The Technological World: Has Psychotherapy Caught up?

John C. Woodcock Ph.D.

Virtual Therapies! This was the theme for The CAPA Quarterly: Issue three 2011. In reading the various articles devoted to this theme, it became clear to me that psychotherapists today have embraced technology, even with the inevitable glitches that come from using the hardware (losing connections, privacy and boundary issues, confidentiality and texting and so on). These are indeed serious issues for the therapist who goes on line today, and the articles presented in the CQ were well rounded, balanced, and helpful.

The articles also represent a prevailing attitude towards technology that I think lies largely unexamined within the field of psychotherapy. This is the almost universal attitude today that technology is a useful means by which we can advance the theories and methods of psychotherapy. I want to examine this attitude, unpack it and see what we uncover by doing so. In advance of my discussion I want to assure the reader I am not a modern Luddite arguing for a return to former times. What a waste of ink that would be! There is no stopping this juggernaut that we call our technological civilisation. What I will be arguing for is the importance of stepping up and comprehending, in terms of our profession, these incredible, irreversible changes going on today.

The first thing to note is that psychotherapy came into existence well before technology took hold of our civilisation, as it has today. Any healing practice at all springs from the soil of the culture whose individuals need healing. This includes the reality in which everyone is embedded, as expressed by the culture. I’ll give an example. The Asclepian temples of ancient Greece show evidence that the sick person could be healed by a dream in which a snake (the animal form of Asclepius) bites the injured limb. This form of healing is only possible for a culture in which reality is very different from our own. The very definition of ‘body’ must have been profoundly different in order for the body to be penetrated and healed by a dream. In fact dream reality and waking reality must have interpenetrated in some way that is no longer available to us today.

So what culture and reality gave birth to psychotherapy? By the early 1800’s the West had finally broken the great Chain of Being that held the cosmos together for millennia, linking the small to the great, the earthly to the heavenly. Modern subjective consciousness was now ‘emancipated’ from any connection to Being and thus felt its freedom fully. We experienced ourselves for the first time, as ‘selves’ quite separate from the ‘world’, and psychotherapy emerged when the integrity of that self was challenged in one way or another (called neuroses at the time). The concept central to understanding how this separate self could be challenged was of course at the time, the concept of the unconscious self.

Psychotherapy since then has burgeoned from this root into a thousand branches but they all share a belief in and dedication to the existence of a separate self (however defined today). When this self is challenged, healing is available through a plethora of ‘restoration’ methodologies. This notion of a separate self is enshrined in our legal and political systems as well. It underlies our notions of responsibility, freedom, consequences, relatedness, ethics, knowledge, economics (e.g., corporations have the legal status of a ‘person’) and so on.

So, when we regard technology as an extension of our psychotherapy, we are saying that technology can assist us in the therapeutic work of developing healthy separate selves (however these are defined by the various schools).
Meanwhile, what is technology itself doing to this notion of a separate self?! Let’s take a look.

1. As I write this, millions of people are going online in the guise of an avatar, where they can create and live a life that is completely absent of ethics, responsibility, relatedness – a kind of freedom empty of any consequences. This feature of virtual reality alone makes a mockery of the notion of a solid, single self. We can become anyone we please! Just a game, you may think. I rather suspect it is a training ground, getting us used to the idea that the definition of a human being as a substantial separate self is gone, over, finished and replaced by…? Well, we’ll see.

2. Programs that fill the media today, from ‘reality shows’ to advertisements, to soaps, to news programs—all demonstrate convincingly that the time of the self that once carried dignity and self-respect is a thing of the past. People seem to fall over themselves to get on to a show, any show, in order to be reduced to a figure of ridicule in front of millions. What could drive such enthusiasm? It must be to bring home to us all the inconsequentiality of the ‘substantial self’ and its inherent dignity.

3. Our emotions are daily excited to fever pitch by an increasingly sophisticated media ‘science’ that seeks only to rivet us to the couch or the movie seat, for the sake of the ratings, no matter the content! So these excited emotions are not coupled with meaning, as they once were. No, they are coupled with images that flow rapidly across the screen, from images of atrocity to ads, to drama to health advice to… Well we have all seen it. The message is that none of it has any meaning while simultaneously our emotions are excited to the maximum. What is being ingrained in us from this extreme experience dished out on a daily basis to millions of people? I think we have to conclude that we are being inducted into a new experience of time—let’s call it, after Wolfgang Giegerich 1 the empty now! Where once the now was pregnant with its own meaning that could impress itself on the receptive self, enriching and deepening that self, now we are being inducted into the emptiness of the self: the self as couch potato! (328)

These are only three examples of what our technological civilisation is doing to us, in contrast with what we think we may be doing with technology as psychotherapists.

Any notion of substantiality is being dissolved before our eyes under the impact of our technological civilization. Take money for example: Now it is sheer fluidity going around the world without ceasing. Knowledge as we once knew it (i.e. collective memory with its selection criteria) has completely broken down, as Umberto Eco 2 shows us with reference to modern search engines:

Everyone would produce his or her own criteria for selecting information… every common norm disappears because everyone will be able to concoct his or her own interpretation of historical events (and) there won’t be any common basis left on which to construct the history of the human race… we would end up with a society of 5,000 million inadequate memories. That’s tantamount to saying that we have a society of 5,000 million languages, every one of them pidgin. (194-196)

Knowledge, as collective memory is now replaced by “what our peers will let us get away with saying”, as Tarnas, quoting Rorty says, reducing our culture to incoherence. 3 Under these circumstances how can we seriously claim ‘to know who I am’, a requirement necessary to therapies of the substantial self?
As substantiality dissolves under the impact of technology, we are instead faced with fluidity or sheer motion. Remember McLuhan’s, “The medium is the message”? The focus of our civilisation has moved off ‘things’ or substantiality to the media, or movement itself.

This is our new reality! It is a reality that psychotherapy simply has not caught up to, in theory or in practice.

As I said earlier, any healing practice that has viability must arise from the culture in which we are embedded at the time and the reality that the culture reflects. Our reality has shifted—transformed, really, and a new healing practice is called for that emerges from and therefore can redefine health and pathology.

For example, when understood from the old paradigm of a therapy of substantial self, spending hours on the internet watching pornography certainly can become pathology, diminishing that self’s capacity to relate in an adequate way to other selves.

But what do we see when we work from within the new paradigm? Firstly we have to come to terms with the compelling fact that millions of ordinary people of all ages, gender, and sexual orientation are uploading their home videos to public domains where all manner of what was once private sexual behaviour is freely watched by millions of other people. The most intimate secrets of our being, what once constituted our innermost essence requiring the most careful guarding through secrecy or ritual or, dare I say it, modesty, are now turned inside out and paraded shamelessly on the surface for all to see. Our innermost essence of selfhood appears no longer to have any cultural value. This teaching is what millions of people seem willing to submit themselves to today.

Again, why do so many enthusiastically display this lack of dignity, modesty, or even shame—emotions that once were sure expressions of a knowledge that the innermost essence of self-hood carries the highest values known to us? From within the new paradigm, we must conclude that all these people are all being inculcated by technology with a new status of being human in which the substantial self and its innermost essential mystery holds no cultural value at all. This new status of course is of course reinforced throughout the economic world where ‘selves’ have become ‘human resources’, or ‘assets’ etc. and are very disposable as many of us have experienced to our astonishment or horror, when fired suddenly, without warning.

Are we willing to say simply that these millions of people are pathological? I for one am wary about making such judgements.

Rather, I believe that psychotherapy has not caught up with the deeper meaning embedded in this phenomenon that we call technology. To regard technology only as a tool we can use to further the interests of a profession founded on principles that belong to another time long outstripped by historical developments, is folly. I believe we must also turn to technology and ask what it is doing to us, to the definition of a human being, and develop healing practices that can adequately address these momentous changes occurring today.

References

3 Tarnas, R. The Passion of the Western Mind. Reading. Cox and Wyman Ltd. 1991
John C. Woodcock Ph.D. is a Jungian Psychotherapist (since 1983) and clinical member of CAPA, now in private practice in Sydney after returning from the USA in 2003 where he lived, worked, and trained for over twenty years. He is the self-published author of several books (through iUniverse.com) all of which represent his post-doctoral research into the question of our future as expressed through the hints of dreams and other phenomena, including our technological civilization.

Further information may be found at his web site: [www.lighthousdownunder.com](http://www.lighthousdownunder.com) and he can be reached at jwoodcock@lighthousdownunder.com.