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Online Social Networks: Who's using them and why?

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*Abstract*

The popularity of online social networks has brought about a shift in traditional community dynamics. The false sense of privacy the networks invoke along with the altered communication elements present with computer-mediated communication have created complex dynamics not experienced before. The elements of anonymity - expression of true self and hyperpersonal interaction - have made it possible for users to experience heightened levels of connectedness which in turn can produce unintended consequences. By looking at who's using the medium and why, we will explore these dynamics and discuss their effect on future use of the medium.

## ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS: WHO'S USING THEM AND WHY?

### *Introduction*

Online social networks have grown exponentially over the past few years. A recent study done by ComScore Media Metrix found that sites in this category have increased in traffic from 185 percent to 528 percent over the past year alone (Walker, 2006). But what are the implications of the increasing use of these communities? Who uses them and why? These questions intrigued us most when it came to network monitoring by individuals in authoritative positions such as school administrators, employers and law enforcement. What follows next is a description of the medium and how the medium is used by both network members and network manipulators (*manipulators* in this context refers to those who are not true members of the community, but are there to gain information for ulterior or insidious motives). The comfort level of online interactivity with others in a group setting causes people to publish personal information. Due to the widespread public access to these sites however, the invoked sense of privacy and intimacy is misinterpreted.

### *The Medium Explained*

There are essentially two types of online social networks that dominate the Web. The first type attempts to connect users through “matching” their profile information with other users. The second type features information sharing as its main focus. We will explain how these sites work, on both a technological and social level, and why they are used.

“Those who feel better able to express their ‘true selves’ in the Internet rather than face-to-face interaction settings are more likely to form close relationships with people met on the Internet” (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons 2002). It’s this subtle fact that is the driving force

behind the social success of social networks. With the lack of face-to-face complexities, like awkwardness and social cues, humans are more apt to pour their heart and soul onto a web page. Bargh et al continue to explain someone's 'true self' as a mix of one's unconscious self through a public mask. It's not what we feel obligated to portray in public or what we strive to someday be (ideal self and ought self respectively), but rather our 'persona' as Carl Rogers explain in his 1951 writings on the concept.

As we'll discuss later, the sites feed off of the abundant amount of self information put into the web site systems. But first, let's discuss the different types of social networking, or social group, sites.

We've chosen three of the most popular sites for examples of "user matching" networks: Facebook.com, MySpace.com, and eHarmony.com. Each requires a person to become a member in order to gain from its functions and benefits as well as prohibit lurking or viewing without participating (Walther 1996). The point is to extract information from a person. By requiring someone to provide the necessary information for registering, the sites' mathematical algorithms are able to match you with suggested friends. It should be noted, however, that although developers may be able to use math to suggest similar people, there really isn't an algorithm to create a community as a whole (Kollock, 1996). If there was, a cookbook would have been written a while back to help people generate the exact type of community they want. A community will always evolve and probably end up different than what the original creator intended. Regardless, these sites still do an excellent job of connecting people.

Facebook, for example, is a network for college students. Any member can put into his or her profile what classes he or she is taking; spring break, summer, winter, and graduation plans; current clubs and jobs; or favorite music, movies, and books. Then, a user just has to click on one

of the snippets they or anyone else as entered, COM370A for example, and Facebook provides a list of everyone else whose profile had information that matched.

MySpace is similar to Facebook however instead of being solely meant for college students, it opens its digital doors to anyone over the age of 14. A solid portion of the user base, though, is middle school students who lie about their age. The features and functions are the same as Facebook however they also have a personal journal that is displayed to other users.

Lastly, eHarmony is meant for an older crowd. Its intent is to create mostly one-on-one romantic relationships through matching profiles and personalities, and suggesting potential mates. There are plenty of success stories and fewer problems than MySpace. This is probably due to the fact that the vast majority of the user base is people over the age of 25, compared to MySpace where there are a lot of sexual predators and young kids – an obviously bad mix.

The second type of online social network features information sharing as the main function. In contrast to the user matching sites discussed earlier, which share users' personal information, these sites are strictly meant to share specific types of information, such as artwork, writing, pictures, stories, advice or self-made music and movies.

Our first example is Deviantart.com. With over 20 million art entries and 250,000 members, Deviantart is a centralized location for anyone in the world to upload their art work and creative writing. The social group aspect is brought to light with a member's ability to vote on art work, send messages back and forth, and watch for new artwork on his or her friend's list.

Last.fm is a perfect example of how the web is interacting with other technologies to bring together people with common interests. The way Last.fm works is a member can download a plug-in for his or her favorite music player. Then, whenever a song plays, that info is submitted to his or her profile online. The site keeps track of how much each song was played. The profile

then displays the most played songs, artists, and albums. Although there isn't much of a focus on matching like the previous sites, a user can search for who has played the most The Beatles songs, etc. The bigger focus is on giving the ability to join groups and adding friends to watch lists. The last function of the site takes your most favorite music, and offers the names of similar types of bands that you may like, along with information about that band and which Last.fm members have played them the most.

Whichever type of site someone becomes a member of, the common thread is that they connect people. Similarly, on another level, they all connect people with like interests. The bottom line is a user always ends up in a group or with other people he or she wants to be in. This creates a comfort level that is imperative as to why the social group sites have increased in volume exponentially.

This layer of comfort is present for several reasons. The first is how the asynchronous and anonymity communication methods decrease the tensions between the individual and groups (Kollock, 1996). If you become bored or uncomfortable communicating with someone else, it's really easy to cut off communication and not have to deal with the future social implications.

Take this for example: When you are at a baseball game and the person sitting next to you starts to get into a conversation, it can get very annoying because you are trying to watch a game. Then this stranger starts asking very personal questions. Now things are very awkward, especially since this person sitting next to you is your boss' son. To be crass or offensive can have dire implications. To simply get up and leave means you miss the game. Consequently, you don't leave and take no course of action, but are uncomfortable for the next seven innings. This doesn't happen with online communication, especially through social groups. You are at the complete control of your preferences and actions at all times (Kollock & Smith 1996, p.169).

Successful social groups, like the ones we've discussed thus far, create complete customization. Ostrom described in her 1990 writing *Governing the Commons* that successful communities allow its members to freely utilize its information and functions however they please. These successful communities also provide its members with the ability to customize the information, functions, and even rules all the while keeping within the general direction the community wants to head as whole.

### *Social Networks On Campus*

Just when parents, professors, and employers thought there was nothing else that could be used as a procrastination tool for college students, along come online social networks such as Facebook. As previously discussed, Facebook is a website which allows students, alumni and even college faculty to interact with each other by such activities as joining groups, adding friends, and commenting on a profile wall. Signing into one's profile, checking messages and photo comments are now just as common as checking school email. Facebook is a completely public domain not only for college students, but now also for high school students with valid email addresses. As with any other social network there are positive and negative implications. The positive aspects of Facebook on campus include breathing life into otherwise crumbling student organizations, promotional tools (such as setting up an event or creating a flier for view to all Facebook users), and connecting with friends. On the other had, there are some serious negatives to Facebook. These would include displaying violations of campus policy, illegal drug use, and privacy boundaries. Because of the negative aspects that Facebook presents, there is great controversy about how a social network such as could be used by upper Administration, Residence Life and college staff members such as Resident Assistants.

Since the creation and consequential monitoring of Facebook on campus, there have been many college coaches that have felt the need to warn student athletes about posting pictures or joining groups on Facebook. Two such incidences occurred at the University of Kentucky (UK) and the Indiana University (IU). The athletic director at UK, Mitch Barnhart, met with approximately 500 student athletes in January 2006 about inappropriate photos on Facebook (Wiseman, 2006). UK athletics spokesperson Scott Stricklin is documented saying that Barnhart “. . . wanted to make sure they knew what was expected of them and that they understood what their responsibilities were as far as wearing the Blue and White.” He also expressed concerns about “bad publicity that could result from misconduct displayed on the Internet” (Wiseman, 2006). At IU, career service professionals are warning students. There has been documented research that many potential employers of college students (recent graduates, summer interns, etc.) are using Facebook as a hiring tool. “The more irresponsible the students appear in the [Facebook] profile, the less likely they are to be hired” says Susie Clark, director of Undergraduate Career Services at the Kelley School of Business (Ginty, 2006). It appears, at these early stages of the Facebook lifeline, that many colleges and universities are taking responsible measures in warning students of their use of Facebook.

On the other hand, there are many discussions on how Facebook is potentially being used as tools to ‘bust’ or document student violations. On a student forum created by the Digital Media Winter 2006 course at the University of California at Santa Cruz, a discussion of Facebook and its use by college faculty (mainly Residence Life) was documented. In this forum, the users discussed a recent rumor that a student “[got] written up by their campus college for evidence found on Facebook. Apparently, students who have pictures of them drinking or doing illegal activities have been written up by their campus administration” (personal communication,

February 17, 2006). Besides the fact that there is no evidence that this actually did happen, it is a concern by this group of students which is shared by many others on college campuses. The general consensus in this forum was that many students do not understand that a social network such as Facebook is a public domain. That said, students need to take responsibility for their actions and not put personal pictures that may be incriminating on the website.

Overall Facebook is a social network tool that presents the same problems as any other network such as MySpace, eHarmony, Blogs, etc. The only difference is many students do not understand that their Resident Assistants, upper Administration, and possible Employers are potentially viewing their information. Students need to be smart about what they post within a public domain such as Facebook or they will continue to experience the unintended consequences.

#### *Use of Social Networks by Employers*

Employers are viewing social networking sites and social groups as potential recruiting tools (Balakrishna, 2006). Many companies are already doing random internet searches on potential employees (Fuller, 2006) and Facebook is just another tool companies have to screen employees. Employers who have access or have employees who have access to sites such as Facebook or MySpace can search for job applicants. They can view pictures and information that the students posted.

The use of these sites by employers has prompted colleges to advise students to be cautious of what they place on these sites. Most students didn't think about what they posted and viewed it as a fun way to communicate with their friends. Colleges have had to remind students that these sites are open to anyone who has access. With this in mind they have advised students to edit their sites. Students are being educated that they should not put anything on these sites

that they would not want a potential employer to see. There are safety measures that are offered by these sites. Facebook spokesman Chris Hughes was recently quoted in a [yaledailynews.com](http://yaledailynews.com) article explaining the safeguards;

Facebook has built-in safeguards against invasions of privacy and that students have the ability to protect themselves from employer investigation if they so desire. In order to view a profile, a future employer would have to be a graduate of the particular school that the interviewee is attending, and that school would have to give out .edu e-mail addresses to its alumni, he said. Moreover, if students do not want a potential employer reading their profiles, they can change their privacy settings to restrict viewer access to current students only (Balakrishna, 2006).

This brings up ethical questions. Would a company decide not to hire an applicant based solely on an entry they made on a public web site? What are companies looking for on these sites? According to Lance Choy, Director of the Career Development Center (CDC) at Stanford, “Employers might be able to confirm background information,” he said. “Some students write about their interests, and employers might want to check on whether this supports their job application. Some employers might try and learn something about the student’s personality and whether it would be appropriate for the job. However, there is information on Facebook that is not relevant to the job but may be used inappropriately by employers to assess a candidate” (Fuller, 2006).

These sites allow employers to get an inside look at potential candidates to determine if they fit their company’s needs. Many students feel this is an invasion of privacy as well as unethical and unfair. They felt that employers could not decide to hire or not hire a candidate based solely on a picture or personal musings. Emphasis should be placed on the applicant’s

skills, education, and experience; not personal information posted on a Web site. Can anyone really be sure that what an applicant is drinking out of that cup in the picture isn't liquor but soda? Shouldn't people be able to enjoy life and relieve stress outside of work? Students will say that, chances are, the same people doing these searches may have behaved in similar ways when they were in school. The only difference is that they didn't have the technology to broadcast it in their youth only to have it held against them later.

This brings us to the flip side of the coin – these students are using a public broadcast medium to display their personal life. Probably an equal amount of people would argue that what is publicly posted is fair game for anyone to do with as they see fit. Except that it's on a grander scale, what's different between this and an employer finding out that one of their staff members knows the applicant? When asked what they know about the applicant the staff member tells them that in college, the person was part of an underground militia plotting to take over the U.S. government. Assuming the applicant will not fit in at the organization based on this revelation, the HR director decides not to hire to them.

The pros and cons to this debate are endless. The main thought that students need to keep in mind is that this is a broadcast medium which has the potential of being viewed by almost anyone. If you don't want a potential employer to discover the "real you" then don't post those elements of your life on the Web.

#### *Use of Online Social Networks by Youth, Sexual Predators and Law Enforcement*

An area which has gained a lot of attention recently is the use of online social networks by sexual predators to prey on kids; a practice called "grooming" which can escalate to sexual harassment or assault (McCarthy, Gaunt, 2005). The site that is getting the majority of negative attention is MySpace. More than any other site, MySpace has become the place that middle and

high school kids go to socialize in the online world. The networks have given kids who are stuck at home a way to hang out with their friends without leaving home.

As stated earlier, you are required to be 14 to sign up for an account; however it is very easy to lie about your age. The most unfortunate thing about the site is it's not just easy for socially ravenous and naïve teens to lie about their age; it's also very easy for sexual predators to manipulate the medium for their own motives. Combine a young person's naiveté with the fact that they believe they are immune from harm and you get a recipe for disaster.

The majority of experiences are not disastrous of course. Online social networks contain so many paradoxical characteristics that it's hard to conceive a way to harness them while simultaneously realizing their full potential. Ilene Berson, Ph.D. of the University of South Florida sums up how the exciting possibilities of the Internet are intertwined with the awesome destructive powers it holds:

According to a quote by Rossetto, the digital age has brought with it "social changes so profound that their only parallel is probably the discovery of fire." Just as fire has brought us warmth and light, the Internet has ignited an excitement for learning in a global medium. Conversely, as the destructive force of the fire necessitates careful use of this unpredictable element, online interaction can expose youth to an insidious threat to their well being. Like the fire, the potential brilliance of the Internet may only be obscured by the hidden dangers which lurk beneath a mesmerizing façade.

This is painfully true, but we can't prohibit our children from participating in online interaction just because we're afraid of the fire. The Internet and online social networking is an integral part of this generation's social lives as well as integral to their success in our increasingly knowledge-

based economy. The key to taming the fire is in understanding the medium and what drives its users.

Without question, the Internet has given predators a less intimidating venue for their pursuits. They no longer have to risk the chance of getting caught while publicly approaching children on the street or in their neighborhood. They are easily able to leverage the element of hyperpersonal communication in their favor by creating an alternate persona or sending misleading messages online: from the comfort of their own home. Predators know exactly what to say to vulnerable teens and use the medium to come across as an ally in their tumultuous lives.

This ease of use by predators inevitably leads us to believe the Internet has led to an increase in predatory activity. After all, approaching a child for sexual intent is the ultimate example of uninhibited behavior, which has been proven to increase online. It is probable that a vast number of online sexual predators would never have dared solicit a child face-to-face. With the advantage of online anonymity, they experience a much lower risk of getting caught or being rejected outright.

For the same reasons a sexual predator is more successful online, law enforcement is able to experience a more productive environment as well. In the past, law enforcement officers couldn't feasibly dress up as a 14-year-old and try to initiate solicitation; but now they can. Due to the large amount of attention online sexual predators are attracting, cyber-crime units and legislation are directing a lot of their efforts towards the phenomena. With this added focus, law enforcement uses the knowledge it gains online to educate the community on how not to become victims. As well as educating the public, legislators around the country are starting to work with the sites that seem to cultivate these activities. MySpace dedicates 90 staff members to monitoring the safety of its members (Kawamoto & Sandoval, 2006) and just announced that it

has hired its first chief security officer. The security officer's credentials prove how serious MySpace is about the issue. Hemanshu Nigam, director of consumer security outreach and child safe computing at the Microsoft Corporation, had served as a federal prosecutor against Internet child exploitation for the United States Department of Justice, an adviser to a Congressional commission on online child safety, and an adviser to the White House on cyber stalking. The company is also working with the AdCouncil and the Center for Missing and Exploited Children to launch an ad campaign educating parents and children on the risks associated with online social networks. (Newman, 2006)

Astonishingly enough, given the increased level of awareness of online predators, kids are still falling victim to them in very high numbers. Roughly 250,000 accounts are being added to MySpace daily. (Kawamoto & Sandoval, 2006) With the relatively small amount of staff and law enforcement available to monitor these sites, the probability for infractions is high and research indicates that this is the case. Of 1,501 children surveyed by the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, 1 in 5 reported receiving an unwanted sexual solicitation (Finkelhor, Mitchell and Wolak, 2000). John McCarthy and Nathan Gaunt of the SAFE Program in Auckland, New Zealand also referenced some disturbing statistics from the same group:

A study by Wolak, Finkelhor and Mitchell in 2004 of 129 US cases of Internet-initiated sexual contact between adults and children showed:

Of the young victims:

- 76% were aged between 13 and 15 years
- 75% female, 25% male
- 50% victims described being 'in love' with the adult

- 74% of the young people agreed to meet face-to-face despite the overtly sexual requests of the adult
- 93% of these meetings resulted in sexual contact
- 41% of the young people spent at least one night away with the adult

As for the adults:

- Half were aged 20 years older than their victims
- 95% of them presented on-line as adults (only 5% lied about being an adult)
- 48% communicated for 1- 6 months before a face-to-face meeting (80% by phone)
- Half sent gifts to victim prior to a meeting
- 80% offenders brought up sex in discussion with the young person before meeting
- Less than 20% used violence or coercion (McCarthy & Gaunt, 2005)

These numbers clearly demonstrate that more research needs to be done to figure out why this is happening and how its frequency can be reduced. Why are children seemingly so open to advances from adults? Are they using the Internet to role play the adult lives they're so eager to experience and predators are so eager to give? The element of "true self" most likely comes into play in most of these situations. Young teens are in the midst of breaking free from childhood and the more adult-like personas they are able to project online are their "playground" for experimenting with adulthood. In an effort to escape their monotonous lives, they connect with seemingly exciting and caring adults in a world somewhere between reality and fantasy. Unfortunately most end up learning the hard way that, so often in life, the reality is much less appealing than the fantasy. Fortunately there is a large community of concerned individuals researching the phenomena and advising those who are in positions to make a difference.

### *Conclusion*

Due to the nature of the medium, members of online social networks are more apt to post personal information publicly. The comfort level achieved is based on two main elements: anonymity and being in your own environment both physically and online. These elements bring about a heightened sense of community amongst network users, sometimes producing unintended consequences.

Anonymity allows network members the freedom to explore their true selves by giving them the power to choose how to display themselves. Anonymity also allows hyperpersonal interaction to flourish which allows both network members and manipulators to present themselves differently than how they come across face-to-face.

Personal environment causes members to feel secure sharing their personal information because they are in their own environment and feel that they are only interacting with like-minded individuals. An individual sitting in front of a home computer will be inclined to forget about the vast audience they are communicating with.

Online social networks have become a major source of social interaction between large groups of individuals and trends indicate they will continue to grow. We cannot overemphasize the need for network members to make smart choices in order to avoid being burned by network manipulators. What a user posts online may haunt them for years to come. As long as the medium is analyzed comprehensively enough to understand the consequences of its use, risk of being burned by the flames of technology will be significantly reduced.

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