

**DIGITAL TRANSACTIONALITY:  
WHY RELATIONSHIPS AND EVERYTHING ELSE IS DIFFERENT**

BY  
TIMOTHY GRAYSON

This paper started as a cathartic screed on how relationships, at one time implying continuous personal connection, feel transactional if not outright commercial. Obviously, even in the *good old days* (that may have never been), relationships existed for *some* gain. But since the mid-nineties, we appear increasingly intolerant of the time and space needed for a relationship.

IF my sense is true, and IF transactionality took hold in the mid-nineties and then accelerated, MAYBE it's the result of exponentially expanding digitization. (I use "digital" here for all things related to the Internet, World Wide Web, mobile telephony, etc.) Maybe it's a natural, if not expected outcome. Not expected because the great Internet promise was broken barriers and unlimited connection to the greater good of all. It seems that those heady hopes have crashed into human reality.

But if it turns out the state of interpersonal connection is a bellwether for a deeper unintended but critical consequence of digital transformation. Understanding it may salve the indignation at least some of us are feeling. More important, the perspective it provides may be exactly what's needed to foresee the next unexpected consequences of this digital

evolution. If I'm right, you may be able to do many things, two of the most valuable being:

1. Work to reverse the trend for the sake of humanity; and
2. Use it for commercial gain.

The story starts long ago, maybe with the advent of cuneiform but certainly with computing in the 1960s and especially the personal computer in the 1980s. Mark this as the watershed when analog peaked and digital began its ascendancy. Computing would prove as important as the steam engine and unleash productive capability in ways previously inaccessible. Like industrialization, it brought forth long-term, mass transformation. All told, a good thing. What it augured, however, was consequences that would creep well beyond anything imaginable.

The post-1980s era of high finance and greed carried on its shoulders the defense-initiated Internet revolution beginning in the mid-nineties. Insane amounts of money was burned at the altar of the dot-com revolution. Despite the millennium "correction," good came of it: WorldCom provided undersea fibre, many failed experiments pointed to value needed (e.g., user experience) and how far and fast business models could adjust. By the time the iPhone crystalized the explosion of mobility and the Internet by combining them in a consumer user experience, the revolution was irreversibly changing things... and us.

Threads of evolution and change need to be pulled together for the argument to hold. We'll bullet them for the sake of space.<sup>1</sup>

- **Customer Relationship Management (CRM)**. CRM organized and applied mathematical rigour to accounting for the value of commercial relationships. In doing so, it tipped the scale on the word "relationship" toward a commercial cast

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<sup>1</sup> Anybody that wants to dig deeper is welcome to call me.

and embedded the idea that a corporate entity could even have a relationship. It applied time-defined, ongoing, binary assessment of relationship status: customer calls were timed, outcomes valued, customers rated and ranked based on last interaction, etc. Could we assume this wouldn't bleed into how we tend toward all other relationships?

- **Mobility.** Hard to imagine, but at one time we got along without mobile telephony or Internet. Of course, some presence was required. There was intent to be with others or at least at a fixed place. Mobility—voice, text, and Web variations—solidify the persistence of impresence: barriers of time and place are erased. We could and do expect instant satisfaction of our immediate, transactional needs. Similarly, we shoehorn these fence-free demands, often only partially, into whatever we might be doing and multi-task through a relationship attending to only that immediately important enough to warrant attention.
- **Texting and email.** Except to teens, these *written* forms have oddly contradictory features. Using them does away with the trouble of engaging. Neither threatens engagement beyond what you alone want nor requires the time/space in which interaction (the hallmark of relationship) exists. Yet they demand reading/typing, requiring more energy than listening/talking. We are willing to pay in immediate time and energy for the transactional efficiency of avoiding interaction.
- **Ghosting.** This phenomenon is a function of voicemail and text/email. At one time, it was challenging—even with an answering machine—to avoid the discomfort of circumstances in which we may not have advantage or be outside our own curated limelight. Voicemail and caller ID plus a preference for textual communication channels make ghosting easy. Its prevalence *and* ghosts reanimating for something interesting indisputably supports relationships being transactional.
- **Search.** Having all knowledge ever just a question away sounds good. In some ways it is; in others, much less so. Never mind how it corrodes what was once

known as privacy. When we all swam in wider pools of ignorance, we lived together in mutual uncertainty. The search engine has put a more immediate, sharper edge on what remains a chaotic world. We solve disagreements transactionally, in the moment. That the answer may be neither right nor definitive is not material. We no longer share our struggles: we compete on them one by one.

- **Digital manipulation.** Anybody with superficial Photoshop™ skill—or any sound, graphic, or document editing tool—can convincingly forge. It doesn't have to be criminal: putting together and propagating for fact or fun, GIFs of sharks where none would be or a tee-shot felling a presidential candidate, for instance, alters opinion and ideas. It entrenches gullibility and, moreso, cynicism. The hardened cynic focuses on only that perceived as transactionally valuable and controllable.
- **Big data.** There is nothing inherently wrong with computer-aided correlations among ever more vast sets of data. Without descending into the problems it creates for privacy, false knowledge, and security—among other things, too many uses of big data analytics is little more than the digital curation of momentary consumption micro wants. Said another way: too much gee-whiz data analytics is used for nothing valuable, unless you believe that effectively selling one more jalapeño hemorrhoid balm is truly valuable.
- **Social networks.** Too much and yet not enough has been said about the abrasive effects of social networks even beyond how social networks create and sustain the preceding threads. It's easy to praise their value in connecting old friends, communities of interest, and so on. It takes much more to effectively illuminate their role in enabling an ersatz world; lowering the quality of discourse (i.e., giving idiots bullhorns); emboldening hatred; the decline of genuine, real friendship and connection; and so on. It is without question that Facebook and LinkedIn profiles, for instance, are as real as patients exiting Hollywood cosmetic surgeons' offices. They tend toward cosmetically altered nonsense.

Collectively these (and more) are ground zero for the creation of filter bubbles and echo chambers. Creating then sustaining such bubbles is operationally burdensome; fortunately digital relieves such burdens. Not to say it can't be done without digitizing: Scientology existed long before the Internet. Digital conditions do, however, accelerate them and open the space for descent into the rabbit hole.

The argument is straight-forward. In a pre-digital environment, the transaction "gold" in any relationship had to be refined from the "slag" environment: pleasantries, tedium, etc. That slag comprised multiple participants' wants and needs, and existed through time. Large periods of "nothing" happening when nobody benefitted, while the relationship transmuted nuggets of transactional value from the slag. The more raw relations mined, the more transactional ore acquired. Assaying the field for value was more delicate and poor work could be penalized. Carpetbaggers, con artists, and mooches unwilling to hold up their end of the reciprocal expectations were drummed out. To stay, (s)he had to at least fake enjoying (enduring) the non-transactional elements of the relationship. Because attitude is shaped by behaviour as much as the opposite, the system found equilibrium: even transactional people were in relationships.

The digital world is off or on. There is no space for lingering and waiting for the sweep second hand to plod through time. With digital, *everything* is a small transaction. That structural reality permeates the technologies and situations listed earlier. It should be unsurprising given the fundamental digital promise and value. From eBay to Uber, SAP to Salesforce, the business case is greater efficiency. Keep this always in mind because the ruthless underlying efficiency of digital is usually soft-peddled behind gentler promises of better user experience, greater control, simplicity, convenience, sharing, and the like.

As noted, this paper uses the consequential impact of digitization on the state and evolution of *human* relationships as one small example of the (possibly) unintended larger consequences of digitization. My opinion is the cost to society and the insidious changes coming forth may be too high. I may also be an old fart falsely remembering a better past. In any case, the point of the example is to induce a broader impact, which is the relentless and unstoppable drive to efficiency enabled by the on/off transactionality of the digital environment, is affecting much more than the app said it would.

Every small digital transaction has a conclusion and can be/is isolated and acted upon. Whether that action does or does not get considered within the broader sweep of context and history is another matter worth studying. It would seem that the calculus of events tends toward eliminating the non-active context and history from consideration.

And this is the point. The digital world has taken us another step toward elimination of space and waste. A ruthless drive for efficiency eliminates waste. Of course, “waste” is in the eye of the beholder. The consequence being that things we may not perceive of as wasteful—say, courtesy or civility—become casualties. The choices are much deeper:

1. What do we believe and value?
2. How do we want to live—with and among others?
3. Can we recapture things we value that have become digital “waste?” Do we care?

And, because I promised that understanding of digitization’s unintended consequences could be used for commercial gain,

4. Where else, in society, could we focus to reduce waste *irrespective of how odious?*
5. How can that be accomplished by applying (digital) transactionality?

Like it or not, digital transactionality on many fronts is forcing a hard rethink of what we consider being human and part of a human society. It's not just about the technology. And it's making everything different.

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*Timothy Grayson is a transformation consultant and writer who lives near Ottawa, Canada. Find him at [tim@institute-x.org](mailto:tim@institute-x.org)*

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