Modern Loneliness

Among the young and the old, loneliness seems to be a defining phenomenon of our time. While modern communication technologies are an essential part of our daily lives and of the way how we connect to each other, they are often blamed for driving us apart and increasing loneliness. Technology that will improve the ways how people interact with one another are becoming more valuable.

Our observations

• Loneliness among the young is rising. Americans under 22 meet in person less than previous generations of young people and the number of Americans with no close friends has tripled since 1985. In the article ‘Have Smartphones Destroyed A Generation?’ of The Atlantic it is concluded that when teens spend more time on smartphones and less time with in-person social interactions, loneliness is more common.

• In 2016, the most common household type in the EU-28 was a single person living alone (33.1%). Although living alone does not necessarily imply being alone, we live more independently from others than ever. In Japan in the 1960’s, there was a break from multigenerational housing resulting in the rise of Western nuclear family housing complexes of modern efficiency outside the city. These complexes are now the homes of the ‘lonely deaths’.

• Loneliness kills. Strong social relationships decrease the risk of death by 50%. Also, isolated seniors are more likely to need long-term care. In the U.S., a rising number of older people face the risk of dying alone.

• One of the world’s longest studies of adult life revealed that close relationships, more than money or fame, are what keep people happy throughout their lives.

• Virtual assistants and chatbots are on the rise. Simultaneously, we have an increasing demand for personal meetings with our doctor or wealth manager. Although robo advisers are on the rise, more than 80% of the clients seek personalized meetings with financial advisers.
Connecting the dots

While we live in big cities among millions of people, we relate only to a very few in a meaningful way. In many areas of our daily lives, there is no need to share anything with others. Earlier, we depended on the community: a social network of the church we went to, the family or multiple generations we lived with, the local producers we bought things from. Nowadays, we can live ‘independently’ from others. In the Third Wave, Alvin Toffler wrote how after the industrial age there would again be a reorganization of the family and of relationships. He described how the institutions on which community depended were crumbling in the techno-societies, and how this would result in a spreading plague of loneliness. Indeed, in today’s globalized world, communities are uprooted and modern societies are more individualistic, for example, more people live alone and this can lead to ‘lonely deaths’. There is a new longing for a community that can provide us with a sense of belonging.

At the same time, we find ourselves more connected than ever. We are constantly present in the digital world. Drawn into our smartphones for over 4 hours a day, this connected era leads to new (online) communities. In the virtual space, new social units are formed that have values, identities, or practices in common. However, social media and smartphone usage are significantly linked to the feeling of loneliness. One reason for this is that engaging with others virtually can temporarily make us feel better, but connections tend to be superficial; there is no real human presence, eye contact, touch, or warmth involved, while these non-verbal aspects define our communication. Moreover, while technology has a social and connecting character, it is social media that allows for filter bubbles and fake news to drive people apart. Like plastic, modern communication technologies were a solution to many problems and are still essential to our world, but can in retrospect be seen as a metaphor for modernity and its problems.

Technology can help in fighting isolation and breaking down boundaries in some cases. As we noted, dating apps can help us to go beyond our limited and mostly monocultural network of friends, relatives, or co-workers. In addition, those prone to isolation can be supported by online platforms, like new mothers or disabled persons. The latter are unable to go out easily and many people feel awkward speaking to disabled persons, but online platforms can support them in talking and connecting. In the end, it might be a positive sign about human beings that human presence cannot entirely be substituted. As the controversial Harlow experiments on rhesus monkeys showed, even if all other needs are provided, physical contact and affection remain a necessity for well-functioning: in this light, technology that enables, amplifies, or facilitates the human proximity can be of great value. As research has showed, we bond through shared, intense experiences. Certain techniques can intensify this experience, for example immersive technologies at live events. In the future, brain interfaces will enable sharing experiences by allowing us to think or feel what the other thinks or feels.

Implications

• Online communities that enable us to become prosumers – creating content or value for goods and simultaneously consuming them from the community – increase a sense of unity and belonging. Collaborative productions and new membership models evolve and enable sharing.

• New types of online events create communities where experiences can be shared, such as E-sports events, gaming forums, or ‘online’ festivals where artists stream their live sets and instant messages with fans.