A Never-Ending Exercise

Facebook as an Apparatus of the Incomplete Self

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1. Expanding the Wall

Though social networking sites are not considered to be anything new in the rapid-fire twenty-first century, they continue to hold a dominant position as a means of communication, scheduling, and as outlets of leisure for hundreds of millions of people from all walks of life and dispersed all over the globe. No one site, however, has achieved the hype and notoriety that Facebook has. As evidenced by its over half a billion user accounts and the recent David Fincher film *The Social Network* (2010), Facebook has become a household word as well as a bookmark bar staple on most personal computers. Facebook's popularity has reached such a high point that the site has begun to expand outside of itself: users can now take Facebook with them on the go via the Facebook mobile phone application; many websites contain a hyperlink to Facebook on their front page so that web surfers can immediately "like" the site in question (or the product or concept the site promotes); and the name of the site itself has become a verb—"I'll Facebook you" is now a common turn of phrase.

Shortly after the aforementioned David Fincher film was released, I went to a screening of it and left with a certain sense of curiosity regarding my own use of the social networking site. I've had a Facebook account since December of 2005, but did not begin using it heavily until early 2008. After seeing *The Social Network*, I wanted to know just how much, and of what, my usage had amounted to, so I returned home and began expanding my own wall. This means that I wanted to make every post, comment, or video ever posted on my wall, by myself or anyone else, visible at once. The process, to my surprise, took over nine hours to complete and resulted in a 258-page document when saved in Portable Document Format (PDF). It is worth mentioning here that the task had to be restarted several times, as the path to a fully expanded wall is fraught with

potholes and anxieties: each time my hand slipped and I accidentally clicked on a hyperlink (a single post from someone else, without feedback, contains a minimum of three hyperlinks), I would have to begin again. In addition, the further along I got in the process, the more I worried that my chosen web browser (Safari) or my entire computer (a Macbook 5 running OS X v10.6.5) would crash; after all, I was opening quite a large document.

It is surprising at first to learn that Facebook offers no easy way to retrieve and display one's own history of use from the beginning. Since the site's default setting is to save everything the user does on the wall in reverse chronological order, it makes sense that Facebook is a kind of archive as well as a database. However, accessing the wall's archival nature is easier said than done, and one has no obvious way of guaranteeing that their task will reach any conclusion. Because of this, as well as multiple other aspects of Facebook's interface and how it impacts user experience, it can be shown that the site serves as an ideological state apparatus of the incomplete individual. By examining the Facebook wall under the light of Toby Miller's theory of the ethically incomplete self, we can see how Facebook encourages its users to play out their anxieties about being incomplete individuals while perpetuating those anxieties at the same time. Facebook generally, and the wall particularly, are exercises that never end and objects that never reach completion, made with a deterministic format that keeps users producing and discourages them from reflecting on what they've built.

2. The Ideology of the Ethically Incomplete Self

Before embarking upon a descriptive exploration of the wall, it is useful to offer some theoretical definitions forto what will be discussed. In his book, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser explains that an individual's perception of oneself as autonomous with agency and beliefs is constructed by social practices. Some of the chief determinants in constructing individuals are what Althusser calls ideological practices, which are constituted by Ideological State Apparatuses, establishments that include schools, churches, family units, and other various cultural institutions[1]. These Ideological State Apparatuses inculcate individual subjects with the understanding that they are free to choose from a range of options predetermined by the State. Ideology functions by hailing, a call that goes out much like a voice on the street crying, "Hey, you!" Each individual will turn and heed this call, believing it to perhaps be aimed directly at them. This entices the individual to work within the Ideological State Apparatus in question willingly, thinking that the hail marks them as standing out and special. Each individual comes to believe that their ideology is distinguished, specific, and personal, and if they perceive that others share in their ideology, they feel united in a common purpose. The job of the Apparatus is to provide an outlet for people to engage with the concerned ideological state. It is important to keep in mind that Ideological State Apparatuses also operate repressively; as Althusser points out, the repressive function of the Ideological State Apparatus moves below the surface:

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[1] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, pp 145.

> [I]t is essential to say that for their part the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly *by ideology*, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is attenuated and concealed, even symbolic. (There is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus.)[2]

The lynchpin of our theoretical framework, however, lies in what social scientist Toby Miller calls "The Ethically Incomplete Self." In his book *The Well-Tempered Self: Citizenship, Culture, and the Postmodern Subject*, Miller describes a state of being prevalent in modern culture in which the individual subject is made to feel unfinished and prompted to engage in activities to build upon his identity:

> [This is] about a determinate indeterminacy. This indeterminacy is an ethical incompleteness, which cultural subjects are encouraged to find in themselves and then remedy. I am defining ethics here to mean the personal capacity to draw upon moral codes as a means of managing one's conduct. This becomes an exercise without end, a seminar of the conscience between desires, practices, collective and individual needs, and so on.[3]

In the view proposed by Miller, subjects are told in not so many words that they are lacking, can be so much more, and are then presented with the means to build upon themselves. The unspoken caveat to this is that there is no complete mode of being. As Miller says, the exercise reaches its endpoint, and the subject is never filled to capacity with what is believed to occupy the void. He further states in his book *Cultural Policy* that in a culture, policy attempts to shape subjects through "repeatable styles of conduct, either at the level of the individual or the public."[4] We can identify this notion of repeatable styles of conduct with Althusser's theory of Ideological State Apparatuses.

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[2] Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy*, pp 145.
[3] Miller, *The Well-Tempered Self*, pp xii.
[4] Miller, *Cultural Policy*, pp 12.

Miller's theory of the Incomplete Self can be found in many common cultural outlets, and Facebook is no different. It has a variety of modes of communication and practice, all of the standards of which users are acclimated to through repetition. Bearing this theoretical framework in mind, we are now ready to explore the user experience and functional parameters of Facebook, to show how the social networking site is an apparatus for the ideological state of the Ethically Incomplete Self.

3. Facebook's Biases

An examination of Facebook's biases is a good starting point for an investigation into the site's role as an Ideological State Apparatus of the Ethically Incomplete Self, owing mainly to the fact that such an examination will help color the rest of the investigation. Bias, as Harold Innis has defined it, is the dimension on which a medium places emphasis or importance. Innis rightly stated that various communication media heavily influence "the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time," and that by studying which of the two a specific medium favored, that medium's deterministic power in its "cultural setting"[5] could be revealed. On the surface, one could claim that Facebook is biased towards both space and time: space because it allows instant communication on a globally networked scale, and time because its database archives everything that a user subject does (so long as the user subject refrains from deleting an object). There is no debate about whether or not Facebook is a space-biased medium: besides providing instant interconnectivity spread worldwide, in the age of the mobile phone app it is completely portable and effortlessly transportable. However, while Facebook's databanks may be recording everything, Facebook is a less reliably time-

[5] Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, pp 33.

biased medium for the individual user subject. This is because the site's archival system is simple, rudimentary, and linear. In order to move backwards on the wall or through the newsfeed, a user has only one option: click "Older Posts," an item buried at the bottom of the page. This, however, only reveals a week's worth of older items, and most of the items are partially collapsed or hidden (requiring the user to hit "See More" repeatedly). Additionally, in order to return to the oldest posts on the wall, the user subject must go through *everything* that came after it. Attempting to present this much information on a single Web page leads to glitches in the display (one side effect I noticed when expanding my wall was that a few times, a week would repeat itself), a slowing down of all operations on the user's computer, and risk of browser or even system crashes. Facebook does not have a readily available way for users to search for old items created by themselves or others, and the difficulty involved in expanding the wall in a linear fashion renders it not worthwhile. Even if one knows exactly what one is searching for, it isn't possible to find the desired post without making several different queries of the database. The result is that user subjects end up being unable to retrieve information that they know is both present and organized.

So Facebook is not truly a time-biased medium, but where this makes it an Ideological State Apparatus of the Incomplete Self is that on the surface it appears that Facebook *is* time-biased because it presents itself archivistically. In *The Big Archive*, Professor Sven Spieker asks, "Is there a part of the archive that escapes from the archivist's control, a 'beyond the archive' that remains inaccessible to its finding tools?"[6] Facebook's lack of tools for searching old posts answers this question tacitly. User

[6] Spieker, *The Big Archive,* pp. 3.

subjects are made to believe at first that they can have what they need whenever they need it, made to believe that they are the archivists of their own lives. However, once they realize that there are things they cannot obtain without a great deal of effort, they experience a sense not of less (to be sure, the information is still there), but of lacking and inefficiency. The other effect is that the lack of efficient search tools dissuades the user subject from even bothering to attempt past information retrieval. In Facebook, one is encouraged to look not backward, but forward and all around. This is shown by the fact that the first finding tool presented to the Facebook user subject, placed at the top center of the screen, is the search bar, which searches other people and pages, but not archived posts. There is always room for exploration, but retrospection is a much more challenging endeavor.

4. Status Updates and User Interface

One of the more popular functions of Facebook is the status update. Status updates allow users to chart their life histories not through moments of significance but instead by focusing on the minutiae of everyday events.[7] What this indicates is a move towards information as Walter Benjamin defines it, which is a focus on the minute-to-minute, a prioritization of knowledge which expends its pertinence within the moment at which it is presented, knowledge which has value that "does not survive the moment in which it was new."[8] The format of the Facebook status update has users distill their thoughts and experiences into sound bites, emphasizing moment-to-moment experience and discouraging retrospection. More importantly, these sound bites are further limited by parameters determined by Facebook. Users are unable to italicize, make bold, or

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[7] Page, "Re-examining Narrativity," *Text and Talk* 30.4, pp 426.
[8] Benjamin, *Illuminations*, pp 86.

otherwise change the font of their status updates unless they are willing to input their own code. Furthermore, the maximum allowed number of characters in a status update is 420. Limited in such a way, the status update will not allow the user to flesh out or "complete" even the most banal of musings.

Once the user has posted a status update, it is unlikely that the update will last long in the public newsfeed or even the user's basic wall display. How long the update will stand in the newsfeed is directly correlated to the number of friends a user has on Facebook: the more friends a user has, the less time it will take for the user's status update to become outdated and pushed down out of sight, into the category of "Older Posts." The user will only be recalled to a past status update if two conditions are met: first, that some other user finds the post and decides to comment on or "like" it; and second, if the first user bothers to check the notifications box at the top of the page. Facebook itself offers no method of cataloging *all* of one's past status updates, and at the time of this writing, the best third-party application for collecting a user's past updates only extends as far back as 416 days, just over 13 months. This means that the only way to retrieve a thought or observation the user considered worth sharing with all of his or her friends from Facebook's database is to tirelessly click on "Older Posts" and sift through everything ever posted on the user's wall in search of the update in question. In light of this, it's clear that Facebook's database logic wants users to continually exist in the moment or look forward. One of the Facebook's user's first options on their homepage is to post a status update, but there are no options anywhere that suggest the user retrieve older ones. The subject can expand upon itself *ad infinitum*, but is not allowed to instantly go back to its beginning.

The entire database logic of Facebook is in fact one of expansion, and here we can see again how the social networking site serves as an apparatus of the Incomplete Self ideology. In his article "Database as Symbolic Form," media theorist Lev Manovich details how the view of the world as an unstructured database replaced the "grand Narratives of Enlightenment."[9] Here we can see how the perpetually incomplete nature of the Internet helped feed into the emergence of the Incomplete Self ideology:

> Where the database form really flourished, however, is on the Internet. As defined by original HTML, a Web page is a sequential list of separate elements: text blocks, images, digital video clips, and links to other pages. It is always possible to add a new element to the list—all you have to do is to open a file and add a new line. As a result, most Web pages are collections of separate elements, such as texts, images, and links to other pages or sites…[t]he open nature of the Web as a medium (Web pages are computer files that can always be edited) means that the Web sites never have to be complete—and they rarely are because the sites are always growing.[10]

If the open nature of the Web emphasizes incompleteness, Facebook could be said to represent a new phase in that nature's evolution. In other words, Facebook has nearly perfected the art of keeping a user subject busy doing new things within the confines of the Facebook site. There's almost no space left on a Facebook page that doesn't highlight a link for the user's cursor. Nearly every object or line of text links somewhere else. The moment a user finishes reading a friend's status update, Facebook encourages the user to add his or her own two cents, so that the user subject can continue to expand and build upon the points at which *others* can link back to them. Most photos are tagged with the names of the users pictured, which also link to those users, and most photos allow other users to make comments. The narrative proposition of "Choose Your Own

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[9] Manovich, *Database Aesthetics*, pp 40.
[10] Manovich, *Database Aesthetics*, pp 41.

Adventure" frequently and rapidly turns into the question, "Now, what was I looking for again?" This type of frequent sidetracking defocuses the user.

Moreover, as Facebook has evolved, the number of tasks it has its users perform has risen. If a user subject has been away from the site for a while, it's no problem: Facebook catalogues all instances in which anyone, friend or stranger, has contacted you directly (via message, friend request, or invitation), tagged you, attempted to tag your photos, notes, or anything else of yours, posted on your wall, "liked" something you have done, commented on something you have done, "liked" or otherwise responded to a comment you yourself have made, commented on anything in which you have been tagged, commented or "liked" a post someone has made on your wall…the options are endless and can be quite exhausting. Facebook archives all of these instances in which anyone else's virtual self has had anything at all to do with the user's virtual self and displays a bright red number in the top left corner of the screen. Clicking on any of these numbers expands the notification field into a list (see figure 1).

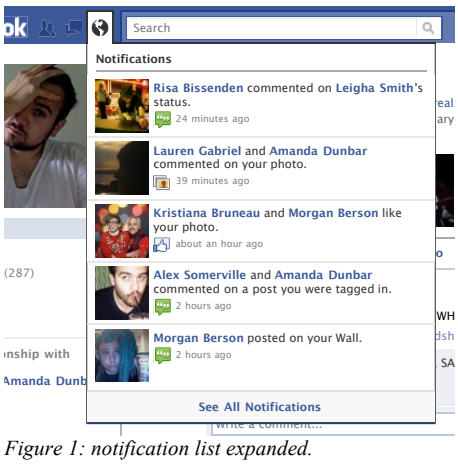

Figure 1: notification list expanded.

Here we can see how the user subject is immediately told upon entering Facebook that they have a great deal of work to do just in response to others, even before the chore of working on the user subject's self can be engaged in.

Of course, this is the way Facebook operates: it continually reminds users that it is a community, and there are always things the community's members can be doing to help build upon each other's Incomplete Selves. The subtext of this, however, is that Facebook is also (and perhaps first) a database, and its community members are also (and perhaps mostly) database users. User subjects are led to believe that they are building themselves or others richer and shinier virtual faces and homes, but Facebook, as a database, sees its users as having a job to do: input data. Even if a user was to find an item on Facebook with no hyperlinks embedded in it, for instance, an untagged photo with no comments allowed, the social networking site has found a way around this: related content. On the sidebar positioned to the right of a photo, along with advertisements linking to sites outside Facebook, several options may present themselves for further browsing without changing sites. These may take the form of links to other photos uploaded by or featuring the user that has uploaded the photo currently being viewed, or perhaps by suggesting "People You May Know" (determined by them having friends in common with the user subject navigating the site). Once again, we see that there is no end to the tasks the user subject has to perform. One is constantly invited not only to work on oneself, but also to reinforce and revalidate other users' efforts to focus on themselves as well.

5. Limitations

Of course, for all the limitlessness to the things there are to do in Facebook, there are many limitations imposed upon a user subject as to *how* things can be done. This too plays into the ideology of the Incomplete Self and reifies the notion's logic. As mentioned earlier when discussing status updates, users are unable to modify fonts in even the most basic ways that most consumer word processing software will allow (unless they are willing to input their own code). This actually extends to most aspects of Facebook, because behind the site there is a database logic that the user subject can't change. Stated simply, one can't put things into Facebook that Facebook doesn't want there. Photos are limited by dimension, resolution, and file size. Messages can only be sent out to a finite number of friends at one time (20 friends at once). Notes can only have so many people tagged in them. The examples that can be uncovered are as wide-ranging as the limitations of the examples are narrowing. This reifies the logic of the Incomplete Self in at least two different ways. First of all, it gives the user subject even more tasks to perform to accomplish what is desired. The user can't upload the photo as is, but can go and tinker with cropping and compressing it until it fits the parameters decided upon by Facebook's logic; the user can send out a message in batches, each reaching up to the allotted twenty people (although it should be mentioned that this introduces the further restriction that there then can't be one unified thread to contain the different responses and discourses that may ensue); the same method applies to notes, and so forth. The second way these restrictions reify the logic of the Incomplete Self is through a feeling of helplessness that follows being met by a restriction. The user subject can't do something they set out to, something that seems like perhaps it should be simple.

Not only do they now have an added roadblock to accomplishing their goals, but they are also left feeling like their life is far less optimized than they might have previously believed it to be.

6. The New Profile

More recently than my wall expansion project, Facebook has introduced a new format for the Profile page. Unlike past Facebook updates, the update to the New Profile is not mandatory (yet). This may be in response to past outcries from large user organizations against forced updates. Once the change takes place, though, the user has no option to return to the old format. There are several main points of interest to be found in an examination of the New Profile. The first is in how it is advertised. Users are not being barraged with notifications suggesting they change over to the New Profile. Instead, somewhere in a user's newsfeed will be an item saying, "This person and X number of other friends now have the new profile." (underlining here indicating a hyperlink, see figure 2 below) The user is then given the option to learn more or get the new profile.

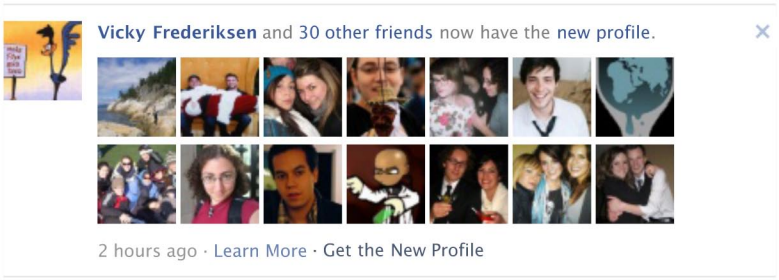

Figure 2: New Profile newsfeed item, found partway down the newsfeed.

Once again, the subject is encouraged to move forward, presented with fun new games and tasks that work toward an optimization of his or her virtual life. The second point of interest is that once a user has the New Profile, all of their friends will appear to them to have it as well, whether or not those users have actually updated their accounts (see

figures 3 and 4 below). This validates the decision of the New Profile user while at the same time removing all reminders of the way things used to be, and, one would imagine, all doubts about whether or not the New Profile user has actually made the right decision. The choice to go with the new, to keep building, is the right choice, and never mind looking back.

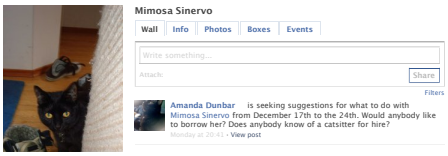

Figure 3: how a user with the old profile format appears to a friend who also has that format.

Figure 4: how that same profile appears to a friend who has updated to the New Profile.

The final point of interest in examining the New Profile format is that while it may offer more options for customization in some ways, it actually limits options for the user in others, particularly in terms of privacy. With the old profile format, a clearer line was drawn between the user's wall, photo, and info displays. The user could customize their profile so that when viewing the wall, only personal information that the user had selected would show up. To see more of the user's information, a friend had to click on the info tab, which fully displayed all the information the user had decided fit for the public sphere. Likewise with photos: to actually view photos of the user, a friend had to click on the user's photo tab. The New Profile, however, deems it appropriate that some of the basics and several of the most recent photos of the user be displayed in a place of prominence, just to the right of the profile picture. Removing the photos from instant display is easy enough: the user can just click the small 'x' that appears when the photo is scrolled over (making a new photo spring up in its place). The instant display of the basic info, however, is trickier: it appears that the user must choose either to have the

basic info on display with the profile picture, to make the information private from everyone, or to delete the information entirely.

All of these points, however, are quibbling when one considers the grander implication that dealing with any of these issues just creates more tasks. Whether or not the user ends up feeling that switching over to the New Profile has opened up a Pandora's box is inconsequential to Facebook as an Ideological State Apparatus of the Ethically Incomplete Self. If the user subject likes the New Profile, they will likely spend time experimenting with their settings, changing options and so forth, working towards optimizing their virtual representation for the latest paradigm. If the user subject dislikes the New Profile, they will *definitely* spend time experimenting with their settings; they will just probably be more frustrated about it. Either way, the user subject is working to improve and build upon the virtual self. The only negative outcome, as far as the social networking site is concerned, would be if the user subject decided to disengage entirely. But with over 500 million users—and counting—Facebook will have ample time to notice a downward trend and rectify it.

7. Boundless Incompletion

All of these points indicate strongly that Facebook encourages an ideological mode in which the individual subject is imbued with the perception that it is far from a completed entity. By discouraging retrospection through its database logic and persuading building and expansion through its format, the social networking site serves as a strong apparatus for the ideological state of perceiving oneself as Incomplete. As it has evolved, changed, and adapted, Facebook has become one of the dominant media of the contemporary world. If this is true, and Facebook can be seen as an Ideological State

Apparatus of the Incomplete Self, then it is easy to infer that incompleteness is one of the dominant modes of being in the contemporary world. Like Facebook's database, the user subject can never be complete, and like Facebook's database, the user subject will always yearn to expand further without ever reaching—or even conceiving of—a state of finality.

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