

Cyberpsychology and Virtual Therapy

1. We have explored how the virtual self is a network of personae enacted across an array of social media platforms, its agency and cognition embedded and extended across networks of resources and allies. We have also explored the inherent vulnerabilities of such a networked self: fragmentation, anxieties over being monitored and manipulated and dependence on the very technologies that enable virtual life. In one of the lectures on virtual religion I explore what religion might have to offer to combat and exorcize such “demons” of the networked self. In this lecture I wish to explore insights on the psychological empowerment and entanglements afforded by social media drawn from the new field of “cyberpsychology” as well as the potential uses of virtual technologies in therapy.
2. In enabling self-expression and recognition from friends and followers virtual communication devices such as our smart phones, personal assistants, tablets and computers are neither fully internal nor external to our identities. (1) Rather they are what psychologist Heinz Kohut refers to as “selfobjects,” through which we both express ourselves to others and find recognition of ourselves from others. (2) Or, in the words of Donald Winnicott, they are “transitional objects” by which we negotiate our relationships with others and the world beyond our consciousness.
3. Pioneering “cyber-psychologist” John Suler in his book *Psychology of the Digital Age* argues that how we use and find recognition *from*, as well as *through* our virtual communication devices can re-enact our own original relations with parents and peers. Following Kohut, Suler differentiates three kinds of recognition we can receive from our devices manners: (1) idealizing or conditional recognition , in which we experience devices as building/undermining confidence though judging our performance; (2) more mirroring or more unconditional recognition, in which we feel nurtured and affirmed *by* them or absorbed and enmeshed *in* them; and (3) twinning or peer recognition, in which we experience devices as accompanying and assisting or obstructing and opposing us.
4. Suler argues that how one’s relationship with one’s devices often re-enacts earlier paternal, maternal or peer relationships. Thus reflecting over how we relate to our devices can lead to (1) greater self-understanding as well as provide motivation for a more functional and meaningful use of media devices in our hybrid virtual lifestyle.

5. Likewise, the design architecture and formatting of different social media platforms can be either beneficial or dangerous for different kinds of personality disorders. For example, the telepresence afforded Zoom chats can be attractive to schizoid personalities who yearn for connection while fearful of surrendering control. (1) Bullying can be enabled by the anonymity afforded through user names on many sites. Twitter may aggravate venting and other impulses. (2) Instagram can both encourage exhibitionism and exacerbate insecurities. On the other (3) hand video games can draw out those who are chronically shy or who suffer from agoraphobia
6. Suler argues that an assessment of a patient's social media use can assist in diagnosing psychological pathologies. He thus argues that it ought to be added to diagnostic interview protocols.
7. Social media and the internet can also offer therapist and client new modes of treatment. For example ongoing tracking of mood and emotion, obsessive thoughts and dysfunctional behavior over smart phones can inform adjustments in treatment regimes.
8. Suler argues that a characteristic feature of virtually all social media is what he has called the "disinhibition effect." (1) The lack of face to face physical presence can lead to people being more disclosive, sooner in relationships. (2) On the other hand it can also lead to people breaking off relationships more easily and more abruptly. Dating platforms such as Tinder suffer from both "TMI"—"too much information" and "ghosting"—where a supposed friend drops all contact, suddenly and without warning, no reason given. (3) Such oscillations of affective intensity and instant indifference certainly mimics addictive cravings.
9. This disinhibition effect may accelerate online talk therapy. (1) Clients may feel safer having a screen between them and their therapist. So too they may feel safer knowing they can always "ghost" their therapist at a moment's notice. (2) On the other hand, establishing rapport with a client may be correspondingly more challenging.
10. Behavioral psychologists are beginning to apply the principles of operant conditioning to "gamify" therapy. Dysfunctional behaviors can be extinguished and healthier habits reinforced through enlisting a patient's competitive nature by making a game of it. (1) Gaining recognition through online awards and prizes can incentivize elusive motivation

to change deep seated but dysfunctional habits. (2) Relaxation or meditation apps can reduce anxiety without having to pop a pill.

11. Cognitive therapy is particularly well suited to online automation. Cognitive distortions arising from negative or catastrophic thinking, can be identified, tracked and challenged through apps on one's smartphone. One of the weaknesses of cognitive therapy is that it can be as tedious as physical therapy. Gamifying exercises designed to reprogram neural pathways can enhance compliance.
12. Virtual reality has also become widely used in desensitizing those suffering from phobias of various kinds. (1) Similarly the military has developed VR programming for the treatment of PTSD suffered by soldiers returning from the battlefield. Traumatic events can be recreated virtually and lived through over and over again in safety with a therapist by one's side to process what was done to and done by the client now in treatment.
13. Virtual reality also offers powerful resources for psychodrama. Childhood trauma can be dramatically re-enacted in an immersive virtual recreation, in which the client can serially adopt the roles of all of the characters in the drama. So too therapists can pause the action at any point to question or advise the client or to exaggerate the scene to mirror its affective valence. For example a virtual re-enactment of a childhood trauma could involve exaggerating the height of the parent to intimidating dimensions, or shrink that of the patient to insignificance.
14. Finally group therapy is also easily amenable to online video chats. The internet hosts self-help groups for every condition under the sun, no matter how rare or shamed. (1) Some of these are sponsored by hospitals, public health agencies and national associations. (2) Others are organized by victims themselves sharing stories, insights and recognition amongst themselves. Such groups offer a form of therapy that is readily accessible, potentially anonymous and affordable to the point of being free to anyone and everyone.
15. It is also important to keep in mind that for the networked self, the primary issue is less the repression of unwanted desires, than (1, 2) their dissociation, what Kohut refers to as a (3) vertical splitting off (4) of one persona from others. (5) This shifts the therapeutic task from the discovery of unconscious desires to (6) owning up and taking responsibility

for problematic indulgence of such desires anonymously online, linking one's various personae together into a coherent identity.

16. Contemporary psychologists and media critics also worry over internet addiction. It is argued that the (1) anonymity, (2) accessibility and (3) affordability (AAA) offered by the internet greases a slippery slope towards addiction. (4) I may well not even recognize that I am spending an increasing amount of time online, particularly with how immersive it can be, such that I lose track of time spent. It is commonplace for users to be shocked at how long they have been online once they look up from their screens. So too the frequency of usage is rarely tracked. The typical American adult spends over 10 hours a day in front of a screen of one kind or another. As a result some social critics now refer to digital natives as "screen people."
17. Furthermore, the addictive character of internet sites is not a bug but a feature. For the current business model for most all social media as well as smart phones themselves is to offer services for free and earn profits through advertising. Thus designers have a strong incentive to engineer their products to be addictive both in frequency and length of use. In response to recent public criticism that its time for media providers to begin taking some measure of responsibility for the dangers of addiction by their users, Apple has now added (1) another i-phone app that monitors screen usage, to provide feedback to users on how much time they spend on which apps, and with features to (2) silence notifications during times devoted to rest and reflection, (3) to block access to problematic sites or (2) to limit daily usage. Through such features I can nudge myself towards the cultivation of character.
18. All this said however, there is still controversy surrounding even heavy internet use. When ought it be criticized as an addiction and when is it rather to be approved, (1) even admired, as an expression of dedication or devotion? We admire athletes and (2) artists for their commitment of time and energy to the cultivation of their performance and craft. This time taken away from the activities of everyday life is taken to be characteristic of a committed way of life, (3) even a calling, rather than shamed as an obsessive addiction.
19. Are gamers who spend comparable time and energy online building their craft addicts or athletes? Is their dedication only professional if they can find a sponsor to financially sustain their way of life? Or are video game companies exploiting addicts in marketing

their products? Is choosing a menial job on the basis of its enabling time and energy to be spent online worse than musicians taking part time or gig jobs to have more time for their music? Or are corporations exploiting a vulnerable labor market? When does such sacrifice make one a role model to emulate and subsidize rather than an object lesson to avoid?

20. So too with media content creators. Are selfies self-promotion or can they be art? Could the time and energy devoted to editing a selfie (1) be considered sacred work analogous to the painting of a religious icon. (2) In both cases you have an image created that draws the viewer into a reality beyond the image.
21. Or those who produce their own Youtube channels. (1) Some may be addicts to be deplored, (2) but others may well be artists to be admired.
22. Furthermore assessment of time and energy spent virtually needs to be contrasted with realistic alternatives in context. Social media is not always a substitute for deep and rich face to face conversation. (1) How is “idle chatter,” condemned already by Heidegger as a product of empty urban modernity, any different from village gossip, or for that matter (2) primate grooming from which speech itself arguably arose in the first place?
23. The benefits and dangers of the internet and social media we have been exploring demonstrate that virtual communication technologies are neither morally nor psychologically neutral. While their value is dependent on the uses to which they are put, each media platform incentivizes and enables some uses, both beneficial and harmful, while inhibiting if not disabling others. We must not sleepwalk into adopting these new technologies uncritically, but neither should we allow our comfort with the familiar and our initial aversion to the immature to lead us to dismiss them wholesale. The unreflective life may not be worth living, but the un-lived life is not worth reflecting over either. In the virtual age, social critics and therapists will need to be both informed and equipped to engage the new digital natives they aspire to study and serve.