

Is Facebook Killing Our Souls?

For a person who writes about how technology shapes us, I'm embarrassed to admit I ended up on Facebook by accident. I received an email from an acquaintance requesting we become "friends." To be polite, I said yes. I clicked a few buttons and agreed to a few things without paying much attention. For the next three days, my inbox was flooded with email notifications from a large number of my real-life friends who were also apparently now my virtual friends. They were thrilled. They congratulated me on joining Facebook—an achievement I didn't consider worthy of accolade. I was also a bit mortified. Not just at how invasive Facebook was, but how excited these people were. What was wrong with them? *[Editor's note: For a different perspective on social media, [check out Caleb Gardner's article](#)]*

I'll admit I found some appeal. There is a certain thrill in looking at pictures of high school friends from long ago without them knowing. It's like being a fly on the wall at your high school reunion. I was instantly connected to long-lost friends. People I would never go searching for, but would love to know what they are doing. And all at once I was not only updated on their life, I was also introduced to their moment-by-moment mental fidgets in the form of status updates. What a simple joy.

There are times when I felt a bit like a voyeur must feel. However, this is not voyeurism. Voyeurism assumes the people you are watching don't want you to see them. Voyeurism is what happens when you steal glimpses into people's lives they don't intend for you to see. The people I'm looking at want me to see everything I'm seeing. They want me to know what they're eating, wearing, feeling and thinking in each moment. They are actually exhibitionists. So while there is a little voyeurism, there is a lot of exhibitionism on Facebook.

Such exhibitionism has an unusual effect on us. We not only want others to see us, we like to see us. We are able to inspect and tweak what others are seeing about us. We become fascinated by the image we project. It's like having a mirror on your desk or in your pocket. And every so often, you pull it out to gaze upon your own image. Perhaps you want to adjust your hair or find postures of the head to smooth out the double chin. This kind of regular self-inspection eventually gives rise to a subtle narcissism.

The narcissism created by these technologies is unique. It encourages not just self-absorption, but, more accurately, self-consumption. We become creators and consumers of our own brand. We become enamored by a particular kind of self, a pseudo-self. A self-image controlled in much the same way corporate brands are controlled. Complete with pictures, videos, songs and, most of all, metrics—the number of friends we have, the kinds of friends we have and the kind of associations we have. We endlessly refine, create and consume a digital projection we want others to see. However, we are rarely what we project. This image approximates reality, but it is not reality.

This heavily edited and carefully controlled self easily hides certain parts of ourselves we don't want others to see. This is hardly new, of course. In any social situation, we seek to control the impression we give. The problem is that in real social settings, there are limits to what we can hide. At a certain point, people intuitively see through us. Eventually they get a sense of who we really are. And in this way, real friendships can function as a healthy mirror. They become an honest mirror that loves but doesn't flatter us. Facebook is more like a funhouse mirror. Feeling short and squatty, no problem, just bend the mirror and presto! You are who you wish you were.

Over enough time, this subtle effect creates a minor split in us. A split between who we are, and who we think we are. This tiny fracture may seem insignificant, but if we remain unconscious, it leads us away from a life of wholeness and integration.

Stunted growth

Narcissism is a rather exquisite vice. It is very difficult to detect in oneself. And when something is hard to identify it makes it hard to dissolve. The real buzzkill, though, is how it affects relationships. Studies indicate narcissists have trouble forming meaningful relationships, tend to be materialistic and are prone to higher levels of infidelity, substance abuse and violence.

So while Facebook and other social media connect us to more digital relationships, at the same time, they deteriorate our ability to maintain healthy relationships in real life.

Our social technologies are increasingly serving as an obstacle to this process in young people. If certain kinds of social media are introduced prematurely in the lives of teens, they may inadvertently short-circuit basic developmental milestones crucial for establishing healthy relationships later in life.

Facebook is the perfect cocktail: a medium that focuses much of our attention on ourselves, while appearing to focus our attention on relationship with others. It is a mirror masquerading as a window.

Just because this developmental hiccup is acute in adolescents doesn't mean adults are immune from the narcotic effects of social media. It's true that most adults have stabilized basic ego structures, but the human psyche is anything but static; it remains profoundly plastic throughout life. As a result, human development never really ends and regression is always possible.

If we persist in consuming these or any technologies without conscious awareness, we will be formed in ways we don't intend. But I must be clear on this point. The problem is not using the technology. The problem is using it unconsciously.

How then do we become conscious? One of the most powerful ways is by practicing a technology fast.

Don't look at your Facebook account for one week and see what you notice about yourself. See what you miss. See what you gain. If nothing happened in a week, try two. The point is not the time—it's the distance. Find ways to gain enough distance to perceive. You will reap the benefits.

Wake up

Now it will be tempting to conclude after all this ranting that I am simply a Luddite, a technophobe bent on the dismantling of all digital technologies. This is not the case. Admittedly, I was hardly even-handed in my observations. However, to herald the virtues of our technology is mostly redundant, it would be like trying to argue the importance of breathing. It's already here, and the value it adds is self-evident. This is why the technologies are so prevalent: we automatically know their benefits, otherwise we wouldn't use them. My concern is that our culture seems only capable of seeing the benefit and utterly blind to the liabilities, the inevitable losses certain technologies bring. I have no interest in trying to end or stop such technological innovations; to do so is like trying to resist the wind or the tides. Instead, I want us to understand them with depth. Not with naïve embrace, or fearful rejection.

If we learn to wake up and understand, perhaps we will be able to use them rather than be used by them.

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