

From the Kitchen

16 April 2016



Take off that mask. Go on. You can't, can you?

Over eighty million people who are registered on Facebook are not who they say they are¹. I'm not surprised. Actually, I'm surprised the number is so low. Are you who you say you are? On Facebook? What about in 'real' life?

We each of us express only an aspect of ourselves at any moment, in any situation, at any place. We hide most of who we are most of the time. We wear masks, chosen for what we want to express at the time. We are chameleons.

Social media is ideally designed to allow an individual to show as much or as little of themselves as desired. In the outside, non-virtual, arena this can be difficult. But most of us manage it. We express a persona – from the Latin 'to sound through', as express through a mask in theatre.

We express that small part of our total being, depending on the situation we are in at that moment. The 'mask' involves the face, the voice and all the non-verbal communications channels. We may be imperious to a waiter and a sycophant to our boss at work. We may be distant with work colleagues at work and raucously funny with them at the pub after work.

We may use a 'mask' to hide what is really going on in our lives. There are preachers (in all religions) who admonish their followers to be morally correct, while carrying on extramarital affairs themselves or indulging in other inappropriate sexual adventures; politicians who exhort us to 'pull in our belts' and live within our means, while they themselves accept bribes and set up schemes to avoid paying taxes.

People do not need to set up false identities on Facebook to hide who they are and what they are up to. Corporations offer much the same, with shareholders and directors hiding behind the 'corporate veil'. That veil is often spread thinly around the world, so that it is difficult for outsiders to see what a corporation and its owners are really up to.

When the majority of humanity lived in villages, it was near impossible for people to hide behind masks – their daily lives, their relationships, their likes and dislikes, their generosity or lack of it were all known by all other villagers. Possibly the only way to hide was to wear the mask of madness or eccentricity, to be the village idiot.

There were drawbacks and benefits of living within a place where it was impossible to be anonymous – everybody knew your business, but you were looked after when necessary, because they community knew that you needed help. In today's cities and towns, your neighbour may have died in his home a month ago and the first you know of it is the presence of police and ambulance to deal with the decomposing body. At least you can be relieved that the smell that has been around for weeks is *not* a dead possum in your wall.

With the flashing blue and red lights out there, you don't want to seem too interested, so you watch from behind the safety of your net curtains.

To try and redress this sad state of dyscommunity, there are programs which encourage people to check on any elderly neighbours on a monthly basis. What has happened that we need programs to encourage us to do this? Another ‘solution’ to the dyscommunity is the development of personal assistance robots that help older people who live alone to take their medicines as needed, and the robot can alert family if their human becomes unresponsive.

There are interesting exceptions to the ease of maintaining privacy and anonymity. Around 1973 I was travelling in Tasmania. I had camped at the Nut, in the far north-west. In the early morning I thumbed a lift and was driven to Burnie, on the north coast. The young driver, in his worn-out truck, told me all about his broken relationship and that he was on the way to Launceston to try and mend things. He said, “I feel safe telling you all this, because you’re from Melbourne and around here no-one else knows about my troubles.”

An hour after being dropped off, I was picked up by an older, retired couple from Hobart (the Tasmanian capital in the south-east) who were returning home after driving around the island. I told them I’d had a lift from the Nut with a young man in a beaten-up truck. The woman said, “Oh, that would be young Charlie, on his way to sort things out with his girlfriend, again.”

People say that Tasmania is different from anywhere else.

Many people do worry about their privacy being taken away by all the surveillance we have today – cameras everywhere, CCTV, retention of mobile phone and internet metadata. But, with so much data being collected and stored, are those who would use all this information able to find the needles in the mountains of hay?

I am sure that, if I wanted to, I could disappear without a trace, provided I didn’t use my phone or any of my plastic cards and went to live somewhere different. There are days when I feel like doing just that, but most of the time I want to know that there are people around me who know me, even care about me.

1. [CNN report](#)