

A Better Friends List: Why Social Networks Have a Long Way to Go

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9-11 minutes

And no, Instagram's Close Friends is not the answer



While the social products that we use have changed dramatically over the last 15 years — think Harvard-era Facebook and AIM in its heyday versus modern day Snapchat and Instagram, and it's about to get a lot crazier — one thing has remained remarkably unchanged: the structure of friends lists. If "the network is the product," why hasn't there been more innovation in this area?



“I want to get married and have 100 kids so I can have 100 friends and no one can say ‘no’ to being my friend.” — Young Michael Scott

“So, like, what are we?” — on social apps, it’s binary

On social apps, you’re ~friends~ or ~not friends~ with another person. It’s all or nothing. Social broadcast apps like Instagram and Twitter add a wrinkle with the asymmetrical “following” option, but it’s basically just as black-and-white. **Someone is on your friends list, or they’re not. Think about the people in your life: does everyone fall so neatly into one bucket or another?**

IRL friendships form much more organically

In real life, our friendships aren’t so clear cut. Imagine a school or workplace “friend” who is really only a friend because you sit near them and see them every day. Then, that structure goes away, they drift out of your life, and it’s fine — but on social, nothing has changed... you’re still “friends.” Still seeing that they grabbed a coffee. Still seeing that they don’t like that new movie. Still seeing the bad memes they share. This all-in-or-all-out structure that we’ve gotten so used to is way too rigid, and doesn’t reflect the dynamic, always-changing nature of our friendships.



Come on. Corey and Shawn shouldn't have to "friend" each other.

"Hello, will you be my friend?" said no one

Think, for a minute, about the concept of a "friend request." You're asking someone to formalize your friendship. Do you want to be friends on here — yes or no? Real life friendships can take suddenly (you hit it off with someone very quickly — "this person is awesome!") or can take a while, and form because of a shared setting/mutual friends/or some other familiarity. Either way, it just happens. We don't say "you're my friend now!" Online, both parties have to explicitly opt-in. The only reason it's not more awkward is because we've accepted it as just how the Internet works. Ideally, the services we use every day would be able to deduce who we're friends with with less input and management on our end.

Friending as a growth hack

It's such a buzzkill to get a new follower, go to check them out, and see that **they have 403,034 followers (cool!) but are following 402,223 people (not cool!)** Why are we subjected to what is essentially an advertisement for this desperate, aspiring influencer?

Every friendship is different, but not on social apps

Let's say I have two friends on a social app. One is my wife, and one is a work friend who I'm kinda friendly with but have no real outside-the-office relationship. (Swap those for "girlfriend" and "kid you sit next to in class" to imagine this for a younger generation.) As far as the social product is concerned, those friendships are the same. Sure, the software's dataset may show that I have more interactions with one over another, but the experience or capabilities of those two friendships are no different on that app. Why don't I have special features for my best friends, unique to our friendships? And, on the other end of the spectrum, why don't new friends or people I'm less familiar with have a bit more limited visibility into my profile? It shouldn't be a one-size-fits-all setup.



You know Paris would've deleted and re-friended Rory a hundred times.

“We’re not friends anymore” — unfriending and being unfriended

Then there's the uncomfortable act of deletion. We've all faced this anxiety. Should I delete this person? Should I just unfollow or mute them instead, to avoid hurting their feelings? What if they come back in my life later...how weird will that be to re-add them? As unnatural as it is to officially declare the start to a friendship, it's equally strange to push a button to end that friendship. This stage of a relationship is so sloppily thought through by social networking services. It puts both parties in uncomfortable positions. Sometimes you unfollow someone so your ~ratio~ will look a little better. There has to be a better way.

The bottom line: friendships are not binary!

Friendships are *not* all or nothing. People are drifting in and out of our lives all the time, and it often happens without us even noticing. Social networks need to better reflect this reality. Features are easy to imitate. Networks, and how engaged those networks are, are the thing that keep us locked in to a service. Imagining and creating a more human friends list — one that fits more naturally with our life with as little explicit input as possible from us, while still respecting our privacy — is a difficult but gigantic opportunity for some consumer social startup to take on. I hope to see more work in this area.

A few other semi-related thoughts:

Secondary identities

Instagram and Twitter are pretty good about this, but they're just scratching the surface. To switch profiles on Instagram, you hold down on your profile picture in the lower right-hand corner. On Twitter, it's in the upper left-hand corner. I hope this becomes a sort of industry standard, because it makes a lot of sense, and is a bridge to a future where our identities are much more fluid online based on the communities we're in, the interests we have, and the mood we're in. Watch this space.

Instagram Close Friends

Instagram introduced Close Friends about a year ago. As far as I know, they haven't released any data about its adoption. [Some creators are using it in a way that probably wasn't intended](#). It's a big part of their [Threads](#) product. The problem with Close Friends is that it's just a friends list within a friends list. It requires pruning by the user. It's an effort to stave off context collapse, and yes, it does offer a feature beyond just a segmented feed of content to see (“Share with Close Friends”) but it's just a degree away from needing Close Close Friends when the first list gets overrun. (One thing I do like: no notification to your friends about whether they're added or removed from your Close Friends. Good move.)

Curated friend lists (almost) never work

Facebook has never been able to make [lists](#) work. Twitter recently gave their Lists feature some much-needed attention. It makes more sense on Twitter, where there's a more wonky user base, willing to put in the time to get their list just right. But lists, in general, require too much work from the user and are a pain to maintain. There's a reason why Facebook has neglected this product. Groups and messaging are far more promising areas to explore.

Remember Wall To Wall?

Facebook used to have a feature called Wall To Wall that showed your back-and-forth with someone. Interestingly, you could look at others' Wall To Walls, too. Now, there are Friendship pages, and they feature a cover photo, your shared pictures, when you became friends, your mutual friends, what used to be your Wall To Wall, and other shared attributes.

Snapchat's Friendship screen

If you hold down on a friend in Snapchat, you can hit "View Friendship" to arrive at a screen that shows your respective locations on the Snap Map, custom notification toggles, messages saved in Chat, and [Charms](#) — "fun, special mementos that celebrate your friendships!" They're pretty hidden in-app, but I like Snapchat's thinking here.

A move every consumer social app should make RIGHT NOW

One small way to make friend lists better — a baby step — and for this one, I'm specifically looking at you, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter: Suggested Deletions. (Sounds harsh, but a better name can come later.) It'd work just like suggested follows, only the opposite. **It'd mine your friends list for people you never engage with and suggest you remove them.** If I'm Twitter, I want the signal:noise in my users' feeds to be extremely high...so why would I not suggest removing follows that hinder that experience for my users?

If you liked this post, please hit the heart or [connect with me on Twitter](#) — I love talking about this stuff. I also made the blog an [Instagram](#) account if you'd prefer to connect on there.

P.S. — I have no real point here, but know what's strange to me? How people say big "goodbyes" to friends they really care about (but may only see a handful of times each year) who are traveling or living elsewhere for 3–6 months. Saying goodbye is tough, obviously, but we have friends who are down the street, who we haven't said goodbye to (or seen, for that matter) and won't see for 3–6 months, either. But because we know the first friend is physically going away — and because we're still digitally keeping up with that person down the street, and we know that they're there, even if we're not seeing them — we do the big goodbye for the first person. Hmm. I guess it's sort of like the comfort of knowing that your things are exactly where you left them, even the things you never really use.