

connecting

how we form social
bonds and communities
in the internet age



mary chayko

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How We Form Social Bonds
and
Communities in the Internet Age

Mary Chayko

State University of New York Press

Published by
State University of New York Press, Albany

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Printed in the United States of America

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For information, address State University of New York Press,
90 State Street, Suite 700, Albany, NY 12207

Production by Michael Haggett
Marketing by Michael Campochiaro

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Chayko, Mary, 1960—

Connecting : how we form social bonds and communities in the Internet
age/Mary Chayko.

p.cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-7914-5433-9 (alk. paper)—ISBN 0-7914-5434-7 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Interpersonal relations. 2. Internet—Social aspects. I. Title.

HM1106. C488 2002

302—dc21

2002019099

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To Glenn, Ryan, and Morgan, to whom I am so lovingly connected

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Preface

When I was a young girl, I noticed that people often behaved as though they “knew” people they had never actually “met.” My friends and I talked about our favorite singers, athletes, and actors as though we knew them personally. At the dinner table, my family and I compared notes on JFK and Jackie, Archie Bunker and Meathead, jazz musician Charlie Parker, and the lineup of the New York Mets in much the same way as we discussed the actions of our neighbors, classmates, and cousins. One of my grandmothers talked about her favorite soap opera characters as though they were real people; the other told me stories about her deceased husband (who had died before I was born) that were so vivid that it often seemed he was standing in the room with us. And, most interestingly, I had developed what seemed like genuine feelings of connectedness to Louisa May Alcott, the author of my favorite book, *Little Women*, and with the novel’s protagonist, a girl my age, Jo March, who wanted to be a writer.

None of us, to my knowledge, were confusing reality with fantasy. We knew who we did and didn’t “really know.” But something still nagged at me. For I felt that in some mysterious way I *did* know these far-away “others.” Feeling a sense of knowing them, of connectedness to them, mattered to me. Yet I knew it would sound ridiculous to say so aloud, so of course I never did; I thought what I thought and felt what I felt solitarily.

Why did I feel something for these distant, absent others? Why did these connections feel so real? And why, I wondered, didn’t people ever talk about things like this? I became more and more intrigued. Years later, when I discovered the ease and allure of contacting like-minded others a world away on the Internet, I realized that plenty of other people had to be engaged in some of these same processes. In invisible—but meaningful—ways, we were *connecting*. But how, in the absence of face-to-face interaction, did we make and maintain these kinds of connections?

I found a “home” for my questions, a place to articulate and explore them, at Rutgers University in the graduate department of sociology. I was fortunate to have arrived at Rutgers when the field of cognitive sociology was emerging as a specialization within the discipline and to have had the opportunity to meet and study with some of the very best in the field. I also took some highly stimulating classes with faculty who epitomize original thinking and demand the same of their students. With their encouragement, I developed the ideas and designed the research upon which this book is based.

Eviatar Zerubavel, in particular, “opened” my mind with his innovative approach to sociology and academia. He meticulously helped me sort through, articulate, and stretch and extend my ideas. He was satisfied only with my very best efforts, unfailingly detecting laziness, redundancy, and irrelevance in my work and always suggesting a useful path for improvement. And I’ll never forget his heartfelt concern for my well-being when that was what I needed most. More than anyone, Eviatar saw what my work, and what I, as a scholar, could be, and for helping me see these things, too, I will be forever grateful to him.

I have been influenced by other fine scholars as well. Karen Cerulo has been the consummate teacher, colleague, co-author, and friend—smart, imaginative, tough, honest, and caring. Judy Gerson, Deirdre Kramer, Randy Smith, Carl Couch, Sarah Thompson, Jim and Greta Pennell, Geoff Curran, Jill Roper, Tracy Budd, Greg Metz, Nicky Isaacson, Christena Nippert-Eng, and Dan Ryan have each made a special mark on my life and on this work. And perhaps no one has ever been more supportive of me than Ira Cohen. Though his analyses of my work always overflowed with invaluable ideas and suggestions, it was, most of all, his genuine compassion and our long, illuminating talks that sustained me through the ups and downs of my life during the span of this project.

Eddie Manning, my boss at the Livingston College Educational Opportunity Fund, where I worked full time during the research for this book, gave me many types of assistance and support, and never made me feel as though I had to choose from among my professional or personal commitments. Several of my co-workers were particularly helpful with regard to the writing of the book and gave me many useful suggestions and ideas. They include: Jennifer Agosto, Milagros Arroyo, Natasha Datta, Eileen Faherty, Terri Goda, Mahasti Hashemi, and Paula Van Riper. Barry Lipinski gave me much-needed library assistance. Ron Helfrich, my editor at SUNY Press, has been a source of support and encouragement since we first “met” electronically. And this book benefitted greatly from

the thoughtful, intelligent editing of Michele Lansing and Michael Haggett at SUNY Press.

To the College of Saint Elizabeth in Morristown, New Jersey, which welcomed me so warmly as I completed this project, I offer sincere thanks. I look forward to many wonderful times and exciting projects to come. I especially want to note the kindness and guidance (both scholarly and spiritual) of Sister Ellen Desmond, Sister Francis Raftery and Dean Johanna Glazewski.

To those who consented to interviews with me, I thank you for your time, your candor, and your willingness to share your stories.

Without a loving family, work such as this must be so much more difficult to do. My parents, Bob and Terri Chayko, have always believed in me and been there for me. My brother John, sister Cathy, and brother-in-law Gary have done the same, always helping and teaching me. But in the end, it is my son Ryan, daughter Morgan, and husband, Glenn Crooks, who give the deepest meaning to everything in my life. Because of them, I have learned to commit to work and to relationships, to set and reach goals, to trust, to recognize and appreciate goodness, and most of all, to love. This is for them—for *us*.

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1

A Meeting of the Minds

When Diana, Princess of Wales, lost her life in a car crash in the summer of 1997, many of us felt a sense of grief and loss—or, at the very least, sadness at the tragedy of a life cut so terribly short. Of course, this was not the only time we mourned the loss of someone we had never actually “met.” JFK, his brother Bobby, and his son John, Martin Luther King Jr., Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, Marilyn Monroe—we felt that we knew them, in a way, and we experienced a flood of genuine emotions upon their untimely deaths.

It is not only in death that we can come to feel that we have gotten to know, and have come to care about, someone whom we have never “met” in a face-to-face sense. It is, in fact, a common occurrence.¹ From the child who establishes a relationship with a pen pal to the old man who considers Walter Cronkite a kind of trusted friend, from the cancer patient who finds companionship in an online group of cancer survivors to the lover of literature who feels a sense of like-mindedness with a favorite author (or even, possibly, with a favorite character in a novel), there are as many examples of connecting with others at a distance as there are people seeking social connection.

These are bonds that exist primarily in a mental realm, a space that is not created solely in the imagination of one individual but requires two or more minds—a “meeting of the minds”—to make possible, to “activate.” These bonds are *sociomental*.² But they are no less real for being located in a mental realm.³ They are the manifestation of an absolutely genuine and often deeply felt sense that despite physical separation, a closeness among

people, a nearness, exists; that while the physical distance separating people may be great, the social distance between them may be very small indeed. They represent an experience of communion with another person, one that does not depend on face-to-face meetings to be initiated or maintained.

Sociomental bonds—bonds between people who cannot or do not meet face-to-face—have never been more prevalent, more central to people's lives, and more critical to an understanding of the times and of the social order. But they are still, for the most part, an underground, understudied phenomenon.⁴ They can seem strange—even a little shameful. We do not talk about them much, let alone consider their contribution to and impact on our societies, our communities, and ourselves. The implication is that they are not normal, not authentic, or that they exist on the fringe of the social world—odd, false, and inconsequential.

But that is not the case. Connecting with people across distances and even across time is a rather ordinary part of the human experience. A social environment saturated with technology virtually ensures that we will all have extensive knowledge of a whole host of people who are not part of any face-to-face social circle of ours—celebrities, heads of state, historical figures, influential writers and thinkers, pen pals (or phone pals, or e-mail pals), even our own faraway or deceased family members and friends. Through television, radio, books, magazines, and, increasingly, on the Internet, it is likely that we will come to feel that we have “gotten to know” plenty of people in this way. We will probably respond to and resonate with at least some of these people mentally and emotionally. We may even come to care about them—possibly quite deeply—and feel that we have bonded in some way with them. And as all bonds do, these touch and affect us, as they inspire us to view different perspectives on the world, to take on new roles, and to learn subtle but important lessons about “the other.” According to John Caughey, each of us makes several hundred connections—some weak, some strong—with others whom we have never met and may never meet (1984: 22).

This book explores exactly how, under what conditions, and with what effect social connectedness takes place in the absence of face-to-face contact. I unfold a theoretical and historical framework for understanding the phenomenon, look at the ways these connections are made and maintained, discuss some of their properties, and look at the benefits, hazards, and implications—the social “fallout”—of the role they play in the Internet age. I examine strong, long-lasting *sociomental bonds*, weaker and perhaps more fleeting *sociomental connections*, and clusters and groupings of such connections and bonds into what I call *communities of the mind*.⁵ And I illustrate these concepts and ideas with dozens of the personal, real-life accounts of

sociomental connecting that emerged in the fifty in-depth, face-to-face interviews and the 143 online surveys that I conducted.⁶ The result is a look at a type of social bonding that is rarely recorded: the bonds and communities that form among people who never meet face-to-face but still feel undeniably, if sometimes unexpectedly, connected.

Even in face-to-face interaction it is by no means guaranteed that a true social connection will emerge when two people spend time together. “Very frequently,” Emile Durkheim reminds us, “those closely knit by ties of blood are morally and legally strangers to one another” (1984 [1893]: xlv). What looks to the observer like a strong social bond (a seemingly “happy” marriage, an ostensibly “close” parent-child relationship) may in reality be weak, neutral, or, for all intents and purposes, nonexistent. Conversely, what may seem *not* to be a bond (a connection that is felt with a deceased person or with a favorite author or actor) may in reality be a strong and meaningful one in the connector’s eyes. The assumption that social connections must satisfy certain narrowly determined criteria (such as “containing” a face-to-face component) in order to be truly authentic greatly oversimplifies the phenomenon of social bonding.

For one of the strongest and most compelling components of social connecting is the perception of a connection in a person’s *mind*. Even social connections initiated in face-to-face interaction endure periods of separation—often long periods—in which the connectors are physically apart (with an exception being conjoined twins). In fact, though we do not usually think of them this way, the terms *social connection*, *social bond*, and *social tie* are, in virtually all situations, merely metaphors for the “getting together” of people who are separated from one another. People are not (usually!) physically connected, bound or tied together; rather, we call them “connected,” “bonded,” or “tied” when we intuit that their relationship is sufficiently strong to warrant the metaphor.⁷

We maintain social connections mentally as a matter of course; we “carry” absent others with us in our minds and hearts. Social connections that are formed when people are *frequently* separated from one another have quite a lot in common with those that form when people are *always* separated from one another. Sociomental connections are “layered,” in a sense, above, underneath, and around face-to-face connections—intersecting with and overlapping them to a large extent. Since we all have had the experience of maintaining social connections mentally, it only requires taking the next logical step to consider how we might initiate and then sustain social connections *solely* in our minds.

This book takes that step. It shines a spotlight on otherwise invisible forms of social connectedness. And it proposes that there is great value in

such visibility. Children tend to accept rather easily the premise that imaginary friends have a degree of social reality, that characters in books are known by us, and that a pen pal is, indeed, a bona fide friend. But as we grow older, we learn to officially discount such feelings, to push them into the dark corners of our minds. In time, they become disavowed, enjoyed only secretly (as “guilty pleasures”) or all but expunged from our consciousness. It is no wonder that they take on the quality of strangeness or, when they visibly erupt, to cause us no small measure of embarrassment.

In the end, though, a greater harm than embarrassment lurks. When we fail to acknowledge (and study) a form of human sociation, we devalue that sociation—and with it, a large portion of existence, a big chunk of everyday life. We devalue our own experiences and emotions. Unwittingly, but inevitably, we end up diminishing important and legitimate parts of ourselves. Yet even as we deny them, we continue to form sociomental connections. In an age in which technology continuously “brings” absent others into our social spheres, our tendency to connect in this way will only increase.

Perhaps this is why, when given the opportunity to speak at length about the connections they had formed with distant or absent others, the people I interviewed seemed happy to do so; indeed, many found it downright cathartic. As I explained the concept of the sociomental bond to them and prompted them to think and talk about such connections, it was as if I was giving them permission to speak openly (and *legitimately*) about such things. Once the floodgates were opened, I often could not stop people from talking. People would contact me again and again after the interview to tell me about “just one more thing” or one more instance of sociomental connectedness that they had just remembered. Both the “high-tech” people I interviewed (twenty-five people who felt comfortable incorporating a wide range of technologies into their lives and thus did so) and those who were more “low-tech” (twenty-five who felt less comfortable with technologies such as computerization and shied away from them) told me about numerous sociomental connections that they had formed. In fact, only two individuals (one high-tech, one low-tech) told me that they did not feel they had formed any at all.⁸

The overwhelming majority of the people I spoke to related many more instances and types of such connections, and described many more emotions in response to them, than I could have imagined prior to the start of my research. A man just graduating from college described the “invisible bond” he felt with all of those who had ever attended his small, all-male high school, a young career woman told me about the special kind of kinship she felt with an established woman in her field that had

developed as she read the older woman's books and articles and learned about her life, and a prospective parent movingly shared his profound sense of "already knowing" his as-yet-unborn baby. Stories such as these—and the others found in these pages—shaped, much more than reflected, my thinking, and they taught me just how important it is to give voice to such experiences.

I noticed the same thing among the people I surveyed online. In each of the six different types of online groups I looked at (groups centered around soap operas, sports, science, literature, religion, and the experience of being in an age-related grouping, "Generation X," which correlates roughly to being in one's twenties in the 1990s), I heard numerous stories about online connections that had been made and which felt absolutely genuine but about which connectors tended not to speak. People told me about connections both fleeting and long lasting, both meaningless and deeply consequential, and both narrow in scope and "multiplex" (encompassing various social spheres and arenas of social life). Again, it was as though I had opened a gate through which people's thoughts and emotions were finally free to flow. "I thought I was the only one who felt this way!" was something I heard frequently, as their stories tumbled out.

When we keep these kinds of connections and processes hidden, we not only devalue them (and ourselves), we are prevented from seeing a bigger picture. We are blinded to the "less conspicuous forms of relationship and kinds of interaction" that, Georg Simmel tells us, "produce society as we know it" (1950 [1908]: 9). In effect, we treat the tip of the iceberg—the visible, physical, face-to-face relationships among us—as the most part worthy of attention. We ignore and relegate to the realm of the insignificant that which is hidden from view. As Simmel also points out:

[T]he whole gamut of relations that play from one person to another, and may be momentary or permanent, conscious or unconscious, ephemeral or of grave consequence . . . *all these incessantly tie men together*. . . . They account for all the toughness and elasticity, all the color and consistency of social life, that is so striking and yet so mysterious. (1950 [1908]: 10, emphasis added)

An appreciation of the hidden, inconspicuous, but very real ways in which people mentally "come together" to form bonds and communities can help us see the bigger picture of society: a more detailed social landscape revealing a wider palette of colors, more delicate shadings, and ever-changing contours.

None of this is to say that face-to-face contact is, or should be, decentered, or that connecting at a distance is somehow equivalent to or preferable to face-to-face interaction. It is not. We need face-to-face interaction. It is crucial to our intellectual and social development, it allows for the development of richer contexts between people in which more intricate details and meanings can be shared, and it provides certain satisfactions that are impossible to technologically replicate.⁹ We would not want to conceive of a world in which face-to-face interaction was considered unimportant, unsatisfying, irrelevant. But that is not to say that *every* social connection requires a face-to-face component in order to become established or nurtured. A “meeting of the minds” can be just what a particular situation requires. Our individual “portfolios” of social connectedness should, ideally, consist of a healthy mix of face-to-face *and* sociomental connections in both dyadic and group forms.

This book, then, is a conceptual and an empirical examination of social connectedness and a critical component of it—the sociomental—that is frequently overlooked. Modern social forces—the speed and complexity with which our lives often move, the high rate of geographic mobility, the fast pace of technological change, the stress of combining work and home lives—often physically separate people from one another. Yet we stubbornly, inventively persist in finding ways to forge the social connections we need and desire. We have a remarkable capacity for connecting with others—for forming social bonds and communities across great distances and throughout time in the Internet age.

2

From Cave Paintings to Chat Rooms: The Sociomental Foundation of Connectedness

We are, all of us, social connectors. In the midst of a world that can overwhelm us with its demands and complexity, we strive nonetheless to make connections with others, whether those connections are strong or weak, enduring or fleeting, “multiplex” (maintained across a variety of settings and life spheres) or “uniplex” (confined to narrow, specific sites), and activated in face-to-face copresence or in the space of our own minds.¹ In fact, the wide variety of ways in which people can connect testifies to the strength of the human need to feel connected to others, the malleability of the social connection itself, and the mental flexibility of those who would become connected.²

In premodern times,³ people relied on face-to-face contact for most of their social transactions and came to form most of their relationships with those with whom they were spatially proximate. People were in more frequent contact with comparatively fewer others than in the modern era. Together, often physically, they developed a set of values and norms; a “mechanical” solidarity, as Durkheim would put it, which sacrificed individuality to the group and connected individuals to one another and to the whole.⁴ As premodern people experienced plenty of face-to-face contact with many of the same other people, the forces that would “unify” them were almost automatically activated (Davis 1973: xxii; see also Simmel 1962 [1908]).

In more modern times, social relations tend to depend more on the sharing of “common ideas, interests, sentiments, and occupations” than on the sharing of literal space (Durkheim 1984 [1893]: xlii). Technologies of

communication and transportation have played a large part in the discovery and development of interpersonal commonalities across space and time. They have permitted people to “see” and know of—and thus potentially feel connected to—many more people than in premodern times. Since we do not see most of our friends or family members on a constant basis anymore, we must deliberately activate those thoughts and feelings that would keep us connected.⁵ At the same time, we busily perform the specialized tasks that a complex division of labor requires; we are part of far-flung social systems that often are global in reach and impact. This interdependence on others who live great distances away and will probably never be met can be thought of as a new kind of “organic” solidarity (see Durkheim 1984 [1893]). In modern times, then, social relations are less dependent on “accidents” of proximity (Campbell 1990: 140) and emerge more often as a by-product of extensive social differentiation and specialization, the increased physical distance between us, and the capacity to choose aspects of our lives that had once been strictly proscribed.

Three basic things are required to accomplish the formation of sociomental connections: a mediator (often technological) to facilitate communication and connectedness among physically separated people, individuals whose minds are similar enough to permit the creation of a connection, and a “space” in which the connection can be said to “take root” and “grow.” In this chapter, I describe these fundamental elements of sociomental connectedness. I focus on the ways in which technologies from cave paintings to chat rooms bridge the distance between absent people, I examine the role of the socially structured mind and cognition in making connections possible, and I provide a perspective with which we may envision the nonphysical realms (such as “cyberspace”) in which connections at a distance form. We will then have a sturdy basis upon which our understanding of sociomental connectedness can rest.

TECHNOLOGY, THE MEDIA, AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Interpersonal relations and structures of social arrangement have always been influenced by the way people produce and use technologies.⁶ Technologies make new modes of production and new kinds of work and leisure activities possible, they serve as mediators between people, facilitating

coordinated activity among people who cannot always be in face-to-face contact, and they inspire subtle ways of thinking and behaving that would never have been possible prior to their invention and adoption. This is especially true of communication technologies for, as Marshall McLuhan argued (1964), modes of human thinking are shaped by the very media through which we communicate ideas (see also Allman 1993: 63). For our purposes, a tool or technique external to the human body that serves as an extension of that body, conducting or transmitting information among disparate individuals, shall be considered a technology.

Technology can increase our capacities to communicate, learn, think, and act, irrevocably changing the world that we inhabit. One significant technological change, Neil Postman writes, “generates total change” (1993: 18). For

[a] new technology does not add or subtract something. It changes everything. In the year 1500, fifty years after the printing press was developed, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe. After television, the United States was not America plus television; television gave a new colorization to every political campaign, to every home, to every school, to every church, to every industry. . . . New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop. (18–20; emphasis in original)

Technology makes possible new ways for us to think and form connections and communities. As new technologies of communication continue to emerge, new social environments are constantly created (see Meyrowitz 1985: 19) in which new ways of apprehending one another develop. It is in these new environments that sociomental connections are established.

The first, simplest systems of interpersonal communication and language—gestures, grunts, cries, and the crude technologies of drawing and picture writing—marked the first moments in human history that people could label concepts and then communicate those concepts to someone else. For it was then possible for something or someone external to an individual to *mediate* between the thoughts of that individual and another—to carry a concept or an idea to a third person who was spatially separated from the first, with the potential result a *realized* and *communicated* point

of commonality. Anthropologist Richard Leakey considers how this may have occurred in the Upper Paleolithic Ice Age:

It requires little imagination to think of Upper Paleolithic people chanting incantations in front of cave paintings. . . . When one stands in front of an Ice Age creation now, as I did with the bison in the cave of Le Tuc d'Audoubert, the ancient voices force themselves on one's mind. (1995: 83)

For the first time a connection could be formed across space and time.

In predominantly oral, preliterate societies, in which written language was either unknown or extremely crude, knowledge had to be contextualized verbally to be passed along to future generations. "Language," McLuhan writes, invoking Henri Bergson, "does for intelligence what the wheel does for the feet and the body" (1964: 83). It enables the intellect to "move from thing to thing," even when those things are not located in one's immediate line of sight (*ibid.*); it permits knowledge of distant things and distant others. Through the use of mnemonic devices and formal rituals, information such as king lists, genealogies, clan names, stories, legal precedents, and the like was given oral textual form with the intent that it be fixed in individual memories and in the social memory of groups (Fentress and Wickham 1992: 79). Specific situational information, as opposed to the abstract concept, was most easily memorized and passed along this way (Ong 1982: 49–57; Luria 1976).

People who lived at this time were thus limited to learning specific, fairly concrete things about their predecessors. They could not, for example, know much about the subtleties of character of a long-dead king, and as such they likely had no sense that it might be desirable, or even possible, to know such a thing. People in oral societies could not and did not develop the ability, the need, or the will to connect across time and space in any kind of sophisticated fashion. Their minds (and their lives) were not so structured.

As picture writing and the spoken word became codified into written languages somewhere in the range of 5,000 to 6,000 years ago, they both influenced and reflected an increasing desire among humans to communicate with greater specificity and at a higher level of abstraction than systems of picture writing and memory permitted. Correspondingly, our ancestors gained the related abilities to think in more abstract ways and to communicate these abstract concepts to one another. As they increased in sophistication, written languages liberated communication from the restrictions of orality. Writing began to connect more people, in a

more meaningful way, across time. And with this increasing linguistic capability came no less than a restructuring of human consciousness and connectedness.

Someone in a different place and time could now read another person's words and gain access to the actual thoughts, the precise words, of that absent person. People could mark the past in a specific, detailed way and produce ideas and information that might be used to bring about change in the future (Schramm and Porter 1982). People's lives—and minds—became structured to accept and create more abstract phenomena and to consider experience in a more linear fashion, with an eye toward knowing things and doing things related to the past and the future. For as people came to *want* to look to the past and to the future, they slowly came to *desire* connections with people from the past and the future—a huge conceptual leap from preliterate connectedness. People could feel, in a more direct way than ever before, connected to someone who had passed away before he or she was born, in a way that was probably not too different from that which my interview subject Maria describes:

My grandfather. I didn't know him. And I do feel connected to him. And I wanted to meet him and share with him the grandfather-granddaughter thing. I heard stories. But he died before I was born.

It is in talking about people of the past and people *projected* to live in the future, my interviewee Ling told me, that people of different generations become and “feel connected, just in passing information from one person to another.”

Of course, it was still a long, slow journey from then to now. Premodern people spent much of their time in face-to-face contact with small, contained groups of others—groups that constituted the bulk of their social relationships. The spoken word had prominence in human life (as it still does today). But in combination with writing and drawing, speaking began to take on the role of connecting distant others, and at this point in history technologies began to be used in combination with one another and with face-to-face interaction to connect people. People could, in effect, create individualized “portfolios” of connections “containing” both face-to-face and sociomental connections.

When stone tablets, paper and ink, hand-copied books, and early newspapers—our first mass media—appeared in the early centuries A.D., another revolution in social connectedness followed. For Gutenberg

would adapt existing printing technologies in the mid-fifteenth century to create multiple copies of the Bible with his printing press and ensure that ever afterward information could be “passed” from one person to another in an entirely new, large-scale way. This extended almost indefinitely people’s ability to share information about themselves and the world around them (Schramm and Porter 1982: 12). A lot of people, or a “mass” of them, could now connect to a single individual or to one another across space and time. As people’s brains began to internalize these capabilities and as technology continued to advance (though probably not without the fear and resistance that tend to accompany the introduction of any technology to a society), more and more opportunities for making sociomental connections began to emerge. People began to become adept at making such connections.

People also could at this point begin to develop and extend their thoughts with an eye toward mass publication—for personal, ideological, or financial satisfaction or gain. Intellectual activity in general burgeoned as ideas became more plentiful, precise, and commodifiable. The technological mediation of human thought became an industry or, more accurately, multiple industries. Numerous businesses, organizations, universities, libraries, and specialized religious sects and political parties were born as people discovered what could be gained by pooling their ideas and resources via the written word if not always by face-to-face interaction.

In short order, mass-produced books, pamphlets, newspapers, and magazines made it convenient and easy to read and learn about faraway others (and new ideas) in easily shared, preservable documents. This created the conditions for educational and political institutions to become increasingly prominent in both public and private life. The book and the newspaper accompanied and made possible the Enlightenment, just as the textbook did with organized public education. Newspapers and early magazines made it possible for ordinary citizens to become informed about and involved in government. Political and revolutionary movements from the seventeenth century on (the Protestant Reformation, the American Revolution, women’s liberation) could scarcely have gathered mass strength without the organization and widespread dissemination of people’s thoughts and strategies in newspapers and pamphlets. Because communication is such a fundamental social process, technologies of communication often inspire and go hand in hand with major social change.⁷

Once the mass print media became accepted parts of everyday life and people became exposed to and could learn about innumerable others, the opportunity to identify, learn about, and sociomentially connect to others increased exponentially. Any number of novelists or journalists or

politicians—or any figure, public or private—could inspire a sociomental connection or a community of the mind. Now my interview subject, Nicole, can say of a woman in her field whose books and articles she has read:

I feel like I know her . . . like she's a friend telling me something new, that makes sense and rings true.

And Cindy can feel connected to a woman whose books she has read:

I've never met her, but I feel like I could probably co-write a book with her. It's just a feeling I have about her.

For Tonya, feeling connected to the author of a book or a character in the book is

the only thing that can get me through a book. If I can't make that connection, I can't finish the book.

E. J., who writes for a newsletter, shares his view on the ability of print to connect those people who constitute a publication's readership:

Just the idea of print publications being out there somewhere where people can have them—they're always available to read. It's not like a television where you have to program a VCR to catch something if you're not present. It's always available. It's as if it's constantly communicating, but it needs a human presence to activate itself . . . and unless [other readers] are really divided along political or ideological lines, you've got that common bond. Of literacy. And accessibility.

His vision of print as “constantly communicating” neatly corresponds to the print media's potential to engender sociomental connections easily and almost continuously.

Each subsequent invention of communication technology has enhanced the ability of people to discover and explore commonalities with one another, even when they are very distant in space or time. Technological advances in transportation systems, such as the railroad and automobile, increased the opportunities for spatially separated people to know about one another. And the establishment of the postal system created a large market for information, as news of other people became widely available