

Hans Schnitzler

Empathy in times of digitisation

Recent figures from the Public Prosecutor's Office show that the number of legal cases for sedition, threats and public assaults has risen sharply in the past year. Obviously, this increase is related to the sharpening of antagonisms during the coronas crisis. What has received less attention is that this coarsening of society cannot be viewed separately from an important side effect of our online existence, namely: the creation of an almost unbridgeable empathy gap.

As the ease of digital interaction increases, it seems increasingly difficult to deal with the social frictions of the analogue world. Is it perhaps the case that the predominantly volatile and light relations of the online world make face-to-face situations, which can often be messy and rigid, more difficult and that, as a result, receptivity to the other's otherness is at stake? And that we thus become increasingly intolerant of a deviant perspective? In short, in data-saturated times, is the human capacity for empathy under pressure?

Indeed, more and more studies show that screen people are increasingly suffering from what is referred to in the literature as the empathy gap. According to Sherry Turkle, professor at the prestigious Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and also a clinical psychologist, this is partly because we are rapidly unlearning the art of conversation. Thanks to the presence of

laptops, smartphones and tablets, which literally come between us and our conversation partners or loved ones, we simply talk to each other less. This lack of contact not only makes the social animal that man is timid, it also undermines his ability to 'read' and 'understand' what moves his fellow man.

In her book *Reclaiming Conversation*, she opens with a chapter entitled 'The Empathy Diaries', which paints an absolutely disconcerting picture. For example, Turkle is consulted by a public school in Upstate New York, because the teachers there observe a disturbance in the friendship patterns of their students. According to the dean of that school, 12-year-olds are increasingly showing emotionally underdeveloped behaviour and excluding other children as eight-year-olds would. 'They don't seem to be able to put themselves in other children's shoes ... they don't develop the kind of relating that involves listening and learning how to look at and understand each other. Teachers cited by Turkle observe that students do not make eye contact and do not respond to body language. 'I am not convinced that they are interested in each other. It's as if they all show signs that belong to the Asperger spectrum,' concludes one of them.

Turkle's conclusion is that by taking the whole person out of the picture as a carrier of spoken information - their facial expression, posture and tone - crucial indicators

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needed for learning empathy skills are lost. The confrontation with the human being as an animated, sometimes somewhat erratic 3D reality is indispensable for the detection of one's own subjectivity and its frayed edges and the necessary condition for the development of something like empathy.

So-called filter bubbles, invisible walls of data that ensure that we mainly come into contact with like-minded people and that constantly confirm our pre-existing preferences, are a good example of a digital force that throws the empathic compass off balance. Those who constantly look into the echo chamber of their own right or desire lose the ability to appreciate or even tolerate other types of voices, divergent visions or desires.

Narrowing the empathy gap starts with the realisation that the screenification of life, in combination with online tracking, targeting and profiling, influences our feelings, behaviour and thinking. This realisation has also reached the European Commission. At the beginning of this year, it presented a constitution for the digital age with the central premise that technology should serve people and

not the other way around. Encouraging as it may be, anyone who wants to nurture their empathic capacities will have to engage in a form of digital hygiene. That means using privacy-friendly search engines and platforms and creating screen-free periods and spaces; at home, at work and in education. For there is much at stake, namely our human dignity.



About the author

Hans Schnitzler is philosopher, author, columnist and speaker. He is the author of 'Het digitale proletariaat' (2015) & 'Kleine filosofie van de digitale onthouding' (2017) at De Bezige Bij, columnist for Follow the Money, former columnist at de Volkskrant. His essays and columns are published in NRC, NRCNext, Trouw and more.

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