At their best, Piskorski argues, social media sites help individuals identify other people with similar interests – or deepen existing relationships – in ways they would otherwise find difficult. Platform designers begin by trying to understand the social, cultural and economic causes of failure in offline interactions, especially interactions that do not occur (norms of humility in Japan, for example, help explain the fact that although mixi users often displayed photographs of objects, animals or buildings, 66% of them in the research sample did not post a single picture of themselves on their profiles, while virtually every Facebook user in the United States presented at least one and 80% more than ten). Sound designers’ “solutions” incorporate an assessment of the costs and benefits to users in displaying information about themselves, searching for and collecting information about others, and communicating online.

Piskorski provides detailed - and often compelling - explanations for the success of some social media strategies. In a comparison of eHarmony and OKCupid, two online dating services, for example, he demonstrates that by limiting the ability of users to contact one another until suitable candidates are identified, legitimizing and personalizing choices, and laying out a protocol for the first exchange, eHarmony, which charges a comparatively high fee to subscribers, overcomes the reluctance of many women to initiate interactions. Since the questionnaire eHarmony requires all parties to fill out is serious rather than flirtatious, moreover, it helps empower women to choose between potential suitors. And the procedure attracts men, especially those who are older, shorter, and more overweight and fear their advances will be rejected, because women on the site receive fewer messages and are more likely to respond to them.
LinkedIn has flourished, Piskorski points out, by combining “meet” and “friend” solutions to create a unique space for professional networking. For some users, no doubt, it serves as a “cover” for a search for a better job. They can be secure in the knowledge that they do not run much of a risk that employers will penalize them, Piskorski indicates, because the information they post can benefit the firm through relationships forged with others on the site.

By contrast, combining meet and friend solutions, and allowing users to view the profiles of others without their permission, contributed to the decline of MySpace. Offering privacy functionalities and a third party developer platform, Facebook accelerated the exodus from MySpace of those who wanted to limit to their disclosure of intimate details of their personal lives to a small subset of people they knew well. Purchased by NewsCorp for $580 million in 2005, MySpace was acquired by Specific Media and Justin Timberlake for $35 million six years later.

Given its subject matter, A Social Strategy is, by definition, a work in progress. Piskorski concludes with the hope that his work has demonstrated that there are “a set of unmet social needs that affect many people” – and that social media, which are not a “flash in the pan,” can help address social failures and market failures.

Piskorski recognizes as well that a debate is now raging about whether the Internet makes us more or less connected to the offline world – and urges that it include breadth, display, and search as well as communication costs. The debate, I would add, should have a qualitative as well as a quantitative dimension. Since social media are, indeed, here to stay, we need to know how, as well as how much, we interact with one another face-to-face. We should ask, without assuming we know the answer, whether technology, which requires brevity, reduces the capacity to comprehend and convey complex ideas. Whether by tethering us to iPhones and inviting us to be incessantly interruptible, connectivity is reducing occasions in which we lose ourselves in the moment. And whether, over time, social media platforms will make us more self-absorbed and less self-reflective.