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Facebook: Corporate Hackers, a Billion Users, and the Geo-politics of the “Social Graph”

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ABSTRACT

As Facebook moves to a new office space, consolidates its growth internationally, and sculpts its corporate identity, it navigates contradictions between the attempt to preserve ideals associated with the company's founding and the demands of global growth. Through an ethnographic snapshot of Facebook headquarters in Palo Alto, California I explore the company's expansion toward one billion users and its efforts to dominate the few national markets in which competitors still have the upper hand. I argue that Facebook combines technical and geopolitical savvy by using cross-network pressure and the soft power of user data, or what it calls “the social graph,” to win the market-share wars. These realpolitik demands trump the impulse to reproduce Facebook's idealistic origins outside the realm of its carefully crafted “corporate culture,” performed meticulously in the company's office design. [Keywords: Facebook, corporate culture, social media, media politics]

Over time, we expect governments will become more responsive to issues and concerns raised directly by all their people rather than through intermediaries controlled by a select few.

—Mark Zuckerberg in letter to potential investors in Facebook’s S-1 Registration with the SEC (Facebook 2012b:303)

Facebook’s S-1 Filing with the SEC

On February 1, 2012 Facebook filed a S-1 form with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) for its highly anticipated initial public offering. The 793-page document, which contains an open letter to investors from CEO Mark Zuckerberg, clearly sets out the company’s mission, business philosophy, strategic assets, and future risks. The form attempts to communicate Facebook’s corporate culture and makes plain the company’s global ambitions. The filing papers are the company’s most comprehensive self-presentation and candid assessment of its strategic outlook. With this in mind, I’ve inserted textboxes with excerpts from Facebook’s S-1 Registration filing papers with the SEC throughout this piece since they dovetail so closely with my arguments.

Introduction

In the lobby, tourists from Milan, Italy posed for a picture in front of a Facebook poster autographed by the company’s first 200 employees. They were visiting Stanford University and wanted a photo of the building that creates the website that they frequent. The tourists took their photos wearing a giant foam “Like” thumbs up, a prop the receptionist has on the ready (see Figure 1). After milling around the lobby, and stopping to stare at the “Real Time Friend Connections” display, a spinning globe with white streaks charting the consummation of Facebook friendships in almost real time (within ten seconds), they left to grab dinner in San Francisco. In their brief visit, these Italian tourists tasted two aspects of Facebook that this essay will explore: the symbolism of its headquarters and the company’s international expansion.

Through an analysis of the design of Facebook’s main office at 1601



Figure 1: Tourists from Italy visit Facebook headquarters.

South California Avenue in Palo Alto and interviews with Facebook employees, I locate contradictions in Facebook's expansion and raise questions about the implications of those contradictions. The first section, on the symbolism of the office space, focuses on the office as an expression of the values that Facebook has sought to embody since its founding, and desires to selectively preserve in its projected future. The second section, on the geo-politics of the global social graph, looks at some of these values and their limits in the context of the company's international expansion. At stake in both sections is an effort to retain and perform founding principles—"openness," being "anti-establishment," and the company's one word motto, their condensed amalgam, "HACK." I will expand on these terms in a moment, but the important point that this essay strives to make is that while these ideals serve as the company's internal cultural logic, that logic is contradicted by corporate practices and realpolitik battles for market share and profits—what official company discourse elides. Zuckerberg walks a fine line as he denies and downplays the profit motive in his letter to investors, while assuring them that the company is not naïvely idealistic.

We don't build services to make money; we make money to build better services...We don't wake up in the morning with the primary goal of making money, but we understand that the best way to achieve our mission is to build a strong and valuable company.

—Facebook's S-1 Registration with the SEC
(Facebook 2012b:305)

The primary way that Facebook the corporation manages this dissonance is through an institutionalized nostalgia for its founding, especially apparent through the forms of inculcating the company's early values. Yet, the more Facebook manages its identity, the less open and more rigid it becomes. New layers of management structures and proliferating standard operating procedures alienate Facebook from its origins. The challenge is compounded by the company's exponential growth, which has put it on the cusp of serving one-seventh of the world's population.

In many ways the challenge Facebook encounters in managing its growth mirrors the challenges its users confront as they expand their networks of friends, acquaintances, and subscribers. For both Facebook and its users, accumulating alliances, managing that accumulation, and masking the self-interest that lies beneath the surface of quantitatively driven accumulations of “friendships,” are cause for crises of identity. While for Facebook that crisis involves the risk of incoherence with its founding vision, for users it can be a crisis of intimacy, in which privileging the quantity of relationships online can have effects on the quality of personal relationships offline. Gershon's (2011) study of Facebook use among undergraduates at Indiana University and its implications for monogamous relationships is instructive. She compellingly argues that Facebook promotes a US neoliberal perspective among its users that does not mix well with intimacy.

When the self metaphorically becomes a business, it is a compilation of measurable skills and assets that enters into relationships with other selves that may have different arrays of skills. From a US neoliberal perspective, the more skills one has, the better. *So too with alliances, the more alliances one has the better. This is a view that Facebook seems to adopt as well, its interface constantly suggesting*

that people add more and more alliances to their profile. Facebook users are visible nodes in a network, in which the number of alliances they have can, depending on the social circles, give them a certain symbolic capital. The Facebook interface encourages people to see their alliances in terms of quantity, and people can easily evaluate their and others' profiles in terms of how many friends they have. (2011:873-874, emphasis added)

In documenting the way students accumulate symbolic capital by forging ever more numerous alliances, Gershon argues that such promiscuous “friendship” poses a risk to monogamous relationships. Across social media platforms there is a common tendency for numbers to serve as barometers of popularity and power. This fetish of statistics in social media remediates the mass logic of “old” media (Bolter and Grusin 2000). On Twitter, the best index of power is the followers/following ratio, on YouTube the sheer number of views. Numbers punctuate the landscape of social media, their pervasiveness suggests that social life has an affinity with statistics, and like a sporting event or political contest, can be understood through a proliferation of tabulations.

Not surprisingly, alliance accumulation also occurs within Facebook the corporation. As with users at Indiana University, scale matters. More users, more activity, more partial information that stokes the need for yet more information, more eyes on Facebook pages—and for the company, more advertising revenue. Such is the unspoken logic of accumulation and curiosity that undergirds Facebook at the level of both campus flirtation and global corporate expansion. With Gershon’s informants, ex-lovers can unfriend each other or close their account entirely if they do not like the jealous, stalker, neoliberal selves they find themselves becoming. A country, however, or other geo-political units, cannot entirely block its citizens from using Facebook, although it can try to keep it at bay (China is exemplary). Contrary to its internal and external branding, the company embraces logics broadly described as neoliberal, especially expansion through the accumulation of users, which is expressed in the drive to win market-share wars.

My entrée into the world of Facebook was through friends, other recent graduates from Duke University, with whom I shared a house in Durham, North Carolina. We were all freelancing on an array of creative and technological projects and because most of us who lived there were transient, the house assumed the epithet, “House of the Lost Boys.”

In 2005, one of the “lost boys” left to work for a start-up none of us had heard of, Facebook (*The Wall Street Journal* later featured him in an article titled “The Man Who Got Us to ‘Like’ Everything,” 8/13/2011). Through “snowball recruiting,” a few “lost boys” ended up working at Facebook. I was happy to reconnect with them and grateful for their willingness to help me get official sanction to conduct interviews. I was treated as a journalist and was provided a minder (more on this later) for my most formal interview. As a condition for access, I was asked to run all of the quotations I would eventually use for this piece past my minder. I agreed, complied, and received all necessary approval. More informally, I was able to loiter, debate, and socialize (which included joining an extravagant outing on a rented luxury bus to the Russian River to celebrate an employee’s 25th birthday).

I conducted research at Facebook over the course of a week in June of 2011. Based on such a short research period, I do not pretend to make definitive claims but rather aim to offer an ethnographic snapshot of Facebook at an inflection point. I arrived a few days after the company had shared blueprints for its new Menlo Park offices with its employees, and left two months before the company began its gradual relocation, a moment of transition in the shifting archaeology of Silicon Valley (Finn 2002). While this is a partial glimpse into the world that produces Facebook, it begins to fill a void in the anthropological literature by addressing the social production of social media. While more long-term fieldwork is needed, this piece— aspiring to embody an anthropology attentive to the “contingency and under determination” of the present, or the anthropology of the contemporary as Rabinow has termed it (Rabinow and Marcus 2008:56)—brings an anthropological perspective to the production of social media.

I argue that Facebook effaces its political dimensions, strategically relying on the quiet diplomacy of leveraging user data or “the social graph” (its visualized form) to win the market share wars abroad against other social networks. Given the fact that Facebook has only recently become a publicly traded company, it is too early to tell if it is strategically sacrificing its ideals in the short term to achieve greater global “penetration” as a means to the digital democracy it hints at in its ambiguously phrased mission statement. With characteristic bravado and ambiguity, Facebook begins the “Our Strategy” section of its S-1 Registration with the SEC : “We are in the early days of pursuing our mission to make the world more open and connected” (2012b:36).

A Symbolic Space in Transition

For new interns and visitors who pass through the glass doors with a “Like” icon sticker above the handle, Facebook’s office makes an immediate impression with its real life refashioning of the office to reflect website design and company values. When I entered for the first time, the space felt somehow familiar; perhaps because I’m one of Facebook’s 901 million active users (as of March 2012). The office’s design strives to transcend functionality and perform Facebook-ness to its employees and visitors, building company values into the design.

Take for instance Zuckerberg’s conference room, a space conscientiously built to depict Facebook’s “core values.” While walking to the bathroom I noticed Zuckerberg standing in a giant glass box (see Figure 2), hands clasped behind his back, holding court in front of a white dry-erase board. By the time I walked back, the meeting had adjourned. Zuckerberg, staring intently at a laptop screen, was standing by one of the many small workbenches grouped together throughout the office space (a replacement for more traditional cubicles or partitions). That was his desk and the glass box his conference room; accessibility and transparency performed. The performance gets an audience every Friday



Figure 2: Mark Zuckerberg’s conference room.

at 4 pm when “Zuck,” as he is affectionately referred to in the company, speaks to the employees and fields questions, an activity that doubles as CEO boot camp and employee participation.

Erin, a senior member of the consumer marketing team, boiled Facebook’s values down to “openness and connectedness.” These values are at the heart of Facebook’s mission statement, and are performed in the open floor plan with rows of clustered plug and play workstations. “Youthfulness,” less a value and more a demographic fact, as the average employee is 26-years-old, finds expression in game rooms that pepper the hallways, such as the “Guitar Hero room,” the RipStick skateboards strewn in the passageways, and the campy atmosphere where picnic benches line the rooftop and sporting facilities divide the lawn.

The décor is far from haphazard, though it can appear so to outsiders. Just beyond the entryway, the visitor finds the “The Facebook Wall,” a white wall encouraging passersby to “Write Something...” (see Figure 3). Everett, a senior member of the communication design team who helped to design Facebook’s Palo Alto, New York, and Austin offices came up with the idea for the wall.¹ I met Everett, on a “corporate Friday,” a spoof of the “casual Fridays” of the staid corporate world. He donned an outlandish suit, his tattoos spilling out from the cuffs of his shirt. Standing by the breakfast station, Everett reflected on the wall’s genesis:

It was just an idea, “Hey let’s get people to physically take ownership of their space.” So that was like the most simple idea that alluded to Facebook. We had the Facebook Wall, people can write on your wall, let’s do this and see what happens.

That’s kind of how ideas start here, “Let’s try something and just see what happens.” Especially with this space, we kind of think of it as a physical dialogue with people here, so it’s like call and response, you know. That’s how this thing originated and we didn’t really do anything but put a bucket of markers down here, and people started adding to it, you know, writing certain things, and then other people would comment on other things, in a sense, and it just became this organic thing. Now it’s like a *thing*, when people come here they always take their picture in front of it and it’s iconic in its own right.

The Facebook Wall makes tangible the virtual wall on the website. The wall is emblematic of the office space, not only because it is an extension



Figure 3: “The Facebook Wall”

of one of the website’s key features, writing on someone’s “wall,” but also because it strives to perform company values:

- *“Let’s do this and see what happens”*: consistent with a fast-paced and highly iterative philosophy of online product design that Facebook has championed.
- *“We didn’t really do anything but put a bucket of markers down here and people started adding to it”*: consistent with providing users with tools and space to create and store content while conceiving the interface as neutral.
- *“So it’s like call and response”*: consistent with a two-way engagement that operates on multiple registers—company/visitor (to the office), company/visitor (to the website), user/user (online).

But the wall is only one side of the entryway to the office space. The other side is decorated with the work of American graffiti artist David Choe, which speaks directly to the company’s history. When Zuckerberg and friends relocated to a rented house in Palo Alto from their Harvard dorm in 2005 they had Choe decorate the walls. The works were salvaged and moved to the Palo Alto office that Facebook is now in the process of

vacating. I asked Everett if he could take one artifact from the Palo Alto office and move it to the new Menlo Park complex, what would it be?

I don't know. You're probably asking the wrong person because I would want to ceremoniously burn everything down here and start new. I think that's kind of my mentality. I took it upon myself to frame some of the most compelling pieces of graffiti and cut the drywall out [of the old office]. Had I not done that it would have just been painted over and forgotten about. I thought at least that was super-important.

Here it's like, I don't know, there's nothing really in the space that's really representative of this period...Originally the graffiti was the fastest way to get art on the walls because the company started picking up steam. “It's like how do we make these offices not boring? Let's just have someone do graffiti.”

I don't know what we'll do in the new space but I don't think we'll take that same approach. I mean graffiti is always something culturally relevant to us because it embodies all of these things: it's anti-establishment, it's superfast.

Choe's graffiti art (see Figure 4) and the Facebook wall, which frame the threshold to the office, give historical continuity to the themes of defacement and set the tone for the office as a symbolic performance of company values and history. Elsewhere in the office, history reappears in the form of inside jokes, adding a layer of code to the design. For example, two giant inflatable whales hang from a central ceiling space (see Figure 5) referencing “Orca,” a secret initiative to acquire Beluga, a leading company in the group text message industry, which helped Facebook revamp its messaging system.

Yet, after all of the thoughtful planning that has gone into making Facebook's office space a performance of the company's ethos, I am struck by Everett's insistence that “there's nothing really in the space that's really representative of this period” and therefore nothing worth salvaging. The lament is echoed in his later comment that “I don't know what we'll do in the new space but I don't think we'll take that same [spontaneous] approach [as we did in the first office].” Everett cites the “wall” in the entryway as an example of an “organic thing,” a design idea that emerged out of reflection, playfulness, and participation with



Figure 4: Choe graffiti artwork in the entryway.

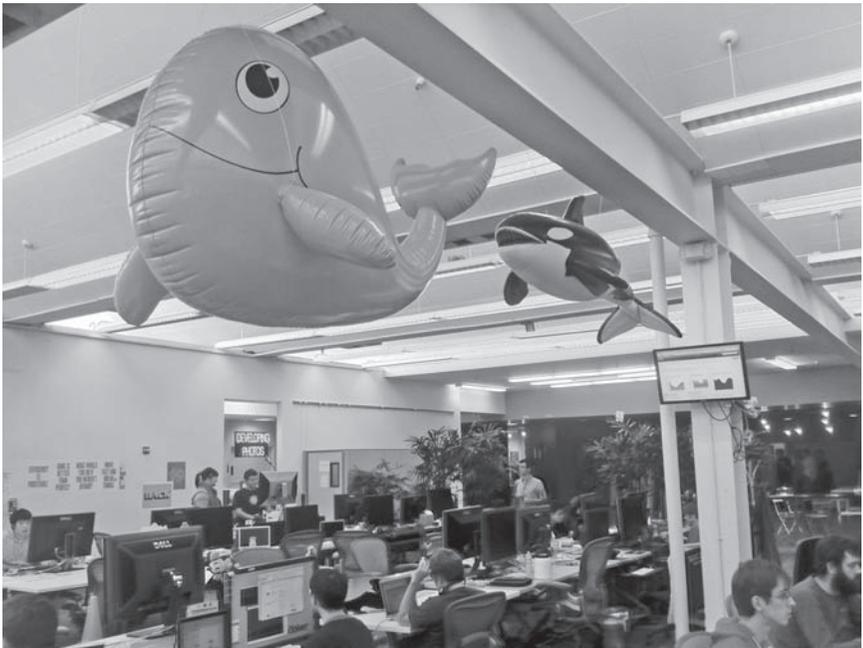


Figure 5: "Orca" referencing a secret program to acquire Beluga, a leader in the group text messaging industry.

passersby. Now re-creations of the Facebook wall can be found in the entryways to Facebook’s other office buildings, diminishing their organic aura. To long-time employees like Everett there is a nostalgia for the days when the company had to hustle to buy new servers to keep the website online and worked in a more freewheeling atmosphere. The staggering growth of the company means many values embraced early on—such as the two Everett highlights, being “anti-establishment” and “superfast”—are necessarily being modulated. The fear is that the company will lose the “organic” aura of its startup phase and begin to “stagnate,” a word that I heard repeatedly at Facebook when people described a fate to be vigilantly avoided.

As our business grows and becomes more complex, our cultural emphasis on moving quickly may result in unintended outcomes or decisions that are poorly received by users, developers, or advertisers.

— Facebook’s S-1 Registration with the SEC
(Facebook 2012b:84-85)

Mottos and slogans etched into the architecture and pinned to the walls are designed to guard against the stagnation to which “inorganic” growth may lead. Dominating the façade of one of Facebook’s two office buildings and throughout its interior spaces is one word: “HACK.” Often in block, capital letters, the word “hack” is a pithier way to define the company’s founding ethos than Everett’s “anti-establishment” and “superfast.” Facebook makes sure some form of hacker culture is imbued in its own culture. But what is hacker culture? As Coleman and Golub (2008) persuasively argue, hacker culture takes many forms and resists the stereotypes perpetuated by those who misunderstand it:

Some hackers engage freely in illicit file trading, while others do not. Some hackers are oblivious to the legal and technical esoterica of cryptography while others see this as constitutive of their hacker identity. Many hackers are committed to the ethical philosophy of free software, while others feel they have a personal right to deploy intellectual property as they see fit. Some hackers announce with pride

their illegal exploits, and others only admit to them reluctantly, a little embarrassed by their foray into the underground. Clearly the material presented here gainsays any attempt to describe hacker practice and ethics as a unitary or homogeneous phenomenon. (2008:268)

Coleman and Golub show how hackers' articulation of their ethics reinvigorates liberalism's concerns: "freedom, free speech, privacy, the individual, meritocracy" in the digital age (2008:256-258). Facebook's appropriation of hacker culture is ambiguous but positions itself in the middle range of the radical/liberal spectrum.

Indeed, if there is a story of origins at Facebook it is of Zuckerberg hacking into Harvard's residential houses to collate the headshots that were the raw material behind Facemash, Facebook's first iteration. It is a story that the blockbuster movie *The Social Network* (2010) helped to popularize. In an effort to perpetuate this origin, Facebook has created bi-monthly "hack-a-thons"² in which employees work intensively in small teams to build their own innovations into the platform.³ Coleman's (2010) research at hacker conferences highlights how face-to-face encounters and collaboration in limited physical space help bond hacker communities often divided by geographic distance. Facebook's "hack-a-thons" serve a similar purpose allowing co-workers to collaborate beyond their small team's tightly defined objectives. While eating lunch with a group of engineers and designers at the first rooftop barbeque of the summer, one employee was so excited for his next "hack-a-thon" project—building a charitable giving option into the ritual of posting birthday messages on friends' walls—that he tried to recruit me to help him. He had assumed I worked at Facebook and viewed the possibility of collaborating at a "hack-a-thon" as a way of building a relationship with me.

We have cultivated a unique culture and management approach that we call the Hacker Way...The Hacker Way is an approach to building that involves continuous improvement and iteration. Hackers believe that something can always be better, and that nothing is ever complete.

— Mark Zuckerberg in a letter to investors in Facebook's S-1 Registratrrion with the SEC (Facebook 2012b:307)



Figure 6: Poster at Facebook’s office

The resonance between hacking and being “anti-establishment” seemed self-evident to me, but I asked Everett something I could not sort out: What is the obsession with speed about? He responded:

The faster you can build things and get them to market the earlier you’re able to collect feedback, the earlier you’re able to make an iteration and optimize for it. So that’s the general premise of speed. It’s a balance between speed and perfection because you could get lost in the details. There are companies that focus on shipping beautiful products that are meticulously detailed and once they hit the shelves it’s “that’s the thing.” The web doesn’t quite work like that... The web forces you to operate faster if you want to be successful at it.

But speed is hard to maintain while burgeoning. As levels of management expand with the workforce growing at about 50 percent each year, and as the company opens new offices from Seattle to São Paulo and Dublin to Hyderabad, remaining “superfast” is a challenge. Perhaps that is why the office space is tattooed with slogans that inculcate through repetition the value of speed and iterative improvement: “Move Fast and Break Things;” “This Journey is 1% Finished;” “Done is Better than Perfect” (see Figure 6). The office space operates simultaneously as a symbolic performance

of self and as a means of socializing interns and new employees to the ethos of Facebook's founding.

The glass box, the CEO Q&A, the open floor plan with swappable workstations, the "Facebook Wall," the Choe paintings, the campy fun stations, the hack-a-thons, and the posters combine to act as an elaborate branding strategy that embraces a foundational ethos—hack—and denies a corporate present. The contradiction is a basic one that does not elude Facebook employees who express anxiety about keeping the "organic" feel to the company and maintaining the historical continuity that Choe's graffiti paintings seek to embody. One of the designers contracted to renovate the new campus was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying, "They don't want to buy into that corporate structure" (Bernstein 2011). But while there has been employee input in the new campus' design, it was conducted by a team of hired firms under the oversight of Facebook's real-estate executive—the Silicon Valley version of organic. The tension between growth and founding ideals, which is literally built into Facebook's office space, is also apparent when assessing Facebook's strategies for winning market-share wars abroad.

We continue to focus on growing our user base across all geographies, including relatively less-penetrated, large markets such as Brazil, Germany, India, Japan, Russia, and South Korea.

— The first bullet point in the "Our Strategy" section of Facebook's S-1 Registration with the SEC (Facebook 2012b:352)

Passing a Billion, Growing Abroad, and the Geo-politics of the Social Graph

This section asks and begins to answer the question: what kind of political actor is Facebook? To give a fuller answer more research into both the production and reception of Facebook is needed. I argue that Facebook's global scope and ambitions require that the company be considered as a geo-political actor, infer its strategies and tactics, and point toward areas of further research. Siva Vaidhyathan asks the same questions of



Figure 7: “Visualizing Friendship” from a 20 million user sample in December of 2010.

Google in his book *The Googlization of Everything* (2011). Vaidhyathan concludes that “As its influence and operations expand around the world, Google is finding it difficult to keep everyone happy and stay true to its mission” (2011:177). I suggest that this conclusion is also applicable to Facebook, and will trace some of the fault lines beneath Facebook’s need to satisfy multiple publics and constituencies. As the first section documented, Facebook attempts to propagate ideals associated with its founding, downplaying and denying its increasingly corporate present. This section looks at similar tensions and strategies for managing ideals through the lens of the company’s global expansion, present and projected.

Since 2004, Facebook has rewritten its mission statement nine times. The current version reads: “Our mission is to make the world more



December 2010

IMAGE COURTESY OF FACEBOOK

open and connected.” Three of the five previous versions centered on the phrase, “connects you with people around you” (Reagan 2009). As the statement evolved, “people around you” has ceded to “the world,” substituting global purview for local relevance. It is worth pausing to consider the company’s global ambitions and what it might mean for Facebook, as a corporate agent, to intervene to “make the world more open and connected.”

In his best selling profile of the company, *The Facebook Effect* (2010), David Kirkpatrick documents how over the course of its short history, Facebook has prioritized the growth of its user-base when faced with a trade-off between monetization and market share.⁴ In terms of winning market share, the next landmark is impressive—one billion active users

(active users are defined as those who login at least once a month). Facebook marked the 500 million active user mark in July 2010 with a blog post including a photo album of employees holding up signs thanking users (“Thanks for wasting your time with us” one employee cracked), and by launching “Facebook Stories,” a project that highlights extraordinary tales of people using the site. Zuckerberg launched Facebook Stories with a video posted on YouTube in which he reads from a script, struggling to sound conversational:

Half a billion is a nice number, but the number isn't what really matters here. What matters are all the stories we hear from all of you about the impact your connections have had on your lives. Instead of focusing on numbers we want to help people around the world hear about these stories for themselves and we want to let you tell your own story. So to celebrate we've launched a new application, Facebook Stories, to do just that. (Theofficialfacebook 2010)

Facebook wants to highlight the many ways that it meaningfully and positively marries people's online and offline lives, such as one Alabama woman who started a Facebook page to return photographs and personal belongings to residents in neighboring towns after they began turning up on the lawns of her town as debris (Theofficialfacebook 2011). But there are also tragic stories, such as the Saudi Arabian man who killed his daughter after finding her flirting on Facebook (McElroy 2008). Of course, that is what corporate spin is about: selective presentation. The point is, for Zuckerberg to say “the number really isn't what matters here” is misleading in the extreme since the numbers are precisely what matter. When I asked employees how long they have been with the company, they often think back to which party they first attended: 10 million users? 50 million users? 200 million users? As Facebook increasingly pervades the US market (one in two Americans are registered with Facebook as of March 2012), the global map of Facebook's distributed user-base matters more and more. As I will argue, there is a geo-political element to the global distribution of social media user-ship, and it is something scholars should be thinking about in a more concerted way.

A quick look at the darker areas of a map showing the global distribution of dominant social media networks (see Figure 7) indicates where growth will need to be concentrated in order for Facebook to expand

beyond a billion active users.⁵ When speaking in Cannes, France, shortly after hitting 500 million active users, Zuckerberg said that Facebook had yet to become the dominant social network in China, Russia, Japan, and Korea, but was confident that it would. He said:

We know that a country has tipped when local-to-local connections [within a given country] outnumber local to foreign [between countries]...It is a long-term thing [and with regard to the four left to tip] we are probably not going to win in six months, not in a year [but] things look promising in three to five years out. (Sweeney 2010)

How does the mission to “make the world more open and connected” correspond with growing market-share in Russia or officially entering into the Chinese market? The company’s discourse on openness is strategically vague. Zuckerberg uses “open” abstractly, most often as a synonym for transparent (not the first adjectives that come to mind for places like China, Russia, and Iran). That is not to deny the possibility that Facebook could help make these countries more “open,” however if it wants a chance to do that, as its mission statement impels it to, politics must be actively elided from Facebook’s corporate culture. It’s a tightrope that Zuckerberg himself walks as he spearheads negotiations for official access to China by learning Chinese, and traveling to China regularly. If there was a foundational ethos of being anti-establishment, Facebook must now efface itself as it enters into negotiations with establishments such as the Chinese Communist Party.⁶

Access to Facebook has been or is currently restricted in whole or in part in China, Iran, North Korea, and Syria...In the event that access to Facebook is restricted, in whole or in part, in one or more countries or our competitors are able to successfully penetrate geographic markets that we cannot access, our ability to retain or increase our user base and user engagement may be adversely affected.⁷

— From the section on “Risks Related to Our Business and Industry” in Facebook’s S-1 Registration with the SEC (Facebook 2012b:80-81)

Kirkpatrick (2010) begins his book about Facebook with the story of the anti-Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) Facebook group, its viral growth, and the mass rallies that it helped to organize.⁸ From 2008 to 2010, Facebook highlighted its ability to be an instrument of political mobilization through the example of a Facebook group called “A Million Voices Against the FARC.” This group was the locus of organization for simultaneous demonstrations (held in more than 100 cities), in protest against FARC.⁹ (Both Kirkpatrick and Facebook focus on the group’s founder, Oscar Morales, but fail to acknowledge the extensive institutional support he received from the Colombian government and mass media).

However, as the Arab Spring erupted in January of 2011, Facebook left commentary on its political influence to the pundits. There are two reasons for this reticence. The first, not wanting to raise the barriers of entry, already high, in places like China or unsettle other governments’ anxieties about the social network’s expansion; the second is it contradicts a prevalent discourse at Facebook headquarters that the interface is neutral, that is, the company provides the platform and the users fill it with content. This discourse was most recently repeated when Chris Cox, VP for Product, presented the latest makeover of the Facebook profile, “Timeline.”

Timeline really is a blank canvas. It’s big enough for anybody’s story, and the most amazing thing for us is we have no idea what’s going to happen next. It’s yours to fill out. (F8 Live Keynote Speeches 2011)

Cox, Facebook’s foremost in-house media theorist, highlights and embraces the unpredictability of how users will interact with “Timeline.” The discourse bears similarities with other parts of the tech sector that create products dependent on user creativity. In his ethnography on the production of the online multi-user game *Second Life*, Thomas Malaby notes, “Linden Lab evinced a remarkable and antibureaucratic commitment to unintended consequences, and then found itself shaped by ‘Second Life’” (2009:16). The problem with the “empty canvas” discourse at Facebook is that it doubles as a commitment to dialogue with the unforeseeable and uncontrollable ways that people use Facebook, *and* as the rationale for political neutrality. The canvas may be blank but its texture and treatment determine what paints can be used. Or perhaps the more illustrative metaphor is that of the empty vessel, where the vessel’s shape influences how contents align. A radical embrace of contingency and its accompanying

respect for the role of users as content producers and therefore contributors to the website does not mean the interface is neutral.

As we saw with the presentation of Facebook Stories, the company is selective about the content it promotes. Similarly, Facebook Live is selective about the guests it hosts. Facebook Live is Facebook's video-streaming application and a video extension of the Facebook blog. It is another brand-building initiative that illustrates the limits of Facebook's neutrality. I requested an interview with members of the Facebook Live team and was granted one with Erin, its co-founder, and Skip, who has been Facebook Live's videographer-technician since its inception and, like Everett, a member of Facebook's communications design team. The interview was in one of Facebook's gourmet cafeterias, under the watchful eye of my minder. Assigning an employee of the communications division to oversee an interview is standard corporate communications practice, but I could not help but begrudge the policy, given the company's discourse of openness. My minder, a young man who checked his iPhone continuously and seemed preoccupied with other responsibilities, was a constant reminder that my access to Facebook was limited and monitored.

I wanted to understand Facebook Live's flirtation with politics. The company was formally sticking to an apolitical line in carefully avoiding comment in the public debate about its role in political upheaval in the Middle East and beyond, insisting that its interface is a "blank canvas" or "empty vessel" and blunting the more radical valences of its "hacker" culture. However, Facebook Live does feature political moments. For example, Facebook Live recently hosted President Obama for a town hall meeting at its headquarters. During the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, Christiane Amanpour was immediately on Facebook Live after she had interviewed Hosni Mubarak on February 3, 2011, eight days before he was deposed. When I asked about the criteria for selecting a guest for Facebook Live, Erin mused:

Do they have a message that is aligned with Facebook's bigger message, open connectedness? Do they believe in us? Do they use us? Are they doing something new and cool? And then, we have a world leader exception. Any world leader is allowed on Facebook Live. No joke, that's it...Now scale is even more important because v2 of Facebook Live, which we're in the middle of constructing and planning is we're gonna get this internationalized and not US focused,

and hit celebrities from all over the world. And we got studios opening in all of our offices, and access to studios all over the world.

In other words, Facebook asks if the guest is “big,” if there is a Facebook public relations tie-in, and going forward, if the programming targets audiences outside of the United States. Erin’s emphasis on internationalizing Facebook seemed like an opportune segue to the Amanpour interview. It is not archived on Facebook Live’s page and by all accounts was lackluster. Excruciating audio feedback pierced the stream and Amanpour had to run off at the end, passing the webcam to one of her producers in a Cairo hotel room. In continuing our discussion about the evolution of Facebook Live’s relationship to the rest of the company, I asked about the marketing logic behind the interview.

Erin: Having [Amanpour] on Facebook Live, ABC-Facebook Live, that piece of content can respectively play live or VOD [Video on Demand] on her page and the ABC page. It allows them to get the “hey look, we’re hip and cool and we’re on Facebook” ding to their audience, which is pretty valuable to 35-55 year-olds in the United States.

Alex: It also reinforces the notion that Facebook is politically relevant and politically potent.

Erin: I don’t think we’re in the position to say we’re politically relevant, or we’re politically potent, but we have a platform that has more eyeballs than any other platform. Because we don’t have an opinion on what Obama said, or what Bush said, as a company, or that Christiane Amanpour and ABC wanted to do it, we just opened up our platform to share eyeballs and brand.

Erin would go on to repeat her insistence that the decisions of who to feature on Facebook Live and who to partner with are neutral because Facebook has no formal position on any of their guests or what comes out of their guests’ mouths, consistent with the blank canvas discourse at Facebook. Consciously or not, Facebook Live is reformulating limited conceptions of objectivity in journalism that anthropologists have critiqued (Hannerz 2004, Pedelty 1995).

What I take from Erin’s comment, “I don’t think we’re in the position to say we’re politically relevant, or we’re politically potent, *but we have a platform that has more eyeballs than any other platform,*” is that Facebook’s

power derives from its size (user base) and online presence (primarily its blog and its own Facebook page). Facebook as broadcaster relies on its 67 million “likes” on Facebook (as of May 2012), a following that has been built without offline advertising. It is worth pausing to consider how this power in numbers is accumulated. As I noted in the previous section, the barometer for power in social media, like media forms before it, is size. However the tactics of accruing media-power through quantitative growth differ significantly, and, in the case of social media, those tactics are not yet adequately understood.

I suggest that Facebook’s strategy for global expansion, especially in the national markets it has yet to dominate, is to efface its political dimensions and rely on user data as a form of soft power that quietly wins new users. Such is the realpolitik world in which the geo-political map overlaps with the aggregated expression of the global user base’s activities on the platform, what Facebook likes to call the social graph. Let me try to explain what I mean through a few anecdotes and statistics.

Social Context. *We believe that the recommendations of friends have a powerful influence on consumer interest and purchase decisions. We offer advertisers the ability to include “social context” with their marketing messages. Social context is information that highlights a user’s friends’ connections with a particular brand or business, for example, that a friend Liked a product or checked in at a restaurant. We believe that users find marketing messages more engaging when they include social context.*

— Definition of “Social Context” from Facebook’s S-1 Registration with the SEC (Facebook 2012b:33)

Facebook makes available to its employees \$150 worth of advertising on Facebook per month in an effort to familiarize them with the mechanics of the company’s revenue stream. One of the employees generously donated his allotment to a campaign I was coordinating to free my brother and his friends, “the hikers,” from Iran.¹⁰ As I acquainted myself with Facebook’s advertising system where you carefully select your audience, taking advantage of the company’s rich trove of user data, I learned the first lessons

of advertising on Facebook: the most susceptible audience is friends of people who already like the page you are promoting. As Facebook informs advertisers in a tutorial, the most common reason people “like” a page is that they have friends that already do. Simply put, the key to building a Facebook presence is working the social graph. What is the social graph? The social graph is why “tagging” catapulted photos on Facebook past the myriad of other photo storage sites online. The social graph is what binds online and offline worlds, which has been a Facebook hallmark. Or, as Facebook describes it, the social graph is “the digital mapping of people’s real-world social connections” (Facebook 2012a). Essentially, it is the data that Facebook collects about its users’ relationships, converted to a visual format that balances the complexity of the relationships and the ability to graph it in a visually meaningful way. Of course, nobody has as complete a view of the social graph at various points of aggregation as Facebook. Ultimately, it is the social graph (a visual manifestation of the network effect) that is fueling Facebook’s international expansion, and geography—old-fashioned geography—plays a significant role.

The Social Graph represents the connections between people and their friends and interests. Every person or entity is represented by a point within the graph, and the affiliations between people and their friends and interests form billions of connections between the points. Our mapping of the Social Graph enables Facebook and Platform developers to build more engaging user experiences that are based on these connections.

— Definition of the “Social Graph” in Facebook’s S-1 Registration with the SEC (Facebook 2012b:322)

Recall what Zuckerberg said in Cannes after hitting the 500 million mark, “We know that a country has tipped when local-to-local connections outnumber local to foreign” (Sweeney 2010). How does he know this? Through experience. Back when one needed a .edu email address to register for Thefacebook, the campus startup had to compete with other social media sites, such as Columbia University’s “Campus Network.” Facebook’s strategy was to encircle its competition. Kirkpatrick explains:

If another social network had begun to take root at a certain school, Thefacebook would open not only there but at as many other campuses as possible in the immediate vicinity. The idea was that students at nearby schools would create a cross-network pressure, leading students at the original school to prefer Thefacebook. For example, Baylor University in Waco, Texas, had one of the earliest homegrown college social networks. Thefacebook launched at the University of Texas at Arlington to the north, Southwestern University to the southwest, and Texas A&M University to the southeast. (2010:108)

The vanguard for the invasion of a given market was its neighbors, and this tactic of creating cross-network pressure continues today in the company's global expansion. The vanguard in the geopolitical maneuvering to establish dominance in a new country is that country's neighbors, its diasporic populations, and users who speak the languages of the target country. Russia, for example, shares a border with 14 countries and has one of the world's largest diasporas. Between April 1, 2009 and April 1, 2011 the number of Facebook users expanded from 201,840 to 4,371,040 in Russia, a 2,065.6 percent growth, and the sixth highest growth rate for those two years after Taiwan, Brazil, Thailand, South Korea, and the Philippines (Burcher 2011). The ability to create cross network pressure is what gives Zuckerberg confidence in his prognosis that Facebook will win the market-share wars in the battleground nations one to three years from now.

In the global market-share war, Facebook has opted to rely on the quiet diplomacy of the social graph, a new soft power that it consolidates with every new user that signs up and every piece of information shared on its platform. Growth and data collection are mutually constitutive. This cycle is the basis of Facebook's power, and remaining apolitical is a strategy to avoid alienating publics, especially authoritarian governments—one of the few actors that can condition Facebook's expansion. This strategy of evacuating politics is articulated in an idiom of technological neutrality.¹¹

Conclusion

Facebook elides its preoccupation with its own expansion, measured most clearly through the size of its user-base. Facebook also denies any political agenda other than an abstracted sense of "openness," preferring

to accumulate and exercise power through cross-network pressure built through the advantage of superior user data. As Facebook continues to open new offices and register new users, it is worth thinking about its power in numbers geo-politically. Facebook’s global growth is making it one of the world’s most influential media companies, however that growth is not evenly distributed. Building upon Gershon’s ethnography, Facebook should be seen through the lens of neoliberal expansion. However, that expansion—as Facebook writes in its S-1 Registration with the SEC, is in an early stage. It is yet to be determined: 1) How the short-term demands of investors in a publicly traded company will react to Facebook’s strategic view of prioritizing growing the user-base over short-term profits; 2) If Facebook will indeed manage to turn the rest of global map of dominant social networks blue, including such red countries as China and Russia; 3) If it will manage to make those markets (and others) more “open.” Facebook understands itself schizophrenically as hacker and anti-establishment when branding itself internally, and expansionist but apolitical when doing business internationally. The neoliberal drive for new users and new markets is leading Facebook onto more screens across the globe, and like other technology giants, Facebook is staking a claim in global governance; its terms of service agreement is a new form of social contract.

The issue of media and governance across borders is not new to anthropologists. In 2008, Amahl Bishara framed her research on Palestinian observations and representations of US media coverage by writing:

Rather than seeing media and political institutions of representation as potentially or ideally independent from one another—as we might in the model of an “objective” or even a “free” press—I propose the examination of media and governing institutions as being engaged in overlapping projects. (2008:488)

What I am suggesting here is the social media equivalent of Bishara’s argument. Whether it is the Saudi Kingdom’s investments in Twitter, and the Iranian government’s efforts to promote an “Islamic Internet” subject to its censorship, or Facebook’s efforts to dominate the Russian market, and Google’s negotiations with China, technology giants are implicated in the geopolitical maneuvering traditionally reserved for statesmen. It is time we as anthropologists pay closer attention to their strategies and tactics. While I have pointed to some of those strategies and tactics,

in-depth ethnographic work will be critical in improving our understanding of Facebook's politics. The question of how much agency to ascribe to the medium of Facebook, which has been given so much air-time in the public sphere (if relatively little in-depth analysis) has occluded a possibly larger question: how to ascribe agency to Facebook the corporation, which—as its mission statement makes clear—sets out to intervene on the world. ■

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Endnotes:

¹For more information, visit Everett's website. Available at www.tychochondriac.com.

²Hack-a-thons would be fertile ground for an anthropologist to explore, as they are ritualized events where employees are able to work beyond their job description and assert their individuality while improving the Facebook platform—begging questions of the individual and the corporate collective, and programmed creativity.

³One feature built into Facebook as a result of a hack-a-thon project is the ability to send private videos to other users. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8tfaW5CaTtc>.

⁴Many I spoke with at the company were critical of Facebook's public portrayals, but saw Kirkpatrick's book as “the least bad” representation of Facebook.

⁵The most recent publicly available maps that chart Facebook's global distribution date back to December of 2010. Increasingly, anonymized Facebook data is collated and sold on a subscription basis to advertising firms.

⁶It is not only authoritarian governments that are unsettled by the prospect of Facebook's expansion, cell phone carriers concerned about losing out in the lucrative text message market are worried about Facebook Messenger and other mobile messaging applications.

⁷The listing of China, Iran, North Korea, and Syria indexes Facebook's proclivity to align more closely with NATO than the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

⁸The mobilization followed the assassination of 11 provincial politicians who had been kidnapped for more than seven years. For more information see Fattal n.d., “War in the Age of Digital Dissemination.” To see how Facebook frames Morales' group and its anti-FARC activism, see <http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=75505423022>.

⁹To see how Facebook highlights the anti-FARC mobilization, see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZXBMSb7_eE&feature=BFa&list=PLADAD8950BE990379&lf=results_main, 1:45 minutes into the video.

¹⁰My brother was visiting friends from college who were living in Syria when they went on what was meant to be a brief vacation in Iraqi Kurdistan. On July 31, 2009, while hiking behind a waterfall near the Iranian border, Iranian authorities detained them. My brother was released on September 21, 2011. For more information, see www.freethehikers.org.

¹¹In private conversations, various employees I spoke with acknowledged that the Facebook's blank canvas discourse is specious.

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Foreign language translations:

Facebook: Corporate Hackers, a Billion Users, and the Geo-politics of the "Social Graph"

[Keywords: Facebook, corporate culture, social media, media politics]

脸书：企业骇客，亿万用户，与“社交图谱”之地缘政治

[关键词：脸书，企业文化，社交媒体，媒体策略]

Фейсбук: Корпоративные хакеры, миллиард пользователей, и геополитика «социальной таблицы»

[**Ключевые слова:** Фейсбук, корпоративные культуры, социальные медиа, медийная политика]

O Facebook: Os "hackers" Corporatistas, Um Bilhão de Utentes, e a Geo-Política do "Matriz Social"

[**Palavras chaves:** Facebook, cultura de negócios, mídia social, políticas da mídia]

الفيسبوك: اتحاد الهاكرز، مليار مستخدم، والجغرافيا السياسية "للرسم البياني الاجتماعي"
الكلمات الجامعة: الفيسبوك، ثقافة الشركات، وسائل الاعلام الاجتماعية، الاعلام السياسي

