Close Relations at a Distance

Lorne Tepperman*
University of Toronto, Canada

Cyberspace is changing family life and other interpersonal relations. We link this theme to a general discussion of the relations between technological change, social change, and value change.

The Internet has already transformed interpersonal relations profoundly. Through the Internet, people create and maintain close social relationships. As a result, cyberspace promises to become an ever-greater basis for information sharing, social support, practical assistance, and intimacy. Thus, family relations - though radically decentralized - will continue to serve as a fundamental source of social and emotional meaning, despite radical social changes in other domains of life.

However, our conceptions of family life, and our expectations of family members - of spouses, parents, children, and siblings in particular - are bound to change as a result. Additionally, our cultural conceptions of "closeness" and the connections between public and private space will change too. How these changes play out - how quickly, and to what degree - will vary from one culture to another. However, no society will be untouched. It is unclear, finally, what will be the moral implications of these changes for relations between spouses, parents and children, siblings, and other kin. This is an area that deserves closer attention.

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Correspondence: Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, Canada
Email: lorne.tepperman@utoronto.ca

Introduction

Try to imagine a future world in which you conduct a love affair mainly by e-mail. In this future, you also "watch over" your aging parents by means of weekly telephone calls; send audio or video-tapes through the mail to stay in touch with young children who live with your former spouse; or, install a camera on your home computer so that you can send pictures of your daily life through the Internet order to stay in contact with your spouse. To many people in industrial societies this is already routine practice. In the future, many more of us will conduct our close relations in these ways.

This paper considers some possible problems, scenarios and even modest predictions about the future of close relations. It examines emerging issues in technology and society, and the underlying cultural dynamics. For this purpose I employ the "layered methodology" of futures researcher Sohail Inayatullah (2001, 2000), which unpacks the social, technological and economic bases of future change and then, below that, the beliefs and worldviews underlying these social forces. However, I stop short of predicting the future. There are too many variables and they are each too complex. As well, this paper is written, admittedly, from the viewpoint of a member of a Western industrial society. What is said here may not apply with the same force to non-Western societies, or societies that are not yet fully industrial. Perhaps what I will have to say about intimate relations will not apply to your own culture; or, perhaps different cultures deal with distance in different ways.

Consider the narrowest possible question: How will an increased reliance on communication technology affect family life in North American society? Specifically, how will family life change with increased distance between members and with increased reliance on communication technology (for example, e-mail, webcast, and other technologies)? Additionally, how will such changes affect our thinking about marriage, parenting, and filial responsibility - home, intimacy, and honest communication? The questions addressed by this paper are, how can people conduct close relations at a distance? Does the closeness of these relations diminish with distance, and if not, how is emotional closeness maintained? Finally, what part can new technologies play in maintaining close relations at a distance?

The answers to these various questions may depend on type of close relation (e.g., romantic versus parent-child); the stage of relationship (e.g., early versus mature); the history of the relationship (e.g., stable versus

bumpy); and the type of technology used for information flow. For some kinds of relations, a technological solution to this "problem" is possible using some kinds of technologies. For others, it may not be.

Now, consider these questions in their broadest perspective. In 1973, sociologist Mark Granovetter asked what are the strengths of weak ties; today I am asking, instead, what maintains the strength of weakened ties? This is the same question Durkheim asked in his classic work, *The Division of Labour in Society*. Social order, Durkheim noted, is easy to achieve when everyone is identical and gathered together in small, undifferentiated communities. The result is what he called "mechanical solidarity." But how is social order to be achieved when people are different and distant? How is it possible to base a stable, moral social order on relationships that are fluid, voluntary and individualized? Durkheim believed that it would depend on an awareness of interdependence. Some believe that it may depend on new technologies of communication.

To make this question easier, think of social structure as a collection of social networks that are more or less connected to one another. Each network comprises nodes - individuals, households, groups, or organizations - and the links between them. Through these links flow information, capital, and social support. Sociologists study whether the links between nodes are becoming more or less numerous, tighter or looser, more open or closed. When information flows, we need to know whether the information is flowing through face-to-face contacts, whether it is mediated by written words (as in letters or e-mail), by technologies that carry sounds (such as telephones and audiotapes), images (such as photographs), or by both sounds and images (such as videotapes and webcasts). We need to consider how the type of medium affects the transmission of information and, over a long time, how it affects the quality of the linkage, or, as we shall call it, the *relation*.

Close Relations

Additional factors enter in when we study *close relations* in particular. These are relations in which the participants consider themselves to be intimate with one another. These are informal relations that usually involve family members and may also involve neighbours, co-workers and extended kin. Typically, assumptions of intimacy are based on three kinds of connection. One, psychological, has to do with a sense of *identification* the linked people feel with each other. A second, demographic, has to do with their *similarity*. A third, sociological, has to do with their *connectedness*. People in close relations not only identify with each other and perceive -

often correctly - that they are similar to each other. They also occupy the same social world. That is, they are tightly and repeatedly connected to each other, exchange a variety of resources (including information, capital and social support), and connect to the same other people. In turn, the people to whom they are each connected are, often, themselves connected with one another, are similar, and are self-identifying. For all of these reasons, closely related people have a deep understanding of each other's secret hopes and fears.

Yet, to define "close relations" in this way is to speak in ideal types. Some closely related people who are thought to be, said to be, or intended to be intimate lack some of these features. For some closely related people, these features are present in only a weak form. However, in Western culture, we commonly think that close relations ought to be this way. Particularly, we think that spousal (marital or romantic) partnerships *ought* to be "close" in the sense described here. To a lesser degree, we think that other kinship relations - for example, relations between parents and children, or between siblings - ought to be this way. And, to a still lesser degree, we think that kinship-like relations - for example, close, long-term friendships - ought to be this way too.

Modern industrial cultures teach us to form, and to desire, "close relations" of love, kinship, and friendship, which will supply needed information, capital, and social support. And, rightly or wrongly, we expect to share the social worlds of the people with whom we have close relations. That is, we expect our intimate relations to be marked by similarity, togetherness, integration, familiarity and intimacy. One of the reasons we have a hard time imagining people maintaining close relations at a distance is because, typically, people in close relations with each other are geographically proximate. This allows them to maintain the type of intimacy we have described here. The quality of close relations may be affected by the way that information and other resources flows through linked networks. It may matter if information flows during face-to-face contact, or across the miles via written words, sounds, images, or sounds and images together. In particular, it may matter to the survival of close relations.

Relations and Communities

In traditional urban communities, most close relations are geographically proximate. According to Tonnies (1925), the first transformation of community life comes in the change from *gemeinschaft* societies typical of the pre-industrial age, to *gesellschaft* societies. Under conditions of

gemeinschaft, almost all relations in a community are close relations. Through centuries of immobility and in-marriage, everyone comes to know everyone else and share a common social world. Everyone can identify with, be similar to, and connect with, everyone else. With the movement to cities came a new social form, *gesellschaft*. Though some early sociologists portrayed the new city life as isolating and anomic, later sociologists noted that people in a given neighborhood could share a common social world through the same processes that characterized *gemeinschaft* societies - self-segregation, immobility and in-marriage. Neighbors in cities can still identify with, be similar to, and connect with, everyone else.

The observations made by Tonnies are similar to distinctions made between mechanical and organic solidarity (Durkheim), status and contract (Maine), and particularistic and universalistic (Parsons). Gemeinschaft, mechanical, status, particularistic - whatever they are called - these communities are all based on long-term personal face-to-face relationships.

Communities and Communications

Today, it is necessary to recognize a new kind of community that is emerging due to new kinds of communications and, more importantly, an increase in global mobility and reduction in in-marriage. We must now consider virtual communities, especially, close relations that exist in cyberspace. These close relations are characterized by infrequent face-to-face contact and regular contact through technology.

Our colleague, Barry Wellman at the University of Toronto, has led in research into the formation of these new communities (see, for example, Wellman, 1999; 2001; Wellman and Hampton, 1999). A community he and student Keith Hampton (Hampton, 2001) studied, "Netville" (a pseudonym), was located in suburban Toronto. It was one of the world's first residential developments to be equipped with a broadband local network. The neighbourhood was built from the ground up with a 10Mbs high-speed computer network supplied and operated free of charge by a consortium of private and public companies. Netville's local network gave participants more than 300 times the speed of ordinary dial-up modems and more than 10 times the speed of contemporary ADSL or cable modems. For two years, a consortium provided Netville with services that included high-speed Internet access, a videophone, an online jukebox, online health services, local discussion forums, and entertainment and

educational applications.

The long-term study of this "wired" community found that, contrary to what we might expect, e-mail communications *increased* the amount of neighbouring. Those with access to the high-speed local network recognized, talked, and visited with many more of their neighbours. Wired residents recognized three times as many neighbours and talked with twice as many, in comparison to non-wired residents. On average, wired residents recognize 25 and talk with six neighbours, as compared with non-wired residents who recognize eight and talk with three.

Access to the local computer network introduced new methods of communication and increases communication with friends, relatives, and neighbours. Wired residents averaged five times as many local phone calls as non-wired residents and send an average of four e-mails to other local residents each month.

In addition to more social activities with neighbours, wired residents also had more contact and exchange more help with friends and relatives living outside their neighbourhood. Greater access to neighbours through the local network meant that wired residents were much more likely to know neighbours living elsewhere in the suburb, not just those living right near them. By contrast, non-wired residents only neighbored with those households closest to their own. A neighborhood e-mail list increased the amount of in-person socializing, as residents organized parties, barbecues, and other local events online. The same e-mail list aided collective action and political involvement. Residents organized to protest housing concerns, collectively purchase goods, share information about burglaries, discuss a local teachers strike, and deal with their Internet service provider.

Because of Canada's vast geography, its researchers have always been at the forefront of theorizing about long distance communication technology and its effect on social organization. As a nation of vast distances and sparse population, Canada has always relied on transportation and communication technology to make social organization possible. The two key theorists in this area have been Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan.

First, Innis (1958) argued that the transformation from oral to written cultures marked a transition from proximate, face-to-face governance to distant, imperial governance. Writing was the means by which laws were promulgated and enforced at a distance. Thus, writing supported global spread, empire-building, and cultural rationalization. A disciple of Innis, Marshall McLuhan (1962) argued that the transformation from written cultures to technologically mediated visual cultures (TV, movies, photographs) marked a transition from cool, reasoned, and inferential to

"hot", compelling, and impressionistic information flow. Like writing, this information flow could cross great distances, so it was not out of line with empire building. What was different was the emotional, non-rational content.

"Modern" research on this topic began with the book *Network Nation* by Starr Roxanne Hiltz and Murray Turoff in 1978s. Among other things, these authors predicted that by 1994 computerized conferencing would be a prominent form of communications in most organizations and as widely used in society as the telephone today. They also predicted that home recreational use of computer mediated communication would make significant inroads into TV viewing patterns; psychologically and sociologically impact various group communication objectives and processes; offer disadvantaged groups in the society opportunities to acquire the skills and social ties they need to become full members of the society; help individuals to form groups having common concerns, interests or purposes; facilitate working at home; open the doors to new and unique types of services; and facilitate a richness and variability of human groupings and relationships.

Their writing provoked a great deal of comment and discussion by users of their pioneering EIES (Electronic Information Exchange System) in New Jersey. Such discussion continued today in the pages of WIRED magazine, among other places. Many have already commented on the addictive effects of computer-mediated communication on marriage and parenting ("Daddy spends all night on the computer talking to strangers and doesn't play with us any more.") Participants in EIES, Peter and Trudi Johnson-Lenz went on to become experts on how electronic communications technologies can change interpersonal relations, especially in large organizations. The Lenz's have hundreds of useful publications on this and are major consultants in the area. By the 1990s, when a second edition of *Network Nation* was published, many of Hiltz and Turoff's predictions about e-mail use and computer-mediated communication had already come to pass.

None of these theorists provided strong predictions about close or intimate relations.

Intimacy and Technology
It is hard to say whether intimacy is decreasing as a result of the various changes described, and changes that do occur depend on the kind of close relationship. Among lovers, it appears that serial intimacy has in-

creased in the West, with easier divorce and easier cohabitation as an alternative to marriage. Among grown children, filial obligations towards aged parents appear to have weakened, although data continue to show children - especially, daughters - provide their parents with care and support. Among younger parents and their young children, it is unclear whether intimacy has weakened. Likewise, we do not know how the closeness of sibling relationships has changed in the last century. The changes may be greater for brothers than sisters, for half-siblings than for full-siblings, and so on. The research on this question has yet to be done.

What is known is relatively slight, especially in relation to the role of technological mediation of these trends. Haythornthwaite (2000, 2001) has shown, for example, that among strongly tied (i.e., closely related) people, easy, cheap technologies such as e-mail do not replace traditional, harder and more expensive communication media, for example, face-to-face meetings or telephone calls. Strongly tied communicators use a variety of technologies. They use new as well as old technologies. A large amount of communication results; and communicators discover that variety and amount of communication strengthens the relationship. By contrast, weakly tied communicators rely on one medium and are less motivated to explore new technologies.

Perhaps the single greatest problem facing a technological solution at present is what observers have called the "digital divide." Currently, access to and familiarity with much new communication technology that would facilitate close relations at a distance is distributed unequally by age, gender, education, income, neighborhood (rural urban, rich poor), region, and country. These variables would need to be considered in evaluating the interplay between close relations and the technology that impacts them.

Evidence from Australia (Stevenson, personal communication) indicates that women in remote areas have taken to the Internet much more readily than men - mostly farmers and agricultural mechanics who are reluctant to go back to a classroom to learn computer literacy. Rural women often have to do the accounts and they seem more enthusiastic to learn, whether computers, or anything else. Likewise, women seem much more inclined than men to use the Internet to build close relations. Men using the Internet see it as a functional tool, rather than a personal help. Thus it may be that the computer, though initially dividing people, also provides traditionally disadvantaged people with new opportunities to improve their position.

One strategy for studying the future of close relations and technology is by examining how technology has already impacted close relations. As we know from the history of the telephone, for example, new technologies have a way of rapidly crossing traditional social barriers and achieving wide adoption (Fisher, 1992). There may be no better way to predict the future effect of new technology on close relations at a distance than by reviewing the history of two recent communication technologies: the telephone and e-mail.

Case Studies

The Telephone

Social histories of the telephone (Pool, 1977; Fischer, 1992) show that, from the beginning, telephone was used primarily for long-distance calling. It was advertised as means to link family, friends and used largely by women for "kin-keeping". Like the automobile, the telephone was adopted rapidly throughout society. Despite some resistance, it quickly became a part of popular culture.

Compared with other means of conducting close relations at a distance, the telephone had many advantages. It was cheaper than distant travel. It enabled the speaker to avoid being seen by listener, yet it created "symbolic proximity" for the two. It allowed escape from continued contact if one or both parties wished it. Beyond that, it allowed people to express their views in their own voices, was simple to use, and was as private as face-to-face communication. As a result, the telephone was adopted by everyone and used to maintain close relations, even at a distance. People quickly became dependent on the new communication instrument.

Despite its wide use, over the twentieth century the telephone's effects on social life have been modest. The telephone did not change close relations. Though telephone communication may have affected the quality of close relations or satisfaction with the close relationship, there is no systematic evidence that it did so. At this point it appears that the telephone did *not* transform close relations so much as it facilitated them by arranging face-to-face meetings. Even today, the telephone acts to maintain current relational patterns, while other factors affect close relations more.

E-mail

In recent decades, we have all been exposed to a new means of communication over great distances - namely, e-mail. The advantages of e-mail are, in some cases, similar to those of the telephone. Like the telephone, e-mail is cheap - even cheaper than telephone communication and long-distance travel. It allows people to avoid being seen by the message recipient, yet it creates "symbolic proximity". Also like the telephone, e-mail allows escape from continued contact if that is desired.

Some of the advantages of e-mail are different from those of telephone. The sender can craft a message, as he/she can draft a letter but not a telephone conversation. Many phone conversations are chaotic, especially if they occur when not expected and we are in the middle of doing something else. E-mail, to the contrary, can be highly organized and to the point, systematic and logical. E-mail gives one time to think and reflect. The sender can also distribute many copies of a message simultaneously, and await replies while carrying on with other tasks. E-mail is not as interruptive as telephone, nor is it as dependent on both people being available at the same time.

However, e-mail is not without its disadvantages. Unlike the telephone, e-mail is a strictly print medium. The sender cannot express views in his/her own voice. It is a sensorily deprived, or "cool" medium, permitting no touch, smell, sight, let alone sound. Relying on computer technology, e-mail is not as simple to use as the telephone, contributing to the "digital divide" we discussed earlier.

Beyond that, e-mail carries a variety of dangers that are absent or controlled in other kinds of communication. For example, there is the danger of hasty, informal expression, called "flaming". This is encouraged by the absence of visual feedback from the message receiver. Faceless anonymity and the absence of the receiver lead to dangers of indiscretion, misunderstanding and misquoting. The shield of visual and vocal anonymity may lead to non-conforming behaviour such as blunt disclosure, textual aggression, and self-misrepresentation, or can cause communicators difficulty in identifying or reaching shared opinions (see, for example, Kiester and Sproull, 1992). Other studies have found that the same shield of anonymity fosters greater self-disclosure and cancels out any negative outcomes.

The lack of temporal and spatial boundaries liberates relationships and makes new relationships possible. This also makes relationships with online communicators possible for people formerly prevented from socializing by a physical disability or agoraphobia, for example. However,

the community feeling derived from cyber relations is, in many instances, illusory. At this time, we have no idea what net effect e-mail is having on close relations. Online chat such as ICQ has become very popular and used for a variety of types of communications. Because it is a real time chat form of communication, it is presumably more active (or hot) than email.

Though many prefer the more anonymous e-mail, others await a technology combining sound and sight. Even though this technology has not become commonplace, its weaknesses are already apparent and scientists are already developing new technology that will provide more "natural" communication experiences in the form of three-dimensional tele-immersion. As we have noted repeatedly, basic research has yet to be done on the relationship between technology and close relations at a distance.

Technologies to Come

What is needed is research on the question of whether close relations conducted at a distance are weaker, less satisfying, and less likely to survive over the course of time, because of the distance. This would consider whether new communications technologies, if used for maintaining close relations, harm those relations or fail to keep them strong. In relation to issues of satisfaction and relationship quality, we predict that:

1. Web-cast and tele-immersion (computer based sound and voice) relations at a distance will be more satisfying, stronger, and longer-lasting than telephone based relationships (voice only) or e-mail relations (print only);
2. Modes of contact that are more sensorily rich will be more satisfying and more often repeated than less sensorily rich modes of contact; thus, in descending order, subjects will indicate the greatest satisfaction with face-to-face visits, tele-immersion, web-casting, telephone, e-mail and letters;
3. E-mail will prove to be a common and moderately satisfying means of conducting distance relationships;
4. Relationships based exclusively, or nearly exclusively, on e-mail will prove to be less satisfying, weaker, and shorter lasting than any other form of relationship with equally common contact;
5. In relation to technology usage, we also predict;
6. No change in main patterns of communication over time: e.g., older communicators will continue to prefer low technology communication (e.g., visits and/or telephone calls, versus webcasting and e-mail);

7. All communicators - and especially the youngest - will continue to use mixed media versus relying solely on a single medium;

8. All communicators will continue, where possible, to rely on, and prefer face - to - face contacts, though face-to-face contacts will become less frequent as other options are made available.

New Norms

Maintaining close relations in the future will mean a greater acceptance of virtuality and more use of communications technology. Equally important, it will mean working out a number of new normative, moral, and ethical issues. One of these has to do with the issue of privacy and self-disclosure.

Privacy and self- disclosure: Internet users see e-mail as a mode of communication that protects one's privacy and time. After all, people access e-mail at their leisure (though anecdotal evidence shows that people increasingly feel pressured to check and answer e-mail an increasing number of times each day) and communicate with others while maintaining a certain level of anonymity (Baron, 2001). Yet, paradoxically, the anonymity e-mail affords promotes greater self-disclosure. It seems that the visual and vocal anonymity shield that e-mail provides, which I mentioned earlier, tends to increase the both the amount and the type of personal information a person is willing to share. Feeling more protected, people using e-mail are more likely to tell all.

Various studies have shown that the visual anonymity of telephone communication prompts people to be more candid in disclosing personal information. Other studies have found that the greater the privacy shield (e-mail is even more private than the telephone), the greater the amount of information a person is willing to divulge. The paradox is that the less a technology reveals of its user, the more the user is willing to reveal of themselves. These findings are especially interesting because of their implications for family communication.

The most striking example of the self-disclosure paradox can be observed in technology-mediated parent-child relationships. Anecdotal evidence suggests that middle-aged parents' communication with distant adolescent or college-aged children improves when e-mail is the primary means of contact. Parents have reported that formerly reticent children have become frequent communicators when, once away from home, relationships are maintained via e-mail. Some reasons for this have been suggested, including the nature of the e-mail message. For example, like the traditional letter, e-mail is a monologue that imparts information as the sender chooses. By contrast, the telephone requires dialogue where both parties can request information, disagree with what is being said, and make demands on the other.

Online Dating Relationships

With growing romantic Internet communication, anonymity can lead either to more relaxed self-disclosure or to misrepresentation. Increasing numbers of anecdotal stories corroborate the incidence of computer-mediated relationships resulting in long-term, face-to-face relationships. While this seems inevitable, since computer and Internet use is increasing rapidly ("nearly 4 trillion e-mail messages were sent in 1998, compared with 107 billion pieces of first class mail conveyed through the US post office" [Baron, 227]), it doesn't necessarily mean that a significant number of computer mediated dating relationships eventually become face-to-face relationships.

In fact, unlike family who communicate via the Internet, partners may meet online rather than face-to-face, and continue communicating online. In circumstances where communications do not culminate in phone, or face-to-face conversations, participants are free to misrepresent their personality, looks, gender, or occupation.

No checks are present in current e-mail technology, chat rooms, MOOs or MUDs - although technologies such as webcasting will certainly change online dating drastically - to monitor whether the information people give about themselves is accurate. In fact, Brym and Lenton (2001) report that 25% of online daters have misrepresent themselves online and that men and women are equally likely to misrepresent themselves. This means that individuals have an extraordinary amount of control over how they are perceived, but a greatly reduced ability to verify that information they receive is true; therefore, they are much less able to evaluate their correspondent, at least by any traditional means. People who access online dating services are generally aware of these constraints and manage their expectations accordingly.

Even if both partners present themselves honestly, meeting online presents unique self-disclosure challenges that are not factors in face-to-face dating relationships. Personal appearance cannot be a means of evaluation (or a very limited means), yet self-presentation through grammatical correctness or writing style, may be important as an evaluation tool. Nevertheless, online dating is becoming mainstream. Logically, as more people connect to the Internet, more people will access online dating services. To date, about 1.1 million Canadians adults of a prospective 9. to 10 million have accessed an online dating site.

Ethical Issues

We have already predicted that increased global access through travel and communication technologies will also mean increased distance between loved ones. This prediction suggests many ethical questions. First, an increase in commuter marriages or long distance relationships (LDRs) - both of which currently have fewer children than the average family - would suggest a further decline in overall fertility. As a result, adult concerns may become even less child-centric and even more career focused. This may affect the general attitude toward children, and could possibly affect the way people who choose to have children view their parental role, especially in relation to their career.

Another important issue is the increased possibility for infidelity and for leading double lives with the advent of technologies, such as e-mail, that make false disclosure so simple. Falsifying information about oneself could increase and spill over into phone, or even face-to-face interaction, as the convention for false self-representation in online chat rooms or dating situations becomes more established. Lying could become commonplace, when lying becomes structurally and technologically so easy.

The lack of sensory information that can be relayed through e-mail is what allows this in part; when speaking on the phone sounds or activity in your environment can be detected by your correspondent whereas no indication whatsoever is available to e-mail correspondents, leaving those who e-mail completely free to "create" their environment as well as their persona. Some things are better revealed in a written communication than by the telephone or face-to-face. One's grammar, spelling, vocabulary, metaphors and so forth can reveal a lot. Some of these things are more or less hidden in verbal communication.

Over the Internet, the lack of sensory information magnifies the possibility of highly edited, or crafted self-presentation - especially when communicating with a person you've never met face-to-face. To a lesser degree, this is true for close relations. As reported earlier, parents and young adults both report better quality communication at a distance, particularly through e-mail; this is in part attributed to the control each party (but especially the young adult) can exert over the impression received by the parent by controlling the information relayed and the tone in which it is relayed.

New technologies not only make deception easy. They also make it easy to maintain a high level of contact with family and friends, despite

distance. This may slow the acculturation process of immigrants to a new host country by reducing their willingness or need to assimilate. If so, the result may be increased alienation toward the host country, though decreased alienation from family and friends.

Future Trends and Projections

At the risk of wrong guesses, let's risk a few predictions about the future that will help us put the "close relations" problem into perspective.

First, we expect no likely decline in the average distance and mobility of closely related people, except under the (unforeseeable) conditions of global war or global economic downturn.

Second, we expect a continued increase in communication technology under all foreseeable conditions, but one - namely, the development of distance-travel technologies (such as teleportation — not currently a real possibility). However, it is unclear what will be the effects of this increase. Mass culture plays an enormous role in how people understand themselves and their close relations. Without addressing this issue, the individual technologies take on a more instrumental appearance than may actually be the case. This mass cultural influence must be acknowledged.

Third, close relations will continue to remain important, especially for people who are poor (and are therefore particularly need the security families provide), except under the following conditions: (a) a major increase in state support, or welfare, for the poor, which makes the continuous presence of family members less necessary, though still valuable for emotional reasons; and (b) a major increase in the cultural assimilation of immigrant groups in which gemeinschaft and other traditional communal bonds are strong.

Fourth, technology is likely to change the nature of, and satisfaction with, interactions between closely related people, just as Innis and McLuhan hinted. Likely, we will all adjust to these changes almost without noticing.

However, it seems reasonable to predict the following. First, close relations that survive are most likely to originate in face-to-face contact. This prediction is supported by research. Recent studies of distance learning (via the Internet), which have focused on students' communication with other students and faculty, have found that first contacts that are face-to-face are critical in establishing a close relationship. Students in one study were first introduced face-to-face at an intensive on-campus meeting and orientation period. It was based on this initial face-to-face

contact that students forged lasting bonds with other distance learners and were able to transfer the bonds formed in physical reality into a virtual or symbolic proximity (Haythornthwaite, et al., 2000). Other studies (Bell, personal communication), however, have found that virtual contact among long distance learners can lead to mutual interest and concern that blossoms when face-to-face contact is finally possible, as for example in an outing such as a picnic.

Second, face-to-face relations are not continuously needed to maintain close relations. "Hot" information-rich technology provides some of the same emotional jolt. Related to this, visual and sound technology are more engaging than print. For this reason, it is unlikely that e-mail will drive out face-to-face contact, telephone calls, webcasts, or the emerging tele-immersion technology. What we don't currently know is how stable virtual communities are and how stable close relations are in virtual communities. Close relations may become merely "virtual" when conducted mainly at a distance. We predict that it will be increasingly difficult, in the future, to establish or maintain close relations at a distance, since the face-to-face component will be increasingly difficult. With increasing distance, it will be increasingly difficult to share a social world - hard to maintain connectedness, similarity and identification.

There are, of course, countervailing forces. Consider, for example, the trend towards greater homogenization of cultural space. We know that as fewer large corporations control more mass culture, local and regional differences become effaced in cultural products. This is a general trend, which has been intensified with each new communication shift from newspapers to radio to TV. So, some of the weakening effects of distance on similarity and identification are neutralized (somewhat) by a flattened out cultural world. A more radical version of this view might suggest that people understand their identities in terms of the choices they make among a limited number of corporate offerings: you are a 'Friends' viewer or a 'Cops' viewer; you listen to 'new country music' or 'alternative' music; you shop at Wal-Mart or you shop at the Gap. Consumption becomes synonymous with identity. Because these choices are available across the nation's lack of proximity to someone is no longer a barrier to a shared sense of similarity or identification.

On the other hand, people's intimate relations are not so easily commodified and universalized. A shared love of *Coca Cola* is not the foundation for a close relationship; it does increase people's similarity, though not their connectedness or identification with each other.

The Current Situation

Already, the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 2.4 million marriages currently involve dual location living and/or working arrangements. Many more long-distance relationships (LDRs) exist if students and military spouses are considered. LDRs have been a part of our culture as a *stage of life* throughout history but, increasingly, modern LDRs are comprised of couples that are officially married, rent or own two homes, and are committed to the long-distance arrangement indefinitely. One prime example is the "commuter marriage" described by Gerstel and Gross (1978) several decades ago.

Another example is the situation of immigrants separated by great distances from their parents, children and even spouses. This is scarcely a new situation. Immigration has often meant that couples were separated sometimes for long times and forced to communicate by letters. Consider the Chinese immigrants to Canada who built the national railroad and were barred from bringing in their spouses. Many of those marriages lasted despite having no close geographical contact for decades or more, though many other marriages did not last. Letters between intimates are the stuff of great literature too. However, today not only is immigration more common, but so too is divorce.

Thus, as Canadians enter the 21st century, more than ever do so as members of families who are likely to live at a distance from their spouses or intimate partners, children, parents, or siblings. More than ever their lives are fluid and their "close relations" are conducted at a distance. One of the primary reasons people are more mobile is because of the changing nature of work in the global market. These distance relationships are maintained in the full knowledge that they are voluntary and could be terminated without legal penalty.

Currently, the parent-child relationship is the relationship most pervasively maintained at a distance when the child reaches adulthood. Millward (1995) reports that parent-child contact is more frequent than sibling-to-sibling contact, regardless of geographic location. Likewise, adult contacts with close relations (such as parents, married children, and siblings) are more frequent than contacts with more distant relatives (Leigh, 1982).

What is needed now to maintain current "close relations" includes equal access to technology and the elimination of a digital divide. Also needed is more sensoraly rich technology - technology that allows the transmission of voice, image, smell, and touch across distances. (Although, we might not want all of our senses to experience everyone we communi-

cate with.) Finally, we will need to develop more protection against misuse of information: for example, new rules about privacy, confidentiality. In our technologically mediated communications, we will need a more refined etiquette of communication, new norms about deception and about politeness, for example.

Alternately, we will need to rethink "close relations." For example, in future, people may choose to accept close relations without shared social worlds. They may learn to build lives around many close relations which are less close than those associated with the traditional family, including many (serial) close relations over time.

Whether people attempt to mold their technology to traditional notions of close relations, or accept new notions of close relations, depends on a variety of things including the importance of career and education, versus family; family relations versus friendships; and skills people develop which allow them to adjust to multiple worlds and relations. In either event, we will need a new etiquette for the new media, to control spamming, flaring, and breaches of trust and confidentiality. Additionally, we will need some new, realistic expectations about close relations. These will include a review of legal issues of duty and obligation; moral issues of trust and fidelity; psychological issues of jealousy; and social assumptions of family stability.

This leaves us with some questions for the future. Will we use new technology to help people live old-style close relations? For example, will we use web casting, videophone, faster travel, and laborsaving home technology to allow us to have new style educational and work lives while maintaining old-style close relations? Or, will we use new technology to help people explore new-style close relations? For example, use technology to meet new people, speak new languages, or develop close relations more quickly than in the past?

Concluding Remarks

Like the telegraph and telephone, computers and technology in general are socially constructed. With the advent of each technology, the public has developed utopian visions for the future of that technology, while in reality the technology was shaped by the private sector and became an expression of human values, or the means of exerting social control (Nye, 1997). In fact, no communication technology has ever achieved its maximum social good. Each has responded to the goals and interests

of the powerful. Likewise, technology responds to the marketplace and social demands for usefulness and to meet specific social ends (Katz, 1997

Based on the development of past technologies, we can expect the effects of new communication technologies to evolve in similar ways. We can expect that the effects of a new technology will be modest, they will differ from one technology to another, and finally, the effects of any one technology may be contradictory.

Having said that, we do not think there is any evidence to suggest that online or other technological media will replace frequent face-to-face contact as the basis for the development and maintenance of close relations. People will continue to spread farther apart and continue to crave the pleasures of close contact. This is continuing to raise the importance of sensorily rich communication media, and no doubt, we will have videophones, tele-immersion, and webcasting facilities in wide use within our lifetimes. The next frontier is to provide technology that communicates smell, taste and bodily energy or charisma.

At the same time, we will continue to be changed by our interactions with technology and our interactions with one another through technology. We will need to develop and teach new etiquettes for communicating politely online, and develop strategies for preventing, detecting and punishing duplicity online.

We will all become more accustomed to meeting new friends online and maintaining old friendships online. The differences between men and women, in their facility with technology, and their interpersonal expressiveness, will likely disappear since they have already narrowed dramatically in the last few decades. Finally, we can anticipate that children will continue to "run away from home" online, and parents will have increasing difficulty controlling them and the ideas that influence them. Peer culture will become increasingly important in children's lives. Parents will respond by bearing even fewer children than past generations, as they have been doing for the last century. In the end, our close relations will become fewer in number, more varied and perhaps less stable.

In attempting to answer the question about close relations at a distance, we are still answering the question Durkheim asked in *Division of Labor in Society*: how is it possible to base a stable, moral social order on relationships that are fluid, voluntary and different. Competing answers to this important question are: (a) maybe it is not possible; (b) maybe new technology will help, and (c) maybe we must change our expectations.

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