Facelessness: The New Face of Connectivity

In the last number of years, social media have dominated the minds of many, perhaps most, young people – especially those living in developed nations. From Myspace and MSN Messenger all the way to Twitter and Tumblr, this form of virtual communication is advancing rapidly. In our society, it has become uncommon to meet even a single person who is not actively involved with at least one social media outlet. The goal of social media was, at least originally, to facilitate communication among people. However, critics now question whether or not these detached methods of contact are instead turning us into anti-social beings. In order to answer, we must first address the question: What is meant by "social"/"anti-social". For the purpose of this essay, the word "social" will be used to mean "placing a high value on human relationships, in particular friendship. On that definition, social media - because they do in fact create and sustain relationships, however impersonal, are not making the world more anti-social.

The beauty of social networking is that it fosters connections among a vast number of people. It does this quickly and simply. Individuals are able to share photos and messages with hundreds, even thousands, of people in just seconds. The simplicity of communication has reached unprecedented levels. For example, photos and memories of the last family gathering can be effortlessly shared with distant relatives. Party plans can be easily established among friends. News can be easily shared. As a result, those who use social media have an opportunity to form and maintain informed relationships with friends and loved ones even when they rarely have the ability to get-together in person. By using techniques of mass messaging and posts which are publicly accessible, more people are able to remain up-to-date with what is happening in each other's lives than was ever before possible.

At any rate, social media so seem to be serving their main purpose. They are an exceptionally simple way for individuals to maintain contact with friends and family. But that is not all they have achieved. Today, social media enable us to develop relationships with new people. Celebrities can communicate with their fans around the world, and people with mutual interests can share them even though they were complete strangers. Surely this ability to establish affiliations does not deserve to be labelled "anti-social".

 Critics argue that these "virtual" relationships are superficial and lack many of the fundamentally important qualities of basic human interaction. And, it must be admitted, when one converses with someone online many of the skills necessary for face to face communication are absent. One such example is eye-contact, an ability that is considered important in most person to person encounters. That being said, this ability, though it may add a certain element to specific conversations, is not necessarily vital to the overall art of sociability.

Moreover, the world is full of people struggling and failing to be accepted in their own communities. Via social media they can often find refuge from their alienated lives by building relationships with strangers who accept them. These friendships differ from traditional friendships, but are they any less meaningful? Actually, many people report finding online friendships to be more rewarding, as they are able to" be themselves" online, with fewer concerns about the consequences involved.

Against this, a common argument asserts that being able to so readily make contact with others often takes away from a person's willingness to socialize with the people in direct proximity to them. This is especially relevant when it comes to my generation who, undeniably, can often be seen focusing on their smartphones while in a room surrounded by people. This is a

valid but limited criticism. It's important to keep in mind a varied range of circumstances. I was given the chance to spend several months in another province as part of an exchange program. While there, it was important for me to remain in contact with my loved ones back home. If I had been forced to keep contact solely via telephone calls, my concern about what was happening at home would have severely interfered with my experiences and friendships on the trip. The ability to contact friends and family simply and whenever time was available meant that I was able to connect with people back home without taking away from the time needed for me to embrace a new culture. Without the use of social media, I would have been forced to plan my activities around those of everyone back home, solely in an effort to stay in touch. So, while social media may in some cases take away from a person's attention to those immediately around them, in many other cases they allow us to engage more fully in life.

The world has changed. With technology constantly evolving, people's lifestyles are often forced to conform to those changes. Overall, the goal of new technologies is to simplify and enhance human experience. That's what social media have done. People are now able to contact individuals or groups living across the city or on the other side of the planet, cheaply and easily. All things considered, social media are not making us anti-social, but are perhaps redefining and expanding the meaning of our social relationships.

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