Welcome To A Facebook World: Part IX

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Big Brother Garbed In Wondrous Raiment:

It might have never occurred to George Orwell how much more dangerous "Big Brother" might be if it were wielded by private power instead of state power. Nor did he suspect how much more powerful it could be if it were dressed up in snazzy attire (instead of operating as a naked, authoritarian presence).

Indeed, Orwell may not have thought that something like INGSOC could take another form: corporate power, operating under the aegis of "free enterprise". This other form of highly-concentrated power (replete with top-down control) involves a scheme wherein citizens are seen (and treated) as target customers rather than as compliant subjects. In this scenario, instead of high-powered government bureaucrats controlling everything with brute force, it is high-powered corporate executives using media to keep tabs on (and manipulate) the rabble. In either case, it is a cabal of oligarchs dictating how things should go in order to suit their own ends.

The lesson is simple: Oligarchs come in many different packages—from tyrannical political regimes to plutocratic orders. Manipulation, we should remind ourselves, can be carried out in ways other than overt force. Systems of domination can come in the form of a government OR in the form of a corporation. *1984* only addressed the former. (Who needs a government-based "Ministry of Truth" when we have a corporate-run media…and thus a corporate-run internet?)

There are, after all, two ways of persuading people that 2+2=5. It can be done by sheer, raw coercion (as it was in Orwell's dystopian future**)**…or by packaging the desired meme as an enticing consumer product—then successfully marketing it. Memetics is not well-understood by most of us, so we rarely recognize what's really happening.

In the end, conditioning is conditioning, regardless of the manner in which it is achieved. This illusion of choice, though, can be very detrimental to our ability to remain autonomous agents. After all, even in Oceania, there was no illusion of liberty. Thus, subordination seems even more dangerous when it is misinterpreted as emancipation.

With these points in mind, certain questions arise: Is there such a thing as hyper-connectivity? Can we be OVERLY integrated into "the matrix" that is the social networking eco-system? Is it possible to be TOO inter-connected? Where do we draw the line? (And how do we even know where the line is?)

There is no doubt that, as Web 2.0 becomes an increasingly integral part of our lives, we are more and more connected. Can that connected-ness be used against us? Even as we celebrate each new technological advance, we'd be wise to note when there is dizzying technological change unaccompanied by genuine human progress.

ATTENTION: YOU'VE BEEN NETWORKED:

The trappings of Web 2.0 are all around us. The augmented capabilities that social networking tools confer upon us is undeniable. But our infatuation with the up-sides of these new tools should not delude us into thinking there are no down-sides to a culture molded by Web 2.0. We may ask: To what degree is Web 2.0 being designed to accommodate us; and in what ways are we revamping ourselves to accommodate Web 2.0?

Social media companies now mediate human relationships—and do so in ways that benefit the bottom line. More than 800 million people "inhabit" Facebook's digital realm. (If it were a country, it would be the world's third largest.) This gives users certain capabilities they may otherwise not have, but it also gives Facebook tremendous power. We are beguiled by the nifty gadgetry peddled to us. Yet, as we adapt to communicate in 140-character blurbs, are we being empowered or debilitated?

In Facebook-istan, we "network". But once we "join", we are promptly "networked". To wit: networking isn't just something we do; it is something that is done to us. The sovereigns of cyberspace offer all the enticements of staying "connected" so as to convince us that being jacked into the matrix is all about us empowering ourselves.

The good thing about cookies is that they help companies keep track of us. The bad thing about cookies is that they help companies keep track of us. As with most benefits, there's "catch" that isn't necessarily announced by those offering the service. Ultimately, cookies offer an avenue that can be easily exploited by those with less-than-noble motives.

Few take notice of this, due to what sociologists dub "mimetic desire": the penchant to covet the same things as "everybody else" in our community. In this sense, humans are susceptible to mass mania—and become disturbingly herd-like in their mentality. In the new Facebook World, mimetic desire is misconstrued as "individual empowerment"—which makes it all the more dysfunctional. So long as we are deluded by our own sense of empowerment, we'll tend to "play along".

Social networking technology capitalizes on our mercurial tendencies—exploiting caprice at every turn—prompting us all to just think re-actively, not pro-actively. The deterioration of our cognitive skills has been the predictable result. It is no wonder, then, that we rarely engage in critical reflection any more. The fast pace of media precludes our ability to evaluate the media.

Funny how that works.

People As Collections of Data:

Data-mining is a new frontier—a process with consequences we don't yet fully understand. We'd all be well-advised to remind ourselves that—though there are social utilities apparent "on the surface"—monetizing data on you and me and everyone else is the (underlying) *economic* goal of social networks.

Operating, as we do, on the surface, users don't necessarily notice what's going on beneath the glossy veneer of each groovy "user experience". "Underneath" all the wonderful-seeming "features" we've come to eagerly embrace, there is a "back end"—accumulating data in

a reservoir, waiting to be mined by parties to which the user isn't always privy.

The monetization of personal information is obviously of profound use to those seeking to sell us (on) certain things. However, such a mechanism is often invisible to the eager participants of social media technology. Even as people are herded into a massive database for "processing", they enjoy the nifty perks of the engrossing social milieu: a virtual playground of blog posts, dancing cats, and shopping.

Little do we care to note: As we make use of our handy gadgets throughout the day, what we experience is only the front end (the user interface)…while the goings-on at the back end remain opaque. Naturally, we base our adoption of such nifty tools on the appeal of the user experience, not on what's happening "behind the scenes". Just like driving a car, what's actually going on under the hood is a moot point to us. So long as the machine performs the way we desire it to perform, why fuss over what's actually making it all work?

Ultimately, though, each inhabitant of the Facebook World is essentially just a collection of traits—to be assessed for product-targeting purposes. The "product" could be an SUV, a shirt, a breakfast cereal, or a political candidate. In this realm, each of us is not so much a human being as a list of characteristics to be strategically parsed according to business models. (Facebook sold more than $3 billion in ads in 2011. But that's just advertising. What we're talking about here goes beyond advertising…to profiling each person.)

It is, indeed, very useful for Amazon to know your entire reading history. Meanwhile, it is slightly disturbing for Amazon to know your entire reading history. Double-edged swords abound in the Facebook World.

Tokens always have two sides: one made for us, and the other side we're not supposed to concern ourselves with. It's wise to be vigilant of *both sides* of every shiny "token" that transfixes us.

DATA EXPLOITATION:

The mountains of private data that are collected on corporate servers are mined to find statistical patterns (consumer habits, ideological penchants, social trends, personal interests, everyone with whom one associates). This is done so that commercial ventures can better solicit you, and me, and everyone else on the planet. Ostensibly, EVERYBODY wins in this new scheme.

It is a realm in which we are categorized based on demographic trends. A Facebook account is like an omni-present "loyalty card" that is active whether or not we are consciously using it. By profiling each person based on digital footprints and digital fingerprints (and perpetual cross-referencing thereof), much can be inferred about any one of us. Indeed, everyone who is engaged in Web 2.0 is ripe for profiling. In fact, the prospect of profiling each person seems to be the summum bonum of Facebook according to its own founder. Like Big Brother in *1984*, we're all told: "I'm following you for your own good."

All this is not DIRECTLY monitoring what we do, but it amounts to the same kind of pan-opticon effect with which Orwell dealt in *1984*. After all, "cookies" never announce themselves; they're just automatically planted on one's hard-drive, as beacons. Who needs a physical

tracking device (i.e. one that records which errands you run) when a VIRTUAL tracking device can do the same thing so much more efficiently? After all, what says more about us these days: our travel route each day or our activity on-line?

"Cookies" keep track of our activities "so as to better serve us". The flip-side to this nifty capability, though, is that the history of all our activity can be more easily recorded by other parties. Cookies can be both our best friend and our worst enemy. Which is which isn't always up to the user.

Would we still consider it a nifty feature (a SERVICE) if Facebook planted a tracking device in our wallets? Why, then, are we so inured to cookies when they are essentially doing the same thing? Our virtual identities, keep in mind, have become just as important as our physical identities.

Much of this has to do with corporate control over information—which is precisely why most large companies vociferously discourage open source, or dissuade users from treating the internet as a genuine public square—a "commons". The real motivations of web companies are often exposed the moment users ask for transparency on the part of those companies, and attempt to bring information into the public domain. Such "true colors" were revealed in the attempted SOPA legislation of 2011.

This is why subversive operations like *Wikileaks* and *Anonymous* are such a thorn in the side of incumbent power structures: such "guerilla" open-source mechanisms undermine the ability of the "powers that be" to maintain opacity—and thus to remain in control of everything under the desired pretenses. Of course, common sense tells us: If there is nothing to hide, then such operations would be seen as unproblematic.

When pushing a dubious agenda, the way to rationalize opacity is to do so under the aegis of "property rights"…perhaps the most abused term in the modern era. Protecting "property right"—just like doing something in the name of "national security"—is often used as pretense for keeping power highly concentrated. Such pretenses are employed to legitimize the interests of those in power and even to further consolidate their power. When commercial interests trump the public interest, red flags should go up.

Highly-concentrated power (HCP) is almost never a good thing. And since transparency is the primary way by which HCP is mitigated, opacity is rarely a good thing. So long as there is a "Big Brother" factor, the Daniel Ellsbergs of the world will be summarily vilified. We should be aware of why this is the case.

BEING MONITORED:

When I read articles on websites that have nothing whatsoever to do with Facebook (and which I did not tell Facebook I "liked"), Facebook is STILL following me. Facebook commonly emerges on the side of an article I'm reading, and notifies me which of my Facebook "friends" "liked" which other articles on that particular site. In other words, Facebook knows where I am on the web and what I'm reading…even when I'm not on Facebook…even when I want nothing to do with Facebook. AND it knows all the people with whom I might be associated who share the interests I'm exhibiting at that moment.

"I'm just here to help you," Facebook essentially says. "THAT is why I'm with you wherever you go, observing your behavior, and comparing it to everyone else." It's like the guardian angel that's getting a little TOO attached, if you catch my drift.

Facebook has integrated itself with other social networking tools, so that everything becomes linked to everything else. We have come to DEPEND ON these tools (for our own empowerment), so—in a way—we can no longer fully escape them. This is a proviso that empowers the tools, not us. Empowerment, it turns out, is a two-way street. Once we come to depend on the matrix, then we end up needing to cater to the matrix more than the matrix caters to us. But so long as we're enthralled by the matrix, we're perfectly fine with that arrangement. In the end, we're just looking for short-term gratification, right?

So there I am, reading an article on a news-site, and I'm being told which people (with whom I'm now associated via past Facebook activity) "liked" which articles *on that site.* Meanwhile, a banner ad appears at the top of the article for a book that I had LOOKED AT (didn't buy, just looked at) a few days ago on Amazon.

The internet remembers everything.

What's going on here? Is this something stupendously useful… or is it just plain creepy? Well, it depends what one's priorities happen to be. When I go on Amazon to browse book reviews, and Facebook is aware of all my book purchases (AND just books I've inquired about), I feel naked…as if I'm being monitored—without my consent—by an omni-present, hidden mechanism.

The feeling is justified. I AM being monitored by an omni-present mechanism.

This inter-linking of EVERYTHING is both amazingly beneficial and—quite possibly—marginally dangerous…if we take it to its logical conclusion.

Am I being paranoid?

I'm just a tad-bit cynical, I guess. And for good reason. My take on the matter is as follows: What I do on Amazon is none of Facebook's business. Heck, it's none of anyone's business. Or is it? Now I'm not so sure.

For the record, I have absolutely nothing to hide. So the contention is not about (unsanctioned) "full disclosure" *per se.* As far as I'm concerned, the world can know everything about me, and that would be just fine. But that isn't the point. The point is: With power comes the ability to abuse that power.

Ultimately, social networks only accumulate as much power as we allow them to accumulate. The "catch" is that something like Facebook can accumulate more power over us

than we might suspect. In other words, we often ***unwittingly*** allow that power accumulation. So it accumulates little by little, bit by bit, with few of us really noticing. This could be called BBC (Big-Brother-creep).

With every augmentation of these monitoring capabilities, the "panopticon" element of social networking becomes increasingly significant.

ENTICING ILLUSIONS:

Everything is now inter-connected; so, automatically, one thing becomes integrated with everything else. Again, this integration is passed off as something wonderful—as eminently useful TO ME. But it is even more useful to others who are operating, as it were, behind the scenes. Apple's innocuous-sounding ***iCloud*** and Microsoft's sleek-sounding ***Skydrive*** both offer "clouds"—those harmless, fluffy things that remind us of a limitless sky—to integrate all our information and all our on-line activity. We're told that such features offer us all this for our own benefit. (INGSOC, on the other hand, was not so creative.)

The wonderful user experience makes it seem like this is all designed FOR ME; but—ultimately—NONE of this is being done "for me". Nevertheless, Web 2.0 is designed to assure each user: "This is all about you!" Play along, the message goes, and everything will be wonderful. "By empowering us, we can empower you," is the common refrain issuing from power structures throughout history. 2012 is no different.

People are most easily exploited who are oblivious to the fact that they are being exploited.   They will eagerly play along, all the while under the glib impression that they are in control. They interpret their subordination as emancipation, and carry on as satisfied customers.

So it goes: We gleefully arrogate more and more capabilities to Web 2.0 for our own benefit. We allow companies to accrue ever more power so that they can better serve us. We interpret THEIR increased power as useful to US. We are rendered willing participants in our own deliciously-disguised subjugation.

The augmented capabilities of Facebook are often celebrated as a victory for the users, for whose benefit each new feature is ostensibly offered. But we must always remind ourselves that with augmented capabilities comes the increased chance that those capabilities can be appropriated for morally dubious purposes. Facebook has become very, very powerful. Concurrent with power is the ability to abuse it. So the question becomes: Who is keeping monolithic internet corporations in check?

Hint: not the users.

This is a matter of an ***asymmetrical*** need for transparency. Note that "disclosure" operates in two directions: Highly concentrated centers of power strive to be aware of the private lives of individual people; civilians can be made aware of the goings-on within highly concentrated centers of power. The former kind of transparency is dangerous; the latter is the basis for genuine democracy. The former benefits the power structures; the latter benefits the general public. Therefore, a civil society deters the former while encouraging the latter. Web 2.0 is doing the reverse…then passing it off as a FAVOR to everyone. We need simply ask: who needs the protection: massive power structures or individual people? The answer to this

question determines in which direction the transparency should apply.

Note the Orwellian wording of the privacy-alteration announcement sent out to all hotmail accounts (on 1/25/12) and then to all g-mail accounts (on 2/2/12):

"We're getting rid of over 60 different privacy policies across Google and replacing them with one that's a lot shorter and easier to read. Our new policy covers multiple products and features, *reflecting our desire to create one beautifully simple and intuitive experience across Google*."

This pertains to Google / Microsoft's project to integrate absolutely everything—in parallel with Facebook's project to do the same. Their augmented power is being passed off as a favor to the users. Again: "The more power we have, the more we can do to help you."

By summer 2012, Facebook will have about a billion members. A BILLION.
Insofar as it persuades most of these people to translate all activity to ON-LINE activity…and then to integrate all their on-line activity into its mechanism…Facebook will engender a dependency on Facebook that is the part of any business's wildest dreams.

…and the optimal incubator for BBC.

BEYOND MERE "SOCIAL NETWORKING":

FaceBook's new *Ticker* offers a feed of all your friends' activities—*streaming in real time*. (Seriously: What on Earth could possibly be the use of this?) Incorporating everyone's life into the FB mechanism is an enticing idea to users who fetishize automation and efficiency…but has weird implications for anyone who values autonomy. Indeed, Facebook *insists* that we put automation and efficiency above all else. (After all, in a Facebook World, what else is there?)

The new *Timeline* format is something INGSOC would have loved. The prospect of aggregating the full range of one's on-line experience in one place may seem appealing at first blush…but is it really such a good thing? This new format urges everyone to incorporate all one's on-line activity…*even when they're not on Facebook*. What's going on here?

Our priorities are shifting to accommodate the precedents being set by this new Facebook World. In a world where people value each other for reasons of sheer utility, genuine human bonds are transplanted by instrumental connectivity. Soon, it is the latter, not the former, that we care about.

Facebook's agenda to integrate every aspect of members' lives *into itself* is analogous to how cults persuade members to incorporate every aspect of their lives into the cult. In both cases, a dependency on the anointed edifice is fostered. In this scheme, members become dependent on a mechanism that is then able to "keep tabs on" everything. When all things are done through the designated mechanism, the thinking goes, one will be empowered. But here's the catch: When I can only be empowered THROUGH that mechanism, I am giving a lot of power TO that mechanism.

Do we really want technology to provide us with EVERYTHING? Is efficiency something to pursue for its own sake, in all contexts?

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

The social networking milieu afforded us by Web 2.0 is intoxicating. Social networking now permeates every aspect of our everyday lives—which means our lives are in many ways oriented around (and molded by) these tools. For many, this is a matter of full immersion. This paves the way for BBC.

We've become so infatuated with the applecart that we are dis-incentivized from upsetting it. We sit atop a massive house of cards—a precarious edifice in which we have a vested interest. So we will tend to protect that house of cards even once we see it for what it is.

In a way, we've painted ourselves into a corner. So long as we remain bedazzled by the kick-ass user experience offered by all the cool, new social media technology, we will remain oblivious to what's going on at the back end. This is precisely how most media corporations want things. For not only are such corporations vying for power OVER the internet; they are vying for power over all users…VIA the internet. "Empower us, so that we can empower you," we're told. Haven't we heard that somewhere before?