

# Hiding behind the screen essay



Human relations, and the self-image of the human being, have been profoundly affected by the Internet and by the ease with which images of other people can be summoned to the computer screen to become the objects of emotional attention. How should we conceptualize this change, and what is its effect on the psychic condition of people who construct their world of interests and relationships through the screen? Is this change as damaging as many would have us believe, undermining our capacity for real relationships and placing a mere fantasy of relatedness in their stead?

Or is it relatively harmless, as unproblematic as speaking to a friend on the telephone? First, we should make some distinctions. We all now use the computer to send messages to our friends. This sort of communication is not different in any fundamental respect from the old practice of letter writing, except for its speed. Of course, we should not regard speed as a trivial feature. The rapidity of modern communications does not merely accelerate the process whereby relationships are formed and severed; it inevitably changes how those relationships are conducted and understood.

Absence is less painful with the Internet and the telephone, but it also loses some of its poignancy; moreover, e-mails are seldom composed as carefully as letters, since the very slowness with which a letter makes its way to its destination prompts us to put more of our feelings into the words. Still, e-mail is reality, not virtual reality, and the changes it has brought about are changes in real communication between real people.

Nor does the existence of social networks like Facebook, which are also for the most part real communication between real people, involve any attempt

simply to substitute a virtual reality for the actual one. On the contrary, relationships on Facebook are dependent on the real relationships offline. They alter in large part by encouraging people to put themselves on display, and in turn to become voyeurs of the displays of others. Some might claim that the existence of these networking sites provides a social and psychological benefit, helping those who are shy to gain a public place and identity.

These sites also enable people to keep in touch with a wide circle of friends and colleagues, thereby increasing the range of their affections, and filling the world with goodwill and happy feelings. Yet already something new is entering the world of human relations with these innocent-seeming sites. There is a novel ease with which people can make contact with each other through the screen. No more need to get up from your desk and make the journey to your friend's house.

No more need for weekly meetings, or the circle of friends in the downtown restaurant or bar. All those effortful ways of making contact can be dispensed with: a touch of the keyboard and you are there, where you wanted to be, on the site that defines your friends. But can this be real friendship, when it is pursued and developed in such facile and costless ways? Friendship and Control Real friendship shows itself in action and affection. The real friend is the one who comes to the rescue in your hour of need; who is there with comfort in adversity and who shares with you his own success.

This is hard to do on the screen — the screen, after all, is primarily a locus of information, and is only a place of action insofar as communication is a form of action. Only words, and not hands or the things they carry, can reach from it to comfort the sufferer, to ward off an enemy's blows, or to provide any of the tangible assets of friendship in a time of need. It is arguable that the more people satisfy their need for companionship through relationships carried out on the screen, the less will they develop friendships of that other kind, the kind that offers help and comfort in the real trials of human life.

Friendships that are carried out primarily on the screen cannot easily be lifted off it, and when they are so lifted, there is no guarantee that they can withstand the real tests of friendship. Indeed, it is precisely their cost-free, screen-friendly character that attracts many people to them — so much so, students of mine tell me, that they fear addiction, and often have to forbid themselves from going to their Facebook account for days on end, in order to get on with their real lives and their real relationships.

What we are witnessing is a change in the attention that gives rise to friendship. In the once normal conditions of human contact, people became friends by being in each other's presence, understanding all the many subtle signals, verbal and bodily, that people use to convey their character, emotions, and intentions, and building affection and trust in tandem. Attention was fixed on the other — on his face, words, and gestures. And his nature as an embodied person was the focus of the friendly feelings that he inspired.

People building friendship in this way are strongly aware that they appear to the other as the other appears to them. The other's face is a mirror in which they see their own. Precisely because attention is fixed on the other, there is an opportunity for self-knowledge and self-discovery. The object of friendly feelings looks back at you, and freely responds to your free activity. As traditionally conceived, friendship was ruled by the maxim "know thyself." When attention is fixed on the other as mediated by the screen, however, there is a marked shift in emphasis.

For a start, I have my finger on the button; at any moment I can turn the image off, or click to arrive at some new encounter. My friend on the other side of the screen is free in his own space, but he is not really free in my space, over which I am the ultimate arbiter. I am not risking myself in the friendship to nearly the same extent as I risk myself when I meet my friend face to face. Of course, my friend may so grip my attention with his messages, images, and requests that I stay glued to the screen.

Nevertheless, it is ultimately a screen that I am glued to, and not the face that I see in it.

All interaction with my friend is at a distance, and whether I am affected by it becomes to some extent a matter of my own choosing. In this "screenful" form of conducting relationships, I enjoy a power over the other person of which he himself is not really aware — since he is not aware of whether I want to keep him on the screen or not. And the power I have over him he has too over me. He, too, therefore, will not risk himself; he appears on the screen only on condition of retaining that ultimate control himself. This is something I know about him that he knows that I know — and vice versa.

There grows between us a reduced risk encounter, in which each is aware that the other can fundamentally control the relationship because each person is sovereign within his impregnable cyber-castle. But that is not the only way in which cyber-relationships are affected by the medium through which they are formed. For instance, while “messaging” is still very much alive on Facebook, much of it is depersonalized in nature: the use of private messages has for many been supplanted by posting messages on a friend’s public “Wall,” meaning that the entire network now participates in the communique.

And while the Wall post still maintains the semblance of interpersonal contact, probably the most common form of communication on Facebook is the “status update,” a message that is broadcast from one person to everyone (or, put another way, to no one in particular). All of these communications, along with everything on the screen, appear in competition with whatever else might be called up by the mouse. You “click on” your friend, as you might click on a news item or a music video.

Your friend is just one of the many products on display. Friendship with him, and relationships generally, belong in the category of amusements and distractions, a commodity that may be chosen, or not, depending on the rival goods. This contributes to a radical demotion of the personal relationship. Your friendships are no longer special to you and definitive of your moral life: instead, they are amusements, things that have no real life of their own but borrow their life from your interest in them.

There is a strong argument to be made that the Facebook experience, which has attracted millions of people from all around the world, is an antidote to shyness, a way in which people otherwise cripplingly intimidated by venturing into society are able to overcome their disability and enjoy the web of affectionate relationships on which so much of our happiness depends. But there is an equally strong argument that the Facebook experience, to the extent that it is supplanting physical human relationships, doesn't really replace shyness. Instead, Facebook simply substitutes a fake kind of affection for the real affection that shyness fears.

For by placing a screen between yourself and the friend, while retaining ultimate control over what appears on that screen, you also hide from the real encounter — denying the your “ friend” the power and the freedom to challenge you in your deeper nature and to call on you here and now to take responsibility for yourself and for him. I was taught growing up that shyness (unlike modesty) is not a virtue but a defect, and that it comes from placing too high a value on yourself — a value that prevents you from risking yourself in the encounter with others.

By removing the real risks from interpersonal encounters, the Facebook experience might encourage a kind of narcissism, a self- regarding posture in place of what should have been other-regarding friendship. In effect, there may be nothing more than the display of self, the others listed on the website counting for nothing in themselves. The Necessary Risks of Life Off the Screen We must come to an understanding, then, of what is at stake in the current worries concerning the Internet and life on the screen. The first

issue at stake is risk. We are rational beings, endowed with practical as well as theoretical reasoning.

And our practical reasoning develops through our confrontation with risk and uncertainty. To a large extent, life on the screen is risk-free: when we click on a Facebook status update, we risk nothing immediate in the way of physical danger, and our accountability to others and risk of emotional embarrassment is attenuated. This freedom from risk is one of the most significant features social networking sites like Facebook. One can enter and leave relationships conducted solely via the screen without any embarrassment, remaining anonymous or operating under a pseudonym, hiding behind a false photograph of oneself.

A person can decide to delete his screen identity at any time, and he will suffer nothing as a consequence. Why, then, trouble to enter the world of real encounters, when this easy substitute is available? And when the substitute becomes a habit, the virtues needed for the real encounter do not develop. In human relations, risk avoidance means the avoidance of accountability, the refusal to stand judged in another's eyes, the refusal to come face to face with another person, to give oneself in whatever measure to him or her, and so to run the risk of rejection. Accountability is not something we should avoid; it is something we need to learn.

Without it we can never acquire either the capacity to love or the virtue of justice. Other people will remain for us merely complex devices, to be negotiated in the way that animals are negotiated, for our own advantage and without opening the possibility of mutual judgment. Justice is the ability



to see the other as having a claim on you, as being a free subject just as you are, and as demanding your accountability. To acquire this virtue you must learn the habit of face-to-face encounters, in which you solicit the other's consent and cooperation rather than imposing your will.

When you retreat behind the screen, you are essentially trying to retain control over the encounter, while minimizing the need to acknowledge the other's point of view. To encounter another person in his freedom is to acknowledge his sovereignty and his right: it is to recognize that the developing situation is no longer within your control, but that you are caught up by it, made real and accountable in the other's eyes by the same considerations that make him real and accountable in yours.