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Facebook Facts, Fears, Facets and Foibles
Critical Analysis Essay

Our communities will never be the same. At least, the definition of communities will never be the same. Online communities have invaded our world, impacting relationships in positive and negative ways. One of the most-popular is Facebook, which is of particular importance because of the effects it is having on established physical communities, such as its origination location, the college campus. In this paper, I would like to explore some of the details about Facebook and its influence on contemporary culture.

I will begin with a bit of Facebook's history, and then explore the definition of community and its relevance to online relationships. Then I will delve into the appeal of this online community, consider its benefits and tolls, and discuss potential forecasts for its future. Further, I will present implications for Christians, considering utilization of Facebook as a tool for witness, growth, and discipleship.

Before considering each of these four community components within Facebook, it is important to know some brief history of the site, as it sheds light on the initial success and growth of this popular online community.

Facebook was begun in February, 2004, by Mark Zuckerberg, while he was a student at Harvard University. Fellow students Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes worked with Zuckerberg in their dorm room to create the site for fellow students. Zuckerberg already had some campus fame from another more dubious and short-lived website (which will be mentioned later). Word spread quickly among students in the Boston area, and then to other Ivy League schools. Within a month, accessibility expanded from Harvard to include Stanford, Columbia and Yale. News coverage helped the burgeoning popularity of Facebook, leaving other schools waiting in line to be added, creating even more furor. By December, 2004, Facebook was already approaching one million active users, with growth to over 5.5 million active users just one year later. Facebook statistics list over 50 million active users in October, 2007, with continued growth plans fueled by a 240 million dollar investment from Microsoft. (Press Room: Timeline).

Community used to be considered the place where we live and the people who live there. The 1913 edition of Webster's Dictionary defined community as, "a body of people having common rights, privileges, or interests, or living in the same place under the same laws and regulations" (Porter). A further description includes, "living in a common home or with some apparent association of interests" (Porter).

To understand the importance of community, I wish to turn to a definition and theory of a "sense of community," from David McMillan and David George. Building on the 1978 "Sense of Community Scale" of Doolittle and MacDonald, used to quantify social behaviors and attitudes within an organization, McMillan and George further developed these five factors: "informal interaction (with neighbors), safety (having a good place to live), pro-urbanism (privacy, anonymity), neighboring preferences (preference for frequent neighbor interaction), and localism

(opinions and a desire to participate in neighborhood affairs)” (McMillan and George 1). These five were reduced to four by McMillan and George. These four components are membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (4-9). Later, I wish to analyze Facebook through this perspective, considering these four aspects to evaluate whether an online community meets these criteria for a “sense of community.”

The concept of community without geographical boundaries is not new to the digital age. Melvin Webber suggested in 1963 that “Members of interest communities within a freely communicating society need not be spatially concentrated (except, perhaps, during the formative stages of the interest community's development), for they are increasingly able to interact with each other wherever they may be located” (Webber, 68). Facebook fits Webber's development concept, having a pre-existing community (typically an existing college, university, or high school) that is foundational to its structure.

In 1976, John Everitt noted the difference between community and propinquity, in identifying, “Traditionally it was believed that communities were, or should have been locality based, but today this is rarely true” (Everitt, 104).

In the days of the dial-up bulletin-board systems (BBS), Howard Rheingold coined the phrase, “virtual community,” reflecting on his online experiences with other BBS users. The phrase became part of the title of Rheingold's book about cyberspace relationships. In the book's introduction, Rheingold wrote, “The idea of a community accessible only via my computer screen sounded cold to me at first, but I learned quickly that people can feel passionately about e-mail and computer conferences. I've become one of them. I care about these people I met through my computer, and I care deeply about the future of the medium that enables us to assemble” (Rheingold 1993, xv).

With some understanding of the acceptability of online community, I would like to utilize the McMillan and George “sense of community” model to analyze aspects of Facebook.

First, **membership**, or a feeling of belonging, provides a safe place, with boundaries helping to define those inside of or outside of the community. While the pain of rejection comes with creation of boundaries, protection is a result. Personal investment is often part of membership to a community, which may be quite tangible (such as money paid) or rather intangible (investing time and service). Symbols and/or rituals may accompany membership (McMillan and George 4-6).

Besides perhaps being in the right place at the right time, how could Zuckerberg and his friends find such phenomenal success in gathering membership participation and provide the coherence of a “sense of community”? Some light on this subject comes from Nisan Gabbay, a venture capitalist advisor who has studied the phenomenal success of Facebook.¹ Gabby notes:

Facebook had its initial success with college students by providing an information service that was not available offline – an interactive student directory containing each student's class schedule and social network. Before Facebook added the feature sets it has today, it was simply a more complete student directory. Facebook did not create a community where one never existed before; rather they provided an important information and communication service to a pre-existing offline community (Gabbay).

Gabbay goes on to identify that a community already existed, with at least a loose

connection to fellow students, many of whom already had social interaction. Besides being able to learn more about other students, this new tool included information which could be sorted in meaningful ways: “Facebook organized students by class schedule for the first time, making it possible to learn more about that classmate you might have a crush on.” (Gabbay).

Early student users perceived credibility in Facebook, hearing it was a project developed by fellow students, as compared to a “company” compiling user data. “It was a place they could trust because one of their own had made it” (Gabbay). This is a bit ironic, as Zuckerberg was actually accused of “breaching security, violating copyrights and violating individual privacy by creating the website, www.facemash.com” in November, 2006. Zuckerberg was charged with using on-line Facebook photographs without authorization from the Harvard computer services department. Zuckerberg's first site was his contrivance of a “Am I hot or not?” website. The www.facemash.com site was taken down quickly, with Zuckerberg's comment, “Issues about violating people's privacy don't seem to be surmountable. I'm not willing to risk insulting anyone” (Kaplan). The domain name, www.facemash.com, is still registered to Zuckerberg, through November, 2008 (WHOIS RESULTS).

Perhaps learning from mistakes with the facemash website, Zuckerberg and company realized that security of users' personal information would be an issue. So a restriction was integrated that all users must have an “.edu” e-mail address for the Facebook college that they attend. This built a level of trust for users, opening them up to share more personal information about themselves, often divulging complete contact information, including cell phone numbers (Gabbay). In September of 2006, registration was expanded so anyone can join as part of a “network,” though users are still restricted to access only others in their self-designated network(s) (Press Room: Timeline).

Further security controls have been implemented as Facebook has matured, to limit which information may be viewed by other users. For example, specific settings are available to each user for each category: profile, search listing accessibility, photo viewing rights, news feed access, poke, message and friend requests, note viewing, and third-party “Facebook Platform” applications (Tour: Privacy). But these privacy settings only protect data from other users' access. Later, I will present serious concerns arising from Facebook's liberal “Terms of Use” agreement.

Second, **influence** is an aspect of McMillan and George's sense of community. To be part of the group, there must be a symbiotic relationship, where the group is influenced by the member in some way, and that the member receives some benefit from participation or alignment with the community. Conformity is generally part of a community, either of an individual to the group's expectations, or for the group to ebb and flow with members' opinions (or opinions of leader(s) of the group) (McMillan and George 6-7).

Facebook has tried to facilitate the attribute of influence with a number of its features. For example, Facebook users can create or join “Groups,” which can be created for virtually any purpose or cause (“Press Room: Product”). Groups can range from political endorsements to prayer groups, with encouragement from one user to another to join groups. For example, “One group of 227,000 at Facebook supports Barack Obama, and for some reason 143,000-presumably mostly feckless college kids-have joined the group ‘I Secretly Want To Punch Slow Walking People In The Back Of The Head’” (Kirkpatrick).

Third, **integration and fulfillment of needs** is a component of community. This is often

categorized as reinforcement, possibly with rewards provided within the community. When members feel their needs are being met, it will build a bond with the community. Thus, an effective community works to perceive the needs of the community and its members and ensures that these needs are met (McMillan and George 7-8).

The Facebook community builds on users need for connection in relationships by providing “News Feeds” about their friends. Whenever a user logs in, their home page shows updated information, called stories, from everyone who has acknowledged a response to be a “friend.” The story types are categorized into events, groups, photos, notes, relationships, added or removed friends, wall posts, profile changes, status changes, and posts (like blog entries). Each user may specify preferences for showing more or less stories (on a 7-point scale) for each story type, with priority filtering (up to 20 friends can be marked for frequent news feed updates—thumbs up, or less frequent—thumbs down).

Fourth, **shared emotional connection** is part of a community. The members must interact, or the community will cease to exist. These connections typically include common points in history, which need not be experienced together, but the more joint experiences exist, the stronger the community. The shared emotional connection factor is considerably stronger with shared events with conclusion. The event(s) may end in a positive or negative way (working through a crisis together can be quite beneficial), but closure is important. Spiritual commonality is a part of this shared emotional connection component, and can be a motivating factor in the formation of the community (for positive ways, as in a church community, or negatively in the formation of a cult community) (McMillan and George 8-9).

Facebook provides a number of emotional connection points within their site design. With the continual updates on the previously-mentioned “News Feeds,” users often feel an emotional tie that existed previously only through face-to-face, or at least telephone contact. Visual images through an unlimited number of Facebook photo albums links events and people together. Shared interest in causes, hobbies, movies, books, Facebook groups, can all provide a feeling of shared emotional connection.

I work with college student workers daily in my work, and a 19-year-old female worker recently shared her Facebook emotional experience. Susan had broken up with her boyfriend on Sunday night at midnight. Minutes afterward, her boyfriend had updated his Facebook “relationship status” in his profile from “in a relationship with Susan” to “single.” Twenty minutes later, Susan observed in her News Feed that his relationship status was updated, so felt the need to do the same. The news goes out to all her friends that “Susan changed her relationship status from ‘in a relationship ‘to’ single, and within ten minutes her cell phone rang. Her brother was calling to console her and find out the details of the breakup. At 8 a.m., her mother called to check on her, having heard the news from Susan's other brother, who had learned Susan's “news” from Facebook at 7:30 a.m. Susan went to her college classes, and by 10 a.m., at least ten other friends had asked her about the change in her relationship. She shared her story with me when I asked, “did you break up with Tom?” she replied, “Aargh! Facebook is telling everyone too much about my life! I hate Facebook!”

It appears obvious to me that Facebook provides valuable tools to reinforce an existing community, particularly for allowing friends to know countless details about their friends, though the details may be on a shallow level. Even though he learned from his online friends, Rheingold admits, “People who use computers to communicate, form friendships that sometimes form the

basis of communities, but you have to be careful to not mistake the tool for the task and think that just writing words on a screen is the same thing as real community” (Rheingold, introduction).

Years after the release of his Virtual Communities first edition publication, Rheingold had developed some caution, included in additional content of the revised edition:

Virtual communities might be real communities, they might be pseudocommunities, or they might be something entirely new in the realm of social contracts, but I believe they are in part a response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world” (Rheingold 2000, 362).

A vast array of literature includes discussion about Facebook, ranging from those interested in profiting from its utilization through advertising and marketing, to those concerned with the demise of values and traditional community through withdrawal from face-to-face interaction (replaced by “face-to-monitor” time). Has Facebook taken over the social interactions of its users, driving them to spend more time reading their friends Facebook News Feeds than actually interacting with their friends in person?

Iowa State University Journalism and Communication faculty, Michael Bugeja, believes that the technologies that pervade our private lives (including cell phone, online PDA's and sites accessed, particularly Facebook) have invaded and often dominate the classroom and campus community. Bugeja found that 78% of students at Iowa State University are registered users on Facebook (Bugeja C2). While this may lead to interaction between students from their friends' shared Facebook News Feeds, this may be at the cost of academic concentration. Bugeja shares a story articulated to him from two TV news anchors:

When Kevin and Mollie Cooney recently visited their daughter's psychology class at the College of William and Mary, they noted how attentive students seemed to be in the large lecture hall. The Cooneys, who are both news anchors for the CBS affiliate in Des Moines, Iowa, and who sit on the advisory council of the journalism school I head at Iowa State University, were intrigued by the tapping of the laptop keys as students appeared to be taking copious notes. "As we looked over their shoulders from our back-row seats," says Mollie Cooney, "we found instead they were on Facebook, Dave Matthews Band Web sites, instant-messaging friends, and e-mailing fellow classmates." "Granted," she adds, "these students were in the minority, and our daughter swears she never takes her laptop to class for that reason. But as parents who pay hard-earned money to send kids to school with better computers than we will ever own, it's a bit disconcerting as to how they are actually being used!" (Bugeja, “Distractions” C1).

WHO-TV interviewed Bugeja after the release of his book, Interpersonal Divide: The Search for Community in a Technological Age. Bugeja is concerned about the way new technologies are changing manners, behaviors, and values. In a short while, he's afraid that students will be so engaged with their technology that “life literally passes them by” (“Bugeja on the Personal Toll”).

Besides time wasted with insignificant personal news about Facebook friends, Bugeja

recognizes there may be a hidden marketing agenda lingering behind Facebook discussion groups. Group affiliations such as “baseball addicts,” “outdoor enthusiasts,” and pro- and anti-gun control advocates, among countless others, are extremely valuable for advertising (Bugeja, “Facing” C3).

A University of Colorado professor comments on student use of Facebook, citing 100% of students responding to using Facebook in a given day, compared to only two of 140 students seeking a reputable news source (Bugeja, “Facing” C3).

In classroom settings, lectures become less captivating with the temptation to continual online interaction, especially as wireless Internet access for students' portable computers becomes the norm. The vast financial outlays spent by colleges and universities to maintain their high-tech appeal in recruiting students. Bugeja notes that a loss of tenured positions has come with the mandated spending for technology (Bugeja, “Facing” C4).

Use of Facebook is only expected to increase, with students now coming to college already addicted to Facebook during high school. Institutions need to consider approaches to dealing with these issues, ranging from possible complete filtering of the website to in-classroom rules prohibiting use to removal of wireless capabilities in classrooms (Bugeja, “Facing” C4).

Ethics and Public Policy Center fellow, Christine Rosen, describes Facebook as encouraging “egocasting, the thoroughly personalized and extremely narrow pursuit of one's personal taste” (Bugeja, “Facing” C3).

Rosen is further quoted to identify the sacrifice of privacy associated with one's Facebook profile, which becomes a “public diary,” revealing boasts of illegal behavior as well as laying out huge amounts of marketing and personal information (Bugeja, “Facing” C3).

I suspect very few Facebook members read the “Terms of Use” accepted when joining, which includes the privacy statement, “By using the Site or the Service, you are consenting to have your personal data transferred to and processed in the United States” (“Terms of Use: Privacy”). This does raise Orwellian concerns of ways Facebook owners may choose to sell or distribute personal information, whether for purposes of marketing or submission to law enforcement reasons. The extent of data shared by many users could also be a risk to the user's safety or security, should the data be hacked or used for other inappropriate purpose (“Terms of Use: Privacy”).

As well as signing away access to personal information, Facebook claims ownership of any and all content submitted to their site:

When you post User Content to the Site, you authorize and direct us to make such copies thereof as we deem necessary in order to facilitate the posting and storage of the User Content on the Site. By posting User Content to any part of the Site, you automatically grant, and you represent and warrant that you have the right to grant, to the Company an irrevocable, perpetual, non-exclusive, transferable, fully paid, worldwide license (with the right to sublicense) to use, copy, publicly perform, publicly display, reformat, translate, excerpt (in whole or in part) and distribute such User Content for any purpose, commercial, advertising, or otherwise, on or in connection with the Site or the promotion thereof, to prepare derivative works of, or incorporate into other works, such User Content, and to grant and authorize sublicenses of the foregoing (“Terms of Use: User Content”).

With this language, user photographs, writings, and other creative content are no longer controlled by the user, having signed rights over to Facebook. Other social networking sites have similar legalese in their user agreements. But Facebook seems to over-extend their self-preservation protection and own-interest-serving in their pages of user agreements.

Dale Clapperton developed a rather fiery critique of Facebook, “dissecting the Facebook Terms of Use” on his blog website, defendingscoundrels.com.² Clapperton was aroused to consider Facebook's policies while investigating new “Web 2.0” services being offered on Facebook. Clapperton admits that Facebook “browserwrap” license agreements are “fairly typical” for website owners, and may be weak as a matter of contract law. But Facebook's agreement is particularly excessive, granting Facebook-owners extensive rights to “whatever complete and accurate demographic data they want, so they can deliver targeted advertising to you.” Clapperton identifies Facebook's “Terms of Use” (over 6000 words) as a “complicated, contractual document that nobody ever reads” (Clapperton “Dissecting”).

Facebook prohibits use of automation scripts to collect information from their site (such as incorporating RSS feeds from Facebook to another website), though Facebook “gives users the facility to aggregate information from many other websites and services into Facebook.” Clapperton goes on with pages of criticism, which raise important concerns. Most daunting may be Facebook's stated right (among other important clauses stipulated in all uppercase letters) that:

To the fullest extent permitted by applicable law, NO ARBITRATION OR CLAIM UNDER THESE TERMS OF USE SHALL BE JOINED TO ANY OTHER ARBITRATION OR CLAIM, INCLUDING ANY ARBITRATION OR CLAIM INVOLVING ANY OTHER CURRENT OR FORMER USER OF THE SERVICE, AND NO CLASS ARBITRATION PROCEEDINGS SHALL BE PERMITTED. In no event shall any claim, action or proceeding by you related in any way to the Site and/or the Service (including your visit to or use of the Site and/or the Service) be instituted more than three (3) years after the cause of action arose. (Clapperton “Dissecting”, capitalization in original Facebook document, underlining by Clapperton).

Clapperton brings out important concerns, which are labeled as paranoia by some. But the presentation of over 6000 words in the user agreement suggests paranoia on the part of Facebook's owners, as well.

While it is doubtful that users have read and actually realize the terms to which they have agreed, Facebook definitely has loyal users. Facebook cites comScore³ figures to claim more than 20 minutes of average use per day, with half of users returning daily, accumulating over 65 billion page views per month. New user signups average 250,000 per day since January, 2007. Facebook's photo-sharing application is now the most-popular on the Web, with more than 14 million photos added daily (“Press Room: Statistics.”) These statistics help create intrinsic value, demonstrated in Microsoft's October, 2007 investment of 240 million dollars for 1.6% ownership of Facebook, placing an astonishing 15 billion dollar worth to Facebook. Microsoft tried to acquire Facebook in May, 2007, but Zuckerberg wanted to keep control. The Microsoft deal puts Zuckerberg well into the category of billionaire (“Microsoft-Facebook” and “Friend accepted”).

With such rampant success, what could be in store for Facebook's future? While context-

sensitive advertisements on Facebook are not new (and part of Zuckerberg's quick-billionaire story), Zuckerberg has a wide vision for future applications. Third-party applications have been available since May, 2007, with the introduction of 65 developer partners creating over 85 applications for the "Facebook Platform" development software introduced August, 2006. Participating partners include Amazon and Microsoft, with features like "Book Reviews" with a "Buy at Amazon" button ("Press Room: Facebook Platform"). Facebook adds huge marketing potential, with notices potentially going out to all the user's friends as a "New Story" that "Joe User just purchased "Book Title from Amazon!" Facebook claims that consumers benefit in learning more about their friends' interests and preference. For example,

Imagine that when you shopped online for a digital camera, you could see whether anyone you know already owns it and ask him what he thinks. Imagine that when you searched for a concert ticket, you could learn whether friends are headed to the same show. Or that you knew which sites-or what news stories-people you trust find useful and which they dislike. Or maybe you could find out where all your friends and relatives are, right now (at least those who want to be found) (Grossman).

Other application developers are vying for position in Facebook Platform integration, which is competing with Google's still-in-development OpenSocial initiative. But some developers are working through the programming challenges of trying to make advanced Web 2.0 applications that will be compatible with both Facebook Platform and Google OpenSocial application platforms (McCarthy).

Ken Silva, chief security officer for VeriSign, has concern that growing Web 2.0 application bandwidth demand may soon exceed the Internet's ability to keep pace. Facebook has added an integrated video application, which is not as popular as YouTube, but YouTube "consumes as much bandwidth now as the entire Internet did in 2000" (Silva). All end users face the problem of bandwidth consumption to some degree, and there are no signs that bandwidth demand will slow. Silva warns, "We are now entering an unprecedented era, and we can't take for granted that the Net will remain always on, let alone secure, with no effort on our part" (Silva).

A valid concern for Facebook as a community is the exclusion of potential members, who may not wish to use a computer, may not be a valid student participant or identify with an interest-group network⁴, or other reasons. Facebook growth is inhibited somewhat by Metcalfe's Law, which states that "the value of a telecommunications network is proportional to the square of the number of users of the system". To apply Metcalfe's Law to Facebook, the more people have Facebook, the more useful Facebook becomes, and the more appeal Facebook will have to attract those not already members. These students and others who are not yet on Facebook may feel out of social connection from others in their physical community, but this is a weakness of the virtual community that hinders its universal acceptance and further saturation ("Social graphiti").

There are potential social risks that can arise from the use of online social networks. Principal Donn Harris at School of the Arts in San Francisco called a school assembly to discuss the posting of a "nasty post on the MySpace.com Web site that targeted some of the school's students." The posting could have just as easily been made on Facebook, LiveJournal, Xanga, or

other similar site. Principal Harris considered protection of free speech, but acted on the greater need to protect his students from harm. Use of the Internet to broadcast insults or threats towards others to a wide audience has brought use of the term, “cyberbullying,” identified as becoming a national problem (Brydolf).

I have been a Facebook user for over a year, and find it to be a useful tool. I will admit that I did not read more than a few lines of the “Terms of Use” when I signed up. From this research, I am concerned about the power Facebook wields over its users. I have uploaded a number of photographs, including (lower resolution copies of) professional travel photos and portraits I have taken. I believe it is unethical for Facebook to now have rights to all of these photos because I uploaded them to Facebook, and clicked on their “I Agree to these terms” button when joining (without carefully reading all 6000 words, I must admit).

Beyond taking liberty with my intellectual images, I am concerned with the seemingly limitless personal information that millions of users are sharing about themselves. Facebook stipulates that all registration information must be kept accurate, which appears to help support their demographics-based marketing strategies. Other “Terms of Use” concern me, as well, but Facebook’s statement to be able to “change, modify, add, or delete portions of these Terms of Use at any time without further notice” (“Terms of Use: User Content”).

Facebook does raise my concerns about users spending too much time learning about what their friends are doing, rather than spending quality and quantity of time with their friends. I have experienced this with my own teenage daughter, who spends a great deal of time using Facebook. My daughter has uploaded 91 separate photo albums, and has been tagged in 1371 photos (including her own and others’ photos). She loves “real” time with her friends, but her homework and study time get invaded almost daily by her Facebook habit. I have been trying to address this “addiction” with her, which she denies. While her Facebook participation does have benefits, I believe we need to be careful that Facebook use does not become too important of a priority in our lives.

In the context of faith, utilization of Facebook does have potential for encouragement, discipleship, and witness. I taught for two years at a school for missionary children, whose parents were/are serving in ministries in over 40 different countries. These high-schoolers are now college age and older, but Facebook allows me to keep connections with many of them (not all are Facebook users, or close enough to be my “friends”). Without Facebook, I doubt that I would have contact with even 5% of these 89 former-student friends. But with Facebook, I have sent messages, wall postings, enjoyed thousands of photos, and kept a much-closer relationship with these people, who were once part of my geographical community, but are now physically very far apart from one another.

I also have friends that I have made through other networking opportunities, and have been able to deepen relationships using Facebook. For example, I found biblical worldview writings from a blog, searched for the person’s name on Facebook, and then was able to learn more about this person’s background and convictions, which are part of his biblical worldview formation.

The Christian boarding school where I taught had a student diagnosed with cancer, which deeply moved the hearts of the students there. One of the students formed a Facebook group, “Pray for Ken Reed.” According to the description, “This was a group to gather friends together to support Ken Reed with prayer/fasting/letters of encouragement as he battles stage 3 cancer.”

Prayer requests, and health updates for the young man were shared. By God's grace and healing power, the 17-year-old young man recovered, concluding with numerous "Wall" posts to the group of praise to God for His healing power. Facebook was particularly useful for this cause, as Kenny is a "missionary kid," with friends and friends' families in over 40 countries of ministry. This is a beautiful example of Christian support and encouragement to others, using Facebook ("Pray for Ken Reed").

Searching for Christian applications for Facebook, I found a discussion site called "ThinkChristian." One of their discussions begins with a quotation from Brett McCracken of Relevant Magazine. McCracken's criticism begins,

The problem with the Facebook/Myspace community is that it lives in cheap abundance, not invaluable scarcity. It provides the illusion that by being constantly in touch with a person, you can know them more; that by accepting a "friend request," you have made a real life, human connection. You haven't. Facebook allows us to have a broad network of "contacts," but contacts are not humans (as Francois in My Best Friend comes to understand; as Voldemort in Harry Potter understands but scoffs at). Digital "friends" feel more useful than they do holy. Avatars can never compare to the real, precious physicality of a human being, just as the connections on "Face" book cannot compare to what is possible in actual face-to-face, soul-to-soul communication ("Why Facebook").

While McCracken identifies important characteristics about relationships in virtual community, responses to the post brought redeeming ways that Facebook has been used for witness, including this response, posted by "peggy w:"

God will use Facebook as a way to connect with people if we let Him show us those opportunities. The quality of my growing friendship on Facebook w/ an individual from another faith is better than that of the relationships I have w/ Christians (from work) who have sent me "friend" requests but dont care to know me. And I see these Christians every day. I have real conversations w/ the non-Christian, we share our thoughts & beliefs and encourage each other. there's 2% chance we'll ever meet in this world; its 100% if he accepts Christ-I'll c him in Heaven. Today, he knows someone who knows Christ.

We may be more effective if we broaden our scope and consider that perhaps life is not just about us. We're still in the world to make a difference, so if hungry souls are on Facebook or MySpace, I hope w/ God's wisdom that's where we will go. B/c that's where Jesus would go ("Why Facebook").

One of the high-school students whom I taught in Graphic Design class invited to me to join an interesting Facebook group, called, "Osama bin Laden could get into heaven," categorized as an open group under "Common Interest – Beliefs and Causes." As an open group, anyone of Facebook's millions of members can join. 367 members have joined this group, some of whom are seekers with curiosity aroused in considering deeply spiritual topics. This group has an ongoing discussion board, with topics including: "Is it possible to lose your salvation?" "The coexistence of God's mercy and God's judgment," "Jesus was not Caucasian," and "What IF Osama became a Christian?" ("Osama bin Laden").

To conclude, I believe Facebook is a valuable tool that does enhance existing social

communities, with the real danger of leaving out some persons. Caution must be heeded to keep Facebook in moderation (I Corinthians 9:25), putting face-to-face relationships with people at a much higher priority. Also, the Christian must guard his/her heart, keeping God's Word and prayer foremost, for many good things pull the believer away from these vital daily needs.

Despite the concerns I have pointed out, I believe Facebook will continue to grow. I will still participate, but with more reserve than I did before. I will also share my concerns with others, for protection of their personal information, and also for their individual spiritual growth through their relationship with Jesus Christ and with others.

Notes

¹ Nisan Gabbay is a venture capital analyst, author and editor, who began Startup Review (www.startup-review.com) to promote his services. His research in Internet entrepreneurship includes informal conversations with Facebook employees, investors, and competitors, which he includes on his website with documented references.

² Dale Clapperton is a fourth-year law student, with ten years Information Technology work experience, and is currently employed full-time by the Queensland University of Technology law school as a Senior Research Assistant. Clapperton has publications cited in Australian law journals. Clapperton is current chairperson for the (Australian) national non-profit organization "representing Internet users concerned with on-line freedoms and rights." The organization, Electronic Frontiers Australia, Inc. (EFA) was established and incorporated in 1994 (Clapperton "About").

³ ComScore provides global Internet consumer behavior information, primarily through its Media Matrix Internet audience measurement services.

⁴ Facebook originally required all members to have a working .edu e-mail address to join a supported school network. Now new users may choose to join an interest-based network, though joining school networks still requires verification through a valid .edu e-mail account.

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