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## Has Intimacy Suffered in the Information Age?

By Amanda Kuehn



Jon Wake, 11, waits 'not so patiently' for his grandmother in Lafayette while brother, Jeff, and father, Dan, check their iPhones. Photo Jennifer Wake

communication we feel we have much more intimate relationships with people than we really do." The instant responses received through texting, tweeting and chatting may cause us to feel close, but often social media is actually more distancing. "The way we express intimacy is changing," said Rigsby.

In her 13 years of teaching, Rigsby has seen a notable shift in her interactions with students. "In my first five years [my students] came to office hours," she remarked. "Now almost no one comes. They text me and e-mail me. For incidental communication they always try electronically first."

"I usually text as a first point of contact before Skype or a phone call or meeting in person," said Chloe Anderson, a master's student at the Academy of the Arts who is in her mid-20s. "I love phone calls, but they do take more time."

Rigsby explained that people who grew up around cell phones prefer to text as a first and primary form of communication. "Calling someone on the phone to ask for information seems like a huge social extension," said Rigsby, who grew up with a rotary phone and doesn't think twice about dialing a new number.

Some people, like Saint Mary's alumnus and hospice nurse Ilona Robinson, are less prone to following new trends in communication. "I use the phone first and email second," said Robinson. "I'm one of those people who still sends letters and cards. I think they're more personal." Robinson noted that new forms of social media can isolate older people, like the patients she cares for.

The immediate and unlimited access provided by smartphones and computers presents its own challenges. "If I'm not careful, I spend the first one and a half hours of the day on email," Rigsby admitted. "I lose the most productive part of the day." But the same tools also offer her great benefits. "I've never been good at keeping track of attendance," she said, recalling how she used to record students names on random scraps of paper. Now she does it all on her phone, adding, "I'm very careful with my phone in ways I'm not with pieces of paper."

Technology has been changing for as long as people have been inventing, but it hasn't always happened this quickly or been so immediate and far reaching. Due to the proliferation of social media, our concept of intimacy is changing.

"I currently have five social media accounts to manage," said Anderson, who uses social media both professionally and personally. "I'm very aware of how I am presented."

"It has its value," said Robinson, "but it can take away from personal relationships. I don't like seeing people out for dinner on their phones or looking at their iPods. It makes it hard to have intimate conversation."

According to Rigsby, "Social media is gratifying, but it doesn't cover what friendship un-mediated by social media can do." Human interaction is a basic need. However, "if we remember what face-to-face friends are for," said Rigsby, "we can navigate technology in a healthy way."

The first iPhone made its debut Jan. 9, 2007. Seven years later, over nine million iPhones were sold in the first weekend alone after the release of the iPhone 5S, according to businessweek.com. Smartphones and their apps follow us everywhere - to grocery stores, soccer games, school, the movie theater. We use them in our cars and at restaurants, for work and on vacation. With the ability to find friends online and take the Internet just about anywhere, is it possible that we are missing out on real connection with each other? Maybe even with ourselves?

Ellen Rigsby, associate professor of communications at Saint Mary's College, shared some interesting insights on the issue. When asked how she saw recent technology effecting today's culture, Rigsby commented that "social relationships develop around technology." Change happens fast because technology itself advances so quickly.

"We have all of these social phenomena," said Rigsby. "Social media is changing the way we relate to people. Due to the instant gratification of online

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