

Friends in high-tech places

In the internet age, friendship is not what it used to be, finds **Michael Bond**

FRIENDSHIP is the only cement that will ever hold the world together,” said US president Woodrow Wilson. A century on, could it be that our fast-moving, high-tech and increasingly urbanised existence is causing that cement to crumble?

Much has been made of the US General Social Survey, which reported that between 1985 and 2004, the average US citizen’s number of close friends – the people they can turn to in a crisis – fell from three to two, and individuals with no confidants at all increased from 8 to 23 per cent. In the UK, a rise in the number of people living alone and the weakening of community ties due to people moving house more often have led to warnings of a “crisis” in friendship. Other studies have linked the internet and cellphones with social isolation. However, while new technology may have changed the traditional notion of friendship, there is also evidence that it is having a positive impact.

Facebook was founded in 2004 at Harvard University to enhance the campus life of college students and people still use it for the same reasons. “The underlying incentives have not changed – to find people who will

support you emotionally, gossip with you, flirt with you, just be there for you,” says Danah Boyd, a principal researcher at Microsoft Research. We still have our core group of friends, the ones we hang out with the most, whether online or offline. “But the dynamics have changed because of the technology and because of contemporary youth culture.”

The most conspicuous difference is the number of people with whom we have some kind of enduring contact. Researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that the social network of the average college student increased from 137 in 2006 to 440 in 2009. A typical US teenager now has around 300 Facebook friends, a Pew study found last year, and 79 followers on Twitter – not all of whom would count as social ties as they may not be being followed in return (see diagram, page 42).

This is far more than the 150 that Robin Dunbar calculates to be the maximum number of “meaningful friends” our brains have evolved to deal with (see page 35). Who are all these extra people? Known as weak ties, they include high school or college friends, work colleagues past and present, previous

partners, people met travelling, casual acquaintances, friends of friends and occasionally strangers. Social networking sites allow us to maintain a relationship with these peripheral friends – via sporadic messaging, for example, or by browsing their photographs or status updates – where previously we would have let them fade away.

But the technology does more than that. New research suggests that Facebook can

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actually improve the quality of these distant or fragile relationships. A study of more than 400 Facebook users by Jessica Vitak at the University of Maryland, College Park, reveals that the site is especially valuable for friends who live more than a few hours’ drive away. The further away two friends live, the more they engage on the site. For such friends, says Vitak, Facebook may make the difference between a real relationship and the memory of one.

Engaging with others online – responding to a question or wishing someone happy birthday on Facebook, for instance, endorsing someone’s skills on LinkedIn, or “liking” or commenting on a picture on Instagram – is a form of social grooming, a modern throwback to our prehistory. “These are all ways in which I am signalling that I’m paying attention to you,” says Nicole Ellison at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. “Like primates picking nits off one another, we have expectations of reciprocity – we can expect attention back from them in the future.” Ellison and Vitak have found that social grooming on Facebook is a highly effective way of maintaining weak ties, and that there are many good reasons to do so. The deep, emotional bonds that characterise our most important relationships are still mostly cultivated face to face, even if we nurture them online. But weak ties, ➤



Apps like SnapChat and Instagram give us new ways to bond with our friends

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Female-female friendships tend to be more intimate, and women make friends with similarly physically attractive women. That is a good mating strategy – their friends attract men who are likely to find them attractive too – but it also leads to competition.

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ARE ALL FRIENDSHIPS GOOD FOR YOU?

No. Relationships with “frenemies” can actually damage your health. These are people who bring us down but who we put up with anyway. About half of the people in your social networks are likely to be frenemies – most of them family members. Interacting with unreliable friends is stressful. Your blood pressure is likely to be more elevated when you are with a frenemy than it is with someone you do not like at all.

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DOES FRIENDSHIP CHANGE AS WE AGE?

Yes. Small children only really need one close friend – we don’t develop the ability to juggle large numbers until our early 20s. Teenagers are hugely influenced by their friends, especially in behaviours such as substance use, violence and suicide.

The strongest and most enduring friendships are forged in our late teens and early twenties, possibly via intense, shared emotional experiences. Adults often find their friendships change as they get older. That is because friends reflect cultural preferences including music, books and jokes, and our tastes in these change.

Middle-aged adults tend to have fewer opposite-sex friends than young adults, possibly because they spend time with same sex friends through circumstances ➤

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