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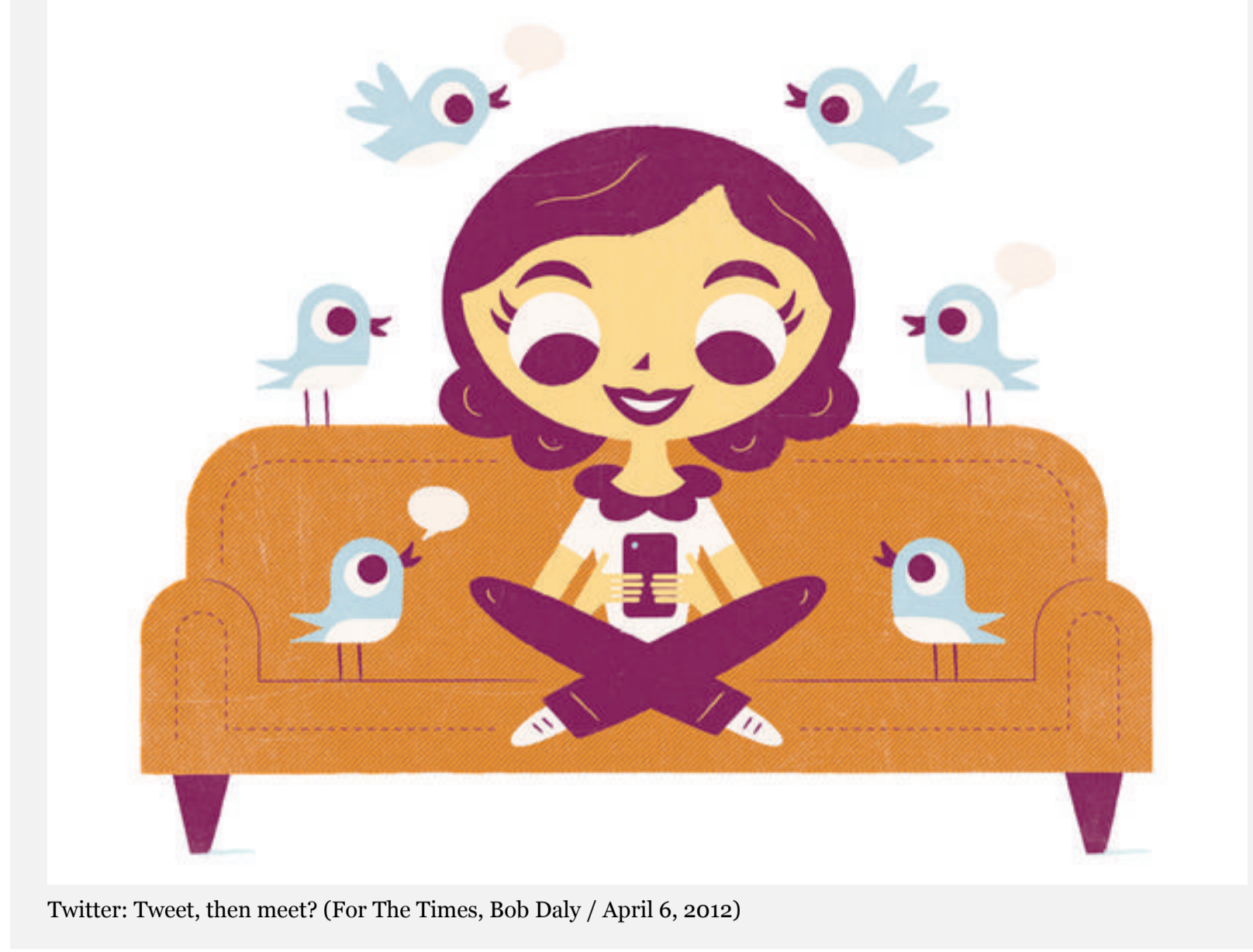
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## Twitter friends: It may be a good idea to meet up

So what does all this digital intimacy with strangers say about our culture, anyway?

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Twitter: Tweet, then meet? (For The Times, Bob Daly / April 6, 2012)

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By Jamie Beckman, Special to the Los Angeles Times  
*April 7, 2012*

I've been live-tweeting "The Bachelor." There, I said it. To a lot of people, including my inner circle of friends, my penchant for reality dating programming (and my willingness to document it in real time) makes me exceedingly nerdy. In fact, I suspect that some of my closest buddies hang out with me despite the fact that I like "The Bachelor." But thanks to Twitter, even though I might be sitting on my couch by myself, searching for the show's hash tag and hitting refresh means I never watch an episode solo.

Until the recent season finale, on any given Monday, garden-variety "Bachelor" fans and funny women (and some men) with huge followings, such as bestselling author Jennifer Weiner, were gathered together on Twitter in a "Cheers"-type atmosphere — complete with inside jokes and one-liners — to mock the plot twists and talk with one another about how we really felt about this season's object of affection. I've actually started to crave the community that comes from chatting with "Bachelor" fans each week — and feel validated that I'm not the only one who sees the show as patently absurd, yet wildly entertaining. The communion feels, for lack of a better term, real.

Obviously, "The Bachelor's" is only one Internet community that has facilitated a shared experience — and potential real-life friendships. Pick an interest, and in the time it takes to type a hash tag or post a comment on a blog you can find people who share it, whether it's something like running, parenting or managing diabetes.

With half a billion registered Twitter handles and counting, we're reaching out to total strangers and sharing details about our interests and lives with them in a way that's sometimes

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more intimate than the way we talk with our closest friends. From an anthropological standpoint, is that weird?

"Fundamentally, human beings are driven to connect," says Pamela Rutledge, director of the Media Psychology Research Center and instructor of media psychology in the UCLA Extension program. "Biologically, we're wired to have an affinity toward people who are like us.... When you have an emotional engagement with something that someone else does ... it actually triggers reward centers in our brain, that we're part of something."

Even though it seems like we're putting the friendship cart before the horse, metaphorically speaking, what we're really doing is fast-tracking friendships, Rutledge says, much like we've souped up everything else in our modern lives.

"We're maybe not evolving, but we're accelerating," says Rutledge, who says that she live-tweeted the finale of "Lost."

"In a way, it allows you to get to the substance before you get to the package. You're able to set aside the external trappings and connect with someone on an internal, emotional level about something that is appealing to you. It's a great way to make friends, because you're focused on 'The Bachelor,' you're not worried about how you're presenting to this person or how they're presenting to you. So it allows you to be a little less posturing, a little more authentic."

In last year's book "Alone Together," author and MIT professor Sherry Turkle argued that isolating ourselves in a room, bathed in a laptop's glow, can be destructive. With the aid of Facebook profiles and Twitter accounts, we've "invented ways of being with people that turn them into something close to objects," she wrote.

But social media researcher Barry Wellman, a professor of sociology at the University of Toronto, says the Internet has merely taken our pre-Web relationships (both far-flung and near) and multiplied them.

"The Internet is reinforcing and expanding a pattern that already existed," says Wellman, who says he's gone on to meet a few of his Twitter contacts in person.

That's not to say that face time is passé. In fact, it's "the gold standard" for gaining the maximum possible amount of information about another person, Wellman says. However, it's impossible to stay in constant face-to-face contact with connections around the country (or the world). What we can do, he says, is fill in the gaps by meeting up in person — meaning getting together with your best Twitter friend or your most trusted blog-commenter confidant is often a good idea.

Yes, there are many people who are still cautious about online communities. It's understandable, says social media researcher Anatoliy Gruzd, professor of information management at Nova Scotia's Dalhousie University. "For many people who are not part of those communities, it's still foreign.... How can you have a meaningful relationship online? Or on Twitter? It will take probably years and years for that to go away."

For those skeptics, let's not forget that previous methods of communication were not always as wonderful as we remember.

"It's amazing how we have this sort of memory of the past of being all beautiful," says Helen Fisher, research professor of anthropology at Rutgers University. "How sitting in a little frontier log cabin with someone you cannot stand — and utterly no resources to tweet and find somebody you can stand — is somehow romantic."

Adds Fisher: "I just finished 'David Copperfield' about a year ago, and David Copperfield — now this was in the middle of the 1800s when that was written — he was sending notes to his sweetheart every three hours. People were using all sorts of social connections. It's just become easier."

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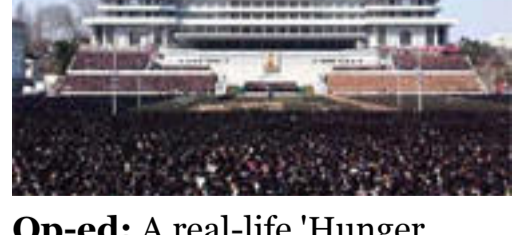
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