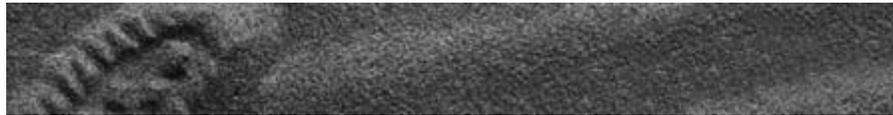


It's Time to Face the Truth: Why Are We All on Facebook?



karen amster-young :: The Desk Chair Chronicles

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It seems like a year ago, but right after Labor Day I was referred to and placed a call to Jane, a dog breeder based half-way across the country. After months of pleading and begging, I had promised my seven-year old that I would begin the process of adopting a cute puppy. Within hours my inbox was filled with photos and information about Havanese puppies. Black and white, brown and white, all white, all black and so on. Literally about 10 e-mails a day. I am now a Havanese expert. When the economy tanked, I delayed the adoption. My daughter will have to wait a few more months. Around the same time I started researching a new place for my Mother-in-Law to live; she really needed help with the process. She currently lives in a remote area of Westchester; quite charming in certain seasons but isolated and a transportation nightmare from November to February. She needs to move. There's more to this story but I'll save that for another day since I am feeling rather calm as I write this and I'd like to remain that way. The broker I spoke with after Labor Day started e-mailing listings. Countless listings — almost too many to navigate if I wanted to have a life. Around the same time my daughter started school and her seemingly increasing number of after-school activities. The e-mails to manage my daughter's life started the last week of August and have not slowed down for a moment. Updates, calendars, reminders, school trip information, assembly information, important dates — and the list goes on. And then there's Facebook. Let's discuss. I finally gave in. I joined on October 16, 2008. By midnight that same day I had received 25 e-mails from old "friends". Now this was interesting. I was thankful for the break from reality - I think.

I had resisted joining Facebook successfully for quite some time. I just didn't want to get more e-mails. I was finally convinced to join on a recent, rare overnight with my college friends. We were at dinner and Facebook had come up in conversation. We were talking at the table and they were shocked that I had not yet joined. "You, of all people, are not on FaceBook yet?" one of them asked incredulously. "You will not believe who tried to 'friend me'", added someone else. I had quickly learned that the word "friend" is a verb on Facebook. When someone reaches out to connect with you they are "friending you" and you have to either accept or decline their outreach. If you choose to "accept" you can now communicate and be back in touch with this person. Someone at the table proceeded to tell us about this guy from college that we all knew but had not heard from in over a decade. Throughout the evening more juicy anecdotes and Facebook stories were shared as my friends — some veteran Facebookers at this point, shared online anecdotes: reconnecting with old colleagues, old flames and even bunk mates from sleep-away camp 100 years ago all of a sudden seemed sexy. Was FaceBook the accepted way for married people to engage in a guilty pleasure? Was this "dating" for married people? Is this the new escapism for married men and women over a certain age that are not in the world of internet dating? Ode to Seinfeld here: not that there is anything wrong with that (this!). One article I read said that Facebook was a haven for exhibitionists and voyeurs alike. Interesting. I think perhaps, married women of a certain age find something exciting about getting "friended" by an old flame, old boss, old friend.

"Facebook is a stalker's paradise. It provides users with the unique ability to chart the dramas, relationships, beliefs, interests, travels and traumas of their old flames, future relationships, friends and enemies alike."

Look we can call it a social networking phenomenon and I guess it is. But according to Redefining Facebook, Facebook's primary draw lies not in its ability to map out human relationships and real lives. "This constant rhetoric about social networking and online connectivity fails to encompass the true guilty pleasure behind the phenomenon — the possibility to ogle the lives of others with an all-seeing yet completely anonymous eye", says the author. "Put simply, Facebook is the Big Brother of the 21st century — a relentless telescreen that anyone who is 'online now' may or may not be watching."

So my curiosity was piqued about Facebook and the "older" users and how it all got started. Turns out a wiz kid, just out of Harvard launched the site in 2004. He rejected a billion dollar offer from Yahoo a few years ago and is now likely the nation's richest man under age 25, despite the rejection. A pretty amazing story; if you're interested in all the details Google Mark Zuckerberg. Incredible. Billed as a complete social networking site it became a complete addiction among young people, encouraging them to spend hours on it. Flash forward to 2008: Facebook signs up 1 million new users a week. According to wired.com, by the end of August 2008 there were 36 million users and the fastest growing segment is users over age 35, representing 11 percent of all site users. I was right; this is becoming huge among my age group. The question is why? Is it simply fun? A distraction from reality? There are probably a million reasons but I do believe one of them is the guilt-less cyber searching and connecting with people from your past and your present. There is something kind of sexy, interesting and intriguing about it all. Then again, in a few months or a year it may just feel like more stuff in my in-box. I don't know right now. All I know is that it's getting colder out and I think I will be on Facebook a lot this winter.

So forget the dog. Forget the condo for my Mother-in-Law. Just keep friending me so I get a break from the endless crap that flows in my in-box on a daily basis. Let's see: Should I search for my first love on Facebook or go to the dry cleaners and call my Mother-in-Law? Hmm. Tough one. Not.

Listen, you don't have to agree with my rant about Facebook, that's just fine. Just "friend" me.