

15 or 20 years ago? Is it part of some deep human instinct that we take an organism as open and wild and free as the internet, and wish then to divide it into citadels, into closed-border republics and independent city states? The systole and diastole of history has us opening and closing like a flower: escaping our fortresses and enclosures into the open fields, and then building hedges, villages and cities in which to imprison ourselves again before repeating the process once more. The internet seems to be following this pattern.

How does this help us predict the Next Big Thing? That's what everyone wants to know, if only because they want to make heaps of money from it. In 1999 Douglas Adams said: "Computer people are the last to guess what's coming next. I mean, come on, they're so astonished by the fact that the year 1999 is going to be followed by the year 2000 that it's costing us billions to prepare for it."

But let the rise of social networking alert you to the possibility that, even in the futuristic world of the net, the next big thing might just be a return to a made-over old thing.

RESPOND TO THE BLOG:

What do you think? Do you participate in online social networks? Do you think they represent a new way of connecting with people, or are they really just a "return to a made-over old thing"?

I Tweet, Therefore I Am

Peggy Orenstein

Peggy Orenstein is an essayist and author of several books including *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* (2011). Her essays have appeared in such publications as the *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, *Vogue*, *Discover*, *Mother Jones*, and the *New Yorker*, and she has contributed commentaries to National Public Radio's "All Things Considered." She is a contributing writer for the *New York Times* in which this essay appeared on July 30, 2010.

CONNECTING TO THE TOPIC

Most people agree that social networking sites have allowed users to connect to people in way they never could before. The social networking site, Twitter, allows people to share, almost instantly, moments in time (as long as they can summarize these moments into 140 characters or fewer). What do our online postings reveal about us and how we view ourselves? More than simply connecting us, social networking sites allow us to present a persona to the world—publicly sharing who we know, what we think, what we do, and even who we wish to be. Are

social networking sites distracting us from living fully in the moment? Or are they enabling us to share our moments with our friends? Or is it a little of both?

WORDS IN CONTEXT

quintessential (1) perfect (adv.)

tweet (1) to post on Twitter

tacit (3) implied but not spoken (adj.)

referendum (3) something decided by popular vote (n.)

Seinfeldian (3) from the sitcom *Seinfeld*, which focused on the everyday pointless and trivial matters of life (adj.)

empathy (7) the capacity to recognize and share feelings (n.)

instigated (7) to urge on (v.)

1 On a recent lazy Saturday morning, my daughter and I lolled on a blanket in our front yard, snacking on apricots, listening to a download of E.B. White reading "The Trumpet of the Swan." Her legs sprawled across mine; the grass tickled our ankles. It was the **quintessential** summer moment, and a year ago, I would have been fully present for it. But instead, a part of my consciousness had split off and was observing the scene from the outside: this was, I realized excitedly, the perfect opportunity for a **tweet**.

2 I came late to Twitter. I might have skipped the phenomenon altogether, but I have a book coming out this winter, and publishers, scrambling to promote 360,000-character tomes in a 140-character world, push authors to rally their "tweeps" to the cause. Leaving aside the question of whether that actually boosts sales, I felt pressure to produce. I quickly mastered the Twitterati's unnatural self-consciousness: processing my experience instantaneously, packaging life as I lived it. I learned to be "on" all the time, whether standing behind that woman at the supermarket who sneaked three extra items into the express check-out lane (you know who you are) or despairing over human rights abuses against women in Guatemala.

3 Each Twitter post seemed a **tacit referendum** on who I am, or at least who I believe myself to be. The grocery-store episode telegraphed that I was tuned in to the **Seinfeldian** absurdities of life; my concern about women's victimization, however sincere, signaled that I also have a soul. Together they suggest someone who is at once cynical and compassionate, petty yet deep. Which, in the end, I'd say, is pretty accurate.

4 Distilling my personality provided surprising focus, making me feel stripped to my essence. It forced me, for instance, to pinpoint the dominant feeling as I sat outside with my daughter listening to E.B. White. Was it my joy at being a mother? Nostalgia for my own childhood summers? The pleasures of listening to the author's quirky, underinflected voice? Each put a different spin on the occasion, of who I was within it. Yet the final decision ("Listening to E.B. White's 'Trumpet of the Swan'")

with Daisy. Slow and sweet.") was not really about my own impressions: it was about how I imagined—and wanted—others to react to them. That gave me pause. How much, I began to wonder, was I shaping my Twitter feed, and how much was Twitter shaping me?

Back in the 1950s, the sociologist Erving Goffman famously argued that all of life is performance: we act out a role in every interaction, adapting it based on the nature of the relationship or context at hand. Twitter has extended that metaphor to include aspects of our experience that used to be considered off-set: eating pizza in bed, reading a book in the tub, thinking a thought anywhere, flossing. Effectively, it makes the greasepaint permanent, blurring the lines not only between public and private but also between the authentic and contrived self. If all the world was once a stage, it has now become a reality TV show: we mere players are not just aware of the camera; we mug for it.

The expansion of our digital universe—Second Life, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter—has shifted not only how we spend our time but also how we construct identity. For her coming book, "Alone Together," Sherry Turkle, a professor at M.I.T., interviewed more than 400 children and parents about their use of social media and cellphones. Among young people especially she found that the self was increasingly becoming externally manufactured rather than internally developed: a series of profiles to be sculptured and refined in response to public opinion. "On Twitter or Facebook you're trying to express something real about who you are," she explained. "But because you're also creating something for others' consumption, you find yourself imagining and playing to your audience more and more. So those moments in which you're supposed to be showing your true self become a performance. Your psychology becomes a performance." Referring to "The Lonely Crowd," the landmark description of the transformation of the American character from inner- to outer-directed, Turkle added, "Twitter is outer-directedness cubed."

The fun of Twitter and, I suspect, its draw for millions of people, is its infinite potential for connection, as well as its opportunity for self-expression. I enjoy those things myself. But when every thought is externalized, what becomes of insight? When we reflexively post each feeling, what becomes of reflection? When friends become fans, what happens to intimacy? The risk of the performance culture, of the packaged self, is that it erodes the very relationships it purports to create, and alienates us from our own humanity. Consider the fate of **empathy**: in an analysis of 72 studies performed on nearly 14,000 college students between 1979 and 2009, researchers at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan found a drop in that trait, with the sharpest decline occurring since 2000. Social media may not have **instigated** that trend, but by encouraging self-promotion over self-awareness, they may well be accelerating it.

None of this makes me want to cancel my Twitter account. It's too late for that anyway: I'm already hooked. Besides, I appreciate good writing whatever the form: some "tweeple" are as deft as haiku masters at their craft. I am experimenting with the art of the well-placed "hashtag" myself

(the symbol that adds your post on a particular topic, like #ShirleySherrod, to a stream. You can also use them whimsically, as in, "I am pretending not to be afraid of the humongous spider on the bed. #lieswellonchildren").

At the same time, I am trying to gain some perspective on the perpetual performer's self-consciousness. That involves trying to sort out the line between person and persona, the public and private self. It also means that the next time I find myself lying on the grass, stringing daisy chains and listening to E.B. White, I will resist the urge to trumpet about the swan. ♦

CONSIDERING THE ISSUES

1. Do you use Twitter? If so, how often do you tweet, and what do you tweet about? If not, explain why you chose not to participate in this social medium.
2. When you post something online, do you think carefully about what you are about to post and how it might sound to others? Do you consider, as Orenstein does, how people will think about you and react to your post? Or do you shoot from the hip, writing whatever comes to mind? Explain.

CRAFT AND CONTENT

1. What does Orenstein mean when she refers to the "packaged self"? How do we "package" ourselves online? What does this mean for our communication with others?
2. Evaluate Orenstein's style of writing in the first person narrative. How does this style allow her to reach her audience?

CRITICAL THINKING

1. Orenstein notes that when she tweets, she is projecting "who I am—or at least, who I believe myself to be." What does she mean? If we have to critically assess each communication for what it might say about us (and how we believe we are supposed to be), are we reflecting reality, or a constructed image? Explain.
2. In your opinion, does Twitter, and other social networking sites, interfere with our ability to truly engage in the present? Do they distract us from our "live" moments, or do they allow us to live these moments more fully and with more engagement with others? Explain.

WRITING ABOUT THE ISSUES

1. Write an essay exploring the consequences of social networking sites such as Twitter on the future of friendship and community.