

Welcome To A Facebook World

November 29, 2011 Category: American Culture

Download as PDF

Pursuant to my “Critique of Facebook”, I’ve decided to offer a series of essays that investigates the implications of Web 2.0. As I survey the world around me, I find myself immersed in a culture that has been molded by mechanized forces. Social conventions have been structured to cater to the *modus operandi* of social media technology. A new mentality has emerged that is engendered by an epidemic infatuation with this new technology. The consequences of this are becoming ever more clear.

For example, many of us—it often seems—emphasize presentation over substance. The appeal of image is often more important to us than the evaluation of objective merit. Idle amusement is now preferred over genuine edification. In a Facebook World, networking (e.g. “friend-ing”) matters more than authentic, human connection. Such developments are often overlooked by those of us intoxicated by all the new wonders Web 2.0 offers.

I’m both bewildered and bedazzled by this new world. As someone who is reticent to embrace all the new tools of social media, I have become an aberration. In this newfangled culture, we’re told to either “get with the program” or get left behind. Upon lengthy reflection (something else that has become an endangered activity), I’ve concluded that the implications of this new trend are more negative than many of us care to notice. This is not a Luddite jeremiad; it is merely an effort to ensure we use our technology judiciously.

My thesis is more cautionary than alarmist: we are changing in ways that involve cons as well as pros. The realization becomes especially clear when we extrapolate far enough into the future. On the present course, in another generation, people may be fully incapable of carrying on a long, substantive conversation—especially if done *in person*. At this rate, within another decade, public discourse will be reduced to tid-bits of superficial quips—inane chit-chat. In such a milieu, vapid banter will become ubiquitous as deliberation becomes anathema.

It seems that we have more and more smart phones...and ever fewer smart people. We have successfully increased “connectivity” on one level, yet have simultaneously become increasingly disconnected on a more profound level. We’ve become infatuated with gadgetry—seduced by a new way of interacting with one another...even as we lose the ability to care about each other as fellow human beings. We’ve all been rendered mere characters populating a virtual world—a world in which we are all blissfully immersed.

Automation isn’t inherently good. It is beneficial insofar as it makes things easier for people without dehumanizing us in the process. Automating something is advisable when it eliminates mundane tasks and pointless busy-work. But in a world where everything is completely automated, people would lose their humanity. So, for each new automated task, we should ask ourselves: Are we co-opting the technology or is the technology co-opting us? Is it enhancing our ability to realize our full humanity, or is it undermining what is most human about us?

During our voracious adoption of each nifty, new gadget, we sometimes allow our infatuation to cloud our judgment. We're enthralled by the increased automation of life...even as we lose site of what is lost by each new automated feature. The great part about automating things is that it saves one the trouble of thinking. The dangerous part about automating things is that it saves one the trouble of thinking.

Indeed, automation is the king of all double-edged swords. We often become so infatuated with new technology, we fail to notice its down-sides. When automation transplants thinking, then thinking often follows suit—becoming conditioned in ways that suit the technology.

Of course, the idea behind automation is to FREE UP one's time and one's mind (by automating mundane tasks) so that one can attend to "more important" things. In this way, re-allocation of one's temporal and cognitive resources is a great idea. The point is to eliminate busy-work so we can attend to worthwhile things—things that are based more on *human involvement* (e.g. creative thinking). This is a perk that's hard to turn down.

The "catch", though, is that this perk doesn't always result from automation. In many cases, automation makes us mentally lazy instead of more mentally active. Is it really a good thing that we can now just relay quick snippets of text back and forth instead of having a genuine conversation? We (understandably) aim to relinquish one kind of thinking (the kind that squanders our limited time), yet we unwittingly end up abandoning crucial cognitive engagement.

How much MORE time do people now spend text-ing and Tweeting...and LESS time conversing "the old fashioned way"? Well, we no longer *need* to converse "the old fashioned way". Fine, then. But how, exactly, has this shift in our time / attention been beneficial? All those hours attending to my Facebook page and checking out the "walls" of other pages: In what ways could I have better used that time? Did Facebook really "free me up" to do more important things?

One can ask oneself some revealing questions: Is that cool, new app really augmenting my ability to achieve things...or is it just something that's very amusing to use? Is it simplifying my life...or is it actually making things more complicated? Is that media tool really unleashing my latent capacity to accomplish my goals...or is it just a distraction? Is it helping me focus more on important things...or is it a diversion from what's really important? Am I better able to realize my full potential by using Facebook...or is this "friend" network really just a pointless list of names based on fleeting connections?

Exactly what benefits does a smart-phone ULTIMATELY confer on me? (One should remind oneself: When one has a shiny, new hammer, everything starts to look like a nail.) Is instant information at my fingertips ALWAYS a good thing? (What are we missing out on by having that luxury?) We can now do all these nifty new things...but to what end? Is this genuinely enhancing our lives...or is it just altering how we do things...in specious ways?

With the incorporation of each new "app" into our daily lives, do we note what was *really* displaced by the app's usage? It may be prudent to remind ourselves: Automating something often means omitting a vital human element of a task—an element that may not abet efficiency, but that is worth retaining. Human-ness is, after all, inefficient sometimes. That's worth cherishing.

In *Ill Fares The Land*, Tony Judt articulated the point well: “If everyone selects gobbets of knowledge and information that interest them, but avoids exposure to anything else, we do indeed form global communities of elective affinity—while losing touch with the affinities of our neighbors.” (p. 120) Custom-made microcosms emerge in which we isolate ourselves with like-minded compatriots. We hermetically seal ourselves into insular groups, and exist in echo chambers—quarantined from external critique.

We’ve succumbed to a blurring of important boundaries. With Facebook, the private is blurred with the public. With Facebook, one’s presentation of who one is (or wants to be) becomes blurred with who one actually is. (Here, one becomes a caricature of oneself. The fabricated depiction is often confused with the actual person. For here, one is defined by one’s engineered portrayal of oneself according to how one wants everyone else to perceive oneself.) Identity, then, becomes a virtual “masquerade ball”.

The blurring of the line between the real and the virtual has reached unprecedented levels. It’s not merely that these two things are conflated—it’s that—for many people—the difference doesn’t even matter. Many no longer care about this fundamental distinction.

Authenticity has become irrelevant in a world fixated on IMAGE. There is no room left for serious reflection, contemplation, deliberation, or introspection...and everyone seems perfectly fine with that. Only immediate gratifications (transient satisfactions) now matter: the “quick fix” conferred by fleeting interludes—ephemeral provocations to which we may passive-mindedly react. Consequently, critical thinking is rendered obsolete; analytical thinking is no longer required.

With Facebook, interaction with other people is rendered a virtual experience...rather than an inter-human experience. Personal bonds become functions of Facebook “statuses”. That is to say: human bonds are rendered mere byproducts of the Facebook template. We then wonder why we’ve become so atomized. Indeed, we are so “connected” yet so isolated.

We hunger for so-called “Reality TV”, yet eschew experiencing reality in person. After all, why bother with Reality when one can indulge in a “reality” custom-made to tantalize and amuse? Why care about other people when we’re only concerned with their Facebook pages? We engross ourselves in an artificial world, and are no longer motivated to engage the real world.

The inner monologue of the Facebook user can’t help but be:

I have constructed a comfy microcosm for myself, so why inconvenience myself with those who don’t “fit” into it? I’ve tailored a realm to suit my own penchants. Those who don’t “belong” in this realm don’t matter—they needn’t be any of my concern. To me, they need not exist. Why bother concerning myself with things that lay beyond the scope of my delimited, customized world?

Is it any wonder that civic minded-ness has almost gone extinct? The ersatz cosmopolitanism afforded by Facebook is an exercise in delusion: provincialism masquerading as “connecting with the world”. As Sherry Turkle’s book notes, this simply means that we can be alone together: narcissists in unison. Each FB network becomes a virtual community of parochial-minded participants. This isn’t fostering agape; it’s creating ways for people to live in echo chambers—allowing their parochialism to transcend physical distance. Such ersatz

cosmopolitanism is dangerous not merely because it isn't genuine cosmopolitanism, but because it offers the illusion of cosmopolitanism, thereby precluding any need to pursue the real thing.

There is also a mis-lead emphasis on quantity over quality. Facebook advocates, including Mark Zuckerberg himself, love to talk about the sheer AMOUNT of information that is shared / exchanged. Yet this omits a qualitative assessment of that information. Amidst the raw quantity of exchanges, what is the quality of discourse taking place? Is the caliber of the information exchange conducive to a deliberative, participatory democracy—or is it just a matter of streamlining massive magnitudes of idle banter, gossip, and vacuous chit-chat? Surely, even Zuckerberg isn't under the impression that Facebook is profoundly edifying—that anyone has become more erudite by spending more time on Facebook.

In the age of Tweets, texts, Facebook walls, and IM, the prospect of reading more than a few paragraphs of serious exposition becomes anathema. If we can't make / get the point in a few snazzy sound-bites (or via a quick snippet of text), then the point is null. Anything requiring on-going cognitive exertion is deemed too unwieldy—and thus unworthy. Expending sustained, focused, mental effort is wildly out of fashion. So technology has followed suit—gearing itself to this new gestalt—thereby reinforcing the status quo.

So many of us “keep in touch with” each other without ever really being touched by one another. Instead of allowing ourselves to be deeply moved by something real, we crave cheap thrills and fleeting episodes of melodrama—elicited by fabricated situations specially designed for the task. We create drama in order to provide amusement. Then we wonder why we have such a tenuous grasp of real life. Yet real life always interferes. So we retreat back into the ersatz reality we've constructed—unconcerned about what goes on beyond the walls of our own microcosm.

A “friend” is reduced to an idle curiosity, a character within the virtual world we've made for ourselves. Each “friend” is merely a persona that we follow—as if he were a character on a TV show. Being “in touch” is simply a matter of being added to a “friends” list...or to a distribution list...or perhaps receiving amusing comments on each other's “walls”. Status updates supplant extensive emotional involvement. I care about you only insofar as you play the appropriate role in my virtual world. I expect nothing more from you; you should expect nothing more from me.

Instead of taking a long walk through the woods, engaged in a discussion (as glances are exchanged, and as a raw, physical experience is shared), we have text on a screen flashing before our eyes. Instead of being with another person, we have words emanating from a disembodied entity. Our own identities become the reflection of a simulation—the carefully fashioned renderings portrayed on mechanical devices.

Instead of two beings—together—interacting within a tangible firmament, one interacts with the representation of a person. (But a representation is all one requires to maintain the charade.) The cast of characters in my fabricated drama suffices for my purposes. I carry on as if I were profoundly connected with each one of them.

Too often, we have a relationship with a medium, not with a person. But that's okay, because we can no longer tell the difference anyway. This has become the standard for all viable interaction. Consequently, we no longer have the attention span required to stroll through a park—deeply absorbed in a living, breathing dialogue. We no longer have the desire for such an organic experience; it's too inefficient.

Technology, we should recall, is amoral; it can be used to serve either dysfunction (e.g. passive-mindedness, superficiality, narcissism, delusion) or noble causes (e.g. giving wider, faster, more convenient access to information). Either way, the technology itself is ambivalent. At the end of the day, we must remind ourselves that it's not technology per se that helps people, it's only people who can help people. Indeed, people can help people by making discerning use of technology. In such happy cases, technology serves as a means to well-considered ends. But the ends themselves can't be determined by the technology. The moment we allow technology to dictate our values, we abdicate our humanity and become tools ourselves.

Behold our present state.

The cases where information technology has proven pro-social are well-known. Facilitating mass mobilization for democratic movements is the most esteem-worthy function of social networking technology (notably, the revolutions across the middle-east at the beginning of 2011). Making information more universally accessible is always a positive thing. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind: We must make judicious use of this enhanced capability...if we are to remain fully human. The question is: Do we have the will to be fully human anymore?