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The Internet: How Words Can Unite or Divide Us

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The power of words on the internet to make or break a career, and a life, has long been on my mind. As a journalist-in-training back in 2010, my peers and I were taught about the perils of reading and engaging with the comments section on websites, where trolls were rife and connection was rare. A decade later, as someone who earns her living working in online media, I'm constantly thinking about the potential of what I write, whether it's a thoughtfully-researched article, or a quickly thrown-together social media post, to deepen connection or sow division. I'm also painfully aware of the potential dangers the words I share online could pose to my own career and life.

In his book, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, journalist Jon Ronson traces the frightening development of modern public shaming on the internet, and the way that one thoughtless joke or throw-away comment shared on Twitter can destroy someone's life and livelihood. He argues that internet shaming is a much more vicious reincarnation of the public shamings of times gone by: "When shamings are delivered like remotely administered drone strikes, nobody needs to think about how ferocious our collective power might be," he writes. "The snowflake never needs to feel responsible for the avalanche."

It's all too easy to use words online to dehumanise people. Empathetic dislocation can easily occur in the context of the internet: precisely because of the disembodied access to one another's worlds and thoughts that it provides. Writing in the comments section of an article or social media post, we become lazy and easily forget the humanity of the person we're engaging with. It's easier to serve someone harsh criticism when we're not physically present to one another. Whilst we often say things we regret in the heat of the moment in person, it's easier to read someone's mood and tone when we can hear their voice, see their face, and watch their body language. Vivek Murthy, in his book *Together*, puts it this way: "The way in which we use technology can not only distract from in-person interactions, but it can also create distance between us and others. Not having to look people in the face when we're commenting on social media shields us from having to deal with their reaction or the pain that our words may cause."

Online, our interactions are stripped back and limited purely to the words (and images) that we choose to share. As embodied beings, inhabiting the same physical space can help us to be more acutely aware of the complex inner life of the person in front of us; being physically present with each other not only provides a kind of closeness and connection as we look into each others' eyes and communication moves beyond the realm of language, but it also makes us aware of our essential separateness and the individuality of the other. When interacting with others on the internet, especially when we're in a hurry and are reading something on our phones in the middle of doing something else, the odds are against connection; when we're not actually in the same physical space as the person we're communicating with, the alienation that can exist between two people who don't understand each

other, don't share similar life experiences and perspectives, is deepened. It's easier to reduce people down to ideological boxes, and to forget the common humanity we share behind our screens. This is why interactions online can often feel so dehumanising for everyone involved.

So yes, the negative power of language stripped of this essential physical presence on the internet is well documented, and many of us are well aware of this from personal experience. But what's perhaps a little less widely discussed is the power of language on the internet to unite us and bring about *good*. For the most part, this has been my own personal experience as an online writer. From the husband who got in touch to thank me for an article that helped him understand his wife better, to the woman with Covid-19 who couldn't go to her dear friend's wedding and needed inspiration to write her a letter to read on the eve of her wedding day, I've felt connected to readers around the world through the words I share online. In 2014, when my father was told he had roughly 5 weeks left to live, a blog post and some tweets that I shared resonated so deeply with people that they were shared thousands of times by friends and strangers all around the world, enabling me to organise a wonderful surprise for my comic book-loving father through a campaign we called [#CapForStrat](#). And then, during a lonely few years of nomadic life and several transatlantic moves, sharing words online helped me to deepen existing relationships, as well as forge new ones.

My work these days involves a lot of research into the kinds of things people type into Google, and the startling intimacy and urgency of the language people use in that little search box never ceases to astonish me. This kind of research can feel a little like snooping on people's private thoughts, hopes, dreams, and fears (though of course I just see the search queries, and not any details about who typed each phrase into Google). It's estimated, for example, that thousands of people type the phrase "pregnant and alone" into Google each month. What kind of consoling and helpful words are these people hoping to find? We can only guess, but it breaks my heart and motivates me to keep writing and sharing words that can potentially help—or at the very least make someone feel a little less alone—online. During lockdown, I watched a spike in searches for gardening tips, bread recipes, how to thread a sewing machine, and online music lessons. I was moved to see a significant uptick in the number of searches for the phrases "how to help the elderly," and "positive news."

Obviously, I'm focusing on the positive here, rather than on the dark side of the way people use words on the internet. Blogs have radicalised mentally unstable people, terrorist attacks have been organised on social media. Pornography, human trafficking, and abuse of every kind is able to flourish under the cover of anonymity that the internet can provide. Online bullying has ruined lives and led young people to suicide; trolls and stalkers regularly use the internet to turn someone's life into a living nightmare.

On a smaller scale, there's the mental health repercussions that social media addiction can cause, along with the temptation to compare our lives to someone else's, and information overload certainly has a negative impact on our attention spans and relationships, as Vivek Murthy points out. "Modern progress has brought unprecedented advances that make it easier for us technically to connect, but often these advances create unforeseen challenges that make us feel more alone and disconnected," he writes. "Thanks to advances in technology, we can enjoy all the conveniences of community without directly interacting with other people."

Certainly, my personal experience of using the internet in an intentional way demonstrates that what we read on the internet can give us a window into someone else's perspective, and that can be a very powerful tool for connection. But the flipside is that it can also leave us feeling discontented and disconnected from our own life and the people physically present right in front of us. Vivek Murthy

points out that “the constant presence of our phones and other communication technology has been shown to reduce the emotional quality of our conversations. As Andrew Przybylski and Netta Weinstein found in their experiments, the mere sight of phones during conversation negatively impacted “the extent to which individuals felt empathy and understanding from their partners.”

When I think about the deepest friendships I’ve forged online, one common thread is that each of those relationships moved from online to offline as soon as possible. We might have got to know one another by reading each others’ social media posts, articles and blog posts, but then we moved to sending emails and private messages, having video and telephone calls, writing each other letters, and then meeting up in person when the opportunity arose. It takes time and care to see and respond to someone’s words in a thoughtful way online, and we can’t do it in a rush or in large quantities.

What I’ve come to realise over the past decade of my life is that it’s all about how we choose to use the platforms and the words at our disposal. If we can be more intentional about how long we spend online, and then unplug and be fully present to those around us, virtual connection can still play a role in bringing about closer connection and building meaningful community. If we can hold the truth in our hearts that each person we encounter, both online and offline, is beloved by our Creator, and choose our words with care, we’ll most likely find ourselves consuming a lot less content and being a lot slower to tear someone down when we disagree with them. Online, even more than in person, you just never know what might be going on under the surface.

Sophie Caldecott is a writer who explores themes of empathy and connection, as well as helping others use the internet effectively (<https://sophiecaldecott.com/>). She lives with her husband and two daughters in the South West of England.

