We Are the Change We've Been Waiting For

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Facebook, one of the most popular social networking websites, reaches millions of young people who share, collect, and distribute billions of bytes of information on a daily basis. You might reasonably suppose, then, that Facebook, by dint of its ubiquity among the younger set, could facilitate collective action on a once-unthinkable scale and produce a deep and lasting impression on political life.

But no. The opinions that attract the most widespread support on Facebook are the least substantive and consequential. Hundreds of thousands of people join "groups" with frivolous or ironic purposes— "When I Was Your Age, Pluto Was a Planet," "I Flip My Pillow Over to Get to the Cold Side," and, one of the most popular, "I Secretly Want to Punch Slow-Walking People in the Back of the Head." Even Facebook groups with nominally political aims are personal, petty, and negative: "One Million Strong *Against* Hillary" and "I Bet I Can Find 1,000,000 People who *Dislike* George W. Bush," both of which long ago reached their stated goal, far surpassing any group

> *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics*
> By Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais
> Rutgers ~ 2008 ~ 336 pp.
> $24.95 (cloth)

supporting or opposing an actual policy or platform.

This is no more the stuff of serious political thought or action than is donning a t-shirt with a funny slogan. Facebook offers users the opportunity to share common experiences, as well as to indulge in all manner of vanity, but it would be hard to find on the site's millions-strong monotony of collective opinion any evidence suggesting that seismic social change is afoot.

But Facebook's overwhelming political vapidity somehow escaped the notice of Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais, whose new book *Millennial Makeover* heralds social networking technology as a revolutionary mode of communication that will give voice to the unique views and beliefs of the next generation of American voters. Winograd, formerly a senior policy advisor to Vice President Al Gore and now affiliated with the University of Southern California's business school, and Hais, retired vice president of entertainment research at a consulting firm and self-anointed expert on "political realignments," argue that the "Millennial Generation"—

born between 1982 and 2003—will use online social networking to fundamentally alter American politics, shifting the electoral map as well as demanding radically new policies and programs to usher in a blissful new dawn of brotherhood and harmony.

Winograd and Hais base their forecast on a bizarre, cyclical account of American history that holds that "underlying changes in generational size and attitudes and advances in communication technology are the real driving forces of [the] constant, and predictable, shift in the fortunes of America's political parties." By way of historical example, we learn that the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, which coincided with the development of the telegraph, "ushered in an era of positive feelings toward politics and political institutions." Even in the most rampantly revisionist history departments in the country, this would hardly pass as a fitting description of secession and the Civil War.

Winograd and Hais assign an equally implausible centrality to technology in contemporary politics. According to them, the rise of social networking technology will reinforce the distinctive characteristics of Millennials and transform the American political process. Peer-to-peer technologies and online social networking permit and encourage Millennials' unique modes of social interaction: the desire to continually "share everything with every-

one" and an unbending faith in the collective decision-making process. Rejecting the supposed individualism of recent generations, "Millennials have a strong group and community orientation and a clear tendency to share their thoughts and activities with others—friends, teachers, and parents. This is considerably different than 'it's all about me' Baby Boomers and the cynical individualism of alienated Gen-Xers."

Winograd and Hais cannot seem to say enough about the generally pleasant demeanor of young people—"an exceptionally accomplished, positive, upbeat, and optimistic generation" who spend as much time as possible cheerfully interacting with each other. As distinct from previous generations, Millennials use high technology to remain constantly in touch with their dotcomrades, as well as to exchange opinions regarding politics, music, and relationships. They typically do not make politically relevant decisions based on information gleaned from centralized, structured sources, like the talking heads on television or the loud mouths of talk radio. Rather, they rely on "authentic" communications from peers and equals.

This pronounced communal predisposition, we learn, is the result of an enlightened education. "Since they started watching *Barney* as toddlers," Winograd explained without a trace of irony in a recent *Washington Post* op-ed, "the Millennials have learned to be concerned for the welfare of

everyone in the group and try to find consensus, 'win-win' solutions to any problem. The result is a collegial approach that attracts Millennials to candidates who seek to unify the country and heal the nation's divisions." Winograd seems to think that television's purple dinosaur will get us beyond the divisions of the red and blue states.

Conversely, Millennials despise "divisive" and "judgmental" attitudes and behaviors—that is, the introduction of morality or religion into the public sphere. Recognizing no legitimate authority on ethical matters beyond personal whim or fancy, they naturally resist "attempts to have the state's coercive powers used to define personal morality." With social networking to organize their efforts, Millennials promise to bring America more sharing, cooperation, and community building, greater economic equality, and less public discussion of prickly moral issues. Social networking will overcome social conservatism.

Winograd and Hais's thesis is thoroughly undermined by just a few minutes spent poking around social-networking websites—where self-obsession is the rule. Rarely do users come together on any but the most inconsequential of topics. Interaction between users on MySpace and Facebook consists primarily of self-interested transactions or exchanges rather than genu-ine cooperation or community. These websites are awash in narcissism; users spend hours carefully crafting their profiles and their online identities, hoping to attract attention and affection from others. Much of the information they share about themselves is false, misleading, useless, or offensive. These websites—like other new communication technologies—facilitate the flow, but do not refine or improve the quality, of information that people share.

Also, Winograd and Hais turn a blind eye to some of the less savory aspects of modern communication technologies. For instance, peer-to-peer technologies do not simply promote the kind of "sharing" that Barney advocates. The swapping of digital music files, which the authors rightly regard as the beginning of the peer-to-peer revolution, may be called "sharing," but it hardly entails service or sacrifice for the greater good, or any kind of preparation for it. Listening to other people's music for free does not require any consideration for the needs and desires of the group, nor does it produce empathy or concern for others.

Moreover, users of social networking sites tacitly acknowledge a lack of genuinely inclusive or "group-oriented" behavior through their approach to revealing potentially sensitive or personal information. While Winograd and Hais claim that Millennials subscribe to a "more contemporary" notion of privacy

that permits them to share their lives' most personal details with the whole world, in fact, users tend to take much more delicate measures in this respect. Online social networking has given rise to the uniquely modern phenomenon of "selective exhibitionism"—when users deliberately share evidence of their indecent behavior with public audiences on sites such as MySpace or YouTube, and attempt after the fact to restrict the audience allowed to view that incriminating footage. Needless to say, they usually fail. Untold numbers of job offers have been rescinded because private indiscretions became public liabilities through imprudent online posting. There is no general or universal impetus among Millennials to share "everything with everyone," as Winograd and Hais suggest—certainly not employers, teachers, parents, or law enforcement officers. Rather, Millennials assert the right to share whatever they want with whomever they want, and to retain absolute control over the consequences of such exchanges. This somewhat more limited assertion reflects their less noble aspirations—not community-building, but self-promotion through image manipulation.

Even more illuminating of Millennials' true communal instincts is the complicated and intense curiosity that social networks encourage among users. The whole success of online social networking is due to one structural feature: the ability to look at other users' information without their knowledge—in other words, to spy. Users can gawk endlessly at the profiles of neighbors and classmates free from the repercussions such attentions would provoke offline. This voyeuristic element promotes a very peculiar kind of "private sharing," in which information is public but the user's consumption of it is not. In response, users have come to demand greater control over their own information, and social networking sites have begun to offer privacy settings that allow users to exercise ever-greater control over the information they share. This hardly resembles the nirvana of openness that Winograd and Hais envision.

That said, the authors deliberately overlook the one apparent political phenomenon on social networking websites that may be genuinely worth mentioning—namely, the persistence of social and religious concerns. Winograd and Hais revive the tired argument that economic equality is the only legitimate political issue and that social and moral issues are "distractions" introduced into public debate by conservative politicians looking to deceive and divide the electorate. This argument clearly doesn't convince many young people who use social networking sites, since pro-life groups, sexual abstinence groups, and groups proudly celebrating religious faith appear all over Facebook, MySpace, and other such sites. Whatever is implied by these

online deviations from enlightened opinion, the generation of voters now maturing and entering public life will not be able to, and probably will not want to, avoid grappling with thorny social issues, such as the moral status of the embryo or the appropriate role of religion in a democracy.

There is no reason to imagine that social networking sites will transform American political life. The assumptions that lead Winograd and Hais to think otherwise have, in fact, very little to do with new technologies and far more to do with an old worn-out cliché: that democratic politics would be far more harmonious and lovely if only people concerned about moral, social, or religious issues would pipe down and fall in line—and that the younger generation understands that. Neither part of this cliché is true, as the reality of social networking, no less than the reality of American politics, plainly demonstrates.

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