

# Facebook, Frosting, and Freshly Darned Socks

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“**Y**ou have been invited to join the Facebook group ‘Martha Stewart Rocks My Freshly Darned Socks.’” I click the link in my email to Facebook’s website where I find the accompanying message: “Hi! Your status said you were researching Martha Stewart and I thought you might want to join our little group! It’s awesome!” I navigate to the group’s homepage, which offers the following description: “Hurrah. Martha is FREE! Well, she may be wearing a tracking collar around her ankle, but at least she’s back in the kitchen, which is a-okay in our book. Because life is just better with Martha. . . . It’s a good thing.” I discover that the group has twenty-one members, plus two officers, whose occupations are listed as “Head of Purchasing and Catalogue Shopping” and “Distant Admirer of Ms. Stewart and her ways.”

I decline the invitation.

“Where I try to make everything look like it should, you just try to make it look like it does” (Vince Gill). So says Martha Stewart to guest Amy Sedaris on a recent episode of *Martha: The Martha Stewart Show*. When Sedaris protests, Stewart looks like she has been backed up against a wall. She shifts her weight, nervously insists, “No, no, I’m not being critical,” and awkwardly transitions into promoting Sedaris’ latest book. Sedaris is effusive and care-free, poking fun at herself while Stewart stands by and smiles politely, looking uncomfortable. Stewart is most relaxed when the two are making a cake together, Sedaris laughing when she spills frosting, Stewart beaming when she carefully removes the wax paper she has placed on top of her cake tray to keep it clean. Sedaris approaches the project with abandon—she is having fun; Stewart takes it on with her characteristic fastidiousness—she is in control of the cake’s outcome, and she will insure that it looks just the way it should.

In Stewart's world, there are no happy accidents: she approaches every project with the "peculiar brand of didacticism" Margaret Talbot discusses in her essay "Les Très Riches Heures de Martha Stewart." Stewart, maintains Talbot, embodies the control and empowerment the modern woman is supposed to reflect, and imparts her carefully chosen wisdom to her viewers. "In Martha's world," Talbot contends, "the managerial and aesthetic challenges of 'homekeeping' always take priority and their intricacy and ambition command a respect" that must be observed, learned, and practiced. And Stewart's viewers subscribe to this "lifestyle cult," which "could thrive," says Talbot, "only at a time when large numbers of Americans have lost confidence in their own judgment about the most ordinary things." She argues that Stewart appeals to her audience with the fantasy of free time, of the "très riches heures" they could fill as they wished. But, she asserts, they would rather fill these hours with inventions of Stewart's making than their own. This, Talbot claims, is a reflection of our desire for a "way to assure ourselves that we're living by the right codes, dictated or sanctioned by experts."

But Stewart's allure lies in much more than a craving for conformity. She offers viewers a different world, one where cakes always turn out perfectly—as long as you remember to place the wax paper underneath the tray. Stewart does offer her viewers assurance that *Martha Stewart Living* is better living, the kind of living everyone should be doing. But it is a different kind of life. It is a life of "cultivating your own walled garden while the world outside is condemned to squalor" (Talbot). It is a life of hard work and adamant pursuit of perfection, and it is a life over which you have complete control. Within the walls of your garden, you are in charge: you nourish the soil; you tend the roses; you trim the shrubs; you pull the weeds.

Stewart gives her viewers the sense that their homes can be as model-perfect as the set of her TV show, that their gardens can be as lush as the ones whose photographs grace the pages of her magazines. You can achieve these things, she tells her viewers, if you put the effort into it, if you take control, if you devote your "très riches heures" to the pursuit of perfection. With her help, she seems to be saying, you too can make life look less like it does and more like it should.

Martha Stewart has declared this "the era of me" (Brady). *Business Week* magazine reports that since completing her jail sentence for lying to federal officials, she has been keeping busy:

She has helped design new homes, forged a slew of merchandise deals, completed a 750-page book, and launched her 24-hour radio channel. She

hosts a daily live TV show. She's helping to create a search engine of Martha-approved sites, and even is developing a line of food. (Brady)

Stewart can add to this impressive tally a total of seventeen Facebook user groups devoted exclusively to her. They range from "Martha Stewart is My Homie!" (thirty-seven members) to "I Kind of Hate Martha Stewart" (twenty-one members) to "Let's Clap for Martha . . . She's Done it Again" (sixteen members). Stewart has thus been drawn into the world of Facebook, which boasted 9.5 million members as of October 2006 (Morrissey).

Facebook, a social-networking site, is attractive to its members because it enables them to determine which visitors of the site are permitted to access their profiles, and how much information they can see. This "user control," says John Cassidy in his article "Me Media," "may turn out to be Facebook's most important asset" (54). Cassidy quotes Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg as saying that his goal in creating the site was to increase information flow by "having people share as much information as they are comfortable with. The way you make people comfortable," says Zuckerberg, "is by giving them control over exactly who can see what" (54). Users formulate their own virtual identities, representing themselves to the online community as a series of favorite bands, movies, and quotes, as the number of people they list as friends, as the synopsis they post in their "About Me" sections. They can let others know they have viewed their profiles by "poking" them; they can create groups that "promote different aspects of their identities while showing off their collegiate wit" (54); they can leave comments by writing on each other's "walls." In doing so, each user is effectively declaring an "era of me."

Perhaps this is why Martha Stewart holds such a great appeal for the dozens of Facebook members who belong to Stewart-themed groups. They identify with her, and they admire the control she has over her brand. Facebook gives these college students the opportunity to become more like Stewart, with their own carefully polished images, their own brands. They are creating their own walled gardens, their own virtual communities, which they can use, if they so choose, to keep the outside world at bay. They can confine themselves to the world of Facebook: to its set format, to the aspects of their profiles—and their lives—that they can control, shape, and polish. They can immerse themselves in a virtual reality free of labs and lectures, free of papers and problem sets. They can use their "walls" to create barriers between themselves and the outside world. They, like Martha Stewart, can leave this world to its "squalor" while they work to make their lives look more like they should.

At her home, says Talbot, “Stewart is the undisputed chatelaine, micro-managing her estate in splendid isolation” (Talbot). But at work, she may have lost this full authority. Since her jail term, explains Diane Brady in her article “The Reinvention of Martha Stewart,” Stewart has been forced to relinquish the complete control she once exercised over her brand. Her crime, perjuring herself to government officials to cover up a stock deal, was seen as an expression of hubris, of Stewart’s over-confidence in the “era of me.” The live show she has taken on is the result of efforts to revamp Martha Stewart Living. Stewart describes her new show as “um, challenging,” noting that she prefers the “leisurely pace and ‘wonderful flow’ of an edited show” (Brady). Stewart feels that she can accomplish more in a taped show, where she has the power of review. She is most content when she can make sure that her cake turns out just right, or if it doesn’t, that it gives the appearance of being more like it should be than like it is.

And this is the challenge of the live show: Stewart cannot make revisions, picking out the most attractive aspects of a segment as she would in a pre-recorded show. She has no power to edit in front of a live audience, so she must create the most appealing image she can in the moment. Stewart feels a “commitment to painstakingly elegant presentation,” declares Talbot. She is “concern[ed] with the look of food even more than its taste.” After all, the actual flavor of the cake cannot be conveyed to the audience, but Stewart can use its visual appeal to imply a correlation between a beautiful exterior and a delicious interior. The audience is encouraged to make judgments about the cake based on this mode of thought—it has perfect frosting, so it must taste as good as it looks. In Stewart’s world, appearances are always indicative of substance.

In the world of Facebook, users try to convey the substance of their characters through appearance alone—the profile is just as much an aesthetic tool as is the photograph. In creating a profile, they have the power of redaction, including only the elements of their personalities that will be most appealing to whomever they are trying to impress. They never have to suffer the awkwardness of working in front of a live audience, of interacting with something they cannot control. They are always in charge, and they always have the capability to make things look the way they want them to look.

For Stewart, asserts Talbot, “the domestic arts have become ends in themselves, unmoored from family values and indeed from family.” She has created her own world of cakes and rosebushes, of cleanliness and order, of perfectly folded t-shirts and color-coordinated place settings. Stewart’s inter-

actions within this world, though, occur only with the objects she creates; when she has to step outside of it she is no longer comfortable. Stewart's live show reveals her awkwardness when interacting with another human being. When the carefree Amy Sedaris is her guest, Stewart clearly is frustrated by the lack of control she has over the flow of the show, speaking tersely to Sedaris and trying desperately to keep her show, and her world, looking the way it should. Stewart's discomfort is especially evident when contrasted with the manner in which she confidently frosts a cake and removes the wax paper lining the tray with a grandiose flourish. When Sedaris interrupts Stewart's instruction on the benefits of wax paper to chime in with an anecdote, Stewart appears discomfited by Sedaris' playful verbal jibes. When Sedaris points out, for example, that both she and Stewart live alone, Stewart is indignant, insisting, "I don't live alone. I have five cats and three dogs and twenty-five red canaries." Her demeanor gives the distinct impression that she would rather be at home tending to her pets and her plants than being confronted with something she cannot control—in this case, another person (Vince Gill).

In Stewart's eyes, suggests Talbot, her world is so fully developed that she "is not remotely interested in the messy contingencies of family life." Stewart has taken the concept of perfectionism to such an extreme that she has allowed inside her walls only those things she can control. Sedaris is an intruder in her world of cake trays and wax paper; a family would upset Stewart's control over her world to a presumably intolerable degree.

The changing social relationships encouraged by sites such as Facebook have the power to "render human boundaries at once more permeable and more provisional," as Sven Birkerts argues in his essay "The Idea of the Internet" (119). When we can simply click on a Facebook profile to connect to a person, we may no longer feel the need to interact with them outside the controlled world we have created. Due to this "system of total connectivity," Birkerts contends, "a sense of unreality begins to shadow our perceptions" (120). We risk becoming, like Stewart, more comfortable interacting with the controllable aspects of our Facebooks than with an actual person. Virtual relations will lead us, Birkerts theorizes, to an age when we will "stand free of the powerful constraints imposed by face-to-face situations" (119).

And, if we allow Facebook to overtake our lives, we do run this risk. We can all follow Martha Stewart's example: we can use Facebook to build our walled gardens, and if we wanted to, we could live entirely inside these walls. We could have total control, but we would be giving up everything that comes along with the outside world—physical interaction, facial expressions,

body language, a layer of social development that could not be achieved if we chose to sustain the static rigidity of our Facebook relationships.

But Facebook does not have to exist in conflict with this world; rather, it can be an extension of it, a complement to it. Facebook does not have to become a lifestyle, just as Martha Stewart Living does not need to permeate every aspect of our being. Talbot declares that “Martha Stewart Living,” with its promises of “très riches heures,” “isn’t really living at all.” But for most of us, Martha Stewart Living does not overtake our lives. It is an escape: an expression of our frustration with our messy world; a place to find craft projects and recipes; a reminder that there are some things over which we still have control. But we do not try to escape forever. We use our free time, our “très riches heures,” to create this world, this walled garden, but we also build ourselves a gate.

We navigate to Facebook when we are at our computers; we retreat from the world to watch Martha Stewart’s show for an hour a day. Yet we return to our daily lives, step back out of our gardens. We return to the world feeling refreshed, secure in the knowledge that we have our walled garden—one we can shape and control, one that will be there waiting for us when we feel overwhelmed or helpless, one that is purely of our making—a garden of Facebook, frosting, and freshly darned socks.

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