

## ***The Past, Present and Future of Human Communication and Technology Research***

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The introduction of social networks has created a paradigm shift in Internet communication. They place a much stronger emphasis on relationships and the building of relationships. These tools enable us to connect with others in ways that were not possible before their invention.

The widespread use of social networking now is making us think about relationships in general. What are the similarities and differences between face-to-face and computer-mediated relationships? How do all of our Internet relationships impact on our face-to-face one? Are we losing a sense of social etiquette as we spend more time on computers?

These questions and many more are the ones that I am exploring in my new work in relationship networking. Virtual worlds, such as Second Life, are forcing us to reexamine the ways we interact with people and the types of relationships that we build.

For over fifteen years, I have been researching human behavior and the Internet. With all of the changes from the text-based Internet to the World Wide Web and now from the Web to social networks and virtual worlds, I have managed to say on the edge of it all. As the Internet changes, so does my research.

Although, software programs for the Internet frequently change, some aspects of human behavior do not. People have always wanted to use the Internet to connect with other people. E-mail is still a killer application on the Internet because it enables people to connect with others. We like to connect, but we don't always behave ourselves.

When people are separated from their words and actions, they can behave badly without any consequences. Misbehavior on the Internet is a problem. Even in spaces like Second Life people do things that are inappropriate. You could write an entire book around the question of what happens when people are separated from their actions.

In oral cultures, people were directly associated with their words. In written culture, the words could be printed and sent across distances. However, most words were associated with an author. Occasionally, people used pseudonyms or wrote anonymous pieces. But, on the Internet many people are unknown. We don't have editors to tell us what is fact or fiction. We don't know if someone is representing themselves as they really are or if they are creating a persona for the net.

Questions of trust and authenticity are important concepts that need to be discussed about the Internet and the people we meet online. This is especially true with

the rise of Social Networks. I still feel strange when someone I don't know wants to be my friend on Facebook. Should I allow everyone to be my friend? Or, should I be selective about who I associate with online? These are questions that we need to think about as Social Networks become a more standard part of business.

Also, how do I relate to my alter ego on Second Life? Should she look like me? Or, should I create an idealized version of myself? A version that is more carefree because it is online. How do we represent ourselves in a virtual world?

These are just some of the questions that I think about when I research the Internet. As a media ecologist, I am concerned with the ways in which these new technologies are changing the ways we understand the changing the ways we understand the world, perceive others, and perceive ourselves.

### ***Author Biography***

Susan B. Barnes is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the Rochester Institute of Technology, is the author of *Online Connections* (2001) and *Computer-Mediated Communication: Human-to-Human Communication across the Internet* (2003).