

Welcome To A Facebook World: Part VII

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Social media is very, very powerful. Indeed, it has helped people topple governments. It now seems to be coming at us relentlessly from every direction. Like it or not, Facebook and other social media technologies are transforming our lives in significant ways: how we date / shop / work / meet new people / do business...and how we interact with those we “know”.

Social networking tools determine how we communicate on a daily basis, how we see others, and even how we see ourselves. They are changing the political process itself—in some ways for the better; in other ways, for the worse. (Like most technologies, it is a mixed bag of pros and cons.)

The present essay seeks to unpack the sociology behind this new Facebook world—investigating the ways in which the Web 2.0 culture is affecting American culture. The insights offered here compliment the insights offered in the first six installments of the “Welcome To A Facebook World” series.

Among other things, we’ve seen that the new social media streamlines communication—yet we rarely note that it also alters **the accepted mode of** communication. Repercussions of this are not always a good thing. Point in case: The deterioration of the political process into stage-managed melodrama—wherein “politics” is little other than a marketplace of brand-names. Political participation has become a consumer activity: we go shopping for whatever happens to suit our taste. When we’re accustomed to expediently surfing around, clicking through this and that, as if impatiently browsing a tabloid magazine, this is how we will tend to approach life-in-general.

In this scheme, public officials are rendered nothing more than well-choreographed performers. The demos is rendered a fragmented mass of quibbling factions. Campaigns become superficial PR contests. When public office is more show-biz than public service, we shouldn’t be surprised when severe dysfunction ensues.

Web 2.0 is exacerbating an already over-the-top hyper-consumerism. We no longer evaluate ideas; we CONSUME them. We peruse what is being marketed to us, and pick the items that happen to grab us “in the moment”. In this scheme, citizens are reduced to target-customers. The polis becomes a mass of mercurial consumers who shop around for whatever “product” catches their fancy. Everything is about PROMOTION...which itself is just a matter of catching the attention of people with ever-shorter attention spans.

(There is little room for critical reflection, because it's too inefficient.)

Here, deliberative democracy becomes anathema. The characteristics of this new zeitgeist are stunning to behold: journalism as entertainment, politics as theater, government as business, and policy as consumer-product. The scheme has been coeval with a drastic degeneration of the public discourse...and, consequently, the tacit approval of the transformation of democracy into a de facto plutocracy.

But what, in heaven's name, does this have to do with the social media technologies of Web 2.0? It is plain to see that the deterioration of the demos has enabled all this to happen. The point is: That deterioration is largely attributable to modern media.

But HOW, exactly? In order to answer this question, we need to understand the following terms:

- social capital
- status anxiety
- social evaluative threat
- false pride (a.k.a. insecure self-esteem)
- narcissism

An explanation of our dysfunction requires these five concepts. In this essay, I reference passages from a book that has nothing whatsoever to do with the present topic. In fact, the book doesn't even mention Facebook or any social media technology. *The Spirit Level* is a book about material inequality. Nevertheless, it deals with insights that are relevant to a critique of the Facebook World.

This essay seeks to apply those insights to another context: the Web 2.0 culture. Certain themes of Wilkinson and Pickett's critique are salient. With each quote, keep in mind: The authors were not discussing Facebook or social media technology when making their point—a fact that makes the following critique all the more potent.

BACKGROUND:

Many Americans are driven to consume in order to find happiness. So, naturally, almost everything has come to be seen as a consumer product. In a Web 2.0 milieu, presentation (i.e. image) is what matters most. Consequently, the orgy of in-authenticity that is Facebook has been romanticized. Not only do we assess other people (and memes within "the marketplace of ideas") based on superficial criteria (e.g. stigmas, gut reactions, quick impressions), we partake in the charade by creating identities for ourselves that are suitable for these purposes. Inevitably, this affects the way we think about things-in-general.

One need only observe adolescents for a day to see that people will do the most ridiculous things in order to be "cool"—to be accepted by peers—to feel as though they "belong". In many ways, FB ensures that we remain adolescent. This is more than wearing one's trousers preposterously low in order to be "hip"; it's about creating a presentation of a virtual self that—in certain ways—comes to define one's real self.

To be aware of this, we need to be aware of "status anxiety": the anxiety that results from the ever-imposing "threat" of social evaluations (no matter how dubiously made) from others.

Chronic

status anxiety begets ever-more desperate schemes for establishing some edifice of esteem for oneself—be it wearing ridiculous clothing or gathering a thousand “friends” on a website. Consequently, petty things (like one’s clothing or one’s FB page) become a proxy for WHO ONE IS.

We all compensate for our insecurities in a thousand different ways. But Facebook offers an *automated mechanism* for doing this—not necessarily a good thing. (By accumulating a thousand “friends”, one will start to feel that one MATTERS. Street-cred becomes web-cred.)

But how do we ameliorate status anxiety in a Facebook World? In ways that actually REINFORCE status anxiety. It becomes a self-perpetuating process: Facebook becomes the “arena” (i.e. a theater) in which we vye for approval and status...oftentimes in utterly specious ways...even as it creates the need to have *that kind* of approval and status.

In their renown book, *The Spirit Level*, sociologists Wilkinson and Pickett explain: As “status competition and social evaluative threat” increase, “egos have to be propped up by self-promoting and self-enhancing strategies...” (SL p45) Facebook serves this purpose via a public forum of exposure...and thereby fuels the pathology rather than tempering it. “We become outwardly tougher and harder in the face of greater exposure to social evaluation anxieties, but inwardly—as the literature on narcissism suggests—probably more vulnerable, less able to take criticism, less good a personal relationships, and less able to recognize our own faults.” (ibid.)

Sound familiar? This is precisely what Web 2.0 is doing to many of the most engrossed (i.e. addicted) users. Narcissism and false pride are engendered as a way of “dealing with” insecurities. With Web 2.0, evaluative feedback is put into overdrive, compelling us to play the game or get left behind.

“Shame and its opposite, pride, are rooted in the processes through which we internalize how we imagine others see us. Shame [is] the [primary] social emotion because pride and shame provide the social evaluative feedback as we experience ourselves as if through others’ eyes. Pride is the pleasure (and shame the pain) through which we are socialized.” (SL p41) Facebook super-charges this process.

Due to systems of social evaluative feedback, “we learn...to behave in socially acceptable ways...” Acceptable to whom? To our chosen peer group. Having a “circle”, after all, is about being accepted by the specified group. We learn this as children, and “our sensitivity to shame continues to provide the basis for conformity throughout adult life.” (ibid.) In certain cases, Facebook could be deemed a social evaluative feedback system gone haywire.

ANALYSIS:

How people see you MATTERS. The question is: How is it that we’ve come to determine how people see us? When one’s identity is based primarily on presentation (rather than substance), something is woefully awry. Facebook has given us a new social evaluation environment. It ends up being venue for every-man-for-himself narcissism, which is passed off as being a savvy “networker”.

As I see it, there are two psychological conditions engendered by extensive Facebook usage:

- **Insecure self-esteem:** the false pride we develop in order to compensate for (repressed) insecurities
- **Narcissism:** making everything all about ME (thinking of all things in terms of MY concerns)

The new social media, I contend, compels us to be this way because that is the way we're forced to "play along" if we want to be part of the party.

Within the Facebook World, we are being conditioned to be more and more self-involved, and to base our self-esteem (and esteem of others) on the superficial criteria on which social networks are often predicated.

The consequent dissolving of social cohesiveness is becoming increasingly apparent. Thus, a sense of community based on authenticity (a solidarity that transcends social factioning) is becoming untenable. Empathetic connection (enabled by the forging of genuine human bonds) is no longer encouraged: it's too inefficient. (We've forgotten that genuine friendship is SUPPOSED TO BE inefficient. Healthy relationships aren't predicated on maximizing efficiency. Why not? Because a human bond isn't based on sheer, raw utility.)

Social media-mediated interactions mitigate our ability to feel empathy—even as they exacerbate our tendency to be self-involved. This new form of connectivity transplants any activity that would form genuine human bonds, so we fixate on the former while disregarding the latter.

It's a vicious circle: Narcissism begets our Facebook selves; the clamoring to manage the presentation of these virtual selves re-enforces (and exacerbates) the narcissism. In this scheme, narcissism is SYSTEMATIZED. In-authenticity becomes glamorous. Presentation trumps authentic expression, and fakeness becomes standard operating procedure.

Forums like Facebook provide those of us with low self-esteem (those who have deficiencies in forging genuine human bonds) with the prospect of having lots of "friends". But once someone has hundreds of "friends", the term becomes meaningless...even as one's esteem is bolstered by the high "friend" tally. The implicit inner monologue: "Wow. Look at how many people 'like' me! I must be worth something."

Meanwhile, the conditions on which a demos depends are undermined...and modes of civic engagement subverted.

THE RACE FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL:

“Social capital” measures one’s involvement in community life (e.g. acceptance by peers, “street cred”, clout). What Facebook does is engender an **ersatz** social capital (a social capital based on petty criteria)...thereby undercutting actual civic engagement. It does this by offering the illusion of “connected-ness” as a palliative for lack of organic community. We’re encouraged be in-authentic in the name of pragmatism—to pay attention to things other than things that we’d be much wiser to pay attention to.

While social networks enable us to TRANSCEND fragmentation and socio-economic stratification, they also DISTRACT US FROM fragmentation and socio-economic stratification. ACTUAL parochialism and ACTUAL inequality is obfuscated by the VIRTUAL cosmopolitanism and VIRTUAL equality of the virtual world in which users immerse themselves. So, instead of dealing with “real-life” problems, we become inured to them. This happens via the enticing illusion of “community” that is provided by social networking technologies.

The fact of the matter is that sometimes it is a GOOD thing to be bothered by problems—as it impels us to strive to solve them. So long as we don’t notice the real problems, we are content to just “play along”. In a way, much of our new social media technology is one gigantic distraction. We eagerly immerse ourselves in the trappings of Web 2.0—all the while remaining oblivious to important matters.

The point is this: Forging VIRTUAL equality is a good thing, so long as we don’t lose site of ACTUAL inequalities. Amidst the gaping lack of organic communities (primarily based on authenticity), genuine human bonds are transplanted by the superficial connected-ness of Web 2.0 social networks.

As organic community dissolves, FB fills the vacuum with one’s own, customized virtual community. It does so based on a mechanized “friend-ing” routine: add a “friend” to your life via a (mutual) click of the button! Here one can become (or gain) a “friend” by extemporaneously accepting a digitized “request”...based on whatever whimsical impetus impels us in the moment. The connection is binary, and measured more quantitatively than qualitatively. If robots were capable of friendships, this is the manner in which they would form them.

Invariably, identities become things we fabricate and consume, peddle and shop for. Consumerism, meanwhile, bolsters our insecurities while offering ways to cover them. (Like religion, it invents the sickness, then offers the cure.) There ensues “a kind of defensive attempt to shore up our confidence in the face of those insecurities. The defense involves a kind of self-promoting, insecure egotism which is easily mistaken for high self-esteem.” (SL p36) Veblen had been (rightly) worried about conspicuous consumption. If only he’d imagined conspicuous self-promotion.

In a Facebook World, we revere those who promote themselves the best. In order to be part of the phenomenon (and not get left behind), we are almost FORCED to garner social capital in the ways dictated by Web 2.0 culture. But as enthralling as this may be, it isn’t a good thing.

Wilkinson and Pickett talk about “a kind of internal attempt to talk oneself up and maintain a positive sense of oneself in the face of threats to self-esteem.” This ersatz esteem is “therefore fragile, like whistling in the dark, and reacts badly to criticism. People with insecure high self-esteem [false pride] tend to be insensitive to others and to show an excessive preoccupation with themselves, with success, and with their image and appearance in the eyes of others. This unhealthy high self-esteem is often called ‘threatened egotism’, ‘insecure high self-esteem’,

or ‘narcissism’...” (SL p37)

A demos can’t exist in this social climate. So not only does a participatory, deliberative democracy become an intractable task, it isn’t even a task we’re interested in doing anymore. It has no part in a Facebook World. Yes, networking technologies facilitate organized events. Yes, networking technologies allow people to orchestrate movements. But this isn’t the end-all, be-all of a healthy society. Democracy can’t work without being deliberative. Even as it enhances communication quantitatively, it diminishes communication qualitatively. Web 2.0 is antithetical to critical deliberation. There is a difference between connectivity and civic-mindedness.

NARCISSISM:

Many don’t realize the extent to which their offline selves are being overshadowed by their manufactured virtual identities. In the new ecosystem, people are no longer connecting with one another in meaningful ways. The idea of a genuine “human bond” is slowly, steadily, eroding into some superficial notion of “connectivity”. All the while, the manner in which we communicate OFF-line has been significantly affected by the ingrained habits of Web 2.0 modes of interaction.

I’ve noted several times in the previous essays, and can’t help but reiterate: People are losing the will and the ability to have genuine conversations. This point can’t be emphasized enough. The gravity of such a development is difficult to exaggerate. The explanation for this is, in part, that we’re becoming too narcissistic to engage in a substantive back-and-forth. We don’t care to inquire about things that don’t fit comfortably into our incumbant schema. After all, there is little room for mutually-edifying exchanges in a Facebook World. Web 2.0 promises to cater to our pre-established proclivities, not to challenge them.

Sociologist Jean Twenge has shown a rising trend in narcissism. She “found that by 2006, two thirds of American college students scored above what had been the average narcissism score in 1982.” The idea that “what we have seen is the rise of an **insecure narcissism**—particularly among young people—rather than a rise in genuine self esteem now seems widely accepted...” (SL p37)

Which brings us back to status anxiety. “It is now fairly clear that the rises in anxiety have been accompanied by rising narcissism and that the two have common roots. Both are caused by an increase in what has been called ‘social evaluative threat’.” (ibid.)

Again, Facebook puts social evaluative threat on steroids, even as it encourages us all to be narcissists. Once narcissism is glamorous, we lose sight of how dysfunctional narcissism really is. We’re so concerned about managing our image, tweaking our presentation to ensure maximum Web 2.0-type “social capital”, we lose sight of other things—the things that used to be important to us. Social-evaluative threat has never been so relentless as when it is automated.

In Twenge's studies, it was found that "tasks that included a social-evaluative threat (such as threats to self-esteem or social status) in which others could negatively judge performance...provoked larger and more reliable cortisol changes than stressors without these particular threats." These findings suggest that "human beings are driven to preserve **the social self** and are vigilant to threats that may jeopardize their social esteem or status".

Think of what the new social media does to this eminently human drive. So much for empathy, human solidarity, and civic-mindedness. (Without an organic community, such things become anathema.) The maintenance of a demos, then, becomes untenable...and democracy suffers. Alas, we're too enmeshed in our hyper-consumerism and petty fixations to notice such real-world developments. We're paying too much attention to status updates and text messages to look around and see the guy down the street who's well-being is interconnected with our own.

Keep in mind, these studies found that "social evaluative threats were those which created the possibility for loss of [genuine self-] esteem. They typically involved the presence of an evaluative audience...a potential for negative social comparisons..." (SL p38) Note how the new social media technologies exploit this tendency: By making the entire world the audience, one is compelled to present oneself in the ways that the culture machine demands. Facebook gives one the largest evaluative audience ever assembled.

So we're trained to be narcissistic as a matter of course. For all its connecting us, Web 2.0 rarely compels us to put ourselves in another's shoes. Empathy, after all, is inefficient.

CONCLUSION:

Wilkinson and Pickett discuss "rising anxiety accompanied by a narcissistic defense of an insecure self-image." They quote the findings of studies that show that the 'social self' that we are constantly trying to defend "reflects one's esteem and status, and is largely based on others' perception of one's worth..." (SL p39)

The modus operandi of Facebook is predicated on precisely this.

So where does (the illusion of) friendship come in? The studies showed that the perception of "friendship has a protective effect because we feel more secure and at ease with friends. Friends make you feel appreciated, they find you good company, enjoy your conversation—they like you." (ibid.) They "give a shit" about you. So, naturally, a mechanism that promises to give you all the friends you want at the click of a button will be a big hit! (Meanwhile, we can all remain smug in the illusion that "I'm just doing it all for networking.")

A generation ago, if one heard from an acquaintance, "I'm friends with you because you're good for networking purposes," one would have been offended. Now, however, this is the norm: a perfectly acceptable reason for having a relationship. People connect with people, then, out of sheer utility. Is it any wonder that organic communities and social solidarity are dissolving? There isn't a demos any longer; there are just social networking circles based on each contact's instrumental value.

All the while, we can rest assured that we have hundreds of "friends".

Wilkinson and Pickett continue: “If, in contrast, we lack friends and feel avoided by others, then few of us are thick-skinned enough not to fall prey to self-doubts, to worries that people find us unattractive and boring, that they think we are stupid or socially inept.”

Facebook takes care of all of this by enabling any one of us to collect a bountiful supply of “friends”. This is better than even the most vivid hallucination. Why? Because hallucinations are limited to oneself. With Facebook, the illusion is advertised, for the world to see, on the world-wide web. One is part of a global phenomenon!

Wilkinson and Pickett conclude: “The evidence of our sensitivity to ‘social evaluative threat’, coupled with Twenge’s evidence of long-term rises in anxiety and narcissism, suggests that we may—by the standards of any previous society—have become highly self-conscious, obsessed with how we appear to others, worried that we might come across as unattractive, boring, stupid or whatever, and constantly trying to manage the impressions we make.” (SL p42) Sound familiar?

This, of course, has always been the case. But the new social media technology super-charges these proclivities. Status-anxiety-on-steroids begets hyper-consumerism and a chronic preoccupation with the superficial. Web 2.0 may do many wonderful things, but it is also having deleterious effects on the weal of society. Yet many of us are too intoxicated by these nifty tools to notice their adverse effects.

A few hours on Facebook provides a case-study in precisely what Wilkinson and Pickett are talking about. “At the core of our interactions with strangers is our concern for the social judgments and evaluations they might make: how do they rate us, did we give a good account of ourselves? This vulnerability is part of the modern psychological condition and feeds directly into consumerism.” (SL p42-43) Keep in mind, they weren’t even thinking of Facebook when they were making these points (which makes the connection here even more creepy).

So we humans—the social animals that we are—do certain things in order to be valued by others. (Speaking for myself, I often do what I do so that I can *feel valuable*.) Facebook offers this feeling—at the click of a button. We are pragmatic creatures, so we will tend to do whatever WORKS. The prospect of “being part of” something where hundreds (or thousands) officially acknowledge our existence is quite enticing. So we run with it.

Meanwhile, though, genuine human bonds and organic communities are dissolving. Few of us notice this, as we’re so thoroughly enamored with, so thoroughly immersed in, so addicted to the trappings of Web 2.0. Democracy can’t work without a demos. But no matter: each of us has cobbled together our custom-fit social circles. It’s what Robert Nozick dubbed an “experience engine”. We’d be well-advised to proceed with caution.