

Unlike Us

Reader

SOCIAL MEDIA MONOPOLIES
AND THEIR ALTERNATIVES

EDITED BY
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MIRIAM RASCH**
INC READER #8

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**'WHY I LEFT FACEBOOK':
STUBBORNLY REFUSING TO NOT EXIST
EVEN AFTER OPTING OUT OF MARK
ZUCKERBERG'S SOCIAL GRAPH**



ROBERT W. GEHL

**FACEBOOK LEFT YOU SOCIAL
MORE PEOPLE COME VOTE
MY LIKE FRIENDS ABOUT
USERS DATA BLOG WORK**

Leaving Facebook is a lonely thing to do.¹ I left Facebook after a two-year stint on the social network. To me, leaving felt like a solitary act, like slipping away alone from a massive party before it ends. This seeming solitude was amplified by the fact that I could not use Facebook to explain to my friends and family why I had left.

But of course, I could not be the only person to leave Facebook, and indeed there are many who have done the same. A portion of them have refused to go without telling others why, explaining their reasons on blogs (as well as on Twitter, Google+, Diaspora, and other media). Like me, many of them indicated that they felt as if they were alone in leaving.

However, they are not alone. In fact, there are many of them. Moreover, their publicly shared reasons for leaving are instructive for others who want to quit Zuckerberg's social graph. These Facebook quitters have produced a remarkable set of critical interrogations of Facebook's worst qualities: its role in reshaping how we think about privacy and sharing our data, its commodification of user activity and emotion, its reduction of life to likes and friending, its incessant and bizarrely addictive noise, and the fact that it is just not cool anymore. Moreover, by writing about their decision to opt out, they are helping to mitigate against the compelling power of the social network that seemingly everyone is on. That is to say, by writing about their choice, they help preserve and extend alternative spaces of discourse outside of Facebook. And they make leaving Facebook feel far less like slipping away from a party and more like joining a smart and thoughtful club.

Facebook Democracy

First, the obvious question: why leave Facebook? Why not change it from within? Given that Facebook claims to have more 'monthly active users' than most countries have citizens – that is, over 800 million,² we might decide to use metaphors of citizenship and democracy to understand how the site is governed. After all, this is the language that Facebook itself uses. The owners and marketers for Facebook and other social media use terms like 'participation' and 'democratization' to describe what they offer

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1. This essay is dedicated to Jessica Houf, who is one of the best examples of social media quitters I know of.
 2. David A. Ebersman, 'Facebook, Inc Registration Statement on Form S-1', Securities and Exchange Commission, 1 February 2012: 1, <http://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1326801/000119312512034517/d287954ds1.htm>.

to users. For example, in a keynote speech at Facebook's 2007 F8 convention, Dan'l Lewin, a vice president from Microsoft (a company which at that time had just invested \$240 million in Facebook), proclaimed:

The partnership [between Facebook and Microsoft] is oriented around democratizing, unleashing the web, unleashing the data the Facebook user community [...] is creating. Facebook today presents maybe the definitive opportunity for unleashing the power of the web and the data the users create and share among themselves.³

This line of thinking holds that, by empowering users to express themselves, Facebook is a democratizing force. Let the web off the leash! An unleashed web of everyday user data is, we are told, an unstoppable force for democracy and connection. This all-too-common line of thinking explains why some proclaimed the Arab Spring to be a Facebook Revolution, as if all it took was the existence of Facebook to drive people into public squares to challenge dictators and demand democratic reform.

So perhaps users could be forgiven for protesting loudly and using tools of democratic governance when, in 2009, it was revealed that Facebook's new Terms of Service (ToS) claimed ownership over user data in perpetuity, even if a user left the service. The change was made public by an article in *The Consumerist* with the headline 'Facebook's New Terms Of Service: "We Can Do Anything We Want With Your Content. Forever."' ⁴ Outraged users started a group, 'Millions Against Facebook's New Terms of Service and Layout', eventually growing to over two million members. They petitioned for a change.

It seemed as if they were heard. To allay their concerns, Facebook allowed users to vote on the proposed new Terms of Service, or keep the old ones. Mark Zuckerberg introduced the first Facebook Site Governance vote in 2009 by writing 'Today, we take the next step in opening our site governance to everyone who uses Facebook with our first user vote'.⁵ And in 2012, Facebook also reacted to pressure from users and privacy regulations in the European Union by holding a vote on keeping an old ToS or accepting a new one. As in 2009, the user-protestors used democratic tools such as petitions and comments to pressure Facebook to improve their privacy policies.⁶

There was only one condition: both votes on changes in the ToS would be binding only if at least 30% of monthly active users voted. In 2009, that was roughly 160 million. In 2012, it was roughly 240 million. These are incredibly large numbers, and in fact they

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3. Mark Zuckerberg and Dan'l Lewin, 'Keynote', F8, San Francisco, CA, 24 May 2007. <http://www.facebook.com/f8>.
 4. Chris Walters, 'Facebook's New Terms Of Service: "We Can Do Anything We Want With Your Content. Forever"', *The Consumerist*, 15 February 2009, <http://consumerist.com/5150175/facebook-new-terms-of-service-we-can-do-anything-we-want-with-your-content-forever>.
 5. Mark Zuckerberg, 'Voting Begins on Governing the Facebook Site', *The Facebook Blog*, 16 April 2009. <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=76815337130>.
 6. Cameron Scott, 'User Vote on Facebook Privacy Policies Hasn't Stemmed Criticism', *PC World*, 6 June 2012, https://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/257101/user_vote_on_facebook_privacy_policies_hasnt_stemmed_criticism.html.

proved to be far too large. About 600,000 people voted in the inaugural vote,⁷ and in 2012 only 350,000 people voted.⁸

So what happened? One might read these numbers as evidence that users do not care about the ToS. One could even read these results as democracy in action (democracy inaction?), since the choice to not vote is the citizen's prerogative. But there's something else going on: the mathematical legerdemain of 30% of *monthly active users*. The votes were held for a week – that is, 25% of a month – meaning that immediately the number of potential voters was depressed. Given the dry nature of a ToS document (reading these is certainly not a fun way to spend a few hours on a social network), it is impressive that hundreds of thousands of people did in fact vote. But these numbers don't come close to the impossibly high goal Facebook set for the elections.

To be fair to Facebook, in 2009, after about 75% of the 600,000 voters chose the new policy, Facebook decided to waive the 30% rule and keep their new policy.⁹ At that point, it sounded as if Facebook would de facto do away with the extremely high 30% requirement. But, they repeated the 30% rule in 2012. More importantly, even though the 2012 vote results had 87% vote *against* the new policy, Facebook chose to adopt it, anyway, unlike their reaction in 2009.¹⁰ Combine this practice with complaints that Facebook did not publicize the vote, how to actually cast a vote,¹¹ and that they held the vote for only a week, and it's clear that Facebook's proclamations of 'democratization' and participation are, if not unfounded, disingenuous at best. In either case, Facebook basically got the ToS documents it wanted, votes be damned.

Certainly, this is not the only way to vote on Facebook policies. Perhaps now that Facebook is a public company, shareholders can vote for policies and practices that protect user rights. However, even a cursory glance at Facebook's Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) Registration Statement reveals that those investors who were able to get Facebook initial public offering (IPO) stock (that is, those users with connections to Wall Street investment firms – keep in mind that small investors are almost always shut out of IPOs) received Class A stock. Each share of such stock equals one vote in shareholder meetings. Compare that with Class B stock, held by executives such as Mark Zuckerberg: a share of Class B is worth *ten* votes. Thanks to their holding of Class B stock, Zuckerberg and the upper-level executives are firmly in control. Moreover, even if shareholders somehow could work together to

7. Ted Ulyot, 'Results of the Inaugural Facebook Site Governance Vote', The Facebook Blog, 23 April 2009, <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=79146552130>.

8. Casey Johnston, 'Whopping .038% of Facebook Users Vote on Data Use Policy Change', *Ars Technica*, 8 June 2012, <http://arstechnica.com/business/2012/06/whopping-00038-of-facebook-users-vote-on-data-use-policy-change/>.

9. David Sarno, 'Facebook Governance Vote Is a Homework Assignment No One Did', *Los Angeles Times*, 23 April 2009, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2009/04/facebook-governance-vote-is-a-homework-assignment-no-one-did.html>.

10. Somini Sengupta, 'Facebook Holds a Vote and Turnout Is Low', *New York Times*, 8 June 2012, <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/08/facebook-holds-a-vote-and-turnout-is-low/>.

11. See user comments at <https://www.facebook.com/fbsitegovernance>. Many claim to have not heard about the vote until after the vote closed. See also Johnston, 'Whopping .038% of Facebook Users Vote on Data Use Policy Change' and Ricardo Bilton, 'Facebook Hid Policy Vote, Privacy Group Says', *VB*, 8 June 2012, <http://venturebeat.com/2012/06/08/facebook-china-policy-vote/>.

advocate for better privacy policies, why would they? Shareholders want a return on their investment. Facebook will provide such a return only if it can commodify user activity, a process that requires the sort of obfuscation and doublespeak that marked the ToS votes.¹²

So much for Facebook democracy as a means to reform this social media monopoly from within.

Opting Out: Facebook is NOT the Internet... But it Wants to Be

After all of the above discussion, I should admit that I have never believed Facebook to be a democracy, and no one else should, either, despite the Web 2.0 language of participation and democracy. Facebook is a business, one based on constantly observing us declare our desires and relationships. Capitalism and democracy just don't mix; as Mark Zuckerberg has allegedly explained, 'the most disruptive companies don't listen to their customers'.¹³ So let's consider our options not from the perspective of the democratic citizen, but from the perspective of the vaunted sovereign, rational consumer (the only subject position we are invited to take in the face of global capitalism and 'disruptive' companies).

There's a saying among neo-conservatives in the United States: 'If you don't like America, you're free to leave'.¹⁴ This statement is part of an argument that true patriotism is uncritical acceptance of the American government's policy (especially its foreign policy, now one of constant war). It's technically true – Americans who disagree with the actions of the country could leave – but in practice pretty much impossible, unless one is very rich (as in the case of one of Facebook's founders who left the US for Singapore to escape tax obligations).¹⁵

In the case of Facebook, however, this is a bit more plausible. There's a mirror to the saying: 'You're free to leave', you don't have to use Facebook if you don't like it. This is the sort of power granted to us in a consumption-oriented society. Don't like ineffective Facebook democracy? Don't like its use of data, reduction of emotion to 'liking', or stunted conception of friendship? You can leave.

But is it true?

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12. Facebook commodifies user activity by constantly recording it, storing it, and selling chunks of it to marketers and even states. This mechanism is hidden behind the surface layers of the software, as well as the discourses of 'participation' and 'friendship' that Facebook deploys. See Robert W. Gehl, 'The Archive and the Processor: The Internal Logic of Web 2.0', *New Media & Society* 13.8 (December, 2011): 1228–1244; Robert W. Gehl, 'Real (Software) Abstractions: On the Rise of Facebook and the Fall of Myspace', *Social Text* 30.2 111 (2012): 99–119; and Christian Fuchs, 'The Political Economy of Privacy on Facebook', *Television & New Media* 13.2 (1 March, 2012): 139–159.
 13. Owen Thomas, 'Even Facebook Employees Hate the Redesign', *Gawker*, 20 March 2009, <http://gawker.com/5177341/even-facebook-employees-hate-the-redesign>.
 14. For a Facebook page on this slogan, see <https://www.facebook.com/pages/If-you-dont-like-America-then-please-dont-live-here/308442008575>.
 15. Quentin Hardy, 'Eduardo Saverin's Billionaire Blues', *New York Times*, 18 May 2012, <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/18/eduardo-saverins-billionaire-blues/>.

A major theory in the economics of communication technology is the network effect. Basically, this means that a communication technology increases in value as more people use it. For example, if I own a telephone, but none of my friends, family, or colleagues do, its value is quite low, even if I paid much money for it. As more people I know get telephones, its value rises almost exponentially, exceeding the price paid.

This economic theory has a sociological aspect: as more people join a network (such as a telephone network or a social network site), more pressure builds on non-users to get on board. This is happening with Facebook. Facebook has a huge user base, so family, friends, political and cultural groups, businesses, and professional colleagues are starting to assume that everyone has a Facebook account. This has led to anecdotal accounts of people being excluded from social or professional events or discussions. In addition, as more and more sites adopt Facebook Connect as their login system, having a Facebook account will be a necessity to use many online services (the music streaming service Spotify is a notable example of this, as is Answers.com). If this becomes endemic, Facebook's network effect could severely undermine opting out as a form of protest. The idea that if 'You can't be found on Google, you don't exist' would be extended to Facebook in all walks of life: friendship, dating, employment, and internet use.

However, Facebook's network effect does have a weakness: Facebook is not the internet. Certainly, it wants to be. Per their initial public offering SEC Registration Statement they state: 'There are more than two billion global Internet users, according to an industry source, and we aim to connect all of them'.¹⁶ With its post-IPO transition to a public company complete, Facebook will likely pursue this goal (while of course simultaneously pursuing the goal of monetizing user content and attention).

Despite this ambition, Facebook has (thankfully!) not yet insinuated itself into every networked communication. Rather than being the hegemonic platform on the internet, Facebook comprises only part of what I have elsewhere called a 'Web 2.0 Portal'.¹⁷ Facebook is certainly strong in terms of providing identification credentials to the rest of the web, although Twitter's OAuth system is competitive here.¹⁸ In comparison to the rest of a Web 2.0 Portal, it is weak in terms of search (people turn to Google for this) and in terms of content management (news and media sites, blog posts, and videos are largely hosted elsewhere – Facebook does however have a huge database of photographs). Facebook is simply a part – albeit a powerful part – of a conglomeration of social media sites that largely monopolize their respective spheres; these sites are interlinked in an array of protocols, APIs, user activities, and trade associations.¹⁹

16. Ebersman, 'Facebook, Inc Registration Statement on Form S-1'.

17. Robert W. Gehl, 'Distributed Centralization: Web 2.0 as a Portal into Users' Lives', *Lateral* 1.1 (March, 2012), <http://culturalstudiesassociation.org/lateral/issue1/gehl.html>.

18. In the literature on web portals, this is called 'single-sign on'.

19. As I explore in a chapter in my forthcoming book *Reverse Engineering Social Media*, the major social media work together in standards- and practices-setting consortia such as the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB). Although news reporting often presents Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Apple, and Twitter as viciously competitive, they do work together via organizations such as the IAB to share data and lobby regulators.

Thus, the existence of Web 2.0 Portal alternatives to Facebook (especially blogs) allows for those who opt-out to ‘exist’, to ‘write themselves into being’ in another context, as danah boyd might say.²⁰ This leads me to the central object of this essay: blog posts from people who have left Facebook.

Leaving Facebook

Right now I should provide caveats: what follows is not a scientific survey. This is simply a series of quotes and commentary from people who claim to have left Facebook.²¹

Before I get to the quotes, though, perhaps I should explore the very idea of leaving Facebook. What does this mean? I myself had a Facebook account for about two years. In 2010, I went through the process of leaving. I visited the Help Center, went through the Account Settings, read the tutorial on deleting my account. Most importantly, I overcame a shameless tug on my heartstrings: a screen that says, ‘Are you sure you want to deactivate your account? Your 312 friends will no longer be able to keep in touch with you. Suzy will miss you. Jim will miss you. Antonio will miss you’.²² And even after that, I had to confirm two weeks after deactivation to actually *delete* my account.

So, after all this, have I left Facebook? Maybe. But what about Facebook’s promise to store all of my data, even after I closed my account (recall that this is what caused the protest in 2009 and the first Facebook ToS vote)? Have I left Facebook, or is my digital data double living on as a sort of zombie, or as a marketing profile (straight white male aged 25-33, college educated, likes 1990s grunge music)? And what if there are images of me on other people’s profiles, or comments about me - have I left Facebook if there are?

I also currently have two fake Facebook accounts. Because I study the architecture and software of Facebook, I have to keep up with its interface and policy changes, even if I don’t participate in day-to-day use. I log in and explore the service with these accounts. It’s not *me* who is logged in – whatever it means to be ‘me’. So have I left Facebook? How much of ‘me’ is in my fake accounts?

Moreover, Facebook’s process for leaving is opaque. It is quite possible that most users who ‘leave’ have *deactivated*, not deleted, their accounts. This is the easiest option for ‘leaving’. Deletion is much harder: there’s a two-week moratorium, and the process to do so is buried behind various help screens. Deactivated accounts remain inactive until the user logs back in. If a user never logs back in, but the user’s data still remains on Facebook’s servers, has he or she left Facebook?

20. danah boyd, ‘Friends, Friendsters, and Top 8; Writing Community into Being on Social Network Sites’, *First Monday* 11.12 (December, 2006), <http://firstmonday.org/htbin/cgiwrap/bin/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/1418/1336>.

21. And I should also say I have not checked up on these people to see if they have, in fact, actually left Facebook.

22. See, Jennifer Van Grove, ‘Want to Delete Your Facebook Account? Be Prepared For a Guilt Trip’, *Mashable*, 22 July 2009, <https://mashable.com/2009/07/22/facebook-deactivate-account/>, for a discussion of this guilt trip.

Finally, there is a third type of account, one for those who leave the living. These are ‘memorial accounts’. As Max Kelly of Facebook explains, ‘how do you deal with an interaction with someone who is no longer able to log on? When someone leaves us, they don’t leave our memories or our social network. To reflect that reality, we created the idea of “memorialized” profiles as a place where people can save and share their memories of those who’ve passed’.²³ So, do the dead leave Facebook if they never leave ‘our social network’ and if their profiles remain online?

These are intriguing questions, and at the heart of them is the nature of digital culture: the duplication of digital data means that no digital object can truly be owned; life in social networks is a digital shadow of the self (or perhaps it is a prosthesis for the self) that can persist even after death; paying attention to the digital flow is a privileged way of being, a way to live ‘declaratively’²⁴ and constantly assert one’s existence.

In light of this, I can only take the following stories of leaving Facebook at face value. I cannot discern whether these bloggers have ‘truly’ left Facebook, because it is not clear what that means. Setting aside these limitations, it is time to finally ask: why do people leave Facebook?

Privacy Concerns

Perhaps the most common criticism of Facebook is that its sole purpose is to gather as much private data on users as is possible. Besides allegedly explaining that ‘disruptive companies don’t listen to their customers’, Mark Zuckerberg will forever be associated with the phrase ‘privacy is dead’ (even though he didn’t actually say it).²⁵ Regardless of what he actually said, some Facebook quitters took exception to what Zuckerberg implied. For example, Matthew K. Gold:

I very much wanted to share photos of my baby with family and friends, but I didn’t want to share them in a space run by a man who believes that privacy is dead. It’s that simple: I deleted my Facebook account *because* I loved my facebook network and didn’t want to see my interactions with it mined relentlessly by a company without scruples.²⁶

Comedian and blogger Fenzel concurs:

[Facebook will] say they’re adding features, and they are... but they’re doing it without asking you, and they’re taking away something valuable from you without giving you a chance to say no – your privacy, your personal information, even your conversations among your friends. They’re putting your job at risk by making it very hard to exercise discretion and keep up boundaries around what you say online.

23. Max Kelly, ‘Memories of Friends Departed Endure on Facebook’, The Facebook Blog, 26 October 2009, <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=163091042130>.

24. James Governor, Dion Hinchcliffe and Duane Nickull, *Web 2.0 Architectures*. 1st ed. Sebastopol, CA: O’Reilly Media Inc, 2009, 190–192.

25. Bobbie Johnson, ‘Privacy No Longer a Social Norm, Says Facebook Founder’, *The Guardian*, 11 January 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/jan/11/facebook-privacy>.

26. Matthew K. Gold, ‘Why I Left Facebook’, *The Lapland Chronicles*, May 15, 2010. <http://mkgold.net/blog/2010/05/15/why-i-left-facebook/>.

They're tricking you into thinking nothing is happening. And then they're selling that to people.²⁷

Part of this criticism is a critique of Facebook's intellectual property practices, especially the February 2009 change in the ToS that prompted the 'Millions Against Facebook' protest. Facebook holdout Cord Jefferson combines the privacy concern with the intellectual property concern:

[p]ull back the curtain and it's a place for getting people ages 13 and over to willingly offer up the most direct ways to sell them things. It's like being at a big party with all your friends but then realizing that the party is really a Pizza Hut focus group. And also, any pictures you take at the party are owned by the focus group forever. Sound fun to you?²⁸

Here, Jefferson deftly links Facebook's surveillance of user activity, its *raison d'être* (selling users' data to advertisers), and its desire to construct what I call an 'archive of affect' out of the appropriated creative activity of users.²⁹ Facebook and other advertising-centric social media are engineered to gather refined data on the desires of their users. This quantification of emotion – what Eva Illouz has called 'emotional capitalism'³⁰ – is imagined to be a gold mine for the realization of surplus value locked within commodities. If a granular archive of affect comprised of creative products and metadata can be built by monitoring user activity, then in theory more targeted advertising can be directed at consumers. These bloggers recognize this.

Less commonly discussed among bloggers, but certainly a concern in surveillance studies, is the phenomenon of surveillance culture permeating the day-to-day practices of 'ordinary' (for lack of a better word) people. That is, the blog posts quoted above point out the ways in which powerful entities such as corporations (Facebook itself, advertising networks) and to a lesser extent states are watching us in social media. But of course, much of social media is marked by 'lateral surveillance' – what Mark Andrejevic aptly calls 'the work of watching one another'.³¹ In other words, watching one another is now normalized, with myriad consequences.

Some of the Facebook quitters cited the burden of this work of watching one another (and being watched) in their posts. Blogger Cass writes, 'I have seen families split apart. I have seen events destroyed through thoughtless social "management." I have seen stalking facilitated, I have seen people delete their grandmothers because they

27. Fenzel, 'Why I Left Facebook', *Overthinking It*, 13 May 2010, <http://www.overthinkingit.com/2010/05/13/why-i-left-facebook/>.

28. Cord Jefferson, 'The New Dinosaur: Why I'm Not on Facebook, and Why You Shouldn't Be Either', *Good*, 6 May 2011, <http://www.good.is/post/the-new-dinosaur-why-i-m-not-on-facebook-and-why-you-shouldn-t-be-either/>.

29. Gehl, 'The Archive and the Processor'.

30. Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007.

31. Mark Andrejevic, 'The Work of Watching One Another: Lateral Surveillance, Risk, and Governance', *Surveillance & Society* 2.4 (2005): 479–497; and Mark Andrejevic, 'The Discipline of Watching: Detection, Risk, and Lateral Surveillance', *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23.5 (December, 2006): 391–407.

can't stand the pressure any more'.³² This software-oriented language – 'deleting' a grandmother – is a powerful indicator of the sheer weight of performing for an always-watching audience comprised of friends and family. Similarly, Brian Fegter writes about the burden of performing for so many people:

I have 1,300 friends on Facebook and almost 500 followers on Twitter. That means at any given time, 1,800 people can look into my personal life, opinions, photos, etc... There are people who follow me and never interact with me, but yet when they see me at a conference they can regurgitate everything I posted for the last six months. The fact that we watch other people's personal thoughts and their life unfold in our time line without interaction is a form of digital voyeurism.³³

According to another blogger, Bluedepth, the work of performing for such ubiquitous surveillance is not mitigated by Facebook's system of controlling what data is shared with whom. In fact, using such a system is a job in itself:

Facebook used to have really easy ways of managing Friends Lists, but recently they've eroded a lot of that functionality away. I maintained a NoWall group and banned that group from seeing any content on my Facebook page. I then stuffed family members, friends, and people I know a little bit into that group. Partly because I don't want to deal with them seeing all that I have to share and partly to punish some for being social twats.³⁴

Bluedepth goes on to explain that, despite this work of managing friends and family, there were still leaks of data to the wrong audience members, a common complaint about Facebook.³⁵

And woe to those who try to limit which friends and family watch us. As Fegter writes,

There have been a few times that I have stopped following others only to receive an angry or inquiring email demanding a reason why. I've discussed this with friends and many have experienced the same scenario. The impact of that one "Stop Following This Person" or "Remove From Friends" has caused turmoil in many real-life friendships.³⁶

For these bloggers, then, either they bear the burden of performing for a voyeuristic audience, or they spend hours carefully managing their privacy policies. Either way, they work as they use Facebook. Certainly, the sheer work of performing – for Facebook

32. Cass, 'I Left Facebook', *I Left Facebook*, 4 August 2010, <http://www.ileftfacebook.com/>.

33. Brian Fegter, 'Why I Am Leaving Twitter and Facebook', Mister Nifty, 13 September 2010, <http://www.misternifty.com/internet/social-networking/why-im-leaving-twitter-and-facebook/>.

34. Bluedepth, 'Why I Left Facebook', Bluedepth's Journal, 9 November 2011, <https://bluedepth.wordpress.com/2011/11/09/why-i-left-facebook/>.

35. See 11:25 of Clay Shirky, 'It's Not Information Overload. It's Filter Failure', The Web 2.0 Expo, San Francisco, CA, 23 April 2008, <http://web2expo.blip.tv/file/1277460>, for a discussion of how even social media scholars have their data leak despite their best efforts to use Facebook's privacy settings to prevent it.

36. Fegter, 'Why I Am Leaving Twitter and Facebook'.

itself, for friends and family – is productive, and we do get something valuable from social media: pleasure, connection, ego boosting. But is this value enough for what we give? This brings us to the next line of critique from Facebook-quitting bloggers.

Who Receives Value?

Because Facebook's business model is based on trading access to the social graph for personal data, we can think of it as a transaction. Let's put on our (neoclassical) economist's hat and think about our existence as utility-maximizing rational actors. Does one get more value out of Facebook than one receives by taking time to update statuses, tag photos, and sort friend lists? Several Facebook quitters say no. Nick Bruun writes,

I have to go through the same stupid process and read the same irrelevant content. Ultimately then, just trying to use Facebook simply drains my energy as I'm left with the feeling of "well, that's <insert time span here> I'm never getting back" after every single bit of effort I put into it. In business terms then, my [Return on Investment] is absolutely zero, and just like any other part of my life, if there's not return, I can't be bothered.³⁷

While access to Facebook is free, the effort users put into is also freely given, a phenomenon Tiziana Terranova famously calls 'free labor'.³⁸ Free access to the social graph in exchange for free labor may seem like an equal trade, but considering what Facebook and marketers do with user data has caused some Facebook quitters to see the exchange as highly unequal. For blogger Thudfactor, Facebook's use of user opinions on products and services amounts to unpaid endorsement deals:

"Like" a company? They'd like to use that as an advertisement, please. Bought something on Amazon? Maybe your friends would be interested in that thing, too. Drinking at a certain bar? If we let the FB timeline know, maybe folks will join you! [...] That's what they really want of you. The price of using Facebook is not just that some of your information gets shared with marketers and that you have to look at advertising. The real price is a blanket endorsement deal. I'd prefer to decide for myself what I endorse and what I don't, but it's clear to me now that Facebook really doesn't want to leave me that decision. And so I'm gone.³⁹

Thudfactor here is doing a rational calculation: I don't want to give my free labor to Facebook, because the price of having to endorse products for free is too high for the value returned.

But there's another aspect to Terranova's 'free labor' argument: online labor (liking, commenting, friending, etc.) is often emotional, affective labor. This is the work of

37. Nick Bruun, 'Why I Left Facebook', Nick Bruun, 21 September 2011, <http://nickbruun.dk/2011/09/21/why-i-left-facebook/>.

38. Tiziana Terranova, 'Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy', *Social Text* 18.2 (2000): 33–58.

39. Thudfactor, 'Why I Left Facebook', Thudfactor, 26 September 2011, <http://www.thudfactor.com/left-facebook/>.

building and maintaining relationships.⁴⁰ Such work is often outside of the theory of utility-maximizing rational actors, because it is difficult to rationalize in terms of price and value. We place a high value on the day-to-day work of keeping families, friends, and co-workers happy, and yet we don't place a monetary price on it (have you repaid your mom for what she has done for you? Could you?) Moreover, it's hard work, and yet it's also love. Regardless, within social media, this work is extremely necessary: it produces the very data that Facebook et al. try to sell to marketers. Facebook quitter Sarah Hunt recognizes these contradictions of free labor:

Even a small distance has revealed how much time I was wasting, and almost all of it doing what Brene Brown calls the “hustle for worthiness.”⁴¹ I am clearly naturally hilarious and personable (and sarcastic), but I started putting pressure on myself to be clever, always, which is exhausting. I also have this insatiable, annoying need to try to prevent my friends from experiencing discomfort, so I'd spend way too much time making sure to like their posts and at least be the one person who would comment on their dramatic status updates or intimately personal pictures or whatever, and I'm sure some of that was driven by an unconscious hope that they'd return the favor.⁴²

Here, Hunt recognizes the labor of making others feel appreciated and loved. This exhausting work is not remunerated by Facebook, even though this work is the very thing that gives Facebook life and builds material wealth for its owners. The only compensation she might hope for is that her affection returns in a cybernetic loop: perhaps her friends would 'return the favor' of likes and comments. Affection, love, and emotion are in fact required by Facebook, even as they are constrained, as we shall see other Facebook quitters argue.

Flattened Friendships

Much has been written about the degradation of the word 'friend' now that Facebook is a dominant website. As Molly Schoemann writes,

Click here to scan through your Facebook friends and realize that very few of them represent actual, current friendships or even associations that you remotely value. In fact your list of contacts feels like an eerie social graveyard of expired friendships, badly ended relationships, and vague, past acquaintances you care very little about. Begin to feel depressed by the fact that so many people have passed in and out of your life without leaving much of an impression on you. Wonder how a website that is so meaningless, vacuous and shallow has become so overwhelmingly popular (particularly with younger generations), and what that means about how we view social interaction today and the direction in which it is going.⁴³

40. Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart* makes a similar argument, especially as it relates to service work. For service workers, as for Facebookers, the labor is a labor of love - i.e., ensuring that others are happy. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983.

41. She's linking to a podcast, available at <http://howshereallydoesit.com/podcast/2011/03/brene-brown/>.

42. Sarah Hunt, 'Why I Left Facebook and Why Nobody Noticed', Cincy Sarah, 20 February 2012, <http://cincysarah.blogspot.com/2012/02/why-i-left-facebook-and-why-nobody.html>.

43. Molly Schoemann, 'Why I Left Facebook', I Heard Tell, 1 January 2009, <http://mollyschoemann.com/2009/01/01/why-i-left-facebook/>.

Schoemann's critique is probably the most eloquent example of similar criticisms from other bloggers. Facebook quitters argue that friendship in Facebook is reduced to meaning 'someone I've met at some point'. For example, Nick Bruun writes, 'the people I "know" on Facebook are just a bunch of people I've randomly run into at some point in my life rather than people I actually interact with'.⁴⁴ For Sarah Hunt, this reduction was confirmed after she left:

No one noticed. Not one of my near 200 "friends" seems to have noticed I'm gone, or if they do, it's clear that our interaction was limited to virtual reality because I haven't heard from them otherwise, despite our daily interactions on FB. No one has checked to see why I'm gone from there, though I suppose it's possible a few of them are wondering if I've just blocked them. I hope that's not the case. Honestly, there are only a few people I'd have tracked down, myself, if they'd disappeared, so I don't really have animosity about that. It's more of a matter-of-fact acknowledgement, kind of a "we both knew what this was" end to an affair.⁴⁵

According to these critiques, the reduction of friendship in Facebook is based on the dilution of friendship. As the next line of criticism shows, this dilution also has the side effect of producing noise.

Noise, or, 'Those god-damned apps!'

In one of my favorite quotes, Felicia Yonter writes, 'The noise of Facebook got to me one day, although it had been building gradually. The apps, those god-damned apps, and quizzes about nothing just got too tedious'.⁴⁶ Her use of the term 'noise' gets at a major category of criticism: that despite its claims to having filters and settings to prevent the social stream from becoming polluted, Facebook is now a noisy place. As Brian Fegter writes, 'In order to be heard above the crowd, you must yell. As more people yell, the noise morphs into a solitary static hum: a hum deafening to focus, yet silent of value'.⁴⁷ And Matthew Eaves adds, 'do I really want to see pictures of people I went to school with 20 years ago at a BBQ, be invited to play Mafia Wars by someone's Nan, or read about items for sale someone I know in Australia's friend is offering 12000 miles away at a bargain price?'.⁴⁸

Eaves's critique gets at a contradiction within Facebook. On the one hand, there is a logic of accumulation: get more friends, get more likes, get more comments. Quantify your social worth. While this accumulation offers users myriad pleasures (from the social to the narcissistic), it increases the flow of data through the system (which is precisely what Facebook wants), but it also leads to the noise that Yonter points out.

44. Bruun, 'Why I Left Facebook'.

45. Hunt, 'Why I Left Facebook and Why Nobody Noticed'.

46. Felicia Yonter, 'Why I Left Facebook', Felicia Cago: Mental Meanderings, 11 February 2010, <http://feliciacago.wordpress.com/2010/02/11/why-i-left-facebook/>.

47. Fegter, 'Why I Am Leaving Twitter and Facebook'.

48. Matthew Eaves, 'Why I Left Facebook', Matthew Eaves, 14 January 2012, <http://www.mattheweaves.co.uk/2012/01/14/why-i-left-facebook-2/>.

I want to relate this to another common critique: that Facebook is addictive. There may be a way to understand this addiction metaphor in information theory terms. Judging from Facebook quitters' blog posts, finding meaning in noise is a time-consuming, yet compelling process, one they equate to being addicted. What compels users to constantly check Facebook if there is so much noise? Perhaps it is the promise of finding anti-noise – meaning – within the social stream. With so much noise within and without Facebook (advertisements, street sounds, small talk, smartphone ringtones, sales pitches), the constant search for meaning, for connection, becomes more and more freighted and difficult, and the high from getting a message or like becomes more and more fleeting. Like addicts building up a tolerance, it takes more and more meaning delivered faster and faster to cut through the noise, and yet in our anxious search for meaning we simply make more noise.

It isn't Real Life; It's Mediated

Similar to the complaints about noise, the template structure,⁴⁹ and emphasis on speed⁵⁰ found in Facebook has caused some Facebook quitters to point to its divergence from 'real life', even though the central claim of Facebook is that it is a place to live one's life (using, of course, one's real identity). To be sure, the meaning of 'real life' is contested and multifaceted. Regardless if we can or cannot define 'real life', at least Facebook quitters recognize the highly mediated nature of Facebook itself. As blogger qntm writes,

It feels like sites like Facebook channel all of our free expression into neat, pre-moulded boxes. "Susie is a fan of writing!" "Ed is in love with Tina!" Dang it, show us the writing! Show us the love! It's like it's become impossible to express any relationship below "friend", and it's impossible to express any feeling below "is a fan of." It's like talking using corporation-manufactured language, in which all we can do is proclaim our fondness for a product, or else keep silent. It reduces everything to a binary love/don't love choice. Personality tests? Great! Answer all these questions, and we will tell you that you, like all humans, fall into one of these eight categories of people! Isn't that INFORMATIVE? Didn't you learn something?⁵¹

Multiple Facebook quitters have drawn attention to this mediated, constrained aspect of Facebook. While Twitter is known as explicitly a short-form medium due to its 140 character limit, Facebook would seem to allow for long-form writing and media such as blog posts or videos. However, Facebook quitters see in Facebook a 'short form culture'. R.D. Thompson decries glibness:

I believe [Facebook] is a failure because it promotes the current cultural shortcoming of being glib. Anything you say, absolutely anything, must be kept short and stupid. I have had myriads of "friends" tell me that I was failing to be simple enough in statuses and notes. That I needed to keep it short and sweet. This is

49. Kristin L. Arola, 'The Design of Web 2.0: The Rise of the Template, The Fall of Design', *Computers and Composition* 27.1 (March, 2010): 4–14.

50. Ben Agger, *Speeding Up Fast Capitalism: Internet Culture, Work, Families, Food, Bodies*. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers, 2004.

51. qntm, 'On Leaving Facebook', Things of Interest, <http://qntm.org/facebook>.

not a good thing and will only continue to further a glib and careless society that has time only for sound bites and flashes of light. A society that has the attention span of a hummingbird.⁵²

And Brian Z. Bub writes:

This is my call: Make it longer. Read more books, essays, poems; write more; watch challenging movies and plays; have lengthy discussions with wise friends; learn an instrument or how to take a quality photograph; go for long walks (or runs or bike rides etc.) and spend time with your own mind without distractions. Spend time with difficult ideas, let them develop in your mind, take the time to articulate them in your own words. Fingerpaint. Whatever! Embrace the long-form in every way possible. We are more than status updates.⁵³

In this line of critique, Facebook's highly mediated structure is contrasted with 'real world' activities and emotional expressions, seen as more nuanced and subtle than the highly constrained software offered by the social network.

It Just isn't Cool

Finally, I'm reminded of the character Cayce Pollard in William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition*. She is a 'cool hunter', paid to scour the globe for the bleeding edge of fashion and consumption. One could easily imagine Pollard losing her job now that we have Facebook; today's cool hunter might simply log into that site and observe what people in various subcultures are saying, or more likely, there's an algorithm being built to parse a database of subcultural utterances to find cool.

But I also think Pollard would have the last laugh at Facebook coolhunters (both human and machine), because Facebook may not be a collection of subcultures; Facebook might simply be a monoculture unto itself, and a decidedly un-cool one at that. Facebook quitter troutgirl sees this:

The other day I was on Caltrain when the entire car filled up with drunk (or even worse, pseudo-drunk) Stanford undergrads going to some kind of stupid costume party. The thing that astonished me was how INCREDIBLY LOUD they were, and how INCREDIBLY LITTLE they had to say — nothing came out of their mouths but pre-chewed catchphrases. They also mentioned Facebook in like every other sentence. Then I realized that they WERE Facebook.⁵⁴

One is reminded of America Online (AOL): how it went from being seen as a place where affinity groups could gather and chat about their subculture to being seen as a marker of technological backwardness. In other words, whatever might have been 'cool' about knowledge of the norms and languages of various affinity groups in AOL

52. R.D. Thompson, 'Why I Left Facebook Forever', The Little Puritan, 18 December 2009, <http://www.littlepuritan.com/journal/2009/12/18/why-i-left-facebook-forever.html>.

53. Brian Z. Bub, 'We Are More Than Status Updates', Burning All Illusion, 25 September 2011, <https://burningallillusion.wordpress.com/2011/09/25/we-are-more-than-status-updates/>.

54. troutgirl, 'Leaving Facebook', Fishy Thoughts, 16 February 2009. <http://troutgirl.wordpress.com/2009/02/16/leaving-facebook/>.

gets subsumed into making jokes about having an aol.com email address.⁵⁵ For trout-girl and others who have left, having a Facebook account might be a marker of technological incompetence and a loss of cultural capital.

For his part, blogger John-Michael Oswalt argues we're seeing 'Peak Facebook':

Back in my engineering classes we talked about Peak Oil and what it meant for the world. Now, I've been thinking much more about Peak Facebook and what it means for the internet and social networks. How much longer are you prepared to remain on Facebook?⁵⁶

In this vein of critique, it is hard to top Timo Vuorensola's argument against Facebook:

The thing is, I just don't like their style. FaceBook is like the hunkiest douchebag in the bar. You know the type, the guy with enormous muscles and fake tan and bleached teeth. He gets to act just as badly as he wants, but there's still always people swarming around him. Sometimes big online services just go into that path and never come back, and I don't need that kind of shit around me.⁵⁷

Is Facebook the next AOL? Or the next Myspace or Friendster? What do those comparisons mean? In terms of internet trends, Facebook is certainly extremely popular, but of course so were Myspace and AOL at one time. It is hard to imagine Facebook fading away under the weight of its own popularity, but this sort of thing has happened before. It could – and probably will – happen again, and the story we tell about Facebook's rise and fall will likely be dominated by a narrative arc of coolness to cliché.

Conclusion: On Upping Our Critical Game

For those of us studying social media (or any area of social life), a blog post from cultural critic Sean Andrews provides us with a warning: 'If you are able to craft insights that the average blogger in that area now find completely commonplace – there is racism in US TV, women deserve equal rights, corporations are greedy – then you need to pick up your game if you are going to be considered a superior intellect'.⁵⁸ While it is easy to be cynical about proclamations that the web is a Habermasian public sphere, it certainly appears to be the closest thing we have to that ideal. With more people writing about culture, we get more and better critical insights. Turning to the object of this essay, considering the scope and power of the critiques written by these Facebook-quitting bloggers, it is clear that critics of social media housed in universities cannot rest on any laurels as they do their work. We have to 'pick up our game' in the face of the increased production of ideas.

55. For a comic book explanation of the cultural meanings of an AOL email address, see http://theatmeal.com/comics/email_address.

56. John-Michael Oswalt, 'Why I Left Facebook', The Schipul Blog, 2 June 2010, <http://blog.schipul.com/why-i-left-facebook/>.

57. Timo Vuorensola, 'Why I Left FaceBook', Beyond the Iron Sky, 28 April 2010, <http://blog.starwreck.com/2010/04/28/why-i-left-facebook/>.

58. Sean Andrews, 'This Image, Which I've Liked for Some Time Because...', Breaking Culture, 1 August 2012, <http://breakingculture.tumblr.com/post/28485650483/review-of-the-public-domain>.

So, in light of the excellent critiques being produced in the blogosphere, what does it mean to pick up your game in terms of Facebook criticism? In my view, after this brief review of the blogosphere (and after reviews of the critical literature on social media I have done elsewhere), this means a few things.

First, we have to continue to place Facebook et al. in their greater political economic context. In part, this means historicizing Facebook. Why did we get to where we are? What relation does Facebook have to its predecessors, to failed projects, to media history, and to past and present regimes of accumulation? This would also mean a continued struggle with theories of value. Clearly, the neoclassical economics emphasis on subjective desires and pleasures of consumption play a major role in Facebook use. But of course, besides the core quantum of desire is the core quantum of (free) labor, and hence labor theories of value are needed. Ultimately, we need a theory of value that synthesizes desire and labor, subjectivity and objectivity, and materiality and immateriality. There is a rich political economy tradition that critics can draw on to do this work.

Next, we need a greater global context than these bloggers provide. Due to my own limitations, I only worked with blog posts written in English. Cross-cultural interpretations of work, value, and pleasure have to be analyzed. Critics supplied with time and resources can do this global work in ways that the majority of bloggers necessarily cannot.

Finally, the emerging field of software studies provides an impetus to push past the interface of Facebook to the underlying layers of code, protocols, APIs, and network topologies that support the social network. Again, this kind of work provides a richer context than we often get in either critical or blog-based analyses of social media.

Ultimately, in addition to placing Facebook et al. in their greater historical, cultural, and political economic contexts as well as critically interrogating their underlying software, to heed Andrews's warning, critics will have to remain attuned to the blogosphere: they will have to write blogs themselves, publish in open access journals that bloggers can access, cite bloggers who provide ideas, and in general, participate in the critical discourse that is slowly growing up outside the academy (or perhaps has been there all along). I hope that it is clear from this brief survey of blog posts from Facebook quitters that there is value in looking to blogs when one starts a critical project.

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