Introduction

Facebook is one of today’s most popular websites with over 200 million active users spending more than 3 billion minutes each day on Facebook worldwide, where there are 35 translations available on the site with more than 60 in development (Facebook, 2009a). While the platform was created by, for, and remains the most popular social networking site utilized by college students today (Cassidy, 2006; Eberhardt, 2007; Higher Education Research Institute, 2008), it has grown to include and embrace users across a wide demographic spectrum. This widespread popularity of Facebook renders its official discourse a potent form of public pedagogy.

In this chapter I contend that Facebook positions itself as a social movement, working to construct a singular Facebook community in support of the movement as well as shape popular discourse around technology in a number of ways. First, Facebook provides interpretive and agenda-setting functions for technological discourse; that is, through Facebook’s widespread consumption as a social networking site, it draws attention to, and shapes perceptions of, particular online practices and relations among social and cultural capital. Second, Facebook constructs a technological gospel justifying the practices of the “enlightened” Facebook team. Drawing on the myth of a chosen nation or movement (Bellah, 1998), Facebook encourages an ethnocentric way of life in the digital world. In its support, Facebook presents a pastoral, prophetic mode of discourse (Coles, 2002) within its social movement rhetoric. Finally, Facebook articulates preferred user identities, experiences, and expectations for user engagement with the platform. Ultimately, I posit that Facebook co-opts the rhetoric of social justice-oriented social movements for a non-social justice end—economic growth and development.

Given these functions, it is important to explore how Facebook operates as a form of public pedagogy promulgating particular and partial points of view on profound technological, social, and cultural changes. The rhetorical strategies used to normalize and/or celebrate its rhetorical vision of these changes act to stifle, trivialize, and ultimately discipline dissent. In this regard, its pedagogy sometimes appears quite explicitly. Much of this rhetoric, however, operates under the surface of public discourse as the basis for discussion. As invisible as it is omnipresent, this public pedagogy constitutes the habitus of Facebook. Uncovering the epistemological foundations of Facebook’s rhetorical vision as a self-proclaimed social movement helps to clarify not
only the meaning of its public pedagogy, but also the conflation of technology and progress within its discourse.

To analyze the public pedagogy of Facebook as a social movement, I critically evaluate Facebook’s discourse in official blogs written by founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg and other Facebook employees ranging from 2006–2009; as well as platform layout and information found on Facebook pages containing information about jobs at Facebook, advertising on Facebook, and general information on Facebook and its history. My rhetorical analysis reveals that Facebook’s public pedagogy is constructed in large part through its self-portrayal as an enlightened social movement.

Virtual Community

The development of communication and information technologies of cooperation (Knowledge-Works, 2006)—online systems that are primarily tools for communication and collaboration giving users an unprecedented amount of freedom to communicate and share information—has “networked” us, making the world localized and connected as new online pathways allow for new forms of social interaction (Castells, 1996; Enriquez, 2008). Hampton (2001) explains that if community is defined as “sets of informal ties of sociability, support, and identity” (p. 15), computer-mediated communication must be considered as a space that fosters the growth of relationships. In fact, when computer networks connect people, they are the infrastructure of social networks (Hampton, 2001) and give rise to virtual communities (Kollock & Smith, 1998). Communities are spawned within these digitally based information networks (Uricchio, 2004)—communities we do not yet fully understand.

Once hailed as a means to democratic communications that would enable anyone, anywhere, anytime, to participate within new forms of communities (Rheingold, 1993, 2002) through networks of interaction formed around the sharing of information and cooperation (Wellman et al., 1996), in recent years virtual communities have not garnered the same idealized support. Despite the popular rhetoric that virtual communities may be “free from some of the systems of control that apply in the physical world (e.g., dress codes), and thus appear to be more democratic than their place-based equivalents” (Goodfellow, 2005, p. 117), Goodfellow argues that “the regulation of power and status within a virtual community is part of what sustains it, just as it is within the conventional kind” (p. 117). St. Clair (1998) notes, “Community relationships can be seen as a site of cultural production and reproduction...Community relationships are not free-floating but shaped by, and embedded within, patterns of discourse. Discourse acts through communities to shape culture” (pp. 8–9). We cannot simply escape the hegemonic structures that dictate physical community formation and participation by moving to the virtual world.

Facebook as a Social Movement

Social movements have arguably precipitated most social, political, religious, and cultural struggles in United States history. Already a decade into the 21st century, it seems clear that technology, as a cultural apparatus, is at the center of an emerging socio-cultural struggle in which Facebook plays a significant part. Positioning itself as a social movement, Facebook attempts to persuade users of its vision for technology. The study of social movements, their ideology and function, should be approached by understanding how their public pedagogy is persuasive. Dykstra and Law (1994) argue that “social movements are undisputedly sites of formative influence” (p. 122) where members are taught the movement’s vision, and the skills and disposition necessary to grow the movement. As an educative force, social movements “engage in purpo-
sive activities that try to influence the way other people learn to interpret the world and to develop skills to amend its meanings and realities” (Dykstra & Law, 1994, p. 122). In doing this, it is essential to understand that people create and comprehend their world through symbols, and that public declarations (like blogs, for example) are important forms of social movement persuasion (Stewart, Smith, & Denton, 2001). Stewart and colleagues (2001) note that a social movement is only as successful as it is persuasive to its vision. Facebook draws on its vision “to construct an alternate map of reality and coherent, even if implied, systematic pedagogy that relates everyday activities to the values and aspirations [it] has for the wider community” (Dykstra & Law, 1994, p. 122).

Size Matters

The apparent size of a movement and its membership numbers are fundamental to the efforts to persuade others to join, give their time and energy, establish legitimacy, and to give the appearance that the movement must be taken seriously. Social movements that appear to be small cannot thrive “because American culture tends to see small ventures as either inconsequential, and therefore to be ignored or ridiculed, or as dangerous, and therefore to be suppressed for the safety of the people and the good of the nation” (Stewart et al., 2001, p. 9). Facebook demonstrates its size and scope as a movement throughout its public statements, making specific reference to the “so many millions of people around the world [who] have decided to bring Facebook into their lives…” (Zuckerberg, 2009, February 26, ¶ 7). Since Facebook began disseminating public statements via the Facebook blog in 2006, the company has continued to highlight its growing membership that was once “over 120 million active users on Facebook, [making it] the fourth most trafficked website on the Internet” (Facebook, 2009b, ¶ 1). Then, in 2008, it saluted “the energy, warmth and incredibly diverse interests of Facebook’s 140 million active users” (Schrage, 2008, December 30, ¶ 2), and in 2009 announced “another milestone: 150 million people around the world are now actively using Facebook…” (Zuckerberg, 2009, January 7, ¶ 1).

Numbers of users demonstrates the vast size of the movement, but does not necessarily justify it as legitimate if those members are not active participants. Facebook articulates the legitimacy of the movement and its members by discussing their active involvement and efforts, emphasizing how engaged users are with Facebook: “Participation and sharing grew even faster—in a typical hour in December, people posted a total of 900,000 status updates, wrote 1.5 million wall posts and uploaded more than 1.6 million photos” (Schrage, 2008, December 30, ¶ 4). Building on the prevalent use and widespread engagement, almost half of Facebook users are on the site everyday, including “people in every continent—even Antarctica” (Zuckerberg, 2009, January 7, ¶ 1). Facebook’s efforts to portray itself as a rapidly growing, engaged movement functions to establish its legitimacy and more so to illustrate that its members are actively involved in the movement’s progress: “You rock. Your postings, photos, applications and friendships make Facebook the extraordinary place it’s become for people all over the world to share and connect” (Schrage, 2008, December 30, ¶ 2). As Facebook continues to grow, it continues to draw on the legitimacy that comes from a movement’s size and scope. While it started as a site for college students, “Today, people of all ages—grandparents, parents and children—use Facebook in more than 35 different languages and 170 countries and territories” (Zuckerberg, 2009, January 7, ¶ 2).
With such a large movement populace, now over 200 million and growing, Facebook presents itself as a way to build and maintain social capital through the open sharing of information and connections it purports to enable through the platform. Social movements rely on the social capital they offer as a way to attract and retain members. Social capital generally refers to the socio-cultural resources accumulated through relationships among people (Coleman, 1988). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) define social capital as “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 14). The resources from these relationships can differ in form and function based on the relationships themselves. In terms of Facebook, these relationships are based on carefully prescribed ways of connecting and sharing with others.

Social capital is built through the social status users can develop by building relationships using Facebook. The company emphasizes its rapid growth as part of a growing popularity—as if those who are not yet engaged with Facebook are outsiders:

No matter where you are in the world, you wanted to discover more about Facebook. From Australia to Chile to Germany to Finland to France to Italy to Malaysia, to Mexico to Switzerland to South Africa, “Facebook” became one of the five fastest-rising search terms in popularity. In Belgium, Canada and the United Kingdom, “Facebook” was the most popular search term of all. (Schrage, 2008, December 30, ¶ 3)

By not joining Facebook and creating a user profile, people are portrayed as missing out on something special because seemingly everyone else is doing it. This bandwagon effect makes those not yet on board appear to have a lowered social status for not embracing the Facebook community.

It has become important to be on Facebook and to use Facebook as a way to build social status—as if a person’s social worth were measured by her level of engagement with Facebook. In fact, Facebook reconceptualizes what it means to be cool in terms of the privacy issues it has faced. As Facebook users have come to exist in a world of constant surveillance (Westlake, 2008), the company attempts to replace the fears and risks of being watched with the apparent social benefits of sharing and connecting with friends. According to Facebook, “stalking isn’t cool; but being able to know what’s going on in your friends’ lives is” (Zuckerberg, 2006, September 5, ¶ 2). Users should not be so concerned about Big Brother, but rather they should be amazed that the “information people used to dig for on a daily basis” is now “nicely reorganized and summarized so people can learn about the people they care about” (Zuckerberg, 2008, September 5, ¶ 2). You certainly “don’t want to miss the photo album about your friend’s trip to Nepal” and “maybe if your friends are all going to a party, you want to know so you can go too” (Zuckerberg, 2008, September 5, ¶ 2) even if others like online predators and the government might be privy to the same personal information. It is important for Facebook’s vision of the technological world that users openly share information as a way to build and maintain social status with little regard for the potential negative effects of who might be watching.

According to Facebook’s rhetorical construction, the social capital it offers outweighs the privacy risks, because “Facebook is about real connections to actual friends, so the stories coming in are of interest to the people receiving them, since they are significant to the person creating them” (Zuckerberg, 2008, September 5, ¶ 2). Friends are the critical component to relationships on Facebook and the social capital it offers users. The 6.6 billion friend requests that were approved on Facebook in 2008 contributed to the company’s portrayal of its social networks as “deepen[ing] connections among people” (Schrage, 2008, December 30, ¶ 7). According to
Facebook’s vision, sharing information about oneself is the essence of a relationship, and as a social networking platform Facebook provides the resource for greater social capital by building richer connections with more people.

Social Movement Norms and Values

Facebook adopts the typical social movement rhetoric of favoring particular norms and values over others, or replacing existing norms and values with new ones (Stewart et al., 2001). Justifying its platform design changes and their vision of technological progress, Facebook articulates a paradigm of thought that positions choices as an either/or instead of potential both/and possibilities. When introducing one of the new platform designs that received strong negative feedback from users, Zuckerberg (2008, September 18) blogged:

> It’s tempting to say that we should just support both designs, but this isn’t as simple as it sounds. Supporting two versions is a huge amount of work for our small team, and it would mean that going forward we would have to build everything twice. If we did that then neither version would get our full attention. (¶ 6)

Acknowledging the possibility of supporting both platforms, but denying its plausibility based on function, enabled Facebook to articulate another norm—it is ok to disrupt the lives of users in the name of technological progress.

Maintaining that it is justifiable to not only disrupt the lives of users, but that this is a necessary part of its continued evolution, Facebook privileges the notion of progress as ultimately and unquestionably good. In fact, their discourse posits that technological progress is so good, that in time users will, like those in Plato’s cave, emerge to see the truth that advances in technology introduced by Facebook are an improvement because even though “Facebook is still in the business of introducing new and therefore potentially disruptive technologies[,] [t]his can mean that our users periodically experience adjustments to new products as they become familiar with them, and before becoming enthusiastic supporters” (Zuckerberg, 2009, February 26, ¶ 6). Facebook’s vision of technological advancements is of a sometimes difficult, trying process that is in constant motion, because “Facebook is a work in progress. We constantly try to improve things and we understand that our work isn’t perfect” (Zuckerberg, 2008, September 18, ¶ 7). Progress justifies changes, disruptions, and even mistakes because it is driving towards an end that does not exist, but is always better than where we are now.

Facebook not only advocates for particular norms and values like either/or thinking and the inevitability of progress’ positive outcomes, but also attempts to replace the meaning of existing norms and values with new ones. When talking about the platform itself, Facebook says, “It’s contagious, infectious and viral—but in the best meaning of those words” (Schrage, 2008, December 30, ¶ 1). Historically, these terms carried extremely negative connotations related to human physical health and since the advent of computer networks, carried negative connotations related to the processes and function of technology. A virus that infects and is contagious brings up images of sickly patients, crashing computers, and foreboding email attachments. In one statement, Facebook not only acknowledges the once prevalent significance of these words, but then overtly replaces it. The best meaning of those words has still come with negative connotations. Yet, within the culture of Facebook, the image of easily contaminating and spreading to others is associated with a positive status symbol and the social capital that Facebook offers to its community members. In the same way it reconceptualizes stalking in the context of being cool, Facebook repositions a virus, infection, and being contagious in the context of a desirable social status.
Whatever a social movement’s goals might be, it assumes the power to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, and ethical from unethical actions (McGuire, 1977). Facebook’s rhetoric paints the portrait that it alone constitutes an ethical, virtuous and principled movement with a moral obligation to “raise the consciousness of the people” (Stewart et al., 2001, p. 15). Facebook’s moral principles that guide the movement are evident:

About a week ago I created a group called Free Flow of Information on the Internet, because that’s what I believe in—helping people share information with the people they want to share it with. I’d encourage you to check it out to learn more about what guides those of us who make Facebook. (Zuckerberg, 2006, September 8, ¶ 6)

Even though users may be disrupted by the technologies Facebook introduces, Facebook knows best: “The launch of News Feed and the recent interface redesign are excellent examples that illustrate why we need to continue to make independent decisions about products in order to push technology forward” (Zuckerberg, 2009, February 26, ¶ 6). Facebook assumes the power to dictate the ways users will share information within its platform because pushing technology forward drives the movement.

Every product, platform redesign, and even advertising tool Facebook rolls out is justified as right, good, and ethical because technology is evolving and therefore making progress. Technology, whether addressed literally or abstractly, is held up as a panacea, and therefore evolving technologies that are uncomfortable for users or seem messy at first are eventually what is best, even if users do not yet know it. Griffin (1969) contends that “all social movements are essentially moral strivings for salvation, perfection, the good” (p. 456).

Emerging from its contention that Facebook has the power to distinguish right from wrong is a struggle “over the definition and construction of social reality” (Gamson, 1992, p. 71). Social movements like Facebook must alter how people perceive the context surrounding the movement in terms of its past, present, and future (Bormann, 1972; Gregg, 1966). Reconceptualizing the way Facebook is governed using an historical argument to demonstrate its fairness, Zuckerberg (2009, February 26) draws on the vague notion that “History tells us that systems are most fairly governed when there is an open and transparent dialogue between the people who make decisions and those who are affected by them” (¶ 8). Facebook’s indistinct historical reference to “systems” depicts itself as something other, and more, than a traditional company. It celebrates openness and transparency, equating its governing procedures to this principle of fairness, “We believe history will one day show that this principle holds true for companies as well…” (Zuckerberg, 2009, February 26, ¶ 8).

Drawing on its own past, and framing it in a way that highlights the evolutionary nature of Facebook and its technology, encourages users to view the company’s actions as progress. Facebook argues that its most recent design change would be a step forward in the user experience:

Back in 2006 we launched News Feed, which brought all of the most recent and interesting activity from the people you care about right to your home page. Similarly, the new Facebook design replaces all the big boxes on profiles and brings all of your friends’ most recent and interesting activity to front and center. We realize that change can be difficult though. Many people disliked News Feed at first because it changed their home page and how they shared information. Now it’s one of the most important parts of Facebook. We think the new design can have the same effect. (Zuckerberg, 2008, September 18, ¶ 3)
The notion that Facebook has always functioned to make sharing information and connecting with friends easier runs rampant throughout its discourse. It does so by painting the picture of its past, present, and future as part of an evolving process of progress towards an unquestioned good that justifies every change made. Zuckerberg (2009, February 3) explains:

Since its founding, one of the constants of Facebook is that it has continuously evolved to make it easier to share...Building and moving quickly for five years hasn’t been easy, and we aren’t finished. The challenge motivates us to keep innovating and pushing technical boundaries to produce better ways to share information. (¶ 3)

Facebook constructs the platform as a “tool that helps people understand what’s going on with the people around them” (Zuckerberg, 2006, August 29, ¶ 4). Again, this portrayal of Facebook enables the company to call on its past to defend current and future actions as part of progress ever forward that will lead to improvements to the way things are now:

When we’ve made changes in the past, a lot of people have gotten upset and emailed in asking us to change the site back. Change can be disorienting, but we do it because we’re sure it makes the site better. It may have felt different at first, but things like photos, events, groups and the wall have all made Facebook a more useful and interesting site. (Zuckerberg, 2006, August 29, ¶ 3)

Facebook may seem like a benign tool that helps users know what is going on with the people around them, but the company depicts the platform as an essential component and driving force behind the “full potential of the web” which is to “make the world more open” (Zuckerberg, 2009, January 7, ¶ 3). Important to the effectiveness of its self-portrayal as a driving force to make the world more open is the image that Facebook is safe and can be trusted—so that users will feel comfortable sharing information. With a history of privacy and user control issues, the success and growth of the Facebook community depends upon people “sharing their real identities online...Facebook has offered a safe and trusted environment for people to interact online, which has made millions of people comfortable expressing more about themselves” (Zuckerberg, 2009, February 3, ¶ 4).

The leaders driving the social movement’s rhetoric seek to frame Facebook and the emerging technological world in particular ways. The ability to make Facebook relevant to the lives of users is a critical necessity in transforming their perceptions to share in its vision of social reality. Facebook frames itself as an integral part of users lives, allowing users to “share interesting insights and stories that hopefully cause you to think more expansively about Facebook and what it can mean to your life” (Chan, 2009, February 27, ¶ 1). On a personal level, “being on Facebook is serious fun” (Schrage, 2008, December 30, ¶ 1), it is “a fantastic way to catch up with old friends as well as make new ones. It’s about self-expression and building community. Facebook is a platform, a medium and a killer app” (Schrage, 2008, December 30, ¶ 1). On a societal level, Facebook frames itself at the forefront of the “development of the open online world” (Zuckerberg, 2009, February 16, ¶ 7) in which users can not only be involved, but have control. Facebook wants to “give you even more control over who you share your information with” (Zuckerberg, 2006, September 8, ¶ 3), is “always looking for ways to improve the site and make it easier for people to share—which means giving you more control and choice over how you use our products” (Chai, 2009, February 24, ¶ 3) and “has succeeded so far in part because it gives people control over what and how they share information” (Zuckerberg, 2007, December 5, ¶ 4). User control is conflated with Facebook’s framing of the open online world, where users
drive the movement’s progress towards a new, open digital world simply by appearing to control their information.

Facebook’s vision for an open online world casts the web as we currently know it as a “vast encyclopedia of information” that Facebook intends to shift to a “social environment that reflects our real identities, and the relationships and information we care about” (Facebook, 2009b, ¶ 1). This particular framing of the web as an encyclopedia neuters the concept of information, essentially making the web, as it is, meaningless. Encyclopedias have always been used as a way to organize and easily locate specific pieces of information in an ocean of content. However, Facebook casts encyclopedias as irrelevant and unorganized locations without meaning. In Facebook’s vision, meaning comes from users engaging with information in the ways it prescribes and through the Facebook platform as it is designed. Not only does the use of Facebook give information meaning, but it also provides a “transparency [that] will help us better understand one another” (Chan, 2009, February 27, ¶ 3). Facebook follows suit of other social movements with a commitment to framing a particular reality through the process of naming because words instruct others how they should see the world (Woodward, 1975). In this way, Facebook gives meaning to otherwise disparate and irrelevant information, and fosters stronger connections and better relationships simply by labeling itself as such.

Important to a social movement’s purposeful construction of social reality, Facebook transforms perceptions of the future by showing it as bright and full of hope. A rhetoric of hope relies upon appeals to some sort of perfection either in time or space (Stewart et al., 2001). Facebook presents utopian appeals to a perfect space, a technological promised land, where its history of actions are designed to produce positive evolutionary results. Bringing about a technological utopia is the reason for the missteps and disturbances now, because “We’re leading a social movement by building ground-breaking technology that gives people the power to share and makes the world more open and connected” (Facebook, 2009b, ¶ 1). By giving “everyone around the world a new way to connect and share” (Zuckerberg, 2008, September 18, ¶ 8), Facebook articulates a vision of the world becoming more open and people having a better understanding of everything that is going on around them. Ultimately, the utopian future Facebook promises based on their design and implementation of technology will “give everyone a voice to express ideas and initiate change” (Zuckerberg, 2009, February 3, ¶ 5).

Resistance is Futile

Throughout its history and the introduction of new technologies, designs, and platforms, Facebook has met with strong user resistance and encouraged users to express their voice. When looking across the rhetoric of social movements, leaders often use persuasion to maintain order and discipline (Stewart et al., 2001). They do so to ensure that the movement’s support is not threatened. For Facebook, user resistance is managed by incorporating it into the company controlled discourse, offering explanations for setbacks and articulating the movement’s apparent mistakes as part of progress ever forward because “We are listening to all your suggestions about how to improve the product; it’s brand new and still evolving” (Zuckerberg, 2006, September 5, ¶ 1).

When introducing its new terms of service, Facebook embraced the resistance of users, “excited to see how much people care about Facebook and how willing they are to contribute to the process of governing the site” (Zuckerberg, 2009, February 26, ¶ 1). The company even involved users in crafting the new terms of service. In the name of progress, Facebook “decided to return to our previous terms of use while we resolve the issues that people have raised.
forward, we’ve decided to take a new approach towards developing our terms” (Zuckerberg, 2009, February 17, ¶ 3).

Facebook portrays itself as working tirelessly to address the questions and concerns of its users. When the rollout of News Feed and Mini-Feed met with negative reactions, the company responded, “Somehow we missed this point with News Feed and Mini-Feed and we didn’t build in the proper privacy controls right away. This was a big mistake on our part, and I’m sorry for it. But apologizing isn’t enough…So we have been coding nonstop for two days to get you better privacy controls” (Zuckerberg, 2006, September 8, ¶ 4). Similarly, when Beacon (an advertising tool) was introduced and feedback was resoundingly poor, Facebook admitted its fault and emphasized how it would move forward to improve the product:

We’ve made a lot of mistakes building this feature, but we’ve made even more with how we’ve handled them...While I am disappointed with our mistakes, we appreciate all the feedback we have received from our users. I’d like to discuss what we have learned and how we have improved Beacon. (Zuckerberg, 2007, December 5, ¶ 1)

Recurring throughout its history of managing resistance, Facebook has opened structured opportunities for users to provide negative feedback. By providing these spaces of discourse (e.g., user councils, voting spaces for proposed changes, and commenting capabilities on Facebook’s blog), Facebook is able to “reserve the right to remove any content that’s defamatory, offensive or off-topic” because “You will be commenting as you, after all, not under some anonymous Internet pseudonym” (Chan, 2009, February 27, ¶ 2). Facebook is able to encourage resistance and user feedback because, within these structures, it can ensure that resistance efforts do not grow beyond its control or outside its boundaries.

Users have resisted Facebook on issues beyond technological progress. In early 2009 Facebook banned images of women breastfeeding on the site, labeling them as obscene. In response, 11,000 users posted images of women nursing and/or updated their profiles to read: “Hey, Facebook. Breastfeeding Is Not Obscene!” Within days, over 150,000 users had joined the Facebook group titled “Hey, Facebook. Breastfeeding Is Not Obscene!” With more users than many countries have citizens, Facebook operates as a significant force in shaping cultural norms around the acceptability of activities like breastfeeding. As some in this example fear, most people who join a Facebook group to resist these forces stop there (Nielsen, 2009, January 8); meaning that instead of applying continued pressure through varied means of resistance, users merely join a group and are satisfied with their effort to pursue change. It seems that this kind of resistance effort does not spur real, transformative change. Instead, Facebook groups act as an outlet for user protest within Facebook’s controlled platform.

Facebook embraces resistance as part of its evolutionary discourse and therefore manages it within its framework because “Even if you’re joining a group to express things you don’t like about the new design, you’re giving us important feedback and you’re sharing your voice, which is what Facebook is all about” (Zuckerberg, 2008, September 18, ¶ 7). Ultimately, this makes it possible for Facebook to not actually do anything about the feedback it gets from resistance efforts if it so chooses. The appearance of user control and having influence over the company’s decisions may be deceiving, but it does make Facebook appear to be an altruistic company working for the users, even thanking them for reaching out with their feedback and assuring users that “[w]e listen to feedback” (Cox, 2009, March 24, ¶ 9), “[w]e are listening to all your suggestions” (Zuckerberg, 2006, September 5, ¶ 1), “we think it’s important to listen to the people using the site” (Holsberry, 2009, March 2, ¶ 1), and “[w]e’re always trying to make the site better, and in order to do that well, we listen to you” (Holsberry, 2009, March 2, ¶ 6).
Managing resistance in the manner in which Facebook does is meant to not only control the movement, but to foster a communal spirit amongst the movement community which is made up of very diverse, disparate groups. Facebook plays on the human need to “identify with others in similar circumstances” and “language creates this sense of interpersonal identification” (Stewart et al., 2001, p. 155). Cathcart (1972) asserts that “movements are carried forward through language, both verbal and nonverbal, in strategic ways that bring about identification of the individual with the movement” (p. 86). In this sense, nearly all social movements draw on the notion of a unified people to bring together disparate groups into one community (Gusfield, 1970). For example, Stewart and colleagues (2001) explain that the use of simple plural pronouns—we, our, us—instead of individualistic pronouns—I, me, mine—invites a sense of camaraderie amongst movement members.

Facebook’s public discourse follows this methodology in form and function. Users are not depicted as disparate from the company and its leaders. In fact, Facebook positions itself alongside the users in driving the movement forward, thanking users for their support “as we work together to make Facebook better and give everyone around the world a new way to connect and share” (Zuckerberg, 2008, September 18, ¶ 8; emphasis added). Highlighting this point and the communal spirit of its rhetoric, Facebook makes reference to “The active community on Facebook [which] makes it possible for us to build new things and make them great…” (Zuckerberg, 2008, September 18, ¶ 8; emphasis added).

Public statements focus on “all users [having] a voice in shaping the policies that govern the Facebook service” (Facebook, 2009c, ¶ 1) and “everyone’s involvement in this new process” (Facebook, 2009c, ¶ 4). The sense that the users, as a singular community made up of sub-communities, drive the movement is emphasized: “Sometimes, your reactions make us realize that new features still need additional work from our design and engineering teams. Other times, you’ve led us to develop new features” (Holsberry, 2009, March 2, ¶ 5; emphasis added). While perhaps not all of its statements allude to an usness between the company and its users, they do provide a sense of active involvement together, on the part of all users, in a great movement. Facebook’s use of interpersonal identification portrays a singular Facebook community that is “…the product of the people who use it. Without you and the connections you make to others, the products we create wouldn’t have much meaning” (Zuckerberg, 2009, February 3, ¶ 2). Echoing its framing of the Internet as a vast encyclopedia of information without meaning and the company’s vision for technology, meaning is imbued through user engagement with information and the interpersonal relationships built with others on the platform. This rhetorical strategy is common amongst social movement rhetoric that implies power and change is coming from the bottom up, from all those members using Facebook, rather than from the top down (Stewart et al., 2001).

Conclusion

The social movement rhetoric of Facebook both fosters and relies upon a Facebook community for its continued progress in line with its rhetorical vision. A sense of community—“that repository of shared purpose, values, and traditions which historically has defined the American character” (Hogan, 1998, p. xii)—makes up the fabric of our society and its loss “poses a serious threat to…democracy” (Hogan, 1998, p. xiii) and even to the “the survival of freedom itself” (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985, p. vii). I have shown that community does still exist and operate on a grand scale, but in new and somewhat foreign ways.
Positioning itself as a social movement, Facebook represents a strong, vibrant community rendered healthy by the language it uses to characterize itself and others. The level of democratic discourse is worth questioning, but the shared beliefs, values, common experiences, collective memories, and vocabularies, among other communal bonds manifested through its rhetorical discourse, illustrate its nature as a community in every sense. As a social movement, Facebook relies on its public pedagogy to construct its disparate members as a community and maintain the community’s function within the movement’s vision.

This chapter demonstrates how public pedagogy not only reflects, but shapes the character of the Facebook community, defined and constructed by its rhetorical discourse. The Facebook community is constantly evolving and in process, fed by language and symbols working to characterize it in particular ways. We must remain alert to the rhetoric and public pedagogy of technologically mediated spaces to determine the ways they function to foster or discourage democratic discourse.

The controversy over the pictures of mothers breastfeeding represents Facebook’s public pedagogy regarding democratic discourse and social justice. Resistance efforts at other times and places (e.g., 1960s civil rights movement, Vietnam antiwar movement, 1999 World Trade Organization protests) were manifested in various ways (e.g., petitions, protest rallies, letter campaigns, and marches), with various contact points, and in various numbers. However, on Facebook, users are encouraged to simply join a group to show support for a particular cause or resist forms of cultural domination. Parent activist Lisa Frack (Nielsen, 2009) worries, “Does that sort of take people off the hook” (¶ 15)?

Traditionally, social movements have been driven by a desire for social justice (e.g., civil rights, women’s suffrage). In many ways, Facebook co-opts the language of social justice-oriented social movements for an end contradictory to most social justice-oriented social movements—economic growth and development. Subverting deliberation and problem solving diminishes critical engagement. Hogan (1998) explains “If we hope to sustain healthy communities, we must learn more not only about [their] rhetoric…but also about the alternatives…in community relations” (p. 292). Demonstrating how Facebook constructs and defines its community through its rhetorical discourse as a social movement, this chapter does not focus our attention on specific solutions for building democratic communities online, but rather on where we might begin to look for those possibilities—the public discourses that comprise online communities and define the interpersonal relationships constituted within them.

References


