The (one) simple thing fueling your social media addiction

A ｜ 🖶 ｜ 💬 2

By **Caitlin Dewey** November 12 ✉ Follow @caitlindewey

What Facebook looks like without the numbers (Grosser)

If friendships were ever about quality, rather than quantity, that certainly isn't the case anymore: Virtually every Web site that governs our social interactions these days puts numbers front and center, like a bold-faced, numerical tally of your precise social worth.

Three hundred Twitter followers. Five hundred Facebook friends. A mere three upvotes on that link you posted to Reddit a full three hours ago, which means it really kind of bombed. I even have a friend who watches the number of Instagram likes his pictures receive, deleting the ones that fail to "go double-digit." As if there were anything in the world more arbitrary than whether nine or 10 people heart that highly filtered photo of your last meal, anyway.

The quantification of our social lives is intended, presumably, to give some shape to our otherwise amorphous interpersonal interactions. But as a [startling new paper](#) by the artist and developer Benjamin Grosser makes clear, all these numbers are having a more insidious effect, as well: They've become the primary measure by which we judge whether our friendships, and our lives, are valuable or fulfilling.

Since 2012, Grosser has published an intriguing, infuriating browser plug-in called [Facebook Demetricator](#), which — as its name implies! — essentially removes all the numbers from Facebook. No friend counts. No event invites. Demetricator even masks dates, so you can't tell exactly when something was posted.
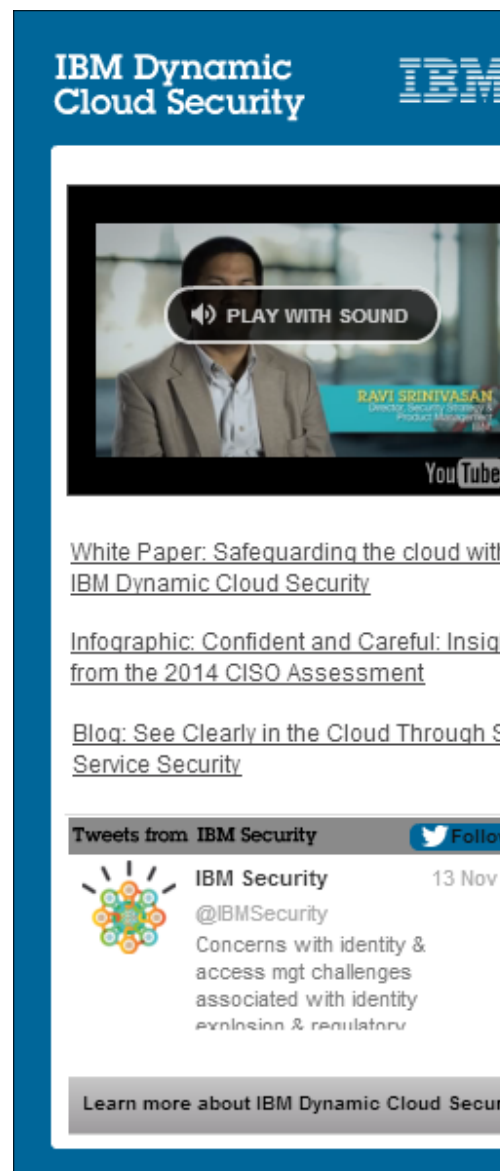
Metrics on Facebook are absolutely everywhere, even if we don't realize it. (Gross)

In the two years his tool has been online, thousands of people have used it — and Grosser has gotten a lot of feedback on how Facebook looks and feels without all those pesky metrics. In short, it acts nothing like the Facebook we know: Users feel less pressure to compete for likes, less pressure to like other people's posts because their friends have, and less pressure to delete unliked posts, a la my Instagram double-digit friend.

In other words, all the anxieties of Facebook fall away. Social networking without the numbers looks less like a popularity contest ... and more like actual socialization.

The Most Popular All Over

"With Demetricator, the focus is no longer on how many "likes" a user received, how much someone likes their status, or on how old a post is, but on who liked it and what they said," Grosser writes in his paper. "Quantity is no longer foregrounded, leaving users to focus on the content that remains."

And that makes sense, right? There's a lot of literature out there on how numbers and numerical feedback impact our behavior; it's the very reason dieters count calories, urban planners place speed display signs, and teachers assign grades on a 1-to-100 scale. For decades, psychologists have understood that real-time, numerical feedback on our behavior motivates us to change it.

"Action, information, reaction," Thomas Goetz wrote in his 2011 deep-dive on the phenomenon. The feedback loop, he found, is a "profoundly effective tool for changing behavior."

Even the +1 on the "Add Friend" button encourages you to make more Facebook friends, Grosser claims. (Grosser)

And yet, as Grosser's Demetricator suggests, maybe social media's feedback loops are changing us in ways we'd rather not. They encourage us to contort ourselves and our digital identities in order to wrack up more "friendships" or "likes." They teach us that jokes and photos and major life announcements are only of value when someone else has double-clicked them.

These days, there is surely no disappointment more

universal than posting a brilliant witticism or adorable photo to Facebook ... and seeing it earn a measly one or two likes.

How many people like this photo? I'll never know! (Facebook)

I had never heard of Grosser's Demetricator before he published this paper — but since I too know the misery of the unloved Facebook status, I installed it for a trial run earlier this week. On Tuesday, I posted a pretty great photo of my dog — a piece of like-bait so adorable, so imminently lovable, I was sure my friends would "like" it. In fact, I'm sure my friends *have* liked it. But I didn't get any notifications on the subject, which is either liberating or invalidating. (I haven't decided yet.)

In my timeline, things were a little more clear-cut: It's awesome, frankly, to be able to judge other articles and ads and other people's baby photos based solely on their merits, without the gentle halo of how many people have judged them meritorious already. I was immune to viral posts, to Facebook peer-pressure, to acutely targeted ads. Only I determined what I clicked, and oddly, in that vacuum, I clicked almost nothing.

Does that say something about the essential nature of Facebook? Of human manipulability? Of both? Grosser certainly seems to think as much: Facebook (and other networks) designed this system intentionally, he points out, to encourage more engagement, more clicks — it's good for advertisers, so it's good for Facebook's business. Whether it's good for the hearts and minds of users is, of course, a different story.

"The notifications become like meth," one man told Grosser. "You just can't stop checking and rechecking. It simply became a nervous addiction for me."

Without the numbers, on the other hand?

"It added a Zen element to the entire format," he wrote. "I finally feel at ease."

Caitlin Dewey runs The Intersect blog, writing about digital and Internet culture. Before joining the Post, she was an associate online editor at Kiplinger's Personal Finance.