COMMUNICATION

Digital Smallness at Work – Shrinking the Enterprise?

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Social media & the online world has turned our networks and thinking narrower.

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Social media platforms undoubtedly have value in keeping us connected and many have fantastic potential to broaden our perspectives, forge new relationships and networks. But herein lies the problem – most currently don't. In fact, rather than setting us free with greater mobility, making us discover new territory and enabling new possibilities. While this is true in the purely geographic sense, it isn't in the collaboration sense. The arrival of the Internet was supposed to make everything bigger, wider, more interconnected and integrated. In fact, we can now reach anyone globally, buying from anywhere around the world and learning about what is happening in the furthest reaching corner of the world, all instantly. Making things and people more relatable across distances and domains could have broadened our minds.

But more often than not the result is the opposite of the original promise: our networks and thinking have both turned narrower. In the online world, we have become parochial by paying narrowly focused attention to very selected and curated (often downright faked) messages, "moments" and "snapshots." As context gets stripped the tools are all too often squeezing us into keyhole sized, narrowed, point-to-point lines-of-sight, devoid of any context that could create empathy. Much has been written about **these digital technologies dividing us into tribes and devaluing truth**, for truth is never narrow and always contextual. "Digital Smallness" of network and mind results!

And now – with the conversion of presence work in offices into virtual spaces – Digital Smallness continues its evolution into the realm of collaboration, creativity and productivity.

A new paper[1] published by 11 authors studying 60,000 Microsoft workers during the company's conversion to virtual work found that collaboration networks among workers narrowed, compacted and shrank to the size of immediate project groups focused on discrete tasks. Not surprisingly, the element of serendipitous interactions and chance meetings so valuable in physical settings disappeared. It is no surprise then that researchers at University College London have found that **23 percent of the respondents reported that their relationships with colleagues or co-workers had got worse over lockdown**.

This means that we are gradually losing the so-called "theory of mind" of others with whom we are supposed to collaborate – building a story in our head about what is going on in someone else's head. We can mostly see how someone behaves within the boundaries of a narrow and short burst of transactions to get things done in a spot fashion, but we do not glean and empathize with the experiences that influence their behaviour.

And that is maybe the most important point of them all: it's not just our thinking and empathy skills that have been reshaped. It is our behaviour as well. The different degrees of lockdowns throughout the pandemic made many of us socially awkward and lower-skilled. A recent study has suggested that **while some people are born with trolling behaviour, ordinary social media users will also troll when mood and discussion context prompt such behaviour**

It is unclear whether all of this has inhibited our productivity significantly in the short run. But is is also clear that this cannot be good for a company's culture, cohesion or creativity longer term. The very justification for having organizations is to maximize trust while minimizing transaction cost. But now, Digital Smallness threatens to erode both if we don't look beyond the confines of the immediate workgroup "tribe."

Needless to say, more research and more innovation are needed on the frontiers of this development, with the goal of bringing some of our more contextual and serendipitous interactions back, widening our perspectives and networks. After all, empathy towards customers, co-workers and stakeholders is essential for innovation, but empathy is hard to develop without a view of a person as a multi-facetted human with memories, pressures, aspirations, fears and joys. Life is not a Slack channel. We need to design algorithms that help us re-aggregate and understand the broader picture, maybe one slice at a time with each slice bringing appreciation and relief, but also more optionality for shared connection and creativity.

This is an urgent call for us – technology and product designers, businesses leaders and government policy makers – to rethink and re-invent a technology-driven environment that is fit for human lives, communities and networks, an environment that is filled with empathy, humility and gratitude. We need to tackle Digital Smallness before it becomes too big of a wrecking ball on too many levels.

1. https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/publication/the-effects-of-remote-work-on-collaboration-among-information-workers/ ↩

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