

A Technological Pandemic: Considering the Relational Effects of Connectivity

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Podcast Transcription

[An electronic cover of Simon & Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" plays]

Hello, smartphone, my old friend. I've come to scroll with you again. Because a message softly warning left a sound while I was scorning. The division of attention in my brain still remains within the sound of silence.

More like the sound of computer-mediated communication, right? Before you tune out at the sound of that academic jargon, I hope you will join me, Ross Weathersbee, in an exploration of the relational effects of computer-mediated communication—how technology has infiltrated our relationships, for both better and worse. Let's get started.

[whoosh]

Whether it's CMC, computer-mediated communication, or ICT, information and communications technology, these things have a way of encouraging us to be "physically present in one realm while being virtually present in another," as Edley & Houston (2011, p. 197) put it. More and more often, we split ourselves between the physical realm and the virtual. What's so bad about that, you say? Well, thankfully, not everything.

According to McGlynn (2007), frequent use of CMC between relational partners cultivates satisfaction and closeness. Sharing memes with a friend? Calling up your significant other after a long day at work? These behavioral instances suggest a deeper relationship outside of CMC and even help to deepen those relationships further.

In her book, *Alone Together*, Turkle (2017) helps us understand why CMC is so pervasive in our society today, especially from a more personal standpoint. To the adolescents Turkle interviews in her book, CMC—via texting and calling—provides a source of comfort and happiness amidst their daily anxieties. One teen, Claudia, even goes as far to say this: "I want to have a feeling, I need to make a call" (Turkle, 2017, p. 176). CMC makes us feel things, both good and bad; there's no doubt about it.

But can we become too reliant on CMC for our comfort and happiness? Can our relationships in the physical realm be damaged? CMC devices like smartphones have given us the ability to communicate anytime, anywhere, and on any platform. Our smartphones might as well be an evolutionary appendage. We can communicate face-to-face, but only if need be.

However, viewing CMC as an addendum to face-to-face communication does not do it justice. According to Pettegrew and Day (2015), thinking of CMC in this way would neglect its "ability to transcend a multitude of social, spacial, and temporal contexts" (p. 135). CMC aids us in starting conversations we might not feel comfortable starting face-to-face. It allows us to communicate with people thousands of miles away. We can let a message go unanswered for hours or days, only to pick up the conversation smoothly at a later time. These attributes alone define the benefits of CMC and firmly separate it from face-to-face communication.

Surely the comfort and happiness we derive from these CMC attributes is good enough, right? Apparently, they are. According to Halfmann and Rieger (2019), most CMC users are willing to accept the "adverse consequences, in order not to forfeit the benefits of mobile communication" (p. 177). Let's take a moment to ponder these negative effects of CMC and ICT.

These consequences manifest themselves most prominently as the illusion of work-life balance. In her book, *Work's Intimacy*, Gregg (2011) argues that CMC and ICT has "brought a conclusive end to utopian dreams that the Internet will revolutionize the working day" (location 497). To Gregg, CMC has made our work more intimate than our home life. We cannot escape our mission to remain 100% connected, 100% of the time.

When I think of how CMC affects my work-life balance, I begin to notice how I have trained myself to check my email, long after I have left the office for the day. I think about how I always carry my phone around the

workplace, even though I check Facebook way too often. I think about how I set up my office phone to ring my mobile phone during business hours; you know, just in case. I have made it almost too easy to stay in contact with others. My life and work are held hostage by CMC because, honestly, I would feel lost without it. Have I developed Stockholm Syndrome? Maybe so.

Or perhaps my employer is holding my time hostage using CMC? Golden (2013) would certainly think so; according to her, employers frequently supply and indirectly encourage CMC as a means to bridge the “work-home boundary” (p. 108). This hijacking of our CMC use has made us so incredibly connected to work that it is difficult to know when we have really clocked out. I mean, what’s so important that it can’t wait until the next business day?

[phone notification sound goes off]

Oh, just a work email. Let me sort this out real quick.

[typing sounds, followed by a sending sound]

Sorry about that. Where was I? Ah, yes.

At this point, you are probably wondering where I am going with all of this. The truth is that, sometimes, I feel hopeless in mitigating my dependence on CMC. I want to make healthy changes to my CMC habits. If this podcast has you feeling similarly, take a stab at one or more of these recommendations:

1. Consider installing or activating a screen time app on your smartphone. With as many screens as we look at already, the amount we consume on our phones alone might surprise you. Gauge your CMC dependence based on what you think a reasonable amount of screen time is.
2. Find a place for your smartphone to live at home. Your home is a place to rest and recharge both yourself and your devices. Put your phone to bed early, and use this time away from work to take a break from CMC if possible.
3. Last, but certainly not least—take stock of your CMC benefits. Send your friend a funny meme. Let your loved ones know they’re loved. CMC isn’t all that bad, as long as we obtain and maintain an awareness of its effects.

[The same electronic cover of Simon & Garfunkel’s “The Sound of Silence” plays again]

Thanks for making it to the end of my podcast. What did you think? Did I miss anything? Let me know in the comments below.

For more information on the references in this podcast, please download a formal transcript by clicking the link below this embedded player. See you next time.

References:

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Notes:

- The version of Simon & Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence" included in this podcast was produced by Ross Weathersbee, using a MIDI track obtained from midiworld.com.
- Sound effects were obtained from Apple's Garageband application.
- Phone sounds were recorded using the sounds available on my Google Pixel 2 smartphone.