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Facing up to social networking

by Heidi Schlumpf



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I hung out in Facebook "limbo" for more than a year, technically signed up but ignoring the friend requests that kept popping into my inbox. And it wasn't just the grammarian in me protesting the social networking site's annoying transformation of a noun into a verb.

I didn't want to be "friended" by people I prefer to avoid -- old boyfriends, high school buddies I haven't talked to in 25 years, and other pieces of my past I'm happy keeping, well, in the past. I also wasn't sure how to combine personal friends with professional ones. It sounded too snobby to ask professional acquaintances to become "fans" instead of "friends." And I already had three e-mail accounts, two personal blogs and a professional Web site I haven't updated since George W. Bush was president. The last thing I needed was one more online activity to take me away from "real" life.

But then I published my first book and knew I needed to market it through every means possible. So I accepted about 50 requests from close friends, other writers and editors, people I've met through knitting or adoption blogs, and, yes, even old boyfriends and people I knew in high school.

It's a miscellaneous mix of people who now have the luxury of knowing when I appear on TV promoting the book and how many trips to Home Depot it took my husband to install a new toilet.

Facebook is the most used social network Web site in the English-speaking world. For free, users can create their own page with profile information and photos, add friends and send them messages, and join groups dedicated to everything from your college's alumni to shared political interests to "I bet Wisconsin can get 1 million fans before any other state."

I don't publish my every waking thought, nor do I try to be clever or witty, though I enjoy it when other people do. And to be honest, I haven't really done that much to promote the book. But I do post several times a week and check it obsessively.

I stay in touch with former coworkers, enjoy regular updates from a friend living in Ghana, and unearth story ideas from others in Catholic and religious media. Sometimes I even discover what my husband is up to.

For good or ill, a ton of information is shared on Facebook, and there is value in connecting there. Although I try to avoid becoming a "fan" of every corporate entity on Facebook (and they're all there, luring fans with coupons and special offers), as a fan of my favorite media --including NCR -- I get updates about new online content and sometimes even get to give input for future stories. Sojourners magazine lets fans on Facebook vote for their favorite cover design each month.

When the earthquake struck in Haiti, Facebook became the place where like-minded people shared information, prayers and opportunities for donating to the relief effort. Catholic Relief Services has posted up-to-the-minute reports from on the ground on Facebook. Social networking, including donating by texting on cell phones, was instrumental in mobilizing massive amounts of money in the days after the devastating quake.

Last summer an English archbishop warned that social networking sites dehumanized community life, encouraged teenagers to see friendship as a commodity, and put them at risk of suicide when those relationships collapse. "Friendship is not a commodity; friendship is something that is hard work," said Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster.

I agree. The term "friend" is misleading, since many of my 100-plus Facebook friends are really acquaintances, if that. But what I originally saw as a disadvantage of Facebook is also its strength -- the wide variety of people in your circle. It's the opposite of niche publishing. Here comes everybody: my editor, my husband's friends, my mom.

Media are neither intrinsically good nor evil. The same Internet that spreads the word about donating to disaster relief can disseminate untruths just as quickly. A teenager who uses MySpace or Facebook may live to regret a public profile full of adolescent angst when applying to colleges or job-hunting.

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I have more than a bit of ambivalence about my life being so public. It does unnerve me that anyone who can spell "Schlumpf" correctly can find me on Facebook, but of course they can also find me elsewhere on the Web. And as a published writer, there is plenty of my personal life "out there," not only online but in good old-fashioned print.

In January, Pope Benedict XVI encouraged priests to use online media to spread the good news. "As new technologies create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances, [priests] are called to respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word," he wrote in his message for World Communications Day.

The Vatican has a Web site, is on YouTube and has almost 4,000 followers on its Facebook page. Benedict has his own e-mail address and sent texts during his visit the U.S. last year.

While there are concerns about the privacy, the safety and -- let's be honest -- the quality of online communication, it is an additional means of connecting that is becoming almost required in today's world.

Don't even talk to me about Twitter.

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