

Letter from Who Knows Where

Facebook Fakebook

By Ruth Ellen Gruber

I WAS JUST starting to write this “letter”—about social networking and my own take on the Facebook (FB) phenomenon—when a friend of mine popped up on my computer screen with an instant message chat request she said was urgent. For readers who are not part of the almost 200 million FB participants around the world, I should explain that the Internet behemoth allows an easy exchange of biographies, photographs, videos, music, and other material.

FB users set up Web pages, called profiles, containing information about themselves and then “friend” other users, forming ever-expanding communication networks. You can post multimedia content to hundreds of people simultaneously, engage in one-on-one conversations, restrict access to chosen information, create special pages about upcoming events or personalities, and also play games like online Scrabble (in a form known on FB as Lexulous).

The friend who wanted to talk to me so urgently (let’s call her Alice) is both a real-life and a Facebook friend. What she told me was disturbing yet fascinating: The Facebook profile of a mutual real-life friend (lets called her Jane) was a hoax—a “Fakebook,” as it were.

The profile purporting to be Jane’s had actually been set up by an impostor.

It mixed real photographs and biographical and career details about Jane, apparently pulled from open Internet sources, with invented information and pictures of someone resembling her.

The scam had been going on for months. Moreover, Fake Jane had created Fakebook profiles for other people, including some the real Jane knows, in order to make it appear that she was engaging in the public chat, picture posting and other online interactions that are Facebook’s hallmark and attraction.

Jane herself, by the way, does not have a real FB profile. She has avoided all sorts of social networking sites, she told me, precisely because of her concerns about online security. She had absolutely no idea how her identity had been stolen and her persona was being used—or, more accurately, abused.

This has been a source of considerable consternation for Alice, Jane and me. “I don’t know whom to trust at all on Facebook now,” Alice said. “Online social interaction was already a sort of parallel universe, but Jane’s experience has demonstrated that there is actually another parallel universe. There could be a Fakebook that has me, Alice, connecting with people in my name, and I wouldn’t know a thing about it.”

The Fake Jane hoax appeared to be an

extremely elaborate, ongoing and time-consuming endeavor for whoever was carrying it out. Before anyone had caught on, the impostor had amassed many hundreds of FB friends and spent hours posting pictures, comments and similar spurious information. The biographical notes and other material seemed plausible; only a few turns of phrase would have raised an alert for people who were close with the real Jane.

But what was the purpose? Financial fraud did not seem to be involved. Nor was there any indication of a sexual predator at work. And Jane is not a celebrity or politician who could be the target of a cyberspace spoof or even a stalker, as many public figures are.

Last year, for example, FB removed two fake profiles of the son of Benazir Bhutto, the Pakistani candidate for prime minister assassinated in 2007. A statement issued then said: “Facebook examines a range of criteria to determine whether a profile is authentic, including reports from users, profile content, the e-mail associated with an account, length of time the account has been open, and network affiliations.”

Searching online—where else?—for

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information about the growing Fakebook problem, I found plenty of relevant articles and blog posts. University and high school Web sites tell students how easy it is to create a “trusted” fake friend.

“Facebook is currently being flooded with fake profiles,” declared an October 2008 post on a computer security blog. “Due to the huge daily registration rate . . . it is hard to keep track of who is a regular user and who is a fake.

“The question that may be asked is why are people setting up fake Facebook profiles? They are generally set up by a combination of either spammers or various malware and virus writers. Once the fake Facebook profiles are set up . . . the virus writers proceed to persuade users to click on links. These links are not authentic and the majority of the time will take the user to malicious and dangerous sites.”

AS I WRITE, the origin of Fake Jane has not been discovered. It seems, though, that maliciousness—by a disgruntled coworker perhaps—may have something to do with the enterprise.

Jane works for a respected nongovernmental organization and is known as a serious professional. The Fake Jane could play on this to become FB friends with many other professional people. Certainly the orchestrated posts, pictures, comments, and conversations appear designed to inspire trust and present a convincing profile of an interactive person.

One of FB’s functions is to introduce fellow users to interesting articles and Web content by posting links to Internet sites. Having established “her” bona fides, the Fake Jane is now in a position to post links to malicious sites FB friends will click on in good faith. In other words, the impostor could be an extravagantly orchestrated bit of scam, meant to spread a virus. On the other hand, the whole thing could also be a less malevolent practical joke. But who knows?

Since learning about the Fake Jane, I have questioned my own use of Facebook. I joined FB more than a year ago, after a (real-life) friend said it was where he had posted some old pictures of us. Membership, which is free, did open up

a new and for the most part fun, yet often very informative, world.

I started amassing FB friends and looking for their updates as part of my daily check of e-mail and news sites. In the process I have been alerted to concerts, exhibitions and other events; I have read news stories and blogs I would not otherwise have discovered; and I have been able to meet some of these people while traveling.

I also enjoy playing online Scrabble with friends in Berlin, Paris, Philadelphia, and elsewhere. On my birthday, I received a long list of greetings from FB friends who had it automatically noted in their “upcoming events” space.

I have found it intriguing to watch the way my various FB friends use the service—what they say and don’t say, how they present themselves and their online identities. Everyone who creates a Facebook profile has the option of stating their age, sex, hometown, political views, religious views, even sexual preference. Some people post almost nothing but their name; others provide intimate details of their lives.

In addition, users can choose which of their friends and the wider FB community can see the contents of their profiles. One of my nephews, for instance, allows his parents and other adult relatives to see pictures and some other posts, but blocks out the day-to-day conversations he has with his peers.

A few months ago, for a column I wrote for a Jewish publication, I looked at the way my Jewish friends on FB define themselves religiously. You can choose whether or not to post anything about your beliefs. I myself feel that if people want to know my religious views, they can ask me.

For my piece on the subject, I tallied how many of my FB friends I know to be Jewish filled this slot. At the time, I had about 200 FB friends, the majority of whom were Jewish. Over half of them, like me, chose to leave the space empty. Of the 80 who did respond, a dozen simply wrote “Jewish.” Another dozen used the standard Reform, Conservative or Orthodox Jew.

The rest produced a colorful spectrum of qualifiers, inventions, political statements, and imaginative shadings that re-

flected the complex tapestry of Jewish self-identity. These included, to list but a few: Secular Humanist Jewish; Spiritualist; Indifferent; Jewish atheist; I love being Jewish; The Golden Rule; Incoherent; That’s between me and my imaginary friend; It’s all good; Eclectic; Anything I can cling to; Agnostic; Resolutely secularly Jewish; Neotribalist; Neopagan of Zion; Spiritual Jewgaysm; Whirling dervish; Rationalist; I can see a church from my window; Jewish but not obsessive; Waiting for UFOs to take me to Hawaii. . .

SOMEONE pointed out to me recently that if Facebook were a country, its membership would make it one of the six biggest in the world. From that perspective, it is no wonder the concerns of the real world, both good and bad, are also those expressed on FB, and vice versa.

To cite one example, privacy issues are frequently raised in discussions regarding Facebook and other online social networks. Young people in particular are warned that they may unwittingly set themselves up for a fall (or a job rejection) by posting compromising or simply ridiculous pictures of themselves. Women, especially women students, are cautioned that their FB profile could leave them open to real-life predators.

“I encourage all students with a Facebook account to reassess what information they choose to expose online,” a University of Maryland student wrote on the university’s Web site. “The Internet can be a powerful tool, but it can also be a dangerous source for criminals and perverts. In addition, employers have caught on to the Facebook obsession and often find ways to check the profiles of potential employees for implicating information and photographs.”

In fact, definitions of what is public and what is private, what is taboo and what is accepted—and what that will mean for future social relations—are in flux online and off. Just think, 15 years ago Bill Clinton had to fudge about how he puffed marijuana but never inhaled. Today, Barack Obama may get more flak because he can’t quit smoking tobacco than because he smoked pot as a student. “I inhaled frequently,” he said, in a film

clip that has been seen by millions on YouTube. "That was the point."

On the Internet, a reality check can be difficult, making cons easier to pull off against a bigger swath of the unwitting public. Hence cases like my Facebook friend Fake Jane.

"If this kind of false-identity fraud hasn't been attempted against you in the past, I can assure you it will be in the future," writes Mike Elgan in an article on the Georgetown University Web site. "Scammers are quickly realizing that posing as another person is a foolproof way to get around the age-old trust issue that can ruin a good con."

Online false-identity fraud, of course, goes far beyond Facebook—and sometimes in surprising directions. Early in March the son of Norman Golb, a University of Chicago professor, was arrested and accused of stealing the identities of several people in order to promote his father's theory about who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls. Prosecutors say he set up e-mail accounts and blogs using false names to discredit one of his father's critics. He faces four years in jail if convicted of the charges: identity theft, criminal impersonation, and aggravated harassment.

"This exemplifies a growing trend," said Assistant District Attorney Antonia Merzon during a news conference announcing the indictment. "It's very easy to open an account using any name you want on the Internet. There's nothing necessarily wrong with that. But when you start using another person's true identity for some purpose, you're crossing the line into a possible identity theft crime or impersonation crime."

They used to call cyberspace the Information Superhighway. The ever faster and heavier traffic demands a new type of street smarts.

P.S. As I finished writing this, a Reuters story came up on my computer news feed:

"LAGOS (Reuters)—A Nigerian undergraduate has been sentenced to 19 years in prison for obtaining \$47,000 (33,382 pounds) from an Australian woman by convincing her over the Internet that he was 57 years old, white, and madly in love with her."

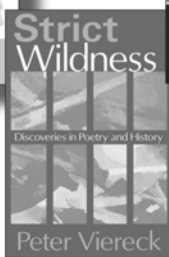
BOOKS BY PETER VIERECK

Peter Viereck (1916-2006) Pulitzer Prize-winning poet, critic, and historian, was known as one of American conservatism's early leaders. He held the Kenan Chair in History at Mount Holyoke College, and was the recipient of Guggenheim Fellowships both in history and poetry.



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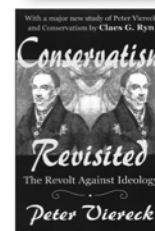
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