

Facebook: How Has Social Networking Changed How We Relate to Others?

Lauren Tarshis

Lauren Tarshis is the editor of two magazines, Storyworks and Scope, both published by Scholastic. She is also the author of two novels. We reprint an essay from Scope, a classroom magazine geared to the middle grades, published September 5, 2011.

Is Facebook Making You Mean?

Anna* did not think she was being mean. Not really.

She was taking a break from her homework, checking her Facebook page. Maya, a girl she knew from her seventh-grade class, had posted a photo of herself from a recent trip to Disney World. She was standing with Mickey Mouse. Dozens of kids had commented on the picture. The first few comments beneath the photo were sweet.

"Cute!"

"OHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!"

By the third or fourth comment, the tone had changed.

"Nice boyfriend!"

"You're dating?"

"I thought it was kind of funny," Anna remembers. "And so many people had written stuff."

So almost without thinking, Anna typed in a comment of her own: "ummmmm. . . ew?"

Then she moved on, thinking nothing more about Maya and Mickey. 10

The next day, Anna was called to the assistant principal's office. She stood in shock as the guidance counselor showed her a printout of all the comments on Maya's picture.

*Names and identifying details have been changed.

Maya had been so distraught over the comments that she stayed home from school that day. Her mom had called the principal. And now every kid who had posted a joking or sarcastic comment was being called to the office one by one.

Anna was completely confused. "It was just two words," she says.

JOKES THAT GO TOO FAR

Rude comments and insensitive jokes have always been part of the middle school (and adult!) world. But experts say that Facebook and other forms of online communication make the problem worse. One of the most important ways in which we communicate with each other is through subtle emotional signals—your best friend's blush when you mention a girl he likes, the flash of anger in your mother's eyes when you say you'll take out the garbage *later*. Over the phone, we can hear a change in a person's tone, or the ominous pause that sends a message to back off. Online communication takes all of these signals away.

"You don't see the impact of what you write," says Beth Yohe, an ¹⁵ associate director for the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which runs antibullying programs around the country.

This goes not only for jokes and snide comments like Anna's, but also for more hostile behavior. Devon, thirteen, says that not long ago, a friend lashed out at her in a Facebook post. "He said that I had spread rumors about him," Devon explains. "I never did. But he wouldn't stop writing it." The posts, written in all capital letters and punctuated by endless exclamation points, made it seem like he was screaming in her face.

Devon says the boy is a quiet kid, "always really sweet." She points out that lots of kids act differently on Facebook than they do in person. "I guess because I wasn't right there," she says, "he just let it all out."

REACHING ACROSS WALLS

So does this mean that Facebook is all about hurt feelings and wounded egos?

Not at all. The online world has powerful benefits, especially for kids who find it hard to make friends at school. "These kids can find whole communities online where they feel comfortable," says Yohe.

Online, kids will reach across social boundaries—the invisible walls ²⁰ that often separate one group of friends from another. Aaron, twelve, says that his 459 Facebook friends include kids he doesn't talk to much at school. "We get to know each other better on Facebook," he says.

Studies support the idea that Facebook can help kids build positive connections. Researchers at the University of Virginia found that the majority of kids use Facebook to build solid friendships and to spread positive messages. But what about those "ummmmm . . . ews?" and other comments that are hurtful or embarrassing?

Experts say that just as teens have to learn how to manage more demanding schoolwork and greater responsibilities at home, they also need to learn how to behave more sensitively online. The bottom line: Think before you post. That can be difficult to do, considering that you're probably on Facebook while simultaneously doing homework, watching your little sister, and eyeing the finals of *American Idol*. But the words you post, typed with barely a thought, are out in the world forever.

As schools crack down on all forms of negative online behavior, many are taking steps to help kids learn to avoid problems online. Some, for example, offer in school workshops like the ADL's CyberALLY, which Yohe directs.

In the meantime, some kids, like Anna, are learning through experience. The day she was called to the principal's office, she apologized to Maya.

In person.

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TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. Do you regard the comments that are quoted in the first few paragraphs as mean—or perhaps merely as acceptable attempts to be amusing? That is, do you think Maya may have overreacted? Explain.
2. Do you think Facebook is making *you* mean? Do you say things that you might not say face to face? If the answer is "Yes," is this always a bad thing? A related question: Is Facebook *making* you mean, or merely allowing your mean nature to express itself?
3. The final paragraph consists of only two words. Is this ending effective? Why, or why not?

Steven Levy

Steven Levy, born in 1951, earned his bachelor's degree at Temple University and a master's degree at Pennsylvania State University. Formerly a senior editor at Newsweek, he now writes for Wired, where in 2011 he published the piece that we reprint. Levy's most recent book is In the Plex: How Google Thinks, Works, and Shapes Our Lives (2011).

Facebook Reset

When Facebook first appeared, the issue of "to friend or not to friend" didn't seem worth sweating over. After all, it wasn't like this college-born networking service was central to your life or anything. Only now, for many of us, it pretty much is. And for too many of its half a billion active users, that carelessly assembled cohort known as the friend list has become a monster.

The list is the gateway through which people observe our major life events, casual musings, physical peregrinations, and crop yields on FarmVille. As Facebook engineers add more features, the friend list becomes ever more critical. But because most of us began assembling it with little sense of its eventual importance, we often accepted requests out of impulse, inertia, or obligation. And sometimes we asked others for Facebook friendship out of idle curiosity or a temporary need to see a photo. Or we just clicked the wrong box.

I propose that Facebook grant us a friend-list do-over. Like most people, I desperately need one: At this point, my collection resembles the contents of a house occupied by a hoarder. I make my way past heaps of classmates, overfriendly PR people, and folks whose amusing conversations in hotel bars led to morning-after friend requests. Open a closet and out tumble a Chinese poet, sources from stories I wrote for now-defunct publications, and one of my son's high-school friends with whom he hasn't spoken in years. Trying to find the front door, I trip over the mashup artist Girl Talk, whom I met once in Pittsburgh. Meanwhile, many of my best friends and closest business contacts aren't even in the house.

Here's how we fix it: On a designated day, everybody's friend list is reset to zero. This goes beyond efforts like National Unfriend Day. I'm suggesting Facebook let us wipe the slate totally clean and start over. Then we can refill the coordinates of our respective social graphs only with appropriate people. Facebook would present us with a list of current contacts, allowing us to reinvite those we want to keep with a single click. We could also import contacts from other services—web-mail, calendars, social sites—to round out our modified lists. In return, Facebook would agree to let us export our friend list to other services (thus saving the company from what looks to be an inevitable demand for government regulation if it insists on anticompetitive friend-hoarding).

True, the days following the reset might be stressful; some of our requests might not be reciprocated. But we would also get a whole lot of invites from others, many of whom may well be important people in our lives whom we never thought of as Facebook buddies. A reset would also be a bonanza for Facebook, as any remaining nonmembers would be flooded with invites.

To soften the blow of rejection, everyone would have the chance to post a "statement of friending principles" that would provide a rationale for jilting. Mine would explain that my new standards limit my list to people I actually recognize in person, or at least those with whom I've corresponded. (Exceptions for Girl Talk and other rock stars.) I would also sketch out parameters for requesters: If you beat me up in fifth grade, don't expect a good outcome.

If all went well, our friend lists would much more closely reflect those we want to talk to and be poked by. I propose July 4 for the Great

Facebook Mulligan.¹ It's a perfect day to declare independence from the temporary connections that have become eternal social millstones and to link instead to our true compatriots. Everybody in?

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. In his first paragraph Levy says Facebook has become "central" to our lives. Is it central to your life? Explain.
2. Do you favor Levy's proposal for a "friend-list do-over" (para. 3), a "reset to zero" (para. 4)? Explain.

Jenna Wortham

Jenna Wortham, a graduate of the University of Virginia, is a technology reporter for the New York Times, where the following essay appeared in 2012.

It's Not about You, Facebook. It's about Us.

This month, when Facebook filed to go public, its employees cracked open the Champagne. But I had a flashback—a memory of a two-year-old fight with a good friend.

I was upset over some comments he had posted to my Facebook wall, beneath a status update about a particularly cheesy pop song I was obsessed with at the time. We argued in a flurry of instant messages. He insisted that his remarks were made in good humor, while I was sure that he was making fun of me.

Our bickering became so heated that he furiously typed "I hate Facebook!" and signed off.

We eventually got over it, and the absurdity of the flare-up still embarrasses me. Yet this kind of misunderstanding seems all too common. As our social life migrates to the Web, our emotions move online, too. Simple remarks may seem to be loaded with deeper meanings.

I'm the first one to confess my undying love of the Web's rich culture and community, which is deeply embedded in my life. But that feud with a friend forced me to consider that the lens of the Web might be warping my perspective and damaging some important relationships.

And, lately, Facebook has begun creeping ever deeper into the texture of life, rolling out new features and partnerships that help bind it even more tightly to the fabric that keeps us connected. This has alarmed some people, convincing them that it's time to pull the plug and forgo the service altogether.

¹Mulligan, in games, a second chance to perform a move. [Editor's note.]

Many of us are ambivalent about our Facebook relationship. Even though we may occasionally feel that we can't live with Facebook, we also haven't been able to figure out how to live without it.

The degree of this codependency may have no parallel. "I can't think of another piece of passive software that has gotten so embedded in the cultural conversation to this extent before," says Sherry Turkle, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and author of *Alone Together*. "This company is reshaping how we think about ourselves and define ourselves and our digital selves."

The symbiotic relationship between Facebook and its users came into sharp focus when the company filed for its initial public offering, revealing just how valuable that codependency is. The intimate details uploaded into the site daily have helped create a company that could be worth as much as \$100 billion.

Not everyone was comfortable with that revelation, but beneath the 10 backlash, Professor Turkle said, loomed a larger struggle: users coming to terms with the Web's evolution from a free-wheeling Wild West into a mature marketplace where the currency, personal data, will finance and fuel the next generation of products and services.

"It crystallized a set of issues that we will be defining for the next decade—the notion of self, privacy, how we connect, and the price we're willing to pay for it," she said. "We have to decide what boundaries we're going to establish between ourselves, advertisers, and our personal information."

That quandary is not confined to Facebook. Every social media company, like Twitter and Instagram, a mobile photo-sharing application, and Foursquare, a location-based service, will have to introduce a coherent business model—most likely one that will make use of what it knows about the people who have access to and use its service.

In a way, it's a coming-of-age for the first offspring of the social Web, a generation of companies that are outgrowing their scrappy start-up roots and turning their sites into actual businesses.

Will the relationship between Facebook and its users change after the company goes public? It's not clear that the perception of Google shifted after it went public in 2004. But the Web was very different then.

"There wasn't the same personal connection to Google that there is 15 to Facebook," says Susan Etlinger, a research analyst who advises companies on how to use technology.

Google's original functions were less intimate than Facebook's. "Search," she says, "is more obscure than social networking."

By contrast, those who upload their vacation photos, post updates about their weekends, share the songs they're listening to, and "like" their favorite designers and television shows may have a sense of ownership of these materials that doesn't come into the picture with a simple Web search.

"It's a dynamic that is bred by the very nature of social media because users are the sources of the content," said S. Shyam Sundar, codirector of the Media Effects Research Laboratory at Pennsylvania State University, who studies how people interact with social media. "Users feel like they have a sense of agency, like they are shareholders."

Facebook, and those that come after it, will have the tough task of balancing their users' needs with the demands of shareholders. And, as Facebook evolves into a sustainable business, the trick will be making sure that users don't cool on its tactics. That could be devastating to the company's main source of revenue—showing advertisements to its members based on what it knows about them.

But most are skeptical that it will get to that point.

"There's a long way to go before that happens," said Andrew Frank, an analyst at Gartner Research. "The size of their user base and the amount of time people spend on the site is so far off the charts."

Even so, Mr. Frank said Facebook might not be impervious to rivals, or at least to more divided attention from people who shift their time to other parts of the Web where intent is easier to understand and the interactions feel less public.

Facebook's current prominence may not last forever. Today, Mr. Frank said, Facebook seems a permanently dominant player on the Web. But, he adds, "There was a time where people thought that way about AOL, too."

TOPICS FOR CRITICAL THINKING AND WRITING

1. In the first four paragraphs Wortham reports an embarrassing episode in which a friend was for a while estranged. Do you think this sort of thing is especially common on Facebook, or, on the other hand, does this sort of thing happen equally on the telephone or even in face-to-face encounters? Explain.
2. In paragraph 8, Wortham quotes Sherry Turkle about Facebook: "This company is reshaping how we think about ourselves and define ourselves and our digital selves." Your view? Explain.

Stephen Marche

Stephen Marche, born in 1976, has written essays, stories, and a novel. We reprint an essay that was originally published in the Atlantic in May 2012. You can friend Marche on Facebook or follow him on Twitter.

Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?

Yvette Vickers, a former *Playboy* playmate and B-movie star, best known for her role in *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*, would have been