Join the Dots –

Garbage and Good Stuff

I began to have my doubts about the value of Facebook when the sheer weight of garbage coming through my feed started to outweigh any of the good stuff. In the early days, it was not all bad. I picked up a handful of new friends, re-established contact with some old ones, and even joined groups that offered updates on topics I cared about. That was the promise of social media: connection, knowledge, and a sense of community. But the numbers kept climbing. At one point I had more than 1,200 friends, and the list was growing daily. Bollocks! Who really has that many friends? Robin Dunbar's book on friendship would knock the socks off that illusion. His research shows that most of us can sustain about 150 genuine relationships. Anymore, and they dissolve into acquaintances at best, strangers at worst.[1] Facebook was selling me the idea that every click was a bond, but deep down it was just an inflated numbers game.

What really soured me, though, was the steady tide of conspiracy theories. More and more of my "friends" were pushing this "join the dots" mentality, where any two unrelated events could be linked and turned into evidence of a grand design. I found myself getting frustrated, almost depressed, at the nonsense parading as truth. Michael Barkun calls this the culture of conspiracy; an eagerness to find patterns where none exist.[2] And of course, it spreads like wildfire online. Studies even show that falsehoods travel faster and further on platforms like Twitter and Facebook than actual facts.[3] Garbage, in other words, has wings.

At some point I realised I was swallowing daily "depression pills" just by logging on. The supposed friendships and the endless "updates" were punishing my pocket of

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[1] Robin Dunbar, *Friends: Understanding the Power of Our Most Important Relationships*, London: Little, Brown, 2021, p. 72.
[2] Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013, p. 27.
[3] Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy, and Sinan Aral, 'The Spread of True and False News Online', *Science*, vol. 359, no. 6380, 2018, pp. 1146–1151.

patience. So I cut the cord. "Bye bye" Facebook. I don't miss it one bit. The same went for other social sites too. If anything, the absence was a relief. No more endless arguments. No more shallow joining of dots. Just silence, and in that silence, space.

Of course, conspiracy thinking is not new. Long before Facebook, human beings found comfort in connecting dots, often where no real connections existed. In the early 20th century, the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious forgery, claimed to reveal a Jewish plot for world domination, and it was widely circulated despite being proven false.[4] During the Cold War, Americans saw communist conspiracies everywhere, while the Soviets accused the West of plotting endless sabotage.[5] Each era has its "dot-joining," shaped by fear, uncertainty, and political manipulation.

What is new about the digital age is speed and scale. Where once pamphlets or whispers carried conspiracies, today a single meme can reach millions in hours. The historian Richard Hofstadter described the "paranoid style" in American politics decades ago,[6] but social media has given that style a permanent megaphone. The conspiracies that used to simmer in the margins now dominate mainstream conversations, amplified by algorithms that reward anger and novelty. This historical perspective reassures me that we're not uniquely gullible today, but it also underlines how dangerous the internet makes old habits of thought.

Once I stepped away from the scrolling and the clicking, I found myself reaching for books again. Reading seriously damages ignorance, I discovered, especially when it's reading stuff written by people who know what they're talking about. Not hot takes or memes, but authors with both academic grounding and lived experience. People who spend years thinking through a subject, not minutes firing off a post for likes. Keith Thomas once said that reading is the surest way of reducing ignorance,[7] and I could feel that truth every time I turned a page.

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[4] Norman Cohn, *Warrant for Genocide: The Myth of the Jewish World Conspiracy and the Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1967, p. 41.
[5] Tony Shaw, *British Cinema and the Cold War: The State, Propaganda and Consensus*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2001, p. 92.
[6] Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, New York: Knopf, 1965, p. 3.
[7] Keith Thomas, *Changing Conceptions of National Biography: The Oxford DNB in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 12.

This wasn't just about information. Reading slowed me down. It made me sit with complexity, contradiction, and nuance. Unlike Facebook's endless scroll, where novelty is king and reflection is rare, a book insists on patience. It also reminded me of something deeper, that ideas worth carrying have usually been built slowly, brick by brick, by minds who valued depth over speed. Alberto Manguel once described reading as entering into a conversation across time.[8] Compared with the garbage of "dot-joining," that felt like real nourishment.

It was Jack London's line that came back to me: "vacuous statements from empty heads."[9] That about summed up much of what I saw online before I left. Endless declarations made with complete confidence, but with nothing behind them. Of course, I know gossip and half-truths have always been part of human life; they existed well before the internet. What's different now is scale. Where once an empty head could only annoy the neighbours, now they can broadcast to thousands, even millions. The damage is multiplied, and so is the fatigue for the rest of us. Nicholas Carr argues that the internet rewires the brain for speed and distraction, making shallow thinking the norm.[10] When I think back to my time on Facebook, I can't disagree.

If Dunbar is right about our natural limits, then what happens when we overshoot them by a factor of ten? Research shows that people with hundreds or thousands of online "friends" often feel lonelier, not less.[11] It turns out that human connection is not about numbers but about depth, time, trust, and emotional investment. Social media tricks us into thinking quantity is quality, but the result is often a crowd without closeness. Jean Twenge has even linked heavy social media use with rising rates of anxiety and depression among young people,[12] who feel pressure to maintain a perfect online image while lacking genuine offline support.

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[8] Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, New York: Penguin, 1996, p. 214.
[9] Jack London, quoted in Philip Foner (ed.), *Jack London: American Rebel*, New York: Citadel Press, 1947, p. 57.
[10] Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2010, p. 119.
[11] John T. Cacioppo and William Patrick, *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2008, p. 74.
[12] Jean M. Twenge, *iGen*, New York: Atria, 2017, p. 104.

In my own case, I could feel that hollowness. The more my list grew, the less real it felt. Genuine friendships were buried under birthday reminders, conspiracy rants, and selfies from people I barely knew. It's not just that the noise drowns out the signal; it's that the very definition of friendship is stretched so thin it almost breaks. True friendship, as Aristotle once wrote, is about mutual virtue and care. It is not about clicking "like" on a photo.[13] He didn't say that last bit!

I sometimes worry that a whole generation is being raised on this diet of speed, simplicity, and garbage. It isn't their fault; the platforms are designed that way. Shoshana Zuboff calls it surveillance capitalism: systems built to harvest attention, provoke reactions, and sell data.[14] Complexity doesn't sell; anger, fear, and novelty do. And so, the "dot-joiners" thrive. It's easier to shout about conspiracies than to sit with the slow work of research, analysis, and reflection. Cass Sunstein has shown how this dynamic eats away at democracy itself, because people trained to think in memes and slogans are less prepared for reasoned debate.[15]

I can see this even in my own neighbourhood – people parroting lines they picked up online, confident in their opinions but unwilling to dig any deeper. They prefer a simple solution, just enough to carry them on to the next worry. It's easier to scroll and share than to stop and think. And it leaves me with the sense that we're losing not only knowledge but also patience; patience with ourselves, with each other, and with the messy business of truth.

Stepping away from Facebook was not just about avoiding annoyance; it was about reclaiming space for thought. It was about joining the right dots, not every wild connection thrown into my feed. Reading more has given me back something I didn't know I had lost: the ability to sit with ideas, to weigh them, and to grow from them. Social media promised friendship, knowledge, and community, but it delivered too much illusion, too much noise. By walking away from these social links, I re-discovered something better, not silence exactly, but greater clarity.

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[13] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Roger Crisp, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, Book VIII.
[14] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, London: Profile Books, 2019, p. 94.
[15] Cass Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 88

So, when I think back now, I don't regret leaving. I regret only that it took me so long. In the end, it wasn't about rejecting technology or connection. It was about choosing depth over garbage, reflection over vacuous statements, and genuine knowledge over dot-joining conspiracies. The challenge is not to "join the dots" at all costs, but to choose carefully which dots are worth joining.

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