**Opinion: Facebook threatens to 'Zuck up' the human race**

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|  | By **Andrew Keen**, Special to CNNupdated 7:10 PM EDT, Wed May 30, 2012 | |

**STORY HIGHLIGHTS**

* Our self esteem is determined by our updates, tweets and check-ins, Andrew Keen says
* Our digital addiction can only be broken by a regime of strict self-censorship, he argues
* Our obsession with posting data about our kids - is "destroying our children's privacy."
* Let's embrace technology which allows data to degenerate over time, Keen says

***Editor's note:***[***Andrew Keen***](http://www.ajkeen.com/)*is a British-American entrepreneur and professional skeptic. He is the author of "The Cult of the Amateur," and*[***"Digital Vertigo."***](http://www.amazon.co.uk/Andrew-Keen/e/B001JS2XPM/ref%3Dntt_athr_dp_pel_1)*This is the latest in a series of commentaries for CNN looking at how internet trends are influencing social culture.*

**(CNN)** -- The news last week was all about Facebook's dodgy IPO.[**Investors are filing suit against Facebook**](http://money.cnn.com/2012/05/23/technology/facebook-lawsuit/index.htm) about withholding "negative" assessment on its business prospects. This IPO not only[**"Zucked up"**](http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-57441887-93/how-facebooks-zucked-up-ipo-just-killed-the-tech-bubble/) Silicon Valley's supposed tech bubble, but it has created the suspicion that Facebook willfully exploited the innocence of the small investor.

But something even dodgier than [**a potential stock market fraud**](http://money.cnn.com/2012/05/23/technology/facebook-ipo-legal/index.htm)is going on. The social network is taking something much more important than money from its nearly one billion members. By sabotaging what it really means to be human, Facebook is stealing the innocence of our inner lives.

[Oh, Zuck: Facebook's bumpy start just got a little worse](http://news.blogs.cnn.com/2012/05/23/oh-zuck-facebooks-bumpy-start-just-got-a-little-worse/)

It may even be Zucking us up as a species.

Sherry Turkle, Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, tells us there's [**a "shift" from an analog world in which our identities are generated from within**](http://edition.cnn.com/video/#/video/tech/2012/05/25/natpkg-orig-ideas-sherry-turkle.cnn), to a digital world in which our sense of self is intimately tied to our social media presence.

But this shift to a Facebook world of incessant "friending," Professor Turkle correctly warns us, is a "seductive fantasy" which is weakening us both as individuals and as a society. The problem, she explains, is that a "capacity for solitude is what nurtures great relationships." But in today's always-on social media world, our solitude has been replaced by incessant online updates, which both weaken our sense of self and our ability to create genuine friendships.

I call this shift from the private to the public self "digital narcissism." Behind the communitarian veil of social media, we have fallen in love with ourselves. But this is a super sad love story. Because the more we self-broadcast, the emptier we become; and the emptier we become, the more we need to self-broadcast.

Facebook isn't alone, of course, in offering this seductive fantasy of a radically transparent digital society in which our self-esteem is determined by our updates, tweets and check-ins. And yet with its almost billion members and nearly $100 billion public market valuation, Facebook is shaping the digital narcissism of early 21st century culture more than any other social media company.

Most of all, Facebook is destroying our privacy as discrete individuals. And it's not just our kids who are revealing everything about themselves to their thousands of "friends" on Facebook. As Aisha Sultan and Jon Miller note in a chilling piece,[**"Facebook parenting" -- our obsession with posting data about our kids - is "destroying our children's privacy."**](http://edition.cnn.com/2012/05/25/opinion/sultan-miller-facebook-parenting/index.html)

Sultan, a parenting columnist at the St Louis Post-Dispatch, and Miller, a researcher at the University of Michigan, whose article was based on interviews with 4,000 children, argue that we've created what they call a sense of "normality" about a world where "what's private is public." Kids are growing up, they explain, assuming that it's perfectly normal to reveal everything about ourselves online.

"And our children will never have known a world without this sort of exposure. What does a worldview lacking an expectation of privacy mean for the rest of society?" Sultan and Miller conclude with the eeriest of questions.

What it means, of course, is that we are creating a world in which our sense of identity, of who we actually are, is defined by what others think of us. Social media's ubiquity means that we are losing that most precious of human things -- our sense of self . Our devices are always on; our "Timeline" (Facebook's product which greedily attempts to capture our entire life narrative) is there for everyone to see; we are living in public on a radically transparent global network that, by 2020, will be fed by 50 billion intelligent devices carried by the majority of people on the planet.

But the situation is actually more dismal than even Sultan and Miller acknowledge. The distinguished psychologists Philip Zimbardo and Nikita Duncan have written about [**an entire generation of young men who, they say, have been "desensitized to reality"**](http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/23/health/living-well/demise-of-guys/index.html) by online gaming and pornography. But what Zimbardo and Duncan forget to add is that much social media is no less addictive that gaming or porn.

Yes, digital narcissism is a narcotic. But unlike online gaming or pornography, it is desensitizing all of us -- young and old, men and women alike -- to reality. Imprisoned in our delusional social media bubbles, our Facebook saturated world has become a self-referential stream of real-time updates about what we just ate for breakfast.

Don't worry about whether the Facebook IPO is creating an economic bubble. The real bubble are the billions of delusional social media bubbles which are distorting our real sense of self and weakening genuine social interaction.

So what to do?

It's time to wake up to the truth about social media.[**Networks like Facebook have turned us into products**](http://edition.cnn.com/2012/02/02/opinion/keen-technology-facebook/index.html) in which their only economic value is our personal data. Like any other addiction, we need recognize its destructive reality. Facebook is free because it sells our most intimate data to advertisers. Forget about last week's dodgy IPO. The fraud is on anyone who has ever used Facebook.

Last year, I quit Facebook. It's a growing movement. I hope you'll consider joining me as a Facebook resistor.

But the solution goes beyond leaving Facebook. Our addiction to digital narcissism can only be broken by a new regime of strict self-censorship. For many of us, perpetually high on the narcotic of self-broadcast, this won't be any easier than quitting smoking or kicking that online porn or gaming habit. But remember, the less we publicly announce about ourselves, the more mysterious and thus the more interesting our private selves become.

There are political solutions too. We need to support governments in both the E.U. and the U.S. to protect online privacy through "do not track" legislation; force companies like Google to be more transparent with their use of our data and even enshrine, as the EU Justice Commissioner Viviane Reding is bravely championing, [**a "law of forgetting" on the Internet**](http://edition.cnn.com/2012/01/25/opinion/keen-technology-data/index.html).

The market can also play a role. Let's embrace new technology which allows data to degenerate over time so our online data, like real world trash, eventually decomposes.

Let's support Internet start-ups like the strictly private social network[**EveryMe**](https://everyme.com/) and the defiantly private search engine **[DuckDuckGo](http://duckduckgo.com/)**. And let's recognize, once and for all, that "free" is never really free and that we are much better off paying for apps and services that absolutely guarantee the protection of our private personal data.

At the dawn of our brave new networked 21st century world, we are faced with two options. Either, we succumb to the narcotic of digital narcissism, turn ourselves inside out and let our kids inherit a world in which the quiet mystery of the disciplined private self becomes a historical artifact. Or we fight our growing addiction to social media so that we are no longer enslaved to the personal update, the tweet or the check-in.

Privacy or publicness? It's not a hard choice. Zuck-up or save the species. I trust you'll know which one to make.

1. Explain what critics such as Keen mean when they say that facebook turns people into narcissists.
2. Give an example of “digital narcissism” that you might see on twitter or facebook.
3. How has facebook turned its users into “products?”
4. Do you agree with the author? Why or why not?