

Resisting Commodification (with Friends!): Facebook and the Spectacle of Capitalism

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Introduction

It is almost ludicrous to mention how big Facebook has become. In less than a decade Facebook has gone from an innovative social networking upstart to genuine economic giant. There are those who have lauded Facebook for the ways it has changed socialization and our interaction with the Web (Mui). Others fear that Facebook is rapidly becoming the quintessential Orwellian Big Brother[1], where rather than having the government looking over our shoulder, advertisers and marketers collect our information for unknown and potentially dangerous purposes. The original version of this paper was my Master's thesis, in which I considered both the commodifying nature of Facebook, as well as its revolutionary political potential. In that work (which I defended over a year ago now) I concluded that Facebook was on a precipice – edging toward becoming devoid of revolutionary or political potential. But I was still quite hopeful that “the Social Network” would continue to provide avenues for resistance to the commodifying forces of contemporary capitalism, even as the site itself became more entrenched in what Guy Debord termed “the Spectacle” of capitalist consumerism. However, in this paper I focus on those commodifying aspects of Facebook and speculate on what potential harms could arise with the continued commodification of what has now become a nearly ubiquitous communication tool.

I: (Mis)Information

Perhaps rather than fearing Facebook as an instrument of Orwellian domination we should instead examine it as the next step in a “Huxleyan future” (Postman 156). In his 1984 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, media theorist Neil Postman used Aldous Huxley's seminal work *A Brave New World* to criticize television culture and propose that cultural domination may not come from an overtly oppressive governmental force (as in George Orwell's 1984). Instead, Postman noted that Huxley's dystopia came from a society so inundated with triviality and entertainment that they were unable to see their oppressors at all (vii-i). Postman suggested that people should be more concerned about oppression through “technologies that undo their [citizens'] capacities to think” than the potential for total domination by an oppressive government (vii). While Postman was critically evaluating television culture, his “Huxleyan warning” resonates with today's Web culture more than ever (155).

One of the most often praised aspects of Facebook and other social networking websites is the speed at which information can be distributed through and across different networks to become nation-wide and even global knowledge. Within minutes of a noteworthy event (and many non-worthy events as well) a Facebook user's News Feed might be inundated with links to articles, friends' reactions to what has happened, and predictions about what can or will happen next. This can be tremendously beneficial in a world where information – and seemingly the

world itself – has sped up. In 2004, sociologist Ben Agger noted that Internet technologies had accelerated the pace of “communicating, writing, connecting, shopping, browsing, surfing, and working” to the point that many people today expect instant gratification in almost everything they do (Speeding Up 3). Although written just before Facebook exploded in popularity, Agger’s reference to “instantaneity” (5) seems to fit perfectly with what users of social networking technology have come to expect when they log on: all of the most important information (as defined by the user) about politics, entertainment, science, technology, sports, and social activism available as soon as something happens in quickly digestible headlines.

I am not arguing that this kind of access to information is in and of itself harmful. On the contrary, having the ability to receive and review information instantly and to redistribute it among differing networks has the potential to make the world more connected (perhaps Mark Zuckerberg’s favorite buzzword next to “openness”) and has the potential to open ongoing dialogues about important social and political issues as they arise. Where this instantaneity can and has done damage is when false or misleading information makes its way into the information stream. Sometimes this information is relatively innocuous and quickly corrected[2]. However all too often the speed at which information is disseminated is used as a tool for those who can benefit from the false information. One need only look at Barack Obama’s presidency to find countless examples of US-based political propaganda attempting to frighten the public with tales of a foreign birth cover-up, hidden terrorist agendas and associations, and a malicious socialist healthcare bill. Although proven untrue on countless occasions, these and other rumors continue to permeate the United States’ national discourse, arising again and again with any new piece of legislation.

This is not to say political mud slinging is something new – far from it. The difference is the speed at which these stories fly. In one of the most prominent and divisive examples of social media being used to deceive large segments of the public, former Alaskan Governor and Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin posted on Facebook that she did not want her grandparents or son to have to face “Obama’s ‘death panel’” as a result of proposed health care reform (Bank). Even though there was and is absolutely no basis for the claim that the health care bill would require people to visit a “death panel” to prove they are “worthy of health care,” within minutes the post created a panic among many conservatives as more and more users reposted Palin’s comments and expressed their fear and revulsion at the thought that life could be treated so cavalierly. Within hours the phrase “death panel” became the rallying cry against health care reform (Bank). And despite how many politicians and experts denounced the idea, no matter how many pointed out that it was ludicrous to think that the government would kill sick and elderly patients, people continued to cling to the catch phrase as they protested the health care reform bill.

Facebook alone cannot be entirely blamed for the spread of misinformation. It is a platform through which information may be disseminated and those who knowingly post false information are clearly to blame for their misuse of this powerful tool. However Facebook is not merely a passive platform, but also participates in the spread of political spin. “US Politics on Facebook” and pages like it (there are several including “Congress on Facebook” and “Government on Facebook”) aggregate posts by and about elected governmental officials and political candidates. There are certainly benefits to having important political information centralized on a single page that reposts the news and announcements from around the country[3]. The problem here is twofold. The first (and probably unavoidable) problem is that repeating and disseminating the thoughts and comments of politicians means that this page participates in the dissemination of political spin. Each politician on Facebook has his or her own agenda, and as we have seen with Sarah Palin (and countless other politicians from the right and left) sometimes that agenda does not include engaging in honest debate.

But Facebook should not be blamed when a politician makes false or misleading statements on their pages anymore than it should be blamed if any individual were to post incorrect or intentionally misleading information. The second, larger problem is that Facebook does not identify who manages these pages and therefore who decides what information is worth sharing and what is not. The “US Politics on Facebook” groups’ stated purpose is to “highlight the use of Facebook by politicians, elected officials, and political campaigns” and to “share tips and best practices as well as news from Facebook” (Facebook). Yet even a cursory glance at the page’s Wall clearly shows that the page administrators do not repost every piece of information by every political candidate (to do so would be nearly impossible). This means that there must be some kind of vetting process in which page administrators decide which posts are most worthy, which candidates are most important, and which national and international events warrant discussion. Even if site administrators do not have their own political agenda and are able to ignore their political biases, they are still making decisions on a daily basis that show page viewers only what they think is important in United States politics. While I understand the necessity of filtering, page administrators’ choices cannot

be adequately criticized or discussed because they do not identify themselves. Without accountability, none of these pages that attempt to consolidate political information can be truly relied upon.

Moreover, the frequency with which patently false news stories make it into United States political discourse is alarming[4] and may point to a larger problem. More than a decade ago sociologist and Columbia University Journalism professor Michael Schudson described how the new digital age had caused a shift in the way people in the United States interact with politics. In “Changing Concepts of Democracy” Schudson argues that because of the explosion of communications technologies we have moved past the era of the “informed citizen” into the era of the “monitorial citizen.” The monitorial citizen is “defensive rather than pro-active” in gathering information and as a result is less discerning and less capable of interpreting the information provided to them (Schudson). This description rings even truer now when one thinks about the Huxleyan deluge of information citizens face on a daily basis. Cable news channels like CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC not only have pundits and newscasters discussing wide-ranging topics twenty-four hours a day, but – in case that is not enough – they also have news tickers streaming across the bottom of the screen nearly constantly. Most of the major American news organizations (and many non-American news organizations too) have a presence on Facebook and Twitter. Radio programs and podcasts are produced on a daily basis on any number of topics – political or otherwise. And that does not take into account the information Facebook users receive via the “News Feed” from their friends (obviously not all of which is political in nature, but still often must be sifted through).

The preponderance of informational sources is at the same time exciting and maddening. It is exciting to live in a world where this much information is – to indulge in the use of a tired cliché – at one’s fingertips. It is maddening to parse through the thousands of headlines and vaguely worded status updates to try to find reliable and important information. It is no wonder then, how misinformation is spread so easily and takes hold so strongly. Depending on one’s choice of news sources and circle of friends, one could hear and see half a dozen stories and status updates about the atrocity of “death panels” before seeing a single correction or rebuttal. The digital revolution has brought a wealth of information, as well as a pronounced dearth of analysis.

Schudson was ultimately arguing for the importance of professional institutions (the news media) in mediating communication “between private individuals and public governing bodies” – that the monitorial citizen needs the expertise of these institutions to deal with the deluge of information that has resulted from the digital revolution (Schudson). While I do not put much faith in professional institutions’ ability to help citizens process information (especially if the professional institutions to which Schudson refers are major news organizations[5]), Schudson’s description of a citizenry befuddled by an over-abundance of information resonates in the Facebook age. The more information scattered across the informational landscape, the more difficult it is to process that information. As a result, misinformation spreads with a rapidity that only new social media and communications technologies can provide.

II: Who Needs Privacy When You Have Products?

In *What’s the Matter with the Internet?* Mark Poster notes that the economy always “colonize[s] new media” (2) in order to find ways to sell “cultural objects” (52). To put it another way, the Spectacle infiltrates all new modes of discourse in order to perpetuate its power and to find new ways to reap the culture for commodity signs. Facebook is not exempt from this cultural harvest. By now Facebook’s privacy woes have been well documented. In 2009, Facebook settled a lawsuit over the short-lived Beacon program – an advertising service that allowed third party websites to post user purchase information to Facebook without their consent (Grimmelmann “Saving Facebook” 1147)[6]. More recently, Facebook has come under fire yet again (and subsequently changed their privacy settings again) after users, bloggers, and technology experts from all walks of life decried the SNS’s more permeable privacy settings[7]. These controversies are only the most visible of what has been a near constant struggle between Facebook users and the social networking giant. When looking at the ire over the years caused by Facebook’s quickly changing, difficult to understand and often-insufficient privacy policy it is difficult to not ask why. Why has Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and his team of programmers failed to adequately respond to users’ privacy concerns? Why do users continue to frequent Facebook – now more than any other website – when it has been made perfectly clear that the information posted is not totally private? However, while these and other similar inquiries are valuable and have attracted scores of bloggers, journalists and scholars of all disciplines, for the purposes of this paper I

am less concerned with why Facebook management and users continue to allow the violations to occur and more interested in how these privacy policies have allowed the advertising industry and the Spectacle to further imbed itself and consumer culture into users' lives[8].

In "Saving Facebook" New York Law School Associate Professor James Grimmelmann describes six common privacy "harms"[9] he believes are prevalent on Facebook ("Saving" 1164). The first two of these privacy violations, "disclosure" and "surveillance" are closely related to one another. Disclosure occurs when a user's information is available to a wider audience than the user intended. This privacy problem is most often associated with (but not limited to) disgruntled employees and teen and young adult Facebook users who post inappropriate pictures or status updates, incorrectly believing that the incriminating information can only be seen within their network of friends (1165-6). Like disclosure, surveillance occurs when those outside of the anticipated network (for example employers or parents) are able to find information that was intended to be private (e. g. rants about one's terrible boss, or pictures of underage drinking) and use that information to punish the poster (1166-7). Surveillance differs from disclosure in that interested parties must take an active approach in seeking incriminating information. While some might argue that users should shoulder most of the blame for these types of violations (again, because in most cases they must incriminate themselves by posting something objectionable), these privacy violations will have significant legal ramifications in the coming months and years[10] and therefore are worthy of further consideration. I do not believe that these violations are a specific goal of the Spectacle's invasion of Facebook (what does capitalist consumerism gain from having a teen grounded for being caught drinking at a party? Or from an employee being fired for disparaging her employer?), but I do believe they are a side effect. Now school administrators and employers can investigate those they are interested in with only a few keystrokes. Information that in previous generations was unavailable barring significant detective work is now readily available and can be held against users unexpectedly. I am of the mind that monitoring one's posts and being strict about what constitutes a "friend" can help users avoid a vast majority of these types privacy problems. However it is worth note that these privacy violations are symptoms of an imperfect social networking system that allows for much greater privacy violations that allow the Spectacle a greater presence in users' lives.

"Disagreement" and "denigration" are another two closely related privacy harms Grimmelmann discusses in his article. Disagreement most often occurs on Facebook when incriminating or embarrassing photographs are posted not by the person implicated in the photos but by another party (1171). Facebook allows users to untag themselves (or remove their name and a link to their personal Facebook page) from a photo but, as Grimmelmann notes, does not allow users to "demand it be taken down or made private" (1172). Like disclosure, disagreement becomes problematic when someone outside one's own network of contacts sees the photos and misuses them. Denigration occurs primarily through two means: "distortion" – when one or more users lies about or misrepresents another user (or non-user) with the intention of damaging their reputation or credibility – and "appropriation" – when one uses the likeness, identity or public image of another user for their own goals without consent (the best example that comes to mind is when a celebrity's image is used for advertising against their wishes) (1176). Like the privacy harms mentioned above, these violations can cause tremendous damage to an individual's private or professional reputation, and there is little being done by Facebook to prevent them (and perhaps little else that can be done). Slander, libel, and other forms of intentional character assassination have always and will continue to exist, these privacy harms represent yet another way that Facebook allows misinformation to flow rapidly and take hold fervently with little recourse.

Unlike the first four harms – which I believe are side-effects or symptoms of the Spectacle's presence on Facebook – I believe that the final two, "instability" and "spillover," directly enhance the Spectacle's power because they allow the advertising industry to further imbed itself into individual Facebook user's lives. Instability refers to how reliable (or in Facebook's case how unreliable) an organization is in maintaining privacy practices and "information flows" so that users can adequately anticipate who can view their information and how it can be used (1169). I have already mentioned a few of Facebook's instability problems and will, after I define spillover, discuss how these harms combine to give Spectacle advertising even more power over consumers who use the SNS. Spillover is a phenomenon in which people or advertising agencies interested in collecting user demographic data can infer "with good confidence" an individual's age, nationality, sexual orientation or other private information by using "a simple algorithm" surveying their friend's demographic data (1174). This is clearly problematic because Facebook's very structure allows information to be gathered independent of one's privacy settings.

It becomes even more frightening when one looks more closely at how marketers and advertising firms are using spillover and Facebook's privacy instability to further infuse their companies and products with users' lives.

In 2009 Advertising Age – a news magazine and website dedicated to the latest developments in the marketing and advertising industries – published an article by Abbey Klaassen and Beth Snyder Bulik describing the ways in which Facebook is being and can be used to brand-promote through creation and dissemination of apps. It is widely known that because Facebook allows users to create their own apps and offer them to the Facebook community, many corporations and marketing agencies have invested in creating entertaining and functional apps in hopes that users will download them and make them a part of their social networking lives. These companies benefit when the app becomes an almost daily brand reminder for the Facebook user. Klaassen and Bulik note that both Target and JC Penny have created apps that “offer gift suggestions, style tips and fashion trends” as a way of staying prevalent in the consumer’s mind[11].

Furthermore, “One market-research firm has launched a Facebook application as a way to gather data on consumers, their friends and the relevant data that comes from comparing ourselves with others” (Klaassen). This app (by now one of many apps tasked with digging up user info) asks users to compare themselves to their friends, and through these comparisons, the market-researchers gather data about “people’s motivations and views of themselves” (Klaassen). In the words of the app’s creator Tom Anderson, “Marketers can leverage these findings to uncover gaps in self-esteem/self-image and message more effectively on emotional attributes that are most important to us” (qtd in Klaassen). Since the article’s publication, Facebook has attempted to crack down on apps and app-creators who try to violate users’ privacy, to varying degrees of success. While Facebook does not intentionally provide advertisers with individual user’s personal information[12], over the last couple of years it has become easier and easier for advertisers to get it. Additionally Facebook allows advertisers to target ads to specific demographics – which can focus on large groups such as women from 18 to 35, or much more specific groups like men 21-24 who list reading as a hobby and live in the New York area (The Facebook Obsession). Now advertisers can even target ads based on the words users mention in their status updates (Del Rey 94).

In other words, the Spectacle has penetrated Facebook – and as a result users’ lives – to an unprecedented degree. Advertisers and marketers are using Facebook as a platform to further disseminate brand information and product advertisements. And they are doing so in a way that is largely invisible to the user. This invisibility (or outright deception) embeds brands into consumers’ lives in new ways and forces users to participate in the further spread and growth of Spectacle-domination. Every FarmVille or Mafia Wars invitation one sends or receives is most likely also an invitation for a marketing firm or data collection agency to target you and your network more specifically. Every time one mentions a band they like, quotes their favorite movie or television show, or discusses a hobby with a friend, they are also communicating with advertisers on how to better market to them.

Nevertheless, even these targeted advertisements might not be as impactful on most other websites. But Facebook is different. Facebook is not simply a website that publishes and archives news and information. In its own words it is a platform that gives users “the power to share and make the world more open and connected” (Facebook). Yet a close examination of Facebook’s self-narrative suggest that its creators want it to be viewed as more than a mere platform but as a conscious entity to which users become emotionally tied. The first signs of this come on the site’s home page. Just above the News Feed, the status update bar reads, “What’s on your mind?” This is significant not because Facebook allows its users to speak their mind (most websites today have enabled users to comment on their various articles and postings) but because it suggests a direct conversation between the user and the site itself. The bar could have simply read “Update Status” or something equally mechanical, but the site’s programmers chose this specific phrase – something often said between friends (or at least acquaintances) at the beginning of a conversation – in order to situate the website as a conscious entity capable of caring about the user. It is important to note that a Facebook user’s friends are not the ones asking what is on the user’s mind. On the contrary, it is a crapshoot on whether or not one’s friends will respond to or even see any given status update. But Facebook always wants to know and always provides the tools that the user needs to best express themselves – as if Facebook wants to be both a friend and an organizational tool, a confidant and a digital party planner.

Facebook’s apparent familiarity with its users is only heightened when one navigates through the site. On the right of each user’s profile is a small box that shows users “People You May Know” which links to a nearly endless list of people and pages that the user has some connection to (for the most part, these connections are made up of people with whom the user has mutual friends). When writing or reading messages Facebook shows users photos of their friends, presumably to remind users of the people to whom they are connected. It is worth noting that both of these functions are impressive technological innovations and are not inherently Spectacle empowering. These and other features (too numerous to mention) demonstrate exactly why Facebook has been able to grow continuously: because they offer tools that not only enable socialization but also invite increased interaction between friends. At the

same time, these and other tools send the subtle message that Facebook is more than a website, that it is a rational, thinking entity that genuinely wants to make users' lives better by creating new connections and solidifying old ones.

This personalization of Facebook is confirmed when one click's on the "About" tab at the bottom of the page which hyperlinks to Facebook's own page. In a case of confusingly self-referential overlap, Facebook has its own page on Facebook. On the Wall of this page – like any diligent celebrity or corporation – Facebook posts (favorable) stories about itself that have been recently published[13]. In the "Info" section, Facebook provides its mission statement and some brief information about the page and its purpose. There are also photos of Facebook employees and corporate art work, and a section that allows users to share their "Facebook stories" about how the site has changed users' lives. Facebook's Facebook page is not very different from those of other companies on the social networking giant. Nonetheless, when combined with the site's many direct communications with users and its ability to foster socialization more efficiently than any "real-world" entity, it effectively positions Facebook as a user's close friend. Facebook then uses this familiarity with its users to enhance the effectiveness of its targeted advertisements. By exploiting the intense personal connection it often fosters with its users, Facebook effectively imbeds the Spectacle into socialization. Most websites have advertisements in annoying and inconvenient places. Ads blink along the top of the screen and shout at readers from the margins of whatever they might be viewing. Some ads interrupt the user's ability to navigate the page with large, animated videos and tiny, hidden "close" options. Not Facebook. Facebook advertisements are not intrusive or annoying. The more information Facebook can gather about a user, the more tailored the ads will be to a user's personal preferences. Facebook's ads are more like friendly suggestions from someone who knows you than the depersonalized, often anger-inducing ads on other websites. Facebook's ability to create direct emotional ties to its users give the site – and advertisers that use its targeted marketing feature – subtle power and unprecedented access to consumers' lives.

The swiftness with which market capitalism has invaded Facebook should not be surprising given the power of the Spectacle to instantly commodify culture and cultural spaces. However capitalism has not only found a way to access demographic information via Facebook but has also interwoven itself into the social networking fabric. On Facebook, one's News Feed is not only populated by the comments of friends and acquaintances, but also of any celebrities, news organizations, shoe companies, and fast food chains that the user has "Liked." Thus, the consumer becomes a mechanism of advertising by affiliating themselves with specific products and corporations – quite literally infusing advertising and socialization. The user/consumer becomes tied to the product in a new virtual way and is encouraged to see themselves as in conversation with (or part of a conversation with) the corporate entities they "Like."

III: Selling the Spectacle Self

Perhaps the most intriguing (and almost invisible) way Facebook reproduces consumer ideology is found in its very structure. In the section labeled "Basic Information" users can provide their current city of residence, their hometown, their sex (choices are limited to either "Male" or "Female"), age, sexual preference (this is merely the phrase "Interested In:" next to two checkboxes marked "Women" and "Men") and languages. The location boxes, as well as the "Languages" box are drop down menus that allow users to search for their city or language from a list of possibilities. The user is restricted to only those locations and languages found on the list, but the lists are quite comprehensive (for example, in addition to "American English" I have listed "Pig Latin" among my languages spoken). Additionally, this tab provides an "About Me" section in which users can write a short narrative meant to give further insight into their personality, write a humorous quote or anecdote or simply leave blank. The "Education and Work" section has a similar drop-down menu from which a user can choose from a list of possibilities. However here users can add to the list if their workplace or school is not found. The "Philosophy" section includes the same drop-down style searchable menu for one's "Religion" and "Political Views," again with the option to add to the list if the user's preference is not otherwise available. The "Philosophy" tab is unique in that Facebook allows for a short "Description" below the drop-down menus for "Religion" and "Political Views." Subsequent sections of the users profile ("Arts and Entertainment," "Sports," and "Activities and Interests") work much the same way as the "Philosophy" section, minus the ability to further "describe" these preferences.

Facebook's newest system for self-description is much less restrictive and much more comprehensive than in the past[14]. Now Facebook paradoxically both challenges and affirms consumerist notions of the self. As Mark Poster

explains, “On the Internet individuals construct their identities, doing so in relation to ongoing dialogues, not as acts of pure consciousness” (184). Identity on Facebook is fluid. It allows users to construct and reconstruct identity on a daily basis, emphasizing different aspects of their personalities as they see fit and not as reified artifacts of the self. Microblogging and wall-posting features allow people to virtually/textually construct themselves with a few quick keystrokes. Users have the ability to update their status with inane information about what they had for lunch or ask important questions like how to choose the right college or career. One can post a link to a funny YouTube video in one moment and then post a link to an article exposing political corruption or challenging others to take action over an important social issue the next. This is an intensely powerful view of the self – not bound to a singular identity but capable of many versions of selfhood that sometimes conflict with one another, without repercussion. This multifaceted self may even be more difficult for the Spectacle to consume entirely.

However, Facebook’s system for self-description is not without its flaws. First, Facebook’s profile set-up may be culturally homogenizing. For their article “Online Language: The Role of Culture in Self-Expression and Self-Construal on Facebook” David C. DeAndrea et al examined Facebook profiles in order to find out how previously established cultural norms regarding self-construal (or self-definition) were expressed. The authors noted that previous research has shown that Westerners tend to favor independent self-construal – or self-expression based on differentiating themselves from others (427). The most common Western notion of self is “seen as intransient, not bound to particular situations or relationships” (427). The authors characterize interdependent self-construal as an expression of the self, dependent upon relationships and group affiliations, where individual attitudes and capabilities are only secondary markers of self. They noted that interdependency in self-definition has been found to be “relatively more prominent in many Asian cultures” than in the Western world (427). Based on these well-established principles, DeAndrea et al examined the language used in the profiles of a small sample of Caucasian, African-American, and “ethnic Asian” students (one-hundred and twenty people total) to find out if cultural norms for self-construal held up on Facebook.

As it turns out, ethnic and cultural background was not a clear indicator of how people self-express on Facebook. The researchers found no significant difference between the internalized attributes expressed by the Caucasians and ethnic Asians studied (437). Furthermore, the group predicted that ethnic Asians would have the greatest “proportion of social affiliation self-description” (self-expression that emphasizes social ties), which was found to be false (437-8). The authors acknowledge that the second hypothesis may have merely been an incorrect supposition on their part. Yet they also note that it is possible that “characteristics of [Facebook]’s interface and/or user norms influence self-presentations” (438). As the writers explain, even though Facebook is international, the three countries with the most users at the time of this article’s publication (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada) are Western countries “associated with independent self-construal” (438).

We cannot draw any certain conclusions from this experiment, first because the experiment was not designed to test if Facebook’s structure invites cultural homogenization. Their explanation was merely an attempt to interpret data they collected that contradicted their original hypothesis. Secondly the experiment was conducted entirely on the Facebook pages of students, faculty, and alumni “the same large Midwestern University” (the specific university in question was never mentioned) (432). The similarities in self-presentation could very well have been the result of socialization that took place outside of Facebook. However, given Facebook’s birth and development in the United States and given the Spectacle’s growing grip on Facebook it is more than reasonable to ask the question: does Facebook’s structure have a culturally homogenizing effect? It is no secret that Spectacle of capitalist consumerism has gained power over the years by appropriating difference (often in the form of counter cultural protest) and making it yet another sellable commodity[15]. Therefore this study should serve as a warning to those who recognize the Spectacle’s power to make homogeneity appear to be difference. If people of other cultures feel forced or even pressured to express themselves in traditionally Western terms – if the Spectacle’s power has reached so deeply into Facebook’s structure that independent self-expression becomes the primary means of self-construal cross-culturally – then it may be too late to resurrect Facebook as a potentially revolutionary platform.

Furthermore, despite the changes to Facebook profiles that allow users more space to define themselves religiously, politically and socially, there is still an equal emphasis on users’ entertainment choices and other product-oriented identifiers. This is not to say that one’s favorite films, books or even clothing brands are not important or do not offer insight into one’s personality. Neither am I suggesting that Facebook is responsible for making people define themselves through that which they consume. On the contrary, the Spectacle’s thorough cultural domination and the advertising industry’s enticing commodity narratives that tell consumers that their lives will be made better if supplemented by a particular product has created an environment in which many people feel they must (at least to

some degree) construct their identities through that which they consume (Goldman and Papson 6). This association between brand, product and self is often how companies create consumer loyalty. Over time, this tendency to associate products with personality – to define oneself through brand name affiliation – has become an ingrained part of the Western psyche. Instead of blaming Facebook for a trend that has been a part of Western society for decades, I mean only to criticize the social networking giant for making this association between self and brand choice more prominent and accessible by displaying a single page which casts religion and political affiliation on equal footing with product-related self descriptions. For some in Western society the self has been overtaken by the “commodity-sign” of advertising and shopping. When this extant trend is combined with privacy settings that allow advertisers more access to consumer’s lives than ever before (with ads that can target highly specific demographics) product-exploration can and will often replace self-exploration. When this happens – when perfectly constructing a list of TV shows, films, musicians, products, and brand names becomes more important in defining an individual than other indicators of personality (whether it be independent self-construal through discussion of personality traits and opinions, or interdependent self-construal through discussion of group and familial affiliations) – the act of constructing the self can become an even more dangerous mimesis of capitalist consumerism.

In a 2009 study of college Facebook use, developmental psychologist Tiffany A. Pempek et al found that over 90% of students surveyed claimed that expressing their identity and opinion was not one of their primary reasons for using Facebook (232). This suggests that many students using Facebook (and presumably many non-student users as well) do not understand that their profiles, status updates, comments on friends’ pages, “Likes,” and group affiliations are all acts of self-construal. However of the same sample, over 90% of the students admitted to at least “some lurking”[16] (235). Clearly even those who do not believe they are expressing (or constructing) themselves through Facebook are being constructed by people in their social network when they view their pages and survey their personal information with or without commenting. If college students and other Facebook users do not understand that the information they post about themselves is a construction of identity and if those identity markers emphasize product and brand-affiliations, then their self-construal on Facebook is nothing more than self-promotion or self –advertising. Rather than using their Facebook profile as a way to express themselves as works in progress – as multifaceted, clearly political beings with many interests that range for the quotidian to the ideological – many people use their profile to express themselves as mere objects of the Spectacle, marketable commodities to sell to friends and acquaintances. This terribly reductive act promotes the self as apolitical (even if the user types “democrat” or “republican” into the space provided) and inherently and inescapably tied to the Spectacle.

Conclusion: Educated by the Spectacle

In the Spectacle world children are often used as pawns for marketing strategies and political agendas. Children are marketed to quite heavily. Turn on any kid- or young adult-themed television show or network and you will see advertisements for the latest toys, movies and theme parks highlighting the fun and excitement of their product. Conversely, kids are all too often used as political props to scare constituents into controversial decisions. State and national budget cuts are almost always framed as attempts to protect future generations from mountainous debt (usually ignoring the debt already waiting for the future generations). Many arguments in favor of looser restrictions on gun laws refer to one’s ability to protect the family. Those against gay marriage frequently and fervently state that “traditional marriage” must be upheld because children can only be properly raised in households with one mother and one father (despite all evidence to the contrary). As I mentioned in section II, former Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin even managed to link child safety to the healthcare reform debate by suggesting that new government policies might cast children with Downs Syndrome in front of “death panels.” Yet despite all of the ways children and young adults are used in Spectacle society – both as subjects of comprehensive marketing strategies and as objects of political strategies – children are essentially apolitical. Educational theorist David Buckingham notes that many children are not able to define themselves as “political subjects” because they do not have the right to vote, are not addressed by the news, and rarely see others their age involved in political processes (Jenkins 228).

Like advertisers and politicians, the news media never hesitates to cover stories about children – always searching for the next educational, social, or health-related crisis to warn concerned parents about. Yet they rarely speak to children. Instead, children are educated by the Spectacle (that is not to say that the news media is outside of the Spectacle – but that is an entirely different argument). They are socialized to consume and do so vigorously. As a

result, kids become alienated from the political process until it is thrust back upon them in their late teenage years, when they often reject it and cling to the familiarity of political non-commitment or dogmatic loyalty to the political views of their parents. The obvious danger here is that Spectacle education favors social ignorance over an informed citizenry and spending over political action.

Much has been written about the potential for Web 2.0 technologies to revolutionize or at least revitalize education[17]. Vice-President of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), Linda W. Braun has argued that new technologies like blogs (the social, micro-blogging site Twitter for example), computer and console-games, and text and instant messaging (IM) have altered the definition of reading and writing and that teens have adopted these new forms of writing without realizing or acknowledging that they are in fact forms of literacy or education (38). Braun emphasizes the importance of not only making young adults aware of the staggering amount of reading and writing they do on a daily basis, but also in finding ways to use these new social tools to improve the quality of their reading and writing skills (40).

Educational theorist and e-learning advocate Herbert Thomas has gone a step further, arguing that the “traditional learning spaces in the form of classrooms and lecture halls” actually hinder students’ learning ability (502-3). Because these spaces are highly formal and emphasize the teacher as the center of the classroom and because current approaches to teaching emphasize active student engagement and participation, Thomas suggests that the traditional classroom setting promotes outdated teaching models and makes it difficult for both teachers and students to engage in new and productive forms of learning (504). Thomas posits that to achieve this new learning environment, educators must first acknowledge that traditional boundaries between work, home and school no longer exist as they once may have (505). As Mizuko Ito explains, most schools today (and not just Western schools) ignore and even decry forms of entertainment (like television and online gaming) and imaginative play that do not fit into traditional educational models[18] (80). This purposeful ignorance and rejection of all new media forms sends the signal to children that popular entertainment and education are always divorced from one another – that learning does not take place during play.

It seems that Thomas and Ito are arguing (and even if they are not, I am) that the prevalence of new communications technologies has already changed the ways people communicate, socialize, play and learn and that educators must catch up to these changes in order to engage and educate new generations of learners. Thomas’s vision for these new learning spaces is unclear. He uses words like “flexible,” “bold” and “future proof” to describe them (504) and suggests that they must be “enchanting” as well as architecturally sound (510). What is clear is that Thomas believes these spaces should not be strictly physical but virtual as well (507). The new models of learning – in both physical and virtual environments – should allow for collaborative learning where the student does not merely receive information from a teacher, book, video, or website, but actively participates in the construction of the lesson with their peers as well as the instructor (503).

Both Braun’s and Thomas’s observations point to ways that technology-infused classrooms can help enlighten children about the world around them and help engage them in their education more thoroughly. Henry Jenkins argues that one way to combat a lack of political awareness among today’s youth is to introduce them to “microlevel” political power at earlier ages (228). Jenkins argues that allowing young people to be politically active in an environment with which they feel comfortable (his primary example is *The Sims* online, a massively multiplayer online game) will ready them to face real-world political and social conversations and decisions when they come of voting age (232-3). Because of its popularity, Facebook could allow children to take part in political and social conversations that are typically reserved for adults in an environment in which their inexperience and inability to vote would not preclude them from having an opinion.

Because so many kids are already familiar with Facebook’s format, it could at least be an intermediate step toward a more progressive and egalitarian learning environment. If set up with adequate privacy controls (admittedly a difficult task given Facebook’s privacy environment) it can provide a sufficient platform through which teachers and parents can monitor, but not control, students’ interactions. One could argue that several extant Internet technologies could allow the same kinds of engagement for those outside of the political spectrum. Blogs can offer an informal and anonymous space for kids to disseminate their political concerns and ideas. Discussion forums can link networks of people allowing them to share information and freely discuss any number of subjects. Social networking websites in general and Facebook specifically can combine the benefits of both the blog and the discussion forum while allowing kids to remain within comfortable and familiar communities of friends and peers.

One example of this potential for political growth (it is important to recognize it as potential and not a fulfilled

ideal) comes from my own particular use of Facebook. As a teacher of freshman composition, I want my students to leave class with at least some sense for how to engage in academic and (broadly defined) political discourse. To this end, each semester I require students to maintain an account on Facebook and join a class “group.” Through the group I am able to message the students simultaneously, notify them of changes to the course schedule and post interesting and informative videos and news articles. I also require each student at some point in the semester to post an open-ended discussion question to the group’s “Discussion Board.” Students often choose to ask about issues discussed in class or found in the films or readings for class, although they are allowed to ask questions about current events not referenced in the classroom. Students’ questions and responses range from the highly insightful (during the 2008 Presidential election a student asked about the validity and ethicality of specific campaign tactics) to the commonplace (students have asked about how others react to “tough times”) and everything in between. Some students take the exercise seriously and genuinely seek out discussions that are important to them and some simply post the minimum amount of responses on the last possible day, only because they know it is part of their grade (and some do not participate at all, to their own detriment). The system is imperfect. It is simply my way of trying to encourage (or coerce, or force) students to think about the highly political world around them – something many of them have never been asked to do.

Just before the 2008 election, in a discussion with each of my classes, a small number of students said they were considering voting in part because of discussion started in class and continued on Facebook. Whether those claims are true or merely an attempt to curry favor from the teacher, I do not know (and would not care to speculate). However I am optimistic that this “coerced” discourse community helped many students at the very least become more aware of the politics that surrounds them and affects their lives on a daily basis.

In “The Impact of Facebook on Our Students” co-founder of ChildrenOnline.org (a website dedicated to promoting safe Internet use among children and young adults) Doug Fodeman levels a number of criticisms against Facebook and other SNSs, ultimately concluding that they do not belong in children’s education. Many of Fodeman’s arguments against Facebook are related to the website’s spotty privacy record and the dangers of online socialization (i.e. that online socialization damages one’s “real world” social skills) (40). Fodeman is right to suggest that Facebook gives users – perhaps young users most of all – “a false sense of privacy” (36). Furthermore, Fodeman is right in warning parents and teachers against the aggressive, targeted marketing that takes place on Facebook (38). The problem with merely ignoring Facebook’s educational potential because of the dangers inherent in its imperfect, Spectacle system is that most high school age students already use Facebook and Twitter and are already exposed to the dangers. Rather than clinging to traditional education methods (which are not without danger) and eschewing new forums for learning, parents and teachers should use Facebook and other social networking websites and make these dangers part of the conversation. Whether parents and educators like it or not, online socialization and education happen. If children and young adults have access to the Web – even if they are successfully banned from social networking websites – they will be exposed to the Spectacle and all of the physical and psychological dangers that accompany it. Rather than trying to shelter young adults from the dangers of social networking, we should evaluate how we can use these tools (which, again students are already using in great numbers) to educate them about the political and social world around them. To fail to acknowledge and openly discuss the power of Facebook, Twitter and other social networking tools is to allow the Spectacle to educate them about it.

I am not the first instructor to use Facebook or other social networking websites for such a purpose. And most of my students are of voting age. Yet programs similar to mine might yield similar or even better results for younger children. Allowing children to participate in real political discussion in a place where they feel like they can safely express themselves (i.e. somewhere they will not be harshly judged for what they may not know) may help them see themselves as the political subjects they are. If we expect nothing of children, they will often oblige. If educators ignore popular forms of entertainment merely because they are popular, we risk missing opportunities to reach them. However, if educators engage students in important discourses on their terms at an earlier age, they may be less resistant to the discourses they have been taught to hate through the Spectacle of capitalist consumerism and may actually desire to understand and participate in the governmental political process as they get older.

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1. One example is Daniel Lyons of Newsweek who has written articles called “Facebook’s False Contrition” and “the High Price of Facebook” staunchly critical of Facebook and its privacy policies.
2. For example, in January of 2011 social networking sites became clogged with posts simultaneously fearing and mocking the possibility of changed Zodiac signs, when in-fact the Western Zodiac system was not affected. For more info see Virginia Bell’s Huffington Post article “New Zodiac Sign: Astrology Makeover or Misinformation?”
3. There could be even greater benefits if these pages – which focus solely on politics of the United States – had a greater emphasis on international politics.
4. There are too many false or misleading stories to even scratch the surface adequately here. A couple of recent examples are lies (from both parties) about President Obama’s 2012 budget, misleading comments about Social Security’s impact on the deficit and fundamental misreadings of Wisconsin union pay and benefits (www.factcheck.org).
5. See the Kevin Coe et al “Hostile News: Partisan Use and Perceptions of Cable News Programming” for a recent discussion of how some news organizations have trended toward politically biased reporting.
6. For news coverage of the Beacon controversy see Juan Carlos Perez’s “Facebook Beacon More Intrusive Than Previously Thought” and Jon Brodtkin’s “Facebook Halts Beacon.”
7. I will again refer to Daniel Lyons’ Newsweek articles that I mentioned above, as well as John Dvorak’s “Why Facebook’s Privacy Settings Don’t Matter.”
8. James Grimmelmann has written an interesting article, “Privacy as Public Safety,” in which he calls for a new mindset about privacy laws on social networking websites. In it, he argues that current database regulation models are insufficient to protect users’ information, and that lawmakers should look at product-liability law for ideas for a new model for regulating information flows on SNS.
9. Grimmelmann notes that these are adapted from Daniel Solove’s *A Taxonomy of Privacy*.
10. See Sam Hananel’s MSNBC.com article “Woman Fired Over Facebook Rant; Suit Follows” for just one of dozens (if not hundreds) of examples of people being punished for comments or photos posted on Facebook. There is even a group on Facebook called “Fired By Facebook” which allows users to document these types of privacy harms.
11. Since Klaassen and Bulik’s article’s publication, the group discount website Groupon has imbedded marketing and purchasing even further into Facebook by allowing users who “Like” the site to purchase geographic-specific group coupons (hence the name Groupon) directly from their Facebook page.
12. Emily Steel and Geoffrey A. Fowler’s Wall Street Journal article “Facebook in Privacy Breach” details the most recent incident in which Facebook unintentionally allowed the transfer of user information to advertising and data collection agencies.
13. As I write, there is a post about how Facebook has used its “check-in” feature to measure what locales are “the world’s most social landmarks.”
14. In previous incarnations of user profiles, stringent word or character limits were placed on how much one could describe and discuss their religious and political views, while at the same time users were given seemingly limitless space to list their favorite television shows, movies, sports, and other consumer products. This imbalance suggested a hierarchy of self in which one’s entertainment choices outweighed their personal philosophies.
15. One prominent example is the image of Che Guevara emblazoned on t-shirts and coffee mugs, available at a variety of stores and online retailers.
16. Also called “creeping” or “freeping” (a portmanteau of the words “Facebook” and “creeping”), lurking is reading and viewing friends information “without directly interacting in any way” (Pempek 235).
17. A couple of recent examples are Wilma Clark’s “Beyond Web 2.0: Mapping the Technology Landscapes of Young Learners” about new technologies that complicate and aid new learning spaces and Harry Pence’s “Preparing for the Real Web Generation” which argues that today’s college students merely represent a transitional period in education and that the real Web generation (the generation of students who truly and deeply engage with web-related technologies) is more than a decade away. There are dozens if not hundreds of other examples from the last decade and earlier.
18. Although television and online gaming may be the most obvious examples of villainized forms of popular entertainment, Ito’s primary example is the “media mix” *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, which is a manga comic, animated television show, and multi-player card game. Ito argues that media mixes can provide a unique form of socialization and participatory education that should be utilized by the education system, not rejected (91).

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