Personal

Technology's Personal Touch that outweighs its many downsides

By: *Nick Bilton*

As a longtime tech columnist, I've seen the dark side of technology. I've written about the privacy minefields of Facebook and other social networks. I've looked at the hate and bullying that people inflict on Twitter. I've seen how the front-facing camera on our smartphones can turn us into narcissists.

I've also witnessed how technology has enabled terrorists to spread their message of hate and incite fear.

All these downsides have made me wonder whether these technological advances are worth it. Maybe we're better off without smartphones, social media, cloud computing and apps du jour like Snapchat that we seemingly can't live without today.
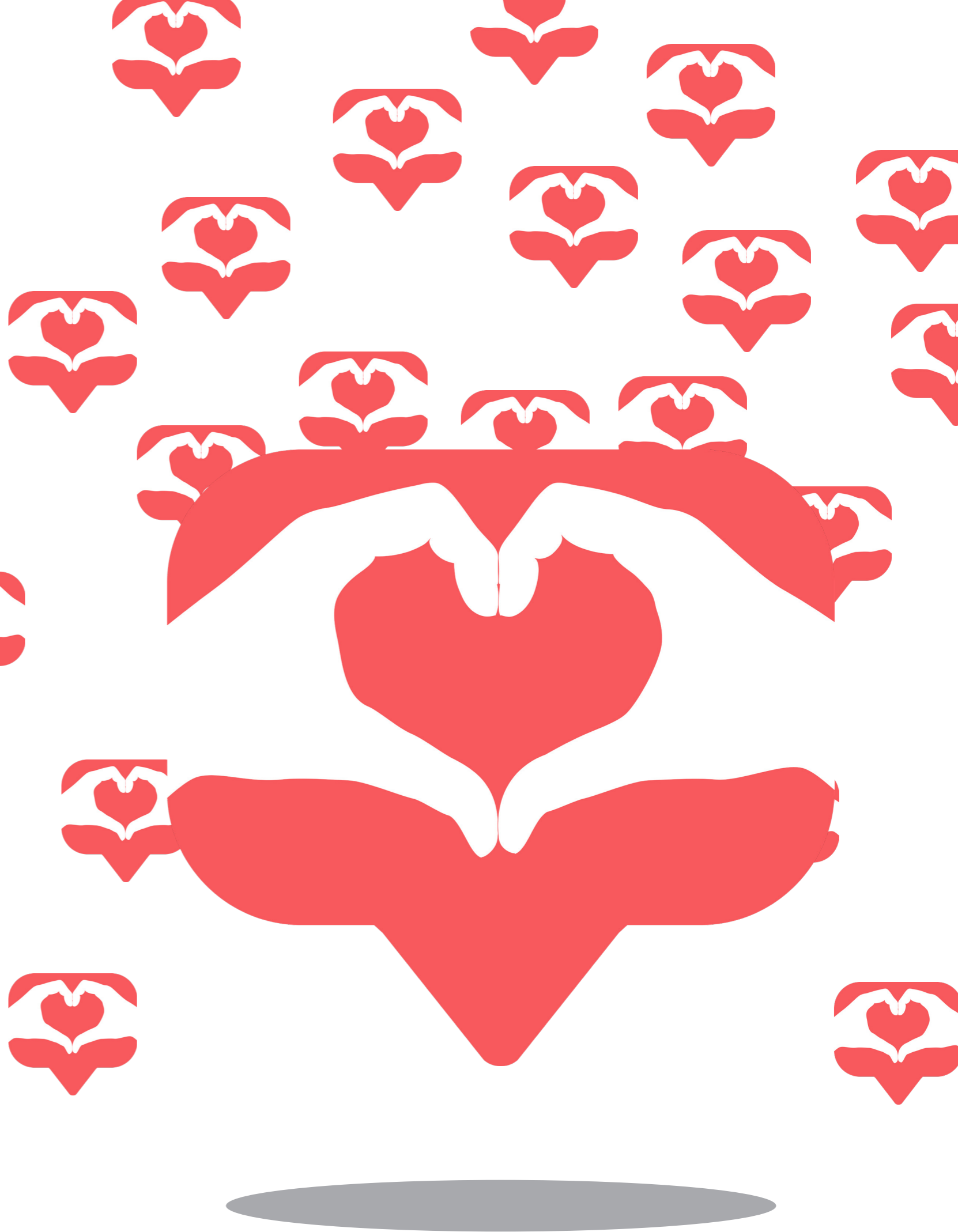
It's a question I've been asking myself as I ponder this — my last column for The New York Times after 14 years working at the newspaper. And it was during this contemplative moment that I gleaned a little piece of advice from an unlikely source: David Carr, the former media columnist here, who died last year.

When I seek inspiration or something to make me smile, I sometimes find myself visiting David's Twitter page (@carr2n) to read his old tweets, which are filled with nuggets of wisdom, humorous insights and deft turns of phrase.

The last time I did this, I also realized that I was still following him. So were 455,000 other people, even though his last tweet was dated Feb. 12, 2015, and was directed at me after a little joke I had played on my dear friend and mentor.

">@nickbilton left me a VM because he thought I'm actually ancient enough to still listen to them. Took the bait. ouch. #gotyermessage"

Is he ever going to tweet again? No. And yet, hundreds of thousands of people (and a few bots) still follow him. That's because technology still connects us (me) to David. In a sense, that's what technology has always done. That's true with planes, trains and automobiles. And that's true with smartphones, social networks and search engines. They, and other technologies, connect us to people who are not with us, geographically or physically, and make us feel a little less alone in this big confusing world.

David Carr isn't the only deceased person who continues to be a guiding light for me. My mother, who died last March, is still saved as a favorite on my iPhone, and I imagine will be there forever.

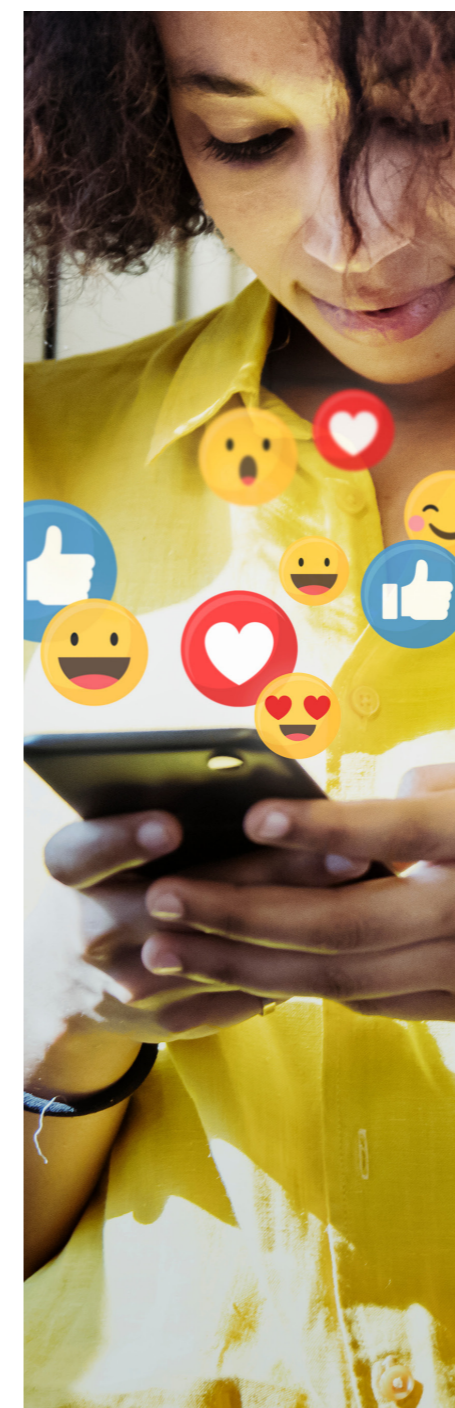I still follow her on Facebook. Her emails are still saved in my inbox (though I feel guilty for having not replied to some), as is a video she sent me two Christmases ago explaining how to make her famous chocolate cake. Thankfully, because of that front-facing camera, I get to scroll through pictures of her that she sent over the years.

In the 1800s, people would photograph the recently deceased, often in a family portrait, as a way of capturing one last moment with a loved one. We now live in an era when, thanks to technology, we can relive countless moments with the people we love after they're gone or are far away. We do so through the digital footprints left behind on Facebook and Twitter, the photos on our smartphones, and all the morsels scooped up by search engines. Technology allows us to connect.

So does the good outweigh the bad? For me, yes. And I think it will in the future too, as newer technologies force us to grapple with even bigger ethical quandaries. Take driverless cars, which I believe will have a huge, unknowable impact on society. When that technology becomes widely adopted — some say this will happen in two years; others say 20 — many will lament the negatives. Pizza delivery guys, truckers, taxi drivers and countless others could lose their jobs. Hackers and terrorists may turn driverless cars into weapons. Teenagers everywhere will no longer experience the joy of getting a driver's license.

And yet, there will be many positives as well. Roads may be converted into parks. Finding parking may become a thing of the past (as will parking tickets). Driving time may be reclaimed for more productive or enjoyable activities, like watching movies, exercising or sleeping. To be sure, driverless cars may be safer, potentially saving millions of people's lives every year. And, perhaps they will connect us in ways we haven't thought of yet.

The same pro-and-con situations will play out with other technologies, including drones, virtual reality, big data, 3-D printers, medicines, wearable computers and, of course, artificial intelligence.

We will worry about these new technologies. We will question them. We will demand changes. And we should.

But in the end, as people use the things we create for harm, there will be a lot more instances when they are used for good. And, most important, when they make us all feel a little more connected, and a little less *alone.*