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But I'm a Social Studies Educator, So I Must Stay Connected: A Theoretical Examination of Technology Use During the Pandemic

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Abstract

Technology integration, use, and application have been of utmost necessity during the pandemic known as COVID-19. However, there is a need for more philosophical and critical reflection concerning technology use. First, I discuss the nature of how people, including myself, use technology; I do this through a running narrative about how I methodically limited and then eradicated my social media use. I then discuss the concept of connectivity in terms of social media use, and then lastly I discuss possible long-term effects of technology use under COVID-19 in terms of technologies' impact on civic engagement and active citizenship.

Keywords: technology; civic engagement; social media; COVID-19

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, each day I would get up and start the day by engaging in my daily scroll on Twitter and Facebook; I had to make sure I was up to date on the latest news, ideas, online pedagogies, and materials. However, at the end of each day, I felt as if I was connected, but nothing had changed except my level of anxiety. I pushed those feelings to the side and attributed those feelings to the pandemic, which was partly true, but I could not help but think there was more to the story. In this reflective article, I will seek to interrogate this idea by discussing my evolution of dissecting my technology and social media use throughout the pandemic.

Reflecting on My Social Media Consumption

To manage my anxiety around social media consumption, I decided to organize specific times without my phone, social media, or constant connectedness; I did this to ensure that I was not allowing myself to become overly anxious by keeping myself constantly connected to “breaking news” which seemed to happen every minute of the day. While these times of being separated from technology/social media were great for my mental health, as soon as I logged on my irritability would increase as I saw people on social media propagating and advocating misinformed stances and ideologies. It was at this point that I began to question social media's role in connecting me to the political/ news world.

I was curious if others experienced similar skepticism of social media, so every opportunity I had to speak with someone I would ask them about their social media use. Most people I spoke with did not have a positive view of social media, but they still kept it and their reason was usually something similar to, “that's how I stay connected to friends and family” or

“that’s how I follow the news.” Both responses elicited emotional responses in myself, rooted in partial truth, as both of these responses were reasons I convinced myself to stay on social media up to that point. Not to mention, I am a social studies educator and how effective would I be if I did not stay connected to the events happening around the world?

However, it was at this point I started to critically examine my connectedness and started to question whether my connectedness was authentic or forced and if any good actually came from this connectedness. Was my unity with others through this time actually real unity or forced? John Dewey discusses the concept of mechanical vs. organic unity. One may think of a mechanical unity as a forced situation, whereas organic unity is more likely to occur naturally and is therefore truly representative of diverse viewpoints, opinions and approaches. For example, Rockefeller (1994) notes, “An organic unity is not, then, an undifferentiated one or a dead conglomerate of mechanically related parts, but rather it is a living unity of distinct individuals, a whole which exists in and through diversity” (p.81). While social media theoretically unites diverse groups of people, research indicates that Twitter and Facebook alone is liable to produce a type of echo chamber experience/confirmation bias, but users of technology and digital media broadly may be more exposed to different types of viewpoints and thoughts (Rajan, 2019). While I did consider myself a user of technology and digital media broadly speaking, my focus in this article is more specifically focused on social media.

Dissecting my Technology and Social Media Consumption

Step One: Getting Rid of My Smartphone

I decided that the first step in my process of dissecting my connectedness was to get rid of my smartphone. This seemed harmless enough, since I still had access to Facebook and Twitter through my computer. I did much research prior to this. For example, I read reflections of people who had made a similar decision, as well as watched random YouTube videos to ensure myself that I was making the right decision (for example, see Germano, 2017). After much thought, I ordered a flip phone and made the transition. The transition was not easy, as I found myself many times throughout the day reaching for my phone to look up something quickly only to find that I did not have that capability. Instead, I started writing down what I wanted to look up later that day when I was near a computer. By the time I returned to my list each evening, most of what I NEEDED to look up in the moment just seemed of no value later that day.

Step: Two: Deleting Facebook

I decided that I must NOW go forward and know the answer to whether or not social media was actually keeping me connected to anything or anybody. I again did much research prior to this decision and one of the most instrumental resources I came across was a TEDx Talk

about quitting social media by a professor of computer science (see Newport, 2016). After much thought, I decided I would delete Facebook first and see what happened. I wrote a draft of a post about deleting my account around three weeks prior to actually deleting my account to ensure I was making the right decision. I finally decided to go forward with my post, expecting people to come out in droves to want to connect with me outside of that platform. People “liked it” and people commented, but not ONE person reached out to connect another way. This confirmed my suspicion that I was not legitimately connected to any person on this outlet.

Step Three: Deleting Twitter

The next step of deleting Twitter was arguably the most difficult for me, as I had many professional connections on this platform. My account was well-followed, I had connected with many people within, across, and beyond my field, and I had even published an article focused on Twitter use (see Mullins & Hicks, 2019). Not to mention, I had many instances where I had interacted with celebrities, well-known authors, and influential community members. However, I still decided to go through with deleting the account. Prior to deleting it, I notified my followers I would be deleting my account and asked if anyone would like to connect outside of this platform; three people reached out to me. Ironically, the three people that reached out to me were the three people I had planned to contact to try to make sure we stayed connected after I left Twitter. Again, the network I thought I had built was not necessarily a network at all.

Reflections after One Month with No Social Media or a Smartphone

It has been around a month since getting rid of my smartphone and a few weeks since getting rid of all social media. I have been able to keep up with news and current events, but I have had to be more deliberate about this. Instead of keeping the constant flow of Google notifications and Facebook news stories, I have to take time each day to read the news or listen to National Public Radio (NPR). I do find that many conversations with people start with, “You probably saw my post...” I then remind them that I do not have social media and we usually engage in an authentic conversation about something new that is occurring in their life.

I have also found that more people call me now because they know I have a flip phone and cannot respond very well to texts, which has been enjoyable because talking to someone allows a connection that is not attainable through text. Additionally, there were some contacts in my phone I had never actually spoken to and had only texted. Because of my transition to a flip phone, I have gotten to have real conversations with them and hear their voices for the first time, some of those conversations being the few people on Twitter that were willing to engage outside of social media.

The most surreal learning from this so far, is noticing the world and people around me. I see people living through technology rather than enjoying what is in front of them. Often, I will scan rooms around me and notice couples, friends, and families sitting with each other without

any conversation, while everyone is looking at their respective technologies. I have watched people experience nature through a device, and pose several times in front of something before getting the perfect shot, instead of taking time to enjoy the moment.

Social Studies Implications

As a social studies educator and scholar, my recent observations and experiences with technology have perplexed me. For a couple months now I have been “off the grid” so to speak and I have found myself no less engaged with the world than I was before when I had social media and a smartphone. If my experience is similar to others, this has significant implications for the field of social studies.

The field of social studies often discusses lofty terms such as civic engagement and citizenship. In fact, many of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) position statements use such terms (<https://www.socialstudies.org/advocacy/ncss-position-statements>). However, perhaps we as a field need to re-examine such concepts as civic engagement in an era when we are constantly engaged, but with technology, not each other. We have to be careful not to reduce citizenship and activism to controversial Twitter posts, Facebook tirades, and social media rants that do not produce meaningful change. Metaphorically speaking, screens are blocking authentic engagement, organic unity, and civic engagement, and to be a citizen now is almost equated to owning a device and posting how you believe when something happens in the world that you may find detestable. Civic engagement and citizenship must refocus on engagement with each other as citizens, in real conversations, and platforms that do not allow us to hide behind a social media handle. I believe that technology has given us the facade that we are making change, but when the technology leaves and the world stays the same, that makes me believe that perhaps we are not putting forth a sustainable, noticeable effort. It may be necessary to re-examine our roles as citizens in an era of connectedness to ensure we are truly, authentically, and organically unified (Rockefeller, 1994) and connected to each other outside of the digital world.

Conclusion

This article is not meant as a manifesto on technology use, but it is rather a challenge to social studies educators to rethink what engagement means in the era of COVID-19, when we are all almost exclusively required to be in online spaces. In these instances, we have to be careful that we do not let online engagement substitute for true and authentic civic engagement with real people in real places. That is why I decided to dissect my technology use to provide others with a point of reflection to analyze how connected they are to the literal, actual, existing world.

When COVID-19 is under control, will civic engagement look different forever? Perhaps it already looks different and we do not even realize it. We have to push to make sure that even if civic engagement and active citizenship is permanently changed under the “new normal,” that

we are still willing to push ourselves out of online spaces as a sole means of trying to invoke change in our world. Otherwise, we may give people the impression that citizenship is simply being a passive participant and they have no place in being the leaders of their own lives (Mullins, 2019). However, the hope is that we can show another generation the benefit and necessity of taking an active role in the world, politics, and citizenship.

Ricky Mullins is an assistant professor of Curriculum and Instruction at Eastern Kentucky University. His research focuses on technology integration, the philosophy of John Dewey, disability, and democratic education. He can be contacted at ricky.mullins@eku.edu.

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