learning to type as saying that the action of typing is “just below the level of consciousness.”²⁸ He also calls the typewriter “a precondition of production that contributes to our thinking to any conscious reaction.”²⁹ This reveals something about the difference between typing and writing by hand. Presumably what he means is that

²⁷ Derrida, 24

²⁸ *Film, Gramophone, Typewriter*, 205

²⁹ *Film, Gramophone, Typewriter*, 214

typing has allowed him to get closer to the realm of pure thought and therefore his thought ends up on the page more effectively than if he were to use handwriting. The difference then between typing and handwriting is that there is less of a filter between thought and the words typed, while more effort has to go into each word that is handwritten. While this may be a function of mechanics (because most people can type faster than they can handwrite), I feel it may have to do with a deeper part one's relationship with a keyboarded tool, whether computer or typewriter. In the case of the computer, Kittler's ideas are pertinent because they show that the computer is able to take your thoughts just as easily and with the same intensity as it gives ideas to you.

Heidegger makes an interesting point about the typed word - that it makes "everyone look the same".³⁰ Type has the quality of taking the most tangible part of a person's character out of writing; the look and feel of someone's actual handwriting. While this may at first seem inconsequential, it is not. Consider a newspaper's office (or pertinantly, a news website) where all pieces are printed or published in the same font and format, along with the fact that articles are placed within the same context of the design of the website. These factors may give the pieces a feel of replaceability to the reader. The effect this could have on a reader is that they are not absorbing the actual information in any given piece, but perhaps searching for a consistency in an intellectual aesthetic to match the visual aesthetic. I am not sure whether or not this could change the writing habits of the producers of the content. However in the age where eyeballs and clicks are the way to make money in media, and sites hope to keep their users on

³⁰ *Film, Gramophone, Typewriter*, 199

for as long as possible, it is easy to think that they could have motivation to write to a particular aesthetic taste.

McLuhan says the spoken word “involves all the senses dramatically though literate people tend to speak as connectedly and casually as possible.”³¹ The important word here is involves, which may help us understand the distinction between the written word and face-to-face conversation. The act of having a face-to-face conversation, as McLuhan suggests, demands the use of many senses and levels of one’s conscious perceptive experience. Hearing is involved not just in comprehending the speaker’s actual words but also in comprehending inflections of the voice that are critically important for meaning. Sight, the only sense also involved with the written word, is important for both establishing a connection through eye contact and for reading your conversation partner’s body language. Speech itself, while not traditionally called a sense, is a way we interact with the physical world, and is obviously also important in creating the aforementioned vocal inflections and for subtlety of meaning. Touch can be involved but more important is proprioception (one’s sense of where one’s body is in space) which is used to convey levels of subtlety in meaning through gesturing and body language.

The synthesis of these biological senses leads to a social sense that allows one to engage with the improvisatory nature of face-to-face conversation. One has to think on their feet in conversation, a skill made unnecessary with the written word, where one can take their time with a response. Metaphorically, we could say it is the difference

³¹ McLuhan, 77-78

between playing jazz music and listening to a symphony. McLuhan uses this metaphor as well, calling jazz:

...a break with mechanism in the direction of the discontinuous, the participant, the spontaneous, and improvisational, it can also be seen as a return to a sort of oral poetry in which performance is both creation and composition... Jazz is alive, like conversation and like conversation it depends upon a repertory of available themes.³²

Face-to-face conversation is by its nature active, reciprocal, and participatory. On the other hand, one can be actively involved with the written word (e.g. texting) but just as easily one can be involved with it as a passive consumer of information, or to continue the music metaphor, listening to it as background music. But what is remarkable about the face-to-face is it shows humans' ability to quickly take in vast amounts of information and react to it, with the same amount of complexity, subtlety and clarity with which the information was received.

Typing and digital conversation lacks the forced spontaneity required by face-to-face conversation. Because the computer works faster than a human thinks, we can type just as fast as we think. But if we hand write, our thoughts come out more slowly which allow us to synthesize our thoughts as we write. While typing on a computer our thoughts can just stream out without taking much time to mull them over. Since the computer can work just as fast as we can³³, we can be as fast or as slow as we want. Whether or not this is a detriment to thinking or writing is up for debate, but it is worth noting a similarity to the ease of jumping from one piece of content to another when surfing the internet.

³² McLuhan, 280

³³ Derrida, 23

In the first pages of *Reclaiming Conversation*, Sherry Turkle lays out why she thinks face-to-face conversation is important;

[It] is the most human -- and humanizing -- thing we do. Fully present to one another, we learn to listen. It's where we develop the capacity for empathy. It's where we experience the joy of being heard, of being understood. And conversation advances self-reflection, the conversations with ourselves that are the cornerstone of early development and continue throughout life.³⁴

Turkle understands that one needs the other; our conversations with ourselves are symbiotic with our face-to-face conversations. When we talk to someone about something and find ourselves thinking about it later we are essentially getting another perspective on it. And when we bring up something that we have been thinking about to a friend, we expect the same attention and hope that they grant us with a new perspective. We can then, in turn, “talk” to ourselves allowing the cycle to continue. If we lose our ability to have face-to-face interactions because we desire to look at our phones more than our friend’s eyes, we lose important material with which to “discuss” during solitude. Many feel as though they can be fulfilled by online conversation. But, says Turkle, “many sips of connection don’t add up to a gulp of conversation.”³⁵

One format for having a conversation with the self is inserting the potential opinions of others into your thoughts. I believe this what Arendt would call the “enlarged mentality”. This allows you to make judgements that can be applied to the public sphere before you actually say them out loud to another person. It also allows you to express the same disinterest in your opinions that an unbiased party might. It follows that during conversation, the ability to hear your inflections and express your ideas vocally allows

³⁴ *Reclaiming Conversation*, 3

³⁵ *Reclaiming Conversation*, 34

another person to see your ideas closer to the way you do than they otherwise would via the diluted form of texting; it is as close as another can get to being inside your head. This allows the enlarged mentality to contain another person's actual opinions, as well as any potential ones you might have dreamt up.

Enlarged mentality may be at the heart of what makes face-to-face conversation different from conversation which takes place through digital media. If our devices have replaced at least some part of the self, then when conversing through text people may feel that they are still in solitude (even though that could not possibly be the case) and not be able to fully recognize that they are dealing with another person. To others, I seem unified; they can not see that I am two-in-one and I can not see that they are either.³⁶

Textual communication is a game of turn taking. On the other hand face-to-face conversation allows for and demands a more complicated dynamic: "you have to listen to someone else, to read their body, their voice, their tone, their silences."³⁷ Along with figuring out what to say in a face-to-face conversation, a person also needs to take into account all of the sources of social information in order to decide when and how to say it. Telephone conversation, while not as complicated as the face-to-face, ought not to be discounted because it only rids us of one of these pieces of information - embodiment which, while undeniably important to a fruitful social and intellectual life, is not the only force at work here. Texting, on the other hand, eliminates all these contextual elements, which means the receiver of the text will often add their own context and subtext. For

³⁶ *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, 184

³⁷ *Reclaiming Conversation*, 45

example, often I will send “Ok.” to a friend to confirm a plan, but some of my more textually savvy friends tell me that I sound annoyed or angry, which certainly was not the intended implication.

Perhaps at the heart of the issue of the face-to-face as opposed to texting is clarity (i.e. the ease with which a message is conveyed). As laid out above, there are numerous channels through which information is communicated in the face-to-face, whereas the written word only gives information through one channel. The use of only one channel of information leads to a higher chance of misunderstanding. Along with exploring the distinction between digital and face-to-face conversation, it is important to note how our relationship with technology might affect the latter. Consider how we interact with virtual assistants such as Apple’s Siri and Amazon’s Alexa. Our “conversations” with these machines tend to be rather one-sided (“Siri, who is Bill Paxton?” “Bill Paxton was an American actor and director. He appeared in films such as The Terminator...”) Many people bark orders at these quasi-artificial intelligences and get an immediate, brief response from them. A similar expectation occurs, I believe, when people simply look things up online. The question then becomes whether we have similar expectations of people. Would we phrase our questions to be as understandable as possible? Not be as patient when our friends don’t understand them? Not thank them when they turn on the lights as Alexa can?

The other way technology can change conversation is through the constant access to information. The ability to compartmentalize information recall shifts conversation dramatically. Imagine, for example, a hypothetical conversation about Bill

Paxton and whether or not he was on a television show that you and your friend like to watch. A quick search of the internet finds that Bill Paxton is in fact dead and after a few moments online you realize that you were actually thinking of Bill Pullman, who is not on the show after all. The nature of the conversation has changed, not only because it is now based on a true assumption rather than a false one, but because the looking up of the actor interrupted the progress of the conversation. It is as if another entity entered the room and wholly commanded the attention of one or all of the participants of the conversation. The question then becomes whether or not this facilitates good conversation or diminishes it.

Additionally, digital conversation can become a repository of thoughts for its users in the way that a handwritten diary used to. Take, for example, a teenager who has moved away from home for the first time and texts her mother about every little thing in her life. Not only does this show a potential inability to sit and reflect on one's feelings (if she simply waited until the next time she saw her mother, she would have likely forgotten most of what she wanted to talk about anyway) but also the inability to recognize the person on the other end as an equal or that they are speaking to another person at all. It is as if all thoughts and worries are sent into her device without consideration of importance, further showing how devices have invaded the thought process and how a device can feel private and solitary as if a part of the mind. But the problem, of course, is that the device connects you to another person who is on the receiving end of your thoughts. The metacognition of presentation then, can extend even to person-to-person conversation.

An equally interesting phenomena is that of the “phone circle”. I have been in situations where a small social gathering devolves from conversation to everyone sitting around looking at their cell phones. Importantly, more often than not, they are not directly talking to other people; they are probably scrolling through Facebook, playing a game, or surfing the internet. How do a group of people each independently end up in the digital space while occupying physical space together? Is it a Pavlovian response where one checks their phone to see if they got a notification and the rest are reminded that their phones are there too? Are attention spans so diminished that they can not focus on conversation with friends unless it fulfills some sort of criteria for attention?

Humans use solitude to find ourselves and to work through our often complicated discoveries. Once we do that, we are able to listen to other people and then later return to our inner dialogue to think about what was just discussed. The ability to listen to someone (including ourselves) and really hear them is how humans develop empathy. So, without the chance for solitude, we cannot fully engage in conversation and thus struggle to feel empathy. Solitude is the time when a person becomes comfortable with themselves and it gives a person the ammunition to reach out to others and listen to them and hear what they say. Sherry Turkle, in her book *Reclaiming Conversation*, discussed that without the capacity for solitude, a child cannot develop empathy. She calls this “the virtuous circle” (solitude - secure sense of self - capacity for empathy - conversation with others which provides material for self-reflection). And this circle is being disrupted by the use of technology.³⁸ Further, Turkle turns to the ideas of Erik

³⁸ *Reclaiming Conversation*, 9-11, 64

Erikson, the famous developmental psychologist, who says that children thrive when they are given time and stillness (under the watchful eye of a parent, of course). Turkle worries that phones demand time and take away stillness to the great harm of development. Turkle quotes subjects as saying “I don’t have enough time alone with my mind”, a statement, she says, that requires a conception of ‘I’ independent from their devices.³⁹ It also implies, however, that there is some kind of intrusion keeping them from having solitude, an essential part of Arendtian thinking.

There are two ways that technology is changing our conception of the self that are important to my discussion of thinking. First, is the creation of a “second self” on a mass scale online; an often idealized version of ourselves that is created as a form of presentation for others. This constructed external self also allows us to consider the self as narrative because of the record of past experiences that stay online after posting. Second, is seeing our devices (particularly cell phones) as extensions of ourselves, specifically they are replacing the “other” in the mind.

When we create an online profile of any sort: whether it be on the chat rooms of the recent technological past or on Facebook, Instagram or whatever platform one chooses, we create more than a signifier for ourselves, we construct another self external to our own. How we construct this second self, as described by Sherry Turkle in 1995’s *Life on the Screen*, varies. It might be completely different from our ‘real life’ selves, a form of escapism, as was often the case on Multi-User Domains (MUDs) that Turkle wrote about in the mid-1990s. More common now is an idealized version of

³⁹ *Alone Together*, 167

ourselves, living the kind of life we wish we were living, or wish others could see us living. This is not a one time process but a continuous one, lasting at least the life of the profile.

And in the era of Web 2.0 there are a number of permutations of the building of an identity online. Zeynep Tufekci (whose book I will discuss in more detail later) describes two affordances by which identity is built online: the first whether a site is anonymous or if one's offline identity is embedded and the second whether it is reputation building or not.⁴⁰ On Reddit, for example, one's online identity is only attached to one's profile if one chooses to do so; it is not required.⁴¹ This means a person is pseudonymous - which means you have a username to represent you, as opposed to your 'real' identity. Part of the site is a reputation building mechanism, known as 'karma'. So when using Reddit⁴² you have an identity⁴³ within the confines of the site but it does not have to be at all connected to your offline identity. One's karma or number of followers represents one's acceptance in the online community.⁴⁴ These kind of sites work more like the now ancient MUDs Turkle was writing about in the 1990s. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram, on the other hand, where users are meant to link their 'real' identities with the one on the site is where the construction of a second self more ideal than the first takes place.

⁴⁰ Tufekci, 171

⁴¹ It is something often done by celebrities on the site. For example, it is well known on Reddit that famed rapper Snoop Dogg's username is Here_Comes_The_King

⁴² Twitter works similarly, where millions of well-known people communicate to the public as themselves, but many millions more are anonymous 'eggheads', named for the default profile picture of an egg

⁴³ Seen by other users not just by how much karma you have, but also by going through the history of your posts

⁴⁴ Tufekci, 169

In *Life on the Screen*, Turkle discusses the idea that we as a society need to “re-tribalize” because many of the institutions that used to bring people together such as a main street, a union hall, or a town meeting no longer exist. Instead, people spend their day alone looking at their phone or computer. Communities, therefore, need to be created in different ways and the computer and the internet are playing a large role in that retribalization.⁴⁵ My sister, for example, has a job at a large international bank. The bank encourages its employees to work from home in order to save the bank money by renting less office space; additionally when she and her colleagues do attend work at the office they do not have any assigned desk. She finds this to be isolating and wishes she could communicate face to face more often with her colleagues. She feels that the lack of connection with her coworkers harms her ability to do her job. I understand that feeling.

My peers often use Facebook groups and GroupMe chats to form communities of people who can speak in a somewhat private arena. For example, upon being admitted to a college, a new student is usually invited to join the admitted students Facebook group. In that closed group the students meet each other much in the way they might on the first day of school (getting to know where everyone is from, what they like, what they study, etc.). GroupMe chats work as a place where kids can chat much as they might as a clique seated in the lunchroom. Some also turn to more anonymous sites like Reddit and Twitter or the chatrooms of the early days of the internet. These “pseudonymous and reputation-accurring sites are like places where people could gather, sometimes in

⁴⁵ *Life on the Screen*, 178

large numbers and sometimes in intimate groups in spaces like coffeehouses or salons - sites suggested by Habermas as the cornerstone of the public sphere - without ever having to reveal their names to observers or one another."⁴⁶ But in all of these examples, no eye contact is made and perhaps no true connections. It is as if you have nothing to lose by being part of such a group; you do not need to devote much time or energy in the relationships and therefore many find such relationships unfulfilling. For example, you need not overcome your shyness, get out of your pajamas, or even think about combing your hair. So when Turkle speaks of retribalization, it speaks directly to these interactions between my peers.

One afternoon in class, I saw on a classmate's laptop that she was creating a profile on what appeared to be a Russian dating site. While the very fact that she was doing this in class raises interesting points about how the internet divides our attention, how she presented herself on the site and why she did so is more pertinent to this discussion. Did she sincerely want to attract potential suitors on the site? If so, would she lie about her identity - her age, name, or location? If this is the case, her personae on the site is a different person than she is, something created by her for purposes unknown. This constructed self presumably acts differently than the woman herself would, perhaps on this site she's more confident and forward than she would be in real life.

More likely she was making the profile as a joke. If so, is it simply to post on a social media platform to impress her followers as being the type of person who would

⁴⁶ Tufekci, 170-171

do something so strange. This brings up an interesting concept, meta-thinking about the presentation of one's life. This is when a person thinks of acting (and their sharing of said action) and considers, "Do I want to be thought of as the kind of person who would do this?" This kind of cognition is an essential part of constructing a self on social media and becomes, for many, a continual part of their daily thought processes. On the subject of self construction through media, McLuhan says in his chapter on movies, that "it was pointed out how the press photo in particular had discouraged the really rich from the paths of conspicuous consumption."⁴⁷ People, he said, became conscious of their being able to be seen and they changed the way they went about themselves accordingly. This an example of how people controlled the presentation of their lives in a pre-social media world.

Variations of meta-thinking might sometimes be helpful: for example, thinking of an idea in terms of how one would explain it to someone else can be helpful in the intellectual process. But once that extends to "How will that person think of me once I have explained this to them?" it becomes less useful. Social media causes many to think this about their experiences and the addictive nature of social media platforms makes the thought processes behind the meta-cognition of presentation pervasive in a person's life. This makes people, particularly young people, very adept at constructing a self. However, it not only can replace other, more productive forms of thought, but the indefiniteness of this kind of construction perhaps could keep the young from properly exploring their 'actual' identities.

⁴⁷ McLuhan, 291

The addictive nature of these platforms makes these types of self construction a compulsion as well. People can become addicted to the constant reinvention of themselves; “addicted to flux” as Turkle puts it.⁴⁸ These conditions are taken to the extreme when looking at people who are addicted to role-playing video games such as *World of Warcraft* or *Second Life*. This constant reinvention prevents a stable sense of identity and can become harder to think in an Arendtian sense because there is not another inside the mind. There is no one home when the time comes to converse with the self.

An interesting side effect of all this is our new ability to be two selves in two places simultaneously. For example, Turkle writes of a man pushing his daughter on a swing while messaging his virtual wife on *Second Life*. Turkle describes such happenings as a “life-mix” and refers to this as “multi-lifing”⁴⁹. A less extreme example would be someone checking their texts while talking to a friend, either in person or on the phone. There is a convergence of these parallel selves with parallel lives as equally real and valid. If however, the virtual self is less real⁵⁰ the effort of self construction should be expended on the more real, non-virtual self.

The second way that technology is shifting our conception of the self is the intense relationship that people form with their devices. We have reached a point where for many, leaving her cell phone at home would feel just a strange as an amputee forgetting to put on her prosthetic limb. An interview subject in Turkle’s *Alone Together* went so far as to say that she has her cell phone set up such that, “even if [it] is in my

⁴⁸ *Life on the Screen*, 179

⁴⁹ *Alone Together*, 168

⁵⁰ which I’m not necessarily saying it is

purse... I see it, I sense it... I always know what is happening on my phone.”⁵¹ implying a very intense sensual relationship between her and her phone. That relationship is possibly comparable to the proprioceptive relationship between the mind and the body.

Turkle discusses the idea of the internet allowing people to cycle through many selves and identities.⁵² Before there was a world filled with computers people could not simply pretend to be someone they were not. Identities needed to be forged; you would need to move far away from home in order to start over as a new person. This could not happen easily, not only because of the practicalities of doing such a thing but because people had lifelong involvement with family and community which kept them from cycling through different identities. But today there are opportunities to change your identity online while continuing to live in your current physical community. That change could be as simple as curating your Facebook posts to show a happy, lively existence while in actuality you are feeling unhappy and lonely. Or the change could be more malicious: when you “catfish” a person (which is convincing someone of a romantic relationship with a fake identity) or when people hide behind an online identity to partake in illegal activities such as child pornography. And all of this can happen without you having to leave your house, much less your community. Therefore, Turkle explains, “the internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the construction and reconstruction of self that characterize post-modern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create.”⁵³ But the energy use for self-fashioning is

⁵¹ *Alone Together*, 161

⁵² *Life on the Screen*, 179

⁵³ *Life on the Screen*, 180

exhausting and it takes time away from more fruitful endeavors that allow for thinking such as reading, studying and playing instruments.

Today, everything and every move is documented on Instagram, Snapchat or Facebook. This makes it hard to find the privacy in which to experiment and try on different identities as we grow and develop. Turkle explains Erik Erikson's theory that adolescents need a period of "moratorium" in order to develop their identities; it is a time of intense interaction with people and ideas, passionate friendships, and experimentation. Erikson said that the moratorium facilitates the development of a core self, a personal sense of what gives your life meaning - what he referred to as identity.⁵⁴ A moratorium gives adolescents time to try out new things and experiences while being removed from the structured surroundings of their normal life. The quality of the moratorium rests on the consequences or lack thereof of these actions.⁵⁵ It brings to mind the Amish and Mennonite idea of rumspringa or the European model of a gap year before university. This removal from responsibility becomes less and less possible in a world where all things are documented and privacy becomes all too rare. Moratorium becomes particularly difficult if the young person documents their time experimenting for their online friends and followers and put their experimental energy into creating their online personae. The construction of another idealized self means that the experimentation of this self is on display for the judgement of others and recorded by the social media on which it is posted.

⁵⁴ *Life on the Screen*, 203

⁵⁵ *Life on the Screen*, 203

Turkle explains that when Erikson was writing during the 1950s and 60s the notion of a moratorium corresponded to the understanding of what was supposed to happen during the college years when one entered as an adolescent and left as an adult. But today, Turkle writes, college is more pre-professional and there is less time, and more risk involved, for sexual experimentation due to AIDS (at least as she wrote in the early 1990s). In 2019, I would have to argue that there is even less time and freedom for moratoria. The cost of attending college has left students without time to experiment with their learning because they need to come out of school prepared to enter the job market. They feel they need to get their money's worth in their four years. Additionally, the culture surrounding sexual harassment makes experimenting sexually an often scary situation. Turkle argues that as a result adolescents moved to the internet to play and to try things out. But experimenting and trying different identities out online is not the equivalent to doing it in real life. And while we may be alone on the internet, we are not in solitude, we are just lonely.

Additionally we must look at whether pushing this stage of development to the internet works at all. When everything is documented on various social media, the anonymity needed for experimentation is gone; if you go out drinking with your new friends at school and post it on Instagram, then your old friends from your old town and even your parents will see and know. Further, if you want to date someone new, your old flame can watch on social media. Perhaps your parents follow you on Find Your Friends and they can essentially see where and when you are sleeping. True privacy is becoming harder and harder to stake out; representing the loss of a necessary part of

growing older. Perhaps missing this crucial step in development is preventing us from becoming adults who are able to think.

I read Zeynep Tufekci's *Twitter and Tear Gas : The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* because I wanted to recognize that there are positive uses for social media. In her study of networked protest, Tufekci puts forth the argument that social media allows for extreme democratization of social movements. Before social media, movements of change happened slowly. For example the March on Washington D.C. in 1963 took years of organization and was the culmination of a huge amount of change that was happening throughout the country. Tufekci says that "[in] the past, when movements first built capacity over a long time and only then could stage large protests, today's movements that are initially organized mostly online generally start the hard work necessary to build long-term movement after their first big moment in the public spotlight."⁵⁶

A networked protest, Tufekci says, can be thought of as an 'adhocracy' - where "tasks can be accomplished by who ever shows up and is interested."⁵⁷ After the first protests in Cairo at the start of the Arab Spring in 2011, an Egyptian found out about the protests the next morning. He linked up with an Egyptian expat in London and one in the Gulf States - they decided to help organize supplies even though they did not know anyone in Cairo that was directly involved with the protest. Together, they started @TahrirSupplies on Twitter. They became invested in a cause, found a problem they could solve and fixed it. Today, technology allows people to be involved from the safety

⁵⁶ Tufekci, 61

⁵⁷ Tufekci, 53

of elsewhere in the world. @TahrirSupplies were able to use all the tools the internet granted them to organize with remarkable effect.

In one night, @TahrirSupplies acquired more than ten thousand followers... Within a day, these four young people were coordinating almost all supplies for ten field hospitals. To keep in touch with doctors on the ground, they also used Skype and other messaging apps. To keep track of supplies, they used publicly viewable Google documents and spreadsheets, embedded on the website they had hastily put up. They used the spreadsheets, updated in real time, to list supplies and needs by hospital and to organize the volunteers who were transporting supplies. The public nature of the spreadsheets lent transparency and accountability to the effort, as well as aiding coordination.⁵⁸

A benefit to organizing via the internet is the internet's inherent ability to transcend geography: "Having organizers in different time zones, two in Cairo, one in London, and one in the Gulf, served them well. They slept in shifts, albeit short ones, over the next few weeks full of frenzy, duty and caffeine."⁵⁹

One common complaint of internet informed activism is the commonality of 'slacktivism' - resulting in the 'thoughts and prayers' phenomenon. This is when in order to virtue signal that one is on the side of a new just cause, they post, 'like' other posts and change their profile picture in accordance with said cause. While this phenomenon might bring some awareness to the given cause, it has little effect on the people whose feet are on the ground. Note that the organization behind networked protests as explained above do not fall into this category - organization is not an effective way to score 'social brownie points'. The danger then for Tufekci is this:

Not looking at the "how" can blind us to significant differences, both in their nature and in the political capacities they signal to power, between the types of protests that require onerous labor and deep organizational and logistical capacity to make things happen, and those that use digital

⁵⁸ Tufekci, 57

⁵⁹ Tufekci, 57

technology to take off as soon they tap into a vein of grievance in the zeitgeist and that scale up quickly using digital affordances.⁶⁰

Often, the problem with recent social movements founded on the internet is people's inclination to do something *now*. Protests are often seen not as "the culmination of an organizing campaign [but as] the start of one".⁶¹ Not only does this speak to the internet's remarkable ability to (perhaps trivially) organize people, but also to the way information found on the internet affects people. Tufekci explains:

In contrast to the past, when movements first built up capacity over a long time and only then could stage large protests, today's movements that are initially organized mostly online generally start the hard work necessary to build a long-term movement after their first big moment in the public spotlight.⁶²

One method or the other does not necessarily work better, but the latter only works because of the 'adhocracy' mechanism. Adhocracy is at work when a movement starts on a fringe corner of the internet and the group decides to meet on a certain day and then the movement gets some publicity. It is my assumption that often these movements do not have any organizational cohesiveness after the initial protest. That being said, some action must come of these movements because a protest march is itself a declaration of action; an advertisement for others to act which creates interest and can turn into organizational action.

Also, the accessibility in such organizations means that social movements often organize themselves around large national change and gestures, as opposed to more local organization on the state, county or municipal level where greater change can be

⁶⁰ Tufekci, 61

⁶¹ <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/02/07/social-movements-path-greatest-resistance/>

⁶² Tufekci, 61

made by a smaller group. National change is built up incrementally says ACLU president David Cole in his review of *Twitter and Tear Gas* and Leslie R. Crutchfield's *How Change Happens*. The implication here is that organizing on a smaller scale, at first, is more effective in the long run. But doing so has become more difficult in the internet age as people are turning toward their gateways to the world that live in their pockets. Additionally the ability for everyone to be able to voice their opinion and have it heard equally as "loud" causes a certain level of organizational chaos. And because what is read on the internet is so often taken to heart so quickly and directly without the reader spending time to think about the content, where the organization's authority lies becomes muddled.⁶³

If there is no place for solitude and if the internet and social media are removing the developmental stages necessary for adolescents to how learn to think, then what might happen in society? Arendt is clearly very concerned about what can happen to a society when its members are not thinking. In discussing her reporting on the Eichmann trial she said that however monstrous his deeds were, "the doer was neither monstrous nor demonic, and the only specific characteristic one could detect in his past as well as in his behaviour during the trial and the preceding police examination was something entirely negative: it was not stupidity but a curious, quite authentic inability to think."⁶⁴ The frightening consequences caused by a lack of thinking and evil-doing leads one to wonder where a widespread interruption of thinking in society will lead us. Are we so

⁶³ <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/02/07/social-movements-path-greatest-resistance/>

⁶⁴ "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 159

absent of thought that we will be led astray by totalitarian leaders who change the rules on us without us taking a stand?

Further, our society may be upended by the speed of change allowed by social media. Arendt discussed in her essay “Civil Disobedience”, that change is constant in the human condition but that the speed of change is not. For thousands of years, change happened slowly enough that there was an almost stable habitat for us to show newcomers.⁶⁵ This makes one think of the long view of evolution and how change happens so slowly that we do not notice. But even looking at a much shorter view, change happens slowly over a number of years - for example the change of our Congress from one party to another. Change brews over the course of years until enough seats switch over to the minority party to make it a majority.

The internet, however, is interfering with the speed of change and society’s need for stability is being tested as technology affects a greater number of people. Arendt explains that while there once was a “traditional standard of three or four generations to a century, which correspond to a ‘natural’ generation gap between fathers and sons, we have now come to a point where four or five years of difference in age are sufficient to establish a gap between the generations.”⁶⁶ It is scary to note that Arendt wrote this in the mid-20th century before the widespread use of computers. While we cannot underestimate the changes to our society made by the invention of electricity, widespread immunization of deadly diseases, telephones, automobiles and air travel, the speed with which change is possible today with the use of the internet is increasing

⁶⁵ “Crises of the Republic,” 78

⁶⁶ “Crises of the Republic,” 78

exponentially. One looks to the changes that can happen quickly with the use of social media such as the Arab Spring when people were organizing themselves in real time through social media and last years anti-gun rallies that were organized by young Floridian high school students on Facebook in a matter weeks. Additionally, our leaders can speak directly to us in real time over Twitter, directing calm or chaos as they see fit. Organizing these changes with such speed would not be possible without the use of the internet. The constant push of information, while exciting, interferes with our ability to think and perhaps causes us to make rash decisions in response.

Of course we cannot take away the internet, that ship has long since sailed, but as a society we need to examine its effects. We need to find time to let the natural course of human development happen and not let it be permanently altered by our lack of a chance to develop the skills to think. The stakes are too high. Turkle explains that members of her field are considering these issues. There is agreement among psychologists that there is an empathy gap among young people who have grown up emotionally disconnected while constantly connected to the internet.⁶⁷ Ironically, Turkle says that there is enthusiasm for having technology fix the empathy gap with use of “empathy apps” to teach empathy. But she is not convinced that using technology to fix the woes of technology is the best idea. Turkle offers that better fixes might include parents taking technology time-outs to reclaim conversation with their children and adolescents shutting off their phones to pay full attention to their friends.⁶⁸ I agree with Turkle when she says “[t]he moment is right. We had a love affair with a technology that

⁶⁷ *Reclaiming Conversation*, 360

⁶⁸ *Reclaiming Conversation*, 360

seemed magical. But like great magic, it worked by commanding our attention and not letting us see anything but what the magician wanted us to see. Now we are ready to reclaim our attention - for solitude, for friendship, for society."⁶⁹ Because of the nature of our internet use, it is becoming increasingly difficult to put these devices down in order to talk about them, but we as a society need to do so.

In order to take full account of Arendtian thinking one must discuss the self. If we do not find out how the conception of the self has changed on a mass scale over time, we will fail to uncover what keeps people from thinking in that time. And if McLuhan and Turkle are right, new media is a remarkably effective tool for changing how we conceive of and extend ourselves. So to leave something that changes people so radically, such as the internet, unexamined is to leave ourselves vulnerable to the banal evil with which Arendt was concerned in the early 1960s.

In addition, discussion of the internet is important when analyzed with Arendt in mind because the internet changes our experience so dramatically. As I hope has been shown in this paper the new media changes how its users are in-the-world. It would be hard to contend then that the new media would not affect someone's thinking. New media takes away from the time that one could use to think, while, for example, standing in line or flipping through their phone before falling asleep. Removing this time for solitude means that the story they tell about themselves will be incomplete. Perhaps most importantly we need to be aware of how these new media affect young people's ability to develop thinking skills. The least we can do as a society is be aware of the

⁶⁹ *Reclaiming Conversation*, 361

potential effect of the new media on our thinking. Otherwise we may be vulnerable to the same winds of evil which caught Eichmann some 80 years ago.

The world has changed, but people have not. We have always looked for easy psychological payoffs and workarounds to avoid thinking about difficult things. The internet is just the most recent and widespread difficult change in civilization's operation. But solitude is deeply important if we are going to live virtuous lives, and the epidemic of non-thinking leaves us very vulnerable to mass exploitation. I have examined Arendtian ideas and how they relate to the opportunity for solitude. Humans need time to have dialogues with themselves without disruption. Arendt concerned herself with what happens when this does not occur. This, synthesized with Turkle's perspective on contemporary technological life and McLuhan's analysis on the media of the past, gives concern as our internet use takes away time we could be in solitude. At some point soon, we all must put down our devices to reflect and talk about what they mean for our collective future.

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