

# The future of social is Bringing People Together

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5-7 minutes

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Twenty years ago, almost no one had an online **“profile”**, and when we used the term **“friend”** to describe someone, it referred to our *“mutual bond of affection”*, not *“I added them on Facebook”*. If you said you **“liked”** something, it generally meant that you actually really enjoyed or appreciated that thing, not just that you *double-tapped*. A lot has changed.

Let’s take a moment to consider what has happened over the last 20+ years. Our entire global society has gone from zero internet connectivity to over 3 Billion people being online and potentially available and on display at any moment.

At the beginning of this, every new experience felt incredible. You could learn more about the people you cared about, know what each other were doing when you weren’t together, and discover new people and communicate and collaborate with them. Those of us who can remember the transition to being social online understand that was born out of fun and novelty with little understanding that it would ever become a core expression of human existence. The tools were rudimentary at the beginning, and the builders were naively optimistic that a more open and connected world simply would lead to a better world since everyone had a voice.

But the challenge isn’t that we gave everyone a voice. It’s that we gave them a channel. “Social Media” has become just another form of media. Everyone has their own channel, trying to broadcast their life, their opinions, their favorite links to tell a story. Listening to each other has gotten harder and harder since so many people are working hard to “create” media that gets noticed — by their friends and often well beyond that.

In fact, the biggest “social” products are more about the “media” than the “social”. Before the internet we associated media with the radio, newspapers, TV, and movies. Are we all media channels now? Answer: Not by choice... but the way social products have been designed to date are built to deeply reinforce this behavior. Now we live in a world where likes and follows dominate our perception of ourselves. This is the first time in humanity that a major part of the population has a channel and starts to act like a brand or broadcaster. When everyone is a media channel, people don’t share their true selves, and social interactions get warped into social competitions. At the core of Facebook and Instagram is a digital reflection of what we do offline. Popularity, likes, and controversy, have created a major negative psychological impact on global culture as a whole through amplifying divide and loneliness.

Simply put, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram et al have become major marketing channels for brands, businesses, politicians, and aspiring influencers. These products are incredible megaphones for anything you want to market. I don’t think there is anything fad like about that but what is simply not sustainable and will not last are the parts of the product where the average person feels the need to become or identify as their own brand to feel satisfied by the engagement with that platform.

There are a lot of changes happening here. Facebook itself is repositioning its efforts around more private communications — since in private conversations people express more of their true selves, and share more now than they do on their feeds or “media channels”. But I’m worried that the incumbents won’t lead us all the way there. They are, at their heart, advertising companies. The proof is in the business model. The main revenue driver for top social companies today are all based on advertising, of which a major factor is the time you spend on the app. Revenue models built on time spent are zero-sum business models.

There is so much more to do. I believe the best “social” experiences are what happens when we are meaningfully spending time together. It’s so much more than what happens when we share and consume later in the form of “social media”. I mean actually doing things together. Sometimes we might do them virtually live such as playing a game together (Fortnite anyone?), watching the same show at

the same time, listening to the same music, in the future experiencing a VR space together. But mostly, these happen when we get together in the real world — going to a concert together, eating dinner, or just hanging out at someone's apartment. These are the real experiences we have together. They matter in the best of times and the worst of times. These are the true moments that create the best memories.

Today's tools don't encourage this as much as they can. But tomorrow's tools will. I believe we will think of our next generation of products as social at the core. Netflix and Spotify should make it easy to have shared experiences and bring people together. Airbnb should make it much easier to travel and explore with friends. Classpass and Strava should get us working out more with our friends. Udemy can have us learning together. When I was growing up, I'd go to the mall to shop with friends. The next version of Amazon should bring this back to shop together with friends. The calendar is the center of how we plan and spend our time together, and a whole wave of apps including mine, IRL, are working to get us together more with the people we care about.

The next wave of social products isn't going to be about "media", it's going to be about experiences. I couldn't be more excited.