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How Digital Media Affects the Nature of Social Interactions

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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Honors Capstone Project in Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework for evaluating and understanding the roles of digital media, in particular the mobile phone and the internet, in our interpersonal and societal relationships. Though this paper is essentially grounded in research, drawing from the work of psychologists, cyber anthropologists, philosophers, and professors of communication studies as well as years of personal observations, it should be understood as more of a theoretical rather than research-based primer on the effects of digital media in our everyday lives. While this paper includes various ways digital connections can improve our relationships, it primarily discusses how such communication can threaten the authenticity and meaningfulness of personal connections. It concludes with a few considerations about how people can shape their personal connections to accommodate for ever-advancing technologies and, with digital media, build stronger relationships and more diverse connections.

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I. Introduction

On a summer evening, my friends and I sat in a Malaysian restaurant in New York, awaiting the arrival of those impossible-to-pronounce entrées. Glancing over at a nearby table, I noticed the most peculiar scene: a mother and her child sat opposite each other no more than three feet apart and yet each stared wholeheartedly at their individual screens. The mother pounded away at her BlackBerry keyboard as her son was just as engaged with his PSP, a handheld game console, each seemingly oblivious to the other's existence. Wondering if this was just an anomaly, I noticed a similar scene at another close by table. This time, an adolescent girl bobbed her head to music from an mp3 as her parents chatted across from her. Staggered by these two tables, I turned back to my own on the verge of mentioning how unbelievable I thought this all was only to find one friend texting and another getting up to take a call. With my mouth slightly agape, I asked myself, "What in the world is technology doing to communication?" That was five years ago. I ask myself the same question today.

While communication was once limited to face to face conversation, technological innovations now allow for new modes of interaction: mobile phone calls, text messaging, instant messaging, email, chat rooms, online multiplayer games, social networking sites, image sharing, video sharing and more. Through this network of digital connections, we are constantly tethered to one device or another in a state of perpetual contact so that too often we may find ourselves physically present in one location yet emotionally and mentally immersed somewhere else. Such a radical transformation of the communication landscape

consequently calls for a critical understanding of how digital media affects our relationships. The purpose of this paper then is not to make sense of what these media do for us but what they do to us: to our expectations of each other, our relationships, and the very authenticity of our identities. The material throughout this paper draws from years of personal observations, explorations, and the growing body of scholarship on how interpersonal communication media changes the nature of our social interactions.

For matters of clarification, this paper does not seek to verbally assault technology. There is a strong but perhaps misguided inclination, particularly in response to new media, to conceptualize technology as an external agent bearing down upon us, of which we are powerless to resist. Since the introduction of the written language to the invention of the telephone, warnings about the degradation of communication have been thrown about, each with its own kind of dramatic finality. Socrates' assertions that writing provided "not truth, but only the semblance of truth" however have proved just as insufficient as the concerns that the telephone might break up home life and end the old practice of visiting friends. Though such worries should obviously not be lightly dismissed, the gravity of their exertions should not be taken too seriously either.

Rather than viewing social change as an irrefutable consequence of new media, we should understand technology as both shaping and being shaped by people. That is, the interaction goes two-way; societal circumstances can give rise to certain technologies of which its uses can accelerate and develop in unexpected forms. From this perspective, technology does not inherently afford one status or

another; it would be irresponsible to say that Facebook is beneficial or harmful to relationships without first considering the unique ways people use such social capabilities. For comparison, I liken technology to guns; guns by themselves are not intrinsically "good" or "bad" as the same gun could be used for protective or destructive purposes. Yet, it seems so much easier to use guns to produce violence than to thwart it and technology, I claim, runs along a similar vein. While I will be the first to acknowledge the extraordinary benefits digital media allows for communication, the design of such media, we shall see, encourages and facilitates an environment where harm to relationships is the greater outcome. In this way, despite our reciprocal relationship with technology, it seems that digital media shapes us more than we shape it in what I shall dub the "lopsided shaping approach."

Plan of this Paper

In the subsequent chapters, I will discuss four prominent forms of digital media (cell phones, social networking sites, massively multiplayer online role-playing games, MMORPGs, and "online communities" such as "PostSecret") and key issues pertaining to each. It is important to note that with each medium, their corresponding issues can just as easily pertain to the other forms of media though some more relevantly than others. This format is meant to illustrate the most significant concepts concerning technology and its effect on social interaction in the most meaningful manner. Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of the kind of media discussed in this paper and their effects. Chapter 3 examines the communicative possibilities and constraints of digital media, paying particular

attention to cell phones and what happens to verbal and nonverbal messages in the context of reduced social cues. Chapter 4 looks at Aristotle's three kinds of friendship and how social networking sites like Facebook potentially redefine our conceptions of friendship and intimacy. Chapter 5 addresses how and what kinds of relationships can be developed and maintained online, especially where anonymity is a factor, and turns particularly to video games for discussion. Chapter 6 briefly looks at online confessional sites and whether it is possible to have “online communities.”

II. Digital Media

Before discussing the key concepts of how media influences personal connections, it seems prudent to clarify the media in question. However, instead of focusing on the communication mediums themselves, which are subject to new developments, I will identify the varying degrees and kinds of social interaction they offer. Electronic communication can be divided up according to its temporal dimensions: does communication occur in real time (synchronous) or are there time delays between messages (asynchronous) (Baym, 2008). In principle, the former includes face to face conversations, instant messaging (IM), chat, and phone calls whereas the latter consists of email, texting via mobile phones, blogs, Facebook, and YouTube. The fundamental difference between email and IM then is a question of synchronicity: unlike IM, emails are not likely to prompt an immediate response as replies can take days or even weeks. Keep in mind however that these two dimensions of communication are not mutually exclusive

since emails may be sent and received so rapidly that you can experience the asynchronous as essentially synchronous.

With both modes of communication, their advantages and disadvantages lie in the capacity of their audience scope and degree of replicability. Since synchronous communication means that all individuals involved in the communication are present at the same time, unless something like telephone conversations are recorded or instant messages saved, such messages are gone as soon as they are said. This grants such communication a kind of irreplaceability and authenticity that can make people feel closer together across distances. Further, because the interactants involved are simultaneously engaged, the size of the audience must be rather small since there are only so many individuals who can participate at once, likely making the interactions more personal. The primary drawback of such communication is that conflicting schedules and different time-zones can make synchronicity challenging. By contrast, asynchronous communication possess the advantage of allowing individuals to communicate and collaborate according to their own convenience and own schedule. Also, since the asynchronous tools in digital media stores or leaves traces of conversations and messages, by virtue of their electronic trail, messages can be easily replicated and, as in the case of websites, reach enormous audiences. As we shall see in the following chapters, whether communication is synchronous or asynchronous plays a significant role as to how messages may be understood and how meaningful they are in relation to their environmental contexts.

III. Cell Phones

We begin by examining a technological device I assume readers are very familiar with: cell phones. It would be no exaggeration to say that most of us not only have cell phones but keep them, at all times, within arm's reach. Usually people do not forget to carry their phones but when they do, you can identify them by their looks of infinite anguish (not unlike "The Scream"), fistfuls of hair being thrown about, and persistent mutterings that question how they are going to survive the day. I hyperbolize but the troubling thing is - only slightly. So attached are we to our phones that cyborg anthropologists, like Amber Case, describe such devices as "second selves," extensions of the mental selves into hyperspace. The idea of a "second self" seems to match our intuition on the matter since many people often depict cell phones as "being a part of them" and "feeling incomplete" in their absence. This is not surprising given that phones may function like secondary, external "brains" that store, replicate, and invoke remnants of the past: conversations, photos, videos, movies, and songs all contribute to corroborations of our identity. More importantly, such machines also provide a source of human connection, enabling communication quite literally with the touch of a button; without them, we may feel isolated from our usual attachments.

This ability to communicate instantaneously across distances can be, without a doubt, extraordinarily practical and productive. However, I am not so much concerned with the benefits of cell phones, which have been so exhaustively explained that it would be redundant to repeat them here. Rather, I am concerned with the domestication of such technology, the process with which innovations

are integrated and adapted accordingly into everyday life. Does communication prosper if we become so accustomed to cell phones that we should prefer texting to talking, to have our eyes glued to our screens and not to each other? I am not saying that all people use their phones as if their fingers were permanently stuck to the keypad, only moving from one button to the next, but there are certainly those who do use phones this way (and they might be more than you think). Regardless of whether you are an avid user of cell phones or not, we can still consider the kind and quality of such mediated interactions and how they hold up against face to face conversation.

For all intents and purposes, face to face communication is the archetype which other mediums of interaction should be compared. The reason is this: a quintessential component of communication lies in a medium's ability to convey the widest possible range of verbal and nonverbal social cues. Whereas verbal cues include word choice, inflection, volume, pacing, and silence, nonverbal cues include facial expressions, body language, physical appearance, posture, and gestures. These social cues serve instrumental functions in illustrating meaning, perceiving feelings and emotions, and coordinating interaction. Non-verbal cues may be considered just as, if not more, important than verbal cues in that they provide more "depth" as to what a person is really feeling or thinking. Because they are frequently done on impulse and not voluntarily, they can provide significant insight to a person's state of mind. The hint of a smile, touch of a hand, drop of a shoulder, raise of an eyebrow, roll of the eyes, twitch of the lips, brush of the hair, tap of a foot all translate into something far more suggestive if we can

pick them up and read them correctly. It makes sense then to question whether mediated communication can successfully express the full range of such social cues available in face-to-face contact - I am inclined to say they do not.

Even if we look at video chat, which includes both verbal and non-verbal cues and is perhaps the closest thing that technological mediation now permits to face-to-face communication, such interaction still falls far short of the norm. For one, a lack of shared physical context subsequently eliminates the possibility of shared physical intimacy - there can be no replacement or equivalence of a warm hug on Skype and sometimes this is precisely what a moment calls for. What otherwise would have been a deeply affirming and intimate moment of friendship is forsaken in this kind of mediation. The inability to exhibit fully one's affection does not necessarily impoverish communication emotionally or socially but it does indicate that such interaction can only be a diminished form of face-to-face communication. Also, depending on the features of the medium, interactants may be unable to see or hear one another, further impeding their ability to perceive the usual social cues available in the physical context. In other words, the application of emotion is not impossible but certainly difficult, all the more so with mediums that offer an increasingly narrow range of verbal and nonverbal social cues.

Obviously, if geographical distances or similar constraints exclude the possibility for face-to-face, it would be better to have mediated interaction than no interaction at all. It is one thing however to use technology as a conduit for communication where face-time is not an option and quite another to actually use such machines in preference to face-to-face communication. In the former case,

technology as a complement to our relationships proves to be remarkable indeed as it grants the opportunity to nourish relationships in the absence of face-time. In the latter case though, technology as a substitute to our relationships is, I shall argue, tremendously insufficient in terms of sustenance and potentially harmful to the interactants involved. In addition to the reduced social cues argument mentioned earlier, there are several reasons why this is so: mediated communication 1) enables a "multiplicity of worlds" so that we are constantly subject to interruption and division of attention 2) facilitates a lack of self-reflection and 3) undermines the trust and autonomy between child-parent and romantic relationships. Each of these points will be discussed in greater detail now.

Multiplicity of Worlds

With technological communication, we can perpetually remain in contact with each other so that we simultaneously live in both the physical and the virtual world. What may have seemed alien a mere ten years ago, we are now accustomed to living full time on the Internet, checking emails or status updates on Facebook, instant messaging, texting - all of which are available at the touch of our fingertips and the space in our pockets. Whereas landline telephone conversations once literally tied down individuals to the cord in question, cell phones have enabled us to talk on the move. A consequence of this becomes apparent: with landlines, if you wanted to engage in another activity, you almost always had to end the conversation. However, given the mobility of cell phones, talking is now usually accompanied with other activities. Conversations can take

place anywhere these days: we talk while we are on the subway, at the supermarket, in the bathroom, walking, driving, and so on.

Because we are usually simultaneously engaged in conversation and some other activity, communication can lose much of its meaning. Part of this has to do with the fact that our attention is divided among multiple tasks; if one person should be driving on the highway and another surfing the Internet, it is hard to see how these two individuals can have a most meaningful conversation. Sure enough, one may argue that many people today, especially my generation, are particularly adept at multitasking and so can juggle multiple activities at once without losing efficiency or productivity in any of them. However, the idea of multitasking on a computer by writing a paper, watching a movie, and browsing through the Internet at the same time does not necessarily carry over to the multitasking involved while maintaining a conversation.

That is, in order for a conversation to flow fluidly, one must pay a great deal of attention to what the other is saying through verbal and non-verbal cues in order to effectively respond. Though one can surely mutter "Uh-huh" and "Sure" or other such phrases in a conversation, this hardly constitutes as an effective response as it does not extend or build upon what was previously said in a relevant manner. Unlike maintaining conversations then, the multitasking of writing, watching, and browsing does not demand nearly the same kind or degree of reciprocity: the interaction goes one-way, not two. To multitask while conversing can thus only divide one's attention between the activities at issue and threaten the excellence that strong communication embodies. Moreover, even if

you are devoting all of your attention to one side of the conversation, this does not mean the other side is too. Although I might be instant messaging only one particular friend, that individual might very well be engaged in multiple conversations, doing homework, and watching TV all at the same time: the point is - I just do not know. This has perhaps contributed towards the increased popularity of text messaging, since we can respond to texts at our own pace and time and do not need to fight for the attention of others.

By contrast, while the intrusive nature of mediated communication can make it difficult to accord one another our full attention, face-to-face interactions, in virtue of their immediate physical proximity, demand their own attention. It might seem a contradiction has taken place since I described earlier how both a son and daughter were engrossed with their respective electronic devices despite being in the company of their parents and now I speak of face-time as commanding the interactants' attention. However, what made these instances surprising is the rarity with which they occur as they are very much exceptions that prove the rule. Though the kind and quality of a relationship must be taken into account, you hardly ever see two people at the same dinner table so thoroughly absorbed in their own technological mediums to the extent that each medium takes priority over the other's company and surely not in the case of close friends. Typically, texts or calls are kept to a minimum against the backdrop of face-to-face interaction and not as the center of attention. Indeed, even if, in the earlier example, my friends did text and take a call during dinner, they made these

exchanges as brief as possible since it would take no less than an emergency situation to bring our face-time to an abrupt halt.

With mediated communication, this is precisely the opposite as both parties involved are constantly vulnerable to interruption and subject to suddenly stop the interaction. If on the phone, I do not like attempting to converse with people who are moving in and out of contact as they approach tunnels, dead-zones, and are liable to end the conversation at any moment. Should an emergency or urgent matter arise, it is perfectly reasonable for an individual to terminate a conversation and excuse themselves but mediated interactions today can end as easily and irregularly as "I have to go" or even without any justification at all. Alas, the previous arrangement of landline phones was also liable to interruptions but given the comparative lack of multiple ongoing activities, the possibility remained much less probable than with cell phones today. Coupled with the earlier notion that technology inherently affords fewer social cues than talking face-to-face, it becomes apparent that phone conversations are not suitable for meaningful conversations.

This does not mean that conversations through telephone cannot be extraordinarily rich - some of my most enjoyable conversations have taken place on the phone. If we choose to allocate our time accordingly or schedule our calls, the problem of potential interruptions is almost entirely removed. Again, we are reminded through the lopsided shaping approach that technology, by itself, does not cause this new way of relating to people but it does make it easier. But just as technology shapes us, we, to a lesser degree, shape it. In the case of reduced

social cues, for instance, we have learned to accommodate to what technology affords. For texting, in particular, perhaps the leanest medium of mediated communication, we have developed ever-richer means of conveying emotional information in the absence of vocal intonations and facial expressions. For example, we can use language in novel ways through punctuation marks, upper-case lettering, and acronyms to indicate emphasis and describe non-verbal reactions: emoticons such as :-) are just as ubiquitous as LOL (laughing out loud). Though these are surely no substitutes for facial expressions, they have helped to show emotions in a medium that leaves little room for them. In our observations of technology then, it is important to consider how in the face of communication barriers, people can come up with creative ways to adapt and improve each situation.

Self-Reflection and Technology

The ease and frequency with which we connect to networked devices is also a concerning matter: they are "always on and always on us" (Turkle, 2011). While I have mentioned this several times already, I cannot possibly over-emphasize the magnitude of such a situation: never have there been more ways to communicate with each other than there are right now. But if we are constantly in the presence of machine-mediated relationships, we may deny ourselves the rewards of solitude, namely self-reflection. Increasingly, when there is a lull in our day (whether we are traveling between destinations or waiting in line at the cashier), we check our messages, emails, and texts. Technological devices are, in many ways, used as "fillers" - they fill in time between point A and point B so as to ease

the passing. Nowhere is this point more aptly visible than universities, where such devices are abundant; you need only walk into a lecture hall before class to notice how many eyes are fastened to Macs, how many fingers are fiddling with iPhones, how many ears are plugged with iPods. If you didn't know better, you'd probably think these congregations were more of conventions for Apple products than communities for learning.

It might seem ridiculous to say that playing "Angry Birds" or checking text messages are harmful to oneself, but the persistent use of technological devices can very much stifle potential opportunities for self-reflection. Beyond just introspection, self-reflection includes looking at who we really are, clarifying what is important to us and why, and regulating our behavior as a means to obtain desired goals. Often this process proves quite difficult as it requires us to look at both the good and bad things about us, things we may not like about ourselves. Yet only in identifying such shortcomings can we become more comfortable with who we are and strive towards who we want to be. Through self-reflection, we acquire self-knowledge and a grasp of one's personal identity. When we have no external input, that is the time when there is self-reflection, when we are able to monitor our interactions with others and reflect upon our actions and feelings in given situations. These moments individually may not do much for the purposes of self-understanding but accumulated over time, they serve as critical components in identity formation as well as self-improvement. Supposing then that more and more of these individual instances are "filled" not with moments of self-reflection but electronic devices, people may come to know less and less

about themselves and develop an insecure or mightily distorted conception of the self.

In view of all the technological mediation available to us then - phone calls, text messages, IM, email, online games, Facebook, YouTube - I worry that most people don't slow down and stop, if only for a moment, to wonder if they are indeed using technology or are they being used by it? I can count, on one hand, the number of people I know who are just as comfortable with technology as they are without, who may purposefully leave their phones behind for a little peace of mind, who may not turn on their computers for days at a time without even realizing so, who may find no less enjoyment in a book or a walk than surfing through the Internet. We have become so accustomed to electronic media that it is the rare individual indeed who can depend on such media for matters of communication or interaction - depend on them but not be dependent on them. The difference is a question of self-discipline - it is a matter of using technology without becoming addicted to it but how easy it is to become addicted.

Today's adolescents and children are especially susceptible to the technologically driven world of rapid response, having grown up with technology that is now regarded as the norm. Yet, it's not as if this generation moved beyond the need for self-reflection - we all need time to think and organize ourselves in private. With the typical American teenager exchanging more than 3000 texts and 640 minutes a month, this, unfortunately, seems like a remote possibility (Nielsen Company, 2010). Though cell phones cannot be held entirely responsible for the degradation of self-reflection, they have done little to promote it. Instead of

working towards an independent self capable of having thoughts and feelings, managing them, and deciding whether or not to share them, we, with cell phones in hand, now come to share things as we experience them. Whether you're distressed or delighted, you know your friends will be there to partake in those same emotions. Don't get me wrong - sharing feelings can be productive towards intimacy but if we incessantly turn to others for reactions, we may develop a fragile conception of the self, one that requires constant support and validation from others (Turkle, 2011). What is being cultivated here is not self-reflection but other-reflection; with cell phones, teenagers often turn to others as a way of completing their thoughts and if one friend should not respond to a text, they can simply move on and report their issues to another.

Trust and Autonomy

The debates surrounding cell phones are hardly black and white; it is not a question of whether teenagers or children should have cell phones or not but what they are doing with their phones that's of consequence. Despite the concerns raised earlier, there are a number of circumstances where it can be perfectly appropriate, even for very young children, to have phones. Aside from obvious scenarios where parent and child are separated in an amusement park or museum, cell phones can be tremendously beneficial for children who must travel far for school or after-school activities and often must wait for their parents to pick them up. The ability to instantaneously contact another is frequently cited as the primary reason why parents purchase phones for their kids, particularly after the events of 9/11 and school shootings like Columbine. After the bombing of the

World Trade Centers, fears about the safety of our children intensified as cell phones became regarded as emblems of emotional and physical safety. Connectivity, within this context of emergencies, can be wondrous towards reassuring one another that we are okay or reporting our status but, as we shall soon see, it is not without its problems.

In the past, when cell phones were not universal, every urban child undertook a rite of passage when he/she was allowed to venture off into the city alone and explore hence unknown territories. For both the parents and the child, this moment indicated a manifest recognition of trust and responsibility. In the former, parents had to trust their child would be able to navigate the city unaccompanied and thus hold themselves accountable for their own actions. In the latter, children were placed in a position of responsibility that could very much contribute to their independent decision-making, development of autonomy and maturation of self. I am reminded of when I was but seven or eight and used to travel to art festivals all across the United States with my father, who is a painter by profession. Of course, we didn't have cell phones, email, or texting so there was no way to communicate with each other when apart. The walkie-talkies we did have, with their limited range, served no real practical purpose other than tuning in to people's conversations and having a leisure laugh. Often then, when I was interested in exploration and my father was preoccupied with selling his artwork, I would be allowed to freely roam the area so long as I came back in a few hours' time. These moments of tremendous independence have helped me to this day to enjoy the rewards of solitude and self-sufficiency. If I got lost, as I sometimes did,

it was up to me to find my way back and, notwithstanding a few tears here and there, what an adventure that usually was. What's more, it was a precious thing to know, as a child, that your parent trusted you enough to take care of yourself, if only temporarily, and my allowances of freedom were a validation of that trust. Betraying it would have been akin to sacrilege and so, I made a point not to do so.

Today, a lot of parents might have heart attacks at the idea of letting their children wander freely in unfamiliar territories, claiming that if it is not child abuse, then it is at the very least irresponsible parenting. Yet, it's not as if by allowing me to roam around, my father threw me into a lion's den with strings of meat tied around my neck; I was usually informed of each area's general layout, observant of my surroundings, and careful not to venture too far (though admittedly this has failed me at times). Caught in the paranoia of stranger kidnappings and sexual abuse, modern parents often transgress the stretch between protectiveness and over-protectiveness, holding their child's hand at every step instead of guiding them along their paths. For instance, despite the relative safety of the New York City subway, when Lenore Skenazy, a columnist for *The New York Sun*, wrote a column in 2008 about letting her son take the subway home alone (without a cellphone, I might add), she received a tsunami of criticism from readers in what became a national news story. Two days after the column appeared, she was featured on *The Today Show*, MSNBC, Fox News, and a host of talk radio shows with the headline title: "America's Worst Mom?" Though stranger abductions nationwide are extremely rare and mortality rates for American children are lower now than they were 25 years ago, many of her critics

were wholly convinced her child had dodged gunfire, crack dealers, and sociopaths to make it home from that afternoon subway ride (Newsweek, 2008). Despite receiving some support and praise for allowing her child independent experiences, the fact that she received that much media attention for something so seemingly commonplace with previous generations points to how much parental protectiveness has amplified in recent years, perhaps needlessly so. Obviously, allowing more freedom may be appropriate for one child and inappropriate for another since each individual's maturity and psychological and emotional development must be taken into account. Even in light of this, however, there is all the difference in the world between parents living responsibly and parents living in fear.

With the aid of cell phones, the aforementioned rites of passages are now radically transformed, debilitating the growth on both ends of the parent-child relationship. Instead of parents demonstrating confidence in their children's ability to take care of themselves, they often tether children with the metaphorical leash that is the cell phone. Whereas kids were once given freedoms like riding the public transit alone, the modern child is sent off with a cell phone and a condition, the condition being that they answer their cell phone. In this way, parents can be constantly informed as to their child's whereabouts so that activities that would otherwise not have been allowed without the phone are allowed with it. But this is not the same as being alone; if I always call to ask where you are and what you are doing, I contribute nothing to your autonomy. The phenomenon of "helicopter parenting" has been widely reported - parents who incessantly "hover" over their

children and are overprotective to a fault. Parental involvement as a means of support can be reassuring to a child's development but counter-productive when overextending to every aspect of a child's life and negatively affecting their ability to solve problems and make decisions independently. For emergencies like 9/11, it is perfectly understandable that parents should want to know the location of their children and if they're okay but for everyday matters, cell phones can undermine the trust between relationships. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine any arrangement where cell phones cause autonomy; it's not as if because a child has a cell phone, he/she is independent. A child, however, can be independent and have a cell phone but this independence exists exclusively from the phone.

Likewise, we have a similar scenario with romantic relationships. It used to be that if a husband had to travel to another city, for business perhaps, his wife could do little to ensure that he was actually doing business and not running off with his arms wrapped around another woman. If these business occasions were frequent, the wife then must place a tremendous amount of trust in her husband since he very well could have an affair without her knowing. Due to the stationary nature of telephone landlines, it's not as if either partner could be reached anywhere at any time, making it near impossible to get caught in the act. Yet, with cell phones, romantic partners can continually be informed as to the other's whereabouts so much so that a lack of response may engender a breed of suspicion. Instead of trusting our partners, we may monitor them - "checking up" through calls, looking at one's call history, text messages, or pictures for suspicious activity. It is obvious that no relationship can be sustainable without a certain level of trust; we

cannot forever be in the physical presence of our partners and so, at one point or another, must trust that they do not cheat on you in your absence. What cell phones do not cultivate then is a foundation of trust, as seen in either case of romantic or parent-child relationships.

IV. Friends and Facebook

In the face of an ever increasing technological world, it is not just cell phones that are cause for some concern. Significantly, are social network sites an ally to friendships or a foe? The answer is not obvious. At the very least, it is clear that Facebook, the most prominent of the social network sites, has altered the way in which we use the term “friend,” so much so that individuals can be “friended” or “unfriended” with the mere click of a mouse. Indeed, the emergence and use of the word “friending” in the English language indicates how something different must be developing amongst virtual friendships that separate them from friendships in what we might call the “real” world. To account for such differences, I turn to Aristotle, who, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, provided one of the richest accounts of friendship to date. Though Aristotle lived in a very different time, in so recognizing the central role which friends play in our lives, much of what he said about friendship still holds true today. Hence, this section begins with an account of Aristotle’s topology of friendship, followed by an extensive discussion of how Facebook has affected the quality of such friendships, and ends with some brief remarks of how Facebook has influenced the way in which we behave.

Three Kinds of Friendship

Aristotle held that there are three different kinds of friendship: on the one hand, there are friendships based on either pleasure or utility; on the other, there are what he distinguishes as the highest form of friendship which consist of perfect friendships. Friendships of pleasure are those in which individuals seek out the company of others, precisely because of the joy it brings. This might be said of those who regularly affiliate with each other in virtue of belonging to the same organization, engaging in the same kind of hobby or sport together, and perhaps individuals who have passionate love affairs. In comparison, friendships of utility are those in which people take up the company of others in so far as they primarily benefit from them in some way. Relationships amongst classmates or co-workers are perhaps excellent examples in this regard. When working on projects or studying, classmates or co-workers might find it helpful to collaborate, particularly if there are complementary forces in play so that one individual is strong in one area and a second individual in another - in which case both members of the party are to benefit.

Of these two kinds of friendship, pleasure and utility, it can be said that such relationships are relatively fragile as they are (1) essentially grounded in the activity in question and (2) will consequently last only so long as there is pleasure or utility involved in said activity (Thomas, 2011). On the first point, if we are to take the earlier example of classmates studying together, it is easy enough to see how such classmates might meet only to partake in that specific activity. Likewise, in friendships of pleasure, individuals who regularly play basketball together or what have you might not meet otherwise. Though it is certainly

possible for the two forms of friendship to overlap in that the same two people who study together also play basketball together, this does not detract from the point that such interactions are indeed limited to those very interactions. In respect to the second point, precisely because so much emphasis is placed on the activities in question, when the purpose for which the friendship is formed somehow changes, the very reason for interacting in the first place disappears and the friendship will in all likelihood end. Such friendships can dissolve just as easily as they form.

The Perfect Friendship

Unlike friendships of pleasure or utility, which are bound together through objects of attention, friendships of the good are based upon the mutual recognition and respect of one another's moral excellence or character and a strong desire for the good of the friend for the friend's sake. In light of this, a profound difference between the earlier forms of friendship and friendships of the good is made apparent: in the former, the basis of interaction primarily revolves around accomplishing some means while in the latter, each party wants to spend time with another if only for that reason alone. Though individuals in friendships of the good may certainly do things regularly, as in the other friendships, what is essential about such relationships is that this is not the extent of their interactions. In this sense, friendships of this kind have a significantly stronger degree of permanence than the other kinds in that they are not so easily dissolved. What bind such friendships together are not some particular service or activity but mutual good-will and propensity to help each other become better people. And so,

while most of our friendships involve an ever-changing circle of friends of utility or pleasure, if we are lucky enough, we may prosper from those friendships of the highest form.

For such a friendship to give rise, however, is no small task, as Aristotle maintains that in order to love the other for whom he is and not any incidental quality, such companion friends must learn a considerable amount about the other and so spend a considerable amount of time together (Thomas, 2011). While this may seem like a rather evident point, there is an incredibly profound implication behind it. That is, part of what it means to spend time with another is to disclose particular bits of information about oneself either through verbal or perhaps even more significantly non-verbal behavior. In this way, individuals can discern much about another's character through such communication and bear witness to the kind of person one is - what one likes and dislikes, what one aspires to be, and so on and so on. Herein lies the enormous magnitude of Aristotle's point concerning companion friends in that by choosing to spend so much time together with another, you are in effect choosing someone who can view you in your entirety, someone who can see you in your strongest of moments and also your weakest. To voluntarily place oneself in such a vulnerable position can thus only speak volumes about the enormous amount of trust that must exist between such individuals.

It is important to note, however, that even friendships of the good may vary in degrees in that the strength of such ties need to be continually reinforced. Unlike family ties, which are not of our own volition and exist whether we enjoy them or

not, friendships are developed voluntarily through concrete actions. Friendships, in contrast to family relationships then, are relatively fragile and require a regular investment of communication and other behavioral exchanges to maintain, otherwise the strength of such friendships decline and end over time (Duck, 1998). Though this is not to say that individuals can't share particularly fond memories of the past, there is no such friendship that flourishes when based entirely on the past. Alas, if the formation of such friendships was not difficult enough already, there may be some serious encumbrances for these friendships to be maintained - geographical distance and personal responsibilities serve as prime examples of such. No doubt however that the nature of communication has changed drastically over the years as technology and social network sites, like Facebook, have done much to improve and indeed preserve contact between individuals. While I shall highlight this feature as being one of the more positive aspects of sites like Facebook later, the kinds of interactions that take place online cannot be nearly as rich as face-to-face interactions. With that I now turn my attention to how Facebook has perhaps altered the very conception of friendship and its formation.

Friendship and Facebook

What is amazing about social network sites, most notably Facebook, is that they have facilitated what I shall call a "polarization of friendships" such that the strongest and weakest forms of friendship are more likely to be found. I will further argue that there is also a middle ground between such polarizations, namely that Facebook allows one to sustain and even renew friendships or

previous relationships and in this sense, Facebook has very much revolutionized the way relationships can be maintained or incurred. On the first note concerning polarization, I assert that technology has encouraged something along the lines like a spectrum of friendships, such that many of one's friendships are allocated towards one end of the spectrum or the other. At one end, there is the strongest possible conception of friendship, Aristotle's friendship of the good; at the other, there is what I shall call the loosest possible conception of "friendship," a kind of friendship that Aristotle may not have considered.

The Loosest Conception of Friendship - Acquaintances

It seems hard to call the latter form of "friendship" a friendship at all since they essentially consist of those whom you have "friended" on Facebook despite knowing little or perhaps nothing about them. Indeed, when referring to such individuals, the term "Friend" seems so loosely applied that perhaps the term "acquaintance" deems more appropriate. That is, in consideration of Aristotle's topology of friendship, regardless of the kind of friendship in question, all of them required a certain degree of "work" to build that particular relationship. As Danah Boyd notes, "Friendships are built on mutual knowledge of each other's lives and the lives of those they know. Social and emotional support is one of those outcomes" (Boyd, 2008). Hence, it is not so much that individuals, A and B, are friends in virtue of A knowing personal details about B or vice versa but rather that A and B reciprocate and share information with one another as a means to build and sustain trust.

In light of this then, Facebook has seemingly altered the very dynamics of friendship maintenance perhaps in a more detrimental manner than one might imagine. It has done so by facilitating a social environment where the number of Friends you have acts very much like a social currency, where more Friends perhaps lends to a higher social image or presence. Coupled with the relative ease of "friending" people on Facebook, it becomes easy to imagine how one might "friend" a significant number of people irrespective of their actual relationship with them. However, having established that a particular amount of work is necessary to build a friendship, it becomes obvious that a person who has something like 1000 friends on their friends list on Facebook could not actually maintain all those relationships, at least not in a meaningful manner. Humans, after all, only have so much time in a day. Amongst such social network sites thus, "Wellman observed that a typical personal network included 3-6 very close and intimate ties, 5-15 less close but still significant and active ties, and about 1000 more distant acquaintances" (Donath and Boyd, 2004). Though people in close relationships do communicate via Facebook, the vast majority of these relationships are in actuality more acquaintances than friends. In what I call "friendships of emulation," (I will elaborate on this in the next chapter) we brag about how many "friends" we have on Facebook, but they are not ties that stick; they are ties that preoccupy (Turkle, 2011). The success of such social networking services (SNSs) then lies in their ability to connect with multiple weak ties simultaneously.

Though these weaker connections amongst social network sites may certainly provide individuals with more access to new knowledge or opportunities via "connections," a potentially negative consequence seems more likely to result. This is seen most aptly in the form of News Feeds, which makes no differentiation between acquaintances and Aristotle's three kinds of friendship, subsequently providing updates from all of them and not just from those of a particularly close knit. Precisely because such social information is so easily accessible and available, people may be inclined to follow the lives of other individuals, even if this data doesn't help them; hence the popular notion of "Facebook stalking." By looking at status updates, wall posts, group memberships, profiles, attended events, mutual friends, and perhaps most significantly photos, one can gain a wealth of information about someone you barely know. Even without direct interaction, people may very well form emotional attachments to essentially perfect strangers and believe them to be friends when this is not the case at all, which has potentially devastating emotional effects.

The Strongest Conception of Friendship

While I have asserted ways in which Facebook has encouraged a social medium where more acquaintances can be found than friends and the negative results of such, Facebook can also be said to have strengthened relationships so as to reach Aristotle's notion of true friendship. If the loosest possible conception of friendship is to be found in acquaintances, the strongest possible conception of friendship is to be found in Aristotle's companion friends. Interestingly enough,

though these friendships are essentially on opposite sides of a spectrum, it seems that Facebook has facilitated relationships of both kinds though admittedly, it has surely promoted more of the former than the latter. One may be rather baffled now with regards to this polarization theory as it is one thing to say that Facebook encourages the weakest of ties between individuals and quite the opposite to say it encourages the strongest of ties as well, especially in consideration of my previous discussion of the enormous difficulties involved in acquiring so-called friendships of the good.

A matter of clarification thus seems to be in order; my claim is not so much that Facebook produces companion friends but rather that it strengthens and affirms the bonds that already exist between friends of a close knit. I say that Facebook does not produce companion friends as even though it is possible for individuals to meet on Facebook and go on to become the very best of friends and perhaps spouses for that matter, my point is that such friendships cannot be maintained or prosper if it exists exclusively on the online domain and not in real life. Regardless of how frequently we may communicate with each other on Facebook, friends must physically be there to support each other and extend a helping hand when necessary. What's more, the kinds of interactions that take place online are not even remotely analogous to the richness of face-to-face interactions. This is not to say that one cannot share precious moments online in which meaningful conversations are ensued. This is to say however that such modes of interactions are severely lacking in social cues, which, as noted, take the form of verbal and non-verbal cues and are essential to the maintenance and

flourishing of communication. In face-to-face interactions, something so small as the raising of a brow or the way in which one smiles can provide incredible insight as to the character of another person and the way in which the conversation is flowing. All of these small moments and the ways in which one can respond to them grant face-time an unbelievable amount of richness and depth of which simply cannot be replicated online.

In this regard, Facebook can be said to strengthen companion friendships by affirming the very instances that are shared together in face time. By posting pictures an individual and their companion friend have shared together, one may very well reinforce such moments so as to make them more memorable than they already are. Such personal moments necessarily affirm and confirm the affection and affability that already exists between them; their sharing pictures with one another are merely a segment of their rich history of spending time together. Further, if one has done so and so or gone to a particular place without their companion friend, Facebook allows oneself to share those moments with the other almost instantaneously by posting pictures or the like online. Though it is surely noted that friends of lesser forms may be able to view such pictures as well, because a companion friendship is grounded in sharing personal information and spending time with one another, such pictures serve entirely different meanings to the acquaintance than to the companion. For the acquaintance, they may serve only an illusory effect for which no genuine reciprocity is involved. For the companion, they serve as a way to reinforce and strengthen existing bonds.

Middle Ground

Though the polarization theory seems like an all-or-nothing approach, there is a middle ground to be found in that Facebook also allows for friendships that would have otherwise expired to be leveled or renewed. Just as scales often have a neutral point in the middle, so is there a balancing point with the polarization theory. This position seems to apply most suitably for friendships based on pleasure or utility and particularly relationships whose spatial distance is of great significance. Considering how easy it is to communicate on Facebook, individuals can seemingly remain in or revive contact with others without so much as leaving their computer. In a sense, Facebook permits for the minimum amount of "work" to maintain friendships. However, provided that friendships require regular contact to survive, this method of sustenance by itself cannot be sustainable for relationships since there is almost no active effort involved in their regulation. It seems that no matter how strong you may perceive a relationship to be, such a relationship cannot survive exclusively through non-face time interactions and even then they cannot exist without continuous interaction, face-time included.

The ability to maintain or rekindle relationships through Facebook can be a wonderful thing, especially for those who have moved to a new geographical area, but there are some concerns to be raised. In the case of teenagers moving from high school to college, staying connected with your high school friends is nice and all but college is meant to indicate a new phase in your life and with it, new friends and new experiences. Though we should obviously not renounce all our previous friendships, we should be careful not to remain plastered to our old lives, unable to move beyond the past. Indeed, when considering our present

friendships, we find that many of our past friendships from childhood to adolescence to adulthood were ultimately short-lived since they changed naturally with the passing years. Yet, when we should resurrect and subsequently maintain a large percentage of past relationships through Facebook, we run the risk of impeding the development of the deeper sorts of friendships that matter most. Rather than spread our time thickly amongst previous and lesser friendships of pleasure and utility, we should instead concentrate our efforts towards the formation and flourishing of Aristotle's perfect friendships, friendships that stand the test of time and lend the most meaning to our lives. That most avid Facebook users would generally admit they loiter or "waste" their time when on the social networking site demonstrates how Facebook may run against true friendships.

Interestingly, the ease with which we can preserve or revitalize relationships has further given rise to the practice of "hooking-up," which involves all the benefits of sexual relations without any of the commitments. While hook-ups typically occur between individuals who hardly know each other, they can transpire amongst previous girlfriends or boyfriends. In fact, 1 out of 5 divorces cite Facebook as one of the reasons for divorce (*The Telegraph*, 2009). There is nothing to suggest Facebook directly causes divorces, but, once again, the ease with which you can contact others and rekindle previous relationships may certainly bait the process along.

In a way then, Facebook can be said to *both* lower our expectations of ourselves as well as each other. With the former, it seems that Facebook has contributed a great deal towards self-deception. The preceding information

regarding divorces certainly points in such a direction for the rate of adultery has risen substantially since the emergence of Facebook and other such social networking sites. Though adultery is certainly not new, websites like Facebook have made it all the easier to connect with previous relationships and have inappropriate sexual or flirtatious chats. What's amazing here is the failure to grasp the simple reality that such contact with an ex cannot bode well for one's marriage; in what world can constant interaction with a previous partner be positive for a committed relationship? Most marital affairs are doubtlessly the product of people convincing themselves that they are not cheating on their partners despite engaging in the utmost secrecy and hiding any suspicious activity.

Of particular pertinence to the middle ground theory is the idea too that Facebook lowers our expectations of each other. Instead of building connections face-to-face, we may spend an increasing amount of time devoted to our online life - chatting on Facebook or idling for hours at other people's pictures and comments. Yet, as with cell phones, becoming too accustomed to these mediated interactions may prove detrimental to our face-to-face communication. The danger lies not only in the growing absence of face-time but that conversations that are more suitable face-to-face are now found more frequently on Facebook. For example, instead of making phone calls to people on their birthday, it has become much more commonplace to wish someone "Happy Birthday" on their "wall" on Facebook. The same goes for apologies, confessions, and even break-ups.

Facebook, in this sense, may serve as an intermediary space for contact that would have been more burdensome or awkward in person. In other words, it is a place to hide. In regards to apologies, the foundation of an apology lies within its capacity to acknowledge the wrong that has been done and rectify the situation in accordance with the offended party. However, the intimate nature of such interactions demands an equally intimate environment to express them; without the full range of social cues available to us on Facebook then, what are we to make of apologies and the like? Technology makes it easy to lose sight of what an apology really is and how impersonal the online space can be. On Facebook, all it takes is a few strokes of the keyboard - "I'm sorry." and we don't even have to mean it. While we have the benefit of evaluating the sincerity of an apology face-to-face, this advantage is lost in a text based media as intonations like sarcasm become difficult to detect. Even if we allow that apologies or what have you are just as sincere online as they are off, this still does not detract from the point that a greater amount of effort is exerted in directly locating and confronting the person we want to talk to than simply posting comments online and leaving it at that; the former is far more pronounced than the latter. The same can be said for confessions and break-ups, which, even more so than apologies, seem to demand the minimum courtesy of explaining why you want to break up.

The intermediary space of Facebook also provides a platform where the application of foresight is often neglected and personal information is over-exposed. While the process of self-regulation occurs so naturally and automatically in real time (owing to the very reality of another's physical

presence and the various observations of non-verbal cues), the responsibility of honoring social civilities online becomes much more forced and must be individually invoked. Without the visibility and familiar cues real time conversations thus afford, people engaged in online interactions are more likely to openly express themselves and perhaps disregard the feelings of others. On Facebook, such instances of increased self-disclosure or hostility seem to occur on a regular basis; I often hear stories about people leaving messages on Facebook in a moment of weakness or frustration only to regret writing them later on.

Buffered by our online identity, we think we have permission to act unkindly or harsh towards others without realizing the consequences of our actions and the harm we may have caused. It is important to note, however, that because those who regularly interact with each other on Facebook generally know each other in real life, this partial lack of anonymity adds a degree of accountability and tempers, to some extent, antagonistic behavior. Additionally, because we are interacting with people we are already familiar with, even without non-verbal feedback, we can already know how such and such would react and avoid much of what they would find to be offensive. Yet, even in consideration of such prior relationships, we have all likely inadvertently performed some indiscretion on Facebook without fully comprehending, at the time, its scope or consequences. When this does happen, it's not as if such messages somehow disappear from the Internet; they remain imprinted on the web whether you like it or not, showcasing you perhaps at your worst. For example, although a person who regrets posting a compromising or disagreeable photo on Facebook may remove it later, there is no

telling how many have already viewed it or if it was downloaded and reposted somewhere else.

On the flipside, Facebook has also unsettled the norms about self-disclosure, making it easier to be honest online without considering again the potential social repercussions of such honesty. While it is possible to adjust your privacy settings on Facebook and hence regulate people's access to your personal data, people rarely take advantage of this option (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). The kind of information shared on Facebook then may be appropriate in one context, perhaps amongst your closest friends, but not so much between your professional colleagues. However, because Facebook makes no such differentiation in the News Feed, our messages and behavior may be visible to unintended and sometimes unexpected audiences. In what I dub the "spill-over effect," online information can often "spill over" to others without our meaning so to potentially damaging effects. When professors or potential employers look at the profiles of university students, for example, the information available can tarnish reputations and cost students jobs.

Spill-over Effect

Though the spill-over effect might seem, at first glance, without benefits, it is instrumental in forwarding the use of foresight online. Since more and more law enforcement agents, potential employers, and school administrations are using Facebook as a valuable information-gathering resource, people might begin to be more cautious as to what they put online, particularly if this information is incriminating. Teenagers who drink underage, for instance, may think twice

before posting pictures of themselves intoxicated at parties, beer bottles in either hand. So, too, may those who participate in crimes become hesitant about broadcasting or instigating such activity on Twitter. I am amazed to no end how many in the London riots posted pictures of themselves with goods they looted from local businesses on Twitter or Facebook, some with grinning headshots. It's not as if I'm promoting underage drinking or looting but if you're going to do something foolish anyway, you might as well be smart about it. If anything, such activity reveals how "immature" our relationship with technology still is and our tendency to think of the online world as a consequence-free environment.

On a more relatable level, the spill-over effect can be applied to the widespread practice of Facebook stalking. With stalking, we may become increasingly knowledgeable about other individuals and spend hours browsing through others' pictures and posts without even realizing so. When this information carries over from the virtual world into the real world, we become aware that the Internet does not exist exclusively within its own domain. This spill-over can be anywhere from expected to downright creepy depending on the nature of the relationships in question. If, for example, your close friend brings up a concert or event you attended over the weekend without him/her, you would probably not be all that surprised since you may regularly check each other's Facebook accounts in virtue of your friendship. On the other hand, if someone you hardly know from class or work brings up that same information, you would likely be puzzled if not alarmed as to how he/she knows that. You might begin to

question how easily accessible your personal information really is and adjust your privacy settings accordingly.

Fueled by our own insecurities as to whether we are being watched or not, I believe the spill-over effect will facilitate privacy's place on the Internet in something akin to panopticism. In Jeremy Bentham's design for a panopticon, the architecture incorporated a central tower in a circular building with an observer at the hub, unable to be seen (Foucault, 1995). In the case of a prison, guards would be able to watch the prisoners at all times but the prisoners, from their points of observation, could never know if they were being watched or not. Always subject to visibility, this structure encourages internalization of the system's rules and regulations and eliminates the need for force. For Foucault, the panoptic model of surveillance is representative of contemporary society. Aided by new technologies, such as closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras, citizens monitor and discipline their own behavior according to the normalized codes of conduct so that even if we are certain there is nobody else around at that crosswalk at four in the morning, we will likely stop at that "STOP" sign nonetheless. By analogy, the Internet is structured in such a way that every citizen may believe they could be surveyed by any person at any time and so inscribes within themselves the principle of self-surveillance. With law enforcement agents and potential employers increasingly looking at Facebook accounts for suspicious activity, I have the feeling that people will become more cautious as to what they put online, especially if such information is damaging to one's character.

Public vs. Private

On a side note, I would like to briefly describe the seemingly contradictory nature that technological communication affords. The paradox of electronic messaging is that it is both public and private. It is private in the sense that messages and pictures of a rather intimate nature are communicated across Facebook but it is public in that such messages are available for many to see, most of which, as we already established, are more strangers than friends. But there are significant problems with delivering private messages across a public domain; for one, if we should make no differentiation between who sees what, intimacy, in its traditional sense, is relinquished. For example, imagine that my brother uses Facebook frequently and assumes that those close to him will check his profile for updates. If he posted, one day, that he was now engaged to his girlfriend on his Facebook profile and I had to find out through this post, I would be downright insulted. Though he may have meant no harm in doing so and simply thought that this was the quickest and most accessible way of letting people know, precisely because of the close nature of our relationship, this information would be so much more meaningful to me than let's say "Steve," with whom he works with.

Privacy concerns surrounding Facebook are, however, not as bleak as I may suggest. With the recent introduction of "Groups" on Facebook, an application that allows users to create groups and collaborate within them, Facebook has demonstrated its ability to develop as a company and cater to individuals who want to share information with a smaller audience. With Groups, it is now possible to communicate exclusively amongst family and close friends and broadcast information to those who are most likely to care. In regards to the

polarization theory of Facebook then, it is this very feature that contributes to the affirmation and reinforcement of perfect friendships.

V. Online Relationships and Avatars

While I have discussed, in the previous chapters, how digital environments can affect relationships between those who likely know each other in real life, I would like to now turn the discussion towards online environments where interactions between strangers are more prominent. Online, there are tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of special interest groups, organized mailing lists, and websites that cover every topic imaginable, ranging from classical antiquity in the Middle Ages to hats made of meat to cats that look like Hitler (I kid you not). Within this world of new media, shared location is no longer a prerequisite for forming relationships; in online worlds and particularly massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), people can spend a great deal of time interacting with digital versions of each other. On the MMORPG Second Life, for example, users, called "residents," interact with each other in a virtual world through characters they create called "avatars." Upon choosing how one looks, users can then explore, socialize with other residents, join groups with common interests, attend concerts, play sports, get a job, and trade virtual property and services with one another. You can even marry other residents and build a family together. With such a wide range of activities available, it is easy to see how one might obsess over their "second" lives so much so that it becomes prudent to question whether the formation of online relationships are healthy or harmful. Therefore, after discussing why people might form new relationships on the internet, this

chapter examines the potential dangers and benefits to be found in online encounters, turning to questions of identity negotiation, authenticity, and honesty.

The Appeal of Online Relationships

In the unique context of cyberspace, anonymity plays many distinctive psychological roles in the expression of different social behaviors. More than the aforementioned impact of reduced social cues and the disinhibiting effect, anonymous communication online offers a number of other features, including, but not limited to, (1) equalized status, (2) common interests, and (3) lower social risks. Even if not seeking online relationships explicitly, such features might elicit an intrinsic propensity towards participating in online contexts. With regard to the first feature, equalized status, the Internet is said to be inherently democratic, equalizing both gender-based power and status differentials. Since our gender, race, wealth, status, physical appearance, and other features of public identity are not immediately evident online, there may be an equal distribution of social power. With online gaming, in particular, strangers are deprived of your personal, historical, and societal circumstances, forcing them to judge you impartially according to the information you present them.

Without any of the backstory, they may withhold any bias from physical characteristics and judge you more favorably than in person. Although one's status in the real world ultimately will have some effect on their identity online, the Internet, if not diminishing status signifiers as a factor in communication, at the very least provides us more options and control for self-presentation. In textual media especially, instead of being judged perhaps by the color of our skin,

what determines our influence on others is primarily our skill and use of written language and the quality of our ideas. On online games, one's name as well as presentation of one's avatar can also serve as significant markers of who we are. While one might say there is no difference in trading one status signifier for another in consideration of avatars, precisely because avatars may take any form users choose (human, animal, mineral, vegetable, or a combination thereof), there is just not the same kind or degree of resentment and discrimination towards, let's say, carrots as there is against black people.

Indeed, the online environment can be an incredible platform for people to share ideas and opinions as it generally provides both neutrality and equal status. From such discussions, the most unlikely friendships may develop for no other reason than the sharing of common interests: friendships, in this way, may span across different countries, races, and ages. Further, when one should participate in a specific interest group online, the underlying presumption of similarity can make others potentially more appealing and relatable. If I should join an interest group, for instance, devoted to the discussion of the cuteness of puppies, I might already feel a base connection with others there because of our affiliation in this select interest. Though there is obviously no guarantee that all of the members in specific interest groups should possess exact overlapping tastes or qualities, the assumption of similarity alone may function as a natural focal point towards conversation and congruence.

By comparison, the success of support groups in “real” life thrives upon the assumption that each of the participating members share similar relevant

experiences. By "relevant experiences," I mean the experiences that pertain to the primary function of the support group in question. In the case of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), the primary function of the organization is to help alcoholics achieve and maintain sobriety; it would make little sense for sober individuals who have never experienced the slightest addiction to alcohol or are, in any way, affiliated with alcoholics to regularly attend AA meetings targeting individuals with drinking problems. It is the presumption of similarity amongst alcoholics in AA discussions and meetings that allows alcoholics to so openly reveal and share stories and information that might otherwise be recognized as reprehensible by sober individuals.

With regard to the third point, lower social risks, there seem to be many parallels that can be drawn between communicating via avatars and communicating through a non-verbal medium such as e-mail or texting via cellphones. All of them offer, in a word, protection; they enable a great deal of control over the course of the conversation and how you might be portrayed to the other interactant. Screen communication, in this way, can be preferable to calls since, in the former, you have more opportunity to plan, reflect, select, and edit what you say and how you say it. You can respond to and control messages at your own pace and advertise the good aspects of yourself without revealing any information as to how much time you may have spent carefully crafting such messages or perhaps how misrepresentative the information you present can be. I say "misrepresentative" not necessarily in a negative fashion, since it is often the

case that we choose to present ourselves in certain ways and negotiate with different identities when interacting with different people in real life.

It is generally agreed upon that a single person's identity embodies multiple roles in real life. We do not talk the same way to a professor or a police officer as we might to our parents or our friends. This much is obvious and the idea is not new. While much more can be said about identity negotiation, construction, and self-identification and many books have indeed been dedicated to these topics, due to space constraints, I wish only make a rather simple point. Unlike in real life, when communicating via online platforms, there are many ways I can present information about myself that is so obviously false but simply cannot be verified online. For instance, though I am a 21 year old Asian-American male, online, I could pretend to be a 46 year old African-American woman going through an abortion, a loveless marriage, and perhaps some unfortunate balding on the side. It might certainly be difficult to assume such a radically different identity but by no means impossible. Though there is admittedly no guarantee of truthfulness in reality either, it is possible to deceive others about the most basic of our physical properties online (e.g. race, age, gender) in ways that are just not possible in face-to-face interactions. At a mere glance in real life, it is easy to see that I possess neither female body parts nor that I am in my 40s. While this is not to say people are necessarily more deceptive online than off, the extremities by which people can deceive one another surely seem broader online; we have all heard, in one variation or another, news stories about sixty year old pedophiles passing

themselves off as fourteen year old teenagers, a feat that is out of the question in real life.

Escapism vs. Working Out

When talking about online life, I identify two ways one can primarily experiment with their identities: one unhealthy way, escapism, and one healthy alternative, working-through. With regard to the first way, though escapism should not be understood as fundamentally and exclusively negative, when taken to the extreme, it involves a detachment or unwillingness to connect with physical reality. This notion of escapism pertains most relevantly to MMORPGS, where you can just sign on and instantaneously communicate with other online members, regardless of whether you know them or not. The function of such relationships may be for pleasure's sake or to accomplish a certain task, just as friendships of pleasure or utility, but its persistent use indicates a certain level of escapism. In the minutiae of daily life, video games present the opportunity to transport the user beyond everyday existence and play a role outside one's identity. Whether it be slashing your way through zombie-infested wastelands or sailing the world on digital waves, games can be wildly entertaining and even thought-provoking but if we are always in the presence of technologically mediated interactions and completely immerse ourselves in virtual worlds, we deprive ourselves of the richness to be found face-to-face.

If we don't negotiate with people face-to-face and become increasingly reliant on technology as a mode of communication, we may, through MMORPGs like Second Life, develop what I call "friendships of emulation." It is hard to call these

relationships friendships at all. They are more holograms of friendship than the real thing, attempting to reap the benefits of companionship without negotiating with any of its demands. Like friendships of pleasure or utility, they are confined to a particular activity but what makes friendships of emulation even hollower are the anonymous nature under which such interactions take place and the unbelievable fragility of their duration. These relationships are further distinct from Aristotle's earlier forms of friendships in that they are not necessarily grounded between individuals A and B but located within any number of members in an online group. Since, in Aristotle's time, there was nothing remotely close to the communication capabilities available online today, his theories of friendship were envisioned with face-to-face interactions in mind and are not necessarily applicable to online relationships. Quite simply, he could not have accounted for something that did not yet exist. Unlike Aristotle's three kinds of friendship then, emulated friends are not so much connections between people as they are connections with technological domains. We have a friendship of emulation then when one should consistently prefer to interact with virtual strangers on online platforms instead of with friends in real life.

That one should find more comfort talking to people on online platforms than in person suggests that strangers, in some ways, may feel closer than friends. This idea is not entirely unfamiliar. In psychotherapy, for example, people often develop close relationships with their therapists and, at the promise of confidentiality, reveal incredibly personal and intimate information about themselves, of which even their closest friends may not know. Though online

interactions afford no such promise, anonymity has allowed for a similar kind of self-disclosure. In both cases, however, there is no certainty that trust is being built in such relationships. Crucial to building trust in friendships are a number of shared experiences so that as your friend, you come to know many things about me and I know many things about you. The process is inherently two-sided. But since your therapist or online interactant might not share anywhere near the amount of information you do, what may be mistook for friendship is actually a one-sided relationship. If I open up to you but you hardly speak in return, how can we possibly be friends? This is not to say that therapists are not beneficial but rather there are potentially harmful effects in thinking you are closely connected to another when, in fact, you are not.

That friendship requires a great deal of work has already been established. But if, as in MMORPGs, such as Second Life, users can converse with any number of people only to sign off and perhaps never meet again, what are we to make of these fleeting relationships? If connections can end just as quickly as they start, they cannot be at all sustainable. Bored with one conversation or activity with one person, we may move onto the next without the slightest commitment or assumption of responsibility in maintaining interaction. Sure enough, relationships on Second Life can progress into more permanent kinds of friendship but this is difficult given the nature of such online platforms is grounded in multiplicity and anonymity. In online interactions then, there is the danger that we believe ourselves to be in friendships when, in fact, they are merely the illusion of friendships.

When discussing this argument regarding escapism, it should be understood that I am focusing particularly on those who allocate a great portion of their time on chatrooms, video games, and other such digital environments. Though it is difficult to specify exactly how much time an individual must spend for such arguments to qualify, if a person perhaps compulsively pours hours each night interacting on a game like Second Life, this is a general indication that one's socialization in virtual worlds is less like a hobby as it is their "life." Hence, the following argument may not necessarily apply to individuals who only sporadically play video games or participate in chatrooms, but rather holds most strongly to those who value virtual interactions to the extent their real world interactions and relationships suffer as a result.

Unlike escapism, the enterprise of working-through issues online involves a tether to the physical reality. In the context of traumatic experiences, psychoanalysts identify working-through as involving a process of conflict resolution, whereby past conflicts are acknowledged, reflected upon, and though one does not utterly transcend the past, one does not remain cemented to the past either. While there is no guarantee for a cure in working-through, there is, at the very least, a possibility for new resolutions or the assumption of responsibility. When working-out problems online then, individuals use the resources and materials of online life to cultivate and practice skills that can be applied in real life settings. This can be especially important and relevant to socially anxious or lonely individuals or those with stigmatized social identities, such as homosexuality or embarrassing or otherwise anomalous illnesses. Because such

individuals may not find an equivalent kind of social support in real life to express significant parts of their identity, participation in online groups devoted to so and so identity can prove extraordinarily rewarding and valuable. Moreover, as McKenna and Bargh (1988) found in their study of identity and virtual group participation, since such online groups may be the only avenue by which they can express that aspect of their identity, members are more likely to monitor their behavior in accordance with the norms of that group, meaning they will likely offer positive rather than negative feedback for candid expressions of identity. As such, individuals who test out honest self-disclosure and practice skills such as willfulness and perseverance online can, with the aid of accepting cohorts, gain the confidence and competence to transfer such skills to real-life scenarios.

While it may be possible for the stigmatized individuals to seek help in person, the anonymity afforded by Internet groups and the guarantee of social contact with individuals with similar interests and/or backgrounds (by virtue of the sheer number of people who use the Internet) make for powerful reasons to seek help online instead. Gay teenagers, as such, may first seek out support in online groups dedicated to gay identities to reduce uncertainty about themselves and gain the confidence they need before telling their family and friends. So too might those with grave illnesses seek out others with the same illness online for social support and fulfillment of the basic need to belong. How we work through such issues and interact with people online can have profound influences on our behavior in reality.

Within the context of virtual reality (VR) environments, for example, recent research has found that the virtual world can even be utilized as a tool for assessing and treating addictions (ScienceDaily, 2008). That is, patients in therapy attempting to overcome addictions or phobias can practice coping in safe VR settings that stimulate real-life responses. In the case of alcohol-dependent individuals, patients practice saying “no” in very realistic, social environments, featuring various scenarios they might find challenging: a house party with guests smoking and drinking, a bar featuring their drink of choice, a corner shop with alcoholic beverages within hand’s reach. Especially in virtual worlds where avatars are designed to closely resemble their creators, the power of such VR simulations comes from watching yourself in the third person performing or perhaps not performing certain behaviors and transferring such actions to the real world. This idea of working-through problems in online environments starkly contrasts with the earlier notion of escapism; whereas the latter pertains to individuals who are more or less obsessed with their virtual identities, the former involves individuals who use online groups much like a base of support that is still connected to reality.

VI. Online Confessional Sites

Confessions no longer only take place in church; they now reign in the online world. Most confessional sites such as PostSecret provide anonymity and rarely filter out content. Irregularly reading such revelations for the past few months, I’ve noticed some lean towards penitence but most describe embarrassing moments, pent-up longings, or downright atrocious acts. Without the fear of

reprisal, we may, as Plato noted in the *Republic*, do whatever we please. Through the story of the ring of Gyges, a mythical artifact that grants its user the power of invisibility, Plato discusses how even morally just individuals can turn morally bankrupt with such a ring. With anonymity online, we may slip on something akin to the ring of Gyges and thus become invisible to the world around us, to the scrutiny of our peers, and the accountability of our actions. On PostSecret, where individuals mail in confessions anonymously on homemade postcards before being posted on the website, the darkest and most twisted of thoughts can come to light. It is in this setting that I wish to analyze the consequences of anonymity in regards to communication as well as relationships.

In one sense, Plato predicted exactly the kind of behavior to be expected online in the face of anonymity. While I will later discuss the potential benefits to be found in such mediated communication, I now turn to a more prominent form of online communication, namely "flaming." In what may be regarded as a kind of Internet road rage, flaming often involves cursing, name-calling, derogatory insults (usually involving "yo momma"), and often antagonistic behavior. Whereas physical presence mandates certain social norms concerning courtesy and civility, the lack thereof indicates an "anything-goes" barbed wire cage match. Though flaming might begin as a heated difference in opinions, it can erupt into a cataclysm of abrasive messaging with no hope of a resolution. In some cases, flaming is done playfully for entertainment's sake and viewed as an integral component of sporting activities or games; "trash talk" or "smack" in this context should not be taken too seriously. But more often than not, flaming in mediated

interactions is seen as an opportunity to be hostile, to displace strong emotions with strangers and exert each opinion as if it were fact. While certainly not all individuals "flame," the fact is, with technology, we are warranted a multitude of new opportunities to attack others without accountability in a way not possible face-to-face.

The anonymity found on online confessional sites not only buffers individuals from the consequences of their actions but provides a platform, not unlike Facebook, for increased honesty and self-disclosure. Precisely because there are no direct social repercussions to what we say on PostSecret, confessions are often stricken with rather negative undertones, commonly containing graphic descriptions of sexual or criminal misdeeds. Whether it be cheating on a partner or murder, the word "confession" evokes emotional pangs of guilt and almost sinister secrets, of which we seemingly have a compulsion to admit. The larger the secret, the more it claws at our innards, fighting to break free. Yet, instead of confessing face-to-face, which might bring criticism or disapproval, we may turn to online confessional sites and attempt to relieve ourselves of negative feelings without directly dealing with a person. But venting feelings is not the same as sharing them; sharing involves a multiplicity of involvement that can contribute to the building and reinforcement of relationships, venting to strangers online does no such thing.

Though some confessional sites offer the option of commenting on posts, the majority of such sites involve anonymous users simply posting information about themselves, to which anyone on the Internet can view. It is not so much then that

these sites provide a community of support for its members where some worrying posts attract the aid of other users, but that the users in question post information as a way of relief. Just as Facebook offers "cheap" alternatives for confrontation (e.g. apologizing online), sites like PostSecret offer similar conveniences - the same story through a different medium. If we have a problem, we can simply post it online instead of confronting it. To be sure, confessions can be somewhat therapeutic but they are not to be confused with apologies. Unlike the latter, which seeks to acknowledge a predicament and resolve it, the former does nothing to alleviate a situation except to make one feel better afterwards. In this way, such sites may serve as impediments to actual confrontation since we may post confessions online and think that it is enough to assuage ourselves of such negative emotions.

By seeking protection from criticism online, technology may leave us vulnerable in new ways. When telling stories that are particularly upsetting or intimate face-to-face, we usually expect our listeners to heed with sympathetic ears and comfort us as a result. We want to be cared for and told everything is going to be okay. Surely if we recount a traumatic experience to our friends, being mugged at gunpoint perhaps, we do not expect them to reprimand us for maybe walking through that questionable neighborhood. Similarly, when we confess something online, we unwittingly invest our emotions in other people's reactions and imagine being nurtured by strangers. However, though there is nothing to suggest strangers cannot reassure you the same way a friend would, the sheer scale and availability of our confessions online certainly leaves us that much more

open to cruelty, especially in the form of flaming. Under the assumption of acceptance, we may find ourselves surprised at being denounced as being "stupid" or "foolish" for walking in that area and subsequently get hurt in the process. Regardless of whether the confessions on PostSecret are true or just fabrications, the power of other's feedback is not to be ignored as even delivering false "good news" may make oneself feel good so long as there is positive feedback or, on the contrary, guilty for misrepresenting oneself.

On something of a side note, I would like to briefly turn to the idea of "online communities." When users should refer to sites like "PostSecret," "YouTube," or "Imgur" as online communities, what exactly does that mean? While there are many features of communities that may resonate in online contexts, including shared space, practice, and identity, I would argue that the quintessential property of communities is boundaries. Regardless of whether communities exist in the virtual or physical world, when you're in a community, you know who's in it and you know who isn't. Yet, if sites like "YouTube" are comprised of millions of users and the only qualification for becoming a user is an email address and a password, there is bound to be a significant amount of variation and subgroups within this single site.

Concluding Remarks

While I have primarily argued throughout the paper all the potential dangers to be found in using digital media, oddly enough, I do not think the future is all that bleak (a dramatic far-cry from how I felt when I first started pondering about these issues). Originally, I envisioned a dystopian future much like the one in

Wall-e, where everyone was essentially isolated from everyone else, each mindlessly consumed with their individual screens on their mechanical chairs. In such a future, individuals would pay so much attention to their personal devices that they become thoroughly disengaged with the world around them and, to a great extent, socially inept. Let me elaborate on this latter point. It is no secret that a significant part of face-to-face communication consists of non-verbal cues. Part of what allows a conversation and interaction to flow fluidly, or at all, lies in our ability to pick up on non-verbal cues and read them correctly.

If a friend who is usually energetic and lively should let out a deep sigh after giving a lusterless “hello,” that is an indication that something may be troubling him/her. If a pregnant woman should longingly glance left and right upon entering a subway car, that is a sign she would like a seat. If a date should fiddle with her keys before entering her apartment and make other such attempts to extend the evening, this is a sign that ... well, you get the idea (a word of caution: clumsiness should not be mistaken for fiddling). Significantly, in each of these scenarios, it doesn't take someone with extraordinary observational skills to pick up the respective non-verbal cues; indeed, by virtue of regular face-to-face contact, we eventually and unthinkingly pick them up. But even the most basic of communication skills requires some practice. My initial concerns with digital media thus revolved around the danger of increasingly replacing small moments of human interaction with a preoccupation with our personal devices. What if, instead of noticing our friend's sigh, pregnant woman's glance, or date's fiddling, we are busy texting or checking email or Facebook? Further, what if we become

so accustomed to communicating via textual mediums rather than face-to-face that we can't even decode the subtleties that make up non-verbal cues?

When we become unable to notice such cues, opportunities are lost. When we don't notice our friend's sigh, for instance, we lose the opportunity to demonstrate our attentiveness and concern for the other's well-being. What's more, we forsake our responsibility as a friend when we consistently neglect to notice our friend is in trouble. Yet, despite all these concerns, as the film *Wall-e* so aptly demonstrates, human beings have a desperate need to connect and communicate with others (ironically enough, it takes a robot to reach this revelation). Though this communication can surely take place via digital media, because such communication falls short of the richness to be found face-to-face, the latter will almost certainly trump the former. Even with the worrying amount of time and energy one can spend texting or playing "Second Life" online, the allure and appeal of face-to-face interactions is, I think, too great. When people need more than their machines can provide, they turn away from cellphones and computers and engage others face-to-face.

This is obviously not to say machines don't have effects. Depending on the digital media in question, communication technologies offer a widely varying range of social cues, which, as we've seen, can affect honesty, identity formation and negotiation, relational development, and relational maintenance. And though I have mostly argued for the potential dangers to be found in these effects, ultimately, the question of whether mediated communication is harmful or beneficial falls upon each individual. Indeed, while I used face-to-face

interactions as the baseline by which digital media should be compared, this paper has not been an issue of one versus the other. Yes, there are circumstances where cell phones can detract from the meaningfulness of conversations by virtue of the “multiplicity of worlds,” but by allocating a schedule for calls, this issue can be easily resolved. There are ways Facebook can lend itself excessively toward interactions between lesser friendships, but it can also strengthen perfect friendships too. There are times when online environments can lead to escapism, but they can also increase opportunities for supportive resources we could not otherwise access. Herein we see a familiar trend as to our relationship with mediated communications; online relationships can be likened to vitamin tablets.

Though food is of course, the best source of nutrients, given that we may not get all the necessary nutrition we need for optimal health in our diets, we may turn to vitamins to fill in the gaps. Needless to say, if you tried to live on vitamins alone, it would be detrimental to your health since they are not intended to replace food so much as supplement it. Similarly, where face-to-face interactions are somewhat lacking in nourishment, online relationships can provide a means of support. The extent to which digital connections help or harm our everyday lives depends on who is interacting in the first place, in what contexts, and to what ends. New forms of online mediation can certainly blur the issues of accountability, authenticity, and meaningfulness, but this may, in fact, be a good thing; consistently using such media in our everyday lives can trigger opportunities for people to reflect on them. As for the future, I am confident that our relationships with technology will continue to evolve and in the process, we

will become more critical and conscientious of what new media can afford, the consequences of our actions with each medium, and how each affects our personal relationships.

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Summary of Capstone Project

When I talk about, in this project, how technology affects the nature of social interactions, I am talking about the very devices and modes of communication in which social interactions are interfaced with. Cellphones. Computers. Facebook accounts. We all have them. We all use them. Yet, it is not often the case that we simply sit down and reflect on how the very devices that so overwhelmingly pervades our lives can consequently alter it – perhaps for the worse. Though I certainly do not deny the positive attributes of technology as I even posit a theory as to how technology can strengthen friendships in the right circumstances, all the technological communication in the world is no substitute for the kind of interactions that take place *face-to-face*. Indeed, in my project, I outline the various ways in how the nature of communication dramatically alters depending on the kind of medium used and further how digital connections can often be less meaningful than the personal connections that can be found face-to-face.

Yet, it is not so much that technology in and of itself is detrimental to human interactions, but ultimately how we use and apply such technology. No doubt it would have been foolish and hasty to simply jump to the conclusion that technology has only adverse, negative effects. This is not what I show at all as I fully recognize the incredible advancements technology has allowed for in terms of communication and I am very much supportive of them. However, while technology does not *inherently* harm the nature of social interactions, it *does* make it all the more easier for meaningful social interactions to disintegrate and

consequently facilitate and encourage relationships that lack much substance. Most of the questions I focus on concern the sparse social cues that digital media provides and the consequences thereof; does communication prosper if some online interactions convey very little information about the person with whom we are interacting? What, as on Facebook, does it mean for personal messages to be transmitted across a mass medium?

Much of my arguments concerning how technology is used are founded on personal observations I have made over the years with respect to people in the United States. As I note in the very beginning of the project, what prompted much of my mulling over this topic was the observation that two people, sitting across from each other at a dinner table, could, with their personal devices, still be worlds apart. From then on, I witnessed many events that made me question our relationship with technology; I have seen people get brushed by cars because they were too busy fiddling with their phones while crossing the street instead of paying attention to the road, guys break up with girlfriends through their avatars on video games only to sign off immediately after, friends drive with their knees to free up their hands for texting. What's amazing about these events is the frequency with which they occur; the last one in particular is especially frightening.

Part of the reason I decided to work on this project in the first place is thus the unbelievable relevance and significance digital connections play in our everyday lives. What's more, the Internet and the mobile phone are, in the context of human history, exceptionally recent and rapidly evolving; it does not feel as if

these technologies slowly crept toward us so that we had all the time to consider and prepare for the implications but rather it's as if they appeared almost out of nowhere and swept us along for the ride. Even in the course of my short lifetime, the evolutionary changes in phone and Internet capabilities are stunningly dramatic. Only a little more than a decade ago, I can still recall fumbling for small change for payphones if I needed to make calls away from home. How long my calls lasted depended entirely on how many quarters I possessed (generally, my conversations were very terse as a result; I would be lucky to squeeze in a "hello" and a "goodbye"). I can also still recollect the days of dial-up, the sequence of beeps and tones the modem made when connecting, the infamous "You've Got Mail" greeting when it finished, and the agonizing amount of time it took to view or upload pictures. Today, we can talk and text for unlimited amounts on our phones, even send and receive pictures and messages on them instantaneously so that we can share our lives at the same rate we live them.

We should not take these kinds of changes for granted; they are changes that matter. Though new media has traditionally evoked long-standing opposing tensions, given that new forms of mediated interaction can explode and become widespread to the point of universal in a matter of years (think Facebook or Twitter), there is even greater cause of concern now than ever. While I and many around my age are in the unique position of having grown up in the technological boom and can, at the very least, potentially reflect on a life when mediated interaction was very much at its infancy and compare it to today, many children now take such technologies for granted. And what of my generation's future

children? Our children's children? Will they question the power and consequences that mediated interaction can have? If we certainly don't question the effects of digital media now, it seems unlikely they will later. Let this project be a reminder that we must remember to ask where to draw the boundary between people and their machines.