

Facebook Friendonomics

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Hey, want to be my friend? It's more than possible; it's probable. Hell, we may already be friends—I haven't checked my email in a few minutes. And once we are, we will be, as they say, 4-eva. A perusal of my Facebook Friend roster reveals that I, a medium-social individual of only middling lifetime popularity, have never lost a friend. They're all there: elementary school friends, high school friends, college friends, work friends, friends of friends, friends of ex-girlfriends—the constellation of familiar faces crowds my Friendbox like medals on Mussolini's chest. I'm Friend-rich—at least onscreen. I've never lost touch with anyone, it seems. What I've lost is the right to lose touch. This says less about my innate lovability, I think, than about the current inflated state of Friendonomics.

Think of it as the Long Tail of Friendship—in the age of queue-able social priorities, Twitter-able status updates, and amaranthine cloud memory, keeping friends requires almost no effort at all. We have achieved Infinite Friendspace, which means we need never drift from old pals nor feel the poignant tug of passive friend-loss. It also means that even the flimsiest of attachments—the chance convention buddy, the cube-mate from the '90s, the bar-napkin hookup—will be preserved, in perpetuity, under the flattering, flattening banner of "Friend." (Sure, you can rank and categorize them to your heart's content, but who'd be callous enough to actually categorize a hookup under "Hookup"?)

It has been argued that this Infinite Friendspace is an unalloyed good. But while this plays nicely into our sentimental ideal of lifelong friendship, it's having at least three catastrophic effects. First, it encourages hoarding. We squirrel away Friends the way our grandparents used to save nickels—obsessively, desperately.

as if we'll run out of them some day. (Of course, they lived through the Depression. And we lived through—what, exactly? Middle school? 90210? The Electric Slide?) Humans are natural pack rats, and given the chance we'll stockpile anything of nominal value. Friends are the currency of the socially networked world; therefore, it follows that more equals better. But the more Friends you have, the less they're worth—and, more to the point, the less human they are. People become mere collectibles, like Garbage Pail Kids. And call me a buzz kill, but I don't want to be anyone's Potty Scotty.

Second, Friending has subsumed the ol' Rolodex. Granted, it's often convenient to have all of your contacts under one roof. But the great thing about the Rolodex was that it never talked back, it didn't throw virtual octopi or make you take movie quizzes, and it never, ever poked you. The Rolodex just sat there. It was all business.

Third, and most grave, we've lost our right to lose touch. "A friend may well be reckoned the masterpiece of Nature," Emerson wrote, not bothering to add, "and like most things natural, friendship is biodegradable." We scrawl "Friends Forever" in yearbooks, but we quietly realize, with relief, that some bonds are meant to be shed, like snakeskin or a Showtime subscription. It's nature's way of allowing you to change, adapt, evolve, or devolve as you wish—and freeing you from the exhaustion of multifront friend maintenance. Fine, you can "Remove Friend," but what kind of monster actually does that? Deletion is scary—and, we're told, unnecessary in the Petabyte Age. That's what made good old-fashioned losing touch so wonderful—friendships, like long-forgotten photos and mix-tapes, would distort and slowly whistle into oblivion, quite naturally, nothing personal. It was sweet and sad and, though you'd rarely admit it, necessary.

And maybe that's the answer: A Facebook app we'll call the Fade Utility. Untended Friends would gradually display a sepia cast on the picture, a blurring of the neglected profile—perhaps a coffee stain might appear on it or an unrelated phone number or grocery list. The individual's status updates might fade and get smaller. The user may then choose to notice and reach out to the person in some meaningful way—no pokes! Or they might pretend not to notice. Without making a choice, they could simply let that person go. Would that really be so awful?

I realize that I may lose a few Friends by saying this. I invite them to remove me. Though I think they'll find it harder than they imagine. I've never lost a Friend, you see, and I'm starting to worry I never will.

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