

Facebook: Social Connections or Social Control?

Facebook's attempts to limit online friendships in the name of spam reduction interferes with political communication

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If you use Facebook, chances are that you have online friends you've never met, and with whom you have never talked or even exchanged email. They issued you a friendship request, or vice-versa, because of some common interest. This is especially true if you are a political activist, but it can be true of people with any type of common interest, such as co-religionists, players of a game, alumni of a university, or owners of a certain breed of dog. Accepting or declining a friendship invitation is easy. You press a button. You can even do it from your email rather than going into Facebook itself.

I am a journalist who has a personal profile with 902 friends as of this morning, as well as a Facebook page called [The End Of Money](#), which is dedicated to deep global economic reform. I also have a rather large list of potential friends, which *Facebook itself has supplied*. At some point after people accept friend invitations for my personal profile, they get an invitation to "like" my political page. My list of potential friends has grown large in part because I don't make connections very often. But when I tried to catch up on the list, Facebook sent me a message that I was going too fast in adding friends and I had to slow down. (This message was accompanied by the annoying CAPTCHA that is used to distinguish between humans and 'bots. I hate having to prove my humanity to a corporation!)

This morning, a friend request to someone I actually know but have not talked to in 25 years was not put through by Facebook. (I thought Facebook was designed to facilitate reconnecting with people with whom you've lost touch?!) The Help Center page to which I was referred said I was temporarily cut off from issuing friendship requests because too many of my previous requests had been declined, which to Facebook is indicative of spam. As this was a generic "help center" response and not a personal message, I don't know that this is actually the reason why the invitation was not sent.

Facebook is trying to limit friendship requests in the name of spam reduction. According to Facebook, you are supposed to issue friendship invitations only to people you actually know. Make too many friend invitations in one period of time or have too many that are declined or ignored—how many is too many exactly, Facebook's "Help Center" message did not say—and you will be presumed a spammer.

Not all unexpected email should be considered spam. There is a difference between a person reaching out to other likeminded individuals for a connection and a Nigerian royalty solicitation. There is a difference between sending one request to a person and sending 5 to that individual. People online also must take a little responsibility for themselves. In joining Facebook or any other social media, you have opened yourself up to potential contact by

people all over the world. You have the freedom to decline or ignore a friendship invitation. As I said before, it's very easy to do. Isn't it better that you do it yourself rather than leaving it to a corporation that makes broad, inaccurate assumptions based on impersonal algorithms? Declining or ignoring does not even mean you don't know the person. I have declined invitations from certain groups and people I personally know but with whom I no longer wish to associate.

What if people are using social media to expand their connections to the world albeit online? They have the right to receive an invitation equal to someone's right to send one. As Will Rogers said, "A stranger is a friend I haven't met." Yet Facebook always includes the message "Please only send this request if you know him/her personally" with the invitation.

We don't need Facebook or any other social media platform to connect with people we know and with whom we currently associate offline. In fact, online social media may hurt those relationships when geographic distance is not an issue. Don't have lunch with local offline friends at a restaurant or invite them to your house, just friend them on Facebook! Such an attitude separates people rather than connecting them.

However, social media is very useful for political communication and organizing, especially on a national or global level, as we saw in advance of the Iranian elections, the votes on "Obamacare," and during the current controversy over Wikileaks. Making connections with people who share your political point of view means sending a message to a person you don't know that is saying, in essence, "I'm here and we have a common point of view on certain issues. Make a connection if you wish." These kinds of connections can break a corporate media blackout or disinformation campaign; they can organize a protest, a lobbying effort, a political campaign or a boycott. Have global political elites ordered Facebook to interfere with that ability to communicate and organize?

It is not the province of social media platforms to dictate to us with whom we may connect, or with how many people we may connect in a particular span of time. Some people might deal with connections for a little while each day, others weekly, others monthly, others on an irregular basis. Facebook has no business assuming that if you issue a lot of invitations in a day that you are a spambot. As a person's experience with social media grows, so does the list of potential connections. It is a lot of work to catch up to everyone on a big list. The decision about when you have the time to do it should be entirely yours.

On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 19 of that declaration says:

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and **to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.** (emphasis added)

This right is meaningless without the people's ability to make voluntary connections with each other, singly and collectively, without interference by governments or corporations. Concomitant with that right is the personal responsibility to deal with the fact that if you're are going to engage the world through social media, your email in-box might get a little more crowded. (Well known politicians, artists, athletes, actors, authors and musicians, this includes you!)

Users rightly have stood up to moves by Facebook that they considered an invasion of

privacy. It is now time for them to tell Facebook to butt out of their friendships.

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