

## **Time to Lose Face(book)**

By Ana Tajder

Finally it is my time to brag about Facebook! Our love relationship has turned into a love-hate relationship. I like(d) social networks: I am home in two different countries. I went to an international school and then an international university. Later, I worked in international business, so my friends are scattered all around the world. For people like me, the social networks are the easiest way to keep in touch. This is why I am everywhere: Facebook, Myspace, LinkedIn, Xing, Small World, Internations, Twitter and some other sites whose names I forgot. And yes, I admit, I have 420 friends on Facebook. And no, I don't know them all – some of them are my readers who have expressed the wish to become my virtual friends. Virtual. That part is slowly fading away. But it shouldn't, because “virtual” is where the problem hides.

Few weeks ago, I posted on Facebook my dilemma about switching to Mac. Within only few hours, I had 29 comments. Passionate comments. Emotional comments. People were arguing and kept returning to see what the others replied and debate with them. Last week, I posted that I was stuck at home with swine flu. Comments? 0. Zero. Welcome to the world of virtual friendships.

There is one slight problem with virtual friendships. No, there are three slight problems. Or even more... One: We are spending more and more time in social networks. Meaning we are wasting time we could be spending in the real world, and also wasting money and productivity. A recent survey done in the UK by Morse, an IT services and technology company, has revealed that the cost to the economy due to use of social networks by office workers during office hours could be over £1.38 billion a year. More than 50% of office workers used social networks for personal use during the working day, and admitted to wasting app. 40 minutes a week virtually networking. A research conducted at the Ohio State University showed that students who used Facebook had a “significantly” lower grade point average than those who did not use the site - the equivalent of the difference between getting an A and a B.

Problem number two: we are getting overly seduced by virtual friendships, maybe even allowing them to weaken the importance of our real friendships. The lesson I have learned with my post on having swine-flu is what sociologists are calling the phenomenon of “weak links”. We think we have 420 friends who are actively sharing our lives. We don't. We have 420 virtual pan-pals who are only here when they want it. “Strong link” is my neighbour Marcus. While I was ill, for almost two weeks, he kept feeding me through closed doors (yes, like you would feed a beast). He bought my groceries and medication. He was there, he helped.

Lately, I have also noticed that social networks started strongly changing the way we begin romancing (and eventually end up having sex). This, in turn, has a huge impact on how we view and present our lives. Last two guys I met (yes, I admit, they were [much] younger than me) asked me for my Facebook contact. Phone numbers, even e-mail addresses, are passé. Hello, this is a revolution in our dating pattern! We used to get in touch so that we could get to know the person and see if we like him/her. Now, everything is upside down – we first get to know (the virtual) person, then we decide if we like him/her – and then we get in touch, or don't. We are making decisions based on someone's virtual identity. Dangerous. Because in the virtual world, what is missing is... yes, the real thing. Everyone is more or less same, and everyone can create the identity they chose to (do you really think I look like my Facebook picture?). So we are slowly starting to think of our lives in terms of how presentable they are online. How alienating is that?

I don't know. I just know I'm cutting “virtual” to a minimum. I have already trained myself to only log on once a day. And I've introduced Facebook-free days. Mostly I combine

them with news-free days. Those days are fantastic- they make life suddenly seem so easy and uncomplicated! You only have to remove the rubbish of other people's destinies... It does sound tough, I know. But sorry - we're just too many.