The Moral Requirement for Digital Connectivity

Abstract

Crises illustrate the value of digital connectedness. When our physical routines are disrupted, having alternative options to connect with others is important. Yet there are clear divisions in access to the internet, and in the distribution of the skills required to take advantage of the internet. I argue that the COVID-19 pandemic is but one example of a more general idea; that everyone has a moral claim to internet access. We ought to use this opportunity to address the continued inequities in internet access and use amongst our population.

Introduction

The failure to ensure that every person has access to the internet is not simply a business issue, nor an economic one. It is a moral issue, the importance of which moved from merely theoretical to imminently practical during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden emergence of 'social distancing' as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the progression of mere distancing into, for many people around the world, enforced isolation, or even quarantine, has drastically increased recognition of the importance of digital connectivity. We are more aware now than before of the possibility that digital interactions could be the only ones available with those outside of our immediate households. Birthday parties and engagement parties have had to happen online, and could have to happen online again. Grocery shopping feels safer online, and recreational shopping is for many people only possible online.

While it is relatively easy for those who were already highly digitally competent or connected to maintain their contacts and social interactions, and thus to maintain some semblance of social equilibrium, it is much harder for those who had hitherto resisted the digitization of their social lives. Those who, through lack of technological capacity (no access to the internet or internet capable devices) or lack of interest (satisfaction, pre-virus, with physical rather than digital communication and socialization) did not have a strong digital communicative presence, are more vulnerable to the harms of social isolation caused by our enforced physical separation from the wider community.

Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought into stark relief the pre-existing gap between the digitally connected and the digitally isolated. But this gap is not just a problem during the pandemic. It will be a problem even when there is a vaccine, and we ought not to think of it as merely another negative component of the current crisis. Given the steadily increasing importance of digital connectivity, the absence of ability to connect (whether through lack of access, lack of skill, or even, perhaps, lack of desire) has an ethical dimension. In this article I argue that we have a moral obligation to ensure access to digital environments to all citizens, but that fulfilling this obligation is nevertheless insufficient to generate online equity, as access alone is insufficient to overcome the current inequalities in digital engagement. I argue that digital connectivity provides us with important social resilience to shocks (such as global pandemics)

and that even when the pandemic subsides, we should remember and emphasize the positive aspects of online interaction.

Digital Divides

The concept of a digital divide arises along at least three levels.[1] The first level of digital divide is simple – it is merely the division between those with access to the internet and those without. This division was commonplace in early studies of online life,[2] but has fallen out of favor as being too simplistic, and failing to capture the relevant concerns in a modern context.[3] A second level division occurs between access and skills, wherein the division centers on whether a given person has the relevant skills to utilize the internet appropriately.[4] This division recognizes that mere access to technology isn't sufficient to deliver the benefits of that technology.[5] The third level of divide is between those who benefit from their use of the internet, and those who do not. Some of those with both access and skills nevertheless fail to achieve beneficial outcomes.[6]

We can mandate that people have access to the internet, thereby legislating away the root causes of the first level of digital divide, but legislation cannot address the second or third levels of divide. In order to address these, we need a paradigm shift in how we think of online environments. In this context, the very framing of the debate, the tendency of some to privilege the physical, is problematic. Physical interaction being the primary means of engagement with others is not uniquely valuable. Rather, it is an artefact of our earlier technological state. I will briefly outline the divides as they currently exist, to situate the discussion in the remainder of the article.

Particularly in the US context, we have good data on the prevalence and distribution of internet usage, and the lines of delineation are, I think, unsurprising. The Pew Research Center notes that among "young adults, college graduates and those from high-income households – internet usage is near ubiquitous."[7] Similarly, the groups which lag behind on internet use are unsurprising – "Racial minorities, older adults, rural residents, and those with lower levels of education and income are less likely."[8] Overall, as of 2019, 90% of American adults reported using the internet. In normal times, this is a good number. However,

[1] Scheerder, A., van Deursen, A., & van Dijk, J. (2017). Determinants of Internet skills, uses and outcomes. A systematic review of the second-and third-level digital divide. *Telematics and informatics*, *34*(8), 1607-1624.

[2] Castells, M. (2002). *The Internet galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, business, and society*. Oxford University Press on Demand.

[3] Gunkel, D. J. (2003). Second thoughts: toward a critique of the digital divide. *New media & society*, *5*(4), 499-522. Hargittai, E. (2008) 'The digital reproduction of inequality', in Social Stratification, ed. D. Grusky, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, pp. 936–944.

[4] Harambam, J., Aupers, S., & Houtman, D. (2013). The contentious gap: From digital divide to cultural beliefs about online interactions. *Information, Communication & Society*, *16*(7), 1093-1114.

[5] Matthew S. Eastin, Vincent Cicchirillo & Amanda Mabry (2015) Extending the Digital Divide Conversation: Examining the Knowledge Gap Through Media Expectancies, Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 59:3, 416-437, DOI: 10.1080/08838151.2015.1054994

[6] Van Deursen, A. J., Helsper, E., Eynon, R., & Van Dijk, J. A. (2017). The compoundness and sequentiality of digital inequality. *International Journal of Communication*, *11*, 452-473.

[7] Pew Research Center (2019) Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/

[8] Pew Research Center (2019) Internet/Broadband Fact Sheet https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/internet-broadband/

what this means in the time of physical distancing is that one in ten US adults has to rely on other means to communicate with those who do not live in their immediate vicinity, or to learn, under sub-optimal conditions, to use this technology (assuming, of course, that the citizens in question are all obeying the requirements of distancing).

So, the first divide shows us that those who will suffer the most from the necessity of digital interaction are members of many groups who are already at higher risk of disadvantage, namely, racial minorities, the less well off, and the poorly educated. We should also be aware that membership in these groups is often intersectional, such that those who are members of multiple groups (such as the rural poor racial minorities with minimal education) are much more vulnerable than those who are only in one of the higher risk categories.

The skill divide exacerbates this problem. While, as noted above, 90% of American adults report using the internet, this does not translate simply into 90% of the adult population being skilled (or even competent) internet users. Rather, the 90% figure includes those who are unwilling internet users in normal times. The relevant group, in the context of the pandemic, are not merely internet users, but those who use the internet socially – as it is this social component to the internet which is now forcedly replacing physical interaction. That is, the particular skills required for digital socialization are less widely shared than the skills required for basic digital competence. Here, two important figures stand out. The first is that only 72% of US adults report using social media, a significant decrease from the numbers using the internet in general.[9] Secondly, while the divisions along educational and racial lines are less pronounced, a significant age-based distinction arises, with only 40% of those aged 65+ reporting using social media.[10] This, it should be noted, is not a problem specific to the USA. Globally, a very similar pattern emerges, of older adults lagging behind the adult population as a whole in uptake of both internet use in general and social media use in particular.[11] As the COVID-19 virus is most dangerous for those in the age group 65+, the importance of maintaining physical distancing is greatest for members of this group. Yet, they are the group least likely to have pre-existing digital networks to rely on. As such, this divide places the elderly at greater risk. We already know that older adults report more loneliness in the best of times than do other adults[12], and that loneliness matters – as Hawkley and Cacioppo note, there is an increasing body of longitudinal research showing that "loneliness predicts increased morbidity and mortality."[13] So, older adults are simultaneously more at risk from the virus and from the negative aspects of isolation, and they are amongst the least likely to have pre-existing access to the now primary means of mitigating this isolation – digital socialization.

Finally, we must consider the third divide. Here again, we see that older adults are generally the most at risk. However, it is worth reiterating the point made in regards to the first of the three digital divides, that

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[9] Pew Research Centre (2019) Social Media Fact Sheet https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/

[10] Pew Research Centre (2019) Social Media Fact Sheet https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/

[11] Hunsaker, A., & Hargittai, E. (2018). A review of Internet use among older adults. *New Media & Society*, *20*(10), 3937-3954.

[12] Pinquart, M., & Sorensen, S. (2001). Influences on loneliness in older adults: A meta-analysis. *Basic and applied social psychology*, *23*(4), 245-266.

[13] Hawkley, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2010). Loneliness matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms. *Annals of behavioral medicine*, *40*(2), 218-227.

the intersectional nature of the considerations here means that not all older adults are equally at risk. Anderson & Perrin note, regarding technology use among seniors that "those who are younger, more affluent and more highly educated – report owning and using various technologies at rates similar to adults under the age of 65."[14] Those at most risk then are the very old, the less educated, and the less affluent. The benefits of online connectivity in the current timeline can be divided into three broad groups: informational, social and instrumental online activities.[15] We have already discussed the first two categories. Informational use of the internet is the most common use, and the norm for simply being online. Social use is more complex and correspondingly less common, and, perhaps again unsurprisingly, instrumental use, such as the use of online banking or online shopping, is performed by very few older adults. Schehl et al found that 81.1% of older adults never or rarely used online banking, and 86.3% never or rarely used online shopping.[16] Again, this suggests that, absent the ability to conduct such activities physically, large numbers of older adults will be significantly disadvantaged compared to the adult population at large.

The Obligation for & Insufficiency of Access

In the last few years there has been some discussion of treating internet access as a human right. Vinton Cerf's New York Times op-ed in 2012 is often cited as the starting point for this discussion, as he baldly claimed that internet access is not a human right.[17] The UN adopted a non-binding resolution in 2016 which was read by many as a declaration that internet access is a human right, but this reading is overly generous. What the 2016 declaration did was recognize the importance of the internet for the enjoyment of human rights more generally and condemn attempts to shut down the internet in response to human rights movements.[18] While a cottage industry has developed defending the human right to internet access[19], we don't need to appeal to human rights in order to establish the moral significance of internet access. The argument for internet access as a human right relies on the importance of the internet, once it exists, for achieving other human rights, including but not limited to the rights of free speech and assembly.[20] However, in the current environment, we are not concerned merely with the higher level human rights considerations relating to internet access. We also care about the social aspects – whether or not one accepts that there is a human right to the internet, one can nevertheless still see the harm being caused in real time to those who do not have or use the internet to develop and maintain social bonds with friends and family. We can see the real harms being caused by a lack of internet connectivity,

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[14] Anderson, M & Perrin, A. (2017) Tech Adoption Climbs Among Older Adults
https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/05/17/technology-use-among-seniors/

[15] Schehl, B., Leukel, J., & Sugumaran, V. (2019). Understanding differentiated internet use in older adults: A study of informational, social, and instrumental online activities. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *97*, 222-230.

[16] Schehl, B., Leukel, J., & Sugumaran, V. (2019). Understanding differentiated internet use in older adults: A study of informational, social, and instrumental online activities. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *97*, 222-230.

[17] Cerf, V.G. (2012). Internet Access is not a Human Right
https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/05/opinion/internet-access-is-not-a-human-right.html

[18] UN General Assembly (2016) https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf

[19] Tully, S. (2014). A human right to access the internet? Problems and prospects. *Human rights law review*, *14*(2), 175-195; Mathiesen, K. (2012). The human right to Internet access: A philosophical defense. *International Review of Information Ethics*, *18*(12), 9-22.

[20] Merten Reglitz – The Human right to Free internet Access *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1-18

or a lack of the knowledge of how to use the internet for purchasing basic household goods and necessities.

In more normal times, the idea that internet access was essential for everyone's wellbeing was seldom taken seriously, even while some people admitted that, for particular groups, internet access was beneficial for wellbeing.[21] Pendry and Salvatore for example argued that "some of the benefits of online interaction may accrue particularly to people with stigmatizing conditions, whose need for a sense of community may be harder to meet in the course of normal, day-to-day offline interactions."[22] In this, they appeal to beneficial structural features of the internet. The internet obscures difference and does so via the same constraints which are commonly used to criticize online activity. The lack of bandwidth historically present online meant that a text-based communications network became the default. For much of the developmental stage of the internet, voice chat was less stable and less clear than participants wanted, so they simply didn't use it. Realtime streaming video was an impossibility until comparatively recently. All this meant that if you had, for example, a speech impediment, or a physical disability, these features of your identity could be elided from your internet self. The internet enabled people who didn't fit comfortably within society's norms, to find safe places to exist.[23]

However, while members of (and advocates for) particular groups have recognized the value of the internet in these ways, the general public has not. The pandemic has changed this. We are seeing the benefits of a robust digital network play out in real-time, and the risks of reliance on physical connectedness similarly. We are also, unfortunately, seeing the effects of inequitable access to digital technologies play out in ways that map to the above. Those in rural areas have less access to reliable, high-speed internet. The poor, wherever they live, are less likely to utilize reliable high-speed internet, even if it is available, as the price tag associated with it made it a luxury in normal times. The elderly, again, are less connected, less confident when connected, and utilize fewer of the benefits of connectivity, than the population at large.

So, I argue that we have a moral obligation to enable internet access for everyone. This obligation has been developing concurrently with the development of the internet. Given the ubiquity of online activity, and the importance of both access and the relevant capacities to use the internet for full engagement in modern society, it is no longer acceptable that some people are excluded from the online world. I don't think it matters particularly whether the obligation is framed as a human rights based obligation (although the case for doing so grows stronger as the internet becomes ever more important to the daily lives of the general population). However, whether framed as a human right or as a matter of best practice for governmental or social policy, the obligation would be on government and policy makers to assist people into internet access, and once they have access, to educate them on the benefits of internet use (social and instrumental) and enable them to access those benefits. A good illustration of the type of policy response that would meet this obligation is provided by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, which

[21] Valkenburg, P. M., & Peter, J. (2009). Social consequences of the Internet for adolescents: A decade of research. *Current directions in psychological science*, *18*(1), 1-5.

[22] Pendry, L. F., & Salvatore, J. (2015). Individual and social benefits of online discussion forums. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *50*, 211-220. 213.

[23] Duplaga, M., & Szulc, K. (2019). The Association of Internet Use with Wellbeing, Mental Health and Health Behaviours of Persons with Disabilities. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, *16*(18), 3252; Peterson-Besse, J. J., Knoll, J. E., & Horner-Johnson, W. (2019). Internet networks as a source of social support for women with mobility disabilities during pregnancy. *Disability and health journal*, *12*(4), 722-726.

aims to identify those school-aged students without access to the internet and to provide this for them, so as to mitigate the effects a lack of access would have on their educational experience.[24] Similar social programs for the elderly or disadvantaged would help to further reduce digital inequality.

This moral obligation did not arise because of the pandemic, but the pandemic has made it clearer, not least because the role which digital connectivity has played in the lives of the few, previously, it now plays for a great many people who have suddenly lost access to physical connectivity. It may not be possible to fix connectivity issues during this pandemic, but we should nevertheless consider how to do so, and attempt to do so, as even under optimal conditions (if/when we ever return to them), the benefits of connectivity will remain.

We must remember that having access to the internet is not enough to confer the benefits of digital connectivity. We saw how this dynamic played out in the preceding discussion of the digital divide, wherein the apparent equity in access rapidly diminishes along familiar lines as we ask not about access but about the skills individuals have and use online, and the aspects of digital life which they are part of. This means that while we cannot fulfil our moral obligation to the population without providing them internet access, we do not fulfil that obligation merely by providing them with access. We must also ensure that everyone is able to take advantage of the benefits the internet provides. As Reglitz notes, there are significant global barriers to such a shift, such as the extent of global poverty, and the consolidation of control over internet access in the hands of private corporations. There are also barriers such as illiteracy, which prevents people from engaging in digital spaces at all.[25] There are no quick solutions to these problems, but we might have some hope that the passage of time is diminishing their severity. By this I mean just that we can see a steady increase in the proportion of people who engage in all (informational, social and instrumental) aspects of online life over time. It seems reasonable to presume that people will not abandon these online behaviors once they have developed them (absent a digital equivalent of the current physical pandemic, at least). So, as all aspects of digital life become more ubiquitous, the number of people highly vulnerable to physical shocks such as this pandemic will decline.

Digital Resilience

The preceding discussion has considered a range of advantages accruing to the digitally connected in times of crisis. But can this be translated to a more general argument for the value of the internet? I think so, and for the following reason: A thorough grounding in online interactions increases the resilience displayed by our social connections in the face of adversity. This might seem obvious, even trivial, but it is an important consideration both in the specific circumstances we face dealing with COVID-19 and more generally, as part of an argument for the importance of the online world. In the specific instance, it means that those people who have cultivated substantial online networks are better placed to cope with physical distancing and isolation. In the general instance, it suggests that, once the technology exists for meaningful social interaction in online spaces, everyone has at least prudential reasons to utilize it.

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[24] Ministry of Education, New Zealand, https://www.education.govt.nz/school/digital-technology/your-schools-ict-network/home-internet-access-to-support-learning/ (Accessed 3 September 2020)

[25] Merten Reglitz – The Human right to Free internet Access *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 1-18. p12

One argument against moving our social interactions online is that doing so reduces well-being because it disrupts offline interaction.[26] Note that for the argument to work, online interaction has to be less valuable for well-being that offline interactions. Even if we were to grant the premise about the value of online interactions, we can during this pandemic reject the concern about disrupting offline interaction – it has already been disrupted. Right now, the move online is happening in the enforced absence of offline interaction. As such, it is correspondingly highly valuable, for without it we have nothing. Yet those who now have to build online networks from scratch, using systems they are unfamiliar with, are going to struggle to do so. Those in the best position to deal with the enforced absence of offline interaction are those who already had strong systems of online interaction in place. This generates an argument for the value of a symbiotic approach to online and offline interaction. Each makes the other stronger, as demonstrated during this type of unforeseen global crisis.

I take it for granted both that social connections are good things to have, and that they are strained when our normal means of reinforcing them are removed. In the context of the pandemic, many of the connections which are under strain are not intended or expected to be anything as grandiose as Aristotelian higher-order friendships. Rather, what is absent in our daily lives is exactly the normal, utilitarian and hedonistic friendships of the workplace, the family, and the broader group of one's friends. Such relationships are far more common than higher-order Aristotelian friendships, and are, day to day, more important to people's wellbeing. They comprise the vast majority of our relationships, so the abrupt removal of these social interactions breaks down the structure of people's days and disconnects them from society in ways that are deeply harmful – they generate social isolation.[27] While there is some controversy over whether higher-order friendships are possible online, all sides of that debate accept that the more common kinds of friendship can be formed, developed and sustained online.[28] As such, it is not controversial to claim that those who have developed such relationships online are better placed to weather the disruption of the pandemic than are those who have not. The enforced move to online interactions has demonstrated that social bonds formed in the physical world are resilient enough to continue in a completely online setting, at least for some time. The experience of many of us who have moved between countries for work, study, or other reasons since the development of the internet has been that online communication and engagement allows us to retain, for decades, bonds with people that we haven't seen physically in all that time. While for many of us, most of our bonds have been developed in the physical world, these bonds are strong enough (and the range of interactions offered by online communication is broad enough) that mere physical separation is insufficient to destroy them.

This crisis has demonstrated the value of online contact for maintaining friendships and associations. While it would be unfair to blame those who relied solely on physical world interactions for failing to account for the possibility of a global pandemic, they are now suffering for their choices, often in avoidable ways. My hobby group and my workmates have Discord servers, my beer drinking buddies have a

[26] Pendry, L. F., & Salvatore, J. (2015). Individual and social benefits of online discussion forums. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *50*, 211-220. 212; Nie, N. H., Hillygus, D. S., & Erbring, L. (2002). Internet use, interpersonal relations, and sociability. *The Internet in everyday life*, 215-243.

[27] Klinenberg, E. (2016). Social Isolation, Loneliness, and Living Alone: Identifying the Risks for Public Health. *American Journal of Public Health, 106(5),* 786-787.

[28] Munn, N. J. (2012). The reality of friendship within immersive virtual worlds. *Ethics and information technology*, *14*(1), 1-10; Kaliarnta, S. (2016). Using Aristotle's theory of friendship to classify online friendships: a critical counterview. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *18*(2), 65-79; Fröding, B., & Peterson, M. (2012). Why virtual friendship is no genuine friendship. *Ethics and Information Technology*, *14*(3), 201-207.

messenger group, even the local historical re-enactors are organized online. Not being able to meet in person did not need to exclude anyone from any of these collective endeavours. And yet for some, it has. In this environment, the value of the online is in the maintenance of existing physical connections. This results in the pandemic impacting different groups differentially, as those without access to, skills for, and practice with the internet (and therefore without these social connections through the pandemic) are primarily older and poorer than the median. In the US, further identifications can be seen along racial lines, with lower internet use amongst African American and Latinx citizens. Further, those who are used to forming social bonds online are more flexible with online resources. They are more able to take advantage of them now, if they already have the basic capacities in place.

Evangelizing for the digital world

While the benefits of being online during a global pandemic have rapidly become obvious, we ought not to overlook the benefits which accrue to those of us who are online in less interesting times. One possible future benefit of living through the pandemic is that the positive aspects of digital life will be more commonly recognized. Here, I suggest a non-exhaustive list of the advantages of online social interaction, as a counterpoint to the sadness of the current situation.

Many of the considerations which shape our social interactions in the physical world matter less online. For instance, age matters less. Absent voluntary self-disclosure, people online operate on social cues which are more a product of being embedded into a particular (digital) culture, than they are of any particular age. As such, fit with the prevailing practice of the relevant virtual community is privileged over age-cohort similarity in determining community. While there are still obvious cohort effects online (consider the usage demographics of TikTok[29] compared to Facebook[30], for example), in many contexts age cohorts intermingle in ways that don't happen offline. This intermingling has obvious benefits in terms of exposure to a heterogeneous range of ideas, perspectives, and experiences – all of which are less available to those whose physical interactions occur within a much more constrained range. Consider how often a sixteen year old has the opportunity to talk about current affairs with thirty year olds in a physical environment, compared to the number of opportunities they get to do so while playing video games or browsing Reddit. Obviously, these opportunities are not always utilized, nor used for good when they are used at all. But that they occur is more than can be said for the physical world.

Geography matters less online than in person. It still matters, simply because time zones and common sleeping practices globally mean that there are some locations in the physical world for which waking hours seldom overlap. As such, individuals who are in these locations seldom overlap. However, outside of this constraint, geography is meaningless (once you are) online. An excellent illustration of this is the abundance of online colloquia, reading groups and so on that have arisen after the curtailment of academic travel during the pandemic. Now, to take but one example, experimental philosophers from around the world can meet weekly to discuss articles as part of the 'XPhi Under Quarantine' series[31], or take part in a distributed fortnight long conference.[32] While these events could have been organized pre-

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[29] https://www.omnicoreagency.com/tiktok-statistics/
[30] https://www.omnicoreagency.com/facebook-statistics/
[31] https://www.axphi.org/xphi-under-quarantine
[32] https://www.axphi.org/corpus-week

pandemic, participants could not meet weekly in person, so the online version offers at least some clear advantages. As noted, time zones provide some problems, but the flexibility of working hours offered by working from home goes some way to mitigating this. I have been able to listen to fascinating talks online at seven in the morning, while organizing breakfast for my daughter, that I would never have been able to attend in person, not least because the talk was being given at three in the afternoon the previous day, in Washington, DC.

Culture matters less. We all have it, but we cannot, online, make the sort of basic assumptions about cultural familiarity that we commonly make in interpersonal interactions in the physical world. While it isn't clear that we ought to make these assumptions in the physical world, that we cannot do so online is clearly positive. We learn from exposure to other cultures, we learn that our culture is not globally dominant, we learn that others see as quirks or idiosyncrasies, things that we take to be core components of our identity. In a similar vein, race and ethnicity matter less. These are a matter for voluntary, rather than involuntary self-disclosure. Why is this important? It is harder to change the prejudices of someone who has decided before they know you, that you are not to be trusted, simply because of the color of your skin. However, if you come to know someone virtually, they will have the opportunity to decide whether they like you based on your self, not your skin. While it is still possible for someone to reject your friendship upon discovering your racial identity, and while this occurs among the intractably racist, the very fact of interaction with those whom you are antecedently afraid of reduces your fear of them.

As we discussed earlier, the internet has long provided safe spaces for those with at least some physical disabilities. Online spaces operate, essentially, as sufficiency-based environments. Once you pass the threshold for capacity to participate, physical attributes do not matter. Some physical impairments make this distinction clear. Paraplegia, for example, causes significant disadvantage in the physical world, due in no small part to the often-overlooked choices that have been made collectively by our societies in how to structure our physical environment. Online, however, paraplegia is irrelevant to full engagement. Of course, there are particular sub-environments where certain physical characteristics still matter, as for example in playing games where micromanagement or fast twitch reaction times are important, but for a wide range of common interactions, physical impairments or disadvantages are irrelevant.

Finally, we ought to consider the advantages offered by the increased frequency and quantity of interactions online. Again, these are easy to overlook when physical interaction is ubiquitous. It is easier to meet people online than in person, and you can meet with more people online than is possible physically. This means that juggling friend groups and coordinating timing online is, in many ways, easier than doing so in person (even when online interactions compete with in-person ones – when online interactions are the only interactions available, their ease is even greater). None of this is intended to provide reason to abandon physical interaction entirely. I am sure many of us look forward to the chance to return to it. But we ought not, when we regain our ability to interact physically, forget the good things that come from digital connection. Perhaps we can take a more positive view of online activity and use it as a positive supplement to face-to-face interaction.[33]

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[33] Pendry, L. F., & Salvatore, J. (2015). Individual and social benefits of online discussion forums. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *50*, 211-220, 212.

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Conclusion

There are multiple digital divides. There remains a division between those who have it and those who do not, but there are also divides between those with the relevant skills to utilize the internet and those without, and a divide between those who take advantage of the benefits the internet offers, and those who do not. The COVID-19 pandemic has made clear the pre-existing gap between the digitally connected and the digitally isolated, and it has shown us who the isolated are most likely to be. In this case, many of the most isolated, the elderly, are both most at risk from the virus itself, and most vulnerable to the loss of physical interaction and its enforced replacement with digital interaction. Whether through lack of access, lack of skill, or lack of desire, many people haven't engaged with the digital world and now find themselves in need of it.

While I don't deny the value in ensuring everyone has access to fast, reliable and affordable internet, even if we think of this provision as a moral obligation, fulfilling it will not and cannot exhaust our obligations regarding digital connectivity. Access alone is insufficient to overcome the current inequalities in digital engagement – we have to try to find ways to make people want to engage digitally, and to support them in doing so. We ought to do this for at least two reasons. One, directly linked to the current pandemic, is that digital connectivity provides us with important social resilience to shocks such as this, and thereby reduces the negative impact of physical isolation on our wellbeing. The second, more generally, is that there are many positive aspects to digital interaction which will continue to exist once the pandemic subsides, and these positives should not be overlooked.