

Book Review

Bored, Lonely, Angry, Stupid: Changing Feelings About Technology—From the Telegraph to Twitter—Luke Fernandez and Susan J. Matt (Cambridge, MA, USA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2019)

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■ **THE HUSBAND-AND-WIFE** team of Prof. Fernandez and Prof. Matt interviewed 55 people for their book. My favorite conversation comes from a young man named Greg who exults in his recently acquired smart phone. So much in awe is he that he compares its use to entering a cathedral “... there’s entire worlds [the Internet] contained in this smart-phone that invites me to an experience of awe...” Fifteen months later, in 2017 he’s had a change of heart: “Yes, the screen is a cathedral, but it is not *the* cathedral... you don’t have that moment of stepping through the low door [of the cathedral] and then standing up into the majesty of the cathedral.” In a bit over a year, his love affair with his phone has lost some of its ecstasy.

He is a figure in a book which deals with changing attitudes to communications technology and media over not only the recent past—as just described—but over the last two centuries. The work treats six questions: are social media making us more narcissistic, are we less capable of enduring boredom, is the Internet making us lonelier, are people no longer able to concentrate well, has the capacity

for experiencing awe diminished, are social media fomenting anger? To summarize: has the self been changed by technology? One of the strengths of the book, besides its many interviews, is its long historical view of these subjects, but this raises some deep questions involving perception and linguistics. The authors are dealing with the history of emotional responses and point out that the word “emotion” didn’t even appear in English until the 17th century and yet the Bible is rich in words for emotions—anger, love, hatred, envy, and greed. The authors make the valid point that feelings can not only be altered by society but can be *changed* by describing them with different words. A concordance I found for Shakespeare shows that he never used the words *bored* or *boring* except with reference to cutting a hole. And yet there are characters who are bored, e.g., the wealthy and leisured Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* confides in her servant: “By my troth Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world.” Fernandez and Matt have put us on guard: if a word describing an emotion is not present at a particular period, it need not signify the absence of that feeling.

Narcissism is a tricky business. Did Facebook cause an explosion in narcissism? *Narcissus*,

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according to Greek mythology, was a handsome man who gets his first look at himself from his reflection in the water. There are several versions of what happens to him with his new knowledge but in all he becomes miserable and dies. Surprisingly, the notion that any mortal might be narcissistic dates from the comparatively recent past: 1898. We learn that the term *narcissism* was first promoted by the doctor and social reformer Havelock Ellis to describe those with an excessive self-regard. The term gained momentum with Freud's 1914 publication *On Narcissism*. Prior to Ellis and Freud, Americans might have resorted to biblical notions of sinfulness and *in lieu* of narcissism might have used *vanity*, *pride*, or *egoism*. Sixty six years after Freud's description the "narcissistic personality disorder" had made it into the major reference for psychiatrists: *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, known in the trade as the DSM. The classification remains controversial and there are periodic attempts to remove it but the term narcissistic now carries with it the whiff of pathology.

But is narcissism as practiced by most of us pathological? The authors estimate that more than a million selfies are taken in the United States each day. In other words, on average, one American out of 300 takes a selfie each day. Now ask yourself how many times a day you see yourself in a mirror. Maybe half a dozen—you go to the bathroom, open a clothes closet. And how many times would you see yourself in a mirror in 1800? The answer, based on what the authors tell us, is somewhere between one and zero. Most homes didn't have mirrors—they were too expensive and didn't become cheap and common until the mid-19th century. And yet few would claim that there is anything pathological about our frequent seeing ourselves in a mirror. The selfie, posted on a web site, is part of what the authors refer to as the activity of the *presentation of the self*. But self-presentation as performance didn't arise from the computer age—it has a long history—and its practices are admirably discussed in a well-known book Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Strangely, there is no reference to Goffman which might have provided a matrix for analyzing the performative aspects of self on the web.

On the subject of neglected scholars, I must mention one other, Marshall McLuhan. In a book that treats how our habits of perception and thinking

might well be influenced by this generation's electronic media it behooves the authors to mention McLuhan's work, especially *The Gutenberg Galaxy* which is the pioneering text on the subject of how the invention and spread of print media profoundly altered perception and led to the privileging of the visual over the oral in western culture as well as contributing to the encouragement of linear and sequential thinking. McLuhan's work is so influential that it must be acknowledged.

And, speaking of Freud, one should be wary of what conditions the psychiatric profession regards as pathological. A Google Ngram search of the term "neurotic" shows it wasn't much used until around 1900 and then gained momentum from Freud's 1914 paper on the subject, reaching a peak around 1955, and has recently fallen to nearly zero. Were people neurotic before Freud and are they not neurotic 82 years after his death?

Awe, with its close connection to the sublime, is a rich topic explored by the authors. Recall that in 1844 when Samuel Morse sent his first telegraph message over a newly opened experimental line from Washington to Baltimore it was "What hath God wrought." The shock surrounding this event cannot be overstated: for the first time ever, messages could be reliably sent, apparently instantaneously, between two points without the burden of a physical object being transported. The hand of God appeared to be at work here. The awe persisted for decades, and when the first message was sent by an Atlantic cable 14 years later, the global celebrations were vast. The telegraph could be seen as the first manifestation of what has been called "the technological sublime"—well described in the book *The American Technological Sublime* (1996) by David Nye. There were other technological sublimes later in the 19th century: the telephone, electrification of cities, wireless telegraphy. In our current era, if there is any sense of the technological sublime—the awesomeness of an invention—it is short lived, as Greg, the author's subject, soon discovers. It is a rare technological sublime that persists, in contrast to the natural sublime. Americans travel great distances to see Niagara Falls or the Grand Canyon, and having experienced such sites once they are rewarded in repeat visits. The rare technological sublime that continues to reward is generally allied with architecture, e.g., the Brooklyn or Golden Gate Bridges. A child born into an existing era of some technology will never be

awed by it—no matter that her great grandparents were once thrilled in 1925 by being able to talk by telephone from New York to a relative in California.

Space does not allow our discussing all six topics treated by the authors, but their history of anger and the present state of its manifestation must be mentioned. On January 6, 2021, an angry mob of thousands broke into the Capitol building of the United States and five people died. In the post-mortem of the event, it has become apparent that the organization of this riot took place on the Internet, where the rage of the participants was fertilized and grew. The book reviewed here was published before the incident but would, if it appeared now, most likely contain some discussion of a day of anger that is destined to become infamous.

Anger in America has an interesting history. From examining diaries and history books Fernandez and Matt describe an 18th and much of a 19th century when displays of anger, at least outside the home, was a privilege of white males, although some felt in colonial America that only God could be angry. The authors have an especially moving written account from a black man who recalls seeing, as a boy, his slave father being beaten by his master for a very mild display of verbal anger. Letter writing took off in 19th century America with the adoption of the cheap penny post, and etiquette books reminded people to wait at least a day to send an angry letter after it has been written. This was echoed in the late 20th century when etiquette suggested that an angry email should sit in your computer a while before being sent. As the 19th century progressed, displays of anger by white males came to be increasingly sanctioned as a display of masculinity, but by the early years of the 20th century it came to be seen as a liability—it disturbed the increasingly hierarchal workplace. Workplace anger is still frowned on, but in the 20th century other forms of anger grew: the term “road rage” became useful and popular circa 1990. Why the term was born then is a mystery because angry motorists were long a fixture of the highway. It is a pure example of an expression being born out

of a need—people had known the phenomenon for decades. The authors cite this as a precursor of rage shown on the Internet—it involved limited face to face interaction and the anonymity of the street or highway as a catalyst. But as the authors point out, social media has its upside in the channeling of anger: the emergence of the Black Lives Matter and Me-Too Movements.

Reading this book is a rich experience yet in doing so one must be sensitive to some kinds of fallacies. One is a failure to realize that what we are experiencing now is just an echo of a change in technology that has already been experienced and is so pervasive as to be ignored. The authors speak of the increasing difficulty of concentrating on one’s work and tell of the casual use of such drugs as Ritalin to focus attention. And yet coffee, which has many of the same purposes, is so much a part of daily life as to be ignored in their discussions. Another fallacy, but one which they are innocent of, is a belief that “there is nothing new under the sun.” And yet the new occurs: the attack at the U.S. capitol born, and nurtured on the Internet, is without precedent.

THE AUTHORS DO not definitively answer any of the six questions they pose in their introduction involving narcissism, boredom, loneliness, concentration, awe, and anger. But their work does give us a useful historical perspective from which to interrogate each of these issues. ■

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