Does Facebook make us lonely?

The social network promises us a world of new friends but research suggests the opposite is true. Could it actually be making us more isolated?

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In the final scene of the film The Social Network, a fictionalised account of the creation of Facebook, its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, sits alone at a conference table, repeatedly tapping his computer keyboard to refresh a web page. Zuckerberg is waiting to see if his ex-girlfriend has accepted his request to be his Facebook friend.

It is, granted, just a film, and given that the social networking site created by the real Zuckerberg in 2004 is expected to float later this month at a value of about £60 billion, giving him a personal fortune of £17 billion, he is probably not short of friends.

For the other 901m users of Facebook, however, friendships may not be quite that simple.
rather than helping its adherents to gather friends, Facebook may actually be making us lonelier.

Some believe that, with an estimated 125 billion friend connections — the world’s population is just over 7 billion — Facebook has become so vast that it is undermining face-to-face interactions and replacing them with online ones.

John Cacioppo, director of the Centre for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at Chicago University, is an expert on loneliness and conducted an experiment to see whether there was a connection between social isolation and the frequency of Facebook use and online exchanges.

“The greater the proportion of face-to-face interactions, the less lonely you are,” he says. “The greater the proportion of online interactions, the lonelier you are.”

Cacioppo and his team asked students to respond to statements such as “I feel isolated”, “No one really knows me well” and “I am no longer close to anyone”. The replies were measured on a so-called scale of loneliness, which Cacioppo then compared with the frequency of the students’ interactions via Facebook, chat rooms, online games, dating sites and face-to-face contact.

Those who scored highest on the loneliness test also ranked highest for their frequency of online interactions and lower on face-to-face contact.

When details of the research were published by The Atlantic, an American current affairs magazine, a fierce online debate erupted.

For Cacioppo, the idea that a website can provide new social networks and real friends is a fallacy. “For the most part, people are bringing their old friends, and feelings of loneliness or connectedness, to Facebook,” he said. He accepts, however, that the effect of Facebook depends on how it is used. “Facebook is a tool. I compare it to a car: you can drive to isolate yourself from others or you can drive to meet people. If you use Facebook to increase face-to-face contact, it increases social capital.

“There is research that says when people become lonely and isolated they are more likely to use Facebook as a replacement.”

Indeed, another recent study by Norwegian academics suggested that such people were among the most likely to suffer from the symptoms of “Facebook addiction”, which they likened to those suffered by alcoholics and drug addicts.

Anjula Mutanda, a British psychologist and broadcaster, agrees that the impact of Facebook on feelings of loneliness and self-esteem depends on the personality of the user. For the extrovert, Facebook is an extension of the personality, and they will probably use it to increase their face-to-face encounters. But introverted people may use it as a substitute for those contacts.

“This is the group we are talking about when referring to Facebook and loneliness,” she said. “Introverted people may see it as a tentative way of connecting with people because they may have social anxieties about actually going out and doing that for real.”

In addition to loneliness, some argue that social networking sites can contribute to feelings of “disconnectedness” and even depression because of the constant comparison with others. Facebook can be a contest — which parts of your life do you broadcast? How honest are you? How envious are you of your friends’ accounts of their lives? How many Facebook friends do you have?

“Facebook is a competitive world,” said Mutanda. “It can make lonely people feel lonelier and more isolated because they are not getting up to what everyone else is doing on Facebook. They are not part of that community.”
“They see people going on a holiday, for example, and feel that they should go there as well — even if they can’t afford it.

“Generally, we tend to feel more lonely because we are in a more competitive world. That can make people feel much lonelier because they can look around social media such as Facebook and feel they have nothing to offer.”

Others point out that sites such as Facebook require minimal interaction to keep friendships going. A mere click on a “like” button can be enough to give the illusion of social contact without any substance.

The debate has had internet forums buzzing. Perhaps because of the medium through which the responses have been made, the reaction has been overwhelmingly in favour of Facebook. Many of the respondents insist that it helps with friendship and reduces isolation, particularly among people who live a long way from their families and friends. To them, Facebook is a lifeline.

The astonishing expansion of Facebook has, however, coincided with a growth in loneliness, particularly in developed western countries and especially among the young. A report in 2010 from the Mental Health Foundation, called The Lonely Society?, revealed that one in 10 Britons often feels lonely. However, almost 60% of those aged between 18 and 34 spoke of feeling lonely often or sometimes, compared with 35% of those aged over 55.

It is possible, then, that while Facebook does not itself make people lonely, it highlights a modern malaise. In Britain 29% of households are single-person homes; in 1971 the figure was 17%. A survey by Sheffield University in 2008 tracked “anomie”, a sense of not belonging to a community. It concluded that the sense of community had weakened in almost every area of Britain over the past 30 years. Furthermore, in 2010, 3.7m employees spent either some or all of their working time at home, reducing face-to-face interaction with colleagues and increasing online contacts.

In Australia, where half the population is on Facebook, research by Tracii Ryan and Sophia Xenos of RMIT University, Melbourne, also identified a link between Facebook and loneliness. “One of the most noteworthy findings was the tendency for neurotic and lonely individuals to spend greater amounts of time on Facebook per day than non-lonely individuals,” they concluded.

For those who value their time alone, there is little question that Facebook is a blessing. Anneli Rufus, author of Party of One: the Loners’ Manifesto, says: “The internet is, for loners, an absolute and total miracle.”

Studies of the internet before the advent of Facebook referred to the “internet paradox”, in which the increased opportunity to connect with others online was leading to a lack of human contact.

Nausicaa Renner, 21, an American student who studied English at Cambridge University, deactivated her Facebook account on her return to Chicago. Doing so, she says, “has really improved the way I think about human relationships, and I am a lot less lonely. I’ve learnt that it’s okay for a lot of friendships to end and in fact it’s healthy.

“Facebook creates this sense of desperation that we have to keep in touch with every person we’ve ever known, somehow because this is ‘networking’. Now, in order to keep in touch with my friends, I have to actually see them or make an active gesture like calling them, and I get a lot more out of the interactions.”

But can Facebook, one of the great social phenomena of our age, really be antisocial? “I don’t think there’s any particular reason to believe that Facebook is going to encourage us to be less social,” says Mark Pagel, an evolutionary biologist and author of Wired for Culture.
“I would have thought it’s going to encourage us to be more social, because we’re making connections with people we would never have made connections with, had it not been for the internet.”

The modern epidemic of loneliness, he argues, is less to do with the internet and more to do with our societies.

“When you consider the amount of time people devote to working and commuting, there just isn’t much time left. Humans are social beyond measure. With Facebook you’re actually seeing people reaching out in the only way they can.”

Asked about Cacioppo’s study, Facebook said it did not comment on third-party research. It did, however, point out that other inquiries had reached different conclusions.

Such studies include one by the Pew Research Centre, in Washington, which examines the impact of the internet.

It found Facebook users were more trusting of others, had more close relationships and had more social support through their use of the site. But what about the scientists themselves: do they have Facebook pages?

“I had a Facebook page because I was connecting with a TV producer, but it was making me anxious. So I gave it up,” says Mutanda. “We don’t have net curtains any more: we have net Facebook.

“You can check in on people, look at their photograph and see their status; whether they are still with their partner or not. It just made me uncomfortable, so I withdrew.”

Pagel says: “I don’t have one, not because I’m a fuddy-duddy — although there may be a bit of that — but because I spend all day looking at a computer screen so I don’t want to go home in the evening and do the same. Mind you, my wife says I’m a bit misanthropic anyway.”

And the man who sparked the debate? “Yes, I have a Facebook page,” admits Cacioppo. “I hardly ever use it. Sometimes I use it to teach, and then I am on it more frequently.

“There was a former graduate student of ours who seemed to be on all the time. He emailed me and said how lonely he was and I thought, ‘Get off Facebook, then — use it to actually meet people.’”

Additional reporting: Helen Mackreath