How social is the internet?
A pragmatic view

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To many, the collocation of the terms ‘internet’ and ‘social’ may seem a bit strange, even contradictory. Either the internet is by definition social, or it is, by observation and intuition, a rather anti-social affair. The article tries to dispel this ambiguity of attribution, by focusing on both positive and negative aspects of internet practices, as we see them developing among its (often younger) users. A new vision of sociality is attributed mainly to the rise of the internet, and the consequences of a ‘fake’ social life are examined. Adaptation, both to the user and the soft/and hardware is seen as a key term in this respect, and some ethical and moral problems related to internet use are discussed with the aid of some actual cases. Finally, a general evaluation of the internet in both its positive and negative aspects is provided.

Keywords: internet, sociality, ‘fake’ life, avatar, adaptation, ethics, embodiment

1. Introduction

To many people, the term ‘social’, used in collocation with that of ‘internet’, may look like an oxymoron: the internet is where we are ourselves, most basically and essentially, without bodily connections to a world, to which we relate only via the fragile communicative circuitry of our computer or some other electronic device. ‘In the depth of my computer, I am by myself,’ one could say, paraphrasing Zarah Leander’s immortal line.¹

To others, the expression represents a pleonasm: Isn’t the internet, by definition and by usage, ‘social’, given the ways our social lives are (mostly, for some even exclusively) organized? Think of the commonly used term ‘social media’,

¹. From the 1926 Ralph Benatzky operetta Axel an der Himmelstür. (The original German text has “Im Grunde meines Herzens bin ich allein” – ‘In my heart of hearts I am by myself’).
used in connection with the internet: for many people, the internet is a natural part of their daily lives – and frequently the only way they can establish or keep up a social connection.

There is however another ‘social’ aspect of the internet – one which at first blush does not seem to imply any sociality. A modern researcher, looking for a source of information about a particular issue of importance to her or his work, will usually not first take a trip to the library or consult their own bookshelves (as many older people, inclusive the present writer, still may do). Nowadays, most people go ‘on line’ to retrieve the necessary information (and suffer some collateral informational damage in the process, mainly in the shape of time wasted on trivial pursuits).

While this kind of activity may not strike us as particularly social, as it is playing out in the intimacy of a single individual and his or her computer, in the end it is: the researcher may be preparing a work for publication, to be distributed society-wide, either using the classical media (printed articles and books), or by placing the results of his or her work on a website or a home page, accessible to colleagues and other interested persons via the socially available internet.

2. Redefining sociality

From the above, it would seem that the internet indeed may be called ‘social’ – maybe even essentially so. But wait – what about those other, old fashioned forms of socializing, like the water cooler gossiping in the office, the casual encounters with friends in the street or on the subway (or even the letter-writing to family and friends around the New Year, today often replaced by a pre-fabricated message sent by mail – or who knows, the very internet)? What often characterized those ‘pristine’ forms of social life was the presence of others within the same physical space, wearing their identities so to speak, on their skins: their social selves were, strictly speaking, ‘embodied’: that is to say, people’s bodies were actually (not virtually) present at the interaction in which they participated. The need to materially provide the essentials of life (such as water, food, sex, conversation, and so on) necessitated the bodily presence of the agents on the scene; the village pump may count as the primordial icon for these original ways of socializing.

With the advent of electronic communication, all of this, potentially and gradually, became subject to change. The village square now became an internet meeting place, a part of a virtual reality; over time, whole ‘second natures’ came into existence, as imagined and partly brought into existence by visionaries like Stefan Helmreich (2000) – and these ‘natures’ or ‘worlds’ were not just the playful universes of ‘dungeons and dragons’, but entire internet micro-cosmoses that
furnished all the essentials of sociality on line: exciting entertainment, pleasant everyday interchanges, inspiring cultural events, shared excitement about sports and celebrities, even romantic contacts, in short everything we have access to in the way of social relations in real life.

In extreme cases, one such ‘on-line agent’ could have been heard to utter words to the effect that the only things he needed for a fulfilling life were an internet connection and a bottle of Coke; however, it was left unclear how his ultimate link to reality was to be managed, where the needed bottle was supposed to come from, and which real life organization would underwrite the cost of the precious, life-sustaining drink. Indeed, the crucial question had to be asked which embodied outside provider would step in to guarantee the working of the vital internet connections at all times, without at least being secured some real world compensation.

In all this, at the end of the day the virtual life reclaims its real, ‘embodied’ rights. On-line dating services aim to provide real ‘carnal knowledge’, as not many internet users will continue to be satisfied with a mere virtual affair: the proof of a successful on-line dating arrangement is still in the final ‘happy bodying’. This need for a definite physical contact is exploited in various ways by the owners of the dating services, e.g. through flashing contact details on the screen with an admonition to ‘call now’, or other, similar exhortations.²

Internet sociality is in essence an ancillary enterprise: it facilitates and exploits social behavior, but does not fully satisfy the human urge to live in a community of embodied beings similar to oneself. Even at the height of a mystical, spiritual or religious experience, the person undergoing the trance-like event will express his or her feelings in a bodily posture (kneeling, kissing the ground) or by a series of self-inflicted or outside caused bodily trans- or deformations, as in Bernini’s famous sculptural evocation of St. Teresa of Avila being pierced by heavenly rays (compare also the self-mutilations proper to certain Oriental and Mid-Eastern religious movements). Long before the internet started to provide its own advances into virtual reality, the rare, but always imaginable culmination of the rapturee’s ecstatic flight was often represented by embodied (literally, bodily impressed) tokens of the virtual contact, in the form of marks called ‘stigmata’ (which, unlike modern piercing, were not self-inflicted).³

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2. I recall how years ago, Greek video ‘dating shorts’ routinely displayed the potential ‘date’ in an attractive pose, while the words Pare me tora (‘Call me now’) would run across the bottom of the screen, followed by a local phone number.

3. On the question of whether ‘ordinary’ virtual (non-mystical) ecstasies might result in similar, embodied contacts, leaving real traces (such as in the cases mentioned above), the jury is still out – and probably will be for a long time to come.
3. Of avatars and aspirations

When navigating the internet, one frequently encounters the term ‘avatar’. It is usually understood as “a (pictorial) representation of an internet user, an image that represents a person in a computer game or chat room and that one can move around the screen” (from Cambridge English Dictionary On Line). However, looking a bit further back, one will discover that the term has an interesting historical background: it originally stems from Classical Sanskrit literature, where it is used to express the ‘descending’ (ava-tara-) of a ‘disguised’ deity into the world of humans. The most famous of such divine shape-shifters is the Lord Vishnu, who manifests himself in various avatars (not only human ones); perhaps his best known human shape is Krishna, while Rama is another of his famous regenerative ‘descendings’. Another notorious descending deity is Indra, who gleefully cavorts through hordes of young, lustful brides, while keeping his record clean by producing a suitable avatar just in time.

Not surprisingly, the various problems of ‘avataring’ in the original sense have been the subject of many stories and legends, often having humoristic or sexual overtones. Here is one example from the classical collection Katha-sarit-sagara, the ‘Ocean of Streams of Stories’, an 11th century AD compilation of folk tales and legends, originally due to a certain shaiva (Shiva-follower) named Somadeva.

At one time, a certain king, being suspicious of his wife having an affair, proceeded to question her while she was supposedly having a bath exclusively with her female companions. On entering the scene, the king noticed a beautiful young man (an avatar of the god Indra) sitting in his wife’s lap, while surrounded by her playmates throwing water on the couple. The king, on viewing the scene, uttered the usual and perfectly superfluous demand to know ‘what was going on’, and ‘who was this person?’ His queen, not to be outwitted by the question, and inspired by the instant shape-shifting of her lover into a cat, replied in her women’s dialect: “It’s my cat”. This utterance brought great mirth to the congregated female bathers, who all spoke the dialect and captured the ambiguity of the queen’s response: the expression: “It’s my cat” (mao-jai) is homophonous within the female Prakrit dialect (but not in the official royal idiom, Sanskrit) with “It’s my lover” (maj-jara). Hearing this, the cuckolded, and now also publicly humiliated king, feeling the need to improve his langage resources, repaired to the wilderness and found himself a saintly hermit teacher, who instructed him in the mysteries of the current Low Sanskrit (or Prakrit) dialects for 12 full years. (It is not reported if upon his return, he did find his wife more amenable to fidelity as a result of his linguistic endeavors). (Source: Lanman 1920, Section 26, p. 49)

What this story of ‘linguistic avatarism’ shows is that adopting an avatar, even for playful purposes, creates a certain risk for the participants, but also, and not
least, for the non-initiated innocent bystanders. In our modern social context, one thing is to daydream oneself to successes and vicarious thrills on line; another is to face the cold reality of everyday life, from which the only escape hatch is another bout of avataring. So, while creating and maintaining an avatar may satisfy one’s immediate aspirations to fame and success, or even such more lofty wishes as love and recognition for one’s qualities, there is no such thing as a ‘free lunch’ on the internet: in the end, the bill has to be settled, the avatar has to be erased (potentially triggering both its own and its origin’s demise in real life).

4. The ‘fake’ social life and its consequences

The fact is that in many of the internet’s social activities, even outside of the gaming community and its avatars, one often encounters one’s contacts and correspondents exclusively on line, that is to say, in the guise of their ‘mediatized’ internet manifestations. In extreme (but not so rare) cases, one may ‘meet’ people who are not who they want you to believe they are, or who do not represent what they pretend to be, often with disastrous results for all the communicating partners. As the American psychiatrist and semiotician Sherry Turkle expressed it in the introduction to one of her books, a frustrated user was heard to have said “When my Palm [an early hand-held device] crashed, it was like a death… I thought I had lost my mind.” (Turkle 1985: 5).

In further, alarming studies of people who ‘took on’ an internet personality or function they were not able to fully sustain, or even represent in reality, Turkle (1985, 1996, 2011) has followed some of her patients whose internet delusions resulted in considerable damage, both psychological and material, to the involved parties. Thus, she recounts the case of a man who operated on the internet as a woman, in an effort to replace his ‘real’, non-assertive male self by an internet personality who was more like his domineering, assertive mother (Turkle 1999). This kind of internet ‘role-playing’ may give the person in question a ‘new’ identity, thanks to which he (or she?) is now able to present self on line with secure and confident language. And while it indeed may alleviate the stress resulting from the person’s ‘normal’, everyday performance as a non-assertive, timid male, his adopting an ‘alias’ identity on the internet and ‘coming out’ as a ‘renovated’ personality, with all the required attributes and characteristics inherent in the new identity, carries grave risks.

Earlier, Turkle (1985) had discussed the case of a person who ‘created’ himself on the internet as a practicing psychoanalyst, and established a virtual ‘office’ which, as times went by, threatened to overshadow, in fact take over, his normal existence (the identity he chose to project on line was probably an expression of
his wish to be able to cope with his own psychological difficulties). Apparently, the new identity was a success not only for its ‘creator’, but also among a fast growing multitude of online ‘patients’ or ‘analysands’, who naturally were not contented with receiving help online only, but began to insist on personal interviews and consultations face-to-face, a telephone number, a physical address to which they could send tokens of appreciation, and so on.

In the end, the would-be psychiatrist decided that it was time to stop the avataring, and devised a sequence of events in which he first fell ill, then was diagnosed with an untreatable terminal cancer, and finally succumbed to his disease – all this online. But in the end, reality struck back: now the ‘patients’ wanted to know all about the circumstances of the illness, the hospital where he was treated, the memorial services and the funeral – all of which the poor man and his email ‘persona’ naturally were unable to provide any concrete information about.

It is easy to say that the ‘psychiatrist’ just could have ended the charade by pressing the ‘delete’ button and consign his entire internet personality to the trash; but the buck wouldn’t have stopped there just like that. There were the many real cases of on-line patients who felt that their mental condition and personal health depended on the fake psychiatrist’s advice and therapeutic interventions; so when, in the end, the man did ‘kill’ his avatar, his own situation had not become any better as the result of the experiment. In addition, he had to carry the burden of having misled a great many innocent bystanders who now had to do without his advice and guidance, and consequently suffered from a very real withdrawal syndrome.

5. The pragmatics of the internet

In all of his, a ‘red thread’ can be discerned: the role of the internet user. Pragmatics has been defined as dealing with the ways the human agent handles his or her linguistic and other communicative resources in the context of society (Mey 2001: Chapter 1). In the present context, the question naturally arises how the human user is actively handling the particular communicative resources provided by the internet.

Activities like these are often subsumed under the classical label of ‘speech acting’. As I have argued elsewhere (Mey 2001: Chapter 8), such an appellation reflects a misunderstanding of sorts; I have suggested to replace the term ‘speech act’ by that of ‘pragmatic act’, in this way including also other activities than mere speech, along with, besides the actual speakers/hearers, also the other persons involved in the act, as well as the various additional contextual elements that are of importance for the acting to succeed.
As for the internet, a singular moment seems to be of outstanding interest: it is the way the internet agent is dependent on the respondent in order to proceed in his or her activities. The internet user is in a way a “voice crying in the wilderness” (Is. 40:3) of the internet ‘airscape’, a context in which he or she is not even sure if there are any proper responders ‘out there’ to receive the calls, and where all depends on the feedback received and its quality. That is to say, the personality I want to create and invoke is not of my work alone: the success of my creation depends on the ways any potential respondents react to my advances. In the Turkle case cited above, the ‘psychiatrist’ did not become one until he had established a group of patients; his professional advice was not ‘valid’ until acknowledged by a number of people willing to accept and follow the advice. More generally, this amounts to saying that the audience co-constructs the speaking agent’s message and in fact, the very person acting as a messenger – something long since established for written literature (see Mey 2000), but more recently becoming eminently significant for the way we use the internet.

Such considerations go a long way towards explaining the success of what currently has become (in)famous under the label of ‘fake news’. While many people are wondering how blatant lies and untruths can become accepted by a wide variety of earnest users, the pragmatics of this process are quite clear: ‘fake’ news is whatever is accepted as news by the audience (even if recognized or marked as ‘fake’), simply because it is being co-constructed through collaboration between the senders and their audience. In the same way that accepting and co-constructing the internet personality of a sender such as Donald Trump absolves the recipient from delving further into matters such as truth and newsworthiness, so too the immediate and unquestioned acceptance of the fake news item happens in a pragmatic act of news- (and truth-) co-construction. I identify with this news and its sender because I have in some way been responsible for its creation: I am its co-constructor, the internet ‘co-parent’, so to speak, of the fake or untruthful news item – and nobody wants to do away with one’s own offspring.

6. The internet: Adaptation and addiction

From another point of view, the use of the internet can be seen as a process by which the ‘users’ (the humans) and the ‘used’ (the hard- and software) mutually adapt. The user has to adapt to the ways the internet is organized: how entries are performed and classified, how messages are created and received (and possibly vetted before send-off and receipt), how access to files and programs is allowed or denied, how to deal with the most recent versions of one’s computer, its server connection and software programs, and so on and so forth. Conversely, the system
adapts itself currently to the feedback received from the user side; usually, this is provided directly in the form of critical remarks or helpful suggestions on the website, or indirectly through the soft- and hardware distributors’ and operators’ reports on how a particular item such as a new feature of a program is being received by the various types of buyers and users.

Even so, from its very beginning the internet has existed under the cloud of ‘program perfection’. By this, I mean that the developers of the relevant hard- and software were people for whom establishing an electronic shortcut or eliminating a line of code was simply a way of life in which brevity and terseness was more highly valued than even the birth of a male offspring, as it is told about the Indian grammarians in the tradition of Pānini, whose grammatical compactness is the apogee of concise proto-computer ‘programming’.

Adaptation to this ‘sub-culture’ of compactness is especially hard on humanists, who have been taught to find the proper expression for their thoughts and ideas, and never were told to save on words for the sake of brevity alone. The adaptation, as we see it happening across our computer screens today, where its norms inform and restrict the writing style of our messages (like in Twitter’s maximum of 140 characters per ‘tweet’) becomes a decisive element for a message’s potential spread on the internet. Which amounts to saying that anyone, whether Donald Trump or just a first year undergraduate student, will have to assemble his or her thoughts in such a way that they fit within the app’s prescribed size limits (a bit like when we have to submit our carry-on luggage in flight to a girth test).

What this implies for the mental organization and bodily realization of human thinking in the near and far future has so far not been explored, except novelistic- and essayistically; but my hunch is that the time of the self-contained essay that develops a thought over a number of carefully crafted paragraphs, organized according to content and expressed in readable, fluent language, is nearing the end of its shelf life. And as for letter writing in the old style, we may guess that

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4. Pānini’s (6th–4th century BC) Ashtadhyayi, an eight chapter long grammatical treatise, consists of mostly (ultra-)short rules that continuously auto-refer: nothing is repeated if it can be understood, or decoded from what has been said earlier. Needless to say, this way of organizing knowledge presupposes a high degree of familiarity with the entire corpus of rules and an understanding of how the individual rules are ‘telescopically’ collapsed and arranged. (For an illuminating parallel to the world of sports, see Tahir Wood’s ‘hermeneutic-pragmatic’ discussion of the rules and practice of the game of cricket; Wood 2015:125ff.) A modern linguistic parallel may be found in the Copenhagen variety of structural linguistics called ‘glossematics’, whose founder, the celebrated Louis Hjelmslev, wanted to make theoretical grammar into a ‘linguistic algebra’ (Hjelmslev 1954). However, Hjelmslev never published his proposal of a solution to the problem during his lifetime, and the posthumous work that contains it, the innocently titled Résumé (Hjelmslev 1975) is a true nightmare to read (or should I say ‘decode’?).
the internet has done away with it for most of the erstwhile letter writing public, who now resort to short outbursts (of often nonverbal character) to express or illustrate their ideas in ‘leetspeak’ or by using ‘emojis’ or ‘emoticons’.5

What we have here is a typical case of forced ‘adaptivity’ (rather than consensual ‘adaptability’; for these terms, see Mey 2009); the problem is that in many, or even most cases, the flow of adapting seems to go only one way: the unseen but forceful adaptation of the user to his or her instrument, along with the inexorably following crises of addiction, when adaptation has gone beyond a point of no return, as in the cases described by Turkle.

How the machine-adapted and network-addicted user sees him- or herself is of course an entirely different matter; even tobacco addicts are unable to see that there is anything wrong with them, and prefer to blame the world around them for its handling of the social implications of their behavior. Similarly, when Turkle’s internet user proclaims himself ‘dead on the scene’ when his hand-held device fails, he is prone to blame the ‘death’ on the internet, its fallacious apps and cruel avatars, rather than diagnosing himself as suffering from a dangerous bout (or even incurable case) of ‘computeritis’.

However, the social tide seems to be turning also here, albeit slowly. As to smoking, whereas a society which gradually limits or prohibits smoking in public places like airports or restaurants may be seen by some as imposing undue restrictions on an individual’s personal liberty, yet the tendency to curb this adaptive flow, or even revert the process altogether by making it difficult for users to practice their addiction, is now more generally accepted – all of which has resulted in a marked improvement of a particular environmental situation. Thus, Copenhagen airport is officially now a ‘smoke-free territory’; other airports, such as the one in Helsinki, still have small spaces set aside for smokers to pursue their habit; by contrast, smoking compartments in trains and other public conveyors are now historical relics.

As to the ‘computer addiction’ referred to above, recent Danish studies have identified the steadily more frequent use of i-pads and other electronic devices, especially among the younger generation, as one cause of weakened performance in the learning context. The widespread use of handheld devices in classrooms has resulted in less efficient learning, more frustration, and greater stress among both the students and the teaching staff. Some authorities are now even advocating a

5. ‘Leetspeak’ or ‘leet’ is an informal language or code used on the internet, in which standard letters are often replaced by numerals or special characters. ‘Leet’ itself iconically corresponds to the number ‘1337’, which also is its alternative ‘spelling’. (Source: Wikipedia). Note that this kind of ‘spelling’ is different from that used in the neo-Nazi jargon, where e.g. ‘88’ reads as ‘HH’ or ‘Heil Hitler’, corresponding to the sequential numbering of the letter ‘h’ in the English alphabet.
total ban on unauthorized computer use in the teaching environment; whether this is a viable ‘counter-adaptive’ move will have to be considered against the backdrop not only of adaptation as such, but of many long-trend experiences. The infamous diet of ‘Coke-cum-computer’ mentioned earlier is not just addictive, but a serious health hazard and in the end, is life-threatening. Not everything ‘goes better with Coke’!

7. Ethics and sociality

As all human acting, also that which is practiced on the internet underlies certain ethical constraints. We may not always be aware of it, but on the internet we are never alone: the bystanders are our co-recipients, and often co-constructors, of our messages – which for us implies the need to take a responsive stance towards our ‘over-listeners’. This stance is grounded on the belief that we, as true Kantians, are responsible for our acting, in such a way that it may be seen as exemplary for our fellow humans.

However, there is a catch here, as the late Norwegian/Swedish philosopher Harald Ofstad (1920–1994) has argued in many of his works. We all agree that ethic behavior has its grounds in morality. But a moral decision can be called that only if the acting person is able to know and understand the effects of a particular act, and foresee its consequences. We can only talk of ‘causing’ something as a result of our activity, if we can “manipulate” the conditions of our acting, or that part of our acting which is “amenable to human control” (Ofstad 1961: 56–57, discussing his ‘principle of manipulability’). Running a red light is a violation of the traffic code; it can be ascribed either to negligence or to willful disregard, but it cannot be construed as an act having necessarily a moral dimension. If I hit a pedestrian while disregarding a traffic rule, I may be accused of negligence or a social-legal transgression, but not of murder, and only occasionally of unintentional homicide. The point is that at the moment of committing the infraction, I was unable to foresee and manipulate the conditions that led to the death of the pedestrian, and therefore I cannot be held morally accountable for it.

Likewise, being careless about how I handle my sensitive email, especially if I am in a high societal or official position, may have personal consequences, as it did for Hillary Clinton during the 2016 US Presidential campaign. But to equate this carelessness, if admitted, with an immoral behavior such as “lying” (as Donald Trump repeatedly did during the Presidential debates in October 2016) is not admissible.

Clearly, the ethical side of internet (mis)-communication (as visible especially in the case of trolls and malware spreaders) needs to be looked into as a truly
social problem, demanding for solutions to be implemented, even on the highest official levels. But can we assign a moral quality to the act of spreading ‘fake news’, or to an internet activity best characterized as ‘slurring’, e.g. by using racial epithets, or by insinuating that some immoral acts are practiced by the object of my slur? (see e.g. Capone 2013; Croom 2016).

Again, all depends on the manipulability of the consequences. For instance, to what degree can racist bloggers be held responsible for Dylann Roof’s racially motivated murder of nine Black people during a praying service in the Charleston, North Carolina Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church on June 24 of 2015? Barring the notion of a ‘collective responsibility’ (which is hard to define, and impossible to pin down with regard to the individual parts of the collective), there seems to be no legal way to define ‘manipulability’ such that it also covers effects that could have been foreseen, but are not real ‘foreseens’ in the juridical sense.

The question of ethics and morality on the internet is and remains a thorny one, and the only way to deal with it is to address the social conscience of internet users, by employing suitable measures to block all kinds of hate mail and politically motivated condoning of violent actions; in addition, the ethical aspect of the clear manipulability involved in spreading pictorial representations of such actions through the emails needs to be addressed as well. For obscure reasons, US legislators and juries have mostly come down hard on matters of sexual transgression, when pictured in the media (even in cases where the First Amendment to the Constitution had been invoked as guaranteeing ‘free speech’; see Mey 2017 for a discussion of the notorious ‘Hogan vs. Gawker’ case), whereas a much more lenient attitude has been observed when it comes to the propagation of violent scenes, both on the big and the small screens.

It may be time to take a hard look at these policies, and try to institute a ban on all internet activities that in some way offend commonly recognized standards for decency, and extend the ban to internet behavior. Such decency may be hard to define, and the same goes for its opposite, in- or lack of decency; but as Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart (1915–1985) once opined about pornography, “I’m not sure how to define it, but I know it when I see it”.

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6. The wrestler ‘Hulk’ Hogan was awarded $135 million in indemnities as a result of a friend having publicized intimate photographs on the Gawker website of Hogan having sex with the friend’s wife.
Advertisements for new computer hardware or software usually place emphasis on the speed with which the new device or program can execute the necessary operations. Speed of operating system (along with ever more sophisticated software) is considered the most powerful selling point for computer hardware (as it probably also is in advertisements for the auto industry). The question where this augmented speed leads us is never raised; speed is, by definition, good: a positive feature, not just in the sales person’s pitch.

Consider now the following case from the world of transportation. In the former East Germany, then called the German Democratic Republic, a curious traffic-related feature always had me fascinated. When traveling south from the Danish border, one noticed how the GDR highways usually were ‘macadamized’ or executed in concrete, which allowed for a relatively smooth ride outside of the townships, even with the often occurring cracks and holes in the road surface. But as soon as one entered the towns and cities of the Priegnitz, like Mirow or Neubrandenburg, the pavement suddenly changed from smooth to cobblestone variety. This resulted in an involuntary, but necessary reduction in speed, from the allowed 80 or 100 kmh to a measly 40 or even 35. It so happened that the latter also was the most common speed limit in those urban and urbanized environments – a limit which thus never needed to be officially announced and upheld by means of special signs or police checkpoints. In other words, by keeping a simple device (old fashioned pavement) in place, a traffic rule was being enforced mostly without (direct) police or other outside intervention – an environmentally friendly or ecological benefit, as we would call it today.

Fast forward to modern times in the unified Germany, where the cobblestone streets of the former GDR are a thing of the past, and asphalt covered roads and avenues are the present rule. Now, signs announcing maximum speed limits are everywhere, and (due to non-observance of those restrictions) innumerable accidents occur all the time. For the victims of the new philosophy-cum-practice (letting the urgency to lower one’s speed be part of the drivers’ decision making, rather than embodying it an ineluctable surface constraint), the augmented velocities in many cases have led to accidental deaths among the pedestrian population (not even counting the involved drivers). Speed kills indeed.

And, in an unexpected historical volte-face, the old cobblestones have made their glorious re-entry into the world of traffic. Wherever slowing down is of the

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7. “Speed kills” was a slogan posted by the Danish transit authorities in the nineties (Farten dreaber) in an attempt to reduce the number of traffic related fatalities on the country’s highways.
essence, the authorities have introduced patches of cobblestones, in addition to bumps and other ‘calming’ devices, to remind, or even force, the drivers to lower their speeds. *L’histoire se répète*, but not without an iconic twist of fate: ‘the cobbler re-cobbled’, to paraphrase Thomas Carlyle.\(^8\)

Now for the moral of the story. When it comes to speed in a computer context, I’m always reminded of the doctoral student from Munich Technical University, who I got to know during one of my summer stints at the Artificial Intelligence laboratory of Yale University. This was in the heady days of the transition from mainframe-connected terminals to Sun workstations to personal computers with everything built into them. Rather than laboriously elaborating a bunch of code on one’s slow machine, then sending it up to the guys in the central computer room and waiting for the result, one could now program directly on one’s own screen, and test one’s work without delay. Everything was easier now, and not least faster.

The German student (who clearly had a philosophical bend, in addition to his computer qualifications), used to tell me how he missed those old-fashioned procedures where one could take a break, have a coke or a smoke, play Pacman, or some other game while waiting. Now, he said, everything is compacted into unbounded time/space; we are simply working all the time; and if we don’t pay attention, the work (with its new, increased speed) will kill us all.

Which is exactly the point here. Speed in computer operations does not necessarily translate into a better product, or create more satisfying work conditions. From being a useful tool, the computer now is a slave driver, admonishing us to go faster and produce more – a bit like those first electric typewriters used to, always humming their monotonous refrain of ‘dyb dyb dyb’!\(^9\) In the current internet context, the quest for speed takes us further and further into a jungle of unfinished, and/or impossible to finish, projects. Our social internet lives (and the whole internet’s social style) have come to depend on how fast one can establish a connection, execute an operation, rig up a Facebook contact, or launch a tweet. What we say and do on the internet is of lesser importance than the bare fact of saying and doing something there – and doing it fast.

On my view, this fascination with ‘speed’ is one of the decisively more negative traits of our modern, computer-aided or computerized communication, as it is

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8. The reference is to Carlyle’s classic satire, *Sartor Resartus* (1838), in which the author mocks the increasing use of philosophical verbal ‘hardware’, intended to mask the lack of proper content in his victims’ intellectual ‘software’ and output.

9. From the Boy Scouts’ junior division, as inspired by Kipling’s *Jungle Book*: Leading Wolf Akela exhorting her cubs to ‘dyb dyb dyb’ (‘do your best’), to which the correct response was ‘we dob dob dob’ (‘do our best’).
facilitated by, and in part due to, the excessive speed with which we now are able to operate. Just as some ‘alternative’ people have been advocating the choice of ‘slow’ food (as opposed to the ‘fast’ production of our nutritional staples and the increased speed of our eating habits), so too I would argue for a return to a more human tempo in establishing and dealing with our internet contacts. After all, more unfortunate happenings have come about as the result of an overly fast digital reaction than of anything else (compare the ‘happy finger on the trigger’ as the final persuader in family and other disputes, in personal as well in geopolitical contexts).

9. Conclusion

Summing up, we can award the internet both good and bad marks when it comes to sociality.

There is no doubt that the internet contributes to a greater awareness of the human condition, including a consciousness of the fact that a majority of the world’s population still lives in substandard, pre-internet conditions; that this has been made visible and is less easily dismissed today, is due to the all-pervading character of internet-related communication and reporting.

Further, the social internet has been material in supporting and bringing about many developments that otherwise would have been unthinkable; thus, in catastrophic situations like earthquakes and tsunamis, fast and effective international help and relief has been organized and followed up via the internet; and popular uprisings have been orchestrated and handled via mobile devices, as in the events commonly referred to as the ‘Arab Spring’.

On the downside, one must notice that a purely pragmatist approach to the internet (‘whatever goes, goes’) is extremely unfortunate. Crimes and conspiracies are easier to plan and execute using the web and its resources. Economic criminality has risen to unknown heights, with scams and scandals in the billion dollar class, thereby revealing the pervasive, subtle but no less dangerous, power of the agents who used to be called the ‘gnomes’ of the banking and financial world (and in the old days were supposed to have their headquarters in Zurich, but currently seem to have set up a domicile on the internet).

Overall, the trend is clear: homo electronicus is no longer just a terrifying future bugaboo; he is real among us, in the here and now, and in many ways he is us. Even so, we also are humans with a free will and the power to make decisions in our own and others’ electronic lives. On the internet, we are all more or less equal: a social fraternity based on computer access and practices is not just in sight, but is part of everyday life for millions of people.
Still, while ‘all people’ may ‘become brothers’ (as per Beethoven’s Ninth), some are more ‘brotherly’ than others, and no amount of computer sophistication will by itself be able to change that. By contrast, a truly pragmatic attitude, that is, one that takes into account the conditions of life for all users, also for those living outside of the computer bubble, is an absolute necessity. And the modern computer culture itself may serve to remind us of the fate of the millions that have been excluded from that culture, and are doomed to a life without any of its emollients; at the end of the day, it may even help us find a way out of the social impasse that the current internet and its users have created and maintain, with its disregard for the needs of the multitudes of potential users who may never attain full membership in the computerized brother- and sisterhood of the future.

References


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Jacob Mey is the author of numerous articles on pragmatics and other linguistic subjects. Among his works are a study of linguistic pragmatics (*Whose Language?*, 1985), a textbook (*Pragmatics*, 1993, 2001) and a volume on literary pragmatics (*When Voices Clash*, 2001). He founded (with Hartmut Haberland) and edited the *Journal of Pragmatics* from 1977 to 2010, when he founded (with Hartmut Haberland and Kerstin Fischer) the journal *Pragmatics and Society*, of which he is still the Editor-in-Chief. In 2008, he edited the *Concise Encyclopedia of Pragmatics* (2d ed.). In 2016, he published (with Alessandro Capone) the edited volume *Interdisciplinary Studies in Pragmatics, Culture and Society*. 