

Welcome To A Facebook World: Part IV

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Paving the Way For Big Brother?

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When Google+ was launched in June of 2011, tens of thousands promptly clamored to sign on. Google+ integrates social services (e.g. Google Groups, Google Profiles, and the now defunct Google Buzz) while offering services like “Circles”, “Hangouts” and “Sparks”.

Meanwhile, with great fanfare, Apple released iCloud, which integrates all users into *the collective*—wherein the hive-mind can monitor each participant’s activity (in order to “better serve” everyone, of course.) Such things go beyond being “registered” in a kind of omni-database; they consolidate otherwise disparate activities into a unified process, where everything tracks everything else. “We track things, so you don’t have to” is an alluring sales pitch. The catch, of course, is that one becomes the tracked instead of the tracker.

What’s going on here? This is no pedestrian inquiry, for it’s to ask: “What’s *really* going on here?” versus “What *seems to be* going on here?” After all, there is a difference between the two when perception and Reality diverge.

“Social Network” mania has super-saturated American culture. The Orwellian nature of the jargon (“bringing people into your circle”) should sound creepy—yet many find such prospects quite enticing. Having “followers” on Twitter; “Connecting” with people (called “friends”, of course) on Facebook; being “installed” in classmates.com (where “getting the scoop” masquerades as nostalgia): such possibilities bedazzle tens of millions, from sea to shining sea.

But, alas, we are no longer interested in shining seas made of water. We’re now endlessly intoxicated by a virtual world-of-wonders—captivated by a world that can be more easily controlled and monitored by the corporations that operate it. This new virtual environment (commonly known as “Web 2.0”) has revealed that it is possible to be TOO inter-connected, TOO immersed. Such hyper-inter-connectivity and hyper-immersion could be called Borg Syndrome. “Join us; it’s so much better once you’re part of the hive...err, network.”

There is no question: Such integration can be very useful, and addictive. The most eager participants in the new zeitgeist are often deluded into thinking that they’re being empowered by these handy new tools. Yet the behavioral trends exhibited by the emerging culture belie a serious host of dysfunctions.

Much of this technology, while offering the eminently enticing prospect of being “connected” ends up dictating how people interact with one another—and even how they think about themselves. Alas, what exactly is the difference between being assimilated into a collective and being integrated into the “network”? There are, of course, key differences; but what are the parallels? People join religions because they want to be “in on the action” (i.e. part of something bigger than themselves). The promise of integration into the *new* “social network” appeals to the same primal sensibilities. It doesn’t matter whether the community is virtual or

organic.

So how we communicate with one another ends up being dictated by these new mechanisms. Facebook is illustrative of this point: Among all the nifty features it offers, it does not *explicitly* display rudimentary contact information (e.g. e-mail address)...lest one request that it be mentioned in the “info” section...at the bottom periphery of the display. Facebook isn’t interested in providing traditional human contact information, let alone traditional human contact.

Why is this? The explanation is relatively straight-forward: Facebook only wants interaction to happen on its own terms (i.e. via Facebook). One would think that e-mail would be one of the most basic pieces of information that would be offered in a profile on a site ostensibly devoted to fostering “connection”. Alas, such outmoded ways of interacting are marginalized in the Facebook microcosm. And for obvious reasons. Anything that doesn’t happen on Facebook’s terms can’t be controlled by Facebook.

This essay isn’t that of an alarmist Luddite ranting about the evils of technology. This is the observation of an Engineer and Sociologist who—while celebrating technological advances—recognizes the crucial importance of using technology judiciously. Indeed, one can both celebrate technology and criticize the ways in which it gets—shall we say—out of hand. We’re already quite familiar with the reasons to *embrace* Web 2.0. Here are two reasons to be cautious:

1 Egregious corporate abuses of I.P.:

The Commons—initially one of the primary virtues of the web—is being steadily dissolved, transplanted by an omni-present, for-profit machinery—a machinery that is antithetical to public space. This means—among other things—corporate control over information: who has access to what. This control is, of course, passed off as a FAVOR: the facilitation of efficiency. It’s a simple trick: pass subordination off as liberation, and people will eagerly play along.

Many of us are (rightfully) concerned about tyrannical governments imposing controls over a populace. Yet many seem to be utterly oblivious when private corporations do the same thing. What many fail to understand is that highly-concentrated power is highly-concentrated power—regardless of the form it takes. Top-down control is top-down control, even when it is a *private* hierarchy. Exploitation is exploitation, even when operating under the (appealing) aegis of “free enterprise” and “economic freedom”.

Draconian laws are being implemented that prevent people from being able to access or use excerpts of video / text that are “owned” by corporations. (These new restrictions have been demonstrated by the strict crack-down on Youtube’s ability to provide video clips.) This has been done at the behest of corporations hell-bent on controlling information (while ensuring that *everything* is restricted to for-profit ventures).

In an age when DNA can be patented by Agri-business, the notion of intellectual property is being grossly contorted, manipulated, and perverted. It is one thing to “own” proprietary designs; yet another thing entirely to “own” general ideas, “own” the means by which the citizenry can become edified, and even “own” knowledge itself. Nobody should have monopoly control over access to human knowledge.

When hyper-privatization sets in, the Commons disintegrates, replaced by an environment in which corporations own—and thus control—everything. When we are no longer setting the terms of how we interact, something dubious is afoot.

2 Loss of desire / ability to carry on a genuine conversation:

Most of us have become accustomed to communicating exclusively via “comments”...taking quick peeks at this and that, then the next thing, without ever taking the time to delve into anything. Penetrating critical analysis? Why bother when a cursory perusal of sound-bites and parcels of text offers instant gratification? It is, indeed, possible to be so inundated with “noise” that relevant things are drowned out. This is precisely what corporate power intends. For in this new milieu, we are incessantly inundated with petty distractions. (How do you manipulate people? Keep them perpetually distracted.)

This new medium of exchange conduces to the quick exchange of tid-bits. We’d rather use **Buzznet** or **Blauk** or **Itsmys** to gossip than conduct a serious discussion about important issues. Why? **Foursquare** and **Tagged** and **LinkedIn** have captivated a hundred million users even as most of them haven’t the faintest clue what is causing most of society’s problems. Why? **MyLife** and **MySpace** have glamorized narcissism even as they help people “connect” with one another...in a very controlled way...based on terms set by the mechanisms.

People have become infatuated with the prospect of being “plugged in” to “what’s going on”. All the while, they are persuaded to “create an account” or “sign up” to do anything and everything. It seems like little can be done any more without creating an account or signing in to some social networking service. Orwell could not have imagined a more severe version of a virtual, privately-held INGSOC-ware.

IMPLICATIONS OF 1 & 2:

The confluence of 1 and 2 has dire repercussions. Amidst the intoxicating pageantry of all this new technology, few have noticed that our thinking has adapted to suit the demands of the medium, not vice versa. Consequently, modes of mass manipulation and mass exploitation seem to be operating under the auspices of “doing everybody a favor”.

Over a decade ago, McDonald’s launched a marketing campaign called “Your way, right away” ...and thus ingrained in people’s minds that it was “My McDonald’s”. (“My way, right away? What’s not to like about *that*?”)

This was a foreshadowing of the coming cultural trend. We saw this marketing strategy from banks (“My Chase”) to various media (“My [insert TV network here]”). All of these “My” campaigns were, of course, preposterous—yet they were each quite effective. Why?

They offered an enticing illusion of empowerment to the consumer, even as the consumer’s

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autonomy was being subverted.

It used to be that, when playing with other children, if a child's mindset was "mine, mine, mine" we deemed it a bad thing. In this new culture, though, we summarily pat him on the back, and congratulate him for staking his claim. This shift in the perception of virtue illustrates a transformation in our culture.

But how do we square the "It's all about me" Syndrome with the aforementioned Borg Syndrome? At first blush, the two would seem to be antithetical to one another: *narcissism* vis a vis *submersion in a collective*. In reality, though, they are eminently symbiotic. Serious sociological inquiry needs to be done on this topic to understand it further. Suffice to say: The best way to control people is to distract them from the fact that they're being controlled. In other words, to control people *without resistance*, convince people that what you're really doing is empowering them. Sustain the illusion of empowerment, and people will enthusiastically go along with the charade...and thank you very much for the blissful subjugation.

Promiscuous connectivity (as opposed to the forging of genuine human bonds) anesthetizes people to this new mode of subjugation. The engineering of quick gratification and of short attention spans renders people oblivious to what's going on behind the veneer of empowerment. As Goethe once noted: "None are more hopelessly enslaved than those who falsely believe that they are free."