RESISTING COMMODIFICATION (WITH FRIENDS!):

FACEBOOK AND CONSUMER

CULTURE

by

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ABSTRACT

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Is participating in the Facebook phenomenon (or can it become) politically resistant – even revolutionary? Or are social networking websites merely another form of commodified capitalist consumerism? In this thesis, I investigate the commodified/commodifying aspects of Facebook, as well as its political potential. In order to establish a common understanding of the problems created by contemporary capitalism, in the first chapter I use Guy Debord's theory of the *Society of the Spectacle* to provide a framework for evaluating the incessant commodification of contemporary culture. I then examine previous attempts to overturn the capitalist system and discuss possible reasons for their failure, as well as how those anti-capitalist movements of the past have influenced contemporary anti-corporate rhetoric.

In the second chapter, I examine Facebook as an already commodified space. I will investigate how Facebook is being used as a tool of capitalism to propagate incomplete and misleading social and political information. I then discuss how Facebook's association with the

advertising industry has allowed marketers and businesses unprecedented access to consumers' lives, and how it's very format may promote a Spectaclized vision of the self.

In the final chapter I turn the tables on the previous chapter's analysis and I examine why and how Facebook can be used to fight the Spectacle of capitalist consumerism. I begin by examining what sociologist George Ritzer calls the "McDonaldization of society" and explaining how Facebook and social networking technologies can complicate and hinder this process. After examining how Facebook can help foster intelligent and honest political discussion, I conclude by describing the ways the social networking giant can help educators rethink the limits of traditional educational models and foster a more politically aware generation of students.

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CHAPTER 1

THE SPECTACLE AND THE WEB

1.1 Introduction: What Does it Mean to be "Alone"?

In 2001 Mark Poster asked the readers of his book *What's the Matter with the Internet?* to imagine an individual sitting alone in a dark room "secluded from the company of family, friends or any other humans, withdrawn equally from public space and from nature, from sunlight and fresh air" (108). Readers were asked to consider their reaction to this individual sitting in front of a computer, starring intently at the screen. While we do not know what the individual was looking at, Poster asserted that many would at first feel reservation if not outright disgust toward this self-isolator who has apparently shunned connection to the "real world" in favor of virtuality. However Poster argues that if we remove the computer screen and place a book in this isolated individual's hands, those of us imagining this scenario might change our minds. Instead of decrying this "wretchedly isolated" person, Poster feels many would praise her or him for personal development and "contribution to the progress of mankind" (108). More recently, cultural anthropologist and digital media researcher Mizuko Ito has examined this distinction between "active" and "passive" media forms. In "Mobilizing the Imagination in Everyday Play," Ito notes that there has been a long-standing criticism of visual media (television and the Web, for example) because many believe that "they do not require imaginative and intellectual work" (80). Visual media forms were (and in many cases still are)

considered passive or consumptive acts that strip users of creativity[1]. Poster's reason for introducing this fictional scene was not only to evoke conversation about our culturally ingrained distinctions between low-brown and high-brow culture, but also to illustrate many people's tendency to blame computers (and technology in general) for a "loss of community," as well as the common misconception that the Web is "asocial" (108-9).

2001 was not the Dark Ages. Personal computers were already in many North American homes. The World Wide Web was readily accessible in schools, libraries, businesses, and – for many – at home. Email addresses were commonplace. Instant messaging (IM) services abounded. Chat rooms linked people by geography, religion, politics, sports, books, and any number of other interests. Yet in the decade since the publication of Poster's book, the Web itself has changed dramatically, slowly shifting many people's attitudes toward it. The often-discussed Web 2.0 shift following the "dot-com burst" early in the 2000's marked not only a change in the way people used the Web, but also marked a dramatic shift in the way people thought about the Web and online sociality. No longer seen as a mere repository for information, the Web became (and is still in the process of becoming) a platform for services and a locale for harnessing the collective intellect of its users[2] (O'Reilly "What is Web 2.0?"). This new Web allows for new projects and new Web-based communities to emerge. For example, Amazon and eBay have changed shopping. The rise of blogs has changed how and when we receive news. Wikipedia changed the way knowledge is organized, filtered, and distributed. All of these changes (along with the countless others I have failed to mention here) revealed that the new Web is a *social* Web – more dependent on user-participation and interaction.

Somewhere in the midst of the rise of Web 2.0 technology began the rise of social networking sites (SNSs). SNSs, like their predecessors Multi-User Domains (MUDs), provide

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[1] Writing primarily about children's imaginative practices, Ito complicates these assumptions by discussing previous scholarship which suggests that traditionally consumptive or passive media forms like television may actually help kids engage in creative and imaginative acts (81).
[2] For more on the shift to Web 2.0 see Tim O'Reilly's "What Is Web 2.0?" and "Web Squared: Web 2.0 Five Years On."

individuals a space to communicate with one another independent of geographic boundaries (Turkle 11)[3]. However unlike MUDs, most SNSs are open to much larger bodies of participants. As of July 2010, the *New York Times* reported that social networking giant Facebook had risen to a nearly unbelievable five hundred million profiles (Wortham). Facebook and other SNSs offer users the ability to reconnect to long-lost friends and distant relatives, to keep in near-constant contact with loved ones living near or abroad, to construct themselves through individual profile pages, and to communicate to others multidimensionally[4].

While criticisms of the Web continue despite these changes, I believe that many of those who might have criticized the Web ten years ago as an escape from community – from the "real world" as it were – are now using some form of social networking technology or software to connect (and reconnect) with loved ones, friends, and acquaintances, or business contacts, and now recognize that the Web can be a site for supplemental connectivity (and reconnectivity) – if not as a space for genuine human connection.

The connective power of these websites – not to mention their increased accessibility through today's smart phones – has taken away much of the stigma from sitting in front of the computer in a poorly lit room. However returning to Poster's illustration a decade after its publication serves as an excellent reminder: even though Web 2.0 and SNSs have helped shift perceptions of Web connectivity and community, we must continue to evaluate these faceless figures in the darkened room. We must not only ponder the impact of Web socialization, but must also look further and ask about the political potential of these SNSs. Is engagement in SNSs (or can it become) politically resistant – even revolutionary? Or are SNSs merely another form of commodified capitalist consumerism?

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[3] For more on MUDs and other social networking predecessors see Sherry Turkle's *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*.

[4] By multidimensional communication I mean: one-on-one communication through individual messaging and chatting, one-to-many communication through bulk messaging and posts to one's individual "Wall," and many-to-many communication through group affiliation and message boards

In this thesis, I will investigate the commodified/commodifying aspects of Facebook (at the moment, the most popular SNS), as well as its political potential. In order to establish a common understanding of the problems created by contemporary capitalism, in the first chapter I use Guy Debord's theory of the *Society of the Spectacle* to provide a framework for evaluating the incessant commodification of contemporary culture. I then examine previous attempts to overturn the capitalist system and discuss possible reasons for their failure, as well as how those anti-capitalist movements of the past have influenced contemporary anti-corporate rhetoric.

Over the last few years, Facebook has seen more than its share of controversy. There have been accusations about the legitimacy of CEO Mark Zuckerberg's claim to the Facebook concept. There have been countless Facebook "groups" created in protest of unilateral changes made to the website's layout and features. Most recently, there has been a major backlash against Facebook's seemingly ever-changing and nearly impossible to understand privacy settings. Therefore in the second chapter, I will examine Facebook as an already commodified space. I will investigate how Facebook is being used as a tool of capitalism to propagate incomplete and misleading social and political information. I will then discuss how Facebook's association with the advertising industry has allowed marketers and businesses unprecedented access to consumers' lives, and how it's very format may promote a Spectaclized vision of the self.

However Facebook is not merely a tool for capitalist consumerism. On the contrary, like most communications technologies it has a bad side and a good side. On one hand, it can be and is exploited by those who wish to make a profit (and thereby extend the power of the Spectacle). On the other hand, it can be and is used by those who wish to oppose the dominating power of the Spectacle. Therefore, in the final chapter I will turn the tables on the previous chapter's analysis and I will examine why and how Facebook can be used to fight the Spectacle of capitalist consumerism. I begin by examining what sociologist George Ritzer calls the "McDonaldization of society" – essentially a kind of business and cultural homogenization

that has proven to increase profits for many companies in the United States and abroad but has also damaged nations and governments that assume that the principles of market capitalism can be applied to education, medical care, and government. I then examine how the social networking website can help foster intelligent and honest political discussion. I conclude by discussing how Facebook and social networking technologies can be used to improve education.

<u>1.2 What's So Bad About Commodification?</u>

Before attempting to assess Facebook's political potential, even before trying to determine whether or not the popular social networking website has been completely commodified, I must first answer one fundamental question: why does it *matter* to what extent this website has been commodified? Proponents of contemporary capitalism have argued (not completely incorrectly) that capitalism promotes innovation. Fordism and assembly line production, modern unions, globalization and outsourcing have all been influenced by capitalism and its seemingly meteoric rise to worldwide prominence[5]. So the questions remains: why does it matter whether or not this website has become a part of consumer culture? Why does it matter if the site is *completely* commodified, or only partially commodified? To answer this foundational question I turn to French philosopher, author and filmmaker Guy Debord and a group of artists and political dissidents known as *Situationist International* (SI).

In the late 1950's and through the 1960's France was in political and economic turmoil. France was not alone in this time of ideological upheaval (for example Germany, China, Mexico, and the United States were all mired in political controversy as well). What makes France's internal conflict unique – or more directly, what makes it important for this thesis – are the ideas that shaped France's intellectual future as a reaction to Charles De Gaulle's conservative government and France's shift to Western capitalism. Debord and SI believed that capitalism was causing the downfall of French (and presumably all of Western) society – transforming the

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[5] I am not intending on judging whether these events and movements have been universally "good" or "right", just noting that they are all significant – especially in the development of the Western world.

French populace from politically active, informed citizens to passive consumers (Harold 3). However more than merely increasing passivity, Debord and SI believed that consumerism actively deceived citizens – even consumed them, as it were, into what Debord termed the "society of the spectacle." In *Ourspace*, communications theorist Christine Harold characterizes the Spectacle[6] as "a novel mode of social domination in which the industrial age's coercive manual labor was replaced by capitalism's deceitful promise of fulfillment through consumption" (2). For Debord, the Spectacle of capitalist consumerism represented a decided shift not only in the production and distribution of goods, but also in people's attitudes towards that which they purchase. Rather than necessity, purchasing became a pastime. As the consumer mindset became stronger and more culturally ingrained, consumption became a near-intrinsic part of citizens' everyday lives.

For Debord, the Spectacle was an intrinsic part of capitalist production. In his book *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord details how and why capitalism became more than a production method, but a way to subdue and control the citizenry. By disguising itself as "a means of unification" – an economic force capable of benefiting the poor as well as the wealthy – the Spectacle quickly became a part of citizens' everyday existence (7-8). Spectacle logic encouraged citizens to buy to achieve happiness. Under capitalism, citizens no longer defined themselves or found satisfaction through their interpersonal relationships or contributions to society. Instead, fulfillment was defined by possession. What one owned (as well as what one did not own) defined an individual more than any other aspect of their lives (11).

According to Debord, it was easy to get citizens to succumb to the logic of the Spectacle because it was everywhere – in advertisements, in popular entertainment, even in the news. This was problematic for Debord and SI because they felt it created a disingenuous society no longer capable of engaging in a world outside of consumption. As Debord put it, "It is

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[6] While Debord did not capitalize the term "spectacle" in his writings, I have here and throughout this thesis because Debord seems to characterize it as a conscious entity, capable of participating in the deception it fosters. I capitalize the term to emphasize this personification.

not a mere decoration added to the real world. It is the very heart of this real society's unreality"[7]

(8). The Spectacle had woven itself into the fabric of modern France (and in most of the

Western world) and had become such an ingrained part of daily life that genuine interaction

between individuals (interactions not mediated by product-oriented, Spectacle logic) was

rendered almost impossible. "Real society" was unable to access reality – unable to form

authentic human connections – because the Spectacle had commandeered reality and replaced

it with image-mediated "unreality" (7, 8). With this "monopoly of appearances" the Spectacle

was able to exercise near-total control over citizens' work, home, and leisure (10).

The Spectacle demanded and obtained consumers' passive, unquestioned acceptance

of this new version of reality and offered in return only images of a "world that can no longer be

directly grasped" (11). Debord feared that the Spectacle's emphasis on visual stimuli dulled

consumers' senses and made them more easily manipulated. Sight, in Debord's mind, replaced

touch as the "pre-eminent" sense (11). This transformation is both literally and symbolically

important. First, Debord believed that sight was the "most abstract and easily deceived" sense

(11). If people relied upon their sight above all other senses, then they would be much easier to

misinform because images were easy to manipulate and falsify. Secondly, sight's rise to

prominence signified a shift in citizens' interaction with their world. No longer did citizens wish to

be immersed in their surroundings – to touch, perceive, and interact with their physical

environment. Rather, this desire to *be a part of* the world had been replaced by a desire for

image and replication of the world. Consumers *willingly accepted* this manipulation and

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[7] There is some dispute over the translation of the last sentence of this quote. Another version
translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith reads "…it is the very heart of society's unreal reality." It
is important to note because there is a potentially significant difference between the meanings
of these two phrases. In the Ken Knabb version quoted above, it seems that Debord is
suggesting that the Spectacle has corrupted "real society" by inflicting this "unreality" upon it –
as if it is something that could be lifted if only the real society could get out from under the
Spectacle's control. In the Nicholson-Smith version, however, reality itself seems to have
changed – been made "unreal" by the Spectacle's illogical logic. I chose the Knabb version here
because it seemed to fit better in the context of Debord's message in this section: that
Spectacle society is the result of choices made in the realm of production and only makes itself
look like it is the result of natural evolution; whereas Nicholson-Smith's version seems to
suggest a more permanent corruption of reality and less the result of choices made by those in
control of the means of production.

deception because they found that the images – the counterfeit world created by modern entertainment and advertising – more appealing than their actual environments. Façade became more important than real-world interaction.

Debord and SI's criticisms of Spectacle society were only the beginning of a litany of critiques of consumer culture. In 1981 Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* addressed the concern with sign and image that Debord had addressed a few decades earlier. Having seen capitalism's influence grow stronger, and the continued rise of the advertising industry, Baudrillard declared that we had entered an age in which the real and the simulated were no longer distinguishable from one another (3). In this world of "hyperreality" image and sign replace and consume the real, displacing the real from its traditional assumed position of prominence – making the real obsolete (1-3). Perhaps the best illustration of this principle is found in the books' opening pages in which Baudrillard uses "the Borges fable" – a tale of a map made so detailed and precise that it frays and tears only when the "Empire" itself begins to crumble – to illustrate how image has come to usurp the real. Baudrillard contends that in previous generations, maps were meant only to reflect a territory. They were a necessary image of a region used to help travelers navigate. On the contrary, in modern society, "territory no longer precedes the map" (1). Instead, Baudrillard argues that the map – the simulation of real territory – justifies and even writes the territory[8].

This concept is crucial to understanding consumer culture (and the Spectacle) because the logic of the Spectacle *is* the logic of simulation[9]. Today one need look no further than one's television to see simulation and simulacra in its most obvious – and paradoxically its most convincing – incarnation. Contemporary advertising works relentlessly to create (or simulate) an attractive reality that has never existed (simulacra). We are promised that certain cars and

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[8] For more on Baudrillard contemporary culture, see *Consumer Society* and Douglas Kellner's *Baudrillard: A Critical Reader*.
[9] To clarify, I am not conflating Debord's society of the Spectacle with Baudrillard's simulacra and simulation. While Baudrillard's writings represent a unique analysis of contemporary culture, I believe his interpretation of simulation and simulacra in modern society fits well with and expands upon Debord's critique of replicated images in the society of the Spectacle.

scents will make us more sexually desirable. We are told that certain eating establishments can offer us happiness and fulfillment. We are shown how buying certain electronic products or household appliances can make our lives exponentially easier and give us more time to spend with our families. We are offered luxury, cost-efficiency, down time, expediency, fun, and safety – often all with the same product. Yet these "realities" promoted in modern advertising do not and have never existed. They are fantasies meant to resemble reality just enough so that viewers can identify with their products – so that consumers can *see themselves* living better/happier/more efficiently with the product. In their 1996 critical examination of the advertising industry *Sign Wars: the Cluttered Landscape of Advertising*, Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson noted that contemporary advertising is "structured to boost the value of commodity brand names by attaching them to images that possess social and cultural value" and create a "commodity narrative" in which the viewer of the image or commercial, imagines themselves transformed or made better by the product depicted (2). In other words, modern advertisers seek to play upon deep-seated cultural desires to spark interest in their products. Deceit is no longer an adequate description for what happens in advertising. As Baudrillard writes, in a world of simulacra and simulation (and Spectacle, for that matter), "Illusion is no longer possible, because the real is no longer possible" (19). In advertising the real is lost – probably forever – in favor of simulation and Spectacle.

Criticisms of capitalism could go on almost without end. This brief introduction into Debord and Baudrillard's criticisms is not meant to stand as a comprehensive explanation of the follies of consumer culture. Instead, this has served as a mere window into the power and prevalence of the Spectacle of capitalism. Debord's criticisms are imperfect. His notion of the passive consumer has been complicated in recent years in part by the rise of Web 2.0 technologies applied to advertising and brand management, which allow users to become active participants in the advertisement and even design and distribution of the products they

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consume[10]. Yet despite potential complications to Debord's theories, I feel that his description of the Spectacle still resonates today. Debord's Spectacle is the personification of capitalist consumerism's fast-growing power over the Western world – a power that has invaded and forever changed the non-Western world as well. It is the beast hidden in plain sight, disguised as inevitable socioeconomic progress but actually a system of continual inequality that thrives on the deception of consumers and the appropriation and redistribution of cultural images and icons. In the next section, I will briefly discuss SI's continued influence over anti-consumerist rhetoric and I will explore why so many anti-consumer and counterculture movements have failed to truly disrupt the system.

1.3 Resistance is Futile!

Given the consumerist climate of France in the 1950's and '60's, Debord announced that SI's role was "to search for what will give rise to the internationally avant-garde, to join in the constructive critique of its programme" and ultimately "to destroy, by all hyperpolitical means, the bourgeois idea of happiness" (Debord "Toward" 100-101). SI's primary means of disrupting the capitalist system were direct protest, as well as more theoretically/rhetorically subversive acts like the "dérive" and "détournement" (Harold 7-17). Christine Harold characterizes the dérive as a kind of rhetorical and physical-behavioral protest in which the "dériviste" or "drifter" tries to find and exploit the lacunae in the Spectacle's domination of everyday life simply by ignoring traditional (i.e. consumerist) motives, and allowing oneself to freely experience their environment (14-5). The dérive was meant to help loosen the Spectacle's grip on individuals' behavior – to break up the work/play dichotomy and allow for truly creative self-expression (14).

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[10] Perhaps my favorite example of this type of marketing is from Mountain Dew's "Democracy" ad campaign from the mid-2000's. In the first incarnation of this marketing strategy, Mountain Dew created commercials and a short film depicting a dystopian society ruled by an overly aggressive corporate government that demands conformity. The only way to avoid the oppression and degradation: one must help Mountain Dew choose a new flavor and bottle design.

On the other hand, the détournement was not meant to increase the individual consumer's personal freedom but was used to disrupt the language of the Spectacle. SI did this by manipulating familiar advertisements and culturally significant images in order to invert their (consumerist) message and expose the hypocrisy and deceit of Spectacle logic (7-8). More than an attempt to create ironic messages or memorable catchphrases, the détournement was meant to truly disrupt the capitalist agenda – to expose both the danger and the prevalence of Spectacle logic through the manipulation of familiar images (8-9). In other words, through détournement SI was trying to "battle" the Spectacle on its own terms by attacking its primary means of control. Because the Spectacle had caused sight to usurp touch (or experience) as the prevalent sense, Debord and SI waged war on the imagistic level – trying to disrupt and even reappropriate the language of the Spectacle.

Although Debord and SI are credited for playing a large part in the 1968 Parisian revolts (as well as much of the unrest suffered by the De Gaulle government), they were never able to tear the fabric of the capitalism and reveal its monstrosity to the consuming public (Harold 21). As Harold points out, Debord himself admitted in his later work that the holes he and SI had previously seen in the Spectacle's grip on consumer society were gone – sealed up, as it were, as the Spectacle matured[11] (14). Yet despite this failure, and despite the fact that SI was not even the most well-know of the protest movements of the time, in retrospect it became quite clear that their rhetoric – in the form of "pithy slogans that inverted conventional values" – served as the ideological foundation for the mass protests taking place throughout the tumultuous decade of the 1960s (6).

As the decades passed, the Spectacle became even more powerful. The increased availability and prevalence of television and other media made the Spectacle's invasion into the lives and homes of consumer-citizens easier and almost unnoticeable. We now live in a time when advertising is ubiquitous and rarely questioned. At home ads are on our televisions, in our magazines (sometimes even our books), and in our email. As we drive to work and school, we

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[11] For more, see Guy Debord *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*.

hear ads on the radio, see them on billboards and on the sides of other vehicles. In leisure time they are ever-present: in movie theaters and concert halls, in ballparks and other sporting arenas, in bars and restaurants. The increased prevalence of advertising has created an insatiable demand on the marketing industry to find new cultural images to draw viewers in and keep them consuming. According to Goldman and Papson, this infinite demand requires "advertising's commodity-sign machine" to constantly pillage the cultural landscape for new material (vi). Because the advertising industry has so thoroughly appropriated culture, it is difficult to recognize cultural icons without recognizing the product and brand names to which they are attached (one example is Coca-Cola's appropriation of Santa Claus in their winter advertisements).

In an attempt to slow this complete cultural appropriation, in recent years some have turned back to the techniques of Debord and SI and have tried to revive the spirit of the détournement. The non-profit organization Adbusters is perhaps the most prominent of these "culture jammers"[12] who attempt to subvert the capitalist system by challenging Spectacle rhetoric. Adbusters describes itself as "a global network of artists, activists, writers, pranksters, students, educators and entrepreneurs who want to advance the new social activist movement of the information age. Our aim is to topple existing power structures and forge a major shift in the way we live in the 21st century" (Adbusters.org). Through their website, magazine, and various public calls to action Adbusters tries to unite its readers against corporate disinformation. Like the Situationists who came before them, one of Adbusters (and other culture jammers) methods for attacking the system is through spoofing corporate imagery in an attempt to reveal the virulent truth behind advertising.

Despite their good intentions, it is important to note that Adbusters (and other such organizations) ultimately fail to produce significant cultural change for several reasons. First, as Harold recognizes, the Situationist activities represent the methods of a vastly different "cultural

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[12] For more on culture jamming, see Mark Dery "Culture Jamming: Hacking, Sniping, and Slashing in the Empire of Signs."

terrain," (24). It should seem quite obvious that the corporate world of the early twenty-first century is much different than France in the 1950's and '60's. Today's consuming public is no longer as strongly affected by the visual rhetoric of counterculture ad parodies because we have been inundated with forms of visual persuasion for decades. In Debord's time, the manipulation of political and industrial images stunned many citizens and had the power to profoundly (if only temporarily) change the ways in which people thought about and interacted within their consuming communities. However, many Western cultures today have become largely anesthetized to the power of manipulated visual imagery. Ad-parodies are everywhere, often used by corporations themselves to disparage their competitors. Therefore, one should not expect social activist schema from the 1960's to have the same shocking or revolutionary affect it might have once had. Right from the beginning, groups attempting to "step outside the system" using such culture-jamming techniques overstate the affect their messages have on contemporary audiences.

Secondly, if the primary goal of these "jamming" techniques is to uncover the hidden dangers of corporate advertisement, then many of the visual arguments made by Adbusters-style media parody fail because they do not reveal anything of which a majority of the population is not already aware. For example, one of Adbusters' primary "subvertisement" targets has been the tobacco industry. Yet who has not heard by now that cigarettes are addictive and cause cancer? It is borderline ludicrous to believe that "revealing" cigarettes' deadly nature will cause any significant number of smokers to quit. The same can be said for ad parodies that take on the fast food industry: serious though may be, it is hardly enlightening to disclose that McDonald's and other fast-food is bad for one's health.

However, the biggest problem for culture jammers today may be exemplified in Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter's book *Nation of Rebels*, in which they argue that counterculture has failed to change the system because counterculture itself is based on a false theory: "There is no single, overarching system that integrates it all. The culture cannot be jammed because there *is* no such thing as 'the culture' or 'the system.' There is only a hodgepodge of social

institutions, most tentatively thrown together..." (8). Heath and Potter realize that because the capitalist system is based upon market-driven competition, there is no one entity to "attack" or "wipe out" that will suddenly free the consumer mind and destroy all socially exploitive institutions. The Spectacle is a vampire without a heart to drive a stake into.

Yet another apt metaphor for modern society comes from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's description of the rhizome from their 1980 book *A Thousand Plateaus*. The rhizome is a subterranean plant structure, antithetical to typical root systems and characterized by its lack of centrality (Deleuze and Guattari 1604). Deleuze and Guattari use the rhizome model to describe the ways in which knowledge is constructed—not through traceable, genealogical lines but organically and along multiple, often random points of connection (1605). In other words, in the rhizome there is no origin and everything is middle. If we understand our consumer society as this sort of "headless" entity, devoid of origin, we can then see why it continues to grow without hesitation or conscience and why attempts to "attack the system" fail so regularly. It becomes easy to see why Heath and Potter describe counterculture rebellion as, at its best, a "pseudo-rebellion: a set of dramatic gestures that are devoid of any progressive political or economic consequences and that detract from the urgent task of building a more just society," (65). While I disagree with Heath and Potter's claim that adbusting and culture jamming are completely without merit, I find it hard to argue with their assessment of its general inefficacy in promoting real cultural and social change.

Furthermore, as Heath and Potter, and Harold reveal, (though in different ways) capitalism or the Spectacle has commodified the "counterculture" image. While Heath and Potter argue that capitalism and counterculture have *always* been intrinsically linked to and dependent upon one another (3-4), it seems that Harold's description of an increasingly rapid process of commodification better fits the current model of cultural rebellion (Harold 60-61). Think of some recent counterculture figures like James Dean, Hunter S. Thompson and Che Guevara (to name a few). Most, if not all of these figures have unwittingly become mainstream cultural capital and their images have become profit ventures for "rebellious" brands. T-shirts,

coffee mugs, magazine covers are all emblazoned with the images of these (and other) counterculture icons. Rebellion past and present is instantly packaged, marketed and sold back to consuming publics so speedily the move is almost invisible. One needs only watch recent ads for Cadillac and Mountain Dew (in which a car and a soft-drink have the power to free individuals from an oppressive society) to see the blatant exploitation of the Western obsession with individualism and rebellion. Today, the rebel – whether it be the indie rocker, the punk, the hippie, the political dissident or virtually any other countercultural figure – is a product of capitalism, not "outside" the Spectacle but actually an integral part of the "system" against which they so fervently rage.

1.4 So What's This Got to Do with Facebook?

When people refer to "politics" they often mean the governmental politics that encourage one to select a specific party affiliation based on social, economic and sometimes religious ideology. However while governmental politics is certainly a vital piece of the puzzle, the politics I am concerned with is a more complex system of interrelated discourses. In *Speeding Up Fast Capitalism*, sociologist and critical theorist Ben Agger notes that, although often disguised, everyday life is political (163). This "everydayness" of political discourse is rooted in "the powerfully colonizing forces of traditional politics and capitalist economics" (126). Agger further argues that the personal is political because "capitalism has infiltrated the private sphere, including the body and psyche" (126). In other words, capitalism's emphasis on constant consumption has become so entrenched in Western culture that our very bodies and minds have become spaces in which multiple contradictory discourses interact. Through advertising and corporate brand marketing we are told that any number of products – from our choice of cell phone, to our choice of shoes; from our choice of insurance, to our choice of soda – "says something" about us and invariably defines us to some extent. What and how much we buy is a reflection of both our wealth and our personality. Additionally, professional and personal group affiliations, the way we spend our leisure time, what we talk about and to whom, and even what we wear and how we take care of ourselves are all choices individuals make regularly

(and even if they are not aware) that situate them within specific market-determined demographics and power structures. Every aspect of life becomes a choice about identity construction and maintenance. In this sense, politics is any discourse on power and power structures.

The Web has been both praised as a potential haven from the constant barrage of commodification, and demonized as a confining space in which the individual is isolated from "real life" and subjected to devious advertising and hidden political agendas. Defining politics in this way situates Facebook and other SNSs within the realm of political discourse. Choosing to use a social networking tool itself would be a decision of self-definition (as the "kind of person" who uses social networking websites, as opposed to those that do not) and thereby be a political decision. However my goal is not to prove social networking websites existence within the political sphere but to assess their efficacy as spaces of political resistance to the cultural-hegemonic power of capitalist consumerism. Social networking websites stand at an interesting crossroads in the Spectacle society. On one hand, they have undoubtedly become a new tool through which consumer culture can further entrench itself into citizens' everyday lives. Advertisements stream across the top and blink along the sides of many SNSs. Facebook even makes suggestions for pages that users might "Like" based on information found in their profiles. On the other hand SNSs also allow the rapid dissemination of information among large, diverse groups, as well as real-time discussion, which can allow for swift action and activism. Additionally, social networking tools have not yet reached their full political potential. Facebook and other SNSs expand their content, change their structure, and increase their capabilities frequently to adapt to new technologies and make their websites more user-friendly.

Because they are not reified cultural artifacts, there should always be hope that SNSs at least have the *potential* to help citizens resist the commodification of every aspect of their lives. Facebook stands at the forefront of this political struggle, not only because with more than 500 million profiles it is the most popular social networking website (Mui), but also because of its multiple uses and its adaptability. Before I move on to the second chapter to discuss the

reasons Facebook may not be politically revolutionary, I must first offer a brief description of the website.

While much of this description may be common knowledge (or even common sense) in today's tech-savvy society, establishing a common understanding of Facebook is essential in moving forward with my argument not only because Facebook is the centerpiece for my discussion of Spectacle society, but also because (as I have mentioned) the site is constantly changing, adapting to new technologies, and adding new functions to keep in-step with popular technological trends, therefore I feel it necessary to describe the website as it stands now. Facebook is a relatively easy SNS to join. It requires only that users enter a valid email address and some basic demographic information (although the website strongly encourages users to give as much information as possible). Facebook gives each user his or her own page in which they can (but do not have to) provide information about their religious views, political affiliation, education and work information, relationship status, and favorite music, movies, and books. The home page of Facebook displays a "News Feed" detailing their "friends'" (anyone in the user's network) recent activity including the links they have shared, the photographs they have uploaded, their new group memberships, and their status updates (much like Twitter's microblogging feature). This brief description of Facebook will serve as a touchstone as I move through both the political potential and the possible complications SNSs offer.

In this chapter, I have shown both the power and the danger of Spectacle society. Furthermore, I have briefly described why Facebook is a Spectacle "battleground" and why it must be examined for its revolutionary potential. In the next chapter, I will play devil's advocate and investigate evidence that suggests that Facebook is already a commodified space – that it serves the market and has simply become yet another avenue through which capitalism can further stretch its tentacles into consumers' lives.

CHAPTER 2

FACEBOOK AS COMMODIFIED SPACE

It is almost redundant to mention how big Facebook has become. It seems one cannot open a magazine or turn on a television without seeing some mention of the attention-dominating social networking website. The website's founder Mark Zuckerberg was named Time magazine's Person of the Year for 2010. The David Fincher-directed film *the Social Network* – a fictionalized account of Zuckerberg's life and the rise of Facebook – has garnered numerous acting and best picture nominations. And nearly every week a new article comes out either criticizing or trying to explain Facebook's privacy policies. Facebook's popularity[13] combined with its importance in the business world, its continued technological innovation and reconfiguration, and its infiltration into popular entertainment has made it a popular sounding board. There are those who have lauded Facebook for the ways it has changed socialization and our interaction with the Web (Mui). Others fear that Facebook is rapidly becoming the quintessential Orwellian Big Brother[14], where rather than having the government looking over our shoulder, advertisers and marketers collect our information for unknown and potentially dangerous purposes. In this chapter, I will examine the commodified/commodifying aspects of Facebook and discuss why we can with good cause define the social networking website as the next step in the evolution of the Spectacle, rather than as the platform to overcome Spectacle power.

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[13] In 2010, Facebook surpassed the popular search engine Google to become the most-visited website. For more information see Mui and Whoriskey's article Washington Post article "Facebook Passes Google."

[14] For example, Daniel Lyons of *Newsweek* has written articles called "Facebook's False Contrition" and "the High Price of Facebook" staunchly critical of Facebook and its privacy policies.

<u>2.1 (Mis)Information</u>

Perhaps rather than fearing Facebook as an instrument of Orwellian domination we should instead examine it as the next step in a "Huxleyan future" (Postman 156). In his1984 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, media theorist Neil Postman used Aldous Huxley's seminal work *A Brave New World* to criticize television culture and propose that cultural domination may not come from an overtly oppressive governmental force (as in George Orwell's *1984*). Instead, Postman noted that Huxley's dystopia came from a society so inundated with triviality and entertainment that they were unable to see their oppressors at all (vii-i). Postman suggested that people should be more concerned about oppression through "technologies that undo their [citizens'] capacities to think" than the potential for total domination by an oppressive government (vii). While Postman was critically evaluating television culture, his "Huxleyan warning" resonates with today's Web culture more than ever (155).

One of the most often praised aspects of Facebook and other social networking websites is the speed at which information can be distributed through and across different networks to become nation-wide and even global knowledge. Within minutes of a noteworthy event (and many non-worthy events as well) a Facebook user's News Feed might be inundated with links to articles, friends' reactions to what has happened, and predictions about what can or will happen next. This can be tremendously beneficial in a world where information – and seemingly the world itself – has sped up. In 2004, sociologist Ben Agger noted that Internet technologies had accelerated the pace of "communicating, writing, connecting, shopping, browsing, surfing, and working" to the point that many people today expect instant gratification in almost everything they do (*Speeding Up* 3). Although written just before Facebook exploded in popularity, Agger's reference to "instantaneity" (5) seems to fit perfectly with what users of social networking technology have come to expect when they log on: all of the most important information (as defined by the user) about politics, entertainment, science, technology, sports, and social activism available as soon as something happens in quickly digestible headlines.

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I am not arguing that this kind of access to information is in and of itself harmful. On the contrary, having the ability to receive and review information instantly and to redistribute it among differing networks has the potential to make the world more connected (perhaps Mark Zuckerberg's favorite buzzword next to "openness") and has the potential to open ongoing dialogues about important social and political issues as they arise[15]. Where this instantaneity can and has done damage is when false or misleading information makes its way into the information stream. Sometimes this information is relatively innocuous and quickly corrected[16]. However all too often the speed at which information is disseminated is used as a tool for those who can benefit from the false information. One need only look at Barack Obama's presidency to find countless examples of US-based political propaganda attempting to frighten the public with tales of a foreign birth cover-up, hidden terrorist agendas and associations, and a malicious socialist healthcare bill[17]. Although proven untrue on countless occasions, these and other rumors continue to permeate the United States' national discourse, arising again and again with any new piece of legislation.

This is not to say political mud slinging is something new. Far from it. The difference is the speed at which these stories fly. In August of 2009, former Alaskan Governor and Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin posted on Facebook that she did not want her grandparents or son to have to face "Obama's 'death panel'" as a result of proposed health care reform (Bank). Even though there was and is absolutely no basis for the claim that the health care bill would require people to visit a "death panel" to prove they are "worthy of health care," within minutes the post created a panic among many conservatives as more and more users reposted Palin's comments and expressed their fear and revulsion at the thought that life could be treated

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[15] I will discuss the positive aspects of this phenomenon in chapter 3.

[16] For example, in January of 2011 social networking sites became clogged with posts simultaneously fearing and mocking the possibility of changed Zodiac signs, when in-fact the Western Zodiac system was not affected. For more info see Virginia Bell's Huffington Post article "New Zodiac Sign: Astrology Makeover or Misinformation?"

[17] Each of these topics has been discussed at length in the news and online. However arguably the best place for information on rumors about President Obama is FactCheck.org – which is an excellent resource with discussions about the origin of these rumors, as well as in-depth analysis of their lack of verity.

so cavalierly. Within hours the phrase "death panel" became the rallying cry against health care reform (Bank). And despite how many politicians and experts denounced the idea, no matter how many pointed out that it was ludicrous to think that the government would kill sick and elderly patients, people continued to cling to the catch phrase as they protested the health care reform bill.

Facebook alone cannot be entirely blamed for the spread of misinformation. It is a platform through which information may be disseminated and those who knowingly post false information are clearly to blame for their misuse of this powerful tool. However Facebook is not merely a passive platform, but also participates in the spread of political spin. "US Politics on Facebook" and pages like it (there are several including "Congress on Facebook" and "Government on Facebook") aggregate posts by and about elected governmental officials and political candidates. There are certainly benefits to having important political information centralized on a single page that reposts the news and announcements from around the country[18]. The problem here is twofold. The first, probably unavoidable problem is that repeating and disseminated the thoughts and comments of politicians means that this page participates in the dissemination of political spin. Each politician on Facebook has their own agenda, and as we have seen with Sarah Palin (and countless other politicians) sometimes that agenda does not include engaging in honest debate.

But Facebook should not be blamed when a politician makes false or misleading statements on their pages anymore than they should be blamed if any individual were to post incorrect or intentionally misleading information. The second, larger problem is that Facebook does not identify who manages these pages and therefore who decides what information is worth sharing and what is not. "US Politics on Facebook" stated purpose is to "highlight the use of Facebook by politicians, elected officials, and political campaigns" and to "share tips and best practices as well as news from Facebook" (Facebook). Yet even a cursory glance at the page's

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[18] There could be even greater benefits if these pages – which focus solely on politics of the United States – had a greater emphasis on international politics.

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Wall clearly shows that the page administrators do not repost every piece of information by every political candidate (to do so would be nearly impossible). This means that there must be some kind of vetting process in which page administrators decide which posts are most worthy, which candidates are most important, and which national and international events warrant discussion. Even if site administrators do not have their own political agenda, and are able to ignore their political biases, they are still making decisions on a daily basis that show page viewers only what they think is important in United States politics. While I understand the necessity of filtering, page administrators' choices cannot be adequately criticized or discussed because they do not identify themselves. Without accountability, none of these pages that attempt to consolidate political information can be truly relied upon.

Moreover, the frequency with which patently false news stories make it into United States political discourse is alarming[19] and may point to a larger problem. More than a decade ago sociologist and Columbia University Journalism professor Michael Schudson described how the new digital age had caused a shift in the way people in the United States interact with politics. In "Changing Concepts of Democracy" Schudson argues that because of the explosion of communications technologies we have moved past the era of the "informed citizen" into the era of the "monitorial citizen." The monitorial citizen is "defensive rather than pro-active" in gathering information and as a result is less discerning and less capable of interpreting the information provided to them (Schudson). This description rings even truer now when one thinks about the Huxleyan deluge of information citizens face on a daily basis. Cable news channels like CNN, Fox News, and MSNBC not only have pundits and newscasters discussing wide-ranging topics twenty-four hours a day, but – in case that is not enough – they also have news

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[19] There are too many false or misleading stories to even scratch the surface adequately here. A couple of recent examples are lies (from both parties) about President Obama's 2012 budget, misleading comments about Social Security's impact on the deficit, and fundamental misreadings of Wisconsin union pay and benefits (Factcheck.org). Lately, this debate about false and misleading news has been most prevalent in Canada, where legislatures have recently ruled that a conservative news channel (like Fox News) would not be allowed to broadcast from their country because they violate laws that require honesty in journalism. For more on this debate see Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s "Regulators Reject Proposal That Would Bring Fox-Style News to Canada."

tickers streaming across the bottom of the screen nearly constantly. Most of the major American news organizations (and many non-American news organizations too) have a presence on Facebook and Twitter. Radio programs and podcasts are produced on a daily basis on any number of topics – political or otherwise. And that does not take into account the information Facebook users receive via the "News Feed" from their friends (obviously not all of which is political in nature, but still often must be sifted through).

The preponderance of informational sources is at the same time exciting and maddening. It is exciting to live in a world where this much information is – to indulge in the use of a tired cliché – at one's fingertips. It is maddening to parse through the thousands of headlines and vaguely worded status updates to try to find reliable and important information. It is no wonder then, how misinformation is spread so easily and takes hold so strongly. Depending on one's choice of news sources and circle of friends, one could hear and see half a dozen stories and status updates about the atrocity of "death panels" before seeing a single correction or rebuttal. The digital revolution has brought a wealth of information, as well as a pronounced dearth of analysis.

Schudson was ultimately arguing for the importance of professional institutions (the news media) in mediating communication "between private individuals and public governing bodies" – that the monitorial citizen needs the expertise of these institutions to deal with the deluge of information that has resulted from the digital revolution (Schudson). While I do not put much faith in professional institutions' ability to help citizens process information (especially if the professional institutions to which Schudson refers are major news organizations[20]), Schudson's description of a citizenry befuddled by an over-abundance of information resonates in the Facebook age. The more information scattered across the informational landscape, the more difficult it is to process that information. As a result, misinformation spreads with a rapidity that only new social media and communications technologies can provide. However this is

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[20] See the Kevin Coe et al "Hostile News: Partisan Use and Perceptions of Cable News Programming" for a recent discussion of how some news organizations have trended toward politically biased reporting.

neither an anti-technology rant nor an argument that this problem is irreversible. In the third chapter, I will discuss this issue further with an eye toward possible solutions (or at least ameliorations).

2.2 Who Needs Privacy When You have Products?

Echoing the sentiments of Goldman and Papson, Mark Poster notes that the economy always "colonize[s] new media" (2) in order to find ways to sell "cultural objects" (52). To put it another way, the Spectacle infiltrates all new modes of discourse in order to perpetuate its power and to find new ways to reap the culture for commodity signs. Facebook is not exempt from this cultural harvest. By now Facebook's privacy woes have been well documented. In 2009, Facebook settled a lawsuit over the short-lived Beacon program – an advertising service that allowed third party websites to post user purchase information to Facebook without their consent (Grimmelmann "Saving Facebook" 1147)[21]. More recently, Facebook has come under fire yet again (and subsequently changed their privacy settings again) after users, bloggers, and technology experts from all walks of life decried the SNS's more permeable privacy settings[22]. These controversies are only the most visible of what has been a near constant struggle between Facebook users and the social networking giant. When looking at the ire over the years caused by Facebook's quickly changing, difficult to understand, and often-insufficient privacy policy it is difficult to not ask why. Why has Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and his team of programmers failed to adequately respond to users' privacy concerns? Why do users continue to frequent Facebook – now more than any other website – when it has been made perfectly clear that the information posted is not totally private? However, while these and other similar inquiries are valuable and have attracted scores of bloggers, journalists, and scholars of all disciplines, for the purposes of this essay I am less concerned with why Facebook management and users continue to allow the violations occur and more interested in how these

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[21] For news coverage of the Beacon controversy see Juan Carlos Perez's "Facebook Beacon More Intrusive Than Previously Thought" and Jon Brodkin's "Facebook Halts Beacon."
[22] I will again refer to Daniel Lyons' *Newsweek* articles that I mentioned in footnote 12, as well as John Dvorak's "Why Facebook's Privacy Settings Don't Matter."

privacy policies have allowed the advertising industry and the Spectacle to further imbed itself and consumer culture into users' lives[23].

In "Saving Facebook" New York Law School Associate Professor James Grimmelmann describes six common privacy "harms"[24] he believes are prevalent on Facebook ("Saving" 1164). The first two of these privacy violations, "disclosure" and "surveillance" are closely related to one another. Disclosure occurs when a user's information is available to a wider audience than the user intended. This privacy problem is most often associated with (but not limited to) disgruntled employees and teen and young adult Facebook users who post inappropriate pictures or status updates, incorrectly believing that the incriminating information can only be seen within their network of friends (1165-6). Like disclosure, surveillance occurs when those outside of the anticipated network (for example employers or parents) are able to find information that was intended to be private (e. g. rants about one's terrible boss, or pictures of underage drinking) and use that information to punish the poster (1166-7). Surveillance differs from disclosure in that interested parties must take an active approach in seeking incriminating information. While some might argue that users should shoulder most of the blame for these types of violations (again, because in most cases they must incriminate themselves in some way by posting something objectionable), these privacy violations will have significant legal ramifications in the coming months and years[25] and therefore are worthy of further consideration. I do not believe that these violations are a specific goal of the Spectacle's invasion of Facebook (what does capitalist consumerism gain from having a teen grounded for being caught drinking at a party? Or from an employee being fired for disparaging her

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[23] James Grimmelmann has written an interesting article, "Privacy as Public Safety," in which he calls for a new mindset about privacy laws on social networking websites. In it, Grimmelmann argues that current database regulation models are insufficient to protect users' information, and that lawmakers should look at product-liability law for ideas for a new model for regulating information flows on SNS.

[24] Grimmelmann notes that these are adapted from Daniel Solove's *A Taxonomy of Privacy*. I will not refer further to Solove's work, but wanted to give proper credit.

[25] See Sam Hananel's MSNBC.com article "Woman Fired Over Facebook Rant; Suit Follows" for just one of dozens (if not hundreds) of examples of people being punished for comments or photos posted on Facebook. There is even a group on Facebook called "Fired By Facebook" which allows users to document these types of privacy harms.

employer?), but I do believe they are a side effect. Now school administrators and employers can investigate those they are interested in with only a few keystrokes. Information that in previous generations was unavailable barring significant detective work is now readily available and can be held against users unexpectedly. I am of the mind that more intelligently monitoring one's posts and being stricter about what constitutes a "friend" can help users avoid a vast majority of these types privacy problems. However it is worth note that these privacy violations are symptoms of an imperfect social networking system that allows for much greater privacy violations that allow the Spectacle a greater presence in users' lives.

"Disagreement" and "denigration" are also two closely related privacy harms Grimmelmann discusses in his article. Disagreement most often occurs on Facebook when incriminating or embarrassing photographs are posted not by the person implicated in the photos, but by another party (1171). Facebook allows users to untag themselves (or remove their name and a link to their personal Facebook page) from a photo but, as Grimmelmann notes, does not allow users to "demand it be taken down or made private" (1172). Like disclosure, disagreement becomes problematic when someone outside one's own network of contacts sees the photos and misuses them. Denigration occurs primarily through two means: "distortion" – when one or more users lies about or misrepresents another user (or non-user) with the intention of damaging their reputation or credibility – and "appropriation" – when one uses the likeness, identity, or public image of another user for their own goals without consent (the best example that comes to mind is when a celebrity's image is used for advertising against their wishes) (1176). Like the privacy harms mentioned above, these violations can cause tremendous damage to an individual's private or professional reputation, and there is little being done by Facebook to prevent them (and perhaps little else that can be done). Slander, libel, and other forms of intentional character assassination have existed forever, these privacy harms represent yet another way that Facebook allows misinformation to flow rapidly and take hold fervently with little recourse.

Unlike the first four harms – which I believe are side-effects or symptoms of the Spectacle's presence on Facebook – I believe that the final two, "instability" and "spillover," directly enhance the Spectacle's power because they allow the advertising industry to further imbed itself into individual Facebook user's lives. Instability refers to how reliable (or in Facebook's case how unreliable) an organization is in maintaining privacy practices and "information flows" so that users can adequately anticipate who can view their information and how it can be used (1169). I have already mentioned a few of Facebook's instability problems and will, after I define spillover, discuss how these harms combine to give Spectacle advertising even more power over consumers who use the SNS. Spillover is a phenomenon in which people or advertising agencies interested in collecting user demographic data can infer "with good confidence" an individual's age, nationality, sexual orientation, and other private information by using "a simple algorithm" surveying their friend's demographic data (1174). This is clearly problematic because Facebook's very structure allows information to be gathered independent of one's privacy settings.

It becomes even more frightening when one looks more closely at how marketers and advertising firms are using spillover and Facebook's privacy instability to further infuse their companies and products with users' lives. In 2009 *Advertising Age* – a news magazine and website dedicated to the latest developments in the marketing and advertising industries – published an article by Abbey Klaassen and Beth Snyder Bulik describing the ways in which Facebook is being and can be used to brand-promote through creation and dissemination of apps. Because Facebook allows users to create their own apps and offer them to the Facebook community, many corporations and marketing agencies have invested in creating entertaining and functional apps in hopes that users will download them and make them a part of their social networking lives. These companies benefit when the app becomes an almost daily brand reminder for the Facebook user. Klaassen and Bulik note that both Target and JC Penny have

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created apps that "offer gift suggestions, style tips and fashion trends" as a way of staying prevalent in the consumer's mind[26].

Furthermore, "One market-research firm has launched a Facebook application as a way to gather data on consumers, their friends and the relevant data that comes from comparing ourselves with others" (Klaassen). This app asks users to compare themselves to their friends, and through these comparisons, the market-researchers gather data about "people's motivations and views of themselves" (Klaassen). In the words of the app's creator Tom Anderson, "Marketers can leverage these findings to uncover gaps in self-esteem/self-image and message more effectively on emotional attributes that are most important to us" (qtd in Klaassen). Since the article's publication, Facebook has attempted to crack down on apps and app-creators who try to violate users' privacy, to varying degrees of success. While Facebook does not intentionally provide advertisers with individual user's personal information[27], over the last couple of years it has become easier and easier for advertisers to get it. Additionally Facebook allows advertisers to target ads to specific demographics – which can focus on large groups such as men from 18 to 35, or much more specific groups like men 21-24 who list reading as a hobby and live in the New York area (*The Facebook Obsession*). Now advertisers can even target ads based on the words users mention in their status updates (Del Rey 94).

In other words, the Spectacle has penetrated Facebook – and as a result users' lives – to an unprecedented degree. Advertisers and marketers are using Facebook as a platform to further disseminate brand information and product advertisements. And they are doing so in a way that is largely invisible to the user. This invisibility (or outright deception) embeds brands into consumers' lives in new ways and forces users to participate in the further spread and growth of Spectacle-domination. Every FarmVille or Mafia Wars invitation one sends or receives

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[26] Since Klaassen and Bulik's article's publication, the group discount website Groupon has imbedded marketing and purchasing even further into Facebook by allowing users who "Like" the site to purchase geographic-specific group coupons (hence the name Groupon) directly from their Facebook page.

[27] Emily Steel and Geoffrey A. Fowler's *Wall Street Journal* article "Facebook in Privacy Breach" details the most recent incident in which Facebook unintentionally allowed the transfer of user information to advertising and data collection agencies.

is most likely also an invitation for a marketing firm or data collection agency to target you and your network more specifically. Every time one mentions a band they like, quotes their favorite movie or television show, or discusses a hobby with a friend, they are also communicating with advertisers on how to better market to them.

Nevertheless, even these targeted advertisements might not be as impactful on most other websites. But Facebook is different. Facebook is not simply a website that publishes and archives news and information. In its own words it is a platform that gives users "the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (Facebook). Yet a close examination of Facebook's self-narrative suggest that its creators want it to be viewed as more than a mere platform, but as a conscious entity to which users become emotionally tied. The first signs of this come on the site's home page. Just above the News Feed, the status update bar reads, "What's on your mind?" This is significant not because Facebook allows its users to speak their mind (most websites today have enabled users to comment on their various articles and postings), but because it suggests a direct conversation between the user and the site itself. The bar could have simply read "Update Status" or something equally mechanical, but the site's programmers chose this specific phrase – something often said between friends (or at least acquaintances) at the beginning of a conversation – in order to situate the website as a conscious entity capable of caring about the user. It is important to note that a Facebook user's friends are not the ones asking what is on the user's mind. On the contrary, it is a crapshoot on whether or not one's friends will respond to or even see any given status update. But Facebook always wants to know, and always provides the tools that the user needs to best express themselves. Facebook reinforces this strange familiarity with users on the right side of the home screen, just below the "Events" tab where it asks, "What are you planning?" Again this phrasing makes it seem as if the site itself is concerned with a user's plans – as if Facebook wants to be both a friend and an organizational tool, a confidant and a digital party planner.

Facebook's apparent familiarity with its users is only heightened when one navigates throughout the site. On the right of each user's profile is a small box that shows users "People

You May Know" which links to a nearly endless list of people and pages that the user has some indirect connection to (for the most part, these connections are made up of people with whom the user has mutual friends). When writing or reading messages Facebook shows users photos of their friends, presumably to remind users of the people to whom they are connected. It is worth noting that both of these functions are impressive technological innovations and are not inherently Spectacle empowering. These and other features (too numerous to mention) demonstrate exactly why Facebook has been able to grow continuously: because they offer cutting edge tools that not only enable socialization but also invite increased interaction between friends. At the same time, these and other tools send the subtle message that Facebook is more than a website, that it is a rational, thinking entity that genuinely wants to make users' lives better by creating new connections and solidifying old ones.

This personalization of Facebook is confirmed when one click's on the "About" tab at the bottom of the page which hyperlinks to Facebook's own page. In a case of confusingly self-referential overlap, Facebook has its own page on Facebook. On the Wall of this page – like any diligent celebrity or corporation – Facebook posts (favorable) stories about itself that have been recently published[28]. In the "Info" section, Facebook provides its mission statement and some brief information about the page and its purpose. There are also photos of Facebook employees and corporate art work, and a section that allows users to share their "Facebook stories" about how the site has changed users' lives. Facebook's Facebook page is not very different from those of other companies on the social networking giant. Nonetheless, when combined with the site's many direct communications with users, and its ability to foster socialization more efficiently than any "real-world" entity, it effectively positions Facebook as a user's close friend. Facebook then uses this familiarity with its users to enhance the effectiveness of its targeted advertisements. By exploiting the intense personal connection it often fosters with its users, Facebook effectively imbeds the Spectacle into socialization. Most

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[28] As I write, there is a story about how a group of Smithsonian scientists that got help identifying a large number of fish by posting pictures on Facebook, followed by a video about MTV stopping by the Facebook offices.

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websites have advertisements in annoying and inconvenient places. Ads blink along the top of the screen and shout at readers from the margins of whatever they might be viewing. Some ads interrupt the users ability to navigate the page with large, animated videos and tiny, hidden "close" options. Not Facebook. Facebook advertisements are not intrusive or annoying. The more information Facebook can gather about a user, the more tailored the ads will be to a user's personal preferences. Facebook's ads are more like friendly suggestions from someone who knows you than the depersonalized, often anger-inducing ads on other websites. Facebook's ability to create direct emotional ties to its users give the site – and advertisers that use its targeted marketing feature – subtle power and unprecedented access to consumers' lives.

The swiftness with which market capitalism has invaded Facebook should not be surprising given the power of the Spectacle to instantly commodify culture and cultural spaces. However capitalism has not only found a way to access demographic information via Facebook, but has also interwoven itself into the social networking fabric. On Facebook, one's News Feed is not only populated by the comments of friends and acquaintances, but also of any celebrities, news organizations, shoe companies, and fast food chains that the user has "Liked." Thus, the consumer becomes a mechanism of advertising by affiliating themselves with specific products and corporations – quite literally infusing advertising and socialization. The user/consumer becomes tied to the product in a new virtual way and is encouraged to see themselves as in conversation with (or part of a conversation with) the corporate entities they "Like." In the next section, I will investigate this problem even further and discuss how Facebook's structure encourages a problematic conception of the self.

2.3 Selling the Spectacle Self

Perhaps the most intriguing (and almost invisible) way Facebook reproduces consumer ideology is found in its very structure. As I describe in the first section, Facebook gives each user their own page in which they can describe themselves and their interests. I will briefly describe some of the features of these personal pages in more depth than in chapter 1 in order

to investigate the ways Facebook can serve both as a complication to and a reproduction of Spectacle logic. In section labeled "Basic Information" users can provide their current city of residence, their hometown, their sex (choices are limited to either "Male" or "Female"), age, sexual preference (this is merely the phrase "Interested In:" next to two checkboxes marked "Women" and "Men"), and languages. The location boxes, as well as the "Languages" box are drop down menus that allow users to search for their city or language from a list of possibilities. The user is restricted to only those locations and languages found on the list, but the lists are quite comprehensive (for example, in addition to "American English" I have listed "Pirate," "Irony and Sarcasm," and "Pig Latin" among my languages). Additionally this tab provides an "About Me" section in which users can write a short narrative meant to give further insight into their personality, write a humorous quote or anecdote, or simply leave blank. The "Education and Work" section has a similar drop-down menu from which a user can choose from a list of possibilities. However here users can add to the list if their workplace or school is not found. The "Philosophy" section includes the same drop-down style searchable menu for one's "Religion" and "Political Views," again with the option to add to the list if the user's preference is not otherwise available. The "Philosophy" tab is unique in that Facebook allows for a short "Description" below the drop-down menus for "Religion" and "Political Views." Subsequent sections of the users profile ("Arts and Entertainment," "Sports," and "Activities and Interests") work much the same way as the "Philosophy" section, minus the ability to further "describe" these preferences.

Facebook's newest system for self-description is much less restrictive, and much more comprehensive than in the past[29]. Now, Facebook paradoxically both challenges and affirms consumerist notions of the self. As Mark Poster explains, "On the Internet individuals construct their identities, doing so in relation to ongoing dialogues, not as acts of pure consciousness"

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[29] In previous incarnations of user profiles, stringent word or character limits were placed on how much one could describe and discuss their religious and political views, while at the same time users were given seemingly limitless space to list their favorite television shows, movies, sports, and other consumer products. This imbalance suggested a hierarchy of self in which one's entertainment choices outweighed their personal philosophies.

(184). Identity on Facebook is fluid. It allows users to construct and reconstruct identity on a daily basis, emphasizing different aspects of their personalities as they see fit, and not as reified artifacts of the self. Microblogging and wall-posting features allow people to virtually/textually construct themselves with a few quick keystrokes. Users have the ability to update their status with inane information about what they had for lunch or ask important questions like how to choose the right college or career. One can post a link to a funny YouTube video in one moment and then post a link to an article exposing political corruption or challenging others to take action over an important social issue the next. This is an intensely powerful view of the self – not bound to a singular identity but capable of many versions of selfhood that sometimes conflict with one another, without repercussion. This multifaceted self may even be more difficult for the Spectacle to consume entirely.

However Facebook's system for self-description is not without its flaws. First, Facebook's profile set-up may be culturally homogenizing. For their article "Online Language: The Role of Culture in Self-Expression and Self-Construal on Facebook" David C. DeAndrea et al examined Facebook profiles in order to find out how previously established cultural norms regarding self-construal (or self-definition) were expressed. The authors noted that previous research has shown that Westerners tend to favor independent self-construal – or self-expression based on differentiating themselves from others (427). The most common Western notion of self is "seen as intransient, not bound to particular situations or relationships" (427). The authors characterize interdependent self-construal as an expression of the self, dependent upon relationships and group affiliations, where individual attitudes and capabilities are only secondary markers of self. They noted that interdependency in self-definition has been found to be "relatively more prominent in many Asian cultures" than in the Western world (427). Based on these well-established principles, DeAndrea et al. examined the language used in the profiles of a small sample of Caucasian, African-American, and "ethnic Asian" students (one-hundred and twenty people total) to find out if cultural norms for self-construal held up on Facebook.

As it turns out, ethnic and cultural background was not a clear indicator of how people self-express on Facebook. The researchers found no significant difference between the internalized attributes expressed by the Caucasians and ethnic Asians studied (437). Furthermore, the group predicted that ethnic Asians would have the greatest "proportion of social affiliation self-description" (self-expression that emphasizes social ties), which was found to be false (437-8). The authors acknowledge that the second hypothesis may have merely been an incorrect supposition on their part. Yet they also note that it is possible that "characteristics of [Facebook]'s interface and/or user norms influence self-presentations" (438). As the writers explain, even though Facebook is international, the three countries with the most users at the time of this article's publication (the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada) are Western countries "associated with independent self-construal" (438).

We cannot draw any certain conclusions from this experiment, first because the experiment was not designed to test if Facebook's structure invites cultural homogenization. Their explanation was merely an attempt to interpret data they collected that contradicted their original hypothesis. Secondly the experiment was conducted entirely on the Facebook pages of students, faculty, and alumni "the same large Midwestern University" (the specific university in question was never mentioned) (432). The similarities in self-presentation could very well have been the result of socialization that took place outside of Facebook. However given Facebook's birth and development in the United States, and given the Spectacle's growing grip on Facebook it is more than reasonable to ask the question: does Facebook's structure have a culturally homogenizing effect? As I discussed in the first chapter, the Spectacle of capitalist consumerism has gained power over the years by appropriating difference (often in the form of counter cultural protest) and making it yet another sellable commodity[30]. In the next chapter I will discuss how Facebook can be used to fight some aspects of homogenization. But this study should serve as a warning to those who recognize the Spectacle's power to make homogeneity

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[30] I am repeating myself, but one effective example is the image of Che Guevara emblazoned on t-shirts and coffee mugs.

appear to be difference. If people of other cultures feel forced or even pressured to express themselves in traditionally Western terms – if the Spectacle's power has reached so deeply into Facebook's structure that independent self-expression becomes the primary means of self-construal cross-culturally – then it may be too late to resurrect Facebook as a potentially revolutionary platform.

Furthermore, despite the changes to Facebook profiles that allow users more space to define themselves religiously, politically, and socially, there is still an equal emphasis on users' entertainment choices and other product-oriented identifiers. This is not to say that one's favorite films, books, or even clothing brands are not important, or do not offer insight into one's personality. Neither am I suggesting that Facebook is responsible for making people define themselves through that which they consume. On the contrary, as I discussed in the first chapter, the Spectacle's thorough cultural domination and the advertising industry's enticing commodity narratives that tell consumers that their lives will be made better if supplemented by a particular product has created an environment in which people must (at least to some degree) construct their identities through that which they consume (Goldman 6). This association between brand, product, and self is often how companies create consumer loyalty. Over time, this tendency to associate products with personality – to define oneself through brand name affiliation – has become an ingrained part of the Western psyche. Instead of blaming Facebook for a trend that has been a part of Western society for decades, I mean only to criticize the social networking giant for making this association between self and brand choice more prominent and accessible by displaying a single page which casts religion and political affiliation on equal footing with product-related self descriptions. For some in Western society the self has been overtaken by the "commodity-sign" of advertising and shopping. When this extant trend is combined with privacy settings that allow advertisers more access to consumer's lives than ever before (with ads that can target highly specific demographics) product-exploration can and will often replace self-exploration. When this happens – when perfectly constructing a list of TV shows, films, musicians, products, and brand names becomes more important in defining an

individual than other indicators of personality (whether it be independent self-construal through discussion of personality traits and opinions, or interdependent self-construal through discussion of group and familial affiliations) – the act of constructing the self can become an even more dangerous mimesis of capitalist consumerism.

In a 2009 study of college Facebook use, developmental psychologist Tiffany A. Pempek et al. found that over 90% of students surveyed claimed that expressing their identity and opinion was *not* one of their primary reasons for using Facebook (232). This suggests that many students using Facebook (and presumably many non-student users as well) do not understand that their profiles, status updates, comments on friends' pages, "Likes," and group affiliations are all acts of self-construal. However of the same sample, over 90% of the students admitted to at least "some lurking"[31] (235). Clearly even those who do not believe they are expressing (or constructing) themselves through Facebook are *being constructed* by people in their social network when they view their pages, and survey their personal information with or without commenting. If college students and other Facebook users do not understand that the information they post about themselves is a construction of identity, and if those identity markers emphasize product and brand-affiliations, then their self-construal on Facebook is nothing more than self-promotion or self –advertising. Rather than using their Facebook profile as a way to express themselves as works in progress – as multifaceted, clearly political beings with many interests that range for the quotidian to the ideological – many people use their profile to express themselves as mere objects of the Spectacle, marketable commodities to sell to friends and acquaintances. This terribly reductive act promotes the self as apolitical (even if the user types "democrat" or "republican" into the space provided) and inherently and inescapably tied to the Spectacle.

In this chapter I have discussed just a few ways that capitalist consumerism has made its way into Facebook. The Spectacle gains power through the spread of misinformation

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[31] Also called "creeping" or "freeping" (a portmanteau of the words "Facebook" and "creeping"), lurking is reading and viewing friends information "without directly interacting in any way" (Pempek 235).

because people are often ill equipped to filter through which stories are presented honestly, which are reactionary and incomplete, and which are outright lies. Facebook's privacy policies do more than irk its users by getting them busted for their inappropriate comments and pictures, they have also allowed the advertising industry unprecedented access to people's lives. Finally, Facebook's very structure mimics consumerism by too often reducing personality traits and deep aspects of the self into fill-in-the-blank boxes that people use to sell themselves as if they too were products on the market ("Be my friend! Look at all of the cool things I like!"). I have done my best to show how Facebook has become deeply tied to market capitalism and the Spectacle. In the next section, I will take the opposite stance and evaluate how Facebook can potentially offer ways to fight the Spectacle from within.

CHAPTER 3

THE REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL OF FACEBOOK

It is difficult to see how anything this popular (it is worth repeating: more than 500 million user profiles) can be anything but commodified. There is no doubt that the Spectacle has sunken its teeth into Facebook and, over the last half decade, developed a taste for the power the social networking giant affords it. It is highly unlikely that the Spectacle of capitalist consumerism can be removed from Facebook (unless and until Facebook is usurped by the next social/technological craze). So, again, I found myself asking why. Why even bother looking for moments of Spectacle-resistance in a website that is not simply commodified, but has actually aided the advertising industry in gaining unprecedented access to users personal information? However there are very few (if any) spaces outside of the Spectacle from which one can resist commodification. As I discussed in the first chapter, over the decades the Spectacle has consumed every mode of resistance with increasing speed, even going so far as to coopt the counterculture image and make previous forms of resistance into marketing strategy. Therefore trying to fight this personification of market capitalism and consumerism from the "outside" becomes daunting at best (and impossible at worst). We must look for ways to resist the Spectacle from within – for ways that we can use commodified spaces to fight commodification of the self – because otherwise we are relegated to waiting for a savior that may never arrive. In this final chapter I will examine ways that Facebook complicates the Spectacle's consumption of the self, and offer some suggestions for how Facebook can be further used to politicize traditionally depoliticized and apolitical groups.

<u>3.1 Facebook vs. McDonalds?</u>

In 1993, sociologist George Ritzer proclaimed that American capitalism was experiencing a new phenomenon called "McDonaldization" which he defined as "the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world" (1). Ritzer explained that McDonalds succeeded – and perhaps more importantly spread to other businesses and countries – "because it offers consumers, workers, and managers efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control" (12). On the surface, these production techniques seem to offer only benefits. Increased efficiency allows for quicker service for the customer and increased profits for the business. Calculability allows customer and manager alike to better predict costs and manage time more efficiently. As Ritzer notes, predictability allows customers to know that any McDonaldized product or service will have more or less the same quality each time they patronize the business (Ritzer gives the example of the popular McDonalds product the Egg McMuffin which tastes the same no matter in which city it is bought) (14). Likewise, predictability allows managers and owners to better understand and predict customer behavior and spending tendencies (14). Each of these benefits allows the McDonaldized business greater control over products, employees, and customers.

As the definition suggests, McDonaldization has stretched beyond fast-food chains and other service-related occupations. Ritzer discusses how several industries have employed elements of McDonaldization in order to increase profits. Higher education has been accused of McDonaldization because of the emphasis on quantifiable measures for success like standardized test scores, grades, and class rankings, which may not always adequately evaluate education (70-1). The health care industry has McDonaldized with the increase of "McDoctors" who specialize in quick-fixes to minor injuries (55), by emphasizing profit over patient care (74), and by the increased influence of "bureaucratic rules and controls" (most notably in the form of highly complex insurance policies that allow for care under only certain circumstances and for only certain medical conditions) (110-1). Even politics has not been

immune to McDonaldization, most notably in how politicians address citizens today. Ritzer claims that rather than in previous generations when political discussion was more thorough and direct, the new McDonaldized political climate allows for only sound bites and political stances that are carefully crafted based on people's perceived desires (79-80).

Below the glossy veneer of increased profits and convenience, McDonaldization causes numerous problems. Many of these problems are related to the product or service itself. For example, as Eric Schlosser notes in *Fast Food Nation*, McDonalds and other fast-food chains put immense pressure on their suppliers (farmers and food processers) to produce food quickly and cheaply. As a result small farms are driven out of business, and the large farms that are able to keep up with the unreasonable demands put health and quality on the backburner in favor of increased production efficiency (Ritzer 10). Additionally, McDonaldized institutions often dehumanize both employees and customers. By creating jobs that are highly specialized and take very little skill, McDonaldization allows for smooth, repeatable production over long periods of time. However this employment method also casts entry-level and even low-level management jobs as easily replaceable cogs in an efficient machine (15). Additionally, customers of all McDonaldized businesses are dehumanized by being greeted with false friendliness in the form of scripted interactions with staff, by being given products and services that emphasize efficiency over quality (especially dangerous when that "service" is healthcare or politics), and by being (figuratively) pushed out the door almost as soon as they are given their food or product (or healthcare) to make way for the next customer[32] (158). Even a cursory evaluation of McDonaldization reveals that this process has changed North American culture significantly over the last fifty-plus years. Yet Ritzer describes McDonaldization as "one of a number of globalization processes"[33] that has changed international culture as well (160). In other words, the parallel ascent of globalization and McDonaldization has increased Western

[32] Ritzer discusses this dehumanization in greater detail including examples of dehumanization in non-fast-food businesses in chapters 6 and 7 of *the McDonaldization of Society*.
[33] Ritzer defines globalization as "the worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relation across continents, organization of social life on a global scale, and growth of a shared global consciousness" (160).

influence in foreign countries. One can point to the increase in Western fast-food restaurants (most notably, of course, McDonalds) and stores overseas as evidence of how non-Western cultures have modified their dining and shopping practices (160). But Ritzer also indicates that several universities outside the United States have adopted McDonaldized educational practices, that many international law enforcement agencies have enacted Westernized "assembly line justice" in their courts systems, and that globalized McDonaldization has made travel more standardized and predictable, and less unique and culturally distinct (161). As Ritzer notes, McDonaldized business practices "have a competitive advantage over other [business] models" because of the promises of efficiency and profit (166).

Ritzer's assessment of the global Spectacle points to some serious problems with the United States' greatest cultural export. The major threat that arises from increased McDonaldization in non-Western countries (aside from the well-earned negative images of US citizens that follow McDonalds) is that dehumanizing working conditions, treatment of customers as faceless consumers, and production techniques that emphasize speed over product safety, can all contribute to cultural homogenization[34].

In an increasingly globalized world, many might see this type of standardization as a positive. After all, new environments are easy to navigate when they are identical to old ones. However business practices are not all that have been exported along with the Big Mac. The spread of the Spectacle's tentacles into non-Western countries can wrongly suggest that Westernized capitalism and society are the pinnacle of world culture. It is easy to confuse market success (something that increasingly alludes Western, already McDonaldized businesses[35]) with cultural superiority.

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[34] Ritzer takes care to note that many fast-food chains outside the US have adapted their menus to fit local cuisine and in some cases have even rejected specific elements of McDonaldization (for example, the emphasis on quick customer turnover) in order to better fit the needs and desires of local patrons (162). These adaptations, while significant, do not seem to represent a rejection of McDonaldization, but more a cultural adaptation to Westernized/McDonaldized processes.

[35] It would be quite interesting to examine if and how much globalized McDonaldization can be blamed for the recent economic crisis, but that is another argument for another study altogether.

Furthermore, this type of market-driven globalization might increase the power and prevalence of what theorist Jon Beasley-Murray calls posthegemony. In "On Posthegemony" Beasley-Murray argues that many political theorists have proclaimed the end of state-driven ideology (118). In its place, Beasley-Murray contests, many countries (America included) now have only a dualistic notion of politics that pits conservativism against progressivism (118). However, in the absence of ideology, politics have not retreated from everyday life but have invaded "every pore of society as the distinction between the political and the social is eroded" (119). Yet the possible end of hegemony does not mean the end of domination. On the contrary, in his book *Posthegemony* Beasley-Murray argues, "command and control, exploitation and oppression, still manifestly continue" (x). However in the postideological, posthegemonic society capital and profit are the driving forces behind governmental action. The perpetuation of an increasingly commodified life becomes the goal of business and government alike.

While these McDonaldized business practices have been successful for several decades, and while they may or may not prove key to the United States' economic future, it is important to remember that any culture's greatest legacy is not its economic system alone but its cultural and artistic heritage as well. When McDonaldization moves beyond the business world into the realms of justice, health care, and politics it runs the risk of infecting foreign cultures with the disease of sameness. This is not meant to be a warning of some golden-arch filled apocalypse. I do not believe that cultures can be ever destroyed while there are those who wish to preserve them. But the seductiveness of the profits promised through McDonaldization does threaten to suppress some of these important differences in favor of the globalized market.

Facebook can serve as a complication to McDonaldization. It would not be difficult to interpret the social networking giant as a kind of McDonaldization of socialization (one could argue that I did this to a degree in the second chapter). From the onset of his book, Ritzer argues that "McDonaldization" is the proper term for this spread of contemporary Westernized capitalism (over "Burger Kingization" and "Starbuckization" for example) because of the

company's innovation and massive popularity (xiii). Facebook might usurp McDonalds as the most popular American institution, and it is arguably one of America's greatest technological innovations[36]. Although Facebook does not offer a unique business model, it does serve as the most prominent example of financial and commercial success in the United States today. If financial success was what ignited mass McDonaldization, it is reasonable to believe the business world will increasingly turn to the Facebook model as an alternative to the dehumanizing efficiency of McDonaldized business practices.

Furthermore, Facebook's very structure – foundational to much of the website's success – opposes many of the principles of McDonaldization. I mentioned at the beginning of this section that McDonaldization offers businesses and consumers "efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control." Facebook invites inefficiency. It did not succeed because users were seeking a website that offered speedy socialization. It succeeded I believe in part because people do not always want to be efficient with their time. It is quite normal for users to spend hours on or continually returning to the site chatting, freeping, commenting on photos or wall posts, updating their status, adding "Likes," changing their profile pictures, and sharing and viewing links to other websites. Teaching first year composition at the university level, I often discuss Facebook and social networking sites with my classes. Inevitably one or more students mention that they "hate" Facebook because every time they log on they end up spending too much time navigating the site and interacting with friends. This kind of "hate" – the kind leads to compulsive over-use – that has driven Facebook's success during its short history.

In many ways, Facebook is quite calculable. For those that use the site commercially Facebook makes statistics of page views and use readily available in easy to understand graphs and charts. It is less calculable and less predictable, however, for everyday users. There is no guarantee that one's witty status update will elicit comments from friends. There is no guarantee that one's new profile picture will be "Liked" by anyone. There is no guarantee that

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[36] I am not suggesting that Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg invented online social networking, only that his creation has become by far the most successful. For more discussion of Facebook's predecessors see chapter 3 of David Kirkpatrick's *The Facebook Effect*.

when a user logs on that there will be anyone else to interact with at all. This incalculability and unpredictability are – I believe – also part of Facebook's appeal. If Facebook offered the same generic, scripted comments with every status update (as a McDonaldized business would), or the same reactions to new photos, or the same friends online with every log in, users would get bored quickly. For the most part, users do not get bored. They continue to log in day after day *because* they do not know exactly what will be in the Feed, or who will have commented on their status.

Perhaps the cornerstone to McDonaldization, control, is also complicated on Facebook. Constantly changing privacy settings and often rigid profile set-ups (discussed in chapter 2) are evidence that Facebook unquestionably exercises control over its users. Yet Facebook users are also responsible for the content of the site. Each user selects her friends, chooses what pages to like, when to use the site, and for how long. If a friend becomes annoying, the user can remove the friend or simply hide them. In other words, Facebook offers what the McDonaldized world cannot: real control over when, how, and for how long they use the product[37]. This level of user control is toothless if users only exercise it to pick their favorite actors, or to block their parents from seeing their profile. However this control can be quite powerful if it can be harnessed to fight McDonaldization and cultural homogenization. There are hundreds (probably thousands) of groups on Facebook dedicated to people's interest in non-Western literature, art, music, and culture (there is even a small group called "Students Against the McDonaldization of the University"). Not all of these pages and groups are active, and most of the users on these pages are probably not motivated by a desire to preserve culture from the McDonaldized/Spectaclized world. Nonetheless, these pages and the connections created between the users who join them are invaluable in fighting cultural homogenization. Their very existence challenges the economic systems that desire conformity above all else because – while they exist in a commodified space – these pages are not products to be marketed and

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[37] It bears repeating that Facebook is not the first social networking platform to offer users this kind of "de-McDonaldized" control, but it is by far the most commercially successful one.

sold. They do not exist outside the Spectacle, but the lack of control Facebook exercises over them assures that they will not be appropriated or transformed into easily packaged marketing gimmicks without the users' consent. This security allows users to discuss and explore that which interests them (not just art and literature but any number of hobbies and interests) freely without the McDonaldized pressure to do so efficiently or predictably.

<div align="center">3.2 Facebook as the New Megaphone</div>

One of the most important ways that Facebook (and social media in general) can be used to alter the influence and power of the Spectacle and its rhetoric is through its ability to inform and unite vast networks of people around specific political issues. This may sound odd because I argued earlier that one of Facebook's biggest flaws is that it allows the rapid dissemination of misinformation (section 2.1). However the same power that can be used negatively to play upon people's ignorance can be (and in many cases is already being) used to increase knowledge and spur activism around the most significant political and social issues of our time. In this section I will briefly examine the ways Facebook is being used to spur activism and political action in the United States and abroad.

Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign might be the United States' most prominent example of how social networking technology can influence politics. President Obama and his staff used Facebook, Twitter, and other SNS to garner support and funding from interested citizens. *The Nation*'s technology columnist Ari Melber notes more than five million people supported President Obama through his social networking websites during his campaign and another two million through his personal website (6). This more direct interaction with his political constituency allowed Obama and his staff to not only disseminate information more quickly to those interested, but also provided a forum in which voters could make suggestions for Obama's campaign, comment upon his policies, and interact with one another about projects and volunteer work. More than any other Presidential candidate in history, Barack Obama engaged in what communications and media theorist Henry Jenkins describes as a kind of "grassroots convergence" or an "informal and sometimes unauthorized flow of media content

when it becomes easy for consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content" (285). In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins describes how the emergence of digital grassroots interaction began long before politicians got a hold of social networking technology, when fans of popular entertainment began using Web technologies to share information, compare theories, and even to write their own fan fiction about their particular interest (for example *The Matrix* movies, the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and the popular *Harry Potter* book series all have rather large online cult followings) (57).

It is important to note that President Obama is not the first politician to tap into the power of grassroots political movements. Famously, 2004 Democratic Presidential hopeful Howard Dean tapped into the power of digital grassroots campaigning techniques (209)[38], but none had been able to fully utilize its power until the 2008 election when President Obama directly engaged the "Facebook Generation" through his staff's command of Web 2.0 technologies. The Obama team took the conversations, speeches, and debates from the campaign – the one's that had been largely ignored by young people in previous elections – and put them in forums with which young voters were already comfortable.

However President Obama's use of social networking technology was not so much a political innovation, as it was a keen insight into the broadening importance of SNS in political communication. Even without direct support from the candidates, citizens across the country started groups supporting presidential hopefuls and discussing the issues that faced them. In 2010, political communications and mass media researchers, led by Florida International Assistant Professor Juliana Fernandes, analyzed and compared the Wall posts of student-created Facebook pages for Barack Obama and John McCain before and during the 2008 Presidential campaign. The researchers were interested in not only finding out which candidate was most discussed in these pages, but also what types of comments were posted (for

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[38] Howard Dean's use of Web 2.0 technologies and social networking has been discussed widely. Notably, prominent media theorist Geert Lovink wrote about the campaign in the first chapter of his 2008 book *Zero Comments: Blogging and Critical Internet Culture*, and journalism and media researcher Axel Bruns in his 2008 book *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*.

example, were users more interested in socialization, or issue-related discussions? Were users more inclined to attack the opposition, or praise their favored candidate?). The group examined nine Facebook pages created at seven universities and found that Obama had twice as many student-led Facebook groups as McCain (six to three) and more than five times as many members (4,070 to 794) (664). Despite a relatively small sample size, the researchers concluded that Facebook had "a positive impact on youth political involvement" (669-70). Because it afforded young voters the opportunity to interact with like-minded individuals in a familiar setting, Facebook became an indispensable political stage in 2008. Perhaps more importantly, the researchers found that a majority of the comments made by both Obama and McCain supporters were positive and focused on campaign issues and long-term party goals rather than personal attacks (671). These findings, while admittedly not conclusive, suggest that civil political discourse is in fact *possible* (despite the fact that it is not often exercised by our political leaders), and that young voters tend to focus on issue-based political discussions when given a forum with which they are comfortable.

In his 2008 book *Here Comes Everybody*, Internet technology researcher and theorist Clay Shirky asserts that social networking technologies have become an important part of contemporary society not because people today are more social than in the past, but because these technologies have "collapsed" traditional costs associated with joining or creating an organization (as Shirky notes, "cost" in this instance refers to not only money, but also to "time, effort, or attention" spent on a project) (18). In other words, Internet and social networking technologies have simplified or eliminated inconveniences (like distance, scheduling, and lack of available information) that traditionally prevented individuals from participating in political debate. By lowering the "transaction costs" of engaging in social and political debates, Facebook made President Obama more accessible to younger voters who may have rejected or felt alienated by political debate in the past. It brought the conversation *to* the generally apathetic *on their terms*. Furthermore, Obama put much of the power of his campaign into the hands of individuals. Users could add content to his SNS's pages: they could not only discuss

issues with one another but also create promotional videos, and even help set up fundraisers and support rallies. As a result, Obama's use of social networking tools opened up political discourse among younger voters, where it had previously been limited. I am not claiming that President Obama's use of SNSs won him the election. Yet Facebook and other websites certainly made governmental politics more available – more infused with daily life – for those who may have previously viewed politics as a remote (and dysfunctional) entity that was too complex and distant for them to really take part in.

While recent protests in Wisconsin have garnered a lot of attention[39], nowhere is the power and importance of social networking technology more evident that in the North African and Middle Eastern nations where citizens have turned to Facebook and digital grassroots political action to help organize protests of oppressive governmental regimes. Bahrain, Egypt, and Libya are only a few of the nations whose citizens have most recently used Facebook and Twitter to organize mass protests, to articulate their concerns (or in some cases demands) for their government, and to disseminate pictures, videos, and stories about the governments' mistreatment of its people[40]. A February 2011 article for the *New York Times* argued that Bahraini citizens' best weapon against military force were their cellphone cameras, which allowed them to document the violent opposition they faced protesting the government (Preston). There is no way to know if these Facebook- and Twitter-organized protests will lead to political revolution, or will give way to returns to controlling, non-responsive governments.

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[39] As I write this, union supporters are still protesting Governor Scott Walker's budget cuts that stripped collective bargaining rights from unions. Facebook and social media have played an important part in organizing these protests. There are several news reports covering these events, but the most recent is Scott Bauer's piece "Wis. Gov. Officially Cuts Collective Bargaining."

[40] It is important to note that these latest protests are not the first time SNS have been used to promote demonstrations against an oppressive government in the Middle East. In 2009, bloggers and political writers from both the non-Western and Western world proclaimed the rise of a "Twitter Revolution" spurred by young activists in Iran upset with the government's domination of its people. The importance and impact of this at best pseudo-revolution has been debated, but clearly the Twitter-organized protests have not led to an overthrow of the Iranian government. For more on this first interaction between SNS and world politics see Evgeny Morozov's "Iran: the Downside to the 'Twitter Revolution'" and Jonathan V. Last's "Tweeting While Tehran Burns."

Even with the latest communications technologies, each of these countries' citizens face long, up-hill battles against powerful leaders and governments that will protect their power by any means. Even so, the significance of these technologies – their power in bringing together diverse groups of people to fight for a common cause – must not be ignored.

I do not offer this example to compare the ongoing battle against the Spectacle to the violent social and political battles taking place in Northern Africa and the Middle East. Instead, I use this (probably too) brief reference to the complex power struggles taking place overseas to illustrate the undeniable power of social networking technology to help organize and galvanize people and nations. Facebook is not anyone's savior. Social networking technologies are merely tools – platforms that allow users previously unprecedented communications abilities. Governments, politicians, pundits, and citizens are able to use these tools to create inaccurate social and political narratives and to disseminate false or misleading information. Likewise, marketers and advertisers use these tools to promote consumption and Spectacle logic. However as long as social networking tools like Facebook remain in the hands of concerned citizens, users can and will fight false information, fight McDonaldization, and fight the rise of the Spectacle at every possible turn. The protests in North Africa and the Middle East, as well as the protests that take place in the United States and other Western countries, attest to this.

3.3 Educated by the Spectacle

In the Spectaclized world children are often used as pawns for marketing strategies and political agendas. Children are marketed to quite heavily. Turn on any kid or young adult themed television show or network and you will see advertisements for the latest toys, movies, and theme parks highlighting the fun and excitement of their product. Conversely, kids are all too often used as political props to scare constituents into controversial decisions. State and national budget cuts are almost always framed as attempts to protect future generations from mountainous debt (usually ignoring the debt already waiting for the future generations). Many arguments in favor of looser restrictions on gun laws refer to one's ability to protect the family. Those against gay marriage almost always fervently state that "traditional marriage" must be

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upheld because children can only be properly raised in households with one mother and one father (despite all evidence to the contrary). As I mentioned in chapter 2, former Alaskan Governor Sarah Palin even managed to link child safety to the healthcare reform debate by suggesting that new government policies might cast children with Downs Syndrome in front of "death panels." Yet despite all of the ways they are used in Spectacle society – both as subjects of comprehensive marketing strategies and as objects of political strategies – children are essentially apolitical. Educational theorist David Buckingham notes that many children are not able to define themselves as "political subjects" because they do not have the right to vote, are not addressed by the news, and rarely see others their age involved in political processes (Jenkins 228).

Like advertisers and politicians, the news media never hesitates to cover stories *about* children – always searching for the next educational, social, or health-related crisis to warn concerned parents about. Yet they rarely speak *to* children. Instead, children are educated by the Spectacle (that is not to say that the news media is outside of the Spectacle – but that is an entirely different argument). They are socialized to consume and do so vigorously. As a result kids become alienated from the political process until it is thrust back upon them in their late teenage years, when they often reject it and cling to the familiarity of political non-commitment or dogmatic loyalty to the political views of their parents[41]. The obvious danger here is that Spectacle education favors social ignorance over an informed citizenry and spending over political action.

Much has been written about the potential for Web 2.0 technologies to revolutionize or at least revitalize education[42]. Vice-President of the Young Adult Library Services Association

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[41] Parental influence cannot be ignored. Clearly there are parents who educated their children on contemporary political and social issues. However it is difficult to ignore the fact that all too many children do not get properly educated at home or school.

[42] A couple of recent examples are Wilma Clark's "Beyond Web 2.0: Mapping the Technology Landscapes of Young Learners" about new technologies that complicate and aid new learning spaces and Harry Pence's "Preparing for the Real Web Generation" which argues that today's college students merely represent a transitional period in education and that the real Web generation (the generation of students who truly and deeply engage with web-related

(YALSA), Linda W. Braun has argued that new technologies like blogs (the social, micro-blogging site Twitter for example), computer and consol-games, and text and instant messaging (IM) have altered the definition of reading and writing, and that teens have adopted these new forms of writing without realizing or acknowledging that they are in fact forms of literacy or education (38). Writing to librarians, Braun emphasizes the importance of not only making young adults aware of the staggering amount of reading and writing they do on a daily basis, but also in finding ways to use these new social tools to improve the quality of their reading and writing skills (40).

Educational theorist and e-learning advocate Herbert Thomas has gone a step further, arguing that the "traditional learning spaces in the form of classrooms and lecture halls" actually hinder students' learning ability (502-3). Because these spaces are highly formal and emphasize the teacher as the center of the classroom, and because current approaches to teaching emphasize active student engagement and participation, Thomas suggests that the traditional classroom setting promotes outdated teaching models and makes it difficult for both teachers and students to engage in new and productive forms of learning (504). Thomas posits that to achieve this new learning environment, educators must first acknowledge that traditional boundaries between work, home, and school no longer exist as they once may have (505). As Mizuko Ito explains, most schools today (and not just Western schools) ignore and even decry forms of entertainment (like television and online gaming) and imaginative play that do not fit into traditional educational models[43] (80). This purposeful ignorance and rejection of all new media forms sends the signal to children that popular entertainment and education are always divorced from one another – that learning does not take place during play.

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technologies) is more than a decade away. There are dozens if not hundreds of other examples from the last decade and earlier.

[43] Although television and online gaming may be the most obvious examples of villainized forms of popular entertainment, Ito's primary example is the "media mix" *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, which is a manga comic, animated television show, and multi-player card game. Ito argues that media mixes can provide a unique form of socialization and participatory education that should be utilized by the education system, not rejected (91).

It seems that Thomas and Ito are arguing (and even if they are not, I am) that the prevalence of new communications technologies has already changed the ways people communicate, socialize, play, and learn and that educators must catch up to these changes in order to engage and educate new generations of learners. Thomas's vision for these new learning spaces is unclear. He uses words like "flexible," "bold," and "future proof" to describe them (504) and suggests that they must be "enchanting" as well as architecturally sound (510). What is clear is that Thomas believes these spaces should not be strictly physical, but virtual as well (507). The new models of learning – in both physical and virtual environments – should allow for collaborative learning where the student does not merely receive information from a teacher, book, video, or website, but actively participates in the construction of the lesson with their peers as well as the instructor (503).

Both Braun's and Thomas's observations point to ways that technology-infused classrooms can help enlighten children about the world around them and help engage them in their education more thoroughly. Henry Jenkins argues that one way to combat a lack of political awareness among today's youth is to introduce them to "microlevel" political power at earlier ages (228). Jenkins argues that allowing young people to be politically active in an environment with which they feel comfortable (his primary example is *The Sims* online, a massively multiplayer online game) will ready them to face real-world political and social conversations and decisions when they come of voting age (232-3). Because of its popularity, Facebook could allow children to take part in political and social conversations that are typically reserved for adults in an environment in which their inexperience and inability to vote would not preclude them from having an opinion.

Because so many kids are already familiar with Facebook's format, it could at least be an intermediate step toward a more progressive and egalitarian learning environment. If set up with adequate privacy controls (admittedly a difficult task given Facebook's privacy environment) it can provide a sufficient platform through which teachers and parents can monitor, but not control, students' interactions. One could argue that several extant Internet

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technologies could allow the same kinds of engagement for those outside of the political spectrum. Blogs can offer an informal and anonymous space for kids to disseminate their political concerns and ideas. Discussion forums can link networks of people allowing them to share information and freely discuss any number of subjects. Social networking websites in general and Facebook specifically can combine the benefits of both the blog and the discussion forum while allowing kids to remain within comfortable and familiar communities of friends and peers.

One example of this potential for political growth (it is important to recognize it as *potential*, and not a fulfilled ideal) comes from my own particular use of Facebook. As a teacher of college-level first year composition, I want my students to leave class with at least some sense for how to engage in academic and (broadly defined) political discourse. To this end, each semester I require students to maintain an account on Facebook and join a class "group." Through the group I am able to message the students simultaneously, notify them of changes to the course schedule, and post interesting and informative videos and news articles. I also require each student at some point in the semester to post an open-ended discussion question to the group's "Discussion Board." Students often choose to ask about issues discussed in class or found in the films or readings for class, although they are allowed to ask questions about current events not referenced in the classroom. Students' questions and responses range from the highly insightful (during the 2008 Presidential election a student asked about the validity and ethicality of specific campaign tactics) to the commonplace (students have asked about how others react to "tough times") and everything in between. Some students take the exercise seriously and genuinely seek out discussions that are important to them, and some simply post the minimum amount of responses on the last possible day, only because they know it is part of their grade (and some do not participate at all, to their own detriment). The system is imperfect. It is simply my way of trying to encourage (or coerce, or force) students to think about the highly political world around them – something many of them have never been asked to do.

Just before the 2008 election, in a discussion with each of my classes, a small number of students said they were considering voting in part because of discussion started in class and continued on Facebook. Whether those claims are true or merely an attempt to curry favor from the teacher, I do not know (and would not care to speculate). However I am optimistic that this "coerced" discourse community helped many students at the very least become more aware of the politics that surrounds them and affects their lives on a daily basis.

In "The Impact of Facebook on Our Students" co-founder of ChildrenOnline.org (a website dedicated to promoting safe Internet use among children and young adults) Doug Fodeman levels a number of criticisms against Facebook and other SNSs, ultimately concluding that they do not belong in children's education. Many of Fodeman's arguments against Facebook are related to the website's spotty privacy record and the dangers of online socialization (i.e. that online socialization damages one's "real world" social skills) (40). Fodeman is right to suggest that Facebook gives users – perhaps young users most of all – "a false sense of privacy" (36). Furthermore, Fodeman is right in warning parents and teachers against the aggressive, targeted marketing that takes place on Facebook (38). The problem with merely ignoring Facebook's educational potential because of the dangers inherent in its imperfect, Spectaclized system is that many high school age students already use Facebook and are already exposed to the dangers. Rather than clinging to traditional education methods (which are not without danger) and eschewing new forums for learning, parents and teachers should use Facebook and other social networking websites and make these dangers part of the conversation. Whether parents and educators like it or not, online socialization and education happen. If children and young adults have access to the Web – even if they are successfully banned from social networking websites – they will be exposed to the Spectacle and all of the physical and psychological dangers that accompany it. Rather than trying to shelter young adults from the dangers of social networking, we should evaluate how we can use these tools (which, again students are already using in great numbers) to educate them about the political

and social world around them. To fail to acknowledge and openly discuss the power of Facebook and other social networking tools is to allow the Spectacle to educate them about it.

I am not the first instructor to use Facebook or other social networking websites for such a purpose. And most of my students are of voting age. Yet programs similar to mine might yield similar or even better results for younger children. Allowing children to participate in real political discussion in a place where they feel like they can safely express themselves (i.e. somewhere they will not be harshly judged for what they may not know) may help them see themselves as the political subjects they are. If we expect nothing of children, they will often oblige. If educators ignore popular forms of entertainment merely because they are popular we risk missing opportunities to reach them. However if educators engage students in important discourses on *their* terms at an earlier age, they may be less resistant to the discourses they have been taught to hate through the Spectacle of capitalist consumerism and may actually desire to understand and participate in the governmental political process as they get older.

In this chapter, I have turned the tables on the previous chapter's analysis and investigated ways that Facebook is being and could be further used to fight the Spectacle of capitalist consumerism. Despite all of the social networking giant's failings, this brief analysis indicates that the site still has the potential to help fight the dangerous, nearly all-consuming power of the Spectacle. In the conclusion, I will examine one final way that Facebook and other social networking technologies could be used to help fight ignorance and Spectacle logic.

3.4 Conclusion: A Choice Between Collective Ignorance and Collaboration

If we return to Mark Poster's individual in the darkened room, we seen that our perceptions of Internet technologies have changed drastically. We may no longer assume that this individual is wasting time. As Web technologies become more sophisticated, they increasingly become infused with our everyday lives. This is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad, but a consequence of technological innovation and progress. Of course, this imaginary individual *could* be using Facebook in Spectacle-acceptable ways like complaining about their boss, freeping friends and acquaintances, reposting articles about a celebrity's latest

rehab stint, or pouring over their profiles to make sure they are selling themselves as best they can. However they could just as easily be doing schoolwork, communicating with friends and loved ones great distances away, reposting articles on social/political issues, or organizing protests or rallies. In fact, they are probably doing a number of these things simultaneously. The power and ubiquity of the Spectacle prevents much realistic discussion of its destruction in the near future. However there is (at least) one more noteworthy way in which Poster's imaginary user can help fight the Spectacle from within.

In 1997, media theorist Pierre Lévy identified the Internet as a space for "collective intelligence" – where groups of individuals with shared interests could come together and amass a body of knowledge greater than any one member could acquire alone. "No one knows everything," Lévy noted, "[but] everyone knows something, all knowledge resides in humanity" (20). Lévy was concerned with the ways in which the undeniable limits of human intellect can be circumvented in an age when people are bombarded by information nearly every second of the day. One person cannot contain a complete encyclopedic knowledge of an entire field of study, let alone vet that information for accuracy and relevance. However Lévy's "collective intelligence communities" are decentralized, loosely organized groups of individuals with shared interests in which each member of the community brings a specific body of knowledge and expertise to the conversation. Thus, by being engaged in a specific collective intellect, members have access to tremendous amounts of information that might have otherwise been difficult to find – if not entirely unavailable (214-5).

Researchers in psychology, sociology, information technology, criminology, and many other fields have written about the potential of and applications for collective intelligence communities in on-line environments[44]. Many have suggested wikis – websites that rely on user-generated content and collaboration – are the best example of collective intelligence in

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[44] A couple of recent examples are Anita Williams Wooley et al.'s "Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups" and Ali Gürkan et al.'s "Mediating Debate Through On-line Large Scale Argumentation: Evidence from the Field."

today's society[45]. However, Wikis tend to falter when confronted with ongoing debate over highly contentious issues because users often become polarized and engage in "edit wars" over content (Gürkan 3687)[46]. Others might suggest that political blogs and discussion forums could best serve this purpose by allowing open and continuing discussion over hot-button issues. Yet the problem with many online discussion forums, blogs, and message boards is that they tend to invite (whether intentionally or unintentionally) either surface-level political observations without depth or conversation or merely bring together groups of like-minded individuals, thus limiting or eliminating the political potential of such sites by merely making them places of collective agreement or launching points for "attacks" on "the other side" (one need only look at popular blogs on the Fox News website for evidence of this).

Lévy has since complicated and amended his vision for collective intelligence communities. In "From Social Computing to Reflexive Collective Intelligence" Lévy notes that the "social sciences and humanities" have failed to exploit the "new opportunities offered by the extension of cyberspace for the study of human and cultural phenomena" because "each discipline and even different schools in the same discipline have incompatible theoretical frameworks" (8). In other words, Lévy believes that collective intelligence alone is no longer enough to help fully utilize the power of information in the digital age. Lévy suggests that we must achieve more reflexive and self-examining collective intelligence communities in order to locate "semantic blind spots" in humanities research[47] (7). While I question whether the humanities and social sciences are the only academic disciplines lacking reflexivity, Lévy's critique rings true. Every academic disciplines would benefit from a collective intelligence system that allows researchers to not only see what work is being done within their own fields of study, but that also allows cross-disciplinary examinations of related topics. Such a system

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[45] Recent examples of this are Vasco Furtado et al.'s "Collective Intelligence in Law Enforcement – the WikiCrimes System" and Ionna Lykourentzou et al's "CorpWiki: A Self-Regulating Wiki to Promote Corporate Collective Intelligence through Expert Peer Matching."
[46] It is worth noting that researchers are already developing "argumentation tools" to deal with these problems, but have not yet perfected them (Gürkan 3687).
[47] Lévy's solution is the developing computing language called the Information Economy MetaLanguage (IEML), which he discusses at great length in the third part of his essay.

would undoubtedly expose gaps in academic knowledge, streamline research, and foster even greater collaboration.

However this "reflexive collective intelligence" could do more than assist the academic research. Social and political discourse outside the realm of academia could also benefit from a system that allows for large-scale information aggregation and categorization. Perhaps the greatest challenge in fighting the Spectacle is its ubiquity. The Spectacle feeds off of and exploits ignorance and misinformation by creating fears and desires that can only be satiated through consumption. The Spectacle thrives when people choose social and cultural ignorance and self-obsession over critical thinking and open dialogue. To combat the weapons of the Spectacle, we must seek out the most efficient and effective ways to spread information and open up dialogue across party lines and international boundaries. Creating a system of "reflexive collective intelligence" may not only make information available to a larger and more diverse group of individuals than ever before, but might also help those who wish to continue the fight against Spectacle domination to see the gaps in social and political dialogue and address them before Spectacle logic can intervene.

Facebook has the potential to make politically and socially focused reflexive collective intelligence communities more heterogeneous. Social networking websites like Facebook could allow users to foster conversations and create collective intelligence communities from multiple social, political, and economic viewpoints through the webs of connections each user already has. Individuals concerned with fostering a more politically engaged society could utilize the connections fostered on Facebook to create spaces in which political discussion and information sharing could take place. This is not a utopian ideal. Universal agreement would never (and I would argue *should* never) happen. Points of dispute would undoubtedly still abound and many social and political problems would never be resolved. But these new spaces of social network-based collective intelligence communities could allow multiple dissenting voices to share information with one another. They could invite civil conversations revealing multiple sides of important issues, rather than dividing issues between our dualistic concepts of

strict "red state" and "blue state" politics, and help us see more shades of purple. And they could offer a place where the uninformed could go to get informally educated.

There are undeniable limits to this idea. For one, (while I am by no means an computer programming expert) there would undoubtedly have to be significant structural changes for Facebook to allow the kind of reflexivity necessary to make these communities viable. Additionally, I am not sure how or even if a project meant to foster socially, politically, and culturally heterogeneous conversations could be promoted without becoming merely another avenue for the Spectacle to imbed itself into people's lives. It is also clear that the political rhetoric of our age hinders (and in some cases prevents) cross-party and non-partisan dialogue. There would be dissenters who would look at attempts to create cross-party and global political dialogue as attempts at brain washing or the creation of a one-world government. Yet despite all of these objections – despite everything that could potentially go wrong – I believe that harnessing a reflexive collective intelligence and collaborative political discussion is the most significant way to fight the power of the Spectacle.

From writing this essay I have found that many of the praiseworthy attributes of Facebook – many of the things that give Facebook the power to be revolutionary – are the same things that can be exploited by the Spectacle. The same can be said for all communications technology: the Internet, the television, the radio, and the printing press all have been both praised for the way they revolutionized communication and condemned for how they have damaged "traditional" social structures. I firmly believe that Facebook has not yet crossed into the realm of complete commodification, but it is on a precipice. And the most important influence on whether or not Facebook crosses that threshold and becomes completely commodified is not Mark Zuckerberg, nor lawmakers, nor the global financial market. Most important to Facebook's continued ability to fight the Spectacle is what we (consumers/users/producers/humans) use it for. If we allow it to become a depoliticized consumer space in which advertisers hawk their products and users hawk themselves, then we will be guilty of creating the world's most expansive and time-consuming tribute to the

Spectacle. However if we continue to push the boundaries of what Facebook can do, and work within those boundaries to extend our political voice, we may create a space that can never be completely commodified. Not a utopia, but a real world platform from which citizens from around the planet can share information, can voice their opinions, and can interact one another, striving for perfection and achieving better cultural and social understanding.

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