

Social Media: Like Feels Like Doing Something

BY

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Glancing at it as she handed me the flyer that had blown free and lodged against her face, she responded not with You're welcome, but, "Well, it's the least I could do."

She had literally been hit on the head. It was the opposite of unnoticeable, begging for an insignificant contribution: stop a few papers blowing away. It was obviously pressing and important, and even the smallest contribution would be asymmetrically valuable. At least she was honest: short of completely ignoring the situation, she had done the least she could do.

Similarly, social media has diminished our capacity—certainly our willingness—to *do* anything meaningful. The woman in the parking lot may as well have clicked a *Like* button.

On social media, people bark at passers-by in the crowd to take notice of their *thing* blowing around. We let the world know we have something to say or share. Maybe it warrants the "conversation" the Internet missionaries babble about. Hopefully, at least our Connections and Friends will see it, take it in, and propagate it wider to support our thing. That's the plan. That's why we *follow* and hope to be *followed* online.

Such is the attraction of social media to the alt-right, presidents, and even people trying to do good: the wide net and potential for geometric audience expansion. Most everybody will get your message through someone they know—or follow—so we expect a receptive, positive sentiment from networked, loose-Connections and Friends.

I have it on good authority that diligent content output and analysis of network feedback results in explosive social media success. Maybe.

More interesting to me than its mechanics is the social engagement itself. As best I can tell, there are two forms of social network interaction: *high* and *low* intensity engagements. Discussion forums are typically high intensity. These communities of shared interest or bile contribute to and debate something, even occasionally to someone's benefit.

As the participants proliferate, the value of high intensity engagement deteriorates into what you find on YouTube or news website comments forums. These are insipid, partisan duels of wit among often unarmed combatants. This, however, is not yet the low water mark. That would be the cruel and sadistic pile-ons that are Facebook and Twitter. Underlying conversation becomes secondary. Across the full spectrum of the civilized, uncivilized, and decivilizing, this *engagement* is about nothing beyond attention for the contributor, generating *Likes* and retweets in the process.

That brings us to *the least I can do*: low intensity engagement. *Like* is the Emperor's thumbs-up—granted to the masses. With, not only is everyone an entertainer, everyone can be a judge. The wisdom of the crowd, generously said, is mob-adjudicated support for outrageous or occasionally brilliant commentary. All it takes is a click or tap. Further consideration may be begged by the issue at hand, in whatever decontextualized and denuanced and, most importantly, dehumanized state. *Like* has no such expectation.

Is *Like* good? Certainly it identifies what resonates among some segment of the social universe at a moment in time, which can be valuable. It can be a social clue or validation. But is it *engagement*? Does a click or a tap constitute (inter)action? or purpose? or even thought? Does it mean anything at all? Facebook, creator of the ubiquitous thumbs-up *Like*, standardized and made tangible “the very least I can do.”

Liking an idea, plan, activity, or whatever is being *shared*, be it personal or global, commercial or societal (as opposed to an idiotic, half-baked, malevolent one-liner), does nothing. Zero. Zip. Zilch. Nil. Nada. It makes the clicker/tapper feel that (s)he contributed. But it does make the person who’s offering is being *Liked* feel (s)he has reached an audience. It’s a giant ego massage that adds up to... bugger all.

Save your Likes. And if you’re going to comment, start with “what can I do...” Unless, of course, your plan is, “The least I could do.”

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