Welcome To A Facebook World: Part III

THESIS: The Impending Extinction Of OID

What follows may at first seem to be a Luddite jeremiad that can be readily dismissed.After all, we should all embrace new technologies and celebrate the bounteous advantages that they confer on our lives.Anyone who fusses over such developments is surely a spoiled sport…or just doesn't "get it".I'm fully open to the possibility that I'm missing something.Perhaps I am.But this is what I do know:

The alteration of American culture in the last decade has been accompanied by a severe deterioration in the caliber of public discourse—and of the quality of human interaction in general.Moreover, recent technological developments have distorted the nature of human bonds.Widespread inability (and unwillingness) to engage in a genuine conversation, epidemic mental lethargy, and short attention spans have been the hallmarks of this change.My contention is that this new mode of operating (and the dysfunction attendant thereto) has both reinforced and been reinforced by the ever-more ubiquitous use of certain communications technology.

In the event that most people in society are acclimated to processing information in quick snippets, the public discourse degenerates to a specious charade of quip-exchanges.Meticulous, patient, penetrating, critical analysis is thereby rendered anathema.On-going, in-depth dialogue (OID) becomes an untenable activity.When an entire populace is conditioned to think in sound-bites, deliberative democracy becomes intractable.The conclusion is quite clear: Even as it offers isolated advantages (e.g. enhanced networking capabilities), such technology has engendered myriad dysfunctions that have proven deleterious to the weal of our society.

We can pose the following question: What exactly, has been so pervasive as to engender such a widespread (degenerate) modus operandi?The suspects, we find, are numerous and complex—as explanations for social trends are never simple, nor are such things reducible to one culprit.Nevertheless, the epidemic dysfunction in question can be largely attributed to the way we've become conditioned by our social media.

At root, we can blame these (dysfunctional) social trends on the behavior and thinking we've come to consider normal (normal, that is, due to the pervasive role of the new communication technology).This is so straight-forward as to almost be a tautology: We are the way we are because of how we conventionally behave—and how we tend to behave dictates the way we are.

We are, after all, creatures of habit, and so think and behave in habitual ways—ways defined by prevailing norms (i.e. that to which we've become smugly accustomed).When we're used to watching television programs of a certain format, corresponding with friends and co-workers using certain tools, our standard for all exchange adapts accordingly.

This is no requiem for the "good ol' days".Indeed, progress always looks forward.They key is to be sober and thoughtful as we move into the future, and not become too intoxicated by the next cool thing.

GENEOLOGY OF A DYSFUNCTION:

It started with the IM-ing infatuation of the late 90's, which seemed relatively innocuous at the time.During this period, the irresistibly convenient exchange of brief e-mails steadily transplanted other (antiquated) modes of exchange—sometimes in beneficial ways, sometimes in detrimental ways.As with most technology, e-mail has been a mixed blessing.Something was certainly gained by it; yet something was also lost.The exchange of quips, written on a screen, was steadily transplanting live, substantive dialogue.

The "quip-exchange" phenomenon then went into overdrive in 2007, approximately when Youtube clips, Facebook postings, and "text-ing" became a predominant mode of pedestrian interaction.This paradigm-shift in pop culture established not only new norms for daily communication, but altered the very nature of communication.What it meant to "have a conversation" was completely transformed in ways of that seemed anodyne to most of us.As with most cultural change, many people became inured to the alteration of precedent, as they were thoroughly immersed in the metamorphosis.

Amidst a widespread aloofness, this process fostered a deterioration of deliberative activity—the very activity on which democracy is predicated.It was a glib aloofness, so it went un-noticed.Twitter was the piece de resistance to this metamorphosis.Even as the expedient Tweet opened up new avenues for PARTICIPATORY democracy (e.g. coordinating mass movement), it engendered

mental habits antithetical to DELIBERATIVE democracy (e.g. engaging in serious inquiry and critical reflection).A healthy democracy, we should be reminded, must be both participatory and deliberative, or it doesn't work.Deliberation without participation can be sage yet impotent; participation without deliberation can be potent yet misguided.Either way, democracy suffers.

It is not hyperbolic to note that many people in our society have lost the ability (and the will) to have a genuine conversation.In fact, it may be no exaggeration to say that most people no longer know how to carry on a substantive conversation lasting more than a few minutes.Banal (though entertaining) chit-chat has become the default modus operandi—even when dealing with serious issues.Mindless (though amusing) banter has become the accepted standard for all exchange.(Ask yourself: When is the last time I had a serious discussion about, say, trickle-down economics—probably one of the most important and pressing issues of the day?Have I taken the time to procure a thorough understanding of it?If not, why not?)

It's not merely that many (most?) people have become incapable of carrying on even a basic conversation (i.e. an exchange of information that confers mutual benefit on the interlocutors); it's that any interest in conducting an OID has all-but-vanished.We can attribute this to "pop culture", but pop culture is delivered via a medium that molds it and shapes it.

The desire to have an edifying exchange of complex, novel ideas has drastically dissipated in this new social milieu—as demonstrated by the Facebook-oriented mentality that has come to define American pop culture.OID has become queer, awkward, and deviant in this new milieu.One is now often shunned, mocked, and even ostracized if one is so brazen as to even attempt such a thing.(After all, in between the quick exchanges that dominate the environment, who has the time?)If one has the audacity to suggest that an OID is warranted (instead of just an exchange of text-messages), one is often chastised for the suggestion.Such deviant ways don't mesh with prevailing expectations.

Many have come to crave quick stimulation, and only quick stimulation, because they have become addicted to the immediate gratification germane to this new mode of communication.Naturally, then, many are now turned off by even the prospect of an OID.In terms of personal edification, many are perfectly satisfied with snippets of captivating hearsay that pose as "the inside scoop" on important matters.(This is demonstrated daily by typical news programming on the major

television networks.)Naturally, then, most people avoid genuine scholarship like the plague: it's turgid, dry, and boring.In other words, it's not the mindless, snazzy, sensationalized fodder to which we've become blissfully accustomed.

We've acclimated ourselves to one mode of thinking at the expense of another.To not notice this is to be staggeringly oblivious to the metamorphosis that everyday American culture has undergone over the course of the past decade.(Of course, most of us don't have long enough attention spans to notice that most of us don't have very long attention spans.)

Sustained focus has become a rare thing indeed.One can clearly observe the trend any given hour of any given day: one need only watch a few minutes of almost any talk show on TV (political or otherwise) to recognize the prevalence of this new mode of communication.Listen to just a few minutes of dialogue anywhere, and one will find it mostly tailored to the exchange of mere quips.Interviews with "guests" on news programs have become so ridiculous that one wonders if one has accidentally tuned in to an SNL skit.In some ways, this new Facebook World seems like we're all just stuck in one big, elaborate SNL skit…that never ends.

THE WANE OF E.S.D.:

Why aren't there more sites on the web like masonscott.org?The answer is relatively straight-forward: there's no market for it.Why not?Well, you see, most people have neither the time nor the interest in reading lengthy essays.It's as simple as that.Get over it, and just get with the new zeitgeist.

Ok, fine.No time for long essays: got it.Meanwhile, how many people squander untold hours engaged in pointless activity on Facebook?The number is disconcertingly large.Welcome to a Facebook World.May I be so pompous as to imagine what the world would be like if as many people who actually spend time on FB instead came to MS each day…while very few people were interested in spending any time on FB?As far-fetched as that scenario may be, the hypothesis is worth exploring.How WOULD things be different?

These days, when an audience encounters anything that remotely resembles E.S.D. (extended, substantive discourse), they tend to turn away.After all, many of us have become hooked on the quick stimulation of the easily-digestible "text message".Naturally, then, we demand the transient gratification inherent to text

snippets whenever we interact with another human being.Our infatuation with this new mode of communication is thoroughly entrenched, so it should come as no surprise that we've developed an ingrained aversion to E.S.D.

Anything that requires prolonged focus and significant cognitive exertion is rendered out-of-bounds in a Facebook World.This is a problem, because E.S.D. is how people LEARN things.Noam Chomsky recently made an important (though utterly elementary) point that—peculiarly—has been taken as somehow controversial: "Text messaging, Twitter, that sort of thing…is extremely rapid, very shallow communication," he said to interviewer Jeff Jetton in September."It erodes normal human relations.It makes [interaction] more superficial, shallow, evanescent."That this is true should be flagrantly evident to even the cursory observer.

The accuracy of such an observation is beyond dispute.The disturbing thing is not merely that this observation is true, but that—upon hearing this observation—many people obstinately refuse to recognize how indisputable it really is. Many have become so inured to the new modus operandi, they've lost the capacity to recognize its drawbacks.Indeed, many of us have become so glibly habituated to deliciously empowering activities that we've lost the ability to even notice the subsequent debilitation.We're blissfully oblivious of any degeneracy that's embedded in superficial enhancements.

In the meantime, we have machines do our thinking for us.The i-Phone's **Siri** app is illustrative of the new modus operandi.The tool is what is called a "knowledge navigator": automating tasks that used to involve THINKING (specifically, thinking for oneself).Since exerting cognitive effort is no longer en vogue, apps like **Siri** have become quite a big hit.Mental prosthetics are handy…especially when they transplant our need to figure things out on our own. Deliberation has been rendered obsolete with "knowledge navigators" handle such time-consuming mental tasks.

Alas, Chomsky's observation is not some profound sociological insight; it is simply a statement-of-the-obvious—something that should be evident to anyone who hasn't been living in a cave for the past ten years.Even as these new technologies offer enticing benefits and hyper-stimulation, their overuse is steadily vitiating our lucidity…while eroding our appreciation for substantive discourse.

The new communication technology has clearly demonstrated virtues, most notably: more efficient coordination of collective action, as we've seen in places from Tahrir Square in Egypt to Liberty Plaza in Manhattan.These virtues notwithstanding, there are down-sides that must be acknowledged—and addressed.With the current thinking / behavior engendered by social media, E.S.D. is slowly becoming obsolete.

The effects of this new Facebook World should be apparent to those of us who are actually paying attention.Yet few people seem to be paying attention for long enough to notice.The explanation: Short attention spans are incessantly reinforced—day in and day out—thus rendering probing critical reflection anathema.E.S.D. has become outmoded because the new media doesn't conduce to extensive deliberation.Discourse is thus reduced to the expedient interchange of quick snippets.Vapidity has been glamorized.Superficiality has been systematized.Narcissism has been glorified.In-authenticity has been romanticized.In is in this social climate that we've become perfectly smug.

The E.S.D. has gone the way of the OID: relegated to the margins of relevance in our lives.Write more than a couple hundred words of serious exposition, speak for more than 60 seconds, and—well—you've lost the audience, my friend.Anything requiring extensive cognitive effort simply doesn't sell.Consequently, high quality public discourse is bad for business.Good business is maximizing market-share.That's all there is to it.Since MSM is a business, not a public service, MSM will cater to the lowest common denominator.Period.

It is crucial in life—and especially life in a PDD (participatory, deliberative democracy)—to be able to formulate well-thought-out positions and articulate the reasons for those positions.In any healthy society, the typical person must be willing and able to carefully construct (and meticulously scrutinize) arguments.In a PDD, people must have the motivation and the where-with-all to assess arguments for validity (e.g. be able to identify logical fallacies) and to evaluate arguments for sound-ness.This critical aptitude is often subverted by the new media technology.(It would be safe to say that no quality critical analysis of anything important has ever been done using Facebook.)

A SURVEY OF THE PROBLEM:

Let’s survey the degree to which Americans have become relentlessly obsessed with the stultifyingly vapid.American culture, we find, is more and more consumed by a chronic preoccupation with the superficial and the petty.The question, then, is: WHY are so many Americans incessantly fixated on such superficial and petty things?(Put another way: Why have mental lethargy and insipidity become so ubiquitous?)

Many people have come to think exclusively in sound-bites, and have thereby lost the capacity (or even the desire) to engage in a serious, patient conversation.Even as collective action is now more easily coordinated than ever, OIDs have become an endangered species, and people have lost an appreciation for genuine human bonding.(What does “friend” mean anymore, above and beyond a useful networking buddy…or a casual interlocutor with whom one can have amusing yet vapid banter?)

When genuine human bonds are transplanted with a superficial connectivity, we’ve come to expect less from each other.“Networking” has become something of a fetish—such that the sheer utility of connection means more than the human aspect of the connection. The illusion of “being totally connected” lulls us into a false sense of being “in touch”…even as we find ourselves more and more out of touch.

We are enthralled by mechanisms like Tagged, Habbo, Bebo, Linked-In, Foursquare, Hotlist, Mylife, Vox, Xanga, and Buzznet.(The social networking craze is not unique to America: Russia has Vkontakte, Odnoklassniki, and Livejournal; Scandenavia has Hyves; Brasil and India have Orkut; South Korea has Cyworld; China has Renren and Qzone; Asia has Multiply; southeast Asia has Friendster; the Arab world has Netlog; and many Latino nations have Badoo, Sonico, Taringa…AND Facebook.)One can’t help but wonder: Do people read books anymore?

In this new world, one can be stupendously “connected” in the superficial sense, yet utterly disconnected from other humans in the more profound sense.In the virtual universe of networking fetishization, maximization of connectivity is valued for its own sake, and the efficiency of connectivity is the sine qua non.We seem not to have the attention span for anything else.Old-fashioned human bonding is slow, messy, cumbersome, and inconvenient.Who has the patience any more?

Observe the format of MSM programming: it is now almost entirely geared to the shallow, superficial mode of articulation indicative of these new communication tools.All of it is essentially the same format, with roughly the same caliber of dialogue (partisan biases notwithstanding): NBC, MSNBC, CNBC, CNN, FoxNews,

ABC, CBS, ESPN, etc.The parity of the quality of content—between all of the channels—is striking.Yes, Rachel Maddow is far better than a Sean Hannity; but the format is the same.It rarely occurs to us that the format is part of the problem.

Observe the quality of exposition in the most popular periodicals.Pick up a New York Post, New York Daily News or any other tabloid.Look at an US Weekly, In Touch, Starz, Glamour, Cosmopolitan, or any other popular magazine, and note the default mode of information-absorption: a format that caters to short attention spans and a stagnant pre-frontal cortex.(Even slightly more serious periodicals like Time magazine and Newsweek exhibit this tragic trend, as does USA Today and the Wall Street Journal.)This only stands to reason: it is what the target consumer wants—it is THE ONLY thing that most consumers want.Ergo, reddit.com.

Behold the caliber of dialogue in any “interview” conducted in MSM: a quick back-and-forth of scripted talking points (most of it simple-minded balderdash).Meanwhile, tabloid fodder dominates our attention—even as our ability to focus on salient issues dissolves.This is why The New Yorker doesn’t have even a tenth of the readership of, say, People magazine.It is also why the MIBYs tend not to sell nearly as well as pulp trash written by celebrity charlatans.

Why discuss the nuts and bolts of supply-side economic policy when one can get the latest juicy scoop of celebrity gossip?One discussion is amenable to 40 words of text; the other is not.With which topic, then, will people with short attention spans tend to occupy themselves?Will people tend to read The Secret or the latest work of scholarship by a world-renown economist?The answer to this question is tremendously disturbing; yet it explains the egregious level of ignorance that currently pervades American society (the flat-tax is fair, trickle-down economics works, ROTA is tantamount to government tyranny, and universal public healthcare is something bad called, “socialism”.)

Survey the caliber of writing in the books found on the New York Times bestseller lists, and one will note the same trend.The degeneracy couldn’t be more blatant.Yet we often don’t have the attention span to notice our lack of attention spans.Consequently, we often construe the popular stuff as the best stuff, and just leave it at that.

Show me a man under the age of 40 who has made the effort to pen a well-thought-out love-letter, put it in an envelope, and send it via snail-mail to a romantic interest, at any point in the last ten years.Courtship has been reduced to a charade

of superficial exchanges.Wooing is now primarily composed of the volleying of electronic flirtations.Show me someone who's taken the time to read a thorough, serious work of non-fiction by a bona fide scholar, just once, in the last ten years.Reading Kant?Unheard of.A 20-page piece of investigative journalism in The New Yorker?Forget about it.

Talk shows—even the allegedly more "serious" political roundtable shows on Sunday morning—are comprised of stilted exchanges of rushed, prepackaged sound-bites… and the occasional clever retort.Many crave the memorable one-liner because that's all they are capable of digesting.Discussion, then, is nothing other than a contest for getting in a 10 (or, if lucky, 20) second quip…before the other guy can interject with his next snappy comment.We've become utterly inured to canned responses to stilted, inane questions because EVERYTHING has become a canned response to a stilted, inane question.

Nobody doubts that Twitter, text-ing, Facebook postings, etc. are marvelously convenient, magnificently efficient, and stupendously effective tools.Such mechanisms are therefore well suited for coordinating collective action (specifically, from the bottom up).These new technologies have helped orchestrate unified dissent and mobilize collective action—as the Arab Spring and OWS movements have illustrated.Such media certainly has a prudent place in our lives—and so has undeniable value in that respect.

But to point out this virtue (as if it were an argument against the present thesis) entirely misses the point of the critique offered by Nicholas Carr, Noam Chomsky, myself, et. al.The concern here pertains to the other effects that this new communication technology is having on us: the effects obfuscated by the delirium in which we're now immersed.

It is disingenuous to hold that criticizing the medium (as shallow, superficial, etc.) is the same as holding that the people who make use of it are ipso facto less capable (or that their endeavor is somehow less worthy).Obviously, the Arab Spring and OWS movements are eminently worthy movements—movements that have helped realize the human potential to stand up to power.These are noble examples of collective action made possible by the new technology.With this in mind, no serious thinker has ever alleged that such new communication tools are useless.

The point is to bring to our attention potential adverse effects (e.g. short attention spans, shallow thinking, superficial discourse, etc.) that ensue when such modes of communication come to be the gold standard for ALL communication…which is precisely what is happening.Every mode of communication has its place.Things go awry when the prevalence of one mode undermines the crucial role of other important modes.This is the point that Chomsky was making—a point that should be taken seriously by everyone.

There's a time to be deep and a time to be terse.We must be cognizant of this fundamental distinction…lest we lose sight of what it is to be fully human.

ANALYSIS OF AN INFATUATION:

Critiques of the new social media are often misconstrued or, worse, caricatured so as to be used in straw-man counter-arguments.So it is important to understand what the present critique is not saying.

To hold that certain means of communicating are themselves (inherently) less deep than others—as Chomsky did—is only to state the obvious.That is not to say, however, that the ideas being conveyed, the cause being promoted, or the people doing it are necessarily "less deep" or "less important".Rather, the point is that when this becomes the primary means by which we engage in any public discourse (i.e. the manner in which we think and communicate in general), grave dysfunction ensues.

I can text my friend in order to notify him that I'm running 10 minutes late without being insipid.Judicious use of the technology can co-exist with a healthy culture.

These handy new mechanisms certainly have their place.The marvelous facilitation of grass-roots movements notwithstanding, there has been a deleterious effect on the mode of public discourse—an effect of which we should be vigilant.Many of us have been seduced, and so can't see the downside of what's happening.(When one is a junkie, one doesn't want to see the adverse side-effects of his next quick fix.)

Even as the ability to network has been augmented, other things vital to civil society are being drastically compromised.After all, efficiency isn't everything.We'd be wise to recognize the side-effects of this new technology, and not focus exclusively on some of the immediate benefits that are often "in our face".Alas, we tend to romanticize things that are easy and fun—and overdo it with things that are nifty and convenient.Facebook is trendy. Tweeting is cool.Get over it.

The key is to define the appropriate role of a new technology.We must do this so that we know when it is being used imprudently (i.e. when it is playing a role for which it isn't suited).I should be able to send a text saying that I'm running ten minutes late to an appointment even as my ability to carry on an OID in other situations remains in tact.

Meanwhile, when I want to cancel plans with a friend, having the courtesy to notify him via a live phone conversation is—well—common courtesy, is it not?The difference here should be common sense—yet many people have lost the ability to make such a fundamental distinction.Being judicious enough to see when a genuine conversation is warranted is important for conducting any kind of meaningful relations.

To reiterate: the sine qua non of communication isn't efficiency.As with all things, efficiency is a means to an end, not an end in itself.Current technologies seem to be pursuing efficiency for its own sake, thereby usurping the crucial role of OID in our lives.**These days, people seem to always want to just text in instances when having a normal conversation is eminently appropriate—or even logistically crucial.**This new penchant can be exasperating to those of us who value quality communication—and who recognize the vital role that OID plays in civil society.

Alas, recognizing the role of OID in life has become quite rare.We're too busy to "miss" OID—even as we're transfixed by each Tweet, captivated by another text message, and eagerly anticipating the next IM response.While we're preoccupied with the latest Facebook posting or obsessing over the latest blog comment, the penchant for engaging in OID evaporates…because OID isn't sufficiently efficient.

Regarding the undeniable (and eminently useful) efficiency and convenience conferred on people by these new technologies, we can draw an analogy.When Morse code was devised for communication, it was stupendously useful—especially during WWII—precisely because it offered the same sort of advantages vis a vis the incumbent technology.Finally, one could quickly disseminate simple parcels of data to lots of people far, far away.Suddenly, one could "get the word out" in a manner infinitely more expedient (and much more efficiently) than any other alternative.It was fantastic.

However, we prudently kept the use of that amazing new communication technology in perspective: nobody supposed that it would be healthy to transplant OID with the relaying of Morse code messages.Nor did the delimited use of Morse code threaten to undermine our ability to engage in a robust, public discourse.E.S.D. persevered in the midst of Morse Code's new role.By contrast, with the 21st Century's new mechanisms, the adverse effects on other modes of communication have been proven all-too-real.Morse Code didn't redefine the way we had serious discussions.Neither should Twitter or text-ing.

Yet many of us figure: Why bother engaging in an OID with one's BFFLNMW when one can simply volley a quick text: "OMG, NBD. LMAO"?The kind of response we've come to expect to such inquiries: "AMOF IDK. W/E. LOL."That just about covers it.WTF? GOI. TTYL.(I don't jest.The caliber of most political discourse is not much deeper than the above exchange.YWSYLS.)

What kind of world do we live in where one would opt to type the six characters "H-MDAY" instead of picking up the phone, calling, and saying, "Happy Mother's Day, mom"?Alas, why bother when there's a more efficient way to do it…while multi-tasking?The value of hearing a voice, replete with tone, inflection, and pregnant pauses, has been lost in a world addicted to reading text on a screen for three-second increments.

We figure that "relationship maintenance" is just another task on our crowded docket.Writing a hand-written letter to a loved one?Out of the question.Reading a serious sociological treatise, then discussing it with a friend, in person, for more than ten minutes?Who has the time?K.I.S.S.Get with the program.Not watch TV or surf the web for an entire week?Are you completely nuts?Activities that were once considered the foundation of edification are now deemed inconceivable…especially in between my favorite Reality TV show and cleaning out e-mails from my in-box.

It's a sad day when we've found the need to create a text for RYS and LMIRL.As most adults have learned, relationships are predicated on being able to communicate well.When that has been lost, authentic human connection is no longer possible. It is fascinating to note that most text / Twitter message abbreviations are simply REACTIONS.Exchanges, then, are reduced to transient volleys of amusing reactions, and reactions to reactions, ad infinitum.Anything warranting in-depth discussion becomes an intractable plight.The queries are simple, without nuance, for maximum expediency.Naturally, then, this is how we expect interviews to be conducted on television.

These days, it seems, we must often remind ourselves that **meaningful human relationships are not predicated on the maximization of efficiency**.(It is no secret that relationships based on convenience or on sheer utility are unhealthy relationships—doomed to dysfunction.Yet those are precisely the sort of relationships that the new social media engenders.)

Wonder how much of the present thesis is mere speculation?Most are tempted to retort: “Listen, buddy.That’s just how people do things now.DEAL with it.”

Still suppose that this critique is just some spurious Luddite jeremiad?Do these claims hold any water?Do Chomsky’s concerns warrant our attention?What’s really going on here?(DBEYR.CMIIR.)

Neither reading nor writing lengthy exposition is any longer on most people’s radar.It isn’t a big mystery why.In an age when people have important talks about their relationship via text-ing (“DTR ASAP”) and when the most social commentary comes in the form of snappy comments on a Facebook Wall.It is a world in which charlatans can pass themselves off as profound thinkers and self-proclaimed self-help gurus masquerade as genuine philosophers.Many find themselves comfortably ensconced in the echo chamber of choice.When even the most idiotic political pundits are deemed bona fide journalists, red flags should be raised.Yes, these days, celebrity talking heads (who often know nothing about anything important) are our primary source of political insight.Is it any wonder so many problems afflict us?

But what else should we expect, when E.S.D. is a thing of the past?

Why do we confuse philistine performers with great thinkers…and Machiavellian plutocrats for noble statesmen?After all, we’re not all morons.Many of us succumb to such faulty perception schemes because of the way we’re conditioned, day in and day out.In a world where our span of attention is determined by a “Tweet”, we no longer know the difference between substantive discourse and bullshit.That’s why CNBC exists.

DIAGNOSIS OF THE EPIDEMIC:

Note that I could not have adequately explicated the present thesis by using Twitter.I challenge those who desire to put forth a rebuttal to the present thesis to do so via Tweets.Of course, that would be absurd.Why?Because, as any Tweeting / text-ing / IM-ing / Facebook-posting aficionado would quickly point out, such tasks are not what Twitter et. al. are properly for.Duh.

But that’s precisely the point.Many people actually would try to offer such a rebuttal in that way.THAT is the problem.We’re now finding ourselves in a world where people are more and more exclusively geared to doing things only in ways that have been defined by such tools.Such a development doesn’t bode well for American culture.

The Facebook-ization of American culture is to blame for much that is going awry.We wonder why Americans are so ignorant, so ill-informed, so aloof, so self-absorbed: this is a major reason why.We are shaped by what we devote our time to doing, how we do it, and—above all—what we care about.Erudition, rectitude, probity: these things can’t possibly be conferred on anyone by the new social media.Why?Because that’s not what the technology is designed to do.Mark Zuckerberg doesn’t care what your values and principles are: he just cares that we’re all more hyper-connected, and USE FACEBOOK.These new communication tools are fantastically handy, yet will never play a role in fostering meaningful human bonds.Nobody has ever become a better person by having used Twitter.

The tragic fact of the matter is: These days, many people would actually try to present a counter-argument to this essay via articulations of the sort that are geared for Tweets or Facebook postings.They would tend to do so because THAT has increasingly become the only way many people are willing to operate.For an illustration of this trend, peruse the text in the comments section of the typical blog.Most of them, one will find, are little other than vituperative “invective contests” and competitions to see who can be the most provocative.(Often entertaining; never edifying.)

Other modes of communication—which are at least as important—have suffered as a consequence.Take a peek at the write-in comments appended to the standard news-site article: low-brow litanies of back-and-forth verbiage that pose as worthwhile “discussion” of an important topic.Tweet-worthy exchanges have transplanted OID in situations where OID is desperately needed.

Meanwhile, note the blog-posts and the news articles themselves: simple-minded, snappy exposition that masquerades as substantive discourse.Alas, THAT is precisely what our public discourse has been reduced to.And, with the precedent set by the new social media, it’s all we’ve come to expect.MTFBWU.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

By far, the best book on this topic is Nicholas Carr’s **The Shallows**.The following four works also offer insightful critiques:

Alone Together by Sherry Turkle

The Net Delusion by Eugeny Morozov

You Are Not A Gadget by Jaron Lanier

The Big Switch –Nicholas Carr

(Maggi Jackson's Distracted and Gary Small's iBrain are more alarmist jeremiads than serious critiques, while William Powers' Hamlet's Blackberry is more of a collection of anecdotes than a critical analysis.)

For a positive assessment of the new technology in question, good sources are **Here Comes Everybody** and **Cognitive Surplus** by Clay Shirky, **Public Parts** by Jeff Jarvis, **Convergence Culture** by Henry Jenkins, and **Wikinomics** by Don Tapscott.The insights offered in the latter books are not counter-arguments to the present thesis; they simply offer "the other side of the story".

See also my Critique of Facebook and Carnival of Distraction.