

# Confessions of a Facebook fraud by Tim Brosnan

*When over 150 Facebook members arrived at our theater's one-day-old Facebook page to list themselves as our friends, I thought we'd struck marketing gold. What I didn't know at the time, however, was that on Facebook, the term "friend" translates as something between "the mother of my children" and "exists."*

Facebook is a free-of-charge Web-based "social utility" that makes it drop-dead easy for anyone to establish a highly detailed, graphically rich, limitlessly networked online presence and to update that presence unceasingly.

And make no mistake, if networking is Facebook's stock-in-trade, updating is what gives that stock its value. Facebook's 43 million members have easy access to an arsenal of plug-ins they can use to embellish their pages with every kind of content imaginable. Photos, videos, Flash animations, interactive components and endless lists of activities and preferences leap from Facebook pages like so many puppies at the pet store. Events can be created and invitations issued automatically. If a member prefers, his "status," meaning his current disposition, can be broadcast real-time via news feeds as widely or as narrowly as the mysterious Facebook algorithms deem appropriate.

Log on to Facebook and you see instantly who else is logged on because a chat window appears inviting you to talk to them. You can monitor their every movement – when a friend request is granted, when a book is read, when a message is sent or a photo commented upon. You can write on a member's "wall" as a matter of public record or simply "poke" them as a means of getting their attention to no particular end. Members with little to say, but who are particularly fond of poking, can enhance their Facebook experience by installing a plug-in that allows them to "super-poke." The typical Facebook session is a blur of chatting, posting, peeking, poking and, of course, the ever-present prospect of invitations to befriend the people who know the people who know the people you know.

Unfamiliar as I was with sites like Facebook and the true meaning of what seemed at first like a public relations bonanza, I was pleasantly surprised by the outpouring of interest in our page. "So many friends of the theater," I thought, "people who recognize our high artistic standards and support us in what we do." And if the current rate of friendship aggregation continued, it seemed Facebook might

be the express lane to new demographic frontiers where single ticket buyers hung heavy on the vine.

In fairly short order, I knew who was reading what, who likes whom to the tenth degree of separation, where they're from, what movies they've seen, their turnoffs and turn-ons and whether, if hatched from a large speckled egg, they'd be a baby penguin, a kitten or an adorable hamster. I saw pictures of them at home, at parties and on vacations. I watched their videos, sampled their music, visited their favorite sites and perused their annotated reading lists. I wallowed willy-nilly in the kind of personal information for which people in my line of work would sell their mothers' souls.

Then something unexpected happened. I joined.

## Down the rabbit hole

While I knew then as I know now that joining Facebook as an individual had absolutely nothing to do with leveraging its marketing potential for the theater, the complexion of the theater's face on Facebook had ceased to matter. Facebook had stirred the sluggish social animal inside me, likewise the actor inside the animal and the addictive personality inside the actor.

It was raw, high-tech exposure in a medium brimming with potential admirers. It was, all of a sudden, all about *me*.

Leaving it to our intern to manage the theater's Facebook page (which she'd assembled for us in the first place), I established my own and attracted a network of 40 friends almost overnight. Not bad, I thought, but I was sure that I could do better. I'm a professional communicator, after all, with decades of experience crafting high-impact messages. I have credentials as a writer, a designer and a performer. I was among the handful of people who, back in the 90's, launched the now-defunct Knight Ridder newspaper chain into cyberspace. So as I browsed the other members' pages, I fancied myself at least a fox in the Facebook hen house, if not a full-grown bear.

Day after day, some days for 12 hours at a stretch, I organized and enhanced content. I alphabetized my list of favorite movies. I posted nearly 100 book reviews, many of them hundreds of words in length. I uploaded my graphics and print design portfolios, production photos and baby pictures. I wrote on people's walls and they wrote on mine.



*The author, circa 1968. Photo no longer available on Facebook.*

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We chatted and messaged and poked, though we never super-poked, and I combed YouTube for thought-provoking videos, links to which I lovingly arranged on my page like roses in a vase.

A week after joining, however, my friend count stood at 45. True, I'd resolved to grant friend status only to people with whom I'd had cordial dealings in the temporal realm, but surely I could break 100. That seemed like a nice, round, achievable, adult sort of number. I sneered dismissively at the "Facebook whales," as they're called, who collect Facebook friends indiscriminately at bars and libraries. Mostly college students, the whales gobble up Facebook friends like krill, numbering them in the thousands. I was determined to keep my friend count meaningful. But I had work to do.

I was looking for the sweet spot, the hidden lever that would cause the world (or at least 50 more friends) to beat a path to my mini-feed. I kept a note pad beside my bed where I scribbled ideas about adding, modifying or (rarely) deleting content. I stepped up my wall-writing. I updated my status hourly. I added 200 books to the "already read" section of my Visual Bookshelf and I pressured my colleagues to join Facebook in a bald-faced attempt to increase my lackluster but legitimate friend count.

But by the end of the second week, my count was advancing at a snail's pace. 49. How could this be? My content was robust and polished to gleaming perfection. My status was always current. I left light-hearted messages on other members' walls. I even changed my profile picture every couple of days to show my commitment to ever-changing, ever-better everything. Yes, I'd righteously ignored a smattering of friend requests from people I'd never met. And yes, there were hopeful signs: event invitations, for example, and people writing on my wall *not* as a direct result of me writing on theirs.

Then it struck me that I'd been ignoring one critical fact:  
I'm a hermit.

Which means that, even at 49, my Facebook friend count was a gross exaggeration of my actual capacity for fellowship, let alone friendship.

Somehow or other, I'd gotten it into my head that I could persuade people already familiar with my special brand of social retardation to respond to my avatar differently than they'd respond to me in person. I'd also used Facebook to show off, pure and simple. I had embarrassed myself.

I'd advertised falsely in a forum designed for people who actually do go to bars and parties and mixers and who really do have friends in quantities that I can only imagine. I didn't belong on Facebook. I was an interloper. An alien. A spy.

So I left.

I deleted the content I'd spent weeks collecting and perfecting. I removed all my finely-crafted personal

information, all my photos and favorites and links. I erased the messages people had written on my wall and purged my mini-feed of all record of everything I'd done since Day One. Then, to make sure I couldn't go back in a moment of weakness, I changed my password to something I'd never remember in a million years, deactivated the account and deleted the password from my hard drive, effectively throwing away the key.

### Post-apocalypse

The theater's Facebook page remains, though its friend count has barely budged from the initial run-up. And since our intern has her own Facebook page, I can't expect her to spend a great deal of time animating ours. Its usefulness to us as a marketing tool remains to be seen, redundant as it is of the theater's primary Web site and the several other arts portals where we post season information. It is free-of-charge, however, so we lose nothing by keeping it and, for that reason alone, probably won't shut it down any time soon.

As for me and my own short-lived Facebook adventure, I have nothing but this narrative to show for my efforts, which is just as well. I'm in a little coffee bar, a favorite haunt of mine, where the proprietor knows my name and an old gentleman whose name I've never asked sometimes sits across from me to read his newspaper. He greets me with a cheerful "Good morning!" as he arrives and I respond in kind. Half an hour later, he leaves.

This is the mode of casual social interaction that comes most naturally to me. It lacks urgency. It discourages documentation. When the old man goes, he tucks his newspaper under his arm and takes his status with him. The wall behind his booth bears no witness to anything he's thought or done.

It was fun to pretend that there were almost 50 people in the world interested in the details of my daily comings and goings, but now that I'm in exile, the irony of my participation in Facebook is undeniable. As I've said, I'm a hermit.

And to be honest, mixed though my emotions about Facebook may be, the idea of dozens of people staring into my perimeter at all hours of the day and night really sort of creeps me out. — *June 1, 2008*

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*The author, circa 1972. Photo no longer available on Facebook.*