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Places to Go: Facebook

by Stephen Downes

[Facebook](#) was launched as "thefacebook" in September 2004 by Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg (Yadav [2006](#)). It followed a by then well-established model for social networking Web sites, following a trail blazed by [Friendster](#) and [Tribe](#), among others. What distinguished Facebook was its focus on education and its requirement that members must be affiliated with a recognized English-speaking university as signified by the having of an e-mail address from that institution.

Despite criticism and lawsuits, the site has grown from a way to connect people at elite universities to a massive billion-dollar business with an audience of more than 34 million active users (Maestri [2007](#); LaMonica [2007](#)). It is one of the busiest Web sites on the Internet, drawing more than 5.5 billion page views in February 2007 (Rosenbush [2007](#)). It began adding universities from India in May, 2006 and from Germany and Israel in August. And in September 2006, it opened its doors to the entire Internet (Abram [2006](#)).

It should not go unremarked that Facebook is an education site, built in the first instance by and for university students. It is a strange fulfillment of Cisco CEO John Chambers's prediction at Comdex 1999 that "Education over the Internet is going to be so big it is going to make e-mail look like a rounding error" (cited in Wall, Ahmed, and Smit [2006](#), 7). Certainly educators, who subsequently went on to develop online courses and learning management systems, had something very different in mind. Yet just as early defenders of the traditional university over online instruction pointed to the institutions' essential role in promoting social interaction, perhaps Facebook has captured the essence of the university system more accurately than the learning management system.

As the Archbishop of Canterbury has commented, "there is a profoundly political element in the university. It is taken for granted that those who exercise power in a society need to be formed in a particular culture. They need to learn how to reflect on the social interactions around them; they need to learn how to evaluate the reasons that people give for actions and policies. . . . The university, then, sustains a culture of its own, a culture of conversation and mutual criticism and appreciation, in the context of which people may grow into a deeper understanding of what characterises human beings as such in their social interaction" (Williams [2006](#), ¶8, ¶20).

Social interactions form the core of Facebook's design and are arguably the reason for its success. Members are invited to join Facebook and, once members, to connect with other members of Facebook by means of an e-mail invitation. The recipient clicks on a URL that (after login) leads to a decision page that asks whether the person in question is really a friend. If the recipient accepts the invitation (the other option is "ignore"), then he or she is given the opportunity to describe the relationship in more detail.

The design of this interaction is important and defines the nature of the community. Relations in Facebook are defined not only as "friends" but also as members of social networks. These, in the first instance, constituted university classes (and many of Facebook's displays still categorize members by their affiliation) but have subsequently come to include groups, causes, and cities and towns. Contrast this with a business-oriented Web site such as [LinkedIn](#), where contact, rather than friendship, is important. The choice offered by LinkedIn, between "knowing" and "not knowing," arguably pushes people to make connections rather than build relationships (Balfour [2007](#)). Or contrast this with Web sites such as [Flickr](#), [Slideshare](#), or [Twitter](#) where confirmation is not required at all; one user merely declares that he or she is "following" another, and the other may or may not reciprocate.

As the structure of the social network defines the community, the definition of the social network also creates the privacy that users value so greatly. Facebook grants members numerous privacy options, allowing them to control whether friends, other members, or nonmembers can view their profile; to control whether friends or members can send them notifications; and to control what information about themselves they send to the outside world. On Facebook, privacy is not only about control but also about trust and understanding. You can share your secrets—or your party plans—while keeping these secrets within a trusted circle of friends.

And there are many ways to share content on Facebook. In addition to a member's profile, which is completed by filling out an online form, users may submit content in the form of "notes." Notes are nothing more complicated than blog posts that may be in plain text or formatted with basic HTML. Notes may also be imported from an external blog, such as one created on [Blogger](#), via the blog's RSS feed, or imported as a text message from a member's mobile phone.

Members may also create more specialized content. Facebook calendar submissions are popular because after filling out the event name and information, members can send calendar entries to an exclusive guest list and allow invitees to add additional content. Members may also allow each other to post public notices in an area of their profiles called "the wall." They may upload photographs and attach them to profiles, groups, networks, or events. And they can update a small single-sentence input area known as the "status."

What makes Facebook work so well as a communications tool is that the sum total of these contributions is displayed in a member's "minifeed." When a member logs on to the Facebook main page, recent entries from all his or her friends' minifeeds are displayed in the large center column. Thus, a member can catch up with an entire network immediately from a single page. Only the most recent entries are displayed, and there's no way to view more, so there's no sense of falling behind. And members can adjust their preferences to determine what sort of entries should be displayed—showing only events, for example, or more notes posts and fewer group memberships.

In May 2007, Facebook opened its platform, providing an application program interface (API) to allow external applications to upload content. (An API is a set of specifications defining how input to Facebook should be addressed, how authentication is managed, and how data should be structured.) The plan, according to Zuckerberg, was to make Facebook a "platform"—that is, "a software environment where others can create their own services, much the way anyone can write programs for Microsoft's Windows operating system on PCs" (Kirkpatrick [2007](#), ¶4). As a result, Facebook members are now able to select from dozens of applications to input and display novel types of content.

The most popular applications give readers an idea of the types of content being created (Hendrickson [2007](#)). [iLike](#) allows members to share iTunes playlists. [Where I've Been](#) allows members to display a zoomable interactive map (specifically, a [Google Map](#) customized by [TripAdvisor](#)). [Flickr Photos](#) allows members to import thumbnails of photos recently uploaded to Flickr. The [Honesty Box](#) allows members to send each other anonymous messages.

The introduction of third-party applications has not been without its challenges. Users complained that the new applications were abusing the notifications system by sending unauthorized requests to members' friends. The applications were also cluttering users' profiles and sometimes hiding things (like advertising) from profile owners (Williams [2007](#)). The managers at Facebook are now struggling to find the balance between tools that spread in a viral manner and tools that allow people to maintain their security and privacy (Morin [2007](#)).

However, while Facebook lets data in, there have been criticisms that it is a "walled garden," a trait it shares with learning management systems. Scoble ([2007](#)) provides an example: ". . . you can't get to data stored on Facebook unless you're a Facebook member. Two days ago I did a video for Chris Pirillo on Facebook. Chris instantly got excited and wanted to share that with his blog's readers. But he couldn't. That video is locked inside Facebook's walled garden. If you don't have a key (a Facebook account), you can't see it" (¶8).

This is not completely true, however. Facebook does export some RSS feeds—for example, status updates (which can then be imported and rebroadcast using [Twitter](#)) and notifications. But still, the criticisms are mostly well founded. As Gilbertson (2007) writes, "When entering data into Facebook, you're sending it on a one-way trip" (§3). There's no way to export photos from Facebook, to export notes, and most crucially, to export your list of friends, the set of data known in social networking circles as the "social graph."

This has led Brad Fitzpatrick, the architect behind another of Facebook's predecessors, [LiveJournal](#), to argue that the social graph should be shared from one social network site to the next (Fitzpatrick and Recordon 2007). This means members could move their profiles and lists of friends from place to place (Downes 2007). It also means that they would have a single login name that stays consistent from site to site—an [OpenID](#), for example. Fitzpatrick writes, "People are getting sick of registering and re-declaring their friends on every site. . . . Developing 'Social Applications' is too much work" (Fitzpatrick and Recordon 2007, "Problem Statement" ¶2).

By contrast, and at the same time, writers have been warning about the danger of too much openness. According to many, Facebook is ideal for phishing attacks and identity theft. Profiles feel private, but they are more open than people realize. The [Sophos](#) Facebook ID Probe, for example, showed that Facebook members willingly revealed personal data to a small green plastic frog: "He now has enough information to create phishing emails or malware specifically targeted at individual users or businesses, to guess users' passwords, impersonate them or even stalk them" (Huffman 2007, ¶10). Numerous people have been fired from their jobs or even suspended from university for "private" comments or photos posted in Facebook.

Facebook is at once too closed and too open because the functions it serves require both openness and privacy. It is, like other social networks, trying to connect people, trying to let them introduce each other, communicate, share their thoughts and memories, and create a community. It needs to encourage openness to do this; it needs to provide members with a space where they can write and create and send messages to each other. At the same time, it seeks to protect the integrity of the groups and the communities that are formed within its boundaries. And to do this, it needs to keep the group's transactions behind closed doors to provide, not so much secrecy, but privacy.

This is a dilemma that faces not only Facebook but educational applications in general. The closed nature of the learning management system is frequently defended on the ground that students need a safe environment where they can experiment without consequences. But at the same time, students may be more motivated to do well when they are required to present their work in public or to participate in the wider professional community. Students need groups, but they also need networks.

At the same time, the nature and popularity of Facebook itself challenges the idea of what an educational application should look like. Facebook puts the social community first, with content—including, but not limited to, educational content—being the medium of exchange between them. Though the traditional learning management system will contain community features, such as a chat room or discussion area, it contrasts sharply with Facebook because it puts content first and structures interactions around the course, the textbook, or the professor.

And if the social function is indeed the primary function of our educational institutions, then we need to ask how that function is being performed, both by Facebook and by our colleges and universities. For there is not only a design difference between sites such as Facebook and, say, [MySpace](#); there is also a demographic difference. As researcher Danah Boyd has argued, typical Facebook users "tend to come from families who emphasize education and going to college. They are primarily white, but not exclusively," while MySpace "is still home for Latino and Hispanic teens, immigrant teens" as well as "other kids who didn't play into the dominant high school popularity paradigm" (Boyd 2007, "Socioeconomic divisions" ¶3-4). And perhaps that's not so far from the original purpose of Facebook. Maybe it was intended to be an online Gramercy Park. As Jay Rosen writes, "Gramercy Park is a beautiful, soft, manicured park in the city. It is the best park, luxurious and green. Gramercy Park is gated. Only the wealthy people who own property around the park are allowed

to access it. What would happen if NYC raised the capital to buy the park and take the gate down? It would get dirtier. There would be more people. It would be harder to police. There would be graffiti. There would be more crime. Gramercy Park would no longer be Gramercy Park" (cited in Rubel [2007](#), ¶12).

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