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Why I Unfollowed You on Instagram

The Social Network is Yesterday, The Interest Feed is Tomorrow

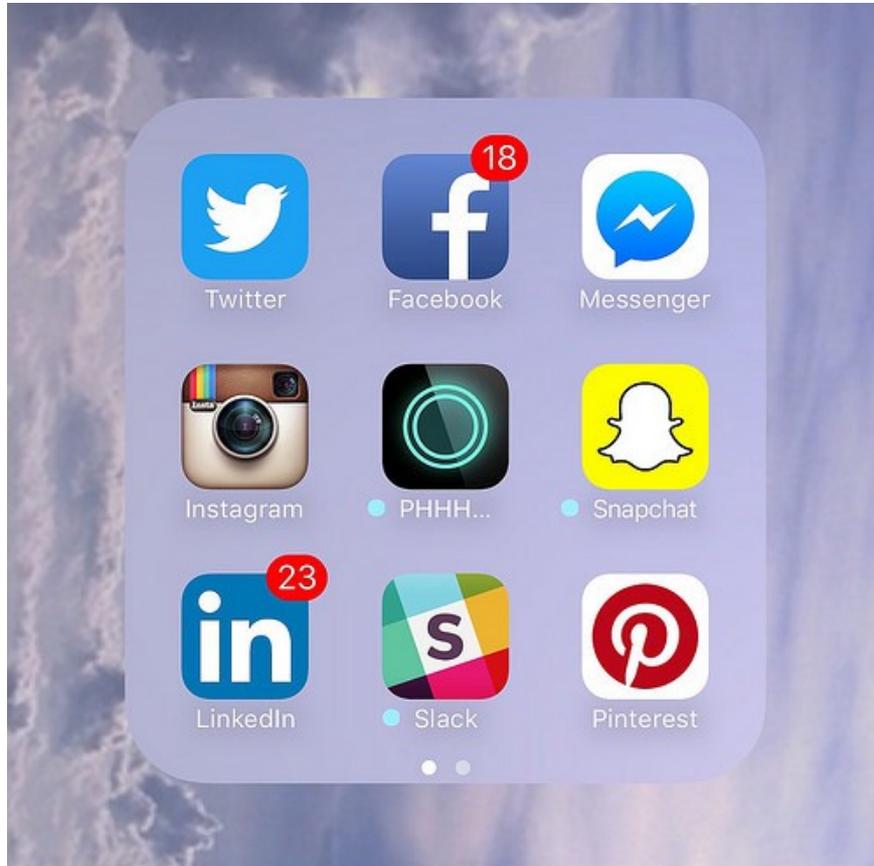
Curation + Personalization

In October 2011 I gave [a presentation called The Race To Be Trusted](#). I was pulling on a thread handed to me by [Andy Weissman](#) regarding the evolution of Internet content distribution. In short:

- **THE AOL ERA:** Navigation via URL (e.g. <http://cs.indiana.edu/~irogers>). Access to the Internet unfettered previously limited distribution. No longer did we need to wait for stuff to find its way to us via TV, radio, and magazines. A kid in a small town had the same access to culture as one in a big city if she/he knew the URL.
- **THE YAHOO! ERA:** Navigation via hierarchical menus. “Gah! This Internet unleashed too much stuff! How do you find any of it?! URLs are long and confusing! Someone organize this mess!” Yahoo! wasn’t alone, Excite, Lycos and others jumped at the “let’s organize the Web” opportunity, too.
- **THE GOOGLE ERA:** Navigation via search box. It’s easy to take Google for granted today but making the best of the Web available via keyword search was no small task and game-changing. Google wasn’t the first or only search engine of course (Hotbot, AltaVista, etc) but it was the first that was accessible to a mainstream consumer. PageRank was the secret sauce and worked by giving weight to pages linked to more often, hereby giving algorithmic weight to editorial selection.
- **THE FACEBOOK ERA:** It turns out the magic of social was not The Profile (sorry Friendster and MySpace) but The Feed. Facebook’s feed brought the best of the Internet filtered by an extremely strong signal—who you know. Facebook also pioneered the “soft follow”, you don’t see everything your friends post, only the “most interesting” as defined by an algorithm reading the behavior of you and your peers.

In retrospect, [that 2011 presentation](#) had it partially right—we all value the first pass of a respected editor. But at Beats Music I saw the

value of curation combined with a second, algorithmic step: personalization. Fill a barrel with the best of the best. Now when I walk in, based on insights about my taste and what I've selected in the past, choose *for me* from the barrel. Wow! Thanks! That magic trick works.



I Have Apps To Manage My Apps, Yet None Are The Interest Feed I'm Looking For

The Internet is full of expert curators but each want you to subscribe to *them*, their newsletter, their Twitter, their Instagram. No longer do content creators expect you to come to them, they have multiple methods of broadcasting to you. Yet an inbox full of single-brand newsletters is not what I'm looking for. I am looking for a tool to bring me the best of all these human curators, Internet-wide, based on what interests me. What I'm looking for is a meta level above the curators.

Instead today I have a myriad of different apps vying for my attention and not achieving this:

- **Facebook**, which wants to be a Social Feed, an Interest Feed, *and* a Communication Tool

- **Snapchat**, a Communication Tool trying to be cable TV
- **Medium**, a great publishing platform not meta-curation
- **Instagram**, a creative canvas full of my interests that makes me do all the curation work (more on that in a minute)
- **Pinterest**, a random-feeling feed of images based loosely on my interests
- **Pocket**, where I consume my link curation
- **Twitter**, a great place to have a public conversation (my interest renewed when we launched Beats 1) but not as creatively satisfying as Instagram nor as well curated (even after I curated who I was following) as the email lists mentioned above.
- **An email Inbox** requiring a second app (SaneBox) to separate the “work” from the “interests”. I subscribe to [Jason Hirschhorn's various ReDEF lists](#), Dave Pell's [NextDraft](#), [The Ann Friedman Weekly](#) and Sean Bonner's [CROWD](#) and value their singular human curation that covers the entire Internet (as opposed to the many sites which are happy to send me a newsletter of what's new on their site alone). The fact that these collections of links have effectively replaced my need to troll links on Twitter points to Twitter's deteriorated utility but my “SaneLater” mailbox isn't the Interest Feed I imagine.

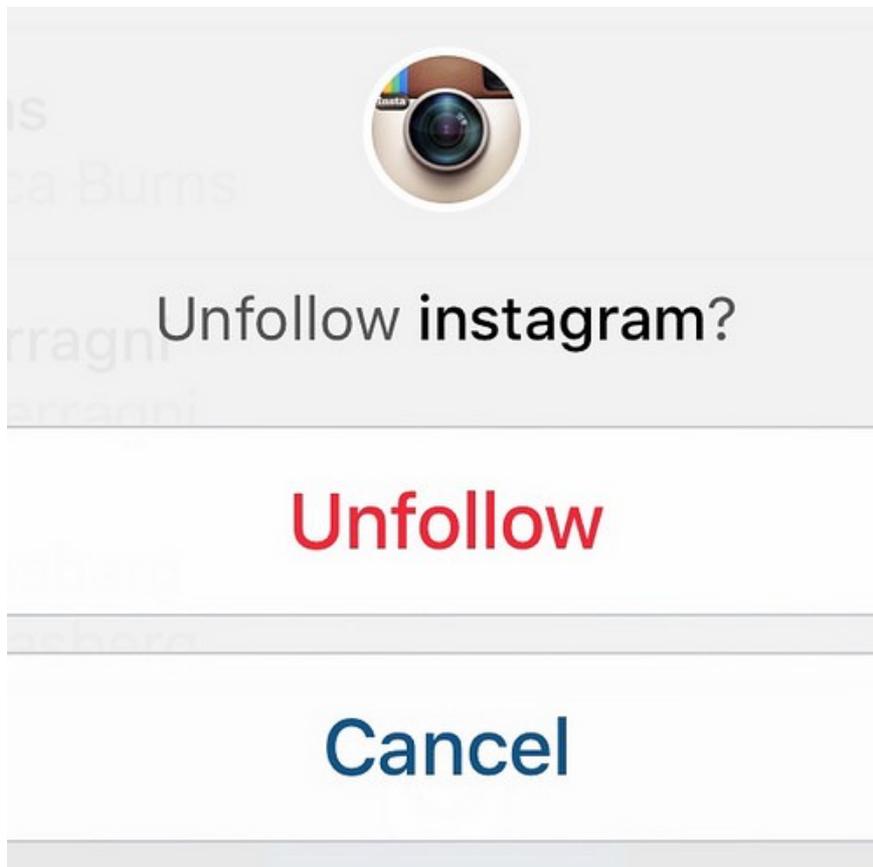
I'm looking for an intelligent feed of my interests. A feed of stuff I'm going to like, drawn from a white-list of trusted curators but personalized for me. Not specific to one vertical (News, Music, Stuff to Buy, etc) or one content type (movies, photos, text, links). Ordered by the most relevant, the stuff I need to see RIGHT NOW. A service which:

- Quickly discerns my key interests
- Shows me a feed of things it believes I'll be interested in, leaning heavily toward video and image content but also including links to articles
- Leverages a white-list of great curators
- Doesn't require me to “follow” anyone or anything. I simply tell it what I like, then interact with the content, and it shows me more of what it thinks I'll like.
- Has a way for me to say which content and curators I do not like

- Features no “private” content. Private content is meant for “social” networks.
- Isn’t a Communication Tool.
- Doesn’t care who my “friends” are. Leave that to Facebook. Let me share to my friends. Show me a feed of my interests, not of things people I know like. Ignore that signal all together.

As a user I would say, “I’m a forty-three year old dad who likes skateboarding, punk rock, and motorcycles” and the service presents me the best of the Internet today, for me. As I interact it would discover what I like to read, eat, and wear. Do this well and I’ll rely on you to always have what I need to know about right now.

Does this exist? Am I missing it?



So, This is Why I Unfollowed You on Instagram

So, this is why I unfollowed you (and hundreds of others) on Instagram, [just like I did on Twitter two years ago](#).

The Interest Graph I want doesn't exist so I'll hotwire Instagram (and maybe Pinterest and Pocket and Apple News) to fake it until it arrives. I'll take the time to unfollow most and follow only people who post things I'm interested in, not people I know. That doesn't mean I don't love you, it just means I'd rather have the Facebook algorithm tell me if that picture of the funny way the Starbucks barista spelled your name merits viewing or if I can skip this one. I'm going to limit my Instagram feed to the best, most creative and entertaining photographers, because that's what Instagram is best at.

I've found hiring these tools for the specific tasks they're best at has extended their relevance to me by amplifying their value. All this to say—this is why I unfollowed you on Instagram, just like I did on Twitter a few years ago.

I use Facebook to keep a network of people I actually know IRL. There's real utility to this network and the smaller it is the more useful it can be. This is where I post things that are personal and things that people who know me would appreciate but are not meant for "public".

On Facebook it's possible to "Like" bands, companies, brands, etc but I am un-Like-ing those instead. I want Facebook to do this one thing well—give me access to and filter the internet via a network of people I know IRL. Facebook will not be The Interest Graph. We've already watched AOL try to be Yahoo!, Yahoo! try to be Google, and Google try to be Facebook. No dominant player from the previous era will ever own the next era, too. This will be a new, purpose-built tool.

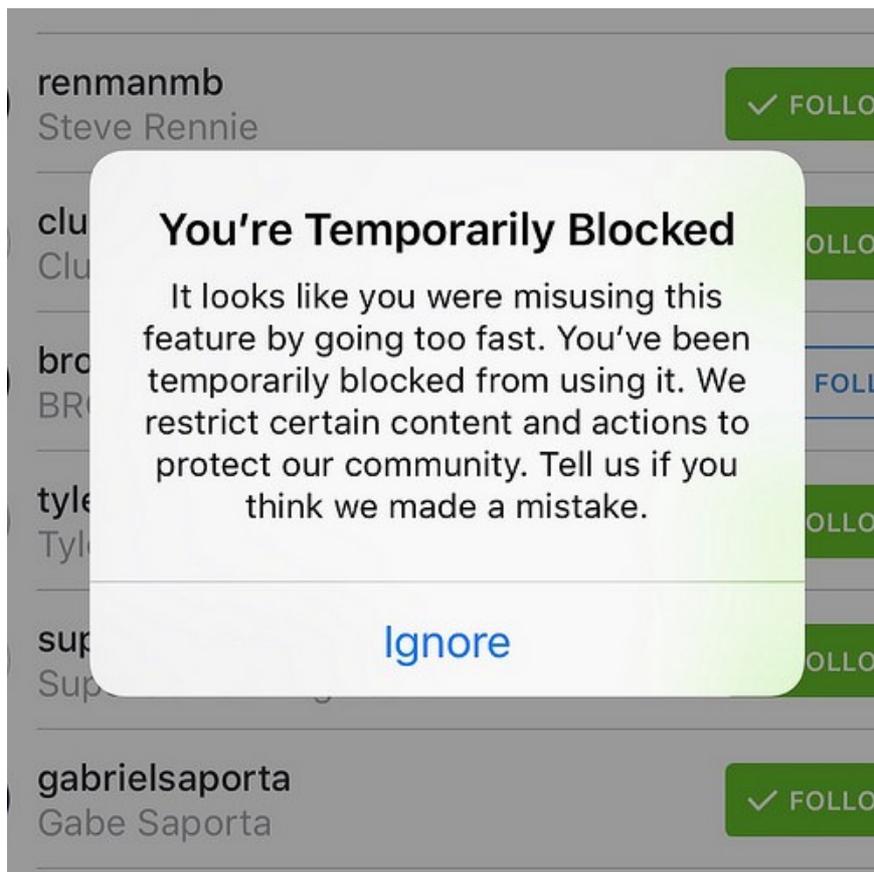
I use Twitter as a feed of news and humor. Once I stopped following people I know or celebrities I like and managed my list of Twitter followers as the list of bylines I'd like to see in my dream publication, my feed got interesting again. That said, I don't consume it very often anymore for the reasons mentioned above.

I use LinkedIn to keep a network of people I've worked with and remember well enough to offer a recommendation about (positive or negative). If I don't know you, I don't accept your request. However, while I intellectualize this theoretical value, I never open the LinkedIn app unless I'm hiring. I do read the LinkedIn emails of news and updates on people in my network, though, so I find culling this list valuable.

Snapchat I use to communicate with a select few people and watch vertical video when I'm bored. The channel offering is limited and

Snapchat has neither encouraged me to follow too many people nor put the most interesting stuff at the top for me yet.

Instagram, on the other hand, is special in that it is a medium for creativity, not information. “Creativity loves constraints”, “a picture is worth a thousand words”, and the (initially) square box of Instagram allowed all of us to communicate a moment as artistically as we were capable. Popular artists of the medium were born. Artists embraced the medium. I love Instagram in an emotional way I don’t love any of these other services.



Please Stop Driving More Followers...

We often hear mainstream users talk about how “overwhelming” “social media” is. I posit this is because the products have been built to drive more following and offer no tools to cull a better, smaller (higher signal, lower noise) set of users to follow. The coveting of follower counts driven these products to encourage FOLLOW FOLLOW FOLLOW when UNFOLLOW would often make the service more valuable for the user, hence driving “overwhelming” instead of “relevant and useful”.

I unfollowed a few hundred people on Instagram this morning and Instagram blocked me. Not only do they not provide any tools to help you cull a better follower list they actually lock the feature if you unfollow too many in a short period. There is a fundamental misunderstanding of how people could get more value from their platform.

...and Stop Calling it “Social Media”

Of all the apps discussed here, Facebook is the only “Social Network”. Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram are more valuable as Interest Feeds, LinkedIn is a network of people from your professional life, and Snapchat is a Communication Tool (aspiring to be an Interest Feed). Yet the fact that my “friends” on Pinterest will get a notification when I start a board about “Skateboarding” (even if they have no interest) is an example of how these tools were built with “social” features that actually detract from what they’re great at.

We would do ourselves a favor to stop lumping all these tools together and calling them “Social Networks” or “Social Media” and instead note what makes each service uniquely great and push these companies to improve what they’re best at. What they all are is “distribution”, ways of building direct connections between people and each other or brands. Person -> Person, Brand -> Person, Person -> Brand.

If you agree please spend some time unfollowing everyone who doesn’t bring you exactly the value you hope to get from each platform. Unfollow close friends on Twitter and Instagram without any guilt. After, let me know, does your experience with the platform improve? Do you post more thoughtfully to each platform? Unfollowing has made me more thoughtful about what I post in each service; I am trying to use each medium in the way I’m hoping others will.

The Interest Feed Cometh. Straight Killer, No Filler.

Today, Instagram is the closest I have to an Interest Feed. On Instagram I see skateboarding, artists, music, motorcycles, etc. But Instagram made me do all the hard work. I followed those accounts. I unfollowed the boring ones. Instagram shows me every image posted by every person, in chronological order, irrespective of relevance to me at the moment. Instagram makes the same mistake Twitter made—it gives me tools to follow *more* people rather than giving me the tools to follow *better* people or make my feed more relevant to me. For the average consumer unwilling to do the work I am constantly doing culling each of my social networks for the most relevant experience for

me on that platform, this is a cliff of diminishing returns and ultimately a migration to a platform that delivers higher relevance aka a better way to pass the time. It will come.

After all, the one thing that hasn't changed is us. There are still only 24 hours in a day, we need to sleep a little less than 1/3 of that time, and we want high signal/low noise. We migrate to whichever platform delivers us the highest degree of relevance (call it what you want—entertainment, satisfaction, scintillation) without thinking about it. We didn't consciously move from Yahoo! to Google, Facebook to Snapchat, it just happened because it scratched the itch a little better.

The next platform that scratches this itch will be an Interest Feed. It knows what we like. It brings us the best of the Internet based on what we like. Straight killer no filler. It doesn't exist yet. Pinterest, Snapchat, Instagram, Medium, and Facebook are all circling the target but if history is any guide none will complete the pivot and hit the mark. Startups like Pocket are building a relevant dataset. Single-interest or media-type-specific apps are too narrow and not intuitive enough. I love this feeling that it's right around the corner, and it's huge, but it's anyone's game.