Welcome To A Facebook World: Part X

Man's most primal longing is to feel as though he "belongs", as though he "matters" in some way, as though he is "appreciated" by somebody else, and is somehow "belongs".People want to feel "connected with" and "accepted by" peers—as though they are a part of something important and worthwhile—as though there is a point to their lives.Religion has often accomplished this.Now there is Facebook.

Today, there are countless blogs, blog aggregators (like Mashable), news aggregators (like Reddit), and miscellaneous social networking services.There is Pinterest and Youtube and Twitter and Linked-In and dozens of other distractions that promise to keep us "connected"…yet often only seem to DIS-connect us…from what really matters.We have our heads in the new "clouds", yet think that makes us more "in touch".

As a result, our attention is chronically diverted by transient amusements, petty concerns, and an endless stream of pointless gossip.Even worse, the promulgation of propaganda is now mechanized.This augers the death-knell of genuine scholarship and bona fide journalism.For the blogosphere has become a veritable orgy of charlatanry.In this new ecosystem, the darnedest things go viral.Such phenomena provide us with a fascinating opportunity to apply memetics, contagion theory, and epidemiology.

THE DARNDEST THINGS GO VIRAL:

A notable case study was the fraudulent campaign known as "Kony 2012"—a bizarrely titled ANTI-Kony crusade that went hyper-viral in March of 2012.The cause was promoted via a well-polished Youtube video—which was viewed by over 86 million people within the month.But what was it really?(More to the point: What warranted such an explosion in notoriety?)

"Kony 2012" was a fundamentalist Christian evangelism project operating under the pretenses of stopping a venal cult leader in central Africa (a notorious madman named Joseph Kony, who is presently operating his "Lord's Resistance Army" in

northern DRC and/or eastern CAR…and perhaps the western edge of South Sudan).The extremely disingenuous promotional video leads the audience to think that the cause is strictly secular—and dedicated to capturing Kony IN UGANDA.

What isn't mentioned is that it is NOT secular, and that Kony is NOT in Uganda.Moreover, the project doesn't mention that it is using its funds mostly for itself (more than 67%), and the balance is simply being given to Ugandan military factions to buy guns—thereby exacerbating the problems the video claims it wants to solve.

Most importantly, if the "Kony 2012" project really cared about the things it claimed to care about (egregious injustices and on-going crimes against humanity), it would be concentrating on Palestinian rights—which are far more atrocious…AND which the U.S. CAN directly do something about.(This is because the U.S. government actively supports the humanitarian atrocities systematically perpetrated by the RDF in Palestine—most recently, Operation Cast Lead in 2008-09.)

Alas, due to the nature of Youtube and social networking in general, NONE of this is revealed to the viewer.After all, the format of Web 2.0 isn't conducive to genuine edification nor to meticulous critical analysis (i.e. things that would be an integral part of ANY noble cause).Nobody knows about Jason Russell, the (dishonest) evangelical Christian narrator of the glitzy video.He is passed off as just a regular guy who is promoting a noble (secular) cause.

Of course, ALL the reasons Jason gives for promoting his cause would apply EVEN MORE to fighting for Palestinian rights.Unsurprisingly, this crucial point isn't mentioned.Put another way, if Jason and his "Invisible Children" organization really cared about preventing the kinds of atrocities he claimed they cared about, they'd be allocating their focus and attention to more obvious places (e.g. Palestine).

Of course, there is the U.S. government's military "interest" in the central African region—which has little to do if anything to do with helping children (and human rights in general) and more to do with one thing: OIL.(AFRICOM: You do the math.)

Here's the really creepy part: The money that people are duped into giving to "Invisible Children" actually goes to an organization called TRI.But exactly what "TRI" might be is never specified—in the video OR on the "Kony2012" website.It doesn't even exist on Wikipedia… nor does it come up on a Google search.(Bizarrely, the symbol of TRI is an up-side down peace sign.It's all very weird.)To top it off, there is no specification of where, exactly, the donations go…or how, exactly, the money

is used.There is evidence that much of the money goes to “compensation” for the Invisible Children impresarios.The organization has refused to be audited by an independent party.

Unsurprisingly, the money isn’t traced.As already noted, even Invisible Children admits that the portion of proceeds that they do NOT use to pay / promote THEMSELVES is simply given to local armies to buy guns.And here’s the perversely ironic part: Those very armies are THEMSELVES guilty of crimes against humanity (including—get this—forcing brainwashed children to be part of their own military, as well as routine rape).Unsurprisingly, the 28-minute Youtube video doesn’t quite cover that relevant tid-bit either.

And, of course, therein lies the rub: Most serious discussions require the kind of in-depth discourse that is not (can not be) accommodated by most social media technology.In fact, the format of most Web 2.0 vehicles is completely inadequate for ANY critical analysis, for any survey of the big picture.The modus operandi engendered by such a format is simply not at all conducive to the kinds of discourse required to properly address such important issues.

Specifically, the new social media technology is shallow and ephemeral, fostering myopia and superficiality instead of genuine edification.It feeds off of (and thus reinforces) short attention spans, quick fixes, and fleeting bouts of self-gratification.“Hey look,” Jason Russell’s video says, “Here’s a way you can pat yourself on the back.Just send us money, and congratulate yourself for promoting human rights!”The point is to get people revved up by a catchy, simple-minded marketing campaign.It’s how politics works, it’s how religion works, and it’s how consumer products are peddled.

The “Kony 2012” sham is typical of the Facebook World in which we now find ourselves.If Jason Russell really meant what he says (about all humans mattering, regardless of ethnicity), he’d be focusing on Palestine.But this (very obvious) point is most likely missed by the vast majority of his target audience: America’s most credulous and mentally lethargic…craving the easy gratification from seeming to “get involved” in something noble.

(Jason calls his movement “Invisible Children”.Well, Jason, what about the invisible children in the poor neighborhoods here in the United States?Or in Palestine?Any plans to do anything about THOSE people?No?Why not?The answer is simple: Jason doesn’t really care about what he claims to care about.)

Indeed, it would be a wonderful commentary on Web 2.0 if an analogous video advocating for Palestinian rights ever went viral…to such a high degree (tens of millions of Americans taking a stand within a few weeks).Alas, Web 2.0 cares very little about merit…or the big picture; it is only concerned about contagiousness, hype, marketability, and—most of all—monetizing everything.Consequently—to reiterate: The darnedest things go viral…and our public discourse deteriorates as a result.

SO WHERE DOES THIS LEAVE US?

In Web 2.0, people can easily profess to care about things that they really don't care about.The faux-compassion exhibited by Invisible Children is standard for a Facebook World: We help promote "Kony 2012" and experience the satisfaction that we're promoting **human rights**.This makes sense because social media makes it all about "me".(Meanwhile, "Kony 2012" makes it all about "Kony 2012"…eschewing the big picture entirely.)This fashionable new trend has (rightly) been dubbed "slack-tivism".

The "Kony 2012" scam isn't an aberration.This is exactly the kind of thing that ROUTINELY happens with the new social media technology.There is neither social responsibility nor intellectual stimulation involved with the use of social networks.There is just spur-of-the-moment, knee-jerk reaction—encouraging everyone to be chronically, pathologically mercurial.

As was demonstrated with the "Kony 2012", many of the things that go viral within the Web 2.0 ecosystem exploit the credulity (and ignorance) that abounds in U.S. culture.Invisible Children made tens of millions of dollars for itself…and used that money for…absolutely nothing that would actually help make the world a better place.But the narrative was enticing: Help us get the bad guy.Help defeat evil.Join the noble cause.Be part of the phenomenon.Get in on the action.

Alas, this is the sort of thing that happens in a Facebook World."Kony 2012" was a perfect illustration of the kinds of dysfunction endemic to the new social media technology.It was the Web 2.0 version of cult activity—replete with credulous followers…and a self-styled demagogue cashing in on the scheme.(In a tactic eerily similar to Scientology, followers were asked to purchase something called an "Action Kit".)Unsurprisingly, Jason Russell was soon thereafter revealed to be mentally unstable.

If you like gossiping and shooting the breeze…making comments that ultimately don't matter…disseminating pointless opinions about this and that…occasionally sharing nifty links…and if you have a VERY short attention span…AND if you're fine with **everyone else** having a very short attention span…then the new social media might very well be just the thing for you.If you want to promote a dubious cause under false pretenses, Web 2.0 can be your best friend.

If not… Well, then, perhaps it is prudent to assess the adverse effects that the new social media is having on our culture.People have criticized MasonScott.org for being woefully un-conducive to the new Facebook World."Nobody has the time or the will to read long essays like that!" I'm told incessantly.These days, hardly anybody is interested in taking the time to digest extensive disquisition—few people have the required attention span anymore.But THAT is the POINT.Such extensive disquisition is REQUIRED in order to really address the serious issues that MasonScott.org strives to address.

If someone isn't willing to make the effort to read in-depth exposition for more than 30-second spurts, then our society is doomed.But 30-second attention spans is precisely what the Facebook World thrives on!We now think in Tweets.Why?Not only are many people ONLY CAPABLE of thinking in Tweets, most of them ONLY WANT to think in Tweets.In a Facebook World, there is neither the will nor the ability to engage in substantive discourse.

We should remind ourselves that Nietzsche's "The Last Man" creates chimerical "True Worlds" for himself in order to "deal" with the REAL world (i.e. the world in which he finds himself).He seeks only a sense of security…a means of comfort…and is satisfied with the status quo.So long as everything remains satisfying, in the moment, then he's perfectly content to go along with things.The Last Man deludes himself into thinking that he's found happiness—but it's an ersatz happiness he covets.Welcome to a Facebook World.