

Jenny is someone I would consider one of my best friends. Although she lives a 10 hour drive down South from my house near Boston, I still felt comfortable talking to her every day and turning to her for advice. The physical distance between us only allowed us to meet in person for a mere 7 days in a year, at our summer camp where we initially met, but regardless, I still felt close to her. Coincidentally, I started attending a college in Maryland this year that is only an hour metro-trip away from where she lives in Virginia. I was predictably excited to be able to meet up with her in person more often than in previous years. However, even though we have met more often now, the lengthy conversations we used to have on a daily basis through Facebook started to diminish. I started to visit the chat box only once a week, if lucky, when I used to check it daily.

Recently, as I chatted with Jenny over winter break, I realized that college has made me a different person. I haven't stopped caring for my long-time friends, but I've become aware that the more new friends I make, the less time I have for my old friends. Since then, I've become intent on finding a way to connect with people in a more effective way.

I propose Social Geography. Facebook posts and activities already are tagged with their location. To take advantage of the rise of smart phones and their location-awareness, I imagine Facebook's News Feed displayed through map interface rather than the current linear list-form method of display.

Seeing posts and news in a geographical relationship lets users interact with friends in a totally different way. Say that I'm travelling to a new city, it would be useful for me to see where friends are in the area, what they're posting, or what events they're going to. Say that I'm daydreaming about my next vacation, I can easily manipulate the map to find out which of my friends are traveling and where they're traveling to. Say that I'm feeling homesick and want to see what people in Boston are doing, a search function would enable me to catch up with people back home. Say that I want to organize my feed in a way that prioritizes those who are most important to me, like Jenny, a map helps show relevance through location. By changing simple constraints I would be able to quickly find the easiest ways to meet up and reconnect.

Most importantly, Social Geography would provide another dimension in terms of user experience. When I see information in a visual format, it's easier to process. When that information is placed within the context of geography, I understand more how things relate to me. If there's one thing I've learned from studying real estate under my mother, it is: "location, location, location." No matter how advanced our tools through the internet are, the most intimate way to interact is still in the physical world, where, until somebody invents teleportation, physical location is law. Social Geography is powerful not because it tries to create an experience, but because it facilitates connecting friends, family, and coworkers in real life. I would love the opportunity to work on Social Geography for Facebook this summer.

I have taken enough biology courses to understand that maps are physically coded into our brains. Why not put that way of thinking into our social media experience?