

Social Networks: What Maslow Misses

By *Pamela Brown Rutledge, Ph.D., M.B.A.*

Created Nov 8 2011 - 2:15pm

Maslow's hierarchy of needs model, developed in 1948, resonates across many disciplines, from business, technology and [education](#) to its field of origin, psychology. It speaks to potential and to positive conceptualizations of human [motivation](#). As popular and widely applied as this model has been, however, insights from the use and adoption of social technologies like [Facebook](#) and Twitter, combined with increased knowledge about brains and networks, show that our [understanding](#) of Maslow's model misses the mark in a very fundamental way. It doesn't give enough credit to the role of social connection.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs captivates us because it brings a sense of order to the chaos of human behavior. Psychologists, educators, [parents](#), and marketers have been trying to figure out what influences behavior for a long time. In contrast to the behaviorist's carrot and stick, both widely employed and frequently discredited, Maslow's hierarchy has a nice sensible structure that makes intuitive sense. Maslow's model, as its name suggests, organizes groups of human needs into levels in a hierarchical structure, forming a pyramid. It's similar in some senses to video games in that you have to fulfill the requirements of one set of needs before you can level up.

But the same things that make Maslow's model cognitively appealing — that sense of order and predictability — also makes it wrong. If only life were so simple.



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model

The human [brain](#) is driven by a basic instinct to survive. This need trumps all others. Thus it's easy to see how obvious biological and physiological needs, such as food, drink, shelter, warmth, and [sex](#), formed the basis of Maslow's pyramid.

As Maslow's hierarchy continues, the second level is made up of the safety needs, such as protection, security, order, limits, stability, and predictability. The third level is where Maslow's model placed the belongingness needs like family, affection, relationships, work groups, and community. The fourth level is what we might consider more the ego-centric needs of achievement, relationships, responsibility, and reputation. And finally, at the top is self-actualization, or the desire for personal growth and fulfillment.

But here's the problem with Maslow's hierarchy. **None** of these needs — starting with basic survival on up — are possible without social connection and [collaboration](#).

None of Maslow's needs can be met without social connection

Humans are social animals for good reason. Without collaboration, there is no survival. It was not possible to defeat a Woolley Mammoth, build a secure structure, or care for children while hunting without a team effort. It's more true now than then. Our reliance on each other grows as societies became more complex, interconnected, and specialized. Connection is a prerequisite for survival, physically and emotionally.

Maslow Rewired

Needs are not hierarchical. Life is messier than that. Needs are, like most other things in [nature](#), an interactive, dynamic system, but they are anchored in our ability to make social connections.



Maslow's Model Rewired for Social Media

Maslow's model needs rewiring so it matches our brains. Belongingness is the driving force of human behavior, not a third tier activity. The system of human needs from bottom to top, shelter, safety, sex, [leadership](#), community, competence and trust, are dependent on our ability to connect with others. Belonging to a community provides the sense of security and agency that makes our brains happy and helps keep us safe.

From the Savannah to Facebook, social behaviors adapt to the environment to support that most basic of human needs. We strive to achieve it within the technological constraints of our environment.

As such, observed behavior is not necessarily reflective of what we are unconsciously driven to do to satisfy our needs. I was a teenager in the period before social networks AND cell phones. My friends and I had to borrow the car from our parents to go out. It was much easier to borrow a car on the weekends than a week night for a host of reasons. If, however, you were a social scientist observing behavior without being privy to local culture and parent-teen negotiations, you might assume that in my town, teens preferred to go out on the weekends. If you did so, you would be making an attribution error, assigning motivation or preference to what was simply a lack of technology (wheels, in this case).

Therefore, what we observe across society may not reflect the underlying motivations. On the other hand, when we do see 'new' behavior, it is most likely the empowerment of goals, not the creation of them. Facebook and Twitter did not cause the Arab Spring. But social technologies did connect people in a way that inspired them to act on existing motivations and goals.

When we look at the rapid [innovation](#) and ubiquitous nature of technology, our reptilian brains get nervous with all the change. In the face of uncertainty, we ask the wrong question. We ask 'what does technology do to us?' The question we should ask is "what can we do with technology?"

Social behavior maps to human survival. Social networks allow us to see, as never before, the interrelated nature of society and the palpable development of social capital from the emerging and intricate patterns of interpersonal relationships and collaboration. The strength of our networks and our bonds improve our agency and effectiveness in the environment. Our need for survival through connection plays out through every successful social technology.

- Collaboration and teamwork allow us control our environment
- Reciprocal and trusting relationships create effective collaboration
- Social comparison establishes organizational structure, leadership and order
- Social validation and social [identity](#) maintain emotional engagement and enhance [attachment](#) to our mates and our group
- Competence contributes to the survival of our group and our sense of security and safety

If we look at the last decade of social technologies, we are not seeing anything fundamentally new. People have not changed. We still have the same old tripartite brain with its reptilian drives. Facebook may not bear much resemblance to huddling around a campfire, but, in spite of [moral](#) panics to the contrary, its function is the same.

Technology is a tool, nothing more. It is a facilitator of human goals. Social technologies have opened the floodgates to new ways to pursue existing motivations and objectives in ways that are increasing our sense of agency. It doesn't change what we want to do, but like with the car, we can get there a lot faster. We should not be surprised nor resist the rapid adoption of tools that enable one of our most basic survival instincts: connection.

Source URL: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/node/79001>