

Facing the Book

by David Amadio

The Facebook logo, consisting of the word "facebook" in white lowercase letters on a blue rectangular background.

I came to Facebook late. Ten years late.

Why the decade-long delay? For one, I didn't want the burden of managing a second self. A manic enough monitor of my first self, I

couldn't see investing time and effort into curating another. Also, I didn't want to be an accomplice to what film critic Steven Rea termed "the collective movement toward Me-ism," which has turned narcissism into a global pastime. I was reluctant to join the chorus of people chanting, "Look at me looking at myself," because I've always believed that real introspection takes place alone—not in the company of 2,000 friends.

Nevertheless, in the spring of 2014, at the urging of friends and colleagues, I put aside my lofty principles and created an account. Almost a year later I'm still an active member, but every day I flirt with the idea of quitting Facebook, turning my back on the bottomless scroll and all of its attendants. On a few occasions I've come very close to committing digital suicide, only to cave under the pressure of the Big Log Out. This may be something that all Facebook neophytes must go through: a period of doubt in which the user questions the value of the social network and his/her place within it. Judging from the "800 million people who use the site on an average day," this period doesn't last very long.

The former statistic comes from technology writer Alexis Madrigal's recent article in *The Atlantic*, "The Fall of Facebook." Despite the ominous title, and the ink he devotes to competitors Yik Yak and Snapchat, Madrigal concedes that Facebook will never fall. He begrudgingly refers to Facebook as "the most powerful information gatekeeper the world has ever known," as durable "as anything American capitalism is capable of producing." He attributes Facebook's longevity to a pair of contrary yet complementary vir-

tues: distributing vast torrents of general information while ensuring a "personalized" internet experience for its users.

As one of those users, I'm not here to challenge the efficacy of the machine, for I too have been dizzied by its magic. My question is this: Exactly what kind of information is Facebook distributing, and how much more of my free time can I afford to spend consuming it?

For the first month of my Facebook membership, I posted nothing but quotes from celebrated thinkers, luminaries such as Bertrand Russell, James Baldwin, Gandhi, and Montaigne. These posts—articulating some of my deepest-held beliefs about life on this planet—were largely ignored, receiving little to no attention from my virtual chums. Having struck out with the heavies, I decided to take a lighter, more generic approach. I shared an old picture of my date and I at a high school dance in 1990, catering to the weekly event known as #tbt. Within thirty minutes the picture had generated more likes and comments than all of my previous posts combined, not to mention a half-dozen friend requests from people I hadn't thought about in years. What did it matter that most of the attention was centered on my date's hair—the picture was the talk of the town, it was getting traction, it was *relevant*.

Or was it? By ignoring the quotes and chatting up the photo, my friends had chosen nostalgia over knowledge, amusement over enlightenment. They didn't want information; they wanted disinformation, which is an altogether different animal (though Facebook would have us believe they are one and the same). "Disinformation," says the media critic Neil Postman, "is irrelevant, fragmented, or superficial information—information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads us away from knowing." Facebook is awash in disinformation. At its worst, the site resembles a river after a storm, fast and muddied and overflowing its banks with all manner of flotsam and jetsam: photos, links, videos, memes, songs, articles, jokes, cartoons. Notorious tributaries Upworthy and BuzzFeed produce the oiliest debris, churning out stories with titles like, "This Anti-Cop Activist Has A Change Of Heart After What These Cops Did," and "Their Dirty Dancing Routine Brought Their Wedding Guests Instantly To Their Feet Cheering." Packaged as legitimate news, these sensationalized articles can be relied on to give the reader

an emotional jolt, but little else. Like my soph hop picture, their popularity is based solely on their capacity to entertain, not their capacity to inform. One begins to see why Gandhi & Co. got snubbed.

I don't mean to sound like a wet blanket. I like fancy bullshit just as much as the next guy. But when does it end? When do people stop sharing *every other thing* they come across in their daily cyber-travels? When does Facebook cease to be a dumping ground for the middle- and lower-brain and mature into a place where frivolity is the exception and not the rule? It seems the only time Facebook users get serious is when Zuckerberg issues a decree which threatens the integrity of the site. Then they unite under the banner of self-preservation, rallying in defense of privacy and the right to free speech. But the effect of their protest is muted when it comes on the heels of "I just made the best pineapple salsa!" The boy who cried wolf loses his credibility because he lies too many times; the bored shepherds of Facebook have lost their credibility because they've posted too many times—too many rants about NFL officials, too many videos of old people dancing, too many pictures of their adorable kids. By the time they get around to saying something meaningful, it's far too late in the game for me to be taken in by it. I've already written them off as frauds.

And yet, for all its glaring defects, Facebook does have an upside. When the father of an old friend from Atlantic City passed away last summer, I drove down the shore to attend the funeral and reconnect with my homeboy, something I never would've done without Facebook—the place where I read the obituary. When one of my acquaintances landed in the hospital with a rare blood disease known as TTP, he used Facebook to organize an emergency blood drive, and the community responded by donating enough AB+ platelets to keep the man alive. And when I first joined the network, the welcome I received from the crowd of veterans waving me through the door was so hearty and so warm it felt like a homecoming. Amid the flux and fluff,

these moments remain. How many more of them I get to experience depends on my willingness to endure the dross, and I feel my strength is ebbing.

Alexis Madrigal writes, "making yourself legible enough to the Facebook machine that your posts are deemed 'relevant' is exhausting labor." I have worked, and put in overtime, pursuing and paying the short-lived attention that makes the widget hum. Even when I'm not "on" Facebook, my mind is straining toward it, appointing energy in the construction of future posts, the enhancement of my second self. And just as I feared he would, my first self has begun to suffer—always distracted by the lure of his laptop, chasing the ghost of that #tbt fluke. A lifelong enemy of disinformation and a fierce protector of my personal space, perhaps I'm not cut out for Facebook "life," if one can even call it that. Go ahead and label me a crank for saying this, but life doesn't happen within the borders of a screen. Life happens outside the borders, in the unnavigable here-and-now. Too large to fit on a Wall, too complex to be merely Liked, it is not meant to Feed but to test us, and those who are prepared to walk un-Friendly roads will be the first to close the Book and resume the task of living.

"Making yourself legible enough to the Facebook machine that your posts are deemed 'relevant' is exhausting labor."

Wow. I should post that.

