

Missing the Point – Social media is no substitute for the real thing.

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The number 4 Instagram celebrity in the world by number of followers, behind only the Instagram company account and two “footballers.” (Shutterstock)

There’s a show I like to watch that’s on one of the streaming services. It’s an exceptionally well-crafted mystery comedy featuring two aging, deservedly famous male comedians and one barely thirty-something female popstar. As it turns out, she is surprisingly well-cast in her role. While not as skilled an actor as her costars, she is a good and sometimes great complement to her senior partners’ performances.

Given the substantial age differences between the older costars, one of whom is the creator and writer of the series, and this thirty-year-old, I’ve wondered how the popstar got the part. Were they devoted fans of her music? I doubt it. Did she take the initiative and pitch herself to producers who knew her name, but were not all that familiar with her work and capabilities? Maybe and, if that’s what happened, good for her.

One thing’s for sure – and I say this not to demean her very substantial talents in any way – it didn’t hurt her chances of getting the job to have on her resume that she has [407,000,000 followers](#) on Instagram, worldwide. Wow.

Smart, beautiful, talented and over four hundred million people care enough about her, want to know what she’s doing, how she feels about this or that, to follow her on just this one social medium. If only a small fraction of those fans watches the show, it’s going to be a substantial hit.

Whatever her personal reasons for being willing to socially expose herself, to do whatever it takes to attract that many followers despite the sometimes hurtful and even traumatizing implications of notoriety on this scale, the commercial implications of her fame are huge. So, I get it. It's not only a lifestyle. More to the point, it's a business.

The "gig," by the way, the streaming series I like to watch, pays her \$600,000 per episode, ten half-hour episodes per year for three years. So, \$18 million gross for what is, from an annual perspective, only a part-time job.

Full disclosure? I write these "[Missing the Point](#)" op/eds and my "[Except for a few details...](#)" short-short stories because I really enjoy writing, because the op/eds are about issues that are important to me and are my way of lobbying the general public. And I write them because they're good for my day job. But they're also my way of reaching out. It feels good to have people read and appreciate something you've created. Don't believe any writer who ever tells you otherwise.

There's no way I'm inside my popstar's head, but at least I see the commercial implications of her putting herself out there. It's the other side of the faux conversation via social media that gives me cause for concern. What I don't get is why the 407 million followers are so interested, so willing to give up part of their lives to be part of hers. Not to mention the other celebrities they're following and time spent on social media exposing and promoting themselves to family, friends, casual acquaintances and outright strangers... Lots of strangers. ...albeit on a much, much smaller scale. The popstar may have commercial reasons for putting her life on the Internet, but the rest of us do not. We're doing it because the exposure is filling a void, compensating for something that's important, that is missing or has been stolen from us by the culture of our times.

I grew up in a small town, before cell phones and the Internet. It was and still is, a popular, important city, but there was no mall way back then. Technologically, we didn't have much more than old style dial phones, "fat TVs" and little radios that boasted of having a whopping six transistors. But what we did have, in our small town, was something called "social intimacy."

According to [one definition](#)...

Social intimacy refers to high quality interactions and relationships with others, including closeness with spouse, friends, or family members, and it predicts mental health (Miller & Lefcourt, 1982).

Note the year that definition was put down on paper. It's been a while. And please keep in mind that we're talking about "social," not "sexual" intimacy. Big difference.

When I was a little kid, I'd go shopping with my mother and would be struck by how she knew the names of so many of the people who owned and worked in the stores. My father had a local moving and storage business. My grandfather, a clothing store near the center of town. The butcher at the meat counter in the A&P knew us by name. *"Hi, Mrs. Cohen. What can I get for you?"* He recognized us, even though we were nobody in particular, and remembered the brisket my mother had ordered a few weeks ago. I was on a first name basis with "Fred," the man who owned the local barber shop and cut my hair until I went to college. And most of the news I needed to know was in the local paper. We only got the Baltimore Sun – It was a much bigger deal, physically and journalistically, in those days. – and the Washington Post on Sundays. Big thick papers with lots of sections delivered to our front porch.

Just to be clear, I'm not just reminiscing about better times that used to be. Forget that. I really like 2023, for the most part. We live in socially, politically, technologically, scientifically and even environmentally exciting times. Good, bad and all too often ugly, the pace of life is breathtaking.

Unfortunately, and precisely when we need it more than ever, the whole concept of social intimacy – the real deal that only happens with bona fide personal contact – has gotten lost in the fray. It's gone now, taken from us largely by population growth, urban sprawl, traffic and so many other things that have increased the time intensity of our lives. There are so many more things to do and less and less time to get them done.

There's no time for personal contact anymore – and the persistent popularity of working from home isn't helping. Just because we have the technology to do something doesn't mean it's a good idea. However casual or intense, we need in-person relationships because it's fundamental to our nature that we relate to each other in a socially intimate way. Technology has given us social media and the super smart communications devices we carry with us wherever we go, but it's not the same. Quantitatively, there's much more sharing going on, but it's largely superficial and sterile when it comes to producing the enduring, satisfying personal relationships that are essential to our well-being.

We go on Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok, exposing ourselves, reaching out mostly to people we don't know and will never see or meet. There's no commercial incentive, just a craving for contact that we're trying too hard to satisfy on a medium that teases the effect we're after, but can't possibly fulfill us.

About 676,000,000 results (0.46 seconds)

The company's latest data reveals that the typical working-age internet user now spends **more than 2½ hours per day** using social platforms, which is up by 2 percent (+3 minutes) compared with the daily average that the company reported at the start of 2022. Jan 26, 2023



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[Two and a half hours a day.](#) Other sources I found had similar numbers. What are we doing, to ourselves, our families, our communities and culture?

Don't get me wrong. We need to share. Sharing, up to a point and as a general concept, is a good and important thing. But social media is generally a single-sided experience. It's exposure without communication. You're not really part of the celebrities' lives. Their purposes may be benign, but they're just using you. Even online interaction with close family and friends is superficial at best. Somehow, we need to get back to the basics of building real, supportive, enduring personal relationships. Anything less is missing the point.

-Les Cohen

Les Cohen is a long-term Marylander, having grown up in Annapolis. Professionally, he writes and edits materials for business and political clients from his base of operations in Columbia, Maryland. He has a Ph.D. in Urban and Regional Economics. Leave a comment or feel free to send him an email to Les@Writeaway.us.

