

Author worries online communities are hurting real ones

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PORTLAND, Ore. (RNS)—When it comes to Facebook, Jesse Rice sees an immensely popular social networking site that’s great for sharing photos and keeping in touch with friends.

He also sees something that encourages attitudes and behaviors that don’t work as well in real life.

Jesse Rice, author of *The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community*, warns that the new social media can encourage attitudes and behaviors that don’t work as well in real life.

Rice, 37, is the author of [*The Church of Facebook: How the Hyperconnected Are Redefining Community*](#). A former worship leader at an evangelical megachurch in California, he has degrees in organizational communication and counseling/psychology and—just as important to his readers—a sense of humor.

On a video he uploaded to YouTube, he explains his credentials for writing the book. “I can look at various parts of an organization, at the flow of communication back and forth within the independent structure, and I can identify all the ways that it’s your parents’ fault,” he quips.

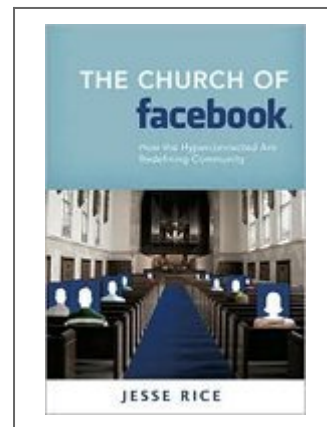
And “I have an actual Facebook account with well over 100 friends.”

Yes, he acknowledges some people have 6 million fans on a Facebook fan page.

“But, back off, Vin Diesel,” he snarls. “It is possible to be too fast and too furious.”

Actually, being too fast to judge others and too furious to write a well-considered post are two ways Facebook thwarts meaningful community, according to Rice, who argues that online social media redefines the term altogether.

“Our definition of community has shifted,” he said. “Now it’s a continuum, with 10 being your best friend and 1 being people you just sort of bump into online. But it’s all community.”



Facebook has its bashers, especially in Christian circles. While some believers say they find genuine community online, others insist face-to-face interaction is essential to a life of faith. Some users find satisfaction in building and sharing their profiles, but others worry that Facebook breeds an all-about-me attitude and is eroding the capacity to listen and empathize.

Don Pape of David C. Cook, a Colorado publisher of Christian books, was looking to help curious pastors and parents who aren't on Facebook learn more about it. Another writer suggested Pape take a look at Rice's

manuscript. “I was hooked from the beginning,” the publisher said.

In broad strokes and funny asides, Rice creates a context for Facebook and connects it to Christian experience. It’s too early to tell how the book will do, Pape says, but sales have surpassed 5,000 copies, and the publisher’s preparing a second printing.

Rice, who admits he had an early crush on Facebook, said he and the social networking site are just living together now, although he expects the relationship to last. Launched in 2004, Facebook has more than 350 million users, and more are joining all the time.

“Facebook has become part of our lives,” he said. “And we’re just beginning to learn how to be human in it.

“Online, we have power over how we express ourselves. You can take the time to choose your words carefully, edit your responses, PhotoShop a picture until you get it just right. Real conversations, real relationships don’t allow that. They include awkward silences.”

Rice has seen people give up on “embodied relationships” because they feel freer on Facebook.

“People do argue that there’s a richness to relationships online,” he says. But it could be that they don’t know what they’re missing. “We don’t feel that hunger anymore.”

Rice figures most of his readers—he also blogs at <http://churchoffacebook.com>—are pastors and parents wondering how Facebook fits into the lives of people they care about.

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In a little more than 200 pages, Rice recounts the brief history of Facebook and compares it to other technological achievements that have transformed

modern life. Air conditioning, for example, changed where and how Americans lived, ate, worked and spent their leisure time. Facebook shows signs of doing the same.

But Rice draws on his counseling experience to argue that prolonged hyperconnectivity shortens attention spans; that fear of missing out tethers people to technology and undermines their sense of control; that creating a Facebook profile turns some people into celebrities and their friends into an entourage or audience.

Rice is sparing in his Christian references, lest he alienate non-Christian readers. But he uses the New Testament story of Jesus asking a Samaritan woman at the well for a drink of water.

Jesus approaches the woman with “intentionality, humility and authenticity,” Rice said. Those qualities transform an ordinary encounter into a life-changing experience, he insists.

While he still has concerns, Rice said Facebook in many ways is just the latest version of an age-old concern.

“Whatever technology that’s in front of us always challenges us,” he said. “Our parents thought we listened to the radio too much.”