

# What the Hack?: Communication Dysfunction in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*

---

Jacqueline Boualavong  
Honors College, Towson University

Almost fifty years ago, Thomas Pynchon offered an astounding insight in his shortest novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, claiming that our interactions and communication processes are dysfunctional. Dysfunctional communication lacks a balance between withholding and sharing information about ourselves, as well as a balance between receiving and understanding shared information—two balances that are necessary for functional communication. *The Crying of Lot 49* follows Oedipa Maas as she tries to execute her enigmatic ex-boyfriend's will and, in the process, discovers the mysteries of a secret underground society, the Tristero. The means by which Oedipa communicates and interacts with the other characters to find answers is ineffective, as she is left distraught at the end of the novel, still unsure of the existence of the Tristero or her ex-boyfriend's legacy. Pynchon's novel shows his anticipation of future dysfunctional communication, which we see today in the form of social networks, specifically Facebook. The online world is a public domain where everything is shared and communicated. But because of its inherent lack of privacy, the environment is ripe for unbalanced, dysfunctional communication. The social networking experiment we see in Facebook

**Jacqueline Boualavong** is completing her studies at Towson University as a psychology major with a minor in Chinese. She hopes to pursue a career in social work, helping military children. Jackie is heavily invested in the effects of the Internet and online social networking sites. She is currently conducting research on online personalities and relationship styles.  
*jackie.boualavong@gmail.com.*

also provides evidence that our communication is still impaired even in our real life interactions. As Facebook and other social networking sites become our main means of interacting, truly knowing one another becomes less and less likely, particularly since the identities that we communicate can easily be altered, exaggerated, or underrepresented, and our messages unheard by the recipient or heard by unintended others. This makes communication on Facebook dysfunctional.

In *The Crying of Lot 49*, Oedipa Maas must interact with many different characters to learn the truth about her ex-boyfriend and the underground society he may have been involved in, but the way she communicates is less than effective. In one sense she is holding herself back, switching through different identities so that she ostensibly behaves appropriately. She cycles through her roles effortlessly: becoming the housewife when she goes to Tupperware parties, the student when she meets Emory Bortz, the stockholder when she encounters Stanley Koteks, and “Arnold Snarb” when she receives a name tag and feels like drifting one evening (Fig. 1). All of these identities are an important part of her quest, but nevertheless, a part that creates distance in her



Fig. 1. An example of Oedipa's Facebook profile picture album, consisting of the different identities that she takes on.

interactions with others. Even her name is a part of her identity, as “Oedipa” references the Greek myth of Oedipus who tries to find his identity because he was abandoned at birth. Like Oedipus, Oedipa searches for answers to the mysteries of the Tristero.

One persona that Oedipa frequently adopts is Rapunzel in the tower, a

persona that represents her feelings of being locked in. She once viewed a painting entitled *Bordando el Manto Terrestre* (*Embroidering Earth's Mantle*) by Remedios Varo, in which the women in the tower embroider a tapestry that spills out of the tower into the emptiness below (Fig. 2). She knows that what she

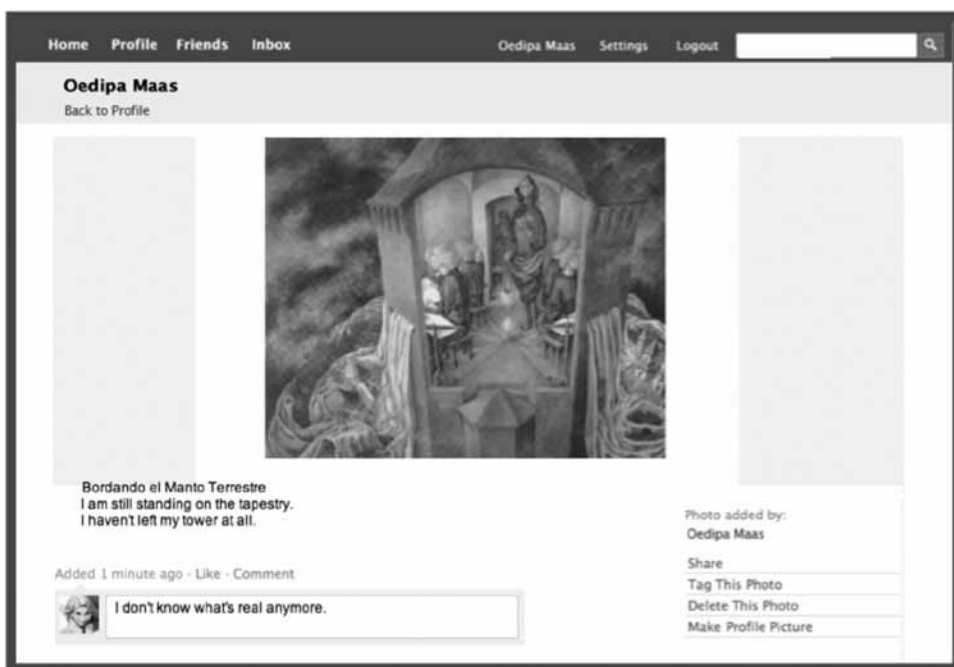


Fig. 2. Facebook users can easily upload photos to share their experiences with their friends. Here Oedipa reflects on how she felt when she saw this painting.

stood on then “had only been woven together a couple thousand miles away in her own tower” (10) as she is no longer able to discriminate between what is real and what is not. As a result, Oedipa is too unsure of her own identity to communicate, and her dysfunctional interactions unravel right from the start.

Just as Oedipa has her own bouts with her identity, the online social networking world of Facebook presents the dilemma in another format: the Facebook profile picture pages. This particular page functions as our way of presenting ourselves, our persona, our role-playing character. In the same way as Oedipa, we cycle through our profile pictures to suit our mood, and we update our profile biography to better fit ourselves. But is our Facebook profile page really who we are? Unlike Oedipa, who can share and withhold different identities to match the situation, we create personas, which are archived on our profile page and can easily be accessed by other Facebook users. Is this how we

want to share and communicate ourselves, with our past easily found?

Pynchon also comments on our dysfunctional communication in terms of how we express what is going on in our heads. In the functional sense of communicating our thoughts, there is the sharing of information, withholding the unnecessary, as well as understanding both sides of the conversation. Pynchon takes this idea of expressing our thoughts, but he places it in a different format. He gives a third-person account of Oedipa's thoughts instead of a personal first-person point of view, creating a distance between what the readers know about Oedipa and what Oedipa lets other characters know (Fig. 3). For example, she withholds much information from other characters despite her need for answers in her journey: "She opened her mouth to ask, but didn't. It was to be the first of many demurs"(71). As she holds back in her interactions with others, her quest for truth is unfulfilled. Although readers gain a lot of

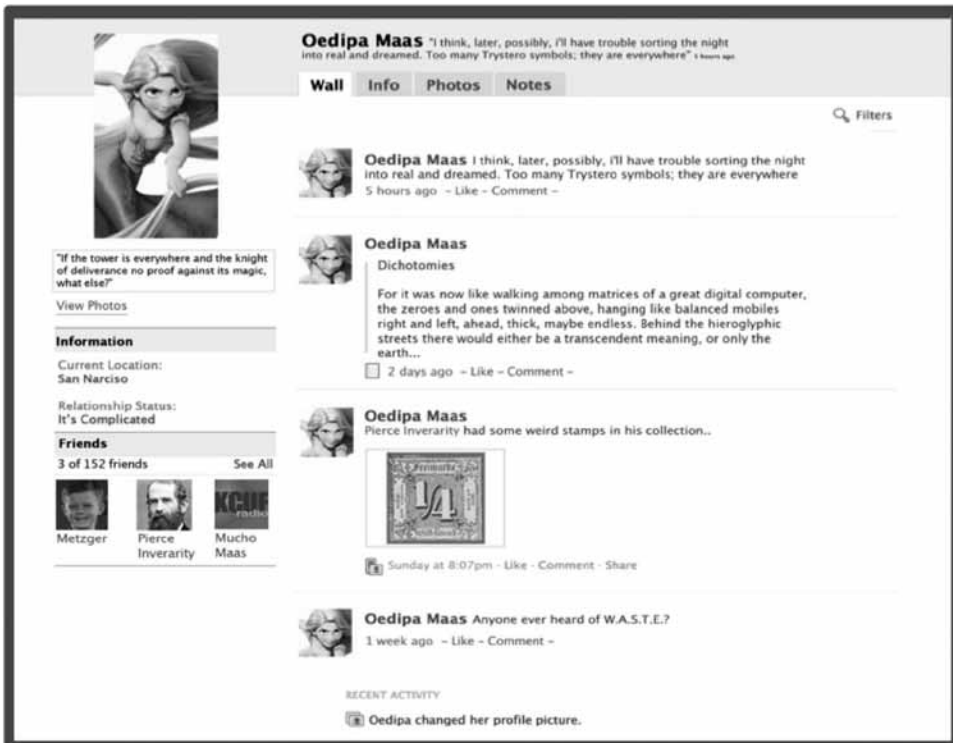


Fig. 3. Oedipa's profile page. It includes her own musings, thoughts, notes, reflections, and photos—but only to the extent that she wishes to share.

knowledge about Oedipa's search for truth, her inability to express what is really on her mind with the other characters leads to her inability to communicate and learn the truth.

In Facebook, “status posts” or “tweets” that get posted on our Facebook page convey our thoughts, but are, likewise, dysfunctional in communication. These posts are a transmission of our thoughts in condensed form for our friends to view. Due to the ease of updating one’s status, frequent updates are made about anything one chooses. These posts are not directed towards anyone in particular but are open to all of one’s friends to read. Without a specific audience, the process of communication becomes lost. Additionally, as Facebook users continually update, users are overwhelmed and may not even read through everything. The overload of information is dysfunctional, as users are not balancing the sharing and withholding of information with what they are receiving.

As most communication is directed in a linear exchange between individuals, Pynchon notes that this process can be interrupted, thus hampering the function of communication. In one scene, Oedipa has a public conversation with Metzger, her lawyer, and his friend Manny Di Presso about their knowledge of her late ex-boyfriend. However, a nearby group of band members, the Paranoids, overhears and comments that their conversation sounds similar to a play they saw recently (Fig. 4). Perhaps the information seems relevant, but Oedipa is instead led on a wild goose chase, trying to figure out if the play they mentioned is related to her ex-boyfriend. Manny Di Presso panics upon hearing



Fig. 4. Facebook lacks privacy: “wall posts” are easily accessible by mutual friends. Here, a conversation between Oedipa and Metzger is read and commented by the Paranoids.

their statement, screaming, "They've been listening. ... those kids. All the time, somebody listens in, snoops: they bug your apartment, they tap your phone" (48). How can one feel safe when one lacks the privacy of a simple conversation?

Like the pervasive eavesdropping in Pynchon's novel, Facebook has the same problem in conversation between Facebook users. Simply posting on another user's "wall," or Facebook profile page, a conversation is initiated between two individuals. However, this exchange is public, at least among the user's Facebook friends. These friends can easily comment on the conversation that did not involve them, as well as prowl around past conversations with a click of the mouse. Facebook tools have made investigating, and what some call "stalking," straightforward, for the "friendship pages" organize any interactions between two individual in an orderly page. Therefore, the process of communication on Facebook is threatened by the openness and the public interactions because it allows others to read conversations not meant for them while intruding on previous exchanges without the user's knowledge.

In the exploration of the Tristero conspiracy, Pynchon zeros in on this issue of privacy, a necessary component of functional communication. The Tristero conspiracy is an underground mailing system meant to hinder government-monopolized mailing systems in exchange for privacy. The mailing society sends mail at specific locations marked by a muted horn and the acronym "W.A.S.T.E.," which stands for "We Await Silent Tristero's Empire" (139). As Oedipa is unable to figure out whether the Tristero exists, Pynchon questions whether complete privacy even is obtainable.

Even in Oedipa's many intimate moments with Metzger, their privacy is intruded upon. The first of these intrusions is brushed off, when a girl with the Paranoid band from the motel peeks in their room during their sexual escapade and Oedipa replies, "I'm sure this pales by comparison ... so why don't you all just, you know, go outside" (26). Eventually, however, the intrusions seemed impossible to escape, as the "teenage voyeurs" all have access to every room and can walk in on any sexual exchange (33; Fig. 5). In spite of the fact that Metzger and Oedipa try to deal with the intrusion by blocking the doorway and maneuvering in a way that will be comfortable, the whole ordeal is long, and they lose interest in their sexual communication (33). With the intrusion in their intimate exchange, the outside intruder obstructs functional communication.

In a similar fashion, the Facebook private messaging systems, working as a way to keep conversations between specific individuals, can also be intruded

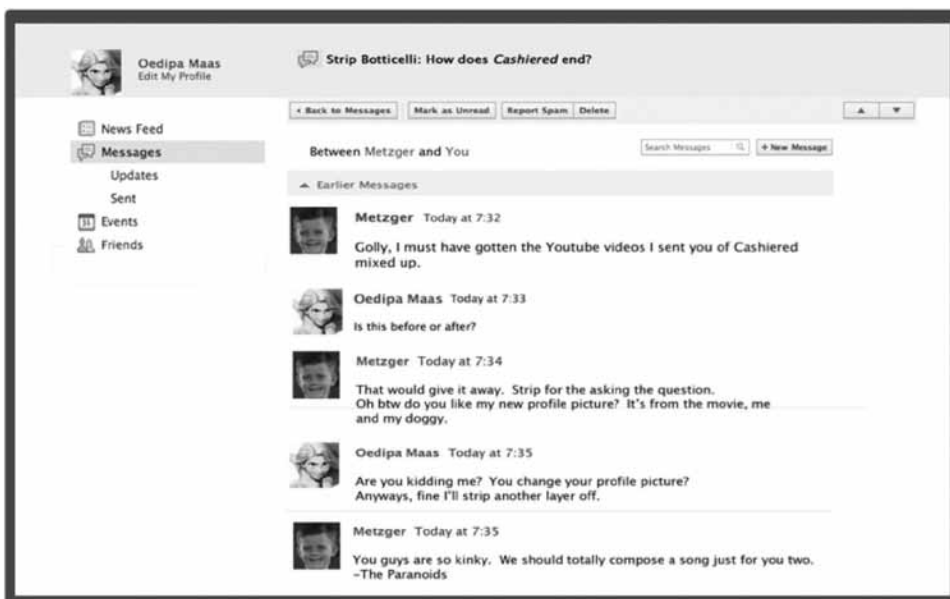


Fig. 5. Despite the secure system of private messaging on Facebook, the online world can be hacked.

upon, despite their privacy settings. In computer terminology this is called being “hacked.” With a few high-tech tools, others can seep through the cracks of password protected sites, such as Facebook, and gather information about users. The hacker blocks functional communication by encroaching on our privacy online. Lev Grossman, author of the *Time* article “Person of the Year 2010: Mark Zuckerberg,” points out, “where there isn’t much privacy, there can’t be much intimacy.” A crucial element of functional communication is the intimacy that privacy can provide, that hackers and intruders can otherwise disrupt.

Although Pynchon provides much evidence that points to dysfunctional communication process, he also offers a partial solution: a filtering system that can sort through all the nonsense to reach the core of understanding and clear communication. In the novel, Oedipa meets with John Nefastis, who invented a machine with the imaginary Maxwell Demon. This Maxwell Demon deals with entropy, or chaos that is built up in the closed container, by sifting and sorting through the chaos to bring equilibrium. Information entropy is at the core of communication dysfunction, as it is a building up of information, an overload in the communication system. Oedipa tries to connect and communicate with the Maxwell Demon to create a chain of reactions that would facilitate the sorting, but fails to set anything in motion. As Oedipa retorts, “Sorting isn’t work? ... Tell them down at the post office”(68): sorting through information overload takes more than just sitting and hoping for change. Perhaps her inability to

eliminate or lessen the chaos is due to her lack of patience or focus with the Maxwell Demon. Nevertheless, Pynchon hints that sorting and filtering what we receive in our communication may be the key to interacting functionally, but discovering the right tool and how to use it may be the problem.

Facebook may be on its way to solving the miscommunication dilemma. It has carefully designed filtering systems within its website. For example, instead of seeing every single update by the users' friends, one is able to see in their "news feed," the recent updates page, posts by friends that one interacts with the most. Friendship pages also log information about interactions between friends to provide easy access to their interaction history, including posts on each other's pages, photos of both individuals, events both attended, and so forth. Additionally, private messages and Facebook instant messages between friends are placed side by side to continue the dialogue. Facebook tries to keep everything organized to match the speed of the information overload to which users continually add.

Pynchon proposed that the way we interact and communicate with each other is compromised. Oedipa is hampered by her multiple identities and withholds information when communicating with others. All the while, she is thwarted by outside intrusion to her privacy. By the same token, Facebook effects this same communication dysfunction on its users, as we see most clearly in users' interactions in the public domain. Pynchon suggests that one key component to functional communication is sorting and filtering of our interactions. Facebook has stepped up to deal with the chaos of continual interactions with its many filtering tools. Despite this, however, the inherent lack of privacy undermines the functional communication process. As Facebook and other social networking sites slowly handle privacy issues, perhaps we can start finding solutions to dealing with our day-to-day, offline interactions. The question, then, follows: *Can we take the filtering and sorting systems that Facebook and technological advancement created and apply it directly to our offline human interactions, or will we be left to deal with information entropy?*

### Works Cited

Grossman, Lev. "Person of the Year 2010: Mark Zuckerberg." *Time*, 15 Dec. 2010. Web. 10 Feb. 2011.

Pynchon, Thomas. *The Crying of Lot 49*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006. Print.