

Reading and Response #4

More Facebook friends, fewer real ones, says Cornell study – ABC News (2011)

We may “friend” more people on Facebook, but we have fewer real friends – the kind who would help us out in tough times, listen sympathetically no matter what, lend us money or give us a place to stay if we needed it, keep a secret if we shared one.

That’s the conclusion made by Matthew Brashears, a Cornell University sociologist who surveyed more than 2,000 adults from a national database and found that from 1985 to 2010, the number of truly close friends people cited has dropped – even though we’re socializing as much as ever.

On average, participants listed 2.03 close friends in Brashears’ survey. That number was down from about three in a 1985 study.

“These are the people you think of as your real confidants, your go-to people if you need something,” Brashears said.

Brashears asked people online from a database called TESS – Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences – to list the names of people with whom they had discussed “important matters” over the previous six months. He reports the results in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Social Networks*.

Forty-eight percent of participants listed one close friend when asked, 18 percent listed two and 29 percent listed more. A little more than 4 percent didn’t list anyone.

What’s going on? Brashears said his survey can’t tell us conclusively, but his guess is that while we meet just as many people as we used to, we categorize them differently.

Does that mean we’re more isolated in these times when we seem to meet more people online than in person? (How many of your Facebook “friends” are really friends of yours?)

Defying some of the stereotypes of the digital age, social scientists say Facebook may actually be healthy for us. Keith Hampton at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania wrote a report for the Pew Research Center in which he found that “Internet users in general, but Facebook users even more so, have more close relationships than other people.”

“Facebook users get more overall social support, and in particular they report more emotional support and companionship than other people,” wrote Hampton in a blog post. “And, it is not a trivial amount of support. Compared to other things that matter for support – like being married or living with a partner – it really matters. Frequent Facebook use is equivalent to about half the boost in support you get from being married.”

But online contact and personal contact are different. While Hampton reports we know more people because of Facebook and similar sites, Brashears reports there are fewer whom we choose to trust with our most intimate worries.

“We’re not becoming asocial,” said Brashears, “but these people give us social support, and they give us advice.”

Respond with ANY one of the following Lens:

- Reader Response
- Psychological
- Historical
- Gender
- Race
- Socio-Economic
- Spiritual
- New Criticism