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Utopia and Facebook: Unsettling the Perception of an Ideal Arrangement

Thomas More's text, *Utopia*, introduces the word "utopia" in conjunction with an ideal society, prodding readers to think of "utopia" as synonymous with "ideal." Indeed, *Utopia* is structured as an egalitarian and communal place, rendering it highly ideal to those wishing for equality in their own worlds. However, More overturns those central concepts of equality and communal existence through the course of the narrative, suggesting that one's ideal world does not, and cannot exist, but operates only in fiction. A utopia, then, is an imagined ideal world that rescinds its own ideals and therefore can never be manifest. Similarly, many utopias are being imagined by people in contemporary society, but instead of using ink and paper to form those worlds, they use the internet. A plethora of self-created worlds exist in internet forums, particularly in the social networking site (SNS) called Facebook. Facebook allows users to form their own ideal worlds via profiles, privacy settings, and open communication with friends. However, while Facebook claims to operate on these ideals of privacy and community, it overturns those ideals in its very operation, proving it to be non-ideal. Just like *Utopia*, Facebook initially appears to fit the conception of an ideal, communal society, but upon further exploration, Facebook is shown to exploit privacy and disconnect people more than it connects them; therefore, because Facebook overturns the ideals it was founded on, Facebook may be said to be a utopia, which by definition can never exist.

Thomas More's *Utopia* is generally perceived as the model of an ideal society; however, *Utopia*'s blurred lines between the real and imagined suggest that ideal societies cannot exist. More penned the word "utopia," which etymologically means "no place," but has come to be used by many critics and the population at large, to suggest an ideal, usually egalitarian society

(Bruce xxi). More's text itself begins with a critique on England and then moves into a description of the island Utopia. What is most slippery about the text is the dividing line between what is real and what is imagined. The text opens with a letter from Thomas More to Peter Giles, introducing More's account of their conversation with Hythloday, the traveler who went to Utopia. Both More and Giles are real people, yet Hythloday and the meeting with him are entirely fictional. More immediately sets up a tension between the real and the imagined world, causing the reader to pause and question to what extent More's truth claims are really true, and if Utopia is really the ideal society. From this perspective, a utopia may perhaps be conceived as a social, political, and economic arrangement that is initially perceived as an ideal arrangement, but really cannot exist, except in the imagined realm.

Utopia's habit of critiquing itself suggests that a utopia is not an ideal arrangement, but rather a critique on an ideal world. Self-critiques usually appear implicitly in the text, but many surface explicitly through contradictions or disagreements with the person describing the utopia. For instance, in *Utopia*, Hythloday praises the Utopians' attitude of being unimpressed with fancy garments or feathers, essentially resisting materialism. He cites the occasion where visiting ambassadors proudly "display their peacock's feathers" trying to impress the Utopians (More 72). But instead of being impressed, the Utopians feel that "all that gorgeousness of apparel seem[s] shameful and reproachful" (More 73). This incident is described in order to indicate the Utopians' rejection of self-importance displayed by finery, and also their valuation of social equality. Such values may appear noble and ideal because they are centered on equality in society, a value generally perceived as ideal. Yet this ideal becomes rapidly unsettled when Hythloday describes the priests' garments, which are decorated with "diverse [sic] feathers of fowls," going further to explain that whenever the priest appears in these feather-laden garments,

everyone drops to the ground in reverence (More 117). Whereas the ambassadors' garments repulsed the Utopians, the priest's similar garments do not. This act overturns the idea that Utopians are not materialistic, but rather, they adore finery. Further, the Utopians give the most "honor [sic] and pre-eminence" to the priest (More 114). So the initial picture of Utopia as a place of equality and disdain for materialism shifts to a society of classes and recognition of physical splendor. Therefore, one of the ideas that Utopia presumably centers upon (equality) turns out to be a principle they do not practice. A utopia is therefore counter-ideal, and is a transmitter of an ideal that actually inverts that ideal it initially praises. Further, if a utopia suggests ideal arrangements and then inverts them, then utopias are a caution to the reader that ideals can never translate into reality.

Similar utopias are being incessantly created in modern society through the World Wide Web, a medium that affords individuals the opportunity to create their own ideal environments. Creating ideal spaces via the internet is frequently - and easily - done through blogs, forums, and SNSs. In these domains, users can invent their own governments, worlds, and even recreate themselves simply by punching some keys and clicking on boxes. Some of the most frequented internet sites are SNSs like Facebook that provide the user with a unique opportunity to create his or her own ideal world. The user creates his or her own profile, including name, age, physical characteristics, interests, and the like, thus giving that individual the freedom to present his or herself in whatever way he or she wants to be perceived. There is no check to make sure the internet profile (imagined) matches the physical profile (real). Essentially, the user can create his or herself as an ideal person without speaking a single word or making an appearance. This ability is ideal to many people, particularly those who may have struggled socially in their developing years, but thrive in an online environment that does not require face to face

interaction (Kim, LaRose, and Peng 451). The proliferation of the internet and Facebook's user-friendly features affords individuals the opportunity to create their own ideal arrangements.

Facebook is similar to More's Utopia in many ways, especially in the way it values privacy. Like Utopia, Facebook has various lines of defense. One cannot view another member's complete profile without that member's consent. Just as an outsider must be guided to the Utopian shore by a Utopian, an outsider must navigate through cyberspace in order to gain access to another member's Facebook world. This arrangement is ideal because it protects the member from unwanted attractions or invasions of privacy. However, once one gains admittance into another member's world, nearly all the content of that world may be freely accessed. This is also similar to More's Utopia, where Utopians have equal access to whatever they want: houses, food, and similar essentials, once they are part of the community. Indeed, one of the major features of Facebook is the quality of sharing one's experiences with one's community via discourse or photographs. The desire to maintain privacy while still being able to share information with one's comrades suggests that privacy protection is one of the chief qualities that draws users to Facebook. Studies suggest that Facebook's initial popularity benefitted from "students' perception that [Facebook] is a somewhat 'private' forum" (Peluchette and Karl 95). Therefore, it may be said that privacy is one feature that makes Facebook "ideal."

Nevertheless, a utopia is not just an ideal arrangement, but also the revelation that such an ideal cannot and does not exist. More can write ten descriptions of Utopia and praise their attributes as much as he wants, but writing about it does not guarantee implementation. Similarly, a Facebook user can write that he is six feet tall, 150 pounds, and was born on 4 July, but if in reality, he is five feet tall, 200 pounds, and born on 31 October, his ideal world will not translate into reality. If Facebook is a utopia, it must suggest an ideal arrangement and then

unsettle that arrangement by contradicting one of its fundamental principles. One such principle is the valuation of privacy. When a user creates an account, he or she selects the level of privacy he wishes to maintain, giving him control over who can and cannot view his information. These settings are called “privacy protection” (*Facebook*). By using these settings, the user expects that his or her information will stay private, giving the user a sense of security that his or her information is protected (Timm and Duvan 90). However, some researchers argue that when users post information on an SNS, “he or she is sharing that information with the rest of the world,” regardless of privacy settings and the user’s intent to share that information only with his or her network of friends (Timm and Duvan 90). Therefore, the irony of privacy settings is that the information is still posted on the World Wide Web, and can be accessed by anyone. For instance, user x allows user y to view his profile, assuming that his information is protected against all other users. But user y decides to physically show user x’s profile to a present companion, and user x’s information is no longer private. Once information is posted, it is considered in the public domain so that even courts of law can use such information in a case. Timm and Duvan explain that when “information is posted online by an individual... it is no longer considered private,” and therefore, the privacy protection umbrella is removed (91). Consequently, what was intended to be an ideal arrangement (maintaining privacy) is quickly inverted by the website itself that requires users to post information about them over a medium that is inherently non-private, proving again that Facebook is utopian, insofar that it claims to maintain the user’s privacy, but actually exposes the user’s information to the world.

Another irony of the privacy perception is the concept of privacy in light of Facebook’s intention to connect people with each other. In order to connect with other users over Facebook, one must share some information about oneself, thus moving private information to the public

forum. At minimum on Facebook, one must indicate one's name on one's profile, which divulges some bit of information about oneself. Putting one's name on Facebook trespasses the privacy barrier because one is sharing the fact that one maintains a Facebook profile. Once a profile is created in a user's name, that name will appear in a search result in conjunction with Facebook. The web searcher might not be able to readily view that user's profile, but he or she knows that the profile exists and that the person uses Facebook. If one wanted to maintain a modicum of privacy over the internet, the act of sharing information, even one's name, seems to derail the privacy protection claim. One cannot maintain a private existence when trying to connect with someone else over Facebook because one must divulge some information about oneself in the course of "connecting" or "sharing" life with another entity. Facebook, therefore, transgresses against its claims to privacy protection by demanding its users to connect through sharing information or partaking in discourse in a public forum.

Facebook also unsettles the idea of community by first demonstrating that it connects people with each other, and then turning to exclude people from the community. Facebook's opening statement reads, "Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life" (*Facebook*). Much emphasis is placed on community in this statement. The terms of community, "connect" and "share," suggest that the principle behind Facebook is social togetherness, transcending the barriers of space and time. Facebook does connect people to each other by allowing friends to leave comments for each other, share photographs, and read updates on what other people are doing. It connects people over space because a person in Washington, for instance, can share photographs and information with another person in Texas, a geographically different place. Additionally, Facebook transcends the time barrier because the people sharing information over Facebook do not need to be at their computers at the same time. One person can

post a comment, and that comment will remain on the webpage. The recipient can respond to that comment and perpetuate the conversation whenever his time permits him to do so. Unlike a telephone conversation, for which both parties must be present over the phone, Facebook conversations do not require the participants to communicate at coinciding times. This makes Facebook convenient for users because they can maintain a presence online while they are not physically at their computers. The appeal of easily keeping in touch with one's friends makes Facebook an ideal arrangement for many people (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 169). Yet this idealistic convenience becomes unsettled by Facebook's inability to connect users with nonusers. A study conducted in a few select East Coast universities revealed that 87.1% of participants used a SNS (either Facebook or MySpace, and in some cases, both sites), while 12.9% do not use those sites (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 171). This is a significant ratio of users to nonusers. Facebook claims to connect people with each other, but is designed to keep nonusers from viewing user profiles, thus separating the users from nonusers and thereby disconnecting friends. The 12.9% of nonusers cannot connect with the 87.1% of users over Facebook, simply because they are not part of the Facebook world. Where Facebook set out to connect people, it disconnects them, segregating people into two distinct communities: users and nonusers.

Further, Facebook creates community at the expense of relationships. As Facebook's popularity grows, users rely on their Facebook sites to share and receive information about their user friends. One study showed that users spend nearly three hours daily on their own sites and their friends' sites, indicating that users rely on Facebook to meet "personal and social needs," such as information gathering and sharing (Raacke and Bonds-Raacke 173). The user invests more time into sharing information with his or her Facebook friends, inadvertently alienating his or her non-Facebook friends. Consequently, nonusers are unaware of any information posted on

Facebook, unless another user shares that information with that nonuser. The nonuser can therefore feel disconnected from his or her friends who use Facebook as their sole means of communication. Hence, the very effect Facebook intended, to connect people with each other, ends up doing the exact opposite: alienating instead of connecting. This inversion is consistent with the pattern of proposing an ideal arrangement and then quickly destabilizing it.

The perception that utopias are principally ideal societies or societal arrangements is incomplete. Utopias complicate the very values it suggests are ideal, implying that those ideals cannot exist in a society. More's Utopians say that they value equality and devalue materialism, but they give precedence to certain individuals based on those individuals' display of material splendor. Similarly, Facebook's public nature contradicts its claim that it can protect people's privacy while concurrently connecting people with each other. Realizing utopia as a self-contradicting ideal arrangement forces one to evaluate the use of internet utopias, such as Facebook, since the ideal world can never cross over into the real world. Facebook users think they are creating an ideal world for themselves, but instead, they are affirming that the ideal world they create does not and cannot exist. Users are therefore trapping themselves in a mindset that the imaginary can translate to the real, when it does not, just like Thomas More's letter to Peter Giles is loosely based in truth, but played out in fiction. Therefore, the danger in using Facebook is deceiving oneself into thinking that relationships cultivated over the internet can translate into reality, that privacy can be maintained in an internet forum, and that all-inclusive community can be created over the internet.

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