

THE POLITICS OF FACEBOOK FRIENDSHIP: THE INFLUENCE OF THE SOCIAL STRUCTURATION OF THE SNS UPON THE NOTION OF THE POLITICAL

Alec Charles
University of Bedfordshire

Abstract

This paper deploys Jacques Derrida's meditations upon the writings of Aristotle in order to suggest a direct relationship between the traditional concept of friendship in European civilization and the Western notions of politics and democracy. It thereby proposes the dependence of the democratic ideal upon the ideal of friendship. Through interviews with researchers and staff at Facebook, and through an empirical experiment which employs a dummy account to monitor the establishment of social relationships through Facebook, the paper suggests that the world's most popular social networking site is redefining the popular concept of friendship and thereby changing the ideal of friendship upon which the concept of political democracy has traditionally been based.

Keywords: Facebook, friendship, democracy, Derrida, Aristotle.

1. Introduction

On 8 April 2010, four weeks before a British parliamentary election, the *BBC News* website reported that

Social networking website Facebook has been brought in to get unregistered voters into the polling booth. In a tie-up with the Electoral Commission, Facebook users who visit the site over the weekend will be asked if they have registered to vote. If they say 'No' they will be sent to a page linked to the Electoral Commission that lets them enter details online.¹

1 "Facebook targets unregistered voters," BBC News Interactive. Available at news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/8610730.stm

It remains unclear whether the use of such a social networking site (SNS) as Facebook can promote participation in democratic processes. On the face of things such high profile political endeavours as Barack Obama's electioneering pages on Facebook would seem to suggest that such sites can foster democratic activity. There remain, however, significant questions as to whether the fundamental ideological perspectives underlying and advanced by these homogeneous media forms are themselves consistent with Western notions of democracy and socio-political engagement.

On 15 April 2010, immediately after the UK's first ever televised election debate featuring the leaders of the country's three main political parties, Rory Cellan-Jones, *BBC News's* Technology Correspondent, posted on his Twitter page the news that 36,483 people had posted a total of 184,396 messages onto the Twitter site in relation to (and during) that debate.² In an article on the *BBC News* website (14 April 2010) Cellan-Jones had pointed out that Facebook would meanwhile run "its own digital version of the leaders' debates"³ – and that all three party leaders had "agreed to answer questions submitted by users." The morning after the first debate (16 April 2010), on the BBC's *Breakfast* news programme, Cellan-Jones added that Facebook had experienced a server overload as a result of online activity related to the debate: "Facebook had so many people [...] they couldn't quite cope." Yet Jones also suggested that this activity did not represent a step change in political participation – it had merely shifted extant offline debates onto these sites. It remains uncertain, however, whether the limitations and structures of these sites allow for the range and freedom of debate possible offline – or whether they offer a regulated imitation of and replacement for such participation practised in the non-virtual public sphere.

During the British general election campaign of April-May 2010, the company producing the yeast-based spread Marmite

2 Rory Cellan-Jones, Twitter. Available at twitter.com/bbcroycj

3 "Social media and the leadership debates," BBC News Interactive. Available at news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/8618700.stm

advertised its parallel Facebook sites for the Marmite Love Party and the Marmite Hate Party, complete with slogans ('Spread the Love' and 'Stop the Spread' respectively) and campaign statements, manifestos, pledges, and profiles of the party leaders – as well as links to the Marmite News Network which kept readers updated with the latest campaign news.⁴ Users with strong positive or negative opinions on the product could log onto Facebook to register their vote for or against the spread. On 22 April 2010 *BBC News Interactive* reported that "the maker of Marmite is threatening legal action against the British National Party to stop it from using a jar of the spread in a party broadcast."⁵ The yeast spread's spoof campaign had itself been hijacked by the anti-democratic extreme of British political opinion; the parody of democratic processes had become a tool for forces actively seeking to undermine those processes. This seems an appropriate, if absurd, model for the effects of hypermediation upon political processes.

If political participation through Facebook or other online activities is meaningful and empowering, then such activity would bias democratic processes in favour of those groups in society (the economically, technologically and educationally advantaged) who least need that empowerment. But if such participation is not empowering and merely offers an illusion of socio-political agency, then it in fact undermines the desire, and therefore the potential for, real empowerment and meaningful agency. The Internet user feels as though she is at the centre of the universe, and this interpellation, this imaginary repositioning, pre-empts the subject's struggle towards such centrality and significance. The Facebook member sits at the heart of a social web which promises to mirror society but which is not the world of material relationships.

4 Marmite Love Party available at www.facebook.com/Marmite?v=app_10339498918. Marmite Hate Party available at www.facebook.com/pages/Marmite-Hate-it/301129306908#!/MarmiteHateParty?ref=ts. Marmite News Network available at www.marmitenewsnetwork.com/?WT.mc_id=new_hope_facebook_aklove2.

5 "BNP facing Marmite legal action," *BBC News Interactive*. Available at news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/election_2010/8637473.stm

This paper suggests that it may not only be the opportunities for traditional Western modes of political participation which such new technologies are subverting. It argues that these new technologies, in their radical reshaping of the conditions of social subjectivity and of social relationships, are eroding the very possibility of politics itself – insofar as the Western concept of the political has, since Aristotle, been based upon an ideal notion of friendship, and insofar as social networking sites are redefining their users’ perspectives upon friendship and society.

2. The subject of Facebook

On 16 September 2009 the *BBC News* website quoted Facebook’s vice-president of engineering, Mike Schroepfer, on the company’s mission “to get as much of the entire world on the social network communicating with the friends and family and the people they want to communicate with.”⁶ More than five per cent of the entire population of the world already subscribe to Facebook, and that figure is growing. Facebook’s ambition is overtly directed towards global domination and by implication the homogenization of contexts and structures of social interaction.

Facebook’s own Facebook page announces that “Facebook’s mission is to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.”⁷ On his own Facebook page the site’s founder Mark Zuckerberg lists his personal interests as “openness, making things that help people connect and share what’s important to them, revolutions, information flow, minimalism.”⁸ Facebook as such represents a revolutionarily minimalist notion of information flow. This is a structure in which the flow itself, the processes of connection and of sharing, and the condition of openness which affords that possibility, signify more, absolutely more, than the content – insofar as what is

6 “Facebook grows and makes money,” BBC News Interactive. Available at news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/8258117.stm

7 Facebook’s own corporate page on the Facebook website. Available at www.facebook.com/facebook?ref=ts#!/facebook?v=info&ref=ts

8 Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook. Available at www.facebook.com/facebook?ref=ts#!/markzuckerberg?v=info&ref=ts

important to the Facebook user, as to its founder, are these processes themselves. Facebook emphasizes the significance of the act of expression rather than what is expressed. Despite its promises of interactivity, its own processes thereby define its users as the subjects of essentially empty and necessarily banal monologues.

Petitioning its user for a status update, the empty field at the top of one's Facebook homepage asks: "What's on your mind?" Not *what are you doing?* – the life of the user may have become too passive, too solipsistic, to countenance such a call to action or to material interaction: the voice of the Facebook user expresses itself and only itself, a subjectivity defined by the processes of Facebook use. The subject of Facebook, the site's mediated user, is delineated by Facebook parameters (gender, relationship status, political views, religious views, interests in movies, books, television, and music) and by an ideology of online friendship (friendship as process, friendship as social capital, but not friendship as moral commonality). One's political views are no longer prescribed by the site's default settings (as they once were), but one's relationship status is strictly limited to: *single, in a relationship, engaged, married, it's complicated, in an open relationship, or widowed*. One might be *looking for* a very limited (and limiting) range of things out of Facebook use: *friendship, dating, a relationship or networking*. These teleological limits are in themselves both epistemologically and ideologically defining. Oymen Gur has suggested that, while social networking websites offer their users the illusion of personal liberation, they effectively seize control of their users' subjectivities: "even though social networking sites seem transparent, users are still mediated through them [...] the more people are liberated with wider and more transparent networks, the more they are constrained."⁹

3. Status update as status symbol

Facebook users' dependence on this site appears increasingly influential in their definitions of identity. Within a few months of

9 Oymen Gur, "Comparing social network sites and past social systems," Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association Conference, London School of Economics, 6-8 January 2010.

its launch on 23 September 2009 a Facebook page entitled 'I will name my son Batman if this page gets to 500,000 Fans'¹⁰ had garnered nearly a million supporters – resulting in the announcement that the offspring of the page's owner had indeed been named 'Batman'. This is an extreme example and yet it seems resonant of Facebook's influence on the lives of its users and their offline networks.

Eager to report the most enthralling status updates, it is not unknown for Facebook users, like diarists or autobiographers, to lead their lives and frame their identities according to the needs of their narratives. Paul de Man wrote that "the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture."¹¹ Although this activity may in part relate to an internal process of self-narrativization – a coming to subjective integrity through the reconstruction of one's life within the logic and aesthetic of the narrative form – it is surely also an outward-facing expression of one's own public identity and social status.

Although the status update announces and performs the identity of the user, it is the user's number of Facebook friends which provides material evidence for the success and status of that user's constructed identity. Danah Boyd supposes that one's "actual collection of [Facebook] Friends [...] provides space for people to engage in identity performance."¹² While Boyd has argued that "the public display of connections that takes place in social network sites can represent a teen's social identity and status,"¹³ it seems apparent that this need for validation is not unique to Facebook's teenaged users (nor indeed to Facebook users). Boyd suggests that "the public nature of [social networking] sites requires participants to perform their

10 This Facebook page, perhaps as a result of its notoriety, has since been deleted.

11 Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 69.

12 Danah Boyd, "Friends, Friendsters, and MySpace Top 8: Writing Community Into Being on Social Network Sites," *First Monday* 11:12 (2006), 13. Available at firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1418/1336

13 Danah Boyd, *Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*, (University of California, Berkeley, 2008), 213. Available at www.danah.org/papers/TakenOutOfContext.pdf

relationship to others [...]. Based on an internal understanding of the audience, participants override the term 'Friend' to make room for a variety of different relationships so that they may properly *show face*."¹⁴ In other words, this process of identity construction, performance, affirmation and validation, insofar as its success is measured by the numeral accumulation of friends as a valorizing commodity, redefines the nature of friendship itself in order to accommodate the relational inflation which this global and virtual medium promotes. It used to be the case (as Dunbar¹⁵ has suggested) that one needed tens of friends to prove one's social and personal worth (to oneself as to others); within the psychological economy of Facebook one needs hundreds... thousands. (And on Twitter, where friends are possessed as followers, hundreds of thousands.)

Boyd proposes that "by having a loose definition of Friendship, it is easy to end up having hundreds of Friends [...]. Because of how these sites function, there is no distinction between siblings, lovers, schoolmates, and strangers. They are all lumped under one category: Friends."¹⁶ Boyd may be overstating the case that Facebook does not offer such distinctions (in some fields it clearly does); yet it seems to be the case that Facebook prioritizes its concept of friendship above these distinctions. Indeed it might be argued that it is only possible to accumulate these hundreds of friends by amending (or relaxing) one's definition of friendship.

4. The geography of friendship

Dunbar has argued that, although social networking sites may have value in supporting ongoing offline relationships, relationships conducted entirely via such sites are neither as stable nor as strong as relationships which take place in the material world "because you're not interacting face to face." He has added that "until they invent virtual touch you will never have

14 Boyd, "Friends, Friendsters, and MySpace Top 8," 4.

15 Robin Dunbar, "How many friends does one person need?," Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, London, 18 February 2010. Available at www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2010/rsa-thursday-how-many-friends-does-one-person-need

16 Boyd, "Friends, Friendsters, and MySpace Top 8," 10.

networked relationships that are in any way like the ones you have in real life."¹⁷

One of Western civilization's first theorists of the nature of friendship, Aristotle criticized a false mode of friendship which is not based on actual physical proximity: "they are not really friends because they do not spend all their time together or enjoy each other's company: things that are considered to be the best evidence of friendly feeling."¹⁸ From Aristotle's perspective there appears to be a real correlation between physical and emotional closeness.

Meditating on Aristotle's position, Jacques Derrida has argued that "if absence and remoteness do not destroy friendship, they attenuate or exhaust it [...]. Question: how would this discourse have handled telecommunication [...]? People can speak to each other from afar – this was already possible, but Aristotle took no account of it."¹⁹ Derrida's suggestion is that Aristotle did not ignore the possibility that friendships might be sustained through contact via media of telecommunications because such media did not exist in his time (as Derrida points out, they did: there were, for example, such things as letters – which, for Derrida at least, are literally modes of telecommunication, communication at a distance); Derrida implies that Aristotle ignored these possibilities because he did not consider them a viable way to maintain friendships.

New technologies have not abolished distance, although they can allow us to forget its enduring significance. When we interrogate the notion of online relationships, geography therefore seems both a banal and an essential factor in the contemporary and ongoing shift in the concept of friendship. The moral or spiritual aspects of traditional notions of social and emotional intimacy seem paradoxically dependent upon the material conditions of that intimacy. From this perspective the limits to the possibilities

17 Dunbar, "How many friends does one person need?"

18 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (London: Penguin, 2004), 210.

19 Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (London: Verso, 2005), 222.

of virtual friendship therefore appear insurmountable and definitive.

5. The nature of Facebook friendship

Boyd writes that “in everyday life most teen friendships are never formalized or verified except through implicit social rituals. Social network sites change this by forcing participants to publicly articulate and display their social connections [...]. While these lists display ‘Friends’, the connections teens have on a social network site are not necessarily the same as ‘friends’ in the everyday sense. The reasons to connect with others are countless and participants use the term ‘Friends’ to label all connections, regardless of intensity or type.”²⁰ Boyd therefore suggests that, within the social networking site, “there seems to be little incentive to be selective about Friendship [...]. As far as most participants are concerned, Friendship doesn’t mean anything really, so why not?”²¹ There are modes of selectivity within the systems of a social networking site (Facebook friends can, for example, be categorized in terms of the levels of their access to one’s pages; other sites allow rankings of friends or contacts), and yet the headline structures of Facebook tend to emphasize the homogenization of friendships over such discriminatory practices. One might therefore ask whether an increasingly non-selective view of online friendship (if “Friendship doesn’t mean anything”) is changing traditional views of friendship in offline interaction – or whether SNS users are able consciously to distinguish between these modes of online and offline relationships.

In an interview conducted for the purposes of this study Danah Boyd (17 February 2010) has responded that “fundamentally [...] people know the difference between a Friend (as in social network sites) and a friend (as in the intimate connection). This is why I go out of my way to differentiate them.”²² Yet the need to

20 Boyd, *Taken Out of Context*, 211-212.

21 Boyd, “Friends, Friendsters, and MySpace Top 8,” 10.

22 Full texts of interviews conducted for this study are available upon request to the author: alec.charles@beds.ac.uk

differentiate between these modes of friendship might suggest that these differences are not quite so clear. The globalizing structures of such social networking sites as Facebook are imposing a homogeneous cross-cultural notion of friendship upon the post-industrial world; and insofar as users interact and exist in a primarily online environment, their ability to distinguish between online and offline modes of friendship seems increasingly irrelevant. The fact that Boyd views the Facebook friend as a 'Friend' (with a capitalized 'F') in an attempt to differentiate this phenomenon from offline manifestations of friendship may suggest by this translation of the term into a proper noun that there is something absolute, definitive or seminal about this mode of friendship (in parallel, say, to the differentiation of 'god' from 'God').

Facebook's own statistics (as of July 2010) suggest that fifty per cent of the site's 400 million active users log onto Facebook each day.²³ On average a Facebook user has 130 Facebook friends. More than 60 million status updates are posted by 35 million Facebook users each day, and the average user spends more than 55 minutes on the site every day. This latter statistic suggests that, even if Facebook users remain able to distinguish between modes of online and offline friendship, many are actively prioritizing and committing significant social investment to their online relationships.

A member of Facebook's Data Team²⁴, Adam Kramer, in an interview conducted for the purposes of this study (3 February 2010) has commented that

it's important to remember that the vast majority of friendships on Facebook are actually traditional relationships that happen to also have a Facebook representation which is termed 'friend'. As far as friendship-like social dynamics are concerned, there's a decent amount of empirical evidence

23 Facebook statistics available at www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics

24 Facebook's Data Team, according to its own Facebook page, "builds scalable platforms for the collection, management, and analysis of data" and uses "these platforms to help drive informed decisions in areas critical to the success of the company." See www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics#!/data?v=info&ref=ts

suggesting that communication through Facebook serves to strengthen 'weak-tie' bonds, or relationships among people who are not very close. But most broadly, it is my belief that Facebook and social networking sites are a facilitator of social interactions, and do not indicate anything 'new' about the psychology of human interaction. Rather, they serve as tools to encourage social interaction in new ways via new means of communication, much like the printing press, telephone, and television did in their day.

Without being overtly technologically determinist, one might suggest that Gutenberg, Bell and Baird's inventions did more than facilitate and accelerate communication; one need not be a disciple of Marshall McLuhan to imagine that these media technologies radically affected the nature and content of social interaction. When such socially influential new media technologies (such as the Internet and the mobile telephone) converge, one might expect their impact to be even more intense than that of one such technology functioning on its own.

Facebook statistics reveal that more than 100 million users access Facebook through mobile devices, and that those who use Facebook on their mobile devices are twice as active as non-mobile-device-using Facebook users.²⁵ The engineer who designed the hugely successful 'Facebook for iPhone' package, Joe Hewitt has commented in an interview conducted for the purposes of this study (2 February 2010) that

Facebook hasn't affected contemporary notions of friendship significantly. Unlike some other social networks where one is encouraged to 'friend' people they've never met, Facebook works best when it is a mirror of the real world, and your friends are people you know in real life. The biggest effect Facebook has had on contemporary friendship is merely to keep friendships alive that might have otherwise faded due to time and distance.

Both Kramer and Hewitt see Facebook as merely a facilitator for traditional offline friendships. The medium is, it seems, no longer the message; the nature, content and meaning of a

communication act are no longer affected by that act's own conditions of process and possibility. In a paper entitled "Social network activity and social well-being" Burke, Marlow and Lento similarly suppose that "social networking sites complement the network of relationships present in the offline world."²⁶ However, in an interview conducted for this study (15 February 2010) Moira Burke has commented:

Social networking sites certainly changed the threshold and nuance that most people experienced in the face-to-face definition of 'friend'. This is primarily because they force people to make relationships explicit, and 'friend' status was often simply an access control mechanism for content. Since early SNSs didn't have tiered relationships or faceted privacy controls, all kinds of social roles were collapsed into a single term. Between the awkwardness of having to explicitly deny someone's friend request and the publication of one's friend count on the profile, many users hoarded friends, in a socio-economic way.

One might therefore suggest that one's focus upon the modes of friendship promoted and defined by social networking sites may change the nature of one's friendships offline, and that the amount of time spent involved in these online processes of social interaction, the number of 'friends' one has online and the emphasis one places not only upon these modes of interaction but also upon the significance of the quantities of friendships achieved and maintained online may fundamentally affect one's notion of friendship itself.

6. The genealogy of virtual friendship

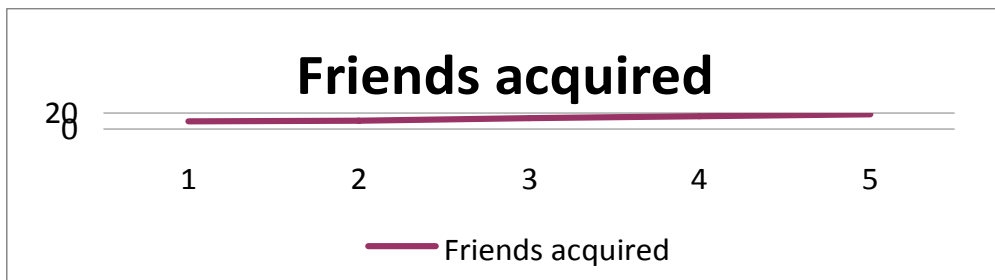
For the purposes of this research an exercise was conducted to test the extent to which Facebook users exercise discrimination in their acceptance of friends.²⁷ A dummy Facebook account was created under a name which, although ordinary and even bland

26 Moira Burke, Cameron Marlow, Thomas Lento, "Social network activity and social well-being," Proceedings of the 28th international conference on human factors in computing systems, Atlanta, Georgia (2010). Available at portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=1753326.1753613

27 Data from this exercise is available upon request to the author: alec.charles@beds.ac.uk

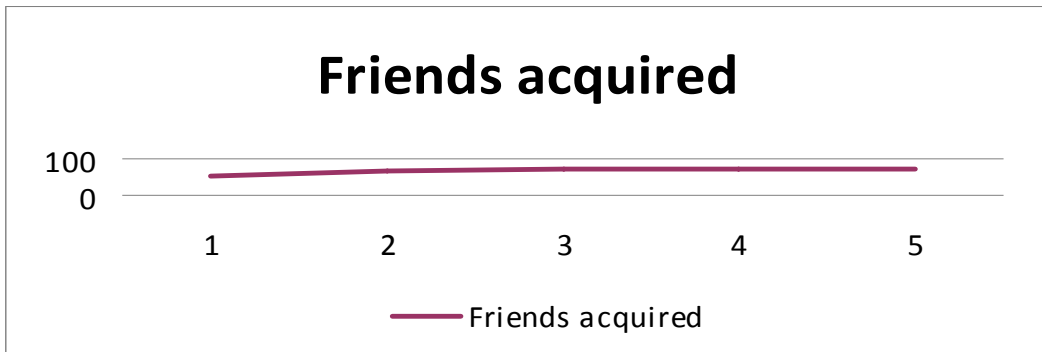
(by English-language standards) did not exist on Facebook – nor (according to a Google search) anywhere on the Internet. This name was chosen specifically to avoid the possibility that it might be interpreted as a real known friend: the name was generated randomly by searching directories for common Anglophone given names and surnames and combining these, and continuing this process until a name appeared that gave no results on a Google search. The Facebook account did not include any images of the account-holder nor any profile information. In stage one of the exercise 100 Facebook users were sent friend requests: the names of these users were generated randomly by searching directories for common Anglophone given names and surnames and combining these. Within five days 18 per cent of these Facebook users had accepted the dummy user as a friend.

Figure 1. Facebook friend exercise conducted January / February 2010: numbers of friends / day of exercise. Stage one: random friends.



In the second stage of this exercise a further 100 friend requests were sent to Facebook users. These recipients were all contacts generated by Facebook itself as suggested friends – in other words they were friends of those who had already accepted the dummy user as a friend. Within five days 74 of these friends of friends had befriended the dummy user.

Figure 2. Facebook friend exercise conducted January / February 2010: numbers of friends / day of exercise. Stage two: friends of friends.



In the third stage of this exercise a further 100 friend requests were sent to Facebook friends of those who had accepted Facebook friendship in stage two (i.e. friends of friends of friends). Within five days 84 of these friends of friends of friends had befriended the dummy user.

Figure 3. Facebook friend exercise conducted January / February 2010: numbers of friends / day of exercise. Stage three: friends of friends of friends.

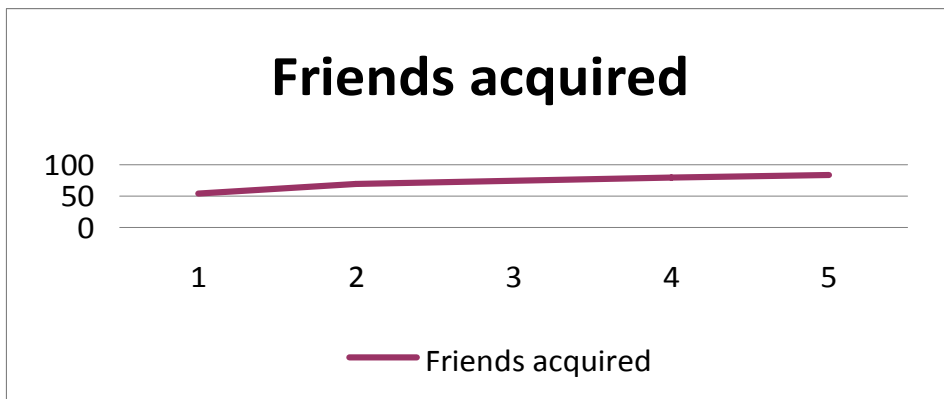
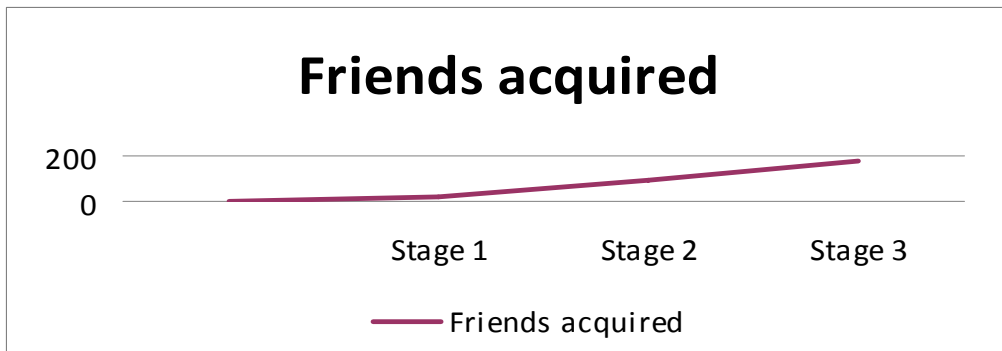


Figure 4. Aggregate results of stages one, two and three.



These results appear to demonstrate that while the majority of Facebook users are relatively discriminating in accepting the friendship of completely unknown contacts, the majority are also willing to accept such friendship on the implicit recommendation of one of their current friends; that is, if they know someone who knows the person requesting friendship, they are likely to accept that friendship. Indeed, they appear to be even more likely to accept that friendship if more than one friend is already shared, and if the petitioner already possesses a number of friends. This mode of friendship is ostensibly one based entirely upon quantifiable notions of social capital: the quantity of social capital possessed by the seeker of friendship (the number of shared friends or their total number of friends) is directly related to the probability of the success of their petition. The petitioner's perceived level of social capital may therefore be seen as adding to the social capital accumulated by the petitioned party. This inference is further evidenced by the fact that during the second and third stages of this exercise the dummy account received seven unsolicited requests for friendship from friends of friends who had not been contacted – as this non-existent user accumulated social capital he came to be perceived by third parties as a commodity worth investing in. In Aristotle's terms this is therefore a mode of friendship based upon utility rather than upon virtue or moral commonality or proximity. Aristotle argued that "people describe as friends those who are attracted to one another for reasons of utility [...] or of pleasure [...] but [...] friendship in the primary and proper sense is between good men in virtue of their goodness, whereas the rest are friendships only by analogy."²⁸ If this SNS experience represents a form of friendship, then it is one which falls far short of Aristotle's ideal. It may therefore be postulated that social networking sites' utilitarian commodifications of friendship in terms of the quantity of friends accumulated and that quantity's relationship to social capital have affected the concept of friendship *per se*, in as much as contemporary friendship may appear in this context to have become more a matter of socio-economic functionality than of emotional or moral idealism.

7. The arithmetic of friendship

In a Facebook blog entry of 5 October 2009 Adam Kramer described a process whereby Facebook's team of data scientists have sought to quantify the sum total of American Facebook users' happiness: "Every day, through Facebook status updates, people share how they feel with those who matter most in their lives. These updates are tiny windows into how people are doing [...]. Grouped together, these updates are indicative of how we are collectively feeling."²⁹ Kramer thus goes on to explain how "data scientists at Facebook started a project to measure the overall mood of people from the United States on Facebook, based on the sentiment expressed in status updates." However, it is not only the tone but it may in fact be the very existence of one's updates that allows for a quantification of one's emotional and social well-being: what one might call one's level of happiness. In their paper on 'Social network activity and social well-being' Burke et al. argue that the "use of these sites has been associated with greater levels of social capital or benefits made possible by the existence of a social structure. These benefits include *bridging social capital*, or access to new information through a diverse set of acquaintances, and *bonding social capital*, or emotional support from close friends." Their study of Facebook specifically suggests that "overall SNS activity, particularly friend count, was positively correlated with both kinds [bridging and bonding] of social capital."³⁰

One's social capital and therefore one's social well-being can be seen to relate to one's level of activity on Facebook and in particular (and as a result of this level of activity) to one's number of Facebook friends. A Facebook user's number of friends appears (for Burke et al.) to be related to their social well-being (or at least to their own perception thereof). If friends are a commodity whose quantity enhances one's level of happiness, they are clearly one to be valued, and one whose integrity is to

29 Adam Kramer, Facebook Blog. Available at blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=150162112130

30 Moira Burke, Cameron Marlow, Thomas Lento, "Social network activity and social well-being."

be officially regulated and therefore closely guarded by the appropriate authorities. On 20 November 2009 the *BBC News* website reported that "Facebook has threatened legal action against a service that sells friends on the social networking site [...]. Customers of USocial use it to boost follower and friend numbers on social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter. On micro-blogging site Twitter, followers can be bought in blocks starting at £53 for 1,000. The biggest block USocial is selling is 100,000 people."³¹ Friendship has clearly become an economic commodity whose quantification is a crucial concern. In a Facebook blog entry of 8 April 2009 Facebook's Chief Operating Officer, Sheryl Sandberg wrote:

One of the most common questions we're asked at Facebook is, 'How many friends can you have?' It's an increasingly important question as more people around the world share and connect on Facebook and on the Web overall, but it's also difficult to answer. While the average user on Facebook has 120 confirmed friend connections, that number doesn't account for all the different types of relationships people have in their lives [...]. When our Data Team measured active networks for users on Facebook, it found that, in any given month, users keep up with between 2 times and 4 times more people than through more traditional communication.³²

A technology which can increase one's quantities of friendship – and therefore one's levels of happiness – fourfold is clearly one which is to be cherished. Yet when one increases one's number of friendships fourfold it seems unclear that each of those friendships remains as valuable as when one had fewer friends. It also appears uncertain that friendship can exist in its offline form within a virtual environment which excludes the degree of material (spatial and temporal) commitment, devotion and even sacrifice which in the physical world tests, tempers and defines it. Indeed it may be argued that friendship as a quantifiable commodity is no longer friendship at all.

31 "Facebook acts on follower trade," BBC News Interactive. Available at news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/8370302.stm

32 Sheryl Sandberg, Facebook Blog. Available at: blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=72975227130

8. The quantification of friendship

Robin Dunbar famously postulated what is known as Dunbar's number – the number of people with whom one can maintain social relationships. He has suggested that this number is about 150. Dunbar proposes that one can maintain close relationships with an inner core of only about five people, and that concentric sets of relationships demonstrating lesser levels of intimacy radiate from this core: "as you go out you include more people but you're including relationships at a lower quality. That ties up very closely with the amount of time you spend with those people. The layers scale in very consistent patterns, they occur at 5, 15, 50, 150, 500, 1,500." Indeed Dunbar extrapolates the next level in these relationship sets to agree with Plato that "the ideal democracy size is about 5,300."³³

Dunbar has suggested that "it has become a kind of competition to see how many friends you can have on Facebook" and argues that if you have hundreds of Facebook friends "you probably don't know most of these people – they're just voyeurs into your life." This, he says, is both because of human cognitive limits ("the size of the inner layers of your social network is directly related to the size of key areas of your brain") and because "you just don't have time in everyday life to invest in each of those people to the extent where you can have a real relationship with them."³⁴ Although Dunbar speaks of the impossibility of ultimately defining the nature of social relationships, he maintains the possibility of the quantification of friendships. While he notes Plato's arithmetical delineation of socio-political relationships, he fails to take into account an Aristotelian tradition which differentiates between politically utilitarian notions of friendship and a notion of friendship which is defined not by utility (or for that matter by pleasure) but by commonality of virtue – a friendship which resists (and is alien to and extinguished by) quantification and commodification.

33 Robin Dunbar, "How many friends does one person need?"

34 Robin Dunbar, "How many friends does one person need?"

Aristotle proposed that “those who have a great many friends [...] are felt to be friends of nobody.”³⁵ He suggested that “there is a limit to the number of one’s friends; and probably this would be the largest number with whom one can be on intimate terms [...] one cannot be intimate, and share oneself, with a large number of people.”³⁶ Aristotle is reputed (by Erasmus and Montaigne amongst others³⁷) to have announced: “O my friends, there is no friend!” Or, in the words of Jacques Derrida, “my friends, if you want to have friends, do not have too many.”³⁸ But also: if you want to have friends, do not try to count them. When you try to quantify friendship as an economic commodity (and therefore when you try to increase your number of friends in order to increase your social capital, the utility adhering to those friendships) then they are no longer friends in Aristotle’s (or Derrida’s) purest sense: as Derrida suggests, “the units in question are neither things [...] nor numbers. [...] one must not have too many friends, but [friendship] nevertheless resists enumeration [...] or even pure and simple quantification.”³⁹

Boyd argues that “for many, the category of friend carries an aura of exclusivity and intimacy unlike the categories acquaintance or contact, which suggest familiarity but not closeness.”⁴⁰ Aristotle and Derrida would agree. The corollary of this proposal is evident: that the Facebook friend is, within such traditional definitions, not a friend as such, not in the absolute and definitive sense. The meaning of friendship is therefore in the process of changing: it is not only that the concept of Facebook friendship (a new and radically different sense of friendship) is overwhelming that of offline friendship, it is also that the practice of offline friendship is being overtaken by the practice of friendship online.

35 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 251.

36 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 250.

37 Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 1981), 214.

38 Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 22.

39 Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 21.

40 Boyd, “Friends, Friendsters, and MySpace Top 8,” 3.

9. The politics of friendship

The virtual friend on Facebook takes place beyond material history, beyond what we used to call the 'real'. The new reality is, according to Jean Baudrillard, a realm without depth and without difference. This is a world in which there are neither friends nor enemies, because we have lost the absolute and irreducible discrimination of friendship, insofar as – as Derrida suggests – “the collapse of the friendship concept [...] carries off the Friend too.”⁴¹ We appear to have entered, as Derrida puts it, “the time of a world without friends, the time of a world without enemies” – “a 'world without politics' [...] abandoned by its friends as well as its enemies [...] a dehumanized desert.”⁴² We return, then, to Baudrillard's “desert of the real” – the waste land of the new, virtualized reality.⁴³

The loss of the concept of friendship, and therefore of its essential and inevitable counterpart *enmity*, fosters a reality without political orientation. Derrida laments the loss of these “enemies without which [...] our subject [...] would lose its political being; it would purely and simply depoliticize itself. [...] without an enemy, and therefore without friends, where does one find oneself [...]?”⁴⁴ Where there are no real enemies, Derrida suggests, there are no real friends. The enemies provoked and imagined to reinforce the ruins of democracy can sustain only an illusion of that democracy. Friendship seems essential not only to the maintenance of the political but also specifically to the endurance of the democratic. Aristotle, for example, supposes that “while in tyrannies friendships [...] are little found, they are most commonly found in democracies because the citizens, being equal, have much in common.”⁴⁵ Friendship is as such a prerequisite for political existence and a symptom of democracy.

41 Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 302.

42 Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 76, 130.

43 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

44 Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship*, 77.

45 Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 220.

The Facebook generation founds friendship upon a lesser ideal (a virtual network) than that performed in real-world relationships – in contrast to the attempts of the Aristotelian tradition to base the concept of friendship upon a higher or more ambitious ideal than that generally encountered in the physical world. Not only does it set a lesser goal for friendship than the metaphysical ideal: it sets its target lower than friendship in non-virtual society. Rather than aiming towards the philosophical heights, it ends up aiming lower than its actual starting point. The uses of world's most popular social networking site have resulted in the development of an increasingly prevalent tendency to quantify and commodify friendship. The consequent redesignation of the name of friendship, the essential shift in its meaning, may signal the loss of an ancient ideal upon which, from the perspectives of such thinkers as Aristotle and Derrida, the society, politics, and democracy of Western civilization are intimately grounded. To lose sight of this ideal, this aspiration, might therefore be to diminish the possibilities of social, political and democratic existence.

Bibliography

- Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (trans. Thomson, J.). London: Penguin, 2004.
- Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. Glaser, S.). Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1994.
- Boyd, Danah, "Friends, Friendsters, and MySpace Top 8: Writing Community Into Being on Social Network Sites," *First Monday* 11:12 (2006). Available at firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1418/1336
- Boyd, Danah, *Taken Out of Context: American Teen Sociality in Networked Publics*. Doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2008. Available at www.danah.org/papers/TakenOutOfContext.pdf
- Burke, Moira, Marlow, Cameron, and Lento, Thomas, "Social network activity and social well-being," *Proceedings of the 28th international conference on human factors in computing systems, Atlanta, Georgia* (2010).

- de Man, Paul, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Derrida, Jacques, *The Politics of Friendship* (trans. Collins, G.). London: Verso, 2005.
- Dunbar, Robin, "How many friends does one person need?," Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, London, 18 February 2010. Available at www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2010/rsa-thursday-how-many-friends-does-one-person-need
- Gur, Oymen, "Comparing social network sites and past social systems," *Media, Communication and Cultural Studies Association Conference*, London School of Economics, 6-8 January 2010.
- McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Montaigne, Michel de, *The Complete Essays* (trans. Screech, M.). Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981.