Real Relationships in a Digital World?

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Introduction:

A defense of online friendship, published in The New Republic, argues that intimacy can be found in both digital and physical realms, and that plenty of “real” relationships play out solely on the Internet.

**Can real relationships be forged between people who never meet? Do online-only friendships count?**

The Internet Can Make Real Life Friendships Easier

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Recently, at an IRL party — that is, a party that takes place "in real life," as opposed to where I generally live, which is on the Internet — a guest asked a friend and me how we met.

“On…the Internet,” I responded bashfully, almost embarrassed.

I’m a — gulp — blogger for a living, so it makes sense that I spend an inordinate amount of time online, but it’s actually enriched my unplugged life: The Internet is where I've found all my friends.

It's easy to dismiss friendships that originate online as superficial, with the broad assertion that no one is their "true" self online, but instead a distilled curation of snapshots, quips and restaurant check-ins, all rolled into one cohesive personal "brand." But why can't our social media presences serve as a primer to our real-life selves, a tangible way to say, "What you see is what you get?" There's a person behind that hashtag.

Exactly one time, at a bookstore, I struck up an real-life conversation with someone because something about their appearance made me think we'd get along. We talked for a few minutes, found out we had a lot in common, and I came away feeling I'd made a new friend. And three hours later, I had proof: She sent me a Facebook friend request.

The web provides a space where the normal barriers to friendship — namely, the confusion about the appropriate way to start one — don't apply. Online, you can choose to opt in — friend, follow, favorite — any person that peaks your interest, because of your pre-existing knowledge, again gleaned from the Internet, of their interests. The web doesn't preclude people from making IRL friends. It actually makes it easier.

Face-to-Face Friendships Involve Real Emotions

*Sherry Turkle, a psychologist and professor at M.I.T., is the author of “Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other” and the forthcoming "Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age."*

Online, we share stories and opinions; we give and get advice; we become infatuated and infuriated. To say these relationships are real is to say they have consequences, that online rejection can hurt us, that online affection warms us -- and that is all true.

But to attest to the reality of these connections says little about the questions that count in relationships: How do they affect who we are as people? How we treat each other? What human capacities do they encourage or discourage?

Every technology has its own affordances and the online life lets us hide in plain sight. We can present ourselves as we wish to be. We can edit and retouch our words. We find it easier to be there for other people because we can titrate their emotional demands by keeping them on the screen. One college freshman shocked her professor, the late psychologist Clifford Nass, by putting it this way: “Technology makes emotions easy.”

What she meant is that when you move friendship online you get the benefits of a “Goldilocks effect”: You can have your friendships at the temperature you want them -- not too close, not too distant, just right. And when you want to end things, it can usually happen without penalty from family or community. A 26-year-old, who I recently interviewed for my new book about conversation in the digital culture, sums up these new efficiencies when he points to the disadvantages of face-to-face friendship: “It takes a lot to risk having to sit down with each other and just see what happens.”

Face-to-face friendship is risky. It doesn’t make emotions easy. It makes emotions into, well, emotions. An in-person exchange cultivates empathy because you are able to experience the whole person, the tone of their voice, the way they hold their body, the way they respond to you. It demands vulnerability -- there is no “just right” distance available when someone makes demands right now. And without the benefit of editing, we are more likely to show ourselves as we are, not as who we want to be.

Online we can have attachments that are exciting and interesting. But part of appreciating their reality is understanding what they can’t bring us. Now that we’ve met a technology that allows us an edited life, we may come to appreciate that the unedited life is the one worth living.

Increased Social Support, Even Online, Is Beneficial

*Alice Marwick, the director of the McGannon Center and assistant professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University, is the author of "Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity and Branding in the Social Media Age."*

When I lived in Seattle in the early 2000s, the homegrown proto-blogging community LiveJournal was immensely popular. Even those of us in the music scene who thought we were too cool for school used it; you’d meet someone in a bar, add them to your Friends list, and suddenly have access to pages of diary entries about their lives and feelings, often quite honest and intimate.

Sharing written accounts cemented and solidified budding acquaintanceships and romantic relationships, filling in backstory for people who might otherwise have remained minor characters. Years later, it was my "L.J." entries that first caught the interest of my now-husband, who hates when I tell people that is how we met.

Such anecdotes illustrate the slipperiness of separating friendships into real or unreal categories, online or off. Internet-only friendships can be "real," but those friendships don't always remain solely in the world of keyboard and mouse. Most of us fluidly move between on- and off-line social contexts, and so do our friendships.

Internet-only friendships used to be a bit of a niche practice. Early Internet users tended to be geeky, highly educated, or deeply involved in subcultures like raving or hacking. Since most people weren't online, you met new people instead. Today, most people use the Internet to talk to people they already know. (Of course, people still talk to strangers: The show Catfish, which purports to uncover the true identities behind online-only relationships, fascinates us because it shows romance that deviates from the norm when it comes to identification.)

The lack of depth in some online-only friendships, on the other hand, doesn’t mean they exist outside human emotion. Instagram "Likes" or Twitter "Favorites" can be powerful reinforcement mechanisms for engagement. The well-known propensity for people to squabble aggressively in comments sections has similarly real, albeit negative, effects on participants. Interacting with others in mediated environments deeply affects how we feel.

Most American adults have only one or two close friends. Increased social support, whether in-person or online, can only be a benefit. Meeting someone at a party is sufficient reason to add them on Facebook or Instagram, but it may be that Gchatting is what builds intimacy beyond acquaintanceship.

Though I followed hundreds of people who wrote at the height of LiveJournal’s popularity, my friends list now contains the thoughts of only a few. I’ve known many of them for close to a decade. We’ve written about marriages, miscarriages, Ph.D. programs, moves, breakups, highs and lows. I feel genuine closeness and intimacy with them based on their words, though they are written by people I’ve never met.

Projecting Onto the Screen

*Nicholas Carr, a technology and culture writer, is the author of "The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains" and, most recently, "The Glass Cage: Automation and Us."*

“No kinds of love,” sang Lou Reed in his Velvet Underground days, “are better than others.” There’s wisdom as well as kindness in that line. Only the mean of spirit would seek to redline certain varieties of love or friendship — to claim that some human relationships “don’t count.” I have happy memories of exchanging letters with distant pen pals while in elementary school, and I recall with fondness the conversations I had with like-minded individuals in America Online chatrooms in the early nineties. Life is lonely; all connections have value.

That doesn’t mean that all connections are the same. If it’s odious to dismiss online friendships as invalid, it’s naive to pretend that there are no distinctions in quality between friendships forged in person and those conducted from afar.

The differences between virtual and embodied friendships come clearly into view at moments of transition, when an embodied friendship becomes a virtual one or vice versa. People who have built a friendship in person have little trouble continuing the friendship online when they’re separated. The friendship may eventually peter out — absence doesn’t always make the heart grow fonder — but the friends don’t feel any anxiety about exchanging messages through their phones or laptops.

Now think about what happens when people who have struck up friendships online finally get together in the physical world. The meetings are usually approached with nervousness and trepidation. Will we hit it off? Will we still like each other when we’re sitting at a table together? Who is this person, anyway?

The anxiety that virtual friends feel when they’re about to meet in person is telling. It reveals the fragility, the sparseness, of disembodied relationships. It makes plain that we don’t really know other people until we’ve met them in the flesh. Screen presence leaves a lot of room for fantasizing, for projecting the self into the other. Physical presence is more solid, more filled in — and, yes, more real.

Does Easier Intimacy Online Lead to Easier Infidelity?

*Katherine Hertlein, the program director of Marriage and Family Therapy at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, studies the role of technology in couple and family life.*

Relationships formed online, and the questions they raise about intimacy and infidelity, can be just as genuine as real-world relationships.

The Internet has many qualities that bond people together more freely. Texting, for example, creates a sense of immediate connection and closeness. Handheld devices’ accessibility provides a sense of continuity through the day, while providing an electronic barrier to vulnerability that let us take risks we might normally avoid. People more freely disclose their thoughts and feelings, accelerating the intimacy and commitment in these virtual relationships.

The freedom to take risks can allow people to share attractive aspects of themselves more easily than they would if they were with their partner in person. And it can allow people to embellish aspects of their lives, physical appearance, or emotions, knowing their partner will never know the truth.

By making it easier to avoid interactions when they do not want them, and to detach themselves from the sexual act, this anonymity has a tendency to put people on a slippery slope to greater degrees of risk-taking behavior.

Online infidelity means different things to different people. For some couples, viewing porn online is infidelity; others only feel that way about cybersex. People in relationships tend to rationalize that this online intimacy with strangers does not make them unfaithful, because they never had a physical meeting.

But the feelings, and the damage, can be just as authentic.