

Listening Section 4: Online Social Networking

You will hear a lecture about how technology affects human interaction.

Good morning. Today we're thinking about the way that technology is influencing our social structures and the way we interact with one another. Humans, as we know, have always lived in groups; without this arrangement, our species would have died out long ago. But now, the way we see and define our group is changing.

Today, our number of weak-tie acquaintances has exploded due to the Internet – to the phenomenon of online social networking. This is still a relatively new way of communication – something that has a huge amount of potential – but also, as with any invention, it brings with it a new set of problems. Let's start with the benefits. Without question, online social networking allows us to pass on the latest news – to be up-to-date with local and global events – and for many, this information comes from sources more trustworthy than local media. So, this is one clear point in favour of online social networking. I know that it's also being used by students – as a means of increasing their chances of success – in the way that lecture notes can be shared and ideas discussed. I think, personally speaking, that we need some further research before we can definitively say whether it helps or not. There's also been a great increase in the number of networking sites devoted to sharing advice on health issues but there are as yet no studies to prove the reliability of that advice. Now, what we do have clear evidence for is that people are developing friendships and professional networks in a way that wasn't possible before – the process is faster. I'm not talking about quality here, but simply that they exist. And it's debatable whether the number of online friends that you have increases your level of self-confidence – that's perhaps an area of research some of you might be interested in following up.