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## Writing is Networking for Introverts



Byrne Hobart May 24, 2019 · 5 min read ★

Networking is painful, and I'm suspicious of anyone who claims to enjoy it. Unfortunately for me, networking is effective: most good opportunities come from personal connections.

We can see all kinds of empirical evidence for this — people getting rich from being aware of it, which is the best evidence that something is true. Conferences buy cheap square footage and lease it at expensive rates to attendees who want to meet other attendees. Stanford business schools offer you the valuable opportunity to meet a lot of Stanford MBAs. Y Combinator's entire model is based on VCs' preference for warm introductions over cold emails: the spend three months getting a startup into shape and then introduce it to a hundred billion dollars of risk-seeking AUM.

Clearly networking, in a broad sense, works.

But it doesn't work very well for people who are bad at striking up conversations with strangers or near-strangers, and I definitely qualify there. I'm fairly introverted (which should be no surprise; introverts are way overrepresented on the text-only parts of the Internet), and I'm pathologically bad at recognizing faces. I used to think I was just nearsighted, but after I got glasses I heard about prosopagnosia and it clicked: if there's a word in Greek or Latin for it, it's probably real.[1]

Introversion and a poor ability to recognize people makes networking an absolute minefield. You're either going to have a somewhat painful conversation with someone



There is a solution: be famous. You lose the ability to filter out who you want to talk to, but at least everyone starts the conversation with some context; you're outsourcing the extroversion to them.

Fame is hard, and it has other costs. But there's a second alternative: *be microfamous*. Microfame is the best kind of fame, because it combines an easier task (be famous to fewer people) with a better outcome (be famous to the right people).

If you're trying to calibrate how hard it is to achieve micro-fame, focus on the micro, not the fame. Micro-fame just means your friends-of-friends have a nonzero chance of knowing who you are, and striking up a conversation with you about something mutually interesting.

My first brush with micro-fame via writing happened in a party in 2014. My wife and I had just eloped, and I naturally celebrated by writing a long Facebook post about how, from a Darwinian/inclusive fitness perspective, the only person *in the whole world* who you could trust to act in your interests for their own reasons was someone with whom you'd had several kids. [2]

A few days later, we were at a party, and a complete stranger introduced himself, congratulated us, and started talking about evolution and marriage. To an introvert, this is nirvana:

1. You don't have to introduce yourself to anyone.
2. You don't have to conversationally grope around for something to talk about.
3. Your conversational partners are pre-selected for having shared obscure interests.

One can argue that this norm has a drawback: part of the fun of meeting new people is learning stuff you didn't realize was interesting. But that's a good use case for writing. Lots of nerdy people form social connections based on a single shared interest, but most nerds have multiple obscure interests.

So Alice, who likes functional programming, lockpicking, and anarcho-capitalism, befriends Bob, who likes functional programming, science fiction, and Marxism. Alice and Bob can use writing to surf one another's friend graphs for other like-minded folk, by writing up something of general interest about their particular intellectual hobbyhorse. When Alice writes something cool about lockpicking, which Bob posts on Twitter, Alice is likely to meet some of Bob's lockpicking friends.



problems with this, one of which is that plenty of normal people do this, too, just for broader interests: there's a difference of kind, not degree, between someone who only wants to talk about weather, sports, and national politics on the one hand, and someone who only wants to talk about computational biology, modern monetary theory, and the reign of Louis IX on the other hand.

But a side effect of the writing-as-networking strategy is that *writing about your other interests gets other people interested*. You're not just identifying neighbors in your intellectual ghetto; you're recruiting more. If more of your friends do it, you get exposed to more ideas. At a very micro-scale, a long essay about a topic you might be interested in is like a long conversation about the same, except that it's a lot less rude to check out thirty seconds into it when you conclude that it's boring stuff for a different kind of nerd.

When people write about "content marketing," there's an emphasis on getting an arbitrarily large audience, but a narrow audience has its own perks. You can save a lot of money on conference tickets and business cards if you use a couple well-chosen essays as a way to get warm intros from friends-of-friends who you'd want to collaborate with.

This is not for everyone. There are some people who really love the idea of walking into a room full of strangers with a fat stack of business cards and making a bunch of valuable connections. But for those of us who faintly dread the prospect, writing is an alternative. If you put in the effort, you can substitute the worst parts of socializing for time spent alone with your computer. As it turns out, "shameless personal networker" is just another one of those jobs being eaten by software.

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[1] I don't uniformly fail to recognize people. It just takes a while, and I rely more on context clues like what they're talking about.

[2] I stand by this argument, with the caveat that identical twins probably share the same evolutionary incentives, but that what we care about is cultural and moral norms

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we're more senior in the utility cap table. If your kid decides to do an on-stage CRISPR injection or go fight ISIS, you're not going to get the benefits from that, but if there are negative consequences, you *will* probably end up helping with those.

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