
UNC CHAPEL HILL

The Issue of Social Networking

Joe Recomendendes

recomend@email.unc.edu

781-710-2952

B.A. 2007, Communications, Boston College. Joseph Recomendendes worked in public affairs for the USS Constitution, planning events and working with the media. He also graduated the Institute for Television, Film, and Radio Production at Boston University in 2002, where he gained film, video, broadcast and Web experience. Joe intends to study public relations, specifically its military application. After graduate school, he intends to join the US Navy as a public affairs officer.

I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance while preparing this assignment and I have written the code myself

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Introduction

Social networking sites have changed the way that many interact with each other in recent years. However, many users display too much personal information, and some changes to the social scene may not be for the best. Furthermore, some users spend far too much time using these sites, and have arguably lost touch with human contact.

Thesis

This paper will review two of the most prominent social networking sites: Facebook and MySpace, how they have affected the social communities on college and university campuses, and whether or not there are privacy concerns on these online communities, and the concern of overuse and subsequent addiction.

Background

Social networking sites, such as facebook and MySpace, have completely changed the social scene for the most recent generation. With the ability and near necessity of students at universities and now high schools to have a facebook profile in order to be accepted, almost all students have a profile. Many of these profiles disseminate massive amounts of information to the viewer as well; some intentionally and some unintentionally. Cell phone numbers, screen names, e-mail addresses, as well as regular home addresses are commonplace information on a facebook profile. Some unintentional information that can be gleaned from one's facebook profile comes largely from content contributed by other users. Wall posts can give away personal information, as well as information regarding the activities of the person. Additionally, photos posted by others can often be offensive, or at least revealing of some personality traits of the people on facebook. Although there are privacy settings that can easily limit some of this information from being displayed, many users do not think to put them in place.

These sites are raising many issues as to the privacy of information, and whether or not anything is sacred anymore. Facebook and MySpace are being used more and more often to research possible candidates for a job, as well as whether or not students at a university or high school are obeying policy and

rules. Additionally, the larger issue at stake is how facebook and MySpace are changing social norms in a direction that deemphasizes actual interaction with people. Social networking sites grew very quickly, and without some examination about their use and the amount of information that is available on them; the consequences could be drastic.

Facebook

Facebook is a social network, geared towards high-school and college students. Facebook stands out as the most successful social network, especially for students, for two reasons. First, their membership numbers are both impressive and attractive, at over 21 million users.¹ Secondly, all the information on facebook is unique, and personal.² Furthermore, at the inception of facebook, one needed a college e-mail address in order to become a member.³ This provided a false sense of privacy to many users, as they perceived the community to be closed from the general world-wide-web. Therefore, many users were less hesitant to put large amounts of their personal information on the site, including their full name, address, and telephone number.⁴

MySpace

MySpace is another major social networking site, launched in 2003.⁵ The structure of MySpace is not particularly unique, though it does allow for greater customization of the users' profiles than facebook. Until recently, MySpace stood alone in allowing pictures, video, and music on the users profile to enhance the page. At the outset, MySpace was open to everyone over the age of 18, although this age limit has since dropped to 14.⁶ MySpace has over 20 million members, most of which are aged from 14-24.⁷ MySpace is especially popular in teen culture, with teens accessing the site at least once a day. MySpace is most famous for the widespread media panic that it has brought regarding the use of social networks by sexual predators.⁸ Despite these concerns, however, MySpace has remained extremely popular among teens and youth.

Literature Review

¹ (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)

² (Acquisti & Gross, 2006)

³ (Facebook)

⁴ (Acquisti & Gross, 2006)

⁵ (MySpace)

⁶ (Boyd, 2006)

⁷ (Boyd, 2006)

⁸ (Boyd, 2006)

Uses

The use of social network sites has grown rapidly in recent years, with people aged 18-24, especially college students, at the forefront of the growth.⁹ The use of facebook and MySpace is primarily for social needs, such as maintaining existing connections and friendships as well as forming new ones.¹⁰ In a 2007 study by Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe, the uses of facebook were examined. For their study, the researchers randomly sampled 800 Michigan State University Students.¹¹ The usage of facebook was measured using a "facebook intensity" scale. The measure included two self-reported assessments of facebook usage and behavior, the number of facebook friends the user had, and the amount of time spent on facebook in a given day.¹² Additionally, several likert-type scales were employed to measure the users' emotional connection to facebook, and how much emphasis and importance they placed on the use of this social networking site.¹³ Additionally, a measure was employed to rate how important certain aspects of the facebook profile were to the user.¹⁴ The researchers found that facebook users spent between 10 and 30 minutes on average using Facebook daily, and have between 150 and 200 friends listed on their profile.¹⁵ Furthermore, respondents also reported significantly more facebook friends with whom they share an offline connection, such as an existing friend, a classmate, someone living near them, or someone they met socially.¹⁶ This goes against many of the theories in place stating that people primarily use social networking sites to meet new people online. The researchers concluded that facebook is an important tool used by college students to enhance and maintain their social circle.¹⁷

The uses of MySpace are similar, although there are some aspects that are different due in large part to the younger demographic. Many teens are drawn to MySpace because it gives them an area to "hang out" with their friends in the digital realm.¹⁸ Many adults perceive the use of the internet to be a waste of otherwise well-spent time, but the teens need the digital realm to socialize with their friends. Teens have moved their socialization online due largely in part to the disappearance of a common gathering area.¹⁹ Boyd's analysis demonstrates that teens have increasingly less access to public space

⁹ (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)

¹⁰ (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)

¹¹ (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)

¹² (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)

¹³ (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)

¹⁴ (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)

¹⁵ (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)

¹⁶ (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)

¹⁷ (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007)

¹⁸ (Boyd, 2006)

¹⁹ (Boyd, 2006)

and areas to spend time with their friends. Classic locations that the adults of today met their friends at, "like the roller rink and burger joint,"²⁰ are disappearing; while malls and 7/11s are banning teens unaccompanied by parents.²¹ Spending time with friends around the neighborhood or in the woods has been deemed unsafe for fear of predators, drug dealers and abductors. Furthermore, teens who have working parents that go home after school while their parents are still working are expected to stay home, and most teens are only allowed to spend time at friends' homes when their parents are present.²² In addition to teen users, MySpace has also become popular for use by bands, celebrities, and viral marketing campaigns due to the free exposure provided by MySpace. Because facebook is segmented into closed communities, the use of facebook by celebrities and bands has not been popular.

Another study done in 2004 states that both of these sites allow people display their connections publically.²³ The study likens the open display of other's friends to real-world examples, such as bringing friends to a party, or bringing a date to a wedding, or name-dropping one's acquaintances.²⁴ The study concludes that one of the reasons people are drawn to social networks is because of the evolution of the social-digital world, where typical displays of prowess, social status, and connection are no longer possible. Therefore, users of social networks have had to re-invent these symbols of status.²⁵ Therefore, one of the main draws to sites such as facebook and MySpace is that the friends of the user are prominently displayed on the user's home page.

Privacy Concerns

Privacy has always been a concern in all corners of the internet, and social networking sites are no different. However, both Facebook and MySpace have different privacy settings, and this leads to a different set of concerns. Because Facebook was originally associated with universities only, it bred a much larger amount of trust.²⁶ On the other hand, MySpace has historically had a much lower level of trust.²⁷ MySpace's lower level of trust is due in part to the fact that the police and the government have alleged that MySpace is used by sexual predators to lure teens into meeting somewhere.²⁸ A study done by Dwyer and Hiltz in 2007 measured the issue of trust in a comparison of Facebook

²⁰ (Boyd, 2006)

²¹ (Boyd, 2006)

²² (Boyd, 2006)

²³ (Donath & Boyd, 2004)

²⁴ (Donath & Boyd, 2004)

²⁵ (Donath & Boyd, 2004)

²⁶ (Dwyer & Hiltz, 2007)

²⁷ (Dwyer & Hiltz, 2007)

²⁸ (Schrobsdorff, 2006)

and MySpace. The researchers established a survey containing two major questions that addressed the issue of trust: "I trust that [facebook/MySpace] will not use my personal information for any other purpose" and "I feel that the privacy of my personal information is protected by [facebook/MySpace]." Two other questions relate to trust in other members of the site: "I believe most of the profiles I view on [facebook/MySpace] are exaggerated to make the person look more appealing" and "I worry that I will be embarrassed by wrong information others post about me on [facebook/MySpace]." ²⁹Each question was structured with a seven-point likert scale. The results were very telling of how facebook and MySpace compare. The frequency of use was found to be very similar, with roughly 55%-60% of users accessing these sites on a daily basis.³⁰ However, on the issue of trust, the researchers found that their hypothesis was true; facebook had garnered a higher level of trust among its users.³¹ Interestingly, the researchers also found that although many users expressed that they were concerned about the privacy level on these sites, very few of them were vigilant about maintaining their privacy or removing sensitive information from their profiles.³²

Studies have shown that the most active users of facebook disclose the most information³³ In a study done at MIT, the researchers sampled 5279 profiles at MIT.³⁴ Of these profiles, they found that the most active users had the most friends. In determining the most active users, they also discovered that their willingness to display all of their information increased.³⁵ Additionally, many users had not familiarized themselves with the privacy protection put in place by the networking site.³⁶ The study concludes that privacy and users knowledge of how best to protect their information will have to grow gradually over time, as with any new technology.³⁷ Additionally, the study found that the consequences resulting from the disclosure of too much personal information have only just begun to surface; as the study cites several cases where stories of students being disciplined based on their facebook profile had become more prevalent.³⁸

²⁹ (Dwyer & Hiltz, 2007)

³⁰ (Dwyer & Hiltz, 2007)

³¹ (Dwyer & Hiltz, 2007)

³² (Dwyer & Hiltz, 2007)

³³ (Jones & Soltren, 2005)

³⁴ (Jones & Soltren, 2005)

³⁵ (Jones & Soltren, 2005)

³⁶ (Jones & Soltren, 2005)

³⁷ (Jones & Soltren, 2005)

³⁸ (Jones & Soltren, 2005)

Overuse

The overuse of social networking sites is another problem with the technology. Studies have shown that teens and young adults are already at risk for becoming addicted to the internet³⁹ and the advent of social networks has only exacerbated this problem. This study states that past studies have indicated that some patterns of Internet use are associated with loneliness, shyness, anxiety, depression, and self-consciousness.⁴⁰ The study focused primarily on relating loneliness and shyness to internet addiction, in addition to demographic information. The participants were drawn from a group of 722 internet users, primarily from the generation that uses the internet the most.⁴¹ The results showed that the higher the tendency of one being addicted to the Internet, the shyer the person is, the less faith the person has, and consequently, the lonelier they become.⁴² People who are addicted to the Internet make intense and frequent use of it both in terms of days per week, and in length of time that they use it, especially for online communication via e-mail, chat rooms, games, and social networks.⁴³ Furthermore, it was shown that full-time students are more likely to be addicted to the Internet, as they are considered high-risk for problems because of free and unlimited access and flexible time schedules.⁴⁴ The implications of this study show that college students are more likely to become addicted to the internet because of the amount of free time they have, and the invention of social networking sites has given them an outlet with which they can spend their free time. This often leads to severe over-use of social networks.

Analysis

In my opinion, human interaction has gone to the wayside. It has become appropriate for one to express a happy birthday or happy holidays on facebook. Gone are the days of greeting cards and phone calls, and I feel that this is a trend that will slowly creep into all other aspects of our lives. My main concern is that soon, wedding invitations will be distributed via facebook, condolences will be posted on people's walls, and greeting cards will be lost altogether.

³⁹ (Chak & Leung, 2004)

⁴⁰ (Chak & Leung, 2004)

⁴¹ (Chak & Leung, 2004)

⁴² (Chak & Leung, 2004)

⁴³ (Chak & Leung, 2004)

⁴⁴ (Chak & Leung, 2004)

Furthermore, the illusion of internet privacy is no more, regardless of how many privacy settings are in place. If someone looks hard enough, or if there is enough determination to find information about someone on either of these sites, it can probably be done. Additionally, among the younger users of facebook, do not even think about the possible ramifications of posting this type of information. However, I agree with the MIT study that eventually privacy and the protection of information will develop over time, as the consequences of not doing to become a larger issue.

Additionally, the commercialization of these sites is of some concern. MySpace was purchased by Rupert Murdoch some time ago, and Mark Zuckerberg is slowly losing his grasp on facebook in light of all the offers he has received. In September of this year, Microsoft paid a sum of \$246 million for a mere 1.6% share in the company. Facebook and MySpace both reserve the right to release user information, and now that these sites are being purchased, the privacy will only diminish. Once corporations have the rights to the users' information, it can then be sold for advertising or marketing purposes.

Lastly, students and other users should be mindful of the fact that the use of these sites for investigations and legal action is on the rise.⁴⁵ In the past, these sites have been used to track down underage drinking, suspects in crimes, people who have violated university policy by rushing the field after a football game, and a multitude of other cases. There is a grey area between completely ignoring the information available for these purposes, and the current exploitation of it by companies, police forces, and journalists. As the number of stories in the media increase, users of the sites will become more mindful of the fact that this information is, for all intents and purposes, public.

Solutions

Despite concerns of over-use and privacy related matters, there are many things that people can do to combat some of the problems that social networks have created. For instance, human interaction should continue to be encouraged. Users of social networking sites should be encouraged to call some friends, meet for drinks or coffee, send greeting cards, get together for meals, or engage in any other face-to-face meeting. Maintaining human contact is of paramount importance.

Additionally, users should be mindful of the information they allow to be prominently displayed on their site. Users should bear in mind how private the sites actually are, and the various consequences that publically displaying their information could have.

⁴⁵ (Jones & Soltren, 2005)

Furthermore, those that overuse the site should be reminded of activities and hobbies that they had pursued before the advent of social networks. Maintaining regular day-to-day activities is important in mediating the use of social networks.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have shown two of the major social networks, facebook and MySpace, and I have explained some of the ramifications that these sites have in terms of their affect on the younger generations. Facebook is used primarily by college students, as it is still thought of as a network for universities. MySpace targets the younger demographic, who are in need of a common gathering place to socialize with their friends. Both sites have a huge number of users. The main issues that present themselves when considering this new technology are how people use the sites, privacy concerns of both the site and the user, and the issue of overuse.

It has been demonstrated that both sites are used primarily to strengthen existing social networks, and it gives the users a place to display their social connections. This goes against older theories that had ascribed the use of meeting new people to social networks. While this may be the case with sites explicitly constructed for that purpose, such as match.com or eharmony, the creators of facebook and MySpace created the sites with no use in mind. Over time, the users established the purpose of these sites, and it has been to keep in touch with old friends, as well as keep up with their existing "offline networks."

The users of both facebook and MySpace have expressed privacy concerns on some level. Users of facebook have a higher level of trust in the other users as well as in the privacy controls built into the site to prevent identity theft. However, despite the claims by the users that they do not want their private information distributed, it has been shown that these same users are much less rigorous in protecting their privacy than they claim to be. MySpace has come under fire more often for becoming a place for sexual predators to prey on teens, whereas the criticism of facebook by the users has been that they are aiding in investigations into breach of university policy.

The last issue that has presented itself is the issue of overuse. Studies have shown that many younger people are in danger of becoming addicted to the internet. This danger is especially prevalent among full-time college students, due to the large amount of free time that they have. The creation of social networks has given the students a way to spend their time online, and their pre-existing predisposal to internet addiction is not alleviated by an interactive site that caters to their specific demographic.

Despite these issues, however, facebook and MySpace have been widely successful in bringing people together and creating a digital place for people to keep in touch and socialize with their friends. In spite of the criticisms regarding the overuse of these sites, social networking has become the way that the younger generations socialize, rather than in person. However, these sites have not been around long enough to judge whether or not there will be a long-term effect on the way that the users socialize, or if it breeds a sense of isolationism. Long-term effects of social networks on the ability to interact with other people in an offline setting remain to be seen in the years to come.

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