Essays on Technology

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Both of the following articles present arguments about how technology is altering the ways in which we experience the world. Carefully read and consider each of the articles. Then, in a well-organized essay of no more than three (3) typed (the list of references is *not* included in the three pages), single-spaced pages in 12 pt Times New Roman with 1" margins, respond to the following prompt.

> **To what extent do you agree with the arguments in the articles that technology is altering the ways in which we experience the world? Explain your reasoning and what, if any, solutions do you suggest?**

The Atlantic

Every Place Is the Same Now

With a phone, anywhere else is always just a tap away.

By Ian Bogost

January 16, 2020

Those old enough to remember video-rental stores will recall the crippling indecision that would overtake you while browsing their shelves. With so many options, any one seemed unappealing, or insufficient. In a group, different tastes or momentary preferences felt impossible to balance. Everything was there, so there was nothing to watch.

Those days are over, but the shilly-shally of choosing a show or movie to watch has only gotten worse. First, cable offered hundreds of channels. Now, each streaming service requires viewers to manipulate distinct software on different devices, scanning through the interfaces on Hulu, on Netflix, on AppleTV+ to find something "worth watching." Blockbuster is dead, but the emotional dread of its aisles lives on in your bedroom.

This same pattern has been repeated for countless activities, in work as much as leisure. Anywhere has become as good as anywhere else. The office is a suitable place for tapping out emails, but so is the bed, or the toilet. You can watch television in the den—but also in the car, or at the coffee shop, turning those spaces into impromptu theaters. Grocery shopping can be done via an app while waiting for the kids' recital to start. Habits like these compress time, but they also transform space. Nowhere feels especially remarkable, and every place adopts the pleasures and burdens of every other. It's possible to do so much from home, so why leave at all?

Over the holidays, my family trekked to a suburban Atlanta mall to see _Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker_. It's the closest theater to offer Dolby Vision and Dolby Atmos, and we decided that increased color gamut and floor-rumbling sound justified the 25-mile sojourn.

Seeing new movies is one of the few entertainment activities left that you really can't do at home (unless you're wealthy, of course). Even so, U.S. theater attendance reached a 25-year low in 2017. There's so much on cable and streaming services, moviegoers need not leave the couch. With Netflix, Amazon, and Apple competing with major studios, television shows now enjoy the prestige, not to mention the budgets, previously

restricted to film. Today, "event movies" such as *Star Wars* are the best way to lure people to the cinema. That partly explains why so many current movies are huge action flicks. It's not that the moving image has deadened itself as art, as Martin Scorsese infamously worried last year, but that most people have shifted their attention to smaller screens. Scorcese's latest film, *The Irishman*, only proves the point—it started streaming on Netflix less than a month after its limited theatrical release.

Over the last two decades, the technology of film has also evaporated into the home. Big-screen television and surround-sound receivers have been around for a while, but when widescreen HDTVs became popular (and then affordable) in the aughts, home theater became competitive with cinema for everyday use. Flatscreens quickly were attached to residential walls, in bedrooms and above fireplaces. Unlike big-action films of the Marvel or Lucasfilm persuasion, *The Irishman* looks great on these home-television setups, making many dens, bedrooms, and great rooms a suitable proxy for the cinema.

But the film also shows just as well on a smartphone screen. With a rectangle perched inches from viewers' faces, sound funneled through earphones, Netflix can feel immersive. Just as home theaters proliferated, the smartphone started to bring television to the couch, or the chair, or the bed. The theater can now swim freely all throughout the house. Cinematic and televisual entertainment has been overloaded into almost every architectural space. The standard worry about home theaters replacing the cinema is about the theaters, but what about the home? The den or the bedroom has to take on additional responsibilities, haunting them with the functions of locations where other activities once took place.

Smartphones continue and accelerate this process. At least the bedroom TV had to be turned off if one's spouse wanted to sleep. Once a show moves to the smartphone screen, every couch cushion becomes its own tiny home theater: *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood* on a preschooler's device, *The Mandalorian* on a father's, *Stranger Things* on a teen's.

Architectural critics anticipated that modern life would change the sensation of space. Almost 30 years ago, the French anthropologist Marc Augé coined the word *non-place* to describe a family of transitional locations where people's sense of self becomes suppressed or even vanishes. Non-places include airports, hotels, shopping malls, supermarkets, and highways. There's a sorrow to these sites, because unlike legitimate ones, human beings never really occupy non-places; they simply move through them on their way to "anthropological places," as Augé called them, such as schools, homes, and monuments.

Non-places have both proliferated and declined in the decades since. On the one hand, there are far more of them, and people encounter them more frequently. More airports and train stations in which more passengers transit more often. More hotel lobbies and conference centers, many boasting their own food courts and shopping plazas, non-places nested within non-places.

On the other hand, the anonymity and uselessness of non-places has been undermined by the smartphone. Every gate waiting area, every plush lobby couch cluster, every wood-veneered coffee shop lean-to has become capable of transforming itself into any space for any patron. The airport or café is also an office and a movie theater, a knitting club, and a classroom.

Non-places always garnered sneers. Augé himself dubbed their rise an "invasion" that brought about "supermodernity," a massive overabundance of dead space devoted to individual rather than collective activity. He predicted that the uniformity of these places—every airport and hotel is like every other—would proliferate into a scourge, a plague that would strip the built environment of opportunities for humans to express themselves.

Supermodernity did come to pass, but not in quite the way Augé and his successors forecast, and feared. You no longer need an industrialized space, such as a supermarket or a conference center, for the anonymity of the non-place to coalesce. Now, something weirder takes place. For one part, the bastions of supermodernity have become more personalized than they used to be. You might overhear a business call in the airport terminal, or witness the emotional distress of a relationship blowing up over text in the Starbucks line. But for another part, any place whatsoever—even the anthropological spaces that Augé thought gave human experience context—can become equally anonymous.

You walk into your own living room to find your spouse or son on the couch, staring or tapping into a device. *What are they doing?* you wonder. Email? Television? Pornography? Shopping? Which is also to ask: What other, foreign, spaces have they conjured into the shared space of the home? The answer is often unknowable, and in any case just as quickly replaced by another space as one app backgrounds and another comes to the fore. A proliferation of non-places wasn't the problem, it seems. Instead, technology has allowed personal intimacy and connection to flourish *too much*, and anywhere. Now every space is a superspace, a place that might be fused together with any other.

Superspaces have been on the rise for decades, since long before personal devices became ubiquitous. Years ago, when computers didn't talk to each other much, my friend Damon and I would walk or ride our bikes from his place to a 7-Eleven a few blocks away to play arcade games. To play *the* arcade game, I should say; they had one, and the clerk would eventually kick us out if we lingered too long. "This isn't an arcade."

But arcades were still seedy places at the time. Some parents would dissuade or even prohibit their kids from going. And so we'd find bowling alleys (no less seedy, and possibly more), convenience stores, laundromats—places where people used to exchange idle time for diversion by dropping coins in slots.

Then Damon and his brother got a Nintendo. The purchase made the bodega and the arcade suddenly superfluous. Now we could murder ducks or pilot plumbers amid the thick pile of his bedroom carpet. Eventually they took the arcade machine out of the

7-Eleven entirely, and the arcade business collapsed. Bedrooms and dens imported the arcade into the home, like the VCR had done with the cinema. As Augé put it, people are always, and never, at home.

Bringing work home with you used to mean carting the actual work from the office to the house—files in briefcases, or lists of calls to be returned from behind a study door. Now it describes a more conceptual and holistic practice. Thanks to laptops, smartphones, broadband, apps, and cloud services, everyone can work all the time: Sending out emails under the dinner table, responding to Slack messages between closing the car door and opening the front door, processing expense reports by photographing receipts on the kitchen counter.

The disquiet associated with these activities is usually theorized as labor swelling to fill what was once private time. I've previously used the term hyperemployment for the endless jobs everyone has, over and above the job they may get paid to do. My colleague Derek Thompson has called Americans' almost religious devotion to their jobs workism. But hyperemployment and workism are also partly consequences of the built environment becoming more super-spatial. It's not just that the work comes home with you, but that the *office* does as well. Infinitely portable, the smartphone turns every space it enters into a workplace. Once Salesforce is launched, whatever room you occupy is a conference room.

Places exist for purposes, and when those purposes emigrate to new locations they also bring along the specters of their former homes. The bathroom is a place to shower or to cast out human waste. Bring your phone in there, and it's also an office where you can complete procurement requests in enterprise-resource-management software such as Workday, and a theater where you can watch *The Crown* on Netflix, and a classroom where you can practice Latvian on Duolingo, and a travel agency where you can book a flight on Delta. And your office isn't just at home, either: It's anywhere. At the gym, on the train platform, in the gastropub, behind the wheel.

That capacity underlies the social and economic power of computation. It also transmutes the individuals who use smartphones into the spaces where discrete activities once took place—or the cultural memory of those spaces, at least. The executive excusing herself to send a message at dinner doesn't just bring the work to the meal, but transports herself back to the office. The business traveler booking a flight from the doctor's waiting room teleports to the travel agency or the airport ticket counter.

These changes hollow out the spaces where specific activities once took place. The unique vibe and spiritual energy of the record shop or the clothing boutique evaporate away once Spotify or Amazon takes over for them. Peripheral spaces also decay, such as the transit lines or roads that lead to them, and the cafés or boba joints that flank them.

But computation's indifference to place also hurls the spaces where smartphones are used into their own chaos. The moment one of those spatial memories comes to the fore, it just gets replaced by another, competing space hiding just underneath. You might

settle in to start streaming an episode of *The Great British Baking Show* only to have a Slack notification transform the couch into a makeshift meeting room, and then back again. But just as likely: You pull up the sheets and then reach for YouTube, where an ASMR video adds a meditation studio overtop the bedroom. Or you browse your Facebook news feed on the toilet, hoping to amend the bathroom's quiet isolation with the social murmur of a pub or café.

It's easy but disorienting, and it makes the home into a very strange space. Until the 20th century, one *had* to leave the house for almost anything: to work, to eat or shop, to entertain yourself, to see other people. For decades, a family might have a single radio, then a few radios and a single television set. The possibilities available outside the home were far greater than those within its walls. But now, it's not merely *possible* to do almost anything from home—it's also the easiest option. Our forebears' problem has been inverted: Now home is a prison of convenience that we need special help to escape.

Refreshed from site specificity after the *Star Wars* screening, my family longed to extend that sense of freedom. So we idled for a couple hours at the Dave & Buster's, an unholy fusion of suburban bar-grill, video-game arcade, and kiddie casino. It's the descendant of Chuck E. Cheese's Pizza Time Theatre, which Atari founder Nolan Bushnell created in 1977 as a family-friendly alternative to the taverns and arcades where video games were played.

In the din of Dave & Buster's, we found our devices already waiting for us: large-scale renditions of mobile games like Candy Crush filled the place, reimagined at arcade scale. At one time, this would have seemed like a perverse joke. But any reprieve from superspace feels earnest now. We happily paid to idle there, tapping and swiping giant versions of the apps already in our pockets, rather than returning to the minivan, and then the highway, and then home, where everyone would recede again into the dense expanse of a smartphone.

Ian Bogost is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic* and the Director of the Program in Film & Media Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. His latest book is *Play Anything*.

Opinion

OPINION

Stop Googling. Let's Talk.

By Sherry Turkle

Sept. 26, 2015

COLLEGE students tell me they know how to look someone in the eye and type on their phones at the same time, their split attention undetected. They say it's a skill they mastered in middle school when they wanted to text in class without getting caught. Now they use it when they want to be both with their friends and, as some put it, "elsewhere."

These days, we feel less of a need to hide the fact that we are dividing our attention. In a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center, 89 percent of cellphone owners said they had used their phones during the last social gathering they attended. But they weren't happy about it; 82 percent of adults felt that the way they used their phones in social settings hurt the conversation.

I've been studying the psychology of online connectivity for more than 30 years. For the past five, I've had a special focus: What has happened to face-to-face conversation in a world where so many people say they would rather text than talk? I've looked at families, friendships and romance. I've studied schools, universities and workplaces. When college students explain to me how dividing their attention plays out in the dining hall, some refer to a "rule of three." In a conversation among five or six people at dinner, you have to check that three people are paying attention — heads up — before you give yourself permission to look down at your phone. So conversation proceeds, but with different people having their heads up at different times. The effect is what you would expect: Conversation is kept relatively light, on topics where people feel they can drop in and out.

Young people spoke to me enthusiastically about the good things that flow from a life lived by the rule of three, which you can follow not only during meals but all the time. First of all, there is the magic of the always available elsewhere. You can put your attention wherever you want it to be. You can always be heard. You never have to be bored. When you sense that a lull in the conversation is coming, you can shift your attention from the people in the room to the world you can find on your phone. But the students also described a sense of loss.

One 15-year-old I interviewed at a summer camp talked about her reaction when she went out to dinner with her father and he took out his phone to add "facts" to their conversation. "Daddy," she said, "stop Googling. I want to talk to you." A 15-year-old boy told me that someday he wanted to raise a family, not the way his parents are raising him (with phones out during meals and in the park and during his school sports events) but the way his parents think they are raising him — with no phones at meals and plentiful family conversation. One college junior tried to capture what is wrong about life in his generation. "Our texts are fine," he said. "It's what texting does to our conversations when we are together that's the problem."

It's a powerful insight. Studies of conversation both in the laboratory and in natural settings show that when two people are talking, the mere presence of a phone on a table between them or in the periphery of their vision changes both what they talk about and the degree of connection they feel. People keep the conversation on topics where they won't mind being interrupted. They don't feel as invested in each other. Even a silent phone disconnects us.

In 2010, a team at the University of Michigan led by the psychologist Sara Konrath put together the findings of 72 studies that were conducted over a 30-year period. They found a 40 percent decline in empathy among college students, with most of the decline taking place after 2000.

Across generations, technology is implicated in this assault on empathy. We've gotten used to being connected all the time, but we have found ways around conversation — at least from conversation that is open-ended and spontaneous, in which we play with ideas and allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable. But it is in this type of conversation — where we learn to make eye contact, to become aware of another person's posture and tone, to comfort one another and respectfully challenge one another — that empathy and intimacy flourish. In these conversations, we learn who we are.

Of course, we can find empathic conversations today, but the trend line is clear. It's not only that we turn away from talking face to face to chat online. It's that we don't allow these conversations to happen in the first place because we keep our phones in the landscape.

In our hearts, we know this, and now research is catching up with our intuitions. We face a significant choice. It is not about giving up our phones but about using them with greater intention. Conversation is there for us to reclaim. For the failing connections of our digital world, it is the talking cure.

The trouble with talk begins young. A few years ago, a private middle school asked me to consult with its faculty: Students were not developing friendships the way they used to. At a retreat, the dean described how a seventh grader had tried to exclude a classmate from a school social event. It's an age-old problem, except that this time when the student was asked about her behavior, the dean reported that the girl didn't have much

to say: "She was almost robotic in her response. She said, 'I don't have feelings about this.' She couldn't read the signals that the other student was hurt."

The dean went on: "Twelve-year-olds play on the playground like 8-year-olds. The way they exclude one another is the way 8-year-olds would play. They don't seem able to put themselves in the place of other children."

One teacher observed that the students "sit in the dining hall and look at their phones. When they share things together, what they are sharing is what is on their phones." Is this the new conversation? If so, it is not doing the work of the old conversation. The old conversation taught empathy. These students seem to understand each other less.

But we are resilient. The psychologist Yalda T. Uhls was the lead author on a 2014 study of children at a device-free outdoor camp. After five days without phones or tablets, these campers were able to read facial emotions and correctly identify the emotions of actors in videotaped scenes significantly better than a control group. What fostered these new empathic responses? They talked to one another. In conversation, things go best if you pay close attention and learn how to put yourself in someone else's shoes. This is easier to do without your phone in hand. Conversation is the most human and humanizing thing that we do.

I have seen this resilience during my own research at a device-free summer camp. At a nightly cabin chat, a group of 14-year-old boys spoke about a recent three-day wilderness hike. Not that many years ago, the most exciting aspect of that hike might have been the idea of roughing it or the beauty of unspoiled nature. These days, what made the biggest impression was being phoneless. One boy called it "time where you have nothing to do but think quietly and talk to your friends." The campers also spoke about their new taste for life away from the online feed. Their embrace of the virtue of disconnection suggests a crucial connection: The capacity for empathic conversation goes hand in hand with the capacity for solitude.

In solitude we find ourselves; we prepare ourselves to come to conversation with something to say that is authentic, ours. If we can't gather ourselves, we can't recognize other people for who they are. If we are not content to be alone, we turn others into the people we need them to be. If we don't know how to be alone, we'll only know how to be lonely.

A VIRTUOUS circle links conversation to the capacity for self-reflection. When we are secure in ourselves, we are able to really hear what other people have to say. At the same time, conversation with other people, both in intimate settings and in larger social groups, leads us to become better at inner dialogue.

But we have put this virtuous circle in peril. We turn time alone into a problem that needs to be solved with technology. Timothy D. Wilson, a psychologist at the University of Virginia, led a team that explored our capacity for solitude. People were asked to sit in a chair and think, without a device or a book. They were told that they would have from six to 15 minutes alone and that the only rules were that they had to stay seated and not

fall asleep. In one experiment, many student subjects opted to give themselves mild electric shocks rather than sit alone with their thoughts.

People sometimes say to me that they can see how one might be disturbed when people turn to their phones when they are together. But surely there is no harm when people turn to their phones when they are by themselves? If anything, it's our new form of being together.

But this way of dividing things up misses the essential connection between solitude and conversation. In solitude we learn to concentrate and imagine, to listen to ourselves. We need these skills to be fully present in conversation.

Every technology asks us to confront human values. This is a good thing, because it causes us to reaffirm what they are. If we are now ready to make face-to-face conversation a priority, it is easier to see what the next steps should be. We are not looking for simple solutions. We are looking for beginnings. Some of them may seem familiar by now, but they are no less challenging for that. Each addresses only a small piece of what silences us. Taken together, they can make a difference.

One start toward reclaiming conversation is to reclaim solitude. Some of the most crucial conversations you will ever have will be with yourself. Slow down sufficiently to make this possible. And make a practice of doing one thing at a time. Think of unitasking as the next big thing. In every domain of life, it will increase performance and decrease stress.

But doing one thing at a time is hard, because it means asserting ourselves over what technology makes easy and what feels productive in the short term. Multitasking comes with its own high, but when we chase after this feeling, we pursue an illusion. Conversation is a human way to practice unitasking.

Our phones are not accessories, but psychologically potent devices that change not just what we do but who we are. A second path toward conversation involves recognizing the degree to which we are vulnerable to all that connection offers. We have to commit ourselves to designing our products and our lives to take that vulnerability into account. We can choose not to carry our phones all the time. We can park our phones in a room and go to them every hour or two while we work on other things or talk to other people. We can carve out spaces at home or work that are device-free, sacred spaces for the paired virtues of conversation and solitude. Families can find these spaces in the day to day — no devices at dinner, in the kitchen and in the car. Introduce this idea to children when they are young so it doesn't spring up as punitive but as a baseline of family culture. In the workplace, too, the notion of sacred spaces makes sense: Conversation among employees increases productivity.

We can also redesign technology to leave more room for talking to each other. The "do not disturb" feature on the iPhone offers one model. You are not interrupted by vibrations, lights or rings, but you can set the phone to receive calls from designated people or to signal when someone calls you repeatedly. Engineers are ready with more

ideas: What if our phones were not designed to keep us attached, but to do a task and then release us? What if the communications industry began to measure the success of devices not by how much time consumers spend on them but by whether it is time well spent?

It is always wise to approach our relationship with technology in the context that goes beyond it. We live, for example, in a political culture where conversations are blocked by our vulnerability to partisanship as well as by our new distractions. We thought that online posting would make us bolder than we are in person, but a 2014 Pew study demonstrated that people are less likely to post opinions on social media when they fear their followers will disagree with them. Designing for our vulnerabilities means finding ways to talk to people, online and off, whose opinions differ from our own.

Sometimes it simply means hearing people out. A college junior told me that she shied away from conversation because it demanded that one live by the rigors of what she calls the "seven minute rule." It takes at least seven minutes to see how a conversation is going to unfold. You can't go to your phone before those seven minutes are up. If the conversation goes quiet, you have to let it be. For conversation, like life, has silences — what some young people I interviewed called "the boring bits." It is often in the moments when we stumble, hesitate and fall silent that we most reveal ourselves to one another.

The young woman who is so clear about the seven minutes that it takes to see where a conversation is going admits that she often doesn't have the patience to wait for anything near that kind of time before going to her phone. In this she is characteristic of what the psychologists Howard Gardner and Katie Davis called the "app generation," which grew up with phones in hand and apps at the ready. It tends toward impatience, expecting the world to respond like an app, quickly and efficiently. The app way of thinking starts with the idea that actions in the world will work like algorithms: Certain actions will lead to predictable results.

This attitude can show up in friendship as a lack of empathy. Friendships become things to manage; you have a lot of them, and you come to them with tools. So here is a first step: To reclaim conversation for yourself, your friendships and society, push back against viewing the world as one giant app. It works the other way, too: Conversation is the antidote to the algorithmic way of looking at life because it teaches you about fluidity, contingency and personality.

This is our moment to acknowledge the unintended consequences of the technologies to which we are vulnerable, but also to respect the resilience that has always been ours. We have time to make corrections and remember who we are — creatures of history, of deep psychology, of complex relationships, of conversations, artless, risky and face to face.