

CURTIS SILVER

## The Quagmire of Social Media Friendships

The explosive growth and burgeoning popularity of online social networking sites raise important questions about the ways we are redefining friendship. It is beyond dispute that these new technologies have reconfigured the ways we think about, talk to, and define our friends. Less clear, however, is whether these changes are for the better. Taking up this question, Curtis Silver shares his thoughts about the ways social media have eroded more traditional notions of friendship. Silver writes about technology and culture for *Technorati* and *Medium*, and is a frequent contributor to the *GeekDad* column for *Wired.com* where this essay appeared in 2012.

**U**P UNTIL ABOUT FIVE YEARS AGO I ONLY HAD A HANDFUL OF people that I would consider friends. These people knew me well, and I them. These were the kinds of people to help a guy move on short notice or jump your car in the rain. Now, times have changed and considering all the social networks I'm attached to, I have thousands of friends. I'm the most popular person in the world!

Until the reality of that thought crumbles, which tends to happen more often than not. Regardless of what we think or what our social media statistics indicate, as functioning humans we can only maintain a set number of actual relationships, straining what exactly a friend is. The best way to contemplate how many "friends" we can maintain and effectively care about in even the simplest sense is with Dunbar's number theory.

Dunbar's number is a cognitive theory that states that we can only maintain 150 "friendships" in social relationships. That is, the number of people we keep some sort of social contact with but does not include those we know personally with a dead social relationship (such as childhood friends we no longer have any contact with) or people we might know casually but don't maintain a social relationship [with]. These [exceptions] might produce a number much bigger than 150, and depend on our long-term memory.

Evolutionary psychologist and anthropologist Robin Dunbar came up with the theory back in the early 1990's during primate study. This behavioral study was quickly applicable to humans, as our social interactions can be pretty similar (in more ways than one, you crazy monkeys

you). More recently, the theory has been applied to social networks, [and the results suggest] that having an exponentially high number of Facebook friends means nothing as you can only maintain 150 social relationships.

I think that is a false assertion of Dunbar's number and doesn't take into account the constantly shifting nature of social networks. Not only that, but Dunbar's number was developed using personal, physical relationships rather than online ones. Online relationships are a different beast. However, I think that the theory itself, perhaps not the exact number, holds plenty of weight when applied to social relationships. First, we need to understand what these relationships really are. That means asking ourselves, what is a friend?

Author Anaïs Nin once said, "Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born." While people we maintain social relationships with are casually called "friends" on social sites. Some may be, but those cases would have other extenuating circumstances. According to the cosmically understood, Oxford dictionary definition of a friend, it is "a person with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically one exclusive of sexual or family relations."

The argument can be made that we have a mutual affection for everyone we interact with on a social network, but those mutual affections in most cases are quite minute and we're possibly grasping at tiny strings in order to justify the usage of the word "friend." For example, in ancient Greek both "friend" and "lover" were the same word, so it's under no slight amount of amazement that the concept of a friend has been debated across all disciplines of psychology. The advent of social networks has given us more "friends," yet at the same time has diminished true friendships.

According to a 2006 study in the journal *American Sociological Review*, Americans have been suffering a loss in number and quality of friendships since 1985. The study states that 25% of Americans have no close friends, and the average of that overall per person has dropped from four to two. Yet, at the same time we hop on Facebook and broadcast our personal business to the world at large. So what exactly does this mean? Does this mean we've lost the personal touch and no longer have any sense of privacy or confidence in confidants?

I think what it means is that we have friends, because we have too many acquaintances that we share too much with to keep them filed at such a base level. As we put more of our lives online, we bring the people

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in our networks up to a higher sociological level in our brains because we somehow feel they know us. Personally, I don't even start to classify someone as that until I've shaken their hand in person. While there are plenty of people online that I'd loosely consider a "friend" the harsh truth is that they are ghosts in the machine.

Because to me, friendship is what its philosophical definition suggests. Friendship is "a distinctively personal relationship that is grounded in a concern on the part of each friend for the welfare of the other, for the other's sake, and that involves some degree of intimacy." To put it bluntly, a friend is someone who cares about you: Not just the fact that you exist, but the fact they contribute to your existence and the quality of your existence. In that, "friend" is still reserved for a biological response, rather than a social one. Yet, our online friends elicit similar emotional responses. So in effect, the word "friend" has split into two definitions of itself, one being in the classical sense, the other being in the modern social sense.

My friend (in the classical sense, having worked together for several years) Stephen put it quite eloquently on a Facebook response:

It's a folksy attempt by Big Social to convince us we all are really friends and that this is something we need to feel wanted (and in turn, something Big Social needs for ad clicks and return visits). But it could just be an outdated term that hasn't been changed when the paradigm of a web only contact was introduced; the resultant being a web only "friend" becoming included under the "Friend" banner by default. When Facebook introduced things like Subscriptions and Acquaintances, we can now delineate between a real friend and just some person we chat with. However, a lot of people just won't know how to keep perspective on which is which (simply because they don't care and just really want that sense of belonging, even if it's a lie).

So now that we've basically defined a friend, let's go back to Dunbar's number and apply it to social relationships. I believe we have to look at each social network differently, but still generally. As an aside, Dunbar himself did consult Facebook back in 2010 in relation to his work on the theory. With the exception of celebrities on social networks, I think that 150 is like an IP

address that changes every time you connect to the internet. Think of it like a sliding scale with thousands of data points on it, and the slider contains 150 points. It slides up and down the scale depending on interaction. There are some folks on Twitter I go weeks without talking to, then suddenly we're back and forth all week.

In the modern definition of it, we can't [help but] say that everyone that we interact with are friends. In truth, and I credit LinkedIn with popularizing this term, they are connections. They are our audience and

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we theirs. Outside of business, social media is a stage and every single one of us is on our stage interacting with the crowd, which we are also in. It's very metaphysical. Social media has created a new sociological definition of existence and really needs to be studied further, because as time goes on it's just going to go deeper and deeper into sociological and psychological territory.

Here is where it is already getting tricky. Because of how casual social media "friendships" are, and our general nature of interaction, actual physical encounters have been affected. Those of us who are inundated in social media tend to carry over that causal attitude when we meet new people, whether they be quick encounters or new co-workers. There is less trepidation and that period of base nervousness when meeting new people in the physical realm. On one hand, this has made talking to people easier and strangely less awkward. On the other hand, it's created a comfortability with strangers that shouldn't exist. Because when it comes down to it, anyone we don't know on a personal level is nothing more than a stranger.

Yet at the same time, that's when the Dunbar number slider slides over to include in that 150 people you are interacting with in your physical life. Think about when you are buried in work or other physical interactions, your social media interactions decrease. That's because that slider has slid off the social media and into your physical life.

Here's what some of my "friends" had to say on the subject. Actually, two of these people are actual real "I can count on" friends in my physical life.

"A friend is someone you can always trust. They are someone if you haven't seen in awhile you can always pick right up and talk like it was yesterday. A friend is always there for you no matter what. Someone you can be silly with and knows you inside and out . . . and still loves you. Ta da!"—Emily (via FB)

"People on social networks CAN be friends, but it's not automatic. A friend is someone who actually cares about you, & acts on it."—@jennywilliams

"Just as we've lost the distinction between 'want' and 'need', we've also lost the distinction between 'acquaintance' and 'friend.'"—@tmoney941

"Friend & Like are sadly bastardized in today's world. Is Friend better than Follower (or minion) to define the new abstract?"—@endashes

The new abstract is a good definer of what a friend is these days. We call them all friends because we have nothing else to call them that relays the same emotional attachment, even if it's not sincere or totally real. But, as evidenced by the quote from another of my connections below, "friend" in the social media age is still being defined.

"I call you my friend, but my wife says you don't count cuz we've never met IRL."—@timlav

## DISCUSSION

1. As the title suggests, the essay addresses its critique toward social media in general. Can you think of a specific example of such media that illustrates the points Silver is making here? How does this example exemplify the ways social media have more broadly reshaped our definitions of friendship? In your opinion, have these changes been for better or worse? How?
2. To support his argument, Silver cites the theory of evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar. What does his reference to this theory contribute to Silver's overall argument? Do you agree that a theory originally applied to primates can be transferred to a discussion of human interaction and social media?
3. One possible counterargument to Silver's critique of social media is to see online technologies as instruments or aids for creating closer and more meaningful connections rather than a "quagmire" in which such connections get confused and lost. Is it valid to think of the virtual connections we forge online as a supplement to the actual connections we forge face to face? And if so, how might this impact the overall effectiveness of Silver's argument?

## WRITING

4. For Silver, online relationships will always exist as an inferior or incomplete version of friendship that can be fulfilled only through face-to-face contact: "Personally, I don't even start to classify someone as that until I've shaken their hand in person. While there are plenty of people online that I'd loosely consider a 'friend' the harsh truth is that they are ghosts in the machine" (p. 446). Write an essay in which you assess the key claims Silver makes here. Do you agree that online friendship represents a merely "ghostly" version of actual friendships? How or how not?
5. Silver writes: "To put it bluntly, a friend is someone who cares about you. Not just the fact that you exist, but the fact they contribute to your existence and the quality of your existence" (p. 446). In a brief essay, analyze and assess the definition of friendship presented here. What's the difference between a friend who only "cares about the fact you exist" and one who "contribute[s] to the quality of your existence"? Is this distinction part of your own definition of friendship?
6. Peter Lovenheim (p. 458) is another writer interested in exploring the ways modern American culture might be fostering habits of social and emotional disconnection. Write an essay in which you speculate about how Lovenheim might respond to the argument Silver is advancing about "the quagmire of social media friendship." Do you think Lovenheim would find much commonality between this argument and the portrait of contemporary neighbor relations his essay presents? How or how not?

## EVGENY MOROZOV

## Open and Closed

In our increasingly wired world, it's become an article of faith that more openness is always better than less, that greater and greater degrees of transparency will automatically improve our dealings with each other. But is it possible that we have embraced this ideal a little too enthusiastically? Are there situations in which — prevailing wisdom notwithstanding — it's actually better to be more closed than open, more opaque than transparent? Outlining just this contrarian view, Evgeny Morozov makes a spirited case for the importance, indeed the necessity, of *untransparency*. Morozov is a contributing editor at the *New Republic* and has written extensively about digital culture. His writings have appeared in such publications as the *New York Times*, the *Economist*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. He is the author of two books, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom* (2011) and *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (2013). The essay below was published in the *New York Times* in 2013.

❗ CAN 3D PRINTING BE SUBVERSIVE?" ASKS A VOICE IN THE CREEPIEST

Internet video you'll be likely to watch this month. It's a trailer for Defcad.com, a search engine for 3D-printable designs for things "institutions and industries have an interest in keeping from us," including "medical devices, drugs, goods, guns."

The voice belongs to Cody Wilson, a law student in Texas who last year founded Defense Distributed, a controversial initiative to produce a printable "wiki weapon." With Defcad, he is expanding beyond guns, allowing, say, drone enthusiasts to search for printable parts.

Mr. Wilson plays up Defcad's commitment to "openness," the latest opiate of the (iPad-toting) masses. Not only would Defcad's search engine embrace "open source"—the three-minute trailer says so twice—but it would also feature "open data." With so much openness, Defcad can't possibly be evil, right?

One doesn't need to look at projects like Defcad to see that "openness" has become a dangerously vague term, with lots of sex appeal but barely any analytical content. Certified as "open," the most heinous and suspicious ideas suddenly become acceptable. Even the Church of Scientology boasts of its "commitment to open communication."

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