

Welcome To A Facebook World: Part VI

December 11, 2011 Category: American Culture

Download as PDF

This sixth installment of the WFW series is concerned with three hallmarks of the Web 2.0 culture: short attention spans, the self-involved treatment of information, and epidemic narcissism.

Even as the new media technology is—ostensibly—being designed to suit our needs, it is becoming more apparent that we are being conditioned *to adapt to the technology*. As I've pointed out earlier, it may now be governing us as much as we are controlling it. In ways we have yet to fully grasp, our lives have been subordinated to the modus operandi of a Facebook World.

As I've mentioned before, this is not a Luddite jeremiad—though some will certainly dismiss it as such. I'm a huge fan of technology, and admire innovative solutions to our daily problems. The concern here is with the *judicious use of technology*—something that seems to be undermined by our infatuation with the new social media. Rather than raining on the parade, this is about keeping it from marching down the wrong street.

SHORT ATTENTION SPANS:

The Facebook World has set a new precedent for handling information. Instead of attending to full works (e.g. reading an entire book), we engage in a cursory excavation of the data universe—extracting tid-bits that suit our immediate purposes. In-depth scrutiny is not fostered by Web 2.0 because in-depth scrutiny simply isn't part of the new zeitgeist.

It has come to the point that A.D.D. is the gold standard by which we interact. People can now only process so much information at a time. They will pay attention to X for a limited *series of moments* before their mind “moves on” to the next thing. Consequently, many people base their impression of X exclusively on whatever transpires in a narrow window of time. Careful, patient deliberation plays little role in this evaluation process.

Barring computer programmers during coding sprees and serious gamers during RPG binges, sustained focus has become anathema with the new technology. We want brief passages of text, not full disquisitions. Lengthy exposition, like lengthy discussion, has no place in such a media ecosystem.

Now that “smart” technology is doing much of our thinking for us, our pre-frontal cortexes seem to be atrophying. Habit begets dependence: everything to which we become accustomed translates to *perceived necessity*. Thus: We “need” to be perpetually hyper-stimulated. We “need” text-ing to communicate. We “need” GPS to navigate. We “need” virtual networking because “that's how people interact these days”. The “old fashioned” ways of deliberating are deemed too antiquated to bother with.

Deal with it, we're told. That's just how things are done now.

Consequently, all material needs to be encapsulated in a few quick sound-bites...if people are going to absorb it. Politicians need to “stay on message”...or lose the audience. A message needs to be “crystallized” in easily-digestible parcels...lest it require too much mental effort. People insist that things be presented in a flashy way...if they are going to take notice.

So get with the program (or get left behind).

The drawback to this new way of doing things is significant: There is no room to engage in (careful) critical analysis. We have become so habituated to immediate gratification that (meticulous) analytical thinking becomes untenable. Multi-tasking is not amenable to such time-consuming activities. If we need to attend to dozens of messages in our in-box before lunch, then there's a fat chance we'll be inclined to read, say, something like the essay you're reading right now.

A good indication of the trend is how music videos and television commercials are edited. During the course of the typical video / commercial, many of the clips last half a second. That's 20 clips in just a ten-second span of time. For the longer clips, the “shot” is held for perhaps 2 to 3 seconds. That's it. WHY? To hold our attention. If the clip lasts for much longer, we lose interest...and our attention wanders to the next item that “grabs” us. This phenomenon existed prior to the inauguration of Web 2.0. But the Facebook World in which we now find ourselves has exacerbated the problem.

Our general perspectives have adapted to accommodate this new m.o. When formulating how to do things, taking into account *the long term* is almost unheard of. Short-term satisfaction, short-term profits, short-term “fixes”: that's the name of the game. Being amused “in the moment” is the order of the day...every day. No exceptions. “I have time for a couple minute-long Youtube clips in between Facebook updates and blog postings. That's about it.”

The consequences of this widespread penchant for attention deficit are quite dire. When we're used to expressing opinions in under 140 characters, we no longer appreciate in-depth exposition. When we are capable only of thinking in terms of Tweets, critical deliberation no longer plays an integral role in our public discourse. (The comic irony is that according to this essay, the very people who should be reading this essay are precisely the people who will probably not read this essay.)

Even as we've lost interest in delving deep into disquisition, we've developed a fetish for *browsing*. The new m.o. isn't conducive to lengthy, in-depth investigation. In due course, we've become used to fleeting interludes of “checking stuff out” before moving on to the next (loosely-associated) thing...and on and on and on. Everything is geared toward hurried glances and impatient perusal. This routine is now called “research”. It's how we “learn” about things. Thus, we've come to treat important matters in the same manner we treat tabloid fodder. As a result, all that seems to exist any more is gossip.

A NEW WAY OF TREATING INFORMATION:

We have become a society of data scavengers. We expediently browse brief snippets of this and that until we find something that tantalizes our fancy. This is now how we define education. When we want to “learn about” something, we are no longer inclined to look into the

peer-reviewed works of renown scholars. Instead, we resort to the hearsay issuing from whatever sources we've designated as sacrosanct.

Instead of doing "research" (the old fashioned way), we troll for data snippets (with Google, Bing, or any of a dozen other search engines). We make use of "discovery engines" and "share engines". Pick any one of fifteen!

- **Bebo**
- **Xanga**
- **StumbleUpon**
- **Digg**
- **Faves**
- **Fark**
- **Furl**
- **Simpy**
- **Reddit**
- **Diigo**
- **CiteULike**
- **Mister Wong**
- **Newsvine**
- **Judgt**
- **Delicious**

Meanwhile, we can "tag" anything that catches our fancy using Google "Buzz", Google +, Facebook "Likes", and Yahoo! "Pulse" (now called "Buzz"). Such a custom-made "web of tags" becomes the universe within which we operate. While tagging, we can follow the next Tweet or the latest comment on our buddy's Facebook Wall. All these nifty tools are essentially super-charged meme-dissemination vehicles.

Moreover, "peer-sourcing" often creates an echo-chamber wherein each of us may comfortably dwell. Rarely will our applect be upset by "intrusions" from anything that doesn't comport with our desired scope of concern. Indeed, many of us tend to retreat into virtual enclaves so that we may hear our own views routinely lobbed back at us by like-minded compatriots. This is stupendously gratifying. Instead of using the web to broaden our horizons, we often end up using it to immerse ourselves in a memetic cocoon.

One can also make use of micro-blogging to stay abreast of what our peers are thinking at each moment. Micro-blogging is a mode of communication that caters to our hyper-short attention spans—and so has been a big hit. Hyper-short attention spans have transformed the accepted standards for exchanging information. This epidemic dysfunction is incessantly reinforced each day by **Tinker**, **Tumblr**, **Twitter**, **Plurk**, **Jaiku**, **Xing**, and **Pownce** (now called "SixApart"): all meme-distribution mechanisms.

Meanwhile, we can occupy ourselves with quotidian activities—such as checking "status updates" on Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Diaspora...thereby ensuring that we're remaining constantly distracted by petty fixations.

The consequence of this is plain to see: Our public discourse is fragmented into disparate microcosms. Within any given “community”, discussion is limited to back-and-forth comments on the blog-of-choice; the scope of exploration limited by the “tags” offered by compatriots. Is it any wonder, then, that we have the factions that we have?

The problem here isn't *recommending things to friends*—something we all like to do. Dysfunction arises when that process becomes too automated—so efficient that insular communities start to form. The microcosm forms faster than outside exposure can keep up. Before too long, “insiders” start circling the wagons. Instead of people asking what they can learn from others, the main question becomes, “Are you one of us or one of them?”

Demarcation of the *in-group* from, well, *everyone else* calcifies in cyber-space—and subsequently in real-space. Survey the tides of traffic on the internet: right-wing libertarians (anarcho-capitalists) will rarely interact in a productive way with left-wing libertarians (anarcho-syndicalists). Instead of the world-wide-web serving as a vehicle for broadening our horizons, parochialism trumps cosmopolitanism. Just follow the tags.

When we're not “networking” with our “contacts”, we're watching clips of cats playing the piano on Youtube. We now have spur-of-the-moment memo-dissemination capabilities. Not only is there **Twitter** (FYIs for social purposes), there's **Yammer** (comments for official organizations).

In this scheme, we're contending with two different kinds of positive feedback loops—each of which is problematic:

- An affinity-based feed-back loop (like-minded reinforces like-minded)
- A popularity-based feed-back loop (popularity begets more popularity)

On the one hand, we've fetishized *affinity*. If something is in keeping with how I already think of things, it will be automatically incorporated into my repertoire; otherwise it will be marginalized. There's nothing wrong with people with common interests finding each other and communing. The point, though, is to know when / where to draw the line. Automating the process releases one from the need to conscientiously draw such lines. In this way, when we share an interest, we end up forging insular guilds or succumbing to groupthink (a.k.a. “crowdsourcing”). When heteronomy becomes automated, tribalism is the inevitable outcome.

On the other hand, we've fetishized *popularity*. If something is popular, then it will tend to become more popular. (Less popular things will be summarily disregarded.) There's nothing wrong with wanting to know “what everybody's into these days”. However, when that's the primary barometer for ascertaining merit, problems will arise. “Let's see what most other people are doing” isn't the best way to make life decisions. Now that we've automated this query, it's the default way to make decisions.

So when people aren't occupied with Zynga games, staying abreast of Twitter feeds, perusing pics on a friend's blog or Flickr or Pinterest or Facebook's Instagram, keeping track of LinkedIn contacts or Facebook updates, and exchanging comments on BlackBerry Messenger, they can further entrench themselves in the virtual community of choice—each custom-fit to suit one's incumbent preferences.

The feedback loop phenomenon is best encapsulated by Amazon.com's “people who read this book also liked these books” algorithm. So Mark Levin readers will be directed to check out Sean Hannity books

(and vice versa). In this model, while Powerline readers will be referred to Politico postings (and vice versa), few in the right-wing audience will be exposed to heretical views. This self-reinforcing flow of traffic causes insular communities to calcify...thereby precluding open inquiry, mitigating critical reflection, and undermining healthy public discourse.

Social media is a blessing, but a mixed blessing. Of course, these tools are eminently useful. But that is beside the point. The question is: What effect is all this having on us? "Spreading the word" has been a part of Americana since Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* was read by (or to) every other adult in the entire country—in a time before even telephones existed. "Buzz on the street" operates in many ways that influence *what people are talking about around the proverbial water-cooler*. There is something to be said for "getting the word out" the old fashioned way. Depersonalizing all interaction may be more efficient, but it loses a vital human element.

The sheer utility of these "share engines" is beyond dispute. We must ask ourselves: To what degree are we using these tools, and to what degree are they using us? The answer seems to be more complicated than we like to think. After all, as any con man knows: An effective way to exploit people is to convince them that you're really SERVING them.

EPIDEMIC NARCISSISM:

Meehive captures the narcissism endemic to the Facebook World. This nifty-sounding tool offers another automated way to make everything ALL ABOUT ME (under the aegis of "news aggregation"). The name says it all: A *hive* geared for like-minded people. Within it, I am promised something wonderful: to be exposed only to "stuff" that suits my taste. It is the news-reporting equivalent of Facebook friend-ing. Having my inclinations perpetually reinforced on a daily basis: What's not to like about that?

The prospect of a HIVE tailored to ME is very enticing: I get to become further entrenched in the mindset I've settled upon. The offer is tough to turn down. After all, having one's views perpetually validated is quite gratifying. *Meehive* can offer me precisely that.

The "catch" to this inviting program is that each of us will have our dispositions further engrained. If I'm a big fan of, say, Sean Hannity and Mark Levin, an aggregator will guarantee that I will not be exposed to, say, Chris Hayes or Glen Greenwald. If I watch FoxNews, I'll be fed things from WorldNetDaily and Newsmax, never from Salon.com or TheYoungTurks. After all, whatever I bother to absorb is governed by how I feel about things. If you don't gear the material to MY sensibilities, then I why should I bother with you?

Now imagine something of a different sort: an "edification engine". That is: a mechanism by which one is regularly exposed to unfamiliar views—or to heterodox ways of thinking about things. Here, one would often be forced to confront (and be confronted by) people with whom one *completely disagrees*. "Well, that's no fun," would be a common response to such an odd proposal. Alas, many of us have forgotten: "fun" isn't the sine qua non of learning. The world, we sometimes forget, isn't "all about me".

Being narcissistic, we should remind ourselves, isn't the same as being selfish or as being vain. One can be vain without being narcissistic, and one can be narcissistic without being vain. Moreover, one can be selfish without being narcissistic, and one can be narcissistic without being selfish. (Selfishness and vanity also don't necessarily correlate.)

The focus here is on a mindset in which everything is thought of in terms of how I personally perceive things—a pathology that is found in Autistics. (Most people with Asperger's syndrome are neither vain nor selfish—yet have an innate penchant for chronic narcissism. They are not avaricious; they simply have difficulty putting themselves in another's shoes.)

Now imagine something like Asperger's syndrome as a contagion. When we automate narcissism, it can't help but become epidemic. Echo-chambers are incubators for narcissism; and narcissism fuels echo-chambers. It's a vicious cycle that is created by Web 2.0. After all, insular communities are self-gratifying, and gratification SELLS.

Making everything "all about me" is precisely the sort of mentality engendered by the new social media. Unlike those on the Autistic spectrum, this is not a congenital handicap; it's a conditioned response. It doesn't necessarily make us greedy or conceited; rather, it alters the lens through which we perceive the world—OUR world. The chances that we'll go out of our way to put ourselves in another's shoes become miniscule. Why bother, when I'm so constantly concerned with maintaining my custom-made world?

Thinking of all things in terms of how *I* feel has become standard operating procedure. This involves a self-centered relativism that is treated—by each respective person—as an absolute. "This is how things are in terms of ME, so that's how I will take things to be, period." The new social media happily obliges. In this scheme, every one of us is another satisfied customer—none the wiser, yet chronically gratified.

In some ways, this is more dangerous than (naked) greed or (overt) pompous self-regard. After all, narcissism can be quite furtive. For we often don't even recognize that we're doing it—even as it molds the way we think about everything. It renders us mercurial, myopic, obtuse, and self-absorbed—though we construe all of this as *participating* in "the system".

Naturally, then, web-designers concern themselves far more with presentation than with substance. In other words, the palatability of "user experience" is a higher priority than the nature of what's happening to the user. (Is he really being edified? Irrelevant. As long as he's a user / customer, that's all that matters.) Our social media reflects this.

Narcissism can be devious, as we tend to remain wonderfully glib while succumbing to its trappings. Remember: Facebook allows each of us to be the center of our own custom-made universes; it's almost irresistible. Once we SYSTEMATIZE narcissism, though, our culture will gradually start to orient itself around that mode of thinking. The effects are now all around us. One way to illustrate the nature of this change is to extrapolate current trends into a distant, dystopian future. Use your imagination: it would make a very scary movie.

CONCLUSION:

Unsurprisingly, there is a symbiosis between these three facets of a Facebook World:

Short attention spans *feed off of* the new way of handling information—even as those short attention spans *play into* that very treatment of information. One is predicated on the other.

Meanwhile, the penchant for narcissism sets the stage for the new way of handling of information—even as that treatment of information tends to foster narcissism. This inter-related-ness is summed up with: If it doesn't concern me, then why should I give a shit?

Finally, short attention spans both engender and are engendered by narcissism. When it's all about how **I** feel, then why bother exploring anything that doesn't conduce to my immediate concern? After all, I demand gratification from what I see before me, here and now—based on my own proclivities. The rest is noise.

NOTE:

There are exceptions to the trends addressed in this essay:

Professional networking mechanisms like LinkedIn, Google Groups, and XING make sense for certain purposes. (Like any technology, they are ripe for abuse, so must be used judiciously.)

Regarding “tagging”, scientific-research-cooperation tools like CiteULike can serve a great purpose. Meanwhile, if I want all my mother's friends to see the video clip of my daughter's dance recital, Google + will make that happen at the click of a button.

Customizing the tools on one's desktop (to better suit one's purposes) can be a good thing—as with My Yahoo!, iGoogle, Pageflakes, Plaxo, and Netvibes. (Again, such things have legitimate utility so long as they aren't abused.)

Not all microcosms exhibit the kind of dysfunctions mentioned above. A discerning community-facilitation is exemplified by the science-based Slashdot.org. Other good examples include:

- Wakoopa for computer geeks
- Disaboom for people with disabilities
- Indaba Music and Reverb Nation for musicians
- LifeKnot for people with shared hobbies
- Virb for artists
- ScienceStage and ResearchGate for scientists
- OneWorldTV and OneClimate for environmentalists

Meetup.org serves as a great tool for those with common interests (who are looking to actually get together, in person). Such “community facilitation” sites don't tend to engender insularity and group-think. It is the ideology-based communities with which I'm concerned (due to their tendency to further entrench people in a designated mindset).

Embracing technology is not an all-or-nothing ultimatum. The key is to remain cognizant of how the adoption of new tools affects us.