

Digital Transactionality

Why Relationships and Everything Else is Different

The transactionality (in personal relationships) that has exploded since the mid-nineties is the natural, if not expected result of exponentially expanding digitization. If the decaying state of interpersonal connection is a bellwether for other critical consequences of digital transformation, understanding it may provide the perspective to foresee the next unexpected consequences of this digital evolution.

This paper started as a cathartic screed on how relationships, at one time implying continuous personal connection, feel transactional if not outright commercial. Obviously, even in the good old days (that may have never been), relationships existed for some gain. But since the mid-nineties, we appear increasingly intolerant of the time and space needed for genuine relationship.

IF my sense that transactionality took hold in the mid-nineties and accelerated, MAYBE it's the result of exponentially expanding digitization. ("Digital" here includes all things related to the Internet, World Wide Web, mobile telephony, etc.) Maybe it's a natural, if not expected outcome. Unexpected because the great Internet promise was broken barriers and unlimited connection for the greater good of all. It seems that those heady hopes have crashed into human reality.

If the pernicious state of interpersonal connection is a bellwether for a deeper unintended but critical consequence of digital transformation, understanding it may salve the indignation some of us feel. More important, the perspective it provides may be exactly what's needed to foresee the next unexpected consequences of this digital evolution. If I'm right, with it you may be able to do many things, two of the most valuable being:

1. Work to reverse the trend for the sake of humanity; and

2. Use it for commercial gain.

The story starts long ago, maybe with the advent of cuneiform but certainly with computing in the 1960s and especially the personal computer in the 1980s. Mark this as the watershed when analog peaked and digital began its ascendancy. Computing would prove as important as the steam engine and unleash productive capability in ways previously inaccessible. Like industrialization, it brought forth long-term, mass transformation. All told, a good thing. What it augured, however, was consequences that would creep well beyond anything imaginable.

The post-1980s era of high finance and greed carried on its shoulders the defense-initiated Internet revolution beginning in the mid-nineties. Insane amounts of money was burned at the altar of the dot-com revolution. Despite the millennium "correction," good came of it: WorldCom provided undersea fibre, failed experiments pointed to value needed (e.g., user experience) and how far and fast business models could adjust. By the time the iPhone crystalized the explosion of mobility and the Internet by combining for true consumer use, the revolution was irreversibly changing... us.

Drivers of Transactionality

Threads of evolution and change need to be wound together for the argument to hold. For the sake of space, we'll only briefly identify them.¹

Customer Relationship Management (CRM)

CRM organized and applied mathematical rigour to account for commercial relationship value. In doing so, it tipped the scale on the idea of relationship toward a commercial cast, embedding the notion that a corporate entity could even have a relationship. CRM applied time-defined, ongoing, binary assessment of relationship status: customer calls were timed, outcomes valued, customers rated and ranked based on last interaction, etc. Could we assume this wouldn't bleed into how we tend toward all other relationships?

Mobility

Hard to imagine, but at one time we got along without mobile telephony or Internet. Of course, presence was required. There was intent to be with others or at least be at a fixed place. Mobility—voice, text, and Web variations—solidify the persistence of impresence: barriers of time and place are erased. We expect instant satisfaction of our immediate, transactional needs. Similarly, we shoehorn these fence-free demands (at least in part) into whatever we might be doing to multi-task through a relationship, attending to that with enough immediacy to warrant attention.

Texting and email

Except to teens, these written forms have oddly contradictory features. Using them does away with the trouble of engaging. Neither threatens contact beyond what you alone want nor requires the time/space for interaction (the hallmark of relationship) to exist. Yet they demand reading and typing, requiring more energy than listening and talking. So, we are willing to pay by substituted time and energy to avoid interaction.

Ghosting

This phenomenon is a function of voicemail and text/email. At one time, it was challenging—even with an answering machine—to avoid the discomfort of not having the relationship advantage or being outside our own curated limelight. Voicemail and caller ID with social preference for textual communication channels make ghosting easy. Its prevalence plus ghosts reanimating instantly for something interesting indisputably supports the argument that relationships are more and more transactional.

Search

Having all knowledge ever just a question away sounds good. In some ways it is; in others, much less so. Never mind how it corrodes what was once called privacy. When we all swam in deeper pools of ignorance, we coexisted in mutual uncertainty. The search engine has put a more immediate, sharper edge on what remains a chaotic world. We disagree transactionally, in the moment. That the answer may be neither right nor definitive is not material. We no longer share our struggles: we compete on them one by one.

Digital manipulation

Anybody with superficial Photoshop™—or any sound, graphic, or document editing tool—skill can convincingly forge. It doesn't have to be criminal: assembling and propagating for fact or fun, GIFs of sharks where none would be or a tee-shot felling a presidential candidate, for instance, alters opinion. Worse, it entrenches gullibility and cynicism. The hardened cynic focuses on only that perceived as transactionally valuable and controllable.

Big data

There is nothing inherently wrong with computer-aided correlation among ever more vast sets of data. Without descending into the issues it creates for privacy, false knowledge, and security—among other things, too many uses of big data analytics is little more than the digital curation of

¹ Anybody that wants to dig deeper is welcome to call me.

momentary consumption microwants. Said another way: too much gee-whiz data analytics is used for nothing valuable, unless you believe that effectively selling one more tube of jalapeño hemorrhoid balm is truly valuable.

Social networks

Too much and yet not enough has been said about the abrasive effects of social networks even beyond how they create and sustain the preceding threads. It's easy to praise their value in connecting old friends, communities of interest, and so on. It takes much more to effectively illuminate their role in enabling an ersatz world; lowering the quality of discourse (i.e., idiots with bullhorns); emboldening hatred; debasing genuine, real connection; and so on. It is unquestionable that Facebook and LinkedIn profiles, for instance, are as real as patients exiting Hollywood cosmetic surgeons' offices. They are, at best, cosmetically enhanced slices of reality for a transactional purpose.

Collectively these (and others) are ground zero for the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. Sustaining such bubbles is operationally burdensome; fortunately, digital means naturally relieve such burdens. Not to say it can't be done without digitizing: Scientology existed long before the Internet. Digital conditions do, however, accelerate them and open the space needed to descend into the rabbit hole.

Transactionality eliminates "waste"

The argument is straight-forward. In a pre-digital environment, transaction "gold" of a relationship had to be refined from the "slag" of environmental context: pleasantries, tedium, etc. Slag comprised multiple participants' wants and needs, and existed through time. Long periods of nothing and nobody benefitting passed as the relationship transmuted nuggets of transactional value from the slag. The more relationship mined, the more transactional ore acquired. Assaying the field for value was more

delicate and poor work could be penalized. Carpetbaggers, con artists, and mooches unwilling to hold up their end of the reciprocal expectations were drummed out. To stay, (s)he had to at least fake enjoying (or enduring) these non-transactional elements of the relationship. Because attitude is shaped by behaviour as much as the opposite, even the transactional people ended up in relationships.

The digital world is off or on. There is no space or need to linger as the sweep second hand plods through time. With digital, *everything* is a small transaction. That structural reality permeates the technologies and situations listed earlier. It should be unsurprising given the fundamental digital value proposition. From eBay to Uber, SAP to Salesforce, the business case is always efficiency. Keep this in mind because the ruthless underlying efficiency of digital is usually soft-peddled behind gentler promises of better user experience, greater control, simplicity, convenience, sharing, and the like.

This paper uses the consequential impact of digitization on the state and evolution of human relationships as one example of unintended larger consequences of digitization. In full transparency, my opinion is the societal cost of insidious changes coming forth may be too high. But I may also be falsely remembering a better past. In any case, the point of the example is to induce a broader impact, which is the relentless and unstoppable drive to efficiency enabled by the on/off transactionality of the digital environment.

Every isolated, minute digital transaction has a conclusion and can be/is acted upon. Whether that action is or is not considered within the broader sweep of context and history is another matter worth studying. cursory observation suggests the calculus of events tends toward eliminating the non-active context and history from consideration, leaving only the transactional "gold."

And this is the point. The digital world has taken us another step toward full elimination of space and waste. A ruthless drive for efficiency eliminates waste. Of course, "waste" is in the eye of the

beholder. The consequence being that things we may not perceive of as wasteful—say, courtesy or civility—become casualties. That makes the choices to consider much deeper:

1. What do we believe and value?
2. How do we want to live—with and among others?
3. Can we recapture things we value that have become digital “waste?” Do we care?

And, because I promised that understanding digitization’s unintended consequences could be used for commercial gain,

4. Where else, in society, could we focus to reduce waste irrespective of how odious?
5. How can digital capabilities be used to turn complicated activities into discrete transactional elements to accomplish it?

Like it or not, digital transactionality on many fronts is forcing a hard rethink of what we consider being human and part of a human society. It’s not just about the technology.

But it is making everything different.

Timothy Grayson

This and other papers are available at institute-x.org

This paper is available under a free license provided that it is (a) reproduced without alteration, (b) generates no economic value for the reproducer, and (c) fully attributed. A Word version is available to facilitate duplication. Contact agents@institute-x.org.