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virtual friendship and the new narcissism

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FOR CENTURIES, the rich and the powerful documented their existence and their status through painted portraits. A marker of wealth and a bid for immortality, portraits offer intriguing hints about the daily life of their subjects—professions, ambitions, attitudes, and, most important, social standing. Such portraits, as German art historian Hans Belting has argued, can

be understood as “painted anthropology,” with much to teach us, both intentionally and unintentionally, about the culture in which they were created.

Self-portraits can be especially instructive. By showing the artist both as he sees his true self and as he wishes to be seen, self-portraits can at once expose and obscure, clarify and distort. They offer opportunities for both self-expression and self-seeking. They can display egotism and modesty, self-aggrandizement and self-mockery.

Today, our self-portraits are democratic and digital; they are crafted from pixels rather than paints. On social networking websites like MySpace and Facebook, our modern self-portraits feature background music, carefully manipulated photographs, stream-of-consciousness musings, and lists of our hobbies and friends. They are interactive, inviting viewers not merely to look at, but also to respond to, the life portrayed online. We create them to find friendship, love, and that ambiguous modern thing called connection. Like painters constantly retouching their work, we alter, update, and tweak our online self-portraits; but as digital objects they are far more ephemeral than oil on canvas. Vital statistics, glimpses of bare flesh, lists of favorite bands and favorite poems all clamor for our attention—and it is the timeless human desire for attention that emerges as the dominant theme of these vast virtual galleries.

Although social networking sites are in their infancy, we are seeing their impact culturally: in language (where “to friend” is now a verb), in politics (where it is *de rigueur* for presidential aspirants to catalogue their virtues on MySpace), and on college campuses (where *not* using Facebook can be a social handicap). But we are only beginning to come to grips with the consequences of our use of these sites: for friendship, and for our notions of privacy, authenticity, community, and identity. As with any new technological advance, we must consider what type of behavior online social networking encourages. Does this technology, with its constant demands to collect (friends and status) and perform (by marketing

ourselves), in some ways undermine our ability to attain what it promises—a surer sense of who we are and where we belong? The Delphic oracle's guidance was *know thyself*. Today, in the world of online social networks, the oracle's advice might be *show thyself*.

>>> making connections

The earliest online social networks were arguably the Bulletin Board Systems of the 1980s that let users post public messages, send and receive private messages, play games, and exchange software. Some of those BBSs, like The WELL (Whole Earth 'Electronic Link) that technologist Larry Brilliant and futurist Stewart Brand started in 1985, made the transition to the World Wide Web in the mid-1990s. (Now owned by Salon.com, The WELL boasts that it was "the primordial ooze where the online community movement was born.") Other websites for community and connection emerged in the 1990s, including Classmates.com (1995), where users register by high school and year of graduation; Company of Friends, a business-oriented site founded in 1997; and Epinions, founded in 1999 to allow users to give their opinions about various consumer products.

A new generation of social networking websites appeared in 2002 with the launch of Friendster, whose founder, Jonathan Abrams, admitted that his main motivation for creating the site was to meet attractive women. Unlike previous online communities, which brought together anonymous strangers with shared interests, Friendster uses a model of social networking known as the "Circle of Friends" (developed by British computer scientist Jonathan Bishop), in which users invite friends and acquaintances—that is, people they already know and like—to join their network.

Friendster was an immediate success, with millions of registered users by mid-2003. But technological glitches and poor man-

agement at the company allowed a new social networking site, MySpace, launched in 2003, quickly to surpass it. Originally started by musicians, MySpace has become a major venue for sharing music as well as videos and photos. It is now the behemoth of online social networking, with over 100 million registered users. Connection has become big business: In 2005, Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation bought MySpace for \$580 million.

Besides MySpace and Friendster, the best-known social networking site is Facebook, launched in 2004. Originally restricted to college students, Facebook—which takes its name from the small photo albums that colleges once gave to incoming freshmen and faculty to help them cope with meeting so many new people—soon extended membership to high schoolers and is now open to anyone. Still, it is most popular among college students and recent college graduates, many of whom use the site as their primary method of communicating with one another. Millions of college students check their Facebook pages several times every day and spend hours sending and receiving messages, making appointments, getting updates on their friends' activities, and learning about people they might recently have met or heard about.

There are dozens of other social networking sites, including Orkut, Bebo, and Yahoo 360°. Microsoft recently announced its own plans for a social networking site called Wallop; the company boasts that the site will offer “an entirely new way for consumers to express their individuality online.” (It is noteworthy that Microsoft refers to social networkers as “consumers” rather than merely “users” or, say, “people.”) Niche social networking sites are also flourishing: there are sites offering forums and fellowship for photographers, music lovers, and sports fans. There are professional networking sites, such as LinkedIn, that keep people connected with present and former colleagues and other business acquaintances. There are sites specifically for younger children, such as Club Penguin, which lets kids pretend to be chubby, colored penguins who waddle

around, chatting, playing games, earning virtual money, and buying virtual clothes. Other niche social networking sites connect like-minded self-improvers; the site 43things.com encourages people to share their personal goals. Click on "watch less TV," one of the goals listed on the site, and you can see the profiles of the 1,300 other people in the network who want to do the same thing. And for people who want to join a social network but don't know which niche site is right for them, there are sites that help users locate the proper online social networking community for their particular (or peculiar) interests.

Social networking sites are also fertile ground for those who make it their lives' work to get your attention—namely, spammers, marketers, and politicians. Incidents of spamming and spyware on MySpace and other social networking sites are legion. Legitimate advertisers such as record labels and film studios have also set up pages for their products. In some cases, fictional characters from books and movies are given their own official MySpace pages. Some sports mascots and brand icons have them, too. Procter & Gamble has a Crest toothpaste page on MySpace featuring a sultry-looking model called "Miss Irresistible." As of this summer, she had about 50,000 users linked as friends, whom she urged to "spice it up by sending a naughty (or nice) e-card." The e-cards are emblazoned with Crest or Scope logos, of course, and include messages such as "I wanna get fresh with you" or "Pucker up baby—I'm getting fresh." A P & G marketing officer recently told the *Wall Street Journal* that from a business perspective social networking sites are "going to be one giant living dynamic learning experience about consumers."

As for politicians, with the presidential primary season now underway, candidates have embraced a no-website-left-behind policy. Senator Hillary Clinton has official pages on social networking sites MySpace, Flickr, LiveJournal, Facebook, Friendster, and Orkut. As of July 1, 2007, she had a mere 52,472 friends on MySpace

(a bit more than Miss Irresistible); her Democratic rival Senator Barack Obama had an impressive 128,859. Former Senator John Edwards has profiles on twenty-three different sites. Republican contenders for the White House are poorer social networkers than their Democratic counterparts; as of this writing, none of the GOP candidates has as many MySpace friends as Hillary, and some of the leading Republican candidates have no social networking presence at all.

Despite the increasingly diverse range of social networking sites, the most popular sites share certain features. On MySpace and Facebook, for example, the process of setting up one's online identity is relatively simple: Provide your name, address, e-mail address, and a few other pieces of information and you're up and running and ready to create your online persona. MySpace includes a section, "About Me," where you can post your name, age, where you live, and other personal details such as your zodiac sign, religion, sexual orientation, and relationship status. There is also a "Who I'd Like to Meet" section, which on most MySpace profiles is filled with images of celebrities. Users can also list their favorite music, movies, and television shows, as well as their personal heroes; MySpace users can also blog on their pages. A user "friends" people—that is, invites them by e-mail to appear on the user's "Friend Space," where they are listed, linked, and ranked. Below the Friends space is a Comments section where friends can post notes. MySpace allows users to personalize their pages by uploading images and music and videos; indeed, one of the defining features of most MySpace pages is the ubiquity of visual and audio clutter. With silly, hyper flashing graphics in neon colors and clip-art-style images of kittens and cartoons, MySpace pages often resemble an overdecorated high school yearbook.

By contrast, Facebook limits what its users can do to their profiles. Besides general personal information, Facebook users have a "Wall" where people can leave them brief notes, as well as a Mes-

sages feature that functions like an in-house Facebook e-mail account. You list your friends on Facebook as well, but in general, unlike MySpace friends, which are often complete strangers (or spammers), Facebook friends tend to be part of one's offline social circle. (This might change, however, now that Facebook has opened its site to anyone rather than restricting it to college and high school students.) Facebook (and MySpace) allow users to form groups based on mutual interests. Facebook users can also send "pokes" to friends; these little digital nudges are meant to let someone know you are thinking about him or her. But they can also be interpreted as not-so-subtle come-ons; one Facebook group with over 200,000 members is called "Enough with the Poking, Let's Just Have Sex."

>>> degrees of separation

It is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the curious use of the word *networking* to describe this new form of human interaction. Social networking websites "connect" users with a network—literally, a computer network. But the verb *to network* has long been used to describe an act of intentional social connecting, especially for professionals seeking career-boosting contacts. When the word first came into circulation in the 1970s, computer networks were rare and mysterious. Back then, "network" usually referred to television. But social scientists were already using the notion of networks and nodes to map out human relations and calculate just how closely we are connected.

In 1967, Harvard sociologist and psychologist Stanley Milgram, best known for his earlier Yale experiments on obedience to authority, published the results of a study about social connection that he called the "small world experiment." "Given any two people in the world, person X and person Z," he asked, "how many intermediate acquaintance links are needed before X and Z are connected?" Milgram's research, which involved sending out a kind of chain letter

and tracing its journey to a particular target person, yielded an average number of 5.5 connections. The idea that we are all connected by "six degrees of separation" (a phrase later popularized by playwright John Guare) is now conventional wisdom.

But is it true? Duncan J. Watts, a professor at Columbia University and author of *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age*, has embarked on a new small world project to test Milgram's theory. Similar in spirit to Milgram's work, it relies on e-mail to determine whether "any two people in the world can be connected via 'six degrees of separation.'" Unlike Milgram's experiment, which was restricted to the United States, Watts's project is global; as he and his colleagues reported in *Science*, "Targets included a professor at an Ivy League university, an archival inspector in Estonia, a technology consultant in India, a policeman in Australia, and a veterinarian in the Norwegian army." Their early results suggest that Milgram might have been right: messages reached their targets in five to seven steps, on average. Other social networking theorists are equally optimistic about the smallness of our wireless world. In *Linked: The New Science of Networks*, Albert-László Barabási enthuses, "The world is shrinking because social links that would have died out a hundred years ago are kept alive and can be easily activated. The number of social links an individual can actively maintain has increased dramatically, bringing down the degrees of separation. Milgram estimated six," Barabási writes. "We could be much closer these days to three."

What kind of "links" are these? In a 1973 essay, "The Strength of Weak Ties," sociologist Mark Granovetter argued that weaker relationships, such as those we form with colleagues at work or minor acquaintances, were more useful in spreading certain kinds of information than networks of close friends and family. Watts found a similar phenomenon in his online small world experiment: weak ties (largely professional ones) were more useful than strong ties for locating far-flung individuals, for example.

Today's online social networks are congeries of mostly weak

ties—no one who lists thousands of “friends” on MySpace thinks of those people in the same way as he does his flesh-and-blood acquaintances, for example. It is surely no coincidence, then, that the activities social networking sites promote are precisely the ones weak ties foster, like rumor-mongering, gossip, finding people, and tracking the ever-shifting movements of popular culture and fad. If this is our small world, it is one that gives its greatest attention to small things.

Even more intriguing than the actual results of Milgram’s small world experiment—our supposed closeness to each other—was the swiftness and credulity of the public in embracing those results. But as psychologist Judith Kleinfeld found when she delved into Milgram’s research (much of which was methodologically flawed and never adequately replicated), entrenched barriers of race and social class undermine the idea that we live in a small world. Computer networks have not removed those barriers. As Watts and his colleagues conceded in describing their own digital small world experiment, “more than half of all participants resided in North America and were middle class, professional, college educated, and Christian.”

Nevertheless, our need to believe in the possibility of a small world and in the power of connection is strong, as evidenced by the popularity and proliferation of contemporary online social networks. Perhaps the question we should be asking isn’t how closely are we connected, but rather what kinds of communities and friendships are we creating?

>>> won’t you be my digital neighbor

According to a survey recently conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, more than half of all Americans between the ages of twelve and seventeen use some online social networking

site. Indeed, media coverage of social networking sites usually describes them as vast teenage playgrounds—or wastelands, depending on one's perspective. Central to this narrative is a nearly unbridgeable generational divide, with tech-savvy youngsters redefining friendship while their doddering elders look on with bafflement and increasing anxiety. This seems anecdotally correct; I can't count how many times I have mentioned social networking websites to someone over the age of forty and received the reply, "Oh yes, I've heard about that MyFace! All the kids are doing that these days. Very interesting!"

Numerous articles have chronicled adults' attempts to navigate the world of social networking, such as the recent *New York Times* essay in which columnist Michelle Slatalla described the incredible embarrassment she caused her teenage daughter when she joined Facebook: "everyone in the whole world thinks its super creepy when adults have facebook," her daughter instant-messaged her. "unfriend paige right now. im serious. . . . i will be soo mad if you dont unfriend paige right now. actually." In fact, social networking sites are not only for the young. More than half of the visitors to MySpace claim to be over the age of thirty-five. And now that the first generation of college Facebook users have graduated, and the site is open to all, more than half of Facebook users are no longer students. What's more, the proliferation of niche social networking sites, including those aimed at adults, suggests that it is not only teenagers who will nurture relationships in virtual space for the foreseeable future.

What characterizes these online communities in which an increasing number of us are spending our time? Social networking sites have a peculiar psychogeography. As researchers at the Pew project have noted, the proto-social networking sites of a decade ago used metaphors of *place* to organize their members: people were linked through virtual cities, communities, and home pages. In 1997, GeoCities boasted thirty virtual "neighborhoods" in which

"homesteaders" or "GeoCitizens" could gather—"Heartland" for family and parenting tips, "SouthBeach" for socializing, "Vienna" for classical music aficionados, "Broadway" for theater buffs, and so on. By contrast, today's social networking sites organize themselves around metaphors of the *person*, with individual profiles that list hobbies and interests. As a result, one's entrée into this world generally isn't through a virtual neighborhood or community but through the revelation of personal information. And unlike a neighborhood, where one usually has a general knowledge of others who live in the area, social networking sites are gatherings of deracinated individuals, none of whose personal boastings and musings are necessarily trustworthy. Here, the old arbiters of community—geographic location, family, role, or occupation—have little effect on relationships.

Also, in the offline world, communities typically are responsible for enforcing norms of privacy and general etiquette. In the online world, which is unfettered by the boundaries of real-world communities, new etiquette challenges abound. For example, what do you do with a "friend" who posts inappropriate comments on your Wall? What recourse do you have if someone posts an embarrassing picture of you on his MySpace page? What happens when a friend breaks up with someone—do you defriend the ex? If someone "friends" you and you don't accept the overture, how serious a rejection is it? Some of these scenarios can be resolved with split-second snap judgments; others can provoke days of agonizing.

Enthusiasts of social networking argue that these sites are not merely entertaining; they also edify by teaching users about the rules of social space. As Danah Boyd, a graduate student studying social networks at the University of California, Berkeley, told the authors of *MySpace Unraveled*, social networking promotes "informal learning. . . . It's where you learn social norms, rules, how to interact with others, narrative, personal and group history, and media literacy." This is more a hopeful assertion than a proven fact,

however. The question that isn't asked is how the technology itself—the way it encourages us to present ourselves and interact—limits or imposes on that process of informal learning. All communities expect their members to internalize certain norms. Even individuals in the transient communities that form in public spaces obey these rules, for the most part; for example, patrons of libraries are expected to keep noise to a minimum. New technologies are challenging such norms—cell phones ring during church sermons; blaring televisions in doctors' waiting rooms make it difficult to talk quietly—and new norms must develop to replace the old. What cues are young, avid social networkers learning about social space? What unspoken rules and communal norms have the millions of participants in these online social networks internalized, and how have these new norms influenced their behavior in the offline world?

Social rules and norms are not merely the straitlaced conceits of a bygone era; they serve a protective function. I know a young woman—attractive, intelligent, and well-spoken—who, like many other people in their twenties, joined Facebook as a college student when it launched. When she and her boyfriend got engaged, they both updated their relationship status to "Engaged" on their profiles and friends posted congratulatory messages on her Wall.

But then they broke off the engagement. And a funny thing happened. Although she had already told a few friends and family members that the relationship was over, her ex decided to make it official in a very twenty-first-century way: he changed his status on his profile from "Engaged" to "Single." Facebook immediately sent out a feed to every one of their mutual "friends" announcing the news, "Mr. X and Ms. Y are no longer in a relationship," complete with an icon of a broken heart. When I asked the young woman how she felt about this, she said that although she assumed her friends and acquaintances would eventually hear the news, there was something disconcerting about the fact that everyone found out about it instantaneously; and since the message came from Face-

book, rather than in a face-to-face exchange initiated by her, it was devoid of context—save for a helpful notation of the time and that tacky little heart.

>>> indecent exposure

Enthusiasts praise social networking for presenting chances for identity-play; they see opportunities for all of us to be little Van Goghs and Warhols, rendering quixotic and ever-changing versions of ourselves for others to enjoy. Instead of a palette of oils, we can employ services such as PimpMySpace.org, which offers “layouts, graphics, background, and more!” to gussy up an online presentation of self, albeit in a decidedly raunchy fashion. Among the most popular graphics used by PimpMySpace clients on a given day in June 2007 were short video clips of two women kissing and another of a man and an obese woman having sex; a picture of a gleaming pink handgun; and an image of the cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants, looking alarmed and uttering a profanity.

This kind of coarseness and vulgarity is commonplace on social networking sites for a reason: it's an easy way to set oneself apart. Pharaohs and kings once celebrated themselves by erecting towering statues or, like the emperor Augustus, placing their own visages on coins. But now, as the insightful technology observer Jaron Lanier has written, “Since there are only a few archetypes, ideals, or icons to strive for in comparison to the vastness of instances of everything online, quirks and idiosyncrasies stand out better than grandeur in this new domain. I imagine Augustus' MySpace page would have pictured him picking his nose.” And he wouldn't be alone. Indeed, this is one of the characteristics of MySpace most striking to anyone who spends a few hours trolling its millions of pages: it is an overwhelmingly dull sea of monotonous uniqueness, of conventional individuality, of distinctive sameness.

The world of online social networking is practically homogenous in one other sense, however diverse it might at first appear: its users are committed to self-exposure. The creation and conspicuous consumption of intimate details and images of one's own and others' lives is the main activity in the online social networking world. There is no room for reticence; there is only revelation. Quickly peruse a profile and you know more about a potential acquaintance in a moment than you might have learned about a flesh-and-blood friend in a month. As one college student recently described to the *New York Times Magazine*: "You might run into someone at a party, and then you Facebook them: what are their interests? Are they crazy-religious, is their favorite quote from the Bible? Everyone takes great pains over presenting themselves. It's like an embodiment of your personality."

It seems that in our headlong rush to join social networking sites, many of us give up one of the Internet's supposed charms: the promise of anonymity. As Michael Kinsley noted in *Slate*, in order to "stake their claims as unique individuals," users enumerate personal information: "Here is a list of my friends. Here are all the CDs in my collection. Here is a picture of my dog." Kinsley is not impressed; he judges these sites "vast celebrations of solipsism."

Social networkers, particularly younger users, are often naive or ill-informed about the amount of information they are making publicly available. "One cannot help but marvel at the amount, detail, and nature of the personal information some users provide, and ponder how informed this information sharing can be," Carnegie Mellon researchers Alessandro Acquisti and Ralph Gross wrote in 2006. In a survey of Facebook users at their university, Acquisti and Gross "detected little or no relation between participants' reported privacy attitudes and their likelihood" of publishing personal information online. Even among the students in the survey who claimed to be most concerned about their privacy—the ones who worried about "the scenario in which a stranger knew

their schedule of classes and where they lived"—about 40 percent provided their class schedule on Facebook, about 22 percent put their address on Facebook, and almost 16 percent published both.

This kind of carelessness has provided fodder for many sensationalist news stories. To cite just one: In 2006, NBC's *Dateline* featured a police officer posing as a nineteen-year-old boy who was new in town. Although not grounded in any particular local community, the impostor quickly gathered more than 100 friends for his MySpace profile and began corresponding with several teenage girls. Although the girls claimed to be careful about the kind of information they posted online, when *Dateline* revealed that their new friend was actually an adult male who had figured out their names and where they lived, they were surprised. The danger posed by strangers who use social networking sites to prey on children is real; there have been several such cases. This danger was highlighted in July 2007 when MySpace booted from its system 29,000 sex offenders who had signed up for memberships using their real names. There is no way of knowing how many sex offenders have MySpace accounts registered under fake names.

There are also professional risks to putting too much information on social networking sites, just as for several years there have been career risks associated with personal home pages and blogs. A survey conducted in 2006 by researchers at the University of Dayton found that "40 percent of employers say they would consider the Facebook profile of a potential employee as part of their hiring decision, and several reported rescinding offers after checking out Facebook." Yet college students' reaction to this fact suggests that they have a different understanding of privacy than potential employers: 42 percent thought it was a violation of privacy for employers to peruse their profiles, and "64 percent of students said employers should not consider Facebook profiles during the hiring process."

This is a quaintly Victorian notion of privacy, embracing the idea that individuals should be able to compartmentalize and par-

cel out parts of their personalities in different settings. It suggests that even behavior of a decidedly questionable or hypocritical bent (the Victorian patriarch who also cavorts with prostitutes, for example, or the straight-A business major who posts picture of himself funneling beer on his MySpace page) should be tolerated if appropriately segregated. But when one's darker side finds expression in a virtual space, privacy becomes more difficult and true compartmentalization nearly impossible; on the Internet, private misbehavior becomes public exhibitionism.

In many ways, the manners and mores that have already developed in the world of online social networking suggest that these sites promote gatherings of what psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton has called "protean selves." Named after Proteus, the Greek sea god of many forms, the protean self evinces "mockery and self-mockery, irony, absurdity, and humor." (Indeed, the University of Dayton survey found that "23 percent [of students] said they intentionally misrepresented themselves [on Facebook] to be funny or as a joke.") Also, Lifton argues, "the emotions of the protean self tend to be free-floating, not clearly tied to cause or target." So, too, with protean communities: "Not just individual emotions but communities as well may be free-floating," Lifton writes, "removed geographically and embraced temporarily and selectively, with no promise of permanence." This is precisely the appeal of online social networking. These sites make certain kinds of connections easier, but because they are governed not by geography or community mores but by personal whim, they free users from the responsibilities that tend to come with membership in a community. This fundamentally changes the tenor of the relationships that form there, something best observed in the way social networks treat friendship. . . .

We should also take note of the trend toward giving up face-to-face for virtual contact—and, in some cases, a preference for the latter. Today, many of our cultural, social, and political interactions take place through eminently convenient technological surrogates—why go to the bank if you can use the ATM? Why browse in

a bookstore when you can simply peruse the personalized selections Amazon.com has made for you? In the same vein, social networking sites are often convenient surrogates for offline friendship and community. In this context it is worth considering an observation that Stanley Milgram made in 1974, regarding his experiments with obedience: "The social psychology of this century reveals a major lesson," he wrote. "Often it is not so much the kind of person a man is as the kind of situation in which he finds himself that determines how he will act." To an increasing degree, we find and form our friendships and communities in the virtual world as well as the real world. These virtual networks greatly expand our opportunities to meet others, but they might also result in our valuing less the capacity for genuine connection. As the young woman writing in the *Times* admitted, "I consistently trade actual human contact for the more reliable high of smiles on MySpace, winks on Match.com, and pokes on Facebook." That she finds these online relationships more *reliable* is telling: it shows a desire to avoid the vulnerability and uncertainty that true friendship entails. Real intimacy requires risk—the risk of disapproval, of heartache, of being thought a fool. Social networking websites may make relationships more reliable, but whether those relationships can be humanly satisfying remains to be seen.