Therapy in the digital age

Are you a laggard, an early adopter, or one of the late majority? Whichever you are, writes **Aaron Balick**, as a practising therapist in a digital world you need to think very carefully about your role in relation to life online

Towards the end of 2013 the venerable Oxford Dictionaries (publishers of the *Oxford English Dictionary* among others) chose its international word of the year. To great fanfare, they selected the word 'selfie', which they defined as 'a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website'.[1] According to their research, the word, which can be traced back to 2002, saw a 17,000 per cent increase in usage over the last year. In order to be considered for international word of the year, the word must have been 'prominent or notable' at the time it was chosen. If 2013 was the year of the selfie, what might this say about today's culture in relation to social media?

The selfie, perhaps above all, represents what is popularly conceived about social media. Namely that it is responsible for our self referential and narcissistic culture and that it poses the deepest risk to intimacy and relationships since television threatened to tear families apart. While for some sections of the population social networking represents a sort of moral panic, for others, most notably younger people, it is simply part of the fabric of everyday life. With more than 1.1 billion people worldwide active on Facebook and nearly three-quarters of adults in the UK with a social networking profile,[2] the way in which social media is inhabiting contemporary society is not to be sniffed at.

It is broadly understood that in relation to digital culture (a phrase that encompasses all manner of online life, from social media to email and online banking) the population is divided into two groups: digital natives (born around 1980 or later) and digital immigrants (the rest of us).[3] While this division is rather simplistic, it does an adequate job of categorising the population by those

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who were born within a digital environment from the start, and those born outside ubiquitous digital culture, coming into it later in life. It also serves as an important reminder that, by this measure, the first digital natives are today into their mid-30s – so we're talking about a huge chunk of the adult population as well.

Internet researchers Lee Rainee and Barry Wellman[4] use a more precise measure to divvy up the ways in which people take up technology, and have arrived at five broad categories:
• innovators (those creating new technologies themselves)
• early adopters (the first to try new technologies)
• early majority (the first wave of popular users)
• late majority (those who adopt new technologies after they've been in use by the public for some time)
• laggards (those who pick up the new technologies after they have been long established).

You may not be surprised to hear that with notable exceptions, psychotherapists and counsellors tend to fall into the last two categories. While this finding of mine is admittedly anecdotal in nature, it is what I have learned after running countless workshops on the issues faced by therapists in relation to digital culture. While it's not universal by a long shot, it is clear that a majority of our community of clinicians run the emotional gamut from being uncomfortable to deeply anxious about the digital status quo. While my sympathies do lie with these fears, within them also lies the danger that such anxieties can shut down the necessary thinking we need to do as psychotherapists and counsellors – not just for the benefit of our clients, but also for ourselves and for our culture at large.

Technology doesn't happen to us

Part of the narrative of the moral panic in relation to technology is often the sense that technology is something that happens to us, that we are passive victims of technology's onslaught. This simply isn't the case. As Baym[5] points out, the development of technology emerges through a relationship between innovators (individuals, inventors, companies and investors) and culture at large by way of a process called social shaping. Perhaps the clearest exemplar of this process is the evolution of computer interfaces as we used to know them; think of the difference

between the alien green hue of the first personal computers that required knowledge of DOS commands in order to operate, and the interface of the iPhone. Over the years, in response to trial and error, the interface has become more and more intuitive; the development of technology has clearly responded to what we as humans need from technology.

Given that technology itself is constructed relationally by way of interaction with human culture, it is no great leap to presume that we can understand technology and its use psychologically. Despite how it is frequently perceived, technology is not antithetical to the interests of psychotherapy; rather it fundamentally lies within the domain of the way we talking therapists understand the world. All we need to do is to set aside our fear of not knowing and apply our psychological thinking to the domain of technology and its use; a process we are already familiar with as clinicians.

In fact, what therapists can bring to the table with regard to social media in particular is immense. When you consider the development of social media in relation to the social shaping hypothesis, we find that we have indeed created a technology that falls directly in line with our own hardwired drive to relate to others. While you may argue that the ways in which social networking enables this relating may be a disservice to other forms of intimacy, the driving force behind the technology fundamentally rests in the human psychological motivation towards mutual recognition.

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Extensions of self

According to Palfrey and Gasser,[3] one of the major differences between digital natives and digital immigrants is that digital natives are less likely to distinguish between online and offline life than digital immigrants. This does not mean that they are unable to distinguish between fantasy and real life. It simply means that they experience social media as an extension of their social lives, not as a separate entity. For therapists this is a crucial insight as these individuals' online lives are as open to interpretation as their internal lives, and to dismiss their online lives as 'less than' will be a disservice to these individuals, who are likely to think you just don't 'get it'. While this shouldn't discourage therapists, who at times may need to challenge their clients' online behaviour, one still needs to watch one's initial assumptions.

From a psychodynamic perspective I have found it helpful to see the self as represented online through social media profiles, as an expression of the outward facing part of the ego.[6] Both Jung's conception of the persona and Winnicott's notion of the false self are helpful in this conceptualisation as they are both seen as non-pathological entities of the ego that are particularly adapted to our public or social selves.

For Winnicott, the false self protects the true self by responding at first to the frustration inherent in the primary relationship, and later by playing the role of social compliance. It is, however, still an aspect of the whole psyche, and a creative and alive one at that. For Jung, the role of persona is similar in that it 'is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society... a kind of mask, designed on the one hand to make a definite impression upon others, and, on the other, to conceal the true nature of the individual'.[7]

For both theorists, the outward facing nature of the ego is a necessary part of being in a social world. For Jung, the danger lies when one identifies with the persona as if it were the whole self, in which case important aspects of the real self are lost. Winnicott makes a similar argument, using the metaphor of an actor: 'There are those who can be themselves and who also can act, whereas there are others who can only act, and who are completely at a loss when not in a role, and when not being appreciated or applauded (acknowledged as existing).'[8]

When approaching the issue of individuals using social media it is absolutely crucial that therapists do not make the assumption that their clients' online activity is simply an expression of the pathological versions of the persona and false self. This is not to say that social media sites don't often enable and invite expressions that may be pathological in nature, but rather that these representations are likely to be extensions of the psychodynamics already present within the individual. Though extended into the digital world, these extensions still emerge from complex human functioning.

Therapists online

Clearly when it comes to digital life, there really isn't an us and them – we are all implicated in it. My interest in applying psychodynamics to social networking arrived when I had my first 'digital impingement'[9] in my consultation room when a client of mine googled me. This client discovered some information about me that he had previously been unaware of, and found this quite distressing. I ended up writing a paper about our experience, where I describe how we worked through this difficult event.[9] My hope was that by writing the paper, I could come to better understand for myself what had happened in my consulting room while offering up my thinking to the community of psychotherapists who were coming across this sort of thing more and more.

However, I came to discover something much bigger than this. It occurred to me that in our ubiquitous digital world, virtual impingements must be happening all the time without the luxury of having a psychotherapy consultation to work out the details of what was happening. It was for this reason that I wrote *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking: Connected-up instantaneous culture and the self* as a way of seeing how the insights from psychotherapy could shed light on this larger cultural situation.

Today there are many psychotherapists who use technology as part of their work (ranging from the odd email or Skype session to working exclusively online) and they need to be thinking carefully about how they do this.[10] However, those who choose to work more traditionally are still fully implicated in a digital world and need to think hard about how they are represented in this world themselves and how this affects their relationships with their clients.

I found to my surprise through my own experience that the way I was represented online via a Google search was tremendously impactful to the therapeutic relationship with my client. This provoked me to consider what I understand to be active and passive online identities.[11] Active identities are those that we have some control over (our website, our social media profiles, etc) and passive identities are those that we have less control over (what other people post about us, what comes up under a Google search of our names, etc).

As practising therapists in the digital world, it is crucial that we are mindful of both of these.

In order to be more cognisant of your own practice, here are some helpful questions you may wish to ask yourself:
• Are you aware of your passive online identity and have you considered how this may affect the way clients see you? You should assume that clients will Google you before they meet you.
• How thoughtful are you about how you represent yourself online? Your website or professional profile are like a first impression; are you taking them seriously?
• How do you manage the myriad of ways your clients may wish to interact with you, whether by email, text, or Facebook friend requests?
• What informs the choices you make about what you do online (eg whether you have a Facebook profile or not)?

We each have to come to our own answers on these matters and make our own choices based on our personalities on the one hand, and our clinical judgment on the other. While I avoided exposure to social networks for some time 'because I am a therapist', at one stage I decided I wanted to join the party and got myself a Facebook profile, later followed by a blog and a Twitter presence. I began to think seriously about whether or not it was kosher for psychotherapists to tweet, and wrote about that too.[12]

The decisions I have made are not for everybody. However, one decision I have made that I do think it is incumbent on all therapists to make is the development of an online policy. Whether this is one that you share with clients, or simply keep somewhere in your head or library for personal reference, is entirely up to you. However, being a therapist today requires that we think very carefully about our roles in relation to digital ubiquity. While this thinking may invite some anxiety, it also invites excitement and challenge. I encourage you all to take up the challenge. ■

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If you would like to use Aaron's digital policy as a model for your own, you are welcome to do so. It is available online at **www.mindswork.co.uk/pdf/social_networking.pdf**

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