How the World Changed Social Media

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Online and offline relationships

With the growing popularity and ubiquity of social media worldwide comes the notion that there is a new generation of so-called ‘digital natives’,¹ who were born and grew up in the digital era. Social media seems set to become an ever-growing foundation to many of their everyday relationships. As a result much of the world is struggling to make sense of this new phenomenon and its impact. Precisely because social media is now so embedded in young people’s lives, anxiety is rising that these are replacing offline interactions and offline relationships.

However, a comparison between two kinds of relationships designated as online and offline may imply either that they are mutually exclusive or opposed to each other. Yet throughout our research we have approached relationships as created, developed and sustained through integrated online and offline interaction. The entire range of offline relationships, from family through school and work to social relations in the wider neighbourhood, may also be present online in a manner that is rarely separated out from one’s offline life. The popular perception of online relationships as things which can be contrasted with a ‘real world’ – inhabited by one’s real or more authentic offline relationships – seems therefore simplistic and misleading. This corresponds to an earlier critique of the concept of the ‘virtual’, a term prominent during the early years of internet use.² In short our study treats social media in much the same way that everyone treats the landline telephone, never described today as a separate ‘online/on-phone’ facet of life.

It is, however, essential for us as researchers to recognise that whatever misgivings we may feel as academics about this dualistic terminology, it remains a primary mode by which people around the world understand and experience digital media. Our informants constantly do speak about a separate online world. Furthermore we need to acknowledge that people give different meanings to these terms ‘online’ and
‘offline’. For example, in the south Indian field site, when asked about the privacy of photographs, many people responded: ‘I won’t share it online, we only share it offline.’ As Venkatraman noted, by ‘offline’ people actually mean sending photos to their close friends via WhatsApp. Technically WhatsApp is ‘online’ in the sense of being sent through a smartphone app, but ‘offline’ in these people’s understanding because that is not for them ‘the internet’. ‘Offline’ also here refers to the very private nature of the sociality, whereas ‘online’ is understood to be the public-facing aspects of the internet. Yet the same informants in other contexts refer to WhatsApp as social media and thereby online. So even if we want to respect the fact that the participants in our field sites commonly use the terms online and offline, both their and our use of these terms is often inconsistent.

This chapter will first deal with the popular concern that increased digital mediation leads to less authentic relationships than offline ones—a belief that can lead to people regarding human societies as becoming less ‘real’ when relationships are mediated by digital technologies. The chapter then moves closer to our own approach, which examines sociality in the age of social media through the lens of ethnography. The final part of the chapter will further explore the new possibilities for human experience and social relationships that have been created through global uses of social media in different contexts.

‘Authenticity’ and ‘mediation’: the big concerns

Why do people feel that using digital technologies makes us lose something of ourselves? It is certainly not the first time societies have feared losing humanity in the face of a new technology. As noted previously, anxieties can be traced back to when writing was adopted by ancient Greeks. The philosopher Socrates (as presented by Plato) warned people that this new technology was a threat to the oral traditions of Greek society; according to him, writing would create forgetfulness. Ironically, without writing Socrates’s remark may have been long forgotten.

No one today sees writing as making us less real or human. On the contrary, illiteracy may be seen as an absence of a fundamental capacity that every human being should possess. More familiar will be the accusation that television reduces us to ‘couch potatoes’. Yet the idea of a family sitting together and enjoying television has become an object of fond nostalgia, compared to what is perceived as the more individualised, and still less ‘real’, domain of digital interaction. We also find
accusations today that echo those of Socrates. Among them is the idea that digital technologies reduce our capacity to think, by reducing our attention span through delegating cognitive functions such as memory to our digital devices.⁶

In all these instances digital devices are regarded as a form of increased mediation that leads to a loss of authenticity. However, anthropologists reject the idea of an unmediated authenticity, regarding all aspects of identity and relationships as intrinsically mediated by cultural and social rules, including gender and ethnicity.⁷ It is axiomatic to anthropology that a tribal society is not less mediated than a metropolitan society. When we meet, face to face communication is thoroughly mediated by conventions and etiquette regarding appropriate behaviour between those in conversation. Rules of kinship can limit what someone is allowed to say just as effectively as technological limits. For anthropologists, therefore, communicating online can be regarded as a shift in cultural mediation, but it does not make a relationship more mediated.

There is a danger that our anxiety about the new technology will lead us simply to neglect the mediated nature of prior offline sociality – now assumed to be not only more real, but also more ‘natural’. By contrast as anthropologists we want to use the study of social media to deepen our appreciation of the mediated nature of prior offline sociality. For example, there is increasing use of webcam as ‘always-on’, so that couples and other people living apart can feel as though they are still living together. By studying this practice we can come to understand the forms of interaction, avoidance and silences that people adopt when they were previously living together within the same domestic space, but learn to give each other autonomy and create agreed times and forms of interaction.⁸

In Spyer’s field site in Brazil people use the term ‘Facebook friends’ to refer to acquaintances with whom one is only in contact through social media. In many cases, not only in Brazil, the so-called ‘Facebook friend’ carries the implication that ‘friendship’ of such a kind, even under the name of ‘friend’, is a lower category of friendship than ‘real friends’. In China people use ‘jiangshi’ (‘zombie’) or ‘shiti’ (‘corpse’) to describe those social media contacts with whom one has never had any kind of communication (no ‘likes’, no comments and no one-to-one or group messaging); they are not even regarded as living human beings. Such phenomena were observed in other field sites too. For academic analysis, however, we need to recognise that people have always questioned their offline friendships to determine whether they were ‘real’ friends and to establish how much one could trust them or rely on them.
Although the terminology suggests a simple opposition between online and offline friendship, therefore, these questions about friendship are mainly being transferred from offline to online relationships. We can, however, still acknowledge that there may be unprecedented aspects to this experience of online-only friendship, and the ways in which we then use these relationships.

We found that in most places people now expect consistency between the two domains. If Brazilians have cordial relations offline, they are likely also to have genial relationships on social media. For a good friend social media is likely to help cultivate and enhance that friendship, whereas, if there is no bonding in the first place, being friends on Facebook may make little or no difference to the offline relationship. Most commonly social media may also be a space where friends of friends/relatives transform into one’s own friends. This seemed particularly important in the regions of Latin America and Trinidad, and most likely reflects the way in which friendship there was previously understood. On the one hand online friendship may be seen as lacking the range of social cues available in face to face interaction. On the other hand since the beginning of the internet people have used online anonymity to discuss issues that they may have found difficult to share with people who know them offline. The people with whom one shares the most intimate secrets may thus now be online strangers whom you will never know offline.

‘Frame’ and ‘group’: approaches to understand sociality

How then can we make more sense of social relationships in the social media age? The theoretical concept of ‘framing’, which derives from Goffman’s analysis of social activity, is also useful in thinking through the relationship between online and offline. Put simply, framing helps to set the boundary, establishing rules and expectations to guide behaviour. Being within the ‘frame’ of a theatre, for example, tells you that you should applaud at the end and not run on stage to rescue the heroine. There are myriad invisible but truly effective frames in social life, and our understanding of frames helps us to behave properly, in accordance with social expectations. For instance, the kind of conversation that occurs in an English pub is different from that at an office meeting because ‘pub’ and ‘office’ frame such behaviour differently, despite the fact that both are forms of talking. We should therefore also regard offline and online as two ‘frames’ in our
daily life\textsuperscript{11} that may trigger different attitudes and behaviours. That is also the reason why, in some cases, people feel that online environments induce some different aspects of certain relationships. Rather than opposing these contexts we can regard them as complementary frames which combine to provide a fuller picture of the person and their relationships.

In practice different social media platforms, or different groups and accounts within the same platform, serve as ‘sub frames’, enabling individuals skillfully to locate a niche within which to deal with various social relationships.\textsuperscript{12} For example in Mardin, the field site in southeast Turkey, it is commonplace to find teenagers and young adults with multiple accounts on the same social media platform (e.g. Facebook); they can, and do, behave differently according to the groups with whom they share these. Costa shows how people switch easily and quickly from one platform to another, or to different accounts within one platform.

Different platforms or multiple accounts allow users to place their contacts into different categories such as ‘classmates’, ‘colleagues’ and ‘others’—a useful way of exploiting social media to ‘sort out’ their social networks. These social ‘categories’ organised on social media again existed in offline social life long before social media existed; however, social media may make those categories more explicit. In our south India field site, therefore, people can retain the default setting on Facebook, so that users are not explicitly categorised, but they are well aware which contacts belong to the same caste—still one of the country’s primary classification systems.

In contrast to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, but like Google +, the Chinese social media platform QQ prominently features categories of friends. QQ encourages its users to sort their online contacts into groups, for instance ‘colleagues’, ‘special friend’, ‘friend’, ‘family’, ‘stranger’, ‘blacklist’ (used to block contacts), and any custom groups they may wish to create.\textsuperscript{13} However, these are only visible to the user, not to their contacts. A popular expression among Chinese people is ‘you will know your relationship better if you know which category your friends put you into on their QQ’. Such practices seem natural in China where (as would also be true of many places outside of China) sociality has long been characterised by diverse and overlapping circles and groups.\textsuperscript{14} The main problem is that online categories cannot match the complexity of traditional networks of ‘guanxi’ (‘social relationships’). The reason is that on QQ friendship categories are mutually exclusive, while in offline life we may well think of our friends as overlapping various groups. Here as in
all field sites, therefore, social media may enhance social categorisation, but it cannot match the complexity of this practice in the offline world.\textsuperscript{15}

**From intimacy to anonymity: scalable sociality\textsuperscript{16}**

In Chapter 1 it was argued that the particular form taken by polymedia within social media can be termed ‘scalable sociality’. The initial example from the English field site was based on school pupils. In our Brazilian field site many older people have limited access to the internet due to poor education and economic factors, so social media can be construed as a young person’s space for creating peer-based collectives and displays of modernity avoiding the adult gaze. Here, as elsewhere, social media often becomes a place for designating intimate relationships (ties of kinship, close friends, couples), where it is relative intimacy itself which is scaled, experienced, maintained and reinforced. In the south Indian field site social media works like ‘fictive kin’, where many people come to be seen as ‘aunties’ or ‘cousins’ (even though not biologically related) in the tradition of extended families and caste. So kinship is used as the idiom to express how far up a person has travelled on this same scale of intimacy.

In Sinanan’s field site in Trinidad many households have parents, children or siblings living abroad, and the use of social media is vital to the maintenance of basic family relationships. Indeed in some of our field sites social media has also allowed families who do not live in the same household to create more emotional bonds; they can spend more time together online than they might have done if actually living together. For example, teenagers in some Western countries may live at home, but sometimes with very limited family connectivity; for example, they may write notices forbidding parents to enter the teenager’s room. Most of their sociality extends from the screens in their bedrooms, a space kept quite separate from the rest of the house. While they live in the same house as the rest of the family, therefore, it can be argued that these teenagers do not live ‘together’ – any more than they live ‘together’ with the people with whom they socialise online.

Haynes found in the north Chilean field site that WhatsApp has become incredibly important for mineworkers in negotiating periods of separation from families while they are working away. Yet while social media solves the problem of separation for some families, it may also bring problems for others. Some miners reported that social media increases feelings of jealousy among male partners of (the few) female
miners; in other cases it may exacerbate already problematic family relationships. However, Haynes also reports that miners see social media as bringing an element of the outside world to the ‘asylum’ of the mine, giving it a sense of humanity.

In the industrial China field site some couples who maintained a long-distance relationship with each other even found that their partners appeared to be more caring online, free from the mundane concerns of physically shared everyday life. Some junior family members also reported that they found senior family members to be more easy-going and funny online, thanks to their use of cute ‘emojis’ on social media – whereas in face to face encounters with seniors these relationships were supposed to be far more serious and respectful. Once again, so far from being separated from offline relationships, social media has become a primary mode by which traditional close-kin relations are in different cases sustained, retained, reinvigorated, but also in certain cases transformed. In all these cases scalable sociality encompasses the possibility that social media can be more intense and intimate than offline relationships.

Another reason this can become highly significant is when people become immobile. Miller included within his field work an extensive study of how a hospice communicates with patients, who mainly have a terminal diagnosis based on advanced cancer. He found that immobility has had a pronounced impact even in a rural area because of the particular nature of English sociality. Sociality in the village follows a general pattern in which people are highly sociable in public, but fiercely defensive of the private sphere; this combines with a strong sensibility among older people that they do not want to become a burden on their relatives and friends. As a result there is a surprising degree of isolation and loneliness. As an applied project, this led to recommendations to the hospice for encouraging the use of social media and easy-to-use devices such as the iPad, particularly at earlier stages of the disease in which people are more amenable to support and assistance. Having established that the cause of loneliness is the dualism of private and public sociality, the specific definition of social media as a form of scalable sociality that bridges between the private and the public makes it a particularly appropriate part of the potential solution to this problem of loneliness in the context of English social reticence.

In some cases, the closer the relationship the more forms of different communication platforms and technologies are supported. Broadbent’s study shows that the proliferation of social media does not necessarily give rise to the extension of new social connections in the
region (Switzerland) where she worked, ‘but rather the intensification of a small group of highly intimate relationships that have now managed to match the richness of their social connectedness with a richness of multiple communication channels’. As is often the case with our project, this generalisation works only in certain regions and not others.

Scalable sociality can be related to many other dimensions, such as the degree to which people want or feel they need the kinds of sociality made available by social media. Nicolescu found in the south Italian field site that for most residents their prior social networks were seen as both stable and sufficient. While the majority of people’s Facebook contacts are also from the town, co-residence meant there was little need for social media as a mode for maintaining these relationships. As a result most people saw social media as making very little difference to their lives. However, Nicolescu also noticed that for a small group of people who had experience of higher education in big cities and had far more diverse social networks outside the small town, returning to the town often meant losing this extended social connectivity. For these people social media played a vital role in retaining such wider connections, often also seen as more important than everyday offline relationships.

Generally speaking, as found in our survey in Chapter 4, people view the way social media facilitates social relations positively. For close relationships it is commonly a place where trust and affection are cultivated and expressed. At the same time people are aware of another side to this coin, in which the increased visibility of relationships leads to jealousy and surveillance.

Compared to these more common attitudes to the use of social media within intimate social relationships, we see a very diverse response to the potential of social media for connecting with strangers. The Chileans tend not to use dating websites or apps such as Tinder and Grindr, now becoming increasingly popular in England; here people sometimes seem to have less mistrust of strangers as potential sexual partners than as people who might view their social media postings. Instead the Chileans rely on friends of friends on Facebook when searching for romantic relationships online. In both sites strangers will not become online contacts without offline endorsement, for instance knowing the person offline or knowing someone who knows them well. Otherwise strangers were a focus of suspicion.

This contrasts with our rural Chinese field site, where McDonald notes that prior to using social media interactions with ‘mosheng ren’ (‘strangers’) were generally far less common. Now young people may friend ‘luanjia’ (‘large numbers of strangers’) randomly, though others,
especially married couples, maintain a comparatively cautious attitude toward strangers online. Similarly Costa found out that in Mardin social media, especially Facebook, has been used to expand an individual’s social networks to ‘yabancı’ (‘strangers’) – whereas traditionally people’s social relations mainly included either ‘akraba’ (‘relatives’) or ‘komşu’ (‘neighbours’), and for some categories of people also ‘arkadas’ (‘friends’).

A transformation in attitudes towards strangers online was also observed in the industrial Chinese field site. Here many see entirely online friendships as ‘chun’ (‘purer’) relationships, since they do not incur the pragmatic demands that often feature heavily in offline relationships and are less infused by social hierarchy. As Feige, a factory worker, put it:

They [online friends] like you and talk with you because they really like you being you, not because you are rich so that they can borrow money from you, or you are powerful so that they can get a job from you. Here [online] everything is much purer, without power and money involved.

A parallel sentiment was expressed by some factory owners. They suggested that they sometimes avoided attending school reunions in fear of requests for financial help from their old classmates. However, they were happy to talk with online strangers on WeChat to release the stress that they believed could not be shown to their subordinates and family members. Although the factory owners and the factory workers represent the two extremes of income in this field site, they have similar reasons for wanting to friend and communicate with strangers online. In both cases online relationships are seen as more authentic compared to offline relationships, which in many cases are highly mediated (or ‘polluted’, as people say) by factors such as wealth and social status.

In the case of more public social media, the online exposure of relationships has also to be interpreted as an ‘official verification’. In our south Indian field site, the relatively close and intimate communications facilitated by WhatsApp were used for communication between family members. On the other hand Facebook, as the most public platform, is the place where family and kinship ties are consciously performed to the audience of non-family contacts. For instance, a Facebook update of a new-born baby is usually followed by many ‘likes’ and comments from family members, even though all of them have already sent congratulatory wishes via phone calls or in face to face situations before posting.
Such social media performances are tailored for non-family and the wider public that share Facebook. Haynes explains that in north Chile a romantic relationship will only gain its ‘official’ validity by being published as a Facebook ‘relationship update’ or through informal posting of love notes on the wall of one’s significant others. Similarly in industrial China young couples constantly need the online audience on QQ to witness their romance. In some cases young factory migrants even set up QQ groups which include all of one’s online contacts in order to say ‘I love you’ in public (on the online group chat) to their girlfriend or boyfriend. Such confessions online are viewed as one of the biggest commitments in a relationship. In this way social media can make us more conscious and self-conscious of both our relationships and ourselves. In these cases offline relationships have now become dependent upon their recognition online before they are accepted as ‘real’.

If we take these examples together, we see that social media has entirely contradictory consequences across the range of fields. Yet this is partly because the term ‘social media’ conjoins a wide range of platforms. If we treat them as polymedia, that is as a general range within which each has its complementary niche, then a bit more consistency emerges. There is the use of platforms to create an opposition between more public and more private sociality, as well as the exploitation of either different platforms or different genres of usage within the same platform, to help organise one’s social world into separated categories. This includes south Indian teachers’ differentiated attitudes towards WhatsApp, depending on whether this is directed to school or family, the use of Facebook by Brazilian teenagers to gain autonomy from the control of adults and Chilean lovers gaining official verification from the widest public. From the maintenance of intimate relationships to the possibilities of forming relationships with strangers, social media can be seen as a form of ‘scalable sociality’ enabling people to better control their social lives. This may be through adapting existing social norms to different contexts or allowing for the creation of entirely new forms of social relations and sociality by exploiting this register of degrees of intimacy and distance.

**Online identity: extended and new dimensions of daily life**

This leads to our final issue with online identity: our tendency to regard identity as something constructed through social interaction rather
than a given psychological state. Sennett’s work shows how identity in ancient times was almost entirely ascribed. A person was born into a particular class, occupation, social role and place of origin – whatever happened, you were likely to remain a butcher from Brittany for life. Giddens argues that in the modern world, on the other hand, people typically have to deal with elements of identity that are no longer fixed and stable, but reflect the dynamics of people's situations, to the extent that now the struggle is to preserve a coherent narrative of self-identity. Both insights are complemented by Goffman, whose previously noted concept of framing also pertains to how people manage multiple identities associated with various social roles and contexts: mother, worker, sportswoman. Going online adds additional frames to this mix. When this sociality becomes more scalable, it may also provide a greater flexibility to online identity.

One way to examine this is through the consequences of the greater visibility of persona and relationships. This is especially important in Trinidad, which had already developed a fundamental association between the cultivation of the self as a project that can only be enacted through the mirror of social visibility. In short Trinidadians recognise that the truth of a person is not who they think they are, but who others deem them to be on the basis of their appearance. Historically this arose out of anti-slavery and resistance movements. Rather than being ascribed in status, as by slavery or social hierarchy, people could attempt to create an entirely different persona in the eyes of their audience through masquerade. Ideally people should be judged not on their birth or job, but their ability to craft themselves as attractive or powerful. The way you walk and talk and clothe yourself is not an illusion or just a performance; it is the only proper way by which you should be judged.

The same logic works for Facebook. Images such as photographs and memes dominate Trinidadian postings, because what is shown on social media is the curated truth of a person. Through that curating they show themselves to be someone who is international and cosmopolitan, or a family-oriented person, or a ‘gangsta’. In Trinidad social media makes what is already visible about a person hyper-visible, further reinforcing their constructed identity. This is also why Miller referred to Facebook in Trinidad as ‘The Book of Truth’.

Trinidadian use of Facebook is perhaps an extreme example of how social media became a place where people create a visible identity that can be regarded as more real than their offline persona. Another
would be the use of QQ among Chinese factory migrants – though in this case the result is entirely invisible to the offline world. In the industrial China field site tens of thousands of factory workers come from villages in inland China. In the context of China’s developing economy, they migrate to factory towns for labour which is largely reduced to completing tasks also performed by machines. Migrant workers, labelled as a ‘liudong renkou’ (‘floating population’), are constantly on the move, providing temporary and cheap labour. They do not qualify for the increase in benefits and education targeted at more stable urban residents and tend to live and work in extremely substandard conditions. It is their offline life that these workers see as temporary. By contrast they regard social media as a far more stable and permanent place where they can keep contact with family and friends. By posting ‘fantasy photos’ (e.g. luxury cars, romantic holidays, images of princess-like women) and ‘feizhuliu’ (‘anti-mainstream’) images (e.g. photographs of rebelling rockers), or by sharing ‘chicken soup for the soul’ (inspirational stories, such as ‘you are poor because you are not ambitious enough’), people actually build up their online identity. This is naturally quite different from the stigmatizing tag of ‘di suzhi’ (‘low human quality’) worn in offline situations by Chinese factory migrants.

As noted in other research, people who have difficulty in expressing or ‘being’ themselves in face to face interactions are more likely to craft what they regard as a ‘real self’ and form closer relationships with people they meet online. As one typical Chinese factory girl who dropped out of middle school suggested, ‘Life outside the mobile phone is unbearable’. We might be tempted to dismiss images of the perfect wedding or being a princess as mere fantasy. Yet in this case the whole reason for taking on such employment is to provide a route towards a different modernity, the nature of which these people are trying to imagine for themselves. The scope for doing this offline is extremely restricted. It is online where people craft and enact a more permanent version of themselves, an image that they hope over time and with increasing income they may achieve. For them the wishes, longing and happiness that they express and clothe themselves in online are extremely real. In effect the migrant workers are part of a dual but simultaneous migration. The first is physical, from villages to factories in cities; the second is from offline experience to online. Social media is not simply a technology for communication, fantasy or entertainment. For these migrants social media is very much a lived place. They work offline and live online.
Conclusion

This chapter began by outlining popular concerns, at least in some Western countries, that social media, together with the supposed increased mediation of relationships, is somehow making human beings less ‘real’, or at least more removed from lived realities.\(^{32}\) The last case study represented perhaps the most profound evidence as to why this is not necessarily the case. In the industrial China field site migrant workers, their lives dominated by manual labour, experience online as the place in which they can be more human, able to express individual aspirations and hopes for the future. The relationship between human beings and new technologies for these informants is not ambivalent: it is essential. The debate in Western countries makes assumptions about people's offline lives. Yet in this case factory workers sleep, work and eat offline, without many of them really having much of what we might call an offline ‘life’. Instead they have an online life during the time when they are not sleeping, working and eating, a time in which they can become themselves and relate to others. We can also see how in some cases the denigration of social media as inauthentic may in part be the practice of elites. Such groups, secure in their power to construct themselves offline, may seek to dismiss the attempts by less powerful populations to assert the authenticity of their self-crafting online.

In a similar manner we cannot ignore the Trinidadian sensibility, which suggests that the visible appearance you have the power to create for yourself online is therefore more real than that over which you had no control; for example, the particular shape of nose you were born with, or the uniform you must wear for work. More commonly as we traverse the range of field sites the situation is less of a dualism. In most cases online has become simply another framed context aligned with the many prior framed contexts of offline life, where people always lived both at work, in families on holidays and so forth. Thus alongside a wide literature, including the work of Turkle,\(^{33}\) Baym,\(^{34}\) Hampton and Wellman,\(^{35}\) Livingstone,\(^{36}\) and others, the evidence from this project is a further call to progress from simplistic arguments based on oppositions such as virtual as against real, and to recognise instead that most people now engaged with a multiplicity of online and offline communications and identities with no clear boundary between them. At the same time we appreciate that almost all our informants employ a distinction that they refer to as offline and online, and that they exploit this to express a wide range of different
oppositions, often using terms such as ‘real’ or ‘virtual’. Further we also recognise that there are people who privilege the online as authentic and pure, as well as those who assume this is the natural condition of offline.

The central section of this chapter suggested a different approach to this issue. Instead of starting from a dualism of offline against online, our project began with a definition of social media as scalable sociality. In other words we constantly see gradations in people’s spectrum of relationships – from more intense, less intimate, more private and so forth. From this perspective the distinction between offline and online is replaced by a consideration of many different dimensions of how we grade relationships. The distinction between online and offline becomes one aspect of this. Indeed many of our examples were cases where the online was higher on such scales than offline, in terms of parameters such as intimacy. These include instances where there is greater disclosure to strangers or preferring to open up to peers one does not live with than to parents one does. Generally, however, it is not that either is closer or more distant. Rather people recognise that they can exploit a variety of contexts for relationships as different frames, just one of which happens to be online as against offline. Finally it is possible that this new dimension of visible creativity in both relationships and identity is making us more conscious, both of our relationships and of ourselves.