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eWave: Digital forays can be a hotbed of betrayal

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SOUTH KINGSTOWN — For every story of a romantic relationship begun on the Internet, it's a safe bet another can be told of a relationship ended. Digital technology does not discriminate: it offers "good and evil mixed together," says Wendy Boivin, an instructor at the University of Rhode Island.

What separates one from the other is user and intent.

"Accessibility, anonymity at some point, and the idea that it's an escape — those are some of the factors that can promote cheating," says Boivin, a therapist who teaches the course "Marriage and Family Relationships."

With its more than 1.1 billion users worldwide, Facebook has become a fixture of contemporary life — and it's free, no less — which makes it what Boivin calls "the easy go-to" site for some people who betray the trust of their current relationships.

"It's the one that you can use at work and you can do at home and no one is questioning what you're doing. It's acceptable. The risk of getting caught is much lower. Also, in terms of self, it's sort of the idea 'Well, I'm just on Facebook. I'm just talking or I'm just reconnecting or I'm wondering what this person is doing.'"

Which can evolve into something more intimate, Boivin says, as increasing familiarity — or re-familiarity — evolves into sharing feelings.

"They start 'self-disclosing,' more and more and more," Boivin says. "And it's easier to self-disclose, in a way, in writing than it is in person. So then the self-disclosure starts growing and growing: 'Oh, me, too' or 'I know how you feel' and ... 'they really get me, they really know me.'"

Adds Jonathan Alpert, a Manhattan therapist and author of "Be Fearless: Change Your Life in 28 Days." "I am seeing a huge wave of patients for relationship issues connected to social media and technology. Eight years ago this was almost nonexistent; today, it's commonplace. I'm also seeing at least one new case a week of someone who either cheated or was cheated on — and in the majority of those cases, technology/social media was used."

Author, blogger and relationship expert April Masini frequently writes about the perils of what she calls cybercheating.

"The Internet allows people to interact without responsibility," she says. "You can strike up a conversation or a flirtation with someone without seeing them in real life, seeing their car, their wedding band, their real age — or even gender — and things you would do and say in real life occur online because it's easier with anonymity."

"What starts out as a foray into a cheap thrill or an easy way to vent about problems in a marriage to a stranger can become an emotional investment that hampers real life. ... I hear from a lot of women who find their men are involved in online relationships — sometimes with porn, sometimes with real people — after a long spell of no sex, no intimacy and no happiness in real-life relationships. Instead of dealing with what's going on in their bedrooms and homes, they avoid the hard work and hard decisions with cybercheating."

Professional intervention can help, says Masini, who offers advice on askapril.com.

"But like any human behavior, the person doing it has to want to stop doing it," she says. "If you find that a loved one is cybercheating, as difficult and uncomfortable as it is, you have to talk to them about it. I hear from a lot of people who don't

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want to talk to their loved ones because they snooped to find out about it, and feel guilty having gone through a loved one's history or emails. This exacerbates things.

"Honesty and articulating feelings of hurt and sadness will help. Pointing fingers and blaming won't. Cybercheaters have a tendency to come out swinging when they feel cornered. The underlying problems to cybercheating have to do with issues in real life that need to be addressed. Sometimes they mean a relationship breakup, sometimes they mean dealing with sexual issues or control issues. But if they're not addressed in real life, many will avoid and anesthetize online."

Ross A. Rosenberg, an Illinois-based counselor, psychotherapist and author, says that the Internet can prove addictive to some people — whether or not they are involved in a relationship.

"For the 'love addicts,'" he says, "Internet dating sites are the crack cocaine of romantic exploration. Although the love addict consciously wants true and everlasting love, they are drawn to the exhilarating rush of new love, like a moth is drawn to a flame. They are blind to their revolving-door dating pattern, which they simply dismiss as a modern phenomenon of the Internet age of romance."

Kailen Rosenberg, author, relationship coach and a regular on Oprah Winfrey's OWN network, also sees peril.

"With the breakdown of communication already at the forefront of all relationship demise, today's world of technology, especially texting, is not only confusing but sabotaging those seeking love and true intimacy," she says.

"From misunderstood innuendos to the confusion of meaning behind one simple word, texting couples are falling in love, breaking up — even divorcing — when the opposite was the actual intention. It's time for people to go back to voice-to-voice, heart-to-heart and face-to-face communication."

URI instructor Boivin cites research published in the professional journal *Contemporary Family Therapy* documenting how Facebook and other social-media sites play a role in "facilitating infidelity." Statistics compiled by the American Academy of Matrimonial Lawyers show that a third of all divorce filings in 2011 contained the word Facebook — an increase from 20 percent in 2009.

So would every "cybercheater" have been betraying trust before the Internet? Boivin says there is no firm answer.

"In some ways the technology makes it much more accessible, much more affordable, much easier to do. You almost sort of [say to yourself] 'I'm not really cheating.' It's that idea that we do things incrementally and then we rationalize it — say it's OK. We all sort of have that ability to do that. We start doing this incrementally and then it's 'Well, I'm just talking on Facebook, rather than 'I'm not stopping at a bar to meet women or men.'"

The basic laws of human behavior — need, desire, satisfaction — remain.

"Those are all the same," she says, "but probably just magnified."

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