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What is This?

Media refusal and conspicuous non-consumption: The performative and political dimensions of Facebook abstention

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Abstract

This paper is a study of consumer resistance among active abstainers of the Facebook social network site. I analyze the discourses invoked by individuals who consciously choose to abstain from participation on the ubiquitous Facebook platform. This discourse analysis draws from approximately 100 web and print publications from 2006 to early 2012, as well as personal interviews conducted with 20 Facebook abstainers. I conceptualize Facebook abstention as a performative mode of resistance, which must be understood within the context of a neoliberal consumer culture, in which subjects are empowered to act through consumption choices – or in this case non-consumption choices – and through the public display of those choices. I argue that such public displays are always at risk of misinterpretation due to the dominant discursive frameworks through which abstention is given meaning. This paper gives particular attention to the ways in which connotations of taste and distinction are invoked by refusers through their conspicuous displays of non-consumption. This has the effect of framing refusal as a performance of elitism, which may work against observers interpreting conscientious refusal as a persuasive and emulable practice of critique. The implication of this is that refusal is a limited tactic of political engagement where media platforms are concerned.

Keywords

Consumption, Facebook, non-consumption performance, non-users, performativity, refusal, rejection, resistance, social media

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Bruce[1] quit Facebook in a huff. He had lots of reasons. He didn't like seeing "shady" guys commenting on his sisters' walls. He felt weird about seeing his teenaged nieces and nephews posting pictures he wasn't sure were age-appropriate. He was mildly unsettled by Facebook's policy of allowing fan pages for certain political causes he thought of as being unpatriotic and dangerous. Eventually it all came to a head when Facebook forebore to ban controversial political organization Wikileaks from having a public profile on the site. Knowing his political objections to Wikileaks, Bruce's family 'called [him] out' and asked if he was going to 'stand up for [his] beliefs' and leave Facebook. Seeing himself as a role model for his nieces and nephews, and wanting to set the example of standing up for one's values, he decided to quit. He didn't go quietly. Bruce recounted:

> I made it out in my own head to be an important moment that I could show them how to stand firm to your beliefs, so I was like, even if you don't agree with me, I'm gonna stand firm, so I went on that day and I posted this ridiculous message about, like, you know, just bashing Wikileaks and bashing Facebook for supporting them and I was like, 'Goodbye everybody'.

And then he deactivated his account.

That wasn't the end of the story though. As Bruce had intended, his act of protest had been noticed. But while Bruce had mainly had a specific audience and message in mind – he wanted to show his nieces and nephews that he did not support Facebook's policies and was willing to end his participation on the site as a result – the audience was of course much larger and the message was not so clear cut. People in his network got offended that he was willing to sacrifice his personal online relationships with them over a political issue. Bruce's aunt expressed sadness that they couldn't interact on Facebook any more. A friend with whom Bruce had used Facebook to stay in touch accused him of being self-centered for 'throwing away' the relationship they had had, just for some ideological stance against Wikileaks. The friend also thought Bruce was being 'self-promoting' by quitting, to show off how 'badass' he was for being able to quit. Others applauded his stance, and Bruce found himself bonding with his fellow non-users over their shared independence from the site. But overall, Bruce said, 'people were left with a bad taste in their mouth like, (a) you're up on a soapbox, (b) you're not better than us, and (c) you're just trying to get attention'.

This paper examines abstention from Facebook as a performative act, as a lifestyle practice that has the potential to signify about the identity and ideological position of the abstainer. I examine resistance to participation on Facebook as a prime case of a type of lifestyle practice I refer to as *media refusal*. Other examples of media refusal include refusing to watch television or refusing to own a mobile phone. Media refusal may also be concentrated in the rejection of a particular media platform or media brand. Not all non-use is refusal; refusal is a discursive move that entails more than simply not using something – it's a kind of conscious disavowal that involves the recognition that non-use signifies something socially or politically meaningful about the non-user. A non-user who is simply unaware of a media technology they do not use, for instance, would not be a refuser. Similarly, individuals for whom a media practice like Facebook use is not a normative feature of everyday life, say in the case of the elderly or those who lack access to the internet, would not necessarily be Facebook refusers. These kinds of non-users,

while worthy of scholarly attention, are outside the scope of the present study, which is restricted to cases and contexts in which non-use may be plausibly construed as conscious and active rejection.

Refusal in the sense that I have defined it can be understood as a tactic of critique, which manifests the objections and dissatisfactions people feel toward media products, or even media and consumer culture more broadly. We can thus situate media refusal as a form of consumer activism, in line with other practices of 'lifestyle politics', which characterize citizenship in contemporary neoliberal society (Giddens, 1991). As we saw with Bruce, and as I will show in more detail below, people who reject a form of media technology sometimes have the express intent of using their rejection instrumentally to 'send a message'. A 2010 campaign called 'Quit Facebook Day', for example, asked Facebook users to sign an online pledge committing to delete their profiles in protest at the site's exploitation of its users. But even when a communicative intent is not explicitly acknowledged, it may be implicit in the way abstainers describe and enact their rejection. For instance, when abstainers talk about how Facebook is a 'waste of time', they communicate that they are the kind of people for whom being productive with one's time is an important value. The publicly stated choice to abstain from Facebook is also socially meaningful in that it implies a certain level of cultural and economic capital to be able to *choose* not to access a social media technology as a way to make a statement. Among the young and tech-savvy consumers who are often centered in public discourse about media use, non-use of Facebook may be remarkable indeed. Thus, to ostentatiously remark upon one's refusal is to implicitly align oneself with those socially privileged groups among whom non-use is not the norm. Paradoxically then, one actually brings oneself symbolically close to a consumption norm in the act of avowing resistance to it.

By examining the discourses within which media refusal is framed by the refusers, we can analyze precisely what is signified by refusal and how (and whether) implicit critiques of media are being effectively communicated. Understanding signification also involves examining the discursive frames through which refusal is interpreted by observers. As Bruce learned, the message one intends to send may not be the one that is ultimately communicated. What one person sees as a demonstration of personal integrity, another person may see as self-righteous elitism. These discursive mismatches make for significant potential for politicized media refusal to be what Austin (1975) calls an unhappy performative. Because of the wide range of meanings associated with Facebook participation – participation is often bound up with personal relationships and social status – the choice not to be on Facebook can imply many more things than just an ideological objection to that particular corporation's policies and practices. As I will show, Facebook rejection is easily interpreted as a wish to demonstrate one's superiority to the abstract 'mainstream', or even one's superiority to the friends one leaves behind in the Facebook network. Interpretations like this are encouraged by much of the public discourse around media refusal, including the discourse produced by media refusers themselves. This presents a key limitation of making one's media consumption choices the site of one's political dissent – if one's performance of refusal is easily dismissed as getting 'up on a soapbox', possibly in order to prove one is better than others, then the critiques expressed by one's refusal are lost. Ultimately,

my argument is that performative tactics of resistance will succeed or fail as political interventions on the basis of the discursive frameworks in which they are interpreted. It thus behooves us to examine which discursive frameworks refusers are invoking in their performances of refusal, and how these may potentially be (mis)interpreted by observers.

In the next section, I further define what I mean by media refusal and explain why Facebook abstention serves as an illuminating case. I offer the concept of *conspicuous non-consumption* to describe performative practices of refusal. The following section shows how non-users' difference from the mainstream of media consumers is communicated through their performances of refusal. I show that refusers often position this difference as a point of cultural distinction, which may easily read to others as elitism. The section after that offers theoretical contextualization to explain why the political critique leveled through media refusal is endangered by the discursive frames through which refusal is interpreted. I conclude that while media refusal may be a legitimate tactic of resistance, it is a limited one. The limitations of this tactic point to constraints of neoliberal consumer activism more generally.

Methods and justification

My analysis draws on several different sites of discourse. Chief among these are websites created by anti-Facebook individuals and organizations and around 100 popular press pieces that discuss Facebook abstention, including articles and editorials from newspapers, magazines, and blogs, published since 2006. I also examined the online reader comments responding to these press pieces where available.[2] Additionally, my analysis draws on 20 semi-structured phone interviews, conducted during the spring of 2011, in which I asked self-identified non-users of Facebook a set of open-ended questions (e.g. 'What led to your decision to quit using Facebook?'; 'What are other people's reactions when they learn you are not a Facebook user?'). I recruited interviewees via word of mouth, including through social media networks. This referral method of recruitment I used was particularly appropriate because it resulted in interviews with people whose non-use had been performed publicly enough for their acquaintances to be aware of it. Interviewees were also self-selecting in that they identified themselves as appropriate candidates for a study about non-users of Facebook. It can thus be assumed that they existed in social contexts in which non-use would be remarkable enough to be a salient characteristic of their self-identities. Indeed nearly everyone I interviewed said that Facebook use was the norm among their friends, which is not surprising given that the interviewees were in their 20s and 30s and living near urban centers. By recruiting through word of mouth on social network sites and by allowing participants to self-identify as non-users, my method of recruitment effectively prescreened participants for relevance to the focus of my study. On the other hand, this is a convenience sample and is thus not generalizable across all non-users.

I recursively analyzed the interview transcripts with the other texts, moving back and forth between them to arrive at a thematic interpretation of the overall discourse of Facebook refusal. I operationalized the performance of Facebook refusal fluidly in

response to the ambiguity of cultural practice. People may have differing understandings of what it means to be a 'Facebook quitter', for example. Some define quitting as permanently deleting one's profile, others see themselves as quitters who have just stopped paying attention to the site. Some non-users describe themselves as 'holdouts' who have never had an account at all.[3] Others, not discussed in this study, may reduce participation on Facebook due to their concerns and critiques, while not considering themselves abstainers or publicly representing themselves as such. What is important for the purposes of this study is that some people *discursively* construct themselves in ways that fit the framework of refusal, whatever the empirical realities of their usage might be.[4]

While it would be a worthy exercise to empirically document actual behaviors of media rejection, my aim here is to explore some of the available frames we have for making sense of refusal as a critical, cultural practice. The assignment of significance must be considered within a circuit of communication in which (a) performances of refusal are envisioned and enacted by individuals who (b) draw on existing discourses about refusal; then (c) these performances are observed and interpreted by others, who in turn (d) draw on existing discourses about refusal in order to make sense of the performances they have witnessed (Hall, 2006; Morley, 2000). The many performative and political dimensions of refusal as a cultural practice may not be immediately obvious or acknowledged by individual refusers, since the effects of performatives often exceed the consciousness and intent of their performers (Parker and Sedgwick, 1995). For example, the individuals interviewed for this study did not universally position their abstention from Facebook as an act of political critique. It is my task here to draw out the performative and political dimensions of refusal through analysis of the discursive frames in which media rejection is popularly situated.

This paper assumes a difference between active resisters of Facebook and those who, for reasons beyond their own control, do not have access to Facebook. While this may not always be a neat distinction in the real world, it should be understood that for the most part the people engaged in meaning-making around Facebook abstention are privileged media consumers and producers themselves. The views represented by my discourse analysis are ones held by those whose voices are published and circulated within mainstream popular culture, and by extension, are made readily available to researchers like myself. While there would certainly be value in seeking out more marginal views and experiences of media rejection, that is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. It is also important to note that social context shapes whether nonuse can be understood as refusal in the sense addressed by this paper. For individuals within particular age groups, education levels, or geographic locations, for instance, social media use may be less normative than for the refusers discussed here. Non-use and refusal would carry very different kinds of significance for the elderly, for example, than what I present here.

Although intentional non-use is a relatively small area of media research, it can serve as an important site for understanding the objections people have to particular media technologies, and beyond this, their discomforts with media and consumer culture at large. Gray's (2003) essay urging the study of anti-fans and non-fans has purchase here, insofar as the practice of rejection sheds light on what refusers see as the negative social

and political work done by media consumption. As Gray puts it, 'behind dislike, after all, there are expectations' (Gray, 2003: 73) and non-consumption is an interesting object for media studies because of the expectations about media, society, and power implicitly and explicitly expressed by practitioners of non-consumption. With a few important exceptions, the media studies literature that addresses media rejection usually does so as an aside to questions of technology adoption and diffusion. Non-consumers generally serve as outliers and are positioned as marginal in relation to the more dominant categories of users who are the immediate focus of study. There is not space enough here to address the treatment of media rejection by these studies; suffice it to say that relatively little attention has been given to the cultural constructions that shape individual rejection behaviors. Thus the discursive and performative dimensions of media refusal – particularly with respect to new social media platforms and technologies – are ripe for study by critical media scholars. Furthermore, as Hargittai (2004) points out, knowing who non-users are, and their reasons for non-use, can provide important contextual information about the norms and assumptions of users. This knowledge can also cast light on the daily compromises made by regular media consumers, who may hold objections of their own but for various reasons do not act on them or even articulate them. It can also help to trouble assumptions such as the 'digital divide' being exclusively a problem of access, rather than non-use being an outcome of other historical, political, and social factors (Wyatt, 2003).

Facebook abstainers as media refusers

Media refusal is a term I use to describe the practice in which people consciously choose *not* to engage with some media technology or platform. Elsewhere in the literature on technology adoption, people who enact such a practice are known as 'resisters' or 'rejectors' (Wyatt et al., 2002). I use the term 'refusal' in order to invoke connotations of cultural revolt: like the rebels of the 1960s counterculture who attempted to escape the exploitative cycle of production and consumption by dropping out of consumer culture in what Marcuse (2002) called the 'Great Refusal', some Facebook abstainers wish to register dissent against the company's specific policies or indeed against corporate media as a whole. As I define it, resistance to Facebook arises out of neither ignorance of the platform nor indifference to it. Rather, many non-users are consciously critical of the platform and the power it seems to hold over their lives. The critique may be personal – use of Facebook doesn't fit within their media needs and preferences – and it may be political – they find use of Facebook to be ideologically objectionable (for various reasons). As with any instance of media resistance, a combination of factors – some platform-specific and some more abstract – motivate the decision by some potential users to abstain.

I argue that the practice of Facebook rejection works as a proxy through which broader critiques are concentrated and meaningfully performed, much as, for instance, the rejection of television has functioned as a symbol of resistance to commercialism, passivity, and moral corruption (Krcmar, 2009; Mittell, 2000; Seiter, 1999). While it would be a small minority of Facebook refusers who would explicitly frame their resistance as wholly political, the Facebook refusal trend is a timely case for thinking about the political meanings of media non-consumption. Even if people do not always articulate a

political intent behind their non-use practices, I argue that we might read conscious rejection as an expression of dissatisfaction that may expose the ideological discord simmering beneath the surface of mainstream consumer culture, as well as the (limited) terrain upon which people feel empowered to enact their dissent. By examining media non-consumption, we can learn about media consumer culture itself: the subject positions it offers us, the social relations it engenders among us, and our potential avenues for critique and resistance.

In 2011, search engine Google reported that Facebook had earned the distinction of being the most visited site on the web.[5] As of this writing, the site has nearly 900 million members worldwide (Sengupta, 2012). Facebook's networked structure means that both its social and financial value is bound up in the number of people it can claim as members. Its business model is premised upon ubiquity to the point of naturalization – it seeks to become thoroughly integrated into the fabric of everyday life for as many people as possible, to the extent that they cannot imagine life without it and thus do not think to question its presence in their lives. Yet by attempting to interpellate everyone as a Facebook user, Facebook and the discourses around it create a new subject position: that of the Facebook refuser. Indeed, recent popular discourse has seen a proliferation of terms used to refer to individuals who abstain from using Facebook, such as 'holdouts', 'quitters', 'resisters', 'rebels', 'defectors', 'downsizers', and 'refuseniks', to name just a few.

Many of these refusers engage in what I call 'conspicuous non-consumption'. While Veblen's (1994) 'leisure class' subjects put their wealth on display through the luxurious commodities and activities they are able to enjoy (what Veblen terms conspicuous *consumption*), refusers make their refuser status visible through performances of non-consumption which are also on display. In a media-saturated consumer society, it is quite meaningful to be a person who says no to media consumption, thus it is significant when people publicize their abstention practices through website testimonials, social media updates, t-shirt slogans, and everyday spoken and written utterances about quitting or holding out from Facebook. The term 'Facebook suicide' has entered the teenage vernacular, and web services have cropped up which would delete one's Facebook presence after notifying one's contacts that a digital suicide ritual was about to occur (Karppi, 2011). A Twitter account called @NotOnFacebook rebroadcasts Twitter user messages ('tweets') in which users declare they have quit Facebook (Eler, 2012). Other users included the hashtag '#facebooksucks' in their tweets often enough that it became a 'trending topic' on Twitter in June of 2011 (Armstrong, 2011). There are also several personal blogs and websites devoted to the topic of quitting Facebook. These examples speak to abstainers' desire not only to abstain but also to make their abstinence a matter of the public record.

Some refusers believe that the performance of refusal itself implicitly communicates their objections. Many writers reveal that their rejection of Facebook is intended to set an example for others to follow and to persuade others to question their own participation on the site. One columnist describes her 'protest' of Facebook as 'proof that another way of life is possible' (Spenceley, 2012) invoking the language of prefigurative politics employed by other activist social movements engaged in refusal (Breines, 1982). People like this columnist see refusal as a rhetorical act that, at minimum, expresses dissatisfaction with Facebook's corporate practices, and more broadly, voices an overall ideology tinged with anti-capitalist sentiment. For example,

an interviewee named Luke, who identifies as an anarchist, described his political objections as being 'a layer' of his refusal of Facebook, if not his primary reason for staying off the site. Regardless of whether boycott campaigns like Quit Facebook Day are successful in changing Facebook's policies, activists take satisfaction in the fact that the campaigns may get 'people talking about what's wrong with Facebook' (Hewitt, 2010).

As a media platform, Facebook may be the epitomic site for the creation and discipline of the neoliberal consumer-producer-citizen: through participation in Facebook's network, individuals are addressed as consumers of commodities; enlisted as panoptic surveillers of their friends, family, and even distant acquaintances; and incited to generate the very content – in the form of status updates, photo galleries, personal messages, and so on – that makes Facebook a site worth visiting. It collapses the stages of capitalist subjectivity and participation – in the Marcusian model of capitalist incorporation, people go to work and generate surplus value for corporate employers, then they spend their earned wages on commodities which consumer culture has encouraged them to desire, thus reinforcing the need to go to work again the next day (Marcuse, 1972). With Facebook, every step of the process is contained within the media user experience itself. The media consumer is simultaneously a producer, and thus by resisting the subject position of consumer, one resists the role of exploited laborer as well.

At the same time as participation in Facebook is a distinctively neoliberal phenomenon, the conscientious and ostentatious inhabiting of the position of 'non-consumer' is also characteristic of neoliberal times. The use of personal lifestyle choices as a means of resistance is a thinkable practice because of an ideological context that encourages self-reflexivity and personal responsibilization for social and political change (Giddens, 1991; Littler, 2009). That Spenceley's editorial modified the global justice movement slogan 'another world is possible' to the more lifestyle-centric 'another way of life is possible' is perhaps indicative of the decidedly neoliberal character of the political activism embodied by individual media refusal: the 'world' need not change – only the user's way of life must.[6] It is important too that lifestyle choices about media non-consumption are remediated by users in other media platforms – abstainers' public stories of Facebook rejection largely circulate in commercial print, web, and social media sites. This remediation inevitably shapes the discourse of rejection in particular ways. A far-reaching critique of neoliberal disciplinary power is less likely to gain traction – or even be available as a framework for understanding one's own discomfort with a platform like Facebook – than, say, a personalized frustration with a site's interface or privacy policy. This can be seen in the many journalistic accounts of the Quit Facebook Day campaign, which nearly universally emphasized the individual privacy concerns of Facebook users, rather than the broader critique of corporate media advanced by the campaign's initiators.

Communicating distinction through conspicuous non-consumption

> I don't have a Facebook is the new 'I don't even own a TV'.
> (Twitter update from actor Rainn Wilson, 17 June 2011)

Refusal is a 'positional good', in the sense that refusal sets refusers apart from others and perhaps even wins them distinction in our media-saturated society, given the difficulty and scarcity of non-consumption (Holt, 1998). Whether refusers are conscious of it or not, performances of resistance send a message to one's peers about the kind of person one is. That refusers *are* sometimes conscious of this message is clear from the availability of t-shirts – available for purchase through the @NotOnFacebook Twitter account – that proclaim for the wearer, 'I'm not on Facebook'. In so far as one's attitude toward Facebook is implicit in one's public decision to reject it, this attitude speaks to the character of the rejecter him or herself. Thus the practice of refusal works to position the refuser socially, amidst social discourses about what it means to refuse.

As with other media technologies that have reached wide penetration (e.g., the television, the mobile phone, the Windows operating system), the rejection of Facebook gains especial symbolic meaning once it becomes abnormal to be a non-user; it is only in comparison with the normalcy of use that non-use has social and political significance. Manjoo, likening Facebook refusal to other forms of technology refusal, explains that once the cell phone became prevalent,

> it became an affectation not to carry a mobile phone; they'd grown so deeply entwined with modern life that the only reason to be without one was to make a statement by abstaining. Facebook is now at that same point – whether or not you intend it, you're saying something by staying away. (Manjoo, 2009)

Indeed, for many, the compulsory nature of having to interact with Facebook is precisely what they are reacting against.

Hoopes (2011) observes:

> deleting Facebook presents a host of issues relating to your perception in a Facebook oriented society. Your motivations are scrutinized, especially in regards to your own notions of what the move really means and what you hope to convey about yourself. You can become a pariah, an outcast, perpetually on the outside.

The perception that refusers are 'different' from the mainstream holds varying valences depending on which discourses of difference it is framed in – many non-users and commentators on refusal described the *stigma* of difference from the mainstream, while others viewed their difference (and even the stigma of difference itself) as a point of *solidarity* with other refusers. Several non-users described themselves as contrarians or as stubborn when it came to media adoption, or perhaps more relevantly, said that others perceived them as such. Both users and non-users use words like 'strange', 'weird', 'crazy', 'frustrating', and 'anti-social' to describe people who choose not to be on Facebook. Others describe 'constant' pressure to join or even complaints, anger, and ostracism from friends and family. Many Facebook refusers actually revel in their difference from the mainstream, seeing it as a mark of distinction, superior taste, and identification with an elite social stratum. This is consistent with Krcmar's finding that families who chose not to consume television 'shared a belief that they were iconoclasts, and for the most part, they relished that role' (Krcmar, 2009: 216). As her research

with nonviewers showed, 'By sharing that resistance with their nonviewing friends, or with a spouse, their difference not only set them apart from others, but united them with each other' (Krcmar, 2009: 191).

Bruce admitted that he had engaged in bonding with other men who took a 'macho' pride in not 'needing' Facebook. Bruce described how the husbands of his female cousins would converse at family get-togethers about not 'playing around with that shit' even though their wives did. After he publicly quit Facebook, Bruce admitted,

> If I'm being completely completely honest with you, there was a small part of me that was like, 'oh now I get to pretend that I don't do that shit', you know like… so yeah I guess I felt a little bit of bonding.

This story from Bruce illustrates the claims to superiority which may be implicit in performances of refusal. In this instance, Bruce felt that masculine norms of rugged independence and seriousness – in contrast to the implicit femininity of playfulness and dependence – were bound up in the men's vocal disidentification with social networking activities.

The very idea of 'mainstream popular culture' has historically been identified with denigrated social categories, including not just femininity but also the uneducated and the working classes (Newman and Levine, 2012; Seiter, 1999). These biases are evident in discussions of Facebook's 'mainstream' character as well. In these cases, solidarity among non-users seems to shade into what interviewee Stan called 'a community sense of elitism' in which refusal is a source of cultural capital and distinction from the undesirable masses. The language of 'cool' is used to highlight generational consumption trends in which youth are identified as the trendsetters as in a *Washington Post* article, whose subtitle reads: 'Now that everybody and his mother is on Facebook, is it time to look for the next big thing in social networking?' (Hesse, 2009). The article goes on to observe, 'The fact that the fastest-growing Facebook demographic is users over 55 – that your latest friend request might be from your grandmother – doesn't help the coolness factor'. Now, these publications claim, the mark of cool taste is to refuse Facebook, as in headlines that declare 'All the Cool Kids are Quitting Facebook' (Estes, 2011) and observations that 'the latest trend among hipster techies [is] quitting Facebook' (Lyons, 2010).

Other terms loaded with class, race, and gender connotations are prevalent in discourses of differentiation between users and refusers. For example, Loomis (2009) describes her failure to stay off Facebook as akin to an 'overeater' sneaking 'a bag of midnight Lays [potato chips]'. Spenceley (2012) also uses a junk food analogy:

> When people ask why I'm not on Facebook, I tell them it is to friendship what fast food is to nutrition: a quick way to feel like we've gotten what we need. But when compared with what we really need, what we get is insubstantial.

Facebook is also metaphorized as 'noise', 'chatter', and 'static'. A university psychologist equates social sites like Facebook with 'reality-TV and soap operas' (quoted in Casinader, 2010). One interviewee implicitly related his not using Facebook to his not being 'a reality TV person'. Another interviewee likened his rejection of Facebook to his

not having a cable TV subscription, explaining that both forms of rejection were typical of his, 'not necessarily, um, needing to be part of the cultural mainstream'. Importantly, he stipulated that he saw not having cable TV and not having Facebook as both 'just fit[ing] into your lifestyle versus a conscious decision, [it's] not like, "oh the mainstream is doing it, I'm not going to do it"', which is precisely how Bourdieu's (1984) theory of habitus explains the reproduction of social stratification through taste distinctions which feel natural rather than overly self-conscious.

Many refusers position themselves as being above the 'time-wasting', 'artificiality', and 'narcissism' that they see as characterizing Facebook use. Again, the parallel to other discourses of media rejection is clear – mediums such as the telephone and the television have been accused of similar deficiencies, often with gendered and other connotations inflected by structural social hierarchies. The discourse of authenticity is invoked to distinguish 'real life', which is worthwhile, from media consumption, which is not. Many comments combine time-wasting and authenticity statements, as in one web commenter's statement, 'I have more of an actual social life than people on Facebook. I go out on a Friday night and meet people face to face. I'm not sitting at home chatting with facebook "friends"' (Rowan, 2010), and another's remark, 'I'm too busy living LIFE than to spend it facebooking' (Kaplan, 2012). These other, more 'real' experiences, when enumerated by refusers, can be read as taste statements aimed at performing and achieving social distinction. Manjoo (2009) compares Facebook holdouts to the fictional subject of a satirical *Onion* article, the headline of which reads, 'Area Man Constantly Mentioning He Doesn't Own a Television', and goes on to quote the man as saying, 'I'm not an elitist. It's just that I'd much rather sculpt or write in my journal or read Proust than sit there passively staring at some phosphorescent screen'. While this reads as a hyperbolic and humorous portrait, many Facebook refusers say similar things, seemingly sincerely.

For example, alternatives to Facebook are consistently described as 'better things to do' with one's time (Boesveld, 2010). Reading books is a frequently mentioned activity. Other media consumption tastes are also positioned as superior to social networking, as when commenters on Kaplan (2012) assert their desires to spend more time watching movies and writing letters, in addition to reading and attending museums. Markwell (2009) describes how she held out on joining Facebook for years, saying, 'I preferred to catch up and/or unwind over a glass of Montepulciano and a DVD'. The website for a service called 'Web 2.0 Suicide Machine' suggests that after committing Facebook suicide, users should 'Try calling some friends, take a walk in a park, or buy a bottle of wine and start enjoying your real life again'. Cohen (2011), a self-described 'Facebook virgin', argues that, 'for those who value authentic intimacy – even with a side order of gossip – I dare say that a trip to the local farmers market can be a more effective tool'.

Productivity is another common theme, with many refusers implying that being productive and getting work or chores done are morally preferable to social networking. One writer observes that people seem 'self-satisfied' when they talk about what they are filling their lives with after quitting (Jutras, 2010), a perception supported by a letter to the editor of the New York Times which claimed, 'Six months ago, I quit Facebook. Today, I am more educated and enlightened by visiting just about any other site on the Web' (Carey, 2012). Even other social media platforms are deemed superior to Facebook.

Indeed, several of the individuals I interviewed said they were regular users of Twitter or some other platform even while they abstained from using Facebook. While it's hard to say to what extent these preferences are based in actual differences among the techno-logical affordances and content offered by each site, the distinctions made among seem-ingly similar sites might be seen to support the idea that the cultural framing of a particular media consumption habit matters as much as the characteristics of the media platform itself.

Interpreting performances of refusal

> The holdouts are everywhere – and many are not the technophobes you might think. […] Many are making a social statement by not joining. (Christine Romans, *CNN.com*, 1 July 2009)

So, given that it seems people are communicating something about themselves through their refusal – whether it be their moral values and political objections, or their elite tastes and difference from the mainstream – an important question is: how are practices of refusal perceived? What is it refusers truly achieve through the conspicuous display of their non-consumption? Might their messages of ethical and political resistance be overshadowed by their implicit identity performances? Hoopes (2011) argues that 'to imagine any conferred status as a result of your holier-than-thou internet asceticism is presumptuous'. He goes on to urge readers, 'Leave Facebook for a variety of reasons but avoid making "to be a giant douchebag" one of them'. So, the question is, can refusal make a persuasive point about one's values where media consumption is concerned, or does it just end up making one look like 'a giant douchebag'?

Indeed, many interviewees described a perception among their friends that they were 'being obstinate just for the sake of it', as one person put it. Another interviewee said that her friends roll their eyes when the topic of her not being on Facebook comes up because they think that she's, 'doing it on purpose to get a reaction'. Another, when asked how others have responded to her not being on Facebook, said, 'my friends make fun of me for thinking I'm so cool'. Editorials and online comments bear out this perception of Facebook abstainers. O'Grady (2010) describes the concerns of Quit Facebook Day participants as 'a cacophony of self-righteous bleating', and Hoopes (2011) argues that the typical Facebook quitter will 'end up acting either the smug contrarian or the proselytizing elitist, babbling on about the virtues of the non-Facebook life'. A commenter on Hoopes's piece echoes this opinion, saying, 'I think anyone that does give up fb does inevitably turn into a bit of a self-righteous tool… in that vaguely hipster "unknown band kinda way"'.

Furthermore, as a result of Facebook's current dominance of the social media field, not being in touch with a particular friend via Facebook may mean not being in touch with that friend at all. Thus the personal or political decision not to participate in Facebook may be interpreted by one's peers as a social decision not to interact with them. We saw this in Bruce's experience (described above): his friend and even his aunt took his rejection of Facebook quite personally, even though Bruce claimed not to intend it that way. Bruce's experience also speaks to the fact that, even if observers are able to interpret an ethical or political motivation in someone's act of refusal, they may still not see this as a legitimate reason to refuse. Other interviewees noted that their friends

would not be supportive if they thought they were only abstaining for political reasons, versus more sympathetic personal reasons, like wanting to avoid an ex after a breakup. One commenter on White's *Adbusters* editorial (2008) accused the author of 'wanting to show up their moral superiority', and of coming up with a justification after the fact of his abstention to suit his 'imagined principles'.

Any practice of cultural resistance has to work against the hegemony of the status quo, which by nature works to delegitimate ideological critique and quash burgeoning counter-hegemonic movements (Hall, 1977). Thus polemical stances against Facebook are easily dismissed by audiences as superficial, self-righteous, and misguided. Refusal may also be written off by positioning it within the discourse of 'technophobia' or 'Luddism' (see Selwyn, 2003). Both my interviewees and the writers I read were quick to position themselves with respect to the discourse of technophobia, either admitting or denying that they were averse to new technology in general. An interviewee named Billy said that his not having a Facebook profile 'kind of falls in line with the broader context of I think how I try to live… like, I listen to vinyl records, I've become an old man in that I read a newspaper.' Billy went on to reflect, 'I think a lot of it has to do with my caveman-esque quality and my allergy to being on a computer and technology as well'. Other non-users felt the need to stipulate the opposite identity, such as when Luke assured me that he is 'not a Luddite in any sense' and that he generally 'embraces technology'.

The very fact that Luddism and technophobia are often conflated with each other speaks to the asymmetry between the discursive frameworks held by refusers and their observers. The original Luddites were in fact a very politically informed movement against what they saw as the exploitative labor relations brought about by industrialization and capitalism in the 19th century (Bailey, quoted in Mullaney, 2006: 46). Their political message has been since distorted, so that the word 'Luddite' has come to refer to anyone who is opposed to technology for any reason, a primary one being fear. The assumption that objections to technology can be traced to some sort of 'phobia' implicitly pathologizes dissent and covers over the political and ideological dimensions of resistance. While the original message of the Luddites might actually be an appropriate analog for the political dimensions of contemporary media refusal, the dominant reading of the Luddite discourse – which, to the Luddites themselves, would be a *misreading* – reflects the difficulties that political protesters acting on the terrain of everyday culture may have in making their refusal read to others *as* political.

I have argued here that media refusal is a way of making one's everyday lifestyle into a site of resistance against the powerful, normative force of media consumer culture. For some, it's a very personal act of resistance without any consciously political motivation; for others it's an activist expression of dissent. In any case, we can understand the practice of media refusal as related to the broader neoliberal trend of lifestyle politics, in which individuals want to intervene in what they identify as large problems, but feel best equipped to make their intervention at a personal level, at the site of their own individual behavior. Critics of neoliberalism argue that such interventions are part and parcel of a regressive ideological structure which in fact works against grassroots-initiated institutional change (Brown, 2005; Littler, 2009; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012). In this view, the idea that 'one person can make a difference' is actually a kind of false consciousness that keeps citizens docile and ineffective in their resistance efforts. This paper

is not meant as a thoroughgoing critique of lifestyle politics or neoliberal subjectivity; it is, however, meant to shed light on some of the limitations of performative tactics of resistance. One of these limitations is that the expression of consumption differences – even differences that may be motivated by consciously ethical objections to mainstream culture – may read as elitism. This reading may be exacerbated by the language refusers use to describe and justify their abstention. Whatever language refusers use, they are still working against a dominant discourse that tends to pathologize technology non-adoption and obscure the political dimensions of refusal practices.

There is a question too of whom the tactic of refusal is most available to, and how this might reinforce the common understanding that refusal is an expression of elitism. It may be that refusal is only available as a tactic to people who already possess a great deal of social capital, people whose social standing will endure without Facebook and people whose livelihoods don't require them to be constantly plugged in and reachable. Some of my interviewees fit this description, like a web developer who said he has the technical skill to locate internet communities who share his interests without relying on a social network site, or Billy, a musician whose fairly successful band gives him 'a voice' to express himself publicly, a luxury that he acknowledges many youth don't have. These are people who have what Noonan (2011) calls 'the power to switch off'; their power means they can afford what Marwick (2011) calls the 'cost of opting out'. Having the option to unplug is a privilege in itself, and it may be a privilege that accrues disproportionately to those who already enjoy economic, political, and other forms of privilege. To appropriate the words of Marcuse, many less privileged Facebook users "have more to lose than their chains" (1972: 6), and thus may not be prepared to remove themselves from the system.

For these reasons, quitting is a limited tactic for those who would strategize against Facebook and other hegemons of media culture. While there may be many 'good' reasons to resist Facebook and other media technologies, it's no surprise that many will see such resistance as nothing more than an 'attitude problem' on the part of people who need to 'get over themselves' (Biddle, 2011; Manjoo, 2009). This is not to say that quitting Facebook and other forms of media refusal are illegitimate choices, only that they ought to be carefully assessed for the discursive work that they do. Refusal may certainly be appropriate in some circumstances, for some people, but only careful analysis will show this. If the ideological critiques of media culture are to gain traction, media refusers may want to integrate the tactic of individual refusal into a larger strategy that aims to reframe the discourses through which people interpret media consumption and non-consumption practices.

This study also offers a more general caveat about the tactic of individual refusal as a mode of political engagement. While other more traditional styles of political intervention – such as campaigns for media policy regulation – clearly call upon activists to do the discursive work of making their cause understandable to a variety of actors, the need for such framing may seem less necessary for individuals who seek only to make change through their personal practices. However, as this study demonstrates, the discursive context within which personal refusal is situated matters greatly for how the practice of refusal is interpreted, whether it is awarded legitimacy, and whether it will win the support of observers. The discursive context will necessarily be constrained by the ideological forces that shape mainstream conversations about consumption. These points

merit consideration by actors across the spectrum of consumer activism, whether they are seeking minor reforms to specific media platforms, attempting to level a critique of the political economy of social media, or aiming to subvert capitalist consumer culture as a whole.

Notes

1. Bruce is a pseudonym, as are all other interviewee names mentioned in this paper.
2. The websites and other texts were accessed in February and March 2012. The dates of publication range from 26 September, 2006 to 7 March, 2012. I conducted LexisNexis, Google News, and ProQuest searches for English-language publications containing phrases like 'quitting Facebook', 'Facebook holdout', and any others that I thought might lead to relevant texts. The publications came from geographic locations across North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Oceania. I excluded articles about people who abstained from Facebook for exceptional reasons, such as celebrities who found themselves with too many messages and friend requests. Furthermore, the issue of differential access or 'the digital divide' was outside the scope of this study.
3. In my observation, there was no significant difference in the discourse of refusal as invoked by 'quitters' versus 'holdouts', though differences within the category of 'non-user' are worth exploring in future research, as Hargittai (2004) has noted.
4. Aside from the standard limitations of interview research – particularly when issues of taste and distinction are salient (see Seiter, 1990, 1999) – a central difficulty for any study of performance is that it is largely a subconscious process. My questions thus attempted to ascertain information about refusal performances obliquely, for instance by asking interviewees whether they 'ever try to downplay the fact that they aren't on Facebook' or whether they 'ever feel a bond with other Facebook abstainers'. Their responses would then give some indication as to the conspicuousness of their non-consumption practices.
5. See http://www.google.com/adplanner/static/top1000/.
6. The syntactic twist is particularly ironic given that the global justice movement explicitly positions itself against what it sees as the damaging effects of neoliberalism throughout the world. I thank Christina Dunbar-Hester for spurring me to think about the important syntactic difference between Spenceley's words and the global justice slogan.

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