



## IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives

**Chris Stedman**

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In the days before the 2020 presidential election, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote that “Facebook and Twitter have become giant engines for destroying the two pillars of our democracy—truth and trust.” These social networks, he says, “are destroying our nation’s cognitive immunity—its ability to sort truth from falsehood.”

Chilling words, but not surprising to anyone paying close attention to how the online world has infiltrated the daily lives of billions of people in such a short amount of time. But what exactly *is* happening in the minds of so many social media users to make preposterous lies and conspiracies appear reasonable? And why is the once noble search for truth suddenly so trivial?

In *IRL: Finding Realness, Meaning, and Belonging in Our Digital Lives*, Chris Stedman seeks to answer “what it means to be digital and to reframe our frustrating, fascinating, and fraught digital lives as a new opportunity to ask persistently difficult questions about what it means to be human.” The gay author of *Faithiest: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious*, and the founding executive director of the Yale Humanist Community, Stedman is at ease in the existential, both digitally and IRL (in real life). “If being an atheist studying religion taught me anything, it was to question. If growing up queer taught me anything, it was to question,” he writes, but refreshingly, he refuses to blame the internet for undermining his search for authenticity. “If anything, my social media use has helped me recognize this split between public and private self, and the fears and inclinations that underscore and bolster it, by making it more obvious to me.”

*IRL* is a fascinating contribution to this all-important conversation.

MATT SUTHERLAND (November / December 2020)

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