A Descriptive Look at Electronic Friendships

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Abstract

The contemporary era is one that seems to be increasingly impersonal as many daily tasks once performed in an in-person format are now being conducted electronically. As it pertains to the topic of friendship, the electronic world provides opportunities to create and maintain friendships but does it come at the cost of intimacy that is often associated with face-to-face interactions? There are those who believe that there has to be some face-to-face contact in order to establish a real friendship but such physical interactions may be overshadowed by the preponderance of time spent in the electronic world. Perhaps, more than anything, what we are witnessing is a type of re-negotiation of the notion of friendship. This paper provides a descriptive account of electronic friendships with a focus on the arguments that claim "e-friends" are similar to the traditional, face-to-face type of friendships, except that they take on a different appearance.

INTRODUCTION

Does it seem like the world is becoming increasingly impersonal? We are all being socialized by the various social institutions of society, our peers and often our family members into conducting everyday activities electronically rather than through more personal ways such as face-to-face interactions and conversations. Consider these scenarios. Calling a friend on the phone rather than texting them is likely to lead to an opening statement like, "Why are you calling me?" And if you leave a friend a voice

message they might snap and say something like, "I don't listen to my voicemails, what did you want?" Of course, at that point you will have to repeat yourself because they have not listened to the voicemail. Send someone a text and they might interpret a "tone" in your message that simply was not intended, and when you explain yourself they might respond by saying, "Well, use some emoticons next time and then I'll know if you were kidding or being serious." Instead of receiving personal invitations to social events such as holiday and birthday celebrations we receive electronic "Evites." In each of these instances, we begin to see how the notion of friendship is being re-negotiated by those who have embraced the protocol of electronic forms of communication over the traditional forms. This increasingly prevailing protocol consists of a general theme of conducting an increasing number of social interactions electronically. Embracing this developing form of social interaction protocol is much easier for those whose lives are already consumed by electronic forms of communication than it is for those who prefer things the way they used to be.

There are many other examples of the infusion of the electronic protocol into our daily lives whether we embrace it or not. For example, have you ever gone shopping at a store and received a receipt only to have the cashier say to you, "If you go online and fill out a survey you might win $1,000"? They assure you it will only take a minute or two. You may respond by asking, "Can't I just answer the survey now with you and you can let me know if I won the $1,000?" "Of course not," is the reply. Now that you are thinking about money matters and making purchases, you may say to yourself before attempting to make your next purchase, "I wonder what my credit/debit card balance is?" To find out the answer to this question you must go online and communicate

electronically with a machine rather than a live person. And trying to get a hold of a live person at most corporate headquarters is extremely frustrating and impersonal as you must go through a series of prompts that will connect you in the right direction. It might even be impossible to get a human being on the line rather than a human-sounding soothing machine voice. In fact, almost all basic information must now be attained electronically.

If your internet connection or WiFi stops working and you call the provider, you are likely to get a message that says something like, "For faster service use our website." Do you want to call for a cab or some other car service, pizza delivery, or order tickets to a ballgame? It is likely you will have to do it electronically. Walk into a bank to conduct some simple banking activity such as cashing a $100.00 check or making a simple deposit, and you are likely to wait at least 5 to 10 minutes to be served only to have the bank attendant say, "You know, you could've done this at the ATM outside." Reply by saying, "What, you don't want to see me?" and observe their confusion. View a commercial on TV by a drug company that purports to provide some potentially life-saving drug only to hear at the end, "Go to our website to learn more." You may think to yourself, but I want to learn more *now*! Hear a news report during your favorite primetime TV show or while listening to the radio that warns, "A dangerous felon has escaped and may be lurking in your neighborhood. Tune in tonight at 11pm or go to our website to learn more." Chances are you will want to know more about this dangerous felon now and not at 11pm.

Just like every scenario described above, and countless more, if the information is important enough to you, you will indeed utilize electronic means to achieve your goals.

We understand that we must seek answers and gain much information via electronic means for so many things now because we have been socialized into a cyberworld that increasingly dominates our daily activities. Then again, if you need information on such varied topics as how to tie a tie or how to fix a leaky faucet, you can go to YouTube and view a "How-to-Video." Further, if you need quick information on almost any topic, you can almost always find it electronically. So, it is not all bad. Welcome to the machine; you are now a part of it.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ELECTRONIC FRIENDSHIPS

Throughout history, humans have forged friendship groups for a variety of reasons including companionship, safety and basic survival. The development of friendships and the formation of strong social bonds improved the group's probability of survival. Even as humans continued to evolve physically and intellectually over hundreds of thousands of years the need for companionship and a strong communal bond with others would remain intact. Until fairly recently, friendships were primarily restricted to those people in close proximity to us as a minimal requirement of friendship is social interaction. This social interaction was nearly always conducted on a face-to-face basis. However, with the advent of communications technology, people are now able to continue old friendships or establish new friendships with little or no face-to-face interaction via electronic interactions. In fact, as will be shown below, it is the norm today for people of most ages to spend a great deal of time communicating with one another in the electronic world (cyberworld). And, for the most part, people seem willingly going with the flow.

Let us revisit the use of emoticons, previously mentioned. There are many good reasons to use emoticons. For one thing, consider all the electronic messages (e.g., text messages, emails, cyber posts) you receive, and think of how many times some of these messages were hard to understand or interpret because of the lack of visual symbols from the sender, such as gestures, that allow the reader to understand the emotion behind the message. As a result, the reader sometimes imposes a "tone" to the message that may be inaccurate as they, for example, misunderstand a joke for a serious comment (e.g., "I don't like the tone of your text. Are you mad at me?"). To avoid possible misunderstandings, it has become commonplace for people to use emoticons to express feelings. Thus, if the message was meant as a civil, non-confrontational, or humorous comment people add some variation of a smiley face. People also use emoticons to express themselves and there certainly are more than enough to choose from; in fact, there are so many emoticons available today that they represent a type of language. A number of messages are sent with just emoticons, and if you are not fluent with emoticons you will be lost. And yet, sociologists would point out, emoticons are simply symbols that help to form a language just like every other language.

TIME SPENT IN THE ELECTRONIC WORLD

We have been socialized into accepting the idea that participation in the electronic world is the norm. This cyber socialization process has been going on for generations now. Nearly everyone, including the elderly who grew up in an era mostly devoid of socialization via the cyberworld, has access to the cyberworld via an electronic device and feels comfortable being a part of it. And yet, there are many who still feel that

communication with friends and family and relationship maintenance via cyber socialization is impersonal and dehumanizing. Sure, we can Skype and FaceTime people, but it is not the same thing as being able to hug or shake hands with someone. Thus, while it is nice to receive an electronic embrace from a loved one, it is not the same as a physical hug. Nonetheless, electronic communications are a reflection of the current times.

The amount of time spent in the cyberworld generally comes at the cost of less time spent with personal relationships in the "real" world. It has already been 7 years since *USA Today* declared 2010 "the year we stopped talking to one another" (Cafferty 2011). Such a declaration came about because of a variety of 2010 statistics including a report that 93 percent of Americans used a cell phone or a wireless device (Cafferty 2011). By 2017, 95 percent of Americans owned a cellphone of some kind, with 77 percent owning a smartphone, according to the Pew Research Center (2017).

In 2014, Americans aged 18 and older spent on average of 11 hours per day with electronic media (e.g., television and internet use) (Richter 2015). When we factor that most people are awake 15 to 17 hours a day, 11 hours per day of electronic media represents a high percentage of our waking activity. American teens spend about 9 hours a day using media for their enjoyment; with some 13-year-olds checking social media sites 100 or more times a day (Wallace 2015). Research has shown that the average daily internet media consumption of Americans more than doubled from 13 percent in 2010 to 30 percent in 2015 (Karaian 2015). This same research indicates that Latin Americans spend the most time (13 hours per day) with some sort of media, and Asian-Pacific residents the least amount of time (a little more than 5 hours) (Karaian 2015).

In the UK, young people aged between 16 and 24 spend more than 27 hours a week on the internet, and people of all ages are spending twice as much time online compared to 10 years ago. This dramatic increase has been fueled by increasing use of tablets and smartphones. Young adults are especially responsible for this increase in the UK as the time spent online has almost tripled from 10 hours and 24 minutes each week in 2005 to 27 hours and 36 minutes in 2014 (Anderson 2015). The average person in the UK spends 2.5 hours every week "online while on the move"—away from their home, work or place of study. This is a five-fold increase from 2005, when the figure was just 30 minutes. Overall, the proportion of adults using the internet has risen from 6 in 10 in 2005 to almost-9 in 10 in 2015 (Anderson 2015). A similar trend occurring in the UK and the US is that while people are still watching a great deal of TV and films, they are increasingly watching this programming online.

In Russia, the most active Internet users are young people between the ages of 18 and 24, and they spend more than 21 hours a week online. This marks an increase of 5 times the number of hours spent online compared to 2009-2010 when the popularity of the Russian social networking (Vkontakte.ru, Odnoklassniki.ru) began to increase rapidly (Rassadina 2015). Another tendency is that 90 percent of Internet users in Russia under the age of 35 use gadgets to get access to the web. Research also indicates that in 2016 the gadgets' owners used the internet mainly for communication in social networks— over 2 hours per day. The overall average of Russians' online activity is about 7 hours a week. That is less than the overall average for Europeans, but higher than the world's average (Yandex 2017). However, the main point about Russian social media interaction is that it develops much of the intercultural and interlingua dialogue within Russia. Time

spent on the internet and particularly in social media (with Facebook as the leading site) could potentially contribute to knowledge of other nationalities and cultures and increases the interest with them. This process creates favorable conditions for the widening of such diverse activities as "couch surfing." Couch surfing itself is an internet phenomenon that is of growing interest among Russians between people from different cultures. Still, the tendency of growing tolerance and dialogue between Russians and people of other cultures is more typical in the larger cities of Russia including Moscow, St. Petersburg and Kazan, than it is in the rural areas (Delaney and Malakhova 2017).

The cyber socialization process that encourages people to communicate with one another electronically has been fueled by an increasing number of social network sites. Facebook remains as the most popular network site (eBiz 2016). In 2017, Facebook surpassed the 2 billion monthly active users mark in the second quarter of 2017 (Statista.com 2017). Facebook is available in 70 different languages, and more than 75% of all Facebook users reside outside of the United States (StatisticBrain.com 2017). Facebook Messenger has been especially helpful for many people to establish friendships. Following Facebook as the world's most popular social network sites are: YouTube, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Google+, Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit and VK (eBiz 2016). Social network sites afford people an opportunity to keep in electronic contact with their friends, family and associates even when they are separated by great distances geographically.

Delaney and Madigan (2017) conducted original research on college students at their respective colleges—SUNY Oswego and St. John Fisher College—and asked them to identify the social media sites they used most often (See Table 1). Instagram was

popular in this survey, reflecting the general age of respondents who were mostly between 18 and 24 years old. Facebook remains most popular with our surveyed college students but it should be pointed out that while our respondents had Facebook accounts they did not use it as often as other social media sites. As shown in Table 1, Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and Twitter are the four most popular social network sites used by our survey participants.

Table 1: Most Commonly Used Sites, by Gender, Number and in Percent

Males (N=76)   Females (N=108)

Social Media Site	#	Percent	Social Media Site	#	Percent
Facebook	54	71	Instagram	89	82
Instagram	51	67	Snapchat	83	77
Snapchat	41	54	Facebook	80	74
Twitter	37	49	Twitter	59	55
YouTube	4	5	Tumblr	12	11
Reddit	3	4	Pinterest	4	4
Tumblr	3	4	Yik Yak	2	2
LinkedIn	2	3	YouTube	2	2
Steam	1	1	BuzzFeed	1	1
Beme	1	1	Reddit	1	1
Yik Yak	1	1	Messenger	1	1
Twitch.tv	1	1	Tinder	1	1
None	3	4	VSCO	1	1

(Source: Delaney and Madigan 2017)

QUESTIONING THE LEGITIMACY OF ELECTRONIC FRIENDSHIPS

Given the increasing popularity of people communicating with one another electronically as a means to establish friendships, there are questions about the legitimacy of electronic friendships and "e-friends." There are those who believe that there has to be

some face-to-face contact in order to establish a real friendship. Others wonder if it is really possible for someone to uphold friendships with hundreds or thousands of Facebook friends. Still others wonder if the quality of an electronic friendship is the same as face-to-face friendships. Questions such as these arise because the nature of social interaction, like social norms, values and beliefs themselves are changing, and while some members of society embrace this change, others lag behind and question its legitimacy.

To be fair, it is common for many Facebook users to potentially have hundreds of friends they have never met personally, and as a result their relationships are often superficial. Then again, many face-to-face friendships are also impersonal and superficial. And yet, there are many occasions when our electronic friendships become very intimate: as we learn about their likes and dislikes, their achievements and pitfalls and their real life friends and family members, we begin to form a real bond with them.

Academics and laypersons alike have been pondering this notion of whether or not electronic friendships are "real" friendships for a number of years now. Alia Dastagir, writing for *USA Today* cites William Rawlins, a professor of communication studies at Ohio University, who said that all friendships have the same basic elements: they are voluntary, mutual, personal, affectionate and equal. "The voluntary part is key. Reciprocity is one of Facebook's central tenants. I can't friend you unless you accept me. This isn't the case for all social networks. On Twitter and Instagram you can follow without being followed back, creating a more impersonal network" (Dastagir 2016). On Facebook however, one must be accepted as a friend, and you can always be unfriended. The affectionate (emotional) component of friendship is an interesting variable, however,

when applied to electronic friends. A study conducted by Oxford University psychology professor Robin Dunbar (2016) resulted in his conclusion that on average, only about 14 (13.6) of your Facebook friends could be counted on for emotional/social support in time of crisis.

The Dunbar study (2016) also points out a similarity between electronic friendships and face-to-face friendships, namely that they are all subject to natural decay in the absence of contact. It appears that social media can function to slow down the decay of friendships but, face-to-face relationships require some face-to-face contact to prolong themselves. Electronic friendships do not need face-to-face interaction; instead, they need to be maintained electronically.

Tanya Hollander, a Facebook user, was wondering if her Facebook friends were real friends so she decided to track them down, all 626 of them. As a photographer, she decided to go on a quest to take all of their photographs. Some of these friends she knew in real life, some were old friends from high school (over 20 years prior), and others she only knew as electronic friends. She started her journey with low expectations, "There's no way these people will give a shit about me" she told Claire O'Neill who wrote an article about Hollander for NPR. As it turned out, her friends, whether "real" or "electronic" were enthusiastic about the project. One electronic friend let Hollander crash with her for over a week as she looked for other electronic friends to meet in person and photograph. Hollander concluded that there is a thin line between electronic friends and real friends and that all it takes for the cross-over is to actually meet electronic friends and they may easily become real friends. Hollander stated, "I have been so surprised at

how generous people have been. Apparently all it takes is some face time to make Facebook friendships real" (O'Neill 2012).

In an interesting cross-media example of the exploration on whether electronic friendships are real or not, consider a letter from a 20-year-old woman written to "Dear Abby" (a syndicated advice columnist) inquiring about grief and electronic friends. The woman wrote that her boyfriend ("my very first boyfriend") committed suicide and that she felt absolutely destroyed. The woman continued that while they lived several states apart and that they never met face-to-face, they did talk every night and video-chatted many times. "My feelings for him are real." She wrote that she broke down after hearing the news and that she was in great distress. Her heartache was made worse by her family's reaction to her loss. "My family thinks I'm overreacting. They can't understand how a relationship with someone online can be serious." The woman wanted help from Abby in making her family recognize how much pain she was in. Abby replied by first offering sympathy for the loss of "someone you cared about so deeply." Abby also wrote that it was sad that her parents minimized her feelings; mentioned how many serious relationships have now started online; and suggested that she seek emotional support elsewhere (e.g., a clergyperson, if she had one, or look online for a grief support group) (Dear Abby 2015).

In the Delaney and Madigan study on SUNY Oswego and St. John Fisher College students, survey participants were asked, "Is it possible to be in a relationship with someone strictly electronically (no physical interactions)?" There was a statistically significant difference between male and female responses with just forty-five percent of males saying "yes" but sixty-four percent of females saying "yes" to the question is it

possible to have a strictly electronic relationship without physical interactions (See Table 2).

Table 2: Is It Possible to be in a Relationship with Someone Strictly Electronically (No Physical Interactions)? by Gender, Number and in Percent

Males (N=74)			Females (N=105)		
Yes or No	#	Percent	Yes or No	#	Percent
Yes	33	45	Yes	67	64
No	41	55	No	38	36

(Source: Delaney and Madigan 2017)

Respondents were asked to explain their answer to the question "is it possible to be in a relationship with someone strictly electronically (no physical interactions)?" and listed below is a sampling of responses from males in support of electronic relationships:

- Relationships are vague and subjective; anyone who communicates with someone has a relationship with that person. Still, I couldn't do a strictly electronic relationship, but that's just me.

- As long as there is a similarity between both parties, a friendship can form.

- It's hard not being near someone you are close with, but it doesn't mean it can't happen.

- Yes, social media has created e-relationships.

- Yes, but it's weird.

- Yes, but it's an incomplete relationship.

- Yes, but only if both people are being true—no Catfish type situations.

- Yes, I am an avid gamer and have many friends that I only speak to electronically.

- Maybe, but I don't think it's sustainable. But, then again, the digital age is changing things.

Among the female responses in support of the validity of electronic relationships are the following:

- Yes, you don't need physical contact to have a relationship with someone (some variation of this comment was the most common).

- Yes, it's still someone to talk to.

- It is possible but not for me.

- Friendship yes; romance, no.

Among the *male* responses who <u>disagreed</u> with the validity of a relationship strictly electronically-based are the following:

- I don't believe in that. Social media is a mask for some people.

- You can't have a real relationship unless you have met that person.

- No, I must have physical contact (most common answer).

- No, in order to have a complete connection you must have some face-to-face/in-person contact.

Female respondents who did not support the notion of a purely electronic relationship offered comments such as these:

- No, you can only truly know someone if you are physically with that person (most common answer).

- No, I need to see/fee/hear the emotion in their voice and read their body language.

- No, electronics are a disconnect from emotion and gestures.

- How can you really know someone if you have never met them in person?

- No, it's like a modern-day pen pal.

- No, why would anyone do that?

- And from the respondent that was victimized by a catfishing scheme, "Never trust someone online. The people you think are real are not real."

Based on Delaney and Madigan's research, it would seem that there is disagreement about the validity of purely electronic relationships (e-relationships). Electronic relationships *are* relationships; they're just not face-to-face relationships.

CONCLUSION

The social world is changing in many ways but as it pertains to this article, the increased normality of communicating with one another via electronic means has particularly influenced social interactions and the formation of friendships. The key to electronic friendships, like face-to-face friendships, would be the maintenance of social interaction. Electronic friendships again, like face-to-face friendships, have the potential

to possess the same key characteristics: voluntary participation, mutuality, sharing personal details about one another, and displaying some degree of affection. Elaborating on the affective aspects of electronic relationships there are those who have established romances and consider themselves "together" in a real sense even though they have not met in the real world. The possibility of maintaining an almost continuous conversation online gives us a completely natural sense of its reality as a "flow" of interaction that can be established. Electronic relationships allow for a wide range of emotions similar to face-to-face communication. Possessing information (e.g., photos, personal stories, descriptions of daily activities) that others share electronically allows cyber interactants to create an image(s) of one another making the experience seem as real as a face-to-face interaction.

Electronic friendships then, are as real as friends make them. The prevailing protocol that surrounds social interactants into accepting that an increasing number of social interactions should be conducted electronically helps to assure the idea that electronic friendships are as real as reality can be. Furthermore, e-friends that have accepted the negotiated protocol of electronic forms of communication over the traditional ones will more likely come to view electronic friendships as real, and certainly, as real as traditional, face-to-face friendships.

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