

Facebook is going public; not me



Times staffer Arleen Spenceley's flip phone is just for talking. Amazed friends post photos of the antique on Facebook, which means she never views them. SKIP O'ROURKE | Times

By Arleen Spenceley, Times Staff Writer

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Facebook is going public, with a stock offering worth untold billions of dollars. But two years ago this month, I *stopped* going public. I quit Facebook.

Wary of what the social network does to relationships, I walked away from it at 24. I said an e-farewell to more than 500 friends. I haven't heard from 490. I don't know their Facebook statuses or their Farmville scores. They don't send me party invitations or show me their latest pictures.

My world indeed is smaller now, but everything in it has more depth. Quitting Facebook quieted the metaphorical noise that, though always entertaining, distracted me. I've learned constant digital connection is not necessary (and that quitting Facebook gives you time to discover what is).

When people ask why I'm not on Facebook, I tell them it is to friendship what fast food is to nutrition: a quick way to feel like we've gotten what we need. But when compared with what we really need, what we get is insubstantial. My decision to cut ties to the most visited website in the United States was just one in a series of steps I've taken toward the good dark side.

I quit Twitter a year and a half ago. My cellphone neither sends nor receives texts, and hasn't since 2007, when I had my provider disable the service. I don't own a smartphone or an e-reader. I'm in a distinct minority for my age. According to a report released by Pew Research Center in December 2011, of those between 18 and 29 years old in the United States, 73 percent use the Internet on cellphones, and 80 percent use online social networks.

At 26, my choices aren't without consequence. I do not know Amazon's daily deal, or about national news the minute it breaks, or what actor Rainn Wilson's plans are for today. (Twitter used to tell me.) And, for the millionth time, I did not get your text, I did not see your tweet, and no, I will not tag you.

I have to remember stuff and plan ahead, and I pay for it if I don't. Yet compared to life prior to my protest — constant pressure to impress an imaginary audience, consistent interruptions, hyper-vigilance and perpetual preoccupation with one question: "Should my Facebook status reflect this?" — this is fabulous. But according to people who don't share my sentiments, not so much.

"You might say I am madly in love with my iPhone," said a friend of mine, also 26. The iPhone is a smartphone, a computer you can stick in your pocket and use to check your email, manage a budget and read the Bible.

My friend's iPhone is her alarm clock, her calendar, her encyclopedia. Her map, her camera and her Spanish teacher. She reads books on it, stores music in it and files taxes with it. It keeps track of how far she runs. It's her source for weather and breaking news.

"Oh," she said. "And it makes phone calls."

Mine, too! In fact, that's all my phone does. And it flips open (I know — so 2003). Some people shudder when they see it. Others laugh. Then they take pictures of it with their smartphones and share them on Facebook and Twitter.

Facebook is a site for keeping up with friends, finding old ones and making new ones. People use it to play games and post photos on their profiles. I used it to read, write and respond to status updates (for example, "I'm stranded at O'Hare." or "Am I the only one who still likes M.C. Hammer?"). It was also good for surveying friends' and strangers' whereabouts and relationship statuses (which is, in fact, code for "Internet stalking").

Twitter is for "tweets," typing a quip, sharing a link or telling the world what you're doing, in 140 characters or fewer. Most of my friends say Facebook is fun but a waste of time, although it can be an important tool for a journalist. They say Twitter is useful, and they aren't sure they'd survive without a smart phone. (Some get short of breath at the thought.) The consensus, as gathered in conversations with social media and smartphone users, is that the stuff just makes life better. But it doesn't. It makes life easier. There's a difference.

It's convenient to text and faster to get news on Twitter than anywhere else. It's efficient to have all you need inside your phone. The best part? In little plastic boxes that beep and light up, we are delivered the ability to get whatever we want whenever we want it. But the best part is also the worst part — for anyone, and especially for my generation and younger.

We already were, in the words of comedian Louis CK, "the crappiest generation of spoiled idiots." We can't stand in line or sit on hold without complaining. We can't wait for a red light to read a text. It isn't worth it if it isn't instant or entertaining or doesn't cater to us (whatever it is).

We can't blame social media and smartphones for our behavior. But what we get from social media and smartphones reinforces what underlies our crappiness: the maladaptive assumption that we are entitled to effortless gratification.

The result is a blurry line between unreasonable expectations and reasonable ones. The belief that luxuries are necessities. An expanding sense of entitlement. An eroding ability to wait. A culture of people who walk the world as if everyone in it owes us something.

Which is why I had to walk away when I did.

When I decided to quit Twitter in late 2010, an acquaintance told me what he thought of it: "You're just trying to hide from modern inventions."

I disagree. I am not afraid of adapting to a changing world, but I am disturbed by a world so uncritically willing to make these particular changes. They come at a cost few are willing to acknowledge.

This is not to say I don't lose out, too. Some of my best friends are people I met online. Thanks solely to social media, I have tracked down, interviewed and written about heroes of mine. Once, I flew to Houston to visit a friend I made on Twitter. By agreeing not to use social media, I agree never to have experiences quite like these again. I grieve a real loss.

Though I badly want to start and maintain my relationships the way my parents did at my age, I am coming to terms with my self-imposed reality: One day, I might be the last one left who wants that.

I am more aware now than two years ago that my protest is a real sacrifice. But it is only part protest. It is proof that another way of life is possible. It is asceticism, an emptying of my time and space so I can fill it with what matters more in the long run.

On the dark side, life is simpler. I have fewer friends, but deeper relationships. I have to read paper books, but I read a lot more now than before. If I promise undivided attention, I deliver. If my phone rings more than a few times a week, it's surprising, or a wrong number.

So I get to sit in silence while I practice patience and exercise discipline. I have to focus on one thing at a time. I have to wait. But I don't mind.

Don't "all good things come to those who wait ... "?

Arleen Spenceley can be reached the old-fashioned way — well, at least circa 1990s — at aspenceley@tampabay.com or (727) 869-6235.

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