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## A Debordian Analysis of Facebook

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### Abstract

What is the reason for the huge success of Facebook? Facebook, in this very sense, realizes what Guy Debord calls "the invasive forces of the 'spectacle' - a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 1992). Therefore, Facebook is an alternative tool able to amplify an individual's alienation and narcissism, which, according to Debord are more than an emotive description or an aspect of individual psychology: rather, they are a consequence of the mercantile form of social organization which has reached its climax in capitalism.

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## **A Debordian analysis of Facebook.**

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Facebook, the second largest social network on the Web with around 60 million members, is one of the fastest-growing and best-known sites on the Internet today. With the U.S. now accounting for only about a third of all Facebook users, we are starting to see a gradual shift away from its original demographic of college-age users (18-25): 46% of all users are 18-25 years old, down from 51% in late May 2008. The number of users in the 18-25 segment is growing, but at a slower pace than the other age groups. Among the major Facebook age segments, the fastest growing are teens (13-17) and young (26-34) to middle-age (35-44) professionals, with the growth in teens driven by non-U.S. markets. Also it is worth noting the strong growth in the much smaller 45-54 and 55-59 age groups (Ben Lorica, 2008). Looking closely at the top 30 countries, a few European countries have grown more than ten percent over the last four weeks 2008 (France, Spain, Germany, Italy), with France having the most number of users (approx. 2.5 million). Italy, in particular, is a country which still has one of the lowest rates of Internet use in Europe (35.6% according to a 2006 Istat report); but, very surprisingly, in the past couple of months Facebook has been literally invaded by Italians, quickly helping Italy reach first place for the greatest (and fastest) exponential growth in adoption of Facebook by a country. Italians seem to have a natural affinity with Facebook – they are not only joining in huge numbers (Facebook is now the fifth most popular site in Italy) but they seem to have seamlessly integrated this technology in their everyday life: Facebook is fast becoming the most used accessory in their beloved “telefonino” (mobile phone) (see Di Gennaro, 2008).

Thus, which is the reason for this huge success of Facebook? One of the reasons is that clearly young Italians’ discontent (as it is young people who are mainly inhabiting Facebook) and frustration with the current political situation and with their political representatives is finding in the Web a channel to let youth voice be heard. In fact not only Italian media are not giving enough voice to the younger Italian generations, but also Italy is actually experiencing a strong lack of generational replacement in its leadership (it is worth notice that the average age of Italian leadership is around 70 years old) (See II Rapporto LUISS, 2008). The main channel of information in Italy is still the obsolete TV broadcasting: Italians indeed like to get multimedia information (mainly images) and almost stream chats, rather than word-content information, even though the kind of information supplied is not networked, but broadcasted: few or no interaction is allowed.

On the contrary, Facebook not only provides multimedia content and a high interactive environment, but it also provides personalised features. In other words, it is my personal content which is available on the web and it make me feel as if I was in the centre of a virtually worldly networked stage: Facebook, in this very sense, realizes what Guy Debord calls “the invasive forces of the 'spectacle' - "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (Debord, 1992). Therefore, Facebook is an alternative tool able to amplify an individual’s alienation and narcissism, which, according to Debord are more than an emotive description or an aspect of individual psychology: rather, they are a consequence of the mercantile form of social organization which has reached its climax in capitalism. The development of modern society in which authentic social life has finally been replaced with its whole representation: "All that was once directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord, id.); life is actually meaningful life if and only if it is described and shared on Facebook. Debord argues that the history of social life can be understood as "the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing" (Debord, id.) which is finally concluded with Facebook, in which private and public spheres are finally melted together. This condition, according to Debord, is the "historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life" (Debord, id.). In a similar way, Jaron Lanier claims that similar collaborative communities such as Flickr, MySpace, and Wikipedia represent a new form of “online collectivism” that is suffocating authentic voices in a muddled and anonymous tide of mass mediocrity (quoted in Tapscott and Williams, 2008). In these cases such as Facebook and MySpace we cannot follow Howard Rheingold when he claims that “Collectivism involves coercion and centralized control; collective action involves freely chosen self-selection and distributed coordination.” (Quoted in Tapscott and Williams, 2008)

The Italian example shows how Facebook (but also MySpace, and even YouTube) cannot be compared – as Tapscott and Williams (op. cit.) claim – to other open-source, collaborative and participative endeavors that Tapscott and Williams call “Wikinomics”. They rather are – according to my debordian analysis – the latter development of advanced capitalism, leading to individuals’ further alienation and narcissism by means of social relation between people mediated by (self-created) images. I believe is not enough that Facebook is opening its platform to users and external developers when most people are, as in Italy, still using Facebook just to join networks, and to connect and interact with other people or adding friends and send them messages, and update their personal profile to notify friends about themselves. Directly parallel to Marx's notion of commodity; for Debord (op.cit.), the spectacle (and in our particular case Facebook) made relations among people seem like relations among images (and vice versa). The spectacle is the form taken

by society once the instruments of knowledge production have become wholly commoditized and exposed to free circulation. To sum up, much cases provided by Tapscott and Williams (op. cit.) are not promising any new shift from capitalism to a new form of economy based on openness, peering, sharing and global action - they called Wikinomics; but rather they are new disguised forms of advanced capitalism which can be analyzed using the debordian notion of society of diffused spectacle.

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