

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Do you have any personal examples of long-distance friendships? Dunbar asserts, "Emotional closeness declines by around 15 percent a year in the absence of face-to-face contact." Do you find this assertion to be true according to your own examples of long-distance friendship?
2. In the article, Dunbar states that we can only maintain around 150 meaningful relationships, online and off. What does the author likely mean by the word "maintain"? What would your definition of "maintaining a friendship" be? Do you agree that it is impossible to "maintain" more than 150 friends? Explain.

WRITING ABOUT THE ISSUES

1. Watch the film *The Social Network* and do research on the beginnings of Facebook. Then write an essay arguing if Robin Dunbar is correct in stating: "Facebook has revolutionized how we relate to one another. But the revolution hasn't come in quite the way that the people behind it assume."
2. According to a blog post of Path's founder Dave Morin, "Path allows you to capture your life's most personal moments and share them with the 50 close friends and family in your life who matter most. Because your personal network is limited to your closest friends and family, you can always trust that you can post any moment, no matter how personal. Path is a place where you can be yourself." Analyze Morin's comments and argue which site is better for college students, Path or Facebook, and state if you think Path will take over Facebook in the future.

Faceless on Facebook

Kate Beals

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CONNECTING TO THE TOPIC

While social networking sites help people network, connect, and meet new friends, they also project an image of their users online. For people who network or meet online, a user's profile page is their online self—the first impression they present to others. Have you ever thought about what your Facebook profile says about you? What image do you project? What do you

hope people will learn about you from what you share? Do you carefully consider what messages you are conveying online about who you are and what you want people to think about you? In this next essay, a newcomer to Facebook describes how the experience forces her to question every word she puts online.

WORDS IN CONTEXT

- Epicurious** (2) Website that contains recipes from *Gourmet* and *Bon Appetit* magazines and cooking information (www.epicurious.com)
fraught (7) filled with something, charged (n.)
covet (9) to desire or want something to the point of envy (v.)
Xanax (10) the trade name for a drug of the benzodiazepine class used to treat moderate to severe anxiety and/or panic attacks (n.)

1 **A**fter great urging from my younger, hipper friends, I gave into pressure and registered on Facebook. As I am on the other side of 30, they told me to network on Facebook, and leave MySpace to the kids.

2 I consider myself to be quite Internet savvy. I used a blog site to connect my graduating class in order to organize my 20th high school reunion. I read Salon.com and Slate.msn weekly. I prefer email to the telephone, and even text message my twenty-something cousin fairly regularly (but I admittedly spell out all the words). I cannot imagine living without Google, Mapquest, or eBay. I regularly look up recipes on **Epicurious**, and do at least 90 percent of my merchandise shopping online. I suppose you could say that I am young enough to handle technology, but still old enough to be impressed by it and how it has changed my life.

3 So why the holdout on social networking sites? I had poked around on Facebook before, but without registering, you can't see that much. Thus, I didn't see a need. But with my friends raving about how connected it made them feel and how they used it for everything from sharing photographs to blogging, I decided to give it a whirl.

4 I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

5 After registering, I was encouraged to add my friends (or at least try to find them). Right from the get-go I started feeling anxious. What if I didn't have many friends? At least on MySpace, I hear everyone gets Tom. Without friends, would I look like a loser? What if I couldn't get enough? Suddenly, I felt like I was back in eighth grade vying for a place in the popular group (or at least in the "not total geek" group).

6 I am supposed to select and post a photo that represents "me." Do I use a real photo? Taken recently? Should I use some abstract piece of

art that conveys "me" in a more cerebral artistic way? After deciding that my photos looked more like mug shots (and bloated mug shots at that), and waffling over the copyright issues that may be connected to posting a piece of art, I decided to leave this blank (at least for now).

7 Then I needed to fill out a "profile." This is my opportunity to tell the world more about me (presumably one's favorite subject). I found the profile page a bit confusing because I presume that the people I invite to connect on Facebook would already have a handle on this sort of information. The "Personal" area I discovered, however, is less about the real you, and more about what you want people to think about you. And each field is **fraught** with peril.

8 It didn't start off very promising. My first few fields made me look like an insufferable bore. Activities: golf, reading and toddler time; Interests: sociology, culture, medicine, child psychology; Music: classical and 80s punk rock (well, maybe that was a little interesting); TV: *Top Chef*; Movies: They still make those?; Books. . . .

9 Now a book list I can handle, I thought perking up. I love books. I usually have at least three going at one time, so I thought this field would be easy. But wait, umm—should I share that the last thing I read was a trashy regency romance (left in the room of a historic hotel in New Hampshire, and gratefully pounced upon instead of the academic fare I had brought with me). Or should I instead say the *Tipping Point*, which conveyed the image of the sophisticated, well-read woman I imagine myself to be in daydreams? If I owned up to reading *Snoop*—a sociology book about what your stuff says about you, will people think I read it because I am shallow? I just read a great book by Stephen Pinker, but the book hardly projects the persona I **covet**—you know, smart, sexy and quirky in an intriguing way (as opposed to nerdy, dependable, and quirky in a weird way).

10 So I stopped at the book list. In fact, I stopped altogether. My life is too busy to think so much about myself—or worry about what I am saying about myself. I know that I probably was over-thinking this. Most people, I suspect, are able to fill out these fields without looking for a bottle of **Xanax**. But there is my page, woefully barren. No friends. No interests. The question "What are you doing right now" hangs unanswered—for an honest "looking at my empty page" would be hardly inspirational.

11 Let people make their own judgments in person. Let someone find out about that trashy book when *they* admit to a great bodice ripper. I'll jump right in and share. When cocktail conversation turns to linguistics (and it very well may at the parties I attend), I will turn to my companions and explore brain science with some like-minded nerdy types.

12 But at least for now, I've decided to let this area of the Internet remain "Kate free." ♦

CONSIDERING THE ISSUES

1. You have probably heard the expression, "Don't judge a book by its cover." The truth is, however, that most of us do make snap judgments based on what we see. How do Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace (and other social networking pages) serve as our online selves? How do they make that "first impression?"
2. The author of this essay reveals that she is nearing 40 years of age. Do you think older adults should use social networking sites? Based on what you know about such places, would older adults be comfortable networking on pages that have traditionally been dominated by teens and twenty-somethings? Explain.

CRAFT AND CONTENT

1. What is the author's tone in this essay? What sort of person do you think she is? How would you describe her based on the information she provides?
2. How does the author use humor to connect with her audience? As a reader, can you better relate to her points because of her humor? Do you think she really takes the issue of Facebook seriously, or is she just having some fun with her audience?

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Why is the author "anxious" about what she posts about herself in her Facebook profile?
2. The author is conflicted about the image she wishes to convey and the person she really is. In what ways do we grapple with such issues every day? Why is image so important? Should it be?

WRITING ABOUT THE ISSUES

1. The author argues that the "Profile" section of Facebook is "less about the real you, and more about what you want people to think about you." Does she have a point? If you have a Facebook or MySpace account, share your own perspective on this observation.
2. Go to Facebook or MySpace and visit some random pages. Based on what you see, what conclusions, if any, can you draw about the users? Would you like to get to know them better? Why or why not? What "hooks" do they use to draw you into

their page? How do they engage you? Based on your research and personal experience, write a short essay about what you think makes an effective Facebook or MySpace page.

Visual Connections



CRITICAL THINKING

1. What is happening in this cartoon? What visual clichés does it use to help convey information to the viewer?
2. How does this cartoon relate to the issue of Facebook and the shelf life of information on the Internet? Explain.
3. What is the underlying message in this cartoon? What point is it making? Is it funny? Why or why not?
4. Consider the theme of this cartoon. Is there anything you have already posted on Facebook or online that could come back to haunt you in 20 years?
5. Would knowing that your children could see what you posted years ago on the Internet in any way deter you from posting something online? Why or why not?

Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism

Christine Rosen

Christine Rosen is a senior editor of *The New Atlantis* and resident fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington, D.C. She writes about the history of genetics, bioethics, the fertility industry, and the social impact of technology. She is the author of *Preaching Eugenics: Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* (2004). She is widely published in many journals and newspapers including the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Washington Post*, *New Republic*, *National Review*, the *Weekly Standard*, *Commentary*, and the *New England Journal of Medicine*. This essay, abridged for space, appeared in the Summer 2007 issue of *The New Atlantis*, where it can be viewed online in its entirety.

CONNECTING TO THE TOPIC

How are Facebook pages like a self-portrait? What do they reveal about subjects and how they view themselves? More than simply connecting us with each other, social networking sites allow us to present a persona to the world—publicly sharing who we know, what we think, what we do, and even what we own. Are social networking sites raising the bar on our level of self-absorption?

WORDS IN CONTEXT

narcissism (title) excessive love for or admiration of oneself (n.)

ephemeral (3) fleeting; brief (adj.)

ubiquity (10) being everywhere at once (n.)

bureaucratize (16) placed under formal control, usually government control (v.)

philately (16) stamp collecting (n.)

debasement (19) lowered in quality or value (n.)

parochial (19) limited in scope, restricted (adj.)

For centuries, the rich and the powerful documented their existence and their status through painted portraits. A marker of wealth and a bid for immortality, portraits offer intriguing hints about the daily life of their subjects—professions, ambitions, attitudes, and, most importantly, social standing. Such portraits, as German art historian Hans Belting has argued, can be understood as “painted anthropology,” with much to teach us, both

intentionally created.

2 Self-portraits as he sees himself once exposed both self-exposure, self-agency, self-agency.

3 Today, from pixels and Facebook fully manipulated lists of our lives merely to locate them to find connection. Like and tweak of ephemeral of favorite books the timeless of these vast

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Making Connections

5 The earliest of the 19th-century private messages like The WELL Brilliant and to the World The WELL community movement emerged register by business-oriented allow users to

6 A new generation in 2002 with the

intentionally and unintentionally, about the culture in which they were created.

- 2 Self-portraits can be especially instructive. By showing the artist both as he sees his true self and as he wishes to be seen, self-portraits can at once expose and obscure, clarify and distort. They offer opportunities for both self-expression and self-seeking. They can display egotism and modesty, self-aggrandizement and self-mockery.
- 3 Today, our self-portraits are democratic and digital; they are crafted from pixels rather than paints. On social networking websites like MySpace and Facebook, our modern self-portraits feature background music, carefully manipulated photographs, stream-of-consciousness musings, and lists of our hobbies and friends. They are interactive, inviting viewers not merely to look at, but also to respond to, the life portrayed online. We create them to find friendship, love, and that ambiguous modern thing called connection. Like painters constantly retouching their work, we alter, update, and tweak our online self-portraits; but as digital objects they are far more **ephemeral** than oil on canvas. Vital statistics, glimpses of bare flesh, lists of favorite bands and favorite poems all clamor for our attention—and it is the timeless human desire for attention that emerges as the dominant theme of these vast virtual galleries.
- 4 Although social networking sites are in their infancy, we are seeing their impact culturally: in language (where to *friend* is now a verb), in politics (where it is de rigueur for presidential aspirants to catalogue their virtues on MySpace), and on college campuses (where not using Facebook can be a social handicap). But we are only beginning to come to grips with the consequences of our use of these sites: for friendship, and for our notions of privacy, authenticity, community, and identity.

Making Connections

- 5 The earliest online social networks were arguably the Bulletin Board Systems of the 1980s that let users post public messages, send and receive private messages, play games, and exchange software. Some of those BBSs, like The WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) that technologist Larry Brilliant and futurist Stewart Brand started in 1985, made the transition to the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s. (Now owned by Salon.com, The WELL boasts that it was "the primordial ooze where the online community movement was born.") Other websites for community and connection emerged in the 1990s, including Classmates.com (1995), where users register by high school and year of graduation; Company of Friends, a business-oriented site founded in 1997; and Epinions, founded in 1999 to allow users to give their opinions about various consumer products.
- 6 A new generation of social networking websites appeared in 2002 with the launch of Friendster, whose founder, Jonathan Abrams,

admitted that his main motivation for creating the site was to meet attractive women. Unlike previous online communities, which brought together anonymous strangers with shared interests, Friendster uses a model of social networking known as the “Circle of Friends” (developed by British computer scientist Jonathan Bishop), in which users invite friends and acquaintances—that is, people they already know and like—to join their network.

7 Friendster was an immediate success, with millions of registered users by mid-2003. But technological glitches and poor management at the company allowed a new social networking site, MySpace, launched in 2003, quickly to surpass it. Originally started by musicians, MySpace has become a major venue for sharing music as well as videos and photos. It is now the behemoth of online social networking, with over 100 million registered users. Connection has become big business: In 2005, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation bought MySpace for \$580 million.

Besides MySpace and Friendster, the best-known social networking site is Facebook, launched in 2004. Originally restricted to college students, Facebook—which takes its name from the small photo albums that colleges once gave to incoming freshmen and faculty to help them cope with meeting so many new people—soon extended membership to high schoolers and is now open to anyone. Still, it is most popular among college students and recent college graduates, many of whom use the site as their primary method of communicating with one another. Millions of college students check their Facebook pages several times every day and spend hours sending and receiving messages, making appointments, getting updates on their friends' activities, and learning about people they might recently have met or heard about.

There are dozens of other social networking sites, including Orkut, Bebo, and Yahoo 360°. Microsoft recently announced its own plans for a social networking site called Wallop; the company boasts that the site will offer “an entirely new way for consumers to express their individuality online.” (It is noteworthy that Microsoft refers to social networkers as “consumers” rather than merely “users” or, say, “people.”) Niche social networking sites are also flourishing: there are sites offering forums and fellowship for photographers, music lovers, and sports fans. There are professional networking sites, such as LinkedIn, that keep people connected with present and former colleagues and other business acquaintances.

10 Despite the increasingly diverse range of social networking sites, the most popular sites share certain features. On MySpace and Facebook, for example, the process of setting up one's online identity is relatively simple: Provide your name, address, e-mail address, and a few other pieces of information and you're up and running and ready to create your online persona. MySpace includes a section, "About Me," where you can post your name, age, where you live, and other personal details such as your

zodiac sign, religion, sexual orientation, and relationship status. There is also a "Who I'd Like to Meet" section, which on most MySpace profiles is filled with images of celebrities. Users can also list their favorite music, movies, and television shows, as well as their personal heroes; MySpace users can also blog on their pages. A user "friends" people—that is, invites them by e-mail to appear on the user's "Friend Space," where they are listed, linked, and ranked. Below the Friends space is a Comments section where friends can post notes. MySpace allows users to personalize their pages by uploading images and music and videos; indeed, one of the defining features of most MySpace pages is the **ubiquity** of visual and audio clutter. With silly, hyper flashing graphics in neon colors and clip-art style images of kittens and cartoons, MySpace pages often resemble an overdecorated high school yearbook.

- 11 By contrast, Facebook limits what its users can do to their profiles. Besides general personal information, Facebook users have a "Wall" where people can leave them brief notes, as well as a Messages feature that functions like an in-house Facebook e-mail account. You list your friends on Facebook as well, but in general, unlike MySpace friends, which are often complete strangers (or spammers) Facebook friends tend to be part of one's offline social circle. (This might change, however, now that Facebook has opened its site to anyone rather than restricting it to college and high school students.) Facebook (and MySpace) allow users to form groups based on mutual interests. Facebook users can also send "pokes" to friends; these little digital nudges are meant to let someone know you are thinking about him or her. But they can also be interpreted as not-so-subtle come-ons; one Facebook group with over 200,000 members is called "Enough with the Poking, Let's Just Have Sex."

Won't You Be My Digital Neighbor?

- 12 According to a survey recently conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, more than half of all Americans between the ages of twelve and seventeen use some online social networking site. Indeed, media coverage of social networking sites usually describes them as vast teenage playgrounds—or wastelands, depending on one's perspective. Central to this narrative is a nearly unbridgeable generational divide, with tech-savvy youngsters redefining friendship while their doddering elders look on with bafflement and increasing anxiety. This seems anecdotally correct; I can't count how many times I have mentioned social networking websites to someone over the age of forty and received the reply, "Oh yes, I've heard about that MyFace! All the kids are doing that these days. Very interesting!"
- 13 Numerous articles have chronicled adults' attempts to navigate the world of social networking, such as the recent *New York Times* essay in

which columnist Michelle Slatalla described the incredible embarrassment she caused her teenage daughter when she joined Facebook: “everyone in the whole world thinks its super creepy when adults have facebooks,” her daughter instant-messaged her. “unfriend paige right now. im serious. . . . i will be soo mad if you dont unfriend paige right now. actually.” In fact, social networking sites are not only for the young. More than half of the visitors to MySpace claim to be over the age of 35. And now that the first generation of college Facebook users have graduated, and the site is open to all, more than half of Facebook users are no longer students. What’s more, the proliferation of niche social networking sites, including those aimed at adults, suggests that it is not only teenagers who will nurture relationships in virtual space for the foreseeable future.

The New Taxonomy of Friendship

- 14 There is a Spanish proverb that warns, “Life without a friend is death without a witness.” In the world of online social networking, the warning might be simpler: “Life without hundreds of online ‘friends’ is virtual death.” On these sites, friendship is the stated *raison d’être*. “A place for friends,” is the slogan of MySpace. Facebook is a “social utility that connects people with friends.” Orkut describes itself as “an online community that connects people through a network of trusted friends.” Friendster’s name speaks for itself.
- 15 But “friendship” in these virtual spaces is thoroughly different from real-world friendship. In its traditional sense, friendship is a relationship which, broadly speaking, involves the sharing of mutual interests, reciprocity, trust, and the revelation of intimate details over time and within specific social (and cultural) contexts. Because friendship depends on mutual revelations that are concealed from the rest of the world, it can only flourish within the boundaries of privacy; the idea of public friendship is an oxymoron.
- 16 The hypertext link called “friendship” on social networking sites is very different: public, fluid, and promiscuous, yet oddly **bureaucratized**. Friendship on these sites focuses a great deal on collecting, managing, and ranking the people you know. Everything about MySpace, for example, is designed to encourage users to gather as many friends as possible, as though friendship were **philately**. If you are so unfortunate as to have but one MySpace friend, for example, your page reads: “You have 1 friends,” along with a stretch of sad empty space where dozens of thumbnail photos of your acquaintances should appear.
- 17 The structure of social networking sites also encourages the bureaucratization of friendship. Each site has its own terminology, but among the words that users employ most often is “managing.” The Pew survey mentioned earlier found that “teens say social networking sites help them

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manage their friendships." There is something Orwellian about the management-speak on social networking sites: "Change My Top Friends," "View All of My Friends" and, for those times when our inner Stalins sense the need for a virtual purge, "Edit Friends." With a few mouse clicks one can elevate or downgrade (or entirely eliminate) a relationship.

- ¹⁸ To be sure, we all rank our friends, albeit in unspoken and intuitive ways. One friend might be a good companion for outings to movies or concerts; another might be someone with whom you socialize in professional settings; another might be the kind of person for whom you would drop everything if he needed help. But social networking sites allow us to rank our friends publicly. And not only can we publicize our own preferences in people, but we can also peruse the favorites among our other acquaintances. We can learn all about the friends of our friends—often without having ever met them in person.

Status-Seekers

- ¹⁹ Of course, it would be foolish to suggest that people are incapable of making distinctions between social networking "friends" and friends they see in the flesh. The use of the word "friend" on social networking sites is a dilution and a **debasement**, and surely no one with hundreds of MySpace or Facebook "friends" is so confused as to believe those are all real friendships. The impulse to collect as many "friends" as possible on a MySpace page is not an expression of the human need for companionship, but of a different need no less profound and pressing: the need for status. Unlike the painted portraits that members of the middle class in a bygone era would commission to signal their elite status once they rose in society, social networking websites allow us to create status—not merely to commemorate the achievement of it. There is a reason that most of the MySpace profiles of famous people are fakes, often created by fans: Celebrities don't need legions of MySpace friends to prove their importance. It's the rest of the population, seeking a form of **parochial** celebrity, that does.

- ²⁰ But status-seeking has an ever-present partner: anxiety. Unlike a portrait, which, once finished and framed, hung tamely on the wall signaling one's status, maintaining status on MySpace or Facebook requires constant vigilance. As one 24-year-old wrote in a *New York Times* essay, "I am obsessed with testimonials and solicit them incessantly. They are the ultimate social currency, public declarations of the intimacy status of a relationship. . . . Every profile is a carefully planned media campaign."

- ²¹ The sites themselves were designed to encourage this. Describing the work of B.J. Fogg of Stanford University, who studies "persuasion strategies" used by social networking sites to increase participation, *The New Scientist* noted, "The secret is to tie the acquisition of friends, compliments and status—spoils that humans will work hard for—to activities

that enhance the site." As Fogg told the magazine, "You offer someone a context for gaining status, and they are going to work for that status." Network theorist Albert-László Barabási notes that online connection follows the rule of "preferential attachment"—that is, "when choosing between two pages, one with twice as many links as the other, about twice as many people link to the more connected page." As a result, "while our individual choices are highly unpredictable, as a group we follow strict patterns." Our lemming-like pursuit of online status via the collection of hundreds of "friends" clearly follows this rule.

- 22 What, in the end, does this pursuit of virtual status mean for community and friendship? Writing in the 1980s in *Habits of the Heart*, sociologist Robert Bellah and his colleagues documented the movement away from close-knit, traditional communities, to "lifestyle enclaves" which were defined largely by "leisure and consumption." Perhaps today we have moved beyond lifestyle enclaves and into "personality enclaves" or "identity enclaves"—discrete virtual places in which we can be different (and sometimes contradictory) people, with different groups of like-minded, though ever-shifting, friends.

Beyond Networking

- 23 This past spring, Len Harmon, the director of the Fischer Policy and Cultural Institute at Nichols College in Dudley, Massachusetts, offered a new course about social networking. Nichols is a small school whose students come largely from Connecticut and Massachusetts; many of them are the first members of their families to attend college. "I noticed a lot of issues involved with social networking sites," Harmon told me when I asked him why he created the class. How have these sites been useful to Nichols students? "It has relieved some of the stress of transitions for them," he said. "When abrupt departures occur—their family moves or they have to leave friends behind—they can cope by keeping in touch more easily."
- 24 So perhaps we should praise social networking websites for streamlining friendship the way e-mail streamlined correspondence. In the nineteenth century, Emerson observed that "friendship requires more time than poor busy men can usually command." Now, technology has given us the freedom to tap into our network of friends when it is convenient for us. "It's a way of maintaining a friendship without having to make any effort whatsoever," as a recent graduate of Harvard explained to *The New Yorker*. And that ease admittedly makes it possible to stay in contact with a wider circle of offline acquaintances than might have been possible in the era before Facebook. Friends you haven't heard from in years, old buddies from elementary school, people you might have (should have?) fallen out of touch with—it is now easier than ever to reconnect to those people.

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25 But what kind of connections are these? In his excellent book *Friendship: An Exposé*, Joseph Epstein praises the telephone and e-mail as technologies that have greatly facilitated friendship. He writes, "Proust once said he didn't much care for the analogy of a book to a friend. He thought a book was better than a friend, because you could shut it—and be shut of it—when you wished, which one can't always do with a friend." With e-mail and caller ID, Epstein enthuses, you can. But social networking sites (which Epstein says "speak to the vast loneliness in the world") have a different effect: they discourage "being shut of" people. On the contrary, they encourage users to check in frequently, "poke" friends, and post comments on others' pages. They favor interaction of greater quantity but less quality.

26 This constant connectivity concerns Len Harmon. "There is a sense of, 'if I'm not online or constantly texting or posting, then I'm missing something,'" he said of his students. "This is where I find the generational impact the greatest—not the use of the technology, but the overuse of the technology." It is unclear how the regular use of these sites will affect behavior over the long run—especially the behavior of children and young adults who are growing up with these tools. Almost no research has explored how virtual socializing affects children's development. What does a child weaned on Club Penguin learn about social interaction? How is an adolescent who spends her evenings managing her MySpace page different from a teenager who spends her night gossiping on the telephone to friends? Given that "people want to live their lives online," as the founder of one social networking site recently told *Fast Company* magazine, and they are beginning to do so at ever-younger ages, these questions are worth exploring.

27 The few studies that have emerged do not inspire confidence. Researcher Rob Nyland at Brigham Young University recently surveyed 184 users of social networking sites and found that heavy users "feel less socially involved with the community around them." He also found that "as individuals use social networking more for entertainment, their level of social involvement decreases." Another recent study conducted by communications professor Qingwen Dong and colleagues at the University of the Pacific found that "those who engaged in romantic communication over MySpace tend to have low levels of both emotional intelligence and self-esteem."

28 The implications of the narcissistic and exhibitionistic tendencies of social networkers also cry out for further consideration. There are opportunity costs when we spend so much time carefully grooming ourselves online. Given how much time we already devote to entertaining ourselves with technology, it is at least worth asking if the time we spend on social networking sites is well spent. In investing so much energy into improving how we present ourselves online, are we missing chances to genuinely improve ourselves?

29 We should also take note of the trend toward giving up face-to-face for virtual contact—and, in some cases, a preference for the latter. Today, many of our cultural, social, and political interactions take place through eminently convenient technological surrogates—why go to the bank if you can use the ATM? Why browse in a bookstore when you can simply peruse the personalized selections Amazon.com has made for you? In the same vein, social networking sites are often convenient surrogates for offline friendship and community. In this context it is worth considering an observation that Stanley Milgram made in 1974, regarding his experiments with obedience: “The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson,” he wrote. “Often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act.” To an increasing degree, we find and form our friendships and communities in the virtual world as well as the real world. These virtual networks greatly expand our opportunities to meet others, but they might also result in our valuing less the capacity for genuine connection. As the young woman writing in the *Times* admitted, “I consistently trade actual human contact for the more reliable high of smiles on MySpace, winks on Match.com, and pokes on Facebook.” That she finds these online relationships more reliable is telling: it shows a desire to avoid the vulnerability and uncertainty that true friendship entails. Real intimacy requires risk—the risk of disapproval, of heartache, of being thought a fool. Social networking websites may make relationships more reliable, but whether those relationships can be humanly satisfying remains to be seen. ♦

CONSIDERING THE ISSUES

1. This article makes the bold statement: “public friendship is an oxymoron.” From your point of view, discuss the meaning of friendship and decide whether social networking sites are using the term “friend” properly.
2. Rosen compares online networking pages to “self-portraits.” Explore this concept in more depth. In what ways is this true? If you have a personal page, discuss what that page says about you and in what ways it is indeed a “self-portrait.” How are painted portraits and websites similar, and how are they different?

CRAFT AND CONTENT

1. What does Rosen mean when she uses the term “Orwellian” and the phrase “our inner Stalins” when referring to social networking sites? To what/whom is she referring, and how do these references connect to her point?

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2. What does Rosen think of online networking sites? Identify areas in her essay in which she reveals her viewpoint.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Rosen comments in an aside, "It is noteworthy that Microsoft refers to social networkers as 'consumers' rather than merely 'users' or, say, 'people.'" Why do you think Microsoft uses the term "consumers"? Do you see this as negative or positive? Explain.
2. The author comments, "tech-savvy youngsters [are] redefining friendship while their doddering elders look on with bafflement and increasing anxiety." Do you find this to be true? How do your older family members view social networking sites? Do any of them have MySpace or Facebook pages? Why or why not?

WRITING ABOUT THE ISSUES

1. Write an essay exploring the consequences of social networking sites on the future of friendship and community.
2. This article traces the evolution of social networking sites. Outline this evolution showing how these sites have evolved from "the primordial ooze" of the 1980s to the newest site being planned by Microsoft.

TOPICAL CONNECTIONS

GROUP PROJECTS

1. Track all of your online correspondence—received and sent—for a period of one week. This should include e-mail, IM, text messaging, and postings on social networking sites including Facebook and Twitter. Develop categories for the communication (social, family, work, school, junk, etc.) and chart how many of each you receive and send in each category. Keep track of how much time you spend online. Discuss your personal results with the group. Discuss as a group how the Internet both enhances and complicates life, and whether it is indeed changing your personal relationships for better or for worse.
2. Several of the writers in this chapter are critical of social networking sites, noting that they promote self-centeredness, reduce our ability to cope with emotions, and cheapen what it means to be "a friend." Interview at least 10 people of different age groups about how they use online communication and their