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LOG ON, GOOF OFF, AND LOOK UP

*Facebook and the Rhythms
of Canadian Internet Use*

Ira Wagman

The act of logging into, out of, and back into Facebook is part of the daily rhythm of Internet use for a large number of Canadians. One major Internet traffic monitoring company recently claimed that Facebook was the second-most popular website among Canadians, just behind Google.¹ A recent article claimed that close to three out of five Canadians have a Facebook account.² According to statistics posted on its blog, the company claims that Canada has the third-highest number of subscribers, behind the United States and the United Kingdom and ahead of countries such as Turkey, Australia, France, and Columbia.³ Like a number of Internet applications, Facebook is accessible on a range of devices, from desktops and laptops to cellphones and iPods.

Facebook's transition from novel to normal occurred over a relatively brief period. The site launched in 2004 but has only been available to Canadians since the end of 2005. Facebook was originally available to students at universities; since 2007, it has been open to anyone with an email address. Until recently, users had to affiliate themselves with a regional or institutional network in order to join the site. At present, every major Canadian city from Victoria to St. John's is represented along with colleges, workplaces, and thousands of high schools scattered across the country.

The Canadian presence within Facebook seems to have mitigated what would be a familiar chorus about the need for a national equivalent, a media technology that is distinctly Canadian. This is despite the fact that the proliferation of sites like Facebook threatens the potential for the kinds of national audiences so treasured by cultural nationalists. In the absence of such rhetoric, one can appreciate the delightful pleasures Canadians take from media products produced by American (or international) firms without any of the usual guilt that accompanied similar practices associated with what we now clumsily call "traditional media." The difficulties in locating the popular are also a spatial concern; as this essay will show, an appreciation of Facebook draws attention to sites of media consumption that exist outside of domestic spheres.

This chapter begins with an overview of Facebook including a brief history of its development, an outline of some of its key features, and a discussion of the phenomenon attributed to it known as social networking. I then consider Facebook as an invitation to reflect broadly on the place of the Internet within the everyday lives of Canadians. I focus my attention here on the use of Facebook by adults (rather than younger users) in order to make three observations: First, I want to initiate a rethinking of our notion of time spent online by arguing that Facebook capitalizes upon the dominant mode of Internet use among many Canadians, a mode I call the brief encounter. Second, I argue that Facebook's popularity as a distraction from work allows for a consideration of office spaces as sites of media exhibition and for an understanding of how media technologies facilitate the blurring of lines between work and play. I conclude by arguing that social networking sites need to be considered as media forms as much as they are considered socially or politically in order to shed light on some of the key issues facing our understanding of new media, most notably that of privacy. Although Facebook makes possible the coming together of range of different media forms, from photographs to retro

video games, I also want to suggest that it raises questions about the historical *uses* of those forms within Canadian life. An examination of a number of controversies involving Facebook serves two purposes: As a reminder of the durability of one of modern society's most powerful informational forms, the directory, and as a reflection of contemporary anxieties about a practice that many of us take for granted when applied to non-digital contexts: The act of looking people up.

To some extent these observations are guided by my own experience as a Facebook user who finds himself drawn to his computer's browser for distractions and who uses the Internet "to Google" people, places, and things. At the same time, however, what follows emerges from the realization that scholars pursue a number of established analytical routes when studying the social role of media technologies, especially the Internet, while leaving others behind. While it may be true that Facebook is the product of a society characterized by narcissism, diversion, and surveillance, such concerns reflect the tendency to equate changes to the technological landscape with transformations of the social world. With those changes come the attendant anxieties about how such transformations will have a lasting effect on established mores. My purpose here is not to counter the position that digital technologies offer prospects for new kinds of creativity, protest, and forms of social interaction, part of a broader *zeitgeist* that Henry Jenkins characterizes as "convergence culture."⁴ Instead, this article serves as a reminder that such developments also serve as platforms for the carrying out of a number of rather banal things, like making plans with friends, checking the weather, or paying the bills. With that in mind, the questions the present paper proposes can be useful to account for the variety of practices and contexts for consumption made possible by new media forms beyond the spectacular ones with which we commonly associate them.

Opening Up Facebook

Facebook began in 2003 when the company's founder, Mark Zuckerberg, developed an application to facilitate communication among his fellow students at Harvard University. From there the company offered Facebook to other universities, before inviting high schools, workplaces, and eventually, members of the general public to join the site. The company's tremendous growth has attracted an incredible amount of media attention and has made Zuckerberg an e-commerce

media darling. However, the hagiographic treatment of Facebook's founding has been contested by a series of lawsuits from Harvard colleagues who argue that Zuckerberg's version of Facebook was adapted from two other services, an online dating site, and a site offering a range of services to fellow students.⁵

Facebook is one of an expansive number of sites offering versions of social networking. A partial list of the current generation of social networking sites popular to varying degrees in Canada includes sites like Orkut, LinkedIn, Bebo, Cyworld, Mixi, Ning, Hi5, Skyrock, and one of the originators of social networking, Friendster. Although the numbers for Facebook's primary competition, MySpace, have been traditionally larger in terms of dedicated users in the United States, the two sites now appear to be neck-and-neck and Facebook is considered to be more popular than MySpace in Canada. It bears noting, however, that users may have accounts with both services, and that different services offer different capabilities. For example, MySpace has emerged as a premier site for accessing music from established artists to newer acts. Many musicians establish MySpace pages as a way to distribute music to users in hopes that it will cultivate fan communities, stimulate radio play, album purchases, or appearances and concerts.

While there is considerable variation among the sites themselves danah boyd and Nicole Ellison suggest social networking sites share three general characteristics: They allow users to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, such as within the Facebook "universe"; they allow users to generate a list of other "friends" with whom they wish to share connections within that universe, and they allow those connected to that universe to examine connections made by other friends within the system. As useful as this may be, for our purposes here it is important to point out that even this characterization should be considered as a placeholder since social networking sites, like websites in general, routinely adjust their capabilities and are therefore in a constant state of flux.⁶

One of the reasons for the changing nature of social networking has to do with the continued process of adaptation and adjustment of the Internet into everyday life. While it was not the first of its kind, Facebook emerged out of the rubble of the dot-com bubble that burst towards the beginning of the new century. Coming out of that downturn, social media websites, themselves part of a discourse around "Web 2.0," highlight the ability of users to create, share, and provide direct forms of interaction and collaboration through a range of different websites, from Wikipedia to YouTube. The move here is part of the broader reconstruction of

of all other users in Facebook who share the same taste. From this or any other range of connections, one is able to create a social network of “friends” with whom one could share messages, photographs, videos, and the names of each other’s friends.

Since its initial release in 2005, Facebook’s capabilities have expanded. The site now contains a “newsfeed” that informs all of the user’s “friends” about one’s activities within the site, such as updating one’s profile page, status, commenting on someone else’s photographs, and so on. The company also allowed third-party software developers to create applications that users download to adorn their profile page. There are thousands of these applications, many of which are intended to encourage various levels of participation or attract attention from a user’s circle of friends. These range from trivia challenges to weather updates, and from tests that reveal aspects of one’s personality (“which German philosopher are you?”) to those that determine one’s “hotness.” One of the more popular classes of applications are those that promote users to engage in virtually gestural forms of communication to get more attention, an act made possible through poking, hugging, sending gifts or good karma, or by throwing animals, giving vampire bites, or unleashing werewolves onto other users. Other popular applications offer diversions such as retro video games or opportunities to play chess or “Scrabulous,” an unsanctioned version of the popular board game.

Many Canadian institutions and a number of political parties have become intimately involved, producing a range of different applications for Facebook users: fans of the Conservative Party can download the “I Support Stephen Harper” application, featuring a collage of images of the current Prime Minister. In Vancouver, the South Coast British Columbia Transit Authority now operates Translink NextBus, an application that provides users with bus schedules. One of the country’s largest banks, TD Canada Trust, has an application for users to organize their monthly budgets. Finally, with a move reminiscent of one of the first uses for radio—to spread religion—the Evangel Church of Kelowna allows users to download an application giving access to the weekly sermon, along with notes to allow users to follow along with the recording.

In an interview with *Time* magazine, Zuckerberg described Facebook not as “social networking” but as a “social utility,” one based not on establishing new connections between strangers, but on increasing the efficiency of communication with pre-existing connections.⁷ Given what I have already said about the promise

offered by companies working in a Web 2.0. environment, one might conclude that Zuckerberg's choice of wording here is part of a corporate strategy where Facebook serves as a broader platform for various kinds of computing applications. Such a description also serves as a branding strategy, one that differentiates Facebook from its competition. If we approach this description from a non-commercial perspective, however, the explanation of Facebook as a utility built on communicative efficiency working within a bounded social sphere—what some call “walled gardens”—is an important feature of its popularity. In other words, Facebook's success with users comes not from the prospects of random engagements with cyber-strangers (although I imagine this depends on the user's age), but through its ability to encourage connections from within one's social world, even a world comprised of people from one's distant past. As I will explain in the next two sections these features also facilitate a kind of Internet experience that is consistent with a pace of Internet use experienced by many Canadians, one marked by frequent checking in between various tasks, quick forms of communication, and contact with people from one's offline social domain, usually in the context of work.

Brief Encounters and Heavy Checking: Characterizing Internet Use

The question of how to consider the temporalities of the Internet has attracted a range of different opinions. One of the more popular conceptions is offered by Manuel Castells who argues that networked societies represent spaces of “flows.”⁸ However Castells' excellent topographical account of the structure of information societies does not provide much assistance for understanding the ways individual users tap into those flows. To accomplish this I want to build on Michael Newman's recent characterization of web video as an “interstitial form” by arguing that sites like Facebook, as well as a number of popular Internet applications, capitalize on a particular form of online engagement, a quick hit undertaken usually in-between different tasks.⁹ It argues that considering one's use of the Internet as a series of brief encounters sheds light on some of the formal properties of a number of popular web applications, including Facebook.

This question of media pacing, the rate of engagement with media forms, is rarely considered in studies of Canadian Internet use. One might argue that this is true with other media forms as well. This is because we have fairly established

assumptions about how audiences engage with media forms. Radio, we are told, is a more intimate but also an ambient media form, facilitating what we now call “multi-tasking” in which one can perform another action while listening. Television is more demanding in that sense, but still allows for more distracted engagement. The dim lights and theatrical settings of movie theatres result in a singularly focused engagement on the screen and, we are taught, with the screen itself. Each of these models make certain assumptions about investment and duration, that one is always “into” whatever form they are engaged in, even if they are doing other things. While popular discussion on the Internet would tend to avoid this problem because a language of simultaneity is part of the social construction of new media, ironically our attempts to measure the pace of Internet use tend to rely on assumptions about investment drawn from previous media forms, as problematic as they may be.

This is reflected by the tendency to measure Internet use through a temporal measurement that centres on the 7-day week. Weekly Internet use has been the measurement used by Statistics Canada over the course of the last two studies of national Internet behaviour.¹⁰ Another major study, undertaken by a number of scholars associated with the Canadian Internet Project (CIP), reflected roughly the same tendency. A review of the results of that CIP study finds questions asking survey participants to disclose the number of occurrences per week listening to recorded music; playing video games; reading or searching for medical information; or reading newspapers or magazines.¹¹ Neither study asked questions about frequency or duration: How many times do people check their email every day? How long does each session online take? Do more people send emails on weekends than at the beginning of the week? How long do they typically take reading email, watching videos, listening to music, and, for my purposes, checking their Facebook accounts? The absence of these questions by survey designers reflects a disconnect between the choice of measurement methodologies and a pattern of use that is typically characterized by repeated checking of a small number of sites (email, news, weather, social networking, and so on) for small amounts of time.

To a certain degree, the popularity of the weekly measurement is a testament to the durability of the week as a socially constructed measurement, one that Eviatar Zerubavel characterizes as promoting “the structuredness and orderliness of human life making it more regular and thus more predictable.”¹² At the same

time, however, the prevalence of weekly use is also tied to the ways measurements of media use are tied to broader narratives about other aspects of social life. For example, the “weekly use” measurement is usually located within a set of discourses that positions one’s investment in media against other kinds of activities, like time spent with family. This kind of logic is preoccupied with questions of media impact and results in relative comparisons placing weekly consumption of media versus other, more productive activities such as exercise, work, or reading books or newspapers in their offline form. A recent story relating Internet and television use to childhood obesity posted on the CBC’s website is a perfect case in point.¹³ Once again, the story points to the same measurement—weekly use—for its interpretive focus. As a result, such figures are located within a moralistic calculus that places media consumption as an intrusion into or unfair competition with the unmediated life and within a discussion about the consequences of wasting time.

Despite its ubiquity, the weekly use measurement does not capture what I consider to be the quicker, more ephemeral uses of the Internet in everyday life. To illustrate what I mean let us consider two different studies that discuss what people say they do when they are online. The Pew Internet and American Life Project found that the top six uses of the Internet are for email, to look things up, to get driving directions, health information, and, of course, the weather.¹⁴ In Canada, the results are remarkably similar, with one additional feature: the act of banking or bill payment online appears to be much more popular here.¹⁵ Near the bottom of both surveys are the activities that seem to garner the most media attention and scholarly analysis, namely blogging, uploading videos, downloading podcasts, and working on one’s personal webpage.

Even if one wishes to take these findings with a grain of salt, both the Pew and StatsCan studies point to a dominant tendency towards a mode of Internet use geared towards efficient means of communication or task completion, engagements with friends, family, and other personal contacts, and quick acts of consultation. In other words, most users experience the Internet through a series of brief encounters, episodic “hops” online for a range of purposes, only to return to some other aspect of life or to leave whatever was online on the screen for future consultation. They also use the Internet for a series of disconnected brief activities, such as a 15-minute encounter that involves reading and replying to email, looking up directions to a party, paying a bill, and checking a Facebook account. In

these scenarios no one activity is sustained over the long term, only its memory is preserved in the history function of a user's browser, deep within the computer's technical infrastructure, or on a server farm located far away.

Some of the most popular web applications capitalize on the interstitial rhythms of Internet use outlined here to provide brevity and efficiency. These include forms of messaging to be sure, from email to text messaging. However, many of the most popular video applications, most notably those that appear on YouTube, are typically less than five minutes in length. This has encouraged a particular form of expression, the user-generated web video that strives for maximum visual pleasure in a reasonably short period of time, earning them the moniker of a kind of content useful for "snacking."¹⁶ Other popular web video content like the practical joke, the animal act, the cute baby, and tricks involving soft drinks and Mentos candies all fall into a stylistic category Newman calls "short and sweet, in the slang sense."

Facebook's interface, then, can be read as reflecting the assumptions about tempo and the short and sweet implicit in Newman's comment on web video. The site's architecture, including its status updates, newsfeed and mini-feed, profile pages, online games, and mail messages, encourages regularized checking in for a series of quick hits—replying to an email, commenting on someone's posted photograph, watching a short music video, or listening to a music clip on someone else's page—and then jumping to a different activity. This also explains the popularity of some of the forms of communication I indicated above, such as throwing zombies or giving bouquets of flowers, or dedicating songs to friends along with practices like "super-poking," kissing or hugging, or writing brief notes on a user's wall. These are all attempts to convey multi-sensory forms of communication that emphasize the short and the sweet, in both slang and literal senses.

These activities occur within the rhythms of quotidian life in which interstitial moments serve as opportunities for communication. Students update their Facebook status after writing an exam, or to make plans with other friends; others announce home purchases, arrivals at airports, or appearances on television, usually before or after something happens; others return to the work on the screen, writing memos, crunching numbers, or completing business plans. This author routinely shuttles back and forth between the Internet and writing through keystroke shortcuts or mouse-clicks. The interstitial nature of Facebook is reflective, then, of the ways in which many people use digital technologies both as machines for work

and play and as megaphones for the announcement of personal details to friends and others, usually in very small doses.

I want to address the question of Facebook as a diversionary force for work in a moment. However, I want to conclude this section by underlining the point that attention to pacing and an Internet experience constituted by brief encounters and heavy checking represents a fundamentally important step towards understanding both the popularity of Facebook specifically, but also toward a more textured understanding of a number of applications on the Internet more generally. One might argue that a turn towards frequency may naturally lead toward another problematic conclusion—that relating media consumption to addictive behaviour. But it may also be the case that a move toward heavy checking might more accurately locate the Internet within a set of routine actions that make up a big part of social life. Here then, Internet use may be located not against various kinds of social activities, like exercise, that are good for you. Instead, media consumption should be seen as a complement to daily activities, where television watching may be a prelude for slumber, where newspapers complement breakfast, iPod use is tied to burning calories on a treadmill, and updating your Facebook status serves as a temporary cure for a range of activities, from sitting in a lecture hall to punching the clock at work, a subject to which we shall now turn.

Facebook, Workspaces, and the Digital Distraction

In the run-up to the provincial election of 2007, Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty made headlines for banning civil servants from accessing Facebook at the office. While McGuinty's actions may have been the result of the heat of the election and a way to protect against claims that the province's workers were "wasting taxpayer dollars," he was not acting in a vacuum. The increasing place of networked communication in workplaces has raised a number of anxieties about the unproductive ways employees are making use of their time in the office. A number of companies have blocked access to the site, arguing that the site makes it either too easy for people to share company secrets or to be drawn away from the other responsibilities on their screens.¹⁷ One might argue that it is not competitive issues but rather the dissemination of images that take place during company hours that may be the problem. Such was the case late last year, when pictures of partying recruits of Canada's Border Services Agency were posted by

disgruntled co-workers on a Facebook page, quickly making the headlines and raising questions about the way the agency was going about adding to its ranks. A report in the *Toronto Star* claimed that an internal audit of Toronto's municipal employees found that a small number of employees working at City Hall had been spending a number of hours idling online.¹⁸ Along with another key form of communication, the press release, the Facebook site represents an important challenge for organizations struggling with image management.

However expansive the literature on media representations of work has been, very little reflection has been undertaken about media technologies *for play at work* in both official and non-official forms. Indeed, there exists a rich literature that focuses on the role of new technologies in the restructuring of companies and the deskilling of labour or the subjection of office workers to more elaborate regimes of panoptic surveillance and of the impact of businesses processes like the consolidation of media ownership on the work environments of Canadian news organizations.¹⁹ Left largely unaddressed, however, is the question of workplaces as *mediaspaces*, sites in which the specific social and political dynamics of work intersect with Internet activity.²⁰ We tend to take for granted the extent to which the rhythms of the Internet mimic the temporalities of the working day. I can say empirically here that email traffic decreases considerably after work or on weekends. I can also say empirically that postings to blogs appear to follow similar rhythms; my rss (Really Simple Syndication) reader or Twitter feed does not overflow between 6 pm and 6 am unless messages are being sent from places in the world where the workday is proceeding along.

Such neglect is also unfortunate because media forms serve a number of different purposes within workplaces. On the one hand, workplaces are profoundly mediated environments, with unique forms of communication such as the memo, the executive summary, the business plan, or the audit report as well as technologies that promise administrative efficiency such as the telephone, fax machine, the website, interactive calendar systems, and email. At the same time, however, workplaces are also spaces for the production, consumption, and dissemination of a range of media and information genres. Radio stations like Toronto's E-Z Rock, Sarnia's "The Fox" or Medicine Hat's "My96FM" position themselves as the "at work radio station," while companies seen as "forward looking" install video arcades or games rooms. While these may work in the name of encouraging camaraderie and developing a healthy corporate culture, the individual use of such

technologies usually symbolizes the level of trust an organization might have for its employees. While giving someone a telephone in the 1950s might be seen as part of an employee's "sense of striving and hope," as C. Wright Mills once observed,²¹ and symbolizes one's move up the corporate ladder, where one has more time to goof off (as opposed to manual labourers, for example) such professional and technological mobility comes with an assumption that the employee won't abuse that privilege by using it for non-work purposes. Technological innovations, like the Internet and sites such as Facebook, then, are only the latest in use at work for non-work purposes and a fascinating backdrop against which to view some of the characteristic features of the Internet both in facilitating brief encounters and as an important part of what the industrial sociologist Donald Roy once called the "game of work."²²

Most of this modern technological use occurs in the context of the precariousness of twenty-first century work. Writers from Jeremy Rifkin to Pietro Basso have noted the change in the notion of work.²³ Zygmunt Bauman notes the key tenets of the work ethic that drove much of industrialization, such as delayed gratification and long-term commitments both to an employer and a work project, have fallen astray in an era of shareholder value and flexible work. "Getting attached to the job in hand," he writes, "falling in love with what the job requires its holder to do, identifying one's place in the world with the work performed or the skills deployed means becoming a hostage to fate... given the short-lived nature of any employment."²⁴ Others, like Richard Sennett, point out that changes in corporate culture, where departments now work against each other to achieve institutional cost savings—with the stakes as high as one's own job in some cases—mean that interpersonal relationships at work have become more fraught and complex. This is coupled with the change in organizational structure of many working environments, one that Sennett characterizes as a move from pyramid-shaped system with centralized control by a few, to one resembling an MP3 player, where aspects of the organization are shuffled and reconstituted for projects oriented in the short term, where management is spread across a number of different middle management positions, and where much of the policing takes place around technological forms, like computerized databases, auditing systems, and so on, that perform institutional surveillance functions.²⁵ The actual office space itself has declined, a product of companies trying to save on real estate costs, as a result of office sharing, and, through telecommuting, the very extinction of the need for an office itself.

An article published in an online real estate magazine notes that for the Toronto market, office space has decreased from 240 square feet to 190 square feet per employee and that similar declining figures can be found in other Canadian cities, such as Vancouver and Calgary.²⁶ The effect on shrinking space alters the character of the workplace itself, as David Franz suggests:

This shrinkage not only saves space, but time as well—time wasted walking to restrooms, the coffee pot, and the marketing department, for example. Supervision is made more efficient too: with no walls to hide behind, slackers have to work or at least imitate work in a convincing way.²⁷

Here, I think, Franz needs a little history lesson on the art of slacking in the workplace. Modes of distraction involving media technologies have always sought to imitate work in a convincing way: the agreement between those engaged in a personal call that the subject matter may switch to something more “official” if someone walks by the office; the chit-chat around the water cooler; the hand over the ear to mask listening to the game on the radio; the magazine under the annual report; and now, the gentle turn towards the palm of your hand to see if one has sent a text message to your phone or the “alt-tab” shortcut to return from your Facebook page to more officially sanctioned activities.

This has manifested itself in a number of different Internet applications that, like Facebook, make brief diversions possible. Sites like *ishouldbeworking.com*, *boredatwork.com*, or *wasteaminute.com* offer games, jokes, funny video clips, Sudoku puzzles, and other activities aimed at taking someone away for a few minutes. A genre of viral videos—many of which are staged—involving people being shown exhibiting “office rage” and destroying office furniture, computers, or photocopiers circulates through forwarded mass emails and are uploaded on sites like YouTube. The popular acronym *NSFW* helps to warn employees about the consequences of their procrastination, by telling users that an attachment or hyperlink may be “not safe for work.” For those managing to engage in *NSFW* activities, some sites offer a “panic button” that transports the user away from the site towards something more anodyne, like the weather, with the click of a button. A site like *readatwork.com*, an initiative of the New Zealand Book Council, mimics the Microsoft Office environment so that users can read literature while appearing to be doing other things.



Figure 2: Screen capture of opening page of www.readatwork.com, New Zealand Book Council.

It is also important to note the ways that workplace media consumption has also had an effect on more established media forms. In the United States, one of the effects of workplace computer use has been to watch network television during the lunch hour, as the hours between noon and 2 pm represent peak viewing hours for online viewers.²⁸ It is unlikely that similar numbers are evident in the Canadian context, but here the reason may not be that Canadians are more serious about their work and less liable to distraction: copyright agreements and cultural policy regulations forbid Canadians from accessing American television websites out of region.

Seen a different way, however, concerns over the distractive capabilities of media technologies in workplace also reproduce a very common line of argument about the relationship between media forms and cognitive abilities, such as the ability to concentrate on more serious issues. However, these kind of diagnostics need to be considered within their context. The impact of short-term “project-

based” work, the need for public companies to deliver profitable results to appease aggressive shareholders, and the continuous concern over job evaporation gives work in the digital era its precarious nature but it also makes for a distracted work environment as well. This is why the attention to Facebook use in the workplace as negatively affecting productivity is the kind of red herring that technological determinism typically presents. The presence of computer terminals that permit data processing but also permit online gambling or status updates on Facebook represents one of a range of distractions Canadian workers must now deal with in order to get any work done.

In the preceding chapter, Toby Miller identifies a “labour focus” as an essential component of a revitalized approach to communication studies. I expand on Miller’s call by suggesting that there are important scholarly benefits that can be derived by examining the rich interplay between media technologies and a range of conceptions of work, in particular, the places where people perform work and the ways media technologies have always offered both the promise for greater productivity and surveillance on the one hand, but also for the potential for workers to goof off. Seeing office spaces as media spaces, then, can continue what has been a fascinating line of work concerned with media consumption in non-traditional settings, and continue to challenge the pre-existing spatial biases that have driven the study of media technologies either to the public square or into the domestic spaces, thereby broadening the study of the interplay between communication technologies, architecture, and the changing nature of work.²⁹

At the same time, however, through its use as a momentary diversion, Facebook also serves a reminder of the persistence of media-related forms of diversion in workplaces, such as the personal call, or the magazine or newspaper under the desk. On one hand, the increasing prevalence of surveillance technologies used to monitor employee Internet activity represents an articulation of the mistrust that exists between employees and employers and of the tense conditions under which many people are forced to work. From a different perspective, however, if we see interruptions as key vantage points in which to engage in ethical reflection, as Amit Pinchevski suggests, than perhaps considering the use of Internet to goof off at work is an effective way for making sense of the changing contexts in which many Canadians work and the ethical questions raised by practices commonly associated with the notion of “stealing time.”³⁰ Being able to step out for a moment, to connect with the outside world, to bring your friends to work with

you even virtually, offers a gentle moment of resistance to the expectations placed on modern workers, but one that is inherently fleeting, for there is always more work to be done.

Here's Looking You Up, Canada

Having outlined how Facebook facilitates a certain mode of Internet experience as well as having provided a context for understanding where a considerable amount of “Facebooking” might take place, I want to conclude this chapter by speculating in a different way as to why Facebook has achieved the popularity and popular scrutiny it has to date. To do this, I want to suggest that we briefly consider Facebook not just as a form of social networking or a form of the cyber-public sphere, but rather to consider the way the site helps us appreciate another particular media form, one that has been so ubiquitous in modern life as to be virtually unnoticeable: the directory. I want to conclude on this point because I suggest that one of the key concerns around the digitization of contemporary life, the concept of privacy, needs to account not only for the power of digital technologies to facilitate surveillance, but also the ways a number of previously existing forms have served to play similar roles, with a significantly different scope, as sites on the Internet. Rather than seeing Facebook as a tool for narcissists and voyeurs one might also see the site's popularity as symbolic of one of the Internet's most notable effects—the mass distribution of directories—and its most powerful function, to facilitate looking things up. Seen this way, a number of the controversies facing the company are representative of the inherent tensions long associated with various iterations of what we now call “the information society.”

Consider the following range of stories about the promise and perils of Facebook use. As danah boyd explains, the company attracted a lot of negative attention when it allowed users to see when their friends updated their newsfeeds.³¹ An attempt to integrate a form of advertising, known as Beacon, which would notify all of a user's friends of one's purchases with a select group of retailers, also backfired. Some stories circulating in the Canadian press concern the more creative uses of the site to mobilize a constituency to protest changes to Canadian copyright law, or as a means to memorialize lost friends of community leaders. However, the majority of stories I have found pertaining to Facebook deal with controversies that stem from misuse of the site. An informal survey of news-

paper stories found pieces on Facebook being used for bullying; for potentially cheating on exams; and, in the case of British Columbia's Ministry of Employment and Income Assistance, for ensuring potential welfare recipients were submitting truthful applications.³² Most recently, a group of law students at the University of Ottawa filed a formal complaint with Canada's Privacy Commissioner against Facebook, arguing that a number of the company's policies violated Canadian privacy law.

Seen from a legal or regulatory perspective, the controversies at Facebook represent the fact that social networking sites operate under what Susan Barnes calls the "privacy paradox," in which users freely give up information about themselves, and yet there remain certain expectations that the giving up of one's privacy might have its limitations.³³ However, seen from a different perspective, one operating under a media studies rubric, the Facebook controversies over privacy reveal anxieties over new media itself. To put it a different way, discourses around privacy serve as convenient shorthand for long-standing concerns about media technologies: their potential for manipulation and exploitation; the relationship between a public right to privacy and a robust sense of citizenship, and, since many of Facebook's users are teenagers and students, moral panics around the corruption of young people through media technologies. More importantly, such developments are stark reminders of technologies run amok, a result of the temporal imbalance between the rapid introduction of new interfaces and devices and society's ability to make sense of them in any meaningful way. Since this disconnect impacts upon the ways technologies like Facebook are framed, used, and potentially regulated, there needs to be some appreciation of where Facebook sits as a media form vis-à-vis other media technologies present within the public sphere. The story of Facebook, then, is not only a reminder of the importance of considering how the resonances of old forms persist in an age of new media but also about the way those media forms come to be put into use.

It is important to consider Facebook's offline influences to see that the porous boundaries between private information and public dissemination are not just inherent to media forms, but are located within their operationalization through a number of different informational forms. The site was created in order to represent an electronic and hyperlinked derivation of facebook, publications made available to incoming university students on a number of American university campuses. While there is considerable variation in the content of facebook from

institution to institution, generally speaking the publication would include a profile with a student's name and photograph, date of birth, home addresses or residence locations, hometowns, and other personal information. The books may also contain the photographs and personal information of a school's faculty, administrative staff, and other faces on campus. In this offline version, the facebook acted as a stimulant for sociality and a deterrent against shyness by theoretically providing an image of the student so that they could be recognizable and enough information about other students to act as a conversation starter.

In this way, the facebook acted like an inverted yearbook, one distributed at the beginning of the school year rather than at its end. Like the facebook, the yearbook acts as a kind of register of faces, often containing information about a student's hobbies or activities in school as well as inside jokes, lists of likes and dislikes, and prognostications for the future. In its design and in the uses it encourages, Facebook draws on a number of different other versions of the directory, such as the dating service, the white or yellow pages, the office directory, the professional directory, as well as publications like the almost century-old *Canadian Who's Who*, whose publisher, the University of Toronto Press, markets as "the most comprehensive biographical information available on leading and influential Canadians."

Each one of these derivations on the directory involves publicizing aspects of your personal and/or professional life so that it can be accessed by members of the public. In this way, privacy is transactional: one surrenders personal information for some common purpose. One chooses to list in the white pages in case someone would like to find you; one gives up information to a dating service in hopes of finding a mate; one "mugs" for a school yearbook in the name of rebellion; one's information can be found in a professional directory or one found in office buildings to make it easy for people to find you. This kind of "publicness" has its other side, too. One can be solicited by telemarketers or crank callers; one can be "profiled" based on how one looks, and so on. Knowing where one can be found, then, represents a profoundly liberal conundrum: How to be open and accessible to others but not to the point of terror. The Internet, and digital technologies such as Facebook then, test the limits of our comfort level with the dissemination of information about ourselves and others sent through the network.

The ways that Facebook, the Internet, and other media forms from the digital and pre-digital era have facilitated "checking people out" may well be a practice

associated with stalking; however, in its more mundane and banal uses, it is also a practice associated with research, to ensure that the decisions one makes about where to travel, where to attend university, which doctor to use, what party to vote for, are the most individually optimal. The drive for one to “take a gander” also reflects a certain sense of curiosity; when one looks for people from the past to see if they have a Facebook page they are likely driven by a question—I wonder what they are doing these days?—which is as much about nostalgia as it is about surveillance. It may also be a pre-emptive move, one “reads up” on something or someone in order to avoid awkwardness associated with ignorance on a range of issues. Is the popularity of such activities part of a thirst for knowledge? A reflection of Canadian shyness, where one can ask questions without direct face-to-face contact? Does the fact that, with only a series of brief encounters, one’s decisions are based on information derived from the top of a Google search, from a colleague’s Facebook page, or from an audit of one’s office computer? These are the kinds of questions that obviously one cannot answer here, but they emerge when we focus on the range of practices that new social media forms make possible.

As in each of the previous sections, what I offer here should be seen as a provocation for further research. With that said, however, I also offer that an appreciation of the place of Facebook and other “looking up media” in digital, analog, and textual forms sheds considerable light not only on the tensions between surveillance and democracy that are inherent in various forms of information technologies, but also the way Canada’s legal and regulatory system has sought to address those diverse uses, from the nefarious to the banal. At the same time, a closer look at Facebook might also help to shed light on the ways in which the anonymous act of looking people up has been a largely unnoticed aspect of Canadian life. It is an aspect of life that is part of the way Canadians use the Internet, as well as a vital means through which information has flowed throughout this country’s modern and digital eras. Furthermore, it is an act made possible, with all of its ethical bumps and bruises, through a diverse range of informational forms that have historically contained a little bit of information about all of us.

The key questions for further research may not only be how to protect our privacy from its abuse by a surveillance state, nor a question of the incredible unease caused by the blurring of lines between private and public spheres. Instead, as this section has shown, there are richer analytical gains to be made by starting from the position that the concept of privacy is a historically contingent concept, one that

plays out in a number of places and contexts in a number of different ways. At the same time however, the task for the researcher may well be to appreciate the ways in which we publicize our private lives, the ways that we opt in, by selecting the most pertinent information, by selecting music videos from bands our friends think are cool; by publicizing friendships to increase our social status; by uploading photos showing only our good sides, and by occasionally working within the machine, managing to stick out from the list, even for a moment, to become the brightest face in the crowd before having to get back to work.

Notes

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