



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

You've got memes

"There will be time, there will be time,

To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet."

TS Eliot, The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock

A few months ago, in a moment of indiscretion, I joined Facebook.

For years I had avoided it. In the beginning I stayed far, far away because my former job required a clandestine approach to my personal life and information, and then later because I just didn't see the need for it. But times change, the world keeps spinning around, and after continual prodding by friends and family — and with an eye toward using the platform as a means to broaden my writing audience — I finally caved in and signed up.

A large part of me now

regrets that decision.

Facebook, it appears, is one of the principle drivers behind the phenomenon of the shrinking, if not — to borrow a phrase — closing of the American mind. They are not alone, of course, those Facebook engineers and their competitors in various Silicon Valley skunkworks have dreamed up any number of social sites, all of which have been cleverly designed to operate on the same dopamine response as methamphetamines. Like and share. Like and share. Like and share, with an ever-diminishing return after the initial high.

Today, in an historical twist, we are faced with a strange contradiction — the notion that even as we drown in information, and are swept away by the speed in which it arrives, we actually know less and less. The conversations on Facebook, where they exist in any recognizable form, quickly spin off into insults and personal attacks, or are reduced to highly dubious and un-cited facts to prove even more questionable points.

From the regrettable and damaging 24-hour television news cycle, to any number of web-based "news" services and social media notifications, to livestreamed cell phone video, who can possibly sort through the daily bombardment of memes

and our minds without any necessary vetting or intellectual challenge, merely slamming into each other and competing for survival. And nobody gets any smarter. We look at them and laugh, or we cry, or we rage against them.

And isn't that the point of information, for us to filter through it judiciously and arrive at some element of truth?

And what, exactly, is a meme? British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins has forwarded a theory of memes as "simple units of cultural information whose primary characteristic is the ability to replicate and spread virally through their interaction with other memes... When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain." And here's the rub — the one that should probably scare you: "Truth and proof are barely criteria in the competition among memes."

Isn't that Facebook, particularly after some controversial event, somewhere in our country?

This robotic invasion of Facebook memes (and who knows where they come from) seems to be unstoppable. The parasite is taking over the host.

The Book of Face is a world of memes competing on a grand scale. These "simple units of cultural information" invade our computers

and our minds without any necessary vetting or intellectual challenge, merely slamming into each other and competing for survival. And nobody gets any smarter. We look at them and laugh, or we cry, or we rage against them.

From a distance, we act and look like heroin addicts on a park bench. And don't believe for a second that the engineers at Facebook and elsewhere don't know this, and seek to capitalize on parasitizing your brain, and maybe even, God help us, with an eye to eventually controlling it.

In a world of self-driving cars and the rise of artificial intelligence, that isn't as far-fetched as it sounds.

I was in graduate school when email swept the planet, and I well remember sitting in a room full of other students being instructed on how to use it. We laughed out loud, thinking it was the most ridiculous thing we'd ever seen. What use could we possibly find for it?

Now, of course, email is going the way of the 8-track, largely replaced with an array of memes, instant messaging, and emojis, and if our means of communicating is any indication of what is

happening inside our minds — to our ability to formulate complicated reasoning and articulate it with some degree of art and persuasion — we are definitely in trouble.

I get it. Facebook is a tool, like any other, but dumbing the world and its issues down to the size of a meme — which can be a photo, a video, or a rant — does nothing to improve the manner, nor the quality with which we exchange complicated information and ideas. It's the principle reason I still love books, and print media, because with print it takes time and effort to build an argument, to read it and digest it, and to formulate an intelligent and informed response.

Print media slows the world down, and makes it bigger again.

Facebook isn't going anywhere, and I'm still on it, but I'm coming to see it more and more as a peddler of dope, who only tells lies, and is happy to give free samples on the merest chance we'll develop an addiction. And if we get hooked, each and every time we like and share an unexamined meme, Facebook makes us liars, too.

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