

Facing up to Facebook

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The development of the Internet has provided unprecedented access to information and to other people. No longer does it take days or weeks to communicate with people across the globe. As with so many things available to us, there is potential for good and evil, and as such it provides a challenge to the disciple of Christ. A more recent feature of the Internet is social networking, which millions use. This article considers the implications of this activity for the believer.

THE LAST six years have seen an explosion of social networks linking people around the world. More than 150 million people use Facebook to keep in touch with friends and family, sharing photographs and videos, and posting regular updates of their activities and thoughts. A further six million are signed up to Twitter, the 'micro-blogging' service that allows users to circulate text messages about themselves. In the UK it is now estimated that 13.7 million people use social networks. It seems that there is now a generation of young people who do not remember the world as it was before the internet took off, and who live their lives in a plethora of public online arenas.

Whilst it seems that the majority of users are in the thirteen years to thirty years age group, large numbers of more mature adults contribute as well. Although Facebook appears to be the one mostly used in the UK, others, such as Friendster, MySpace and Bebo, also provide the same service, and there are a number of others. Christadelphians, and young people from Christadelphian families, have joined the rush to avail themselves of these social networks, convinced that they are useful, harmless and even beneficial for fellowship.

The reality, though, could be very different, and the purpose of this article is to look at social networks and to ask the question, Should the brethren and sisters of Christ be so involved with such worldly organisations?

A number of different areas need to be considered.

Mind-set

For some time now, neuroscientists and psychologists have expressed concerns that the excessive use of social networks is causing changes in the brains of young users. "It is hard to see how living this way [logging onto social networks] on a daily basis will not result in brains, or rather minds, different from those of previous generations",¹ says Baroness Greenfield, Oxford University

neuroscientist. Susan Greenfield, along with a number of other scientists, suggests that the use of these sites shortens attention spans, encourages instant gratification and makes young people more self-centred.

These are the very characteristics that disciples of Christ need to avoid and encourage their children and young people to avoid. The ability to meditate on Scripture, to look forward and wait patiently for the Kingdom, and to be prepared to learn that self-sacrifice is an important element of discipleship, are the traits we must seek to develop. Sue Palmer, author of *Toxic Childhood*, says, "We are seeing children's brain development damaged because they don't engage in the activity they have engaged in for millennia. I'm not against technology and computers. But before they start social networking, they need to learn to make real relationships with people".² It seems that one of the dangers to come from constant or excessive use of social networks by young people is that their ability to communicate or concentrate away from the keyboard and screen is diminished.

Mind your own business

The loss of privacy in this day and age is endemic. We may be critical of society and its incessant thirst for revelations about the lives of celebrities, politicians and sporting heroes, but by baring all about ourselves on social networks we become

1. www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1153583, 24 Feb. 2009.

2. *Ibid.*

part of the same culture. Online we are so busy opening up our own privacy that we don't think other people's matters. If we are sharing then everybody should, we think. The minutiae of our daily lives, the ephemeral activities and injudicious photographs, along with inane comments, are there for all to see.

This writer has viewed many Facebook entries from Christadelphian sources that can be described in this way. He also discovered that a picture of himself and his wife while in an overseas country was posted on a Facebook entry and subsequently could be viewed by countless others without his prior knowledge or consent. Not that there was anything about the picture that could cause concern; it was actually a rather good portrait of us both!

On another occasion a picture of my wife and myself and two of our children taken in the 1970s appeared on someone else's Facebook entry, again without prior knowledge or consent, to be viewed by who knows how many people. My wife's reaction was one of dismay: "Oh no! Just look at my hair! I look a sight". If asked, she would not have wanted that picture circulated.

Young people upload photos of themselves and friends and acquaintances caught on camera at all sorts of events and in all sorts of places without making sure that everyone in the picture is in agreement with it being made public. The problem is that they then try to outdo each other with more zany, humorous or revealing pictures and comments, and so the spiral continues. For them it's all good fun; but the naivety attached to such activity is not good. Social networking sites are not secure, and what is posted on them can be used against people and misused in all sorts of ways.

A question that rarely seems to be asked is, Who am I sharing this information with? It may not just be with those whom you choose as 'friends'; it may well be with friends of friends whom you do not know and would not have chosen to include in an offline context. Sadly, when one reads the Christadelphian entries there is little that educates in regard to the faith we hold, the coming Kingdom, the need for the forgiveness of sins and the sacrifice of Christ.

Can we imagine what the Apostle Paul, or Timothy, or Silas, would have written in their Facebook entry? I do not think it would bear much resemblance to what the world would consider interesting today. Reading Philippians 2 is quite salutary.

Used in evidence

The advances in technology in this digital world are so rapid that one can scarcely keep up with them or comprehend them. Although we enjoy the facility that social networks brings in promoting communication and information sharing among individuals and groups, what we need to understand is that governments and educational and commercial organisations are now concentrating on and monitoring the many networks that exist. Much of this stems from the terrorist activity of 9/11 in New York; but it is not just terrorists that the state seeks to monitor now.

In Europe and North America, in particular, researchers are busy developing more effective 'total information' electronic surveillance systems. A Canadian organisation based in Montreal, [GlobalResearch.ca](http://www.globalresearch.ca), reports that a consortium called INDECT (Intelligence Information System supporting Observation Searching and Detection for Security of Citizens in the Urban Environment) has developed just such a system, called Work Package 4. The object of this system, according to Tom Burghardt, is to "comb web blogs, chat sites, news reports, and social-networking sites in order to build up automatic dossiers on individuals, organisations and their relationships".³ The *New Scientist* journal predicts that the UK government plans to harness advances in internet technology to combine data from social networking websites with details such as banking, retail and property records, which will allow them to have all-embracing personal profiles.

What many people do not realise is that this is already being carried out to a certain level by insurance companies, universities and businesses, as well as state organisations such as government departments, the police and security services.⁴ In 2008 the *Independent* newspaper ran a report under the heading, "Facebook can ruin your life", showing that employers and authorities were monitoring what people imagined were private websites and using the contents against them. It revealed that at Cambridge at least one

3. "Mind your tweets: the CIA social networking surveillance system", Tom Burghardt, 27 Oct. 2009, <http://www.globalresearch.ca>.

4. This was highlighted recently when a photograph of and information about a local brother in the mission field was posted on Facebook by a CBM fieldworker returning home. This information was accessed by the internal security of his country and created considerable difficulties for the local brother.

don admitted 'discreetly' scanning applicants' Facebook pages before deciding on whether to grant them a place, and that this is also a practice widespread in job recruitment. A survey released by Viadeo said that sixty-two per cent of British employers now check the Facebook, MySpace and Bebo pages of some applicants, and that a quarter had rejected applicants as a result.

Such practices should cause any who write on a social network to think carefully about what they put in print. There is also the problem of criminal activity against Facebook users. Only recently, on 5 September 2010, the *Sunday Times* featured an article that revealed how hackers are stealing the identities of Facebookers in order to get their cash. These fraudsters break into the accounts of people on the social networking sites and trick their friends and families into sending them money. A sister known to the author had her Facebook site hacked into, and she was blocked off and could not get into her own site. Emails of an obnoxious sort were then being sent out, purporting to come from the sister. She was powerless to prevent it, and so, it seemed, were the authorities.

Besides the privacy of users being compromised, our own naïvety in the posting of unwise comment lays us open to the exploitation of others. Recently a hacker downloaded half-a-million private pictures from MySpace and made them available on the file-sharing site BitTorrent. This is the world we live in, and we need to have a greater spiritual awareness and realisation of what we should avoid and refrain from. The old adage, 'Always read the small print', also applies when signing up to a social network, especially if at some future date you wish to come off the site. Facebook's terms and conditions mean that one cannot actually delete one's account, only 'deactivate' it. Facebook keeps hold of all details for perpetuity. The site only agrees to cancel an account if every event, message, and so on, that is on it is deleted manually. Imagine what a long and difficult process that would be for a regular daily user!

A matter of conscience

Is this just the ramblings of a twenty-first-century Luddite, a cry to bring back the quill pen, a desperate attempt to stop progress and change because I don't like it and don't understand it? Or are there serious implications for the Brotherhood and for individual brethren and sisters?

I think there are implications that we need to be aware of. Those representing the Brother-

hood, such as the Military Service Committee, a committee dealing with matters of conscience, is in dialogue with state organisations such as the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office. It makes representation and presents our Scriptural beliefs and principles, seeking either exemptions or to influence certain aspects of legislation. The government is now able to view social networking sites and see whether our lifestyles, words and so on are consistent with what we claim as a community. If the time comes again when, as individuals, young brethren and sisters seek exemption from military service or certain civil defence activities, or decline to take certain employment, they may find that their entries on social networking sites will be used against them.

It seems to this writer that our wholehearted acceptance and use of social networking sites has not improved the presentation of our faith, but instead revealed more of our human nature, the humanistic aspect of life which such sites promote. Scripture challenges us when it instructs us, "but sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:15).

When required to give witness to our hope our words may not convince the listener, for we might be brought face to face with our Facebook image! It seems as though these worldly institutions do not elevate our behaviour, but encourage us to follow the ways of the world. The psalmist in Psalm 145:3-7 sets out the pattern for us: "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; and His greatness is unsearchable. One generation shall praise Thy works to another, and shall declare Thy mighty acts. I will speak of the glorious honour of Thy majesty, and of Thy wondrous works. And men shall speak of the might of Thy terrible acts: and I will declare Thy greatness. They shall abundantly utter the memory of Thy great goodness, and shall sing of Thy righteousness".

No one seems to be embarrassed by personal revelations or comments on these sites, but are they the sort of comments we would want our heavenly Father or the Lord Jesus to be reading or listening to?—which, of course, they are doing. It seems to the writer that, if prayer had a greater part in our lives, if we were more aware of the spiritual network we can be and are part of, then when we communicate on earth through this social networking system it would be more likely to reflect our heavenly communications.

“Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed;
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast”

(Hymn 164, *Christadelphian Hymn Book*).

The advice of the Apostle Paul is, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17); and to the Ephesian ecclesia he said that, armed with the Word, they should be “praying always with all prayer and

supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints” (6:18). We must all stand before the Lord when he returns, to give account for things said and done. It may well be that, both as a community and as individuals, those lives revealed on social networking sites will cause us to be called to account by people and institutions here on earth prior to our Lord’s coming.