

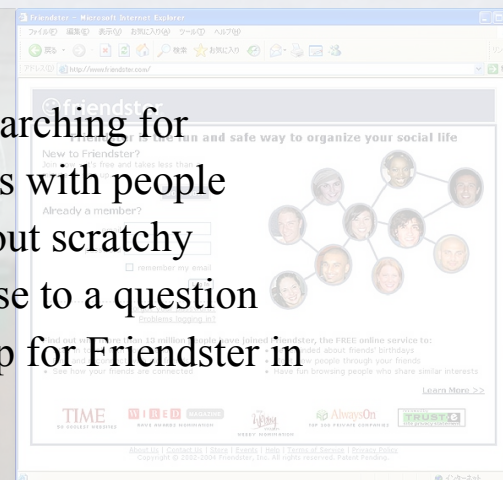


# What Social Networks Want

*Some thoughts on digital canvases*  
by Steven Klimek, March 2014

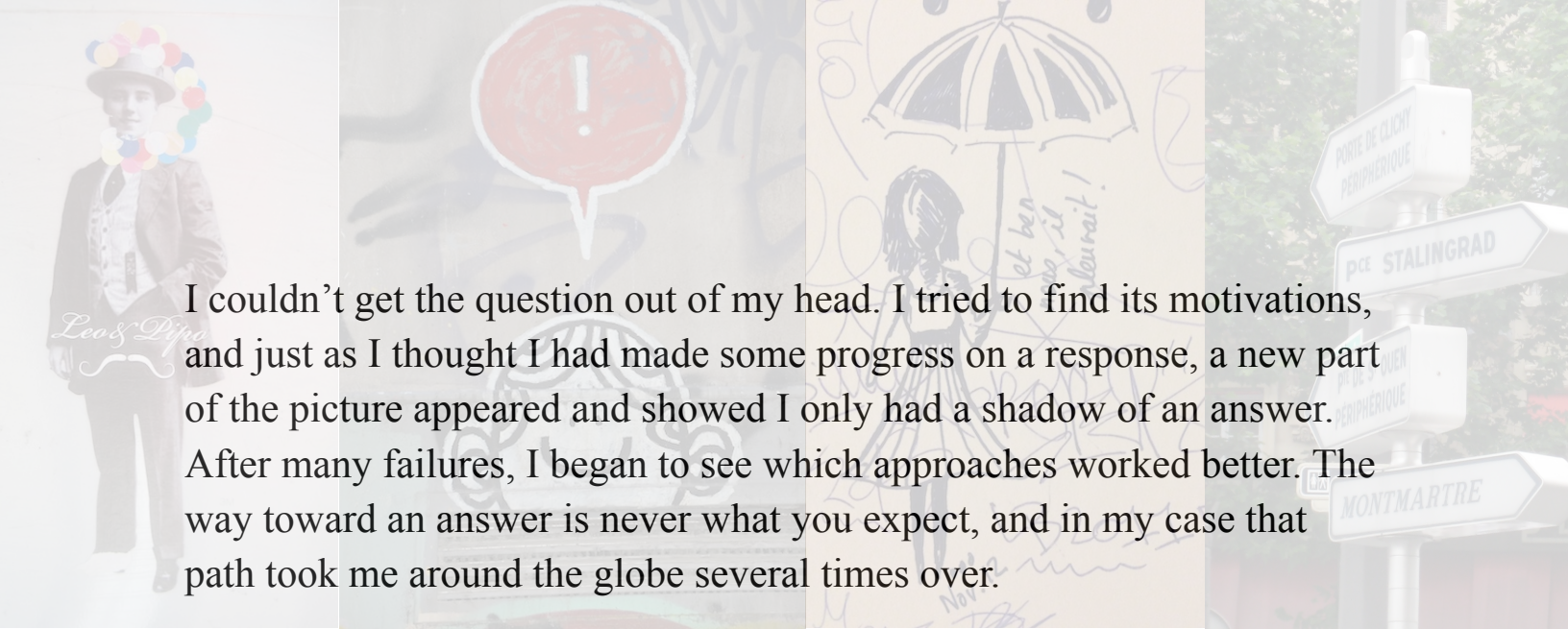
This essay is inspired in part by Frank Chimero, who wrote an essay entitled What Screens Want that we were lucky enough to read during the development process of our startup. We found that Frank's outlook so eloquently described some of the problems we are trying to solve, albeit in a different context, and so we wanted to give him a shout out. So thanks to Frank, and thanks to you for reading this musing.

The past nine years, I've been wandering the globe searching for answers. I read books, looked at art, had conversations with people whose language I couldn't even speak, and sketched out scratchy thoughts of my own to search for any sensible response to a question that had been lodged in my head since I first signed up for Friendster in 2003.



What does it mean to be *social*  
through media?





I couldn't get the question out of my head. I tried to find its motivations, and just as I thought I had made some progress on a response, a new part of the picture appeared and showed I only had a shadow of an answer. After many failures, I began to see which approaches worked better. The way toward an answer is never what you expect, and in my case that path took me around the globe several times over.





An aerial night photograph of a city. In the center of the sky, a large heart shape is formed by numerous blue and white lights. Two airplane tails are visible in the foreground, one at the top and one at the bottom, both featuring a red heart logo. The city lights are visible in the background and foreground.

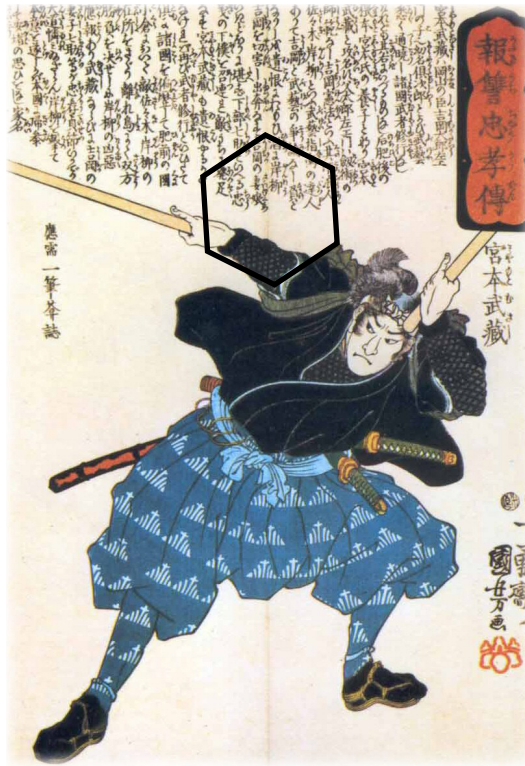
WELCOME

TO

INITIAL

DESCENT





Pictured above is a woodblock print of Miyamoto Musashi, who 400 years ago was considered the fiercest samurai in Japan. I saw the image while browsing philosophy books at the Kinokuniya bookstore in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward, and it struck me as odd that Musashi was pictured with his swords facing upwards.

I did some digging, and I learned that the sword he used was called a *katana*. Unlike its predecessor, the *tachi*, the katana was worn with the blade facing up, making it possible to draw the sword and strike the enemy in a single motion. What was interesting to me, though, was that the evolution of the katana did not begin with a sword at all. Instead, it started with a different style *obi*, or sash, which the samurais wore to hold their swords. Some early-adopters figured out that if their obi opened upwards instead of down, they could draw their tachi quicker. As swordsmiths caught on, they redesigned the swords themselves to face up—what began as a tool to assist (the obi) actually became the new style of sword.

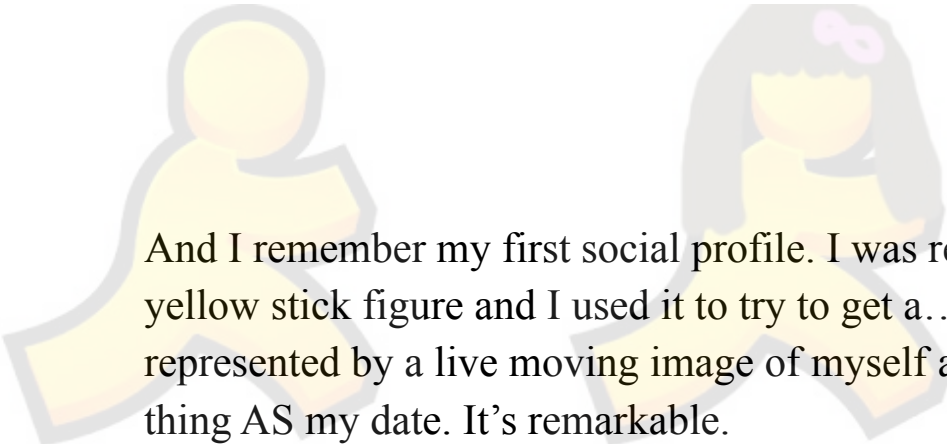


When I learned that, it occurred to me that we've been experiencing a similar situation with social media. I mean, have you taken stock of the activity on your content streams lately? Or stepped back and assessed the actual tools you use to communicate? Things have changed, right in the palm of our hands. We take it for granted, because the transition was so fast and thorough.

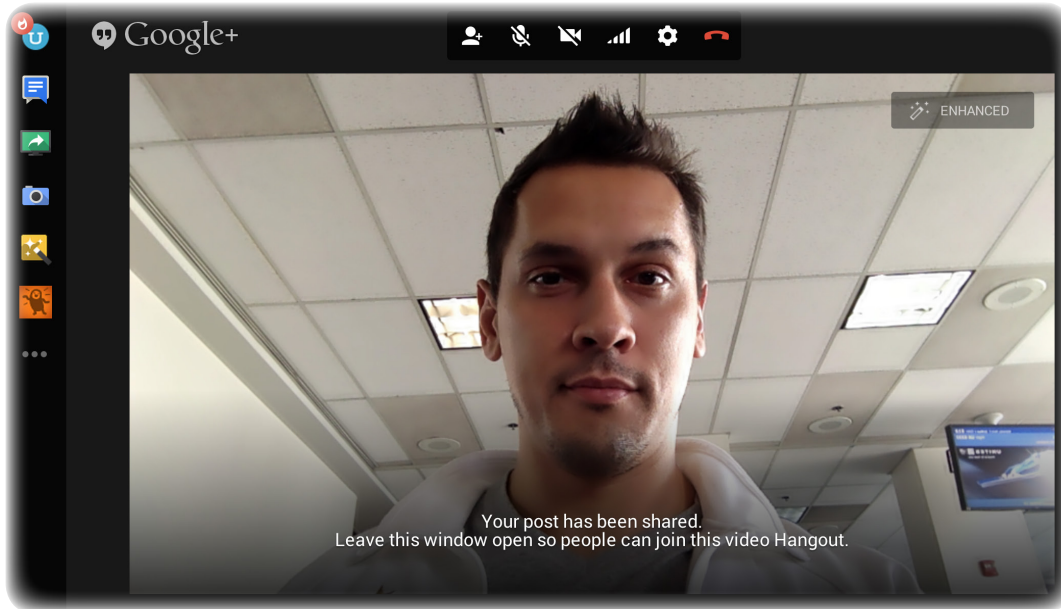


I remember my first social tool. It was attached to a wall and I could use it to call the tall girl I had a crush on in high school. Without fail, her Dad would answer, and those awkward, short conversations made me feel like a freshly neutered dog. It was miserable. To think that every kid now has a smartphone and that the first boy who ever dates my future daughter will not even have to go through me—it just feels wrong!





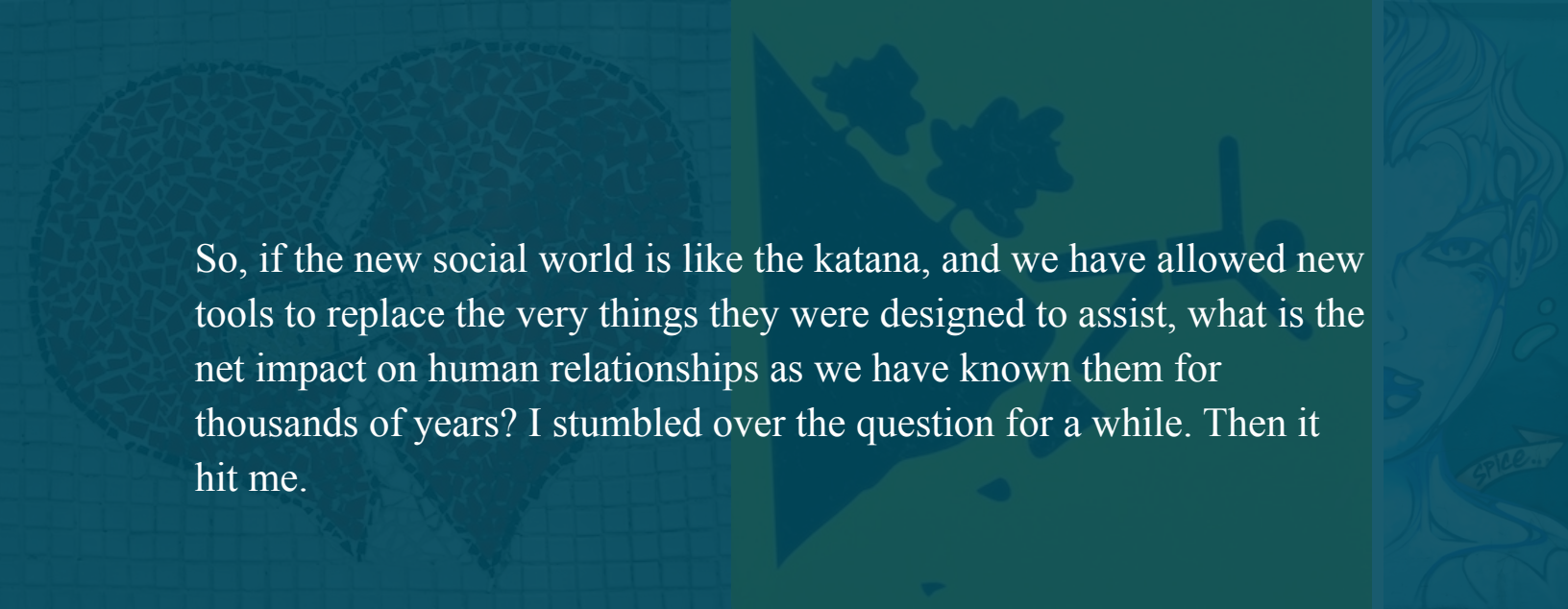
And I remember my first social profile. I was represented by a fat, yellow stick figure and I used it to try to get a...umm...date. Now I'm represented by a live moving image of myself and I can use the damn thing AS my date. It's remarkable.



So just like the katana, something that was originally designed as a tool to assist has become a replacement. Chances are you have spent more time today interacting with the very screen you're reading this on than you have with other living, breathing human beings.

And now, because we are so used to electronic feedback as opposed to reading the millions of unique facial expressions and body movements that comprise 93% of human communication, we communicate with an end goal in mind. The whole feedback cycle of participating in the new social world is built around a few be-all-end-all 'results' that we desire, and desire right now. It's no wonder that the average millennial today is uncomfortable with eye contact.





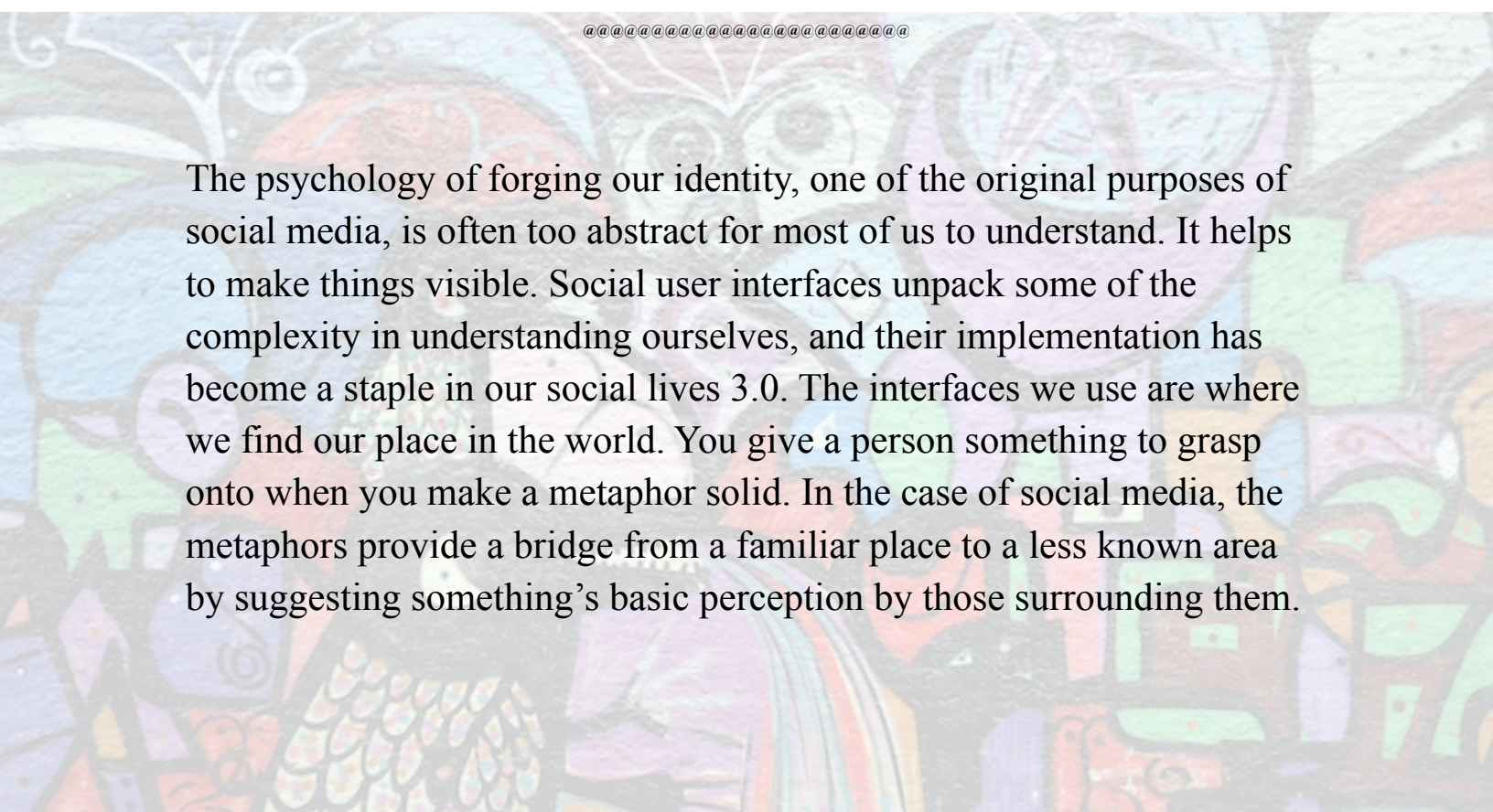
So, if the new social world is like the katana, and we have allowed new tools to replace the very things they were designed to assist, what is the net impact on human relationships as we have known them for thousands of years? I stumbled over the question for a while. Then it hit me.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo

The motivation isn't in the  
conversation anymore.

It's in the feedback.

oooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo



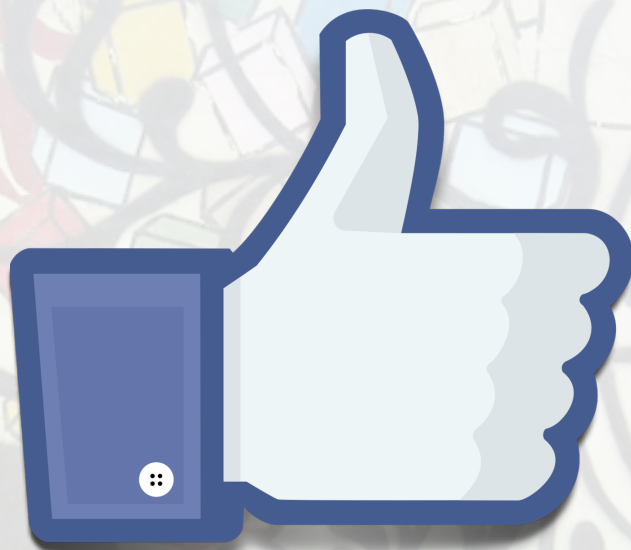
The psychology of forging our identity, one of the original purposes of social media, is often too abstract for most of us to understand. It helps to make things visible. Social user interfaces unpack some of the complexity in understanding ourselves, and their implementation has become a staple in our social lives 3.0. The interfaces we use are where we find our place in the world. You give a person something to grasp onto when you make a metaphor solid. In the case of social media, the metaphors provide a bridge from a familiar place to a less known area by suggesting something's basic perception by those surrounding them.



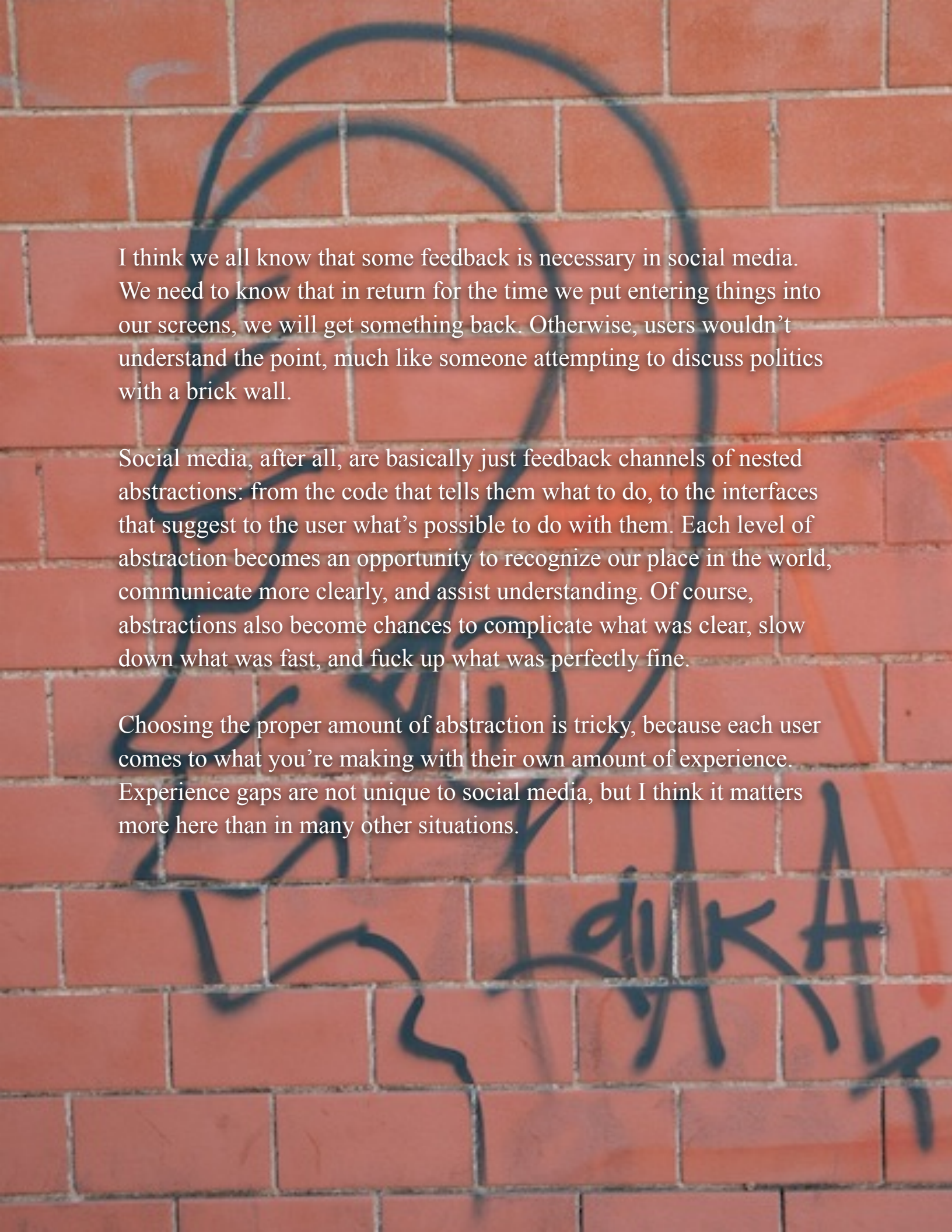


For instance, if I say “This is a Heart,” you may not know psychological goings on underneath the surface of one’s skin, or what specific and complex emotions they may be feeling, but you’ve got a pretty good idea of what hearts symbolize. You can deduce that the person who left the heart is expressing appreciation for the content, thus positively reinforcing your forged identity.

Metaphors are assistive devices for understanding.





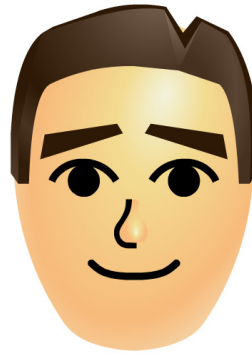


I think we all know that some feedback is necessary in social media. We need to know that in return for the time we put entering things into our screens, we will get something back. Otherwise, users wouldn't understand the point, much like someone attempting to discuss politics with a brick wall.

Social media, after all, are basically just feedback channels of nested abstractions: from the code that tells them what to do, to the interfaces that suggest to the user what's possible to do with them. Each level of abstraction becomes an opportunity to recognize our place in the world, communicate more clearly, and assist understanding. Of course, abstractions also become chances to complicate what was clear, slow down what was fast, and fuck up what was perfectly fine.

Choosing the proper amount of abstraction is tricky, because each user comes to what you're making with their own amount of experience. Experience gaps are not unique to social media, but I think it matters more here than in many other situations.





The best way to understand why is to look at the difference between your social identity and your actual, brick-and-mortar life. Your real life can't change overnight, but your social persona can: if you're clever enough, you can trick an entire world into thinking you are whatever you say you are. While in real life, we probably think those around us are fairly normal, their online persona would lead you to believe they all rescue puppies from burning buildings as part of their morning exercise routine. Enough exposure to this, and it becomes difficult to differentiate which is real and which is virtual.

We've been living through that confusion, seeing the lines between what is real and what is fictional becoming more and more blurred every day. The interfaces of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Whisper (among others) suggest our adeptness at navigating the new social world, and like them or not, each represents a major touchstone in our relationships today.

But it's not the first time we've gotten this confused. Let's go back 50 years.



MY  
FRAME  
OF  
REFERENCE



I'd like to show you an old video clip called *Frames of Reference* by University of Toronto physicists, Donald Ivey and Patterson Hume.



As a little formal exercise, since we are talking about the relationship between social media and social life, let's look at the feedback we receive in our virtual and realistic frames of reference.

VISTA  
SUA  
EXISTÊNCIA



You probably recognize this from grade school. It means you did a good job. You can enjoy those Skittles now. Isn't being "retweeted" the social-age equivalent?







And if your grades were good enough growing up, perhaps your parents handed you one of these each time your report card came out. I wonder what's more gratifying—a fresh five dollar bill (which will buy you about 385 Skittles if you're keeping tabs), or seeing how many “likes” you get with each Facebook post.

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In real life, there's no positive reinforcement better than a nice smile, is there? But you'd probably trade a hundred smiles for a bunch of hearts on each Instagram post...right?



**idworldwide**

3 months ago

Airport lounge, relaxation chair, Muppets socks...and a fine cognac #initialDescent



**revvkev**, **reubmuzik**, **roseyposeee** and 5 others like this.





If you've ever played sports, or given a concert, then you surely know how good this feels. But the socially savvy get to feel that adoration every minute of every day—so long as they log into Twitter.



**Questlove Jenkins** ✓

@questlove

your favorite twitterer's favorite music snob.

Philly & Fi-Di NYC & 31Rock · [itunes.apple.com/us/artist/the-...](https://itunes.apple.com/us/artist/the-...)

TWEETS  
**50.6K**

FOLLOWING  
**6,506**

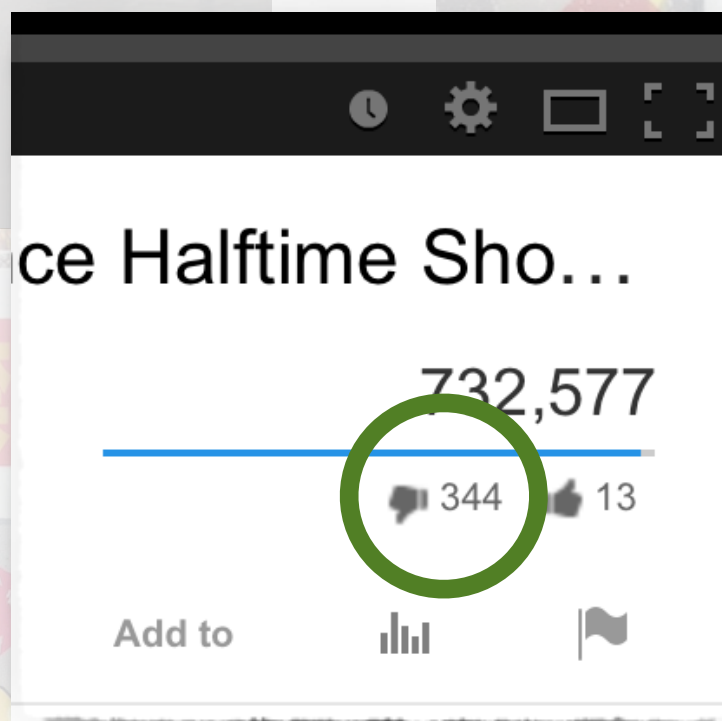
FOLLOWERS  
**2.92M**

Following

Of course, not all feedback is good feedback.



Hopefully you won't recognize this. If not, don't go rushing to google it. It means you didn't study hard enough. I guess you could say the same if your next YouTube video is received like this...







Surely we've all known the feeling of being flicked off by a 5-year-old hooligan. But not getting any retweets probably feels a lot worse.



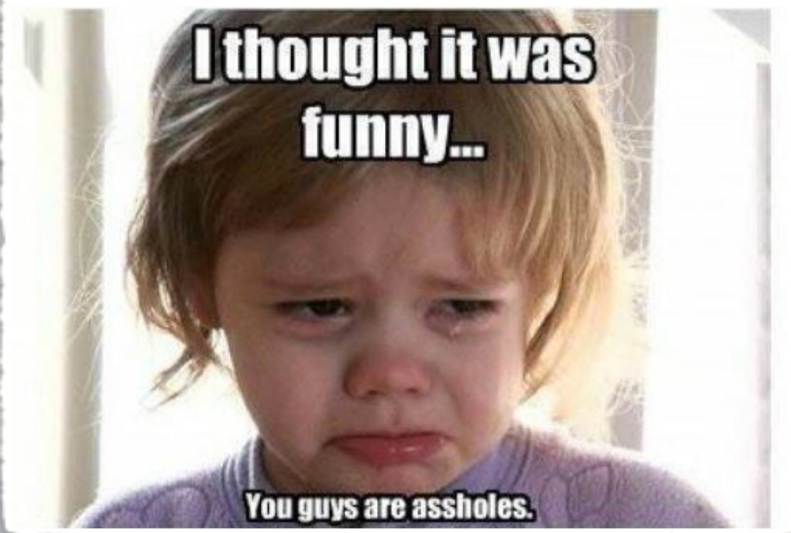
**Zach Galifianakis**  
@ZachGalifianak



+ Follow

When I get 0 retweets  
[pic.twitter.com/YDtOjSAd3O](https://pic.twitter.com/YDtOjSAd3O)

↩ Reply   ↻ Retweet   ★ Favorite   ⋮ More





Getting punched in the face is kind of insulting, no doubt. But if you've ever seen this on Facebook, it means that you just got blocked. For shame...

**Sorry, this page isn't available**

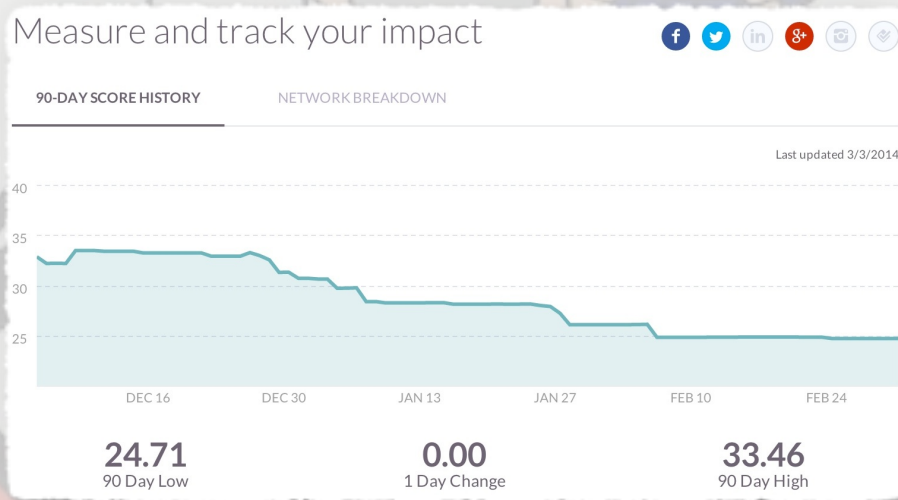
**The link you followed may be broken, or the page may have been removed.**







Hopefully you didn't have to face up to one of these in grade school. I'll avoid the obvious social comparison, but in a way, isn't having a low *Klout* score kind of like being made fun of?



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What Professors Hume and Ivey—the guys in the video—demonstrate is context. Just like any communications channel, social ones have affordances. Much like people do, I believe media channels have a bias: a certain way they are designed that describes how they will be used. Figure out the bias, and you know how to design a social channel to fit your agenda.

And that's what seems to be pervasive today. If you look and assess the real-life vs. virtual feedback patterns above, one thing sticks out. In our virtual lives, we voluntarily become statistics. Any action we take is up for judgment.

### **We're becoming addicted to feedback, and quantity trumps quality.**

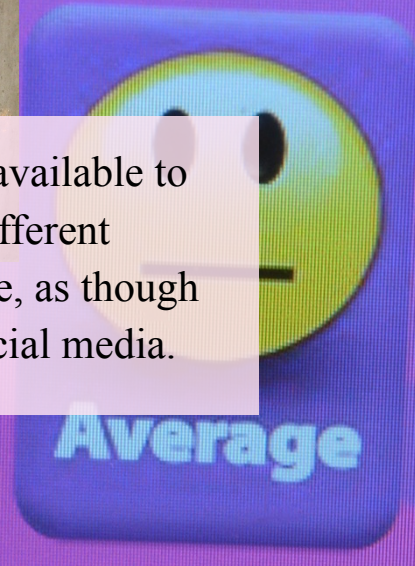
Design-wise, there are two categories of social channels: those which “validate” us according to our identity, which is what we generally think of with social media, and those which do so based on our content, such as the anonymous tools from the first AOL chatrooms to Whisper or Reddit today.

By now, everyone is probably aware of the privacy issues that using social media raise. Anything you see on Facebook or Twitter already comes with a filter attached, given that people will only post thoughts that they don't mind their boss, or their family, or their significant other seeing. And you've surely noticed that as soon as you mention that you'll be in Cabo next month, it becomes miraculously easier to book a hotel there with a single click.

So it is a reasonable assumption, then, that we can use the “identity” channels to establish ourselves in the new world, while using the “content” channels when we want honest feedback. Right?



As much as I wish to agree, I just can't—not with what is available to us today. Because while those two categories serve very different purposes, the ideology in their design is still the exact same, as though a mechanism for **judgment** is a natural consequence of social media.



Post New Topic New Poll Post Reply

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**parheel**  
Hall of Famer  
Post #2651  
Asheville, NC



[MyFanPage](#)  
[Add Buddy](#)  
[Ignore](#)

**THANK YOU ROY!**

With Cal getting tossed, Kansas losing, Syracuse etc. I am so thankful that Roy is our coach and end off to have this team where they are right with all of the off the court issues to have to be amazed.

Adam Lucas wrote an article a few months back about the PROGRAM means...and I think our program is there. Glad to have this team to pull for the re truckin, Roy!

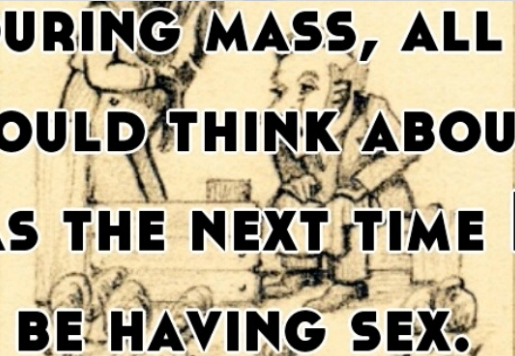
3/2 1:33 AM | IP: Logged

**Re: THANK YOU ROY!**



**BillyL GOLD 105**  
MONTHS  
Post #25547  
Alexandria Va

**DURING MASS, ALL I  
COULD THINK ABOUT  
WAS THE NEXT TIME I'D  
BE HAVING SEX.**



whisper

[#catholic](#) [#behavingsex](#) [#thenexttime](#) [#wenttochurch](#) [#during](#)  
[#mass](#)

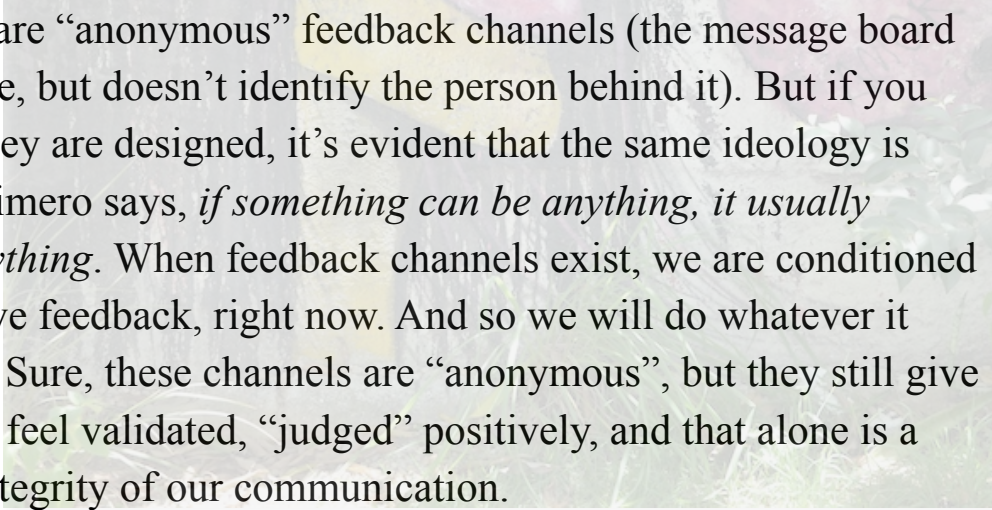
Wilders Grove

1633


107









Both of these are “anonymous” feedback channels (the message board has a username, but doesn’t identify the person behind it). But if you look at how they are designed, it’s evident that the same ideology is used. Like Chimero says, *if something can be anything, it usually becomes everything*. When feedback channels exist, we are conditioned to want positive feedback, right now. And so we will do whatever it takes to get it. Sure, these channels are “anonymous”, but they still give us a chance to feel validated, “judged” positively, and that alone is a filter on the integrity of our communication.



And perhaps that’s not surprising at all. After all, every social channel we have basically comes from the same location and even the same demographic. Facebook lives in Palo Alto, just up the street from Stanford University. Instagram? Snapchat? Both came out of Stanford fraternities. Whisper? It’s biggest financial backer is a VC firm located in—where else?—Palo Alto.



Granted, there is a reason venture capitalists flock to the Valley—there is no doubt that talent attracts talent. My point is simply that, with every prominent social channel available to us basically being birthed out of the same location, same world view and same “business” ideology, how can we reasonably expect to eliminate the bias built into social networks? At some point, it seems, we need to get out of the bubble that is Palo Alto and into the streets of Beijing, Bogotá or Bombay.







# THE THUNDER DRAGON KINGDOM





This is the national emblem of Bhutan. On it, you'll notice a few things. There is a male and female *druk*, which proudly represent the name of the country, a tiny, landlocked place in Asia with about 1/4th the population of Brooklyn. There is a thunderbolt representing harmony between secular and religious power, and a lotus designed to symbolize purity. And finally, you'll see a jewel.

Of course we know what the jewel is supposed to represent. After all, if you or I want to visit Bhutan, it's going to set us back a pretty penny. The government takes a tourist tax of USD \$250—per day!—just to remain in the country. No exceptions. The government must be rich, so including a jewel in their emblem makes perfect sense.

Except the jewel is not symbolic of wealth, but instead of sovereign power.

And that's a good thing, because the country and people of Bhutan are a far cry from wealthy, by our measurements anyway. The average Bhutanese household brings in about \$2,400...per year.





As for the government? Well, rather than hoarding that money, it actually spends it. On things like hydroelectric power, sustainable organic farming and maintaining its most prized cultural icons, its temples.

People in Bhutan actually have to put in an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. They work with their hands, in the sun, and don't generally have the same tools helping them out that we have. And yet the Bhutanese are widely and consistently regarded as being among the happiest people in the world.

This is by design. A few decades ago, its government created a statistic called "Gross National Happiness", which it still measures today. And nearly 300 years ago, the country's legal code stated that "if the government cannot create happiness for its people, there is no purpose for the government to exist."

Why is it, then, that social media works in the opposite way? Whereas the people of Bhutan have created more happiness with less tools, the additional tools we have available to us socially have created discontent. Does it mean we have missed the mark when it comes to designing them? Or should the fault be placed collectively on us, the users?

**What a man can be, he must be.**



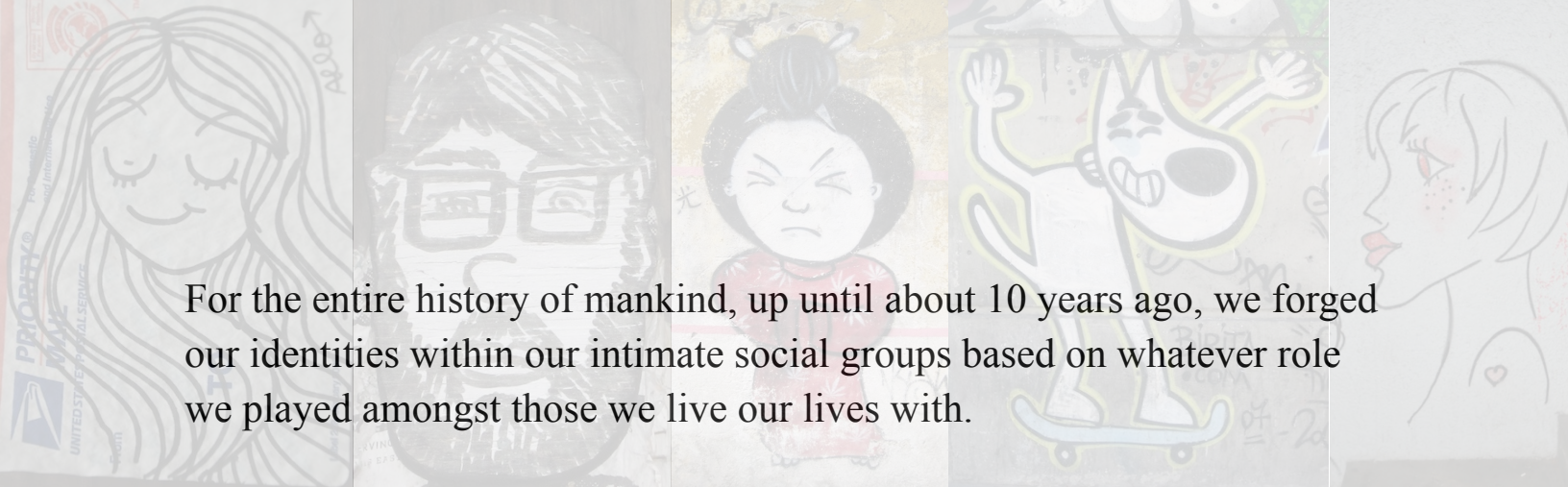


This is a triangle. On its own, it's nothing extraordinary. But what's inside of it is. In the 1940's, a Columbia University researcher named Abraham Maslow wrote a paper called "A Theory of Human Motivation." In it, he included this triangle, which attempts to lay out the stages we must go through to reach a state of self-actualization, or rather the state of full self-satisfaction that comes with achieving all that we are capable of.

Chances are you've seen it before, but in a nutshell, it's saying that we first need to have things like food and water, then health and security, then relationships, then esteem, and then we can reach our peak. This provides a lot of insight into the unheralded genius of the Bhutanese way of life.

Human beings are social creatures. Since the beginning of mankind, we have thrived in social settings. Years of sociological research has suggested that the maximum size of human groups is about 150 people, as beyond that, the groups tend to break apart. In other words, we are only capable of knowing about 150 people intimately.

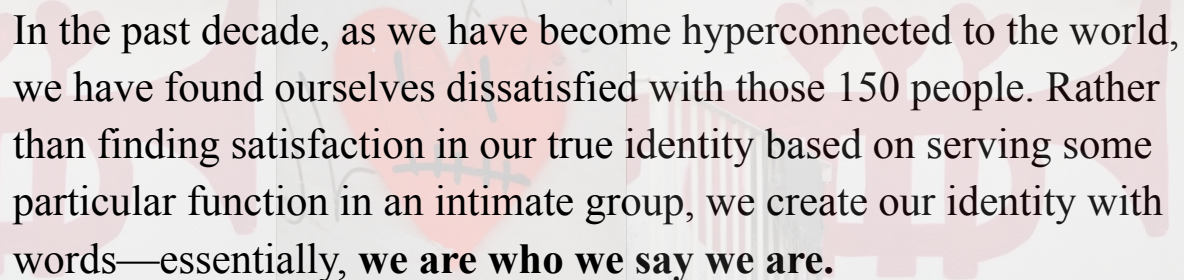




For the entire history of mankind, up until about 10 years ago, we forged our identities within our intimate social groups based on whatever role we played amongst those we live our lives with.

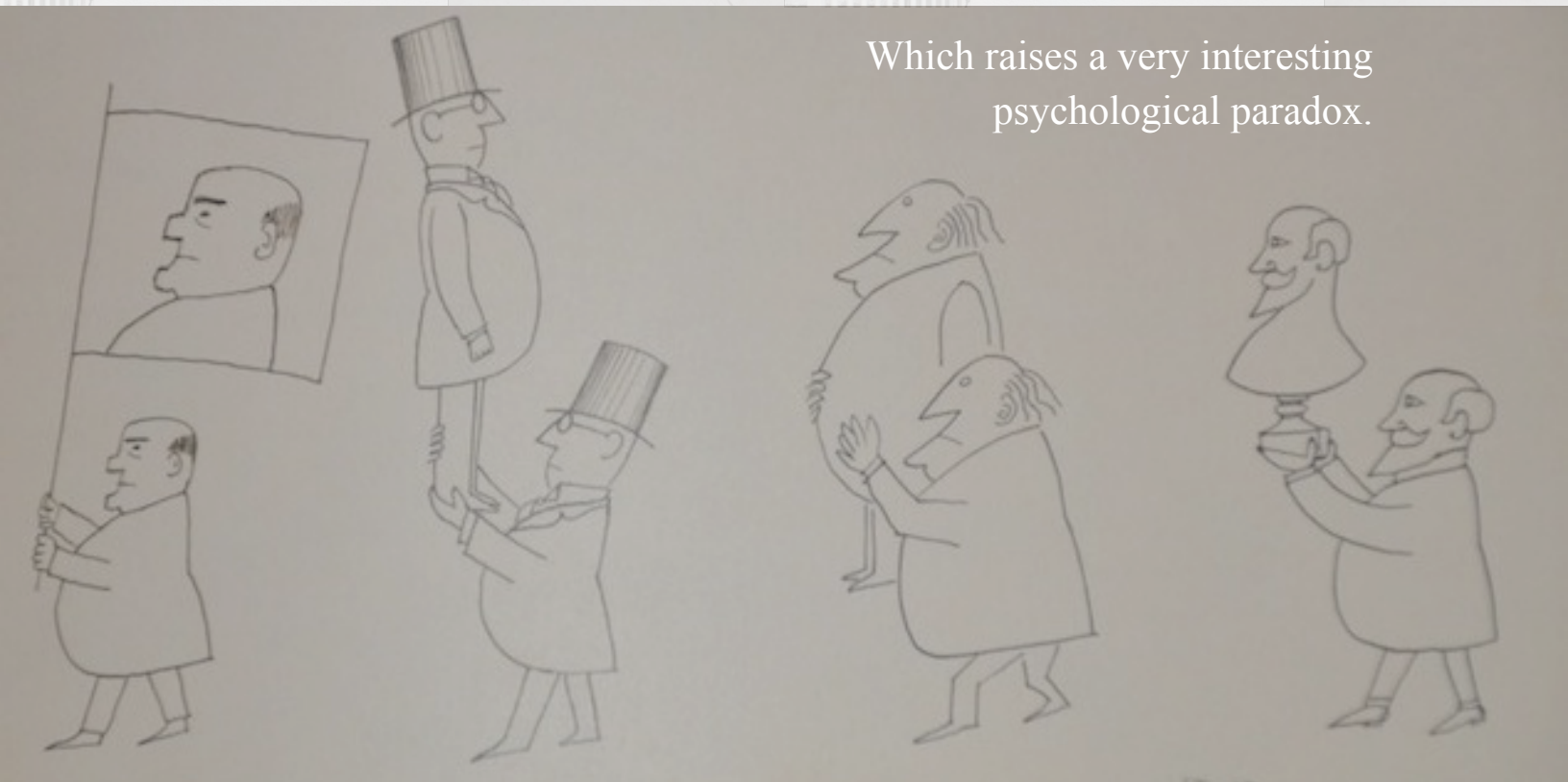


Those small groups, which happen to be a lot closer to the cultural status quo in Bhutan than the world we've become accustomed to, also make it relatively easy to scale Maslow's pyramid. Our physiological and safety needs aren't any different from the Bhutanese, but at the higher levels, it's easy to find intimacy with friends and family when they are all we have. And because the Bhutanese have their established role in the smaller social groups they make up, the path to self-esteem and respect becomes a lot less convoluted.



In the past decade, as we have become hyperconnected to the world, we have found ourselves dissatisfied with those 150 people. Rather than finding satisfaction in our true identity based on serving some particular function in an intimate group, we create our identity with words—essentially, **we are who we say we are.**

Which raises a very interesting psychological paradox.





I'd like to ask you to watch another short clip, from a talk given by behavioral economist Dan Ariely:

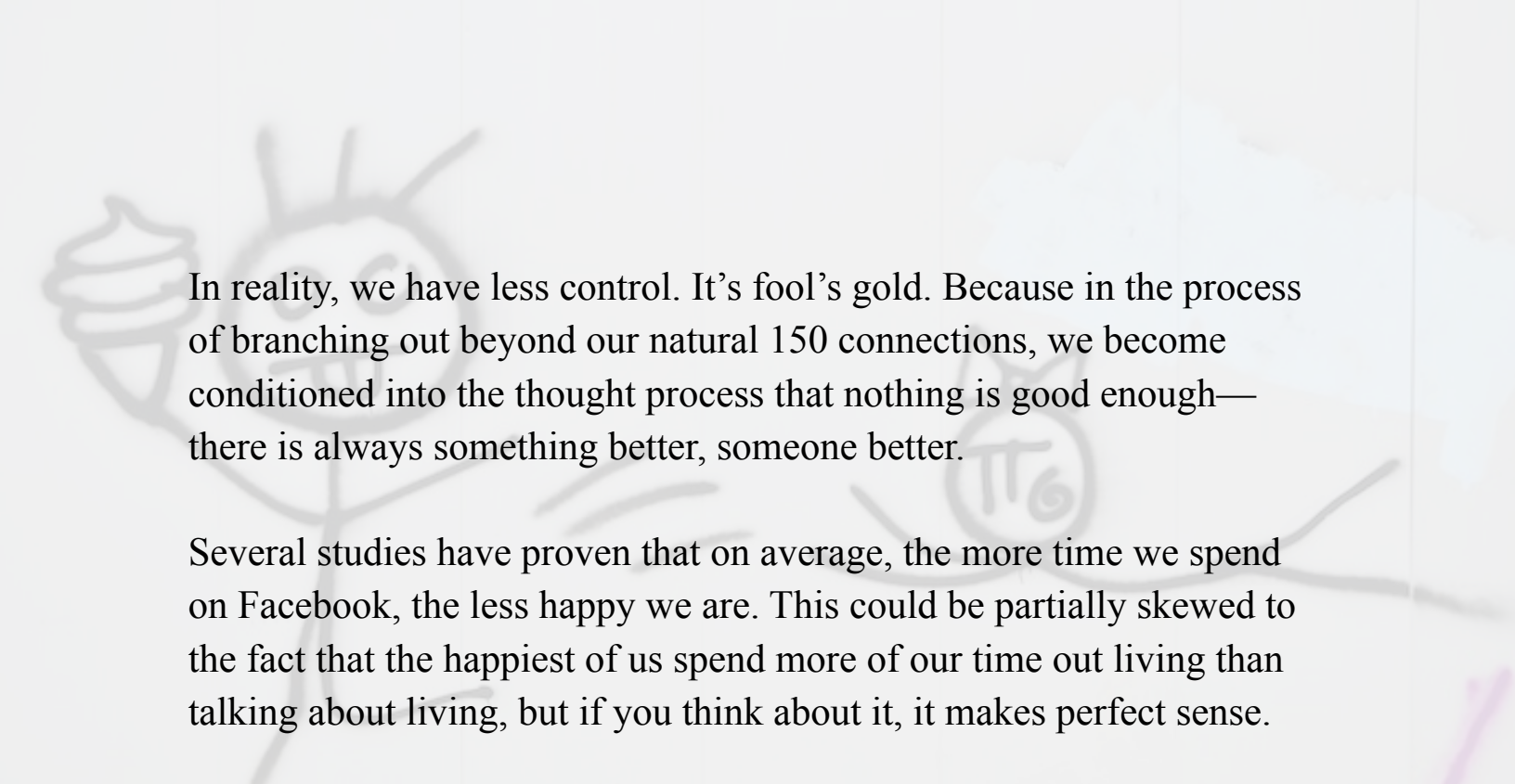


Why does he like IKEA furniture better? Because of the illusion of control—that he, and not someone else—“made” the furniture. In a nutshell, the more perceived control we have over a situation, the happier we are. Where psychologists like Martin Seligman have proven the concept of *learned helplessness*—that we can essentially be conditioned to “accept” a negative stimulus to a point that continues even when we are given back control to avert it—the opposite is true as well. In two identical situations, with one person having control and the other not, the person who has control over it is happier. Quite simply, autonomy breeds happiness.

Such is the appealing paradox to social media today—we think we have control, over our identity, over our connections, and over how we are viewed by the outside world.

But it's a trap.

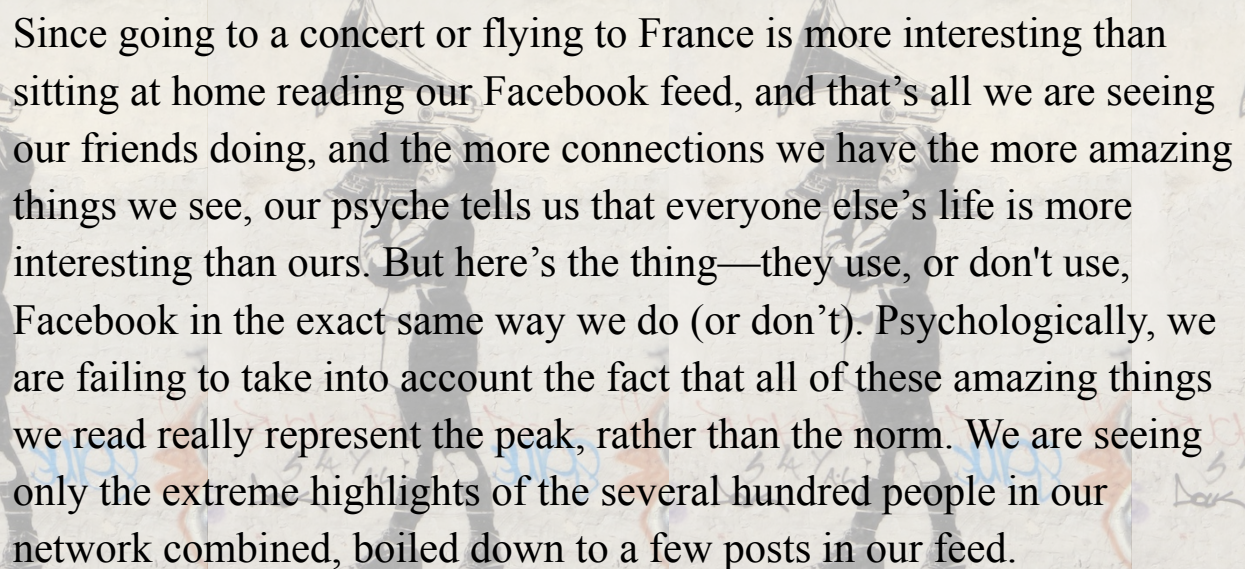




In reality, we have less control. It's fool's gold. Because in the process of branching out beyond our natural 150 connections, we become conditioned into the thought process that nothing is good enough—there is always something better, someone better.

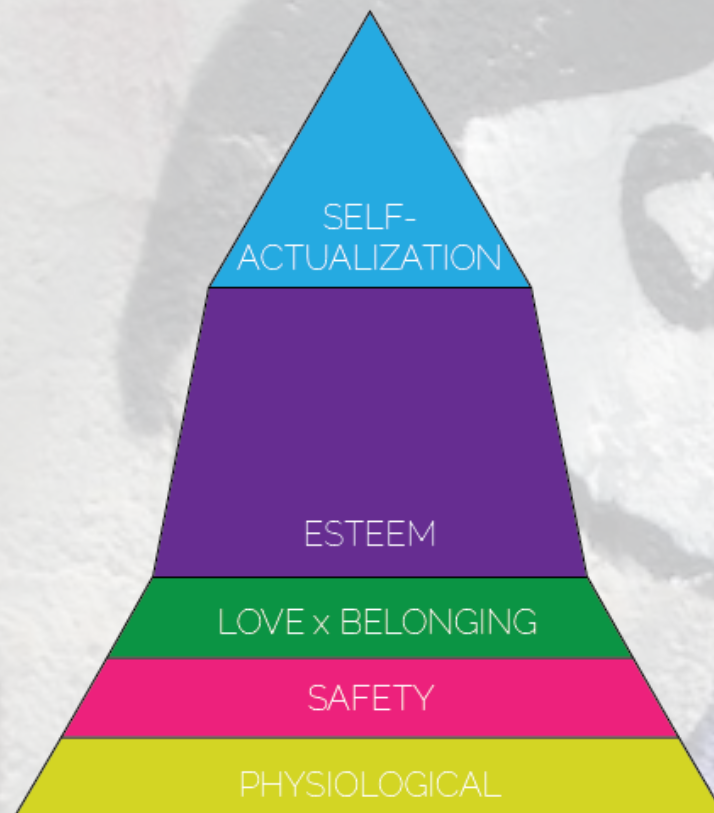
Several studies have proven that on average, the more time we spend on Facebook, the less happy we are. This could be partially skewed to the fact that the happiest of us spend more of our time out living than talking about living, but if you think about it, it makes perfect sense.

See, most of us have rather mundane day-to-day lives, which is precisely why we are browsing our Facebook feed. But we don't post about what an amazing time we are having sitting on the couch browsing our Facebook feed. We only post when we do something actually amazing, like going to a concert, or flying to France. Or sometimes when the opposite is happening to us, like when we are angry that our flight to France is delayed.



Since going to a concert or flying to France is more interesting than sitting at home reading our Facebook feed, and that's all we are seeing our friends doing, and the more connections we have the more amazing things we see, our psyche tells us that everyone else's life is more interesting than ours. But here's the thing—they use, or don't use, Facebook in the exact same way we do (or don't). Psychologically, we are failing to take into account the fact that all of these amazing things we read really represent the peak, rather than the norm. We are seeing only the extreme highlights of the several hundred people in our network combined, boiled down to a few posts in our feed.

Going back to Maslow, it is easy to how as our connectedness expands, the climb up our pyramid to fulfillment becomes a lot steeper. Perhaps it looks like this:



Before, I just had to gain the respect of a handful of people who I saw every day and who knew me intimately. Now, I have to gain the respect of thousands of faceless people who don't know me beyond what I want them to see (if they even choose to ingest that), and no matter how I define myself, there is going to be someone better at however I define myself than I am.

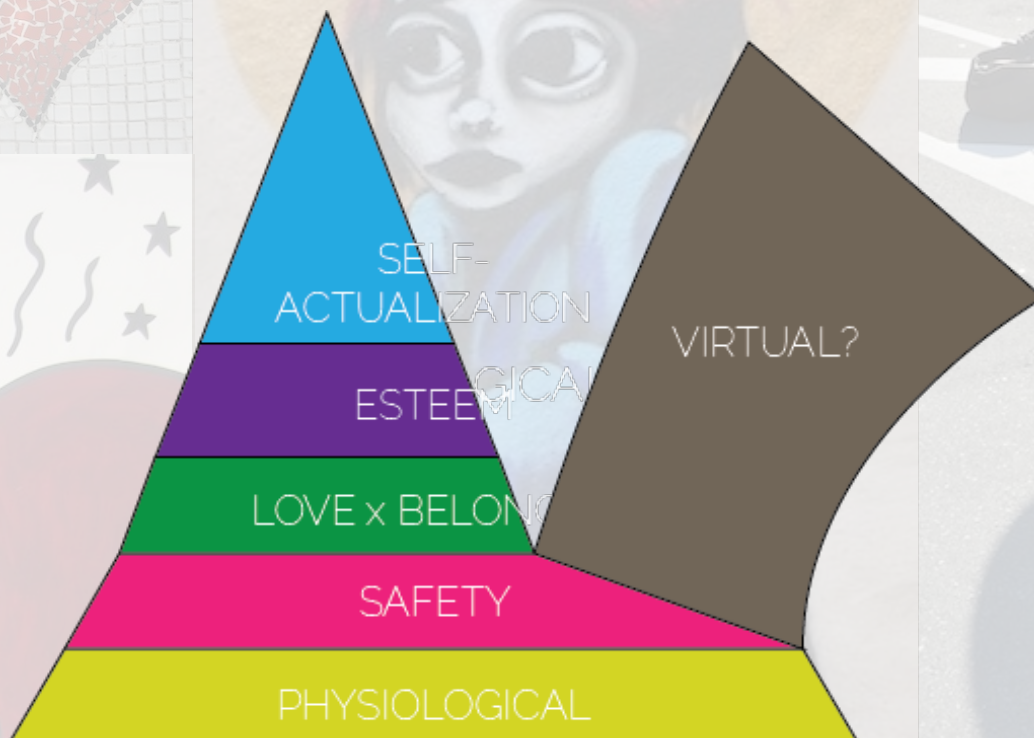
Consider the following from Randolph Nesse and George Williams, both biologists who specialized in evolutionary psychology, in their book *Why We Get Sick*:



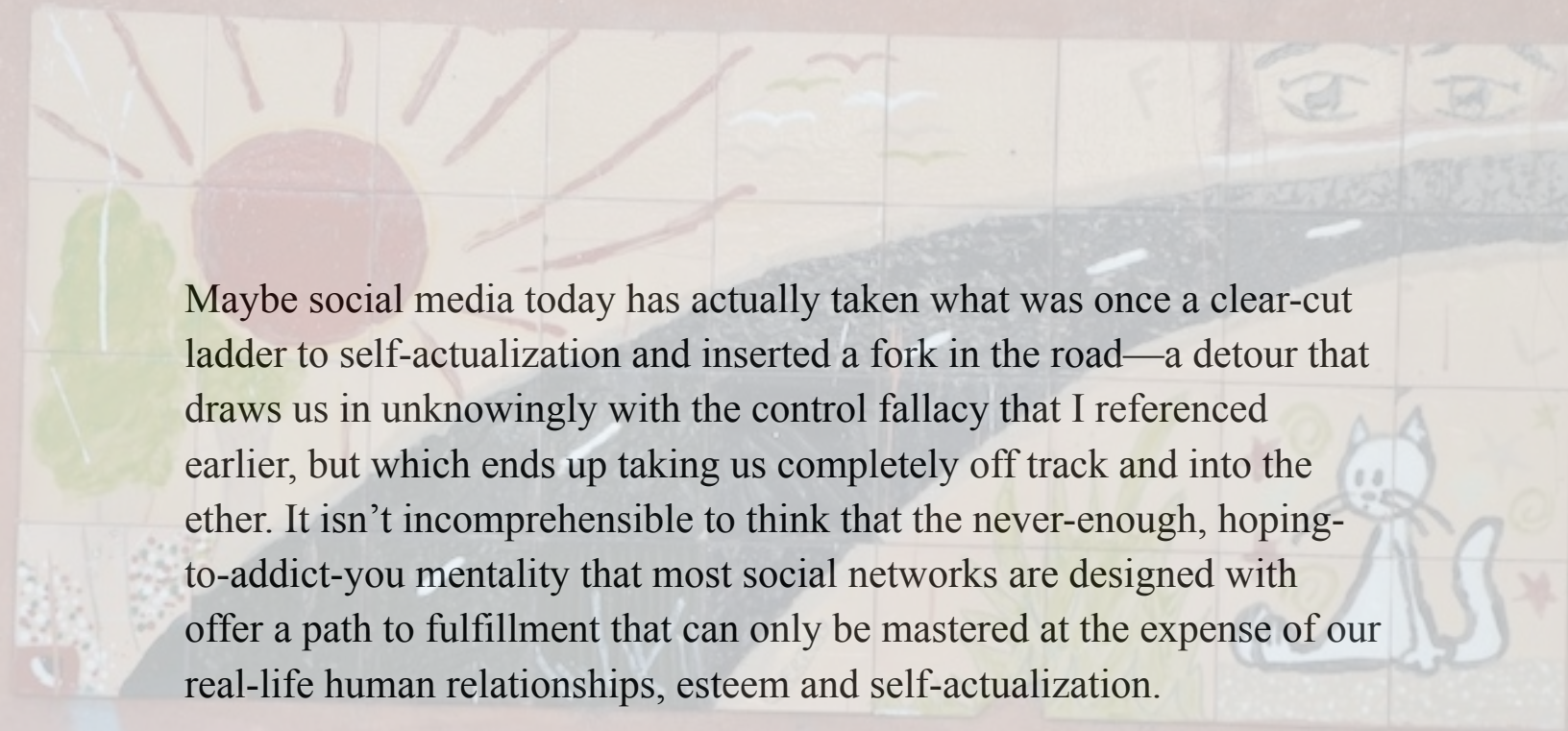
“Mass communications, especially television and movies, effectively make us all one competitive group even as they destroy our more intimate social networks...In the ancestral environment you would have had a good chance at being the best at something. Even if you were not the best, your group would likely value your skills. Now we all compete with those who are the best in the world. Watching these successful people on television arouses envy. Envy probably was useful to motivate our ancestors to strive for what others could obtain. Now few of us can achieve the goals envy sets for us, and none of us can attain the fantasy lives we see on television”

This excerpt was written in 1994, before any of us knew what a social network was. But you can see how the same effect applies in the social networking context, making the “esteem” part of Maslow’s triangle significantly harder to scale.

Or perhaps it’s even worse:

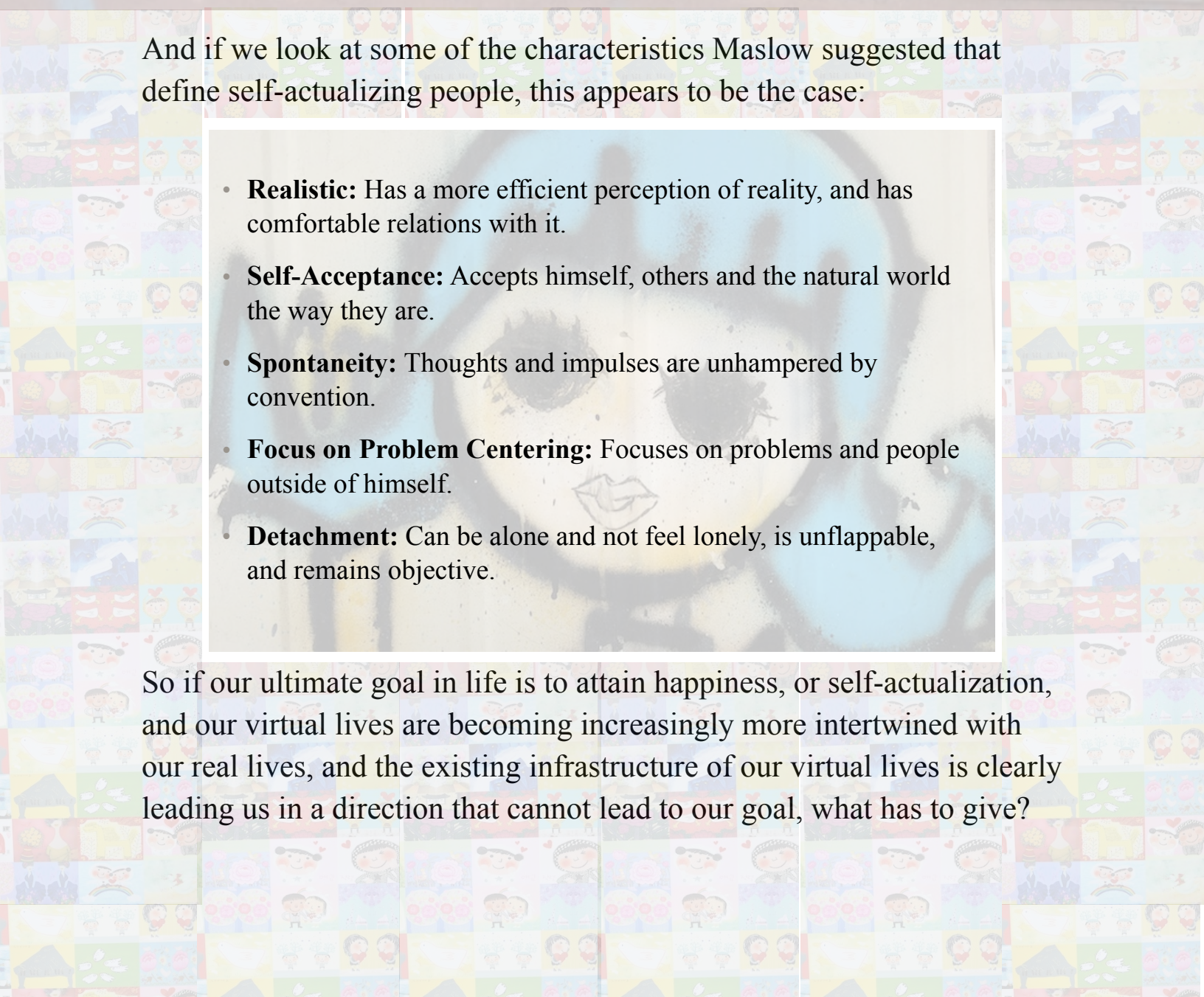






Maybe social media today has actually taken what was once a clear-cut ladder to self-actualization and inserted a fork in the road—a detour that draws us in unknowingly with the control fallacy that I referenced earlier, but which ends up taking us completely off track and into the ether. It isn't incomprehensible to think that the never-enough, hoping-to-addict-you mentality that most social networks are designed with offer a path to fulfillment that can only be mastered at the expense of our real-life human relationships, esteem and self-actualization.

And if we look at some of the characteristics Maslow suggested that define self-actualizing people, this appears to be the case:

- 
- **Realistic:** Has a more efficient perception of reality, and has comfortable relations with it.
  - **Self-Acceptance:** Accepts himself, others and the natural world the way they are.
  - **Spontaneity:** Thoughts and impulses are unhampered by convention.
  - **Focus on Problem Centering:** Focuses on problems and people outside of himself.
  - **Detachment:** Can be alone and not feel lonely, is unflappable, and remains objective.

So if our ultimate goal in life is to attain happiness, or self-actualization, and our virtual lives are becoming increasingly more intertwined with our real lives, and the existing infrastructure of our virtual lives is clearly leading us in a direction that cannot lead to our goal, what has to give?

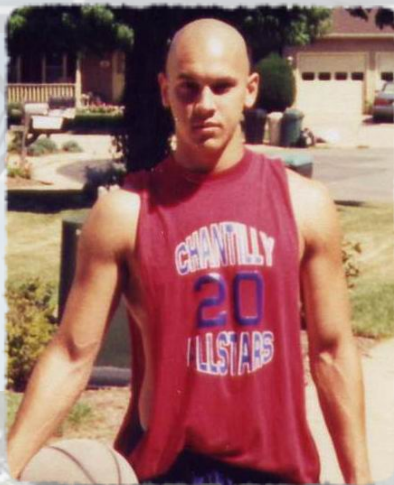


The background is a close-up of a weathered wooden surface. There are several blue paint splatters in the upper half and a large red heart in the lower half. Inside the heart, there is white graffiti that appears to say 'RISK'. The text is overlaid in white, thin, sans-serif capital letters.

CULTURE  
DOESN'T  
DETERMINE  
ANYTHING...



When I was in the 9th grade, I had long hair, wore big glasses, and I loved to play basketball. But when I would go to the local basketball court, I would have to wait hours before getting picked to play in a game.



Two years later, I had contact lenses, a bald head, and I still loved to play basketball. But by then, when I would go to a playground to play—even a new one in a different neighborhood—I would usually get picked up pretty quickly.

I wasn't any better as a basketball player. The reason I got picked quicker was because of *heuristics*. It's not a word you hear every day, or use in typical conversation, but it's something you use every time you make a decision.

Heuristics are basically things we use through learned experiences to make decisions in the absence of perfect information. In this case, the kids picking teams had no idea if I was any good or not. But their heuristics told them that kids with bald heads and no glasses were probably better than kids with shaggy hair and big glasses.



...BUT

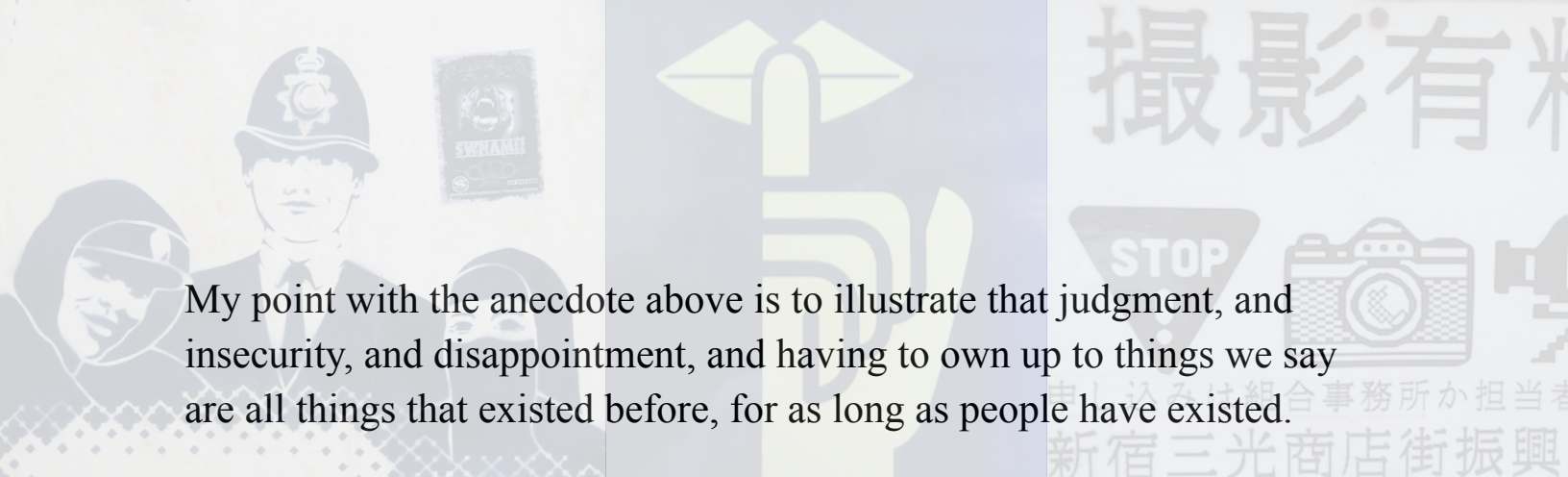
IT

SHAPES

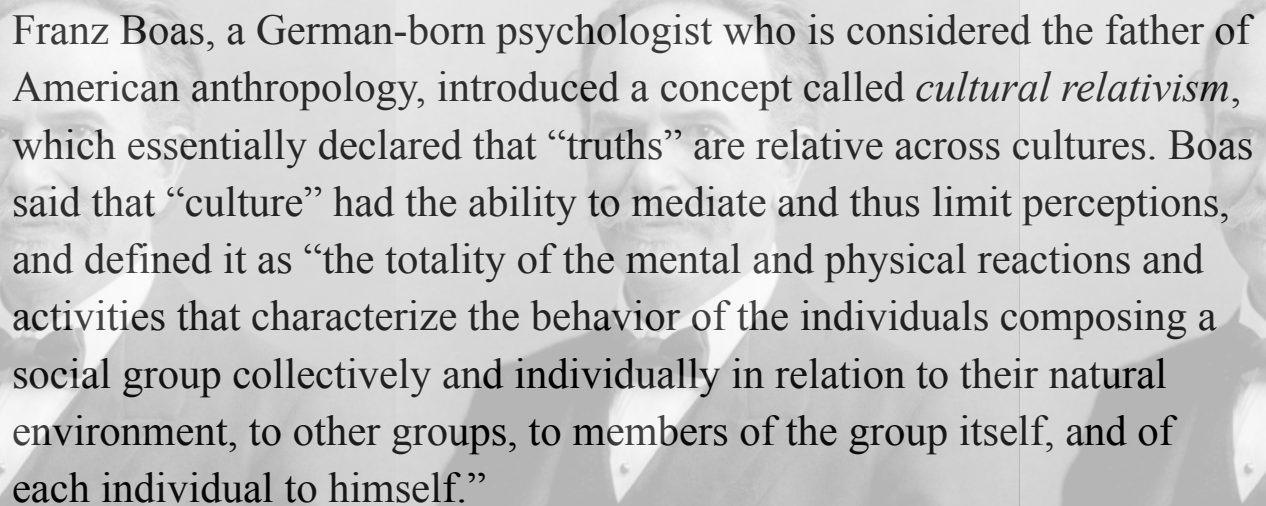
EVERYTHING



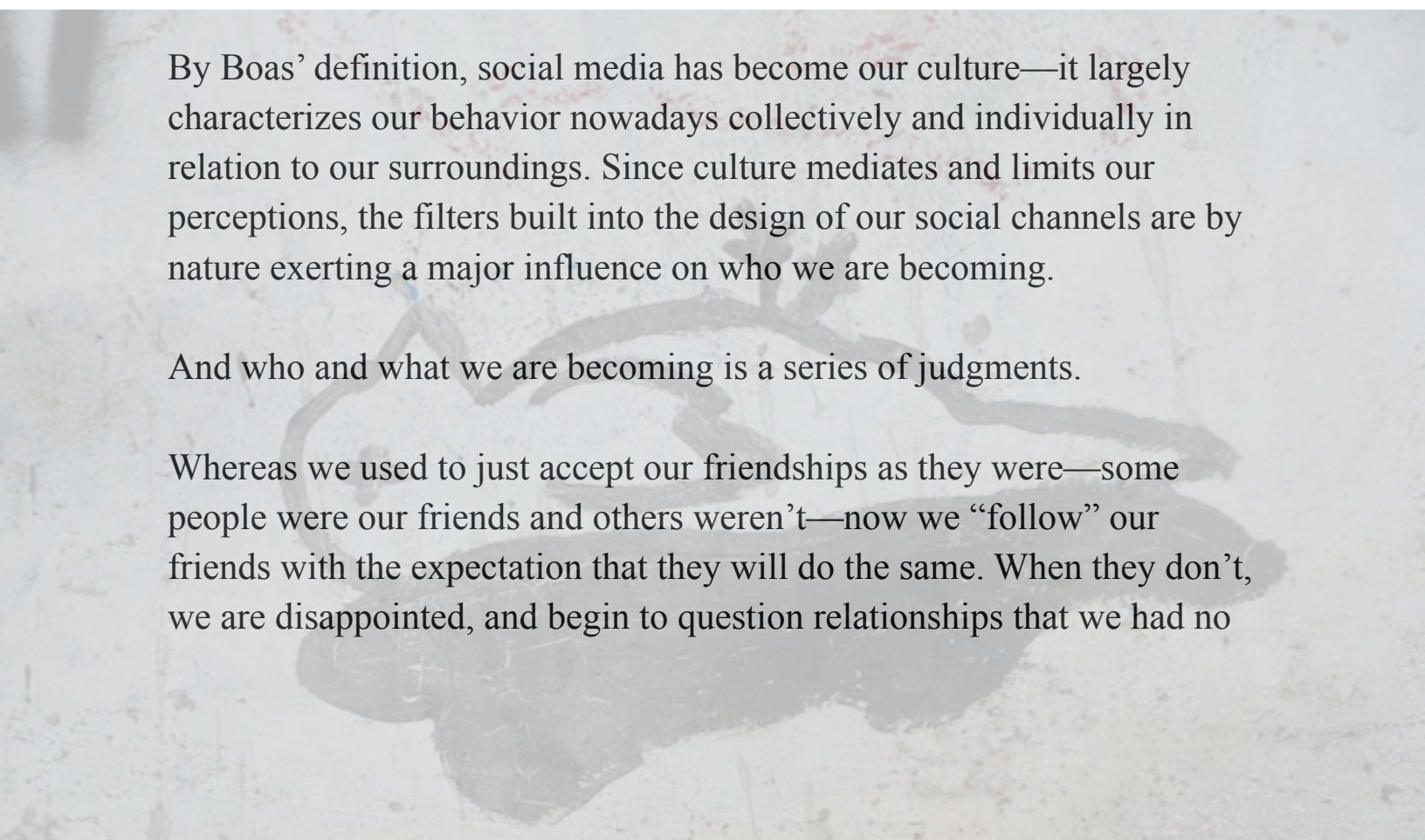




My point with the anecdote above is to illustrate that judgment, and insecurity, and disappointment, and having to own up to things we say are all things that existed before, for as long as people have existed.



Franz Boas, a German-born psychologist who is considered the father of American anthropology, introduced a concept called *cultural relativism*, which essentially declared that “truths” are relative across cultures. Boas said that “culture” had the ability to mediate and thus limit perceptions, and defined it as “the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of the individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relation to their natural environment, to other groups, to members of the group itself, and of each individual to himself.”



By Boas’ definition, social media has become our culture—it largely characterizes our behavior nowadays collectively and individually in relation to our surroundings. Since culture mediates and limits our perceptions, the filters built into the design of our social channels are by nature exerting a major influence on who we are becoming.

And who and what we are becoming is a series of judgments.

Whereas we used to just accept our friendships as they were—some people were our friends and others weren’t—now we “follow” our friends with the expectation that they will do the same. When they don’t, we are disappointed, and begin to question relationships that we had no



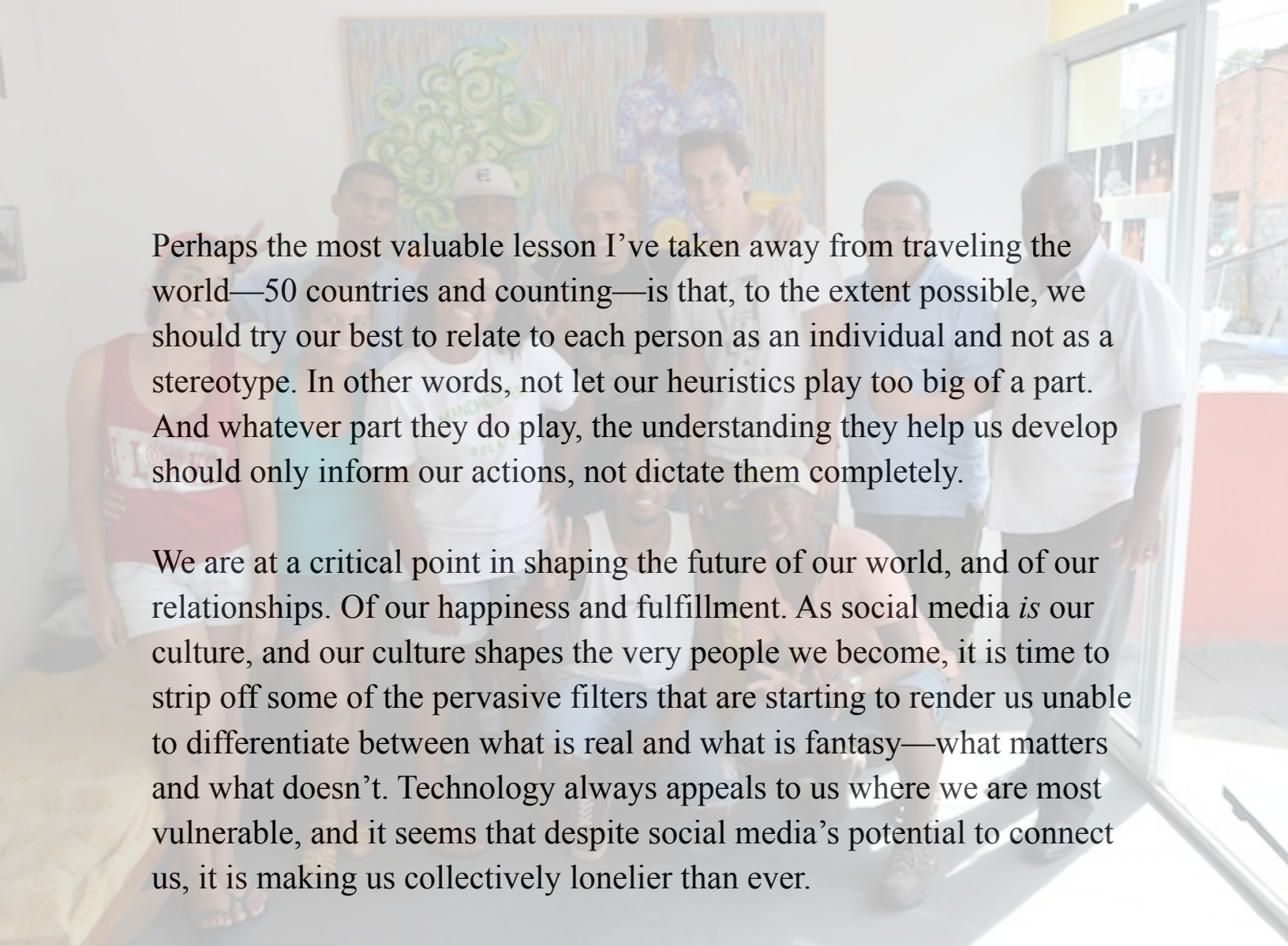
need to question before. Even through existing anonymous channels, which in theory should be predicated around nonjudgmental venting, we post and expect to receive “hearts” in return. When they don't come, we are reduced to a lower place than what prompted our need to post some deep, dark secret in the first place. We collect “friends” and “followers” like we used to collect baseball cards and barbies, and we get insecure when we don't have as many as everyone else. In a nutshell, our entire life is becoming a popularity contest, and we are allowing it.

And since we are stuck in the popularity contest, we might as well try to win it, right? We see what other people are doing—the people who Facebook says are liked and Twitter says are insightful and Instagram says are artistic and Whisper says are deep and Klout says are influential. And we copy them. And copy them. And copy them. Until all of the content we see is exactly the same—created by the same type of people, the self-promoters.

In other words, we have the ability to “edit” who we really are to maximize our chances of success in the game, in a way that we can't in real life. We can't edit the embarrassing spill we took in seventh grade that got us laughed at, or the time we dropped ice cream all over our date, or the time we accidentally passed gas during an exam.

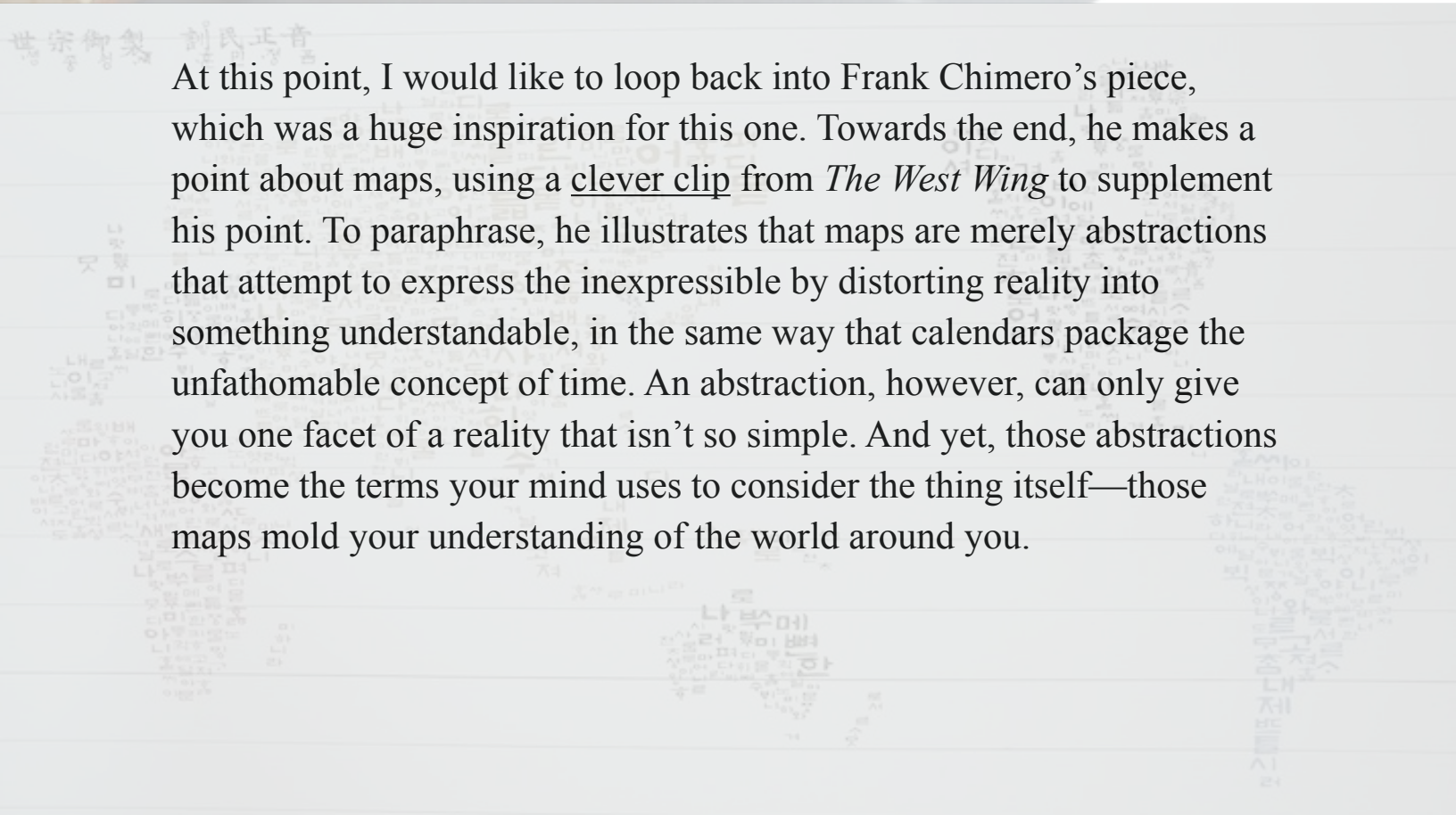
But these are real parts of the human experience, which Maslow says we need to feel comfortable with and accepting of to get to a point of true fulfillment. And besides, don't these things make some of the best memories?





Perhaps the most valuable lesson I've taken away from traveling the world—50 countries and counting—is that, to the extent possible, we should try our best to relate to each person as an individual and not as a stereotype. In other words, not let our heuristics play too big of a part. And whatever part they do play, the understanding they help us develop should only inform our actions, not dictate them completely.

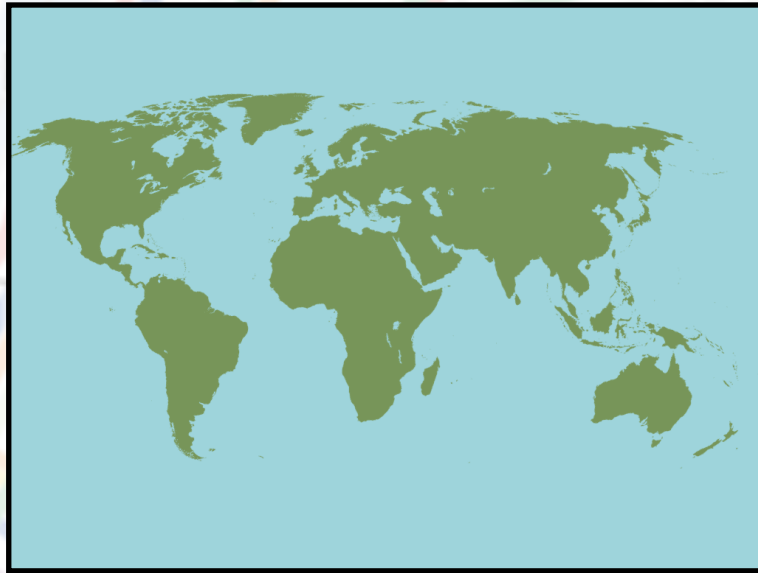
We are at a critical point in shaping the future of our world, and of our relationships. Of our happiness and fulfillment. As social media *is* our culture, and our culture shapes the very people we become, it is time to strip off some of the pervasive filters that are starting to render us unable to differentiate between what is real and what is fantasy—what matters and what doesn't. Technology always appeals to us where we are most vulnerable, and it seems that despite social media's potential to connect us, it is making us collectively lonelier than ever.



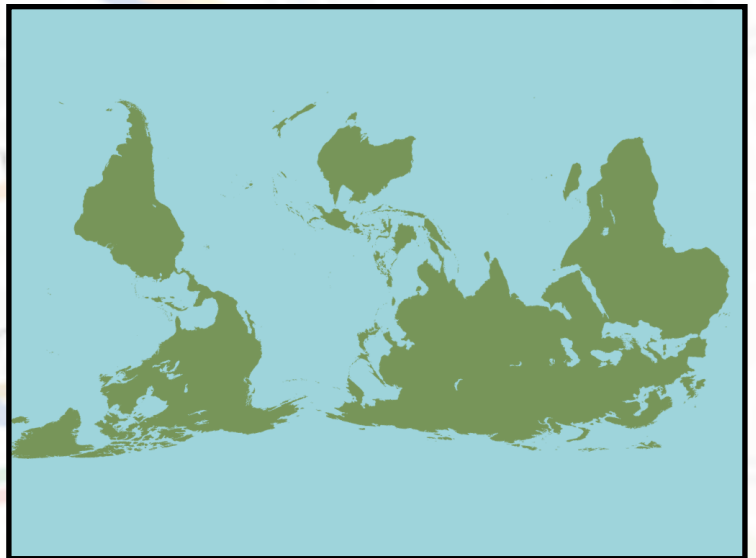
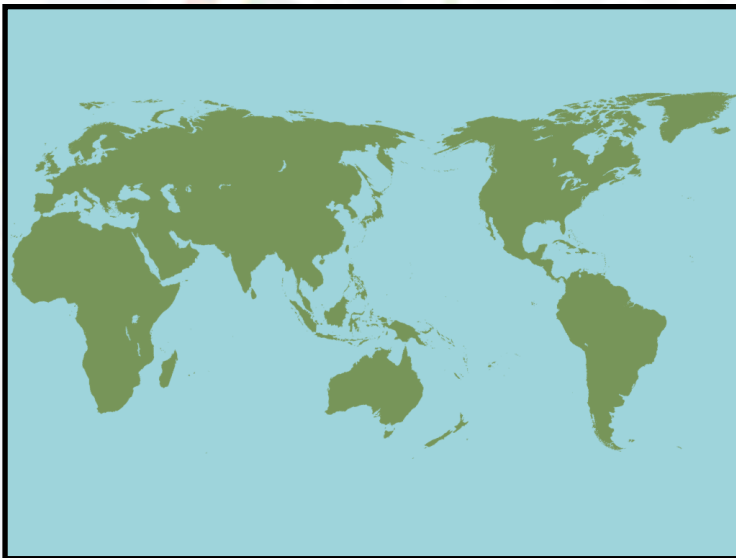
At this point, I would like to loop back into Frank Chimero's piece, which was a huge inspiration for this one. Towards the end, he makes a point about maps, using a clever clip from *The West Wing* to supplement his point. To paraphrase, he illustrates that maps are merely abstractions that attempt to express the inexpressible by distorting reality into something understandable, in the same way that calendars package the unfathomable concept of time. An abstraction, however, can only give you one facet of a reality that isn't so simple. And yet, those abstractions become the terms your mind uses to consider the thing itself—those maps mold your understanding of the world around you.



For example, most Americans are used to seeing the world portrayed like this:

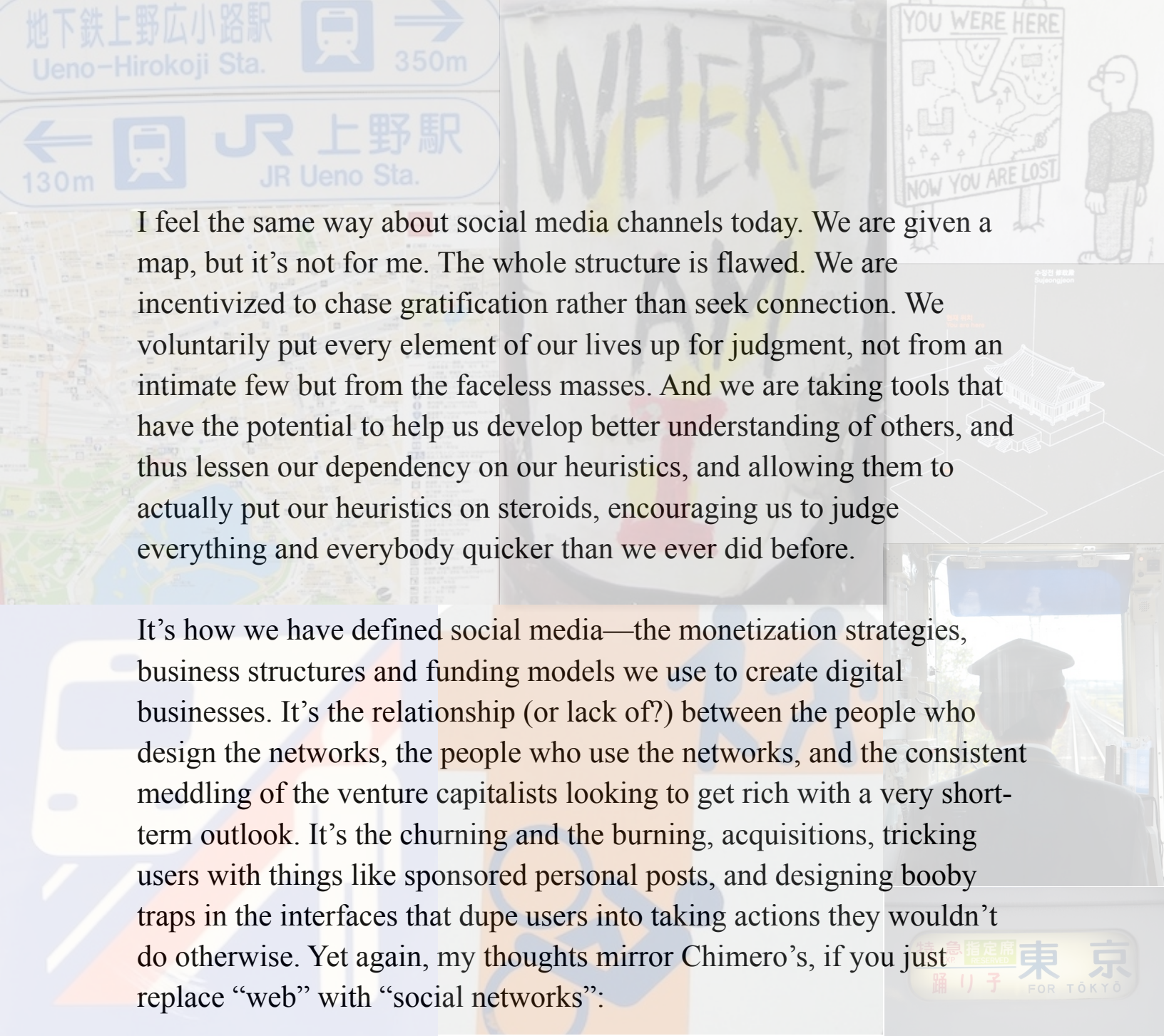


But there is absolutely nothing incorrect about either of the following:



The problem, Chimero argues, is that the biases maps are made with “do service one need, but distort everything else. Meaning, they misinform and confuse those with different needs.”



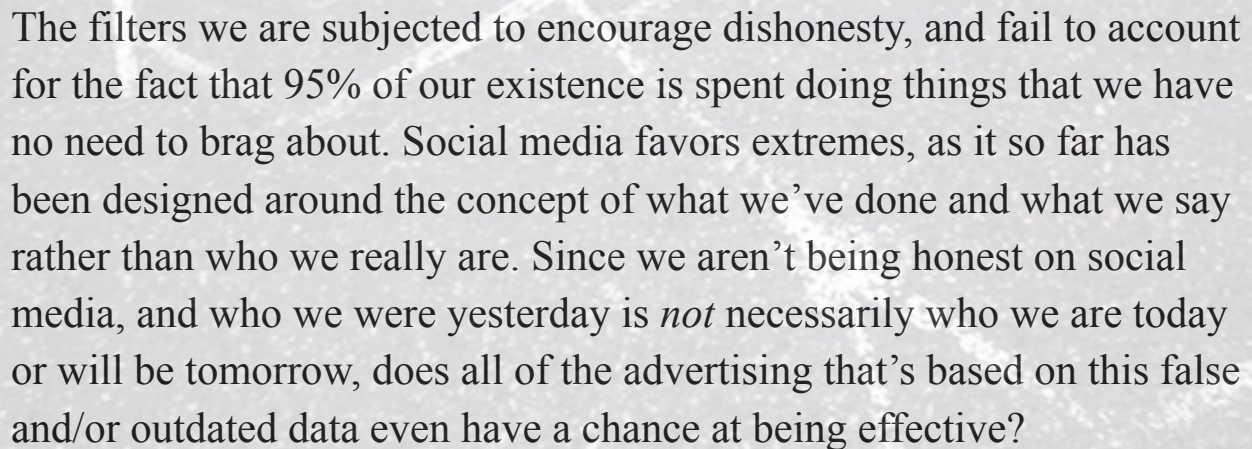


I feel the same way about social media channels today. We are given a map, but it's not for me. The whole structure is flawed. We are incentivized to chase gratification rather than seek connection. We voluntarily put every element of our lives up for judgment, not from an intimate few but from the faceless masses. And we are taking tools that have the potential to help us develop better understanding of others, and thus lessen our dependency on our heuristics, and allowing them to actually put our heuristics on steroids, encouraging us to judge everything and everybody quicker than we ever did before.

It's how we have defined social media—the monetization strategies, business structures and funding models we use to create digital businesses. It's the relationship (or lack of?) between the people who design the networks, the people who use the networks, and the consistent meddling of the venture capitalists looking to get rich with a very short-term outlook. It's the churning and the burning, acquisitions, tricking users with things like sponsored personal posts, and designing booby traps in the interfaces that dupe users into taking actions they wouldn't do otherwise. Yet again, my thoughts mirror Chimero's, if you just replace "web" with "social networks":

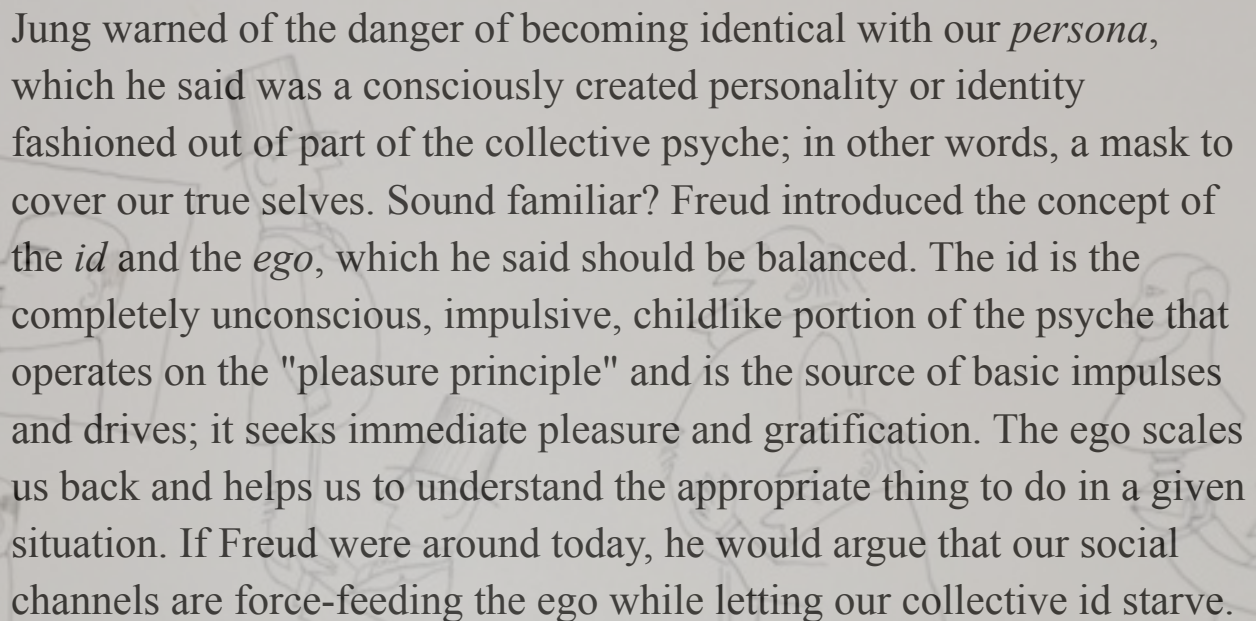
Increasingly, it feels like we decided to pave the wilderness, turn it into a suburb, and build a mall. And I hate this map of the web, because it only describes a fraction of what it is and what's possible. We've taken an opportunity for connection and distorted it to commodify attention. That's one of the sleaziest things you can do.





The filters we are subjected to encourage dishonesty, and fail to account for the fact that 95% of our existence is spent doing things that we have no need to brag about. Social media favors extremes, as it so far has been designed around the concept of what we've done and what we say rather than who we really are. Since we aren't being honest on social media, and who we were yesterday is *not* necessarily who we are today or will be tomorrow, does all of the advertising that's based on this false and/or outdated data even have a chance at being effective?

There must be a better way, for the user *and* for the marketer. For our society as a whole. And my assertion that something needs to change if we are going to maintain our collective sanity isn't just my view—it's a psychological fact. Maslow and Boas were at the peak of their fields when it came to understanding human behavior. Other psychological royalty, like Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, also offered up theories that should be taken as warning signs to the state of social today.



Jung warned of the danger of becoming identical with our *persona*, which he said was a consciously created personality or identity fashioned out of part of the collective psyche; in other words, a mask to cover our true selves. Sound familiar? Freud introduced the concept of the *id* and the *ego*, which he said should be balanced. The *id* is the completely unconscious, impulsive, childlike portion of the psyche that operates on the "pleasure principle" and is the source of basic impulses and drives; it seeks immediate pleasure and gratification. The *ego* scales us back and helps us to understand the appropriate thing to do in a given situation. If Freud were around today, he would argue that our social channels are force-feeding the *ego* while letting our collective *id* starve.



Maybe it's time to listen to these guys. Maybe it's time to take psychology into account. Maybe we can use psychology to solve the problems that we are experiencing in social media today. Psychology can be a powerful problem solver, as deft English marketer Rory Sutherland outlines in a humorous example:



What Sutherland describes, of course, are different frames of reference—one referring to time, the other two referring to experience. Perhaps the goal doesn't need to be just to decrease travel time, but instead to increase productivity during travel, or make the travel time more pleasant.

In the same way, maybe the goal with social doesn't have to be to compare ourselves to everyone in the world, but instead just to observe and understand.



So where do we go from here? In Chimero's lecture, he quoted Ted Nelson, the man who invented hypertext. I must have read 50 articles trying to find a better summary of the state of social media today, to little avail. Nelson comments about the internet, but I believe he hit the nail on the head when it comes to social as well:

"The world is not yet finished, but everyone is behaving as if everything was known. This is not true. In fact, the computer world as we know it is based up on one tradition that has been waddling along for the last fifty years, growing in size and ungainliness, and is essentially defining the way we do everything. My view is that today's computer world is based on techie misunderstandings of human thought and human life. And the imposition of inappropriate structures throughout the computer is the imposition of inappropriate structures on the things we want to do in the human world."


Techie misunderstandings of human life. Guess who controls the channels we are using to communicate today? Mark Zuckerberg is a brilliant guy, but I don't think anyone would accuse him of being a "people" person. And as an interesting test, look up the LinkedIn profiles of the vast majority of employees at Facebook, Instagram, Whisper and the like. In the little part next to the location where it specifies industry, the vast majority of what you see is "Internet". Not people, not psychology, not sociology, but Internet. And at the end of the day, shouldn't a social network be about people?



しばらくの間  
ご協力ください。







But as Nelson says, the world is not yet finished. What is misunderstood can always become understood, and the powerful ability that social media has to connect people isn't going away. If we just reframe our thinking, we can produce a social framework that isn't based on:

commoditization

judgment

popularity

surveillance

intrusion

rewards

We can build a new frame of reference, or reimplement the one we seem to have misplaced, that is based on:

individuality

honesty

communication

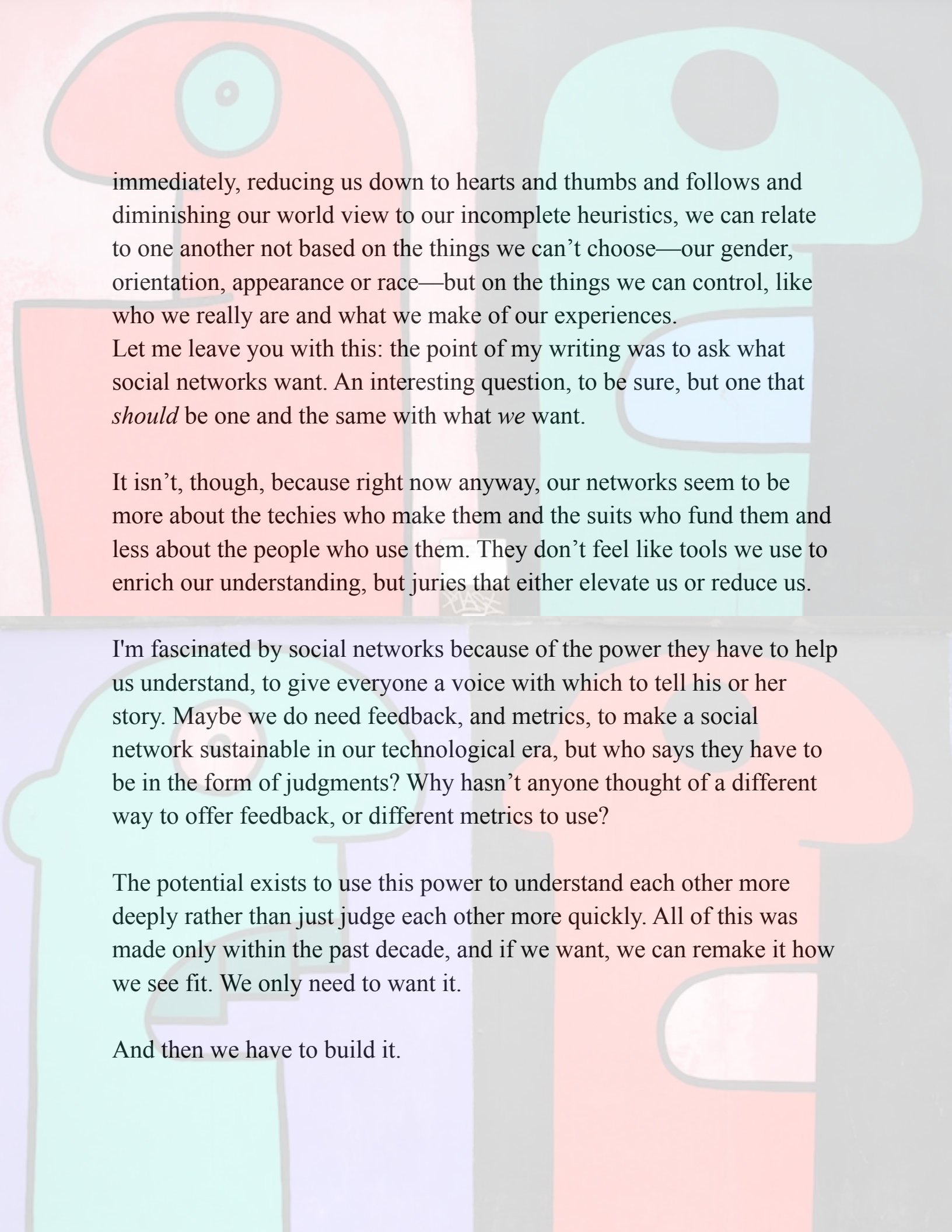
community

intrinsic motivation

*id*

We can use the efficiency and power of social channels to help people understand each other—to allow them to experience what it's like to walk in someone else's shoes. Rather than forcing us to judge everything





immediately, reducing us down to hearts and thumbs and follows and diminishing our world view to our incomplete heuristics, we can relate to one another not based on the things we can't choose—our gender, orientation, appearance or race—but on the things we can control, like who we really are and what we make of our experiences.

Let me leave you with this: the point of my writing was to ask what social networks want. An interesting question, to be sure, but one that *should* be one and the same with what *we* want.

It isn't, though, because right now anyway, our networks seem to be more about the techies who make them and the suits who fund them and less about the people who use them. They don't feel like tools we use to enrich our understanding, but juries that either elevate us or reduce us.

I'm fascinated by social networks because of the power they have to help us understand, to give everyone a voice with which to tell his or her story. Maybe we do need feedback, and metrics, to make a social network sustainable in our technological era, but who says they have to be in the form of judgments? Why hasn't anyone thought of a different way to offer feedback, or different metrics to use?

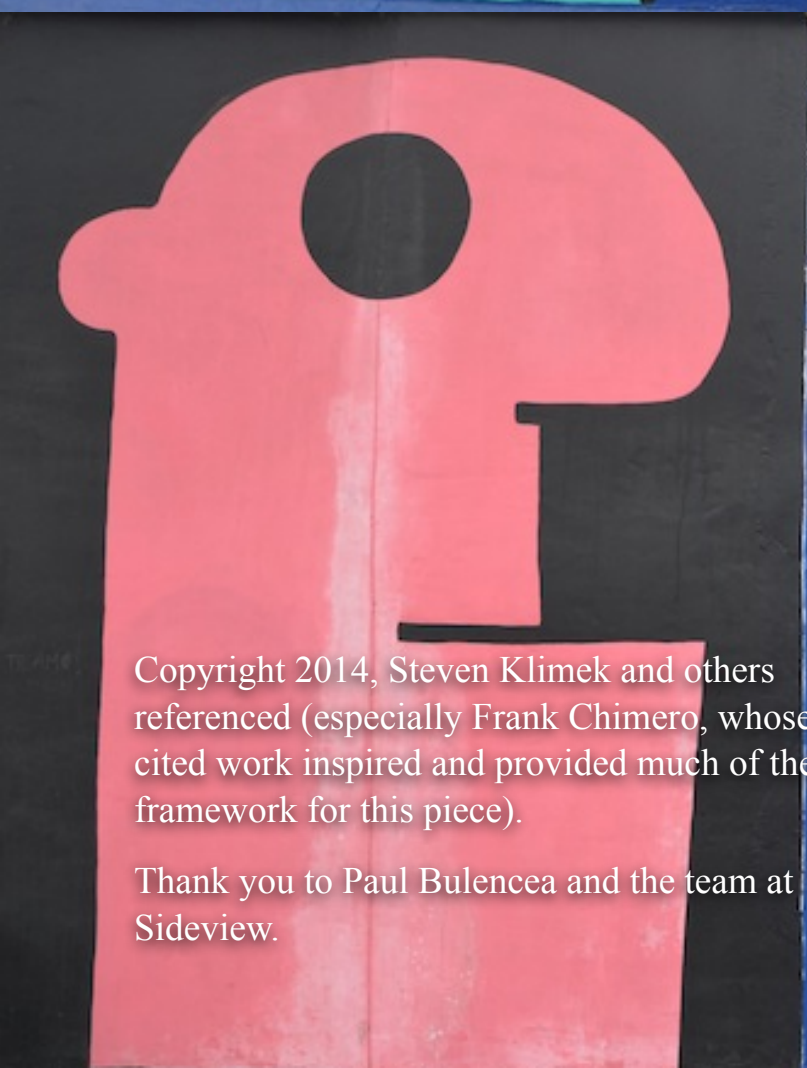
The potential exists to use this power to understand each other more deeply rather than just judge each other more quickly. All of this was made only within the past decade, and if we want, we can remake it how we see fit. We only need to want it.

And then we have to build it.









Copyright 2014, Steven Klimek and others referenced (especially Frank Chimero, whose cited work inspired and provided much of the framework for this piece).

Thank you to Paul Bulencea and the team at Sideview.