



Hello. I'm Stephan and I'm an addict. Admittedly, my drug of choice isn't unusual. There are thousands of others like me, many of them Maties students and staff alike.

Facebook anonymous

Confession time: I'm utterly addicted to Facebook. I wake up in a cold sweat at three in the morning and feel the need to update my status. I find myself 'poking' people that I meet in real-life situations. I'm ashamed to say that there are people on my list of friends whom I haven't even met face-to-face.

I came late to Facebook. Yes, I was one of the rearguard naysayers, protesting feebly about 'real' communication and face-to-face interaction. And then I tried it.

I was hooked when I realised how easy it would be to communicate en masse to all my friends and family living abroad. And so it innocently began. The unstoppable behemoth that swallowed my life was launched.

Facebook has been part of many Maties' lives since it began expanding on campus in 2006. Nowadays, you struggle to meet a single student who isn't 'booking'. Step into any of the University's computer-user areas and, by an overwhelming majority, Facebook is running on most of the machines.

The more cosmopolitan net-wise browsers are linked in far further: Flickr for their photos, Twitter for micro-blogging. There are, however, still a few oddballs clinging desperately to MySpace. Talk about rats on a sinking ship.

The majority of Maties, however, seem quite content to stick to what they know: the comfort of

friends, photos and applications on Facebook.

Another self-confessed tech addict is SU's head of e-communications, Lize Esterhuizen. "There's a good and a bad side to online social networking," she says. "People don't have much extra time in their busy lives, and by using these tools they can stay in touch with people."

I was one of the rearguard naysayers, protesting feebly about 'real' communication and face-to-face interaction. And then I tried it.

flirt, campaign for causes and make small talk.

In keeping with the University's quest to keep up with evolving technology, Lize & Co. are looking to create a Facebook-style intranet for Maties that will allow for better communication with commuter and Private Students' Organisation students: an overarching communications network to make use of how wired-in students are, so to speak.

As you might expect from the 2006 winners of the Department of Science and Technology's award

Precisely the self-justification that I chanted to myself as I first created my 'FB' account.

Lize does make an interesting point, however: social networking is simply an online extension of day-to-day communication. It's used for precisely what people in groups do: gossip, flirt, campaign for causes and make small talk.

for the most innovative university in South Africa, our technocrats are thinking ahead. The massive Facebook group 'Maties' represents a resource as yet unplundered - all those students, milling around like wild horses just waiting to be harnessed! Might as well get something useful out of all that time and energy spent online...

Because that's what Facebook is - no one even pretends anymore that it's useful. We use it for no purpose other than having fun and engaging in an electronic popularity contest; which I appear to be losing, by the way.

Oh, and let's clear up a misconception: Facebook does hold some real-world social value. It's used to communicate details of parties, braais and, very occasionally, study sessions. It's not a substitute for a real social life; it's a tool, albeit one that takes all your time and energy, leaving you with neither for your real life.

Perhaps I'm being a trifle pessimistic. My addiction must come from some flaw within me. I should be strong enough to resist it. All I need do is develop some real-world 'character'. The way that I understand it, this means a soul-crushing abhorrence of all things fun and entertaining. Then I can look forward to a life of drudgery and depression, freed from the shackles of entertainment and technology.

Let me check my profile just one last time before I go...

- **Stephan Matthee is a BPhil Journalism student and plans to work as an independent journalist next year.**