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Facebookers Anonymous

Facebook. Twitter. Myspace. Admit it, you know you have one. Chances are you're probably logged on at this very moment, even as you read this paper. Social networking sites such as these have become such a regular part of daily life that they've probably become part of your daily routine: wake up, check Facebook. Shower, check Facebook. Drive to the store, write about it on Twitter. While Facebook and Twitter are easy ways to communicate with friends and family, few stop to consider the implications its usage may have for them in the future, or the hidden dangers of having an account. Besides the total loss of privacy that comes with these networks, they can also affect your eligibility for employment, allow unknown predators access to private information, and impair peoples' ability to handle real-life problems effectively. In addition, studies have shown a negative correlation between Facebook use and college GPA. (Vanden Boogart 57). I am proposing that people delete their Facebooks and their Twitters, take a break from cyber life, and rejoin the land of the living. It's not so bad out here.

First and foremost, let me clear the air of a few things. Please do not feel as though I am attacking Facebook users on any form of personal level. I myself was once a Facebook user, and I understand the ease in which one can spend much more time than planned on the network. With such a dynamic structure and constantly changing status updates, it's easy to get caught up in the

constantly changing homepage of 500 friends. I also understand that people are very busy, and that it is next to impossible to keep in touch with everyone between going to work, going to school, studying, cleaning, eating dinner, and sometimes even sleeping. All I am asking is for you to continue to read with an open mind. Take what I say with a grain of salt, and maybe, after hearing what I have to say, you might just change some of your opinions toward social networking sites.

First, how many friends are on your friends list? The average person has about 120 Facebook friends. (Marlow). While this may not seem to be an extreme number, I have known people who have had upwards of 300 or 400 “friends” on their friends list. And when these numbers are compared to the numbers that represent a persons “core support network,” the network “of people with whom individuals ‘can discuss important matters,’” the discrepancy becomes clear. (Marlow). The magic number for the composition of a core support network? Three. (Marlow). On average, Americans state that they can confide in and have important conversations with three people. (Marlow). If you can’t discuss private matters in person with 120 people, what makes it necessary to share the same information with them online?

Status updates range anywhere from what someone had for lunch to discussing the latest relationship/work/family/health drama. First, why is it so important to know that Alice Smith ate a Caesar salad for lunch? Conversely, when you post information that was once considered private, such as the proceedings of the fight you just had with your boyfriend, you let the world into your own personal space. Rather than calling his or her best friend and having a private, meaningful, conversation, people are not only invading the privacy of others by broadcasting information that involves people other than themselves, but are losing the human connection that can only be gained by real-life contact. As face-to-face contact diminishes, so do the personal

relationships that are beneficial to a supportive social circle. Instead of developing close relationships with a few select people, Facebook users tend to place a value of their worth based on how many people they have on their friends list. This leads to superficial relationships and the desire for people to show off their lives in a brighter light to make others jealous of their success. (Fodeman and Monroe).

Another result of the loss of face-to-face interaction is the loss of ability to handle stressful social situations successfully. (Fodeman and Monroe). Online, it is easy to say what you are thinking without worrying much about the consequences. There is not much emotional attachment to the situation, and being in a remote location makes people more likely to do or say things they may not do or say otherwise. However, the same does not hold true for real-life interactions. In real life, there is eye contact, immediate responses, and emotions and feelings that one must be able to handle. People tend to think more about the consequences of their actions before acting on them, and will have to suffer the consequences immediately. There is no option to “turn off” the other in a personal conversation. There isn’t a protective screen between the two. (Fodeman and Monroe). Since young children are now participating in the Facebook network, this is an important issue to discuss. People need to learn how to interact with others socially, and this is only done through practice. If this skill is unlearned, it will affect school and job performance later in life. One example of how this has become an issue is through the abundance of people who are now ending relationships with their significant others online. According to Doug Fodeman and Marjie Monroe of *The National Association of Independent Schools*, “16-year olds say that they would rather break up with their girlfriend/boyfriend by texting, IM-ing or posting on their Facebook wall than tell them in person (or over the phone). When asked why, they'll tell you "because it's easier.'” (Fodeman and Monroe). I completely

agree with them when they state, “We believe this avoidance will have increasing negative ramifications on their communication skills throughout life.” (Fodeman and Monroe).

Another example of people using Facebook to say or do things they normally wouldn't do in person is the case of Buck Burnette, former lineman for the Texas Longhorns. After the election of President Barack Obama, Buck posted a public status announcement stating: “all the hunters gather up, we have a #\$\$%&er in the whitehouse.” (Brinson). Would he stand in the middle of Time Square and yell this statement into a microphone? Probably not. But because he felt comfortable behind his computer, he broadcasted this statement to eventually millions of people. (Brinson). Buck has since been kicked off of the team because of his actions, and has made a public apology. (Brinson).

The Longhorns aren't the only ones using information on Facebook to gather information about their students. Colleges and employers are now searching Facebook and other social networking sites for information about prospective students and hires. (Barnes and Matteson). When you apply for Graduate School, the admissions department may very well be viewing your Facebook page to learn a little more about you. Since we've seen that having a “private” page is actually very far from having actual “privacy,” many departments are able to view your profile. Nora Barnes and Eric Matteson found that 21% of all college admissions departments in America use social networking sites as an evaluation tool for prospective students. (Barnes and Matteson 5). While this number may not seem very high, keep in mind that only a few years ago, the percentage of colleges using Facebook for this use was 0. (Barnes and Matteson). The number will only continue to grow over time. Would you want to be judged for admission based upon what is on your page? Like it or not, it is happening.

Employers have also had to take measures to ban Facebook use in the workplace. Employees are spending increasing amounts of time on social networking sites and less time focused on actual work. In Australia, an internet filtering company called SurfControl conducted a study to see how much time people are spending on Facebook while at work. (West). Richard Cullen found in this study that “if an employee spends an hour each day on Facebook, it costs the company more than \$6200 a year.” (qtd. in West). Since there are about 800,000 offices in Australia, Cullen estimates that Facebook use at work may cost businesses \$5 billion each year, collectively. (West). One worker interviewed offered this comment: “Of course everyone checks Facebook at work, duh! I don't have neither internet nor a TV at home because I like doing more useful things with my time when I'm off work.” (qtd. in West.) Another stated this: “I work full time as a tax accountant,” she said. “For the past two weeks I'd say I have averaged about 15 minutes of work per day.” (qtd. in West).

In addition to drastically lowering production levels at work, some employers fear that Facebook use on company computers may make the company vulnerable to system hackers. (West). Because of these reasons, many Facebook users are either prohibited from checking their profiles while at work, or have strict rules regarding their use. (West). This decreased performance also applies to college students. From my own experiences, I have seen Facebook procrastination at its best. My two former roommates were college students, and on numerous occasions were up all night, taking 8 hours to do 2 hours of actual homework. When asked why they took so long, their response would generally be “I got sidetracked on Facebook (or AIM.)” Many people can probably identify with this situation. Whether by becoming distracted in class or at home, Facebook use makes everything take longer than it should. As stated by my former

roommate Nicole: “It took me 3 hours to write 2 pages. Once I closed Facebook, however, the last 6 pages only took about 2 hours.” (Vowell).

Facebook users also give up a substantial amount of privacy the minute they sign up for an account. Did you know that by registering for Facebook, you give them the rights to anything you post on the site? Even if someone else posts a picture of you that you may not be proud of, that picture (or video) becomes property of Facebook indefinitely. According to the Facebook Terms of Service:

For content that is covered by intellectual property rights, like photos and videos ("IP content"), you specifically give us the following permission, subject to your privacy and application settings: you grant us a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any IP content that you post on or in connection with Facebook. (Statement of Rights and Responsibilities).

Basically, they are saying that they own the rights to anything you post online, and can do anything they want with it. Think about this for a minute. They own EVERY picture you have EVER posted. And since it is common knowledge that information remains online even after you “delete” it, there is no way of ever really getting those pictures back.

No one can control what other people post online. If someone posts a picture of you, it’s there, whether you like it or not. True, you can “untag” your name from the picture, but the picture remains nonetheless. This becomes an issue when you consider that people are able to make judgments on *you* based on what *your friends* say on your wall. According to Walther et. al, in “The Role of Friends’ Appearance and Behavior on Evaluations of Individuals on Facebook: Are We Known by the Company We Keep?” people are likely to draw conclusions

about the character of Facebook users through the wall posts of their friends: “In a Facebook profile, things that others say about a target may be more compelling than things an individual says about his- or herself. It has more warrant because it is not as controllable by the target, that is, it is more costly to fake.” (Walther et al 33). In addition, when a Facebook account is “deactivated,” the profile remains online, it is not actually deleted. All of the information remains in cyberspace. (Statement of Rights and Responsibilities). And since I have already shown you that your future employers or graduate school admissions officers may be using Facebook to learn more about you, is this loss of privacy and control really worth it? And do you *really* know who is connected to your profile?

“John Smith has added you as a friend.” Confirm? Whether or not you personally know John Smith, chances are he will end up on your friends list. A computer company called Sophos conducted an experiment in 2009 to see how many people would accept a friend request from a fictional person. The results? 41-46% of users accepted the request from a person whom not only had they never met, but didn’t even exist. (Ducklin). At least half, and often much more, of these same people offered up private information such as hometown, occupation, school, and birth date. They also provided the personal information of their friends and family. (Ducklin).

While this may not initially seem like a big deal, consider this: “these details make an excellent starting point for scammers and social engineers.” (Ducklin). Paul Ducklin also stated in an interview: ““People aren't just handing over their own life story to criminals. . . They're betraying people close to them too, by helping those cybercrooks build up a detailed picture of their life and their milieu. This is an identity scammer's dream.”” (qtd in Noda). Accepting friend requests from people you don’t know can open the gates that allow all sorts of private information out into the open. And considering that the average person has at least 120 friends,

the possibility of an unknown lurker on your profile is pretty feasible. And this isn't the only way it can happen. Identity theft can also occur through phishing emails, emails that look just like legitimate messages from Facebook or other users. These usually include a link to a false login page, where your username and password are then captured by hackers and identity thefts. (Sullivan).

Identity theft doesn't always only affect the user personally either. Friends and family members are put at risk of being scammed as well. Just last year, Bryan Rutberg and his friends found this out the hard way. (Sullivan). Through what he believes was a phishing email, hackers were able to take over Bryan's account. After changing his password, they began posting status updates stating that he had been robbed while on vacation in the U.K., and needed money for a flight home. Bryan's friends learned of his "plight" through Facebook, and with the best intentions, wired money to an account they believed belonged to Bryan. One of Bryan's friends recounts how he was fooled: "I thought the whole story was weird but given the circumstances my instinct was to help you out," Rubenstein wrote. "I was afraid it was a scam, but since I transferred using your name and given the emergency situation, I did it." (Sullivan). The hackers had access to all of Bryan's personal information, which was all they needed to concoct a truly believable scam that people willingly fell for. This can happen to anyone. Even you.

Along with the increased danger of having your personal information hacked by a third party, Facebook users also risk putting themselves in physical danger as well. I know what you're thinking, "I'm smart about my computer use. I know how to take care of myself." Ashleigh Hall most likely said the same thing. However, consider her story: 17 year-old Ashleigh was a Facebook user. She befriended who she believed to be a local teenager named Pete Cartwright, and engaged in conversations with him frequently. Eventually, they arranged to

meet, and Ashleigh told her mother that she would be staying at a friend's house that night.

(Carter). "Pete" told Ashleigh that his dad would be picking her up. In actuality, "Pete" was "an emaciated, 33-year-old convicted double rapist, who was almost toothless and living in his car."

(Carter). When Ashleigh allowed him to pick her up, he then raped and murdered her.

Ashleigh's body was found in a field. Her arms were tied together, and she had been suffocated.

(Carter). "Pete" had used the picture of a teenage boy to pose as a teenager on Facebook to lure teenaged girls into befriending him on Facebook. (Carter.). Through Facebook, he was able to victimize Ashleigh, and if he had not turned himself in, probably would have done the same to others. (Carter). This story goes to show that you never really know who is behind the handsome picture on the profile.

Even if you may not knowingly arrange a meeting with a stranger, you may be giving strangers all of the information necessary to meet up with you anyways. E. A. Vander Veer states my case clearly when he writes:

Theoretically, someone could find out what town you live in and where you plan to be next Thursday at 8:00 p.m. (a book club meeting you RSVP'd to on Facebook, for example). Armed with your picture, that someone could show up at your book club and try to convince you he's your long-lost cousin Al who's down on his luck and needs a couple thousand bucks to hold him over. (Vander Veer 208).

The point is, you don't always know what people are using the information you provide them with. If someone wants to find you, they most likely have every tool they need to do it.

This has been further solidified with the addition of the Foursquare network, which provides the location of the user down to the exact coordinates. (Foursquare). If you go to

Starbucks, everyone knows it, and they know exactly which one you are at. (Foursquare). Since you have broadcasted your whereabouts, everyone now knows you are not at home. Since you told everyone that you bought a new 50 inch television, they may just use this information to pay a visit to your house. When you get home, surprise! Your new TV is gone.

Even if you don't feel that Facebook use can be dangerous, I'm sure that not many will deny that Facebook can be quite addicting. In a study which encompassed 4 large universities, 31.1% of participants reported feeling as though they were "addicted to Facebook." (Vanden Boogart 38). In fact, psychologists have declared that a Facebook addiction does exist, due to its intermittent reinforcement. (Pope). "Intermittent Reinforcement" refers to the "unpredictable high" one receives through "[the] notifications, messages and invites [on Facebook.]. . . That anticipation can get dangerously addictive." (Pope). Psychologist Rob Bedi claims that "internet addictions are common on university campuses, often helped by free Internet access, web-based assignments and unstructured blocks of time." (qtd. in Pope). He continues to say that "there's a difference between procrastination and addiction. If you're losing assignment time to Facebook, though, that's a problem." (qtd. in Pope). Bedi compares Facebook addiction to other types of addiction, such as to alcohol or drugs, and says that internet addiction cannot be quit "cold turkey," but needs to be done over time. (Pope).

As stated earlier, even I understand the time-consuming aspects of Facebook. I have seen first-hand the results of Facebook addiction. If Facebook seems to be cutting into time you need to be spending doing other things, you may be affected. Pope offers these questions for you to consider:

Are personal relationships taking a backseat to Facebook? Do you think about Facebook even when you're offline? Do you use Facebook to escape problems or homework? Do you stay on Facebook longer than intended? Have you ever concealed Facebook use? (Carter).

If this sounds like you, you may have a touch of Facebook addiction. Please pay close attention to the conclusion of this paper.

I understand that some people are able to use Facebook responsibly. Many people say that Facebook is just for fun, and that it provides people with an easy way to maintain relationships and meet new people. Some may say that without social networking sites, they would have lost touch with many friends over the years. Others claim that Facebook has brought long-lost friends back together after years of being apart. I remember receiving friend requests from former high school classmates on a regular basis. However, I also remember not really being friends with them in the first place. People can say that Facebook has helped them keep in touch with classmates, but how many of them were you really friends back then? If you weren't friends with them then, are you really friends with them now because of Facebook? Do you have a close, personal relationship with them? Or are they just another name on your friends list, someone who's posts you read but you don't really relate with? Are they just someone else to show off your life to? True, Facebook can be fun in moderation. But so are lunch dates with your best friends. So is taking your dog for a walk. When Facebook usage takes over your free time to the extent that "real life" interactions suffer, where is the fun in that?

So here's my proposal to you, Facebook addicts: Unplug. Turn the computer off, close your laptop, and put your phone back in your purse. Start by just going one weekend without

logging on to Facebook or Twitter. Use this weekend to see what you can get accomplished. Take the time to study, go for a walk, or even watch television. It doesn't matter what you do, just stay off those websites. I'll bet you'll be surprised by what you can accomplish with your new free time. Once you make it through the weekend, try for a week. It gets easier. Just as drug addicts need to detox slowly, Facebook addiction is a sickness best treated over time. If you slip-up, that's ok. Just keep trying. It may be hard, it may be frustrating, but I promise you, it's for your own good. Your social skills will sharpen, your personal relationships will strengthen, and your dog will love you for taking him outside. Thank you for your time, and good luck to all of you.

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