

A (NOT SO) FREE FACEBOOK

A brief analysis of modern communications
for use on the Generation SUNY Blog.

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FORWARD

When originally pressed with the SUNY-Central question, “Why is Facebook free?” I thought the answer from a financial standpoint was easy enough – put simply, the mass public subscription to Facebook allows it to be profitable as a social data analysis goldmine. More importantly Facebook, I’m certain, thrives upon the profit from companies using the service to market products with sidebar advertisements. The answer seems intuitive enough – to the public, Facebook is (and may remain forever) a financially free service, but to me the question demands further inquiry: “What are the hidden costs of mass public subscription to text-based communication services like Facebook?” I’d like to explore the relative freedom of Facebook and other text-based communication services with this question in mind.

Since this is the first stab I’ll take at intellectualizing the potential, societal ramifications of text-based communication services, I’ll start with a bit of personal history, a disclaimer and some ground rules.

History: I’m Nick. I’m a 31-year-old Assistant Professor of Cognitive Psychology at SUNY-Ulster. I’ve been on Facebook since April 21st, 2005 and frankly, I like it; though I don’t like everything about it.

Disclaimer: *There are plenty of good things about the mass availability of text-based communication services – we now have an opportunity to be connected to many people; we have the ability to live in, in some ways, a safer world because of constant connectivity; we can meet, network, and connect with people in ways previously unavailable. Also if used as a supplement to/starting place for face-to-face interactions, text-based means of communication have the capacity to provide varied and enhanced interactions among its users. There. I said it.*

Ground Rules:

1. I do not intend to cite a great deal of research here, but instead use this opportunity as a meta-analytical, if anecdotal, means of exploring the limited-emotional-connection costs and benefits of services like Facebook upon a society.
2. When you read “text-based communication services,” know I’m talking about texting, email, blogging, etc. for the purposes of this essay, I’ll refer to the whole gamut as “texting.”
3. It’s of some use to draw a distinction between the current text-based communication services and those of days gone by - like writing someone a letter. I won’t be discussing letter-writing here; because of the limited frequency of letters, personal-touch qualities and inherent time investment required, letter-writing doesn’t limit emotional connection altogether.

These days instead of text-based communication services acting as a supplement to social relationships, they are often, instead, primary modes of communication. In my opinion reliance upon these services as foundations for communication may have at least two important side effects. First, these services generally **speed** up communication and this, in turn, both increases expectations for the frequency of communication while decreasing the demand for any depth or breadth in the exchange. Second, it indirectly abates emotion by removing most of the direct **human factors** (e.g., the sound of a person's voice, body language, etc.) experienced in less high-speed means of communication (e.g., face-to-face chat, phone conversations, etc.). Taken together, it seems, the speed and lack of human factors inherent in text-based communication fail to make services like Facebook completely free. Instead, these factors have cost subscribers patience and emotional vulnerability, and this is having long-term ramifications. I'll explore each of these factors below.

SPEED

To really consider the cost of services like Facebook, it seems necessary to get to the root of much of Facebook's communication style: texting. It wasn't always faster to shoot someone a text. Really. It wasn't. When texting was introduced to the world, it wasn't immediately embraced, either (see Gallup, 2001); instead it was seen as tedious and only useful for business exchanges when other means were unavailable (Crystal, 2008). To me there are two interesting points to be made about the roots of texting. First, it is likely that the supposed tedium of texting was due not to the rudimentary qualities of first generation texting services (i.e., cell phones without full alphanumeric keypads) but, instead, because it placed a demand on the user to learn a new, less natural style of communication. Second, that the advent of texting was purposed to be inherently emotionless (e.g., "*It's just business*") lends itself to a better understanding of why it continues to be largely emotionless today. The troubling thing here is that these factors have been either overcome or embraced so completely that texting is now integral to the social world. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, by May 2013, more than 90% of Americans owned cell phones and 80% of those owners were engaged in texting (Raine, 2013). What's most startling, though, is since 2011, more than 31% of cell phone owners PREFER texting as their primary means of communication – remember, that statistic isn't exclusive to the 18-25 year old demographic (where estimates are considerably higher) and doesn't even consider what goes on with texting and the computer (Smith, 2011). And now with more advanced, user-friendly, text-based communication services like Facebook, even more people text. As a point of reference, Facebook now reports 1.11 billion people using the site each month, which has surely flourished in part to Facebook apps which integrate the service with a person's cell phone.

Indeed we have overcome the cumbersome fingering of the first generation texting services by introducing larger cell phones (remember when cells kept getting smaller and smaller?), re-imagining the flip phone and, most notably, teaching ourselves how to type with our thumbs and index fingers. Couple learning to type this way with the fluid advancement of quick-text language (e.g., *IM txting 4 u*), and you've got yourself a world

full of people who, of their own collective volition, decided to invent and learn a foreign language completely outside of the classroom, and that's no easy task. Learning to text fluently, like learning a new language, requires many memory modalities similar (but perhaps not as arduous to engage) to that a non-native would use to learn English as a second language – something consistently reported to be difficult. So, clearly, people wanted this thing to happen and, I'd imagine, all under the guise of *staying more connected*.

So sure, now communication is faster because we know how to text, and we're teaching younger generations the how-to's earlier and earlier. It's even faster now because our texting language is short-hand. But with all the efforts we've made to increase the frequency of communication we've also, as a necessary byproduct, increased our expectations for it, too. For communication to be *this* rapid, something had to give; and, with the way texting was introduced the give was, quite naturally: *emotionality* – this abatement was inherent in the original intentions for texting that is, business exchanges when other means were unavailable.

HUMAN FACTORS

Relative to matters-of-fact, emotion can be slow. So naturally it seems perfectly feasible to remove emotion from the equation in the world of quick communication, right? And like it or not, texting often does this bi-directionally (i.e., for both the sender and receiver), rather seamlessly. Not only does it remove many of the human factors from communication (i.e., voice, eye-contact, body language, pheromones, etc.) it requires each person in the exchange to indirectly interpret or ignore the emotional content necessarily inherent in nearly every other social exchange. This cognitive load puts capacity demands on the reader such that, if time is limited, emotionality is typically foregone simply to gather The facts.

To be clear, Lewandowski and Harrington (2006) asked 18-25 year old participants to provide commentary concerning how they felt about authors of letters/emails/other text-based forms of communication which contained either texting language (e.g., IM Gr8, How R U?) or standard English (I am great, How are you?). Overwhelmingly so, authors who used texting language in their writing were thought to be putting forth less effort in communication and, more importantly, having a less favorable personality. Specifically the texting language-using authors were perceived to be less intelligent, less responsible, less motivated, less dependable and less emotionally available. Not only do these findings suggest that the use of texting language typically removes emotionality from communication, it also implies *when the emotional content is inferred indirectly by the reader, it is typically negative*. Given that Facebook also uses pictures and other media, these effects may be lessened, but are surely present as it is still up to the viewer to interpret all the text-based, static information on a screen. Is this a cost? Sure it is.

Consider the potential for a negative, emotional evaluation in light of the frequency expectation (brought on by speed) highlighted earlier. Are text-based communication services a fertile breeding ground for a high

frequency of largely emotionally void or emotionally negative exchanges? Is there an impact upon our face-to-face relationships? Hmm . . .

Just think, the moment two people decide to begin a relationship through Facebook, they are rather *instantly and completely connected*. Wasn't the trust attached to this sort of "connected" meant to take time? If it no longer takes time, shouldn't we be wondering why? What's now missing?

Because text-based communication is largely emotionless, rather effortless and constantly at everyone's disposal, it is implicitly understood – whenever you're not communicating with someone, it is nearly always because one or both of you do not want to engage the other. Now expand this notion to include the consideration of the speed texting allows/mandates and, more importantly, view these ideas through the lens of realizing the number of people a given person is connected to in this capacity (i.e., *Go take a quick look at your Facebook friends list, your cell phone address book, and your email contact log*). This is a cold reality not previously available to the twisted phone cord generations of the past. In the past people were free to wonder and obsess about such romantic things like, "I wonder if he/she is thinking of me right now?" and "I can't wait until we can talk again!" **In short, imagine the cost . . . if no one's communicating with you in one way or another at this very moment, it's because right now (and for whatever length of time, thereafter), no one wants to.** *No one wants to take the few seconds required to engage you with a device that is almost always as close as a jacket pocket.*

But we don't like to think of this side of text-based services like Facebook . . . so we don't.

I think, in part, avoiding this realization leads to a self-directed sense of worth. That is to say, it is now more effortlessly up to the individual to determine how present he/she is in everyone's lives. And ironically, instead of that presence being reinforced with emotionally-binding activities like sympathy or empathy, it is burgeoned through self-righteous marketing - the tendency for people to talk *at* each other – thereby further removing emotion brought on by face-to-face human communication and replacing it with a less affecting, less emotionally-invested (but nearly always self-aggrandizing) exchange that was once reserved for the world of showmanship. **What I mean is, instead of communicating *with* each other, we now seem more invested in putting on a show for each other where the lifeblood is praise and the stakes can be self-worth.** It is in this way that there is no direct connection; it's all on screen and, just like Hollywood, *for your entertainment only*.

To me these conclusions make sense as blogging, tweeting, and status updates (none of which typically necessitate a back-and-forth) are all quite popular.

Just think, in 2010 according to Facebook Analytics, the least occurring sentence-ending punctuation mark in a status update was the question mark. For personal relevance click down the list of your posts, and look at the ratio between your posts which beg a response and those which do not.

With all this “free” text-based communication offered by Facebook, we've redefined the social world into a plethora of people interacting in the emotionally and physically solitary confinement of their desk chairs. That is to say, we may now be verging on becoming a world connected by ideas we are bound to spread largely in the form of acting as our own marketing companies with our own sidebar advertisements – which, incidentally, are the sorts of things for which Facebook already charges a fee.

On second thought, maybe Facebook won't be financially free forever.

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