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"Facebook in the Flesh"

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The Web has often and, I think, justifiably been touted as a democratizing and empowering communications medium. But as with any communications phenomenon of this magnitude, there are bound to be some negative effects. I am not talking here about the threats to children or the ubiquity of online pornography. In more basic social and expressive terms, the manner in which people associate and communicate "online" may be producing certain deleterious effects with regard to such activities "offline." Although there are likely others, I want to discuss two such potential negative effects.

The first possible negative effect relates to basic interpersonal skills and social networking. As some educators (the author included) are doubtless aware, students have a tendency to resort to email rather than make appointments for face-to-face meetings with instructors. Disembodied or "virtual" communication can of course be quite beneficial in terms of things like convenience and efficiency. But for students, emailing, texting, and participating in social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook are not primarily related to convenience and efficiency; they are now the principal means of connecting to and communicating with others. What effect are these modes of online communication having on real space encounters and interactions? Consider a recent orientation seminar offered at New York University, entitled "Facebook in the Flesh." As [reported](#) ^[1] in the September 17 edition of *The New Yorker*, the seminar was apparently designed to teach students how to socialize and build social networks *in person* — social processes that a seminar brochure recognized could be very "intimidating" to students. At one point, participants were paired off and given instructions on how to do such elementary things as ask questions and discover commonalities and connections. Thus, one possible negative effect from online modes of expression is the difficulty, and in some cases even inability, to effectively interact with others located in the same physical space. This negative effect may have serious social and economic, as well as expressive, ramifications. (According to a recent [survey](#) ^[2], time spent at work has not decreased despite the availability of mobile technologies.)

Another possible negative effect relates specifically to the manner in which audiences interact with speakers — public officials, commencement speakers, celebrities, comics, etc. — in public and quasi-public settings. The practice of heckling appears to be ascendant. A documentary entitled "Heckler" was shown at this year's Tribeca Film Festival. As [reported](#) ^[3] in the *New York Times*:

The film . . . argues that hecklers have grown not only more conspicuous in recent years, but more scathing, as more people feel emboldened to partake in public criticism, perhaps in part because the culture of blogs and online user reviews has created a climate where everyone is a critic — and a harsh one. It's not enough to give performers a simple thumbs down. They must be personally lambasted, humiliated, even virtually willed out of existence.

Heckling, an expressive form that challenges and generally irritates the speaker, may be giving way to the "takedown" — an expressive form that seeks not only to silence and discredit the speaker but in many cases to assert the primacy of the heckler's own message (a version of the "heckler's veto"). Psychologists refer to the disabling of personal filters (manners) as the "disinhibition effect." Online disinhibition has been facilitated to a large extent by Web anonymity. But disinhibition is present in many non-anonymous online encounters as well. As the *Times* article notes, today's heckler, whether online or offline, often wants *credit* for the takedown. Although some psychologists have suggested a connection between online expressive behaviors and offline disinhibition, one cannot of course establish a direct causal relationship. Nevertheless, there is at least a plausible argument that behaviors like the disinhibited online takedown are seeping into our offline expressive culture. Is this necessarily a *negative* effect? After all, heckling is a longstanding

and even in some sense venerable First Amendment tradition. In today's often minutely stage-managed public domain, some interruption and disruption may be a salutary thing. But there are important differences between heckling a speaker and taking her down. Takedowns undermine basic First Amendment values like tolerance for diverse viewpoints and respect for a speaker's ability to deliver her message. In an offline expressive culture in which there may be no "audience" of listeners but only a subjectively entitled, increasingly narcissistic, and vociferous group of speakers, such basic First Amendment values will be difficult to preserve.

Is there a connection between these two negative effects? Possible personal networking difficulties and behaviors like the takedown suggest a culture that may ultimately be less socially adept, at least in the traditional sense. As or more importantly, we may be witnessing the gradual decline of critical aspects of our offline expressive culture — the ability to connect with others in real time and space and to listen respectfully, in silence, to what others have to say.

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[1] reported : http://www.newyorker.com/talk/2007/09/17/070917ta_talk_schulman

[2] survey: http://www.vault.com/nr/newsmain.jsp?nr_page=3&ch_id=402&article_id=53253&cat_id=1101

[3] reported: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/08/fashion/08heckle.html?ex=1333684800&en=9062d5a18b37219c&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>

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