Welcome To A Facebook World: Part V

Social networks should come with a flashing disclaimer: **You are now so connected that your connectivity is no longer in your hands.**

In this new Facebook World, connection with others is mostly being done for us…or even to us.“Trust us,” the system says, “We’ll take care of it.”The CEO of Google wants to (in his own words) “systematize everything”.The CEO of Facebook unabashedly declares that he seeks the quantitative maximization of connectivity.He wants us to be able to do everything via Facebook.

Sounds tempting.In a way: yes.But what’s going on here?

Take the following scenario:

My account (and thus, my profile) is suddenly inter-linked with the accounts of myriad other people (with whom I may or may not actually be, or want to be, associated) simply because one of those people (wittingly or not) happened to post a photo in which I happened to be present.The automated face-recognition “tagged” me, thereby automatically incorporating me (and anyone else who happened to be in any of the photos on any of the other peoples’ accounts now in that loop) into this metastasizing web of indirect associations.

Splendid.

When one un-hesitantly views this occurrence as a nifty thing, one has most likely succumbed to the lure of what I call “Borg Syndrome”.In this fantastical scheme, connections between humans are no longer managed by the humans involved, but by a meta-mechanism presiding over ALL of us.Sounds wonderful, right?If magnitude of connection an end it itself, then such a feature is a wonderful thing.If.

We’re all being “connected” (in the Facebook sense), but at the expense of what? Everything is being “systematized”, but at what cost?No worries: “just go with it” and enjoy the ride.

Indeed, this can all be delightfully convenient for those of us seeking to maximize efficiency.However, if we don't seek efficiency for its own sake, a chary approach to these new mechanisms may be warranted.After all, when each of us can keep track of our designated community by using the system, that means the system is keeping track of everybody.

In this scheme, the information asymmetry will never be in our favor.We are masters of our isolated domains, but slaves to the system that mediates those domains.Welcome to a Facebook World, where we have become the tools—yet have been made to feel like masters.

The political scientist, Langdon Winner, once noted: "If the experience of modern society shows us anything, it is that technologies are not merely aids to human activity, but also powerful forces acting to reshape that activity and its meaning."Let's look at the effects of this new modus operandi—on both the micro and the macro level.

PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS:

Times have changed…for better in some ways, not for the better in others.As with most things, this change has been a mixed bag of pros and cons.While most of us are all-too-familiar with the pro's of this new world, an evaluation of potential cons may be in order.

In this Facebook world, our diminishment of sustained focus has had undeniable consequences.Nicholas Carr notes that reading has been largely supplanted by "the speedy, superficial skimming of information."For example, when making inquiries, we find ourselves impatiently browsing parcels of data culled from the links generated by a Google search.Such a search, he points out, discourages "any deep, prolonged engagement with a single argument, idea, or narrative."Whereas once we procured understanding by delving into extensive exposition, we are now only willing to tolerate a dynamic catalogue of swiftly-updating snippets.It is a process in which "the strip-mining of 'relevant content' replaces the slow excavation of meaning."This is no accident.

With each text volley and Tweet, we indulge in another "quick fix"…and are thus plunged into what science fiction writer Cory Doctorow calls an "ecosystem of interruption technologies."With every Google search, we're drawn in whatever direction the crowd happens to be moving.With each additional "friend" request, we are that much more firmly plugged into the collective…and that much less

connected on a human level—a level we've almost forgotten even exists.On each social site, we wear our masks for the virtual masquerade ball, yet sometimes lose track of who we are.Alas, who we really are simply doesn't matter any more: we're defined by our utility in this "how connected can we become" rat race.(Or, perhaps, "who we really are" has become a byproduct of the self that we're compelled to fabricate in order to suite this new world—a self designed to accommodate the virtual world to which we've become beholden?)

Well, whoever we are, at least we're hyper-connected.

Indeed, we are infatuated by a daily orgy of network-mania.Yet, in the midst of this festival of "connecting", something about our humanity is being sacrificed.In The Shallows, Nicholas Carr notes: "The great danger we face as we become more intimately involved with our computers—as we come to experience more of our lives through the disembodied symbols flickering across our screens—is that we'll begin to lose our humanness."Even as we immerse ourselves in the latest blog-posting, we continue "to sacrifice the very qualities that separate us from machines." (p. 207)As William Gibson would put it, we're all blissfully "jacked in".We're all too enraptured to find anything about this Facebook World the least bit creepy.

Carr continues: "One of the greatest dangers we face as we automate the working of our minds, as we cede control over the flow of our thoughts and memories to a powerful electronic system, is the one that informs the fears of both the scientist Joseph Weizenbaum and the artist Richard Foreman: **A slow erosion of our humanness and our humanity.**" (p. 220)Carr is no Luddite.Like Einstein with nuclear technology, he salutes the advance of human knowledge while emphasizing the need to be judicious in the use of any new technology.

Goethe once pointed out that we are rarely deceived by others; it is we who generally deceive ourselves.We must ask ourselves: To what degree are we indulging in self-deception when we become intensely engrossed in (and chronically dependent on) this new media technology?Alas, Web 2.0 apologists scoff at these concerns: "Get with the program," we're told, "Or you'll just miss the world as it flies by."Who cares about abstract talk of "humanity" when there's concrete utility to be maximized?

But perhaps it would be wise to step back for a moment—and take stock of the enchanting world in which we now find ourselves.With this new way of operating our day-to-day lives, there seems to be (almost) no more mental discipline (no more

prolonged concentration, and certainly no more thorough deliberation).Instead, we must make haste…or miss out.That's how the world works now. Deal with it, we're told, or get left behind.

Ok, fair enough.But "dealing with it" also involves a prudent dose of skepticism."Dealing with it" is not necessarily tantamount to wholesale acceptance of each new gadget.The fact of the matter is that meticulous critical analysis is becoming outmoded.(Why?It's too inefficient, cumbersome, inconvenient.)Is this a good thing?Patient critical reflection is fast becoming a thing of the past.(Who has the time anymore?The world no longer works that way.Didn't you read Malcolm Gladwell's Think?)Engaging in on-going, in-depth dialogue (formerly known as "having a conversation") is no longer in fashion.These days, if you can't relay it in a text-message, then you're irrelevant.

Get used to it, we're told, that's just the way it is now.

Becoming deeply engrossed in serious exposition has become almost unheard of.Substantive discourse that takes more than three minutes of our time is rendered obsolete in a world where things are digested in snippets.

That's just not how people do things anymore.Adapt.

I hear you.But here's the problem: Short attention spans can be considerably detrimental to democracy.After all, part of being a responsible citizen is being able to stay abreast of important issues while cultivating a thorough understanding of the subject matter.In an A.D.D. culture, few are willing to sit down and take the time to learn about what's really going on.It's so much easier to catch a 5-minute back-and-forth on Fox News or MSNBC.

Participatory, deliberative democracy can't work without a well-informed citizenry.A citizenry can only be well-informed if it's willing to make the effort to learn stuff other than the score of last night's ball game or which celebrity is dating which celebrity.So Democracy is NOT working these days.Funny enough, the "powers that be" seem to be counting on precisely that.At the end of the day, it is in their best interest when the proletarian masses are engrossed in Reality TV, Twitter followings, Facebook friend-ing frenzies, the latest shocking development on the local news, getting "the dirt" in popular gossip mags, and staying on tope of scandalous melodrama offered by tabloid rags.

Observe American pop culture.We find that few people are interested in focusing on relevant things—as they are chronically distracted by irrelevant STUFF.(See my Carnival of Distractions.)We've become a nation of feckless consumers—mentally lethargic (yet thoroughly amused) drones incapable of critical reflection.Serious deliberation is anathema in a world where people can only focus on the next Tweet or text message.

Our psychology is molded by the technology's modus operandi, not vice versa.We'd be wise to keep this in mind.

SOCIAL EFFECTS:

We all tend to conform to prevailing norms.Our sense of what is important, then, tends to align itself with the tidal pull of the (ambient) collective consciousness.The "catch" is that this often involves what sociologists call false consciousness.What do we care about?What do we pay attention to?What sorts of things are we concerned with during the course of a typical day?What is the Grand Narrative by which the masses make sense of their lives?

Our culture forms around the technology that we've come to depend on.Regarding this point, Nicholas Carr offers some important observations in The Shallows:"Every intellectual technology…embodies an intellectual ethic, a set of assumptions about how the human mind…should work."He adds: "The users of the technology are also usually oblivious to its ethic.[They] are concerned with the practical benefits they gain from employing the tool."He concludes: "Ultimately, it's an invention's intellectual ethic that has the most profound effect on us." (p. 45)Indeed, we have developed an intellectual ethic tailored to the prevailing technology—an intellectual ethic that is, shall we say, problematic.

The Facebook World is changing us.Carr explains: "As the time we spend scanning web pages crowds out the time we spend reading books, as the time we spend exchanging bite-sized text messages crowds out the time we spend composing sentences and paragraphs, as the time we spend hopping across links crowds out the time we devote to quiet reflection and contemplation, the circuits that support those old intellectual functions and pursuits weaken and begin to break apart.The brain recycles the disused neurons and synapses for other, more pressing work.We gain new skills and perspectives but lose the old ones."(p. 120)With this in mind, we'd be wise to asses what we're losing even as we're enthralled by what we're gaining.

Let’s take, for example, the ways in which most people form their views.What is it that most of us base our opinions on?Currently, in American culture, few want to make the effort to educate themselves—because it’s so much easier to remain in an echo-chamber: the echo-chamber of one’s choosing.Why is this?An echo-chamber offers each person the satisfaction of having his pre-established views perpetually re-enforced.Visiting a typical blog or news-site enables one to remain smugly within his hermetically-sealed ideological cocoon.It is extremely gratifying to have one’s beliefs eternally validated by those who’s role it is to eternally validate those beliefs. (After all, who doesn’t like to feel like he’s right about things?)

Painfully perusing one of the most preposterous periodicals in the nation, The Weekly Standard, I sometimes wonder: “Do people really believe this stuff?”Yes, indeed they do.That’s why those who read The Weekly Standard read The Weekly Standard and not Mother Jones: because this, not that, is what they have an entrenched vested interest in believing.

Nevertheless, I can’t help but ask myself: “How can people read this?They can’t possibly take this seriously.”Indeed, they can; and they do.Trickle-down economics? Check.Universal Public Healthcare would be a bad thing?Check.Corporate power is a good thing?Check.

But how, I wonder.How is it that they come to believe such things?When someone’s mind is accustomed to only processing provocative Reality TV scenes and text messages, one becomes stupendously easy to manipulate…and exploit.Credulity goes into overdrive once critical reflection is removed from the picture.This is how religions operate.This is how jingoism operates.Propaganda and indoctrination are predicated on this very tendency.

The illusion of empowerment can be more compelling than actual empowerment.We observe this social-psychological effect at work in other contexts.For example, when people join cult movements, they typically feel more empowered, even as they eagerly abdicate sovereignty over their minds.It’s candy-coated subordination that is the most dangerous.The typical member will proclaim that he’s never felt more free in his life.

Whether this is the Peoples Temple or the G.O.P., the underlying scheme is the same.After all, it’s about making people FEEL good, while ensuring that they don’t THINK (for themselves) too much.Keep ‘em fixated on the show, and they won’t care

what’s going on behind the curtain.Stagnant pre-frontal cortexes make this stunt easier to pull off.A Facebook World is the optimal incubator for a similar thing: cognitive stagnation on one level veiled in hyper-stimulation on another level.

As Carr points out: “The Web…places more pressure on our working memory, not only diverting resources form our higher reasoning faculties, but obstructing the consolidation of long-term memories and the development of schemas.” (p. 193)In a Facebook World, say goodbye to analytical thinking skills.Now, re-active thinking is the name of the game.Why are so many Americans so reactionary with their politics?Here’s part of the explanation.Want to condition tens of millions of people en masse?Make sure they’re all fixated on Facebook updates, pre-occupied with the latest development on their favorite television show, and awaiting the next juicy scoop of celebrity gossip.

Want to guarantee that the public discourse degenerates to a level where right-wing policy actually sounds like a decent idea?Ensure that most people are only capable of thinking of things—anything—in terms of Tweets.Want to pass a charlatan off as a guru?Ensure that people not only can’t tell the difference between a scholar and a propagandist, but aren’t even aware that there is a difference.So people watch CNBC and CNN, all the while under the impression that they’re staying informed.This is now the only way audiences know how to operate cognitively, so it never occurs to them that they’re not really thinking.

How is it that people can so easily, so thoroughly, become ensconced in an ideological cocoon?Such a state of affairs seems to have always been the case: with partisan periodicals of the 18th and 19th centuries regularly duking it out in both America and in England.Now, as then, each rag caters to its target audience, reinforcing the desired dogma.Ideological turf wars are as old as civilization.So what’s so different now?

Now, it’s systematic and relentless: technology enables people to immerse themselves in a 24-7 echo-chamber…while glibly depriving themselves of the will and the wherewithal to focus on anything for more than a brief time.Back then, people read (or listened to the reading of) Rights of Man vs. Thoughts on the Revolution In France.But these days, BOTH Paine and Burke would be out of a job.Gone are the days of the Federalist Papers…or even the Lincoln-Douglas debates.Now, we have performers (called political pundits) doing snappy Q&A sessions with well-dressed sophists in between frequent commercial breaks.Both the

commercials and the television program are comprised entirely of canned sound-bites—customized to appeal to short attention spans and chronic mental lethargy—delivered by the celebrity charlatan du jour.

CONCLUDING REMARKS:

Parochialism has always been a problem in human society.But now, parochial worldviews are no longer based on physical proximity.These days, we have virtual communities in which we can dwell in blissful insularity with like-minded compatriots.Ironically, the worldwide web has become a mechanism for systematic parochialism more than a vehicle for widespread cosmopolitanism.

So where are we headed?Nobody doubts that our culture is undergoing a metamorphosis of some kind.That metamorphosis, we should keep in mind, is tailored to the new media technology.As that happens, are we being taken somewhere that we want to go?In what ways have we changed?Why?

There are some indications about the direction we've (unwittingly) taken.The quality of education received—on average—by the general populace in the United States is horribly diluted.Youth are graduating high school with a magnificent proficiency in social media…yet with egregious incompetence in even the most basic scholastic areas.There are embarrassing levels of ineptitude in basic philosophy, basic macro-economics, basic expository writing skills, basic history, basic sociology, basic science, elementary logic (analytical thinking), and basic mathematics.Investment bankers don't need to know ANY of that stuff, so why bother?

Meanwhile, tens of millions are fantastically hyper-connected…yet are so malleable-minded that they will believe whatever seems plausible at first blush, whatever has the snazziest packaging, whatever claims they find the most appealing (based on conditioned biases / dispositions), or whatever SOUNDS like it makes the most sense (an impression often predicated on a deficient knowledge-base).In this climate, people adopt dogma the way they purchase consumer products: they shop around and see what captures their fancy.Naturally, then, people often only end up believing what the peers within their in-group happen to believe…or whatever the anointed demagogue declares…or whatever seems to offer immediate utility.Erudite discernment is out of fashion.Genuine edification isn't "hip" because it's not in demand.

We've become a culture that values smart phones more than smart people.And "smart" now means, "can make a lot of money for oneself".But why is it that so many of us operate this way?Why has this degenerate mentality become so prevalent?The answer, in part: This is the mentality engendered by a Facebook World.We allow ourselves to be controlled because we've become enraptured by the illusion of being in control.But control is less and less in our hands.

So…where do we go from here?Well, that depends on what we habituate ourselves to.Where we end up is largely dictated by what we do, now, about how we operate on a typical day.Therefore, it may be wise to reassess the emphasis we place on the new skills with which we've become so enamored vis a vis the ones we no longer seem to care about.

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