

FRIENDS, "FRIENDS," AND FACEBOOK

by Karl Stephan¹

Last week, a lady named Sal who uses the social-networking website called Facebook showed a group of older professors (including yours truly) how the system works, what her own site looks like, and answered questions about it. Someone asked her how interactions with students through Facebook compares to dealing with them live and in person. She said some students will tell her things on her "wall" or in private messages on Facebook, that they would never mention in person. She finds that these students are rather more awkward socially than otherwise, but can open up and be quite interesting online.

This experience comes on the heels of an article by Christine Rosen, a senior editor at The New Atlantis, which is a quarterly devoted to issues of technology, ethics, and society. Rosen writes that friendship, a kind of personal interaction which has not fared that well in the modern era in the first place, may be suffering further decline as people trade the risks and uncertainties of face-to-face relationships for the reliability and controllability of online connections. If you tire of a person who's sitting in your room, we have not yet gotten to the point where you can acceptably say, "Go away, I'd rather not see you right now." But if you're reading your latest wall entries or your latest statistics on how many "friends" you have on Facebook, you can quit and do something else at any time and nobody else is the wiser-or gets their feelings hurt, either.

Facebook, of course, is a for-profit enterprise, and they are doing pretty much everything they can to increase the number of users beyond the current 34 million or so worldwide reported on Wikipedia. So it's understandable that the system is biased to encourage quantity of connections rather than quality. We've all known people who seem to collect relationships as others collect stamps or matchbook covers. To such people, you count mainly as a number, not as a unique individual.

To a computer, everybody counts only as a number, and that is only one way that computer-mediated interactions tempt us to objectify other people. If I know Joe Schmo mainly as a particular bizarre emoticon with a peculiar expression, the next time I think of Joe Schmo, the first thing that is likely to come to mind is that weird emoticon, not a living, breathing human being with his own history, likes, dislikes, hopes, and fears. But it was Joe who chose that emoticon, and for all I know, he likes for me to associate it with him, just as certain dramatic personalities in the past went around wearing capes and waxed moustaches for effect. In a larger and larger

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marketplace of potential friends, people will adopt more and more attention-grabbing disguises in order to get any traffic at all.

So in one sense, there is nothing new going on here. The reality of social networks-the thing you can diagram by writing names on a big sheet of paper and drawing lines between any two people who know each other-has been around since before history began. For people who get charged up by social interaction, joining Facebook may be like putting wings on a wildcat. For those of us (myself included) whose main sensation after meeting a boatload of new people is usually just a headache, Facebook's attractions may be harder to grasp. But for everybody who uses it, whether they're out simply to increase their number of friends or whether they are seeking the deepest and most profound relationship possible, the fact that their interactions on it are mediated by technology set up a certain way, will slant the nature of all those relationships in a way that favors quantity over quality.

There will be some people who try to abuse the system: stalkers, con artists, and so on, though according to Sal, Facebook is notably free of most such problems so far. And there will be more people who simply overuse it, like the students who neglect their homework and crash university servers when they buzz around on Facebook for hours upon end. But like the Internet itself, Facebook does put more people in touch with each other, in some fashion, than would otherwise be the case, or at least it looks that way so far.

All the same, I wonder whether someone like C. S. Lewis would have found much of a use for Facebook. As a student at Oxford he was fond of meeting a few intimate friends, nearly always male, with whom he would go on long walks in the hills and forests, discussing anything and everything, from what kinds of clothes they were made to wear when they were boys to the meaning of life. He also wrote letters, but it is clear from the journal he kept as a young man that the heart and soul of his friendships (many of which he maintained through most of his life) was conversation: sitting in a room together and talking. In a time when telephoning was mainly local and telegrams were used only when needed, he clearly regarded letters, phone calls, and other means of communicating with those not present as secondary substitutes for the real thing. I can't help but think that there is some deep preset bias in the human being that favors in-person conversation over all other forms. These other forms can be learned, used to mutual benefit, and abused as well. But if a person begins to prefer them over being in the same room with someone else, I also can't help but think that something is awry.²

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Source: www.engineeringethicsblog.blogspot.com

² **Sources:** Rosen's article "Virtual Friendship and the New Narcissism" appears in the Summer 2007 issue of *The New Atlantis*, p. 15. C. S. Lewis's journal of the 1920s was edited by Walter Hooper and published as *All My Road Before Me* (HarperCollins, 1991).