

Solipsistic Certainty and Other Dystopian Delights

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The social media website Facebook launched in February of 2004. For those of you who are unfamiliar with Facebook, it is the largest social media website on the Internet. It connects people using personal pages called profiles where users can post pictures, videos, interests, messages and other content. Connections are established through accepting a "friend request" from family, friends, or other acquaintances, in a process termed "friending". Using the connectivity of personal relationships, the site allows people to list and share their interests and join groups of others with similar interests. Facebook now boasts over eight hundred million active users who share well over one billion pieces of content daily.

One autumn day a couple of years ago, Susan Arnout Smith received an email from her publicist with the subject line of "Facebook". Smith had joined Facebook at the urging of her publicist who she recently hired. Smith is a sixty three year old married professional writer with two children. She is a woman who would pass you by in the grocery store unnoticed. A relatively unknown Playwright, Essayist, and Mystery Writer with a few awards to her credit, she described herself saying: "...chances are, you don't know my name."

Her publicist, as well as other writer friends, had repeatedly prodded her to create a Facebook page to assist in the promotion of her career. Grudgingly she agreed and set out to create her online persona. Being a sensible sort of neophyte to the online social media world, she purchased the appropriate book in the ever-growing "For Dummies" series: "Facebook for Dummies". She entered the Facebook

world to find herself immediately connecting with old friends, catching up on what had transpired through each other's lives while out of contact over the years. She enjoyed the lively interaction with other writers who shared online marketing techniques. In short, she was enjoying her experience tremendously.

She opened her publicist's email to discover him expressing concern over her Facebook profile. The email included a link to the page, described as containing inappropriate and disturbing content. Smith clicked on the link and came face to face with a page titled with her name portraying her as trolling for sex with all comers. The page included photos of her face, taken from her personal website, spliced with photos of women in suggestive and lewd poses. The page offered money in exchange for sex.

In a panic she called the number for Facebook listed in the front of "Facebook for Dummies" to find it no longer connected. She tried directory assistance in Palo Alto, California, the home of Facebook's headquarters, to be once again stymied with no listed number.

Smith entered her full name in Google's search engine and the fake Facebook page popped up at the top of the list. Anyone else who searched the web for her name would be directed to the pornographic portrayal. The fake Facebook page had been online for over eight months when her publicist discovered it.

Smith and her publicist filed numerous daily reports with Facebook requesting the profile to be removed as a fake. Repeatedly Facebook replied with automated responses of "you have already filed a report" and "do not expect a personal response to your request". She contacted the police who informed her that they could not do anything unless her assailants had stalked, threatened, or stolen money. She felt anger and shame based on the misperception of untold numbers of people who had visited the false page.

While on a routine walk with a friend of more than twenty years, Smith was asked by that friend, "So, tell me about this other Facebook profile." Smith responded, "You can't for a single moment have thought that I was responsible for that." Her friend said that it did not sound like her, "but you never know..."

She sought an attorney to begin legal action against Facebook for not removing the false profile and neglecting to respond to the persistent requests for removal. Her attorney insisted that she investigate the page herself, click every link and search every profile that had linked to the pornographic page. Maybe she would find a name or face that she recognized.

Her investigation was soul searing. The posts made by the imposters were sexual, degrading, and perverse. The profile included a link to her legitimate book site. As she clicked through to friends of the profile, she found that some of the profiles had over a thousand connections. Combined with a top placement on web search results, she faced the real possibility that many thousands of people could have viewed the Facebook profile and understood this to be an accurate representation of who she was.

Smith's shame and frustration turned to anger. She vowed to find the culprits and bring swift, biblical justice upon them. She followed links. She searched the web for personal clues about the people who linked to the page. She began to find clues to the culprits' identities. She found music she did not recognize, hidden secrets not so well hidden, and television shows not broadcast in the United States. She identified the country of the imposters. She identified the city, and two schools, religious schools, on the far side of the world.

Using public information available on the web she found that her tormentors were star athletes, one written up multiple times in the local sports press as being one of the most promising athletes in the city in many years. She found and read speeches given by another who had excelled academically. She found out that another had received from his school a much sought after artistic award for his web design. She found photos of the students with their families. She even discovered the train routes they took to athletic events.

An Episcopalian priest she consulted during her ordeal insisted going after them; they needed to learn a lesson. They needed to be punished for their offenses.

Instead, she contacted the principals of the two schools and made them aware of what their star students had perpetrated. The principals somehow contacted Facebook and had the profile removed, in a single week. They

investigated the students' belongings at school and could not discover any connection to Smith. It was a random hijacking.

Smith also discovered that the country in which this had occurred had laws against this particular type of behavior. She could charge them with crimes. Rather, she demanded that the principals disclose in intimate detail to the students' parents what their star children had done to her and what a tremendous blow it had been to her image, career, and life. She intended for the students to never do, or allow to be done in their presence, anything like this again. She wanted them to understand the degree of pain she suffered. She did not press charges. She did not want the balance of their lives to be determined by one unscrupulous act, performed in their youth. She also did not want to be defined for the balance of her life by a single act of revenge.

Mrs. Smith's ordeal sounds like something from Kafka. Fortunately, her tale contained an ending less disagreeable than those in the works of Kafka.

Franz Kafka was born in Prague in 1883. During his lifetime, he published only a few short stories in magazines and his now well-known novella "The Metamorphosis". The vast majority of his work was published posthumously against his wishes. Shortly before his death, he instructed his close friend and first editor Max Brod to destroy all unpublished paper upon which he had written. In 1924, at the age of forty, Kafka succumbed to tuberculosis, a disease that had plagued him for seven years. Over a period of approximately ten years after Kafka's death, Max Brod tirelessly organized and published over one hundred of Kafka's short stories, three novels, his diaries and letters.

When we think of the writings of Franz Kafka, we imagine a sinister, labyrinthine world of bureaucratic inaccessibility, in which one is hopelessly bound by an official file. We imagine horrific injustices, never to be righted, never to be understood or even known. We imagine the tortuous, surreal shadow of existential uncertainty, which is to be endured alone.

In Kafka's novel, "The Trial", published in 1925, a year after his death, a bank clerk named Joseph K. is arrested one morning on nameless charges, which are never

revealed. He struggles endlessly to defend himself against the charges, clear his name, and to find out the nature of the charges against him. All the while, he is never imprisoned or restrained; he maintains free will.

At the initial hearing, held in a tenement living room, the magistrate consults Joseph K.'s file and enumerates a series of false statements about him. He hires an inept lawyer, consults a variety of people who he thinks may have insight into the workings of the law, but never makes any progress whatsoever. His lawyer advises him that no one should ever expect progress when a case is before the law.

Some may recognize similarities to own legal system, but I will refrain from further comment.

While waiting in a cathedral for an appointment with a business client from Italy who never shows up, Joseph K. is addressed directly by the attendant priest who shares a parable about the law. The priest tells him "...you don't need to accept everything as true; you only have to accept it as necessary." Joseph K. replies "Depressing view. The lie made into the rule of the world."

In Mrs. Smith's case, the website Facebook played the role of the unresponsive bureaucratic authority holding a profile that contained falsehoods taken for reality.

My own Kafkaesque experience occurred when I traveled to Mexico in 2005 to attend a steel making conference, held in the city of Monterrey, in the state of Nuevo Leon. I was to fly to Brownsville, Texas, where I was involved with the scrapping of Navy vessels. From there I, along with a Mexican translator who also served as driver, would ride to Monterrey, attend the conference, visit two steel mills in cities relatively close to Monterrey, return to Brownsville, and then finally Cincinnati.

When I arrived at CVG for departure, the long lines at the ticket counter quickly convinced me that a ticket kiosk would be a wise choice. I approached the kiosk, pulling my wallet from my pocket, and extracted my American Express card. I slid the card into the card reader and in a few moments, the kiosk's computer screen informed me that I was required to go to the ticket counter. I tried my card again, reasoning that the magnetic strip had lost its charge. The machine responded as before. I gathered my

carry-on bag and my briefcase and headed for the now somewhat diminished ticket counter line. After a few minutes, I stood before the agent, first in a line of only a few travelers. I remarked about how my credit card was most probably demagnetized and that probably explained why I stood there now. The agent checked with her computer and, in a most matter-of-fact, dispassionate tone and manner, said that I was on the terrorism watch list. "Oh yeah, the balding middle aged guy with a family and a mortgage and employees; yeah that's an obvious terrorism suspect." I remarked to myself inaudibly.

After a few questions and pieces of identification presented, I was allowed to board the plane. The agent gave me a phone number to call to inquire as to my status and, perhaps, get me off the list.

I arrived in Brownsville without further incident. Upon entering Mexico, we were required to exit our SUV and enter a small, poorly appointed customs office. The uniformed officer grilled us for almost twenty minutes as to our destination, names of the hotels in which we would be staying, and our purpose for entering Mexico. It was clear to me that my newfound status as a potential terrorist had made its way into the hands of the Mexican authorities. Now, multiple governments were tracking my movements.

Over the next few days, we attended the conference, drove to the steel mills over mountain highways where occasionally we were forced to brake hard so as not to collide with goatherds in the process of crossing, and headed back for the U.S. border at Matamoros.

On the trek north, we were periodically pulled over by Mexican soldiers, also know as Federales, who were searching for weapons in transit to the drug wars raging on the Mexican side of the border. The waypoints typically consisted of an inspection of identity documents and a cursory peek into our SUV. One however was different. A squad of four or five soldiers pulled us over and began the expected regimen. Unlike the other squads we encountered, this one had a fifty-caliber machine gun mounted on the top of their Humvee. It was manned, and pointed at us, the entire time. My watch list status, having faded from primacy in my mind during the conference and mill visits, once again tickled my paranoia nerve. The young Mexican officer in charge of the squad began talking with my

translator. An unintelligible exchange commenced, of which I only recognized the words "gringo" and "tequila". Thinking that the soldier was accusing me of excess tequila consumption the night before, I laughingly indicated with a shaking of my head that I was not guilty. While the Federales thoroughly searched our SUV inside and out, the officer maintained a stern demeanor, occasionally broken by a quick, threatening grin. As his men removed every article of clothing from our suitcases, he periodically chided me in terribly broken English, for what I did not know, but I did know that he held a decidedly unfavorable appraisal of me.

As we departed the checkpoint, I asked my translator what had transpired. He replied that the soldier had asked what I was doing here. "What did you tell him?" I asked. He replied, "I told him that you were here, like all the other gringos, to drink our tequila and fuck our women." I looked back at the checkpoint, and wondered about the effective range of that fifty-caliber machine gun.

We continued northward, replaying the inspection stops a few more times, none of which involved glaring armed youths. When we hit the U.S. border crossing, where I fully expected a grueling inquisition as to my status on the watch list, the black uniformed, bulletproof vested, M-16 toting, sunglasses wearing border guard simply asked if we were U.S. citizens. Upon the unison of yes from the two of us, we were dismissed, documents unrequested or presented.

The only hurdle left for me was the check-in at the Brownsville airport. The ticketing agent, unfazed by my status, deftly tapped out the correct combination of keystrokes to get me on board without further ado. No problem, at least until I entered the security check line. I must point out that the waiting area of the airport in Brownsville could easily fit inside the comfortable rooms in which we presently find ourselves. I cleared the metal detector without incident; however, my briefcase was pulled from the x-ray conveyor for additional scrutiny. The TSA inspector rummaged a bit, snooping purposefully through the many flaps and pockets. Suddenly, he stopped with his hand still inside my briefcase, looked up at me, and asked a question. His accent was very thick. I did not understand. "I'm sorry. Would you say that again?" I asked. He repeated his request. Again, I failed to comprehend his words. I could see a serious and frustrated look growing on his face. I began to wonder if the surly Federales who ravaged

our car might have planted some illegal substance in my briefcase. Panic, subdued panic, but panic nonetheless, took root in my mind. I asked him to repeat himself again, trying with focused attention to appear both deferential and calm, a behavioral combo that I was incapable of pulling off. By this third repetition of the unknown question, I had convinced myself that the contents of his hand, found in my briefcase, were sure to provide me with a felony charge for possession of drugs or explosives, planted as a consequence of an ill-timed joke. He pulled something out of a deep recessed pocket and said while lifting the questionable item into the bright light so everyone in the compact waiting room could see, "Is this your Scooby-Doo compass?" With obvious relief, I replied, "Yes. That is my Scooby-Doo compass."

I had forgotten that a year or so earlier my seven-year-old daughter had placed her compass in my briefcase so that she could feel certain that I would not lose my way when I traveled.

The concern of a young child is anti-Kafkan.

Soon after returning home, I called the TSA number provided by my outbound ticket agent. It took me three or four attempts before I spoke to someone. She told me that I would be required to fill out some forms and send them in for review. She asked for my address, which I thought odd. "Doesn't the watch list include an address?" I thought. I concluded that maybe this was simply a test to see if I would lie at any point, giving them all the proof they would need to restrict me to solitary confinement prior to deportation to Guantanamo or worse yet some unspecified rendition arena in the Balkans. She blandly remarked that my name was probably on the list by way of a clerical error or perhaps I simply had a similar name to someone they were looking for.

I do not know if I am still on the list. The TSA did not send me any forms to fill out, nor did they advise me of a new status regarding my watch-ability. Having read Kafka gave me fair warning not to pursue the issue unless it came up again, for to pursue this issue might raise some other flag of implied guilt by behavioral association.

I try not to fly often, but whenever I travel, I have my Scooby-Doo compass with me, just in case.

Regardless of why I was, or perhaps still am on the watch list, a file exists that links me to the false premise that I might be a terrorist.

When I was a child, the occasional teacher would, upon reaching a certain critical level of frustration with my behavior, invoke a most frightening threat: that if I did not heed her commands, I would be forever branded by a negative addition to my "Permanent Record". I have never seen my "Permanent Record", nor do I know it to exist.

Each of us has a "Permanent Record" of sorts, consisting of a series of files that hold, to varying degrees of accuracy, information about us that is outside of governmental control. We add to it daily, just as Ebenezer Scrooge and Jacob Marley added to their ponderous chains, link by link. We forge our chains in the public domain for all to see. That domain is the Internet.

The Internet launched five days short of forty-two years ago on October 29, 1969 when two computer nodes were connected between UCLA and the Stanford Research Institute. At this inceptional moment, the network was called ARPANET, named after the Advanced Research Projects Agency or ARPA which developed the network under the auspices, and with the financial backing, of DARPA or the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, an agency of the Department of Defense, hence the heavy handed acronyms. The initial purpose of this network was to facilitate the transfer of information between various universities and research laboratories working on defense department projects, that is, to be connective. The first message sent via this network were the two letters "l" and "o", the first two letters of the word "login". The system had crashed after two characters transmitted, but a revolution in communications had begun.

It only took one hour to get the network up and running again, and another two months to connect two more nodes so that four computer networks were connected by December of 1969.

The growth of Internet connectedness is astounding. According to Internetworldstats.com, there are now over two billion regular users of the Internet or approximately thirty percent of the world's population. Of those users, forty-four percent are from Asia, twenty-three percent are

from Europe and a mere thirteen percent reside in North America.

The power of such a communication network was demonstrated in the manner in which Facebook, Twitter and Youtube were used during the Green Revolution in Iran and the Arab Spring revolts now occurring. Participants gathered video footage in real time, which they shared with the world. They coordinated protests using Facebook. Twitter became an instantaneous, around the clock, news feed. Many view the use of the Internet during these uprisings against tyranny to be strong evidence, if not proof, that the Internet has a democratizing influence on cultures worldwide.

We now can, in real time, communicate across the globe exchanging news and information at a cost that continues to approach zero. The direct cost is zero if one avails oneself of the free computers in public libraries.

As Mrs. Smith discovered, this rosy view of the Internet is illusory.

On August fourth of this year, researchers from Carnegie Mellon University released the results of a study about face recognition capability. Using existent technologies, the researchers were able to create an application that will allow any smart phone owner to discover public as well as private information about anyone whose picture they take, that is if the subject participates in the use of social media. The researchers employed off the shelf face recognition software from a company now owned by Google, cloud-computing technology freely available to anyone, and the public databases of the government, and social media sites like Facebook and LinkedIn. In their study, they were able to take a picture of someone and within a few seconds receive the person's name, personal interests, address, court records, and even in some cases their social security number, all of this from a simple digital image. One easily understands the tremendous impact this technology can have when implemented by governments.

London is famous for using cameras to record the movements of people throughout the city. Estimates are that the average person is photographed over three hundred times per day. Brazil, in anticipation of hosting the 2014 World Cup soccer matches, is testing eyeglasses that have

miniature cameras attached to capture facial images and compare them with a database of known criminals. "Big Brother is watching you."

What is just as disturbing is the potential for criminal utilization of such technologies. A team of thieves could have one member prowling political and charity fundraisers, or expensive restaurants, and have the patrons' faces matched with their addresses. The balance of the team would then be able to approach the target's home with an increased probability that no one will be there. I predict that costume parties will gain in popularity with the well healed.

We tend to believe that we are acting in an anonymous manner while on the Internet, thinking that our emails are private communications between the sender and receiver. The fact is that all of our Internet behavior is monitored and used to sell us products, whether they are ideas or things. Every link we click, every email we send, every web page we visit is recorded and algorithmically analyzed to alter what we see. What we see are advertisements, increasingly the ones we have contextualized to ourselves. For example, if one has an interest in James Joyce, performs searches on Joyce and visits websites that pertain to Joyce, then one will begin seeing advertisements from Amazon or other online booksellers offering books by or about Joyce. The contents of our emails, as well as every choice we make on the Internet, are used to create online files, which in sum constitute who we are in cyberspace.

The problem with this model is that our scope of vision is ever narrowed. We see only what is of interest to us according to the algorithms used by Internet companies; we only see what we supposedly want to see. Whereas this is of minor concern in terms of commercial advertising, in the realm of politics we wander dangerously close to a terrible trap.

Americans increasingly receive the news by way of the Internet. Over fifty percent of Americans under the age of thirty-five receive their news through Facebook, the home of "friending" and "liking". Even though the vast majority of newspapers have an online presence, each provides us with the opportunity to customize what types of news we view. This reduces the probability that we will see a news item that is outside of our stated area of interest. Thus, the news we receive reflects our own concept of the world.

Furthermore, by restricting the inflow of news to only that which conforms to our worldview, we reinforce the notion that we are seeing the big picture, that we are right. If I watch the news everyday and it agrees with my position, my position is bolstered.

Gone are the days of the shared experience of broadcast news where we would hear Walter Cronkite end his nightly segment with "And that's the way it is." Television news now allows us to cleave to a given political point of view without the encroachment of opposing views. The obvious examples are Fox News and MSNBC, which have distinctly different political stances. If one has a particular political bent and watches only the news that adheres to his point of view, then what he receives is a one-sided version of the story. What once was, in the presentation of the news, "Here are the facts", has become "Here is the way to interpret the facts" and "Here is the way our opposition incorrectly interprets the facts." As long as we avail ourselves of this type of solipsistic information, we are acquiescing to a feedback loop of self-certainty that is wrong and dangerous.

Because of this, we see in our country the metamorphosis from political discourse to political discord, a discord based on not having heard the intent of our opponents' position, of our literally choosing the absurd, a word derived from the Latin surdus, meaning deaf or inattentive.

Towards the end of WWI, or soon thereafter, Kafka wrote a very short story titled "A Little Fable". Here it is:

"Alas," said the mouse, "the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, I kept running and running, and I was glad when I saw walls far away to the right and left, but these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into."

"You only need to change your direction," said the cat, and ate it up.