

Discussing

1. One of the points Shirky makes in “Does the Internet Make You Smarter?” is that the collaborative characteristics of Internet technologies improve how we make and circulate knowledge. He identifies a number of examples to support his claim. How do you respond to the claim that increased collaboration is a benefit? Discuss the role of collaboration and your assessment of the value of collaboration in terms of digital information technologies.
2. Shirky cites Martin Luther as decrying, “The multitude of books is a great evil. There is no measure of limit to this fever for writing.” But Shirky does not provide the full quote from Luther: “The multitude of books is a great evil. There is no limit to this fever for writing; every one must be an author; some out of vanity, to acquire celebrity and raise up a name, others for the sake of mere gain.” First, how do you respond to Martin Luther’s quote—either Shirky’s abbreviated version of it or the more complete version? Second, given the time period in which Luther made this claim and his own leadership role in the Protestant Reformation, how are his words applicable in the context in which Shirky invokes them?
3. One of the most provocative claims that Shirky makes is that “The Net, in fact, restores reading and writing as the central activities in our culture.” Discuss the implications of such a claim.

Writing

1. Shirky provides a brief summary of how people responded to the development of the movable-type printing press, but his summaries are general. Conduct some research to learn more about the responses to the printing press and the effects it had historically. Write a research paper about the effect of the printing press on culture and the responses that were voiced about it.
2. Shirky makes a distinction between “throwaway materials” and materials of intellectual value. Yet distinguishing between those things can be a matter of situation and context. For example, for some, comics might be throwaway material, whereas for others they are a legitimate intellectual medium. With Shirky’s argument in mind, write about how we might culturally distinguish between throwaway material and legitimate material.
3. How do you respond to Shirky’s claim? Write a response essay that contributes to this situation.

A Death on Facebook: Intimacy and Loss in the Age of Social Media

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has appeared in the Ideas section of *The Boston Globe*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Times*, and *Vogue*. She regularly writes about social media. Her essay reprinted here, “A Death on Facebook: Intimacy and Loss in the Age of Social Media,” asks us to think about the role of friendship and intimacy as it is mediated by social networks like Facebook. The essay is less about technology and media per se than it is about the cultural and social effects of the mass use of such technologies. As you read this powerful piece, think about the kinds of relationships you have developed via social media that might not have evolved without the technological connection.

I met “S” several years ago, when she was hired by the magazine where I worked as an editor. She was an assistant in a different department, so we had very little day-to-day contact. I somehow learned that she went to nightclubs a lot, and I once overheard her tell a colleague that she wanted to be the editor in chief of a magazine someday. It was a snippet that stayed with me, as her partying lifestyle seemed contrary to such a career goal, and for a while whenever I passed her desk I would worry over the incongruity. Eventually I found resolution in the idea of Bonnie Fuller, doyenne of celebrity journalism. That’s what S meant, I decided: she would be an editor like Fuller, rather than someone bookish, like the legendarily reticent *New Yorker* editor William Shawn. She even had a haircut like Fuller’s.

Eventually S quit the magazine. There must have been a goodbye party, with the customary boutique cupcakes and plastic Champagne flutes. Months wore on, maybe even years. Much to our collective shock, one Wednesday morning our parent company announced it was shutting down the magazine, and by Friday we no longer had jobs. At first I was intoxicated by the novelty of solitude: it was late January, a nice time of year to spend the day reading on the sofa. But in the weeks to come, I started to miss popping into colleagues’ offices to get their daily romantic updates, or just making absentminded loops through the corridors, halfheartedly hunting for chocolates.

So it came to pass that I started logging on to Facebook. And, like seemingly everyone else I’d ever met, eventually S “friended” me. My policy has been always to accept whoever asks, no question, and never to friend anyone myself. (In this way I maintain the fiction that I’m not an active user.) I glanced at S’s picture—that pretty smile and Bonnie Fuller shag—clicked “confirm,” and unconsciously relegated her to the vast, benign category of “friends” with whom I never interact, but who constitute a comforting background chorus.

S would accept no such fate. Straightaway, photos of her nightlife dominated my news feed. Her status updates were bubbly shrieks of uppercase letters and exclamation points. I considered “hiding” her—this is the function

that allows you to make a friend invisible without going so far as to “defriend” her—but that seemed excessive. S was, after all, my envoy to an alternate universe of abandon. Twenty-five years old and barelegged in winter was a variety of fun I’d never known before.

Then, in the spring, a man—G—entered the frame. At first he appeared with other men, the whole group at a table in a bar, offering pints of beer to the camera. But quickly everyone else fell away and he emerged in photographs with S alone, his arm thrown around her. At first the gesture was friendly and drunk, but over time I could track the way his arm both relaxed and tightened, his hand cupping her shoulder, and see him taking possession.

It turned out that G lived in London, and in the fall S posted images from a visit: the couple in a crowded pub, or on a bridge at sunset. By now I habitually clicked through S’s photo albums, a diversion far better than popping into a colleague’s office for a romantic update. Here, I had the satisfaction of a love plot unfolding right in my living room, complete with revolving backdrops and the suspense inherent in a long-distance relationship. When was her next trip? Oh look, G is coming to town! At this I felt relief: I took it as evidence that he was as committed to her as she was to him.

But that was nothing compared to my delight the December morning I logged on to Facebook and was greeted by a photo of S and G grinning madly on an enormous gray sofa, S presenting the back of her hand to the camera to show off the diamond on her finger. I have never known that kind of happiness with a man. Without thinking, I started to type a note of congratulations into the comment box, but midway through I erased it and logged off. I hardly knew this person. When had I become such a voyeur?

Still, I continued to devour her fairy tale. Here G was introducing her to his parents; here she was introducing him to hers. A year had passed since S had friended me. We never exchanged messages, or commented on one another’s postings, or saw each other in person (save for one early, awkward encounter in a furniture store, during which it took me a moment to place who she was). Yet I thought about her often, even

when I wasn't on Facebook, as I would any close friend in a similar joyful circumstance. More, in fact: her news thrummed inside my chest as if it were my own. I wondered where the wedding might take place, what she would wear. Being a voyeur isn't so bad, I decided, as long as you've been invited—and you don't tell anyone.

In late January, I traveled from my Brooklyn apartment to a remote Vermont farmhouse belonging to a friend of a friend. She was leaving the country for two weeks, and I'd agreed to take care of her animals. It was a brave little house with a big, tumbledown barn and fields that sloped into forests beyond. The days were bright with snow, the nights forbiddingly dark. I had to drive 20 miles to get Internet access. But one evening I made an exciting discovery: balanced just so on a windowsill, my iPhone had snatched a stray sliver of signal and garnered 50 e-mails. News from beyond! As the messages downloaded, excruciatingly slowly, I boiled water for tea, stoked the furnace, and settled into an

armchair, pleased to see a message from a former colleague with S's name in the subject line: had I actually been invited to the wedding shower?

It was a mass e-mail. "It's my great displeasure to be the bearer of such horrible news, but S passed away on Sunday," it read. "It was very sudden and I believe it happened in her sleep. I don't have any other details; a friend of hers sent me a message via Facebook."

A loud sob broke out of me, like a bark. It was a frightening sound in that too-quiet house. I stood up, heart racing, and paced the rooms, switching on any lamp I could find. But the rooms weren't familiar to me, and their features—shelves sagging with books I'd never read; ropes of garlic garlanding a cupboard; decades of dirt caking the floor seams—only enlarged my sense of unreality. Even the smudged windows framed a night so black that I could see nothing there but my own pale face. How do you cry for someone you hardly know? And for what was I crying? S or her story?

Analyzing the Situation

1. What role does gender play in this essay (beyond the simple fact that we know the genders of the narrator and of "S")?
2. In what ways does the narrator's lack of familiarity with her physical surroundings when she learns of S's death affect the situation and her reaction?
3. Is the situation in which "A Death on Facebook: Intimacy and Loss in the Age of Social Media" participates an unusual situation or is it familiar and commonplace?

Analyzing the Rhetoric

1. Why do you suppose Kate Bolick opted to relate this story and pose her inquiry about intimacy by way of a personal narrative? Could she have engaged the same critical questions in other ways?
2. If questions usually leave a reader wanting answers, how do the final three questions of the essay function as a conclusion?

3. "A Death on Facebook: Intimacy and Loss in the Age of Social Media" is a relatively short essay, yet it takes on a rather complex and potentially big subject: intimacy and social media. How does the essay's brevity contribute to its success in engaging its subject?

Discussing

1. How do you respond to this essay? Focus your discussion on the ramifications of how social networking alters concepts of friendship and intimacy rather than on the events of the narrative.
2. Are Facebook friends and other social network contacts really friends? Discuss the varying degrees of how you think about your online relationships versus your face-to-face relationships.
3. What seems to be Kate Bolick's attitude toward Facebook and social media in general? That is, what does she seem to suggest the purpose of social networks is? Do you agree with her portrayal of them?