Zadie Smith’s “Generation Why?,” a film review of David Fincher’s *The Social Network*, morphs from film analysis into something much more complex: an examination of the role of Facebook in society and individuals’ lives. She lays out her concerns for readers: she’s wary of Facebook because it embodies the mind of a kid who created a whole other world because he wanted to be liked, since “[f]or our self-conscious generation . . . not being liked is as bad as it gets.” Using *The Social Network* as a springboard, she posits that, just as the film distorts the real story behind Facebook’s creation, Facebook itself distorts the real stories of its users. According to Smith, Facebook corrals, hides, and truncates people’s identities.

When creating Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg wanted to allow people to connect to one another, yet, Smith argues, “the quality of the relationship that connection permits” was not considered. She claims that Zuckerberg failed to realize that “superficial connections . . . might not be an entirely positive thing.” As a result, “life is turned into a database,” and individuals are simplified. Contrary to Zuckerberg’s initial expectations, we “lose our bodies, our messy feelings, our desires, our fears” as we reduce ourselves to a set of data (9). When compressed into Zuckerberg’s world, we become less individual because “information systems . . . [underrepresent] reality’” (Jared Lanier, qtd. in Smith). On social networks like Facebook, we are “[o]ne nation under a format,” a format Zuckerberg created so that he could feel liked. But since there is “no perfect computer analogue for what we call a ‘person,’” our individual selves become caged within circuits and microchips, lured by the false belief “that computers can presently represent human thought or human relationships” (Lanier, qtd. in Smith).

Smith believes that Facebook’s “falsely jolly,” “self-promoting,” and “addictive qualities” are what conceal its danger from the majority of users. While she appears less critical of *The Social Network* because “the movie knows” it is distorting the real-life Zuckerberg, she notes that Facebook, on
the other hand, is “slickly disengenuous” in its misrepresentation of reality. Users are blind to the limitations of the Facebook world because it poses as a viable venue for social connection. Smith believes that these online public spaces trap users in a commercial world, where statuses and posts become personalized ads, and we “[begin] to think of ourselves that way”—as mindless consumers. She urges us to “struggle against Facebook,” to avoid the disguised system in which everything is simplified and reduced into Zuckerberg’s format.

Smith encourages readers to avoid trimming their lives into highlight reels for Facebook. Quoting “philosopher-techie” Jaron Lanier directly, she echoes his proposal for readers to “seek to inspire the phenomenon of individual intelligence” rather than to “seek to make the pack mentality as efficient as possible.” Smith applies Lanier’s advice throughout her essay, considering and presenting different perspectives, gathering steam, and inspiring the reader to question with her. She begs readers to “step back from [their] Facebook Wall for a moment,” asking them to consider their life in such a format: “Doesn’t it, suddenly, look a little ridiculous?” Yet, Smith seems wary of her own generational perspective, and thus encourages her readers to form their own opinions. She emphasizes her points with italics, but also asks many questions to invite her readers to think, initiating a discussion in which individuals explore what they know of themselves and the world in relationship to social networks, hoping to inspire the individual intelligence that Lanier promotes.

As a college professor witnessing an ever-growing dependence on technology, Mark Edmundson proposes his own approach to encouraging individual thought. In his essay, “Dwelling in Possibilities,” Edmundson explains that his students have become “possibility junkie[s],” caught up in the fast-paced, hectic world of technology, where anything seems possible (33). Edmundson finds himself competing with laptops in his own classroom, email and YouTube filling the time and space in which he wants his students to “stop and think” about the material he gives them (42). In an era where technology allows students to lose themselves in cyberspace’s limitless possibilities, Edmundson claims that it is all the more crucial for them to “stop and think” about what they are engaging. Edmundson believes that deliberate and open conversation about the ideas of relevant “brilliant antagonists” like
Nietzsche or Freud can encourage intellectual growth and individual thought in the otherwise distracted minds of his students (42). By confronting his students with controversial ideas, Edmundson hopes to get them to pry their eyes from their screens, confront the texts, and form their own opinions, an integral step towards “self-knowledge” and education (42). Those who do not at least occasionally disconnect from technology end up consumed by “[a]lcohol, drugs, divorce, and buying, buying, buying what [they] don’t need [that] will all help [them] jam [their] round peg of a self into this or that square-holed profession” (43). Because of today’s more open possibilities, without stopping to think about what we want for ourselves, we will lose our way, drowning in other people’s dreams instead of pursuing our own.

Edmundson seems sure, almost self-righteous, about his anti-technology stance, urging other professors to follow his lead in the name of students’ best interests. “Stop and think,” he demands at each of his many paragraph breaks; “stop and think” if you are in cyberspace instead of listening to a lecture; “stop and think” about how you choose to engage with the world rather than just “doing what [you] are supposed to do” (40). Yet, he addresses “[us] teachers” rather than his students, who are forced to “check [laptops] at the door” (43). Should he not be convincing his students, rather than other professors, about the value of traditional education? Edmundson implies that his students—intoxicated by the possibilities of technology that provide “a kind of high that can take the place of happiness”—do not possess the presence of mind to think for themselves (38). According to Edmundson, students are too wrapped up in technology to consider who they are and what they want in life. Edmundson is concerned, like Smith, that technology threatens the individual. However, when criticizing technology, Edmundson does not consider the limits of the environment he enforces in his classroom.

Edmundson fails to recognize that, in many ways, his methods are as limiting as Zuckerberg’s Facebook. Smith may be considered one of Edmundson’s “brilliant antagonists,” challenging society’s infatuation with Facebook, and asking her readers to think critically about the implications of social networking. Edmundson, on the other hand, channels student learning into a structure he finds important, similar to the way Facebook forces users to adhere to its format. If technology opens the door to limitless possibilities, couldn’t Edmundson utilize it to his advantage, somehow incorporating it for
his students’ benefit? Instead, he concretely defines what a proper education should be and creates a classroom environment that rejects technology, labeling it as a destructive force.

When Facebook and Edmundson provide rigid definitions, individuals lose opportunities to learn for themselves. However, Edmundson’s essay is not without value. When he asks his students to “stop and think,” question, and engage with antagonists, he makes a point that seems crucial for intellectual thought. Like Smith, he asks his students to not blindly accept ideas, but to doubt.

Stacey D’Erasmo’s “Uses of Doubt” suggests that a “divining rod,” a keen sense of doubt, is crucial to a developing artist’s work, particularly in today’s society that pretends that doubt is not only unnecessary but entirely avoidable (24). D’Erasmo posits that doubt “begins to tug when it nears something fertile and fluid and underground,” suggesting that doubt, when investigated, can unearth new dimensions to an artist’s work (24). Just as Edmundson wants his students to “stop and think,” doubt helps D’Erasmo to pursue self-knowledge and grow. Through careful and thoughtful investigation, she evaluated and reexamined her work, making changes for the better. Since “[a]rt is not, by definition, a sure thing,” the artist can explore and pursue endless possibilities, thereby breaking accepted societal conventions to seize control of “the means of production of meaning” for their own purposes, to suit their own desires (26, 24). D’Erasmo, like Smith and Edmundson, asks us to question societal definitions of education and individual growth. Doubt is integral to this healthy learning process, as it helps us break away from the pack mentality and function as independent, critical thinkers.

While reflecting that society’s sometimes rigid definitions can be rewarding, D’Erasmo notes that an aesthetic’s development necessarily involves struggle and discomfort, as art is constantly subject to “uncertainty, to risk, to unpredictability” (26). In the eyes of the world, an artwork may be “wayward, uncertain,” and “of dubious value” (27). It may be, nevertheless, worthwhile. Artists operate in a realm of uncertainty: they doubt themselves and their surroundings as society, in turn, doubts their work. Yet, from that doubt and experimentation with new aesthetics, new social commentary and art forms can arise.
Doubt is difficult and often uncomfortable, as the individual is forced to reexamine himself. When considering artists, D’Erasmo confronts a frightening truth: although artists are committed to their art and aesthetic, required to “own [their] desire and value it to a foolish degree,” there is usually a moment when everything falls apart, when uncertainty becomes too much to handle (26). However, she thinks that the “moment when the novel falls apart, the commitment to art falls apart, the life falls apart,” is “tremendously undervalued” because, while paralyzing at first, it reveals the vulnerability of the artist (29). Such uncertainty and vulnerability leads to a redefinition of perspective, identity, and aesthetic. Doubt, as it contributes to this process of evaluation and education, helped D’Erasmo define herself as an artist.

Growth is fluid, a continual process of stopping and thinking, reevaluation, and often uncomfortable decision-making. As Smith and Edmundson warn, we can only develop intellectually when we stop blindly accepting societal trends and conventions, and think critically about our choices. Growth is a messy matter, a matter we must take into our own hands. We are all in need of a little doubt.

WORKS CITED

