
Reviewed by Sarah Casey, Griffith University

Ilana Gershon, Assistant Professor in Communication and Culture, Indiana University, USA, was prompted to write *The Breakup 2.0: Disconnecting over New Media* after asking her students, ‘what counts as a bad breakup?’ Gershon identified responses alluding to mediated breakups (breakups communicated via text messages, email or Facebook, for example). Thus *The Breakup 2.0* centres around the construction and negotiation of relationship breakups managed via new technologies. Gershon discovered that although the outcome (the breakup) itself matters, the method is viewed as critical, and that, ‘breaking up face-to-face is widely regarded the ideal way to end a relationship’ (p.3). Gershon also found that while we are all still working out the ‘rules’ around such technologies, people often talked about the ‘appropriateness’ of using certain mediums for disconnecting relationships (p.22). For example, the formality or informality of the medium used to convey the message. As such, text messages were often ‘too informal for something as serious or important as a breakup’ (p.23). Gershon contends that the formality or informality of a medium is not inherent to the technology itself, rather this is determined by people’s media ideologies (p.23).

Over two years (2007–9), Gershon conducted ethnographic interviews with 72 (predominantly) college students to investigate breakups mediated via the abovementioned communicative technologies. She recruited 54 women and 18 men. The research project found that ‘the medium becomes part of what is being communicated’ (p.3). She discovered that while people assumed there were correct ways of breaking up, ‘there is not yet any widespread consensus about what those ways might be’ (p.8). Thus in the study she seeks to elucidate the ‘different media ideologies and different idioms of practice that people brought to breaking up in non-face-to-face ways’ (p.8). Gershon did not explore why people breakup or appraise how people *should* breakup, but rather the premise of the book was to examine the ‘intersection between disconnection and the media people use to disconnect...what people say about mediated breakups as a starting point for understanding how people think about and use different media’ (p. 12). She investigated ways in which different media can both facilitate and limit communication.

To make sense of the ways contemporary relationships are often navigated through the world of various media, Gershon employs numerous ‘analytical tools’ to work through some of the ‘ethical dilemmas that arise’ (p.200). Thus she
traverses the ground of three key concepts: 'media ideologies', defined as 'a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning' (p.3); 'remediation', a concept she borrows and expands upon from Bolter and Grusin (1999, p.28) and which she describes as 'the ways that people interlink media, suggesting that people define everyday technology in terms of other communicative technologies available to them' (p.5); and 'idioms of practice' which express how 'people figure out how to use different media and often agree on the appropriate social uses of technology by asking advice and sharing stories with each other' (p.6) in the book. Throughout, she effectively communicates that technology both enables and limits communication; she attempts to use breakups as the vehicle through which to do so. Refreshingly, *The Breakup 2.0* is neither an uncritical celebration of so-called 'new' technologies, nor a dismissive moralising about them—or their users.

Interestingly, Gershon likens the technological performance of commitment demonstration (for example, 'making the relationship Facebook 'official'') to the 19th century tradition of giving pins. It is not the performative nature of relationships (or relationship breakups) that is novel; it is the technology that is (and which constantly changes). She argues that the 'newness of new media' can be understood during moments like breakups, as this is when 'communication is most fraught' (p.11). Furthermore, she reasons that breakups offer moments to assess certain ways of using particular mediums as this is when 'people were also laying the groundwork for shared understandings of how to use different media' (p.11). Gershon believes that 'over time, people's practices can change from being idioms to widely accepted practices' (p.48). Additionally she found that her interviews overturned stereotypes about the 'youth of America' (p.12) with regard to new technologies, as many were 'very uneasy about how the media they use shape their social interactions' and were 'often nostalgic for the times that were B.F.' (p.12).

*The Breakup 2.0* highlights both space and distance between 'old' and 'new' media. While there is a temporality to any media, there is also agelessness to the situations Gershon describes, despite the increasingly public nature of relationships. As Baym and boyd argue, 'it is popular, yet too easy, to claim that everything is different in a world of Facebook and Twitter. Old practices and patterns continue to thrive in new media. However, social media blur boundaries between presence and absence, time and space, control and freedom, personal and mass communication, private and public' (2012, p.320). Gershon, in *The Breakup 2.0* captures such tensions well, and this is one of the book's strongest features.

The research for *The Breakup 2.0* involved a relatively small, and thus somewhat limited sample. The resulting book is repetitive at times and it appears—occasionally—as though the outcome of the study was exhausted halfway through the book. Yet it is also amusing and engaging (especially in the earlier parts). While the disconnections mediated via technology that Gershon relates in the book are between people, not between 'real' or the virtual worldly interactions (p.14), the book would have been further developed (that is, more interesting past the first few chapters) if it had combined a depth of accounts...
about the relationships as well as their demises with the stories of the technologies used in breaking up. Gershon’s non-moralising attitude toward both the technology and its users was a particular strength, as were the countless anecdotes and examples. I found myself nodding throughout the book to the types of narratives to which I could personally relate. I started examining my own idioms of practice as I was reading, especially with regard to the act of Facebook ‘defriending’ and potential offence, for example. The analytical framework set out by Gershon is helpful in comprehending the relatively new practices and challenges that technologies have brought to relationships. Overall, The Breakup 2.0 is an accessible, introductory academic work that could easily be classified as a clever crossover book.

The question of relevance remains with regard to The Breakup 2.0: Disconnecting over New Media, as the research was conducted in 2007-2008. Questions also arise about what has happened in ‘new’ technologies since its publication. By the time any book on social media is published, it is presumably in the process of relative redundancy (for example, Gershon’s study occurred when Facebook was predominantly used by US college students. A couple of years later Facebook considerably emerged and become much more public and mainstream). Similarly, Twitter is not included in the study, but it has experienced rapid growth more recently, and would have been an interesting inclusion or future study. Furthermore, as articulated by Robards, ‘the questions and assumptions that drive research around sociality in online social spaces must be continually revised’ (2012, p.387). While certainly not gathering dust a couple of years post-publication, at the time of The Breakup 2.0, Gershon assessed a part of the technological Zeitgeist in a way that was (and remains in parts) relevant—and readable—for students, interested users and academics of ‘new’ media.

Notes
1. B.F. refers to ‘before Facebook’.

References