

'Facebook' friends don't add up to close relationships

> MELISSA HECKSCHER

So there we were at some upscale Manhattan Beach restaurant when Jacob's cell phone vibrates (now that we're not in the courting phase anymore we've both agreed it's OK to bring the cell phone to dinner) and he looks down to see that yet another Long Lost Friend has found him on Facebook.

It's a thrice-daily occurrence now, these Facebook reunions. This time it was a former co-worker from his New York ad agency days. The last time it was a guy he knew in high school. The time before that, some girl from college who is now married and whose maiden name he couldn't remember.

And this is when I realize: Facebook is getting on my nerves.

"What's the point?" I ask Jacob as he punches away on his cell phone, presumably responding to the aforementioned former co-worker.

"What's the point of what?" he says.

"Well," I say, trying my best not to sound bothered but doing a terrible job of it, "what's the point of being online friends with all these people who aren't really your friends in the first place?"

I already know his answer to this: It's a work thing. Jacob is in advertising. Offline or online, he says: "It's all about networking."

Which makes sense, I guess.

But it still bugs me.

Don't get me wrong, I'm on Facebook, too. I've done my share of photo "tagging"; I've accepted virtual potted plants; I've joined clubs such as the Humane Society's Fur-Free campaign and the New York City Mustache Club (don't ask).

My biggest weakness is simple spying. I've spent far too much time peering in to see how many of my high school friends have babies and I've been simultaneously amazed and depressed at how terribly "grown up" we've all become.

But, just the same: I don't understand the point.

Facebook (and any other networking site, for that matter) may allow us to catch up with friends without having to actually, you know, t-a-l-k to them.

But are any of the approximately 100 million Facebook members any better for it?

Scientists say no.

According to a University of Liverpool study, most people have about 150 friends in their online social networks; however, only

five of these — the same acquaintance-to-friend ratio as exists in real life — are "core" friends.

A follow-up study at Sheffield Hallam University in the U.K. found that even when people's social networks ballooned to more than 1,000 people, the number of close friendships did not change.

"Our data suggests weak ties are (more common) but there is no difference in the number of close friends people have," evolutionary psychologist Will Reader said in a Reuters news report.

"Nearly all our close friends require face-to-face contact."

Does this surprise anyone?

And another thing. Let's talk about this whole "status" thing.

For those who don't use Facebook: The status line is a place where people can leave messages about their current whereabouts or frame of mind. Frequent Facebookers update this status line multiple times a day so that everyone knows exactly what they're doing or how they're feeling at any given moment.

My friend Vanessa likes to use her status line to make herself more desirable to men she's dating. She'll write, "Vanessa is ... going to a really nice dinner in Hollywood" or, "Vanessa is ... at the Lakers game. Courtside."

Other people like to update their status to reflect the most mundane of activities:

"Julie is ... at the bank."

"Sarah is ... doing laundry."

"Jake is ... bored."

Come on, people, does anyone really care?

Personally, I like to defeat the system by typing in total lies:

"Melissa is ... moving to th Ukraine."

"Melissa is ... cashing in that lottery ticket."

"Melissa is ... buying a pet monkey."

People respond. Last night, while "researching" this article, I typed in "Melissa is ... in the Congo." Within minutes, my friend Tony instant messaged me to ask: "Are you really in the Congo?!"

Ah, it's too easy.

Jacob saw my status change, too. He responded with a "public" comment (i.e., one that can be seen by all 447 people in his network and all 122 in mine):

"The Congo?" he said. "So that's where you went."

Admittedly, I had to laugh. And maybe, well, that's the point.

Melissa Heckscher is the author of six books including "Date Him or Dump Him? The No-Nonsense Relationship Quiz" (Quirk Books, 2005). She can be reached at melissa.heckscher@dailybreeze.com

Daily Breeze 13 Nov. 2008
p. C1