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# Virtual friendship and the new narcissism

Social networking sites like Facebook and Myspace have gained popularity in a short time. Every day, swarms of people update and build their contacts on these sites, which poses an interesting challenge to traditional notions of human relations, explains author Christine Rosen. But what is even more interesting is the possibility that Facebook and Myspace reflect a radical change in history. Many historical events of today will be understood only by the virtual by tomorrow's historians. Gilles Kein, My Friend Icon in the Virtualmuseum ☺, 2006 Some reserved rights. In Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism, Rosen argues that the proliferation of social networks like MySpace and Facebook means a new economy of human interaction devoid of the substance of real relationships.1 Because Rosen defends a traditional notion of friendship, she is pessimistic about her future. In response to Rosen's request, I will provide a different framework for critically assessing how real-life events relate to the virtual. Behind Rosen's belief in the erosion of friendship lies a normative claim: human beings desire

recognition. She interprets the growth of virtual social networks in light of the fact that: For centuries, the rich and powerful have documented their existence and status through painted portraits. A marker of wealth and a call to immortality, the portraits offer intriguing clues about the daily lives of their subjects - professions, ambitions, attitudes and, above all, social status.2 This same narcissism is in effect in virtual social networks, says Rosen. However, in contemporary life, this narcissism is no longer limited to a few aristocrats. With the proliferation of virtual networks, narcissism has become a popular vice. Websites like MySpace and Facebook make it easy for a creepy licensee. Grossness and vulgarity are commonplace on social media for a reason: it's an easy way to stand out, she says. These sites become not only a haven for those who want to attract attention, but for those who are eager to exploit the desire for user recognition, such as spammers, marketers and politicians. Rosen's normative assertion contains an implicit critique of human nature and the desire for recognition. What is implicit in his analysis is a degeneration of traditional forms of friendship. She believes that new media foster weak relationships and encourage limited forms of communication fashion and popular culture. In essence, the growth of communicative technology has made it easier to express identities in a protected way. Virtual social networks are modes that seem to facilitate our desire for expression and recognition, when in reality they do hide they're supposed to reveal. In the quest to be different, what is expressed is banal. Rosen observes one of the most striking features of MySpace for anyone who spends a few hours lagging behind its millions of pages: it is an extremely dull sea of monotonous unitonity, conventional individuality, distinctive similarity. For her, there is a sense of individuality, but which is generally expressed through the use of revealing or shocking images and photographs, which only shows that virtual social networks respond to the depraved and voyeuristic aspect of human behaviour. Rosen's criticism of virtual networks is not limited to the ubiquitous fraudulent self-representation of online users, but also emphasizes the virtual as a place where people should exercise some discretion when disclosing personal information. In addition to dangers such as the online presence of sexual predators, personal disclosures can easily be accessed by future employers. Rosen says: A 2006 survey by researchers at the University of Dayton found that 40% of employers say they would consider a potential employee's Facebook profile as part of their hiring decision, and several cancellation offers reported after checking Facebook.4 Virtual representation can have an effect on one's body reputation, as virtual social networks are not exclusive to the public arena and social evaluation and judgment. As a result, virtual social networks threaten to undermine the traditional notion of friendship, Rosen says. If friendship is understood as a relationship based on reciprocity and mutual revelations that are hidden from the rest of the world [and] can only flourish within the limits of privacy,5 Rosen is ultimately skeptical of the possibility of deep, lasting friendships forming in the virtual domain. For not only does the virtual domain encourage protean personalities, but the desire to communicate, connect and interact with others is often mediated by the anxiety of achieving a higher social status. In the context of the virtual arena, friendships are often without virtue. Friendships are no longer relationships, but opportunities to publicly expose the number of friends we have. Not only do people lose sight of each other, but the rise of the virtual has made us forget the imperative to improve substantially. However, we should not despair of Rosen's pessimistic portrayal of the evolution of mass communication. Perhaps the virtual should be evaluated from a different angle, not only limited to social relations issues. It more interesting to study the desire for recognition, because it motivated us to invent these virtual domains in the first place. If we really want to consider the ontological meaning of the virtual, we must ask ourselves why we want to be recognized and how this desire desire shape has evolved. What is different today is the transmutation of our desire for recognition, since this desire transcends the different societies that divide human beings. As far as virtual domains are concerned, borders are breaking, perhaps because of the unique fact that disparate human populations have gathered in a new space to meet each other. From that point of view, I think we are about to have a different story. The one where a radical transformation of the human condition will take place in the imaginary spaces of the virtual, since the real stories of human populations are now distributed, recalled and stored in virtual realms. The acute (re)production of history, in terms of how we analyze, collect, collect and interpret historical data, shows how the present is contextualized in the virtual: we enact, imagine, interpret and remember past stories in virtual spaces and use recorded data as a measure and standard to judge everything that presents itself. The virtual allows comparative analyses of the different stories, by which the failed encounters of different cultures and peoples, which have resulted in conflicts, disputes, murders and misunderstandings can be delineated and reconstructed. While these analyses cannot change past events, they help to avoid the repetition of past mistakes and to better understand each other. But not only is the past controlled in the virtual space, but the present itself is monitored and studied. Data collection is stored in virtual domains, then recalled and distributed as units coded with information about what happened. If our understanding of the present is now mediated by the virtual, the future will also be understood in virtual terms. Predicting future events now depends on a vast virtual library that can catalogue a variety of possible events. Regardless of any prediction, we will not arrive at an absolute resolution to any human problem as long as there is a difference between the real and the virtual. This same disjunction is what ultimately makes the proliferation of social networks problematic. Thus, it is inevitable that Facebook and Myspace will be criticized for obscuring the essential aspects of what constitutes true friendship. Rosen's pessimistic account is therefore not surprising. His argument depends on a dualistic representation: the virtual is the site where our desires can be expressed unconditionally, while the real remains this field of resistance where traditional notions must be defended. However, the social, cultural and political energies of many populations now in the virtual domain, which circumscribes tradition, defying, transforming and ultimately questioning its existence. At first glance, there seems to be a significant difference between the real world and the virtual world, since reality remains limited by traditional norms, while the virtual appears appears a decadent space where normative norms are moving away. But this may not be the case at all, because even if these virtual domains are relatively free, they are still subject to intervention and manipulation. The spectre of censorship remains, a reactionary force that opposes the opening of the virtual. This is because the virtual depends on the material existence of human beings, a material existence not only subject to the laws of biology and physics, but also to the judicial and political wills of various governments and the economic interests of companies. Thus, the spirit of excessive liberation, which exists in the virtual, emerges from the repressed field of natural and social limits. However, if we look at the concept of the virtual in a revolutionary way, it is quite easy to present it as the opposite of reality, as if the communicative situation were dichotomous. There is a good reason for that. A dualistic representation, of the virtual as a site of excessive freedom and reality as a horizon of decorum and tradition, is an easy-to-understand simplification. However, the distinction between the virtual and the real is specious. If the virtual is a communicative condition of proliferation, of different and irreconcilable expressions of human identities, the general economy of mass communication must be latent in the real world itself. If these differences stem from an immanent desire for recognition, then what is symptomatic of the virtual realm must already be intrinsic to the real and offline condition of human beings. Rosen's defense of traditional notions of friendship in light of the proliferation of virtual social networks misses the forest for trees. His argument targets the communication tools that people use for their virtual interaction. What he missed was that the current deterioration of friendship is not exclusively determined by the virtual, because such a deterioration must emanate from the real world itself. Rosen is right to identify how virtual networks reveal different forms of human interaction that can create new relational dynamics. But to blame MySpace or Facebook for the exploitation, voyeurism and inability of people to understand each other is to forget that these networks could well be amplifications of what has been going on for a very long time. References 1. Christine Rosen. Virtual Friendship and New Narcissism New Atlantis. 17 (2007): 26. 2. Rosen, 15. 3. Rosen 24. 4. Rosen 25. 5. Rosen 26. This article is published under a Creative Commons contract. Comments Comments

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