

# Facebook Friends as Mental Health Amateurs: A Case Study on the New Age Subculture

## Amigos de Facebook como potenciales terapeutas: Un Estudio de Caso sobre la Cultura de la Nueva Era

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### Abstract

In this paper, the researcher examined a case study from Facebook: a question posted publicly by a contemporary American writer and philosopher, whom we shall refer to with the pseudonym FR, and the comments he received on his question from his virtual friends and followers. The data was analyzed using grounded theory in three broad stages: open coding, higher order themes, and theoretical sensitivities. The nature of the question and the answers were psychological, so it was commonsensical to evaluate the advice that FR received and to try to identify FR's mental condition based on the available clues, that is, the phrasing of FR's question and the comments his question received on Facebook. Based upon the researcher's interpretation of the qualitative data the following theory was generated: Facebook friends can play the role of *mental health amateurs*; however, it is our responsibility to be discerning as receivers of such lay psychological advice. An argument is made for Facebook Therapy (FBT), but not as a substitute for traditional forms of therapy, rather as a starting point that may help us choose the right treatment path. FR was chosen for a number of reasons, but mainly because his network represented a sample of the New Age (NA) subculture, which is a part of the focus of this study. Theoretical literature is referenced towards the final stage of the research to help, at a meta-level, situate the Internet vis-à-vis the *noosphere*. In conclusion, the results of this study shed light on the potential of one's virtual community on social networks as a useful resource when it comes to lay psychological advice.

**Keywords:** facebook therapy, new age subculture, psychological advice, mental health

### Resumen

En este artículo, el investigador examinó un estudio de caso de Facebook : una pregunta publicada por un escritor y filósofo americano contemporáneo -a quien nos referiremos con el seudónimo FR- y las respuestas que recibió a su pregunta por parte de sus amigos virtuales y seguidores. Los datos fueron analizados usando la "grounded theory" en tres etapas: codificación abierta, elección y ordenación de los temas, y sensibilidades teóricas. La naturaleza de la pregunta y sus respuestas, fueron de tipo psicológico. Se evaluaron de forma racional los consejos que recibió FR y se intentó identificar la condición mental de FR basándose en los indicios disponibles, es decir, la redacción de la pregunta y los comentarios recibidos a su pregunta en Facebook. Basándose en la interpretación del investigador desprendida de los datos cualitativos, se postula la siguiente teoría: los amigos de facebook pueden jugar un papel como aficionados de la salud mental. Sin embargo, es nuestro papel como receptores, el discernir este tipo de consejos psicológicamente profanos. De este hecho se induce una razón para la Terapia Facebook (TFB), obviamente no como un sustituto a las tradicionales formas de terapia, sino más bien como un punto de partida que puede ayudarnos a elegir el camino para el tratamiento correcto. FR fue elegido por varias razones, pero principalmente debido a que su red de amigos y seguidores suponía una muestra representativa de la subcultura de la Nueva Era (NE), la cual es parte del foco de atención en este estudio. En la etapa final de esta investigación se ofrece una literatura teórica para entender Internet vis a vis, como una noosfera. Los resultados concluyen que existe un ingenioso potencial en la comunidad virtual en lo referente a redes sociales, que sirve como herramienta útil de asesoramiento psicológico, aunque de forma no profesional.

**Palabras clave:** terapia facebook, subcultura nueva era, asesoramiento psicológico, salud mental

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## Introduction

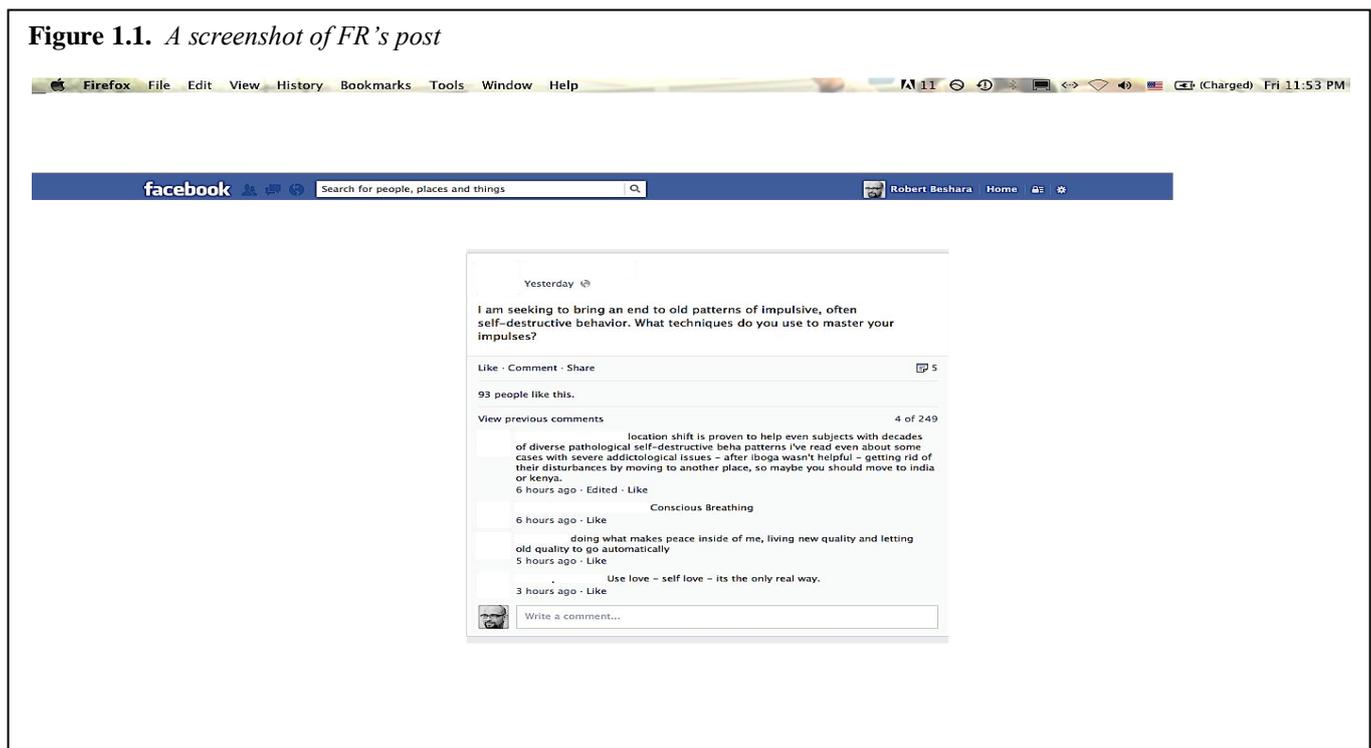
In this research paper, the qualitative data that was analyzed and interpreted included a question posted by American writer, FR, on his 'Facebook wall', and the numerous comments, which FR's virtual friends and followers wrote, in response to his question (see Figure 1.1.). This specific case study was relevant because of the psychological nature of FR's question: "I am seeking to bring an end to old patterns of impulsive, often self-destructive behavior. What techniques do you use to master your impulses?" (FR, 2013). Additionally, the psychological disposition of the comments his question received were pertinent, which opened the theoretical possibility of Facebook as an online and interactive therapeutic platform. To unpack the concept of Facebook Therapy (FBT), the psychological advice given by FR's Facebook friends and followers, most of who seem to ascribe to the New Age (NA) subculture as will be clear from their comments, was evaluated. For the analysis of the data, grounded theory was chosen because it is a straightforward yet rigorous methodology that does not come with a lot of philosophical baggage, as is the case with some of the other qualitative research methods. The analysis included three broad stages: open coding, higher order themes, and theoretical sensitivities. Theoretical literature is referenced towards the final stage of the research to help, at a meta-level, situate the Internet vis-à-vis Pierre Tielhard de Chardin's (1964) notion of the *noosphere*, of which the collective unconscious and collective consciousness could be seen as parts.

The main argument of this paper is that many of our Facebook friends or one's virtual community in general, may be regarded as *mental health amateurs*. Facebook, as the most popular social network site (EBizMBA, 2013), if appropriately used can be a potential platform for free—albeit unprofessional—therapeutic advice. For this reason, FBT should not be considered as a substitute for traditional forms of therapy, rather as a starting point that can help those interested in self-help choose the right treatment path, as far as their mental health is concerned. Certainly, some of the pros and cons of using FBT are examined, but exploring the weaknesses of FBT in depth are beyond the scope of this paper, which leaves a lot of room for future studies to be done in that area.

The position of this paper is one of skepticism toward NA beliefs, so the emphasis is on NA as a subculture rather than as a religion—and NA is used here non-pejoratively and more so as an umbrella term. This is relevant to underline because we have analyzed psychological advice that was situated within a specific context, i.e., the NA subculture, and not just any general, acontextual psychological advice. Also, the results from the data we have worked with do not speak for the NA subculture as a whole; rather we have collected an online sample of the NA subculture, which sheds light on some, but not all aspects of said subculture.

FR posted his question on his Facebook wall on Thursday April 12, 2013, and the data was retrieved on Friday April 13, 2013 at 11:53 pm garnering at the time, two hundred forty-nine comments, ninety-three likes, and five shares.

Figure 1.1. A screenshot of FR's post



### Ethics and Caveats

The data collected from FR's Facebook wall was used without getting consent from FR or any of his friends and followers who commented on his post. The researcher, however, did not break any of the ethical codes of qualitative research because the privacy setting on FR's post, the fulcrum of this study, was public. As a result, the researcher had access to rich qualitative data that was analyzed for the purposes of this paper. Nevertheless, since there was no informed consent between the researcher and the research participants, the identities of the participants have been protected via anonymity.

Also, FR's psychological state is postulated in the next section based on the phrasing of his question and some of the comments his question received. There is a possibility that the researcher's interpretation may be false because FR did not personally confirm or disconfirm the validity of the analysis suggested here. Still, the researcher would not have been able to evaluate the bulk of the data (i.e., lay psychological advice) without analyzing FR's question, which was the impetus behind all of the comments.

And finally, since we have not conducted interviews with the participants, we did not ask all of the people who commented on FR's question whether they identified themselves as belonging to the NA subculture or not. That theme, the NA subculture, was inferred from the discourses that were interpreted.

### Initial Coding

At the first level of coding—aka initial or open coding—, two hundred and four codes were assigned. Incomprehensible or irrelevant comments were excluded because the criterion for inclusion was to evaluate comments that constituted lay psychological advice regarding treatment vis-à-vis FR's question. FR's mental state was interpreted in an attempt to postulate a possible diagnosis; not to pathologize FR, but mainly for the sake of evaluating the relevancy of the psychological advice he received on Facebook from his friends and followers. This case study offered us a window into a sample of the NA subculture, whose advice was evaluated without the research literature in mind except at the final stage of the research process. The most relevant codes in terms of their number of occurrence were: meditation (29), yoga (25), mindfulness (19), breathwork (18), acceptance (14), therapy (13), physical exercise (10), and daily practice/repetition (8). The codes were inferred from either explicit or implicit data. In the case of the former, the word meditation or yoga may have been mentioned verbatim in the comments though the specific type may have differed. For example, these are some of the types of meditation that were referenced:

concentration, visualization, or kundalini. As for the latter, mindfulness and awareness are sometimes used interchangeably, and they mean the same thing. Sitting practice is another way of saying meditation. EMM spoke of “[b]eing a witness,” ES spoke of recognizing moods, and SCB wrote: “watch yourself. [W]atch your thoughts. don't [sic] judge them, just watch them”; those are all expressions that mean the same thing: mindfulness. About habit formation, some suggested daily practice, repetition, ritual, or discipline; again, they all mean the same thing: consistent commitment. It is also worth noting that some of these codes overlapped; for example, yoga can be a form of physical exercise, mindfulness can be a form of meditation, and breathwork can be an aspect of yoga. Some of the above codes were specific (e.g. mindfulness) and some were general (e.g., physical exercise). Clearly, a group of the respondents saw some form of meditation as a good solution, but a smaller group specifically suggested a Buddhist form of meditation known as Mindfulness. Popularized by Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990), Mindfulness happens to be one of the two—the second being Transcendental Meditation—most researched forms of meditation in the U.S.A. (Goetzke, 2010). Most of the above codes refer to things that are acceptable, and even encouraged by mainstream psychologists in the treatment of some psychiatric disorders, or to improve overall wellbeing. Nonetheless, there were instances of irrational advice that speak for the pseudoscientific side of NA, such as the following codes: binging, ascension, NLP, the Law of Attraction, tantric masturbation, alcohol, and magical thinking. Fortunately, within the context of this case study, such irrational advice represents a minority position. The prominent codes point to the fact that most of FR's Facebook friends and followers, as *mental health amateurs*, offered advice regarding traditional treatment (e.g., psychotherapy), and/or non-traditional mind-body interventions (e.g., yoga). The former falls within what is acceptable by the scientific community today, and the latter belongs to the complementary and alternative medicine field, which in the past was regarded as “New-Age medicine,” hence, pseudoscientific. Nowadays this may be changing; for example, according to a recent article in *The Atlantic*: “many doctors admit that alternative medicine often seems to do a better job of making patients well, and at a much lower cost, than mainstream care –and they're trying to learn from it” (Freedman, 2011). The lack of consistency in terms of the advice given by members of the NA subculture can render the NA enterprise pseudoscientific in the eyes of skeptics.

### Higher Order Themes

Let us now examine the six higher order themes identified, which are: acceptance, contemplative practice, healthy lifestyle, habit formation through consistent commitment, support group, and therapy (see Table 1.1.). Before we go into the themes, here is FR's question again: "I am seeking to bring an end to old patterns of impulsive, often self-destructive behavior. What techniques do you use to master your impulses?" Based on the information in the previous question, two potential diagnoses come to mind: impulse control disorder and substance-use disorder. Since the author of this paper is not a therapist but more of a researcher, *The Gale Encyclopedia of Psychology* (Strickland, 2001) was put to use in the identification of FR's psychological state at the time of his inquiry based on his phrasing of his question and some of the comments his question generated. In the following comments from FR's

Facebook network, contradictory clues regarding his problem are given: "AA" (MD); "The plants, yoga and the 12 steps. Helping others overcome a fear or addiction is the best way to get outside of self. Look closely for unresolved resentment, especially [sic] of self and others close to you" and "That nicotine gum helps too" (JE); "A big spliff. Oh..no, actually I [sic] the problem" (JJH); "Mindfulness meditation to become aware of the roots of the motivation behind the impulsiveness; tapping to reprogram the body memory; understanding that addictions are a mirror to reveal to us what we love most" (AHB); and "Appreciate the help that your addictions are offering. As you love them and see their misguidedness you can start to find a better way of getting what you really want" (JL).

We can infer from the previous comments, which could be from people who know FR in person, that FR may be struggling with either addiction, compulsivity, or impulsivity; it is not clear, however, if

**Table 1.1.** Data Analysis Matrix

Higher order theme	Illustrative data extract	Contributions to study conclusions
<b>Acceptance</b>	<p>"Learning to accept our impulses, rather than judge them as bad or wrong, is a good start" (EW)</p> <p>"[U]nderstanding that addictions are a mirror to reveal to us what we love most (we use addiction as a displacement activity because we feel unworthy of receiving our deepest desires) and radical acceptance of the entire process because what's happening is exactly what we need to experience at this point in our lives" (AHB)</p> <p>"Possibly we can come to self-acceptance by stopping the internal war with our self" (JK)</p>	<p>In order to master one's impulses, one first must accept them especially if they are "old patterns of self-destructive behavior" as stated by FR. Mastering may be too ambitious of a project, a sign of perfection perhaps that can unfortunately lead to self-judgment a la the "addict's loop." Other codes along the same line were: forgiveness, love, and compassion.</p>
<b>Contemplative practice</b>	<p>"Meditation on the feeling in the moment" (SM)</p> <p>"Mindfulness meditation to become aware of the roots of the motivation behind the impulsiveness" (AHB)</p> <p>"I want to keep a notebook for tracking impulses, the emotions that trigger them or are triggered by them and use mindfulness to connect the conscious with the subconscious that controls impulse" (EM)</p>	<p>Four codes that came up a lot were meditation, yoga, mindfulness, and breathwork. There are many forms of meditation (e.g., mantra) and mindfulness, which is rooted in Buddhism, is one of them. A scientific or secular version of mindfulness has been popularized by psychologist Jon Kabat-Zinn. There are also different types of yoga (e.g., kundalini, Bikram, etc.) and breathwork (e.g., <i>pranayama</i>), and some of these codes overlap with the following higher order theme because they can be considered not only as contemplative practices but also as physical exercises. Other less prominent codes were chanting, prayer, and journaling.</p>
<b>Healthy lifestyle</b>	<p>"[M]editation, regular exercise and healthy balanced nutrition" (GN)</p> <p>"Good diet, lots of water, rest &amp; meditation. Breaking of cognitive dissidence patterns, breathing exercises, yoga" (CC)</p> <p>"Exercise of some kind. And then lifestyle: stop drinking, smoking, smoking pot, let go of caffeine, sugar, etc. It's all about finding joy in simpler things, and making sure you are wed first and foremost to your practices....keeping the mind and body clear...we elevate" (AE)</p>	<p>The most common codes here had to do with fitness (e.g., jogging, weight training, Alexander technique, and yoga), sex, nutrition and healthy eating, and quitting toxins such as nicotine and alcohol. The emerging idea at this point based on the current and the previous higher order themes is wellness through balance of body-mind. Different types of mind-body interventions were suggested, (e.g., EFT, Reiki, flower remedies, Tai Chi, Qi Gong) and a few entheogens were mentioned, too (e.g., Iboga, Cannabis, Psilocybin, and Ayahuasca). Clearly, one's community can potentially be very resourceful in terms of advice.</p>

**Table 1.1.** Data Analysis Matrix (continued)

<b>Habit formation through consistent commitment</b>	<p>“Daily practice” (JMB)  “PRACTICE. ....you only get better in it by doing it continually” (BK)  “Lift something heavy, put it down, repeat” (LR)</p>	<p>Even though it was not clear what exactly FR was talking about, one can infer that he was referring to some addictive behavior, which was not specified but was hinted at by some of the people who commented. In any case, to break free from his old habit(s), he has to form a new habit, which is hard to do, but repetition tends to help as several people pointed out.</p>
<b>Support group</b>	<p>“[F]inding others that are on this path too is a sure way to success. [G]roup effort” (SM)  “‘What you're describing tends to thrive in isolation, [FR]. I would heartily encourage you to find a men's circle, or any other circle where not only can you practice the "techniques" you might be asking for, but also get the assisted processing, reflection and support needed to solidify those as a practice. Your web, your safety net, your community. Otherwise, all may remain barren advice since those parts you're referring to will tend to defend and deflect the medicine you bring to them on your own. You may practice them for a period of time, then may hit an interval and not even notice it without an outer eye to help you peer into your blind-spots [sic]” (AA)  “Surround yourself with positive people who encourage your dreams” (CC)</p>	<p>As is clear from the wealth of information that FR's friends and followers have, one's community can be very resourceful when we need advice for free, and Facebook can be a platform for connecting communities. However, it is fair to also realize that FR is a celebrity (i.e., he is well off) and he lives in a large city, so he is tapping into your above-average crowd in terms of socio-economic status, probably upper-socioeconomic status, and interests, ascribing evidently to a lot of New Age beliefs and practices.</p>
<b>Therapy</b>	<p>“Deep breaths reboots negative feedback loops, DBT, CBT” (RT)  “[T]he garden allows me act out patterns and model the change [I] wish to see in myself plant a window box and love it unconditionally” (JC)  “Family Constellation by Bert Hellinger (or Psychogenealogy by Jodorowsky) can very well show you your patterns and you unlearn them just by honoring your history” (PK)</p>	<p>The forms of therapy recommended included: DBT, CBT, Ecotherapy, family constellations, hypnotherapy, EMDR, and Hakomi. Some are more widely acceptable than others; however, most are forms of psychotherapy. DBT stands out because it makes use of mindfulness, which happens to be one of the important codes during initial coding.</p>

the substance in question is nicotine, alcohol, or something else. Addiction, regrettably, is a loaded term, but we will stick with it to generally refer to addictive, compulsive, or impulsive disorders; FR may be struggling anywhere on the use-abuse-dependence continuum. To reflect on FR's question further, his choice of the word “technique” instead of treatment may be telling: the former implies a short-term, shallow approach, while the latter implies a long-term, in-depth approach. Also, FR seeks advice on how to “master” his impulses, which implies over-ambitiousness or perfectionism, a characteristic of impulse control disorder that can, unfortunately, lead to self-judgment à la the ‘addict’s loop.’ The Kübler-Ross model is relevant in this context because FR could be grieving substance abuse although we cannot be sure what the substance may be. The fifth stage in that model is acceptance, which is also one of the higher order themes. FR's desire to master his impulses may be unrealistic especially if he knows that they are “old patterns of impulsive, often self-destructive behavior.” A more realistic goal would be acceptance of his impulses, but that is the end of a sometimes very long

and arduous process: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Perhaps, FR's perfectionism and impatience is stunting his ability to get over his old habits. Other codes along the same line as acceptance were: forgiveness, love, and compassion. The most relevant higher order theme in this context, however, is therapy, particularly as reflected in these codes: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT). The latter is known for making use of mindfulness, and one version of CBT, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), also makes use of mindfulness.

The next higher order themes are support group and habit formation through consistent commitment. Conceivably, the daily practice could be a contemplative practice. Four codes that came up a lot were meditation, yoga, mindfulness, and breathwork. Mindfulness can be practiced in different ways not just sitting down, since that is how most people envision meditation to be. Just as there are different types of meditation, there are also different types of yoga (e.g., Kundalini or Bikram) and breathwork (e.g., *Pranayama* or Holotropic), and some of these codes

overlap because they can be considered not only as contemplative practices but also as physical exercises. Other less prominent codes were chanting, prayer, and journaling. The most common codes related to a healthy lifestyle had to do with fitness (e.g., jogging, weight training, Alexander technique, and yoga), sex, nutrition and healthy eating, and quitting toxins such as nicotine and alcohol. The emerging idea at this point, based on the identified higher order themes, is wellness through balancing the body and the mind. On this note, different types of mind-body interventions were suggested, (e.g., EFT, Reiki, flower remedies, Tai Chi, Qi Gong) and a few 'entheogens' were mentioned, too (e.g., Iboga, Cannabis, Psilocybin, and Ayahuasca).

### The New Age Subculture

The NA subculture is fascinating for many reasons, namely because of its diversity and eclecticism, but it is also a source of contention for many; this continuum speaks of NA's paradoxical nature rendering it a subculture not to be easily dismissed.

James Tucker (2002) explains the rise of NA religion, which he does not view as a mystical smorgasbord, as follows:

Modernity fosters individualism and a gradual weakening of traditional social institutions, including, most importantly, religion. As religion weakens, people increasingly have no overarching spiritual framework to help them make sense of the world. As a result, many individuals turn to New Age religion to fill the spiritual void left by secularization (p. 50).

Tucker has a favorable outlook, not shared by many scholars, on the NA subculture, which he views as a religion—and clearly his use of the word 'religion' is not in any way pejorative. As was stated in the introduction, this paper is not investigating NA beliefs; rather the emphasis is on the NA subculture in the context of FBT. M. C. Berg (2008) points to an important therapeutic focus of NA: self-insight, reminiscent of the ancient Greek notion of "Know Thyself" associated with the Oracle at Delphi. Self-knowledge is also important in psychoanalysis and cognitive therapy, and it echoes the previously mentioned code of mindfulness. According to Aupers and Van Otterloo: "New Age deals with emotional and physical issues rather than with morality and truth" (cited in Berg, 2008), this highlights NA's therapeutic potential while suggesting that it is a pseudo-religion, contrary to Tucker's position. Even though there are correlations between NA practices and happiness (Berg, 2008), not all practices are beneficial, and so,

further research into NA psychotherapies is needed to identify ineffective, or even harmful practices.

What follows are two major critiques of the NA movement vis-à-vis FBT; this is not meant as a devaluation of the advice given by FR's peers, but rather as an evaluation of the implicit assumptions, or ontology, inherent in the NA paradigm:

1. The first one is based on Ken Wilber's pre/trans fallacy, and it is well captured in the following quote, which describes NA's tendency towards the pre-rational: "Contrarily, it's common in new age or personal growth communities to develop anti-intellectualism, by confusing pre-rational states with trans-rational, and thereby assuming that any non-rational state must be spiritual — even though many non-rational states are actually highly egocentric or narcissistic (self-absorbed), not to mention simply disturbed (pathological)" (Mistlberger, 2008).
2. The second critique is of how the NA movement has been co-opted by capitalism. Here, the author of this paper aligns himself with Kobutsu Malone's (2010) seemingly harsh criticism: "There is no escape in the New Age; it is a mere product of the culture of materialism, a fantasy woven to cater to our neurotic obsession with ourselves and our personal angst. New Age is for those who have money, idle time and nothing better to do. Check it out – How many poor people struggling to put food on their tables, living lives far more uncomfortable than our own are in the New Age stores seeking answers to their problems?"

In summation, in the NA movement there may be some inherent congruity and a general tendency toward pre-rational beliefs and practices. These factors and others discussed later, point to some of the weaknesses of the NA subculture as a context for FBT, and this is just one reason further research into FBT in other contexts is needed.

Having thought about NA psychotherapies, this leads us to think about the effectiveness of Facebook as a platform for therapy. According to a recent research (Berger, & Buechel, 2012), FBT can be beneficial: "emotionally unstable individuals are more likely to post self-relevant information online and write about their emotions when doing so – a tendency not observed offline. Further, such emotional writing, paired with the potential to receive social support helps them repair well-being after negative experiences. These results shed light on a motivator for, and benefit of, online social networking, while also demonstrating how the social sharing of emotion can boost well-being."

It is worth adding that FBT is also free, but everything comes at a price. The downside is that having too little or too many Facebook friends—354 being the tipping point—can make us feel less happy according to a study presented recently at the Society for Personality and Social Psychology (Watkins, 2012). FR has reached the maximum amount of friends he can have on Facebook (5,000) and 8,922 people follow him. Nevertheless, according to a different study, because of FR's high socioeconomic status, it makes sense for him to have a large number of Facebook friends, as reported in the Daily Mail (Prigg, 2012).

### The Internet vis-à-vis the Noosphere

The point in this section is to situate FBT, and the Internet as a whole, in a macro context, beyond the framework of the NA subculture, to get a bigger picture from a theoretical point of view. Some of the researcher's theoretical sensitivities concerned the Internet and its connection to Carl G. Jung's notion of the collective unconscious and Émile Durkheim's notion of collective consciousness, as potentially two out of many components of Chardin's (1964) notion of the *noosphere*. Just as an individual has a conscious and unconscious mind, according to psychoanalytic theory, social networks, or a society/culture as a whole, collectively have a conscious and unconscious Mind. In a technical paper taking a Cognitive Neuroscience perspective, Shaikat Hossain (2012) views the Internet from a post-Jungian lens:

Whereas Jung initially conceived the collective unconscious as being an inborn, primordial matrix, the discovery of these interactions between large groups of people has revealed yet another side to the notion. The properties of these social networks can be understood according to the ideas behind chaos theory (Lorenz 1995). In chaos theory, the behavior of a complex system is largely dependent on initial conditions. Furthermore, the behavior of the system is an emergent property that is not directly obvious from the behavior of the individual components. As a result, these systems take on an almost lifelike quality. Whereas in an ant colony, the individual members exhibit quite simple behavior, a network of human minds is many levels more complex. In addition, the natural state of human beings has typically been to gather in small tribes or families. Never before has there been a time when one could study the human mind as part of a global colony (p. 105-106).

Whereas collective consciousness is a concept from sociology and the collective unconscious is a

concept from analytical psychology, the *noosphere* can be regarded as an integrative theory. The collective unconscious can help us explain the recurrence of certain themes, or archetypes, across cultures and time, while collective consciousness can help us explain how a group of individuals can unite and act spontaneously because of a shared passion (e.g., NA beliefs). Perhaps, the *noosphere* speaks to the overall coherence of the NA movement as a subculture and the constructive interactional dynamics amongst its online members—à la ant colonies—regardless of the group's flaws.

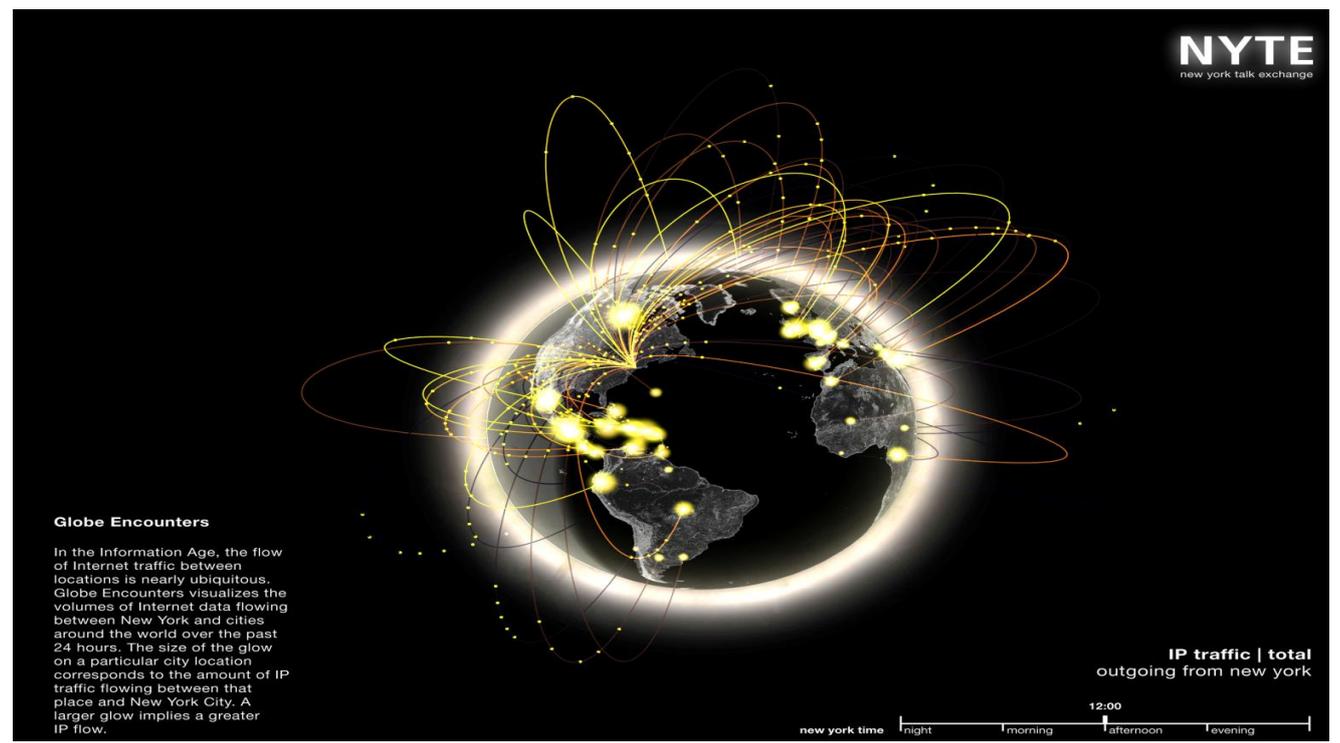
In writing about Chardin's notion of the *noosphere* or "the sphere of spirit/mind/consciousness," Ingrid H. Shafer (2002) had the following to say:

The Internet's intuitive, interactive approach to discovery—as a journeying across uncharted and still-expanding seas—involves vast assemblies of nets that sweep the groundwaters of the collective unconscious and allow those waters to create new modes of seeing and knowing that can help build the foundation for global understanding. This open-ended mutuality offers Net navigators and cybertizens the unique opportunity to uncover new-old language that will grow naturally, the way a child learns to speak out of the experience of encountering the other and a poet or scientist forms original words when existing language does not suffice. This emergent language will facilitate direct confrontation with alternate frames of reference (p. 833).

Clearly, we are more interconnected than we think we are (see Figure 1.2.). FR's Facebook friends and followers who responded to his question about mastering impulses, almost worked collectively like an ant colony. As a matter of fact, a group of scientists at Stanford University have recently discovered that the behavior of harvester ant colonies mirrors the fundamental Internet technology known as Transmission Control Protocol (TCP), a phenomenon that they have labeled as the 'anternet' (Carey, 2012). Said differently, as Facebook users we are *holons* (Koestler, 1968) within Facebook, Facebook is a *holon* within the Internet, and the Internet is a *holon* within the *noosphere* (Teilhard, 1964), which contains both the collective unconscious and collective consciousness. All of this speaks of the complexity of FBT, and why it may perhaps be effective for some extent in the long run as it changes and adapts (morphogenesis), particularly, as the Internet transitions from Web 2.0 to Web 3.0, while seeking balance (homeostasis).

**Figure 1.2.** *The Internet as an aspect of the noosphere*

Reference: New York Talk Exchange (2008). nyte - globe encounter [Visual]. Retrieved from <http://senseable.mit.edu/nyte/visuals.html>



Overall, most of the advice that FR received, as summarized in the higher order themes, are very appropriate in relation to his suggested diagnosis of substance-use disorder or impulse control disorder. Even though these lay psychological advice are given by a sample of the NA subculture, they are not irrelevant nor are they mostly pseudoscientific. In fact, three higher order themes hit the nail on the head: acceptance—the fifth stage of grieving in the Kübler-Ross (1969) model—, therapy (esp. CBT and DBT), and support group (e.g., family and/or friends). And the rest is complementary to the treatment of addiction, if that happens to be what FR was struggling with: habit formation through consistent commitment (i.e., practice makes perfect), healthy lifestyle (i.e., physical exercise, sex, healthy nutrition, etc.), and contemplative practice (e.g., mindfulness). Of course, some advice ranged from the pseudoscientific to the nonsensical, but these represent a minority position, which could be seen as a lack of consistency, however, it speaks to the wide knowledge range and experience level of FR's Facebook friends and followers.

### Conclusions and Future Study

We infer based on analyzing the data that FR's virtual community on Facebook, who constitute a sample of the NA subculture, at least in the U.S., and who act as *mental health amateurs*, have gained their knowledge based on first-hand experience or from

reading. Further research is recommended in the areas not explored in the present paper, such as the pitfalls of FBT. As of today, FBT is still free and as this study shows the lay psychological advice offered to us by our virtual friends may in some instances be useful as a jumping off point. Our social networks allow us to tap into a resourceful community of *mental health amateurs*, who undoubtedly have the wealth of knowledge of an exponentially more complex system than that of the most impressive ant colony. It is our responsibility, on the receiving end, to pick and choose from the advice being given to us and to discern the information being shared with us. In conclusion, FBT is evidently not being recommended as a substitute for traditional forms of therapy, or as the main treatment of any psychological condition, but rather as a useful tool that can help us think about our options in terms of psychological treatment when we have a question to ask.

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