

Digital Oxytocin: How Trust Keeps Facebook, Twitter Humming

BY ADAM PENENBERG Today

Internet users--Facebookers most of all--are a trusting bunch. Why? Because we are wired to build relationships around trust.



The most surprising takeaway from the recent Pew Research Center study, "[Social Networking Sites and Our Lives](#)," wasn't that 80% of Americans regularly use the Internet or that 60% of web users have a social network account--double the number in 2008, with the vast majority on [Facebook](#) (52%) and [Twitter](#) (33%). Nor is it that people have gone gaga over smartphones, with one in three Americans owning one. Rather, it's the idea that the Internet, in particular social networks, engender trust, and the more time you spend on them the more trusting you become.

As the report put it, "The typical Internet user is more than twice as likely as others to feel that people can be trusted," with regular Facebook users the most trusting of all. "A Facebook user who uses the site multiple times per day is 43% more likely than other Internet users and more than three times as likely as non-Internet users to feel that most people can be trusted." What's more, while the average American has two "discussion confidants"--people they discuss important matters with--Facebookers who log in several times a day average 9% more close ties.

This has significant implications, because far from being merely a touchy-feely concept tossed around at a Zen retreat, trust goes to the heart of our economic and social systems. Neuroeconomist [Paul J. Zak](#), a professor at Claremont College and author of the forthcoming book, *The Moral Molecule: Vampire Economics and the New Science of Good and Evil*, says that trust is the lubricant that makes economic transactions possible. It wasn't until European nations could agree on standard weights and measures, which facilitated trust, that trade and commerce flourished. While it may say "In God We Trust" on every dollar bill, what we are really trusting is that this piece of paper or coin--nowadays often a digital representation on a screen--is worth what we all believe it's worth.

In his own research, Zak and a co-researcher [found](#) that nations with higher levels of trust (Sweden, Germany, the U.S.) have stronger economies than those on the other end of the

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spectrum (the Congo, Sudan, Colombia). "Where there is more trustworthiness, there is more prosperity," Zak says. This trust also influences what we buy. A 2009 Nielsen Global Online Consumer Survey study found that shoppers value the opinions of people they know the most, followed by online reviews written by strangers or in online communities.

There's a good reason for this. We humans are hard-wired to commingle with one another offline and on-, and the web and its platforms like Facebook and Twitter make it more efficient than ever. That's because virtual relationships can be as real as actual relationships. The truth is we're all one step removed from reality, living life through the prism of our own minds. Researchers at Washington University in St. Louis found when they [scanned](#) the brains of fiction readers that they reacted as if they were actually living the events in the story.

Zak has traced much of our behavior to oxytocin, a single neuropeptide he's dubbed "the moral molecule" because it appears to shape much of our better nature. Also referred to as the "cuddle hormone," oxytocin is the same chemical that forges that unshakeable bond between nursing mothers and their babies. Women have 30% more of it than men, but men have plenty, too, and in a spate of experiments spanning a decade Zak has linked oxytocin to all manner of human behavior--from empathy to generosity to trust. And when we believe that someone trusts us, we trust them back, and this alters our behavior: It makes us more generous, for one. Ultimately, oxytocin is, Zak says, the "social glue" that adheres families, communities, and societies while simultaneously acting as an "economic lubricant" that enables us to engage in all sorts of transactions.

I wrote about Zak last year in a feature titled "[Doctor Love](#)" for *Fast Company*, and in addition to participating in a series of studies he conducted, I had him gin up one just for me. While there was overwhelming evidence that oxytocin played an important role in economic transactions, I theorized it would also affect a person engaging on Facebook and Twitter. What is social networking but a social transaction? So Zak took my blood, I got on Twitter for 10 minutes, then he took it again, then compared to the two samples. In those intervening 10 minutes my levels of oxytocin had risen 13.2%--as much as a groom at a wedding. (My wife: "That's pathetic.")

Subsequently Zak traveled to Korea and redid my tweeting experiment, this time with three journalists using Facebook. The result: They all demonstrated increased levels of oxytocin. In fact, the oxytocin levels of one of the journalists, who was writing to his girlfriend, shot up nearly 150%. In other words, the brain's release of oxytocin may correspond with the depth of connection between two people online.

The population on social networks has almost doubled over the past three years. Although some worry these online connections are being used to replace flesh and blood relationships, the Pew study found "little validity to concerns that people who use [social networks] experience smaller social networks, less closeness, or are exposed to less diversity." On the contrary, Americans "have more close social ties than they did two years ago," and "are less socially isolated."

And it all comes down to trust. For this, you can thank the oxytocin in your brain.

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