Online Social Networking—
No need to be scared... yet

Paul Harrison
There is a concern among many commentators that social networking sites, such as Facebook, Bebo, Twitter and MySpace, signal the end of "real" relationships as we know them. Janet Street-Porter, in a column in The Daily Mail subtly titled "Why I Hate Facebook," says that online social networks are "shallow" and "pathetic," because they "delude users into thinking that they are experiencing and managing real relationships." Baroness Greenfield, Professor of Synaptic Pharmacology at Lincoln college, Oxford, has gone so far as to argue (albeit without any evidence) that social network sites risk infantilising the mid-21st century mind, leaving it characterised by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathise and a shaky sense of identity. Obviously both of these commentaries could be dismissed as particularly jaundiced perspectives from a bunch of "old flogeys" who don't understand young people, but I believe what is more compelling here is the transformation (or perhaps, evolution) of relationships, rather than the end of anything in particular.

There is no doubt that people are now shifting a major proportion of their daily activities to the online environment, and that to a large degree, the systems and structures determined by technology are slowly infiltrating every aspect of our lives. In addition to using the internet for gathering information, reading the news, playing massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as "World of Warcraft" and "Age of Conan," shopping and communication, people are also using it to meet friends, form social networks, build communities and even construct identities.

But it doesn't mean that online relationships will replace our current relationships. The problem being highlighted here is that there is a tendency to think that any change will dramatically refashion the way we live our lives, when in fact, research (and experience) suggests that this is less than realistic. When it comes to human interaction, the arguments of the doomsayers fail to recognise the persistence of ambiguity and complexity in all of our relationships.
For some people (including people who might have difficulty forming relationships, such as those with social phobias, or forms of autism), the online environment is a perfect means by which they can meet like-minded others and express who they are. In the same way that we construct an identity when we go on a date by choosing a particular restaurant, or take a potential client to a footy game to impress upon them that we are like them, the online environment allows people to show their online friends what they want them to see. We try to create and manipulate our identity all the time, and in both the online and offline world, we don't have control over how people might interpret this construction.

By updating what we are doing, posting photos, or providing book recommendations, we are broadcasting our lives to people who might be interested, and, when people respond, it feels good to be noticed and valued. For a person who doesn't have regular interactions with others in a workplace, such as the growing number of workers who work from home, are freelance, or consultants, then this is a good way to stay connected with the world. It doesn't replace other relationships; it is just an additional means of interaction.
There seems to be a notion implied in a lot of commentary that the only "real" relationships are those that are deep, ongoing, personal, and face-to-face. In fact, we form all sorts of relationships with people, and the online environment is, ultimately, another form of facilitation, just like the telephone, SMS, email, and even letters.

Of course some people will have preferences, and of course, the telephone, SMS, letters and email, would never replace the close, caring, reciprocal relationships that we have with people with whom we interact together in the same environment on a regular basis. But I would argue that there are plenty of people who maintain close, caring and authentic relationships with people via telephone, email and online social groups. Ultimately, what Facebook and the online environment do is facilitate another form of relationship, and what critics have to realise is that social systems are constantly reconfigured by the interaction of the observer and observed, the system and environment, human and technology.

The reality is that, in many cases, relationships are multiform and multifaceted. We might have 258 Facebook friends, but these are Facebook friends. As in other relationships, there would be a few of those friends whom you can call on if you were in need of a lift home tonight, and similarly, others that you would feel comfortable asking them if you could stay at their place for a night when you are next in London, Sydney, or Guantanamo Bay.

The major concern not considered by social commentators is that social networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo, and Twitter, may eventually commodify relationships. Facebook's founders have said that it will be two to three years before they are able to "fully monetise the business model", which really means they have no idea at the moment how to make money from Facebook. Present attempts with "targeted" advertising are pretty rudimentary and are easily ignored. But it won't be long until someone is smart enough to reconsider the core logic by which we approach our understanding of the consumer and the social nature of consumption.

In light of our emphatic adoption of technology, it should be these concerns that commentators should be focusing upon. When the social world becomes a commercial world, it is cause for concern, but at present the business world is struggling as much with this model as Baroness Greenfield and Janet Street-Porter.