

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University

DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU

All College Thesis Program, 2016-present

Honors Program

2016

Facebook: The Alienation from Oneself

Kaitlin F. Knapp

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, kfkknapp@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors_thesis



Part of the [Communication Technology and New Media Commons](#), [Critical and Cultural Studies Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Mass Communication Commons](#), and the [Social Media Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Knapp, Kaitlin F., "Facebook: The Alienation from Oneself" (2016). *All College Thesis Program, 2016-present*. 1.

https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/honors_thesis/1

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All College Thesis Program, 2016-present by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.

Facebook: the Alienation from Oneself

AN ALL COLLEGE THESIS

College of St. Benedict/St. John's University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for All College Honors

And Distinction

in the Department of English

by

Kaitlin Knapp

April 27, 2016

“There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another.”

(Walter Benjamin)

INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of technology in the 20th century included an expansion in the methods of communication on both an individual and global scale. The first major global step occurred in 1967 with the worldwide broadcast of the BBC show, “Our World,” which was the first time a television show was broadcast to the entire world (Science Museum). Fittingly, the popular band The Beatles agreed to play their song “All You Need is Love,” spreading messages of peace and interconnectedness among all people despite geographical differences. Viewers from 19 countries tuned into watch live video showing the daily lives and actions of people all over the world. This show represents the beginning of the Age of Information: a time when, due to the use of technology, people could begin to communicate with others instantaneously using methods never conceived of before.

The subsequent creation of the Internet provided the average person with the opportunity to create and share her or his own information with others. The theorist Walter Benjamin explored the shift in the public’s participation in the creation of information. He stated that, “the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a change in the mode of participation” (“The Work in the Art of Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 239). Rather than allow the television stations to show how life is lived, people have shifted to share their daily lives for themselves. The public constantly creates the media themselves through the use of blogging or social media

sites to establish what is important. In 2006, Time magazine recognized the significance of this social movement by naming “You,” those that actively add to the available knowledge through social media, as the winner of the “Person of the Year” award. The magazine spokesperson Lev Grossman stated that, “for seizing the reins of the global media, for founding and framing the new digital democracy, for working for nothing and beating the pros at their own game, Time’s Person of the Year...is you” (Reuters).

Time Magazine, 2006



The blurb on the cover states that, “You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world:” the magazine celebrates the fact that the individual user is able to create change, a power that

people could not have dreamed of before the invention of such sites. Richard Stengl, editor of Time, stated that, “these blogs and videos bring events to the rest of us in ways that are often more immediate and authentic than traditional media” (Reuters), thereby giving the impression that such sites are a positive and lasting addition to society. Ten years after the publication of this article, social media sites are still a major force in society, demonstrating the lasting and continuing power of “You.”

Social networking through sites such as Facebook has recently become especially prominent in both personal and professional settings. The basic premise of Facebook is to create a profile—an online persona—that represents any personal information that the user wishes to share with her friends on the site. The creators of Facebook designed the site to allow for maximum sharing possibilities in various forms such as private messages and public posts. A private message functions similarly to an email in the sense that the only people who can see the message are the user who sent it and the user[s] who received it. Posts are intended for all Facebook friends to see and comment upon because users do not target specific Facebook friends. Rather, every friend has the ability to see and comment upon such posts. Posts are also referred to as status updates because they provide a means for users to update their Facebook friends with any new thoughts or information. People can also share pictures almost instantaneously and add information about the picture such as the location, time, occasion, and who is in the picture. Referencing other Facebook users in either picture or a comment is referred to as “tagging” that person.

All of this detail becomes a part of the user’s online profile. A profile is composed of both what the user shares and what the user’s friends tag the user in. For example, if one user uploads a picture to Facebook and tags her friend, then that picture becomes part of the friend’s

profile. The sample profile below demonstrates how the layout of the website promotes interaction among users. Note how the entire right side of the screen is taken up with a current list of my friends who are currently online and on the left side there is easy access to my complete list of friends. The middle section contains updates posted by either my friends or myself. In this sample, my top update is a picture in which my friend has tagged me.

Sample Profile

The screenshot shows a Facebook profile for Kaitlin Knapp. The browser address bar indicates the URL is <https://www.facebook.com/kaitlin.knapp.5>. The profile header features a cover photo of a sunset and a profile picture of three people. Below the profile picture are tabs for 'Timeline', 'About', 'Friends 221', 'Photos', and 'More'. The 'About' section includes 'Add a Short Bio', 'Worked at College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University', 'Lives in Saint Joseph, Minnesota', and 'From Aurora, Colorado'. The main content area shows a status update from Demetre Koukouves shared to Marc Austin Mack's timeline, dated December 6 at 9:22am, with a 'Haha' reaction and a tag for Erin Carey and Kaitlin Knapp. The right sidebar displays a 'Recent' activity list and a 'Friends' list with 221 members.

The creation of the individual profile through the interaction of friends reflects the mission statement of the Facebook company: “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.” People use the site to “discover what’s going on in the world,

and to share what matters to them” (www.facebook.com/facebook/info). Facebook attempts to offer users the opportunity to continue to network with friends or other professionals in a virtual setting. Although it has optimistic intentions of promoting and improving communication between its users, Facebook’s platform has changed the way that people communicate. Due to certain constraints of the website itself, Facebook limits the quality of the communication that can occur between users.

An important distinction to note is that while communication on Facebook is limited, it does not worsen real life relationships. Some critics of social media have argued that online interactions replace face-to-face communication, causing a decrease in the overall quality of life. However, more recent studies on how Facebook affects relationships have asserted the opposite to be true. In the book *Networked: The New Social Operating System*, Barry Wellman and Lee Rainie argue that:

In reality people are not confusing the Facebook screen with the person at the other end of it, just as they have not confused the telephone receiver with the person with whom they were talking... When we send emails to our spouse or look at a friend’s Facebook updates, we do so with a strong understanding of the person with whom we are communicating (*Networked Relationships* 120).

This idea is key to fully understanding how relationships are built and maintained online, and will be furthered explored at a later point in this thesis. Instead of viewing communication on Facebook as replacing or harming face-to-face communication, social scientists like Anna Buchner and Katarzyna Zaniewska, authors of the article *Facebook as a Catalyst for Beneficial Participation in Culture*, argue that social media sites such as Facebook should be viewed more as extensions of the non-virtual world instead of as conflicting with it. They assert that, “Internet

reality [like Facebook]... is inseparably linked with our everyday life” (Buchner and Zaniewska 108). These scientists further state that, “Facebook is a social networking service and as such is based predominantly on recreating the real world relations which usually have a local reach” (107). This attempt at a recreation is not possible without first experiencing the non-virtual world and gaining an understanding of the people that are also on Facebook. It is in a non-virtual setting that users generally build the beginnings of relationships that are then furthered on Facebook.

Although interactions on Facebook do not necessarily negatively impact face-to-face communication, the structure of the site is problematic. Hypothetically, Facebook is supposed to be the ideal representation of the user’s life. It is the user’s opportunity to choose what specific aspects of life she would like to share with friends and to ignore other aspects. However, in the virtual setting of Facebook, non-verbal communication, such as hand gestures, tone of voice, or facial expressions are nonexistent, removing some of the user’s control over how other users receive the message. Another major factor to consider is the power of Facebook’s algorithm which functions to determine what is the highest quality experience for the user, mainly without the conscious input of the user. Therefore, the user’s profile is a mixture of that which the user desires to share and what the user’s friends want to tag her in, but also what the algorithm has determined to be appropriate. The fact that other users shape one another’s profile leads to a loss of power over one’s own profile because it is not the user that determines what aspects are important and are worthy of being shared. Facebook did not promise the user the ability to control how other people interpreted the profile, but it did ensure the right of the user to create the profile. People on Facebook will become alienated from their own profiles as other forces shape their image in ways the users never intended. Facebook serves as a document of its users’

lives: but through its unique process of documentation, it alienates the user from the image that she intended to create.

THE MEANING OF WORDS AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

In his work entitled “Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art,” social scientist Gregory Bateson explores form and patterns of anthropology in the specific setting of primitive art. Bateson’s focus is on how information and meaning is coded into art; his goal is understanding the “how?” not the “why?” He begins his work by stating that meaning is “an approximate synonym of pattern” (Bateson 140). One interpretation of this definition is the alphabet itself. People find meaning in words after seeing them repeatedly, and words are formed by repeated patterns of letters. Bateson uses as an example the letter T. Based on the known rules of the English alphabet, only certain letters typically follow a T: R, H, or a vowel. With this knowledge, English speakers become proficient at spelling and reading by recognizing and applying these patterns to letters.

This same principle can be applied to the interactions between people. Just as letters follow certain patterns, individuals also tend to act in certain ways; creating, in a sense, an individual set of “rules” for that specific person. While these “rules” are not set in stone, they can be observed and predicted. Upon becoming familiar with how other people normally act and respond, Bateson argues that, “from what I say, it may be possible to make predictions about how you will answer. My words contain meaning or information about your reply” (141). The process of learning and becoming familiar with these “rules” and patterns of a person mirrors the concept of being knowledgeable about the English language. The more experience one has with the patterns of language, the more effectively one can communicate using that language. Similarly, the more accustomed one is with another’s habits, the more effectual the communication between the two will be.

These “rules” should even be applied to the topic of conversation. When interacting with friends or even acquaintances, there is an unspoken understanding of what are acceptable topics of conversation and what would be inappropriate. For example, when speaking to a professor, most students do not feel comfortable speaking about how they chose to skip the homework the night before in order to go to the bar. Students understand that most professors would react negatively to such a comment, and that such conversations are not appropriate. Another example would be if a friend has recently lost a parent. In this situation it would be inappropriate to make a joke about dying, unless it had been previously established that this friend approved of such jokes. The same holds true in a Facebook setting. While it is possible for a user to post comments or pictures about almost anything, it is logical to assume that some users will not understand those posts, even if they are friends of the user. Based on past experiences and relationships, the user could tell how her friends would respond to a specific Facebook post, if they responded at all. Due to this knowledge, some users choose not to post certain stories or pictures, even if they personally agree with the post’s message. Personal censorship, used in order to pacify the user’s friends, demonstrates an understanding of how the “rules” of a relationship limit the user from having total control over what is posted on sites like Facebook.

Bateson goes on to explain how communication exists on multiple levels: both unconscious and conscious. According to Bateson, a key component of communication is that of unconscious thought processes. These processes refer to the non-verbal aspects of communication like tone of voice or hand gestures. Bateson explains non-verbal communication using the example of how an individual practices a specific skill. To excel at something, one must spend time practicing to become confident and comfortable with the action; however, practicing has multiple effects on the skill. It makes the person “more able to do whatever it is he

is attempting, [but also] by the phenomenon of habit formation, it makes him less aware of how he does it” (Bateson 147). When a skill is practiced enough, it becomes like a second nature and therefore, one does not actually comprehend how the skill is accomplished. For example, individuals who communicate often may modify how they communicate with certain friends without realizing it, based off of previous interactions with that person. The patterns of communication between the two people, such as use of certain phrases or tone of voice, have become an unconscious habit. When speaking with a school official, students are likely to use a more respectful tone than when talking with a friend. When disciplining a child, parents often use a stricter tone of voice than when interacting in a lighter setting. While the shift in tone may be purposeful, it is often an unconscious adjustment to the different situation, especially if it is a reoccurring situation, like that of a parent disciplining a child.

Unconscious thought is a part of peoples’ processing skills that has not been fully explored because the unconscious plays such a large role in every thought process. According to Bateson, the unconscious is focused on *how* humans perceive, while the conscious is focused on *what* they perceive (146). He maintains that, despite the lack of concrete knowledge about the unconscious, these thoughts do affect the formation of relationships:

In truth, our life is such that its unconscious components are continuously present in all their multiple forms. It follows that in our relationships we continuously exchange information about these unconscious materials, and it becomes important also to exchange metessages by which we tell each other what order and species of unconsciousness (or consciousness) attaches to our messages (Bateson 146).

Unconscious communications are sent and received between individuals through the metamesages, as mentioned in the above quote. The person receiving the information perceives these metamesages as feelings, shown in non-verbal communication in ways like tone or facial expression. While the speaker has some control over these metamesages, normally they are automatic responses to the conscious message being sent. The very nature of communicating on Facebook, however, eliminates the receiving person from perceiving these sorts of nonverbal metamesages. It would be impossible for the user to perceive the facial expression of another user simply by reading a post because there is no direct face-to-face communication. The lack of metamesages sent and received through face-to-face communication limits how the information being sent by one user is perceived by the receiving user. The user can only send words; the technology makes it impossible to send the unconscious communication such as facial expression or hand gestures.


While the technology removes certain aspects of communication, it also complicates the process by adding a third entity in to exchange: Facebook itself. Whether the user is aware of it or not, Facebook monitors all interactions between the users, whether the messages are private or public. The site has algorithms in place that collect how the users interact with the site: who the user's friends are, what type of posts the user makes, what organization the user follows. The algorithms then analyze the information in a similar process to how people process and learn about others. In a sense, Facebook's algorithm replaces the metamesages that people use to communicate in order to replicate the process of learning the "rules" of a person. Instead of the user's friend receiving the metamesages—the feelings about the messages imparted by the speaker—Facebook's algorithms take note of other unstated information about the message and

compile this information into an account about each individual user. The algorithms then evaluate the information to establish what the user experiences on Facebook.


Facebook, in its attempt to recreate a process of coding the unconscious metamessages of its users, chooses what each person sees from her friends to better suit that specific user's interest. The effects of the algorithm's interpretations can be seen in various aspects of the Facebook profile. For example, the site suggests news stories, groups to join, even friends with whom to connect on the main page of the Facebook website as seen in the sample suggestion below. The top of the image shows the bottom of one post, the user has the option to like, comment, or share. As the user scrolls down to the next post, Facebook shows her a list of suggested friends. This friend suggestion is placed in the middle of the newsfeed in between two different posts, one being cut-off and the other being a story from the website *feministing.org*, to ensure that the user will see it. Also, under each the image of each suggested friend, Facebook has automatically informed the user of how many friends she has in common with this person to further prove the benefits of the suggestion. This knowledge is yet another example of how Facebook "reads" each user in order to create the best experience possible.


Sample Friends Suggestion List

People You May Know



Paj Ib Xyooj
8 mutual friends





James Cruz
1 mutual friend

See All



Feministing.com

Dec 10 at 11:10am • 

It's Day 4 of the (all-white, mostly-male) jury deliberations in the #**DanielHoltzclaw** rape case. One victim asks, "What kind of police do you call on the

The Director of the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project, Lee Rainie, and the Director of the Faculty of Information and the University of Toronto, Barry Wellman, co-authored the book *Networked*, to examine how connections through technology affect our daily lives. In the chapter "Networked Relationships," they explain that:

Facebook newsfeeds update Nicole's friends with what is happening in her life. The feeds are neither random nor comprehensive: Facebook uses algorithms that try to tailor the information that each friend gets according to their interests...

Each friend gets a somewhat different picture of Nicole’s life on their customized newsfeed (“Networked Relationships” 143-143).

The Facebook newsfeed is perhaps one of the most important and unique features of Facebook. It is where users can see any updates posted by friends or pages that they follow. It is the equivalent of the front page of the newspaper. Users choose which friends to follow as well as other pages to follow such as CNN or BuzzFeed. The newsfeed is where users learn about what is going on. The sample newsfeed below shows not only the main story of the day, but also includes more recommendations for the viewer on the left hand side of the screen.

Sample Newsfeed

The image is a screenshot of a Facebook newsfeed. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation links for 'Kaitlin', 'Home', and other icons. The left sidebar contains navigation options like 'Kaitlin Knapp', 'Edit Profile', 'News Feed', 'Messages', 'Events', 'Games', 'On This Day', 'Trivia Crack', 'Saved', 'Photos', 'Notes', 'Suggest Edits', 'Pokes', 'Games Feed', 'GROUPS', 'Segovia 2015', 'Hynes Scholars', 'CSB/SJU Class of...', 'Shouse-Tourino's ...', 'Eile & Hannah for ...', 'New Groups', 'Create Group', 'FRIENDS', 'Acquaintances', and 'Friends'. The main content area shows a post from 'Women in the World' with a red and yellow logo, posted 17 hours ago. The post text reads: 'When millionaire property developer Ehsan Abdulaziz was arrested after a teen claimed he had raped her, he told the police: "She'll have to prove it."' Below the text is a photograph of a building entrance with a sign that says 'SUNNY BROOK SUPERVALE'. The post title is 'Millionaire accused of rape claims he accidentally "fell and penetrated" teenage victim'. The post text continues: 'Ehsan Abdulaziz, a millionaire developer who is standing trial for allegedly raping a teenager while she was sleeping, claimed that he accidentally penetrated her.' The source is cited as 'NYTLIVE.NYTIMES.COM'. At the bottom of the post, it shows '196 Likes', '57 Comments', and '143 Shares'. On the right side, there is a 'TRENDING' section with items like 'Facebook Year in Review: US', 'Final Fantasy VII Remake: Developers Explain Why New Version is Being Produced in Multiple Parts', and 'Star Wars: Battlefront: Electronic Arts Releases Statistical Infographic About Video Game'. At the bottom right, there are links for 'English (US)', 'Privacy', 'Terms', 'Cookies', 'Advertising', 'Ad Choices', and 'More', along with 'Facebook © 2015'.

Since the user chooses which other people to follow on Facebook in order to know what these individuals or groups are posting on the newsfeed, it does not make sense that Facebook itself gets to decide which of these stories the user sees. If two people both have the same friend, why should one of those users get to see the mutual friend's post but the second friend does not? Any error on the part of Facebook's algorithm would mean that the suggested friends for the user are not relevant, the user misses an important post from a friend, or the recommended stories would be deemed uninteresting. While none of these consequences are dire, they signify that Facebook has failed to satisfy its users by not offering the services that attracted the users in the first place.

While Bateson never officially wrote about social media sites like Facebook because he did not live during the age of social media, he did offer a warning to those who would attempt to recreate people's ability to perceive metamessages:

These algorithms of the heart, or as they say, of the unconscious, are, however, coded and organized in a manner totally different from the algorithms of language. And since a great deal of conscious thought is structured in terms of the logics of language, the algorithms of the unconscious are doubly inaccessible. It is not only that the conscious mind has poor access to this material, but also the fact that when such access is achieved... there is still a formidable problem of translation (148).

The first part of this quote acknowledges that the "algorithms of the heart," which he also refers to as feelings or the metamessages, are structured in a completely different manner than language. People cannot even fully express emotions in their own language due to the difference between unconscious and conscious. Feelings are unconscious, uncontrollable. Sometimes there are no words to cover the full scope of the metamessages, especially if the individual cannot

fully comprehend their own feelings. Conscious thought is conceptualized through language: how can it ever be used to explain unconscious thought? Bateson terms this as an “issue of translation.” It is as if an individual is attempting to use one language to translate another language.

This warning applies to what Facebook has tried to do with its algorithms. The technologic algorithms used by Facebook operate in a manner completely different than the way the user’s mind would work. Just as Bateson considered the unconscious and conscious as separate languages, so too are algorithms and people’s power of perception. While individuals may eventually learn the “rules” of a person after perceiving the metamesages present in communication, computers algorithms cannot learn the same information as effectively because the algorithms are observing different aspects of communication. Instead of noticing facial expressions or tone, the algorithms are noting the number of times that two friends interact or what kind of posts the user likes. Therefore even though both everyone shares the end goal of learning the “rules” of a friend to better understand messages being received from them, Facebook’s lack of non-verbal communication as well as lack of metamesages means that the chance for errors in translation is more substantial.

THE STORY AND THE LIMITED ROLE OF THE USER

The purpose of Facebook is to provide its users with opportunities to communicate with others by sharing posts or status updates. As stated earlier, the mission statement of the site is “to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.” The implication is that every user is, in fact, a storyteller of sorts; hence the terminology of a “story” to refer to any post by a user. This term implies either personal stories created by the individual user or what the user’s friends post on Facebook. The main purpose of the site is to provide a platform where users can openly share personal comments, articles, and pictures in order to share their stories. However, as explored in the previous section, communication has evolved. While users still utilize the term “stories,” the information shared on Facebook does not follow the same format as traditional storytelling.

In the essay “The Storyteller,” the theorist Walter Benjamin argues that storytelling, which he defines as the ability to share experience, is no longer valued in modern society. He makes the bold statement that, “it is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken away from us: the ability to exchange experiences” (83). However, with the advent of technology, people are more aware of events going on outside of their own sphere. This constant access makes it difficult to believe Benjamin’s claim that society has lost the ability to exchange experiences. Benjamin, though, accounts for this argument in his writings:

Every morning brings us news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that

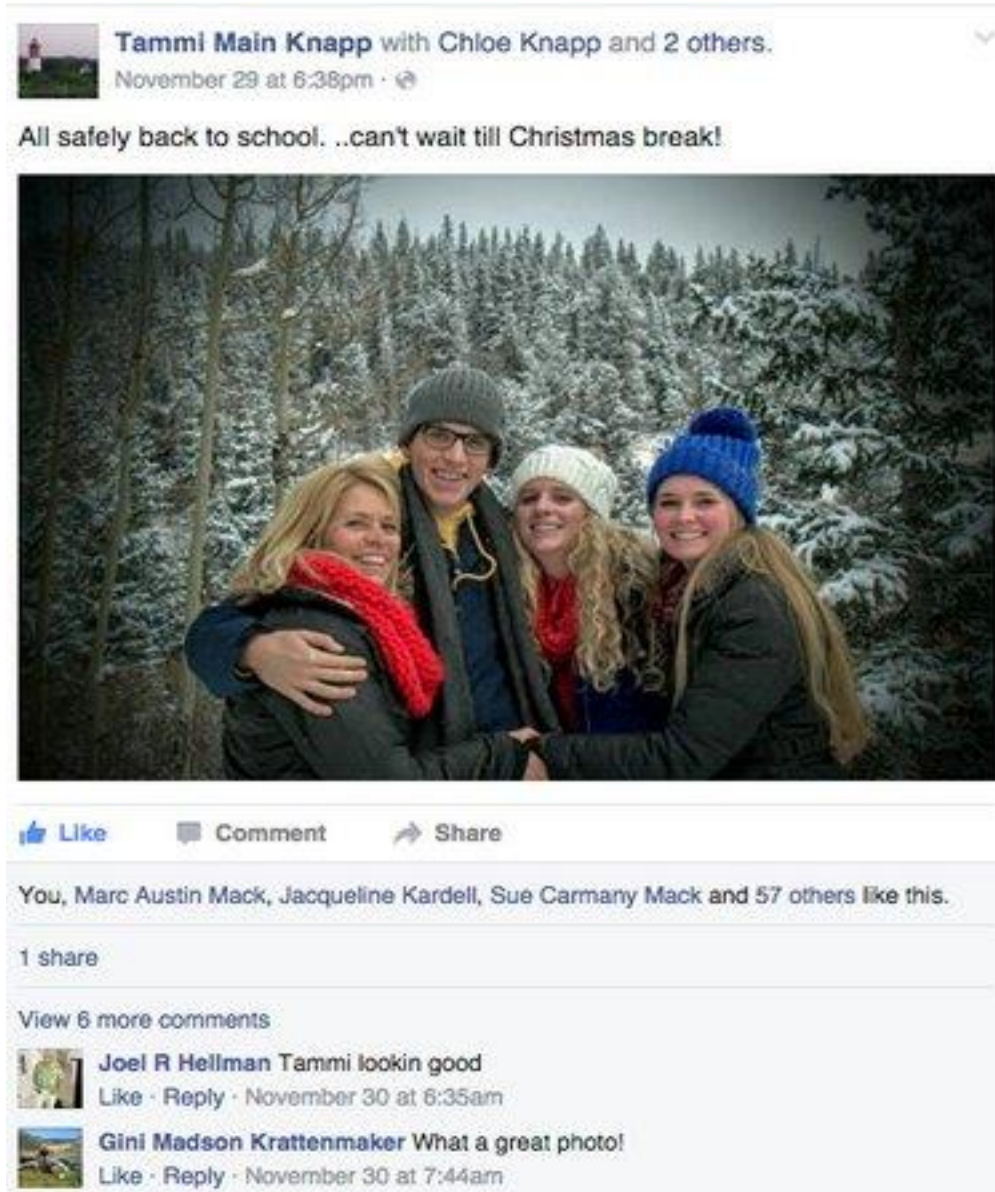
happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information (“The Storyteller” 89).

Modern technology has made knowledge about global events available to anyone at anytime, a feat that would have been nearly impossible before the creation of the Internet. However, as evinced by Benjamin’s quote, this phenomenon does not signify the increased spreading of stories. Current news outlooks do not share stories because they do not share experiences. Rather, today’s news is simply information, which Benjamin defines as “being understandable in itself” (89). It is communication that needs no outside context to achieve understanding because the news outlets explain the original stories for the viewers. Despite having written this theory long before the invention of the Internet, these words serve to describe the type of communication that exists on social media sites like Facebook as well. Facebook is a platform to share information: the users do not expect their friends to share their actual experience. Therefore, based on Benjamin’s theory, Facebook posts should not actually be considered as valid stories but as shared information.

Benjamin also argues that, “storytelling is the art of repeating stories” (“The Storyteller” 91). The traditional function of storytelling, as defined by Benjamin, does not occur because the process of storytelling has evolved to exist in a new medium: the Internet. An explanation of this evolution is found in the article “The Algorithmic Spectator;” which argues that the number of algorithms supported by Facebook “challenge the previous cultural dominance of narrative storytelling” (Benson-Allcott 1). Facebook posts challenge traditional storytelling through amount of time that they last. Stories survive through repetition, they spread when one person imparts the narrative to another. Facebook posts are not repeated like stories, but rather are “eternal” because the posts can never be deleted; users have the ability to search through the


archive of someone's profile and find past posts whenever they want (Buchner and Zaniewska 112). Therefore, posts do not function in the same way that stories, as defined by Benjamin, do. Rather than sharing traditional stories, Facebook users are simply sharing information with each other. As Benjamin contends: "information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time" ("The Storyteller" 90). The value of a Facebook post is in its novelty: after a certain period of existence, the post will quickly become outdated and users and their friends will forget it in the multitude of newly created posts.

The Facebook post's importance is not only dependent on novelty, but also on the user's friends. When describing the role of the listener, Benjamin argues that, "it has seldom been realized that the listener's naïve relationship to the storyteller is controlled by his interest in retaining what he is told" (The Storyteller 94); if the listener is not interested, then there is no point for the storyteller to continue. Even though Facebook posts share information rather than stories, this concept can still be applied to the user and his friends. The Facebook friends, those that view the user's posts, control how successful the post is by deciding if the post is interesting to them. Friends are able to demonstrate their interest in a post by liking it, commenting on it, or by sharing it to their own profile. Notice the likes, comments, and share on the sample post below. In the following example, users can see that 61 of Tammi's friends liked her picture. Under that, Facebook shows that one person has shared the photo, and under that users can read the 8 comments on the picture. While Facebook does not show all 8 comments, the user can choose to make all comments visible by clicking "view 6 more comments."

Sample Post

Tammi Main Knapp with Chloe Knapp and 2 others.
November 29 at 6:38pm · 🌐

All safely back to school. ...can't wait till Christmas break!





👍 Like 💬 Comment ➦ Share

You, Marc Austin Mack, Jacqueline Kardell, Sue Carmany Mack and 57 others like this.

1 share

View 6 more comments

 **Joel R Hellman** Tammi lookin good
Like · Reply · November 30 at 6:35am

 **Gini Madson Krattenmaker** What a great photo!
Like · Reply · November 30 at 7:44am

However, as explained by Benjamin's description of information, friends have no context outside of the screen on which it is viewed because of the nature of online communication. In the sample post, the no one would know the location or reason for this picture without specifically asking the person who posted the picture, Tammi. As Benjamin stated, there is only the

presented information, no story. While the user presents the friends with the information about an experience, the friends determine all context and meaning when they view and respond to the information.

After users post information to Facebook, their own views about the post become almost meaningless because of the power of the friends to determine the context independently. Barthes' interpretation of the power of the reader in his essay "The Death of the Author" functions as an explanation of why Facebook friends determine the meaning of a post even when they did not create the post. Barthes' work explores the lack of control over the interpretation of a work felt by the author when readers create interpretations of the work without more context than what is originally provided. This model can also be applied to Facebook: the author is the user and the readers are the user's friends. The lack of control stems from the fact that after publishing a work, the author no longer can control how it is received; the viewers base their thoughts off of the writing itself. As Barthes states: "language knows a 'subject', not a 'person', and this subject, empty outside of the very enunciation which defines it, suffices to make language 'hold together'" (145). Facebook operate as a text authored by the users that are read by the user's friends; the posts, while created by the users, become subjects that are detached from those that create them. Benjamin comes to a similar conclusion: "he [the friend] is ready to make it [the information on Facebook] completely his own, to devour it, as it were" ("The Storyteller" 100). Friends have freedom of interpretation, and it is this interpretation that gives meaning and value to the post.

In the example post above, the first visible comment is "Tammi lookin good." While Tammi might not have intended her appearance to be the meaning of the post, one of her friends interpreted it that way, and she has no control over that. Joel R. Hellman's comment is simply

one possible meaning of this post. Based on Bateson's theories, one could argue that, in the example of this post, the fact that the communication between Tammi and her friend occurred on Facebook severely limited Joel's understanding of the "rules" of Tammi as a person. This interaction occurred on Facebook, so there were fewer contexts for Joel to understand her post. Perhaps Tammi simply wanted to share a picture of her and her children, she may not have been expecting anyone to comment on her image. Since she was not directly communicating with Joel, Tammi did not feel the need to clarify her reason for sharing this picture, and Joel was free to interpret the picture the way he chose.

This explanation helps to demonstrate that Facebook's format causes a certain level of alienation between the user and her profile because of the online setting. Even though it is the user who adds the information to create the profile, other users also have the power to interpret and add to other user's profiles without any context clues from the original user. The user's story is no longer private because the user no longer has control over what information will be portrayed on Facebook. The profile becomes public knowledge. While Benjamin was not alive for the creation of the Internet or of Facebook, his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" hypothesizes about the potential alienating effects of the technological advances, effects that can easily be applied to sites such as Facebook. His work explores the disconnect between an actor and the film representation of those actions in order to demonstrate the divide between the worker and the work itself. Benjamin claims that:

The film actor feels as if in exile—exiled not only from the stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about, in order to be changed into a mute image,

flickering in an instant on the screen, then vanishing into silence... The projector will play with his shadow before the public, and he himself must be content to play before the camera (229).

In this quote, Benjamin argues that the actor loses touch with his own body in the creation of a movie. The camera and projector have the control over what parts of his performance the audience sees; he himself is void of control and reality. The public will see the actor and interpret his movements, but it is the camera that presents the actor to them, not the actor himself. He is changed into a “mute image” that vanishes into silence. Users experience a similar exile from their profiles. The user attempts to present a certain image of herself on Facebook by creating certain posts and by liking specific stories. However, just as the camera shapes the final image of the actor, entities outside of the user can shape how others view her profile. When contemplating the relationship between the audience of film and the actor, Benjamin contends that, “the audience’s identification with the actor is really an identification with the camera” (“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” 228). In terms of Facebook, the audience, or the friends of the user, are in actuality interacting with other entities that have power to shape the user’s profile. Friends can depend only upon past interactions with the user to judge the context of any posts; a process that replaces the majority of non-verbal and unconscious contributions that the user would contribute to a face-to-face conversation. Therefore, the user is exiled and alienated from the very communication that she proposed when making the original post.

To further the idea of alienation, it is imperative to have an understanding of other entities that are involved in any communication on Facebook. As previously stated, there is the user and his friends, each of which affects the online representations of actual people. However, Facebook itself is yet another entity that has power over the user’s profile. As explored in the

first section of this paper, Facebook has created algorithms that observe and record the actions of each user on the site. This information is then analyzed to determine what the user will see every time he is on Facebook. The algorithms also determine what products are advertised to the user, all of which *creates* a unique experience for the user. While the user works to create a profile and to facilitate interactions between friends, the algorithm silently and discretely builds an independent relationship between itself and any information shared by each user.

Walter Benjamin theorized that advancements in technology had destroyed the concept of a story because people were no longer interested or capable of sharing experiences. Instead, society focused on the spread of information. Benjamin's logic illustrates why communication on Facebook inhibits storytelling. The technology itself eliminates the role of non-verbal communication, limiting the understanding of the person on the receiving end of the conversation. Also, the fact that other users and the algorithms of Facebook have the ability to shape and influence how a person's profile is created causes the user to become exiled from his own personal profile, thus negating the goal of Facebook to give users the opportunity to make their own world.

COMMODIFICATION OF THE USER

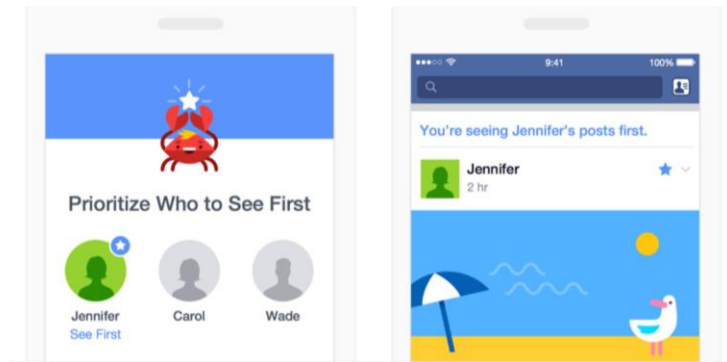
When discussing Facebook, its founder, Mark Zuckerberg, once stated, “The question isn’t, ‘What do we want to know about people?’ It’s, ‘What do people want to tell about themselves?’” This quote demonstrates that even in its conception, the point of Facebook was never to provide a completely accurate depiction of the user’s lives and communication. The site was designed to allow users to shape their own lives. The profile is supposed to be a representation of how the user wants to be viewed, based entirely upon what the user would like to post about his life. Hypothetically, the user has the choice to pick which of his experiences to put on Facebook and which of his experiences Facebook users do not get to see. To use Facebook jargon, users should be able to create the “story” that they want to tell. However, since other entities have power to shape this story, to tell another story than what the user wants to share, the persona that the profile represents is no longer the product that the original user intended to create. The format of Facebook produces a separation between the user and the profile that he intends.

One such entity is the user’s friends who, once accepted, have access to view, like, share, and comment on any information posted by the user or on the user’s profile, even if that information was posted before the person was added as a friend. In a non technology-based setting, friends do not have this sort of instant access to all information about a person instantaneously. Instead, through the process of becoming a friend, the person must gain the trust and confidence of the other person, allowing her to share when she feels ready. On Facebook, however, there is no way for new “friends” to gain the trust of the user before being able to access previous experiences. This trust stems in part from the knowledge that friends have built an understanding of each other through experiences. Friends understand each other’s

communication styles, both conscious and unconscious. As discussed earlier, a friend has learned the “rules” of the other person. Without such an understanding, people would feel less comfortable giving others complete access to their thoughts and opinions; such an access would seem inappropriate because it would be more likely that the other person would interpret this information in the wrong way. Based on Facebook’s dichotomy of either friend or not friend, there is a high possibility that users grant this permission to people without realizing the potential consequences. These “pseudo” friends are more likely to “devour” the user’s information, as Benjamin would say, since they would have even less context from which to create meaning.

The algorithms are another impersonal entity that maintains control over the user’s profile. They observe every choice that the user makes while on Facebook such as what content is posted, what pictures are shared, and what other posts are liked. Algorithms also determine which stories appear on the user’s profile and other suggested content on Facebook based off of previous content that the user has either liked or not liked. These actions, coupled with the power held by the friends of the user, produce an atmosphere that eliminates the input of the user in terms of the content of her profile. For example, the following advertisement from my own profile seems to give me, as the user, the power to choose what stories I desire to see on my newsfeed:

Facebook Suggestion



Put the people you love at the top

Kaitlin, we care about showing you posts from people who matter to you. We've made new controls that allow you to prioritize friends and family in your News Feed.



Pick friends

The add claims to give me the choice to pick my desired friends through the heading “Put the people you love at the top;” while the use of the imperative implies that I have the capacity to determine the order of who appears on my newsfeed. However, the advertisement then negates this power through the explanation that, “we [Facebook algorithms] care about showing you posts from people who matter to you.” Facebook will prioritize the user’s friends through “new controls.” This means that, ultimately, it is just another algorithm that will be determining how the user’s News Feed is formatted, not the user. No matter how I prioritize my list, the ultimate decisions still lie out of my control. While the user provides the information with which to create the profile with the intent of generating the ideal representation of herself, the user never has the

sole power to make those decisions. There is a distance between the user and the profile; the user becomes alienated from the very image that she intended to create on Facebook.

The idea of alienation originated with Karl Marx's idea of alienation of labor: it is the condition in which people are dominated by forces of their own creating, which then confront them as alien powers. He arrives at this conclusion by first starting with the observation that "the whole society falls apart into the two classes—the property *owners* and the property-less *workers*" (Marx 106). The workers, also known as laborers, produce commodities that cause the wealth of the property owners to increase. Therefore, from the perspective of the property owners, the laborers themselves become commodities—not just the actual product that is produced:

The worker puts his life into the object; but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object... Whatever the product of his labor is, his is not. Therefore the greater the product, the less is he himself. The *alienation* of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him (108).

In this case, the Facebook profile is the "object" created by the user to act as an online representation of the user's life. Facebook is meant for communicating with both one individual as well as a larger group in a non face-to-face setting. The profile is not equivalent to the user; it is only a representation of the user that is created by both the user and others, as previously stated. The profile exists "*outside him* [the user], independently, as something alien to him [the user]." Facebook profiles are alien in the sense that due to the influence of outside forces, the profile exists and changes independently of the user's intention.

In his further examinations of the effects of the alienation of the labor force, Marx proposes the idea that ownership of the product, whether it is a sellable good or a Facebook profile, no longer belongs to the person that made it. According to Marx, “if the product of labor does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, then this can only be because it belongs to some *other man than the worker*” (115). The friends of the user could be considered to be the “other man than the worker,” as could the Facebook algorithms that control what posts and suggestions appear on each individual profile. An article from the *Business Insider* stated that, “Facebook comes up with algorithms to surface the best material... [Facebook] tweaks what stories show up in your News Feed to cut back on what it considers to be low-quality content” (Yarrow). While it is admirable that Facebook tries to eliminate “low-quality content,” its goal implies that the user does not determine the ultimate content of her own profile if Facebook deems that content to be “low-quality.” Rather, this goal demonstrates the length that Facebook has gone in order to implicitly control the content on each user’s profile.

These hidden influences of the Facebook algorithm serve as an example of how power over an entity functions in the new technological settings like Facebook. According to the theorist Michel Foucault, modern displays of power have shifted from being centered on one single individual to a web of power extending over a group. He described modern power as “a web extending its lines everywhere in a crisscrossing pattern...Power is...an organization of relationships of individuals and institutions in which everyone is involved” (Palmer 119). He utilized the classic example of the panopticism to illustrate this web of power. In the panopticism, prisoners are in a cell in which the only person that can see them is the supervisor who is centered in the middle of the prison. Likewise, the prisoners can see no one except for the supervisor. Each prisoner is “seen but...does not see; he is the object of information, never a

subject in communication” (Foucault 200). Due to the elimination of contact between prisoners and guards, the prisoner can never communicate with anyone and expect an answer; therefore, he is never the subject. Facebook is a modern day example of the panopticism because the other entities that exhibit power exist within Facebook itself, not outside of it. Rather than an outside organization controlling what the user may or may not post, it is the very algorithms of the website that determine what is quality content. The other users that are consciously given permission to access the profile have the power to shape said profile. As stated by Foucault: “in short, [the panopticism] arranges things in such a way that the exercise of power is not added on from the outside, like a rigid, heavy constraint, to the functions it invests, but is so subtly present in them...” (206). The organization that wields the real power of the profile is not the user, who creates the profile as a representation of herself, but other users and, most subtly, Facebook’s computer algorithms.

Facebook wields this power over the profiles for a reason, and not simply to create a forum for communication online. Contemporary Marxists would argue that the users of Facebook, like other workers before them, have been turned into commodities for the purpose of making a profit. Marx goes so far as to argue that commodities have become fetishes in today’s society. Benjamin explored this concept in his work *The Arcades Project*: “ambiguity is the appearance of dialectic in images...such an image is afforded by the commodity per se: as fetish” (10). When the appearance of reality, such as an image, becomes dialectic, it means that it is discussing the truth of the appearance. In the Facebook example, even though an online profile of a person does not equate to a true reflection of the person, users and friends operate as though this were true. This misunderstanding leads to the creation of a fetish because it has “gained

autonomy... the commodity has been transformed into an idol that, although the product of human hands, disposes over the human” (181).

The Facebook fetish appears in the way that the Facebook algorithms treat the information on Facebook as a free commodity. The purpose of these algorithms, according to the book *Reverse Engineering Social Media* by Robert Gehl, “ultimately, for the owners of social media sites, the goal is to store as much user-generated content and data as possible... and then store the results, creating an ever-more-precise and extensive archive” (62). This archive contains all information about what the user posts, likes, comments on, or shares. It also includes who the user communicates with, as well as how the communication occurs. For example, the algorithms track whether the user prefers to use the more private instant messaging tool or if they write publically on another user’s wall. In his book, Gehl maintained that:

If Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Marlene Manoff, and Geoffrey Bowker are right in arguing that control of the archive leads to social power, then social media site owners are becoming quite powerful indeed, because they have the ability to pull data from their archives to produce knowledge (43).

The commodification of a Facebook profile can be seen in numerous different ways. One is the literal commodification of a profile for the ultimate profit of the Facebook company itself. Currently, Facebook is free to the user, no one has to pay to create a profile or interact with other profiles. However, that does not mean that Facebook does not make a profit from the users. Rather than charging it’s users, Facebook makes money though advertisements. In his book about the financial powers of advertising, Joseph Turow supports Gehl in the theory that, “Facebook...gathers an enormous amount of information about what everyone on its site does and then turns around and sells the ability to reach them anonymously with advertising based on

the profiles that Facebook members have created for themselves” (Turow 145). As Marx theorized, the laborer does the work, so the user creates the profile, and then the “property owners,” the owners of Facebook, turn a profit from this work. Thus, the users become even more alienated from their work, the profile, because they are not receiving any of the profit from its creation.

According to Turow, companies use Facebook data for two purposes: the first is to identify potential customers and the second is to follow this person on as many devices as possible (computers, phones, etc...). Companies hope to do the following:




Identify likely customers; use databases to encourage them to click on personalized content and relevant ads; reinforce their responses across a variety of websites and mobile devices; serve these customers personalized commercial messages at the moment of sale; and convince them to swipe their frequent shopper card, credit card, or debit card to complete the gauntlet—and offer up more data (Turow 139).

For example, four of my friends have recently gotten engaged and, to share the news, each posted about the news on Facebook. I “liked” their pictures and posts about the engagements and future weddings for the sole reason of showing my support of these events. Facebook’s algorithms noted the unintentional pattern of my actions based on wedding posts, as well as my personal information such the fact that I am in my 20s as well as in a relationship, all of which could imply that I am a potential customer for those in the wedding market. Based on these facts, Facebook has assumed that I too am interested in being engaged and married and has organized my own profile and advertisements to reflect this assumption. Now, the majority of the

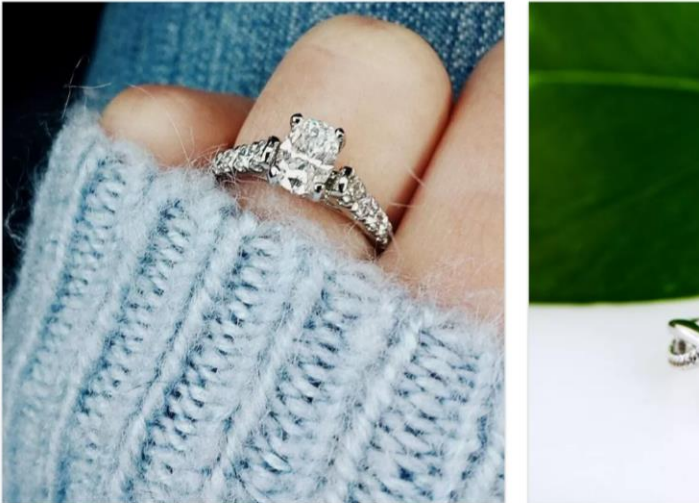
advertisements that I see on my profile are centered on engagement rings or photographers that specialize in taking wedding pictures, as seen in the example below:

Sample Wedding Advertisement

Suggested Post ▼

 **Wedding Day Diamonds** 
Sponsored • 

Now offering 24 months interest free financing and no down payment! See our St. Cloud store for details!



Hundreds of styles to choose from! **Learn more & diamond!**

Obviously, Facebook has shared its information about my personal information and my activity on Facebook with companies interested in the wedding industry, and now those companies target me as a potential customer. They have even noted the location of pictures I am tagged in to

determine that I would be more interested in visiting a St. Cloud store, even though I have my hometown listed as Aurora, CO.

This example also demonstrates how the format of Facebook is designed to increase the commodification of the user. Facebook has, without my explicit permission, shared personal information that is a part of my profile with outside organizations that have then shaped my profile based on their interpretation of me. The book *The Electronic Silk Road: How the Web Binds the World in Commerce* explores how Internet, in specific social media sites, works as a moneymaking industry. In “Facebookistan,” the chapter specifically about Facebook, revealed shocking facts about the legal issues that the company is currently facing in countries all over the world. It states that, “Facebook itself makes and enforces rules for the use of its platform” (Chander 5), ensuring that it does not have to follow national laws about sharing information. Therefore, “even if one forgoes all these opportunities [to participate and interact with others on Facebook], other people can still put up information about one on Facebook” (7) which the site still has access to use and sell.

As explored in the previous section “The Story and the Limited Role of the User,” Tammi chose to post a picture of herself and her children without sharing the full context of the image. One of her friends made a comment about her appearance, which may not have been the type of comment she had been hoping for about this picture. The comment, “Tammi lookin good,” gave an entirely new meaning to the picture: instead of the focus being on her status as a mother, her appearance became the focus of the post. Tammi willingly chose to not participate fully with her Facebook friends by not providing more detailed context for the picture, and yet Facebook still made assumptions about her based on other comments.

CONCLUSION

As stated by founder Mark Zuckerberg, the goal of Facebook is to allow its users to share what they would like with the world. It is supposed to be an opportunity to shape how the world sees the user by allowing the user to determine what facts the world can access. In essence, this is a pure intention. Facebook does its best to provide high-quality content for its users in an easy to use format. However, the issue is that the entity regulates the quality of the content of the user's life. The epigraph of this paper states that, "there has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism." This description fittingly applies to Facebook, arguably one of the biggest cultural documents since its beginnings in 2006. The barbaric nature of Facebook lies in the process of transmission: its methods of determining what is quality content as well as who actually has the power to shape the user's personal profile

Theorists such as Gregory Bateson and Walter Benjamin both explored the complex phenomenon of communication. Bateson examined the role of the subconscious and the conscious, the verbal and the non-verbal communication. His ideas help to demonstrate why communication on Facebook is so difficult. Users depend upon non-verbal messages, such as hand gestures or facial expressions, to fully share an idea with another person. Without those messages, the person receiving the message has a much more limited experience of communication. Benjamin focused more on the lost concept of the story. According to his work, society no longer shares stories because people are more interested in information rather than the full story. People desire knowledge that can be understood without context, knowledge that can be learned in a short amount of time. While information can be valuable, it becomes problematic when society replaces all stories with information. The instantaneous nature of Facebook encourages users to post as often as possible, meaning that friends expect new information on a

regular basis. Previous posts are considered “old,” with no new information to share. Users live for the present, not for the wisdom of the past.

And therein lies the barbaric nature of Facebook. There is the expectation that a user will post information that will present herself in the ideal manner, not as a realistic person. Despite this effort though, the user does not have the sole power to shape the profile. Instead, the friends and computer algorithms dictate what is quality content, what is well received, what the user will see and post more often. The “ideal representation” of the user is the ideal of others, not of the user. Therefore, the user becomes detached from this representation of herself that attracted people to Facebook in the first place. The user’s goal is to offer a quintessential image of her life, but instead she will face the unavoidable power of the other users, leading to a distance between the two. This detachment is alienating; it is barbaric.

Working Bibliography

- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." *Image, Music, Text*. Trans. Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977. 142-148. Print.
- Bateson, Gregory. "Style, Grace, and Information in Primitive Art." *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*. 1972. Reprint. Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1987. 137-161. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1999. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968. 83-109. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1968. 217-251. Print.
- Benson-Allcott, Caetlin. "The Algorithmic Spectator." *Film Quarterly* 64.3 (2011): 55-58. Web. 16 July 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/FQ.2011.64.3.55>
- Buchner, Anna, and Katarzyna Zaniewska. "Facebook as a Catalyst for Beneficial Participation in Culture." *Polish Sociological Review*. 117 (2012). 107-16. Web. 15 July 2015. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41478922>.
- Chander, Anupam. "Facebookistan." *The Electronic Silk Road: How the Web Binds the World in Commerce*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2013. 113-41. Print.
- "Communication, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2015. Web. 27 January 2016.
- "Data Policy." *Data Policy*. 30 Jan. 2015. Web. 6 Aug. 2015. <https://www.facebook.com/about/privacy//>

- Foucault, Michel. "Panopticism." *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon, 1977. 195-228. Print.
- Gehl, Robert W. "The Archive and the Processor: The Internal Hardware Logic of Social Media." *Reverse Engineering Social Media: Software, Culture, and Political Economy in New Media Capitalism*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2014. 41-70. Print.
- Marx, Karl. "Estranged Labor." *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Trans. Martin Milligan. Ed. Dirk J. Struik. 1st ed. New York: International, 1964. 106-119. Print.
- Reuters, Thomas. "Time magazine's 'Person of the Year' is... You." *Life on NBCNEWS*. (2006): Web. 6 Feb. 2016.
- Science Museum. "Information Age: The Satellite Broadcast that Changed Our World. Online video clip. *Youtube*. Youtube, 23 Oct. 2014. Web. 8 Feb. 2016.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hnD78Rcd13k>
- Turow, Joseph. "The Long Click." *The Daily You: How the New Advertising Industry Is Defining Your Identity and Your Worth*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2012. 138-170. Print.
- Wellman, Barry, and Lee Rainie. "Networked Relationships." *Networked: The New Social Operating System*. The MIT Press. 2012. 117-46. Web. 20 July 2015.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vjq62.10>.
- Yarrow, Jay. "Facebook is a Fundamentally Broken Product that is Collapsing Under it's Own Weight." *Business Insider*. (2013): Web. 19 Dec. 2013.
<http://www.businessinsider.com/facebook-news-feed-benedict-evans-2013-12>
<http://www.facebook.com>
<http://www.facebook.com/facebook/info>