A Critique of Facebook

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OVERVIEW:

As a point of departure for any honest critique, it is in order to recognize the positive elements of that which is being critiqued. This is especially important when the conclusion is that the cons outweigh the pros. Therefore, the essay will start with the reasons that Facebook is (or at least seems to be) a good thing. It will then move to a critical analysis of the wider view.

The case will be made that, though Facebook is certainly not the sole source of the problems discussed, it is certainly a prime symbol of those problems. That is to say, in many ways, Facebook is symbolic of wider social phenomena that are proving deleterious to society. The new social media fosters these dysfunctions just as it is a byproduct of them–thereby creating a self-reinforcing cycle. Cyber-fetishists, enthralled by the wonders of Web 2.0, in the midst of their eager tech-exuberance, seem to be afflicted with an acute web myopia. Many of us are, in fact, infatuated.

Jaron Lanier, a technology expert who is disconcerted by what technology has become (or, more specifically, what social media technology is causing us to become), notes that Facebook and Twitter, more than engendering short attention spans, are dehumanizing. Indeed, they are designed to encourage shallow interaction and contrive artificial identities. Lanier noted in a recent *New Yorker* article that Facebook has fostered Janus-like identities in its habitual users, "much like what happened in Communist countries, where people had a fake social life that the Stasi could see…and then this underground life" for their more authentic selves.

The fact is that Facebook is a degenerate yet seductive way to forge and navigate human relationships. While the site may prove useful in certain respects, it has also been shown to create an orgy of narcissism and superficiality. It does this under the auspices of offering a means of "connectivity". While fulfilling this role in an enticing manner, a culture of A.D.D. is often the result. In ways that have not been widely acknowledged, let alone addressed, social networking sites de-value human bonds and degrade human connection. By introducing a new mode of interaction, another is displaced. Yet there is a tremendous appeal to this: Subversion of the individual masquerades as liberation of the individual; subservience is thereby misconstrued as empowerment.

In providing connectivity, the site keeps people distracted, preoccupied, and—in a more profound sense—UN-connected. For while Facebook "connects" people on one level, it seems to undermine any activity that involves genuine human connection. So we must wonder: What characteristics does the site tend to engender in the common user? This essay attempts to answer this question.

THE 5 UPSIDES OF FACEBOOK:

Facebook boasts a panoply of handy features. While some of these features are of dubious merit, others serve eminently worthwhile functions. The ostensive raison d'etre of the site is to foster a social network. But about this, we must ask two important questions: To what end? Based on what?

Let's assess the site's ostensive virtues. There are five potentially *healthy* roles Facebook plays:

1. Photo sharing

2. Finding (and "keeping in touch with") old friends

3. Exchanging files

4. Promotion / Advertising

5. Networking

Let's break each of the five "perks" down, one by one.

1: Posting pictures to a common destination (and being able to view them communally): this is, indeed, a nifty thing. Of course, there are other ways to do this: Flickr, Photobucket, Snapfish, Phanfare, Fotolog, Windows Live photolog, etc. Facebook is just another handy mechanism for doing this. Blogspot and Blogger provide venues to share photos as well–though, like Facebook, they tend to engender self-importance.

2: Tracking down (and then corresponding with) people from one's past is an enticing prospect. Indeed, Facebook serves as an efficient mechanism by which people can be found, and—once contact is re-established—communication can be carried out.

Of course, finding specific people is possible without recourse to Facebook. Moreover, there are much better mechanisms for communicating with people—Skype, cell phone, and e-mail being the two most obvious. (Heaven forbid we ever write a letter and send it via snail-mail. When people no longer write letters, something valuable is being lost.) Want to video-conference with anyone, anywhere in the world, at any time, for as long as one wishes, for free? Skype is the best way to do this. (Skype includes other useful features: a regular audio-phone, file sharing, as well as IM.)

Users insist that Facebook is the best way to "stay updated" with groups of people—by sharing information, posting comments, promoting one's projects, and "chatting". But what does all this amount to? Important contacts? Indeed! But also: Idle banter, mundane pleasantries, superficial connections, fixations on petty things… Amidst the fantastic connectivity, we often end up remaining pre-occupied with the banal and inconsequential.

Is this really the quintessence of communication? Is this really how human beings best stay "connected" with one another?

3: Sharing / exchanging information within a designated cadre of people is a handy function. Facebook facilitates this quite well. However, "Google Groups" is a superior mechanism for file-sharing and for forums (serving as a great venue for posting files and for managing discussions amongst a designed group).

Meanwhile, if one merely wants to post information / comments (for a designated community to view), one can simply set up a blog. Otherwise, it seems, one is often just engaging in the inane chit-chat mentioned in #2. Is our time best spent posting comments of fleeting relevance on each other's "walls"? It's like an ephemeral graffiti: of fleeting importance, soon forgotten…all to what end?

4: Facebook can be used to promote oneself (or a project / cause in which one is partaking). "Getting the word out" about something is a feat we all want to achieve; Facebook offers a great way to do this. On

Facebook, announcements can be made to one's designated community. A Facebook page can serve as a virtual business card—a sort of pseudo-website for promoting oneself (or marketing one's latest endeavors). The site is great for "spreading the word" because it serves as a global *grapevine*: If one wants to "get out a message" via word of mouth, there seems to be no more efficient (or cheaper) way to do it.

Insofar as commerce is concerned, Facebook may well play a legitimate role, facilitating the promotion of one's enterprise (serving as a vehicle for business activity in general). Yet, when mapped to THE PERSONAL, this may engender narcissism and self-absorption more than human inter-connectedness. What sort of culture is Facebook fostering when we base our interactions on such superficial levels?

5: We all like to forge connections with those with common interests. However, there are better ways for bringing people with shared endeavors together. Finding such people, and orchestrating REAL LIFE get-togethers, can be done via Linked In, Meetup.org, and other sites explicitly designed for the task. Virtual communities can serve either a healthy or unhealthy purpose, depending on how they are used.

As for just general communication, Facebook can play a useful role, but seems to *transplant*—instead of compliment—more authentic modes of human interaction. We should remind ourselves that having a conversation with someone is best had in person—and that it is a mis-use (read: abuse) of texting, IM-ing, etc. to use them as stand-ins for substantive dialogues. Such technologies render our conversations superficial, and omit some of the most crucial elements of human interaction.

Expediency / convenience is a double-edged sword. We've become so acclimated to, say, texting, that **many people no longer know how to carry on a substantive, patient, thoughtful conversation**. Such people have habituated themselves to sound-bites and small parcels of text, rendering their attention spans miniscule. This new "Facebook World" has fostered an A.D.D. culture–thereby handicapping any ability to interact on a more "human" level.

Social communication (as opposed to sheer exchange of raw data) requires so much more than text on a screen. Lost with these new technologies are those other crucial aspects of communication. Often the dynamic between two people is eliminated when they're merely relaying bits of text to one another. As many of us have learned the hard way, this mode of communicating leads to myriad scenarios of MIS-communication. We should be cautious with any technology that promises to make our lives "easier" and "quicker". Often that augmented expediency comes at a price.

Efficiency, we should remind ourselves, isn't everything. What is most human about us isn't enhanced by being more efficient. Dysfunctions endemic to a Facebook World often seem to elude those of us who are most immersed in it. In our eagerness to get the latest new "app", we remove ourselves just a tad bit more from genuine human interaction. Indeed, many of us are more impressed when gadgets do wonderful things, and less appreciative when humans do wonderful things. We want our phones to be smarter, not ourselves.

CONCLUSION:

In a sense, Facebook is superior to more antiquated means of "getting things done" simply because it's a one-stop-shop. It's not so much that it does *any one* of the aforesaid five things, it's that it does *all of them in a single place*. (One can't share comments with all one's "friends" on Skype. One can't post/view photos on meetup.org. It's difficult to market oneself using only e-mail. Facebook integrates *all functions*.)

However, we'd be well advised to pose the following important questions: What IS genuine human connection? What form does the healthiest mode of human interaction actually take? Does Facebook foster this?

The snazzy jargon of the new social media serves to obscure some of its setbacks. "Friend-ing" rarely has anything to do with forging a new friendship; it's just another link in the network. The *illusion of empowerment* often obfuscates *augmented subservience* (as we've seen with the laity in most religions and with the rank and file's endorsement of Neoliberal ideology).

Regarding our identities, Facebook—like the profiles on dating sites—tends to provide a venue for creating a caricature of oneself. This isn't a matter of deception or inaccuracy, necessarily, but merely a matter of inauthenticity. We end up rendering ourselves fabricated constructs–depictions that are created in a virtual world. These artificial selves may *emulate* who one is (or wants to be) with relative fidelity; but they are not WHO ONE IS. A simulated "rendering" is not the real thing—and Facebook often conflates the two.

Like sports team fandom, tabloid gossip, talk-show fodder, and reality TV, Facebook amounts to an elaborate, massive, addictive distraction—a distraction from (among other things) what's truly important in life. One is tempted to say: "All that time focused on Facebook when we could have been [insert edifying activity here]."

Regarding relationships, we should be careful not to confuse quantity for quality. Human connection isn't all about efficiency. Of oneself and one's "friends", we may ask: What kinds of personality traits does the site engender? What does "friend" REALLY MEAN? Have we degraded the concept "friendship" in our avid desire to be connected with as many people as possible? What IS it, after all, to be a "friend"? Once we answer such questions, we may find that Facebook isn't required at all.

Facebook is more than a website; it is a mechanism for guiding the zeitgeist and molding the public psyche. While serving as an efficient means of networking, it has had several deleterious effects on our culture.

In brief, it is a gigantic distraction. It fosters atomization under the pretense of "connecting" people. It serves as a grand diversion from the real world. It promotes hyper-consumerism, heteronomy, superficiality, insularity (within "friend" groups), self-importance, short attention spans, petty fixations, and a romantic narcissism disguised as savvy self-promotion / self-expression. All the while, it has brought about a Big Brother effect…via the internet…in which people are reduced to a list of traits that can be mined for corporate exploitation.

Meanwhile, it has lead to the degeneracy of various important things: genuine human connection, substantive conversation, and—above all—authenticity. In a colossally ironic twist, we've become worse and worse at communication…even as we vociferously text, IM, Twitter, blog, and post comments on each other's pages.

In an effort to serve as a device for presenting oneself to the world, Facebook has served to demean the notion of *identity* (in which humans are reduced to a collection of data). By doing so, it has transformed the concept of *the personal*—rendering any treatment of ones personal life a spectacle for the amusement of others. Facebook has thereby mitigated any appreciation for the personal and for the authentic—all the while fetishizing the petty and glamorizing the superficial. The demarcation of the public and private spheres dissolves, and we sometimes forget who we really are.

Finally, the meaning of friendship has been utterly degraded—rendered a binary status in which relationships are exclusively a function of connectivity. By deterring actual human interaction, the site has

precipitated a culture in which profound relationships are no longer recognized, let alone valued. Instead, we've become pre-occupied with a new category, "friend", which is little more than a technical status within the mechanism. We've transplanted what used to be profound human relationships (called "friendships") with a stage-managed process of "friending".

No one has ever become a better, wiser person by spending time on Facebook. Endless time that could have been spent on edification has been swallowed up and squandered by this intoxicating, addictive site. The site has become—more than anything else—one gigantic distraction. Instead of a culture of erudition and cosmopolitanism, Facebook has fostered a culture of myopia and provincialism. The increased "connectivity" we may gain isn't worth this price.

EPILOGUE: THE WRITING IS ON THE WALL:

Once upon a time, people looked up with amazement at the night sky, enchanted by the stars and a cool breeze brushing up against one's face. Now, we're preoccupied with Facebook pages on a computer screen. This transition is very illustrative of a larger phenomenon. What has happened?

In 1987, William Gibson had one of his characters say: "It's the matrix. Something's happening…I'd say a good three quarters of humanity is *jacking in* at the moment, watching the show." Gibson, eerily prescient in the mid-80's, invented the word "cyberspace" to describe what we now know as the "internet". (He also coined the term, "matrix" for the network.) In his dystopian "Sprawl" universe (inaugurated by the classic, *Neuromancer*), corporations own and run the world: gigantic mechanisms of private power (i.e. narrow centers of wealth) that have consolidated and consolidated…and all-but-merged with governments the world over…thereby forming a monolith of highly-concentrated power. In Gibson's disturbing depiction, the virtual world and the real world meld into one another.

Facebook is a step in an on-going process that seems headed toward this creepy future. Whereas once a few people were *consciously* playing (multi-player) RPGs online by, say, MUDD-ing (fully immersed in a clearly delimited "virtual reality" experience), the immersion in a virtual world has become mainstream. We now have teens ubiquitously writing on (and highly concerned with) each other's "walls"—engaged in idle banter, gossiping, and exchanges of vacuous verbiage…all while living out the fabricated identities that they've concocted for their on-line profiles. It is a virtual masquerade ball that never ends. Amidst the chronic absorption in this daily chit-chat routine, the boarder between fantasy and Reality is systematically blurred. Naricissism is engendered, inauthenticity romanticized, and superficiality made glamorous. Just as Facebook would prefer, the distinction between the virtual and the authentic is chronically conflated.

What does this mean for our society? Following is a five-part series, **Welcome To A Facebook World**, that strives to address this important topic.

(For further reading on this topic, I recommend "The Shallows" by Nicholas Carr, "The Net Delusion" by Evgeny Morozov, and "Alone Together" by Sherry Turkle.)