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Anti-Copyright



How Facebook Changed the World

Burn Shit

December 8, 2011

This recent BBC documentary was even more galling in its content than in its ridiculous title. To confuse cause with means so clumsily, and belittle the more-than commendable achievements of the street-fighters, occupiers, insurgents and insurrectionists of the ‘Arab Spring’ by attributing the success of their movements to Zuckerberg’s ‘revolutionary’ social network. Facebook was indeed a key tool in organising the tumultuous overthrow of Tunisia and Egypt’s dictatorial regimes, but let’s not get carried away with the smug technophilia. Facebook changed the world in 2011 inasmuch as the telegram changed it in 1917, the telephone changed it in 1968 and television changed it in 1989.

What is the real impact of the internet and facebook in a more general sense? Real community replaced by online community. Real debate and discussion replaced by forums, ‘likes’ and youtube comments. Real living replaced with vicarious experiences in online gaming and virtual worlds. Facebook’s position in all of this is that of the ultimate Simulacra, the ultimate Representation. Each individual is mapped on a vast network

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Retrieved on 1st June 2021 from kpbsfs.wordpress.com

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of separated subjects, with their own quirky ‘profiles’ as the digital projections of the self. Individuals who have constructed an immaterial relief of their personalities online, whose lived experience is recorded and logged in the ‘statuses’, ‘comments’, ‘likes’, ‘attendings’ and ‘not attendings’ of facebook’s Grand Simulation.

The genius of facebook lies in the semblance of participation it provides; the ability of users to comment, join groups, create events, add friends, and choose the profile picture that most suitably represents, defines and epitomises *them*. Our lifestyles are laid bare in a succession of computerised images that we can filter, crop and tag so that they *truly* encapsulate the mood of the night. The facebook profile is the surrogate self, the alternative ego expressed through images. Controlling and managing our identities, our own digital understudies. Sifting through a days-worth of banal newsfeed – a wonderful substitute for actual contact and conversation. Seeing how our semio-friends are doing in their second-lives. The facebook medium separates us more than it connects us. The participation it offers is only participation in our own alienation. It is a debased substitute for the Real, a meaningless collection of digitised images and signs that mediate the experiences of everyday life. Vicarious living, self-improvement through self-projection, secondary experience, indulging our tedious curiosities about the lives of others – these are the main functions of the social network.

All this without even mentioning the implications for personal privacy or the hoarding of data and information for use in market research, targeted advertising, consumer surveys, police investigations and whatever else The Corporation deems appropriate. Facebook can be a useful tool for organisation, but we must not exaggerate it’s potential as a catalyst for emancipation, rather we should realise its obvious limits – that it is perhaps the most advanced and ingenious technology of spectacular domination.

Facebook produces docile bodies and docile minds. Entire populations connected in abstraction but separated more than ever in reality. It is a highly-addictive social anesthetic that exemplifies the tedium and superficiality of late capitalism. Consistent with facebook’s global takeover, we’ve seen the rise of the ‘slacktivists’ and ‘clicktivists’, a particularly obnoxious breed of activist-militants, who boost the radical credentials of their online selves (and surely get a perverse sense of self-satisfaction) when they ‘Like’ the Robin Hood Tax or join the ‘I Hate David Cameron’ group, changing the world one step at a time, without ever leaving their bedrooms. Such a blatantly ineffectual substitute for direct action and unmediated struggle – the online petition – but one that provides the *appearance* of action and a *veneer* of participation, and after all, what *appears* is good and what is good *appears*. Dissent is signified, accepted, encouraged, incorporated, commodified and reduced to a simple click – channeled into the cyber-Symbolic realm of facebook.

Politics is what happens in everyday life. Facebook is a denial of life, it is life’s poor substitute, it is what happens when life stops, it is the pinnacle of post-industrial-consumer-spectacular-capitalism’s degradation of existence and the perfect encapsulation of our alienation, separation, mediation and banality.

Off facebook and onto the streets.