

Real friends: how the Internet can foster friendship

Adam Briggles

Department of Philosophy, School of Behavioral Sciences, University of Twente, P.O. Box 217, 7500 AE, Enschede, The Netherlands

E-mail: a.r.briggles@gw.utwente.nl

Abstract. Dean Cocking and Steve Matthews' article "Unreal Friends" (Ethics and Information Technology, 2000) argues that the formation of purely mediated friendships via the Internet is impossible. I critique their argument and contend that mediated contexts, including the Internet, can actually promote exceptionally strong friendships according to the very conceptual criteria utilized by Cocking and Matthews. I first argue that offline relationships can be constrictive and insincere, distorting important indicators and dynamics in the formation of close friends. The *distance* of mediated friendships mitigates this problem by promoting the courage to be candid. Next, I argue that the offline world of largely oral exchanges is often too shallow and hasty to promote deep bonds. The *deliberateness* of written correspondence acts as a weight to submerge friendships to greater depths and as a brake to enhance attentiveness to and precision about one's own and one's friend's character. Nonetheless, close friendships may fail to develop on the Internet. Insofar as this failure occurs, however, it would be for reasons other than those identified by Cocking and Matthews.

Key words: computer-mediated communication, cyberspace, friendship, Internet, online relationships

Introduction

Aristotle argued that "Friendship is a thing most necessary to life, since without friends no one would choose to live, though possessed of all other advantages" (*Nic.* VIII, 1155a). An increasingly mobile and networked world brings citizens of developed nations many advantages. But what is the fate of friendship – this most indispensable human good – in such a world? Friendships and other personal relationships are central aspects of the age of digital media, including Web 2.0 social networking sites and Web 3.D virtual worlds. Such technologies are bound to influence friendships in ways that may both enrich and diminish our lives. More broadly, the new media age has greatly influenced personal relationships, sparking many theoretical frameworks such as Barry Wellman et al.'s notion of "networked individualism" (2001). But despite such empirical and social theoretical research, there has been very little philosophical discussion about the nature of friendship and the relative quality of offline and online friendships.

Dean Cocking and Steve Matthews' article "Unreal Friends" (2000) is one notable exception. They develop a strong argument that the formation of purely mediated friendships via the Internet is

simply not possible. Because such "friendships" are likely to increase and perhaps displace some offline aspects of friendships with the further adoption of digital media, their argument suggests that we may be trading in the real thing for something of less value. This is a grave concern, and their claim deserves critical scrutiny.

In this essay, I critique Cocking and Matthews' argument. I contend that mediated contexts, including the Internet, can promote close friendships according to the same criteria utilized by Cocking and Matthews. After summarizing their thesis, I make my counter-argument in two sections. I first argue that offline relationships are often constrictive and insincere, distorting important indicators and dynamics in the formation of close friends. The *distance* of mediated friendships mitigates this problem by encouraging honest exchanges. Next, I argue that the offline world of largely oral exchanges is often too shallow and hasty to promote deep bonds. The *deliberateness* of written correspondence can enhance the quality of friendships. Of course, close friendships may fail to develop on the Internet, because distance and deliberateness are affordances that require the appropriate user motivation. Insofar as the Internet fails to promote friendship, it is not

for any deterministic “structural” reason as maintained by Cocking and Matthews. Rather, it is due primarily to cultural trends and personal decisions about media use.

Unreal friends

Cocking and Matthews (2000) argue that the Internet presents significant structural barriers to the formation of exclusively online close friendships. These barriers inhibit relational identity, which is an essential feature of close friendships. They do so by diminishing or eliminating acts of non-voluntary self-disclosure, which are necessary for the mutual shaping characteristic of close friendships. The Internet is a context dominated by voluntary self-disclosure, which enables one to choose and construct a highly controlled self-identity. It creates a distorting filter on aspects of ourselves that are normally disclosed to friends in offline contexts, thereby short-circuiting the mutual interpretation and shaping of identity that contribute to the depth and character of close friendships. The authors thus conclude that “within a purely virtual context the establishment of close friendship is simply psychologically impossible” (p. 224).

After a brief discussion of how context affects content (or the non-neutrality of media technologies), Cocking and Matthews discuss the nature of friendship. Friendship, for Cocking and Matthews, is a personal relationship characterized by mutual affection, a disposition to assist in the welfare of the other, and a desire to engage with the other in shared activities. Though there is long-standing philosophical debate about the nature of friendship (see Pakaluk 1991; Badhwar 1993), this general definition captures many features of friendship that are widely accepted as necessary conditions. I thus accept these criteria for identifying friendship. Therefore, I will argue below not that Cocking and Matthews are wrong about what friendship is, but that they are wrong about the possibility of friendship – as defined according to their own criteria – flourishing wholly online.

The authors next identify a basic process of interpretation in friendship. They claim that it is so fundamental that even widely diverging accounts of friendship must recognize it. It is this process of interpretation that the new context of the Internet disrupts, leading to failures in attempts to realize friendship. We notice aspects of our friend’s character, which impacts how we interact with her and how the friendship is realized. Such mutual interpretations of one another’s character are central and common-

place in close friendships. They are the dynamic materials of which both ordinary and significant expressions of friendship are made:

I express my affection for my friend when I playfully tease her for becoming boisterously drunk after only two drinks; my recognizing her enthusiasm for the football moves me to suggest we go to a game together; my lightening up the situation when her ex-partner enters the room exhibits my concern to promote her interests (p. 227).

My interpretation of my friend is, then, a central way in which I express my affection and well-wishing. The indicators that I receive about my friend’s character guide this interpretation and thus are highly important.

Cocking and Matthews argue that such indicators can be either voluntary or non-voluntary. In so doing, they echo a distinction made by Erving Goffman in his analysis of impression management (1959). For Goffman, we can either “give” (consciously, directly) or “give off” (unconsciously, indirectly) signals about ourselves. Cocking and Matthews argue that “The internet is perhaps unique in its facilitating personal relations primarily on the basis of voluntary self-disclosure, and eliminating many significant aspects of non-voluntary self-disclosure” (p. 227). There is a contrast in the ways people are enabled, or at least disposed, to present themselves in online compared to offline relationships in terms of the kinds and degrees of self-disclosure they may exercise. The Internet allows for much greater control and choice in self-presentation. I can play down less desirable aspects of myself and play up others to craft a carefully constructed self. Furthermore, there may be things about myself of which I am unaware or only dimly aware, meaning that I could not reveal these things to online friends, because I do not know they are there to be revealed. Offline contexts, by contrast, often betray these aspects of our self-identity to others. Also, on the Internet I can choose when I respond to my friend and my responses will be uninterrupted.

I can, then, choose and control self-presentation online in ways that I could not or would not be disposed to in offline contexts. In the offline world where such control is not possible, my friend will notice more about me. More about my character non-voluntarily leaks out as indicators that inform and enrich interpretation. With more, and more accurate, indicators about my identity, my friend will be more deeply involved in both shaping and in helping me to understand and evaluate who I am. And this process of mutually drawing one another’s identity (being receptive and responsive to direction and interpretation

by one another) is a necessary aspect of close friendships (see also Cocking and Kennett 1998). Thus, “non-voluntary behaviour and interaction is crucial to the nature and value of close friendship and the self within it” (p. 230).

Introduction to a critique of the argument

In the traditional CMC lingo, Cocking and Matthews present a “cues filtered-out” approach to friendships mediated by the Internet. Important cues of a person’s character are distorted or lost, which severely hinders interpretation and the mutual formation of relational selves characteristic of close friendships. This is so, they claim, even if the online interlocutors work diligently and honestly to relay everything about themselves. These are still voluntary acts, and will therefore be incomplete and distorted. My non-voluntary self-disclosures give my friend truer indicators of who I really am, which she can use to expand or challenge my perspective and foster greater self-realization. The offline world is more “real” in the sense that it permits more sincere interaction based on a fuller array of indicators or cues.

In my argument, I defend a position contrary to the “cues filtered-out” approach that could be called “friendships liberated.” This approach turns a skeptical eye on the offline world in order to discern ways in which it acts as a distorting “filter” inhibiting the realization of close friendships. Mediated relationships, including those in cyberspace, I argue, can be more “real” than offline relationships in the sense of less dissimulating, truncated, or shallow. The increased distance and slowed pace of Internet relationships can foster friendships of equal or greater closeness than those in the offline world.

Again, I accept Cocking and Matthews’ arguments about the importance of interpretation, self-realization, and relational identity formation. My argument, rather, is that these activities and goals can be accomplished online – there is no deterministic “structural barrier” to the formation of online close friendships. Many people can attest to this through their own personal experiences of forming close relationships in wholly mediated contexts. Indeed, Cocking and Matthews find themselves in the untenable position of claiming that something is “impossible” even as it frequently occurs.

But I am not just interested in pointing out the empirical inadequacy of their thesis. I want to explore the philosophic issues at stake in the mediation of personal relationships. Key to this discussion is the old quarrel between technological determinism and technological neutrality. I will argue that Cocking

and Matthews present an implausible deterministic thesis, because the fate of online friendships depends at least as much on the people involved as it does on the tools used. Establishing close online friendships requires serious and dedicated people, but the same is of course true about the offline world. This is not to say, however, that the Internet or any medium is neutral with respect to our social practices. Indeed, I will point out ways in which the Internet tends to both mirror and reinforce a culture of speed that is poisonous to close friendships.

I present my argument in two sections. In the first, I argue that offline indicators are often more distorted than Cocking and Matthews suggest. In the second, I continue the parallel point begun in the first section, namely, that mediated indicators can be richer and more accurate than offline indicators. The first section focuses on the benefits of distance, while the latter focuses on the advantages of writing and reading for the cultivation of relational identity via interpretation.

Face-to-face feigning: mediation opens a space to be real

One of the enduring legacies of the American Civil War (1861–1865) is the collection of written correspondences between soldiers and their loved ones. Many letters are powerful expressions of friendship. They display mutual affection, a disposition to care for the other, and a desire for shared activities. Indeed, the very act of writing and reading letters was often the most important and comforting aspect of such a frightful and uncertain existence. Cocking and Matthews do not deny that friendships can be *maintained* through mediation, as in this case, between friends temporarily separated. Their claim is that the *establishment* of *purely* mediated close friendships is impossible.

Imagine, then, a soldier fighting in the Western Theater of the Civil War and a school teacher in Boston. They have never met before. The Bostonian read about the brave soldier’s embattled regiment in the newspaper and felt moved to act. He is, however, unable to fight due to a disability and he has very little money to contribute to the cause. He decides to write to the soldier and offer to be his pen pal. The soldier is intrigued by the Bostonian’s letter. He writes back. In this wholly mediated situation, could a close friendship be established?

At first blush, it would seem that any friendship formed via the handwritten letters would pale in comparison with the camaraderie of fellow soldiers. Doubtlessly, the soldier has formed intense friendships

with the men who together daily face toil and peril. As anyone who has participated in team sports or activities can attest to, shared suffering and joy from a common quest build strong relationships.

But for a variety of reasons stemming from the very closeness of these relationships, the soldier withholds certain facets of himself. For example, he is often plagued by doubts about the nobility of the cause they are fighting for or the rightness of the means that they sometimes use. He suspects, though, that he would fall out of favor if he voiced these concerns to his comrades. They too may feel this doubt, but they are likely either to not consciously recognize it or to feel insecure in voicing it. It remains unsaid. Furthermore, the soldier believes that open doubt about the war will undermine morale, which could hinder performance, thereby jeopardizing safety.

The soldier also feels uncomfortable voicing his fears and apprehensions. The most subtle gesture or look shared across a night's campfire can convey a complex message: "I know the fear you are experiencing. It is eating me alive too." But the fear is left unexplored and unquestioned. That part of them that is agonizing is mutually recognized but left alone. It can do no good in such a tightly-knit community to bring *that* into the light. They all know about *that* but if it is openly discussed it would threaten to dissolve the bond of courage that alone provides the possibility of survival. It is left to fester. The very tightness of the soldier's bonds, then, requires him to disassemble. Certain things remain unsaid or understood through exquisite acts of mutual pretense. As Shakespeare wrote, "Most friendship is feigning."

The Bostonian is *distant* in two respects. He is both physically far away, and he is removed from the dynamics described above. This distance transforms their letters into a safe space where the soldier can explore and express those parts of his identity that are kept tightly wrapped by the closeness of his unmediated life. As he comes to trust the Bostonian, he reveals more and reaches further into his spirit. This openness begins to work on the Bostonian who learns what it is like to be on the front lines and re-examines his own life in that light. For example, he faces his daily chores with a greater resolve and begins to appreciate more the simple things of a life at peace. Furthermore, he interprets the soldier's letters in ways that the soldier himself did not at first consider. The soldier too, then, begins to reconsider and reflect on his experiences and his previous ways of thinking about them.

In short, the interpretation of a close friendship takes place in a mediated situation. And this happens even because of the difficulties in forming this kind of

close friendship in the soldier's unmediated life. Of course, it would not have been impossible for the soldier to form this kind of closeness with a fellow comrade in his battalion. But it was in fact easier to do so through the medium of letters.

The tightness of the soldier's bonds is admittedly an extreme case, and his offline relationships are very rigidly bound by many formal and informal rules. But the differences between this case and more common contemporary friendships are matters of degree, not kind.

It is, then, a valid example for illustrating the point that offline friendships occur within complex webs of relations and social structures. These webs are freighted with demands of status, norms, expectations, and conventions that shape the nature of friendships. Friends are more or less consciously squeezed into various compromises by the structure of this overarching social ecology. It can be hard, then, to really "be myself" within any space that this web affords. There may be a secret or deeper self that is unable to emerge as we must enact in our daily lives what Goffman (1959) called our "front stage behaviors." In place of the soldier, we can imagine an accountant who does not feel completely at home in any single life-context. Her office mates are friendly enough, but there is a great deal of political posturing and half-hidden competition. She likes her friends on her volleyball team, but here too there is historical baggage from awkward romantic relationships that became crossed. Furthermore, there is a tenderness about her that she feels uncomfortable expressing in this group always alert to signs that a certain unspoken minimal level of toughness may be compromised. She likes her companions in her poetry club, but she feels restrained from expressing other aspects of her identity lest she tread on their air of serious contemplation.

This is not to say that a close friend could not emerge in any of these contexts, or that close friends must completely transcend such machinations, or that we ever could fully know let alone express our "whole" or "true" self. It is only to point out these subtle dynamics always at work that demand often un-conscious or half-conscious compromises, which amount to insincerities. These take not only the form of distorted indicators about our selves. The insincerities also come in the form of an unspoken compliance by our friends who tread lightly on half-hidden subterfuges for various reasons stemming from a need to get along together. Such compromises are magnified when different life contexts come into contact. These situations often force us to negotiate a "neutral" self that is thin and flexible enough to bridge the disparate spheres. Our accountant might

more easily form a close friendship with someone who is distant from these subtle binds. In such a context, she could feel more freedom to explore parts of herself – even parts that she feels are central to her integrity as a person – that seem to be marginalized in her offline life.

We must “get along with” our offline friends, because they are woven into our daily lives. As Mark Vernon (2005) points out, this means that friends often offer each other the “kind vices” of half-truths, flattery, and prevarications that keep things “friendly.” But they also make friendships less than ideal, because the friends do not develop a rich relational identity by being open and nurturing of a greater self-understanding. Vernon echoes Cocking and Matthews, by claiming that it is close friends that “find the courage and humility to overcome the stalemate of the little lies or ignorances in which most friendships trade, and turn to work on themselves and achieve the good things which as individuals might be beyond them” (2005, p. 61). Due to the distance involved in Internet friendships, there is less reason for “little lies” (either to one’s self or to one’s friend) to develop. Furthermore, this distance offers a comforting buffer that can reduce feelings of vulnerability thereby fostering greater courage in overcoming any falseness that does arise.

Another way to put my point is that, more important than the nature of the cues (voluntary or non-voluntary), is the extent to which they are used by the people involved to form a close friendship. In offline contexts, we may encounter richer cues, but we may also often be constrained from working with them to do the important interpretive effort of building close friendships.

Cocking and Matthews naturally fill their article with examples of friends (often playfully) challenging one another to be sincere. As Elizabeth Telfer (1971) argues, our privileged knowledge about our friends and our position to act for their well-being creates such duties to help them even when it would be easier or more pleasant not to speak-up. This is one thing that distinguishes close friends from more shallow friends. These duties are difficult to consistently perform, which is why people can only sustain a few close friendships. But the very closeness of the offline world can make these duties even more difficult to fulfill. Due to the distances they afford, mediating technologies can ease these difficulties. Mediation loosens the links of daily life and softens the gaze of a physically co-present person with whom we are caught in the immediate moment at hand. It thus can encourage greater honesty and increase confidence in disclosing more about one’s self, challenging the other, and being open to her challenges.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1841, in Pakaluk 1991) makes this point in his essay on friendship. Like Cocking and Matthews, Emerson regards sincerity – dropping “even those undermost garments of dissimulation, courtesy, and second thought” – as central to friendship. Yet, in opposition to Cocking and Matthews, Emerson notes how difficult it is in “actual society” to achieve sincerity. It is a challenge to express our essential self and connect with another human being on a spiritual level. So often, “Our faculties do not play us true, and both parties are relieved by solitude.” Our physical proximity – bound together in a world of trifling matters – dooms us to spiritual separation. We in fact need physical distance to achieve the right vantage point for true relations:

Why should we desecrate noble and beautiful souls by intruding on them?...Leave this touching and clawing...The hues of the opal, the light of the diamond, are not to be seen if the eye is too near (in Pakaluk 1991, pp. 229–230).

Indeed, Emerson advocates letter writing as a way to achieve closer, more sincere friendships, “To my friend I write a letter and from him I receive a letter...In these warm lines the heart will trust itself, as it will not to the tongue.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau similarly pictured friendship as a sincere opening of hearts that is corrupted by society, where we must wear masks, play roles, and fit molds. This introduces a fissure between appearance (the indicators we present) and being (our real self). For Rousseau, then, true friendship requires bracketing off society. Friedrich Nietzsche as well noted that the soul of a human being can become tattered through too much contact to the point where we cannot see its beauty. The overwhelming magnitude of involuntary cues can act as so much noise, distracting us from the essentials that we wish to share with our friends.

Ironically, by Cocking and Matthews’ own criteria, the establishment of close friendships in purely mediated contexts is not only possible, but such contexts can prove especially fertile for the development of strong relational identities. One example above relies on handwritten letters rather than the Internet. But Cocking and Matthews argue that the salient feature of the Internet for their position is its near complete elimination of non-voluntary self-disclosure. Insofar as Internet communication is characterized by voluntary signals, the same would be even truer regarding handwritten letters, which are usually composed more slowly and thoughtfully than e-mail correspondences, let alone instant messages. If friendships can form and flourish through handwritten letters, then according to Cocking and Matthews’

concern about voluntary self-disclosure, it should be at least as easy for friendships to form via Internet communication.

It may be, however, that other features of the Internet weaken its ability as a medium for the establishment of close friendships in comparison with handwritten letters. The Internet may not, for some combination of these other reasons, enable or readily dispose people to establish close friendships. For example, the Internet may not readily support the establishment of close friendships in the contemporary world because e-mail and instant messaging are so casually used and not well suited to the long exchanges more frequently found in handwritten letters. But this shortcoming is not attributable to the supposedly more accurate or genuine indicators received in the offline versus the online world by virtue of less voluntary control of those signals. The online/offline distinction is less important here than those between different types of media. It is also less important than the level of commitment displayed in the choices made by the would-be friends. In other words, user motivation trumps any supposed deterministic structural feature of the technology.

Writing, reading, and the self

The relationship between the Bostonian and the soldier is characterized not just by the distance that afforded escape from the often all-too-tight links of our immediate relations. It is also a relationship – like many on the Internet – which is based mostly on acts of reading and writing. Cocking and Matthews maintain that these acts are too voluntary to provide true indicators for the processes of interpretation central to the development of close friends. I agree that one path toward relational identity is through the processes whereby a friend witnesses and interprets for me my non-voluntary self-disclosures offline. But this is not the only way in which relational identity and close friendship can be achieved.

Indeed, mutual acts of reading and writing can be especially rewarding avenues for cultivating close friendships. This is so for two reasons. First, increased levels of self-conscious introspection naturally accompany any act of writing about one's self as, for example, in the case of a journal. The rewards of writing for raising self-awareness or honesty about oneself were often cast in moralistic terms by early Christians. In the fourth century, for example, St. Athanasius wrote "let us each note and write down our actions and impulses of the soul as though we were to report them to each other; and you may rest assured that from utter shame of becoming

known we shall stop sinning and entertaining sinful thoughts altogether" (*Vita Antonii*). As Michel Foucault (1994) notes, for such reclusive ascetics the act of writing palliates the dangers of solitude. Writing "plays the role of a companion by giving rise to the fear of disapproval and to shame" (p. 207). Writing helps to twin the self into an I and me that converse, which arguably is at the very heart of the dictum "know thyself," which summarizes what it is to be thoughtful and thereby a person (see Arendt 2003).

When writing occurs in the form of missives or interpersonal correspondences, this raised self-awareness can be turned directly to the art of cultivating close friendships. Here a second feature comes into play, as interpretation in text-based friendships is a process that naturally overflows the original intentions of the friends, creating the challenging and unexpected insights central to interpretation and mutual drawing. As Foucault (1994) notes, correspondences actually predate personal notebooks in the history of writing as cultivation of the self. He cites the letters between Seneca and Lucilius as one early example of how writing is a powerful way of manifesting or showing oneself to oneself and to others. The letter gives an opening for the other onto oneself, setting up a "reciprocity of the gaze and the examination" (Foucault 1994, p. 216). Below, I further consider both reasons why close friendships can occur through reading and writing.

The invention of writing, or literacy, was crucial for the development of the modern self. Walter Ong (1982) notes how for oral peoples judgment "bears in on the individual from outside, not from within" (p. 55). The analytic categories afforded by literacy structure knowledge and consciousness at a distance. The literate mind tends to stand at an abstracted remove from the concreteness of lived experience, which fosters greater introspective self-judgment. This is another sense in which the medium of the written word creates distance. The modern genre of the diary or journal epitomizes this form of self-knowledge, as the act of deliberate written introspection makes me less opaque to myself.

Though this may be a kind of interpretation leading to altered identity, Cocking and Matthews will rightly point out that it is far from friendship. Journaling is a solitary act, and the identity shaped here is not relational. The same holds true regarding the hermeneutics of literature. "Interpretation" here connotes the drawing of meaning or significance out of a text in such a way as to illuminate one's own life. If a novel is well-written and the reader engages it with adequate skill and care, the experience of this art will change her life. Books can be surprisingly like friends. As Vernon notes, a good book "resonates

with our experience, throws light upon it, and constantly reveals things to us about ourselves” (2005, p. 65). Again, though we can be shaped by books, this is not a mutual formation of a relational identity. Marcel Proust argues that books are superior friends, because when we are done with them, they can be shelved without offence. But this is clearly a solipsistic “friendship.”

Nietzsche made clear the bind this puts us in. On one hand, solitude leads one to sink into the depths of the self, thereby truncating our social nature. He writes, “I and me are always too earnestly in conversation.” On the other hand, social existence is rife with pervasive feigning:

Every man alone is sincere. At the entrance of a second person, hypocrisy begins. We parry and fend the approach of our fellow-man by compliments, by gossip, by amusements, by affairs. We cover up our thought from him under a hundred folds (in Vernon, p. 153).

Can we only be sincere while alone with ourselves? Or, with Nietzsche, can we imagine ideal friendships – the *allos authos* (other self) of Aristotle – where the friends are “alone together”?

I have already argued that the distance involved in handwritten or digital letters can improve sincerity. We can add to this strength another quality of written correspondence that I call *deliberateness*. Writing occurs at a slower pace than speaking, which fosters the attentiveness and discipline to discover deeper truths about one’s nature. It also affords greater opportunities to formulate precise language to describe one’s character or to articulate one’s reactions to the words of a friend. This deliberateness can thus act as an anchor to submerge the friendship to greater depths, or as a brighter beam of light with which to explore aspects of our selves. In this way, friends corresponding through the written word send each other concentrated, refined, and deep indicators about who they are. This will naturally vary with the kind of mediated exchange in use. For example, e-mail and other asynchronous forms of computer mediation more readily enable such activities than the rapid-fire of synchronous exchanges such as instant messaging.

Cocking and Matthews rightly point out that there may be “things about myself of which I am simply unaware, or of which I have little insight, or about which I am self-deceived” (p. 228). Having a friend notice our non-voluntary cues about these things is one way to initiate interpretation and gain self-knowledge. However, the slow and deliberate introspection made possible with writing is another way. Furthermore, this activity is not entirely voluntary, as

our style of writing, timing of response, word usage, and even letter content are shaped by unconscious forces that send signals to our friend that we were unaware of. (As a much simpler example, imagine the non-voluntary cues sent about education and character when an e-mail friend chronically misspells words.) Friends will always see something more or different in my written correspondences. The processes of writing and reading in iterative exchanges of letters are far more dynamic, open-ended, and surprising than Cocking and Matthews admit.

In mediated friendships, the written words serve as indicators that are won through self-reflection. But they are not completely voluntary indicators. An indicator is not only the signal sent, but also the way in which it is received. In human communication, the receiver does not simply gather the unchanged “original” signal in any linear or neutral sense. Rather, the reader of the written words will interpret them in light of his experiences. Through this interpretive process, meanings emerge, and indeed the very indicator itself is partly constituted by this work at the receiving end. This naturally gives rise to insights that would not be expected by the writer, which undermines any sense of written correspondence as wholly voluntary. Through dialogue, the written words will take on new, emergent meanings that surpass initial intentions on the writer’s part as they are interpreted by the reader. Thus, in addition to the increased self-awareness afforded by the deliberateness of writing, mediated friendships allow for the dynamics of relational identity formation via non-voluntary cues. Indeed, because the act of writing plunges the friends toward greater depths of introspection, these interpretive processes can take place at a more profound level.

If the distance of mediation is a corrective for overly tight bonds, this quality of deliberateness is a corrective for the overly frenetic pace of modern life. For Nietzsche, the ideal of soul friendship or being alone together is about achieving separation from a world that “loathes rest and reflection.” This is similar to Emerson’s vision of friendship as a chance to “stand in true relations with men in a false age.” The harried pace of the modern age often thwarts attempts to come to sincerely know oneself and to notice cues about who one’s friends really are. Written correspondence has a major advantage over off-line life in decelerating the world, creating the time to be candid with self and others.

Again, there may be reasons that inhibit the formation of close friendships on the Internet. But these reasons would need to be due to something other than the supposedly wholly voluntary nature of the indicators involved. For example, although the

deliberateness discussed in this section is a potential feature of all writing, it is more apt to emerge in certain contexts rather than others. Reading and writing handwritten letters exchanged via “snail mail” are naturally slower acts more conducive to deliberateness than squeezing in e-mail or instant message exchanges while multi-tasking on one’s PC. The very speed and convenience of the Internet tend to heighten the carelessness and frantic pace of modern life. In this way, the Internet may undermine rather than promote the kind of deliberateness conducive to the formation of mediated close friendships.

Some recent empirical studies in the United States provide evidence suggesting that close friendships and other forms of social capital are declining. One study, for example, found that over the past twenty years the number of people reporting that there is no one with whom they discuss important matters has nearly tripled (McPherson et al. 2006). Relationship networks are shrinking as are the number of close confidants in our lives. Insofar as these findings are true, then even as new media technologies make possible an enormous increase in sociability, close friendships seem to be waning. The argument above suggests that this trend is not readily attributable to any intrinsic property – such as increased voluntary self-disclosure – of the Internet or other new media technologies. Indeed, if used deliberately, the Internet holds out the promise of being – in Foucault’s words – a novel “technique of the self” that could enrich the kind of close friendships Cocking and Matthews identify.

The problem of declining friendships lies less in the technology considered in isolation than in the wider socio-technical dynamics and cultural values of a hyper-paced world, where efficiency is a chief virtue and, as Nietzsche noted, one even eats lunch with a watch in one hand. Close friendships can only flourish if those involved commit to taking the time and expending the effort necessary to forge strong relational identities. This commitment may be declining in a world increasingly obsessed with individualistic, career-oriented goals. But where it exists, the Internet at the very least poses no barrier to the formation of close friendships. Indeed, the Internet can serve as an island of refuge removed from the compromises and distractions of daily life.

Conclusion

Cocking and Matthews argue that close friendships cannot be maintained online, because of the lack of involuntary cues. I have argued that close friendships can be maintained online, which means that there is much more going on in mediated friendships than their

one-dimensional (i.e., an emphasis solely on non-voluntary signals) and deterministic thesis can account for. Friendships can be initiated and flourish in mediated contexts due to the benefits of distance and deliberateness. Mediation seems especially well suited to the soul-searching and introspective friendships focused on uncovering what lies below the surface and cramped by daily life. Online friends can “be alone together with the truth about one another” (Vernon 2005, p. 67). Plutarch, like Cocking and Matthews, regarded the true friend, not as a shadow that nods when I nod, but as one who exercises the virtue of candor. My friend, then, may at times be like a foul tasting medicine that is good for my soul. The real friend is honest about his faults as well as mine, an act that requires time for reflection and a level of vulnerability that separation makes more bearable. In this way, deliberateness and distance serve as the time and space dimensions capable of fostering close friendships where the immediate, frenzied world might otherwise fail.

The Internet can and often does channel users toward shallow relationships. But this stems from widespread habits of use that in turn are symptoms of a culture of carelessness and speed – a culture that is reflected in Internet features, for example, hyperlinks and high-speed connections. Poor indicators stemming from too much voluntary control are not the culprits. If used conscientiously as a laboratory for sincere self-exploration and honest mutual exchange, there is no reason that the Internet cannot support wholly mediated close friendships.

References

- Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*. Schocken Books, New York, 2003.
- Neera Kapur Badhwar, *Friendship: A Philosophical Reader*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 1993.
- Dean Cocking and J. Kennett. Friendship and the Self. *Ethics*, 108(3): 502–527, 1998.
- Dean Cocking and Steve Matthews. Unreal Friends. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 2(4): 223–231, 2001.
- Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 1. Paul Rabinow, editor. London: Penguin Books, 1994.
- Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Mayflower, London, 1959.
- M. McPherson, L. Smith-Lovin and M.E. Brashears. Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades. *American Sociological Review*, 71: 353–375, 2006.
- Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the World*. Routledge, New York, 1982.
- Michael Pakaluk, *Other Selves: Philosophers on Friendship*. Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 1991.

Elizabeth, Telfer. Friendship. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 223–241, 1971.

Mark Vernon. *The Philosophy of Friendship*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2005.

B. Wellman, A. Quan Haase, J. Witte and K. Hampton. Does the Internet Increase, Decrease, or Supplement Social Capital? *American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(3): 437–456, 2001.