

September 10, 2013 Posted by [*Maria Konnikova*](http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/bios/maria_konnikova/search?contributorName=Maria%20Konnikova)

**How Facebook Makes Us Unhappy**

No one joins Facebook to be sad and lonely. But a [new study](http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi/10.1371/journal.pone.0069841) from the University of Michigan psychologist Ethan Kross argues that that’s exactly how it makes us feel. Over two weeks, Kross and his colleagues sent text messages to eighty-two Ann Arbor residents five times per day. The researchers wanted to know a few things: how their subjects felt overall, how worried and lonely they were, how much they had used Facebook, and how often they had had direct interaction with others since the previous text message. Kross found that the more people used Facebook in the time between the two texts, the less happy they felt—and the more their overall satisfaction declined from the beginning of the study until its end. The data, he argues, shows that Facebook was making them unhappy.

Research into the alienating nature of the Internet—and Facebook in particular—supports Kross’s conclusion. [In 1998](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/9841579), Robert Kraut, a researcher at Carnegie Mellon University, found that the more people used the Web, the lonelier and more depressed they felt. After people went online for the first time, their sense of happiness and social connectedness dropped, over one to two years, as a function of how often they used the Internet.

Lonelier people weren’t inherently more likely to go online, either; a [recent review of some seventy-five studies](http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/ppm-1-1-23.pdf) concluded that “users of Facebook do not differ in most personality traits from nonusers of Facebook.” (Nathan Heller wrote about [loneliness](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2012/04/16/120416crbo_books_heller?currentPage=all) in the magazine last year.) But, somehow, the Internet seemed to make them feel more alienated. A [2010 analysis](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20557242) of forty studies also confirmed the trend: Internet use had a small, significant detrimental effect on overall well-being. [One experiment](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19366318) concluded that Facebook could even cause problems in relationships, by increasing feelings of jealousy.

Another group of researchers has [suggested](http://aisel.aisnet.org/wi2013/92/) that envy, too, increases with Facebook use: the more time people spent browsing the site, as opposed to actively creating content and engaging with it, the more envious they felt. The effect, suggested Hanna Krasnova and her colleagues, was a result of the well-known social-psychology phenomenon of social comparison. It was further exacerbated by a general similarity of people’s social networks to themselves: because the point of comparison is like-minded peers, learning about the achievements of others hits even harder. The psychologist Beth Anderson and her colleagues [argue](http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/features/ppm-1-1-23.pdf), in a recent review of Facebook’s effects, that using the network can quickly become addictive, which comes with a nagging sense of negativity that can lead to resentment of the network for some of the same reasons we joined it to begin with. We want to learn about other people and have others learn about us—but through that very learning process we may start to resent both others’ lives and the image of ourselves that we feel we need to continuously maintain. “It may be that the same thing people find attractive is what they ultimately find repelling,” said the psychologist Samuel Gosling, whose research focusses on social-media use and the motivations behind social networking and sharing.

But, as with most findings on Facebook, the opposite argument is equally prominent. [In 2009](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01474.x/abstract), Sebastián Valenzuela and his colleagues came to the opposite conclusion of Kross: that using Facebook makes us *happier*. They also found that it increases social trust and engagement—and even encourages political participation. Valenzuela’s findings fit neatly with what social psychologists have long known about sociality: as Matthew Lieberman argues in his book “[Social: Why Our Brains are Wired to Connect](http://www.amazon.com/Social-Why-Brains-Wired-Connect/dp/0307889092),” social networks are a way to share, and the experience of successful sharing comes with a psychological and physiological rush that is often self-reinforcing. The prevalence of social media has, as a result, fundamentally changed the way we read and watch: we think about how we’ll share something, and whom we’ll share it with, as we consume it. The mere thought of successful sharing activates our reward-processing centers, even [before](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23722983) we’ve actually shared a single thing.

Virtual social connection can even provide a buffer against stress and pain: in a [2009 study](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19788531), Lieberman and his colleagues demonstrated that a painful stimulus hurt less when a woman either held her boyfriend’s hand or looked at his picture; the pain-dulling effects of the picture were, in fact, twice as powerful as physical contact. Somehow, the element of distance and forced imagination—a mental representation in lieu of the real thing, something that the psychologists Wendi Gardner and Cindy Pickett [call](http://books.google.com/books?id=QxxVzwDcfFkC&lpg=PP1&pg=PA238) “social snacking”—had an anesthetic effectâ€š one we might expect to carry through to an entire network of pictures of friends.

The key to understanding why reputable studies are so starkly divided on the question of what Facebook does to our emotional state may be in simply looking at what people actually do when they’re on Facebook. “What makes it complicated is that Facebook is for lots of different things—and different people use it for different subsets of those things. Not only that, but they are also *changing* things, because of people themselves changing,” said Gosling. A [2010 study](http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1753613) from Carnegie Mellon found that, when people engaged in direct interaction with others—that is, posting on walls, messaging, or “liking” something—their feelings of bonding and general social capital increased, while their sense of loneliness decreased. But when participants simply consumed a lot of content passively, Facebook had the opposite effect, lowering their feelings of connection and increasing their sense of loneliness.

In an [unrelated experiment](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20950180) from the University of Missouri, a group of psychologists found a physical manifestation of these same effects. As study participants interacted with the site, four electrodes attached to the areas just above their eyebrows and just below their eyes recorded their facial expressions in a procedure known as facial electromyography. When the subjects were actively engaged with Facebook, their physiological response measured a significant uptick in happiness. When they were passively browsing, however, the positive effect disappeared.

This aligns with research conducted earlier this year by John Eastwood and his colleagues at York University in a [meta-analysis of boredom](http://pps.sagepub.com/content/7/5/482.abstract). What causes us to feel bored and, as a result, unhappy? Attention. When our attention is actively engaged, we aren’t bored; when we fail to engage, boredom sets in. As Eastwood’s work, along with [recent research](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/cb.320/abstract) on media multitasking, have illustrated, the greater the number of things we have pulling at our attention, the less we are able to meaningfully engage, and the more discontented we become.

In other words, the world of constant connectivity and media, as embodied by Facebook, is the social network’s worst enemy: in every study that distinguished the two types of Facebook experiences—active versus passive—people spent, on average, far more time passively scrolling through newsfeeds than they did actively engaging with content. This may be why general studies of overall Facebook use, like Kross’s of Ann Arbor residents, so often show deleterious effects on our emotional state. Demands on our attention lead us to use Facebook more passively than actively, and passive experiences, no matter the medium, translate to feelings of disconnection and boredom.

In ongoing research, the psychologist Timothy Wilson has learned, as he put it to me, that college students start going “crazy” after just a few minutes in a room without their phones or a computer. “One would think we could spend the time mentally entertaining ourselves,” he said. “But we can’t. We’ve forgotten how.” Whenever we have downtime, the Internet is an enticing, quick solution that immediately fills the gap. We get bored, look at Facebook or Twitter, and become more bored. Getting rid of Facebook wouldn’t change the fact that our attention is, more and more frequently, forgetting the path to proper, fulfilling engagement. And in that sense, Facebook isn’t the problem. It’s the symptom.

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Read more: <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/elements/2013/09/the-real-reason-facebook-makes-us-unhappy.html?printable=true&currentPage=all#ixzz2vktQxyFs>

[Jeff Bercovici](http://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffbercovici/), Forbes Staff

**4/12/2012 @ 12:19PM |21,344 views**

**Is Facebook Making You Lonely? Don't Be Stupid.**

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If you want to get a lot of attention on the internet, blame the internet for causing people’s deepest problems. The Atlantic learned this in 2008 when it published a cover story headlined [“Is Google Making Us Stupid?”](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/) The digital dust storm that kicked up was such that the magazine felt compelled to follow up with [a story asking](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2009/07/get-smarter/7548/), “Is [Google](http://www.forbes.com/companies/google/) actually making us smarter?”

Now here we are again with another cover story, this one by Stephen Marche, posing the question: [“Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?”](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/8930/)

So: *Is* Facebook making us lonely? In a word, no.

It’s clear that *something* is driving up levels of self-reported loneliness in America and elsewhere. That it’s not Facebook, or the broader phenomenon of social networking, is apparent from what I consider to be Marche’s unintentional nut graf:

Move up http://i.forbesimg.com tMove down

The decrease in confidants — that is, in quality social connections — has been dramatic over the past 25 years. In one survey, the mean size of networks of personal confidants decreased from 2.94 people in 1985 to 2.08 in 2004. Similarly, in 1985, only 10 percent of Americans said they had no one with whom to discuss important matters, and 15 percent said they had only one such good friend. By 2004, 25 percent had nobody to talk to, and 20 percent had only one confidant.

“By 2004″ — in other words, by the year that Facebook launched. A little hard to blame it for anything that happened before then.

In fact, suggestive headline aside, Marche doesn’t really accuse Facebook of making its users lonelier. Indeed, it would be hard to given the considerable body of evidence to the contrary, such as [this Pew study](http://pewinternet.org/Media-Mentions/2011/Report-Facebook-users-more-trusting-engaged.aspx), which found that Facebook users have more friends and enjoy more social support than non-users.

His argument is subtler: that Facebook causes us to withdraw into ourselves and makes some people feel worse about their lives by exposing them to evidence of others’ happiness. Even there, though, he falls down pretty hard in places, as here:

The beauty of Facebook, the source of its power, is that it enables us to be social while sparing us the embarrassing reality of society — the accidental revelations we make at parties, the awkward pauses, the farting and the spilled drinks and the general gaucherie of face-to-face contact. Instead, we have the lovely smoothness of a seemingly social machine.

You can make a lot of valid complaints about social media, but that it spares us from “embarrassing reality” and “accidental revelations” isn’t one of them. Has he never heard of [Anthony Weiner](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/17/nyregion/anthony-d-weiner-tells-friends-he-will-resign.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)? [Roland Martin](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/02/08/roland-martin-suspended-cnn-super-bowl_n_1263276.html)? These examples are of people who shot themselves in the foot with Twitter, but Facebook offers the same opportunity for self-sabotage. (Just the other day, I watched an episode of “Mad Men” with a friend who posted a status update about how fat Betty Draper had gotten, only to hurriedly delete it when it was revealed later in the episode that she had a thyroid tumor.)

There are plenty of reasons people feel lonelier than they used to, and technology undoubtedly has a lot to do with it. Just not Facebook.

http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-04-24/is-the-internet-making-us-lonelier-or-less-lonely-yes



**Is the Internet Making Us Lonelier or Less Lonely? Yes**

By [Mathew Ingram](http://www.businessweek.com/authors/1761-mathew-ingram)April 24, 2012

We have recently seen a rash of essays and articles in the mainstream press that take a somewhat scare-mongering tone toward social networks and digital communication of various kinds: [A piece in the *Atlantic*](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/8930/) raises the question as to whether Facebook is making us lonely, and [a *New York Times* op-ed](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/22/opinion/sunday/the-flight-from-conversation.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1) by MIT professor Sherry Turkle a few days ago argues that all the texting and social-media usage we’re engaging in is bad for us as a society because it prevents us from having “real” conversations and connecting with other human beings. Is this a real problem or just another example of how new technologies often get blamed for behavior that existed long before they were invented?

The crux of Turkle’s argument is that while text messaging, Facebook status updates, and Twitter messages may make us feel as though we are connected to our friends and family in small ways, these “sips” of online connectivity don’t add up to much. It’s similar to the case she made in her book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*, in which she talked about how social networks such as Facebook are actually [keeping us at a distance](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/books/review/Lehrer-t.html?pagewanted=all) from one another, instead of helping to connect us.

As Turkle puts it in her *NYT* piece: “We live in a technological universe in which we are always communicating. And yet we have sacrificed conversation for mere connection. E-mail, Twitter, Facebook, all of these have their places—in politics, commerce, romance, and friendship. But no matter how valuable, they do not substitute for conversation.”

Is that really true? There’s no question that a Facebook or Twitter chat can’t substitute for a face-to-face conversation with someone you care about. But is anyone really saying it should? It feels as though Turkle is proposing a false dichotomy, as though all the online communication we engage in somehow takes the place of “real-world” conversation. It’s like an updated version of the old image of young people sitting alone in their basements playing video games instead of going out to meet their friends in the “real” world. (Susannah Fox has a nice roundup of [some reactions to Turkle’s piece](http://storify.com/SusannahFox/the-flight-from-or-is-it-to-conversation).)

This argument has a number of flaws, including that [research shows](http://gigaom.com/2011/06/16/the-line-between-online-and-offline-life-continues-to-blur/) that people—particularly young Internet users—who are more social in their use of online networks and tools are also more social in the offline world. Sociologist Zeynep Tufekci has written about this false dichotomy many times, including [an exchange](http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2011/06/the-woman-who-gave-it-to-bill-keller-about-twitter-on-twitter/240858/) with former *New York Times* Executive Editor Bill Keller, who echoed Turkle’s fear that online connections are a pale imitation of “real” human connections. Tufekci argues that the online world and the so-called real world are almost indistinguishable now and that in many cases they tend to support each other, rather than the opposite.

In [his recent piece](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/8930/) in the *Atlantic*, author Stephen Marche asked if Facebook were making us more lonely instead of less; ultimately, he seemed to come down on the “more lonely” side of the equation, saying: “In a world consumed by ever more novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society. We live in an accelerating contradiction: the more connected we become, the lonelier we are. We were promised a global village; instead we inhabit the drab cul-de-sacs and endless freeways of a vast suburb of information.”

As poetic as that sounds, however, it simply doesn’t appear to be the case. Even the “expert on loneliness” who is cited by Marche in the *Atlantic* piece [doesn’t agree we are becoming lonelier](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2012/04/is_facebook_making_us_lonely_no_the_atlantic_cover_story_is_wrong_.single.html), and there’s no real evidence to suggest that Facebook is helping or hurting in this regard. As with Turkle’s analysis, Marche seems persuaded that social networking, text messaging, or various other forms of online connection are replacing real communication between people. At least in my experience—and also in the [research of others such as Tufekci](http://technosociology.org/?p=431)—this isn’t at all what’s happening.

If anything, online connections tend to spark or promote real-world connections. I have met dozens, possibly even hundreds of people I wouldn’t know except for Twitter, had spontaneous coffee meetings thanks to Foursquare check-ins, and made countless other connections between the online and offline world. Does everyone do this? Of course not. I’m sure there are people who become more alone or more lonely as they use the Internet, just as there are lonely people who watch a lot of late-night television. That doesn’t mean television causes loneliness.

As with any activity, too much of it can be harmful to your health—which goes for plenty of “real” world activities as well. Alexandra Samuel, the director of the Social + Interactive Media Centre at Emily Carr University, wrote in [a response to Turkle](http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/12/04/own-it-social-media-isnt-just-something-other-people-do/256212/) that: “[W]orrying about kids who choose to live online is as misplaced as worrying about seniors who choose to live offline. It’s the result of looking at an emergent digital lifestyle through a generational prism, one that assumes conversations are only meaningful when they look like the conversations we grew up having.”

To me, this feels very much like the debate that was swirling around the Web in 2010 about [whether the Internet was making us stupid](http://gigaom.com/2010/06/06/does-the-internet-make-us-smarter-or-dumber-yes/)—a theory advanced in part by author Nick Carr in his book *The Shallows*. As several people, including [media theorist Clay Shirky](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704025304575284973472694334.html) and [Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker](http://gigaom.com/2010/06/12/some-sanity-in-the-web-makes-us-dumber-debate/) pointed out, the Internet doesn’t really do anything to us, apart from reinforcing habits or behavior patterns we may already have. Can the Internet be used in ways that make us stupider, or at least make us appear that way? Sure it can. So can virtually every other invention mankind has devised since the wheel.

Pinker points out that virtually every technological development related to media—from newspapers and paperbacks to television and the Internet—gets demonized at some point, as people try to blame human nature on some external force. In each case, it’s how we choose to use these new tools that matters, and this is something we all have the power to change, for the better as well as for the worse.

Facebook Isn’t Making Us Lonely

And Americans aren’t all that lonely, either. Refuting the new *Atlantic* cover story.

By [Eric Klinenberg](http://www.slate.com/authors.eric_klinenberg.html)

Americans devour books that say we’ve never been lonelier or more disconnected. [*The Lonely Crowd*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0300088655/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0300088655), [*The Fall of Public Man*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0393308790/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0393308790), and [*The Pursuit of Loneliness*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0807042013/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0807042013)rank among the best-selling sociology texts in history. In recent years, [*Bowling Alone*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0743203046/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0743203046) and [*Alone Together*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0465010210/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0465010210) won significant attention and generated widespread debate. Often, these books lament the loss of a Golden Age when Americans had better marriages, stronger communities, safer streets, and greater happiness. They warn that we’ve grown dangerously isolated, and after we read them we return to our friends, families, and colleagues to discuss why we no longer spend time together.

In this month’s *Atlantic* cover story, “[Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/8930/)” the novelist Stephen Marche offers an unusually extreme claim about the state of our disunion: “[W]e suffer from unprecedented alienation,” he writes. “We have never been more detached from one another, or lonelier. In a world consumed by ever more novel modes of socializing, we have less and less actual society. We live in an accelerating contradiction: The more connected we become, the lonelier we are.”

Articles about American alienation may well feel true to those who long for simpler, happier times, but they’re built on fables and fantasies. In fact, there’s zero evidence that we’re more detached or lonely than ever. But since the *Atlantic* story is already becoming popular and influential, with [columnists](http://www.creators.com/liberal/connie-schultz/the-lonely-world-of-facebook.html) and [commentators](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/compost/post/facebook-makes-us-worse-than-lonely/2012/04/16/gIQA3cmLMT_blog.html) citing it as evidence that the Internet is tearing us apart, it's worth showing how it manufactures the myth that we’re lonelier than we’ve ever been.

The article opens with the tale of Yvette Vickers, an elderly former *Playboy* playmate and B-movie actress who died alone in Los Angeles and wasn’t discovered until her body had “mummified.” Her death, Marche reports, is the symbol of our atomized age. It's a good story, poetically told, and it's powerful enough to distract us from a fundamental flaw with the essay: It offers nothing to support its thesis that “we have never been lonelier.” The closest it comes is a sentence reporting that an AARP study published in 2010 found a dramatic rise in chronic loneliness among adults older than 45 (but not among the younger cohort most likely to use Facebook), and a vague claim that “various studies have shown loneliness rising drastically over a very short period of recent history.” Sorry, this is nowhere near sufficient to establish Marche’s grand claims.

Marche also draws heavily on the work of John Cacioppo, a University of Chicago psychologist whom he calls “the world’s leading expert on loneliness.” (I agree.) He quotes from [*Loneliness*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0393335283/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0393335283)*,* where Cacioppo writes that “Forming connections with pets or online friends or even God is a noble attempt by an obligatorily gregarious creature to satisfy a compelling need,” and that “surrogates can never make up completely for the absence of the real thing ” But for most of us, Facebook friends are supplements, not surrogates, to our social lives. Neither Cacioppo nor others who do research on loneliness believe that people expect online contacts to “make up completely for the absence of the real thing.”

I reached out to Cacioppo, who told me he does not believe Marche’s “never lonelier” thesis. “I would not say *never*,” the psychologist emailed me. In fact, Cacioppo continued, “the evidence for it increasing recently is mixed.”

Marche does make some effort to persuade us that Americans have never been more socially isolated, which is a measure of our frayed ties rather than our loneliness. He claims that, “We meet fewer people. We gather less. And when we gather, our bonds are less meaningful and less easy.” But the data he provides to back up this claim come from an infamous study reporting that, in Marche’s words: “In 1985, only 10 percent of Americans said they had no one with whom to discuss important matters, and 15 percent said they had only one such good friend. By 2004, 25 percent had nobody to talk to, and 20 percent had only one confidant.”

I say infamous because, as I report in [*Going Solo*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1594203229/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1594203229), my book about the rise of living alone (which Marche quotes), the study’s findings—and the survey data on which they are based—are so inconsistent with all other research in the field that the leading sociologists of social ties distrust them. (There appear to be problems with the original survey data in the 2004 General Social Survey, and an [article](http://www.soc.washington.edu/users/brines/fischer.pdf) (PDF) in the 2009 American Sociological Review cautions that “Scholars and general readers alike should draw no inference from the 2004 GSS as to whether Americans’ social networks changed substantially between 1985 and 2004; they probably did not.”

Among those who are now skeptical of the spike in social isolation is Matthew Brashears, one of the authors of the article Marche draws on to claim that one in four Americans has no confidant. “I certainly don’t think it’s reliable,” he told the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in February 2012. Neither does Claude Fischer, a Berkeley sociologist and a leading scholar of American social ties. His new book, [*Still Connected*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/087154332X/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=087154332X)*,* definitively refutes the Marche thesis that Americans have grown more detached. Drawing on 40 years of social surveys, Fischer shows that the quality and quantity of Americans’ relationships are about the same today as they were before the Internet.

I reached out to Fischer to get his response to the *Atlantic* article and he told me that many of Marche’s historical claims were as unfounded as its sociological ones. “When the telephone arrived,” Marche writes, “people stopped knocking on their neighbors’ doors.” Fischer, whose [*America Calling*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0520086473/ref%3Das_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=slatmaga-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=0520086473)is a landmark study of how the telephone affected U.S. social life, found that “When the telephone arrived, people didn’t stop knocking on their neighbors' doors; they called and then knocked.” Marche argues that “If cars created the suburbs, surely they also created isolation.” According to Fischer, “The car did not isolate us; women flocked to driving cars because cars made it easier to get out and see people.”

Marche also draws on U.S. cultural history to explain our proclivity for loneliness. He reminds us that “The great American poem is Whitman’s ‘Song of Myself.’ The great American essay is Emerson’s ‘Self-Reliance.’ ” But, as I write in *Going Solo*, for all our talk of self-reliance and rugged individualism, Americans are actually far less likely to live alone and enjoy key forms of personal autonomy than people in other countries, including France, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Britain, and Japan. What distinguishes Americans is not that we are more isolated, but that we spend more time and energy worrying about whether we are.

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The fact that Americans are neither more lonely nor more detached than ever makes it difficult for Marche to prove that Facebook is responsible for turning us into a nation of lonesome narcissists. But this thesis wouldn’t hold up even if rates of loneliness and isolation *had* reached unprecedented levels. As Cacioppo and the other experts Marche interviews tell him, people who feel lonely in their lives offline are likely to bring that loneliness to Facebook, whereas those who feel more connected are not. “Facebook is merely a tool,” Cacioppo tells Marche. “Like any tool, its effectiveness will depend on its user.” He adds: “How we use these technologies can lead to more integration, rather than more isolation.”

After speaking with Cacioppo, Marche concedes that “Loneliness is certainly not something that Facebook or Twitter or any of the lesser forms of social media is doing to us.” He accepts the psychologists’ insight: “We are doing it to ourselves.” For a moment, at least, March appears to answer his article’s inflammatory question, “is Facebook making us lonely?” with a definitive *no*.

But instead Marche concludes by arguing that Facebook is in fact doing something far more harmful. “The real danger with Facebook is not that it allows us to isolate ourselves, but that by mixing our appetite for isolation with our vanity, it threatens to alter the very nature of solitude.” Facebook, he claims, has produced a “new isolation,” one that demands constant attention to the Internet and precludes any genuine retreat from the world. Facebook, he charges, “denies us a pleasure whose profundity we had underestimated: the chance to forget about ourselves for a while, the chance to disconnect.”

I think we still have that option. Disconnection requires little more than shutting down your computer and smartphone. But if the connection is still on and Marche wants to forget about himself for a while, he could simply click away from Facebook and navigate over to Google, which will direct him to the research on loneliness and solitude that has been there for him all along. Used wisely, the Internet could help make his sociological arguments less isolated from reality.

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