FetLife Considered Harmful

The Risks of Sex Ghettoization

by “mayMay” (maybemaimed.com)
August, 1966
"cross-dressing"
is
illegal
in San Francisco. In the sixties,
Gene Compton's Cafeteria in the Tenderloin neighborhood was one of the few places in San Francisco where trans people could gather safely. They were unwelcome almost everywhere else they went. They were even often kicked out of gay bars.
Stonewall
won’t happen
for another
3 years.
the “LGBT” community
is currently known as
the "homophile" community.
America
is experiencing a wave of
student

student and youth
protests
against the war in Vietnam.
Three years before the Stonewall riots on Christopher Street in New York City,
police entered Compton's Cafeteria on Turk and Taylor Street in San Francisco.
Fed up with the constant persecution, the transgender woman the officers were harassing threw her coffee cup in their faces, instigating a
riot that marked "the first known instance of collective, militant, queer resistance to police harassment in United States history". Many of the rioters were trans and homosexual members of
"Vanguard, Incorporated," an LGBT youth organization sponsored and funded by the Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco. Vanguard's goal was to bring together factions of the San Francisco Tenderloin neighborhood—gay, trans, straight, police, businesspeople, and any other neighbors—to air differences peacefully and end discrimination. Later that year,
the Vangaurd youth group changed its name to The Gay and Lesbian Center, becoming the first gay community center in the nation.
In 2002,
I joined public sexuality communities; I began talking to people about their stories and started learning about the history of marginalized sexuality cultures.
In 2009,
the Internet turned me into a sexual freedom activist; I co-founded
KinkForAll and I began traveling across America spreading the idea from city to city, coast to coast. But despite talking to thousands
upon thousands of people, despite reading hundreds upon hundreds of news reports and blog posts and so on, it was not until 9 years later (2011)—this year—that I learned about
Compton's Cafeteria, or the central role
trans people and young people played in fighting for sexual freedom from even before the start of the gay liberation movement in this country. When people think of San Francisco they often think of
Harvey Milk, or the Castro Theatre. "San Francisco," they say, "sanctuary for the sexually open.

"If a bullet should enter my brain, let that bullet destroy every closet door."

-Harvey Milk
San Francisco," they say, "home for wayward queers. San Francisco," they say, "epicenter of the
sexual revolution." I'm no longer so sure. Walk the streets of my (new) hometown of San Francisco in 2011 and, if you take the time to look around carefully, you may notice a peculiar thing. Go to the Castro and, yes, you'll find it teeming with hyper-masculinized musclemen, visit the Haight and you'll run into YUPpies and hipsters with their designer boutiques as plentiful as Starbuck's are in New York. But go to the Tenderloin and you'll find every disadvantaged group you can imagine: immigrants (especially from Vietnam), Blacks, and—of course—trans youth.
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After the Compton's Cafeteria riots, police essentially cordoned off the Tenderloin as an area where trans people, most of whom were sex workers, could go without getting bullied. The Vanguard youth had won territory—they were granted a ghetto—where they have largely stayed, largely invisible to the up-and-coming GLB("T") mainstream, to this very day.
Not two blocks from where I live, on the corner of Sutter and Larkin Street, is where many of the city's trans street walkers call their office. In contrast to the Tenderloin's intersectionally underprivileged populace, the monoculture of other neighborhoods is stunning—the ghetto of San Francisco's Tenderloin is and has long been
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Like all other institutions, monocultures are inherently exclusionary. And as our generation’s organizing is moving away from physical city streets and into what Steven Johnson calls the
cyber–cities that are websites on the Internet, I fear some of them, and one website in particular, is unwisely recreating sexuality monoculture online. We live in an amazing moment in history. As I bet any sexually vocal person will tell you (if you don't already know),
the Internet has fundamentally transformed our ability to communicate with one another. For example, before the Internet, if you were a gay teenager in bum-fuck nowhere, you were
the only gay person in the world. Now, though, after the Internet, if you're a gay teenager in bum-fuck nowhere,
you're one of millions of gay teenagers communicating online.
this is
big. This is not merely the evolution of telecommunication technologies.
this is a
revolution. But for a while now, I've been growing increasingly concerned about the monopolizing—and whitewashing—effects
FetLife is having over sexuality community discourse. Like a fetish all its own, sex community inhabitants are turning to FetLife instead of their own blogs or local mailing lists to write, debate, and promote their art and events.
FetLife is sucking us up like a big black hole, and we risk getting crushed by its gravitational force. On its homepage.
FetLife says it's "similar to Facebook and MySpace." On his Twitter profile, FetLife's creator, John Baku, describes himself as
"David" to other social networks' "Goliath". No matter how noble his goal, however, in an ironic twist of fate John may have inadvertently created the greatest threat to online sex community and cyber-sex culture that has ever existed. For those who don't know, FetLife.com purports to be a safe space made "by kinksters, for kinksters." Once inside,
you're ostensibly within the "community's" walls. Here, limited individual privacy controls means that almost anything you post to FetLife is potentially visible to any other FetLife user. At the same time, anything you post to FetLife is restrained within FetLife's walled garden;
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For an individual, FetLife's primary "privacy" offering is simply that nothing you post will be indexed by search engines like Google. Since there is no way to access FetLife from outside FetLife, it's like Vegas: what you say on FetLife stays on FetLife. The implicit claim, then, is that the entire container is safe. However,
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since all that is required to gain access to FetLife membership is a (free) email address, the claim is farcical on its face. Claiming FetLife is either private or safe for any given individual is like breaking open someone's back door and then selling them a stronger lock for their front door.
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For Devon, the nature of his career forces him to keep his scene self under wraps, and though he’s a CV regular, few people know his real name. He describes one particular night he was going out with a bunch of his job friends at T.G.I. Friday’s when a co-worker whispered “Devon” under her breath. “I have a secret—I know you’re on FetLife,” she said.

—Majoring in Kink
by Devin Briski, The Eye, February 24, 2011

Source: http://eye.columbiaspectator.com/article/2011/02/24/majoring-kink

(read slide, then…) Frankly, I'm shocked that some
malicious idiot with a blog hasn't logged onto FetLife and mined it for LULZ yet—but I assure you, it's only a matter of time. When that happens, it's not going to be FetLife's fault per sé, but it is their responsibility as a social networking company to portray both the technical and social aspects of their service in an accurate way.
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In this sense, Facebook is actually a far, far safer place for a savvy kinky individual than FetLife is right now. FetLife should either prioritize and implement granular privacy controls post-haste (instead of what they seem to be focusing on, which is creating a mobile version, chat rooms, and a spam filter) or change its public line to reflect that it has no meaningful ones. Since having a false sense of security is more dangerous than having an awareness of one's very real vulnerabilities, prioritizing anything other than privacy at this stage in the game is irresponsible.
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But FetLife is also hurting sexuality communities globally by encouraging people to join what amounts to a voluntary ghetto, and doing that is as stupid as it sounds.
they said it’s “safer” here

put your “fetish” shit on FetLife, freaks!

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the public Google group has no responses, while the FetLife group has quite a number. This is not merely personally annoying, it is problematic for the entire community in at least 2 ways. 1st, when someone in the FetLife thread offered valuable additional information about the article, that information was not visible to anyone outside of FetLife. (It was up to me to cross-post the followup.) 2nd, since the FetLife login screen effectively repels Google, everyone from archivists to casual observers are guaranteed not to stumble upon the additional information.
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our generation's Vanguard? Sexuality on the Internet is a terribly persecuted topic.
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Why are we, as a community, making it easier for our words—our voice—to be muffled? Don't get me wrong. Some private spaces are necessary and helpful. But when so much community evolution takes place within a single, closed environment, we are voluntarily ghettoizing our most important cultural valuables. Take, as an example,
Why are we, as a community, making it easier for our words—our voice—to be muffled? Don't get me wrong. Some private spaces are necessary and helpful. But when so much community evolution takes place within a single, closed environment, we are voluntarily ghettoizing our most important cultural valuables. Take, as an example,
Asher Bauer's excellent essay, Field Guide to Creepy Dom. At the top of his post, Asher says, "This is something I wrote about two years ago which has been reposted every which way all over the internet. I don’t even know where it is at this point, I just know that I still get repost requests for it all the time." I did some digging and found that it was originally posted (where else?)
inside FetLife. Again, 2 things are worthy of note about this: 1) Despite being "reposted every which way all over the Internet," Asher still received "repost requests for it all the time." What this seems to suggest is that people were HEARING ABOUT the article, but UNABLE TO FIND IT ON THEIR OWN. Hence, the repost requests. Indeed, (at the time of this writing) Google's cache only shows 6 hits on 3 different domains for a unique phrase within the essay. Of these, only one (1!) is a personal blog unaffiliated with one of John Baku's "Goliaths."
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2) Despite the obvious importance of this essay to the BDSM community, ONLY THE PEOPLE WHO HAD HEARD ABOUT IT ALREADY were able to extract value from it, because only they even knew to go looking for it. And despite getting posted to the Internet by others, it took nearly 2 years for the essay to even make it outside the FetLife wall and onto the public 'net in the first place.
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The Internet gave the sexual revolution—gave us—
warp speed. I fear the growing FetLife monoculture is pulling us back to impulse. In contrast to Asher's essay,
Patti's equally thoughtful essay, Safewords are Dangerous, was first published at Alt.com. For all the problems of Alt.com (and they, themselves, could fill a whole talk, much less a short KinkForAll one) Patti's essay was then,
and is now, public for any newbie who's googling for "safewords" to find. Even Patti, however, has now cross-posted the essay to her FetLife journal, perhaps a tribute to the all-mighty social network effect gods. This should not be surprising. FetLife has become a cultural institution, and it carries with it all the side effects of such an organization.
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FetLife is inherently exclusionary

As Clay Shirky says, "an institution is inherently exclusionary." The Internet has changed sexual culture. Is FetLife a peek into our future,
a generation that ignores history

or is it a reflection of our past? I fear it is the worst of both. Using FetLife,
we're unable to interact with the outside world while simultaneously being unable to interact to our full potential within its walls;
and

promoting a "101" class or doing outreach using FetLife
no future

is a waste of energy because those things should be geared for people who probably don't spend time there. In the words of Dar Williams:
“And what's the future, who will choose it?
Politics of love and music,
Underdogs who turn the tables,
Indie versus major labels.
There's so much to see through,
Like our parents do more drugs than we do.

[...] I am calling, can you hear this?
I was out here listening all the time....”

—Dar Williams
Are You Out There

Source: http://www.guntheranderson.com/v/data/areyouou.htm

(read slide, then...)
“And what's the future, who will choose it? Politics of love and music, Underdogs who turn the tables, Indie versus major labels. There's so much to see through, Like our parents do more drugs than we do.

[…]

I am calling, can you hear this? I was out here listening all the time….”

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Are You Out There

Source: http://www.guntheranderson.com/v/data/areyouou.htm

(read slide, then…) Do you hear them calling? The masses of people, young and old, who don’t yet know where to look?
I am calling, can you hear this?
I was out here listening all the time....

If you’re spending most of your time in FetLife’s walled garden, you’re not listening.
And what's the future, who will choose it?
Politics of love and music,
Underdogs who turn the tables,
Indie versus major labels.
There's so much to see through,
Like our parents do more drugs than we do.

I am calling, can you hear this?
I was out here listening all the time....

But it’s worse than that, because as far as they know, you don’t exist.
I am calling, can you hear this?
I was out here listening all the time....

But it’s worse than that, because as far as they know, you don’t exist.
“Are you out there, can you hear this? [...] the static walls surround me...

I am calling, can you hear this?
I was out here listening all the time....”

—Dar Williams
Are You Out There

And that means they think they’re the only gay teenager in the world.
The end.
The end.
Q&A?

status.maymay.net
twitter.com/maymaym

Any questions?
Nonviolence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time; the need for mankind to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence."

—Martin Luther King, Jr.