

Chapter 7

Face-to-Face on Facebook: Students Are There . . . Should We Be?

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SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: AN INTRODUCTION

In the past seven years, social network sites (SNSs) have moved from relative online obscurity to become the most trafficked Web sites in the United States and internationally. As of November 2008, two SNSs ranked in the top ten Web sites globally: Facebook (5th) and MySpace (7th). The same two ranked in the top five in the United States: MySpace (3rd) and Facebook (5th) (Alexa.com, accessed 2008). Social network sites have several key elements that, when combined, make them unique compared to other Web sites; according to boyd [*sic*] and Ellison, SNSs are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 211). As SNSs have grown in popularity, librarians, professors, and teachers have decided (on various levels) if and how to use them; in particular, Facebook has become part of the educational discourse on many college and university campuses due to its widespread use among students. In this chapter, I will examine current scholarly research on social networking sites; discuss the treatment

of SNSs in popular media; and investigate the educational uses of SNSs, specifically Facebook, by educators and librarians.

The Demographics

SNSs are extremely popular with Generation M. More than half of online teens, ages 12–17, use SNSs, and 85 percent of college students have an account with Facebook (Lenhart and Madden, 2007; Facebook, accessed 2008a). It is important to note that Generation M is not the only age group using social network sites. The fastest growing demographic on Facebook is users age 25 years and older (Facebook, accessed 2008a). According to Rapleaf, a research company, 63 percent of the users on Facebook are female and 36 percent are male (2007).

A Brief History

Social network sites arrived on the Internet scene in 1997 with the establishment of SixDegrees.com, the first Web site to combine the three elements of a social network site as mentioned in the Introduction (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Although SixDegrees folded in 2000, other social network sites soon followed. Many of the first sites were (and still are) popular with various U.S. subcultures. Friendster, Asian Avenue, and BlackPlanet all started in the late 1990s/early 2000s and still maintain a loyal user base.

MySpace started in Los Angeles in 2003 when two friends, Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe, had an idea to create a Web site connecting local L.A. bands, club owners, and friends (Sellers, 2006). Bands quickly began using MySpace to self-promote events to their fans, and by promoting their bands they brought more users to MySpace, and those users invited their friends, and those friends invited their friends, etc. Reaching out to local bands was pivotal in MySpace's quick success. At the same time, rival SNS, Friendster, began to flounder because of imposed restrictions on user profiles (bands, dogs, and buildings, for example, were not allowed to have profiles) and slow loading times (rapid growth slowed their servers to a crawl); Anderson and DeWolfe took notice and benefited by allowing users to have more control over their profiles and by providing quicker loading times (Sellers, 2006). Many Friendster users quickly migrated to MySpace.

As MySpace continued its rise in popularity, Facebook emerged in 2004 when several university students, Mark Zuckerberg and three

of his friends, Dustin Moskovitz, Chris Hughes, and Eduardo Saverin, began the SNS in their Harvard dorm rooms (Facebook, 2008b). For the first month access to Facebook was limited to Harvard students, but Zuckerberg et al. opened the site to three additional universities within one month. Word quickly spread about Facebook, and students around the country were requesting their university be added to the Facebook network. Originally, Facebook was only open to higher education institutions; every member had to have an ".edu" e-mail address to register and access the site. Within one year, the site had reached more than one million college and university students, faculty, and staff (Facebook, 2008b). Today, anyone can join Facebook and it still remains the most popular Web site among college and university students, even more popular than Google (Anderson Analytics, 2007).

As of June 2008, MySpace maintained the highest overall popularity in the United States, but Facebook dominated as the most widely used SNS among college and university students (Alexa.com, accessed 2008; Anderson Analytics, 2007). Although MySpace is the most popular SNS among high school students overall, students who aspire to attend a university or college generally connect online through Facebook, since it is widely acknowledged as the place where university and college students go (boyd, 2007a).

THE RISE OF FACEBOOK

I joined Facebook in late 2004 when I was employed as the marketing coordinator for Housing and Dining Services at Oregon State University (in 2007, I became the Business & Economics librarian at the same institution). I had some student "friends," but overall I found most staff and faculty were not interested in joining and, as a result, my network of friends was relatively small and uninteresting. That all changed in the summer of 2007. It was then that Facebook experienced a meteoric rise in popularity. Within one week, I had ten Facebook "friend" requests in my e-mail inbox from staff and faculty at Oregon State University. As the invitations continued to pile up, I quickly turned to the media to find out, "What is going on with Facebook?"

On May 24, 2007, Facebook launched the "Facebook Platform," which allowed any third party to develop applications for Facebook; and on that day 85 new applications were added (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Facebook applications are small programs that work on the Facebook Web site.

There are all types of applications including games, news aggregators, political opinion sharing, quizzes, sports affiliation, daily quotes, and book reviews; by adding an application to a profile, the user adds the ability to interact with that small program. So, from a user's Facebook page she can play games with other people, get the latest news, and read a funny quote sent from a friend—all for free. By opening up the development of applications to third-party developers, Facebook quickly set themselves apart from other major social network sites. Sites like MySpace closely guarded the development of applications and typically shut down third-party applications or acquired them for a small sum (Arrington, 2007). As of June 2, 2008, developers had added 24,000 applications, roughly 140 applications per day, to Facebook since the Facebook Platform was launched (Vora, 2008).

Although most applications do not have an educational component, many educational institutions and enterprises are now engaged in creating applications with the hopes that students will connect with their service or product through Facebook. Libraries, such as the Harvard University Library System, Hennepin County Library, and UCLA, have created online catalog applications for students to embed into their profiles. Library database providers, like JSTOR and Worldcat.org, have also created search engine applications for their services. While these different library and database applications do get some use, social applications where users interact with one-another, such as Library Gifts created by Michael Porter of the OCLC Online Computer Library Center, are considerably more popular; as of November 2008 Library Gifts had 20 times more monthly users (2,005) than the top ranked library catalog application from Ryerson University (77 monthly users). This is understandable since socializing is the primary objective of Facebook.

Another educational use for Facebook applications is the creation of the applications themselves. Instructors BJ Fogg and David McClure at Stanford developed a hands-on learning opportunity for university students using applications. In the fall of 2007, Fogg and McClure taught the computer science course, "Creating Engaging Facebook Apps" (Stanford University, accessed 2008). In this class, 80 students created more than 50 applications that were installed over 20 million times (Ammirati, 2008).

ACADEMIC RESEARCH INTO FACEBOOK

danah boyd, a sociologist, PhD student, and pioneering researcher in the field of SNSs, keeps an online bibliography of all known academic publications, conference papers, trade publications, works in progress, and theses on the subject of SNSs (boyd, accessed 2008). A review of the academic publications listed on her site as of May 29, 2008, revealed there was one publication about social network sites in 2003, three in 2004, 11 in 2005, 20 in 2006, 24 in 2007, and 12 for the first half of 2008. A search using the term “social networking site*” in Academic Search Premier revealed 71 scholarly articles; five were published in 2006, 19 in 2007, and 66 in 2008 (as of November). The same search in Web of Science uncovered 35 articles; 1 in 2005, 3 in 2006, 9 in 2007, 22 in 2008 (as of November). It is obvious from these numbers that interest in SNSs is slowly growing in academia.

Popular media often focuses on the negative aspects of emerging technologies and its effect on youth and young adults, but published academic research into Facebook reveals many positive correlations between Facebook use and student life. A study conducted at two large public universities in Texas showed a positive relationship between intensity of Facebook use and students’ life satisfaction, social trust, civic participation, and political engagement (Valenzuela, Park, and Kee, 2008). Similar research at Michigan State University (MSU) found Facebook plays an important role in which students form and maintain social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007). French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu first analyzed social capital in the 1980s when he linked social connections and resources with economics (Portes, 1998). MSU Professors Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe define social economics as “the resources accumulated through the relationships among people” (2007). Three types of social capital are discussed in the MSU findings: bridging social capital, bonding social capital, and maintained social capital. Bridging social capital is defined as a weak tie or loose connection that may prove useful, but does not typically provide emotional support. Bonding social capital is described as emotionally supportive connections, like relationships with close friends and family. Maintained social capital is the ability to maintain valuable connections as a person moves through life. According to the researchers, “Facebook appears to play an important role in the process by which students form and maintain social capital, with usage associated with all three kinds of social capital included in our instrument” (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, 2007).

Interest in SNSs is high among librarians and as of November 20, 2008, the Facebook Group "Librarians and Facebook" boasted 7,395 members. The largest educators' Group "Educators Using Facebook" had 533 members. In 2006, Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis (2007) conducted a study about academic librarians and their perspectives toward Facebook. Out of the 126 librarians who participated in the study, 114 had heard of Facebook. When given a list of possible effects Facebook has had on their library, 10 percent of the participants indicated computer use had gone up due to student use of Facebook. Fifty-one participants indicated that librarians needed to keep up with Internet trends like Facebook. Fifty-four percent of the librarians indicated Facebook might serve an academic purpose, whereas 34 percent said they were unsure. Nineteen percent of the librarians expressed concern over privacy issues related to Facebook. Because the research conducted by Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis is over two years old, and in that time the popularity of Facebook has quickly spread beyond colleges and universities, it would be interesting and enlightening to replicate the study and compare results.

EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS OF FACEBOOK

When I discuss Facebook and other SNSs with faculty and staff members of universities and colleges and teachers at high schools, many questions pop up but are generally centered around one focal question: "Should we (I) be there?" These worries are what I've come to refer to as "Facebook anxiety"; they include concerns about generational differences, technological expertise, appropriateness and professionalism, privacy, and legality. Researcher Alice Marwick calls anxieties such as these "technopanic" (2008). As outlined by Marwick, technopanic has three defining characteristics: a focus on new media such as computer technologies; widespread negative media attention of young people's use of the technology; and cultural anxiety that results in parents, educators, or lawmakers curtailing or controlling young people's use of the new technology or the producers of the new technology.

Popular media has sensationalized the supposed threat of online predators and privacy concerns. Most of the hype centers on only a handful of incidents. In June 2008, Facebook had 80 million active users. It is only fair to assume the online community will mirror the social ills of the larger offline society; however, it is important that educators and librarians recognize the benefits of online social networking. As Marwick

points out, "While new discoveries almost always have both benefits and disadvantages, breathless negative coverage of technology frightens parents, prevents teenagers from learning responsible use, and fuels panics . . . teenagers should be encouraged in their use of technology. Technological skills are advantageous both in terms of social capital and job prospects, and we should promote technological knowledge among young people rather than discourage it" (2008).

When librarians and educators are on Facebook, what is the impact? Does the time, energy, and learning curve necessary for a SNS presence by educational institutions merit such a presence? A review of the available literature holds some surprising findings. A study by Mazer, Murphy, and Simonds examined what students would expect of classroom climate, learning, and motivation based on an instructor's Facebook profile (2007). In this study, 133 undergraduate students at a large university were shown one of three instructor profiles; the same instructor was used, but each profile had a different level of self-disclosure (low, medium, and high). The low disclosure profile featured only a head shot and no comments on the "Wall," the medium disclosure profile included photos of the instructor at home with her family but no comments on the "Wall," and the high disclosure profile included photos of the instructor in various social situations with friends and family in public locations and many comments (not related to teaching) were featured on the "Wall." Over 80 percent of students who viewed the high and medium disclosure profiles made comments emphasizing what they believed the teacher's strengths would be based on her use of Facebook and a small group of students made negative comments. Sixty-one percent of the students who viewed the low self-disclosure profile indicated they could not determine the effectiveness of the instructor based on the profile. The majority of all the participants in the study viewed the teacher's use of Facebook positively.

Another quantitative study by Hewitt and Forte (2006) found contact between professors and students on Facebook had "no impact on students' ratings of professors" when compared with students who had not had contact with the same professors through Facebook. However, in the qualitative section of the survey, several students indicated Facebook contact had a positive impact on their perceptions of the professor and no students indicated it had a negative effect. Gender did seem to be a factor in the qualitative section, with males being twice as likely to say faculty should be on Facebook.

In 2006, two librarians, Chu and Meulemans, did an investigation

into the problems and potential of MySpace and Facebook in academic libraries (2008). They administered a survey at California State University San Marcos to four sections of a general election course for first-year students. Of the 89 students who participated in the survey, 45 percent felt it would be useful if professors had a MySpace/Facebook profile page and 29 percent didn't know if it would be useful.

Professorial presence and activity in Facebook is a somewhat new phenomenon. As mentioned earlier, while an ".edu" account was originally required to join Facebook, most librarians and educators were not active in the site and students viewed the site as their exclusive community. However, it is possible students will become more open and interested in having educators and librarians on Facebook, especially now that Facebook is open to the general public and the largest growing group in Facebook is persons over age 25. In the not-so-distant future, students will no longer remember a time when Facebook was only open to university students, faculty, and staff, because all of the students who had Facebook accounts in 2004 and 2005, when Facebook was an exclusive community for universities and colleges, will have graduated and moved into the workforce.

CREATING A PROFILE, ADVERTISEMENTS, AND A "FACEBOOK FAN PAGE"

As mentioned in the previous section, many students have favorable views of professors and librarians who have Facebook profiles. Creating a profile is simple:

1. Visit Facebook.com.
2. Fill in your name, e-mail, birth date, gender, and password.
3. Confirm your e-mail.
4. Fill in some basic profile information.
5. Done. You now have a simple profile from which you can connect with students and colleagues, add photos and Facebook applications, create advertisements and "Facebook Fan Pages," etc.

When creating a personal profile in Facebook you should consider the following hints:

- Include photos. Keep it professional, but remember that adding several photos of yourself makes your profile more interesting

and approachable. In Facebook the third most popular activity is browsing pictures, after browsing profiles and interacting with applications (Freiert, 2007).

- Don't search out your students, instead, wait for them to invite you to be their "friend" in Facebook.
- Once you have student "friends," don't invite them to add applications to their profile, as this may be considered annoying and "spammy"; this also goes for coworkers unless the application relates directly to their jobs.
- Invite friends and colleagues already in Facebook to "friend" you.
- Join Facebook Groups and Facebook Fan Pages that interest you or are related to your field, for example, "Librarians and Facebook" or "Arts Education is Absolutely Necessary."
- Consider discussing Facebook and other SNSs in your classes. Students may become more engaged in the conversation if they know you have a profile and are truly interested in their opinions about these popular communities. Possible conversation topics include: privacy, usage, media-coverage, employer and instructor presence, relationships, and information sharing.

Once you have set up a profile you can begin promoting your school, library, and services through advertising and/or a Facebook Fan Page. Advertisements are displayed in the right hand side of Facebook profiles, Fan Pages, or directly in the News Feed. The ads are small blocks of space that are available for purchase by anyone including libraries, schools, and private companies and can be targeted to specific audiences (for example undergraduates at your university or students at your local high school). You can purchase ads by the number of times users click on your ads (CPC) or by the number of views (CPM). Visit www.facebook.com/Business/?socialads for more information.

Another way to advertise, without the cost, is through a Facebook Fan Page where students can "fan" your school or library, write on your Wall, upload photos, talk with other fans on the discussion board, view your hours, and interact with applications. When your Fan Page is updated, fans are notified in their personal News Feed. Usage stats, including the number of visitors to your page every day, can provide valuable information about the popularity of your Fan Page. Visit www.facebook.com/home.php#/Business/?pages for more information on setting up a Fan Page. A keyword search in Facebook for the term "library" in Facebook Fan Pages uncovered more than 500 pages; the

most popular pages were (1) NASA Glenn Technical Library with more than 3,000 fans, (2) The British Library with more than 2,200 fans, and (3) the Seattle Public Library System with more than 1,600 fans (accessed November 20, 2008).

As a final note, before creating an advertisement or a Facebook Fan Page, consider contacting the media or marketing specialists at your institution to inquire about any guidelines regarding the creation of an online presence in social networking sites.

CONCLUSION

In the past ten years, social network sites have gone from relative obscurity to the most highly trafficked Web sites in the world. Most recently, Facebook has emerged as the most popular Web site among college and university students in the United States. While not every librarian or educator needs to have a Facebook profile, all should know what effect SNSs are having on students, how they're being used, why they are so popular, and how students share information with one another on the sites. Librarians and educators should not be discouraged from creating profiles and participating in the Facebook community. Rather, they need not only to be where the students are, but also explore ways to effectively serve them in their online communities.

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