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All Me...All the Time

BOB BATCHELOR

Choose your own adventure:

A. We live in a selfie world. Rampant consumerism, omnipresent capitalism, and undying self-love merged into a kind of evil triumvirate aimed at your pocketbook, fueled by unchecked narcissism.

B. We live in a selfie world. Technology innovation enables people around the globe to connect in an instant to share ideas, experiences, and culture like never before. People's willingness to link together via social media is an expression of the world becoming more open, humane, and compassionate.

Whether one takes path A or B or charts a different course, the fact that we are in a selfie world seems clear. From the new ABC television rom-com "Selfie" to the recent controversies surrounding the release of nude pictures supposedly hacked from iCloud of movie star Jennifer Lawrence and others, the evidence is overwhelming. As an astute friend recently exclaimed, "Facebook is nothing more than one big selfie."

While I began this editorial using a choose your own adventure concept, the frank question is whether or not an alternative exists. If one follows Internet privacy arguments and the issues raised by Edward Snowden's release of secret government documents, a case could be made that all electronic communications are being gathered, assessed, and saved. The challenge goes beyond what Facebook is collecting to what

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seems like a global initiative to use technology to justify possibly peeping into every aspect of a person's life.

It is not just Lawrence and other celebrities that have been hacked. In a widely publicized story from this past summer, Snowden claimed that National Security Agency workers are sitting in their office looking at your naked selfies too. Not only that, they share the best ones among themselves. From passing around to downloading, takes how many clicks?

What brought the selfie idea to my own doorstep in a glaring way is watching my nine-year-old daughter, Kassie, and her third and fourth grade friends take imaginary selfies on a recent fieldtrip to a local pumpkin farm. Huddling together to ensure they were all in the pretend frame, they smiled and held up their arms as if they had cellphones. They even took turns taking the photo, gently rearranging themselves and giggling throughout. These are the true digital natives! The idea that one would not want selfies to exalt a significant moment or event is preposterous.

Now imagine this: four or five decades from now Kassie or one of her Montessori school friends is running for public office, maybe even for president. What if someone who has access to Facebook's or Google's or Vine's servers (or whatever entity owns the equipment in that distant future) uncovers embarrassing or controversial photos or instant messages that could stop the candidate in her tracks? Is there any good reason to think that this may not be part of our electronic future?

I am not a prude, nor do I advocate eliminating or regulating social media organizations to ensure that this potential future does not take place. Heck, I have posted selfies and watched in fascination (and sometimes horror) as people I know, brands I use, or celebrities post them too. What I would rather point to is that as popular culture scholars, we help audiences – from college students we teach to those we may influence – understand that there is context related to social media. The act of posting is not the

end of the equation and what comes next could matter in personal and significant ways.

The Internet and social media provide a platform. People use the electronic megaphone to facilitate constant recognition and acknowledgement that what they are doing, saying, feeling, and presenting holds meaning. It is as if the act actually is meaningless until it is posted. But, let us remember the context, the bigger picture, the possibility that what is posted today may haunt one tomorrow or next month or next year or fifty years from now.

For words of wisdom in our quest to make sense of technology and its complexities, I turn to a founding father of popular culture studies, Fred E. H. Schroeder, who wrote long before the Internet became ubiquitous:

Grown-ups think, and that's why they are incapable of boredom. Grown-ups do not confuse lack of sensuous excitement with lack of stimulus. Grown-ups think, and analyze, and compare, and contrast, and store up, and do not make a decision only on the basis of the report of the first precinct. The lively arts have value only insofar as they contribute to the art of living, only insofar as they become part of the living. (139)

Think, analyze, assess, acknowledge, reflect...these are the cornerstones of what we do day in and day out. Life is one enormous choose your own adventure game. Selfies are now part of that choice. But, whether one engages or not, the path can be navigated more skillfully if it is measured and well-thought-out.

* * *

Before ending this opening salvo, it would be illogical and inattentive not to acknowledge that it can be very difficult to lead the life of the mind given the current anti-intellectual, anti-education climate. Too many of our colleagues and friends are underemployed or unemployed, facing

challenging paths to tenure, and struggling to find one's place. At times it seems as if the odds are stacked against success.

Thus, I think it is essential that we continue to support one another on our collective journeys. Let's help one another find jobs, get published, create new courses, find internships for our students, teach well, and grant one another wisdom in our administrative duties. Collectively, we can help one another find success (however, it is that one defines that term). As a matter of fact, we do not spend enough time celebrating our milestones, particularly when it is so easy and convenient to be critical.

The power and foundation of the Midwest Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association has always been a commitment to the good of all popular culture scholars and enthusiasts. Let's look to one another for strength, compassion, and wisdom as we carry on toward our goals and aspirations.

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