

Freemasonry and the Strange New World of Social Networking

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Attendees at the monthly ritual schools are generally the officers and leaders of Freemasonry in the district. As such, you are – and should be – role models and change agents. So this month, I thought I would expose you to a couple of concepts in advance of my preparing a slightly longer talk as a Lodge program.

The topic is the Internet and how it may impact on the Fraternity. The Internet is not only a research tool, but also a new way to communicate. But, I know that there are a number of the Brethren who view it with a degree of suspicion. In part, this may be the result of unfamiliarity with the new technology. In part, it may be the result of a broader uneasiness with the rate and pace of change – just as soon as some of us get used to e-mail, we now are asked to deal with a myriad of new social networking sites. It may also be the case that some see the value added of Freemasonry in its face-to-face contact and human interaction, and believe that the impersonal nature of the Internet is a disadvantage rather than a benefit to the Fraternity.

All of these concerns should be taken seriously, but I want to urge you to look at the Internet and social networking from a different

perspective and consider this new technology as just a modern variant of what Masons have always done- and that is “to travel in foreign countries.”

When we look to our early history, we note that at a time when most people stayed all their lives in the same village or town where they were born, and few ever traveled more than a dozen miles from home, Masons were free to travel from place to place, town to town and country to country plying their trade. They had this freedom because of their skills – they were at the cutting edge of the science and technology of their time.

As operative Masonry slowly made way for speculative Masonry, Masons were still at the cutting edge – at the cutting edge of new ideas – democracy, individual rights, free speech, and religious toleration. They discussed and promoted these new ideas at a time when they were not widely accepted.

Both our operative and speculative predecessors were ahead of their time, and as heirs of such technically and intellectually gifted Masons, we also should help our Fraternity maintain its place in the forefront of new technology.

In colonial times, it took months for letters to cross the ocean, but underwater cable, telephone, and telegraph shortened the time considerably. High speed cable and satellites have continued that

process, until today, we can reach out, almost instantaneously, to our Brethren “wheresoever dispersed.”

Here are a few statistics to show you how much has changed and how quickly. It took 38 years to reach 50 million users of radio, 13 years to reach 50 million users of TV, 4 years to reach 50 million users of the internet, 3 years to reach 50 million users of the iPod. Facebook added 100 million users in less than 9 months, and iPod application downloads hit 1 billion in 9 months.

Here are a few more statistics. If Facebook were a country, it would be the 4th largest in the world. And today, 80% of companies are using LinkedIn as primary tool to find employees, 80% of Twitter usage is on mobile devices, and YouTube is the second largest search engine in the world. (Qualman, 2009). Spending on advertisements on social networking sites exceeded 1.6 billion in 2008. Wikipedia.com has 10 standard languages and has over 14 million articles. (Wikipedia, 2009).

E-mail is now passé to Generation X and Gen Y already outnumber Baby Boomers, and 96% of them are connected to one or more social networks. Indeed, social media has overtaken pornography as the leading #1 activity on the web. In 2009, three of the top five most visited sites on the internet were social media sites. (Qualman, YouTube, 2009)

The larger point is that this new way of communicating is not a flash in the pan, but the way of the future. It is not just the young people who live in this new electronic environment. Today grandparents are using the Internet, Skype, e-mail, and social networking tools to keep in touch with their grandchildren, who may live hundreds of miles away. Indeed, by using electronic tools, they are able to build close relationships and share the lives of their grandkids in a way that would have been impossible only a few years ago.

So what does this have to do with Freemasonry? Well, Freemasonry focuses on building social relations among the Brethren. This can be done in the Lodge with a few of our fellow Masons and in the district with a few more. But when we use a social network, which focuses on building social relations among people who share common interests or activities, we can reach so many more of our Brethren. Through Facebook, and Twitter, we can have conversations with Brother Masons we might otherwise never meet. We can share ideas, become more knowledgeable about Freemasonry, and improve ourselves and our Lodges.

The bottom line is that we should not fear, but rather embrace the new technology, and benefit from the communication advantages that it offers. Just as in the past, Masons were wont to travel in foreign countries to meet their Brethren, so today Masons can do likewise. But instead of a long and arduous journey by horse or ship,

we can “travel in foreign countries” through the electronic marvel of social networks.

I hope you will think about the inherent possibilities for the growth of Freemasonry and for the intellectual growth of Master Masons using these new tools. I look forward to sharing with you more of my thinking in this regard, in a future Lodge program.