

The logo for 'The Weekly Standard' features the words 'the weekly' in a white, lowercase, sans-serif font inside a blue rectangular box. Below this box, the word 'Standard' is written in a large, bold, blue, serif font.

Down with Facebook!

What nobody bothers to mention about the social-networking site is that it's really dull--mind-numbingly dull.

by Matt Labash

03/16/2009, Volume 014, Issue 25

Look at the outer shell--the parachute pants, the piano-key tie, the fake tuxedo T-shirt--and you might mistake me for a slave to fashion. Do not be deceived. Early adoption isn't my thing. I much prefer late adoption, that moment when the trend-worshipping sheeple who have early-adopted drive the unsustainable way of life I so stubbornly cling to ever so close to the edge of obsolescence, that I've no choice but to follow. This explains why I bought cassette tapes until 1999, why I wouldn't purchase a DVD player until Blockbuster cashiered their VHS stock. Toothpaste? I use it now that it's clear it's here to stay.

So I'm not inflexible. But there is one promise I've made to myself. And that is that no matter how long I live, no matter how much pressure is exerted, no matter how socially isolated I become, I will never, ever join Facebook, the omnipresent online social-networking site that like so many things that have menaced our country (the Unabomber, Love Story, David Gergen) came to us from Harvard but has now worked its insidious hooks into every crevice of society.

For the five or six Amish shut-ins who may not yet have heard of this scourge (your tenacious ignorance is to be admired, and I'd immediately friend you if I was into Facebook and you had electricity), Facebook is an online community where colleagues, friends, long-lost acquaintances, friends of friends or long-lost acquaintances, and perfect strangers find and "friend" each other based on their real or perceived affinity. They then have access to each other's web pages, and consequently to each other's lives, quirks, photos, jottings, oversharing, and mental disorders, as well as to those of the ever-expanding universe of their friends' circles, thus increasing the likelihood that you will either embarrass yourself or be embarrassed by someone whose life would never otherwise intersect with yours. (Right about now, a Facetard is ginning up an angry letter to the editor saying this would not be the case if you know how to control your privacy settings. Save the geek speech for your Facebook friends, Facetard, I already got my eight hours sleep.)

Why the resistance? There are many factors. But mainly, it's Farhad Manjoo. He's the technology columnist at Slate, an online magazine that I regularly read and a place where I have several real friends, as opposed to the fake friends you collect on Facebook. I've not met Manjoo, who strikes me as a perfectly pleasant fellow even if his ilk is destroying America. A few weeks back, I received an email from a California lawyer friend of mine. A proud skeptic and non-joiner by temperament, he had downed a shot of Kool-Aid and was now asking me to clasp hands and join him in his journey to the new fantasy land of Facebook. Attached to his invitation, intended to shame me out of nonparticipation ("Resistance is futile, join the Borg," he wrote), was a link to a piece Manjoo had just written, tauntingly entitled "You Have No Friends--Everyone else is on Facebook. Why aren't you?"

Manjoo cited all the statistics: Facebook had just added its 150-millionth member and since last August is signing up 374,000 people each day. It has achieved absolute critical mass, thus compounding its

utility and effectiveness. Not joining now is an affectation in itself, like refusing to own a cellphone or rejecting the social lubricant of antiperspirant. "Facebook is now at the same point," he wrote. "Whether or not you intend it, you're saying something by staying away."

How right you are, Mr. Manjoo. I am indeed saying something, and it is this: I hate Facebook and everyone on it, including my friends, who I like. My wife just joined it, and I dearly love her. But scratch that. I hate her too. After all, right is right. Sometimes, we courageous few must make a stand.

One by one, my non-joiner friends have succumbed. As one reluctantly joined the world of "poking" and getting "poked" by people he already talked to, people he had no interest in talking to, or people he didn't know at all--all conducted under the suspect rubric of "friendship" so that they can look at each other's photos and write dreary "status updates" on their "walls" (brief squibs about what you are doing at that exact moment, usually with emoticons and inappropriate quotation marks: "Matt Labash is wondering how long to marinate human flesh to get out that 'gamey taste' :-))--he was almost apologetic about it. Within two days of his birth on Facebook, he said, "I have 198 friends. I have never heard of most of them. This is so dorky, I hate myself for doing it."

Being a true friend, I didn't allay his guilt. I told him he was a very sad man, that collecting Facebook friends is the equivalent of being a catlady, collecting numerous Himalayans, which you have neither the time nor the inclination to feed. "You have obviously never been on Facebook," he said. "It's so much worse than collecting cats." By this week, however, he'd lost all ironic distance. When I told him that he now took it all way too seriously, that I liked the old, conflicted him better, and that he should take a hard look at himself, he sloughed me off. He was now just another friend-whore: "I don't need to look at myself. I have 614 Facebook friends to do the looking for me."

Another longtime friend, the host of Fox's Red Eye, Greg Gutfeld, tells me he has 3,200 Facebook friends: "I know maybe 50 of them." To Gutfeld's credit, he is ashamed. He concedes that Facebook is a place that turns adults into teenage girls. "Instead of making things," he says, "We're telling people how great Gossip Girl is. Would your grandfather go on Facebook? Probably not. I think we've become a country thirsting for attention--Facebook is basically Googling yourself for people who don't have enough hits to warrant it." Being a television personality, Gutfeld will go on for the occasional ego-stroke, but admits, "It's all pointless. A Facebook friend won't shave your back."

The hardest to watch fall, however, has been my wife. I'll call her "Alana," since that's her name (but note to Face-tards: Don't try to friend her to heckle me, she will not receive you). A few months back, she became a hardcore Facebook addict, as our late 30s age group has become the fastest-growing Facebook segment (35-54 year-olds have increased 276.4 percent to nearly 7 million users in just the last six months). There are worse things she could become, I suppose: a Meth dealer, a UPS delivery-man groupie, a Twitterer. Still, it's unsettling.

In our house, there have always been clearly defined roles. I procrastinate, shirk responsibilities, and spend much time peppering a fairly wide circle of friends with an incessant barrage of individually tailored emails, many of them lengthy (as opposed to the abbreviated, promiscuously generic, group-blog like messages left on Facebook). I tell myself it keeps me in game-shape, writing-wise, like a baseball player taking cuts in the batting cage. Alana isn't an Internet dawdler by nature, but rather, a doer, a model of graceful efficiency. She is Felix to my Oscar.

But slowly, I noticed things taking a turn. The cosmetic stuff, like her immaculate appearance and hygiene, stayed the same. Nor did I see her do anything too creepy or severe, such as sending pictures of her feet at the request of a new Facebook friend or running out to some hot-sheets motel to get worked like a farm implement by an old high-school flame who'd renewed contact (which happens with some

frequency on Facebook). But I did notice a general distractedness, a vacantness, a thousand-yard-stare. She seemed to notice it too. In the old days, she'd check her email maybe once or twice a day. Now, she was hitting her laptop like a rat hits a lever for pellets in a Skinner box.

"I hate myself," she'd say.

"Why?" I'd ask.

"Because I'm becoming you," she said.

A regular complaint around here is that I ignore her when consumed in email correspondence. But now, as I tried to relate a story to her from my day, she'd humor me, dutifully nodding as I'd only see the top of her head, since her nose was buried in her computer. She pretended to listen, but was really just acquiring more Facebook friends or picking a piece of "flair" to put on her message board as if she were a waitress at TGIF's or perhaps contemplating whether to hit someone with a "yellow snowball" (a Facebook application seemingly intended for six-year-olds, in which you can hit a friend with a snowball, leaving them with the knotty moral dilemma of whether to hit you back, though snow, of course, never actually changes hands). Or maybe she'd just be uploading pictures of herself, or worse, of me and the kids and Moses, our Bernese Mountain dog, a presumptuous act. Without our consent, she was incorporating us in her new career as a flasher. It was harmless enough for now: unauthorized photos of me fly fishing, or sitting on the porch with our sons. But with the creeping exhibitionism that takes over most Facebook users, it seemed only a matter of time before she started posting the nudes, some shots I took when I was trying to break into Washington journalism (I was young and needed the money).

Normally a crisp woman who tackles tasks with speed and aplomb, she had a new slackness to her. All the things she usually takes care of without me even being much aware (paying bills, making dinner, etc.) would slide, as she was now filling out the endless Facebook busy-work questionnaires people constantly send to each other like dippy substitute teachers who don't know what assignment to give. As she filled out the now ubiquitous "25 Random Things About Me" list shooting around Facebook circles, near perfect strangers could come to know things it took me years to find out ("I hate when people talk without clearing their throats. . . . I tend to like those with an easy smile") and things I hadn't even yet discovered ("I wish I had more opportunities to shoot a gun").

I'd earned this knowledge by taking the time to get to know her. But now, she was slutting it out for free. And not just to old high school chums who seemed to migrate to Facebook en masse almost instantaneously. Alana accepted friendship from people she knew, people she barely knew, and people who said they knew her, but she couldn't pick out of a police lineup. With some of her new friends, it might come down to that.

One recent afternoon, my sister-in-law came over, carrying the local paper and informing Alana and me that a distant acquaintance from their childhood was on the front page for getting in a barfight, and holding a knife to a guy's neck, leaving a superficial wound. "That's a crazy coincidence," said Alana. "I have a friend request sitting from him in my inbox right now!" I read the story aloud, but Alana went straight to her inbox, looked up the knife-wielder in question, and hit accept. On his Facebook page, he bragged of owning the "friggin' cemetery on Ward Road," while his profile photo featured him holding a fork at an odd angle, not unlike an angle you'd hold a knife against a guy's neck.

"What are you doing?" I asked, incredulous.

"Oh c'mon," Alana said, shooing me off. "He's just a Facebook friend. It's not like we're having him over to the house for dinner."

Time magazine recently declared Facebook more popular than porn. But who are they kidding? Facebook is porn. With porn, you watch other people take off their clothes and abase themselves in public. On Facebook, where there's technically an anti-nudity policy (thus defeating the whole purpose of the Internet), you get to figuratively do the same.

By now, the horror stories are legion. It's a place where anorexics have been caught giving each other new ways to purge, where the Uruguayan interior minister posted pictures of herself in the shower, where a site was set up where young men could boast of hitting prostitutes with donuts and hot chocolate. It's a place where a Swedish nurse got in trouble for posting photos of the brain from a brain surgery she was assisting with, where marauding bands of teenage thugs intercepted birthday party logistics so they could crash a home, leaving it in ruins and the dog comatose, and where a husband ended up hacking his wife to death with a meat cleaver after noticing she'd changed her Facebook status to "single."

It's a place with so many superficial friend hoarders that one guy vowed to eat all 12 McDonald's value meals in one sitting (including the fries) if 100,000 people friended him. They did, and he gave it a go, but somewhere short of the Filet-O-Fish, he ended up violently hurling in the parking lot. It's a place where friendship is so devoid of honor or value that it can be shown up by a cynical burger joint advertising stunt. Burger King, in their "Whopper Sacrifice" campaign, started a Facebook application which would reward you with a free hamburger when you sacrificed ten Facebook friends. Burger King would then send alerts to the jettisoned ones, effectively notifying the newly defriended that they were only worth a tenth of a flame-broiled Whopper. Facebook ended up disabling the application, but not before 233,906 friends were sacrificed.

As if all of this isn't embarrassing enough for Facebook devotees, the most cloying writer in the world, West Wing creator Aaron Sorkin, signed on, promising/threatening to write a Facebook movie.

But it isn't for all the aforementioned reasons you should join me in hating Facebook. Far from it. For after going onto my wife's account to know what I'm not missing, I'd have been happy to run into some meat-cleaving husbands, showering Uruguayan ministers, or even Aaron Sorkin (actually, I'd take the McDonald's hurler over Sorkin). That, at least, would've been interesting.

No, the reason to hate Facebook is because of the stultifying mind-numbing inanity of it all, the sheer boredom. If Facebook helps put together streakers with voyeurs, the streakers, for the most part, after shedding their trench coats, seem to be running around not with taut and tanned hard-bodies, but in stained granny panties with dark socks. They have a reality-show star's unquenchable thirst for broadcasting all the details of their lives, no matter how unexceptional those details are. They do so in the steady, Chinese-water-torture drip of status updates. The very fact that they are on the air (or rather, on Facebook) has convinced them that every facet of their life must be inherently interesting enough to alert everyone to its importance.

These are all actual status updates (with name changes): "Maria is eating Girl Scout cookies. ... Tom is glad it's the weekend. ... Jacinda is longing for some sleep, pillow come to momma! ... Dan is going to get something to eat. ... Anne is taking Tyler to daycare. ... Amber loves to dip. I can dip almost any food in blue cheese, ranch dressing, honey mustard, sour cream, mayonnaise, ketchup. Well, I think you get the point." Yes. Uncle. Please make it stop. For the love of God, we get the point.

Then, of course, there is the crushing anticlimax of people re-entering your life who might've fallen

away into your past, because in each other's past is where you mutually belong. Perhaps you haven't seen them in 20 years. Perhaps she was the cheerleader whose shapely legs fired your imagination in geometry class, whose smile could heat the gymnasium, whose joboba-enriched hair you smelled when you broke into her locker and pulled some strands from her brush, dropping it in a Ziplock baggie, taking it home to fashion an effigy for your hair-doll shrine.

Now you're left on Facebook, desperately trying to recapture the magic by paging through photos of her freckly kids at Busch Gardens, stalking her like some kind of weirdo. She's 15 pounds heavier now. But that's okay, next to her husband, a red-faced orb who used to be a hale three-sport athlete, whose only physical exertion now appears to be curling gin-and-tonics and power carb-loading. But her words are still a caress, as even pixels carry the melodious lilt of a voice that perfumes the air like April birdsong, when she status-updates you and 738 of her closest friends, with: "Madison ate bad clams last night. Boy, does her tummy hurt!!! :-("

Last week, my wife logged onto Facebook, took it in for about three minutes, shook her head, snapped her laptop shut, and sighed.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I don't know, it's not the same," Alana said. "I was into it at first. But then I realized, there's no longer any wonder, any intrigue. Everything's out there, on display. For years, you wondered, 'Whatever happened to so-and-so?' And now you know. All questions get answered. There's no more mystery."

She reminded me of a line from F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Crack-Up": "It is sadder to find the past again and find it inadequate to the present than it is to have it elude you and remain forever a harmonious conception of memory."

Alana put on a winter coat, leashed up Moses, and walked out into the February cold, returning to the land of the living. I was glad to have her back. Maybe I could even learn to love her again, after her torrid Facebook affair. I could stop worrying about her now, and get back to more important things, like my personal email, where I could service my own circle in earnest, devoid of faux interlopers. Where I could experience human complexity: rivalry, and thinly veiled insults, and petty jealousies and imagined slights. Who needs Facebook friends? That's what real friends are for.

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