JPE

Together Again: The Value of Our Encounters Offline[1]

EMILY MCTERNAN
University College London, Department of Political Science/School of Public Policy

This article is a protest against the trend toward ever greater online contact at the cost of, or as a replacement for, in-person interaction. Increasingly, meetings and events are 'hybrid' or take place entirely online. Even when physically near others in shared spaces like streets, parks, and cafes, we are often glued to our screens. But I argue that we lose something of value when online contact comes to dominate and crowds out in-person interaction. Our offline interactions are valuable in ways that, for the most part, our online encounters are not.

I begin by defending the social value of our encounters with one another, drawing from literature in democratic theory, architecture, and urban theory. I then tackle the strongest argument in favor of online forms of encounter, on the grounds that they are a less costly and more inclusive alternative to their offline equivalents. I argue that enabling online participation is both an insufficient amendment to an ableist and patriarchal society and a far from all-purpose one. The article then makes the case for putting down our screens, going in-person to meetings and events, and refusing to distract ourselves with our virtual lives when in parks, public squares, cafes, and the like. First, I argue that physical encounters are distinct in the proximity that they force and the subtlety of gesture they permit. Second, I argue that, by contrast to in-person encounters, online encounters permit only an attenuated form of the connection that we need with fellow citizens. Indeed, with the rise of AI-generated content, online platforms may fail to offer any connection to another human at all. Third, I draw attention to the ways in which the commercial nature of these online platforms threatens to subvert our online encounters far more systematically than the selling-off of public spaces that has often troubled democratic theorists.

1. With thanks to Chris Nathan and two anonymous referees for their constructive and insightful comments. This paper also benefitted from a discussion of online encounters at the Philosophy Senior Seminar, University of Glasgow.

Contact: Emily McTernan <e.mcternan@ucl.ac.uk>
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7190-3034

Keywords: encounters, interaction, social media, association, democracy, interactional ethics

> At a café a block from my home, almost everyone is on a computer or a smartphone as they drink their coffee. These people are not my friends, yet somehow I miss their presence.
>
> —Tuckle, 2011: 156

> At the start of Covid, the world rapidly moved online. . . . Many people predicted this would be a permanent acceleration that would continue even after the pandemic ended. I did too.
>
> —Mark Zuckerberg's layoff message to Meta employees, https://about.fb.com/news/2022/11/mark-zuckerberg-layoff-message-to-employees/

The pandemic caused a widespread shift to associating online, including for work meetings, events, and catching up with friends and family. Now much of our associational lives have returned to in-person, physical events. Many students don't want to be taught online, even if some academics enjoyed the ease of prerecorded lectures. Bosses—and some employees—desire a return to the office instead of full-time working from home. Terms like 'zoom fatigue' are common parlance, capturing the sense some of us have of having had quite enough of interacting online. Some popular social media platforms, like Facebook or Instagram, appear to be increasingly the preserve of older generations. It might even be argued that newer platforms like TikTok don't serve quite the same functions, being less about socializing online or keeping up with old friends and more about viewing new content.

Still, some think that moving our social lives online is our future, at least outside of our intimate and close relationships. In one vision, what we have seen is only the start of what is to come—namely, a technological transformation of how we encounter each other with ever more of our interactions taking place virtually or mediated through technology. Our pandemic experience demonstrated the breadth of the possibilities of meeting and associating with others, virtually. Further, despite the shift back to in-person events, many of us engage in some online or virtual social life—for instance, by using social media to keep in touch, participating in a steady stream of WhatsApp messages, or creating avatars in online games.

This is an article about what can be lost by going online and what might be gained by staying, or returning, to being together offline much of the time. In particular, I raise a set of objections to moving too many of our casual

interactions online and about our encounters with others being crowded out by the pull of technologies like phones and computers. This article by no means proposes the abolition of online association: it can be put to good use and many find it valuable. At times, online contact can even promote greater inclusion, although I'll argue this argument doesn't have the reach nor force that one might assume. Still, the trend toward ever greater online association is at a moment of potential resistance, or even retreat, post pandemic. It is not our inevitable fate. At the least, then, we should be clear about what we risk in doing most things online and what to weigh against the many benefits of online association. The question of this article, then, is ought we welcome the trend toward ever greater online contact often at the cost of, or as a replacement for, in-person interaction? What might be lost in a society where the demands of online contact come to dominate, one where people are on screens in cafes and parks, and one where education, meetings, and events all take place online?

I'll begin in section 1 by sketching the central focus of this paper, of our encounters, and why they are significant, drawing from literature in democratic theory, architecture, and urban theory. In section 2, I consider the strongest argument in favor of online forms of encounter. On the face of it, online forums and platforms look like a less costly, readily available, and—crucially—more inclusive alternative to their offline equivalents. However, I argue that the inclusivity argument in favor of life online is not as strong as it might appear. Enabling online participation is both an insufficient amendment to an ableist and patriarchal society and a far from an all-purpose one.

In the second half of the article, I argue that online encounters lack much of the value of our encounters offline. I offer three arguments, then, for why we should pause rather than embrace moving our social contact online. The first is based on the distinctiveness of physical encounters, both owing to the subtle gestures that we can carry out in person but cannot online, and to the fact that our physical proximity results in a friction that has to be worked through where online proximity does not. Second, I suggest that by contrast to in-person encounters, our online encounters permit a weak and attenuated form of connection, one lacking the kind of commitment found offline, especially among cocitizens. Indeed, with the rise of AI-generated content, online platforms may fail to offer any connection to another human at all. Third, I draw attention to the commercial nature of these technologies and argue that we ought not overlook online platforms' core commercial aims and the ways in which this may subvert our encounters. Thus, I argue that there are good reasons to resist a replacement of offline contact with that online, insofar as our encounters with one another have important social benefits.

1. The Social Value of Encounters

Establishing that something is lost in our intimate relations if they were to move to being mostly online is straightforward. We may be able to sustain our intimate relations for a time virtually but most of us would not—and recently, during the pandemic, did not—welcome online forms of communication replacing offline contact with those to whom we are close.[2] The connection to intimates that our virtual lives permit looks attenuated or diminished compared to that in real life, in person. So, this article's focus is, instead, on the harder cases for a defense of a life offline: namely, our casual acquaintances and fleeting contacts with others. These are, as I'll shortly detail, significant. And on the face of it, the internet *appears* to give us a rich source of such interactions. Indeed, the internet appears to drastically increase this particular aspect of our social lives where we associate with others in informal, casual, and unplanned ways. However, I will offer reasons to hesitate before embracing online social lives, even for this: here, too, what we find online is very often a diminished, less valuable form.

I begin with a description of our acquaintances and fleeting contacts, which I'll label our 'encounters'.[3] To illustrate, these include like-minded citizens chatting in a pub or people in a neighborhood who recognize one another enough to nod or say hello or merely regard as a familiar face; and the weak connections between coffee seller or corner-shop owner and their regular customers. I also include our looser acquaintances or alliances, such as those among not-so-close colleagues at work, or with fellow union members that we meet on picket lines, or those who attend the same church service. I count among our encounters, then, the happenstance meetings between people participating in the same formal organization or association: the meetings that the existence of the organization enables, such as the people that we encounter while carrying out some joint activity. The relation of interest here is not that of membership (a formalized relation) but, rather, the happening to meet with one another and the striking up of an acquaintance—for instance, when we chat in the audience while waiting for a talk to start or at the water cooler at work.

2. Exemplified in the reaction to visitor bans and the provision of technologically mediated alternatives, like video chats on iPads, see McTernan (2023a).

3. I draw for this description on McTernan (2024). Another important observation, with thanks to a referee, is that the particular examples that follow likely reveal the places I've lived or stayed for extended periods (namely, London, Canberra, Berlin, Cambridge, and a couple of other small British towns). Indeed, the work I draw on in what follows from architecture and urban theory, and from sociology, is even more limited in its range, often to the United States. There is far more cultural variation in places of encounter and in what social contact looks like than my examples convey. Still, I suggest that the importance of connection and physical presence, which I later defend, holds across many varying contexts.

Encounters can be fleeting and one-offs, but often we will encounter the same people over and over if our lives align and for the time that they happen to do so: the commuter who tends to catch the same train, the parent who is often as late to the school gate as you, or the older neighbor who takes a stroll as you return home. Clearly, the line between repeated encounters and other kinds of associations is not sharp. At some point the person we repeatedly encounter may become a person we meet on purpose and with greater commitment, say as a friend or a lover.

In the aftermath of the pandemic, a helpful way to pick out these connections is that they are the people that one wouldn't ever think to call or even have the contact details for, let alone deliberately arrange to meet up with. Their presence in one's life might have seemed ephemeral or insignificant and yet their absence from one's life was one of the things that made the experience of lockdown so isolating for some. The idea that we lost something in losing these casual contacts will, I hope, ring true to the reader.[4]

To see what might be lost by moving our encounters online, we first need to get a sense of their general value. Loose bonds and fleeting encounters are valuable to us as individuals: they can give us entertainment, joy, and a sense of possibility (Young 1990; McTernan 2024). They can also, as Kimberlee Brownlee notes, help to alleviate loneliness (Brownlee 2020). But the interest of this article is how encounters may be of value for us *collectively*: valuable for society and for democracy. Below I offer a sketch of the social benefits that have been claimed for our positive interactions and weak bonds. These cohere around the idea that such connections promote a sense of community, trust, and social cohesion.

A running theme among urban theorists is that positive encounters with our fellow citizens promote social cohesion and social trust, which I return to examine in the argument to come. In particular, the ways in which we design our shared spaces such as streets, parks, and public squares will affect these encounters and how they contribute to shaping our sense of community and society (Jacobs 1961; Wood et al. 2023; Lund 2002). Jane Jacobs, for instance, defends the importance of our encounters on busy and mixed-use city streets—with workplaces, businesses, and residential properties—for our sense of safety and social trust, since we feel there are 'eyes on the street' (Jacobs 1961). We gain a sense of our fellow citizens. This work has been picked up by democratic theorists who defend the importance of our shared public spaces in promoting democratic values and sentiments. In such spaces, they argue, we form our sense of the public

4. For some popular support see Moorehead (2020). The importance of casual contacts is supported by some empirical evidence. See Granovetter (1973).

with whom we share our society, we encounter those with different views, and we perform political acts like protest in ways visible to our fellow citizens.[5]

Our weak ties and loose bonds can also contribute toward shaping our democratic values and civic virtues. This is a more familiar thought in consideration of formal and lasting associations, but it also applies to our encounters with our fellow citizens. In particular, we practice cooperation when we live alongside others who share some of our ends yet have other competing ends. Take people sharing a park who negotiate how to use that space together or neighbors disagreeing over how to organize parking or where to leave bikes. In this process, we rub along together, overcoming competing interests, and learn to be good neighbors despite competing over resources. Democratic negotiation and cooperation are practiced then, and even formed, in many of these encounters where we share common space and make implicit or explicit agreements about how to do so. This looks like good practice for what is required from us in a democracy.

Against this, one might have a vision of democratic virtues as being for the big stuff: concerning our relation to the state, such as citizens being law-abiding, or concerning the exercise of basic liberties, such as tolerance toward our fellow citizens such that all can exercise their freedom of religion. However, there is more to a thriving democracy than this. Many of the problems we need to collectively solve, to find ways of living together, of cooperating and tolerating each other's competing aims, are the small issues of local life: from cycle parks and rubbish collections to organizing for local or national goals. The little makes the large: there is more to a democracy than just going to the polls once every five years to elect representatives.

2. Life Online and Its Apparent Promise

The discussion above reveals the assumed *physicality* of these claims about the importance of encounters. The existing discussion focuses on features of our physical spaces, like mixed-use neighborhoods, with shops and housing, on streets that are friendly to pedestrians, or on the importance of particular public or adjacent spaces, like public parks or balconies.[6] You might think this radically out of date. Now that we have the internet, you might think that we don't need to worry much about the way in which we design our city streets or public squares. Nor do we need to worry about the loss of public spaces to private corporations or the way that grocery apps might threaten local stores and corner

5. On forming our sense of a public, see Zacka (2020). On different views, see Sunstein (2009). on politics and public spaces, see Parkinson (2012),

6. On streets, see, for instance, Jacobs (1961); on balconies, see Zacka (2020); on public spaces, see Parkinson (2012).

shops, since we have online replacements. Some regard platforms like Twitter as akin to a new public square.[7]

Not only that, but online contact has some obvious and important attractions. For a start, it promises a cheaper and less burdensome means through which to encounter others. There are no travel costs nor lost time in getting to the meet-up point—indeed, you don't even need to get properly dressed. Online contact also promises a dramatic increase in the range of people with whom we can be in contact. No longer will geographical proximity determine with whom we associate. Online, we can encounter anyone, from anywhere, discussing things in an online forum, finding those with shared interests in hobby-related groups or reading others' thoughts about various issues. Can't all this online contact give us a sense of connection and a sense of a public with whom we share a society too? So, too, online we also might find a place for the practice of prosaic civic virtues, of getting along and cooperating to achieve small, shared goals.

Still more important is the fact that our online encounters appear significantly more inclusive than many offline spaces. In-person meetups present a multitude of barriers to participation; for example, owing to a lack of childcare, the physical inaccessibility of spaces where we tend to make connections in person, or the costs of travel. There is thus a substantial advantage of online spaces in terms of access for those with mobility restrictions, those with caring responsibilities, and those who otherwise find online spaces present fewer barriers. This increased inclusivity—for some—of online contact needs to be considered as we return to offices and in-person meetings and conferences.

None of the arguments to follow suggest the abolition of spaces to encounter others online. So, too, people's needs and often rights to access education, social spaces, and employment substantially outweigh the losses of the kinds I will shortly describe. One cannot point to the value of our in-person meets of the kind that I describe as a reason to ignore, say, employee's need for reasonable adjustments: the two kinds of reason are not commensurable in that way. Still, the appeal to accessibility isn't a knockdown case against contemplating what we may lose by moving things online for two reasons. One is that merely providing online access is a profoundly inadequate answer to, or solution for, the exclusionary construction of a society's shared spaces or a workplace or educational setting's failure to make reasonable adjustments to enable access. A society falls far, far short of what is required if a section of its population is limited to online access. Far more is required of us to transform our shared spaces, workplaces, and educational settings to accommodate all.

The second is that we ought to be cautious about embracing life online as an *all-purpose* answer to all access and inclusivity requirements. There are a range

7. For instance, describing them as 'public fora', see Kramer (2021).

of ways in which online spaces are often not inclusive or accessible to all. Some people will find online spaces harder to navigate, for instance, including those with vision impairments—especially where pictures are used without descriptions. Many online spaces are characterized by kinds of communication that exclude and alienate certain groups. Here, one might think of women's experiences receiving unsolicited sexual advances or images or violent threats when they engage in online discussion. As one last example, there is some evidence that those with ADHD risk internet addiction (e.g., Wang et al. 2017). Moving more of a life on screen, then, may not be to the advantage of all.

As to caring duties, especially for young children, the pandemic and its significant increase in life being lived online, including working from home and socializing online, was not generally found to be a step forward in gender equality or supporting women's achievement at work, even when the schools were open (Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021; Derndorfer et al. 2021). Insofar as the burdens of the home disproportionately fall on women, moving work to home may not have the liberating effect that we might hope for. That worry gains particular strength where others continue to go in, in person, and so gain the various advantages of being seen, known, and thought of for opportunities. Again, then, I think we've reason to hesitate before seeing life online as a panacea. Stuck in the juggle of caring and work, being able to do the laundry and cooking, and additional collects around one's work can be a benefit. But it isn't likely a boost to productivity, at least not for deep or focused work, and it will hinder careers in jobs where it is important to make connections in order to progress. Nor will such a pattern of work from home be likely to improve the balance of labor in the home.

To say anything hesitant about online spaces, as I will, faces one more challenge—this time from the diversity of our online spaces. We use a wide variety of online spaces to encounter one another, and people use these platforms in varying ways. These include, as a small sample, short, written, public interactions, often between strangers on Twitter; posting renovation photos and videos on Instagram; producing short videos for TikTok; using the various video or text chat platforms, usually with existing contacts, like Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams; and online gaming. That makes it near inevitable that there will be counter-examples to any claim made about what is valuable offline as opposed to on.

Still, despite the variety in, and the advantages of, online interaction, the remainder of this article is devoted to the downsides. The arguments I make below consider some tendencies in how we interact using these technologies and in the ways in which these technologies encourage us to interact. While exceptions are possible, I propose that we have reason to worry about the general tendencies of our lives together online and what many of the spaces in which we encounter one another are like. Technological optimists could read the below

as a set of principles by which to redesign online platforms, insofar as we want them to be valuable spaces for our encounters and for encounters with value.

3. What Is Missing I: Physical Presence

There is one crucial assumption that underlies the three reasons to hesitate that I'll offer in what follows: namely, that our online lives tend to crowd out our encounters offline. There are two ways in which this crowding-out occurs. One is that we spend time browsing the internet on our devices that we'd otherwise spend in ways that would bring us into contact with others. There are some elements of direct replacement: we order things online rather than going to the shops, we meet on zoom rather than meeting in person, and we work from home rather than commuting to the office and walking the city streets. There is wider automation replacing human interaction too, from chatbots for customer service to grocery checkouts becoming self-service rather than using cashiers.[8] But there is also an indirect replacement as online ways of occupying our time crowd out the time we'd otherwise have for encountering others.

The other way in which the crowding-out occurs is through the ways in which we use screens while in public or shared spaces. This happens as the opening quote from Sherry Turkle describes, that our screens distract us from actually encountering others as we move around shared spaces or sit in cafes, bars, trains, and the like. We can be occupied with our online lives at the expense of encounters offline, even when we are in public and shared spaces rather than being alone at home.

Democratic theorists have been suspicious of trading in-person encounters for those online and about the growth of the use of technologies in our leisure time. Cass Sunstein, for instance, worries that we will end up in echo chambers online, where we don't get exposed to alternative views and information in the ways that we do offline.[9] John Parkinson insists on the importance of physical public spaces for political performance and politics (Parkinson 2012). Or consider Robert Putnam's famous work on bowling alone. At the cusp of the internet era, he writes of his worries about the 'technological transformation of leisure', such as TV, as

> radically 'privatizing' or 'individualizing' our use of leisure time and thus disrupting many opportunities for social-capital formation. . . .

8. With thanks to a referee for this apt observation on the broader trend.

9. Sunstein's argument may not be conclusive: radio stations, too, enabled polarization. Still, my concern stands. My worry is about the amount of time we end up online and the reduction in the time spent engaging with those we'd otherwise encounter in real life. See Sunstein (2009).

> Television has made our communities (or, rather, what we experience as our communities) wider and shallower. In the language of economics, electronic technology enables individual tastes to be satisfied more fully, but at the cost of the positive social externalities associated with more primitive forms of entertainment. (Putnam, 2000)

How much worse the internet is, we might think, in terms of the separation that it permits from our fellow citizens *even* when we inhabit the same spaces, where we become absorbed by our screens.

Why exactly, though, do our encounters tend to need to be *physical*—rather than virtual—to be valuable? Even if we displace in-person encounters in favor of encountering people online, can't those online encounters be equally valuable—assuming that we avoid echo chambers and still have some public spaces for political protest? As a first response, there appears to be something distinctive about our offline encounters, in that something about being physically proximate to someone is crucial if encounters are to build social trust and social cohesion.

In particular, some crucial part of the nature of encounters is found in small gestures and microexpressions that cannot easily be performed in online forums. Erving Goffman, a sociologist of the minutiae of our social encounters and their importance, describes the importance of 'civil inattention' and how it is expressed through small gestures. So, to give one example, take the way we offer a *brief* moment of eye contact with strangers on the city street or subway or tube carriage: we make eye contact but then, crucially, look away after a quick moment. In so doing we convey our acknowledgment of another but also the fact that we will abide by the norms of not intruding and not directing too much of our attention to another. In so doing, we act so as to preserve the social order that lets us rub along together, and we reassure the other that we are not dangerous to them. These sorts of micro-gestures as we encounter our fellow citizens cumulatively underpin our trust in the social order and one another (Goffman 1963). It is hard to imagine how this sort of micro-moment of reassurance, of attending to the other, could take place in our online lives together, at least on the kinds of fora to which we currently have access.

It could be said that these subtle physical gestures might, one day, take place online. For instance, someday perhaps there will be widespread use of virtual reality, where we meet as if in person. Maybe that will trick our minds and bodies into thinking that we have real contact and maybe it will be equally able to convey the micro-gestures and expressions. Since there is no such technology, however, we don't currently have this lifelike online contact that might—if we are lucky—trick us into thinking it physically real. There is a tendency among the technological optimists to ask us to compare what we already have, offline,

to possible, idealized future technologies. But when thinking about what we might lose by moving too much online, we'd do better to compare our actual physical lives and our actual online lives.

There is another crucial reason that the physicality of our offline lives has significance—namely, that physical proximity produces a friction to our interactions with others, and a friction that it is not easy to evade. One problem with the internet is it permits us to switch off, to find a new space, to block and remove at the drop of a hat: this is one of the reasons that Sunstein is concerned about echo chambers in terms of viewpoint. One witnesses the ever-increasing fractures of groups by particular interest or particular viewpoint.

By contrast, when in physical proximity in streets and parks and balconies, we need to get along together in a minimal sense. That isn't to say that we need to become close: nearly always, we remain strangers or at best mere acquaintances. But the values of our loose bonds and casual encounters may come, in part, from that friction and the lack of ease. Above I highlighted that one of the democratic benefits of association is the fact that one needs to rub along with others who differ from oneself and yet pursue some shared end together. But we aren't forced to tolerate or rub along together online in the same ways, because we tend to find very exclusive interest groups online (with less awareness of the other facts about a person). Online, too, we can fragment so very easily into subgroups, throwing out those who deviate from us in even the smallest of ways. That dynamic is less likely to emerge in person both because our connections tend to be deeper, and so ending them is more costly, but also because it is substantially harder to find like-minded folks, at least for more niche beliefs. As a result, to jettison others for small infractions of one's shared beliefs is less appealing and not so cost-free.

So, the lack of physical presence undermines the ability to build trust, especially through micro-gestures, and makes fragmentation and blocking of others too easy. Still, one might object, online spaces provide some of the democratic goods of encountering others despite these issues. In particular, first, online spaces let us organize around common ends and engage in democratic negotiation and cooperation. I might, for instance, engage in negotiating the terms of engagement on some public forum. Yet this idea of active formation and negotiation of community has less force in the current version of the internet than it had in the early start-up days. The majority, now, are interacting on structured platforms with settled rules, under the control of a company, and not experimenting with new forms of interaction and rules of encounter in setting up their own platforms, with some exceptions. Second, online forums have been used to organize real-life protests: a central part of political and democratic life.[10] Again,

10. For one discussion of the dynamics, see Tufekci (2017).

and to both, though, my claim is not that online spaces have no value but that they have a diminished value—that there are ways in which offline encounters are valuable that online encounters strongly tend not to be. While I concede the role of social media in some recent social movements, I still hold that what we get online is an attenuated, diminished version of what we get from encountering fellow citizens in real life for the reasons given so far, of weaker ties of social trust and exclusion, and for the reasons that now follow.

4. What Is Missing II: Connection

The second reason for hesitation about life online is the presence of apparent connection but without any commitment or true connection. First, one apparent benefit of online spaces is that they permit contact with anyone from anywhere. But that has some obvious disadvantages from the point of view of cultivating democratic sentiments, like a sense of social cohesion and trust. The global reach of these technologies mean that we often lack any other connections to those we encounter online, such as living in the same state. By contrast, it is significant that very often our physical or in-person encounters tend to be with one's neighbors or fellow citizens: it is precisely that which lets them play a role in forming our sense of a public, of the people with whom we share a society. Online encounters with far-away strangers won't build that sense of a public and of a shared society.

Second, there is reason to worry about the nature of the connection that we form online. Offline, we very often feel, over time, that we end up with duties toward, or at least some reason to do things for, others that we repeatedly encounter or with whom we form loose ties. So, we feel ourselves duty-bound to continue to talk to the neighbor we've begun to chat to each time we leave the house, and we feel that we ought to offer small bits of aid and assistance to those with whom we've struck up various forms of loose and weak associations or connections. Indeed, one reason for the importance of our (negative) freedom of association, of our right not to associate, is precisely the ways in which forming ties, even early on, creates, for most, a feeling of being bound and restricted in these ways. It lies beyond the scope of this paper to determine which of these emerging feelings of obligation are, in fact, genuinely duties.[11] Still, regardless of their moral standing, these emerging feelings of obligation create social ties and positive social benefits. One of the reasons that Jane Jacobs and those following her think that the busy urban street is such an important space has to do with the loose kinds of connections that we strike up, making life safer. The idea is that

11. See Brownlee (2020) for one discussion.

the eyes on the street look out for one another, the corner-shop owner knows the customers' names, and so on. From that comes the beginning of commitment to one another and an emerging sense of social trust.

Online, it is far from clear that such ties and binds emerge. Turkle describes a particular kind of failure of connection in our online lives: "Networked we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone. And there is the risk that we come to see others as objects to be accessed—and only for the parts we find useful, comforting, or amusing" (Turkle 2011: 154).[12] She describes this as seeming, at first, 'thin gruel' before we accustom ourselves, thanks to the sheer convenience of not having to be in touch with others (Turkle 2011: 160). There is a convenience here—I am not, it seems, bound in the same web of felt commitment and obligation as I am offline. We can just leave the group and no longer engage with the 'community' that we've made online. A common experience of online groups is that very often once-active members will disappear or go silent with no explanation. But there is also a loss, too, in the absence of that connection and felt obligation that we find offline.

Some may think that I underestimate the strength and importance of our online lives. Indeed, Patrick Stokes, addressing our post-death digital identities, describes our 'digital flesh': the way that, through engagement online, we gain what he describes as 'embodiment' (Stokes 2021). So, am I wrong to think of our online communities as so fleeting and insubstantial? To reply, while our online presence has complicated our grief and memory rituals—where people continue to post on dead people's social media profiles and where those we have lost pop up on our devices unexpectedly—the way the grieving respond to these sometimes cruel reminders doesn't show that our online 'selves' are embodied nor genuinely connected to others. Our behaviors toward the real, living people are starkly different. Along with the propensity to just vanish coupled with the way we treat others online that I've described above, one could add here that the very common online—and much rarer offline—presentations are entirely fictional selves. You might think that you are interacting with a school girl in Nebraska when you are really interacting with a middle-aged man in Scotland.

It might be objected, still, that some find their friends online, that from online discussions real friendships and romances offline have emerged. So, too, some start funding campaigns online and are overwhelmed by the generosity of strangers. Sometimes, then, connection and emerging commitment do seem to result from life online. Further, it is possible to find online spaces where it is precisely those who live geographically near one another who interact: neighborhood

12. See, also, on distance and issues of connection and estrangement online in cases of conflict McTernan (2023b).

Facebook groups are a common phenomenon and so too WhatsApp groups. In these spaces people clearly strike up conversations with proximate citizens and not random strangers.

To respond, I return here to the point made earlier, that life online has many forms. Some of it may resemble some of the advantages of a life lived offline: it can be a place where we meet those who we then encounter offline; it can be a space where we converse with those we already know or those we live near. These may well be the desirable forms of life online to be sustained. But that doesn't cover all, and I suspect not most nor many, of our lives online.

As the third piece of the case for concern over the connections we make online, and regardless of these positive moments, this article has been written at the very beginning of what might be a revolution of our online spaces—namely, the increasing amount of AI-generated content. When I see posts on social media, when I Google something, I may not be seeing anything that has even been written by a *person*. There may be no connection to be had, not even a loose and fragile one, with any human mind at all. We might be at a turning point where the sheer amount of AI-generated content will render many online platforms still more alienating and still further from being spaces of connection with (actual) others. It will depend on the algorithms and how platforms choose (or can) deal with this content, if any space for connection is to remain at all—even that attenuated, commitment-free connection that I think, along with Turkle, is what tends to result from our online lives.

5. What Is Present: The Profit Motive

The last reason for hesitation about moving life online, even for our encounters, has to do with the *nature* of online spaces. Offline, those thinking about space and democracy are deeply concerned about the encroachment of businesses on public spaces and the privatization of public spaces. Some of our previously public spaces, like parks or squares, end up in the hands of private owners—some in exchange for their building more housing. The public are still permitted to access these spaces and yet the perception is that these spaces are thereby compromised as locations for valuable encounters. Certain people will be less likely to access these spaces than others. For instance, the faux-public squares of cities are often patrolled by private security guards and become unwelcoming for young people hanging out in groups, especially those from racialized or minority groups. Others observe that our access to these faux-public spaces becomes conditional on our spending money: these become spaces where businesses make money, where we have to pay to sit at cafes and restaurants rather than on public benches. It is often conditional, too, on our not using these spaces

for protest and political action, which are some of the most important uses of public space.[13]

Think, then, of online spaces. Social media platforms are not a free-for-all public sphere. By in large, they are monetized platforms, run by companies for profit. The worries of the democratic theorists and philosophers about the gradual encroachment of private businesses on public spaces would thus seem dramatically amplified when it comes to life online: it is all private, and it is all for profit. Worse than the security guard and the exchange of the park bench for the expensive cafe table, we now have platforms with algorithms that govern who sees what, and these platforms are filled with adverts.

A popular issue in discussions of the ethics of social media has been that of free speech and content moderation. There, too, one sees discussions of whether social media platforms count as public spaces or 'public fora'. Some might find the outsized role of companies like Meta or X in shaping our discourse troubling. Some object to the apparent intrusion on our free speech that occurs where these private companies moderate what people can say while others worry about the misinformation that is spread on these platforms and the harms that speech online can do. But this isn't an article about free speech but, rather, a kind of association. Considering our association and democratic values, another worry arises about these companies, beyond their control over speech—namely, that they monetize our attempts at human connection, whether with acquaintances, friends, or strangers, and they shape our associations and encounters in accordance with their corporate, financial interests. Yet these are the very worries that drive the objections to small infringements by businesses on our public spaces.

To conclude, the purpose of this article has been to articulate some reasons for hesitation about having too many of our encounters online: reasons to be weighed against the many benefits of our online forms of connection with others. First, I propose that the isolation of having much of one's human contact be online is not the best answer—and not an all-purpose solution—to the ableist and patriarchal construction of our societies. We owe our fellow citizens a better solution to the inaccessibility and lack of inclusivity of our lives offline than having some restricted to participating virtually. Second, I offered three reasons to put down the screen and, instead, walk the streets or sit on the park bench, in a public square, or in a cafe. These are the kinds of spaces where we can encounter those with whom we are in a society as opposed to when we engage with the

13. For a wide-ranging discussion of work on privatizing public space, see, for instance, Bodnar (2015). For a summary of key complaints and an assessment, see Carmona (2015). For one detailed discussion, see Loukaitou-Sideris (1993). On politics and public spaces, see Parkinson (2012).

disembodied, disconnected, and, increasingly, perhaps not even human voices on the internet.

References

Bodnar, J. 2015. 'Reclaiming Public Space', *Urban Studies*, 52.12, pp. 2090–2104

Brownlee, Kimberlee. 2020. *Being Sure of Each Other: An Essay on Social Rights and Freedoms* (Oxford University Press)

Carmona, M. 2015. 'Re-Theorising Contemporary Public Space: A New Narrative and a New Normative', *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability*, 8.4, pp. 373–405

Derndorfer, J., et al. 2021. "Home, Sweet Home? The Impact of Working from Home on the Division of Unpaid Work During the COVID-19 Lockdown" *PloS One*, 16.11

Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Behavior in Public Places: Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (Free Press)

Granovetter, Mark S. 1973. 'The Strength of Weak Ties', *American Journal of Sociology*, 78, pp. 1360–1380

Jacobs, Jane. 1961. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (Random House)

Kramer, Matthew. 2021. *Freedom of Expression as Self-Restraint* (Oxford University Press)

Loukaitou-Sideris, A. 1993. "Privatisation of Public Open Space: The Los Angeles Experience", *Town Planning Review*, 64.2

Lund, Hollie. 2002. 'Pedestrian Environments and Sense of Community', *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 21.3, pp. 301–312

McTernan, Emily. 2023a. 'Against Visitor Bans: Freedom of Association, COVID-19, and the Hospital Ward', *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 49.4, pp. 288–291

McTernan, Emily. 2023b. *On Taking Offence* (Oxford University Press)

McTernan, Emily. 2024. 'Freedom, Spontaneity, and Our Encounters', *Political Philosophy*, 1.2, doi:10.16995/pp.16864

Moorehead, Joanna. 2020. Why casual chats with strangers are the thing many of us miss the most. *The Guardian*, 23 May https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/23/why-casual-chats-with-strangers-are-the-thing-many-of-us-miss-the-most-coronavirus [accessed July 29, 2025]

Parkinson, John R. 2012. *Democracy and Public Space* (Oxford University Press)

Putnam, R. D. 2000. 'Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital', in *Culture and Politics: A Reader* (Palgrave Macmillan)

Stokes, Patrick 2021. *Digital Souls: A Philosophy of Online Death* (Bloomsbury)

Sunstein, Cass R. 2009. *Republic.com 2.0* (Princeton University Press)

Tufekci, Zeynep. 2017. *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Yale University Press)

Turkle, Sherry. 2011. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (Basic Books)

Wang, B. Q., et al. 2017. 'The Association Between Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder and Internet Addiction: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis', *BMC Psychiatry*, 17, pp. 1–12

Wood, Lisa, Billie Giles-Corti, and Max Bulsara. 2012. 'Streets Apart: Does Social Capital Vary with Neighbourhood Design?' *Urban Studies Research*

Yildirim, T. M., and H. Eslen-Ziya. 2021. 'The Differential Impact of COVID-19 on the Work Conditions of Women and Men Academics During the Lockdown', *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28, 243–249

Young, Iris Marion. 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press)

Zacka, Bernardo. 2020. 'What's in a Balcony? The In-Between as Public Good', in *Political Theory and Architecture*, ed. by Duncan Bell and Bernardo Zacka (Bloomsbury Academic)