

Connectedness?

What to do when the brand new book you are reading for this week's Blog turns into a 'horror movie' that keeps you awake all night!? Bear with me and hang on to your sense of humour; it will help to have some music playing in the background. The book is *Fully Connected - Social Health in an Age of Overload* by Julia Hobsbawm, OBE, British author, entrepreneur and educator.

When I started using the word 'connectedness' in relation to the human mind I felt a little awkward because it wasn't such a common term, but nowadays it is probably the most widely discussed element in business management and social media. Of course, I was referring to a crucial biological connection that each of us must make with our surroundings for our mind to function whereas common usage today is about a machine-driven communication system that becomes more obviously every day **something we cannot do without**.

Although I'm no longer in the workforce, I was curious about what we might be able to learn about our own minds by reflecting on what connectedness means for most people today as described by a respected leader in this field. The book is very well written and researched – impressive, I would say. Julia's father is a prominent British Marxist and historian, she was hailed as the first ever professor of networking, and her publisher says this book is the 'first attempt to define 'social health' in modern society' – a big claim!

She dives straight into the health issue, which she says is a serious crisis. Many of us, and most organisations, are probably suffering from at least six serious ailments: **infobesity** (the obvious one), **time starvation** (a tricky one?!), **techno-spread** (digital enhancements expand like your waistline), **network tangle** (think knitting perhaps?), **organisational bloat** (it just happens) and **life gridlock** (she calls it 'not waving but drowning' and uses her own health breakdown as an example).

As an outside observer it's hard not to sound facetious, but this is certainly not a joke. For example she mentions the 'bloated tangle' of emails and texts about the fire hazard that needed to be fixed prior to the Grenfell tower disaster that killed 71 people in London and another mix-up with crucial intelligence information before the Manchester shooting that killed 23 people at a rock concert. Attempts to improve 'productivity' (the economist's holy grail) can also produce inertia and being able to involve more people in the discussion may hinder decision-making rather than help it.

This is a book full of **contradictions** and perhaps that is telling in itself because we may be our own worst enemy without realising it. She states clearly that we are so 'fully connected' today we are sick – and yet the pathway to health is to be more 'fully connected.' This implies that we do something differently. Some practical suggestions for lightening the 'overload' include thinking of your diary as if it's your body (you can only eat a certain amount), building in periods of disconnection from time to time, prioritising your contacts (you only need six people in a 'personal boardroom') and diversifying your interests – in short, just a little tidying around the edges.

The main benefit of being 'fully connected' seems to be that there will be fewer individuals struggling on their own to solve a problem that has already been solved elsewhere or needs a broader view to solve it. She gives some good examples in health care and solving crime. Skillsets are spread across more people so we can see more clearly 'the **patterns** as well as

particulars.’ This is the essence of her solution – ‘pattern thinking’ – or **hexagon thinking**,’ to be precise.

One of the rave reviewers in the beginning of the book calls her the ‘Queen of Networking’ and there is a section in the book called Worker Beings. Every diagram in her explanation is based on the hexagonal shapes used by bees to build their hives. She says the way they fit together is important. I think any images that help us to think about what we do differently can be helpful, but this one needs further work!

And her new definition of **Social Health** – ‘the productive, functional flow of **Knowledge** and **Networks** at the right **Time** (the **KNOT**)’ – gives me a bad night’s sleep! I like the idea of functional flow because that’s the essence of our mind’s work and, admittedly, she is living in what they call the ‘Knowledge Economy,’ which I find confusing anyway, so maybe I’m being too critical. But when she writes that Social Health is ‘just pattern management of connection’ I fear that the quality of the connectedness between individuals is not receiving the attention it deserves.

In fairness she does acknowledge the need to build relationships and strengthen trust, but her main concern is the ‘**transactional**’ kind of connectedness rather than the ‘**relational**’ kind. There is food for thought here about our own lives. How much of your connectedness is for the benefit of the relationship itself and how much is a deal or arrangement to benefit something outside that relationship? Transactions are required when we are playing certain **roles**. We need to do both kinds of connection, but probably shouldn’t forget to make the most of the relationship aspect.

We do well to remember, I think, that the human mind naturally acts as if it is the amount of **control** you have – your **power** – that will best define your health, even though this is certainly not true and leads us astray. She implies that the bigger and slicker your patterned network is the more productive and powerful you are. Donald Trump has more than 20 million followers on one of his Twitter feeds apparently (@therealdonaldtrump). On the other hand Google gets its power differently – it is super-efficient because it is so **small** for a network (having only 65,000 employees around the world) – but its control is vast.

Julia Hobsbawm does not mention something that *The Digital Ape* authors acknowledged clearly (see my Blog #1) that control of this Second Machine Age is in the hands of too few people, who own it. Sir Tim Berners Lee, who gave us the internet for everyone to use, is now its biggest critic because he says it’s been too easy to exploit and take possession of. He is working to redesign it’s engine to reclaim the internet for the people.

In Blog #1 I said there will be painful teething problems as our minds move rapidly towards a closer alliance with machines in everything we do. If our leaders are blind to the dangers of connectedness that is not based on qualities such as love and respect, I fear our journey forward will involve a lot of casualties. Some of the ‘**things we cannot do without**’ will have to change as we learn what it is about our minds we need to value and preserve.

One thing I feel I have learned (again) from reflecting on connectedness today is that, even when there are few outward signs of it in the work life of modern individuals, **love** is most certainly there in the background looking after us. Human beings manifest a force called love in our everyday minds even when we don’t notice it. It works even better if we speak about it openly as well.