How social networks can destroy your social life

An [article in the New York Times](http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/10/14/seeking-privacy-in-a-networked-age/) caught my eye. In it, Nick Bilton, a NYTcolumnist, recounts a recent dinner party that he hosted, in the middle of which his phone beeped with a text message. "Hey, I see you're having people over," it read. "OK if I stop by?" What puzzled Mr Bilton was how this person knew he was having a dinner party.

Then he looked at his guests. "Over the course of the three-hour dinner," the poor sap eventually discovered, "my friends posted seven photos on Path, sent six Twitter messages (five with photos), six photos on Instagram and two people checked in on [Foursquare](http://www.theguardian.com/technology/foursquare). When I added up the collective follower counts of the people in the room, my little dinner party was potentially viewed by more people than watch The Late Show on CBS: over three million." (Two of his guests have large numbers of followers on Twitter.) And, to add insult to (self-inflicted) injury, a few days later he telephoned someone in a work-related call, only to be told by the other person – who has never crossed his threshold – how much he "just loved" the lamps hanging above the Bilton kitchen table.

Welcome to our socially networked world. One of the most puzzling things about it is why normally sane, well-adjusted, intelligent people lose not only their judgment but also their marbles when confronted with the opportunities for exposure offered by Twitter, Facebook, Foursquare, Path, Instagram et al. As I wrote that, my Twitterstream updated. "I'm at Leicester Square underground station (London)," tweeted one of the (normally sane, well-adjusted, etc) people whom I follow. Then I checked with Foursquare, a service to which this person subscribes. "xxx checked in at Leicester Square London underground station," it burbled, before excitedly adding that xxx had earned seven "points" for managing to find a major tube station. Three of these points were for "First time at Leicester Square London underground station", and four were for "First Tourist Information Center!"

[Foursquare](https://foursquare.com/), in case you haven't come across it, is possibly the daftest application of GPS technology yet devised. It's a mobile application that allows registered users to "check in" at a particular location. Checkers-in are rewarded with "points" and sometimes "badges". (I am not making this up.) Check-in requires active user selection and points are awarded at check-in. Subscribers can also opt to have their checking-in achievements automatically posted to Twitter or Facebook.

But wait, there's more! If you've checked in to a location on more occasions than anyone else over the past 60 days, then you are crowned "mayor" of that location. But of course some other rotter can depose you by checking in even more frantically and no doubt even as I write there are epic tussles going on for the mayorship of, say, Tooting Bec underground station, or the third litter bin on the left at the exit from Waterloo station.

If this business of points, badges and mayorships reminds you of the collection games that five-year-olds play with picture cards, Pokémon accessories and other gewgaws, then you're right on the money. The thing is, though, that, [according to Wikipedia,](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foursquare) the Foursquare game is currently being played by 20 million adults, which makes one wonder if perhaps the time has come to rethink the whole business of universal adult franchise. Should anyone this idiotic have the vote?

But actually Foursquare is simply the looniest extreme of this mania for self-revelation. In pondering Nick Bilton's story about his inadvertently broadcasted dinner party, I was suddenly reminded of Erving Goffman's great book, [The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life](http://www.amazon.co.uk/gp/product/0140135715/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1634&creative=19450&creativeASIN=0140135715&linkCode=as2&tag=meme11-21), which first appeared in 1959 and which I read as a student in the late 1960s. In it, Goffman uses a theatrical metaphor to interpret social interactions between people. In everyday life, he argues, we are all actors, each of us playing a variety of roles. The audience consists of the other people with whom we interact. And, as in the theatre, we operate in two zones – one when we are, as it were, on stage, and the other when the curtain is down and we can revert to being ourselves – ie discard the role or identity we assume when in the presence of others.

Goffman's analysis was entirely predicated on the face-to-face encounters of social life as it used to be in a pre-internet age. In those days, it really was possible to go backstage, as it were: to discard one's public face and be oneself. It still is, but now you have to switch off your phone and resist the egotistical temptations of social networking and location-based services. And, hey! – if you do that, then maybe people will start inviting you to dinner again.