



As usual when it comes to Facebook, the numbers are impressive and this time it's all about the billions. As the imperial social network lumbers its way towards one billion subscribers, it has just added the mobile photo application Instagram to its portfolio for the lofty sum of \$1bn. A staggering investment indeed, even by Silicon Valley standards.

The acquisition is the latest manoeuvre in a long-standing offensive intended to establish a dominant position within the marketplace of social networks. Of course this aspiration is far from fanciful; to many users, Facebook has already become an indispensable part of their plugged-in, connected lives.

As members of the Muslim community have shown, a lot of good can be done on social networks and our brothers and sisters have used them to post updates on classes and events, as well as to publish religious advice for the consumption of a wide audience. So you won't find any sweeping generalisations here about the destructiveness of the new technologies.

Even so, there are dark truths to be uncovered between pokes and status updates. And we're not talking about the now tedious cliché of the Facebook obsessive who attends to online acquaintances more diligently than to friends and family. Or the lurid tabloid tales of happy homes being wrecked when long-dead romances are rekindled by a casually thrown sheep. No, this is about something else entirely: a culture in which the notion of friendship is being diluted and devalued.

I was struck by the bleak demise of Claire Lin, a 31 year-old Taiwanese woman who committed suicide while logged into Facebook. As many as nine of her online 'friends' chatted with her in the last moments before she was asphyxiated by the smoke filling her room. To invoke the old adage, you can tell a lot about someone from the company they keep (both real and virtual).

On some level, Lin knew the spectacle was part of a terrible, postmodern theatre and remarked

mournfully on how utterly dependent she'd become upon her connection to Facebook. Morbid fascination may have drawn many of her onlookers, but the media later reported that none thought to call for help as Lin died alone.

As Muslims we're advised to be tactical about the friends we choose, in the same way that we should be careful about how we spend our time (and of course the two go hand-in-hand). But good friends are hard to come by, particularly when so many of us are uncertain of what signs to look for and when there are such mixed messages in the culture around us.

The conscientious Muslim accepts that this life is a period of trial and an opportunity to invest resources like time and ability in ways that will give dividend in the Hereafter. A good friend is one who nurtures and supports these aspirations, who shares one's moral outlook and who's quick to encourage virtue and decry sin.

As social networks and other new recreations increasingly fill our lives, this calibre of friend remains a rare commodity. For many of the members of the AICP, it was this kind of friend who made all the difference in the world and while they may not fill our Facebook accounts by the hundred, they're definitely worth looking out for.