

# The future of social is Bringing People Together - Josh Elman - Medium

Josh Elman

14-18 minutes

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*In late January, I wrote this with my friend [Abraham Shafi](#) who is co-founder and CEO of [IRL — a great and fast-growing social calendar app](#). We were talking about the future of social apps and how much opportunity there is ahead in bringing people together to do more and better things with their time. Abe and his team have been very focused on helping people meet up “In Real Life” and share more and better experiences together.*

*While I’m taking a break from full time work and larger commitments, I was so excited about the team’s vision and opportunity, I joined in a small / part time capacity to help with special projects.*

*Around the same time, the awareness of COVID-19 started rising. Before we had time to publish our piece below and build some new features, the world shifted from one of social experiences to one of social distancing. We had a number of conversations about what this means for IRL’s vision, and why bringing people together remotely is even more important than ever. We got excited for how the core product of IRL can help people do this... well with a bunch of changes. Today they have relaunched their IRL app as “In Remote Life” and [Techcrunch covered it here](#).*

*Given recent events and what’s happening in the world right now, I think the core premise of what we wrote in January still holds. There is a bright future for social products ahead:*

Photo by “[My Life Through A Lens](#)” on [Unsplash](#)

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. Udemmy 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.

Written by

**I love building products that people use. I've helped build Twitter, Facebook Connect, LinkedIn, Robinhood. Investor in Medium, Tiktok/Musical.ly, Discord**

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Thanks to Corona Virus, we're quickly moving from social lives to social distancing. We're changing work from in person / in office to WFH. This is a great window of opportunity for new products. Here are a few ideas I was thinking about. If you are building anything like this, let me know, it would be fun to jam.

One of the biggest challenges with Slack, email, group messaging, and most group communication channels is what happens when you ask a question or ask for feedback. You usually start with a request for feedback by sending an email, a doc, or even just a thought. Then the responses start coming. It's often the first person to reply who sets the tone for the entire rest of the thread and discussion. ...

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A lot happened over the past decade. As I was thinking about the impact of the past ten years, I thought about some hopes I have towards the next ten.

1. Now that billions of people are online and using the same products, I hope that we can use them to help make society even better instead of just profit centers with great margins
2. Now that we are seeing the real impact of our climate changing and global warming, I hope we can implement solutions that put the world in a better place for the next decades
3. Now that we have seen a massive rise in the income and savings gaps between the wealthy and middle / lower classes, I hope we can reverse the trend and make sure everyone has access to jobs at reasonable income levels, affordable health care, and more, and create more...

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Mammoth Media CEO Benoit Vatore and team.

There are probably 1 billion phones in the world that people have looked at in the past hour. 98% of millennials in the United States have a smartphone. While some people say "mobile is dead" (for new investments / startups) or "no one is downloading new apps", this just doesn't match up with the rapidly increasing numbers and time spent on mobile. Consumers are always on the hunt for new, fun ways to interact with content and each other. Last year, I wrote a [blog post](#) on how the next great platform is still mobile and it rings even truer today.

For millennials and Generation Z, mobile devices are the primary screen in which they connect with their world. They communicate with their friends and families constantly over text, iMessage, Facetime, Snapchat, Houseparty, etc., and keep up with each other's lives and more through Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. People play games — lots and lots of games. The mobile gaming space is massive — over \$46B was spent on mobile games last year across App Store and Google Play, and this has become the largest segment of the games industry.

Beyond just communication, social media, and games, these devices have become more and more common place for seeking out entertainment — books, video, music. One of the fastest growing areas of mobile have been subscription services accessed through your phone. People pay for Spotify or Apple Music to get their music, and Netflix, Hulu, and HBO to access their videos, or Kindle Unlimited to read books. What's interesting about these services is, unlike mobile games, none of these started on mobile, nor are optimized for mobile.

This brings us to [Mammoth Media](#). CEO Benoit Vatore believed there was an opportunity to create a new “studio lot” that could produce apps that provided unique mobile-first entertainment on a daily basis. They incubated this company within [Science](#), with the idea that true mobile entertainment should be interactive, shareable, and provide a few minutes of fun, multiple times per day, instead of a 30 minute or longer show.

They first launched Wishbone, a polling app. Wishbone provided a “daily dozen” poll of 12 questions in the format “which do you prefer — A or B?” Millions of people opened their phones to vote and compare their taste to others. Over time they extended this to multiple times per day and opened the question creation to their community. Mammoth Media’s next big hit is Yarn which lets users read and watch interactive stories, with new content created daily. Yarn started with stories told through simple text message threads, and have evolved to a rich new storytelling format including video, “live streaming”, and more to tell the story. Users can subscribe on a weekly or monthly basis to access the catalog of stories within Yarn — similar to subscribing to Netflix or HBO. Yarn and Wishbone are just the beginning of Mammoth’s vision for a new mobile-first entertainment network.

In just two years, Mammoth Media has become the leading mobile-first media company to produce, distribute, and monetize original content. They deliver engaging, short-form content through their suite of mobile products and online channels, which has garnered a mass audience of users and downloads. Mammoth’s mobile apps, like Yarn and Wishbone, are consistently ranked in the Top 100 App charts. Yarn is one of the fastest growing destinations for short-form storytelling with a total of 36 million stories read, 1.6 million episodes read per week and 7.5 billion messages read. Wishbone, a community where millennials can share their opinions, has an average of 352 million votes per month and 17 billion votes created to date.

Today Mammoth is announcing its exclusive content partnership with Skype and their new series HACK’D. This is the beginning of taking more professional content and bringing it to this new mobile-native format. The Mammoth team is uniquely poised to take advantage of this opportunity with their deep experience of mobile dynamics including acquisition and monetization. For content owners, Mammoth provides direct access to millions of viewers and a platform to deliver quality content.

Along with that announcement, I am excited to share that Greylock led the \$13M Series A financing in Mammoth Media, and I have joined the board. ...

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Recently, a friend of mine took a week off for learning that he called “[Think Week](#)”. I was reading his post and his preparation and felt a little jealous that he was in a place to take a week off, be free from schedule and responsibilities, and able to do all this great learning. I saved many of the articles to read later, and wondered to myself what it would take to get a week off. It’s hard between work, commitments, and family...

And then last week happened. It was supposed to be a very full week ending in a trip to [Summit](#). I had a number of meetings with founders, meetings with important contacts, and 4 different speaking engagements planned. But instead, I didn’t do any of it. For the first time in as long as I can remember, I cancelled my entire week. I had no choice. I was sicker than I ever have been. ...

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The Otto Team.

We believe that over the next decade, our homes will become as digital and connected as our phones are now. In 2013, I led Greylock’s investment in [SmartThings](#), a company building the hub and OS for connecting devices in the home. Less than a year later, [Samsung acquired SmartThings](#) and they have continued to make great progress towards that vision. Things were moving quickly, with great products like the Nest thermostat and

Ring doorbell showing everyone the potential of replacing simple devices in your home with new versions that were smart, connected, and provided important new value. The following year, Amazon unveiled its Amazon Echo which quickly became a top selling product and brought deep interactivity and engagement to what could have been just a speaker.

It is still very early in the cycle of bringing smart devices to all parts of our homes, though it's starting to happen. Today, most of my friends own an Amazon Echo or Google Home, and their houses are more and more integrated with smart devices for lighting, climate control, cameras and security, and even kitchen appliances. (Admittedly, I have a lot of early adopter friends.) From smart phones to smarter homes, we are at a moment where people are ready to use smart devices that make their lives more convenient and comfortable. But there are still a lot of key areas in our home waiting for great products to bring them into this smarter, more digital world. ...

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