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Social Media: Man's New Best Friend

Posted on **September 1, 2009** by **Editor**



By Jennifer Hernandez

When you get home after a long day of school, work, or whatever, what's the first thing you do? Perhaps you turn on your computer and immediately forget the drag of your day, get lost in colorful pages and animated ads (obnoxious, but nearly inevitable to the online experience). Here's another scenario: walking between classes, you see a group of students on the path together. However, instead of laughing and chatting with each other, they are each on a different device, engrossed in a different world, and hardly acknowledging each other for their colorful backlit LCD screens as they communicate themselves away from one another. Social interaction is gaining momentum in just as monumental a way as the technology itself is changing and adapting to the demands we place on it as users.

As users of any communications technology, we expect to keep connected to our digital worlds, and in turn, to events and happenings which go beyond our screens. Friendships can be a part of this cycle, whether they are built upon, or excluded from it. Our Facebooks [1] and MySpaces [2], Twitters [3] and Google calendars [4] can be extensions of our daily lives, a virtual water cooler or digital notification and RSVP system.

In addition, as we grow more used to the instantaneous nature of our communication via faster networks and cables, we expect faster and easier communication. Now, coffee shops and university buildings (for example) without Wi-Fi are passé and get passed over for wireless hotspots elsewhere, no matter how good the coffee.

I've been called the quintessential geek (thanks, Jeffrey -__-), but I'm not sure that I am. I can definitely attest to being introverted, however. A study (summarized in the NY Times) conducted by the Carnegie Mellon University found that, "'Extroverts, who like making new friends, are using new technology to express that,' Dr. Kraut said. 'When introverts are using the Internet,' he said, 'it seems to hurt their social well-being, their social connectedness.'"[5].

I do think that, for me, spending a lot of time using the Internet, while more comfortable in some cases, or necessary, bites into the time that I could be spending actually hanging out with

friends. It's a lame excuse sometimes, because I can "Facebook" (yes, I use it as a verb. I place it in the same category as "to Google" something—made up out of its utility and ease) someone instead of call them to tell them something or ask a question. It becomes a comfortable habit, or perhaps just laziness. I prefer to think of it as a habit!

The habit extends year 'round: sometimes, when I'm out of school much earlier than my state university friends (Pacific University, a private school which I attend, ends the school year at least a few weeks before the public universities do), I feel lonely and disconnected, so I turn to the Internet, where they are still in school-Facebook mode, like I was a few weeks ago as well. I log on to Facebook and see that little red box in the bottom right hand corner announcing that I have any number of new notifications: photo comments, wall posts, replies to links I've posted. I don't know why it's so exciting, and maybe it's also a little bit sad that I find it so. It means people are paying attention and "interacting" with me, though indirectly, and sometimes, very distantly. This isn't a new thing to me.

Back when I posted faithfully to xanga [6] in my early high school years, I experienced the same satisfaction in checking for comments each day to my silly teenage ramblings. It meant someone was, in effect, listening to what I had to say. My "journal" became a visual link between the world and me.

Why keep all this in my head? It actually started with a physical shared journal between my friend —also a Jennifer—and I. Our journals were probably the most intimate and meaningful connection I had with anyone via the written word. I wasn't merely writing a paper and submitting it to a teacher, but recording and reacting to everything throughout the day, "commenting" all over entries Jennifer had written. Our own personal notification system was in each other's scrawly and unique handwriting in a myriad of multi-colored inks.

So, while we had a more intimate conversation, there was still a sort of screen between us at most times, though this one was of paper. I can see the argument that even communication such as this could diminish real contacts (we were communicating solely with one another, therefore leaving everyone else out; time spent writing was taking away from time spent doing; etc). The difference with journals is that we had to get together to trade them, while with the computer, the contact and conversation are one in the same, whether instantaneous or delayed.

Along the same lines of intimacy: I began talking to my now fiancé through Facebook, and then AOL Instant Messenger [7] after formally meeting him at my martial arts school. I found it much easier to talk to him that way at first, rather than face-to-face, especially since he kept calling me cute and I had to threaten to punch him in the face, which I didn't actually have to follow up on, thankfully. The most I could do to let him know my great discomfort was to use my time-honored set of emoticons, which he didn't understand anyway, and plenty of action-words enclosed in asterisks. *sigh* -__- Silly boy.

Now, my fiancé has an iPhone [8], and when there's nothing to do, or we're just relaxing, he'll occasionally pull it out either in response to a little chime that means he got a text or to check anything from e-mail to movie times. Sometimes he checks his Twitter. I don't really get Twitter. I'm amazed by the ability of one little device to bring the world of the computer out a step farther into the real world. He's not bound to a desk, or even to a laptop. Thinking about this article, I thought about how tied we can be to technology, even when we're spending time with loved ones.

Being engaged led to a curiosity on my part about a website called The Knot [9]. I didn't know anything about it besides that you can put your name in the URL, which is pretty cool to me. So, now I'm getting e-mails about wedding related services and events in Portland. I'm not too sure where I'd look for these kind of things besides the Internet. The same goes with ring shopping. I can't show you the ring I found in case my fiancé reads this, but I definitely wouldn't have been able to find something so perfect at a local jewelry store—jewelry stores are very intimidating, by the way.

Anecdotes aside, in a poll on "Generation Next" by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 65% of those surveyed responded positively to the question of technology making people more isolated. 30% responded negatively; they do not think that technology isolates us. [10] Findings such as these begin to point to a growing concern that we have about technology replacing real social connections with digital ones.

Surely, it can be argued that it's not necessarily the friendships and connections that are changing, but the way we view and use them, respectively. The way we communicate is changing, and so should our realization that it's not always a change for the better if we can't keep up with it.

Analyst and writer Stowe Boyd [11] comments on the changing nature and definition of friendship: "It's not about metrics, because my yardstick has changed along with everything else. It's really about an enriched self-identity, meaning, and purpose: and those — for me, at least — have changed irrevocably through the web, through my connections: and all for the better." [12]

Just as definitions in dictionaries change over time—reflecting the change of social meanings, if not necessarily intellectual meanings—then so should it be expected that, given the factor of pop culture and social changes in general, views and attitudes towards just what constitutes a "friend" are shifting. The Internet can be a useful tool for staying in contact with others—friends from high school, family in faraway places, college roommates, when away for the summer. There is no replacement for face-to-face conversation, however.

In the future—in our futures—it will be interesting to see what kind of new and improved technologies come up to further enhance our communications and aide in our burgeoning social lives; that is, if we keep in touch.

Endnotes

[1] <http://www.facebook.com>

[2] <http://www.myspace.com>

[3] <http://twitter.com>

[4] <http://www.google.com/calendar>

[5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/26/technology/cyberspace-isn-t-so-lonely-after-all.html?sec=technology&spon=&pagewanted=2>

[6] <http://www.xanga.com>

[7] <http://dashboard.aim.com/aim>

[8] <http://www.apple.com/iphone/>

[9] <http://www.theknot.com>

[10] <http://people-press.org/questions/?qid=1674270&pid=51&ccid=51#top>

[11] <http://www.stoweboyd.com/about.html>

[12] <http://www.stoweboyd.com/message/2007/08/anne-truitt-zel.html>

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3 THOUGHTS ON "SOCIAL MEDIA: MAN'S NEW BEST FRIEND"

Editor

on **September 1, 2009 at 4:45 PM** said:

Poster Name: Jeff Cain

Message: I'm glad to see that you made note of how society is undertaking a social communication paradigm shift. Just like previous inventions of the past (like the telephone), new social media is altering how we communicate with and among (as you alluded to) each other. Nice article.

Editor

on **September 1, 2009 at 4:47 PM** said:

Poster Name: Khoa Ngo

Message: I liked your article, especially the mention of you threatening to punch me in the face. We have a healthy relationship, lol. As far as the subject matter, I believe social networking and technology for it are the same as any other technology: when used as a tool, it further enhances our lives, but when abused, it detracts from our lives. Ironically enough, I just read this all on my iPhone using the Facebook application using the wifi at a Starbucks in Pioneer Square. =D

Editor

on **September 1, 2009 at 4:47 PM** said:

Poster Name: Jenn Hernandez

Message: Thank you for reading my article and taking the time to respond!