In politics, the Internet is more likely to provide cover than transparency.

By Frank Rich
The New York Times

"The Social Network," you're understandably sick of hearing, is a brilliant movie about the Harvard upstart Mark Zuckerberg and the messy birth of his fabulous startup, Facebook, circa 2004. It's historical fiction, with a sardonic undertow. You leave the movie with the sinking feeling that the democratic utopia breathlessly promised by Facebook and its Web brethren is already gone with the wind.

Nowhere, perhaps, is the gap between the promise and..."
The reality of the Internet more evident than in our politics. In the idealized narrative of digital democracy, greater connectivity has bequeathed more governmental transparency, more grass-roots participation and even a more efficient rendering of political justice.

Thanks to YouTube, which arrived just a year after Facebook, a senatorial candidate (George Allen of Virginia) caught on camera delivering a racial slur was brought down swiftly in 2006. Not long after, it was the miracle of social networking that helped enable Barack Obama's small donors to overwhelm Hillary Clinton's fat cats, and his online activists to out-organize her fearsome establishment pros.

But you can also construct a less salutary counter-narrative. For all the Obama team's digital bells and whistles, among them a lightning-fast site to debunk rumors during the campaign, Internet-fed myths still rage. In a Pew poll in August, 18 percent of Americans labeled the president a Muslim — up 7 points since

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The explosion of accessible media and information on the Web, with its potential to give civic discourse a factual baseline and hold politicians accountable, has also given partisans license to find only the “facts” that fit their prejudices. Meanwhile, wealthy candidates such as Carly Fiorina, the former Hewlett-Packard chief executive running for Senate in California, have become adept at buying up real estate to compete with digital stink bombs tossed by the rabble.

The more recent miracle of Twitter theoretically encourages real-time interconnection between elected officials and the citizenry. But it, too, has been easily corrupted by politicians whose 140-character musings are often ghost-written by hired 20-somethings, just like those produced for pop stars such as 50 Cent and Britney Spears.

When South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford was pretending to hike on the Appalachian Trail during his hook-up with his mistress in Argentina last June, his staff gave him cover by feeding his Twitter account with musings about such uncarnal passions as “Washington, D.C., financial recklessness.”

At least Obama and Ron Paul have admitted they don’t write the Twitter feeds in their names. It took journalists poring through financial disclosure forms to discover that Sarah Palin had paid a Los Angeles blogger $22,000 to script her “Internet messaging.” We must take it on faith that her former running mate, John McCain, an admitted computer illiterate who didn’t use e-mail just two years ago, is now such a Twitter maven that he dashes off apertus about MTV’s Snooki to his followers.

Just as “The Social Network” hit the multiplexes, Malcolm Gladwell took to The New Yorker magazine with a stinging takedown of social networks as vehicles for meaningful political and social action. He calculated that the nearly 1.3 million members of the Facebook page for the Save Darfur Coalition have donated an average of 9 cents each to their cause.

Gladwell mocked American journalists’ glorification of Twitter’s supposedly pivotal role during last year’s short-lived uprising in Iran, suggesting that the rebels’ celebrated Twitter feeds — written in English, not Farsi — did more to titilate blogging technophiles in the West than to aid Iranians in their struggle against totalitarian rulers.

“With Facebook and Twitter and the like,” Gladwell wrote, “the traditional relationship between political authority and popular will” was supposed to be upended, so it would be “easier for the powerless to collaborate, coordinate and give voice to their concerns.” Instead, he concluded, we ended up with the reverse: Social media increase the efficiency of the existing order rather than empowering dissidents. In his view, social networking is far less likely to re-create the civil rights movement of the 1960s than to track down missing cell phones for Wall Streeters.

Gladwell’s provocative Internet critique is complemented by a much-buzzed-about independent movie — in this case, an actual documentary — that was released shortly before “The Social Network.” This film, titled “Catfish,” is a ham-fisted production, but it’s highly unsettling nonetheless. It tells of a 25-year-old Manhattan photographer who strikes up a devoted Facebook friendship with a small-town Michigan family whose 8-year-old daughter is a painting prodigy. When the photographer seeks out his virtual friends in the real Michigan, it’s inevitable that he and the audience will learn the hard way, as The New York Times film critic A.O. Scott put it, that cyberspace is a “wild social ether where nobody knows who anybody is.”

Even if Gladwell and “Catfish” are overstating the case, it is only one if you look at the political environment in our election year of 2010. The Internet in general and social networking in particular have done little, if anything, to hobble those pursuing power with such traditional means as big lies and big money.

Perhaps what’s most remarkable this year is the number of candidates who have tried to create fictitious avatars like the Facebook impostors in “Catfish.” These candidates and others often fashion their campaigns to avoid real reporters (and sometimes real voters). Some benefit from YouTube commercials paid for by impossible-to-trace anonymous donors. In this wild political ether where nobody knows who anybody is, the Internet provides cover, not transparency.

Go online, and you’ll discover that many of those now notorious false fronts for oil billionaires and other corporate political contributors have Facebook pages. We don’t know who has written checks to Crossroads GPS, the more shadowy wing of American
Crossroads, the operation concocted in part by Karl Rove to raise $50 million to attack Democrats.

But the American Crossroads page on Facebook sure looks like a bottom-up populist movement, festooned with photos of thousands of ordinary folk voting their “like” of the site. The Save Darfur Coalition page may have infinitely more friends, but it’s American Crossroads that has real clout in the real world even if nobody knows who is behind the screen.

What you might call our “Catfish” congressional candidates are a perfect match for the phantom donors. The power of the Google search hardly deters those politicians intent on fictionalizing their identities. Richard Blumenthal, the Democratic senatorial candidate in Connecticut, repeatedly implied in public speeches that he had fought in the Vietnam War, though he’d served only stateside. Mark Kirk, the Republican senatorial candidate in Illinois, bragged of a nonexistent teaching career, and exaggerated his derring-do in a teenage boating accident. Ben Quayle, an Arizona GOP congressional candidate with no children but a history of writing under a nom-de-porn on a racy website, burnished his image with a campaign photo in which nieces stood in for his nonexistent daughters.

In each of these cases it was old-fashioned analog reporters, most of them working for newspapers, who penetrated the falsehoods.

When Christine O’Donnell ran an ad with the improbable opening line, “I’m not a witch,” we once again had to marvel at the Delaware primary triumph of a mystery candidate with a falsified résumé, no job, and apparently no campaign operation beyond out-of-state donors and out-of-state fans such as Palin “writing” Twitter endorsements.

O’Donnell’s Facebook page is by far the most palpable presence of an aspiring senator who shuns public events and the press in Delaware.

In a brave new political world where candidates need only exist in virtual reality, it’s no wonder that Donald Trump believes he’s qualified for public office because of his relative gravitas as a heavyweight on a television “reality” show.

Sometimes I wonder if the most “real” candidate this year is the one most derided by Democrats, Republicans, the news media and late-night comics alike: Alvin Greene, a 33-year-old previously unknown military veteran who won the Democratic senatorial primary in South Carolina with 59 percent of the vote over a Charleston city councilman. Greene achieved his victory without giving any speeches, raising any money or stating any positions. As soon as he won, even South Carolina Democrats said his candidacy was a Republican prank. The most incriminating piece of evidence was the fact that he doesn’t own a computer.

As it turned out, Greene’s résumé actually is more authentic than those of O’Donnell, Blumenthal, Quayle and Kirk. He really is who he said he is — a genuine nobody with no apparent political views.

That he drew 100,000 votes — more than three times O’Donnell’s tally in her Delaware victory — leaves you wondering if he’d have a shot at the presidency had he only been on Facebook.