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## So-Called Relational Technology Might Erode Nation's Social Fabric

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After a five-year career in financial services (a highly relational, face-to-face business), I enrolled in graduate school to make a career change into coaching. Soon I found myself surrounded by undergraduates nagging me to join the social-networking Web site Facebook.com.

"Are you on Facebook?" they asked. "I can't believe that you're not! You have to join. You're a good networker, you'll love this!"

"Facewhat? I don't get it!"

Though I didn't understand the purpose of this online networking instrument, I begrudgingly created a Facebook profile and got hooked. When I was supposed to be writing papers, I found myself checking my Facebook profile, adding friends, joining groups, checking out others' profiles, and seeing who knew who. This was a fantastic procrastination tool! Facebook was far more entertaining and exciting than the paper I was supposed to be writing.

It didn't take long for me to notice I had been sucked into this vacuous cyber vortex when I realized I had spent more than three hours (15 minutes here and there) in one day on this stupid Web site. What was I doing? What benefit did that add to my life? Did it make me more productive? No. Did it enhance existing friendships or help build new ones? No! I knew better, but somehow got captured by this medium.

There is something almost alluring about these online social-networking sites. Most media, parents, and educators warn of the privacy and safety concerns of online worlds such as Facebook or MySpace.com. Yet maybe we should be asking: What is this doing to our relationships? How does this change the way young people develop as humans? What is this doing to our social fabric and human interconnectedness?

### Technology Changes Behavior

My hunch is that it has some implications that could be serious. Look at how cell phones have changed the social rhythm of society. For example, four young people are in a car, each on a cell phone or frantically text-messaging somebody else. Even in family life, mom or dad can come home from work and fracture family time by attending to messages or calls on a Blackberry. The technology is effectively fragmenting our time with each other into more segmented and, perhaps, superficial interactions. The combination of mobile devices, instant messaging, online chat, blogs, Facebook, and MySpace are changing the way humans relate to one another. This is more than communication technology -- it's relational technology.

## **Personal Interaction Matters**

A critical part of healthy adult relationships and child as well as adolescent development is a sense of deep interpersonal connection with other humans. Researchers have demonstrated that strong, stable, interpersonal relationships with prolonged interaction are linked with myriad forms of emotional and mental well-being. Likewise, a lack of personal connectedness and intimacy is associated with depression and many other negative effects on health and well-being.

Humans are relational beings and this sense of belongingness and being accepted is among the deepest human needs. Can trust and intimacy be built through all of these digital channels? Can we understand each other and build a deeper relationship without spending recurring time with real people, face-to-face where we can hear their voice, read their body language, and see the whites of their eyes?

Don't get the wrong idea; I carry a mobile device that can surf the Web, check my e-mail, make phone calls, and send text messages. I believe technology increases productivity and competitiveness in business. I maintain Facebook and MySpace profiles and have made successful business connections through LinkedIn.com and online common-interest forums. The technology is not bad in and of itself, yet I wonder if used out of balance how it affects the quality of our daily lives on social connectedness and the human spirit. We're in a world where one could interact with others in complete isolation through electronic devices. What are the long-term implications of this new reality?

Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that, after health and safety, the needs for friendships, family, respect of others, self-esteem, and confidence take precedence. If this technology is eroding the fabric of our relationships, then is the allure of Facebook or MySpace falsely filling a void of intimacy and connectedness? Sure, people are more "connected" at a surface level with digital representations or avatars of each other, but are they truly connected offline? We don't know.

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