INTERNET

CONNECTION

Technology makes connecting easier than ever, yet as individuals, we've never been more isolated. So how can we harness it to find and strengthen relationships?

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The irony of the situation wasn't entirely lost on me. Here I was driving around hunting for a car spot on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles, discussing the omnipresence of technology in the modern world with a woman I had met on an online-dating website while passing a huge billboard for a gay men's hook-up app. There was an iPhone between us, plugged into the dash, bringing up Google Maps while streaming the US internet radio station Pandora.

When we got to our dinner destination, a Japanese restaurant on North La Cienega Boulevard, conversation turned to Kodak. After being in business for more than a century, it had just filed for bankruptcy having misjudging the digital wave. Kodak? Broke? It was a cultural icon. How could it be allowed to happen? It was an outrage.

My glamorous blonde friend, all six feet of her, didn't agree. "Adapt or die," she said. "You either get with technology or you don't." And as much as it pained me to admit — a man who still liked the idea of sending letters through the post, who fancied himself as one of the last romantics in a world of disconnected love — my friend was right.

I only had to look at myself to see how much technology had changed my life. I was a serial dater, since the immolation of my 10-year marriage in 2007. Hundreds of dates, a few too many one-night stands, a lone 'The One' and a whole lot of heartache — all facilitated by the internet.

I was a slave to the point-and-click relationships as much as anyone else. And for all its pitfalls — false intimacy, the tyranny of too much choice, the all-too-common disconnect between our online personas and our real selves — my computer had given me a better chance of finding true love with the sort of ▶

woman I wanted than sitting at home as a single parent with my eight-year-old daughter watching re-runs of *iCarly*.

The figures, jumbled up in the ether like the broadband cables that increasingly connect us, might be open to debate, but one-in-five committed relationships are said to now begin on the internet. Interestingly, the same amount arguably end because of the internet. Facebook, the social-networking site with nearly a billion users, is cited in up to one-in-three divorce petitions in the UK. There are now more Apple products in American homes than married couples. And Stanley Milgram's famous six degrees of separation are now 4.74 — at least, if you're on Facebook.

It's not a stretch to say that technology and the infiltration of social media and the internet into our personal lives have dramatically impacted our relationships. How people meet. How soon — and where — they might choose to find someone else when things go awry. How partners appraise each other physically and what they expect of each other sexually. How much quality time couples actually enjoy when they are together.

Sydney-based relationships counsellor Clinton Power offers some insight. "I see a huge impact from social media and technology on the singles and couples in my relationship-counselling practice. Recurring themes for many of my clients include jealousy that arises from using social media to spy on others, relationships that end due to misunderstandings via texting, or social networks and relationships that don't get off the ground because of a perceived faux pas related to communicating via technology."

Technology, a facilitator of distractions, has given us a world that promises freedom from solitude but in many cases is only isolating us even more.

In a major piece in its May 2012 issue, American magazine *The Atlantic* even postulated that the ubiquitousness of Facebook in our lives and a growing preference to connect to friends and family via electronic devices rather than physical contact had created an epidemic of loneliness. "We are living in an isolation that would have been unimaginable to our ancestors, and yet we have never been more accessible," the article's author, Stephen Marche, wrote. But speaking from hard-won personal experience and all those frequent-flyer miles, technology can also be profoundly liberating.

Power agrees with that point. "On the flip side, technology is an incredible tool that facilitates relationships beginning and sustaining," he says. "Time and distance are no longer obstacles to relationships forming, and I have worked with many couples who met online and were able to build a connection across vast distances until a point when they could actually meet in person."

Technology gifts us the idea that anything is possible. Distance ceases to matter and consequently the world seems smaller. As a newly single man at the wrong end of my thirties, technology opened vistas for me that hitherto had not been there. I met women I would otherwise have never met. I made some great friends; lifelong ones with whom I have enjoyed both virtual and real-life encounters. Developed new career opportunities and business networks. My life, instead of completely imploding after my divorce, was immeasurably enriched through the connections I made putting myself online and giving myself over to the music of chance.

And although my third stab at a transpacific love affair was ultimately about to come to nothing — just like the others that came before it; all victims of inflated expectations and romantic tourism — I had been gifted a shot at something that, had it come off, would have set my life on an entirely different course. Like Kodak, I was learning that the things you know sometimes aren't enough ▶

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and the way you do things sometimes have to change. You adapt or you die.

This unpredictability and randomness to our increasingly tech-engaged mobile lives can make the search for love in the digital age so exhilarating. Used well, it can be a boon to all our important relationships, romantic or otherwise; not a time-sucker. Seemingly innocuous apps such as Words with Friends and Draw Something have, in fact, proved to be powerful agents for keeping people connected who might otherwise not be in regular contact.

You're never short of options, be they online-dating websites such as OkCupid with its global listings; Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) which encourage connections to be formed, as in the case of World of Warcraft; GPS-based hook-up apps such as Blendr, the not-so-freewheeling straight version of the popular gay app Grindr; and the introduction of services such as the ability to select who you sit next to on planes by viewing Facebook and LinkedIn profiles. Endless choices, countless options, but when do you stop?

The problem is that making a decision is harder than it's ever been — and that's when the search itself can become an addiction. Technology is not to blame. It only broadens our horizons. Rather, it's the expectation we have of what it can deliver that frequently leads to disappointment. The chance to make a true connection also goes begging because the internet, an unforgiving place at the best times, typically calls on us to present a faultless, idealised version of ourselves rather than the fallible souls we really are.

"Problems seem to occur when people present a false version of themselves online. This limits them in attracting the sorts of people with whom they may be compatible," says Sydney-based psychologist Victoria Kasunic.

"For example, many women describe themselves as independent when actually they are craving a relationship of intimacy and then they get upset when the guys they attract don't contact them very often. Likewise, I have had men who complain, that although they're having lots of sexual encounters facilitated by online dating, they still feel lonely. That's not the fault of online sites, rather it's not understanding that it takes time and trust to build a real connection, and rushing into physical intimacy doesn't always give you a chance to see if you have a genuine connection."

A mistake I had made too many times. It's very easy to fall for a face you see on a dating site, add each other on Facebook, start poking, migrate to Skype, declare undying love and book an airline ticket. Unless you've put in the emotional groundwork, it's when you actually meet in real life that the dreaded disconnect — the lag between fantasy and reality — can happen. Physical intimacy is virtually a given. A truer, deeper intimacy is much harder to come by. I was to discover that within days of meeting the tall blonde in LA. I'd been led to believe we'd already established that intimacy but, of course, we hadn't. It had been easier for us to connect online through Facebook pokes than it was face to face with simple conversation.

After three weeks holed up in her flat, I went home to Sydney swearing to never again fall for another woman on the internet. But within a week, I'd put up my profile again and, despite my best intentions, was talking to a personal trainer just a few blocks from where I'd been staying in West Hollywood. She was bright. She was beautiful. And yes, once again, she was some 12,000 kilometres away. For too many of us, including me, the thought that the 'perfect' partner is out there somewhere remains an irresistible drug. It might be imperfect and impersonal for some, but so long as technology continues bringing people closer together, it will only become more common in all our relationships. As Kodak learnt the hard way, adapt or die.

Jesse Fink is the author of Laid Bare: One Man's Story of Sex, Love and Other Disorders *(published in September by Hachette Australia, $32.99).* ⊗