

Politics brings out true depth of Facebook 'friending'

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Sean Bergan has witnessed the turbulent confluence of a heated presidential race and the free-wheeling world of social media.

And, like many this election season, he has responded by putting a virtual finger to his lips, saying "Shhhhh!" and clicking a button to vanquish those who fill his Facebook page with partisan rants.

"I've unfriended people on several occasions," said Bergan, 19, of Oswego, N.Y., who is a sophomore at Eastern Illinois University. "Especially if they're so extreme to one side or the other. I like to consider myself moderate. You just don't want to be seeing that stuff three times a day in your own news feed."

This divisive presidential contest has brought out the worst in many people, particularly in the online world. The result is a rampant severing of social media ties - unfriending or unfollowing. Web acquaintances who reveal their political leanings find themselves swiftly jettisoned by so-called friends who realize their ideologies don't align. Or Twitter [followers](#) are dumped simply because they won't shut up about politics.

It says as much about passions over the campaign as it does about the evolving - or possibly devolving - definition of the term "friend."

"Friendship is cheap on Facebook," said Glenn Sparks, a communication professor at Purdue University. "The ease with which you can connect with other people, it does kind of cause a cheapening of the term

'friendship'."

In real life, Sparks noted, it's unlikely you would call someone a friend without already knowing that person's political opinions and tolerating them, even if you disagree. But when a Facebook friend "likes" a candidate's Web page or tweets something political that you disagree with, it can come as a sucker punch.

Holly Cadenhead, an account director at a downtown advertising firm, has opted to mute some of her more politically vocal Facebook friends by "hiding" them so their comments don't appear in her timeline.

"I haven't gone so far as to de-friend anyone, but I do hide people who are just filling up my feed with all kinds of political stuff," said Cadenhead, 34, of Chicago. "It doesn't matter which side they're on or whether I agree. That's just not what I want to log in to see."

Some wonder whether the ease with which we can temporarily silence or completely cut off voices we don't want to hear might be damaging us in the long run.

Laurie Zoloth, a professor of medical humanities and bioethics at Northwestern University's Feinberg School of Medicine, cited the important role friendship has played in society.

"What makes a democracy work is this thing that Socrates called 'parrhesiah,' the ability to speak truth to each other in public," Zoloth said. "You need a friend who will listen to you, and you need the courage to speak and the courage to hear."

She said Aristotle wrote about how friendships hold states together, and defined a friend as someone who is honest with you and imagines you being the best version of who you are. But in the social media realm, that

becomes difficult to achieve when "it's so easy psychologically to wipe out a friendship."

"Does (social media) make us able to have more friends, and then make them more disposable?" Zoloth said. "That would be a tragedy."

Sparks agreed.

"The ease with which people can just hit the button and cut off other people, I think that's an absolute threat," he said. "There's no question that can be habit forming and it can carry over into our real relationships."

Bergan, who has about 1,500 [Facebook friends](#), predicts that the widening use of social media will have a negative impact on interpersonal relationships.

"I think the sensible answer would be that it's not helping our social skills whatsoever," he said. "It's so much easier to say, 'I don't like what you're saying so I'm just going to ignore it.'"

And that, Sparks said, takes away the need for us to listen to others and the intellectual exercise of reacting to opinions that conflict with our own.

"We are separating ourselves in a way where we don't use face-to-face feedback to adjust our next message," he said. "When we're together talking, I can see how you're reacting to the way I'm talking and the feeling in my voice, and I can adjust instantly and start communicating differently. In text mode, you can't pivot. So when people find out someone is from a different political persuasion, instead of being forced to adjust your communication and interact with that person, you can just shut them down."

Still, none of this is likely to change the way people handle their social media worlds. Both Bergan and Cadenhead said they consider these online spaces to be areas they want to streamline and control, with Bergan using his more for news and information and Cadenhead more for keeping up with friends and family.

"It's one aspect of our lives that I know is going to be there, it's for certain, and it's going to be there the way I want it," Bergan said. "It's my own environment."

And for Cadenhead, whatever might get lost by shutting down voices that create dissonance, there is an advantage to the way [social media](#) can, in essence, pre-screen potential real friends.

"I think you find out a lot more, a lot more quickly, about a person on Facebook as opposed to when you're just on a face-to-face basis with them where your interactions would be a little more limited," she said. "There may be things that ... may have taken you years to find out, and they might come out in just one [election season](#)."

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