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# How Facebook Ruins Friendships

By ELIZABETH BERNSTEIN



Notice to my friends: I love you all dearly.

But I don't give a hoot that you are "having a busy Monday," your child "took 30 minutes to brush his teeth," your dog "just ate an ant trap" or you want to "save the piglets." And I really, really don't care which Addams Family member you most resemble. (I could have told you the answer before you took the quiz on Facebook.)

Here's where you and I went wrong: We took our friendship online. First we began communicating more by email than by phone. Then we switched to "instant messaging" or "texting." We "friended" each other on Facebook, and began communicating by "tweeting" our thoughts—in 140 characters or less—via Twitter.

All this online social networking was supposed to make us closer. And in some ways it has. Thanks to the Internet, many of us have gotten back in touch with friends from high school and college, shared old and new photos, and become better acquainted with some people we might never have grown close to offline.

Last year, when a friend of mine was hit by a car and went into a coma, his friends and family were able to easily and instantly share news of his medical progress—and send well wishes and support—thanks to a Web page his mom created for him.

But there's a danger here, too. If we're not careful, our online interactions can hurt our real-life relationships.

Like many people, I'm experiencing Facebook Fatigue. I'm tired of loved ones—you know who you are—who claim they are too busy to pick up the phone, or even write a decent email, yet spend hours on social-media sites, uploading photos of their children or parties, forwarding inane quizzes, posting quirky, sometimes nonsensical one-liners or tweeting their latest whereabouts. ("Anyone know a good restaurant in Berlin?")

One of the big problems is how we converse. Typing still leaves something to be desired as a communication tool; it lacks the nuances that can be expressed by body language and voice inflection. "Online, people can't see the yawn," says Patricia Wallace, a psychologist at Johns Hopkins University's Center for Talented Youth and author of "The Psychology of the Internet."

But let's face it, the problem is much greater than which tools we use to communicate. It's what we are actually saying that's really mucking up our relationships. "Oh my God, a college friend just updated her Facebook status to say that her 'teeth are itching for a flossing!'" shrieked a friend of mine recently. "That's gross. I don't want to hear about what's going on inside her mouth."

That prompted me to check my own Facebook page, only to find that three of my pals—none of whom know each other—had the exact same status update: "ZZZZZZ." They promptly put me to "zzzzzz."

This brings us to our first dilemma: Amidst all this heightened chatter, we're not saying much that's interesting, folks. Rather, we're breaking a cardinal rule of companionship: Thou Shalt Not Bore Thy Friends.

"It's called narcissism," says Matt Brown, a 36-year-old business-development manager for a chain of hair salons and spas in Seattle. He's particularly annoyed by a friend who works at an auto dealership who tweets every time he sells a car, a married couple who bicker on Facebook's public walls and another couple so "mooshy-gooshy" they sit in the same room of their house posting love messages to each other for all to see. "Why is your life so frickin' important and entertaining that we need to know?" Mr. Brown says.

### *'I Just Ate a Frito Pie'*

Gwen Jewett, for her part, is sick of meal status updates. "A few of my friends like to post several times a day about what they are eating: 'I just ate a Frito pie.' 'I am enjoying a double hot-fudge sundae at home tonight.' 'Just ate a whole pizza with sausage, peppers and double cheese,'" says the 49-year-old career coach in suburban Dallas. "My question is this: If we didn't call each other on the phone every time we ate before, why do we need the alerts now?"

For others, boredom isn't the biggest challenge of managing Internet relationships. Consider, for example, how people you know often seem different online—not just gussied up or more polished, but bolder, too, displaying sides of their personalities you have never seen before.

Alex Gilbert, 27, who works for a nonprofit in Houston that teaches creative writing to kids, is still puzzling over an old friend—"a particularly masculine-type dude"—who plays in a heavy-metal band and heads a motorcycle club yet posts videos on Facebook of "uber cute" kittens. "It's not fodder for your real-life conversation," Mr. Gilbert says. "We're not going to get together and talk about how cute kittens are."

James Hills discovered that a colleague is gay via Facebook, but he says that didn't bother him. It was after his friend joined groups that cater to hairy men, such as "Furball NYC," that he was left feeling awkward. "This is something I just didn't need to know," says Mr. Hills, who is 32 and president of a marketing firm in Elgin, Ill. "I'd feel the same way if it was a straight friend joining a leather-and-lace group."

And then there's jealousy. In all that information you're posting about your life—your vacation, your kids, your promotions at work, even that margarita you just drank—someone is bound to find something to envy. When it comes to relationships, such online revelations can make breaking up even harder to do.

"Facebook prolongs the period it takes to get over someone, because you have an open window into their life, whether you want to or not," says Yianni Garcia of New York, a consultant who helps companies use social media. "You see their updates, their pictures and their relationship status."

Mr. Garcia, 24, felt the sting of Facebook jealousy personally last spring, after he split up with his boyfriend. For a few weeks, he continued to visit his ex's Facebook page, scrutinizing his new friends. Then one day he discovered that his former boyfriend had blocked him from accessing his profile.

Why? "He said he'd only 'unfriended' me to protect himself, because if someone flirted with me he would feel jealous," Mr. Garcia says.

Facebook can also be a mecca for passive-aggressive behavior. "Suddenly, things you wouldn't say out loud in conversation are OK to say because you're sitting behind a computer screen," says Kimberly Kaye, 26, an arts writer in New York. She was surprised when friends who had politely discussed health-care reform over dinner later grew much more antagonistic when they continued the argument online.

Just ask Heather White. She says her college roommate at the University of Georgia started an argument over text about who should clean their apartment. Ms. White, 22, who was home visiting her parents at the time, asked her friend to call her so they could discuss the issue. Her friend never did.

A few days later, Ms. White, who graduated in May, updated her Facebook status, commenting that her favorite country duo, Brooks & Dunn, just broke up. Almost immediately, her roommate responded, writing publicly on her wall: "Just like us." The two women have barely spoken since then.

### *Band-Aid Tactics*

So what's the solution, short of "unfriending" or "unfollowing" everyone who annoys you? You can use the "hide" button on Facebook to stop getting your friends' status updates—they'll never know—or use TwitterSnooze, a Web site that allows you to temporarily suspend tweets from someone you follow. (Warning: They'll get a notice from Twitter when you begin reading their tweets again.)

But these are really just Band-Aid tactics. To improve our interactions, we need to change our conduct, not just cover it up. First, watch your own behavior, asking yourself before you post anything: "Is this something I'd want someone to tell me?" "Run it by that focus group of one," says Johns Hopkins's Dr. Wallace.

And positively reward others, responding only when they write something interesting, ignoring them when they are boring or obnoxious. (Commenting negatively will only start a very public war.)

If all that fails, you can always start a new group: "Get Facebook to Create an Eye-Roll Button Now!"

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