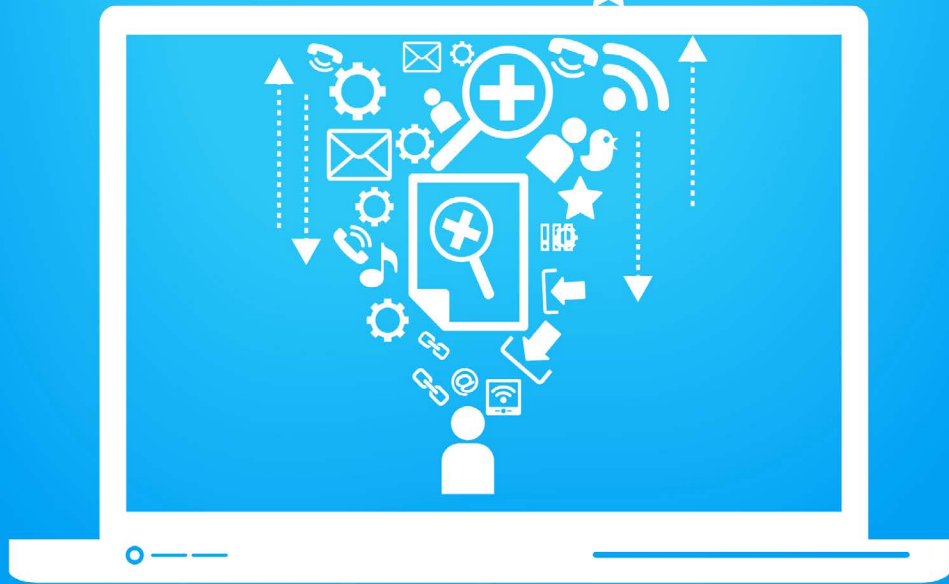# The *Real* Motivation Behind Social Networking

AARON B

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ALICK

Poke beneath the surface and you'll find that everybody just wants to be *liked*

IT'S ONE OF THE SIMPLEST OF WORDS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE; FOUR LETTERS, ONE SYLLABLE.

It comes with a nifty blue icon too, a thumbs up. I'm referring to the 'like' button on your Facebook page. It is operated with deceptively simple ease, just a click of a mouse, and yet it really packs a punch. You

see, the 'like' button may be the simplest way yet to deploy one of the most important things that one individual can give to another: recognition. The function of intersubjective recognition can be traced right back to infant/mother interaction and is one of the most important psychodynamic functions in the development of selfhood.

Given the vital function that recognition serves, its ease of deployment by way of the 'like' button begs a simple question to a complex set of psychological events; is clicking the like button too easy? And

just what kind of recognition are we giving?

The ways in which today's online social networks are constructed create a heady psychological mix that belies the simplicity of its interface and the ease in which one engages with them. Such a concoction can be seen as a sort of recipe for online social interaction, souped-up for ease, convenience and a taste that will have you coming back for more. Just throw in a few cups of distraction and instant satisfaction, mix in some voyeurism with a dash of puerile curiosity, and perhaps add some exhibitionism too,

if that's to your taste. Mix together in a large bowl with a generous base of ease and convenience and you're nearly there. Before you pop it in the oven it needs a good 24 to 48 hours of basting in the most important ingredient: the basic human motivation to relate. Once your social network is fully saturated with this, you can't help but make it a great success.

When Web 1.0 (so called only retrospectively) - that pioneering yet boring and static era of the Internet comprised of a series of linked content-heavy web pages - evolved into Web 2.0 - the glitzier interactive version of its former self - the world changed with it. The main difference was the development of interactivity and human-to-human connectivity (think MySpace, YouTube, Second Life, and now Twitter and Facebook). The World Wide Web was no longer a static entity, but one that regular people could interact with on a daily basis.

The consequences of these developments have been massive, ultimately icing the cake (to carry on a metaphor) that, as Marshall McLuhan (1964) described fully 39 years ago in which, "we have extended our central nervous system itself into a global embrace" (p3). This global embrace is as wide reaching as it is compelling since it combines the extension of our own relational selves through a system of interactivity designed to engage our most addictive vulnerabilities as well. Perhaps Nicholas Carr (2010), author of *The Shallows: how the internet is changing the way we think, read and remember* puts it best:

if, knowing what we know today about the brain's plasticity, you were to set out to invent a medium that would rewire our mental circuits as quickly and thoroughly as possible, you would probably end up designing something that looks and works a lot like the Internet. It's not just that we tend to use the Net regularly, even obsessively. It's that the Net delivers precisely the kind of sensory and cognitive stimuli-

repetitive, intensive, interactive, addictive – that we have been shown to result in strong and rapid alterations in brain circuits and functions . . . the Net may well be the single most powerful mind-altering technology that has ever come into general use (p115-116).

As I will be arguing in my upcoming book ***The Psychodynamics of Social Networking*** (Balick, in press), the fuel for this utterly compelling development in our modern social lives is, like the 'like' button, another seemingly simple concept: recognition. It seems simple because we all know what recognition is, but the way recognition operates is rather more complex. Recognition is a two-way street ideally resulting in an intersubjective state that Jessica Benjamin (1988) calls "mutual recognition". When online social networking is boiled down to its bare essentials, what do you get *but a very efficient and simple technology for deploying recognition?* The trouble is, mutual recognition is neither simply deployed nor simply received.

IT'S DEVELOPMENTAL

Benjamin comes from the tradition of Relational Psychoanalysis, a development of Object Relations theory that has been developing since the 1980s from the original work of Greenberg and Mitchell (1983). Relational psychoanalysis has been influenced by a whole variety of disciplines outside psychoanalysis including fields as diverse as attachment theory, feminism, post-modernism, and philosophy; it is a modern and cutting edge iteration of psychoanalysis, reviving a theory and discipline that many have proclaimed anachronistic; this version is anything but.

Relational Psychoanalysis, like Object Relations, sees the motivation to relate as absolutely central to human experience and the meanings that individuals make of their lives. It's difference lies in the fact that it is fundamentally an intersubjective theory; it conceives of human psychological development not just in relation to the infant (as subject) developing in a world of objects (with an emphasis on the infant's inner world), but rather developing in a world of subjects (other people, particularly the primary

caregiver, with a mind of her own). For Benjamin (1990):

> The development of the capacity for mutual recognition can be conceived as a separate trajectory from the internalization of object relations. The subject gradually becomes able to recognize the other person's subjectivity, developing a capacity for attunement and tolerance of difference (p33)

The development of a capacity to manage sameness and difference is a fundamental developmental achievement in relational psychoanalysis, and continues to be a challenge throughout life. However, the nature of the individual's upbringing will have a large part in that person's ability to tolerate difference. For example, does the primary caretaker wish to *really* recognise the growing infant as a subject in his own right, or does she see him as an extension of herself? The way in which a subject makes their way through early relational challenges will deeply influence both their selfhood and relational patterns as an adult.

The work of British Psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott occupies an important position in relational thinking due to his concepts of "good enough mothering" and the "facilitating environment". His famous statement that there is no such thing as a baby (Winnicott, 1964) is a fundamentally intersubjective statement, indicating the mother/infant relationship is an important co-constructed space. His further development of the concept of the "false self" that the infant creates to meet the needs of his mother (where she is unable to meet his "difference") is another helpful tool in understanding the dynamics of recognition. The false self (and similarly the persona in Jung) develops in the direction of interpersonal or social compliance.

The infant seeks to be authentically recognised by
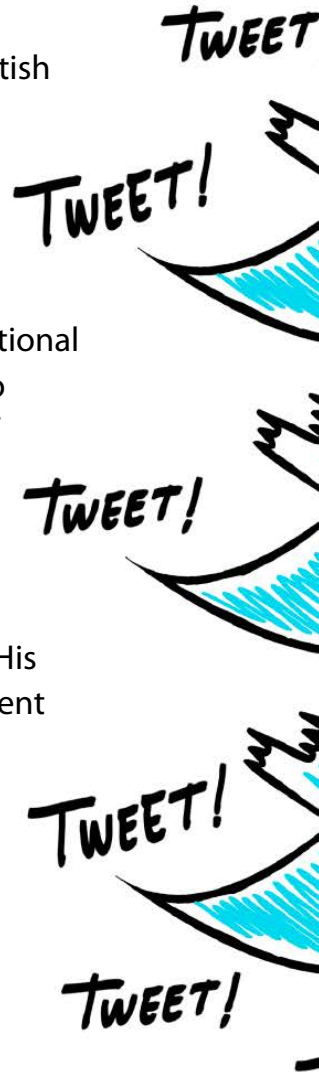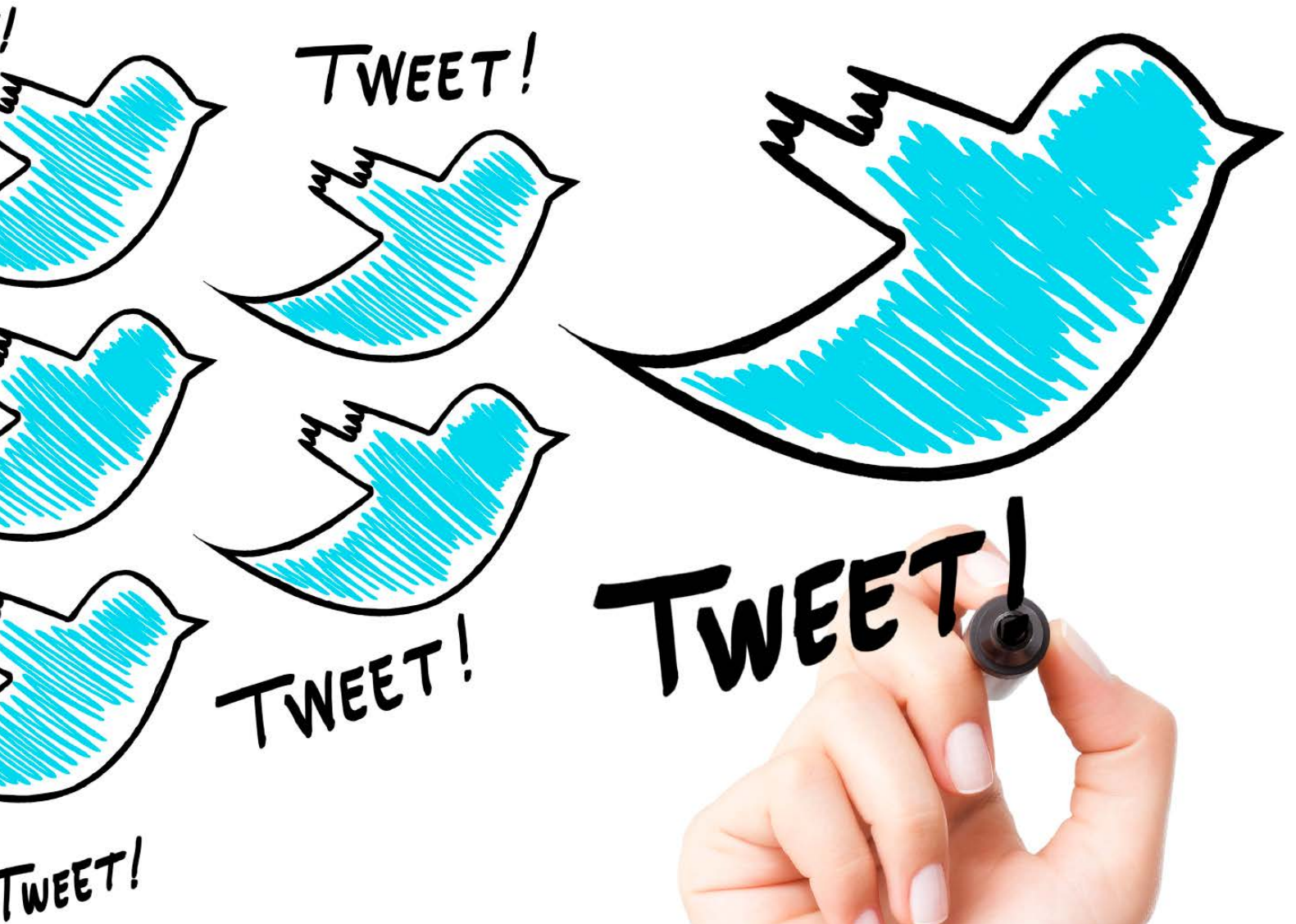
her primary caretakers, but also seeks and finds enjoyment in the discovery of the subjectivity of the other. The continued operation of seeking and being sought continues throughout life as one of our greatest relational pleasures and difficulties. The pleasures results from these moments of authentic mutual recognition whereas the difficulties revolve around managing narcissistic self-states (of the self and/or the other) and the function of the false self catching most of the attention (recognition) at the expense of the true self; a series of events that leads

to a feeling of alienation from the self, or a sense of being fraudulent.

SEEKING AND BEING SOUGHT ONLINE

I have written elsewhere (Balick, 2012) that these days a lot of the seeking and being sought occurs online. In my paper "TMI in the transference LOL" I tell a story about how a client found some information about me in a Google search that fundamentally changed the nature of our therapy together. I came to understand these virtual events that shift the nature of a relationship as "virtual impingements". A virtual impingement is defined as "any event that happens in relation to a person by way of the virtual world, which is experienced as an intrusion on the self" (p125). We can assume that impingements of this sort occur online all the time between individuals in and out of therapy. Those fortunate enough to experience them while in therapy have the opportunity to explore them at a deeper level.

It is important to see the world of online social networking as

the sin qua non of our online relational selves. It is an arena where the desire to seek and be sought is in full throttle. As online social networks are outward facing, they call upon the facilities our ego has of facing outwards, that is, the false self or persona. Both of these concepts are closely related as they refer to the mask we use to operate in the public realm. It is important, however, not to get caught up in the word "false". We all develop a false self in relation to our strengths and capacities, so it is not "false" at all, but as real as any other part of us. It is, however, deployed with the aim of social compliance and is therefore not a fully free expression of our authentic selves (which is itself a complex and problematic concept).

When the psychodynamic functions of false/true self and the motivation for mutual recognition are combined with the ease, convenience and architecture of the online social network, you can see how the social network is replete with opportunities and challenges. In one sense, recognition is so easily acquired over the social network (Look! He "liked" my comment; Great, she followed me!) many of these acquisitioned are gained by the persona or false self. Does the true or "real" self get neglected in this transaction? Benjamin (1988) draws our attention to the importance of real authentic recognition:

It is important to see the world of online social networking....as an arena where the desire to seek and be sought is in full throttle.

Recognition is so central to human existence as to often escape notice . . . it appears to us in so many guises that it is seldom grasped as an overarching concept . . . to recognize is to affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, empathize, take in, tolerate, appreciate, see, identify with, find familiar . . . love (p15–16).

A cursory glance at Benjamin's verbs above will show you just how closely these psychic needs align with the functions of your favourite social network. The "like" button on Facebook alone can be used to recognize, affirm, validate, acknowledge, know, accept, understand, appreciate, or find familiar with. A few comments on a wall will fill in the details for the rest. While these functions no doubt do a job, they also beg the question of whether

or not the simplicity and ease of delivering such sought after ego needs "fill the jar" as it were, of good psychological health. Additionally, the ease with which misrecognition can occur over the social network also has to be taken into account. With such dispatch can we deliver virtual impingement too.

THE ROLE OF MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS

Mental health professionals have a complex role in relation to the fast moving online world of social networking. On the one hand it is imperative that they come to understand the nature of the online social network as a fully psychological phenomenon that needs theorising and understanding more fully. While there is currently a great deal of research in the field on this subject, most of

it is largely quantitative or survey based and does not adequately address the deep psychodynamic meaning-making that is so central to our experience of social networking: more qualitative work is needed in this area.

Research like this is particularly important for children and younger people, those that Palfrey and Gasser (2008) call "Digital Natives"; those who have grown up fully saturated in digital culture and do not make a distinction between online and offline lives. It is the online arena where these young people will be seeking much recognition, and we have yet to fully learn the way in which recognition deployed on social networks fully operates.

Another challenge facing mental health professionals is their own use of the social network, and how their presence and accessibility in the virtual world has consequences for their own personal lives, and

the lives of their clients. Where many psychotherapists were once wary of being publically available through online social networks, as these networks have become more and more a regular part of everyday life, this becomes less likely. What does our availability and accessibility as therapists existing online mean to present and future clients? How does one deal with a virtual impingement when it is instigated (purposefully or not) by a therapist towards his or her client? These questions bear serious thinking about by mental health professionals.

The computer scientist Kranzberg (1986) famously stated that "Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral." Sherry Turkle (2011) pithily informs us that "Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies" (p1). The combination of these two statements makes an important synergy. It puts into perspective the nature of an online world that *has an architecture* and for this reason is not neutral. Yet this architecture mediates our intimacies. In many ways, the more virtual we become, the more dependent we are on this architecture. We retain, however, the free will with

which to choose how we interact across this architecture. Dini (2009) describes the multitude of ways in which patients utilise the Internet:

> Patients can use the internet for purposes that actualize or accentuate either adaptive or pathological functioning. Because of the nature of internet interaction, users can be secretive or deceiving, exhibitionistic or voyeuristic, to a degree and in ways never before possible. For example, the simultaneous increase of shame and of modes for tension regulation around it can lead to conflictual feelings and, often, dissociative defenses. A need of community has always existed, but as the nature of community is changing, the internet may lend a capacity to distorted defenses and methods of relating in ways with which we, as therapists, are familiar (p982).

I don't think that Dini is being hyperbolic here when she states that the very nature

of community is changing. In reference to Kranzberg's (1986) statement, this change is neither good nor bad, but it is equally not neutral. Psychotherapists and the role of psychotherapy in today's society cannot avoid the issue from the comfort of the consultation room, which is rightly in many ways, cut off from the high-speed world of online relating. Though readers of this magazine are presumably more familiar with online dynamics than the wider field is likely to be, there is no doubt great mileage to be had in thoughtfully applying developmental psychodynamics to the ways in which we operate and think about our subjectivities within the online world.

CONCLUSION

John Naughton (2012) compares the development of the Internet (and particularly Web 2.0) to the Gutenberg press and notes that within the first 20 years of its invention society would never have guessed that this invention would challenge the authority of the Catholic church, trigger the Protestant revolution, facilitate the rise of the modern scientific enterprise and create entire new social classes (p13). We too are within the first 20 years of an invention that is bound to challenge aspects of familiar cultural life that we cannot even begin to understand:

> . . . anyone hoping that the turbulence wrought by the Internet will eventually subside, and that things will eventually level out, is doomed to disappointment. The complexity of our emerging media ecosystem, together with the 'permissionless innovation' that is facilitated by the Internet, make a return to stability is an unlikely prospect. Instead, our future will be one that is characterized by ongoing disruptive innovation. The good news is that we will adjust to this new realty, just as we have always done in the past. Humans are an adaptive species, and we are good at building tools that help us to cope with changing circumstances (Ibid., p182).

I concur with Naughton's hope in the faith in the adaptive nature of the human species in the face of unknowable change. Psychoanalysis emerged at the frontier of the great unknown of the human unconscious and Freud stood at the precipice and looked forward with great anticipation. He delayed the publication of his first major work of psychoanalysis The Interpretation of Dreams (completed in 1899) to 1900 as he wanted its date of publication to be at the start of the gleaming new century. Few would have guessed that Freud would have the Gutenberg of the unconscious and fundamentally shifting the way the 20th century West would understand individuals, culture and society.

Few now would think that the insights of a man born in the middle of the 19th century might have something to tell

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us about a technology that, to him, would have been unfathomable. However, psychoanalysis was born in the face of the unfathomable; and Freud's heirs are up to the task.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Aaron Balick is a UKCP registered psychotherapist, supervisor and psychological consultant in London; he is also an honorary lecturer at the Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies at the University of Essex. As a founding and executive member of The Relational School UK he works to develop and promote contemporary relational thinking in the UK and abroad. He is a media spokesperson for the UKCP and resident psychotherapist on BBC Radio 1's phone-in show, *The Surgery with Aled*. Aaron will have two books published in 2013, *The Psychodynamics of Social Networking: connected-up instantaneous culture and the self* and a book for children entitled *Keep Your Cool: how to deal with life's worries and stress*. His blog is here and he can be contacted on Twitter via @ draaronb.

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