

# **Social Media and Personal Relationships**

## **Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship**

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# 1

## Introduction

One of the most striking changes in personal life during late modernity is the use of social media for conducting personal relationships. These changes entail a growing significance in the public display of personal connectedness and the importance of the term ‘friendship’ in managing these connections. Digital communication technologies are contributing to new ideas and experiences of intimacy, friendship and identity through new forms of social interaction and new techniques of public display, particularly on social network sites. This book explores the ways people engage with social media to build, maintain and exhibit personal networks. The aim is to provide an understanding of the *mediated* nature of personal relationships by developing a theory of ‘mediated intimacies’. The dramatic changes in rituals of connection brought about by the explosion in use of social network sites compel us to reconsider the concept of ‘intimacy’ and extend it beyond its former, narrow focus on family life. This book therefore enquires whether digital modes of communication are generating new intimacies and new meanings of ‘friendship’ as features of a networked society. Key debates and research evidence are assessed about emerging ways that people share their lives with each other in a digital environment and the motives for doing so. New opportunities being offered by social media to transform identities and generate new modes of self-presentation, interaction and etiquette are identified.

With a particular focus on the ways social network sites are being used to support or complicate personal ties, this book explores the intersecting uses of a range of social media. Social network sites constitute a now well-established mode of communication. Yet they only emerged in the first decade of this century. These highly popular forms of social and personal connection continue to be treated, publicly and academically,

as an emergent phenomenon. Facebook, for example, now has over 900 million users globally and is regarded as a 'new media' success story. The company states, 'Our mission is to make the world more open and connected'.<sup>1</sup> At the end of March 2012, just before its shares were floated on the market, Facebook was able to boast that it hosted 125 billion total friendships.<sup>2</sup> This detail is simply fascinating, yet in terms of its significance the figure is also totally mystifying. The implications of such an assertion are still being unravelled by those of us engaged in the study of mediated interpersonal communication. How people construct their mediated networks to build their identities and establish intimate relationships is, then, the subject matter of this book.

Social network sites are said to be increasing the number of friends that people have and strengthening ties between families, especially those separated by migration. Yet, at the same time, new media technologies are being blamed for a decrease in close, 'genuine' bonds. A strong belief persists that face-to-face communication is superior to mediated communication, as Nancy Baym (2010) states. This assumption is regularly expressed in news reports and by various experts (e.g. Ferguson 2012; Putnam 2000). It has had a powerful influence on debates about social media, fuelling fears that social network sites contribute to a breakdown of community. Has Zuckerberg's vision of a more connected world transformed into a more alienating scenario with people interacting with their screens and disregarding the people around them? The current hype about social interaction on the Internet conveys some of the public anxieties and moral panics surrounding social media (see Critcher 2008). Fears have been expressed that online social networks cause alienation and uprooting, the breakdown of community, erosion of family values and traditional modes of sociability. For instance, the head of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, Archbishop Nichols, has claimed that Facebook and MySpace can provoke teenagers to commit suicide because such sites encourage them to build transient relationships and dehumanise community life (Wynne-Jones 2009).

Disturbing to some is the image of solitary individuals withdrawn in their private domestic spaces yet simultaneously in connection with a global network. A further media-generated panic includes the idea that young people have no sense of discretion or shame and have grown into the habit of exposing 'their bodies and souls in a way their parents never could'<sup>3</sup> (Livingstone 2008: 397). Users of social network sites are regarded as self-obsessed and narcissistic (Buffardi and Campbell 2008; Carpenter 2012; Twenge and Campbell 2009) or as socially isolated. Sites such as Facebook are also being blamed for damaging time-honoured

conventions of personal communication, for generating shallow relationships and for making us all feel insecure. As journalist Keith Watson remarks in a light-hearted tone:

That's the thing with Facebook – it has ripped up rules of social intercourse and kidded us with a vision of a bright new smiley world where we all *Like* each other. But really it's just cranked up our potential for insecurity to a massive scale. Haven't we all got a clutch of Friends Requested killing us softly with their rebuffs? Just me then.

(Watson 2011<sup>4</sup>)

There is, then, a concern that digital media is creating a dysfunctional society in which past tight-knit communities are being fragmented and gradually taken over by more dispersed social networks. Exaggerated claims have also been made in the opposite direction through assertions that, in the era of 'communicative abundance' (Keane 2009), social barriers and inequalities will be broken down by the rise of a new global digital network. Within this extravagant scenario, an egalitarian public sphere is envisaged in which each individual is liberated through digital autonomy with a shift of control from governments and big business to individuals. Whether optimistic or pessimistic, such exaggerated claims suffer from a media centrism: a technological determinism in which digital communication is misrepresented as being at the centre of society as the determining or principal factor of social change and that we all orient our lives around it (Postman 1993; Smith and Marx 1998; Williams 1974). In both scenarios, social network sites seem to have become the index of the progress or collapse of social connectedness.

## Changing meanings and practices of friendship

Despite widespread social anxieties about the impact of digital technologies on traditional social ties, emerging findings indicate that social network sites and other social media have become important sites for cultivating *personal* relationships. The research addressed in the following chapters contests the view that heavy social network site users are more isolated than occasional or non-users. Growing evidence suggests that this technology is contributing to a dramatic reconfiguration of our ideas about intimacy and friendship. While sites such as Facebook, MySpace and Friendster are reshaping the landscapes of business, culture and research, these sites are also forging new ways of being intimate and 'doing intimacy'.

Although research in this field is embryonic, a growing body of scholarship is now assessing the ways that social network sites and other social media are being drawn on to sustain personal relationships. This book engages with the disciplinary traditions of media studies and sociology to explore the key features of changing personal relationships and modes of sociability in the context of social media. The book draws on and combines traditional and new sociological debates about intimacy, family, friendship and new social ties with new media studies of computer-mediated communication and social network sites. Social network interactions and intimacies are examined from a range of theoretical and methodological angles. The aim is to revisit and advance the concept of 'intimacy' through the lens of social media use and to develop a theory of 'mediated intimacy'.

This emphasis on intimacy, family and friendship is something that Facebook is keen to promote in describing its attributes. It states, 'People use Facebook to stay connected with their friends and family, to discover what is going on in the world around them, and to share and express what matters to them, to the people they care about.'<sup>5</sup> The company is keen to become embedded in our personal lives. It now has strong commercial motives for doing so (see Chapter 9). At the same time, this communication technology is capable of facilitating weak, thin ties of acquaintanceship (Morgan 2009). Close relationships with family, children, lovers and friends are being sustained in concert with loose ties connecting work colleagues, acquaintances, neighbours and also virtual networks composed of shared interests and causes. The transformative potential and affirmative values of choice and agency associated with social media, particularly social network sites, are therefore foregrounded in this book. However, while social network sites offer us opportunities to express our identities and connections online, individuals are subjected to certain social pressures and constraints in the presentation of an online self. The personal profile requires constant monitoring and remodelling. The kind of self-regulation involved in online self-presentations suggests that social network sites can be viewed as sites that cultivate the enterprise of self-improvement (Rose 1999). This issue is explored in Chapter 4 on self-presentation online.

'Friendship' is a major ideal being exploited as a principal feature of social network site communication, within the process of *publicly displaying* connectedness. However, this new, *mediated* friendship is being shaped by conventions that vary considerably from those associated with the traditional sense of friendship formed before Web 2.0. In contrast to the public display of matrimony, for example, friendship has not generally been publicly declared until now in Western contexts (Baym

2010). This digitalised era is the first in which personal connections of friendship become formalised through online public display. The question is whether this emergent ritual of displaying non-familial as well as familial social connections online affects conventional meanings and values associated with 'friendship' and 'intimacy'. Questions about the intensity and speed of self-disclosure online, the unforeseen side effect of constant self-disclosure and how to sustain digital connections are issues that provoke questions about the sorts of skills now required to be 'a friend'. These social skills may include initiation of contact, changing expressions of self-disclosure, rejecting self-disclosure or friendships, self-management of identity and creating social distance from others. The internal rhetoric used by social network sites promotes 'friendship' signifiers and imagery through the choice of terms employed by the sites themselves. For example, MySpace.com has described itself as a place to 'find old friends' and 'make new friends', as a place to 'connect', as a community (Parks 2011: 106).

The design of social network sites, including the software applications or 'tools' of engagement for making personal connections, plays a key role in shaping users' communication. The processes are therefore worthy of some attention here. Participants create an online profile by listing personal information and interest, connecting with other site users and sharing updates about their activities and thoughts in their networks (boyd and Ellison 2007). Sites such as Myspace and Facebook encourage users to publicly display a record number of 'Friends' by offering specific incentives for users to add people to their Friends list. Users are provided with the tools to create an individual web page to post personal information such as self-descriptions and photos, to connect with other members by creating 'friends lists' and to interact with other members. After joining a social network site, users are invited to link up with others on the site that they know. Although the label for these connections differs according to site, common words are used to emphasise the informality, sociability and casualness of the links including 'Friends', 'Contacts', 'Fans' and 'Followers'. On Facebook, individuals invite other users to be 'Friends,' in a relationship that is made visible to others on the site. This enables two users to communicate with each other and share content. The decision to include someone as an online 'Friend' prompts a 'Friend request' which asks the receiver to accept or reject the connection. This generates a further stage of processing or friendship management.

Most sites reveal the list of Friends to anyone permitted to view the profile but several recently launched privacy features enable users to prevent 'non-Friends' from either viewing their profiles, adding comments

or sending messages. 'Friend' selection allows choice in excluding people from one's friendship list. Excluding and 'deFriending' a person known to the member can generate offence. This practice is particularly an issue among teenagers for whom the management and public display of Friends can play a major role in peer group interactions. These are often characterised as intense, dramatic and occasionally volatile (see Chapter 5). In addition, a whole range of information about online status and idle status and about 'away messages' can reveal personal information about a person's context and movement (Baron 2008).

While the contact lists on our mobile phones are used as personal reference tools for connecting with significant others, social network sites are unique in publicly displaying personal contact lists to all who have access to our profile. Contact lists publicise our networks as our 'Friends'. Friends have therefore come to function as a key dimension of a person's identity and self-presentation (see Chapter 4) as well as part of the regulation of access to certain features (such as commenting) and content (such as blog posts). The rise of social media has coincided with the introduction of several new words in the English language such as to 'Friend', to 'defriend' or to 'unfriend' a person; 'offline friends' and 'non-friend'. The term 'frenemies' is used in the context of online stalking: 'stalking your frenemies'. The term 'unfriend' was selected as the Oxford Word of the Year in 2009, defined as the action of deleting a person as a 'friend' on a social network site. 'Friending' a person on a social network site presupposes and evokes the idea of a degree of purpose and determination in establishing the connection (Madden and Smith 2010). Following boyd and Ellison (2007), the word 'Friend' is capitalised here to indicate social network contacts and to distinguish the term from conversational understandings of the term.

In a study of friendship in LiveJournal, Raynes-Goldie and Fono (2005) discovered considerable variation in the reasons people gave for Friending each other. Friendship represented content, offline facilitator, online community, trust, courtesy, declaration or nothing. Similar motives were found by danah boyd (2006) in a study of participants' activities on Friendster and MySpace. Thirteen incentives were identified by boyd in descending importance, as follows:

1. Actual friends;
2. Acquaintances, family members, colleagues;
3. It would be socially inappropriate to say 'no' because you know them;
4. Having lots of Friends makes you look popular;



5. It's a way of indicating that you are a fan (of that person, band, product, etc.);
6. Your list of Friends reveals who you are;
7. Their Profile is cool so being Friends makes you look cool;
8. Collecting Friends lets you see more people (Friendster);
9. It's the only way to see a private Profile (MySpace);
10. Being Friends lets you see someone's bulletins and their Friends-only blog posts (MySpace);
11. You want them to see your bulletins, private Profile, private blog (MySpace);
12. You can use your Friends list to find someone later;
13. It's easier to say yes than no.

The first three incentives involve already known connections. The rest provide clues about why people connect to people whom they do not know. Most of the reasons given reveal how significant the technical facilitators are in affecting individuals' incentives to connect (boyd 2006). There is evidence that Friending encompasses a wide range of contact categories and that, as boyd's findings show, not all users view all 'Friends' as actual friends. The implications of these changing practices are explored in the following chapters.

The emerging principles and customs shaping online friendship and intimacy are having a profound impact on the way companionship is practised and experienced offline. This is particularly the case for young people (see Chapter 5). For example, users of sites such as MySpace are invited to rank their 'Friends' in order of preference as a routine feature of engagement. These online customs are also influencing conventions surrounding intimacy for adults. The word 'Friend' is being applied to all declared connections whatever their nature or intensity. Family members, work colleagues, school friends and acquaintances are regularly being listed and publicly displayed as 'friends'. In 2007, Facebook set up a feature for users to group friends into categories. Before that, all contacts were indistinguishable, all being labelled as 'Friends'. MySpace differed, with a tool enabling users to mark out their 'Top 8' contacts.

## **Modes of online connectivity**

### **Levels of engagement**

This section addresses variations in levels of social network site engagement according to social groups and online experiences. It acts as a

backdrop to some fascinating details outlined in the following section about *why* and *how* people engage on sites and *who with*, to provide insights into digitally mediated personal ties. In terms of age groups, data from the Pew Internet and American Life Project confirms that more young adults use social networks than older adults in the United States (Lenhart 2009). Among 18 to 24 year olds, 75 per cent of online adults have a profile on a social network site and among 25 to 34 year olds, 57 per cent have a site profile. The number steadily decreases with age with 30 per cent of online adults aged 35 to 44 having a profile, 19 per cent of online 45 to 54 year olds, and 10 per cent of online 55 to 64 year olds. Among those aged 65 and over, only 7 per cent of online adults have a profile. In a study of frequency of use, Joinson (2008) found that women visited Facebook more often than men. White Facebook users tend to have more ethnically and racially homogeneous friendship networks than non-white users (Seder and Oishi 2009). Studies further reveal that different sites attract different social groups (Hargittai 2007). The different designs of sites offer differing modes of functionality and affordances (Hargittai and Hsieh 2011). Some sites are used mainly for maintaining social relationships such as Facebook and others to promote professional networks such as LinkedIn. Significantly, the *personal* use of social networks is more widespread than *professional* use in terms of both the type of networks that adults choose to use and their reasons for using the applications (Lenhart 2009).

Although research on the intensity of social network site use is nascent, certain patterns emerge. Eszter Hargittai and Yu-li Patrick Hsieh (2011) found that some people engage with one site only either frequently or infrequently while others use several sites regularly or infrequently. Based on a study of US college student users, they distinguished between Dabblers, Samplers, Devotees and Omnivores. Dabblers use only one site and occasionally. Samplers visit more than one site but infrequently. Devotees are active users on one service only. Omnivores use several sites and use at least one site intensively. Women are more likely to be intense users than men but only more likely to be Omnivores. There are no gender differences between Dabblers, Samplers and Devotees. No significant differences according to racial and ethnic background were detected except that non-Hispanic African American students are less likely to be Dabblers and non-Hispanic Asian American students tend to be devotees. Students with at least one parent with a college education are more likely to be Omnivores. They are also more likely to be intense users if they do not live with their parents. Users with better web skills tend to be intense users and to incorporate their

social network site use into their daily routines. Web skills are likely to be enhanced by the extent of use as well as vice versa (Hargittai and Hsieh 2011).

### Types of relationships

Throughout the relatively short history of online communication, a major question for researchers has been whether the Internet is used mainly to sustain pre-existing connections or to establish relationships that start online and then move offline (see, for example, Ellison et al. 2007, 2011a, 2011b; Walther and Parks 2002). For some time it was believed that the Internet would be perfectly designed for forming networks with strangers on the other side of the world, with or without shared interests. It was initially assumed that innovations in digitalised communication activities would essentially lead to an explosion of globalised social contacts. Two key trends emerge from research on patterns of social media use. First, all the digital mediums available to us – such as cell phones, texting, Skype, instant messaging (IM), social network sites, blogging and email – are mainly used to communicate with a remarkably small handful of people, largely made up of intimates. Second, in the case of social network sites, rather than being used for initiating new relationships we find that they tend to be used for maintaining or deepening already existing *offline* relationships and for tracing people already known offline.

Regarding the first trend, in research on interpersonal digital communication across multiple media platforms among families in Switzerland, Stefana Broadbent (2011) found that on average 80 per cent of regular exchanges are with the same four or five people. Whether the exchanges were on IM, social network sites, Skype or mobile phone, the result was the same in all cases. Broadbent's in-depth study involved interviews, observations and surveys of users' homes. Respondents were also asked to produce communication logs to identify and describe the purposes of *all* their communications. Most communication was about the state of loved ones including partners, family and friends. She found that most mobile phone calls are made to the same four intimates. Broadbent (2009, 2011) also discovered particular communication channels are preferred for keeping in touch regularly with intimates and that these are determined by the *level* of intimacy afforded by the connection. She distinguishes between 'synchronous' and 'asynchronous' channels, emphasising the more *intimate* nature of voice communication such as the telephone, Skype and SMS in synchronous media (addressed in Chapter 2).

Despite the asynchronous nature of social network sites, they do involve intimate communication. As Sonia Livingstone (2009a) points out, social network sites are displacing, incorporating and remediating other modes of online communication. The technology is supplanting communication forms such as email, chatrooms and website creation and absorbing others such as IM, blogging and music downloading. Social network sites fuse earlier technologies of communication and involve *multimedia* engagement (Haythornthwaite 2005; Jenkins 2006; Madianou and Miller 2012). The technology provides communication, storage and social applications for hundreds of millions of users. The multifaceted technological opportunities or 'affordances' of this medium make it highly suitable for fostering and maintaining intimate ties. Social network site technology also remediates synchronous forms of communication such as face-to-face and telephone communication (Bolter and Grusin 1999; Jenkins 2006).

Although social network site technology offers a remarkably wide and complex range of affordances to connect with large numbers of people through text, images and News Feeds, the medium is being used by individuals mainly to sustain very close, personal ties. Moreover, political communication is limited. During the year of the US presidential campaign when Barack Obama's success was attributed to the use of social media, research by the Pew Internet and American Life project (Kohut 2008) found that only 10 per cent of Internet users in the US population posted political comments on social network sites and 8 per cent posted comments on blogs. The majority of Internet users (64 per cent) obtained their core information from television websites such as [cnn.com](http://cnn.com) or [abcnews.com](http://abcnews.com) (Kohut 2008).

While social network sites such as Facebook, Bebo and MySpace have made it easy for users to broaden their range of contacts to hundreds of Friends, most users have an average of five close friends (Binder et al. 2009; Choi 2006; Ellison et al. 2007, 2011a, 2011b; Joinson, 2008; Lampe et al. 2006; Lenhart 2009; Walther and Parks 2002; Wilson et al. 2009). In a large-scale study of user interaction events on Facebook, Wilson et al. (2009) found that the most active users only received photo comments from a small number of their Friends (15 per cent), and most users received comments from only 5 per cent of their Friends. This pattern is reflected on Twitter where 97 per cent of twitterers attract less than a hundred followers while celebrities such as Britney Spears have around 4.7 million followers (Infographic 2010). Moreover, the majority of Facebook interactive events tend to be generated by a small and highly active subset of users, while a majority of users are significantly

less active (Wilson et al. 2009). A study of user interactions on the South Korean social network site, Cyworld, reflects this pattern. It was found that Cyworld users with fewer than 200 friends interact only with a small subgroup of friends. Interactions tend to be bidirectional rather than multidirectional (Chun 2008). Significantly, this pattern resonates with conventional offline friendship networks and users of other social media technologies.

With reference to the second trend, a succession of studies confirm that social network sites are being used for sustaining *pre-existing* contacts which have strong offline connections of proximity. For example, a US survey of over 1000 undergraduate college students about offline/online communication by Lampe et al. (2007) found that Facebook profile fields were quite difficult to falsify. Importantly, the software design of sites fosters meaningful or *consequential* ties in the sense that it allows users to identify common ground in offline contexts such as home town, high school and cultural preferences. The researchers found that users of Facebook tend to use online profile details to identify others with whom they have something in common in an offline environment rather than just shared interests. The search for indicators of common ground among other members helps to simplify the process of detecting shared backgrounds, interests and experiences. Lampe et al. (2007) even suggest that simply being aware that a person is from the same town affords a common background and point of reference for people who have not met before. Holding online conversations about having local milieu, events or acquaintances in common can facilitate future contact. Similarly, a related US survey by Nicole Ellison et al. (2007) of 286 undergraduates revealed that users of Facebook connected with many more people with whom they shared *offline connections* such as existing friends, class mates, nearby neighbours or a person they had already met socially than with meeting new people. Facebook users are also much more likely to 'search' for people with whom they shared an offline connection than they are to 'browse' to meet complete strangers (Ellison et al. 2007).

Despite the remarkable technological possibilities for global networking, most people's online connections are, then, generally localised or stem from former local connections. Niche networks can be geographically dispersed but strangers and distant others are far less appealing to users of online social media than initially assumed (Boneva et al. 2006; Mesch and Talmud 2007b). Surprisingly few social network connections are initiated online and there is little evidence that this form of social media is being used to replace existing social relationships with new

ones. This range of findings suggests, then, that social network sites are predominantly a medium for *personal* engagement and for maintaining pre-existing contacts with offline connections of proximity. To paraphrase Broadbent,<sup>6</sup> it amounts to a 're-appropriation' or a conquest of *personal* mediated discourse over other kinds of communication. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the use of these sites for the formation of weak ties, as indicated below.

Certainly, social network sites help strangers to connect through shared interests, activities and political views. However, the emphasis on *personal* communication is indicated by the dominant patterns of personal engagement with social network sites and the use of this social medium for sustaining existing relationships rather than linking up with strangers. Given these patterns, the impulse to differentiate between offline and online associates now seems too simplistic. It fails to take into account the intricate ways in which online communication is integrated into everyday personal life (Bakardjieva 2005; Livingstone 2009a; Silverstone 2006<sup>7</sup>). Livingstone emphasises that despite this remarkable range and mix of affordances, face-to-face communication is not being displaced by online connections. Instead, these technological attributes have ensured an *embedding* of this technology in personal life. This is also supported by research beyond Western contexts. In the study of South Korean site, Cyworld (Choi 2006), it was found that Cyworld has become embedded in everyday life. Maintaining and reinforcing pre-existing social networks was reported as the main motive for Cyworld use by 85 per cent of users (Choi 2006: 181). This *embedded* nature of the technology indicates that most site users convey information about their own identities rather than inventing new online identities.

### **'Mass friends'**

While social network sites are being used mainly to sustain and deepen *pre-existing* connections formed offline, some users accumulate vast numbers of occasional 'friends'. The average number of online connections generally varies between 120 and 180. Yet certain users of social network sites are accruing thousands of 'Friends' (Golder et al. 2007). This tendency signals a rise in weak ties or acquaintances. Within the motives for Friending others identified by boyd (2006) which are listed above, after the first three, most reasons involve people known to members, the rest provides clues about the incentives for participants to connect to many people that they do not know: popularity, being

a fan (of a person, band or product, etc.); expressing one's identity; to make the user look cool; to gain access to several features such as more people or to a private profile or to someone's bulletins and their Friends-only blog posts; to allow others to see one's bulletins, private profile, private blog; to find someone later and finally because it is easier to say 'yes' than 'no'. These incentives for Friending are addressed in later chapters. Speculation about the status of friend collecting and the changing nature of friendship on social network sites has prompted media reports with headlines such as 'Most Facebook friends are false friends'.<sup>8</sup>

The technical facility to generate a large number of online weak ties encourages some users to draw on the software to browse for names online to add to their friend collections (Donath 2007). As indicated by the incentives identified by boyd, this 'mass friend' collecting involves connections with strangers as well as acquaintances. The majority of those who collect large numbers of Friends are often adults such as musicians, politicians, corporations and celebrities. These users depend on wide social networks to advance their status, careers or leisure interests. Most loose connections are likely to be 'trophy' friends such as famous actors, sportspeople and celebrities. The lack of a facility to differentiate between *casual* and *intimate* contacts encourages a blurring of relationship groupings. Social network sites have the *potential* to generate large numbers of positive weak ties, but it raises questions about whether we are capable of handling large numbers of contacts online, whether 'Friend collecting' has social benefits or whether the practice is simply a pretence used to impress others. Research on the theoretical boundaries for the number of stable personal connections that humans are capable of managing suggests that we are unable to handle more than about 150 relationships (Dunbar 1996).

In terms of the qualities and social benefits generated by our social networks, enquiries into the social capital generated by social network sites by Ellison et al. (2011a) suggest that when the number of reported actual friends surpasses 400 to 500, there is a 'point of diminishing returns'. The social benefits to be gleaned from large numbers of Friends are not apparent (see Chapter 8). They point out that, at this size it is likely to be impossible to conduct the kind of relationship maintenance needed to ensure that weak ties provide useful forms of support and information. While some social network site users might have 1,500 friends, the traffic on these sites shows that most people maintain a much smaller circle of about 150 connections (Dunbar 2010). Site users are likely to know little about the lives of more than 150 of their digital

contacts. These contacts may range from very close friends to casual acquaintances.

A set of conventions are emerging around the ritual of Friend collecting and gradually being recognised as digital protocols through regular use. Derogatory terms such as 'Friendster whores' indicate the kinds of negative views being associated with indiscriminate Friending activity (Donath and boyd 2004). Young people in particular are scrutinising each others' profiles and judging the number and management of online friendships among their peers (see Chapter 5). In a study of perceptions of social attractiveness on Facebook, Tong et al. (2008) discovered that higher Friend counts corresponded with higher levels of perceived social appeal. Intriguingly, this operated within distinctive limits. Users who accumulated more than 302 Facebook Friends were actually rated lower in terms of social attractiveness, and this was likely to be because they were judged to be 'Friending out of desperation' (Tong et al. 2008: 542) or substituting face-to-face contacts with digitally generated ones. The aspiration to acquire hundreds of friends and the practice of adding relatively weak ties to online friendship lists confirms key changes in the meanings and values associated with 'friendship' in the context of social media.

### **Weak online ties**

The acquisition of large numbers of Friends raises questions about whether online networks are reducing the investment needed in making strong friendships or whether new ties generated online are inevitably inferior ties. Placing multiple postings of information to several people is so simple and fast that the cost of maintaining and forming these weak associations, in terms of time and effort, is being significantly reduced (Ellison et al. 2011b). As mentioned above, social commentators are concerned that IM, texting and social network sites are somehow undermining human intimacy and sociality. Yet others claim that fostering numerous loose ties or 'nodding acquaintances' may have important social benefits.

Mark Granovetter (1973) categorised the members of a social network according to the strength of the ties. He contrasted the effectiveness of 'strong' ties of family and close friends with 'weak' ties of casual acquaintances such as former colleagues or new people whom we meet. Granovetter described the strength of a tie as a combination of the amount of time, emotional intensity, intimacy and reciprocity entailed in the relationship. Our weak ties or acquaintances are less likely to



know each other or be socially involved with one another compared to our close friends and family. Granovetter states:

Thus the set of people made up of any individual and his or her acquaintances comprises a low-density network (one in which many of the possible relational lines are absent) whereas the set consisting of the same individual and his or her *close* friends will be densely knit (many of the possible lines are present).

(Granovetter 1983: 201–202)

Weak ties may offer us access to the kinds of resources and varied social groups and belief systems that close family and friends are unable to supply. Those with extensive weak ties will have access to information, new ideas and tastes from outlying parts of the social system. For example, it gives individuals an advantage in terms of the labour market where employment may depend on knowing of job openings (Granovetter 1973, 1983). Since casual friends and acquaintances often move in social circles that differ from our own, they are more likely to have access to different information and can facilitate information sharing (Benko 2011; Morgan 2009). The benefits generated by weak ties are referred to as ‘bridging capital’ (Putnam 2000) and are addressed in Chapter 8. By contrast, the strong ties of family and close friends are defined by the frequency of contact and by their voluntary, companionable, supportive and long-term nature (Haythornthwaite 2005). They offer the kind of ‘bonding capital’ which is not available from weak ties or acquaintances. As Baym (2010: 125) puts it, ‘Resources exchanged in strong tie relationships run deep and may be emotionally and temporally expensive. As a result, we cannot maintain too many strong tie relationships at any given time and have many fewer strong ties than weak ones’.

Caroline Haythornthwaite (2005) uses the concept of ‘latent ties’ to address the ways in which social media technologies create new opportunities for contact between people would not otherwise link up with one another. Latent ties are described as connections ‘technically possible but not yet activated socially’ (Haythornthwaite 2005: 137). They occur when a new medium of communication becomes accessible, allowing individuals to make contact. The telephone system and phone directory is an example of this. Ellison et al. (2007) emphasise the affordances of social network sites for detecting and identifying people online which might prompt users to initiate latent ties in the future. A ‘latent tie’ is

...a relationship between two individuals which has not been socially activated. These individuals may have a passing awareness of one another (or may have even met briefly), but the affordances of the social network site serve to enhance and accelerate the relationship development process.

(Ellison et al. 2011a: 877)

The question, then, is whether and what kinds of weak ties and latent connections are being activated in the context of social media such as social network sites, and how they may be contributing to changing personal relationships. This is the subject matter of Chapter 8. Evidence suggests that however small the numbers of connections generated or revitalised through weak ties online, these contacts online can be enormously significant and even life changing (Wilson et al. 2009).

### **Mediated intimacies**

Having outlined some of the broad features of digitally mediated social connectivity, the preliminary characteristics of social network site interactivity can be identified. I shall highlight these characteristics in turn and follow this with a discussion on how they are approached in the following chapters. First, social network sites are, in the broadest sense, (a) *conducive to sociality*. Social network site use corresponds with a growing significance in (b) the *public display of connectedness*. This connectedness is being expressed predominantly through (c) the model of *friendship*. Digitally mediated personal connections tend to involve (d) a small number of *intimate ties* and (e) draw on an informal, *casual* mode of address. This pattern of social media use amounts to (f) the dominance of a *personalised discourse*. Patterns of use also confirm that social network site engagement, alongside all social media, is becoming (g) *embedded* in everyday life. We find that online contacts are largely composed of (h) *pre-existing offline relationships* and related to the way the software is designed, they tend to foster (i) *consequential* or meaningful ties. Finally, social network sites offer the technical affordances to generate and sustain (j) extensive non-personal, *weak* or latent ties.

Engagement with multiple channels of communication – from text messages to social network sites – confirms this pervasiveness and the mediated nature of *all* contemporary personal ties (Madianou and Miller 2012). It indicates the need for a theoretical framework to explain mediated personal relationships, that is, the interconnections

between the technical and emotional dimensions of social media in the formation of present-day personal ties. Digitally mediated networks can be approached as ‘mediated intimacies’. I use the term *mediated intimacies* to develop a framework to explain the distinctive ways in which new media technologies are being engaged with to sustain personal connections and to understand the nature of these connections. I use the term ‘intimacy’ in a broader sense than sexual, romantic or familial relationships to include wider ties of friendship (see Chapter 3). In the context of social network sites, *mediated intimacies* configure and are framed within ‘networked public culture’ (boyd 2007, 2011).

The term ‘networked public’ is drawn on in the following chapters to describe some of the key ways mediated intimacies are being publicised through social network site engagement. I use the term ‘*personalised public networks*’ to explain the nature of digitally mediated intimacies. The following chapters explore the ways that personal relationships are being *mediated* through digital communication technologies and how media platforms, in particular social network sites, are being *socialised*: that is, the way these technologies are engaged with and become embedded in our everyday lives. This is focused on first in Chapter 2 by examining the distinctive attributes and affordances of the digital mediums that help cultivate an affiliation between technical and emotional dimensions of personal communication as *mediated* interaction. Further characteristics of mediated intimacy are identified in the following chapters and analysed towards a theory of mediated intimacy in Chapter 9.

## Approach and overview of chapters

Digitally mediated social relationships are investigated through a series of social and cultural contexts which form the core themes that structure this book. The first part of the book explores relevant theories of mediated technologies and theories of changing intimacies and friendship. How personal connections are being articulated through social media engagement is examined in the second part of the book through a group of five chapters that address key frameworks or contexts of association: the self, youth, families, dating and social capital. These frameworks help to identify the major roles played by social media in transforming personal life. The final chapter identifies the principal features of mediated intimacy. It explores the constitutive features of mediated self and, finally, looks at some of the implications of locating mediated intimacies within commercial frameworks.

Chapter 2 begins by confirming that personal relationships no longer depend on one kind of technology but on a *plurality* of media and examines the implications of this dramatic change. I draw on Madianou and Miller's concept of 'polymedia' which describes this integrated media environment. Polymedia offers 'proliferating communicative opportunities' (Madianou and Miller 2012: 8). This new polymedia environment has led to a major change in modes of interaction from a situation in which the technology dominates to one in which people have a sense of *agency* over the technologies. The concept of polymedia highlights the technological choices offered by social media and the cultural and moral processes involved in the myriad of individual ways of conducting relationships such as through text messaging, Skype, email and Facebook. They describe these new dynamics as a *re-socialisation* of media.

This re-socialisation of media constitutes a significant transformation in the moral framework of personal communication. More personal choice is generated by the multiplication of communication technologies, their convergence (as exemplified through social network sites and smartphones) and the drop in the price of the technologies. The growing diversity of these technologies implies growing control over our interactions. Chapter 2 explains that the choice of medium involves important social and moral questions and not just technical or economic considerations. This choice then becomes a moral issue about the appropriateness of the medium, particularly for dealing with relationship break-ups and family-based misunderstandings (Gershon 2010; Madianou and Miller 2012). Chapter 2 therefore highlights the importance of the concept of mediation (Silverstone 2005) to explain the diversity and complexity of the emotional changes that media sustain. Social media constitute and express the relationships developed in the context of intimacy and friendship. Importantly, these digital technologies of communication offer choice and agency, promoting a discourse and sense of expressive purpose.

The question is why the concept of *friendship* has been adopted to describe this new personalised discourse, and what are the implications for personal life? This is the subject matter of the third chapter. It is tempting to use a media-centric argument and suggest that the nature of the transformation of friendship is being led by the technology, for example by the design of websites and profile pages. Chapter 3 addresses relevant debates about changing intimacies and personal relationships in order to identify the key social trends that precede and therefore underpin aspirations towards the more fluid and more intense personal

ties being expressed through social media. It explains how ‘friendship’ informs the digital era. ‘Friendship’ has become a key trope in the cultural imaginary during late modernity.

‘Intimacy’ has emerged as a key area of academic interest in sociology and cultural studies but has generally been situated in the field of family studies. Chapter 3 argues that interpersonal democratisation is ascendant and that, as part of this trend, friendship has grown into a centrally valued relationship that epitomises individual agency and choice. Drawing on Giddens (1992), we can suggest that today’s technologically mediated relationships coincide with the quest for choice, equality and emotional disclosure. More informal relationships based on non-hierarchical relationships are being sought after. Social network sites support a new, mediated intimacy which draws on friendship not only to reflect the more flexible and informal qualities of contemporary personal interactions but also to confirm a sense of agency in the use of the technology.

The nature of changing relationships is explored by drawing on the concept of ‘personal communities’ (Spencer and Pahl 2006) and ‘networked publics’ (boyd 2011). The *ideal* of friendship is a relationship no longer defined by or confined to ties of duty, but entered into voluntarily in a situation of mutual benefit or well-being. Friendship has extended from a term that describes personal and intimate to include ‘network’ and ‘community’. As such it becomes a slippery concept that can mean many things to many people. As well as being so appealing in the context of social network sites, it feeds into negative debates about fragmentation and moral panics about the superficial nature of relationships, ‘too much sharing’ in the sense of disclosing too much personal information and eroding the nature of the private and the personal. The following chapters explore these issues.

Chapter 4 addresses self-presentations online by examining the management of self-presentation and the construction of mediated personal identities. It draws on symbolic interactionism to explain the interactive nature of the mediated self, and the challenges of managing the reshaping of public and private boundaries in expressions of self-identity. Following Nikolas Rose (1996, 1999), I argue that the careful management of self-identity required on social network sites can be interpreted as a form of governmentality and self-regulation. Chapter 5 examines the ways social media are used by teenagers to develop and maintain friendships and manage peer networks. It draws on a range of ethnographic studies by Mizuko Ito and colleagues (2010) and also group discussions I held with a small cohort of A-level students aged 17

to 18 in the North East England. The chapter also makes use of a range of survey findings of social media use by young people in the United States and Europe. It shows how teenagers are creating networked publics through social media and how social media are transforming the nature and meanings of friendship for young people. The chapter on home, families and new media (Chapter 6) examines the role that social media plays in sustaining family bonds with a focus on changing meanings of home and changing parent–child relationships. The chapter explains that the relationship between the home and the outside world is transforming in addition to the changes in family dynamics occurring within the home. A variety of strategies are used by parents in attempting to control their children’s use of social media and to foster family identities. How social media are used to maintain personal communication between members of transnational families is also addressed with a focus on the combined uses of social media to control the communication process (Madianou and Miller 2012).

Chapter 7 on digital dating begins by examining the way young people use social media for initiating and ending romantic relationships and how they handle mediated break-ups. It also investigates the role of dating forums and social network sites in fostering offline relationships among adults. Patterns of self-presentation and issues of choice and agency are explored in the context of disembodied intimacies. Chapter 8 on virtual communities and weak ties considers the ways in which the concept of ‘community’ has been used to express mediated networks and asks whether communities are actually being created on social network sites in the context of personalised network publics. This is followed by an assessment of research on the ways in which social network site use may generate bonding and bridging social capital.

The final chapter draws together the key debates in this book to develop a theory of mediated intimacies. It identifies the key features of today’s mediated personal relationships by exploring the social consequences of public displays of intimacy and changing personal communities in relation to transforming notions of ‘privacy’, ‘intimacy’ and the ‘personal’. The chapter also examines the characteristics of the ‘mediated self’ by highlighting modes of self-regulation involved in new online self-presentations. The final part of the book explores some of the implications of the framing of mediated intimacies within commercial frameworks. How mediated intimacies and related ties are being moulded by commercial agendas is examined.