BOOK REVIEW ARTICLE

The Psychodynamics of Social Networking: Connected-up Instantaneous Culture and the Self, by Aaron Balick, Karnac, London, 2014; Routledge, Abingdon, 2018, 188 + xxxv pp, ISBN 9781780490922; price (paperback) £28.99.

Reviewed by Richard House

The Internet does matter, but we simply don't know how it matters. (Balick, *Psychodynamics of Social Networking*, p. xxxii, quoting E. Morozov)

Across the online social network, we are both objectified and subjectified; we seek recognition for our true selves while being compelled to present our false selves; we struggle with intrapsychic object relations while seeking the satisfaction of intersubjective interaction. (Balick, pp. 126–7)

Answer me this. Can you get through this entire article without checking your phone? Try it and see how far you get. At average reading speed it will take about five minutes. Can you go five minutes without checking your email, Facebook, Twitter or Instagram? If not, you need to seriously ask yourself if your attachment to your social media is messing with your head and your relationships…. If you've been unable to get through a five-minute article without checking, who's in charge?…. Today's brightly-lit smartphone's addictive appeal goes right to the basic operating systems of our brains…. The combination of the portability of a smartphone and the draw of social media creates a heady mix that is irresistible… Your brain's desire for validation and novelty gets hijacked by social media, texts and emails, even though we often feel worse for having looked at them. Paradox. (Balick, 2017)

I was taken aback when I came across this book on the psychodynamics of social networking written by an eminent psychotherapist – mainly because social networking, ICT etc. have been an issue that's preoccupied and concerned me for some years; yet somehow this important book slipped under my radar. So I'm delighted to be able to review it here.

Any book on this subject that's fulsomely endorsed on the back cover by Andrew Samuels and Susie Orbach must surely be one we need to take notice of. As Samuels states in his endorsement, the book is an excellent example of the ways in which therapeutic thinking can illuminate modern culture. And for Susie Orbach, 'Social media has infiltrated our psyches, demanding that we rethink issues of recognition, longing, connection, and dissociation'; and Balick's book illuminates 'the deeper psychological meanings of social networking'. My literary juices were running already….

I should declare an interest and a bias at the outset, and share my own position on social networking, digital technologies etc. While I am regularly on email on my big, heavy laptop

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(receiving many emails a day, 365 days a year), I very rarely use a mobile phone (my Nokia is very old, and is used for texting alone). And regarding social networking, I've never touched it, on principle. So I cannot promise to be an unbiased reviewer; but while this review will unavoidably be coloured by my own position and viewpoints, I will strive to be as fair as possible in my commentary on this thought-provoking book.

In an age of increasing polarization, Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) constitute a field that exhibits strongly polarized views. Social media in all their guises and manifestations are seen by some as offering hopeful and democratic new departures for education, information availability and human progress. Others, on the other hand, are deeply concerned by the erosion of civility in the online world, attenuating attention spans in a pervasive culture of instantaneity, reading habits in steep decline, and the impact of 24/7 peer pressure on young people. And this is not to mention the issue of very young children's increasing exposure to these technologies, and the impacts they may be having while children's brains are still developing (e.g. House, 2012).

The book's author, Aaron Balick, is a UKCP-registered psychotherapist, supervisor and a media and social networking consultant, and was a regular contributor as the 'resident psychotherapist' on BBC Radio One's phone-in show, 'The Surgery with Aled'. He is the director of Stillpoint Spaces, a psychology hub in London where he shares his passionate interest for ensuring that clinical and academic psychological insights are made accessible to the public. Balick therefore has much experience in applying psychological insights to life, business, culture, and society.

In the book, then, Balick interrogates the unconscious motivations underpinning and driving our online social networking use, arguing that social media is more than just a technology – being essentially human and deeply meaningful. It's certainly unarguable that social networking has fundamentally changed the way we relate to one other, with mobile technologies giving us untrammelled access to the world in ways that increasingly transcend both space and time (cf. the

quotation by Marx on the 'annihilation of space by time', quoted later). Until recently, we could never have begun to imagine how our very selves were destined to be extended into the digital world, offering us the opportunity for instantaneous relating to others through a variety of platforms, like Facebook and Twitter. More on these themes later.

The book consists of six chapters, and a substantial introduction and conclusion. In the Introduction, Balick refreshingly announces that he will be focusing on process, not content (p. xvi), with a core focus being 'how the contemporary mode of digital expression [these 'new technologies of our intimacies' – p. xxvii] meets our deepest unconscious need to recognise, be recognised and relate to others' (ibid.). In looking at a history of online social networks, we are told that social networking has 'saturated our methods of relating with profound speed' (p. xvii): a nation of Facebook users, for instance, would make up the world's third-biggest nation! (ibid.). We learn also that in writing and researching the book, Balick 'embedded himself in social media' (pp. xxix and 5) – and 'Without wholly putting oneself into the experience, it may be difficult to fully understand it' (p. xxix). He outlines his adopted 'research methodology' for writing the book on pp. xxviii–xxi and 5–6; and he is careful to make the point that research into this field is 'fraught with difficulty' (p. 8).

Balick is especially interested in how social networking users 'come to understand themselves' (p. xxxi), a core question being whether these technologies are 'changing us in some fundamental way, or are simply novel technological platforms through which the same old psychological traits express themselves through a different medium' (ibid.). This is surely a key question that anyone either supporting or challenging these technologies has to address in great depth.

For Balick, psychoanalysis is well placed to help us 'understand the underlying processes informing [technological] relating, and the potential consequences of it: both positive and negative'; and also 'the complex effects on our expectations, communication styles, relational styles, and even our identities' (p. xxxiii).

Chapter 1 then goes into the theoretical base for the study, describing the relevant core concepts from relational psychoanalysis, which are then built upon throughout the book. He finds that current research on the impact of these technologies is mixed (p. 7), and maintains that 'making overall statements about the value of online relating [is] unhelpful' (ibid.). The main theoretical corpus covered here is psychoanalytic object relations theory, relational psychoanalysis, notions of 'true' and 'false' self (Winnicott) and persona (Jung), and the issue of recognition (Benjamin). I was struck by his statement that 'the nature of the outward-facing social-networking sites [SNSs] naturally invites presentations from the false self. The result of this can leave the true, or real, self feeling invisible and unrecognised, and, at the deepest level, unloved' (p. 17). And more, 'SNSs might encourage us… to emphasise [our false self and persona] at the expense of [other aspects of our psyche]' (p. 18). It follows from this, further, that there can easily be a tendency for partial aspects of the psyche to be mistaken online for the whole – thus leading to misrecognition (ibid.) – e.g. with false self being mistaken for true self (p. 20); and negotiating all this is fraught with complex issues (ibid.). Thus, Balick tells us that 'the false self/persona becomes the vehicle for our self-expression on status updates and tweets, to the exclusion of other aspects of our wide ranging and multiple subjectivities' (p. 19). Lots to think about for thoughtful, undefended social networkers here!...

Regarding recognition, we learn that 'the drive for recognition from another is built into the very intention of these networks' (p. 23), and in general people seek recognition through human interaction. So from a humanistic viewpoint, one could ask whether 'virtual, online recognition' merely provides *an illusion* of recognition – or at least a much denuded version of it – in contrast to real, face-to-face, body-to-body experience (cf. Reed, 1996). And we're also reminded that 'recognition is being traded like a commodity across social networks; it is the fuel that is driving users to them in droves' (p. 22) – with (following Sherry Turkle) technology posing itself as 'the architect of our intimacies' (ibid). This is not to mention the well-known issue that 'interpersonal communications online are quite limited in contrast to the myriad of relational cues that provide so much information in real life' (ibid.).

So again, we can legitimately ask what impact this denuded kind of communication might be having, in both short and long run, on what we experience to be truly human. And for Balick, 'recognition goes nowhere if it is the false self solely (or even mostly) that is being recognised' (p. 24) – with this being a particular danger on SNSs where partial revelation of the self is very much the norm, and with the SNS architecture making such partial forms of recognition so easy and effort-free to engage in.

Finally, in strong humanistic spirit Balick quotes Jaron Lanier in saying that 'Giving yourself time and space to think and feel is crucial to your existence' (p. 24). And yet (Balick), 'the danger in the social network is that it can sometimes jump the important process *of being with something*… – online social networking has the capacity to bypass the more difficult navigation of relational complexity' (p. 25). Balick doesn't go into this issue in great depth, but it seems to me to be an absolutely crucial matter, as it has profound implications for the quality, breadth and depth of human relationships – and especially where children are gleaning much foundational learning about relationships from these very media.

There is much in the rest of the book that merits detailed discussion, but alas that is well beyond the scope of a review – but I have touched above on just some massive questions about our core psychology and identity that can't be ignored or sidelined by anyone wishing to really understand the human impact of these technologies. In the rest of the book, briefly: Chapter 2 then focuses on a clinical event from the author's own practice, which was provoked by a Google search. Then Chapter 3 looks in some depth at the ubiquity of these technologies in our everyday lives. Chapter 4 explores the objectification process and its dangers, which plays such a central role in social networking. Chapter 5 then switches the discourse in looking at how *being in the mind of the other* is an essential aspect of online relating. Chapter 6 then looks deeply into how online relating can impact upon identity.

Balick's conclusion is, as one might expect from a psychoanalytic therapist, equivocal and nuanced, 'holding the dialectic' (as he calls it – p. xxxv) without taking a clear (polarizing?) 'for' or 'against' viewpoint. In fact, he explicitly states that he has very much sought to avoid such a dichotomous judgement of these technologies (ibid.). And he approvingly quotes J. Naughton as saying that 'the optimists rarely address the reality of the destruction [of the old ways] while the pessimists rarely acknowledge the creative possibilities of the new. We need to transcend this shouting match.' (ibid.)

In his Conclusion, Balick ranges across the nature and effects of 'hyper-connectivity' (pp. 150–1), including its implications for 'the complex nature of our selfhoods' (p. 150); the pros and cons of the boundary-less nature of the Internet (pp. 152–3), and how it can encourage 'a regressive sense of omnipotence' (p. 153), which can easily degenerate into anxiety, depression and loneliness; the reality status of virtual relating ('it is real, but it is also different' – p. 155); and whether this 'brave new world of relating' may be changing us in some way (p. 157).

As intimated earlier, I have major concerns about these technologies, that Balick's book has done little to allay. It's not as if there were no evidence pointing to significant harm stemming from these technologies and what they unleash. For example, a recent report (Anon, 2019) on a survey of over 2,000 regular social media users by well-being brand Soul Analyse concluded that social media has a negative impact on a fifth of British adults' mental health, with 20 per cent reporting feeling depressed or anxious when using social media platforms (though of course we must treat such research with all the usual methodological caveats). Young people were also found to be more at risk of being negatively affected, with 30 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds reporting feeling anxious or depressed while using social media, and 58 per cent saying that social media makes them more likely to notice their own flaws.

Soul Analyse co-founder Stephanie Dunleavy is quoted as saying, 'the pictures we see online are not representative of reality and *it can be difficult to distinguish between what's real and what's not*. This is no doubt causing body image issues, especially among young people…. [T]hese hugely popular platforms are potentially very damaging to people's mental health.' (ibid., my italics).

And as printed elsewhere in this issue of the magazine, the musings of one of Facebook's founders is somewhat chilling, in terms of the deliberate manipulative intent behind the design of Facebook. Thus, Sean Parker (2017), founding president of Facebook, has stated in a live TV interview:

> …Facebook [is] all about how we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible…. We… need to give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while because someone 'liked' or commented on a post or whatever; and that's when it gets you to contribute more content…, when it gets you to add more likes and comments … It's a social validation feedback loop – …exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology…. It literally changes your relationship with society, with each other… [and] God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains….

Balick is all too well aware of this, of course: on page xxvi, for example, he writes, 'those who wish to utilise social media for commercial gain are seeking to exploit the human motivation to relate to others for their commercial purposes'. Balick (2017) has also written elsewhere that 'if the "social" aspect of networking starts to replace complex "real life" face-to-face moments with loved ones, you are replacing attention from a living breathing person in front of you for a notification on your phone'.

I am delighted that Balick has taken the trouble to write a book on the *psychodynamics* of these technologies, and the impact they have at the level of 'the unconscious'. Not least, the phenomena of narcissistic behaviour, addiction and compulsion, and abusive 'trolling' are all aspects of the digital world that arguably *necessitate* a psychoanalytic perspective in order to fully understand them. And I'm even more delighted that a 2nd, completely updated edition of the book is currently in preparation by the author.

My own position on these issues leaves me disappointed that there is no engagement in the book with more *spiritually* informed insight into the wider evolutionary and paradigmatic meaning and context of these rapidly emerging digital technologies (e.g. Naydler, 2018; Perlas, 2018), and also with *philosophically* informed critiques of these technologies and their effects (see J.-F. Lyotard, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, George Lakoff etc.; Sim, 2001). With reference to philosophy, for example, I would liked to have seen something more in the book on the *existential*-psychoanalytic question of how these technologies so easily become a means of distracting ourselves from authentic *being*, feeding into the futile delusion that there exist technological solutions or 'fixes' to what are, at root, existential givens of human existence and its many vicissitudes.

In my view, those like myself who advocate a precautionary approach to these technologies are far from being reactionary 'conservatives', or uncritical 'moral panickers', or nostalgic, over-sentimental romanticizers for a non-technological past. Rather, we argue for bringing a critically reflective capacity to the breathless momentum of modern technological developments, taking a paradigmatic, contextualizing meta-view of the place of technology in the evolution of human consciousness – and most crucially, a passionate wish to protect what is *fundamentally human* from the march of 'the Inhuman' (Sim, 2001).

With specific reference to therapy practice, Balick rightly concerns himself in the book with the ways in which the Internet can expand and disrupt our cosy assumptions of psychodynamics and psychotherapy – implying that therapy really needs to take all this very seriously, if it's to be up to speed with modern culture and the kinds of material and influences that clients bring into the consulting room

From the standpoint of psychotherapy, it could also be argued that there is a *democratizing* aspect to social networking, in that it is much harder to maintain a precious, over-professionalized mystique around therapists and around therapy as a practice, if it is relatively easy to discover personal information about therapists online. This could

well lead to a (long overdue?) re-thinking of what we've learned in our therapy trainings about boundaries, and (in some modalities, at least) the importance of avoiding therapist self-disclosure.

It seems to me that therapists could and should be at the forefront of deconstructing these technologies with their clients, teasing out their complex (psycho-)dynamics and also their addictive and addiction-creating nature, and becoming aware of how they are designed. Balick approving cites various others research and writing in this field which be finds 'exciting' (p. xxvii) – e.g. boyd & Ellison, 2007; Clarke, 2009; Turkle, 2011) – though there is certainly more recent critical, penetrating work being done, too (see, for example, Glockler & Brinton, 2019; Lanier, 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

The third epigraph introducing this review comes from an article written by Aaron Balick at least three years *after* the writing of his book under review here. I wonder whether Balick might now be less relaxed about the impact of these technologies, with the advent of the increasingly ubiquitous smartphone, and the increasing ease and speed with which one can connect to social networking platforms – the increasing instantaneity of virtual relating, the speed of accessing potentially limitless amounts of information… – or what Karl Marx, in his critique of the dynamics of capitalism, brilliantly characterized as 'the annihilation of space by time'.

As such 'annihilation' continues and accelerates apace, fuelled by the human addiction to instantaneity and these technologies' capacity to give us the illusion of distracting ourselves from Being and life's existential givens, surely we must start asking fundamental questions about this 'march of the Inhuman' in hyper-modern culture (Sim, 2001; Perlas, 2018; Zerzan, 2008), and the impact it is having, and threatens to have, on our very humanity. There could hardly be a more pressing and telling question for those aligned with the concerns of Humanistic Psychology and the humanistic therapies to be addressing. For as Balick himself wrote in a 2015 Huffpost blog, 'Looking for meaning in your life? There's no app for that.'

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Richard House edits the AHP online magazine, and from 2020 will resume the post of editor of *Self & Society* journal.