

PREFERS QUAL touch



Despite its flaws,
social media's ability
to connect personally
holds greater value.

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. #gotyermesssage"

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

“newer technologies force us to grapple with even bigger ethical quandaries”

SOCIAL MEDIA *by the numbers*

Personal connections are an essential part of the human experience, and human experience pre-dates social media by a couple of million years. But since the first social media platform — Six Degrees — was launched in 1997, social media has increasingly become this species' favorite way to maintain those connections. A look at the latest numbers:

4.48 billion

Number of people who currently use social media worldwide, more than 60% of the world's population

99%

of users access social media websites or apps through a mobile device

6.6

Number of social media platforms with which the average social media user engages

54%

of social media users in the U.S. are female; globally the number is 46%

17%

growth of social media users in Asia from 2019-2020