

The Impersonal World of Facebook

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(Editor's note: Emma Kinsey is the winner of the Peggy S. Pittas LCSR Award for the best essay in the 2012 Agora dealing with a social problem.)

I am addicted to Facebook. Supposedly, the first step in overcoming a problem is admitting it, but I am still slightly apprehensive about conceding to my weakness so readily. I ritually find myself contemplating why I seem to have so few hours in the day: I do not have enough time to work, to relax, or to spend having personal contact with actual human beings. It is ironic that I regard these lost hours as if they have escaped from my life and as if I have no control in regulating them. I lament over wasted time, while I continue my habit of procrastination. Technology is an integral part of current daily life, no matter how much one may wish to escape it. According to Michael Bugeja, the author of an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, "Facebook tallies 250 million hits every day and ranks ninth in overall traffic on the Internet." For my generation specifically, technology is even more significant because of the role it plays throughout the entirety of one's life. Teenagers and young adults simply cannot imagine their lives without the use of smart phones, iPads, or Facebook. More often than not, these gadgets are misused and repeatedly taken for granted. The effects of current technological advances are far reaching and prominent; they help to perpetuate societal development, to aid in research and development, and to connect people in a globalized, flattened world (Friedman 6-8). At the same time, however, technology has led to the dehumanization of common social interaction. Facebook, specifically, has become a leading

force in maintaining this impersonal interaction; it has diminished creative and individual thought, reduced the worth of privacy, and degraded our ability to interact with people face-to-face.

Although my obsession with Facebook is typical of many young adults, the circumstances through which I came to devote so much time to this social network are peculiar, according to current societal standards. My experience with Facebook is significantly more limited than that of most of my peers. Unlike many, I joined the Facebook community a little over two months ago, after I graduated from high school. As a thirteen year old, I begged my parents to allow me to create a profile, but they never relented. My dad was particularly against it: he liked to justify the restriction by constantly reminding me that “Nothing good could possibly come of it.” I grew up in a fairly strict household, and as the oldest of four, I was under especially tight control: I did not have a cell phone until ninth grade and could not text until the end of twelfth grade. Although my parents eventually determined that a cell phone was a necessity and the privilege of texting was something I had earned, they never allowed me to make a Facebook profile. In fact, they saw inherent dangers in its design and recognized that more bad than good would come of my participation in what they believed to be nothing more than a “popular trend.”

As a security consultant and ex-military man, my dad is adept in his knowledge of security and privacy settings in the online world. He would be the first to agree with the claim that “The Internet Age can place a person’s history . . . at the world’s call” (Levmore 124). What many people either do not realize or simply ignore about the internet is that once something has been sent into cyberspace, it can always be recalled. This principle is especially important

when it comes to social networking sites, such as Facebook, because the majority of teenagers are careless about the types of pictures they upload, statuses they post, and links they share. It is too easy to save a picture from one person's profile onto another computer: all it takes is a few clicks. Generally, teenagers do not think about the fact that they can be held accountable for their thoughts and actions on Facebook. The computer screen becomes like a protective barrier that makes the user invisible to the online world, and "a vexed relationship develops between what is true and what is 'true here,' true in simulation" (Turkle 153). This mentality results in an impersonal relationship between the user and the online world.

The nature of uploading and the use of the internet can be interpreted in multiple ways, and many scholars from different backgrounds have contributed their opinions based on their experience. Thomas Friedman, on one hand, believes that "Uploading is, without a doubt, becoming one of the most revolutionary forms of collaboration in the flat world" and values the power people now have in controlling what information they release (95). Friedman's study of globalization and the internet in his book *The World is Flat* praises uploading as having a beneficial effect in expanding the scale of communication among people. Jaron Lanier also discusses this idea of "digital flattening" in his novel *You Are Not a Gadget*; however, he provides a slightly different perspective with his discussion about technology rendering creativity obsolete. Like Friedman, Lanier acknowledges that technology is developing in a way that automates a variety of processes. In fact, he concedes, to an extent, that this technological expansion has a positive effect; however, he still advocates for methods that allow for personal expression (47). This idea mirrors Vaclav Havel's urging in his *Open Letters* for people to continue to concentrate their skills within the sphere in which they live. Havel asserts that

people can maintain their dignity no matter how frivolous their jobs may seem, as long as they are doing them well. In contrast to Friedman and Lanier, Havel sees the benefit in pure creative expression and does not see the need to consolidate systems that operate efficiently on their own (151).

One of the most negative aspects of Facebook is the potential loss of privacy that comes with using the site. Making an account with Facebook can be dangerous if it is used without restriction, where personal thoughts and information can be seen by anyone. Though many security measures are available to protect privacy, Facebook itself is designed as a network to share information. Assuming that most users understand how Facebook functions, it would seem that most teenagers have little regard for the importance of privacy, given the amount of personal information they choose to make public on their profiles. Like so many things, the risky venture is equally alluring. While threats to one's privacy may seem inconsequential to some young people, the dangers of exposing personal information are significant and can concern, "disclosure of personal information, damaged reputation due to rumor and gossip, unwanted contact and harassment or stalking . . . [and] use of personal data by third-parties" (Debatin). In some circumstances, a breach of privacy is simply the result of user error: some people, although not all, do not spend enough time thinking about the impression they give when they upload a picture or post a comment on Facebook. Generally, privacy is something people value as important; however, the increased use of technology has brought on a new set of issues in interpreting what should be kept private and what should be made public. On Facebook, for example, anyone can post a picture including a number of people on one person's wall without the consent of those people. Participants in cyber space should be asking

themselves this question directly: “When do unflattering photos taken and posted without permission become a violation of privacy?” (Levmore 140).

My thirteen year old sister came home from school a few days ago and revealed to my mom some of the latest middle school gossip, as she always does. However, the talk around school recently involved something slightly more serious than which couples were dating or what the cafeteria served at lunch. An eighth grade girl received an obscene nude picture on her phone from a male classmate. The picture was quickly forwarded around the school and inevitably made its way to Facebook, where it was discovered by a teacher. The boy who sent the picture and all who received and forwarded the text message are expected to face severe disciplinary action. The boy obviously intended to reveal himself to the other eighth grade girl, but I am sure that he would have preferred that the picture not be sent to the entire school or posted on Facebook. At this time, my sister said that she was glad that she did not have a cell phone: I had never heard her say that before. In this situation, Facebook admittedly plays a somewhat secondary role and cannot be faulted for the unfortunate incident – one that was a direct result of the boy’s own immaturity and carelessness. Nonetheless, social networking does play an integral role in society, especially in the lives of the younger generation. Perhaps, then, issues arise from the disjuncture between accepting this fact and teaching people how to use electronic media responsibly and in an age appropriate way. No matter how much I hate to admit it, incidents like these help me to understand why my parents would not let me join Facebook at age thirteen.

The major shift between the previous generation who only started using Facebook after they became adults and young people in the twenty-first century involves a person’s ability to

develop interpersonal skills. Brent Staples, a *New York Times* editorial writer, argues that “Electronic communications have none of the socializing rewards of face-to-face encounters” and that “Overuse of the internet can . . . retard the personal growth that comes from learning how to interact with others in the real world” (49). People have always told my parents how personable and confident their children seem: my parents have always attributed these traits directly to the fact that they raised us differently from the way that most parents do. My parents have focused on values they felt were more important than stressing the excessive use of technology: instead, they have encouraged us to carry on a conversation with an adult and to know how to write and articulate thoughts. These small, seemingly insignificant requirements that I found annoying while I was growing up have had more influence on my development than I was fully able to grasp at the time. The value of these personal interaction skills has been revealed to me slowly as I have applied for jobs and had college interviews. I realize that in a “flattening world” it will be especially important for me to market myself in a personable way. This skill set could be particularly useful and even rare since in the coming decades, technology is likely to become even more ubiquitous; I find new reasons every day to be thankful that my parents chose to raise me the way they did.

Facebook and the electronic devices that enable it, such as cell phones and computers, do not independently instigate the negative effects of depersonalization. Like any form of technology or communication tools, Facebook is not necessarily detrimental when used moderately and in responsible ways. However, it is important that people truly examine the ways in which technology and social networking, such as Facebook, affect their lives. Unless current teenagers and young adults can learn to compensate for the rapid expansion of

information sharing, society may be condemned to interactions no more personal and meaningful than the exchanges available on Facebook.

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