CYBER NATION:
How the Digital Revolution Is Changing Society

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Real Relationships

A family sits at the dinner table. During the meal, the father scrolls through Twitter. The mother taps a quick answer to a work e-mail. The son comments on a celebrity's Instagram post, and the daughter invites a friend to play a puzzle game. Each person is physically present in the same space. They are sharing the same meal. Yet they are also each absent, off in their own virtual worlds. No matter how good a person thinks he or she is at multitasking, being present in a virtual space almost always means temporarily ignoring the real world. This is merely one of many ways in which digital technology is changing the way people build and maintain relationships with each other.

Humans are social animals. They naturally yearn for connection with each other. Strong relationships enhance a person's happiness and general well-being. Digital technology offers myriad ways to connect, including texting; photo and video sharing; video calls; social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram; online forums and comment streams; and multiplayer gaming. Each of these channels comes with its own nuances. Each can foster healthy, happy relationships or host harmful, bullying behavior. It all depends on how people use the technology.

The Rise of Social Media

Before the 1970s, relationships formed through in-person experiences, postal mail, or phone calls. Over the next few decades, the beginnings of the Internet were established. This new communication medium opened many novel ways for people to talk to each other. Early e-mail and text messaging usually connected just a few people at a time in private exchanges. Social media was dif-

ferent, making it possible to easily stay in touch with a wide group of people, and in a more public manner. As of 2014 the average American adult Facebook user had 338 friends, according to the Pew Research Center. Social media sites help satisfy people's hunger for attention and connect them to others with similar interests. Today YouTube and Facebook are the second- and third-most visited websites in the world, trailing only Google in popularity.

The more people who create profiles and share content, the more successful a social media site will be. Numerous sites have tried to gain a following, only to fail. Friendster, Google+, and iTunes Ping never caught on. A social media site without enough users is like a party without enough guests: It will not be fun, and the guests will soon look for somewhere else to hang out.

Missing the Party

For many groups of friends, social media really is a virtual party. When not together in real life, they hang out online. The exchanges that happen in Instagram comments or while gaming together

Digital technology is changing the way people communicate and relate to each other. Today many families are distracted during family meals by texts, video clips, or work e-mails.

become part of real-life interactions, so much so that missing out on a friend's update may lead to exclusion or embarrassment. Today making or keeping friends in real life may be nearly impossible without also connecting online. The ability to go online is essential to many young people's social lives.

In 2016 the British newspaper the *Guardian* asked a group of teenagers to go without digital technology for as long as they could. Henry Button made it for seven days. When some online drama happened in his group of friends, he had no idea what was

Saving Lives

In March 2015 Andrew Parker posted a suicide note on his blog. "Nothing brings me joy," he wrote. "Everything I look at or think about only brings more pain. . . . I just can't keep going on like this. I can't. I can't. I can't." Parker was a thirty-four-year-old freelance writer who had struggled with anxiety and depression since he was a child. He put a link to the post on Twitter, and immediately, responses came pouring in. Friends, acquaintances, and even total strangers reached out. He wound up going to a treatment center and getting help. "Social media, those people, saved my life," Parker said. "I would not have sought help if I had not seen those messages. That was more than I could have asked for."

Organizations that work to prevent suicide realize that social media messages often precede an attempt. The fact that many people always have a digital device nearby means that someone should be able to respond instantly to a person in distress. The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline has worked with both Facebook and Twitter to make it easy for users to report a suicidal post. This then alerts a trained counselor to attempt to get in touch with the person. In addition, Lifeline worked with Google to make its phone number appear when individuals type in phrases that indicate they may be considering suicide. In this way, digital media has the power to bring a person who feels isolated and worthless back from the brink of disaster.

Andrew Parker, "The End of All Things," *Even If It Kills Me* (blog), March 17, 2015. https://andrewjparkerblog .wordpress.com.

Quoted in Laura Armstrong, "'Social Media Saved My Life,' Says Man of the Caring Responses to His Suicide Note," *Toronto Star*, April 9, 2015. www.thestar.com.

going on. The sixteen-year-old says, "I wouldn't turn [my phone] off again. Even though I was more productive, I felt a lot more isolated."[4] Janice Da Costa, an eighteen-year-old, literally missed a party during the challenge. She never found out about a friend's birthday celebration.

The irony here is that people who spend all of their time on digital media may feel more socially connected and fulfilled, but they often end up missing out on real experiences. "If you're spending three, four, or five hours a day in an online game or virtual world . . . there's got to be someplace you're not," says Sherry Turkle, a social scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). "And that someplace you're not is often with your family and friends."[5] If Da Costa had attended that birthday party, chances are good that many of her friends would have spent a good chunk of their time together texting, sending snaps, or checking Instagram rather than talking.

Texting Versus Talking

Some people go so far as to avoid in-person conversations in favor of digital communication. Sending and receiving text messages is now the most common means of communication for Americans younger than fifty, according to a 2014 Gallup poll. The younger a person is, the more likely he or she is to prefer texting, e-mail, and social media over phone calls. "There has been a shift in the way we communicate; rather than face-to-face interaction, we're tending to prefer mediated communication," says Paul Booth, assistant professor of media and cinema studies at DePaul University in Chicago. "We'd rather e-mail than meet; we'd rather text than talk on the phone."[6]

Some people do not have the patience for real-time conversations. They want to know what is going on with other people—

> "There has been a shift in the way we communicate. . . . We'd rather e-mail than meet; we'd rather text than talk on the phone."[6]
>
> —Paul Booth, assistant professor of media and cinema studies, DePaul University

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Center for Digital Democracy

1621 Connecticut Ave., Suite 550
Washington, DC 20009
website: www.democraticmedia.org

The Center for Digital Democracy is a leading consumer protection and privacy organization that was founded in 2001. Its website offers press releases, information about its current projects, a special section on youth privacy and digital marketing, and link to the *Need to Know* blog.

Federal Communications Commission (FCC)

445 Twelfth St. SW
Washington, DC 20554
website: www.fcc.gov

The FCC is an independent US government agency that regulates communications by radio, television, wire, satellite, and cable in all fifty states, the District of Columbia, and US territories. Numerous publications related to online privacy issues can be accessed through the website's search engine.

Internet Society

1775 Wiehle Ave.
Reston, VA 20190
website: www.internetsociety.org

The Internet Society is an organization devoted to increasing Internet access around the world and ensuring that the Internet remains free, transparent, and open to all.

National Cyber Security Alliance

1010 Vermont Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20005
website: http://staysafeonline.org

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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