

ROBERT G. FERRELL

/dev/random



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WHEN I WAS A KID IN NORTH TEXAS

in the sixties—I realize young people, or at least those who can still comprehend entire sentences that contain no abbreviations, tend to tune out anything that follows the introductory phrase “When I was a kid,” but I doubt there are many of them reading this column in the first place—“networking” pretty much meant meeting other people face-to-face at church picnics, the Rotary Club fundraiser bake sale, or that annual carnival in the Piggly-Wiggly parking lot. The term “social networking” was redundant and therefore unnecessary. This was, of course, in the days when lack of legitimate linguistic function was still an etymological disqualifier.

Along came computer networks, ARPANET, and, eventually, the public Internet (thanks, Al Gore), and the landscape of social interaction changed almost overnight. Impersonal communication has more or less always been possible via messenger and then postal mail, of course, but the delay between statement and response was so great that it couldn't really be compared with actual conversing. You had days, even weeks or months, to consider and compose your contribution to the dialogue. The advent of the telegraph shortened this latency considerably, and then widespread adoption of telephony brought remote conversations to real-time status. There were no visual clues inherent in this verbal intercourse, though, so miscommunication was rampant.

Now we have (lucky us) “social networking,” which term is really nothing more than an insidious oxymoron. Yes, it involves interactions among lots of people, but those people almost never come into physical proximity in their daily genuflections to Face(less)book. Social networking really is a throw-back to the old “party line” days of the early telephone system, where many people talk over one another or eavesdrop silently in an anonymous amorphous mass. Humans are primed genetically to respond to even the subtlest visual clues about the mood and intentions of another human via body language. Emoticons just don't convey the same level of information, no matter how cleverly employed. Maybe if we keep communicating this way for another hundred thousand years or so we can develop some kind of “verbal-only perception”

sense, but I doubt it. We haven't, as a species, made a lot of progress towards developing sense of any sort.

It isn't that I think the whole concept of social networking is outright bogus or stupid. There are things about it I really admire, most of which revolve around the fact that it keeps kids who might otherwise be doing drugs, creating hip-hop, or planning careers as investment bankers somewhat distracted. I personally get a certain amount of entertainment envisioning people raiding Naxxramas while sending email, texting, tweeting, and talking on the cell phone simultaneously, in much the same way that I used to enjoy watching the Surgery Channel whenever flesh-eating bacteria played a prominent role.

At the risk of exposing myself as the rapidly aging fuddy-duddy I quite definitely am, the single most amusing (disturbing) facet of the social networking phenomenon (plague) from my perspective is the willingness of MySpies users to expose themselves, both anatomically and psychologically, at the drop of a virtual hat. Never before in history has intelligence gathering regarding the innermost demons of prospective students/employees/spouses been so simple and convenient. It takes a lot of the tedium out of being a sexual predator when potential victims post their complete hopes, dreams, aspirations, and itineraries online for your casual perusal, lemme tell you. It's as though you have a 21-inch LCD window into every teenager's private diary. With a soundtrack and video. You don't even need the little brass key.

The business-related heads of the social networking hydra I don't so much mind. LinkedIn, for example, seems nominally useful if for no other reason than I like to look at the interesting societal cladistics generated by the interrelationships therein represented. You are in a maze of twisty passages, all alike. My life has been indelibly enriched by the realization that there are only four degrees of LinkedIn separation between myself and an individual who claims to be a confidant of Valiant Thor, an avowed native of the planet Venus. I suppose if I were in the import/export business that might present some potentially lucrative commercial possibilities, but shipping costs are somewhat problematic. Then there is also the whole "virtually everything is quickly reduced to a molten mess on Venus" inconvenience. On the plus side, getting through Customs should be a piece of cake.

Blogging and its ADHD-riddled bastard offspring, tweeting, are the latest and arguably most pathogenic mutations of the always-connected neurophage. Blogging at least has the potential for relating moderately enlightening information, mired deeply though such gems are in a planet-sized morass of the mundane, the inane, and the profane. Tweeting, on the other grossly deformed hand, is nothing more than a low-budget horror flick where thousands upon thousands of zombies stumble around mumbling incoherently to themselves while the incoherently mumbling zombies who pass nearest them pretend briefly to be listening.

It is good practice for membership in state or federal legislative bodies, I guess.