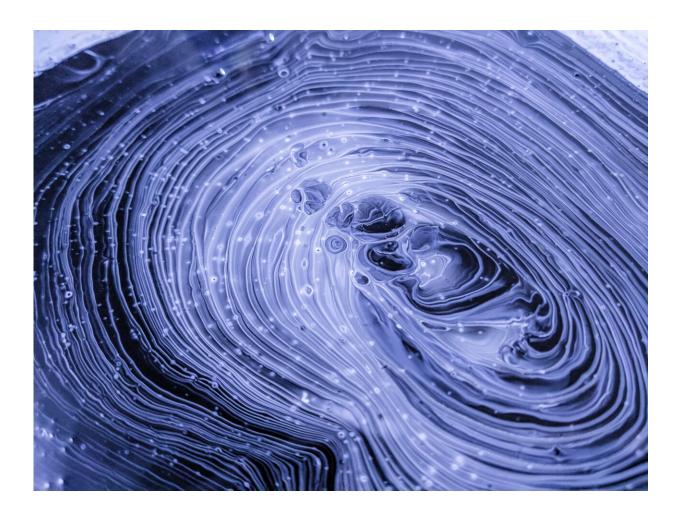# It's inevitable that the internet changes how we relate – what matters is how

October 6 2015, by Sally Quinn

Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Breaking up is never easy, and while 20 years ago there may well have

been little or no post break-up contact between exes, 21st century technology – from social media to Whatsapp – means there are many new ways to open old wounds. With so many communications channels with which to get hold of people, and with so much of our lives visible online through such things as Facebook, it's easy to keep an eye on our exes once we've parted.

A recent study found that "Facebook stalking" an ex-partner was found to hinder recovery after the end of the relationship through prolonging the emotional distress felt. Those who were more traumatised by the break-up were more likely to indulge in Facebook stalking. It's hard to imagine that these people would all have been prepared to stalk their ex-partners so readily in real life. What is the internet doing to our relationships with other people that lead us to behave so differently on- and offline?

The two key attributes the internet offers that allow people to act so differently online are anonymity and physical distance. These attributes contribute to the disinhibition effect. The internet essentially removes the constraints we usually feel when talking face-to-face, with the resulting effects on our behaviour, leading to online bullying, trolling, stalking and flaming. The regularity with which these behaviours appear in the media might lead us to think that the disinhibition effect has only negative effects, but there can be positive effects too.

For good and for ill

Building closer relationship with people is built upon sharing things about ourselves, such as our likes, dislikes, worries and concerns. Some people find this quite challenging face-to-face, so the physical distance provided by communicating through the internet is invaluable. For example socially anxious adolescents find it easier to disclose personal information to their friends when online, the internet acting as a place

where relational skills can be practised.

A report from Pew Research in the US found that digital technology enhances teenagers' romantic relationships, helping them feel closer and more connected to their partner and to resolve conflict – although being able to access a partner's online profile can easily lead to jealousy, too. But generally, by connecting with others online we can keep in touch with family, friends and acquaintances, near or far, which helps us to strengthen social ties and become closer.

As well as supporting friendships, the internet can provide opportunities for support at important times in our life – sometimes even from strangers. There are many online support groups, from the general to the very specific. Social media is often used as support following specific events – for example, a Facebook group has been set up for survivors of the Aurora Theater Shooting in Colorado in 2012. These groups can help people develop a sense of empowerment, allowing them to feel more in control with greater self confidence. Being able to talk to strangers who have experienced or are experiencing similar circumstances can have a cathartic effect.

Always-on generation

Regardless, it cannot be ignored that the internet has become more mobile over the last decade. Around 66% of UK adults own a smartphone allowing internet access around the clock. There have been concerns around the effects this may have on a generation that is permanently switched-on and plugged-in. One possible effect is the phenomenon known as the fear of missing out, or FOMO.

People who experience FOMO feel as though they are missing out on rewarding experiences that they perceive their friends are having. FOMO has been found to be related to greater social media engagement

which is not surprising given that Facebook use, for example, has been found to be [driven by feelings of disconnection](#). This suggests that [people](#) are constantly checking their [social media](#) to ensure they're not missing out on anything and to satisfy feelings of disconnection to others. What this does to our relationships and our psychological well-being has however yet to be determined.

Clearly the internet, which provides an experience of a different nature to offline life, but which we spend a lot of time using, is changing the ways in which we interact with each other. Unfortunately there will always be those who use this to cause harm to others, just as others value it as a space to enhance relationships or to find support at important times in their lives. The mobile internet may lead to a generation so attached to platforms such as social media that they feel they can never "switch off". It's crucial that we constantly question not only what, good or bad, online platforms provide us, but also what they may take away from our lives.

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