

DIGITAL DEVALUATION

BY

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Everybody's concerned about the market valuation of digital—or technology—businesses, making *devaluation* disconcerting. Don't worry. This isn't about that. This devaluation is about the corrosion of our social lives by social networking businesses.

In an earlier poke at this phenomenon, I challenged the ubiquitous "Like" thumbs up. It's made manifest how we have all shrugged off a thank you in an "Aw shucks" way: "It's the least I could do." *Liking* is, in fact, the very least you can do short of nothing.

Now consider this. Facebook has "Friends;" LinkedIn has "Contacts;" Twitter has "Followers." To be charitable, the social networking businesses have expedited and shaped changes to word meaning that a living language naturally absorbs. Or, thanks to Facebook and LinkedIn neither *Friend* nor *Contact* means a damn thing. Which is unfortunate as it makes it harder to calibrate genuine interpersonal relationships.

Forget LinkedIn: *contact* was always a plastic business concept anyway, meaning anything from "I have dirt and he'll do what I want," to "I got her card at a trade show four years ago." Such connections have always been transactional, though a *contact* is hopefully valuable. In the mists of my memory, there was a time it was.

As for Twitter, it plays to the height of narcissism. Everybody wants Followers, presumably settling for twelve that are exceptionally dedicated. Years ago, Warhol gave everyone 15-minutes; social networking lets us take 15-followers. You have to hand it to Twitter: these are clever psychological hijinks just to create masses of users.

With Facebook's unrelenting pervasiveness, "Friending" is everywhere and enjoys the same fate as *Contacts*. Consider: there is a chance that you may ask and I may out-of-hand accept a Friend request though I know you not, because I — and my Friends — are keeping an eye on my tally.

Is that what friends are? *Of course not. We all know on Facebook there are Friends and then there are friends. We like Followers and get an ego jolt having relative strangers validate us. But we know our friends from our Friends.*

Is that so?

What about in real life? Am I the only one who expects civility among friends? Especially those with whom I've spent time, broken bread, been unholy drunk? Am I the only one who responds to my friends in their moment, assuming their appeals to be important to him/her (and thus near-important to me)? Or do I have friendships and Friendships all wrong?

Most of my life I've classified and redistributed true friends, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, coffee line 'hellos,' and so on as the strength and number of threads connecting us grows or dwindles. It provides perspective so my behavior toward and expectation of each and everyone can be appropriate.

Don't get me wrong. This is not a screed of personal hurt. I accept that Ockham's razor would say the reason this might happen to me is because I am arrogant and largely

unlikeable. But that doesn't hold when I see it happen to others not nearly as disagreeable as me. That is devaluation of friendship.

By robbing the word of meaning, the social network companies nudged people everywhere to be politicians and Mexicans talking to tourists: everyone — no matter how distant, how ephemeral the contact, how tenuous the connection — is an amigo. At least in these and similar situations we know its a job or a lie. To question that status daily, particularly friends, is just too much friction.

People themselves probably have not changed much. We have trouble maintaining two definitions. So our friends become our Friends, really and figuratively. Our real life relationships start to resemble social network connections. They take on the hue of public activity, happening as suits us and governed by our own need for validation.

Real friends come and go. Even BFFs — especially BFFs. That's life. Time and distance washes out friendships. Nostalgia lingers. But now everyone's a permanent *Contact* or *Follower* or, worst of all, *Friend*. Which social media's marketers have redefined as *audience*. So much is the pity and shame on you.

Because this change crept unnoticeably into daily life, pay attention and do yourself a favour. Don't confuse your friends with your Friends. Genuine friends may come and go, but audiences are a fickle bitch.

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