The problems of the world can be solved merely by navelgazing, not through engagement with the world, changing one's behaviors, or helping others.

Perhaps the biggest problem is that the urge to share your every musing with the world is contagious. I am tempted to exhume moments from my life that I previously thought were merely absurd or funny to me, but that I now realize are worthy of widespread recognition. But I'll spare you.

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face value
mary l. gray

Facebook

For at least 40 years, printed directories of college freshmen have been dubbed “face books.” First-year students browsed them to search for other freshmen from their hometowns or check out prospects for dating. Fraternities notoriously used them to send party invitations to women whose pictures drew their attention. Facebook—a digitized student listing named after the hard-copy directories of its student founders—was launched at Harvard in February 2004. It was the first face book to leave the printed page behind.

As Harvard goes, so goes the world. Within months Facebook branched out to other Ivy League and elite colleges in the United States. It soon took on a life of its own as clusters of the hottest campus gaggles—from fraternities and sororities to Campus Crusaders for Christ—signed up in droves. By 2005 local versions (think of a cross between library branches and fast-food franchises) appeared at more than 2,000 college campuses across the United States, Mexico, the UK, and Australia. When Facebook reached a saturation point with brick-and-mortar colleges, it reached out to the business world, senior-citizen communities, and high schools as potential markets. Facebook now has more than 7.5 million users around the globe, spreading mainly through word of mouth on college campuses and the buzz generated by newspapers.

Facebook—like Friendster, launched in 2002, and MySpace, which in 2003 transformed itself from a ho-hum webfile host to the zenith of social scenes for U.S. high schoolers—represents what the information-technology biz recently christened “me media.” Facebook (originally called The Facebook) and its ilk are the latest commercial (not to be confused with profitable) iterations of what Wired magazine described in the 1990s as “social software.” Social software and social network services build and display users’ social networks online through links and references to friends and associations. Constellations of your buddies and favorite affiliations literally revolve around your virtual presence. You are at once the sun to those circling (well, linking to) you and a star in someone else’s universe. More than 300 known social-network services are vying for your attention, all built on a computer protocol dubbed FOAF (Friend of a Friend). The software architecture links users through identifiable, commonly shared properties. So, commonalities among birthdates, locations, likes, and dislikes are cross-referenced to build connections among user names found in the relational databases of social software search engines. It is an online, ever-extending game of “six degrees of separation” that promulgates a sense of serendipity.

For college students, the Facebook site offers a simple, prefab homepage that guarantees a local audience. The site is mainly text-based; images are used only for discreet advertisements along the Web page’s borders and the uploaded pictures of the site’s users. A basic blue-and-white color scheme keeps the reader focused on content rather than design. Refreshingly, and perhaps surprisingly, there are (so far) no pop-up ads or spam sent from the site. To join university-based Facebooks, you need a verifiable .edu e-mail address, and initially you are limited to your campus’s Facebook presence. While you can register as part of the Facebook associated with your campus e-mail address, you cannot belong to a Facebook elsewhere without the e-mail address credentials from that organization. The site allows you to “friend”—extend an invitation and link to—anyone you can name from across the Facebook network or find through the Facebook keyword search. Of course, your “friend” must accept the invitation to establish the link. Depending on whom you know around the globe, you can always work to land your profile on other Facebooks. In fact, students will tell you that collecting friends from far and wide boosts their reputations. Everyone knows you don’t really have 6,000 friends in the traditional sense, but if you can muster links to that many profiles on and beyond your campus—impressive!

Another alluring feature is the graffiti wall. Friends in your network can scrawl comments on your profile page under a section called “the wall”—at least until you decide to take the comments down. Most students use these walls
to exchange boasts or barbs about weekend exploits—from raucous shout-outs for drinking feats to more subdued wishes of goodwill. Some of the most poignant and emotionally stirring graffiti postings are the makeshift shrines to students who have died unexpectedly. In May 2006, for example, the day after Indiana University student Alvin Henry Jr. died in an auto accident, friends transformed his Facebook graffiti wall from an everyday collection of banter into a living tribute. Because Facebook automatically deletes deactivated profiles within a month, a fellow Facebook member created a group in memory of Alvin so that his images, friendship circle, and more than 100 wall postings might stay alive on Facebook. The deceased student’s Facebook pages were akin to a school assembly crafted entirely by a group of peers rather than older adults.

The flexibility of Facebook’s personal profiles allows members to tailor their public persona. Users can display globally or to a closed network of friends the gender of the people they tend to date, their relationship status or political leanings, and uploaded pictures that capture the day’s events. There is also an ambiguous feature known as “poking” that lets members virtually tap the shoulder of a fellow member without leaving any particular message. For most people on Facebook, a poke registers much like a wink or a flirtatious smile from across the room. Facebook members can also join and/or fabricate an endless number of group affiliations.

While the Alvin Henry Jr. memorial group may only know each other through their mutual love of a friend, many Facebook groups represent virtual versions of organizations already on campus. So, the campus Young Democrats and Young Republican chapters stake out their presence alongside the university’s LGBT club or its marching band. Of course, the volumes of Facebook groups out there for drinking (or having sex) on Wednesdays, before noon, or in unorthodox places match (okay, exceed) the school organizations that regularly meet face-to-face. I have yet to see, for example, the offline counterpart of the Facebook group, “I love the Golden Girls.” Profile details—whether group membership, favorite quotes, or pet peeves—can and do regularly change with no explanation. Such changes used to occur without fanfare, but in early September 2006, Facebook introduced “news feeds”—automatic broadcasts over social networks noting any tweak to a personal profile. Although individual users could turn off or control this flow of information, the company faced a hailstorm of complaints from students who wanted a bit more across-the-board anonymity with their profiling.

Students turn to Facebook for one task above all others: to browse their peers. As Brock Read reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education in 2004, Facebook “puts names to faces.” From dating and studying to dining hall runs, you name it, and you can find someone with whom to share it. Connecting names to faces produces a semblance of familiarity. In some ways seeing (or reading) is experienced as the first level of visceral knowing. As Facebook’s site producers noted to Read, “The networks make meeting people seem like a casual process.” Online social networks like Facebook also make universities seem like smaller, more manageable social worlds. In Read’s review of Facebook, students described personal profiles as “virtual clubhouses where they control who’s allowed to join.” Creating social networks through linking and group affiliations allows students to feel that they can manage disruption to their self-presentation while still inviting the unexpected poke. The site aims to control social interaction and make it predictable while still allowing for unexpected encounters.

For instance, at the start of each school term, students with Facebook profiles who are enrolled in the same courses are automatically interlinked. Students walk into their college classrooms knowing and sharing more small-talk trivia about their peers than most of us garner from work colleagues after years of holiday office parties. Students no longer have to spend weeks figuring out who that brunette is in the fifth row. Chances are the brunette has already disclosed not only a full name but also sexual and political desires (maybe even a favorite quote, book, or song) on Facebook.

While many members of earlier generations may find this level of self-disclosure and showcasing a tad creepy, remember: this is the nannycam generation. These students have been closely monitored and on display since they were in diapers. Is their comfort with online exposition (or exhibitionism) so surprising? Their Facebook profiles might be one of the first venues that their parents can’t easily access,
where they feel in control of the information flow around their public persona, and where they can imagine they are communicating exclusively with others like themselves. For them, this is a safe, contained kind of getting-to-know-someone-from-a-distance.

Though Facebook is new, people who interact on it are working with some old assumptions when it comes to changing someone from stranger to friend. It is tempting and common for people to imagine that new media sites allow us to cut to the chase when it comes to forging social bonds. We assume that if we have enough information from someone’s profile (and broadcast choice bits about ourselves), the work of building a common connection is halfway done. But these electronic assessments and inventories do not take the guesswork out of getting to know someone. Case in point: A group of gay- and lesbian-identifying students at my university gathered one night to talk about the pros and cons of using Facebook to meet potential partners or casual hook ups. Some voiced frustration that students “who everyone knows are gay” either did not clearly define their sexual identities on Facebook or changed their listings from gay to straight and then back to gay again. These students wanted Facebook to make whom to date or how to come out a transparent, stable matter—an old-fashioned sort of desire in a medium that highlights just how dynamic and variable our expressions of identity can be in different contexts.

Facebook profile settings might make declaring same-sex desire easy, but the online setting cannot circumvent offline political and social complexities; it cannot make “being out” any easier in one’s Intro to World History class. The gay and lesbian students could all relate to how “being out” was never a single or coherent act entirely under anyone’s control, but they imagined Facebook would make it easier to rely on existing sexual identity categories to cut through the quagmire of identity politics. Ironically, Facebook and other new media amplify contemporary struggles over how to manage social identity rather than simply providing new, neutral places to be social. Quests for transparency and stability are as complicated online as anywhere else.

In the not-too-distant past, we relied on the repetitive crossing of paths to learn the layers that make up a person’s presentation of self. But now, as public, physical crossroads deteriorate around us, we are culturally banking on the promise of bypassing repetitive meetings. We are hoping we can learn more—and more accurately—through textual encounters. Unfortunately, we forget that textual representations are just as layered and complicated as our bodily selves. Reading about someone over and over again online may seem to yield deeper knowledge, but we need varied encounters to expand and deepen what we know and how we know it. When we rely on one venue, electronic or otherwise, for social connection, we fall back into old habits of assuming that stable lines exist between the bodies we see—textual bodies when it comes to Facebook—and the far more complex bodies that walk through our everyday lives. What there is to know about any one of us always comes packaged with a social context that complicates the picture of who we are.

I opened my own Facebook account last year after several undergraduates in my new media and society class cajoled me to join. They told me if I did not get on Facebook, I would miss out on their generation’s Woodstock (that I too was born after Woodstock did not seem to occur to them). Once I established my Facebook profile, though, I had to make the same hard decisions my students make about how to present myself online. Would I be the (sort of) hip, queer-identifying professor with a partner of eight years, or would I leave out my sexual identity and relationship status entirely? Would I link to other faculty only or extend my circle to students I have met in my classes and community service work? Would I divulge pet peeves and favorite quotes to fellow Facebookers or keep it to the college professor equivalent of name, rank, and serial number? Most of the decisions I made about what to put on my Facebook profile had little to do with the site’s technological possibilities and everything to do with my own anxieties over how to manage my new social identity as an assistant professor.

Facebook may appear to make me more accessible to my students, as they can now send instant messages to my profile any one of us always comes packaged with a social context that complicates the picture of who we are.Plainly, the access and angst we attribute to Facebook and similar sites are not products of the technology itself. Facebook does not so much introduce new dilemmas of intimacy and identity as give them a different shape, adding to the complexities of getting to know each other in any epoch.

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