Thomas Parrott

served in the U.S. Air Force for over six years before attending UGA; he wrote this essay for an English 1101E special topics class on Social Networking, the Entertainment Industry, and Consumer. Thomas's English 1101 Barnett essay follows one of the oldest prose forms – the true "essay," from the Old French *essai*, meaning "a trial, testing, proof, experiment" (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Traditionally, the essay is thought to follow the writer's train of thought and to have no other organizational principle – or a thesis, for that matter. But the essay's conversational tone and look of spontaneity are deceptive. Although it may be implicit rather than boldly stated, Thomas's essay has a definite thesis; it also makes an argument – if you'll try, you will see that you can easily restate that argument in more formal terms. The essay is "FYC distinctive" because it is insightful, unique, and funny, according to his instructor.

ENGL1101E
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Diary of a Facebook Convert

One of my foremost traits is the simple reality that I am not a social person. Others are anxious to go downtown on the weekend, while I'm perfectly happy sitting at home and reading a book. I avoid being the center of attention and prefer the freedom of being relatively unnoticed in the crowd, enabling me to do my own thing. It may come as something of a shock, then, when I reveal that I am a habitual Facebook user, one of those people who logs in on their phone just to find out if anything new has been posted in the last fifteen minutes. I didn't become an internet socialite overnight; rather, it was the result of how my opinions evolved over a significant period of time.

As I said, I didn't begin as a fan of social media. Around eight years ago, I kept a LiveJournal more as a joke than anything else and updated it only sporadically with bursts of teenage angst. I found a handful of blogs that I considered interesting enough to keep up with, but the huge numbers of random people blogging only left me confused and questioning, "Who were they trying to reach? What were they getting out of it?" Then along came MySpace, and the only real response I could muster was scorn. Somewhere in the combination of garish colors, irritating repeating music, and incomprehensible comments, the creators of the website

and pages alike had managed to find a recipe to drive me away completely. I would likely have written off the whole concept if I hadn't shipped out and left Georgia behind for several years to come.

There is a phenomenon in the Air Force that I'm sure is duplicated in the other branches as well, called a "tech school marriage." In essence, people complete basic and move on to the next step in their training, only to immediately "fall in love" with a fellow trainee and be married within a month. I'm no trained psychologist, so I can't say with any assurance what causes this phenomenon, but I have my own theory: extreme homesickness you can't even admit you're feeling. People are ripped away from friends, family, and comforting surroundings and generally run ragged. They want something to hold on to and reach out to grasp anything that will make this "home." Some people choose a hasty, ill-conceived marriage. In the end, I turned to the internet to hold onto old connections.

The first time I got an opportunity to use a computer after basic training was in a dingy, old computer lab located in our dormitory building at Presidio of Monterey, the kind of place with age stains on the ceilings and gouges in the walls. The computer itself was old enough that I was worried I might have wandered into a museum, and I found myself desperately hoping that the internet had existed when the computer was built. Yet soon enough I was logged in and exchanging emails with people back home, setting up my first stretch of leave to be spent with friends and family over the Christmas exodus, when the entire base would be a ghost town as all the trainees went home. Just as easily as that, the connection between "internet" and "home" was fixed in my mind.

From there, my acceptance of social media started with online bulletin boards and a more concerted effort to get into my friends' LiveJournals. Soon enough, however, someone came to me talking about a new site that had appeared on the stage: Facebook. As was my nature at the time, I scoffed at this; even the name seemed terrible, some sort of a reference to a high school yearbook. Yet over time, more and more people I knew joined and talked about it. First, friends who were close to my age, then my sisters, and by the time I was twenty-one, even my mother and aunts were making profiles. Now, I might not like to think of myself as a man who caves to peer pressure, but when even your technophobic mother is encouraging you to "get on Facebook," eventually you have to crack.

Thus, I found myself in possession of a brand new Facebook profile. I had told myself I'd never post pictures of myself to the internet: that went out the window the same day. There were no garish color schemes, no ear-grating midis playing on endless repeat. In fact, the format was all surprisingly uniform and straightforward, easy to read. Then came the ultimate

shocker: it turns out that people who you like and think are funny and entertaining in person are likely to be so even when posting a brief thought as a status. So in the end, it wasn't the application itself that won me over, approval of the format or no. Instead, in a way that was obvious in retrospect, it was the people I cared about that got me hooked in.

Hooked or not, however, I did not anticipate when Facebook would have its largest impact on me. A major part of military life is the reality of deployment. Your training instructors tell you first, "Everyone goes eventually." This mantra is repeated by supervisors and commanders, until eventually it is, indeed, your turn to go. You wake up bright and early some morning and report to a building where you and dozens to hundreds of others sit around, tired and bored and nervous, all at once. You get on the plane, sit uncomfortably for a whole day of travel, and finally, you're there, on the other side of the world from everything you know and love. Eventually, you are given a chance to use the media tent, and for me and others like me, Facebook is one of the things waiting for you. It might not be as good as being there, but you can still get a sense surprisingly quickly for how things are going back home. You can peruse a dozen statuses, laugh over pictures, and let everyone know that you're doing okay. If you're lucky, for just a moment you can even forget where you are.

Of course, these days I've left the military behind and moved on into a new stage of my life. The hair cut, the clothes, and the attitude all changed as I came to the University of Georgia, and the way I used social media changed, too. Part of it is role reversal, as I'm the one sending friends overseas the messages encouraging them to keep their chin up. My usage goes further than that, though: it's not about just keeping in touch with old friends anymore. Now it's about networking with new ones, making and maintaining the connections that are going to carry me through the college years and on into the rest of my life. As my life changes, my use of Facebook just changes too, leaving me convinced it's not going anywhere any time soon.

Now that we've charted my course from an absolute social media skeptic to a Facebook true believer, I won't claim that I don't still see flaws in the progress of social media, or that I've bought into the whole scheme. I've seen it exacerbate too much drama and provoke too many arguments all by itself, not to mention the occasional violations of privacy and the like. In the end, though, it lets me keep in touch with friends and family scattered all across the country and even the world, and if nothing else, I'm grateful for that opportunity. Just don't get me started on Twitter, as I still can't quite take that sort of nonsense. At least, until my mother gets an account.