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The Virtual Campfire:
An Ethnography of Online Social Networking

By

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"To define is to kill. To suggest is to create."

-Stéphane Mallarmé

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> *"I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing*
> *than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance"*
> *(e.e. cummings)*

Table Of Contents

Introduction

"Technology is the campfire around which we tell our stories."
-Laurie Anderson

Thousands of years ago, our early human ancestors gathered around campfires, creating communal hearths of warmth and light. There they might tell stories, converse about the day's events, perhaps engage in shamanistic rituals involving plants, music and dance, or simply gaze silently at the flames in collective meditation. Today, the fireplace in my family's living room shares its centralizing power with the television, around which we gather with our laptops and cellphones by our sides. Our time spent together is increasingly mediated by new technologies, enabling new forms of storytelling, altering our processes of individual and collective identity formation, and extending the possibilities for creating and maintaining social relationships. What follows is an ethnographic exploration of online social networking, a controversial new medium of communication that has become a fixture in the everyday lives of middle-class, American youth.[1]

Studies of our primate cousins have found that their striking affinity for grooming one another serves the primary function of creating and maintaining social bonds. Predominantly social animals, our success as a species can be attributed in part to our capacity to form large groups, wherein different members perform a variety of roles

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[1] For the purposes of this research, I have largely limited my focus to my own generational and cultural milieu. However, it should be noted that while online social networking was particularly attractive to highschool and college students in its initial stage, it has become increasingly popular among older generations and in other areas of the world.

and activities necessary for the well-being of their kin. It has been theorized that language evolved as a means of extending our social networks, allowing us to stay informed about friends and family through gossip (Dunbar 1996). Through language, humans create mutually understood symbols with which we coordinate social activities and pass on the stories, norms and values that order social life. Over the course of the past few centuries, the traditional roles of storyteller, gatekeeper, and matchmaker have been transformed through the accelerating force of mass reproduction, allowing for the increasingly expansive circulation of information in ways that transcend previous boundaries of space and time.

The myriad mediums through which we communicate symbolic forms cannot be examined in isolation. Rather, each new medium builds on prior media, extending our possibilities for symbolic interaction. While these communication technologies allow us to accumulate more information quicker and keep in touch with others at any time and from any place, they are typically seen as lacking the fundamental characteristics of immediacy and presence valorized in the formation of intimate social bonds; namely, eye contact, gesture, and body language. Nevertheless, as media develop they are increasingly adapted and appropriated in culturally specific ways, and subsequently integrated into everyday life. Just as mobile phones have become natural extensions of the modern cosmopolite's person, so too are social networking sites becoming habitual features of the everyday lives of "digital natives," engaged with regularly and ritualistically.

My central argument in this thesis is that online social networks can potentially serve as both places of the hearth and avenues to the cosmos. Over time, these sites function as personal records of one's experiences and relationships. These archives are

made up of a variety of forms akin to older modes of record keeping, such as address books, journals, diaries, photo albums, personal correspondences, and yearbooks. Additionally, they serve as gateways to the greater milieu, enabling the circulation of information about the world and granting members the capacity to participate in various ways. For teenagers and marginalized groups, in particular, these sites can be safe spaces for exploring and experimenting with identity, as well as for connecting to new people and ideas.

At the same time, engagement with online social networking sites can potentially violate the privacy of the hearth and limit one's exposure to the larger world of the cosmos. As certain sites become more popular, one's online connections within the medium may expand to include family members, authority figures, co-workers, and past acquaintances. Information that was once accessible only to trusted members of one's inner circle or particular community (such as a college campus) may become more publicly visible, thereby encouraging self-censorship or the imposition of privacy controls. Additionally, the ego-centric nature of online social networking allows users to regulate the information they come across online in such a way as to limit communication only with certain trusted individuals, or within a particular sphere of cultural tastes. Rather than creating the much-celebrated "global village," the Internet may actually be contributing to the increasing fragmentation of taste communities.

Integrating these seemingly opposed facets of online social networking in light of my ethnographic findings, I propose that everyday involvement with these sites can

be metaphorically represented as a "virtual campfire."[2] A campfire serves to bridge the gap between the hearth and the cosmos, drawing individuals out of the comforting indoor hearth of the household, taking place outdoors in gatherings of larger (yet still intimately connected) groups in order to tell stories and converse with each other, collectively engaged in the ritualized processes of tending and feeding the flames. Engaged members of online social networks share their stories with Friends through creating individual Profiles, updating their Status messages, writing blog posts, and uploading photographs, music, and videos.[3] Friends may then participate in the storytelling and camaraderie, posting Comments in response to this uploaded content. Social bonds are reinforced in diverse ways, ranging from written messages, Event invitations, and the formation of Groups, to virtual Pokes, Gifts, and online gameplay. Most importantly, these sites allow friends to construct private spaces for nurturing social cohesion and group membership.

However, the virtual nature of this intimate hearth- the lack of physical co-presence- complicates this "campfire" dynamic considerably. Not only is it difficult to control the information one promulgates to invisible and potentially unintended audiences, it is possible to learn about others and make character judgements without ever interacting with them. Additionally, some participants in my study have expressed concern over their overuse of the medium for such purposes as procrastination from work or voyeuristically "stalking" others, habits easily reinforced due to the low cost and

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[2] In computing, "virtual" is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as: "not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so."
[3] Throughout this thesis, the ordinary language terms used to describe official features of these sites will be capitalized as proper nouns.

accessibility of the Internet in their lives. Despite these issues, the virtual aspect of these

sites allows individuals (especially the shy and the socially anxious) to express themselves

in potentially creative and uninhibited ways- for example, through the use of multimedia.

Furthermore, intimate groups may flourish regardless of the spatial proximity of their

members, extending the possibilities for the formation of geographically dispersed

communities based on shared tastes.

Description of the Fieldsites

Before one can be known in online social networks, one must first "be in the

know." For the average user, this is possible only through *being* a participating member of

a given site, and all that participation implies. My interest in studying the phenomenon of

online social networking arose out of my own personal engagement with three particular

sites: MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe.net. Though these sites differ in the modes of

participation they entail and the participants they primarily attract, they share several

general activities: the creation of an individual Profile; the active or passive accumulation

of Friends; interpersonal communication; and the sharing of media via photographs,

music, videos and links.

The first step in becoming a member of an online social network is the creation

of a member Profile, enabling one to "type oneself into being" (Sundén 2003: 3). Basic

demographic information (age, gender, location, education information, and occupation),

favored cultural referents (quotes, movies, television, music, and books), more open-

ended autobiographical fields (interests and "about me"), and a corresponding image

comprise the essential structure of Profiles on MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe (see *Appendix B*).

The next step typically involves searching for and requesting the formal "Friendship" of others. It is generally the norm (especially on Facebook) to "friend" those one knows outside of the context of the site, allowing users to visibly articulate their social networks. On MySpace, many also openly "friend" interesting or attractive strangers, celebrity figures, favorite musicians, and iconic Profiles (such as "Satan"). For "MySpace Whores" and those seeking to promote themselves (particularly musicians), it is common practice to "friend" other members en masse; as a result, such users often accumulate thousands of Friends, thereby acquiring high visibility and claiming social status. On Tribe, it is common for members to "friend" interesting strangers within Tribes (the equivalent of Groups) to which they also belong.

Once having actively created one's online social network, the real fun can begin. While the norms for interpersonal communication vary widely between as well as within MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe, the basic mechanisms are similar. Messages between any two individuals can be either posted publicly on each other's Profiles (in the form of Wall Posts on Facebook, Comments on MySpace, or Testimonials on Tribe) or privately (much like e-mail). Furthermore, all of the sites also enable members to create Groups, formed around various sorts of common ties or shared interests, within which members communicate primarily through message board forums. More recently, instant messaging programs have been launched on each site, enabling "real-time" synchronous communication between members.

Lastly, all three sites promote the circulation of user-generated content in the form of photo albums, blog posts, uploaded videos, embedded music playlists, and hyperlinks. On MySpace and Facebook, members can Tag someone in a photograph, designating names of Friends to particular elements of a photograph (such as a person's face), which then becomes linked to that member's Profile. Given the prevalence of both popular and amateur musicians on MySpace, it is a common practice to introduce friends to musical discoveries through sharing MySpace Profile links. In the next sections, I seek to convey some of the defining characteristics of these sites through brief ethnographic descriptions. In so doing, I introduce a few of the many individuals who informed this study, whose subjective experiences and interpretations elucidate some of the main shortcomings and potentials of the "virtual campfire."

MySpace

> When I started being like, "well, this is… things I'm more interested in, poems I wrote," or whatever, then more people started finding my page, or more people wanted to be my friend, were reading. You know, it's all about the war for eyeballs, no matter what- if that's what the Internet and media is, MySpace or Facebook or any of those things, it's all media. We're making the media. We're the content creators.

Demetri, my principal informant on MySpace, describes the typical MySpace Profile as "digital bling," saying that "people go crazy customizing it, putting little videos on it, like 'this is what I love!' So many videos, yeah, you're gonna crash my computer…" When asked to elaborate, he went on:

> Basically, the designer has been eliminated. And so [the Profile] is loaded with crappy code, custom sparkle tags... whatever, you know? And in some ways that's a good thing, but sometimes people don't know how to sort of limit themselves, and they have 3 Ghz Pentium computers with massive hard drives, and they can

load up their own page and it's like, fuckin'… looks like Vegas, know what I mean? On *their* browsers. And it works... and then, someone else'll click on it and it's like, "whoosh!"- crash. Just burns...

There are two primary attitudes in evaluating MySpace. On one end is the aforementioned complaint regarding exposure to the intrusive "poor taste" of other members, combined with the irksome, prominent presence of advertisements and spam. On the other end, there is a sense of pride among members that the site, with all its flaws and quirks, empowers them to creatively express themselves and perform their identities in what Demetri describes as "the modern-day soap opera" of MySpace- where everyone is the star of *their* story. To peruse the site is to dive into a veritable ocean of colorful self-expressions and social dramas, publicly played out and displayed as entertainment for all.

MySpace, currently the fifth most-visited website in the world, achieved mass popularity over the course of 2005- especially among high school students.[4] However, the extent to which a site is known and viewed is likely to lower rather than raise its cultural status. MySpace is commonly viewed, like "pop" music, with a kind of condescension by those who perceive themselves as culturally superior, such as college students. In my day-to-day conversations with friends, the topic of MySpace nearly always draws a derisive snort and a comment similar to my friend Jeff's response: "That site is so annoying. Too many ads. Yo! I don't want to hear your crappy music blasting my speakers!" The liberties that come with creating a MySpace Profile (such as embedding HTML code and uploading music) are the very source of the site's reviled drawbacks. Additional disparaged elements include the large blocks of space reserved for

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[4] Site ranking retrieved on 8 April 2008 (Alexa Internet, Inc.).

sponsored ads as well as a regular flow of spam, disguised as Friend Requests from porn

sites, pyramid schemes, and businesses. Currently, exactly a third of my current Friend

Requests are from members whose Profiles no longer exist; it is likely they are spammers

who have since been reported to the MySpace administration.

MySpace is notoriously sex-driven. With a devilish grin, Alex informs me that he

accepts Friend Requests "from all the porn stars," and particularly enjoys it when they

leave Comments on his Profile. Along with commercial activity, romance is a principal

component of MySpace. Over the four years I've known Demetri, he has twice been

involved in relationships with women whom he'd met and courted on MySpace, and

many of my informants discussed experiences (either their own or those of their friends)

with meeting face-to-face people they had previously met on the site. While both men

and women enjoy perusing the site in search of sex and romance, women are frequently

the objects of unwanted advances. One female friend, who is an avid Facebook user,

explains why she removed her MySpace Profile not long after creating it:

> Within a week I started getting creepy messages from creepy old men. People are
> too sketchy. Besides, I can still use the site without being a member, because I
> use it mostly to find musicians… they're public, anyway, and link to each other's.

From amateur artists to indie rock icons, folk bands to experimental musicians, MySpace

is commonly viewed as the universal platform for promoting music and connecting to

Fans (used in place of "Friends" for MySpace Music accounts). As music preferences are

key indicators of an individual's cultural tastes, "Friendship" between musicians and

Fans is mutually beneficial: musicians acquire social status through high Fan counts and

Profile views, while Fans can publicly display their tastes and stay informed about

upcoming concerts and events. MySpace, then, is alternately viewed as a place for "the

cool kids" and as the nexus of "pop culture," serving as a vast public space wherein members can hang out with their friends, perform their identities, and also acquire new information and cultural forms.

Facebook

> I think Facebook has taken the mystery and excitement out of romantic social interaction, especially at small schools. It allows us to investigate more than just the person but his/her friends. It perpetuates clichés and exclusive social circles. It perpetuates perceived assumptions. It makes you dislike them on false grounds b/c you see who they socialize with. The mystery is gone. I only feel free on other college campuses. I don't hook up here. I only watch... it's been a long while since I cared.
>
> (Anonymous Wesleyan blogger)

Since Facebook launched in 2004, it has become a pervasive element of college life across the United States. Julia, a Wesleyan sophomore, remarked that she had been told, "you don't exist if you're not on Facebook." Indeed, upon discovering that a new acquaintance is not a member of Facebook, it is typical to observe surprise and curiosity. For Julia, an incoming college freshman in 2005, acceptance at a prestigious liberal arts university was followed by eager anticipation: the acquisition of a university e-mail address allowed one to officially join that campus' Facebook network and served as a platform through which soon-to-be classmates could gauge one another. It has become common for incoming freshmen to "Facebook Friend" future classmates they've never met face-to-face. While oftentimes this is merely a way to express their openness toward new friendships, it can also be a highly effective method of creating and establishing one's reputation through "image broadcasting."

The user's capacity to project an idealized self is limited to some extent by Facebook's emphasis on the "real-life" affiliations of members. Those with whom one typically interacts on Facebook are usually people one also sees and interacts with on a regular basis offline in her school, workplace, or geographic communities. Because people's Profiles are by default only visible to those within these articulated networks, the site instills a sense of privacy and trust. However, the bounded nature of Facebook networks may simply expose a user's Profile to the judgemental and potentially predatory gaze of her peers. Says Carla, a Wesleyan sophomore at the time of our interview, "Let's just say that the [certain frat] brothers really like to use Facebook to compare, contrast, and hunt down the women they have or would like to get nasty with…"

Both MySpace and Tribe allow for a great deal of user input in the look and feel of one's Profile. In contrast, Facebook's reputation is predicated upon the "clean" look of the site, emphasizing functionality over stylistic elaboration. While this austerity has been widely praised by proponents of the site, it has recently become compromised by the "clutter" of third-party Applications that greatly expand what were once simple, uniformly designed profiles. As the following conversation will attest, it's just not "cool" to like Facebook- one is better off being critical- though many depend on it in some way or another as a way of maintaining social bonds:

> *Carla:* "The applications were pretty fun at first. I liked throwing food at my friends and turning them into zombies... but it got old real fast."
>
> *Toby*: "They're stupid, they're annoying, I just really don't care at all anymore. I mean, I guess it's useful for keeping in touch with people you don't care enough about to e-mail."
>
> *Luke:* "Well, I care so little that I let *her* [points to his girlfriend] go in and change my whole profile around. It's ridiculous, and I haven't even changed it back."

[They giggle.]

Me: "There are some useful applications." [There is a contemplative silence.]

Luke: "Well, there're so many of them! I don't feel like sifting through all of that crap. Facebook's turning into MySpace."

Despite the disparaging tone in which many college students refer to Facebook in conversation, I've found that my Friends on Facebook continue to be highly active, having become skilled at incorporating the more useful features of the site into their everyday lives. 25% of the most recent 50 emails in my inbox are Facebook notifications of some sort- Event Invitations, Friend Requests, Wall Posts, Group messages, and Pokes.[5] Upon logging into the site, the "News Feed" that makes up the center of the homepage serves as my very own town gossip, informing me, for instance, that my friend Julie has added "comedy clubs" to her Interests, that ten of my Friends will be attending a party in New York next week, and exactly what my friend Steven wrote on my friend Dave's Wall. While the site extends one's capacity to communicate with friends and stay informed about upcoming parties and events, it also enables members to join Groups connecting disparate individuals on the basis of shared interests, as well as facilitating potential connections with weak and latent social ties (such as classmates).

Tribe

[Tribe has] inspired me in many ways. But the one thing more than anything else is hope. Life can suck the royal ass. Work may or may not completely suck. Depends on the load. Personal problems can seem overwhelming from time to

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[5] On Facebook, members may "poke" each other, which simply displays a message to the recipient that she has been poked by the addresser. The sexual implications of this feature can be summarized by one particularly popular Facebook Group, entitled "Enough with the Poking: Let's Just Have Sex," with 366,129 members at the time of this writing.

time. But Tribe is always here. One of my RL [real-life] friends invited me to Tribe initially. He said there are lots of nice people on here and I should check it out. I think I was hooked since the first few minutes. :) It has inspired me to pursue many things but even when I barely have the energy or will power to make it through work, if nothing else, it inspires me to push through the work day. It inspires me to continue living. It inspired me to think of a slogan that may or may not resonate with other Tribers. If I had a car I could put bumper stickers on it would be cool to have a sticker that says "TRIBE IS LIFE. LIFE IS TRIBE." Or a t-shirt with Tribe is Life on the front and Life is Tribe on the back. :) While it can allow us to vent and serve many purposes, the best thing about it is that it inspires happiness. I'm not Mr. fucking happy happy joy joy all the time (yeah, no shit), but I'm pretty certain I'm more happy more often than I would be if Tribe didn't exist. Long live Tribe! WOO HOO!!! lol

(Male, age 39, San Francisco Bay Area)

When registering for Tribe, one chooses a local geographic network and gains access to events, recommendations, and classified ads posted by members in the vicinity. By far the most populated network is the San Francisco Bay Area, where so many web startups had their beginnings. Recent posts are by default visible on one's homepage, alongside a separate module for events, listings, and blog posts made by Friends in one's network [see *Appendix B*]. The most popular means of engaging with this particular online social network is through joining social groups, known as "Tribes," and participating in the message board forums that are the principal source of community formation on the site. Within the milieu of Tribe, it is common to find individual Profiles made up of original content in the form of blog posts, displays of recent activity on the site (such as posts made to Tribes), poetry, images, videos, and descriptive lists of esoteric interests (such as "flying trapeze"). It is also typical to come across transgressive topics such as polyamory, drug use, and nudism. Tribe's lack of censorship is one of its most cherished values:

Tribe has inspired me to cut back on numerous other site memberships because I'm finding so much of what inspires me here, artistically, intellectually, sexually,

etc. It's as if the tribe members here celebrate who they are an encourage others to do so as well.

To me that's the magic here. Even the trivial stuff is more entertaining than elsewhere, and easy enough to skip when you're short for computer time and want to have a life outside of that.

(Gay Male Artist, Atlanta, GA)

I use the site primarily to read and discuss Tribe message board threads pertaining to New Age[6] sentiments and alternative subcultures. The site's locality-based structure is especially useful for finding out about "underground" parties and artistic events in specific cities. Members of Tribe tend to be somewhat older, usually young urban-oriented adults with an affinity for artistic forms- in particular, attendees of the annual Burning Man arts festival and smaller but similar parties of the "psytrance" genre.[7] Such gatherings attempt to evoke our "tribal" past- communal rituals of music, drugs, and dance that evoke one of the images of the campfire described at the beginning of this paper. By and large, my Tribe network consists mainly of individuals I have met at such gatherings and know only in these occasional contexts. Nevertheless, though my Friends on Tribe are not involved in my everyday life, they are still part of what I consider an important subcultural "community" based on shared values of communality, living as an art, and opposition to the "mainstream." A few weeks ago, a friend who I run into primarily at psytrance parties mentioned that he had recently been

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[6] As defined by Steven Sutcliffe (2003: 223), New Age is "a diffuse collectivity of questing individuals."

[7] Psytrance is a form of repetitive electronic dance music that is usually played at all-night parties and festivals. While different cultures certainly exhibit their own nuanced styles, the common origins of the global psytrance phenomenon can be traced to a collective of 1960's hippie countercultural expatriates in Goa, India (McAteer 2002; Greener 2005).

told by a fellow "trancer" that he absolutely *had* to join Tribe, and even went on to say

"if you're not on Tribe, you shouldn't even be at this party!"

If MySpace and Facebook are "ego-centric" in nature, I would describe Tribe as

"community-centric." Tribes are typically based on shared interests or affiliations to a

subcultural group. Given the primacy of group discussions on the message boards of

Tribes, however, the site itself may become the central "place" for such groups to gather,

as many members are typically busy with their everyday lives apart from the other

members of their subculture.

> I look forward to reading the new posts in the tribes I'm in every day. I look
> forward to checking Tribe at the end of my day, like calling friends and chatting
> about my day, when I used to do that. I don't have friends like that anymore.
> Before Tribe came into my life I used to be a reluctant morning riser. Now I pop
> out of bed, and I have Tribe to get me going in the morning, something to look
> forward to when I'm just coming to consciousness and would previously rather
> just stay asleep.
>   (Female Circus Artist, San Francisco Bay Area)

For those with eccentric interests, then, niche-based online social networks such as Tribe

may be seen as safe spaces to express unconventional elements of one's personality and

connect to like-minded others. While it is still common to "friend" those on Tribe

whom one has met in "real life," the small population and specific niche demographic

drawn to the site inspires trust between members, enabling the formation of

geographically dispersed communities based on shared interests. Many of the Tribes I've

come across serve to connect artists from geographically disparate communities, as the

following story will attest:

I'm 47 and had lived in the Bay Area all my life. I'm not a Burner, Raver or belly dancer.[8] I teach middle school! Four years ago, I moved to Reno and had no RL [real life] friends here. My sister told me about tribe and I signed up to see if I could contact locals that might become friends. I have found 2 locals (one literally in my backyard!) but found most of the folks I met on my local tribe were more into burning and raving and I did not connect to them and left that tribe.

Here's the inspiring part. I'm an artist and craftsperson and I joined a huge craft tribe, then a smaller spin-off tribe where we trade crafted items. I met a small group of women who had met on another tribe (see how it goes?). We became friends and did all sorts of crazy, fun wacky things together. We created a world of our own, peopled with strange and wonderful characters. This group has inspired me to continue my art in different forms. I have a venue, an audience and sometimes even a market!

It doesn't stop there! Over a year ago, we threw around the idea of actually getting together in person! We were skeptical that it could ever work, since we're spread all over from Canada and Massachusetts to the west coast, but somehow it happened! We all met in Maryland last year and rented a house together for a week! It was wonderful! It was awkward at first, putting a face to what had previously only been a written voice, but we found that the people we had met online were who we thought they were! We had a blast and now are friends IRL [in real life]! In the last couple years, we've been through a lot together and I find that I have real friends here I can truly count on and can be myself with.

We're getting together again this year, adding a few to our ranks. Thanks, tribe! Having true friends is the best inspiration I could hope for!

(Female Middle School Teacher, Nevada)

Being, Knowing, and Being Known in Online Social Networks

Mike, a friend from high school, had been going through a "Facebook-identity crisis" over the past couple of days; each time I had logged into Facebook during this time, the "Recently Updated" tab indicated that Mike had changed several elements of

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[8] A "Burner" is one who attends the Burning Man Festival, an annual gathering dedicated to community and radical self-expression. Not coincidentally, the 7-day fleeting community is supported by a gift economy, in which an individual is encouraged to give, in the words of Burning Man founder and director Larry Harvey, "a considered thing that is imbued with spirit. It should somehow speak of intimate intention even as it conveys a respect for the person you are giving it to (Ray 2002, interview)."

his Profile. Often, his changes would include a reference to the Facebook medium itself. Curious, I sent him an IM (instant message) and struck up a conversation. He noted the inadequacy of Facebook Profiles for truly getting to know others, particularly those he had recently met but had yet to develop a good friendship with, and expressed his desire to be able to connect "directly to people's brains." His observations, provoked by his personal experiences with Facebook, can be applied to virtually every medium of human communication- beginning with language itself. As the early twentieth century philosopher-poet T.E. Hulme put it: "Language is by its very nature a communal thing; that is, it expresses never the exact thing but a compromise—that which is common to you, me, and everybody." From face-to-face conversations to modern technologies of communication, our experiences of the world are mediated by language. Through language, humans develop mutually understood symbols by which we construct our sense of ourselves, of others, and of reality itself.

The struggle to effectively or authentically communicate one's "true" self is not particular to online social networking; rather, the tension between one's inner self and its outward portrayal had been a subject of concern in Western culture long before the advent of the Internet. Plato spoke of the "great stage of human life." If, as Shakespeare mused, "All the world is a stage, and all the men and women merely players," then what happens when the curtains close and we go backstage? In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Erving Goffman (1959) elaborated upon this dramaturgical approach in crafting a sociological theory that has come to be known as "symbolic interactionism." Once backstage, "the impression fostered by the presentation is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course (112)." From the symbolic interactionist perspective, one performs

a certain role on the public stage that is often subverted in the private sphere ("backstage"). This private sphere supposedly allows for a more "truthful" performance of self, but is nevertheless still a performance tailored to a specific audience. The question then becomes: can one only truly know oneself in the absence of others?

Paul Ricoeur, an eminent scholar in the field of hermeneutics and phenomenology, challenges the notion that the self is transparent to itself. Rather, he theorizes that the hermeneutic self is revealed to that self through the 'other'- most immediately and directly through two interlocutors. Furthermore, this direct, intersubjective encounter is a relation that is "invariably intertwined with various *long* intersubjective relations, mediated by various social institutions, groups, nations and cultural traditions (Kearney 2004: 4)." One continually attempts to define herself as an individual with a unique "personality," however this process is itself co-constructed through one's everyday interactions with others as well as the subjective appropriation of various cultural markers of identity. From this perspective, online social networks mirror the process by which individuals construct their identities by extending interpersonal communication and providing fields in which they may articulate their cultural tastes and group affiliations.

By granting users access to new forms of cultural expression, a member of an online social network may acquire different kinds of knowledge and skills that serve to increase her cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). The ability to navigate through these websites and acquire and display such knowledge is itself a form of cultural capital, indicating that one has familiarity and expertise with computers. The cultural capital one acquires in online social networks is often demonstrated through member Profiles in the

form of articulated cultural preferences (such as books and movies), the extent to which one portrays herself as more or less the producer of her own text, and the style in which an individual's Profile is presented. Oftentimes, the cultural capital demonstrated on these Profiles can best be described in terms of Sarah Thornton's concept of "subcultural capital," which expands on Bourdieu's original theory and applies it to members of a subculture. A subculture defines itself through its differentiation from other groups, such as "pop culture" and "mainstream society," and its members acquire "hipness capital" in adopting certain styles and acquiring certain kinds of knowledge and status (particularly discerning music taste). Subcultural capital is displayed on all three sites, but especially Tribe; members demonstrate their membership to the "underground" through joining certain Tribes that allow one to stay in the know about upcoming parties, new music albums and artists, and ideas and dialogues pertinent to, for example, the Burning Man subculture.

The increased possibilities for community and self-formation enabled by online social networks can also serve to increase one's social capital. Pierre Bourdieu (1986: 51) defined "social capital" as:

> The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to… memberships in a group- which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the world.

By aggregating one's social contacts, be they close ties or casual acquaintances, and providing detailed information about these individuals, one accumulates a wealth of potential resources. As Robert Putnam (2000: 171) defines it, "Social capital is all about networks, and the Net is the network to all ends." When members join networks (such

as university or workplace networks) they reaffirm their group memberships, instigating a sense of belonging. Social capital can even be symbolically demonstrated by the number of Friends or Fans one has- though excessive numbers of Friends may evoke suspicion over the "authenticity" of an online persona. Thus, social capital is furthermore contingent upon two primary factors: reciprocity and trust.

A review of the recent sociological, economic, psychological and philosophical literature on the nature of trust was examined in a paper by Chopra and Wallace (2003) entitled "Trust in Electronic Environments." Trust is considered a crucial element with regard to social capital, and exists on four levels: the individual (psychological), the interpersonal (one to another), the relational (social glue), and the societal (functioning). The processes involved in the development of trust include past behavior, intentionality of the trustee, emotional bonding, reciprocity, reputation, and shared values. A variety of factors influence the degree to which an individual trusts those with whom they interact in virtual environments, such as one's technological bias, disposition, referrals by trustworthy others, and the context within which these online relationships are formed. In the context of the online social networks I am examining, an individual's level of trust in the network is dependent on her personal comfort with online sociality, the extent to which her offline communities are connected to her online, the presence of untrustworthy others, and the site's reputation itself. While online social networks can serve to reinforce or extend one's social capital in local offline communities, these networks also increase the efficacy of dispersed community formation based on shared interests or cultural tastes. One's sense of trust, then, is also largely informed by the

degree to which one's online network aligns with one's personal values, such as family and local community or music preference and party style.

Despite the evidence that all experiences are mediated and that the "self" is co-constructed, I have time and again encountered the pervasive belief that experiences with online social networking diminish the quality of interpersonal communication and fail to authentically portray one's "true" identity. This perceived disconnect may be attributed to a number of factors. Firstly, computer-mediated communication reduces the kind of social cues we frequently rely on in face-to-face communication (such as gesture and intonation), thereby increasing the likelihood for miscommunication. Secondly, successful computer-mediated communication demands not only literacy and the ability to effectively communicate through written text, but also a certain level of "fluency" with the specific language of the online environment in which one is participating. Thirdly, popular online social networks pose the threat of enmeshing multiple social contexts (such as the university versus the workplace versus the family), effectively challenging the previously established boundaries between public and private. In these cases, the protective boundaries between how we perform ourselves "onstage" and "backstage" become dangerously blurred. Finally, because these audiences are often invisible, we may come to know more about another through their online personas than through "natural" face-to-face interactions, and vice versa. In such cases, the "self" is projected rather than co-constructed, thus potentially altering the process through which we come to know another. This is not to say that the "self" has not historically been projected in the formation of impressions, but rather, that online social networking intensifies and multiplies the contexts for this practice.

Though I was officially a member and actively participated in the online communities I chose to write about, much of what I understood about the practices of others in these environments was garnered through the ubiquitous practice of observing what was publicly accessible. Perhaps the most controversial ethical issue that arises through online research is the practice of "lurking" undetected as a means of easily accumulating information that can then be categorized and analyzed. While such a method diminishes the potentially negative repercussions that may arise as a result of declaring one's intentions as a researcher, it also precludes cooperation between researcher and subjects; moreover, the practice effectively circumvents the issue of "informed consent" and might therefore be regarded with suspicion. I remained (and do still remain) uncertain about my role as an anthropologist: am I a participant-observer, or a participant-lurker? Does the "participant" component of this identification legitimize the "passivity" of lurking? After learning of prior research in this area, it was apparent to me that informed, sensitive ethnography would help to dispel some myths and highlight productive forms of interaction in this era of swift technological and social change.

Previous Scholarship

Academic research on online social networking has only recently begun to produce ethnographic texts, a trend that will hopefully continue to grow. When I began this study, however, I was unable to find any published ethnographic accounts of online social networking practices. Therefore, I turned to the field of what has variably been called "computer-mediated anthropology," "the anthropology of cyberculture," or "cyberanthropology." Sherry Turkle's (1984) early ethnographic study of emerging

computer subcultures, based on hundreds of interviews and six years of participant-observation, pioneered the field by articulating the computer as a cultural object that is not only subculturally appropriated in a variety of ways, but also creatively invoked in the construction and projection of self-identity. However, it would be a decade until "the anthropology of cyberculture" would be coherently defined by Arturo Escobar, whose 1994 article "Welcome to Cyberia" was published in *Current Anthropology* and widely received.

The first "virtual ethnographies" were situated within the domains of BBS' (bulletin board systems) (Myers 1987), online role-playing games (known as MUDs) (Turkle 1995; Jacobson 1996), and Usenet newsgroups (Baym 1992). These forms of early online "communities" were predominantly text-based in nature, bringing together previously disparate individuals on the basis of shared interests and cultural tastes (such as local Internet hobbyists studied by Myers, and television soap opera fandoms studied by Baym). Many of these first Internet ethnographers invoked Erving Goffman's theory of "symbolic interactionism," whereby group members actively negotiate the meanings of symbolic interactions and thus participate in shaping the communication environment (Lawley 1992). With the growing availability and accessibility of the Internet in the mid-1990s (due in large part to the rise of user-friendly Internet Service Providers, such as America Online and Prodigy, and the introduction of free web browsers such as Mosaic and Netscape), participation in these and new forms of online interaction became increasingly popular. By this time, the concept of "the virtual community" had been

introduced in Howard Rheingold's (1993) landmark novel by the same name, though he would later suggest the more apt term "online social network (2000)."[9]

The turn of the 21st century was marked by a plethora of authoritative publications that served to articulate the ethical and methodological issues involved in conducting ethnographies of the Internet (Jacobson 1999; Jones 1999; Hakken 1999; Hine 2000). However, as we will see, the overwhelming majority of the research on online social networking has been observational and quantitative in nature. The first ethnographic research on social networking sites, to my knowledge, was danah boyd's research on Friendster (boyd 2004). Boyd articulated the struggles faced in crafting an online profile for a potentially vast and heterogeneous audience, as well as the ways in which members used the medium in creative and occasionally disruptive ways.

Much of the popular discourse on computer-mediated communication, and indeed of all new media when it is first introduced, is organized by dualisms: whether emerging technologies are good or bad for "society" (particularly children); whether experiences on the Internet are "real" or "virtual;" and whether the Internet is a libratory space for individuality or another mode of control and surveillance by ruling powers. Given the predominance of quantitative sociological and psychological studies concerning online community formation, much of the scholarly literature I came across made generalizing conclusions based on large population sampling and surveys conducted by outside researchers. A short review of some of the major studies serves to

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[9] The historical precedents for these technologies, as well as their social characteristics and development, are discussed in further detail in Chapter One.

highlight some of the primary findings of research regarding online social networking and demonstrates the need for an engaged ethnographic approach.

In one of the largest-scale studies on online social networks I have found, Golder et al; (2007) conducted a statistical analysis of 362 million messages sent by 4.2 million Facebook users over a period of 26 months. The results showed a strikingly consistent temporal pattern of messaging across the whole network, with internal variations consistent across campuses. The elusive nature of "poking" on Facebook was described as a socially meaningful act that necessitates reciprocity, thus reinforcing social bonds. While the overwhelming majority of messages were sent between Friends, the researchers also found that only a small proportion of Friends sent messages to one another. This raised doubts concerning the strength of Facebook ties. However, my personal experiences with Facebook suggest that the vast majority of interpersonal communication actually occurs in the more public realm of "Wall Posts" (which are posted at the bottom of a user's Profile), suggesting a desire to publicly display one's social interactions and a degree of comfort with such displays.

Online privacy has been at the forefront of popular discourse, and several studies have focused primarily on this issue. A quantitative study of 4,000 Facebook users at Carnegie Mellon University was conducted by Gross and Acquisti (2005). They examined three factors of information revelation in online social networks: identifiably of the user; types of information presented; and visibility of one's Profile. On the basis of their results, they concluded that Facebook users appear generally unconcerned with the public sharing of their identities, with 91% posting an identifiable picture of themselves and 40% posting their personal phone numbers. In a related effort to assess

the identity-sharing behavior of college students, Stutzman (2006) conducted a random survey of 200 undergraduate and graduate Facebook-using students. Results suggested that, although students exhibited a general feeling of doubt regarding the protection of their identities online, they were generally comfortable with this information being accessible to friends, who constitute the majority of one's network on Facebook. However, they were markedly less comfortable with strangers viewing this information. Such results warrant a more nuanced examination of the perceived audiences of online profiles, as well as balancing the potentially negative consequences of revealing personal information online with the benefits that motivate students to continue doing so regardless.

In an effort to elucidate the benefits of online social networking, Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2006) discuss the implications of Facebook use for crystallizing relationships that might otherwise remain latent (such as classmates), and maintaining relationships formed in previous communities (such as high school). In an extensive study based on 286 survey responses at Michigan State University, Facebook use was highly correlated with high school social capital, interactions with preexisting connections (as opposed to forming new ones), and increased social capital overall for those with relatively low self-esteem and school satisfaction. The researchers acknowledged the drawbacks of self-response measures, and suggest pairing survey methods with actual measures of use (assessing Facebook Profiles themselves).

In a later study by Ellison et al; (2007), a quantitative analysis of over 30,000 MSU Facebook Profiles examined the relationship between the amount and types of information presented in Facebook Profiles and the number of Friends in one's network.

A strong positive correlation was found between the two factors, particularly with the inclusion of more verifiable information (such as high school, AIM screenname, and birthday). The results are discussed through the lens of how individuals use Profile elements as signals in order to establish common frames of reference, thus reducing the cost of searching and enhancing communication between interactants. The study focuses largely on the visible behaviors of information revelation, and the researchers acknowledged that a major limitation was a lack of understanding of the attitudes toward and motivations for such behaviors, which could be investigated through interview methods.

A recent study by Dwyer (2007) employed just this method in an exploration of student use of online social networking sites and instant messaging. A panel of six undergraduates conducted semi-structured interviews of 19 college students, inquiring about issues such as self-presentation, dependency for sociality, anonymity and expectations of privacy. In the final discussion, the researchers defined an underlying framework of connections: communication technology features enable interpersonal relationship management, which is influenced in turn by individual attitudes (such as impression management and privacy concerns). While my research indeed supports this basic framework, it expands upon it to examine the formation of communities based on shared tastes.

The issue of taste was explored in an extensive project developed by Liu, Maes, and Davenport (2006), who discussed the performative, self-conscious nature of publicizing one's personal profile in online communities. The researchers coded the Interests of over 100,000 Profiles on Friendster and Orkut in order to create a "taste

fabric" of these social networks. In so doing, they created a virtual geography based on shared tastes, marked by "identity hubs," "taste neighborhoods," and "taste cliques," finding a common unifying aesthetic among individuals' Interests. This research provides support for online communities as uniting geographically dispersed individuals based on shared cultural tastes. Based largely on the theory of Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halto (1981), that the self is a construction of the "symbolic environment" that both echoes and reinforces her identity, the research also supports the idea that the construction of identities in general is a largely interactive process. I highlight this study as one example of how scholarship in this field often serves to reinforce unifying, empirical theories that ignore the experiential nuances of the medium and the forms of agency it enables; there is little research that focuses on *why* individuals engage with online social networks and how they interpret their experiences.

Value of Study

> The fundamental codes of a culture- those governing its language, its schema of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices-establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home. At the other extremity of thought, there are the scientific theories or the philosophical interpretations which explain why order exists in general, what universal law it obeys, what principles can account for it, and why this particular order has been established and not some other. But between these two regions, so distant from one another, lies a domain which, even though its role is mainly an intermediary one, is nonetheless fundamental; it is more confused, more obscure, and probably less easy to analyse.
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> -Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970: xx)

As the popularity of "Web 2.0" continues to skyrocket, researchers from various academic disciplines (such as sociology, psychology, linguistics, and media studies)

attempt to shed light on the relationship between the Internet and society. While such studies serve well to illuminate general trends and highlight issues of public interest, they overwhelmingly lack nuanced understandings of *why* people are motivated to engage with this medium in the ways that they do, and many of them have called upon ethnographic and interview-based studies as productive avenues for future research. Nevertheless, the issues highlighted by previous scholarship came to guide many of my early inquiries on the subject, expanding my horizon of understanding and field of inquiry. Furthermore, in engaging deeply with previous work, the grand narratives underlying them became apparent, allowing me to distinguish some of the established assumptions at play.

By giving voice to those who choose to represent themselves online, including myself, I have sought to foster a deeper understanding of the complexities that arise in everyday conversations with others involved in this new medium, such as the ways in which the Internet challenges notions of space and time, public and private, self-representation, interpersonal communication, and the credibility of information. Such an endeavor seeks to question the boundaries of how we understand the world, in the process elucidating the spaces betwixt and between such boundaries that give rise to new possibilities for re-interpretation of the experiences that these new technologies enable.

However, pure description of how others talk about online social networks would be but a superficial approach to ethnography. From the phenomenological point of view, the "truth" of ethnography lies in the interpretation of lived experiences, and is always partial. Such an endeavor is problematized by the author's own re-interpretation of described experiences, a process that is undoubtedly influenced by the anthropological quest for authoritatively representing the "other." The tradition of composing these

reinterpretations into a generalizing, authoritative theory is precisely the flaw, from Heidegger's point of view, of the phenomenological reduction. He contends that in order to truly understand something one must begin, not with ideal structures, but rather with everyday experiences of things as they show themselves. Therefore, it is only through immersion in the shared world of online social networks that I can claim to know anything at all- the basic premise of ethnography. Even then, perceptions are influenced by one's own position and interests, and thus this ethnography is necessarily to some degree "autoethnography," as I seek to interpret my own experiences. This reflexive interpretation takes into account the described and observed experiences of others, the role of popular discourse, and the impact of prior knowledge and historical precedents. Such an ethnography finds its value, not in enumerating an empirical structure informed by hierarchical representation, but rather in examining how these new and emergent interactions with technology are deeply entrenched in prior forms of human communication and representation.

Computer-mediated communication is like speech in that it allows for casual, convenient, and immediate interactions. Additionally, it shares several aspects of written communication in its potential for permanency, replicability, and transcendence of spatial and temporal constraints. It is evident that a deeper and more nuanced approach to understanding this new medium would entail elucidating the parallels between current and past communicative practices. The pervasive belief that online experiences indicate a turn away from direct, unmediated experiences of the world ignores that all experiences are in some way mediated. Rather, online social networking is indicative of a *qualitative* shift in the ways in which some people construct their identities and relationships with

others. As such, the topic is best understood firsthand, and best analyzed through the lens of qualitative description.

The rapidly evolving nature of web technologies can be dizzying to the researcher. The Internet mirrors and magnifies the social world, which is always changing and adapting to new situations and developments as they arise. The very notion of "community" is one that is constantly in flux, for "community" is easily eroded as sites become more popular, less directly useful, and as new niches arise and break off of the larger community. As Derrida noted, "contrary to what phenomenology- which is always phenomenology of perception- has tried to make us believe, contrary to what our desire cannot fail to be tempted into believing, the thing itself always escapes (Derrida 1979: 104)." From this point of view, it is impossible to articulate the meaning of experiences, for in order to do so we must grant false stability to that which is inherently always in flux. To frame it in the dialogue between Heidegger and Husserl: fulfillment of experiences, the ideal of categorial intuition, is not the "true" nature of phenomena, for there is always room for still further interpretation of any experience.

It has become clear to me that the value of this ethnography lies in elucidating the myriad shifting possibilities that emerge in the highly intersubjective field of everyday discourse. As my research has deepened, the one thread that ties these discourses together is the pervasive feelings of anxiety evoked by the blurred boundaries between subject and object, voyeur and exhibitionist, human and machine, reality and imagination. All technologies extend the possibilities of humankind, and in turn, they become appropriated and embedded in everyday experiences. However, at times technologies may seem alien and incomprehensible, instigating fear and a sense of

powerlessness. The sense of agency felt as one "types oneself into being" through the creation of a publicly viewable online profile can quickly be negated by the discovery that this personal freedom comes with the cost of possible persecution by unintended audiences, such as potential employers and legal authorities. What occurs is a splitting of selfhood, a temporal shift of identity from intentional author to victimized object of the gaze.

Despite the existential anxieties that arise frequently in everyday conversation, many celebrate the Internet for its potential to democratize information. The perceptual difference between democratization and invasion of personal privacy lies in whether individuals perceive themselves as having some degree of control over the medium, or conversely, tend to experience the medium as having control over them. A common way of regaining control and agency when confronting one's own powerlessness is with words and thoughts, projecting apathy or distaste and finding affirmation through others.

Feeling a loss of connection to her adolescent brother, my friend described him as "consumed by MySpace, his gaze never turning from the computer screen." For her brother, it is likely that MySpace conveniently fulfills his youthful desire to hang out in a safe space, away from the judgemental gaze of his family. Rather than explaining his disconnection from the family as a negative effect of new technologies, the situation can be more deeply analyzed in terms of discursive methods of power. To reject or criticize is to reclaim one's subjectivity, or at least portray oneself as the author of one's own meanings. Thus, technology, unable to speak for itself, has time and again become the scapegoat for generalizing theories of modernism- identified as the cause of the growth

of individualism and the erosion of communal, social ties. My goal in this ethnography is to juxtapose a variety of representations- scholarly, historical, technological, autobiographical, institutional, and popular- with the subjective accounts of those who engage with online social networking sites as regular facets of everyday life.

Becoming a Cyber-Anthropologist

For roughly half my life, I have been an avid enthusiast of the Internet and a member of a wide variety of online communities- in short, I am a "digital native" (Prensky 2001). Unlike most established scholars in this field, I was an active participant in the sites I have chosen to study well before I began researching them academically. My interest in online ethnography began quite suddenly and voraciously in the spring of my junior year (2006). Having declared a double major in psychology and anthropology the previous year, my schedule that semester consisted of three psychology courses (Psychological Measurement, Cultural Psychology, and a Seminar in Eating Disorders) and two anthropology courses (Making Anthropological Video and Youth Culture). For the first time, I was to conduct semester-long research projects of my own design.

My final project for "Youth Culture" was an ethnographic analysis of Wesleyan Facebook users. The paper began with a brief overview of the history of social networking on the Internet, and developed into a description of the many functions and the organizational structure of the Facebook. Firstly, I positioned Facebook as a virtual representation of an existing "real life" community- the Wesleyan campus. Through interviews and auto-ethnographic analysis, I explored issues of image management and perceptions of the role that Facebook plays in the lives of Wesleyan students. Other topics included notions of privacy (or lack thereof), media controversy surrounding the

Facebook, concerns over narcissism and voyeurism, social pressure to be a part of the Wesleyan Facebook community, and control over one's life through this virtual and visual medium. Aside from interviews and auto-ethnography, segments of the actual Facebook Profiles of respondents were incorporated to supplement the analysis. This medium frames individual and group identity in what can be rather limiting ways, and thus I stressed how people used sarcasm, irony, wit, and misrepresentation as strategies to work around or subvert these limitations.

In the "Seminar on Eating Disorders," I conducted research on the role of online diary communities in the lives of individuals afflicted with eating disorders. Using ethnographic analysis and interview methods, my partner and I examined nine different LiveJournal communities, as well as the Eating Disorders and Body Image Circle on OpenDiary. Although previous research had been conducted on pro-anorexia websites, no research had been done that examined the impact of online eating disorder communities like those we analyzed. Some of the issues addressed were: self-presentation; the role of "noters" (those commenting on the diaries of others); positive versus negative feedback; support; "rules" and goals; images and photographs; themes; implications for future studies; and demographic factors such as age, gender, and location. From the nine communities I posed questions to, I received thirty-seven detailed responses. Given the convenient, accessible, and inexpensive nature of the Internet, its potential for therapeutic purposes is substantial. However, there is also an enormous potential for abuse: many of these communities define themselves as pro-eating disorder, and individuals looking for such support can easily find it in this environment. The anonymity of the Internet, in this case, proved to be invaluable in my

social research on individuals who identify themselves in relationship to these communities and the "safe spaces" they form.

By the end of that semester, I felt as though I had truly begun to establish my niche in the realm of academia as an anthropologist of the Internet. As I entered my senior year, I embraced my new role as Internet researcher with gusto, and decided to apply for the combined BA/MA program offered by Wesleyan's anthropology department. Two of the four courses I'd enrolled in that semester (Anthropology of Dance and Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology) allowed me to once again craft lengthy research projects of my own design; once again, I devised projects based in online ethnography.

In "The Anthropology of Dance," Professor Kolcio challenged us to explore new ways of doing social research. In exploring the global phenomenon that is the modern psytrance movement, I posed a series of questions regarding the nature of trance dance, community, and transcendent/ecstatic states on several Tribe trance groups. I received well over thirty fascinating replies, ranging from intellectual assessments of trance dance to pure poetry. The implications for researching global phenomena through online ethnography were explored, as well as the risks and limitations of engaging with respondents through this virtual medium. The issue of embodiment is a very pertinent question in the realm of online research and virtuality. How can a community be formed outside of physical space and displaced from traditional notions of time? Additionally, I drew from what I had learned in my own experiences with psytrance, as well as what I had learned from psytrance communities on

Tribe, by creating such events in my own space, amongst my own immediate community.

For "Qualitative Research Methods," I conducted interviews with Wesleyan students regarding the impact of Facebook on their daily lives. I was concerned with three questions in particular: What practical role does Facebook play in an individual's life? How does it affect her social relationships? How does it affect self-identity and perceptions of other identities? My engagement with this class illuminated much about how methodologically and ethically to go about doing online research and conducting interviews. In contrast to my previous research on Facebook, these interviews were with self-selected individuals and far more in-depth, allowing respondents to discuss issues of importance to them, as well as tell stories they found applicable to my research project, as they understood it. Some points of interest are: the language people use in discussing Facebook; the trend among incoming freshmen who eagerly awaited their Wesleyan e-mail address solely to register themselves "officially" in the Wesleyan Facebook community; the role of Facebook as a necessary tool for communication and practical information; and the role of Facebook in generating gossip and enabling surveillance.

The following semester, I was officially accepted into the BA/MA program and began my thesis research in earnest. To begin, I set up a blog I titled "WebnographY," in which I posted my summaries and notes of the books and articles I read that were related to my research.[10] Additionally, the blog was used to record my random thoughts and experiences, link to my past research projects, and to solidify my emerging identity as an anthropologist of the Internet by serving as the website URL linked to my

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[10] A blog is an online journal that is usually publicly accessible.

signature when commenting on related forum threads and blog posts. By the end of my senior year, I had completed an extensive literature review that dealt with a variety of topics highlighted by past research of online communities: methodological issues and ethics; virtual identity formation; social, cultural, and sub-cultural capital; and popular discourses framing the Internet in utopian or dystopian perspectives.

Since creating my blog a year ago, it's been visited by over 1,300 people and has also been referenced on the blogs of others conducting online ethnography (such as Alexander Knorr's research on Second Life) as well as on the online syllabus for UC Berkeley's course on social media. One visitor to my blog sent me an e-mail asking if she could reference one of my papers in her own undergraduate research on Facebook, while another recently inquired as to whether I'd be interested in speaking at a conference entitled "Gender and Technology" at Rutgers University this spring. By maintaining an informative blog of my ongoing research, I've come to feel a strong affinity with an online community of those interested in the anthropology of social media. In the near future, I aim to create a website that will allow me to freely publish this thesis online and aggregate a diverse array of resources for those interested in learning more about this field of research.

Years ago, I endeavored to learn Swahili and travel to Zanzibar for ethnographic fieldwork. As I became engaged with the actual practice of writing ethnography, however, it became clear to me that writing the "other" would always feel somewhat wrong to me, a condescending mode of knowledge. When I wrote my first paper on Facebook back in the spring of 2006, I was struck by the way in which my own experiences resonated in my writing, how the words of others challenged and

complicated my perspective with layers of meaning. In other words, I became aware of the ethnographic authority implicit in my own position as a "native" of an emergent "other." Eventually, the real struggle became that of subverting such a perceived authority in pursuit of deep listening- of practicing empathetic, temporal re-interpretations of my interpretations. It is easy to say in theory, but difficult to show in practice. It is my belief that the next stage of human knowledge is the expansion of a process of co-construction of knowledge, enabled through widespread access to technology and the emergence of truly interactive and immediate forms of communication that also allow for archival and easy reference ("searchability"). As such, I have teamed up with several Facebook scholars to create a website that would ideally bring to life the co-constructive nature of this project by enabling further co-authorship in the form of a wiki.[11]

Structure of Thesis

The first section of this study provides an historical background for the emergence of the contemporary online practices of computer-mediated communication discussed in this thesis. In Chapter One, I briefly sketch the development of modern communications media, beginning with the popularization of the Gutenberg printing press in the era of nation-building that marked 18th century Europe. I go on to look at the Industrial Revolution, and to trace the relations of the middle class to new media technologies over the 20th century and into the 21st. In the second portion of this chapter, I provide an historical overview of the development of computer-mediated

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[11] A wiki is a website that allows anyone to edit the site's contents.

communication over the past half-century, elucidating points of comparison and departure from prior forms of communications media.

Chapter Two traces the development of Tribe, MySpace, and Facebook over the past five years, beginning with a description of some of the earlier popular websites that defined the social networking genre. By tracing the histories of these sites, I aim to demonstrate how popular attitudes have changed over time, marked by particular events that have evoked controversy, opposition, and anxiety. While all three sites are modeled on granting users the ability to create a virtual private space, they have at times violated the trust of their members by implementing features and policies that disintegrate the boundaries between public and private, moderating or censoring the content that can be displayed, or attending to the exploitive interests of commercial enterprises.

In the third chapter I explore my own experiences with the Internet and the various roles online communication has played in my life since I first encountered the medium over ten years ago. In so doing, I seek to explicate the complex ways in which these technologies both shape and are shaped by everyday understandings of self-identity, relationships with others, and membership in various kinds of communities. This chapter sets the stage for what I consider to be the most important contribution of this research: an emphasis on the subjective experiences of individuals as they adopt and integrate this medium into their everyday social practices.

In the latter half of this thesis, I turn the lens from myself to the stories of others engaged with my particular sites of focus: MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe. Chapter Four examines some of the anxieties and dystopian views expressed by my informants. The vertical gazes of legal authorities, commercial enterprises, and other unintended

audiences threaten to expose or exploit members' personal information. Longstanding student concerns with popularity, authenticity, and romance are expressed in new ways on these sites, which many criticize as lacking authenticity, contributing to the deterioration of face-to-face communication, and promoting narcissism and voyeurism.

In Chapter Five, I discuss the various pleasures and utopian visions described by participants. By interacting in these virtual private spaces, members can experiment with their identities, engage in transgressive acts, and foster a sense of communal belonging. These sites enable the promotion and circulation of various forms of user-generated content, ranging from photo albums to home videos, across boundaries of time and space. Some believe that these technological advances have arrived just in time to salvage community as the world descends into the destructive forces of modernism, advocating a return to humanity's ancient "tribal" roots.

Chapter Six explores another possible future scenario for online social networks: the "digital graveyard." Through observation and ethnographic analysis, I examine the phenomenon of memorializing the online profiles of deceased individuals. In such cases, the "virtual campfire" metaphor can be applied to the ways in which memorialized profiles become public and permanent while simultaneously creating an intimate space for collective remembrance. While these factors may result in profanation of this sacred space, they also extend the possibilities for commemoration in unique ways. Ultimately, I suggest that members of online social networking sites take into account the possibility that their virtual identities may quite suddenly come to serve as "digital graves," potentially permanent encapsulations of lives as they were lived online.

I encourage readers to peruse the Appendices as they are needed: *Appendix A* provides a glossary of some of the potentially unfamiliar Internet terms and jargon I refer to on occasion. In *Appendix B*, I have selected portions of my own Profiles on MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe, as well as the personalized "homepages" that greet members upon login, so as to provide a reference for those unfamiliar with the sites. My online Profiles have developed as I became more involved in these networks, reflecting my current desire for creative self-expression through these media. *Appendix C* contains a descriptive list of and links to recommended resources for those interested in learning more about online social networking, including links to my own Web presences.

Chapter 1:

A History of Mediating Communications Technologies

In this chapter, I briefly trace the development of modern communications media, focusing specifically on Europe and the United States. Beginning with the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in the mid-15th century, I discuss the evolution of what would later come to be called "the media" in terms of major technological developments, social and political shifts, controversy regarding institutional ownership and regulation, and the emergence of a "public sphere" in relation to "mass culture." The second half of this chapter traces the development of computer-mediated communication in relation to complex social, cultural, and political processes that unfolded in the United States over the latter half of the 20th century. I call attention to similarities to prior forms of media, as well as the ways in which the growth of computer-mediated communication can be viewed as both an extension of and a departure from traditional patterns of media development.

The Development of Modern Communications Media

The advent of recognizably "modern" technologies of communication can be traced back to the middle of the 15th century, when the techniques for printing developed by Johannes Gutenberg began to spread throughout the emergent European nation-states. During this period, a mode of agrarian production organized through feudal relations began to be replaced by capitalist production of commodities, due in

large part to the expansion of trade, colonialism, and the rise of urban areas. Additionally, this period involved simultaneous processes of centralization and dispersal of authority. While the means of production and distribution of commodities became increasingly controlled and regulated by centralized political institutions and detached from social relations, this was accompanied by the enormous reproductive power of the printing presses, which were quickly spreading information and ideas across Europe.

In 15th century Europe, the printed word was principally dominated by the church (which sought to reproduce sacred knowledge) and the university (which sought the standardization of moral and philosophical knowledge). Around this time, the introduction of postal services enabled written communication between two geographically distant individuals. However, literacy and thus written communication was, for the most part, restricted to a small minority of the educated, wealthy economic and political elites. The new possibilities afforded by the printing press aided political and religious authorities in establishing standardized national languages that helped to reinforce national identities.[12]

By the 16th century, the secularization of knowledge had intensified: the power of the church gradually declined in the face of religious fragmentation, while the university flourished with the advent of modern science and the increase of literacy (though still largely limited to the wealthy elite) (Thompson 1995). Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517) were initially enclosed with a scholarly letter protesting the sale of indulgences to raise money for the Roman Catholic church. Luther then posted a copy of the *Ninety-Five*

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[12] Benedict Anderson (1991) speculates that nations are "imagined communities" brought into being through a particular mode of communication he calls "print capitalism," especially the newspaper, where unifying ideas are horizontally shared with disparate individuals.

Theses to the door of a German church, which at the time served as bulletin boards for advertising events on university campuses (Junghans 2003: 26). The subsequent mass circulation of the *Ninety-Five Theses* sparked widespread debate that challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic church, contributing to its eventual fragmentation in the form of the Protestant Revolution.

Throughout the 17th century, newspapers, pamphlets, and periodicals began to circulate with regularity. As a result, knowledge about the world beyond one's direct experiences of it became available to and arguably constituted "the public," who were also increasingly exposed to a variety of different perspectives on issues pertaining to their lives (Thompson 1995: 65-67). This "public" was made up of literate, bourgeois individuals, defined by Jürgen Habermas (1962) as:

> …the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor (27).

This form of "public," intellectual opposition to the detachment of the state-controlled commodity market from everyday social relations has long been a primary concern of those in power. In turn, they sought to control the production and dissemination of knowledge in the interest of political stability.

The intellectual culture that took shape in Europe over the 18th century is known as the Enlightenment. In this metaphor of knowledge production, the "light" of scientific truth is heralded as dispelling the "darkness" and "shadows" which religion had imposed. Through this configuration, media forms became valorized for their potential to transmit truthful knowledge to the "masses." The rising authority of the new

intellectual elite was accompanied by the proliferation of printed news organizations that operated separate from, and often in tension with, governments in power. Political attempts at censorship were contested by the liberal voices of the literate, intellectual sphere. The freedom of the press came to be seen by intellectuals as a fundamental right of society, an ideal that is reflected in the First Amendment of the American Constitution. This liberal discourse positioned the media as a powerful means by which to educate "the people," an ideological category that served as the foundation for the growing popularity of democracy.

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution beginning around the middle of the 18th century, the technical means by which the printed form was circulated were vastly improved. These technical advancements coincided with the expansion of literacy among the rising middle classes, allowing for a wider and more diverse array of producers and consumers of mediated culture. However, though the representation of media as liberating and enlightening would come to promote the optimistic reception of all subsequent forms of media, the contrary call for censorship and control of knowledge by ruling political elites would continue to problematize this discourse, claiming that increased access to mediated information would lead to political instability and a disintegration of the moral fabric of society.

The beginning of the 19th century witnessed a dramatic increase in urbanization and literacy rates in Western societies. The concept of "the masses" began to be applied increasingly to the widening readership of newspapers, which played a significant role in the shaping of national consciousness (Anderson 1991), while new literary genres also disseminated a bourgeois ideology of domesticity. Throughout the early Victorian era,

ideals of "proper" domestic life proliferated through plan books, home manuals, and magazines. The home was depicted as the spiritual haven of the family, a place of rest and relaxation in sharp contrast to both the competitive, acquisitive world of work and to what was seen as the dangerous, unruly realm of urban commercial entertainment, comprised of "low" cultural forms such as popular theater, circuses, and dance halls (Spigel 1992). "Proper," bourgeois leisure activities, such as piano playing and Bible reading, were to take place in the feminized domestic sphere of the home. Over the postbellum era in the U.S., however, this mentality began to fade as improvements in transportation led to the development of suburbs and enhanced access to increasingly commercialized urban centers. The latter half of the 19th century saw the gradual formation of a new professional middle class and was marked by a concomitant shift in the ideals of family leisure, moving away from religiosity and toward the material luxuries of consumerism.

Propelled by the profitable possibilities of a widening public audience, as well as the rising affordability of production and circulation, producers of print media became increasingly commercial in their interests. Seeking to capitalize on the distributional power of the media, during the final decades of the 19th century newspapers and magazines in the United States began to be funded by commercial advertisers and regulated by emerging media conglomerates. Around this time, the Kodak camera was introduced into domestic use and sold by the millions (Briggs and Burke 2005: 134). Such luxuries were no longer limited to a wealthy elite, as industrialization had resulted in an overall increase in material wealth and leisure time and an emergent professional-managerial middle class primarily employed by large corporations. New domestic

technologies of leisure, such as the phonograph and the radio (and later, television) were promoted in home magazines, and their widespread reception, which brought the public sphere into the private domain, was conversely accompanied by the growth of department stores and commercial entertainments that drew women out of the home and into the public realm (Spigel 1992). Together, these factors contributed to a deterioration of the boundaries between the public and domestic spheres.

The rise of a suburban middle class, which took shape as the bourgeoisie sought to distance themselves from the "dangerous classes" gathering in the industrial urban centers, was facilitated by the development of transportation systems, beginning with the railway. Post-industrial America has been characterized as "a highly mobile world where communities are joined together through transportation and communications systems" (Spigel 2001: 392). By the turn of the 20th century, along with the automobile, both the telephone and the radio had been invented in the United States.[13] Both were revolutionary for enabling the instantaneous communication of speech: the telephone allowed two spatially distant individuals to communicate directly with one another; the radio, on the other hand, could be used for two-way, point-to-point communication between individuals and within small groups, with each individual playing the roles of sender and receiver; but it could also lend itself to "broadcasting" messages from a central source to widely dispersed receivers. Most importantly, these technologies were to be incorporated into the domestic sphere of the home, while simultaneously providing a means of connecting with the world outside of the private sphere.

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[13] The early 20th century, an innovative period marked by mass reproduction of "luxury" commodities, has been coined both "the Age of the Automobile" and "the Age of Broadcasting" (Briggs & Burke 2005: 149).

Over the course of the 20th century, both the telephone and the radio were integrated into the everyday lives of Americans. Though amateur "ham" radio, a predominantly masculine pastime, flourished throughout the first decade, the sinking of the *RMS Titanic* in 1912 (largely attributed to the abundance of casual transmissions that drowned out the important warning message) triggered the United States government to pass the *Radio Act of 1912*. Limited to extremely "short wave" transmissions, amateur radio became significantly less popular, and by the advent of World War I in 1917 was officially eliminated altogether. However, following the end of the war in 1919 these restrictions were removed and radio again began to flourish, marked most notably by the shift to corporate control in the formation of the Radio Corporation of America (RCA), which sought to monopolize the industry and mass produce "radio music boxes" for popular consumption (Briggs & Burke 2005: 130). The 1920s saw the rapid development of broadcasting systems, allowing radio transmissions to be sent from centrally organized "networks" to a vast heterogeneous audience (Thompson 1995: 79). By 1927, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) had developed and would become powerful commercial broadcasting networks, backed financially by advertising.

Film emerged as a form of public entertainment with the opening of the first American film theatre in 1905. Filmmakers and film stars alike migrated to Hollywood, California, where the birth of American cinema flourished. By the 1920s, much to the indignation of independent and amateur producers, both the motion picture and radio industries were largely controlled by privately owned corporations and regulated by the government. The rising popularity of movies, particularly among youth, was seen as

potentially threatening family life by eroding boundaries between public and private recreation. In response, a moral panic swept the country, orchestrated by moral reformers who warned that by moving leisure outside of the home these "new commercial amusements" were posing a threat to parental authority over children (Spigel 1992: 25). Radio broadcasting, in contrast, was represented as a form of home entertainment and education, gathering families together around an "electronic hearth" within the security of the domestic sphere. Additionally, the 'golden age' of radio was marked by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's famous "fireside chats," which were broadcast between 1933 and 1944. These broadcasts, which attracted more listeners than the most popular programs at the time, helped to form a "virtual campfire" that would strive to unite the nation in the tumultuous era of the Great Depression and World War II.

The mass popularization of radio broadcasting, evidenced by its adoption in 81% of American homes by 1940, empowered the radio industry with the means by which they would eventually come to develop television broadcasting (Spigel 1992: 29-30). Indeed, the technological innovations that allowed radio broadcasting to flourish, particularly the valve amplifier, were necessary precursors for the development of television (Briggs and Burke 2005: 141). This development would have to wait, however, as the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) insisted on establishing national standards, which would be delayed for another ten years as the country became embroiled in World War II. As soon as the war ended, however, television sets began to be advertised to the public in popular print media and on radio, and were quickly adopted throughout the 1950s, reaching a majority of households by 1955 (Spigel 1992:

32). The post-war economic boom in America contributed to renewed interest in the domestic sphere; television, then, was the perfect, affordable addition to the expanding middle-class nuclear family households, and popular television in turn offered its audiences images of and instruction in the new form of suburban family life.

By and large, the new TV industry adapted forms of entertainment programming that had been originally developed for radio, such as comedy-variety, soaps and sitcoms. While soaps were aired in the daytime and aimed at housewives, primetime sitcoms were increasingly designed for the "family audience," while other, adult-oriented genres, such as sports, comedy variety, and live dramas made collective spectator entertainments formerly associated with the public sphere into a component of the private sphere. Theatrical, collective spectator entertainment thus became an important element of the domestic in an era marked by increasing privatization of everyday life. The development of television as a "mass medium" helped to shape popular imagination, circulating images of a happy, harmonious, suburban middle-class family ideal. Popular television, like newspapers and radio before it, began to play a critical role in the shaping of national consciousness.

National politics became the highlight of television in 1960, as millions of Americans tuned in to watch the Kennedy-Nixon presidential debates. Kennedy, with his composed appearance and charismatic personality, could attribute his victory, at least in part, to the capacity for television to endear such "personalities" to its massive number of viewers.[14] His inauguration occurred at a critical juncture in American history,

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[14] By 1955, television sets had been incorporated in 65% of American households (in Spigel 1992: 32).

as the relative domestic tranquility and consensus politics of the preceding era had already begun to give way to the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement.[15] The mass media played a critical role in shaping national consciousness of the movement through potent and increasingly sensationalist coverage, which relied heavily on recent technological innovations (such as the portable camera) that enabled mobility in newsgathering. At the same time, institutional power was being challenged on an ideological level, as countercultural values were embraced by the New Left, composed primarily of college students. The origin of the term "New Left" can be traced back as far as 1960, to an open letter written by sociologist C. Wright Mills entitled *Letter to the New Left*. It outlined the purported "end of ideology," which Mills defined as "the ideology of an ending; the ending of political reflection itself as a public fact," and advocated progressive change through the formation of a "New Left":

> The Right, among other things, means — what you are doing, celebrating society as it is, a going concern. Left means, or ought to mean, just the opposite. It means: structural criticism and reportage and theories of society, which at some point or another are focused politically as demands and programmes. These criticisms, demands, theories, programmes are guided morally by the humanist and secular ideals of Western civilisation — above all, reason and freedom and justice. To be "Left" means to connect up cultural with political criticism, and both with demands and programmes. And it means all this inside every country of the world.
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> (Mills 1960: electronic document)

Though Mills died an early death in 1962, he continued to live on as an iconic hero for the New Left student radical movement. As the decade unfolded, a widespread attitudinal rejection of the capitalist values of the postwar era was accompanied by the

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[15] The 1955 Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which overturned previous rulings allowing "separate but equal" racial segregation of public schools, has been widely regarded as marking the advent of the Civil Rights Movement.

popularization of humanistic ideals such as autonomy and communality. The grassroots formations that developed in this era were dispersed and decentralized, connected in a web marked by overlaps and intersections as well as offshoots and fragmentations. As we shall see, the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and the values of individual freedom and local community they made fashionable, were to become significant historical precedents for the development of computer-mediated communication.

Computer-Mediated Communication in Historical Context

In the 1970s, American military researchers developed the first computer network, known as ARPANET. Though initially created to allow researchers in the Department of Defense to operate multiple computers at a distance, the potential of this technology for interpersonal communication was quickly realized by programmers, academic scholars, and scientific researchers. Throughout the 1980s, computer networking was adopted by hobbyists and developed into a viable communications medium. Ordinary citizens could legally communicate with one another through personal computers and telephone lines, leading to the rapid grassroots development of Usenet and bulletin board systems (BBSs) (Rheingold 1993). While BBSs typically formed around local geographic areas and were centralized in nature, requiring a central system operator, Usenet groups (coined "newsgroups") were decentralized, allowing for the emergence of global news servers organized by topics of interest.

These early forms of computer-mediated communication, first developed around

1980, coincided with the invention of the first MUD (Multi-User Dungeon) in London.

Howard Rheingold (1993: Chapter Five) defines MUDs as:

> Imaginary worlds in computer databases where people use words and
> programming languages to improvise melodramas, build worlds and all the
> objects in them, solve puzzles, invent amusements and tools, compete for
> prestige and power, gain wisdom, seek revenge, indulge greed and lust and
> violent impulses. You can find disembodied sex in some MUDs. In the right
> kind of MUD, you can even kill--or die.

MUDs allowed for synchronous "real time" conferencing, as opposed to the

asynchronous conventions of newsgroups and BBSs. Internet Relay Chat (IRC),

developed in 1988, further enabled synchronous communication. Both MUDs and IRC

were voraciously adopted by college students, setting off a moral panic over their

addictive and transgressive properties that echoed previous moral panics surrounding

cinema, television, and video games.

Like the radio before it, computer networks were originally invented for military

use. However, the development of computer technology as a medium for civilian

communication finds its beginnings in the intellectual sphere. Just as print media were

largely produced by the church and the university between the fifteenth and seventeenth

centuries, so too was computer-mediated communication initially confined to powerful

institutions, namely the government and the academic and scientific research

communities. The subsequent adaptation of this technology for personal use by a small

group of hobbyists has a parallel in the history of the radio. At the turn of the twentieth

century, amateur "ham" radio enthusiasts were the driving force behind the rapid

technological advancement of the medium, and likewise, it was a community of

computer "hackers," rather than the government, who have been principally responsible for the early technological developments of the computer.[16]

Ideologically, the "hacker" movement embodied many of the ideals of the international Situationist movement of the 1960s, a radical cultural movement which sought to subvert the tools of societal control for libratory ends. According to Situationists, social domination worked through centrally produced, controlled and supposedly controlling mass media; these constituted what French Situationist leader Guy Debord (1967) called "the society of the spectacle," wherein interpersonal relationships are mediated and saturated by icons and images in an increasingly consumerist society. The Situationists advocated détournement, referring to the specific tactic of appropriating and "turning" the instruments and products of "spectacle society" to other, libratory ends. While the most well-known Situationist practice of détournement was altering prominent billboard ads, 80s "hackers" concentrated their energy on manipulating computer networks. However, Situationist ideology also highlights the contrary process of recuperation, in which threats to the dominant political order are appropriated or reappropriated by "the spectacle," absorbed and made "safe" for mass consumption. This was certainly the case with prior broadcasting media, which by that time had become controlled and packaged for mass consumption by large media conglomerates, such as CBS and NBC. There was, nevertheless, a striking difference between the national moods that had shaped the reception of earlier culture industries and computer-mediated communication: radio, film, and television had all

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[16] The term "hacking" actually originated in the amateur radio community in the 1950s, referring to practices of creatively tinkering the machine in order to improve its performance.

emerged in eras characterized by a popular desire for national unity and material wealth; the computer, however, was developed in large part by those who advanced an ideological rejection of capitalism, imperialism, and consumerism.

Thus, the historical precedent for the grassroots development of computer-mediated communication was primarily the U.S. countercultural movement of the 1960s. Just as the mass circulation of Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* had a pivotal role in the fragmentation of religious authority in 16th century Europe, so too did underground publications (such as radical newspapers, political pamphlets, and 'zines') in the 1960s help to foster collective resistance to political authority in the U.S. One of these publications was the *Whole Earth Catalog*, whose readership connected disparate academic, technological, and countercultural communities. Its focus on reader contributions and practice of publishing financial accounts mirrored the interactive and open-source nature of modern Internet technologies. The *Whole Earth Catalog,* created by Stewart Brand in 1968, was inspired by Brand's involvement with systems theory and New Communalist politics (which were based on the democratized spread of information and collective consciousness). New Communalists rejected private property values, which they argued alienated individuals from society, and sought transcendence in the form of a "back-to-the-land movement."[17]

Brand's quest to create collaborative communities led to the creation of the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (more commonly known as the WELL), a collective of online message board forums established in 1985. The intimate social dynamics of the

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[17] This American movement is characterized by a demographically prominent migration from urban to rural areas throughout the 1960's and 70's, with the creation of somewhere between 2,000 and 6,000 communes (Turner 2005: 487).

WELL constituted the central theme of <u>The Virtual Community</u>, published in 1993 by Howard Rheingold, who'd been an active member since its inception. The members of this "virtual community" consisted of technologists, academics, and counterculturalists (particularly fans of the Grateful Dead), reflecting the dispersed networks previously established by the *Whole Earth Catalog*. The overarching ideology of the WELL traces its roots to the Situationist International and the New Communalists of the 1960's, who sought to appropriate the tools of societal control in order to bring about personal empowerment and communal world-building. With the introduction of the "hacker" came a return to the ideals that defined the New Communalists; namely, that "information wants to be free" (Brand 1985: 49).

These lofty goals were famously articulated in a treatise entitled *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* by John Barlow, published in 1996. Barlow, an information technology journalist and pundit, had also been a lyricist for the Grateful Dead, whose fans constituted a major segment of The WELL. He wrote his treatise following a Congressional meeting in which the *Communications Decency Act* (1996) was passed, which sought to restrict pornography on the Internet. Barlow called for a social revolution that would overthrow the oppressive forces of government, replacing them instead with the pursuit of individual enlightenment, communality, and collective consciousness. His triumphant manifesto is constructed as a pointed attack of the legal system on behalf of the civilians of cyberspace; like the Situationists of the 1960's, he invokes a primitivist image of revolution as reclaiming a tribal past, free of the iniquities of individualism and capitalism and defined instead by a return to communality and the gift economy:

Governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. You have neither solicited nor received ours. We did not invite you. You do not know us, nor do you know our world. Cyberspace does not lie within your borders. Do not think that you can build it, as though it were a public construction project. You cannot. **It is an act of nature and it grows itself through our collective actions** (Barlow 1996, emphasis added).

Discourses on cyberspace are centrally rooted in idealistic notions of freedom, on the one hand, and cautionary moralistic fears, on the other. The notion of cyberspace as a "libratory space" parallels older optimistic discourses surrounding new forms of media; the 18th century popularization of printed news was celebrated as a means of enlightening "the people," and early discourses surrounding radio and television similarly hailed these technologies as enabling access to the greater world. Likewise, this idealistic construction of new communication technologies has historically been countered in the form of institutional control and the proliferation of a "moral panic" which in turn calls for and legitimizes government regulation; that is, knowledge should be controlled in the form of "papa knows best," so as to protect the innocent and naïve (particularly children) from the putative dangers posed by unmonitored engagement with new media.

Following these early grassroots formations, a variety of new Internet-based technologies of communication emerged, principally based in the World Wide Web, which debuted as a public service in 1991. The creation of the Mosaic Web browser in 1993, made freely available to the public, catapulted the Web into mainstream popular use. User-friendly "Internet gateway" services, chiefly America Online, Compuserve, and Prodigy, drew tens of thousands of new home users onto the Internet and into online chat rooms. This rise in popularity sparked commercial interest in the Internet as a new medium for advertising, the mode by which the vast majority of online companies would

support themselves financially (as opposed to selling services directly). Throughout the mid- to late-1990s, personal "homepages" were created in abundance, a trend aided by free web hosting services such as Angelfire and Geocities that offered limited server space in exchange for ad placement. In 1995, online dating site Match.com debuted, and set a new standard of subscription-based online services. However, while companies with profit in mind flocked to establish their reputations on the Web and create lucrative services for average Web users, the decentralized and rapidly-expanding nature of the Web and the anarchic principles it was founded upon made it a challenge for any one site to draw in paying customers. Global online gaming communities, or "massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGS)" reached widespread popularity in the late-1990s with games such as Ultima Online and EverQuest. The late 1990s was also marked by the rise of online diary sites, such as LiveJournal and OpenDiary, which enabled the proliferation of personal online diary communities linked together by interest.

More recent developments of the World Wide Web are collectively often called "Web 2.0" technologies, referring to a shift toward more interactive Web-based applications that derive the majority of their content from users themselves. Tim O'Reilly, credited with coining the term, cites Craigslist as one example; the site allows visitors to browse and post local classified ads freely. Examples of recent "Web 2.0" technologies include: weblogs (more commonly known as "blogs"); social bookmarking; personalized photo and video sharing; online social networking sites; wikis (collaborative websites); and RSS feeds (allowing users to subscribe to regularly-updated web content such as blogs and podcasts). As these technologies have proliferated and come into

popular use, they have evoked a host of speculations over how they may be extending and/or transforming processes of individual production of media and virtual community formation.

Conclusion

> Media frames are persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual.
> > -Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making & Unmaking of the New Left, 2nd ed.* (2003)

Since the advent of the Gutenberg printing press in the mid-15th century, the process by which individuals accumulate knowledge and communicate with one another has undergone a rapid evolution. With each new advance in communications technologies, the spatial and temporal dynamics that had traditionally limited the flow of information were increasingly transcended. Over the course of these developments, institutional control over the production and dissemination of media forms has profoundly shaped the arena of public discourse and national identity; the public, in turn, has routinely contested and subverted their authority, adapting media forms to various agendas of liberation, personal empowerment, and revolution.

It is hardly a coincidence that the emergence of mass reproduction of the printed word was coeval with the emergence of modern capitalism; the commodification of cultural forms makes profitable such technologies of mass distribution. As we have seen, the expansion of a prosperous bourgeoisie together with the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution resulted in "mass" consumption of newspapers and magazines, prompting the rise of commercial advertising and corporate control of mass media

industries. Over the course of the 19ᵗʰ century, the dramatic increase in wealth and

leisure time enabled some people to spend more time developing their individual

hobbies and interests. Vehicles of mediated information and entertainment, in particular

the radio and the cinema, became increasingly commoditized, marketed to serve the

eclectic tastes of the public. The World Wide Web, in its current form, is the greatest

cultural marketplace, incorporating each prior form of commoditized media in its

monetized offerings. However, just as corporate control and commercial advertising

have been disparaged and resisted through "alternative" radio and avant-garde anti-

commercial video in the 1970s and 1980s, so too has commercial exploitation of the

Web been resisted through the popular practice of sharing and downloading free

content, as well as the "open source" movement.[18]

Computer-mediated communication, though originally developed for military use

like the telegraph and radio, grew in an independent grassroots manner. In this way, the

development of the Internet differs markedly from the military and corporation

controlled communications technologies that had developed over the past two centuries.

Studios dominated the film industry and corporate broadcasting networks dominated the

radio and television. However, while the reception and development of these prior

technologies were heavily influenced by public desires for domestic technologies and

national security following wartime crises, computer technologies evolved in an era

marked by widespread rejection of the governmental, military, and corporate institutions

of power and control. In many ways, this emergent "public sphere" would come to more

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[18] The "open source" movement refers to a set of practices for writing software and making
freely available the original source code, allowing others to more effectively expand upon already
created software.

closely resemble Habermas' (1962) depictions of the 18th century "sphere of private people come together as a public," as the development of multiple social and political reform movements "claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves."

The evolving nature of "mass media" has both shaped and been shaped by a series of shifts in the public and private spheres and the relations between them. Once primarily relegated to the church, the university, and the coffeehouse, the mid-18th century marked a notable shift toward reading as a popular domestic leisure activity. The seemingly contradictory effects of industrialization and urbanization, characterized by the privatization of the domestic sphere in an increasingly large-scale mobile society, were resolved through the widespread incorporation of broadcasting media in the home, which Raymond Williams (1992; 1974: 20) describes as "mobile privatization." The introduction of the telephone, newspapers, radio and television broadcasting brought the public realm into the private sphere, in turn at least potentially inculcating a sense of commonality amongst dispersed audiences. Lynn Spigel (2001: 392), expanding Williams' theory, discussed what she termed "privatized mobility," as the "media home" became increasingly experienced as "a vehicular form, a mode of transport in and of itself that allowed people to take private life outdoors." With new technologies such as the media-loaded car and the mobile phone, people could also "be at home" while in public spaces.

The evolution of computer-mediated communication, in turn, has itself evolved from a state of "mobilized privatization," where computer-mediated communication was seen as providing a domicile window to imagined communities (such as fandom newsgroups and the virtual worlds of MUDs), to "privatized mobility," when the mass

popularization of Internet use and the development of the World Wide Web resulted in the personal lives of individual Internet users becoming increasingly broadcast to the world in the form of personal homepages and virtual diaries, and extended the spatial and temporal dynamics of interpersonal communication with offline relations through e-mail and instant messaging. With the rise of "Web 2.0" technologies, computer-mediated communication has entered a new stage of "networked individualism," wherein disparate pre-established communities (family, classmates, colleagues, co-workers, etc;) are situated within the context of one's online identity, allowing one to maintain an extensive network of both strong and weak social ties (Boase, Wellman, Quan-Haase, & Chen 2003). Here I am referring specifically to the rising popularity of online social networking, the development of which is outlined and discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 2:

A Brief History of Online Social Networks

By the early 1990's, the concept of "the virtual community" had penetrated popular imagination. Hobbyists, visionary entrepreneurs, and venture capitalists alike saw the World Wide Web as a nebulous world full of possibilities and unpredictability, a new frontier for creativity, community and profit. Though there were many failures, the first successful Web-based communities laid the foundation on which later mainstream social networking sites would build. These early formations strove to establish trust among their users in a variety of ways: implementing protective features to regulate online communication; efficiently providing needed services within geographically-bound communities; and allowing users to draw in their offline relations and articulate connections online, effectively expanding their online social networks to include friends of friends with whom they might otherwise have lost touch.

Origins

Contemporary online social networking sites combine a variety of components that distinguished several earlier forms of online "communities." Some of the most popular early web services consisted of online matchmaking, classified ads, and virtually establishing one's offline relationships. An examination of the origins of MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe suggests that three prior sites substantially influenced the current state of online social networking: Match.com, Craigslist, and SixDegrees.com. The

shared origins of all of these sites are of notable importance. From the WELL to Friendster, Tribe to MySpace and Facebook, the creators of these online social networks inherited a geographic and ideological legacy stemming from the imagined "frontier" of the American west coast, California in particular. The "dot com" frenzy of the early 90's took hold in Silicon Valley, much as Hollywood had been the birthplace of cinematic developments decades earlier. However, the "bottom-up" business model that drove the development of computer technologies was a significant shift in the history of communications media (Briggs & Burke 2005: 224).

Craigslist, founded in 1995 by Craig Newmark, was inspired by the community-based nature of the WELL and Usenet newsgroups. What began as simply an e-mail listserv for events in San Francisco has since evolved into the largest classified ad system in the world. Visitors to the site may browse, upload, and respond to posts about "jobs, housing, goods, services, romance, local activities, advice - just about anything really (Craigslist n.d.)." Though Craigslist was incorporated for-profit in 1999, Newmark has staunchly resisted commercial exploitation of the site, advocating human survival through cooperation in the face of "kleptocrats and sociopathic organizations that have the almighty dollar as their only goal (McHugh 2004)." For purposes of moderation and authentication, there are modest fees for job postings in eleven major U.S. cities, as well as for brokered apartment listings in New York. To this day, Craigslist, which now serves over 450 cities worldwide, has remained primarily text-based (although posters may upload photos in the "housing," "for sale," and "personals" sections) and ad-free (Craigslist n.d.).

Match.com, one of the first online dating sites, was launched in 1995 with the sole purpose of bringing the popular "personals" segment of newspapers online. The site allows singles to create personal profiles and communicate with potential romantic partners. "I had observed that in the Bay Area personals there were many more men advertising than women," founder Gary Kremen said. ``So I realized two things -- you had to get gay men and women on the service (Angwin 1998)." While anyone can become a member, create a profile, and search for potential matches, the capacity to send and receive e-mail is limited to paying subscribers. Match.com's consumer-oriented model transformed the world of dating by providing a safe and secure way of meeting other singles online, and quickly rose in popularity. Membership peaked in 2004, with over 20 million singles registered on the site.

The emergence of online social networks based in users' pre-existing offline relationships began in 1997 with the creation of SixDegrees.com, inspired by the 1929 theory of Frigyes Karinthy that anyone on earth can be connected to any other through a chain of six acquaintances. SixDegrees.com allowed users to provide their names, as well as create lists of acquaintances and friends who would then be invited to join the network. Users would then be able to view other users up to six degrees of separation, and communicate with members within three degrees of separation. Membership peaked in 1998 with over a million members. Despite its engaging premise, the site quickly declined in popularity, due to both the limited number of people using the Internet at the time as well as a lack of new interactive features. Nevertheless, SixDegrees.com set a new precedent for ego-centric online communities, as opposed to the interest-centric mailing lists and web forum communities before.

In the decade since, online social networks have proliferated to such an extent that they are now among the most visited sites on the Internet. Friendster, the first of these sites to achieve mass popularity in the summer of 2003, was predicated on SixDegrees.com's tactic of linking members to one another through expanding viewable networks of friends-of-friends. It original premise was to compete with popular matchmaking services, particularly Match.com. As such, activity on the site was primarily geared toward romance; members could post "Testimonials" on the Profiles of their Friends, which helped establish their trustworthiness and reputation for potential romantic interests. Friendster's early users were predominantly gay men, bloggers, and Burners in their twenties (boyd, 2004). The site's rapid decline in popularity among its early core groups was due in large part to a dramatic increase in surveillance of its members, a response to the popular trend of creating fake Profiles. Nicknamed "Fakesters," such Profiles consisted of theatrical, interactive virtual play.[19]

---

[19] Examples of Fakesters include celebrities, fictional characters, concepts, objects, and institutional affiliations (boyd and Heer 2006: 5).

TheJennyGang

Female, 24, Single

Interested In: Relationship Women, Dating Women, Friends, Activity Partners

Member Since: Mar 2004

Location: Great Britain (UK)
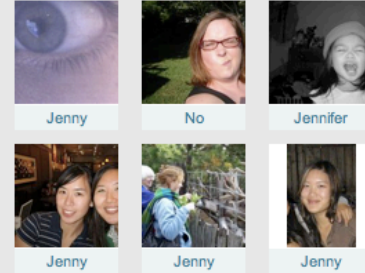
Hometown: London

TheJennyGang's URL:
http://profiles.friendster.com/6740234

"Jenny just about sums it up add us if you're called Jenny: thejennygang@hotmail.com"

▸ More about TheJennyGang

Send Message	Send a Smile
Forward to Friend	Invite to Group
Add Comment	Add Bookmark

How you're connected:　　　　**View All**

Already your Friend:
you have 1 friend in common

TheJennyGang's Friends

Jenny	No	Jennifer

Jenny	Jenny	Jenny

View All (52)

TheJennyGang's Photo Gallery

View all Photos (4) | Submit Photo for TheJennyGang

More About TheJennyGang

Occupation:
Jenny

Hobbies and Interests:
Meeting more Jennys

Favorite Movies:
Anything where Jenny Agutter gets her kit off

Favorite Music:
Little Richard, Stellastarr*, Joe Jackson, The Vibrators, Stephen Malkmus, Danny Kaye, Tommy Tutone, Nina Simone, The Killers
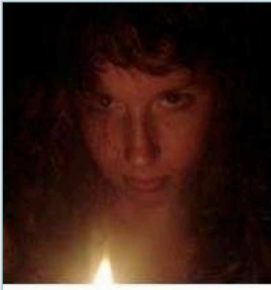
About Me:
Jenny just about sums it up

add us if you're called Jenny: thejennygang@hotmail.com

Who I Want to Meet:
Anyone called Jenny

A "Fakester" Profile

Jenny

Post a shoutout to your profile!
(Create)

Female, 23, Single
Interested In: Friends, Activity Partners
Member Since: Sep 2003
Profile Viewed: 0 times since
Location: Middletown, CT
Hometown: Clinton, NY
Your URL [Edit] :
http://profiles.friendster.com/1979552

"all madness i attribute to the red hair."

▸ More about Jenny

View Messages   Create Blog

Edit Friends   Edit Comments
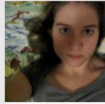
Customize Page   Edit Profile

Edit Photos

Recent Updates:
No recent updates.

Jenny's Friends

Lodro   Liz   Aaron
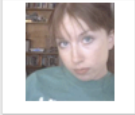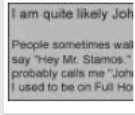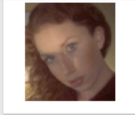
Lucy   Irn   Lee

View All (31)   Edit Featured Friends

Jenny's Photo Gallery

I am quite likely Joh
People sometimes wa
say "Hey Mr. Stamos."
probably calls me "Joh
I used to be on Full Ho

View all Photos (5) | Who's Grabbed My Photos   Edit Photos

More About Jenny

Schools (Other):
Wesleyan University, Clinton Central School, St. Mary's School

Occupation:
lover

Affiliations:
http://condor.wesleyan.edu/jaryan

Hobbies and Interests:
anthropology, lists, web design, graphic design, drumming, healthy food, laughing, the color
green, writing, my hamster Tweaklet, denmark, spring, the ocean, scuba diving, running,
parasailing, rollerblading, dancing, other things that feel like flying, fairy tales, rocking out, making
out, plane rides, coffee, smoke rings, backrubs, places that are not the united states of america

Favorite Books:
Francesca Lia Block, Carlos Casteneda, The Unbearable Lightness of Being, On The Road,

My Friendster Profile

As conflict between serious networkers and playful Fakesters heightened, Friendster began deleting the Profiles of putative Fakesters en masse, thus alienating its core user base and drastically reducing its popularity (boyd and Heer 2006: 9). It has since become a veritable graveyard of abandoned online identities; however it undoubtedly set the stage for sites such as Tribe, LinkedIn, and MySpace, which were all initially developed as competitors to Friendster.

The Early Years (2003-2004)

> *Paul Martino[20]:* no one knew what would happen
> *PM:* we were invited to the MySpace launch party in LA
> *PM:* and were investors in LinkedIn [a business-oriented online networking site]
> *PM:* it's only in hindsight that there is this notion of competitors
> *PM:* back then ALL of us were just making it up
> *PM:* we had no idea that it bifurcate into niches
> *PM:* geographic
> *PM:* affinity based
> *PM:* age
> *PM:* etc.
> *PM:* no one, and I mean no one knew that in 2002
> *PM:* anyone who says they did is full of it!
>
> (Online chat, 8 October 2007)

In July of 2003, as Friendster's popularity was peaking, Tribe was introduced to the Internet community. Its San Francisco origins are still evident today, as this particular local network remains the most populated and active. The site, which emphasizes local networks organized by city, allows users to buy and sell items, rate restaurants and other establishments, and rummage through job postings and housing ads. Members can establish trustworthy reputations by creating personal Profiles, joining "Tribes" based on shared interests, and connecting to friends. As the site's history has not been articulated in any comprehensive manner, I contacted co-founder Paul Martino, resulting in an online chat through Instant Messenger later that week. "The original thesis of Tribe," Martino told me, "was to marry Friendster and Craigslist- or as one of our focus group members said, 'Craigslist with a face.'"[21] In articulating the origins of Tribe's demographic base, Martino says, "to some extent Tribe was 'captured' by the Burning demographic." For this reason, Tribe never became mainstream in the way MySpace did,

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[20] Co-founder of Tribe.net.
[21] Personal communication, 8 October 2007.

instead becoming a niche site for displaced Fakesters, Burners, and a collective of "New Age" spiritual seekers. To this day, it remains relatively unknown to most of those with whom I've discussed online social networking.

MySpace entered the scene in the fall of 2003 as a direct competitor to Friendster. Among its early adopters were indie-rock bands based out of Los Angeles that utilized the site to connect to fans and promote their music virally. "It was VERY nichey at the start," explains Martino, "MySpace then 'crossed over'… it became pop culture." In 2004, the site's popularity with high school students exploded, prompting MySpace to remove their original policy that refused membership to minors. High school students gravitated to MySpace due in large part to the site's emphasis on musician fandom, a crucial aspect of modern youth identity. MySpace enabled its members to publicly articulate their connections to favored musicians, and provided a source for information about upcoming concerts and local events. More importantly, it provided highschoolers with a virtual place in which they could "hang out" with their friends. MySpace became in many ways an extension of the teenage "bedroom culture," where private youth spaces, so important in the creation of youthful identities, were staked out as distanced from the adult supervision present in the institutionalized spaces where teens spend much of their time.

In early 2004, as MySpace took hold among the teenage demographic, then-Harvard student Mark Zuckerberg was busily crafting a social network he dubbed "thefacebook," so named after the student directories with photographs commonly distributed to college students. It allowed those with an "@harvard.edu" e-mail address to join, creating a closed campus network that was an immensely appealing alternative to

the more anarchical MySpace. Thefacebook's clean aesthetic and functionality were an instant hit at Harvard, and new networks were gradually launched at colleges and universities across the United States. Facebook, like MySpace, quickly became embedded in the everyday social practices of its users- in this case, college students- and reached a million active users by the end of its first year.[22]

Gaining Momentum (2005-2006)

The purchase of MySpace for $580 million by Rupert Murdoch (the controversial president of News Corporation, a dominant player in global media distribution) in September of 2005 provoked intense scrutiny by the media. Just as television had been attacked as the moral corrupter of youth when it was first established in American homes, so too did MySpace become the scapegoat of a moral panic propagated by sensationalist media coverage regarding sexual predators "lurking" on the site and luring naïve and unsuspecting teenagers out of their homes and into the streets. MySpace was represented as an unpredictable and potentially unsavory world rife with dangers that through it invaded the protective safety of the home. Popular coverage was primarily aimed at parents, presenting upsetting scenarios and offering safety tips- a dramatic, negative instance of "mobile privatization."

In July, the United States House of Representatives passed the *Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006*, an amendment of the *Communications Act of 1934* that would require federally funded schools and libraries to limit access to social networking sites and chat

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[22] "Active users" are defined by Facebook as those who have returned to the site within the past month (Facebook 2008).

rooms. Though the bill has yet to be voted on in the Senate, its obtuse definition of

"social networking site," which includes the creation of an online Profile and the

capacity for interpersonal communication, has evoked widespread criticism, as it includes

most modern "Web 2.0"-inspired websites (such as Wikipedia, Yahoo, and

Amazon.com). In an interview concerning the legislation, Henry Jenkins (2006), Director

of Comparative Media Studies at MIT, criticized the legislation from an historical

perspective on moral panics:

> A single high profile incident – some kind of tragedy or crime – can spark
> backlash. Political leaders, seeking headlines, and journalists, seeking readers,
> exploit those anxieties and feed those fears. Soon, there is a call to take action
> "even if it is wrong," a call to action which races well ahead of any serious
> research or thoughtful reflection on the matters at hand. The new legislation is
> being embraced by politicians in both parties eager to woo cultural conservatives
> and suburban voters as they enter what everyone knows is going to be a hotly
> contested election.

Despite the concern of cultural pundits and legislators, MySpace continued its explosive

growth, surpassing 100 million accounts the following August- though millions of these

accounts are abandoned experiments or spam robots. Additionally, the site's

demographics underwent a generational shift, as a little more than half of visitors in

August of 2006 were age 35 or older (Mills 2006).
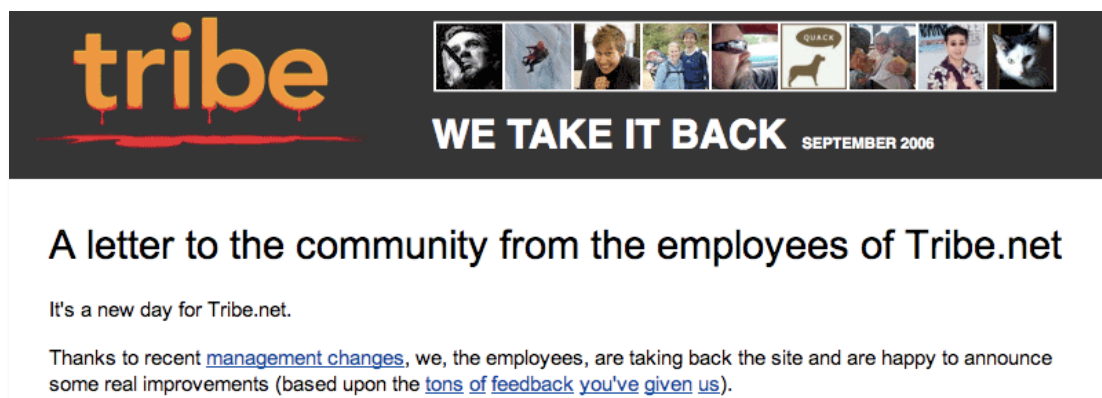
In marked contrast to the dramatically increasing popularity of MySpace, Tribe

was seeing little increase in traffic, prompting the site to focus its energies on marketing.

In April of 2005, Tribe CEO Mark Pincus was replaced as part of the company's

initiative to accelerate its stalled growth. Over the course of the next year, Tribe

members vocalized their discontent with the new management's alterations of the site,

such as graphical and navigational changes. In July of 2005, rumors abounded that Tribe

was soon to be bought out by NBC, inciting enormous protest and criticism that Tribe had "sold out." These rumors proved to be false. However, the new management's goals of drawing more members and ad revenues was made explicit the following December. In response to a newly amended federal law (Section 2257) requiring that website owners maintain documentation assuring that "every performer portrayed in a visual depiction of actual sexually explicit conduct" is over the age of 18, the management imposed new regulations aimed at censoring such "sexually explicit" content (in Blue 2005). Members such as Violet Blue, a celebrity sex educator and author who created the immensely popular Smart Girls' Porn Club on Tribe, protested virulently. Over the next six months, the site failed to produce significant revenue. Attempts to market Tribe to the mainstream were largely unsuccessful, for, in the words of one Tribe employee:

> …in trying to guide this site to the mainstream we were trying to be something that we weren't. It remains to be seen whether an audience of geeks, kinks, and burners can grow out from its largely San Francisco based roots and embrace other niches in other places.
>
> (Tribe Company Blog, 24 July 2006)

Shortly following this announcement, in August of 2006, Pincus bought back the faltering site. His return signified a shift back toward the original management structure, which promised to return the site "to the community and the content" (Tribe.net 2006):

The move was celebrated by the loyal community of Tribe members, who flocked to the newly-formed "brainstorming" Tribe to suggest improvements and new ideas. Members overwhelmingly expressed their support of the features that made Tribe unique from other social networking sites, particularly its emphasis on local community and "alternative" discussion.

While Tribe faded from prominence in the world of online social networking and MySpace became the symbol of the practice's morally degenerative potential, Facebook was fast becoming the new favored icon of the medium. Within a year and a half of the site's launch, a reported 85% of students at 882 supported colleges and universities had become members, with an astonishing 60% of those users logging in daily (Arrington 2005). Once reserved for those possessing an ".edu" e-mail address (initially college students, but also increasingly including faculty, staff, and graduates), Facebook opened up to high school students in mid-2005 on an invitation-only basis, thus solidifying its reputation among highschoolers as the "cool college site." The original members of the site, college students, were furious. A wave of protest was evidenced by Facebook groups adamantly opposed to any sort of "open doors" policy which threatened its distinctive value. One such Group at Wesleyan, "College Students Against High School Students on Facebook," states in its Description:

> With the inclusion of the less regimented and more disaster prone high schoolers, Facebook could be in the shitter. While mildly admirable, though selfish, to try to be the highest visited site online, there are very few pros to having high schoolers on this network. There are no college email requirements, and there are a shitload of 14 year old idiots. Besides, why can't they use myspace until they become undergrads? Let's be careful, collegiates. Let's be careful.

However, because the site only allows users to view others in their mutually established networks, the addition of high school networks to the site had little to no effect on the everyday experiences of core users. Throughout the next year, Facebook's member growth was exponential, particularly with high school students. By the end of the year, 5.5 million people had joined the site (Facebook 2008).

In September of 2006, Facebook implemented two major changes that dramatically altered members' perceptions of privacy and feelings of security. On September 5th, without warning, a News Feed was introduced on the homepages of members. The News Feed served to aggregate the Facebook activities of Friends in one's network, displaying them as prominent "headlines":
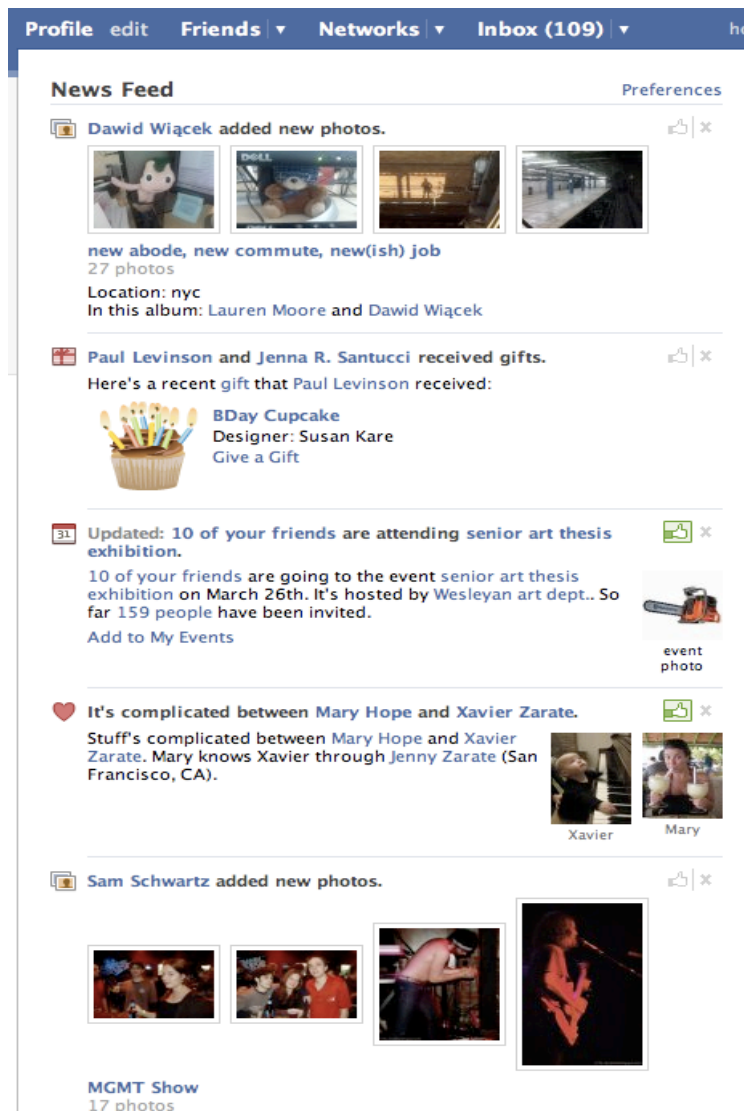
Additionally, a "Mini Feed" was incorporated on the individual Profiles of members, and could not be deleted. The implementation of the "News Feed" features incited virulent protest on the part of Facebook members. In one of the most unanimous displays of protest ever seen on the Internet, a Group called "Students Against Facebook News Feed (Official Petition to Facebook)" accumulated over

750,000 members in a span of three days, prompting substantial changes to the News

Feed by Facebook and another apology by Zuckerberg:

> We made the site so that all of our members are a part of smaller networks like schools, companies or regions, so you can only see the profiles of people who are in your networks and your friends. We did this to make sure you could share information with the people you care about. This is the same reason we have built extensive privacy settings — to give you even more control over who you share your information with.
>
> Somehow we missed this point with News Feed and Mini-Feed and we didn't build in the proper privacy controls right away. This was a big mistake on our part, and I'm sorry for it. But apologizing isn't enough. I wanted to make sure we did something about it, and quickly. So we have been coding nonstop for two days to get you better privacy controls. This new privacy page will allow you to choose which types of stories go into your Mini-Feed and your friends' News Feeds, and it also lists the type of actions Facebook will never let any other person know about. If you have more comments, please send them over.
>
> This may sound silly, but I want to thank all of you who have written in and created groups and protested. Even though I wish I hadn't made so many of you angry, I am glad we got to hear you. And I am also glad that News Feed highlighted all these groups so people could find them and share their opinions with each other as well.
>
> <div align="right">(Mark Zuckerberg, 8 September 2006)</div>

Through the collective will of the network, the rule of the site administration was

effectively leveraged through the simple actions of individual members, who needed only

to accept the Invitation to the Group to express their desire for change. While this

appeased many of the protestors, however, the peace would not last long. On September

26th, Facebook opened up membership to everyone, eliciting further outrage from

college users. Nevertheless, the move resulted in an exponential increase of membership,

surpassing twelve million active accounts by the end of 2006 (Facebook 2008).

Critical Mass (2007-2008)

In March of 2007, Tribe (described as "a mostly forgotten social networking site") and FiveAcross (another social networking site) were officially acquired by Cisco Systems, a "Silicon Valley heavyweight" in the field of telecommunications equipment (Stone 2007). In response to a blog post covering the news on the popular technology website TechCrunch, one reader commented:

> Seems the wild west has a new frontier tale to tell today, one about how the cisco kid gathered up the tribe and rode into the (silicon) valley, five across and lord knows how many deep, all manner of whoops and hollers piercing the pregnant air, gold in them thar hills, a whipping post and minions predisposed to bdsm and fire dancing on the open flats by nightfall... and the age-old struggle to domesticate the tribes rises up at high noon as the cisco sherriff makes steps into the cantina… can the tribe be civilized? will they settle? is this a new home or a hollywood set rigged and ready for showtime? there's talk in the tribes and the whipping post sweats and communal bondage, or is it bonding, waits to meet the law… switch on, switch off, or switch sides…

Despite this reader's amusingly ominous predictions, Cisco was primarily interested in acquiring the site's cutting-edge technologies to sell social networking services to clients seeking to build niche communities, and Tribe has remained independently owned and operated. Tribe's slick user interface was likely the reason for its acquisition by Cisco; it is among the most flexible and advanced of any social networking site, allowing members to drag and drop modules on their homepages as well as their Profiles.[23] Their user-centric approach has been grounded in communicating directly with members through forums dedicated to suggestions, criticisms, and concerns. This approach is widely appealing to members dedicated to the site:

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[23] Among the external modules that can be incorporated on one's profile are: personal blog and RSS feeds; Amazon Wishlists; del.icio.us bookmarks; Revver, YouTube, and Google Videos; and xspf music playlists.

I belong to both Myspace/Writers cafe and recently a friend asked me to join Facebook. Myspace I don't use very much as there has been a lot of negative publicity and comment of just who and what is on there due to a murder (in Australia) linked to persons trawling My Space for a victim. Writers cafe I use but overall I prefer tribe. People here have (mostly) good intentions and the content is always interesting. Long live TRIBE!!!!

(Tribe Member, 2007)

The campaign for new laws regulating the activities of children and sexual predators on MySpace gained new momentum in the spring of 2007, when the Connecticut and North Carolina Attorneys General mounted a campaign pressuring MySpace to provide data on the number of registered sex offenders registered on the site. MySpace reported that 29,000 Profiles of sex offenders had been found and their owners banned from the site (BBC News 2007). The story was covered widely in the mainstream press and used as leverage for politicians seeking to gain popular support for proposed legislation targeting sex offenders.

As MySpace hastened to implement improved security measures and redeem its reputation, Facebook's popularity continued to soar. March of 2007 recorded two million active Canadian members and one million active UK users (Facebook 2008). With the debut of its third-party developer's platform later that spring, Facebook allowed members to add Applications within their Profiles, which would then virally proliferate as they invited their Friends to add the Application. The wealth of consumer data and marketing opportunities this move entailed for outside developers and organizations pushed Facebook into the spotlight of Silicon Valley technocrats, who have since created business networks on the site and developed thousands of applications (the majority of which fail to catch the attention of more than a fractional minority of users). These applications range from the inane (e.g., Food Fight!, My

Aquarium) to the entertaining (e.g., Texas HoldEm Poker, IQ and Personality tests) to

the truly useful (e.g., Trips, RunLogger, Business Cards). Not surprisingly, the

proliferation of these applications was widely regarded by early adopters- college

students and recent graduates- as annoying and intrusive. Their viral proliferation has

aroused widespread disdain among veteran Facebook users, as exemplified by the

following group:

High school students (many of them also MySpace users) and web developers, in

contrast, have generally responded favorably to the change. Later that year, Facebook

made its first acquisition, Parakey, a "secretive startup" that had been developing

technologies for integrating online and offline application-building (Marshall 2007).

Shortly afterwards, Microsoft bought a $240 million stake in the company, thereby

increasing its Web standing among top advertising competitors such as Google (which

had a monopoly on MySpace ad placement and search). On October 10, 2007, MySpace

announced its plan to follow in the footsteps of Facebook by also allowing third-party

developers to create and propagate applications. They began rolling out new features

throughout the next few months, such as photo tagging and "Friend Subscriptions" (MySpace's version of Facebook's News Feed).

In November of 2007, Facebook launched Project Beacon, which aggregates member activity on participating websites (such as Blockbuster, LiveJournal, and NYTimes.com) and displays this information to one's Facebook Friends through the News Feed. Initially, participation in Project Beacon was applied as a default for all users, though one could choose to "opt-out" by navigating to and changing her own privacy settings. Beacon was intended to be implemented in a way that was barely noticeable to average users, and as such most Facebook members were unaware of the new feature. However, media coverage (primarily in the Silicon Valley blogosphere) was extensive and highly critical, propelled for the most part by MoveOn.org, a left-liberal "family of organizations" dedicated to political action and civic justice. MoveOn also spearheaded a Facebook Group protesting Facebook's privacy policies, providing a link to an online petition that could be "signed" electronically. The group, titled "Petition: Facebook, stop invading my privacy!" grew to over 50,000 members within a week and a half of its debut. Nevertheless, this was a paltry response in comparison to members' reaction to the News Feed. Thus, the media were primarily responsible for eliciting yet another public apology from Zuckerberg and a set of privacy changes with regard to Beacon; users were given the choice to "opt-in" as the new default, and could also turn off Beacon completely (Zuckerberg 2007).

While most users continue to compare Facebook to MySpace, for the past year popular media coverage has taken to comparisons of Facebook and Google, with Facebook positioned as challenging Google's long-established reputation as the leader of

the Web. Facebook, currently with 68 million active users[24], is in possession of an

enormous wealth of personal data that is kept out of reach from the once seemingly

omniscient databases of Google. However, in November of 2007 Google announced its

new social networking initiative, OpenSocial, in collaboration with MySpace. The goal of

the platform is to develop a set of standard APIs (Application Programming Interfaces)

for use on affiliated social websites, which includes many other popular social

networking sites such as Orkut, Bebo, Friendster, Hi5, LinkedIn, and Xing (Google

2007). The move emphasizes open source development and collaboration, in sharp

contrast to the "walled garden" of Facebook, where developers must learn a markup

language specific to the site.

Tribe, on the other hand, continues to live up to its promise of dedicating itself

"to the community and the content," focused on listening to ideas proposed by

members themselves and eliminating ad-based revenue in favor of a new tactic. In

December of 2007, Tribe launched a "premium membership" program, proposing

enhanced features such as instant messaging and file sharing in exchange for inexpensive

paid subscription fees. The response was quite positive, as many members value their

communities on the site and have been proud to show their support by purchasing the

$5 monthly service (marked by the addition of a gold star next to their usernames).

Conclusion

MySpace and Facebook, unlike the relatively unknown Tribe, have become two

of the most visited websites in the world. The mass popularity of these two sites has

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[24] Retrieved 2 April 2008 from: <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?factsheet>.

attracted the vociferous attention of both legal authorities and business corporations, who respectively play the roles of gatekeeper and matchmaker. The sites themselves also encompass these roles, attempting to maintain a balance between satisfying external interests while also responding to the desires and concerns of their members. The discontents expressed by users of these sites turn around questions of public/private spaces, as either "Who gets heard?" or "Who is listening?" As we have seen in several cases- Friendster in 2004, Tribe in 2005, and more recently with MySpace- silencing the voices of members not only angers them, it prompts many of them to leave the sites altogether. With Facebook, the blurring of the boundary between public and private occurred in a different way, exposing what members saw as "private" conversations to the larger "public sphere" of the News Feed resulted in widespread anger and distrust among members. While core users bemoaned the "clutter" and spam-like nature of Applications, adults and MySpacers alike flocked to the site, marking its transition from cult status to mass medium.

While Beacon provoked widespread debate and concern for publicly publishing consumer data on personal News Feeds, the practice of tracking and collecting Web user information is a driving force in the success of most Web companies that is typically invisible to the average Web surfer. Advertising and media industries have long cooperated in the exploitation of mass communications media, and the massive popularity (or what is often called the "stickiness") of online social networking has enormous potential for marketers. Major Internet players, such as MySpace, Microsoft, Yahoo, and Google, are able to not only reach audiences through targeted ads on thousands of popular websites, but also regularly acquire smaller companies in order to

obtain a richer wealth of consumer data (Story 2008). Interestingly, the information

provided by users (whose demands must be met so as to retain "stickiness") has become

itself a commodity, subject to trade and highly valorized in the competitive, fast-paced

online market.

Though the OpenSocial initiative is aimed at spreading such information across

the Web in a seemingly democratic fashion, championing the ideals that have defined the

Internet since its nascent beginnings, this cursory examination of the history of social

networking sites reveals the extent to which individuals value the intimacy of virtual but

bounded "private spaces." Everyday conversations regarding online social networks

often evoke taste-based comparisons of MySpace and Facebook. Though MySpace

continues to dominate statistically with over 200 million registered accounts, Facebook is

typically heralded as better designed and more practically useful. Nevertheless,

Facebook's history of egregiously violating the privacy of its users for the sake of growth

and revenue has instigated increasing distrust and disenchantment with the site- at least

among its original members. The "sell out" of Tribe in 2005, marked by censorship and

corporate greed for ad revenue, triggered a dramatic decline in member activity- only to

resuscitate itself with its recent return "to the community and the content." The tightly

knit communities that make up Tribe's demographic celebrate the site's relative

anonymity, unhindered by crowds and thus able to gather together more closely around

the "virtual campfire."

Chapter 3:

An Autoethnographic Exploration of Life Online

The initial aim of this chapter was to closely explore my personal experiences

with MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe. As I began to write, however, I realized that such

an exploration would need to go back to my adolescence and the beginnings of what has

been a 12 year long engagement with the Internet. Throughout my childhood, I was a

self-professed "bookworm," spending countless hours wandering in wonder about the

local library, skinny arms laden with books, the covers of which appealed to my

sensibilities. I religiously judged books by their covers, and was especially fond of the

short anecdotes about everyday hilarities that littered the pages of my mother's extensive

Reader's Digest collection. My constant submersion in the words of others shaped my

understanding of the larger world, a world that was scarcely visible from the vantage

point of my isolated, countryside childhood home in upstate New York. A quiet kid, my

greatest transgressions involved illicit reading during class, slim paperbacks tucked neatly

beneath my composition notebook and taken in through sporadic bursts whenever the

opportunity arose. Over the past twelve years, my gaze has shifted from the fixed text of

books to the increasingly dynamic and interactive screen of the computer.

First Forays Into the Cybernetic Jungle (1996-1999)

My childhood obsession with reading was extended and transformed by the

advent of the Internet in my rather sheltered adolescent life. When I was a child, I

routinely brought the mail into my family's kitchen after disembarking the school bus.

One day, when I was about 12 years old, I noticed a shiny disc packaged by a company called America Online. Particularly memorable to my mind were the words "World Wide Web." I became insatiably curious, and (as children will do) began pestering my parents for the product. My father eventually acquiesced, and I spent the night before our first login excited and sleepless, envisioning an enormous spiderweb that would allow me to crawl about the world, exploring the myriad whims of my inquisitive mind. I sought answers to the kind of existential questions that consume the late-night ponderings of precocious teenagers. At the same time, I yearned for a sense of belonging, for a comfortable "hearth" in which I could find intimacy, and for secret worlds of the imagination that could not possibly be realized within the drudgery of middle school social politics. The Internet offered me access to a world beyond the small town where I resided, at the same time granting me a voice with which I might be part of that world.

My introduction to the Internet occurred at the pivotal juncture between childhood and adolescence. Moreover, for me this transition was marked by my family's move from the countryside of upstate New York (where our backyard merged with a local farmer's berry crops) to the nearby small college town of Clinton. The move was made in large part so that I could legally attend one of the better public schools in the area, having graduated from a tiny private Catholic elementary school in the same town. Not only was I the new kid, but I was a shy bookworm who still let her mother choose the clothes she wore. Overwhelmed by the new milieu, I found solace and freedom on the Internet, where it didn't matter who you knew or what you wore. Certainly, my online interactions were not always pleasant, but I at least had time to craft a witty reply,

unhindered by my tendency to blush furiously and lose the ability to speak in response to direct interactions. I quickly discovered the world of "fanfiction," made up of writing communities based on the fictional characters and plotlines of favored television shows and books. By and large, these communities resided in mailing lists and web archives, encouraging feedback and support from readers. Fanfiction based on a handful of science fiction television dramas would come to be my primary reading material throughout my middle-school years, a universe that extended from the television screen outward into countless possibilities.

Like all adolescents, I sought an environment in which I could experiment and play. Many of these explorations were marked by transgressions of the "social laws" that typically guide adolescent behavior, such as adult supervision, as well as more general social norms regulating aggression and sexual conduct. My first forays into the veritable human jungle of online chat rooms were my own secret dramas, the social risks of which were null (in the "real world," anyway). Early on, I learned to avoid the America Online (AOL) chatrooms, preferring the more anonymous, unrestricted diversity of Internet Relay Chat (IRC).[25] On AOL, I was frustratingly limited to a single username linked to my main e-mail inbox, meaning that anyone I conversed with in AOL channels could send me messages whenever I was online (unless, of course, I blocked them). With IRC, I was free to create a new name for myself each time I logged in, free to experiment without risk of exposing my true identity. Often, I attempted to pass as a college-aged

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[25] IRC was born way back (relatively speaking) in 1988, enabling real-time text-based communication between users in the form of private messages as well as public or private chat rooms, called "channels." One connects to the IRC server through a freely available, downloadable "client" program (such as mIRC), and creates a "handle," or nickname, upon login.

woman with a name like "Wildfire," and was delighted to find I could successfully banter

intellectually with my faceless peers. Many of the more popular chatrooms felt a bit like

entering a bar: one would immediately be asked "a/s/l? (age/sex/location?)." To expose

oneself as a young female would be a fatal error, indeed; it would inevitably result in a

barrage of messages, the likes of which taught me a good deal about (self-identified)

men, sex, and danger. Oftentimes, when I didn't feel like dealing with the lecherous

come-ons of lonely males, I would choose an androgynous handle, one considerably less

evocative than my usual "Wildfire" or even "Jenneh." Over time, I developed the ability

to distinguish "quality" chatrooms from the aforementioned squalor and came to spend

a good deal of time competing with other users in word games monitored by a robot, or

gossiping in fan-based chatrooms about the latest episode of *The X-Files*.

"Jenneh," as I was known to those I considered my closer (albeit still faceless)

Internet friends, was the creator of a website composed mostly of favorite quotes, self-

fashioned graphics and animations, and long lists of other "favorites." Anyone who was

at all Internet-savvy during this time period (many of them younger users) had a personal

webpage, usually obtained by creating an account with a free web-hosting provider such

as AngelFire or Geocities. Usually, these pages were loaded with bad HTML, such as

flashing text and continuous GIF animations, reminiscent of today's MySpace Profiles.

Creators of such sites linked to one another based on the relevancy of another site's

content (a direct recommendation), or through interest-based "webrings" located on the

page (typically not affiliated with the site owner herself).[26] Such custom-made, egocentric

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[26] "Webrings" are a collection of websites, usually based around a common interest such as
"Science Fiction" or "Boating and Yachting," linked together through a navigation bar that is

webpages parallel today's online social networking Profiles, where everyone is an author without an editor. Today, such Profiles are usually linked together through social networks increasingly based on offline ties. Certainly, the medium for self-expression on the Internet has evolved, but the desire for transgression, the search for human connection, and the allure of anonymity and fantasy continue to be key factors in the ways people choose to engage with one another online.

My first sexual "encounter" occurred in the ethereal realm of cyberspace at the age of 13, when I fell in love with a boy I would never end up meeting face-to-face. Though it would be another two years until my first *offline* sexual interaction, the sense of intimacy, excitement, awkwardness and joy felt no different. We'd gotten to know each other in the chatroom of a downloadable game called HoverCraft, where players met in the game's chat rooms to challenge each other to virtual races in virtual hovercrafts. In this world, I was a renowned "expert" at the game, and so was he, inspiring friendly competition and mutual respect (as well as sexual tension). After races, which one of us usually won, we would often linger on the course, represented by our little red hovercrafts, typing to each other into a void made visceral by our frequent games of hide-and-shoot. Though we chatted for hours each night for several months, when he finally called me on the phone our conversation was stilted. His voice sounded too feminine, too young. I realized that my attraction to him had hinged in large part on fantasy, intensified by the titillating unknown. Nevertheless, our bond was not without foundation; it was, most certainly, the result of what I have come to call "mind-

added to one's site. The navigation bar allows one to move to the previous or next member's site in a circular manner.

melding," when empathy, vulnerability, and affection coalesce to allow for the kind of connection that transcends conventional hierarchies of appearance and social status. That year, following a recent divorce from her cheating husband, my best friend's mother moved to Germany to marry and live with a man she'd met over the Internet and gotten to know over a period of 10 months. As parents raised eyebrows and murmured their disdain for such "impractical," "pathetic" behavior, I remember thinking to myself, "the world is certainly evolving faster than they can understand." My friend's mother remains happily married in Germany to this day.

High School: Self and Others (1999-2003)

Upon entering high school, my online social practices underwent a shift. I began to use the Internet primarily for school assignments, which I could put off through my AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) program. Typically, I would have several programs running at once. In one window, I would be writing a school paper in my word processor. In another, I would be reading articles and generally surfing the World Wide Web in my web browser. Always, AIM would be open in the background, and I would often be involved in several conversations at once. These late-night online conversations, one-on-one with various members of my high school social clique, were often focused around gossip, in addition to helping each other with homework assignments. My best friend and I would copy and paste segments of our concurrent online flirtations with boys we liked, or virulent arguments with a mutual friend. This helped us to cope with that persistent beast that hinders all forms of communication, but especially online

communication: miscommunication, in its myriad forms. "He probably didn't mean that sarcastically," I would advise, "it's hard to detect sarcasm through text."

Throughout my high school years, I was also coming into my own as a creative writer and poet. Often, late at night, I would post some prose or a poem I'd recently composed on my online diary, located at OpenDiary.com. My online diary was relatively private: I posted under a pseudonym, which I disclosed only to close friends who also kept online diaries. We would often comment on each other's posts, offering constructive criticism occasionally, although more often praising each other's poetic gems and pointing out ideas that called for further elaboration. This was a space in which I felt free to experiment with my writing, describing dreams in poetic stanzas and therapeutically articulating my frequently confused and chaotic states of mind through stream-of-consciousness. In the lonely dark of the night, scratching at the inner depths of my psyche with a vulnerability I could not normally exhibit in everyday conversations with my friends, I could give in to the yearning of the young writer who is driven by a desire to put words to it all. What's more, there are few things so satisfying for the writer than feedback, than knowing that someone in the world read those words and cared enough to respond. The Internet enabled that feedback in a way my secret paper diaries could not; however, a few years ago that treasured record was deleted due to my inactivity on the site. Clearly, there are as many disadvantages as there are advantages to the medium.

Upon graduating from high school, I embarked on a year-long student exchange stay in Denmark. Having always been a small-town girl, culture shock both overwhelmed and inspired me. I began, once again, to write furiously. Firstly, I bought a durable

notebook that I kept with me at all times. Not only did I want to be able to record my thoughts wherever I went, I wanted to create a permanent artifact of my journey. When traveling, I could not always get Internet access, nor did I want to spend too much money on Internet cafes. Thus, my physical journal became a sketchbook of ideas and prose that I would later incorporate in more finalized "publications" through the Internet. Though I continued to use my online diary for more intimate musings and to keep in touch with some of my closer friends, I primarily wrote lengthy e-mails to family, friends, teachers and other looser acquaintances. Hand-written letters were written sparingly, usually to grandparents, though it was always an exciting occasion to receive a written letter or package.

I saw practically no one I knew from home for an entire year, but I found solace in writing those e-mails and maintaining my relationships in a visible way. During my first three months abroad, I also chatted regularly with many of my friends on AIM. However, when winter came I moved in with a new host family. They lived out in the countryside, and counted among their household three golden-haired children, a down-and-out family friend, a goat, two horses, and several chickens. They did not have Internet access. The umbilical cord cut, I started text-messaging my Danish classmates habitually. My Danish not only began to improve rapidly, but I started to forget about my relationships back home. While this shift was beneficial in the end, in the midst of that dark Danish winter I felt isolated, confused, and depressed. I turned to my journals and reminisced often, thankful for the tangible permanency of paper and pen.

Transitional Periods: Juggling Networks and Finding My Place (2003-2006)

I returned home from Denmark in the middle of the summer of 2003, and spent the next month reconnecting to my family and friends and preparing for the next stage of my life: Wesleyan University. Excited about new possibilities, I scoured the Internet for any and all information I could find about my new school, just as I had done during the college selection process that had dominated my senior year of high school. The best source I found was the Wesleyan University LiveJournal community, whose membership ranged from incoming freshman to recent alumni. Most of the posts were written by eager "pre-frosh" who wanted to know more about dorm life, campus clubs and organizations, and information about classes and professors. Many of the new members introduced themselves to the community, seeking to make some friends before they arrived on campus. Though I quickly chose to introduce myself and ask a few questions that had been on my mind, for the most part I lurked, acutely aware that those who were highly active in this community were unlikely to be the sort of people I would end up spending time with upon my arrival. I was right: most of the friends I made my freshman year had little to no interest in online diary communities; they were extroverted and spontaneous, the sort of personalities I had come to gravitate toward during my year abroad.

Upon arriving on campus, I was almost immediately turned on to the then-popular social networking site Friendster. In the chaotic onslaught of introductions and chance encounters with my new classmates, Friendster became pivotal to the process of defining my emergent social network. Though it was possible to send private messages to new "Friendsters," as they were often called, the most popular form of

communication was posting publicly viewable "Testimonials" on the Profiles of new

friends. The primary function of Testimonials was to bolster the ego of the Friendster in

question, with the expectation that the same gesture of kindness would be returned in

exchange. The style of these Testimonials typically referred to the addressee in the third

person, and was usually light-hearted, sentimental, and witty. For example, my friend

Sandra, a Mexican girl and fellow exchange student I'd befriended in Denmark, wrote

me a sweet Testimonial early on in the year:

Sandra
Posted 09/12/2003 9:37 am
My god! I met this red hair girl in an exchange student program in Denmark and for the fist time I felt that i was founding a best friend. She's the coolest girl ever (even if she dated the boy i liked in Dk..hehe..she didn't know), she doesn't care if you are messy, or loud, or short, or MEXICAN, she rocks...
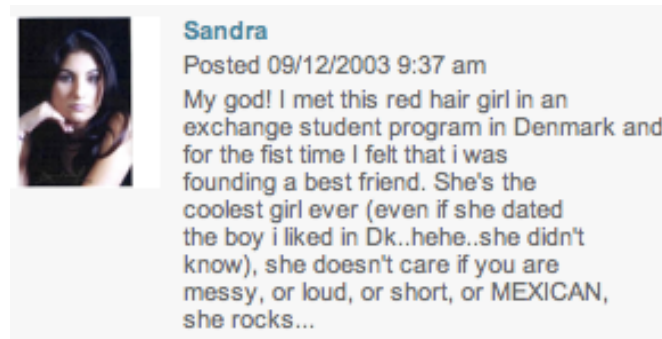
To which I of course replied, two days later:

Jenny
Posted 09/14/2003 2:57 pm
Sandra is amazingly happifying. Oh, the times we spent at language school making each other laugh- she has the best laugh in the universe. She's sweet, gorgeous, caring and hilarious. I love you, chica!
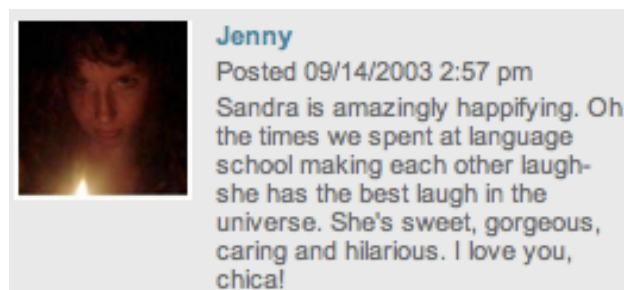
Throughout my freshman year at Wesleyan, Friendster was all the rage. However, with

the advent of thefacebook.com (as Facebook was originally named) in February of 2004,

Friendster's popularity among Wesleyan students began to decline abruptly, while

Facebook's popularity swelled. That spring, I stopped logging into Friendster altogether,

and created a Facebook account.

Facebook was exclusively for college students, protectively insulated from the Friendster "meat market" of overeager singles and porn advertisers. With its clean, austere style, impeccable functionality, and insular network organization, Facebook complemented the institutional bubble of college life in ways that Friendster could not emulate. Its viral popularity meant that within months, the majority of my friends at Wesleyan and other college settings had created Profiles on the site. During the summer of 2004, much to the amusement of many of us, the incoming freshman class received their e-mail addresses and began creating Profiles en masse. I recall the disparagement expressed by my classmates toward those incoming freshmen who already had dozens of "Friends." There was even a neologism for such people, "Friend Sluts," which implied that they Friended others promiscuously and with little to no regard to forming face-to-face relationships, instead seeking primarily to raise their Friend count and come across as popular. The class of 2007, of which I was a member, was the last to form social cliques without the aid of Facebook. However, the transition from freshman to sophomore year often entails a shifting of social alliances (at least at Wesleyan) as students become more confident, less dependent on their hallmates, and begin taking a more active role in choosing with whom they wish to spend their time.

It became regular practice to check out newcomers and make quick judgments, mostly based on Profile photos, music taste, and how witty or clever their "About Me" section was. Before I'd even met my hallmates, for example, I already knew what they looked like, where they were from, and what their favorite books and bands were- and they knew just as much about me. Consequently, our first impressions of one another had already been made based on how we chose to represent ourselves on Facebook.

There are certainly both advantages and disadvantages to this mode of learning about others: individuals can broadcast aspects of their identities that may not arise naturally in face-to-face encounters; however, such a static form of self-disclosure to a largely invisible audience means that people have little say in how their Profiles are interpreted by others. Though many students spoke about Facebook as a shallow, superficial way of representing their identities and disavowed or downplayed their interest in and activity level on the site, in practice Facebook continued to grow in popularity: most of my friends logged in daily, discussed the site's merits and downsides in everyday conversations, created silly Groups based on inside jokes, and used the site to show friends they were hanging out with the Profiles of people who came up in conversation.

That summer, while being trained as a WebTech for Wesleyan, I lived with Demetri, a 28-year old Middletown resident and friend. Much to my bemusement, Demetri spent most of his free time on MySpace. When he wasn't updating his Profile with his latest poem or looking for attractive, interesting women, he was busily living up to the oft-used label "Comment Whore." Like all addictive behaviors, commenting on the MySpace Profiles and photos of other members leads to a sweet and easy reward: receiving comments in return. Almost daily, Demetri would chortle, "check out how many comments I've gotten on this picture!" His MySpace girlfriend that summer was a Long Island drama queen, and the site quickly became a battleground where their displays of affection, jealousy, anger and sorrow played out in a magnified, often publicly visible form. As is common to all dramas played out on the Internet, their fights were exacerbated by frequent miscommunication and the partial anonymity of text (which frequently serves to lower one's inhibitions). Demetri, always on the lookout for more

readers/Friends, begged me to join MySpace. "Pleeeeease?" he cajoled, "I really want

you to be my Friend!" "We are friends," I retorted, but joined anyway. Due to the site's

immense popularity, I was well aware that my parents and relatives might look me up

(and they have). In creating my Profile, I hastily uploaded my "one good picture" of

myself and filled out the fields pertaining to cultural tastes and demographic information,

leaving the open-ended fields completely blank.

Initially, I recall being excited about the diversity of identities exhibited through

creative and multimediated MySpace Profiles. However, maintaining my active

membership on the site quickly became a burden, as my inbox exploded with random

Friend Requests. The sheer quantity of requests, combined with the lack of any verbal

correspondence (beyond the MySpace-generated "_____ wants to be your friend!")

obliged me to accept or deny requests based solely on superficial, cursory glances at the

initiator's picture and username. In recent months, I have begun to actually visit the

Profiles of those who request my Friendship. At the time of this writing, there are 12

Friend Requests pending. A substantial majority of these requests are from DJs and

musicians seeking to promote their craft; three feature the ubiquitous "Profile Does Not

Exist" avatar, likely spammers who've since been deleted by MySpace.

I recall with utter clarity the night, that following autumn, when my housemate

screeched from the next room, "Oh my God! You can upload unlimited photos to

Facebook, and tag people in them!" She spent the next several hours joyously uploading

her digital photographs to her Profile, revisiting the stories of her past as she

methodically Tagged the faces of her friends, choking with laughter as she came up with

clever captions. Within days, I had received a dozen e-mail notifications that I had been

Tagged in my various friends' Facebook photo albums. Though alarm bells sounded in some distant corner of my mind, I joined in enthusiastically. To date, I've uploaded 939 photos to 25 albums, photos that range from my childhood to the present day. The vast majority of these photos were taken at Wesleyan, and feature the sort of "scandalous" transgressions that are common to college life: friends playing "beer pong," friends making out, friends drinking and smoking, friends dressed in drag for Queer Prom, etc; Facebook photos became a regular fixture in the weekend partying routine; inevitably, someone had taken photos at that party one might have a rather hazy memory of, and the phrase "do NOT put that picture on Facebook!" became a common plea for those caught in compromising situations.

The summer after my junior year, my boyfriend and I sublet an apartment in Boston. The day we moved in, our friend Natan rushed over and proceeded to drive us around the neighborhood. All the while, he chattered excitedly about introducing us to his friends and the Boston psytrance scene, which featured monthly outdoor parties on the river. "You guys gotta join Tribe," he said earnestly, "it's like MySpace for the cool kids." My interest flared immediately, and I eagerly loaded the site on my laptop upon returning to our apartment. "Add me as a Friend first," Natan instructed, "and then you can browse through my Tribes- join Gnomefatty Collective and Sonic Beating, they're the ones organizing the Circle parties and Firefly [an annual arts and music festival held in Vermont]." I quickly registered and spent the next few hours browsing the site. To my delight, Tribe was indeed overwhelmingly populated by "cool kids," as well as thousands of Tribes dedicated to the sort of "New Age" ideas and practices that aligned perfectly with my own "alternative" interests: trance parties, artist collectives, science fiction,

vegetarianism, experimental writing, and shamanism (to name a few). The site resembles older forms of online communities based around subcultural tastes, but is also strongly rooted in geographically based communities. Thus, I soon found myself oscillating between forum threads discussing the psytrance subculture as a global phenomenon, and local member reviews of the best restaurants in the city.

As the summer progressed, Tribe proved to be a useful communications medium in a number of ways. Firstly, it enabled me to be "in the know" about upcoming parties, festivals, and events posted on the forums of Tribes such as Sonic Beating. Thornton (1996: 13-14) proposes that "the media are a primary factor governing the circulation of [subcultural capital]," providing "a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge." By posting an Event to associated Tribes, party promoters can easily and freely circulate the necessary information about the event to a specific niche population in one fell swoop. More conventional methods, such as word of mouth or the circulation of fliers at popular venues, while still utilized just as often as before the advent of the Internet, require more effort on both ends to communicate with the "right" people or visit the "right" venue- rather, partygoers must frequent the "right" online venues of party promoters, by they on MySpace or Tribe. Secondly, as I became a regular attendee of psytrance parties I began Friending and being Friended by those I had met at these events. This practice served to solidify my sense of belonging in the "scene," and enabled me to learn more about and keep in touch with the many fascinating individuals with whom I had briefly shared a dance floor. Lastly, Tribe became a portal through which I could participate in conversations with like-minded individuals around the world about "alternative" topics of mutual interest, fostering

cross-cultural understanding vis-à-vis a global subculture rooted in the shared ritual of psytrance parties.

Convergence of Spheres (2006-Present)

During my visits back home, my younger sister sits in front of the computer for hours on end, her attention shifting back and forth from MySpace to AIM. Sometimes her cellphone will be pressed to her ear, other times gripped in one hand as she rapidly punches out text messages to her friends. "What are you *doing* on there?" my dad would occasionally ask as he passed through the room. "Nothing!" she would snap, clicking back to the web browser in order to shield the chat windows that covered the screen. Even when she had friends over they would often sit together at her computer, perpetually engaged in the exchange of gossip and various online performances of high school life. Though I'd always been an Internet geek myself, I could not understand the allure of MySpace, a site I found to be littered with advertisements, plagued by spam, and populated by poorly-coded Profiles with a tendency to blast terrible music upon loading. Nevertheless, when I talked with my sister about MySpace (via AIM, of course, as she communicates far more effectively with me through IMs than face-to-face conversations), she was most enthusiastic about the site's ability to enable users to "make things pretty." During the peak of her MySpace use, she spent 2-3 hours a week creating and editing her Profile. The rest of the time, she told me, was spent browsing the local teenage male population and exchanging flirtatious messages.

Natan, who was also a regular MySpace user, was quick to point out how "lame" my Profile was. I took his insult as motivation to update all of my social networking

Profiles, uploading images of drawings I'd made and transcribing poetry I'd written. On MySpace, I even took some time to code the layout and design of my Profile, upload an audio track, and edit my "Top Friends" to include Friends whose music, art, or writing I wanted to promote, as well as those who had included me in their "Top Friends," thus reciprocating their gestures of friendship and appreciation. While I thoroughly enjoyed these empowering acts of self-expression, only on Tribe did I feel truly free to express myself, demonstrated by importing my intimate LiveJournal onto my Profile: MySpace was far too well-known, the first place anyone (including my parents) would look for someone's online presence; similarly, Facebook was exploding in popularity and becoming increasing less insulated since the site had begun allowing high school students to join earlier that year. Tribe, in contrast, is a more "restricted" cultural field characterized by certain broadly shared interests and orientations. By virtue of even joining the site, members demonstrate their subcultural knowledge of the "online underground."

Over the past few years, my brief visits back home in upstate New York have shaped my understanding of the marked differences between older generations and my own. Several years ago, I began making the transition from spending most of my visits alone in my room to sitting with my parents in the living room, gathered around the television and fireplace. My laptop accompanied me, providing a portable and private form of entertainment, information, and socialization. Friends and books in a box- not to mention a tool for constructing my individual "brand," as well as a personal journal! As they were held captive by the blaring voices and painfully "hip" dramatizations of commercial advertisements, I would sit in the chair closest to the fireplace, chatting on

AIM with friends from school while updating my Facebook Profile to broadcast that I was home. "What's coming on?" I might ask, perhaps lifting my gaze from the screen. The would respond, on occasion, "the weather." At that point I would smirk, pointing my mouse cursor to the upper left-hand corner of my screen; a plethora of widgets would cascade into view, the one in the very center displaying the current weather conditions and six-day forecast.

Today, perhaps inspired by their technologically savvy children, my parents now own laptops themselves. Last time I visited, most of my time was spent, as before, gathered around the woodstove (itself a much older example of the ways technologies become embedded symbolically in everyday life) with my parents. Now, however, their attention to the television has become increasingly replaced by attention to the their laptops. My father will often come home from a long day at work, turn the television to the news or a sports game, sit down and plug his cell phone into its charger. Getting settled, he then puts on his glasses and pull out his laptop from his briefcase; depending on his mood at the time, but usually first checking his e-mail, he will proceed to read online newspapers and/or log into his "fantasy sports" account, where he and his brothers and nephews compete in a virtual reality, building sports teams and trading "real life" players. I am currently teaching my mother, who has just purchased her first laptop, the proper etiquette of instant messaging, beginning with emoticons. :)

Conclusion

In the imagination we transport ourselves into alternate universes of possibility with the sometimes comforting knowledge that the real world will be there waiting for us

when we return. The greatest mysteries lie at the nexus between individual imaginations and collective hallucinations; that is to say, we may become the people we wish ourselves to be in the spaces "betwixt and between" the roles we presently perform in everyday life (Turner 1986: 97). The Internet allowed me to play out my fantasies in a space separated from my ordinarily adult-supervised reality, and in this process of experimentation, actively imagine and construct my identity.

Besides experimenting with who I was not, my online experiences also frequently served as a mirror in which I could effectively see myself. In both cases the world of the Internet was seen as a safe space, particularly for an anxious and somewhat shy girl as myself. As I acquired more offline friends and the Internet expanded in both popularity and interactivity, my social activities online became increasingly related to my high school community, as opposed to interest-based communities like an online game or television fandom. As the boundaries between my online imaginings and offline "realities" became increasingly blurred, the protective veil of anonymity I'd previously enjoyed was replaced by the selective revelation of my online persona to trusted members of my high school social clique. Like a reflection in the mirror, their feedback on my late-night written confessions helped me to see myself as a creative being and articulate my emerging identity.

Eventually, my online diary and extensive archive of e-mail correspondences became, like old journals and mementos, visual articulations of my past. As I moved on to Denmark and then college, I began using the Internet as a medium for maintaining the weaker ties to my past. With the explosive popularity of Facebook, in particular, I've found myself reconnecting with my Danish classmates, old high school friends and

acquaintances, and even a handful of classmates from my early days at St. Mary's Elementary School. As my network grew, I became increasingly concerned with how to most authentically portray myself on the site. Wishing to be seen as unique and unwilling to be defined by predetermined fields, I began filling out my Profile on Facebook with snippets of poetry I'd written. Like my sister, I enjoyed the potential for social networking sites to operate as vehicles for creative self-expression, allowing me to become a cultural producer in a system that constantly reinforces my role as a consumer.

My interest in studying the phenomenon of online social networking was piqued in part because of the ways these three sites (MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe) served to encapsulate three different version of myself: on MySpace, my Profile was like an artistic self-portrait that served to promote the creative endeavors of my friends and to connect me to family members and friends who did not attend college; Facebook was used as a high school and college yearbook and directory, signifying my membership in the Wesleyan community and serving as a useful tool for finding out about on-campus activities, groups and individuals; Tribe helped me to solidify my membership in the global psytrance subculture, allowed me to read and participate in conversations pertaining to some of my more eclectic interests and learn about ongoing events and local "tribes" of interest outside of my immediate Wesleyan community. Given the variety of public personas that make up my social identity, maintaining three different social networks has become, to some degree, necessary. Thus, the recent development of social software that effectively consolidates one's online identities (such as Google's OpenSocial and SocialUrl) is of no use for me.

Online social networking has, however, allowed me to consolidate the various activities that made up my early uses of the Internet: rather than online chatrooms and listservs, I learn and converse about particular shared interests on Group message boards; instead of sending e-mails that require me to know the recipient's e-mail address, I can choose to either send a private message or post one publicly on her Profile; rather than crafting a personal webpage or online diary, I create detailed personal Profiles and import my blogs; even my desire for "gaming mastery" is fulfilled by the popular Facebook Scrabble application, Scrabulous. Nevertheless, in creating "authentic" online identities directly affiliated with my offline relationships, the level of anonymity I once prized is no longer attainable. Not only are my activities on these sites made visible to the scrutinizing gazes of those in my networks, they can also potentially be used against me in a court of law- for Big Brother, of course, is always watching.

It is this very visibility, however, that makes online social networks such rich sites of anthropological research. Simply browsing through MySpace, for instance, is to browse through an incredibly diverse array of individuals searchable by interest, group membership, or demographic characteristics (such as gay 20-somethings in India). Besides enabling researchers to pinpoint special interest groups, online social networks facilitate the research process by maintaining an extensive archive of user activity, providing an observable medium for reflexive conversation in the form of group message boards, and visually displaying the ways in which people are connected to one another. Most importantly, social networking sites combine preexisting online and offline practices in unique ways.

By examining my personal history with the Internet, I have sought to provide a qualitative, nuanced account of how these sites effectively bridge the divide between imagined communities based in shared tastes (such as fandom and a "global subculture") and geographically-based communities (such as shared institutional affiliations like the university or workplace). In so doing, the perceived division between online virtuality and offline "reality" is being replaced by individually-tailored practices that invoke qualities of both- a "virtual campfire" that grants me a participatory role in uncovering the cosmos from the comfort and warmth of my personal hearth. In the chapters that follow, I seek to portray some of the main anxieties and pleasures experienced by my informants that complicate this cozy notion of a "virtual campfire," in turn reinforcing a variety of dystopian and utopian discourses.

Chapter 4:

Anxieties and Dystopias

Historically, new forms of media (such as film and television) have often been initially perceived as threatening or dangerous, evidenced by the "moral panics" perpetuated in popular media. These moral panics typically portray new media as granting children access to an "adult world" that escapes the protective gaze of the family. Online social networking sites have been criticized for enabling sexual transgressions, promoting popularity contests, and encouraging members to publicize personal information. For these very reasons, these sites have become increasingly popular vehicles for creating virtual private spaces within which young people negotiate the everyday concerns that dominate their personal lives. Nevertheless, the popularity of these sites is frequently disparaged by users themselves in the form of a deeply embedded dystopian cynicism, as many of my informants perceive the medium as a poor replacement for face-to-face interaction, encouraging voyeuristic and narcissistic practices that they see as symptomatic of our increasingly digital generation.

Everyday conversations concerning online social networks frequently elicit a good deal of anxiety. One source of anxiety is uncertainty regarding who has access to the information that is found on these sites. Unintended audiences include parents, educators, law enforcement agencies, potential employers, corporations, and government intelligence agencies. Another source of anxiety has to do with members' personal relationships with this new medium. In my interviews people have touched upon various

issues triggered by engagement with these sites, longstanding student concerns that are often intensified online, such as quick judgments of others, procrastination from schoolwork, social anxiety, lowered self-esteem, casual or obsessive "stalking," and outright addiction.

Big Brother is Watching

Like all forms of communication media, online social networks are heavily influenced by legal and economic factors that shape the manner in which individuals engage with them. At the same time, modern communication media have also rendered these forces increasingly visible to the public. The content of online social networking sites is primarily provided by the members themselves, and in order to retain popularity the sites must maintain their trust and favor. The most controversial issue with regard to the Internet is privacy, and most sites that provide services must also develop a Privacy Policy that balances user interests and compliance with the law. The relationship between online social networks and legal authorities is a frequent source of tension. Facebook's privacy policy explicitly states:

> We may be required to disclose user information pursuant to lawful requests, such as subpoenas or court orders, or in compliance with applicable laws. We do not reveal information until we have a good faith belief that an information request by law enforcement or private litigants meets applicable legal standards. Additionally, we may share account or other information when we believe it is necessary to comply with law, to protect our interests or property, to prevent fraud or other illegal activity perpetrated through the Facebook service or using the Facebook name, or to prevent imminent bodily harm. This may include sharing information with other companies, lawyers, agents or government agencies.[27]

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[27] Retrieved 20 November, 2007 from: http://wesleyan.facebook.com/policy.php.

Compliance with the law is practically universal in the privacy policies of online social networks, including MySpace and Tribe. Many of my friends perceive me as the local expert on all things relating to social media, and regularly ask me how much and for what purposes the information they provide to these services is tracked by government agencies. In response, I point out that since the inception of the *Patriot Act* in 2001, Americans have been stripped of a great number of civil liberties in the war against terrorism. In today's political climate, it would seem that freedom of speech is secondary to the higher priority of defense against potential acts of political violence. In 2005, for example, a University of Oklahoma student was visited by the Secret Service in response to references he made on Facebook regarding the assassination of President Bush (Epstein 2006). Having heard countless stories of government control and censorship of electronic information, many people express some degree of mistrust and fear. A fellow student relates her struggle between this somewhat abstract fear and the comforting knowledge that one is merely a face in the crowd:

> *Dana:* "The other day I had a bout of paranoia; I started thinking that Facebook was evil… so I got freaked out and was about to quit it- and I tried to do it- but then I realized, 'You can't quit it'. No one is watching me *explicitly*."

Dana belongs to a subset of savvy users who are conscientious about the content they make publicly available on their Profiles. However, she went on to acknowledge that despite her precautions, key words of her Profile might nevertheless be used to target advertisements.

While the top-down gazes of the government and the companies themselves provide the common incentive for self-censorship and distrust, commercial advertisers are seen as directly targeting consumers in a manner that is viewed as an aesthetic

annoyance and a reminder of the capitalist culture that has tended to exploit all forms of

popular entertainment. Popular online social networking sites are truly, in the words of a

fellow student, "a marketer's wet dream." This corporate presence is especially

prominent on MySpace, and generates one of the most common criticisms of the site.

Most users, however, have developed high tolerance for advertisements. Internet-savvy

youth often proclaim they don't even notice advertisements or scams; rather, their eyes

scan and filter out meaningless content, the cursor scrolls past in pursuit of the message.

The better a person articulates her tastes online, the likelier it is that advertisements will

be of greater pertinence. As a general rule, for instance, Google maintains an extensive,

dynamic archive of user data, which serves as the backbone for its popular advertisement

program, AdSense. Thus, their advertisements are geared toward the individual user

based on the type of websites she visits and the subjects she displays interest in

according to the specific search terms queried. In fall of 2007, Facebook and 41 affiliated

companies (such as Blockbuster) initiated Project Beacon, which tracks user interactions

through the companies' sites, aggregates them with Facebook data, and publishes this

information on a member's News Feed (see *Appendix B*).

Most Facebook users were unaware of the Project, which initially took advantage

of them through an "opt-in" strategy, making participation the passive default. This

move was met with widespread alarm and condemnation in the blogosphere, prompting

Facebook to eventually post a public apology and grant users the capacity to control

what is displayed to their Friends:

> Users will have clear options in ongoing notifications to either delete or publish.
> No stories will be published if users navigate away from their home page. If they

delay in making this decision, the notification will hide and they can make a
decision at a later time (Facebook Press Release, 30 Nov. 2007).

Nevertheless, Beacon continues to collect data on what people do on these affiliate sites,
which is then sent to Facebook along with identifying IP addresses (Perez, 2007). Not
even those who have deactivated their accounts are immune. "It's scary," Robert says,
"Facebook is becoming evil." Nevertheless, the utility of Facebook for negotiating
everyday social practices generally take precedence over the egregious invasions of
privacy that most users suspect occur. The trend is not abandoning Facebook- it's far
too useful. However, the site's reputation is definitely tainted, and some Facebookers are
using the site to form or join Groups that promote awareness of Facebook's privacy
policies and petition for change (such as "Petition: Facebook, stop invading my privacy!"
with over 75,000 members).

Tracking consumer data is nothing new, but online social networks enable
corporate access to increasingly personal information. The vast majority of negative
consequences of publicly displaying one's personal information arise when
"inappropriate" information is made viewable to more local levels of authority, such as
employers and school faculty. Uploaded images and references to illicit activities and
offensive ideas (such as homophobic speech) have been subject to investigation by high
schools and colleges alike, and have sometimes resulted in suspension or even expulsion
of the offending student. In my brother's senior year at high school, several students
were called into the principal's office to discuss inappropriate photographs of underage
drinking posted on public MySpace Profiles. The principal had created an account and
was therefore able to enter into a domain that these underage students had considered to

be their own. His infiltration into their "private sphere" was met with widespread

indignation. "I would have told them to fuck off if they brought me in," my brother

informed me, "it's private shit." As a result of the incursion, he and his friends realized

the necessity of making their Profiles private. Across the country, similar cases were

covered in the popular media.

As MySpace and Facebook have risen in popularity, more recent media coverage

has exposed the threat of employer investigation into the Internet identities of potential

employees. Colleges and universities advise students on the importance of "cleaning up"

one's virtual identity. Maria, who is a Resident Advisor, told an interesting story about

her training:

> At the beginning of the year, they gave us a sheet of paper that outlined for us
> 'be careful of using Facebook,' and told us to take down any pictures that might
> be incriminating… and that we can be held responsible for any information that
> is found on the website.

Controversy regarding Facebook's privacy policy was tinged with resigned acceptance

that the policy, in the words of an informant, "is very strange, and not a privacy policy,

really." Some members allude to this imagined disapproving audience in the crafting of

their Profiles, as exhibited by the following Profile picture of a Wesleyan senior:

This is but one of countless examples of the ways in which online social networkers are responding to the growing threat of surveillance. Many choose to implement privacy features that allow them to maintain intimate, closed social networks within which they portray themselves as they truly see themselves. As a result, it's become increasingly common for me to be unable to access the Profiles of people I'm not Friends with. Others have simply taken to deleting much of their Profiles, leaving just an e-mail address, a witty or ironic comment, and maybe a funny picture.

Most first-generation Facebookers express some degree of distrust/disgust for the site, often a great deal of it. Regardless of how they talk about them, however, young people continue to use the site regularly for everyday social practices- it's a way to easily invite people to parties and share photos from said parties, to visually organize one's social network and keep track of geographically distant friends, alumni, and old high school buddies, and to find out the sexuality or relationship status of that boy you've been admiring from afar. If a college student is not on Facebook, she's going to be somewhat out of the campus loop. The same factor applies, albeit to a lesser degree, to MySpace and Tribe. For many, it's become as habitual to check one's favored social network site as it is to check e-mail. Nevertheless, self-censorship is a necessary response to the increasingly blurred boundaries between one's public and private spheres online.

Blurred Boundaries

Computer-mediated communication is like speech in that it allows for casual, convenient, and immediate interactions. Additionally, it shares several aspects of written communication in its potential for permanency, replicability, and transcendence from

spatial and temporal constraints. Furthermore, mediated publics enable the persistence

of messages in ways that may skew the original context and intended meanings. In this

way, online communication complicates traditionally understood boundaries between the

oral and the written, the public and the private. This confusion is further exacerbated by

a factor that is unique to the Internet: "searchability." Because most of the information

available on the Internet is archived by search engines such as Google, it has become

increasingly important to manage one's online reputation. The process of image

management entails not only the calculated projection of symbolic markers of identity,

but also an imagining of the audiences that may view this display. Online audiences are

not limited to intended addressees and may include family members, employers,

educators, corporations, and government agencies.

There are many ways in which members of online social networks manage their

various unintended audiences. As noted above, some people choose to make their online

Profiles private, and thus viewable solely to their immediate networks of chosen Friends.

On Facebook, one can also create a "Limited Profile" that displays only certain chosen

parts of the Profile, and mark this option when accepting a Friend Request from, for

instance, a younger sibling. Within Tribe, it is common to identify oneself by a nickname

or pseudonym, which substantially diminishes one's "searchability." Eliminating or

falsifying identifying factors (such as name, age, and location), another way of reducing

one's "searchability," is particularly common among teenagers on MySpace (boyd 2007:

4).

Despite the growing concerns over unintended audiences, however, many users

maintain a comfortable indifference over who might come across, let alone care about, a

single online Profile amidst the millions in existence. "There's nothing on there that's really inappropriate or troublesome," Tory says, "So what do I have to worry about?" Many believe that they retain some degree of anonymity, particularly high school students on MySpace. Because of their network nature, interaction and visibility on these sites is primarily between designated Friends in particular niches. When these niches are popularized, they are perceived to be less safe and less exclusive, diminishing trust and encouraging self-censorship; the social context becomes a confusing mix of multiple contexts.

Though membership on Facebook was initially limited to college students, in 2005 the site announced its decision to open membership to high school students as well. In response, thousands of college students united to protest the decision. Hundreds of Facebook groups were created, encouraging users to express their concerns to the Facebook administration or to delete their accounts altogether. Many of those who protest Facebook's "open doors" policy express their fear that Facebook is "turning into MySpace." Facebook responded quickly by implementing a wide array of privacy features, allowing members to create Limited Profiles and to choose the degrees of separation by which their Profiles may be viewed, such as "friends," "friends of friends," or a single network (i.e.; one's university or city of residence). Despite continued protests over the site's expansion, however, Facebook eventually opened up still further- starting with corporate networks and eventually opening membership to anyone with an e-mail address. Many veteran Facebook users have expressed nostalgia for the way things were "before Facebook turned evil"- that is, before they betrayed their niche users by opening the site to anyone.

Facebook is often cited as a useful tool for finding out the sexual orientation of a potential romantic partner, however, the decision whether or not to articulate one's sexual preferences can be difficult. Ralph, a Wesleyan senior who recently "came out" to his friends as homosexual, decided not to specify his sexuality on Facebook. His decision was not an easy one:

> I don't put that I like men on Facebook because I often get friend requests from kids I worked with as a camp counselor this summer. I don't want them to know, it would be weird. However, some people have said to me that I won't be able to get a boyfriend here at Wesleyan unless I identity as gay on Facebook and join the queer groups… "Boys Who Like Boys" and so on. What's up with that?

Ralph went on to describe the stigma of pedophilia that motivates his self-censorship. Gay men working with young boys are often faced with the problem of reconciling the consequences of this stigma with the desire to pass on the all-too-important lessons of tolerance and acceptance. Semi-public arenas such as Facebook and MySpace encourage normativity; notably, these sites both request that members designate their gender as either male or female, and the options for articulating one's sexuality are also rather binary-enforcing. On Facebook, members can choose to be "Interested In" men, women, or both men and women; on MySpace, members may describe themselves as bisexual, gay/lesbian, straight, "not sure," or "no answer."

Tribe is a very different story. Displays of sex and gender on Tribe are notably "alternative." A quick search of Tribes using the query "women" is rather revealing, with the top ten results being: a belly dance gathering for "warrior women," an article entitled "PA Fines Midwife," a Tribe called "BDSM[28] Women Only," another for BDSM

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[28] "BDSM" is an acronym for a number of sexual practices involving "Bondage and Discipline," "Domination and Submission," and "Sadism and Masochism."

women's parties in San Francisco, another called "Women of Star Trek," "San Francisco Women's Film Festival," "Younger Women for Older Men," "Empowering Women in Peace Love and Light," "Bio Boys 4 FTMs,"[29] "Understanding Women and Islam." The focus here is on various modes of empowering women and embracing alternative and diverse lifestyles.

A search for "men" yielded the following results: a Tribe called "Men Flirt with Men," another called "Men of Middle Eastern Dance," "Gay Men with Depression," a gay man's Profile whose handle is "ManDater," again the Tribe "Younger Women for Older Men," but this time followed by "Younger Men for Older Women," a curious Tribe entitled "San Francisco Men's Auxiliary of SCUM"[30] (which has a mere seven members), "nature boys: queer men outdoor sports," "Gay Masculine Men," and lastly a "SF Citadel Men's Group" representative of a queer BDSM and kink "community dungeon play space" in San Francisco. While these results are a mere fragment of the community as a whole, the gay male community is certainly well supported on the site. Tribe is a site where the marginalized become the mainstream, helping to positively reinforce one's "alternative" lifestyle or worldview by creating a safe space in which to express it through Profiles, meet others who share it, discuss it in message boards, and find out about related offline events, gatherings, and workshops.

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[29] "FTM" stands for "Female-to-Male," referring to sex-change operations undertaken by women.

[30] "SCUM", the Tribe declares, stands for "Society for Cutting Up Men," a violent feminist movement directed toward the total destruction of the male sex. The roots of this radical misandrous movement can be found in the *SCUM Manifesto,* written by Valerie Solanas sometime before or after she shot Andy Warhol.

Of the three sites, Tribe is the only one that imposes age regulations on its members. Those under 18 years of age are technically not allowed to join, although it is a simple enough matter to lie when filling out the registration form. Such a regulation is deemed necessary due to the notable lack of censorship on the site. It is not uncommon to come across erotic photograph collections or proud nudists like Jim, whose Profile picture features him seated naked in a camping chair, surrounded by leaves. His About Me section reads: "I am a truck driver & a nudist. I Like Nude Hiking, nude camping, and Skinnydipping." Such postings are typical of a site primarily focused around "alternative" lifestyles, whose advocates are quite vocal in opposition to censorship and constitute a niche community based on shared values of acceptance and freedom of expression. Tribe is regarded as a safe space for discussions based on shared subcultural interests, such as craft-making or African drumming, but in this way also allows the proliferation of information about subjects that parents may not want their children coming across, such as psychedelic drugs and polyamorous relationships.

Precisely this quality of the Internet- its blurring of the public and private spheres, granting young people access to "inappropriate" or "adult" content- encourages a moral panic just as television did half a century ago. Like television, video games, and popular music, the Internet is a medium through which young people learn things about the world that their elders might prefer them not to be exposed to. Unlike television, moreover, the Internet allows individuals to interact with one another in unmoderated environments. This fear is mirrored and magnified in popular media, which circulate horrific cases of naïve children lured out of their homes by sexual predators with such headlines as "MySpace, Facebook Attract Online Predators (Williams 2006)" and

"MySpace: Your Kids' Danger? Popular Social Networking Site Can Be Grounds For Sexual Predators (CBS Broadcasting, 2006)."[31] Further substantiating the fears of concerned parents and educators, an amendment to the *Communications Act of 1934* was passed by Congress, called the *Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006*. The Act, directed specifically at online social networks and chat rooms, requires schools and libraries to take protective measures on behalf of minors.

In reality, such cases are few in number, and usually involve willing teenagers meeting up with adults they have met online. In a recent conference entitled "Just The Facts About Online Youth Victimization," a panel of four experts emphasized that the revelation of personal information is not what endangers online youth. Rather, most instances of these crimes involve mutual seduction and youthful curiosity and rebellion:

> In seventy-three percent of the crimes, the youth go to meet the offender on multiple occasions for multiple sexual encounters. The law enforcement investigators described the victims as being in love with or feeling a close friendship for the offenders in half the cases that they investigated. In a quarter of the cases, the victims actually had run away from home to be with these adults that they met online.
> <div align="right">(Dr. D. Finkelhor, Internet Caucus Advisory Committee)</div>

Despite its negative consequences, sensationalized media attention has also contributed to the increasing awareness among online youth of the potential dangers of the Internet. It is common practice to refuse the Friend Requests of unsavory-seeming strangers (as evidenced by their "sleazy" Profile pictures and aggressive, sexualized style of writing) and simply delete inappropriate messages. Rather than being naïve "victims" of "online predators," those engaged with online social networks typically demonstrate a savvy

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[31] A Google search for the terms "MySpace," "Danger," and "Children" resulted in 1,920,000 hits.

understanding of communicative norms on these sites. Most are wary of strangers requesting their Friendship, aware of the information they provide about themselves, and strive to establish trusting relationships on the basis of authentic online personas. Nevertheless, the very nature of the Internet allows for inauthentic performances that have much more subtle consequences.

Authenticity

There are numerous factors at work that result in the diminishing of trust in and perceived authenticity of others online. Offline, one's interactions in the public sphere are informed by visible bodily presence, a factor that is profoundly absent online. Because of this lack of visual cues, it is entirely possible that an online persona could be completely falsified. Grace told a story of how her high school debate coach was impersonated by another student on Facebook, with nearly disastrous results:

> *Grace*: The impersonator used a real photograph of him on the profile, and sent inappropriate messages to other students on Facebook. All they needed was his e-mail address to do it. The administration got really freaked out… He very nearly lost his job. The kid finally 'fessed up because otherwise they were going to lose their debate coach. He was really mad that this extension of his identity, completely foreign and unknown to him, existed on the Internet without his knowledge, and he's scared that some people will have perceptions of him that aren't authentic as a result. It's like he lost control over the shaping of his (online) identity.

On MySpace, Profiles of famous people that are created by fans are quite common, though they usually state that they are not the actual person. Nevertheless, other fans will Friend this pseudo-persona and leave Comments as though they were speaking directly to the object of their admiration. Rather than a personal attack, such activities are imaginative and playful in nature. Occasionally, however, fans will express

anger when realizing that they have not, in fact, stumbled upon the Profile of their hero.

Impersonation is rare on Tribe, though imagined identities are likely to be creative

constructions of self, particularly "technoshamans" who seek to provide wisdom and

insight for others. One such Tribe member, who Friended me long ago and whose

enormously high Friend count (13,179) piqued my curiosity, responded almost

immediately to my message asking how and why he has so many Friends:

> I started back in 1/04. It was a time in my life that I knew that there was more to
> life than myself & dying one day. I just didn't know what to do with it, how to
> vent my feelings & such. In Tribe I found a community of people that allowed
> my feelings to show. Personally. I'm quite the quiet one, desiring solitude.
> Friends are a vital component in this venting, since the belief is that without
> sharing, life itself is meaningless or at least not as fruitful as it can be. Peers either
> noticed my message or heard of it, requesting friendship or responded to my
> own request for such. Regardless of one's beliefs, I try not to place mine over
> theirs, believing we all have our own individual paths to the "truth." The blogs &
> pics are there to stir comments amongst the network of friends, hopefully they
> will develop other friendships utilizing me as a nexus. Also I don't try to say
> much of myself, except some particulars. This is solely because the message is
> what is vital, not the messenger. The number of friends exist solely because this
> is a message that rings a chord in so many & they rarely have this opportunity to
> share such. I afford them this opportunity. There are times that I am
> overwhelmed by rude comments & such directed at me personally either via the
> comments or my mailbox, but they are far outnumbered by positive inputs. I do
> respond to all that seem to request such, obviously it does take a bit of time,
> especially trying to hold down a regular job/jobs. I've been invited to join other
> networks, but don't have the time. I don't try to network for monetary gains, just
> knowing I'm there to listen if someone needs an ear or maybe comment to direct
> requests. I meet with some, but rarely find the time. There is so much I'd like to
> do, but I'm only one person. In regards to what I've gained, the sharing of love
> alone...Frank
>
> (Tribe Handle: Love Is Everything)

When browsing through the Profiles of other members on Tribe, I often find that I am

connected to them through "Love Is Everything." Frank's emphasis that "the message is

what is vital, not the messenger" was also expressed by Demetri, who told me, "I'm just

a vehicle." Individuals who acquire a wide audience on these sites often feel a

responsibility to project a positive message, minimizing the gritty details of their personal lives and focusing instead on a message worthy of sharing with others, thereby gathering them around a common theme. Though Demetri has thousands of Friends on his primary MySpace Profile, he also maintains a secondary account just for staying in touch with those he knows or wants to get to know, around 180 Friends.

On an existential level, some people express anxiety over the authenticity of their own Profiles. "I refashioned my Facebook profile completely this semester," Lauren recalls, "I was sick of viewing this 'bubbly' personality that I no longer felt to be accurate." These sites allow members to reflect changes in their identities as they occur. While some may strive to portray themselves as honestly as possible through their online Profiles, others see their online identities as co-constructions, informed by who they perceive their audience to be. It is common for people to describe their online personas more as "who I want to be, or how I want to be seen, and less actually who I am (Jackie, 2006)." Others express the belief that not only is honesty impossible, but it hardly matters to them. In one casual conversation, my friend Luke proudly proclaimed, "I care so little that I let *her* [points to his girlfriend] go in and change my whole profile around. It's ridiculous, and I haven't even changed it back." His statement reflects a common stance in the face of the widespread popularity of Facebook and MySpace. The notion that "I don't care" is exhibited through a variety of ways, from playful and humorous falsification of one's Profile to near-total austerity. I've increasingly come across Profiles that offer little to no information about the person's personality, a "functional" Profile that seemingly exists just for the sake of demarcating one's belonging in a university network.

For many users, a preference for face-to-face communication is a principal

motivation for minimizing one's online persona. "I think it becomes easy for people to

learn about others in a way that promotes no dialogue or discourse," Jordan says.

Indeed, quick judgments based on subjective interpretations of online Profiles are often

cited as one of the most pervasive negative repercussions of the medium. "I'm addicted

to stalking people on Facebook," Danya says, "and judging people based on their

profiles." An individual represents herself on the Internet through modes quite different

from face-to-face encounters. When I come across a MySpace Profile, I see the image

this person has chosen to reveal, a factor that calls to mind an amateur video popularized

in 2005 entitled *myspace: the movie*, a satirical portrait of MySpace members and the social

dramas of the Internet. In one clip, a young woman is said to have "the angles"- all of

her MySpace photos are close-up shots of her face, at various unnatural angles so as to

accentuate the good whilst concealing the ugly. To my amusement, an old high school

acquaintance who recently Friended me on Facebook engages in precisely this activity.

Her Profile picture changes multiple times a week, each time an angled face shot that

bears little resemblance to the girl I knew in high school. My instinctive judgment is that

this girl is extremely self-conscious, vain, and fake. This exemplifies but one of the ways

in which the authenticity of an individual's online persona is questioned.

In addition to adding new features to the world of social interaction, social

networking sites are also redefining the meaning of a "friend" and how people go about

pursuing "friends" and romantic interests. It may be unfair to say that these sites

trivialize the concept of friendship (though such criticism makes sense when one sees

Friend counts in the hundreds), but most people feel that Friendship is defined more

loosely than other kinds of friendship. To illustrate this point, Maria told an interesting

story:

> I have one friend who made it her goal – and I had known her before – but she made it her goal to friend every person on Facebook… every single member of the freshman class on Facebook before she got to Wesleyan…well, she tried to. I think some people didn't accept, but she had a ridiculously high friend count.

The nature of online social networking is such that it allows people who haven't even laid eyes on each other to be virtual "Friends." On Facebook especially, it is likely that one will eventually find herself face-to-face with said Friend, resulting in the awkward situation of knowing far more about someone than is comfortable admitting. Many people have described experiences in which Facebook instigated social awkwardness, particularly when bringing Facebook into the realm of the "real." As Isabelle put it, "You never want to be the one to say 'hey, I met you on Facebook!'"

MILDLY SLEAZY USES OF FACEBOOK, PART 14:

LOOKING UP SOMEONE'S PROFILE BEFORE INTRODUCING YOURSELF SO YOU KNOW WHICH OF YOUR FAVORITE BANDS TO MENTION

FAVORITE BANDS? HMM... MAYBE REGINA SPEKTOR OR THE POLYPHONIC SPREE.

WHOA, THOSE ARE TWO OF MY FAVORITES, TOO!

CLEARLY, WE SHOULD HAVE SEX.

OKAY! MY FAVORITE POSITION IS THE RETROGRADE WHEELBARROW.

OHMYGOD, MINE TOO!

The Shame! From Surveillance to Snooping to Stalking

> *Mark*: So, Facebook: basically it's like a secondary email account, with pictures and narcissism... and the faint, pleasant aroma of voyeurism. But I'll check my email in class, and I won't check Facebook.
> *Me*: Why?
> *Mark:* I mean, it's so masturbatory... snooping around, admiring one's own clever profile... not something to be done in public.

As the conversation above attests, there is a sense that surveillance of self and others via online social networks is an intensely private practice, bordering on narcissism. Just as seeming too concerned with one's popularity was simultaneously "uncool" and common practice, publicly acknowledging the attraction of Facebook is generally considered to be "uncool," however, it nevertheless continues to be a factor in the daily lives of the vast majority of college students:

> *Jordan:* I'll be in a situation or a conversation where someone will be like, "hey man, I saw on Facebook that you did this or you're like this," and everyone will be like [mockingly] "ohhh, Facebook," and it's like, "shut up guys, you know you're on it, too".

The rising popularity of online social networking has been accompanied by the incorporation of "stalking" as a normal, everyday linguistic term. What was once a word reserved for obsessive sexual predators has come to refer to ubiquitous, mundane practices of learning about others through information available on the Internet. However, the line between simple surveillance and outright "stalking" is blurry at best, and ultimately subjectively defined. What may constitute normal "friending" behavior on Tribe, for instance, would be regarded as aberrant behavior on Facebook. These norms are largely informed by the communities the sites seek to represent. Thus, Friendship on Tribe is generally motivated by shared interests marked by membership in particular Tribes, while Friendship on Facebook is typically motivated by shared institutional

affiliations (for the most part, schools). On MySpace, however, it is common practice to be "friended" by utter strangers, many of them musicians looking to promote their music, as well as spam robots. When Demetri became a member of Facebook, he "friended" a good friend of mine who had met him only once, years ago, and proceeded to leave a message on her Wall inviting her to an upcoming party. She described the experience as "weird," noting the plethora of self-taken photographs on his Profile that were littered with "his own comments. I mean, seriously! That's so narcissistic!" "That's so MySpace!" I chuckled in response.

References to "stalking" are most frequently brought up in conversations centered on matters of the heart. It is common practice to "stalk" a romantic interest online as a safe way of finding out the person's relationship status, sexual orientation, and social habits. With the rising ubiquity of digital cameras and public online photo albums, a picture truly is worth a thousand words. The following discussion on a Wesleyan message board exemplifies the significance of the visual:

> *Anonymous Poster #1:* Does it bother you to see pictures of a boy you like… with another girl? Or vice versa? Or same-sexually? You know, I'm talking to everyone! 'Cause I find it irksome.
>
> *Anonymous Poster #2:* Yes, it so does. I get all suspicious that every girl is his girlfriend and Facebook-stalk them all obsessively…

Jealousy would seem to be a principle motivation for "stalking" behavior. One friend confided that she'd spent the previous evening examining the several hundred Facebook photos of her boyfriend's ex-girlfriend, eventually admitting "she's pretty cute, I guess." I commiserated with her, having done the same thing myself in the past. It would seem we're not alone in this particular guilty indulgence:

Anonymous Poster #1: I can't help Facebook/blog-stalking my SO's ex even though my SO and I are actually doing just fine. Is there a cure for that?

Anonymous Poster #2: I don't know if there's a cure, but I know I do exactly the same thing.

Anonymous Poster #3: Me too.

Anonymous Poster #4: Quick question for responders: Was the ex kinda crazy? Did ze start to do weird things like call and try and get back together with the ex?

Anonymous Poster #1: No, she's just staying away and trying to move on. I feel like a total asshole because of that.

Anonymous Poster #5: Don't worry, it's pretty natural to want to know more about your SO's ex (I guess it would make more sense if the ex was at one point a problem in the relationship, but all in all it's only human). You should probably stop or cut back on "stalking" activity if it starts to consume your soul and/or affect other parts of your life (i.e., social activities, your relationship, etc;), but only you can determine when too much is too much. Good luck!

The Seductive Power of the Internet

For some, the Internet can become a guilty indulgence that allows one to avoid dealing with various aspects of "real life." Online social networks, in particular, are popularly utilized as tools for procrastination. From personal experience, it is simply too easy (not to mention enjoyable) for me to click away from my word processor and instead indulge in gossip through instant messaging programs and online social networks. It is a distinctly private practice that is frequently looked down upon in public discourse; like most outward expressions of preoccupation with popularity, it is considered "uncool" to be overly concerned about one's identity on these sites, even though it is rather common in practice.

While it is not uncommon for students to sheepishly admit to cruising Facebook when they were supposed to be writing papers, the practice may also be symptomatic of

deeper emotional issues. As one blogger confessed, "my days are spent refreshing Facebook a hundred times an hour and sleeping and not dealing with life." Psychological depression is highly correlated with the breakdown of kin support networks, a phenomenon especially familiar to college students who must create new social bonds upon being abruptly disconnected from their home communities. One person's advice for problematic Facebook use was to "stop using Facebook for awhile. Have a friend change the password and promise not to give it to you for a month or whatever." This proposed solution is also advocated by a Facebook Group called "I found a solution to facebook addiction":

> step 1. walk up to any1 you know or you don't really know .. It doesn't matter
> step 2. give them your password
> step 3. tell em to change it to any password of their choice
> step 4. instruct them never to give it to you again until ..... God knows when
> step 5. you are no longer a facebook addict

Internet Addiction has recently become a popular topic, evidenced by a steady increase in support groups and psychological research (Leung 2004; Widdyanto & Griffiths 2006; Caplan 2007). Though it has yet to be officially classified as a mental disorder in the <u>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</u> (DSM), proponents of its inclusion have developed a set of diagnostic criteria. These criteria include excessive use, signs of withdrawal syndrome such as anxiety and obsessive thinking, a desire to cut down on Internet activities, reduced involvement in important family, social, occupational, or recreational activities, and a negative impact on one or more of these spheres (Goldberg 2002). These factors are frequently invoked by heavy users of online social networks when describing their personal concerns and anxieties regarding their motivations for such use. Carla, a Facebook "quitter," recalls:

> …spending hours looking at people's profiles and writing on people's walls and being worried about people writing on my wall and how much they liked or cared about me based on this… I'd be on Tom's profile and I'd write him some message and he wouldn't reply to me, but I could see he'd been writing little messages to Lucy all day and it would make me crazy! And I was like, "well, I do NOT need this in my life."

Carla's confession is not unusual. Rather, it reveals the obsessive thought patterns and social anxiety some experience in tandem with heavy involvement in online social networks. These sites encourage quantitative comparisons of one's social capital with that of others. For this very same reason, I am able to quantitatively demonstrate the prevalence of those who label themselves addicted by joining Groups of fellow addicts. A search for "Facebook addict" displayed 230 Facebook Groups pertaining to the topic, ranging from Alcoholics Anonymous-style support groups to proud and seemingly casual declarations of one's identity as a "Facebook Addict." A similar search for "MySpace Addict" on MySpace yielded 67 public Groups; however, it is impossible to tell how many private Groups for MySpace addiction are in existence. Less-populated Tribe is not without its own Group of "Tribe Addicts," currently with 171 members.

As is the case with most addictions, overuse of online social networks is often accompanied by feelings of shame and guilt. Rather than merely observing and fantasizing about the life one wishes to lead, however, some conceptualize their "addictions" in a positive light, demonstrating enthusiasm for the socially beneficial aspects of the medium. Nevertheless, it is also common practice to tease those who spend a good deal of time on these sites:

> *Carla:* I think some people take Facebook way too seriously, and their friends make fun of them for it. I especially like to make fun of my friends for being on it all the time because I don't do it/usually don't/won't have it. Hell, I'm

laughing at myself for having to reactivate my account to get my phone numbers back.

Carla's testimony reflects pride at having overcome what she saw as a debilitating habit. However, shortly after our interview she rejoined Facebook and resumed normal Facebook activities- creating Events, posting messages on her Friends' Walls, and uploading photographs. Facebook makes re-joining a very easy process, allowing those who have deactivated their accounts to rejoin at any time simply by re-entering their e-mail address and password on the site. Furthermore, the site archives all user information such that upon re-joining, it is as if one never really left.

Conclusion

As the popularity of online social networking grows, a host of privacy issues are brought to the fore. They are dealt with in various ways, ranging from apathetic dismissal of one's visibility, to privatization or simply elimination of personal information on Profiles, to collective and occasionally effective protest. While users of MySpace and Facebook have increasingly had to respond to the sites' expanding publicity, however, Tribe remains a relatively restricted niche. Thus, the site enables playful performances and transgressive acts by significantly decreasing the chances that one will "be seen" by those in positions of authority. While the "top-down" gazes of authority figures and advertisers are often configured as problematic, users of these sites also describe concerns with the horizontal gazes of the members themselves.

While many of my informants condemned social networking sites for contributing to a perceived decline in face-to-face interaction, by and large these sites

serve simply as extensions of preexisting communication practices. The ubiquity of social Internet use among younger generations has given rise to the use of online social networks for expressing friendship bonds and group affiliations, lending an explicit affirmation of belonging in the world. In one of my interviews, a student related to me that before she came to college, her older sister informed her that "you don't exist if you're not on Facebook." It is precisely this mentality that may lead some to depend on these visual articulations of their social worlds, especially in times of loneliness and depression. Online social networks enable the virtual expression of longstanding offline obsessions with effectively performing one's identity, demonstrating one's popularity, and acquiring information about romantic interests.

Being overly concerned with the "authenticity" of one's social identity is common among young people struggling to find their place in the world. However, online social networks enable new forms of creative self-expressions by allowing individuals to portray themselves as they see themselves through multimedia, constructions effectively broadcast to one's social network. While online social networks certainly may reinforce the importance of popularity, a traditional student concern, those overly obsessed with acquiring "Friends" are kept in check by the risk of being labeled a "MySpace Whore" or a "Friend Slut." Self-admitted "addicts" can easily find support within the medium, and "stalking" others online has come to be a casual colloquial term-demonstrating the pervasiveness of the act in everyday life.

Dystopian views based in the potential dangers of the medium are not to be dismissed, however. Online privacy has become a widespread topic of controversy, prompting legal actions (such as the Deleting Online Predators Act of 2006), academic

research studies, and a variety of organizations dedicated to disseminating information for protecting Internet users (such as the Internet Safety Technical Task Force, headed by Harvard's Berkman Center for Internet & Society). The reality of these online practices is that much, if not all, of the personal information members provide can very well be used against them by legal authorities and exploited by commercial interests, and is definitely stored in centralized databases. The complex and sometimes problematic issues and anxieties discussed in this chapter only partially portray the "virtual campfire," which combines the traditional "campfire" activities of gossip, interactivity, and group belonging with the "virtual" elements of permanency and public exposure. In the next chapter, I seek to balance these perspectives by examining the pleasures and utopian ideals described by members of these sites.

Chapter 5:

Pleasures and Utopias

As I discussed in Chapter One, the history of the Internet is strongly rooted in the utopian idealism of the 1960s. Today, the medium is still frequently heralded for its potential to circulate information and enable new possibilities for interpersonal communication, identity performance, and community formation. Many find that the anonymous and text-based nature of the Internet offers users a safe space for disclosing personal information and pursuing romantic interests. Online social networks, in particular, facilitate the spread of information based on established networks of trust and reciprocity. By visually displaying such networks and their membership in them, people may derive an increased sense of communal belonging. Furthermore, individuals can also easily promote and distribute their own content in various forms, such as audio players, video clips, and photo galleries.

On a collective level, the Internet provides a platform for the spread of information and ideas that can bring like-minded individuals into contact with one another regardless of temporal or spatial distance. Such perceived potential provides support for utopian ideologies, such as "neotribalism" and "technoshamanism," that purport to promote the sanctity of humankind- the "sacred" campfire ritual and shamanistic practices described at the beginning of this thesis- utilizing modern technologies to tap into the "collective un/consciousness."

Safe Spaces

Despite the many claims that mediated communication is less valuable than face-to-face communication, in the absence of physical co-presence, people have long sought and will continue to seek out contact with others across boundaries of time and space. For those grappling with a dearth of face-to-face contact in their everyday lives, computer-mediated communication can provide a meaningful form of social interaction. Having recently transferred to Wesleyan, Isabelle found the "Events" feature of Facebook particularly useful for informing her about what was going on socially on campus. Lola observes that "it's nice to sign on and see that little notification that you have a new Friend Request," and few deny this pleasure in practice, though they commonly try to in face-to-face conversation. "Everyone acts like they are not that into Facebook," my friend Teresa commented, "but everyone so is." At Wesleyan, joining Facebook is practically requisite, an indicator of one's membership in the community. "I think it does help me sort of establish myself," said Maddie, a freshman, "as like, 'I'm a Wesleyan student.'" A sense of solidarity, a feeling that "everybody's doing it," effectively cancels out any potentially negative social consequences of simply having an online Profile. Conversely, those who are *not* on Facebook or MySpace (a minority among my social network) may be viewed as "too cool" for the medium, a paradigm that is mirrored in the social construction of cell phone ownership.
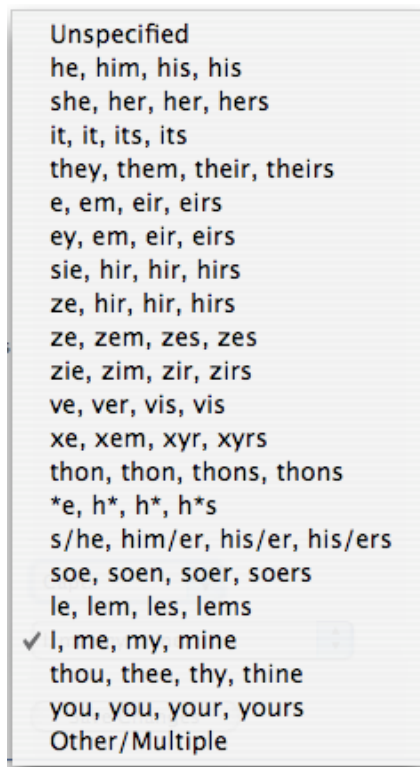
A study conducted by Ellison et al; (2006) of 800 Michigan State University students found a high correlation between intensive Facebook use and increased social capital for those with relatively low self-esteem and school satisfaction. The somewhat anonymous nature of online communication provides a low-stress environment for

communicating with and learning about others, regardless of the social setting or the strength of one's relationship to the addressee. Online social networks, while they simulate offline social bonds, are nevertheless fundamentally mediating. It is this spatial distance that allows people to represent themselves to and communicate with others in ways unhindered by the limitations of physical co-presence. For instance, the user is granted a high degree of authorship over her self-disclosure, able to construct an identity grounded in written text and (usually) chosen, static images, which may be edited and revised at any time. Nevertheless, this form of expression is also limiting, for it demands a certain level of "cultural capital" and prior training in the medium to represent oneself effectively. The "truthfulness" of one's online identity is, for the most part, up to the individual, however it is also largely dependent on the extent to which one's online identity is linked to offline relationships and activities. Furthermore, a user may "lurk" undetected, thus deriving the voyeuristic satisfaction of consuming social information without risking self-disclosure, let alone initiating interaction.

Many find this security especially beneficial for pursuing romantic interests. With a few clicks of the mouse, one can look up a new crush and find out his relationship status. "If you're interested in someone," an anonymous Wesleyan student writes, "send hir a message via Facebook or e-mail." On college campuses, Facebook interactions have come to be an accepted way of indicating interest toward a person one may not otherwise run into, and in this way the medium changes the way that people build relationships with others. Carla, after meeting someone briefly at a party, sent him a Facebook message immediately afterwards saying that they should hang out again. She also started a fling with another man she had been admiring from a distance by way of

Facebook messaging. "At Wesleyan, it's especially important to look at sexuality," wrote

Leah, a sophomore girl. Facebook simplifies what is often a complicated process of

outwardly identifying oneself as queer, enabling individuals to mark the gender(s) they

are interested in and search for others who have indicated that they're interested in the

same sex. For those desirous of more fluid gender and sexual identity options, there's

SGO (Sex Gender Orientation)- an application that allows one to choose from a number

of fields pertaining to gender and sexual identity:

- *Sex:* "Unspecified," "male," "female," "intersex," "eunuch," "MTF [male-tp-female]," "FTM [female-to-male]," and "Other/Multiple."
- *Transition Status:* "Unspecified," "Non-Op," "Pre-Everything," "In Transition," "Pre-Op," "Post-Op," and "Other/Multiple."
- *Gender Identity:* "Unspecified," "Male," "Female," "Bigender," "Agender," "Androgyne," "Genderqueer," "Third," "Fourth," "Fluid," "Questioning," and "Other/Multiple"
- *Gender Presentation:* "Unspecified," "Maculine," "Feminine," "Butch," "Femme," "Androgynous," "Metrosexual," "Genderfuck," and "Other/Multiple"
- *Orientation:* "Unspecified," "Straight," "Gay," "Lesbian," "Bisexual," "Pansexual," "Asexual," "Heteroflexible," "Homoflexible," "Bicurious," "Androsexual," "Gynosexual," "Androgynosexual," "Queer," "Questioning," and "Other/Multiple")
- *Sexual Identity:* Same as above.
- *Kinsey Scale:* from 0- exactly heterosexual- to 6.0- exactly homosexual.
- *Interested In:* "Men," "Women," "People," "Transmen," "Transwomen," "Transpeople," "Cismen," "Ciswomen," "Cispeople," "Nobody," and "Other."
- *Out To:* Common social and familial groups, ranging from "Myself" to "Everyone."
- *Title:* "Unspecified," "Mr.," "Ms.," "Miss," "Mrs.," "Mx.," "Mre.," "Dr.," "Prof.," "Capt.," "Rev.," and "Other/Multiple"); and pronoun:

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Unspecified
he, him, his, his
she, her, her, hers
it, it, its, its
they, them, their, theirs
e, em, eir, eirs
ey, em, eir, eirs
sie, hir, hir, hirs
ze, hir, hir, hirs
ze, zem, zes, zes
zie, zim, zir, zirs
ve, ver, vis, vis
xe, xem, xyr, xyrs
thon, thon, thons, thons
*e, h*, h*, h*s
s/he, him/er, his/er, his/ers
soe, soen, soer, soers
le, lem, les, lems
✓ I, me, my, mine
thou, thee, thy, thine
you, you, your, yours
Other/Multiple
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Though this application is used by only 137 Facebook members, 10 of them are Friends

of mine from Wesleyan. This fact is indicative of the importance placed by Wesleyan

students especially on tolerance and awareness of the full spectrum of gender and sexual

identities.

Jordan provided a more extreme example of the role Facebook has played in

relationship formation. He once looked up all the people who were going to an

upcoming music festival on campus and found a cute girl he had never seen before. He

went on to tell me the story of their serendipitous encounter:

> So I looked at her profile, and I looked at her (she did look pretty) and I
> saw…there was something about her profile…I think she liked some music artist
> I liked, so I messaged her about it and I was like 'hey, I like your music' or 'I like
> your something or another'. And we started up this conversation and e-mailed
> back and forth a few times…and it never really went anywhere until like, 6
> months later and we were at some party…and I see this girl and I'm like, "holy
> shit," and I went over and I was like, "is it you?" and she said, "oh my god, it's

you!" And so she ended up coming back to my house and hanging out with my friends, and we actually ended up sleeping together that night… And then the next day, she came over again, and ended up meeting the girl who she ended up becoming long-term girlfriends with.

These and other anecdotes make it clear that, rather than substituting for social interactions, Facebook is becoming integrated into the everyday processes of relationship formation on college campuses. Facebook users are granted the capacity to build upon chance encounters and sustain long-distance friendships. For the most part, interactions in the Facebook realm center on playfulness and are quite casual. A person one normally sees only in random chance encounters can instead be contacted through a Facebook message or Poke, or at the very least, one is able to see which parties he has RSVP'd to for the coming weekend by scanning his Mini-Feed. Both are common practices on college campuses

MySpace is avidly used for romantic pursuits by high school students as well as adults; it was initially developed as a medium for online dating. Demetri, who has met many women on MySpace and dated two of them, has been involved in a great deal of "MySpace drama," which he describes as a "modern-day soap opera." During one conversation, he ranted at length about the often lewd, transgressive character of the site:

> There's a whole other element of sexual expression there, which in our society is generally frowned upon, but because you're online, all of the sudden you feel like you can do what you want, and not be… in trouble, or criticized, or taboo, 'cause it's not the same people seeing it, or whatever. So there's this whole element, on MySpace especially, of people being like- and this has actually happened to me now, too, but mostly it happens to women, from men- they'll be sending them messages like, "I wanna take all your clothes off you and lick your whole body," but whatever… it's like, this erotic interlude, all of the sudden you get this message from some random guy, and it's like, "I wanna rape you, blah blah blah," whatever, "wouldn't that be hot?" [laughs] Why would you think it's okay to send me a message like this? 'Cause I'm a woman and I have some picture of me up on MySpace and I'm hot? And so… that gives you license to send me a

message that you want to do dirty things to me? Noooo, that's not okay, you wouldn't come up to me in a supermarket and tell me you wanted to lick my asshole. Why are you telling me this online? …So there's this whole sense of social lubricant there… alcohol and the Internet both provide that social lubricant. Where else do people feel free to do or say these kinds of things? You would never say that at church! You would never proposition someone's 22-year old daughter at church, be like, "hmm, we're an older couple looking to experiment…"

His last statement referenced a story I'd told him earlier on in the conversation, about receiving just such a proposition from a Middletown couple via MySpace. It is quite common to encounter such "inappropriate" behavior on the site, and violating social norms of respectable conduct is one of the principle pleasures of the online medium-which, as Demetri aptly points out, functions as a "social lubricant" through reducing social risk. To include one's location on one's MySpace Profile is to voluntarily list oneself in an online directory of potential sexual partners. This use of the site is especially popular amongst high school students, who constituted the original majority of MySpacers in the site's infancy. "I didn't use the site, but all the girls did," my brother recalls, "they were always talking about boys from other schools they found on MySpace." It would seem that MySpace was commonly used by girls at my high school to expand the dating pool beyond the tiny insular community of Clinton, where classmates of the opposite sex often seemed more like little brothers than potential romantic partners.

While it is a popular activity on MySpace to initiate correspondence with strangers, the site is also frequently utilized to track down people one has met offline and would like to get to know better. One afternoon, a freshman boy named Tom replied to a call for stories I had posted on the Anonymous Confession Board, initiating a conversation

144

with me via Instant Messenger in order to tell me a tale of his "MySpace romance:"

> I went to Starbucks in my town in high school almost every day senior year on my way to the library. One day, the cashier looked at my name on my debit card, looked me up on MySpace, and sent me a message… and then we dated for 3 months.

As the conversation continued, I realized that the pursuant was also male.

> "Oh, a him?" I wrote, "That's interesting…"

> "Why?" he replied.

> "There is more social risk involved in asking out a random member of the same

sex… and the Internet reduces social risk," I responded.

> "That makes sense," he wrote back:

> It might be interesting to note that my sexual orientation is NOT on my MySpace. And I think he knew someone in my high school who he asked to ensure that I was gay. The details are a little foggy. But, I wasn't out in my high school, and I believe he was told that there was a good chance.

When asked why he ended the relationship, Tom went on to write:

> He was just what the gays call a "closet usher"… someone who you're really able to overlook your insurmountable differences because you're happy enough to be finally dating a guy. This is so weird that I'm telling you all this! I don't know who you are!

A classic example of "reduced social risk," indeed!

Tribe is representative of another kind of "safe space"- it is a niche site where the "alternative" is not only accepted, it's the norm. Tribe is relatively unknown to those unassociated with Burning Man or psytrance culture. While the more popular MySpace and Facebook encourage self-censorship to some degree, on Tribe it is common to come across message board threads publicly discussing such topics as bondage, drug use, mysticism, and shamanism with the sort of frankness normally reserved for close friends.

A novice drug user, posting a thread entitled "lsd versus mushrooms," received 122 responses of advice from more experienced members. In a Tribe called "Au Naturel," a post entitled "how many of you drive naked?" incited friendly camaraderie and support in the form of 51 responses. A Tribe called "3+ Male Relationships" describes itself as "A tribe for Gay men that are interested in LTR [long-term] relationships of 3 or more," and has 121 members. Clearly, the site is an excellent source of information and social support that would be difficult to come across via mainstream media or in everyday life.

The Strength of Weak Ties

Social networking sites have become popular tools for keeping in touch with new acquaintances and friends, increasingly replacing other forms of networking (such as exchanging cell phone numbers). Last month, vacationing in Mexico, I befriended several Canadians who happened to also be fervent Facebook enthusiasts. We promised to post the photos we'd taken of our adventures, and to keep track of one another through the site. MySpace has enabled me to stay in touch with those I meet who do not attend university and thus are less likely to have a Facebook account. In addition, I regularly add musicians I enjoy listening to, as well as authors who have had an important influence on my life. Tribe, alternately, helps me befriend and remain connected to people I may know only through our shared presence on the dance floor, and to "meet" Trancers from other parts of the world (such as Mexico, Romania, India, Canada, the UK, and Portugal). This sort of transnational networking triggers an intense feeling of belonging to a global underground community, tied together through shared beliefs, music tastes, and party styles.

Howard Rheingold, who coined the term "virtual community" in 1993, seeks to debunk the critique of virtual communities as alienating and superficial through a discussion of the merits of both strong and weak social ties in the acquisition of knowledge:

> A social network with a mixture of strong ties, familial ties, lifelong friend ties, marital ties, business partner ties, is important for people to obtain the fundamentals of identity, affection, emotional and material support. But without a network of more superficial relationships, life would be harder and less fun in many ways. Weaker ties multiply people's social capital, useful knowledge, ability to get things done (Rheingold 1993: 361).

Much of the research that has been conducted on online social networking highlights the benefits of the medium for strengthening weak social bonds. Donath and boyd (2004: 80) contend that while use of social networking sites does not necessarily increase one's strong ties, the sites enable one to form and maintain a greater number of weak ties, thus increasing and diversifying various kinds of information and opportunities. The vast majority of those I interviewed would agree that online social networks simply make life easier. Those seeking information about a homework assignment, for instance, may (and often do) use Facebook to find others enrolled in the same course. Additionally, the sites are often utilized to "introduce" one friend to another, in more or less useful ways. On occasion, these sites have served me as vehicles for finding others interested in my field of research. "Get in touch with my friend Leo," Tara wrote on my Wall, "Facebook: Leo Patterson. He goes to Harvard and has some crazy ideas about/fun with social networking sites. Also one of the smartest people I've had the pleasure of knowing." More common, however, is the practice of "checking out" new acquaintances. Online Profiles allow one "to learn about where [someone is] from, who else they are friends

with, this that and the other thing. And like, you know, what groups they represent,"

according to Jordan. He went on to discuss how Facebook has facilitated his own

repository of "useful information":

> There have definitely been times where I'll note somebody tera-peripherally and
> it'll become something kind of in the Facebook, like I'll see in their profiles that
> they're really into a lot of the same stuff that I'm into, or maybe they're from a
> city I've visited and really like, anything that kind of piques my interest about
> them… and next time I'm having a conversation with them I'll be like, "hey man
> I just learned this about you, let's talk about this". There was this one kid, for
> example, that listed [on his profile] all these names of musicians I've never heard
> of and they were all very Eastern European-sounding. So the next time I saw
> him I was like, "hey what's up with these guys?" and he was like, "Oh, I'm really
> interested in gypsy folk music," and we had a really interesting conversation
> about it, and it turned me on to some musicians who I listen to a lot now.

Drawing on the aforementioned study as well as the work of Robert Putnam

(2000), Ellison et al; (2006) distinguish between two forms of social capital: bridging

social capital, which refers to the weak ties between individuals who may share

information and differing perspectives, but not usually emotional support; and bonding

social capital, which refers to the strong, emotional ties typically found within families

and close friendships. In addition, they included a new form of social capital- high

school social capital- in reference to the particular audience supported by the Facebook

platform (high school students moving out of the home and into a university setting).

Facebook was found to be particularly useful for keeping in touch with old high school

friends and acquaintances, thus increasing bridging social capital (2006: 1162). In

particular, they note that the site is often used to activate "latent ties" by allowing users

to discover how such ties may be more applicably useful in various contexts. For

example, I recently utilized Facebook in order to find out more information about a new

housemate, and discovered that we have 15 Facebook Friends in common, that he is an

experimental musician, and that he is from Germany. Upon discovering these facts, I

breathed a sigh of relief that my soon-to-be-neighbor is most likely laid-back and

interesting- an assessment based primarily on our mutual acquaintances.

The Information Revolution

> My ideal? To throw such lustrous content into the world that the shine of it
> blinds me to myself while warming and illuminating all others nearby. Such
> possibilities have always been exactly what propelled me to study online social
> networks in the first place. Yes, there is glitter and garish HTML, narcissism and
> virulent flaming, but there is also enormous creativity. As the Internet becomes
> increasingly burdened by censorship and rampant commercialism, we would do
> well to make the most out of our united power as not simply consumers, but
> *creators* of MySpace, Facebook, and other Web 2.0 sites defined by user-created
> content.
>
> I urge you all to make your online profile a work of art and a source of
> inspiration. We are all starseeds.
>
> Best wishes, fellow seedlings!
> > (First post to my blog, *miss.anthropology,* January 2008)

Online social networks are but one of many new forms of web applications that

fall within the spectrum of "Web 2.0." Web 2.0 has myriad definitions, but can best be

understood as the shift from a one-way flow of information to information tailored by

and for the users themselves, many-to-many. Wikipedia, for example, allows anyone to

edit the enormous database of encyclopedia entries that have been produced over the

past five years. However, while with Wikipedia the entries themselves are the common

reference point among participants, online social networks perpetuate a plethora of

"ego-centered" flows of information directly pertaining to one's virtually established

relationships, which are more often than not pre-established in the offline world. This is

best exemplified by Facebook's News Feed, where I can learn about Events that my

Friends plan to attend, who has recently updated their Profile photos, what one Friend

wrote on the Wall of another, and that John and Paige are now engaged.

All three sites allow members to upload or link to various forms of media, such

as video, music, and still images. Most everything that is uploaded to an online social

network can potentially become a subject of "conversation" in the form of Comments.

For example, Facebook notifies me when someone has Commented on a photo in which

my name is Tagged, prompting me to revisit the photo and perhaps respond. The nature

of responses is typically light-hearted and casual, often joking. Unlike telephone

conference calls, anyone who is able to view the photos may potentially contribute to the

conversation at any point in time. Users may also Tag others if they wish them to be

notified of a Note they've posted, nearly ensuring that their words will be read by an

intended audience, and encouraging reciprocal feedback. On MySpace, members are

informed when their Friends post blog entries or broadcast "Bulletins":

From	Date	Bulletin
KellyLovesJe remy<3	Oct 25, 2007 3:48 PM	yyyyyaaaa......
KellyLovesJe remy<3	Oct 25, 2007 3:40 PM	**70 Questions I Guarantee You've Never Answered:**
KellyLovesJe remy<3	Oct 25, 2007 3:31 PM	yep, i'm bored...
Chemical Brothers	Oct 25, 2007 11:59 AM	**BBC ELECTRIC PROMS W BETH ORTON AND TIM BURGESS TONITE**
Laura Goldha mer	Oct 25, 2007 10:32 AM	**Meditative Music TONIGHT 6-7 pm sharp!**
Lama-Jigme	Oct 25, 2007 9:45 AM	**Changing Every thing?**
AUDIO SCIENCE EXPERIMENT	Oct 25, 2007 4:48 AM	**NEW TRACKS!!! ON MY SCEOUND PROFILE!! NEW TRACKS!!!**
James Harmon	Oct 24, 2007 4:14 PM	**New Track. 1992 style...**
KatAlyst	Oct 24, 2007 11:58 AM	double dose
Mike Cavana ugh	Oct 24, 2007 8:21 AM	**show in Boston**
View All Bulletin Entries		

Above is an example of recent Bulletins posted by my MySpace Friends. Kelly, my younger sister, posts lengthy surveys with her answers to such frivolous questions as "Coke or Pepsi?" Lama-Jigme is a Buddhist monk I stumbled across on the site, found his thoughtful Bulletins interesting, and added as a Friend. KatAlyst, a local Middletown friend, informs his MySpace Friends about an upcoming party in New York City. The rest are musicians I either am a fan of (Chemical Brothers), know personally (Laura), or whose Friend Requests I've accepted after checking out the music they've uploaded to their Profiles.

The "searchability" and transparency of the Internet is another important facet of the "Information Revolution." With regard to social networking sites, finding others who share such eclectic interests as "Javanese Gamelan" is as simple as typing the phrase

into a search bar. Individuals may also join or create groups composed of like-minded enthusiasts around the world, thus diversifying and extending "communities" based on shared interests. Moreover, the sheer popularity of MySpace and Facebook means they are often the first places to look for tracking down old friends and acquaintances, much like phonebooks. Unlike phonebooks, however, online Profiles provide a glimpse into the lives of others without the potential awkwardness of direct interaction that a phone call entails. Such transparency has given rise to the widespread linguistic use of "Google" as a verb. It is now common practice, for instance, for employers to "Google" potential employees.[32] One of the greatest appeals of online social networking is the ability to observe without being observed. Rather than being the sole right of state agencies and corporate marketers, individuals themselves are granted this observational power, promoting a proliferating array of "lateral gazes" in a way that may compensate for these "vertical gazes" of authority.

As I log onto Tribe, I am greeted with an array of content in the form of Local Posts (set to show posts pertaining to New York City) and Blog Entries (posted by those in my network of Friends). A cursory glance at the posts informs me about upcoming concerts, parties, astrological events, and spiritual musings of the "New Age" variety. Many of those with whom I've discussed Tribe have admitted that they rarely log onto the site. "When I do," remarked Ted, "I'm usually looking for discussions about, say, ayahuasca, or certain audio programs…"[33] For those seeking discursive information

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[32] An article entitled "Want a job? Clean up your web act," reported survey results that one in five employers use the Internet to find information about job candidates (Ferguson, 28 March 2007).
[33] Ayahuasca is a vine containing the powerful hallucinogen DMT. Traditionally, it is used in

regarding alternative political and artistic ideas and practices, Tribe is bursting with conversation. My search for political activity on Tribe has inevitably led me to discussions pertaining to the 9/11 "conspiracy," tirades against President Bush, and issues of global interest. Often, this sort of information is not easily accessible, as the majority of members pride themselves on their rejection of mainstream media, representing themselves as the "global underground."

Both MySpace and Facebook, in contrast, have become important sites for more mainstream political activities and interests. In 2006, Facebook launched a feature called "Election Pulse," enabling members to indicate which candidates they support, learn about and discuss political issues, and gauge how candidates are faring among Facebookers through polls organized by state. MySpace, in turn, recently launched "Impact Channel," fulfilling essentially the same functions as its Facebook counterpart but reaching an even greater audience. Furthermore, the "Channel" is heavily video-oriented, featuring a series of dialogues with the candidates in collaboration with MTV's "Rock the Vote" initiative. Visitors to the site are able to submit videos of themselves asking questions of the candidates, promoting a sense of being directly involved in political democracy. Similar collaborative endeavors between network television and online social networks include the YouTube/CNN presidential debate in June of 2007 and the Facebook/ABC presidential debate in January of 2008.

As the 2008 presidential election approaches, candidates have been rushing to capture the elusive yet desirable youth vote. Unsurprisingly, the Democratic party has

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South American shamanic rituals. Since the 1950s, it has become popular among many in the counterculture.

been considerably more effective with its use of new social media to drive campaigns. In

a CNN article, "The social networking election," dated 12 September 2007, a Republican

pollster is quoted as saying: "Our party is really behind in learning how to maximize this

and use it to our best benefit. We were very proactive in learning how to use talk radio.

When it comes to the Internet, especially social networking sites, we're really behind."

On MySpace, Barack Obama leads the popularity contest with over 340,000 Friends (as

of April 2008)- not counting the thousands of Friends who link to alternate Obama

Profiles created to represent each individual state in the U.S. His Profile consists of a

regularly-updated blog, YouTube videos of his past speeches, links to further

information, photographs, podcasts, and various buttons linking to his other "online

habitats" on sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Such practices serve to

humanize politicians and breach the disconnect felt by voters, and are particularly

oriented toward the purportedly politically "apathetic" youth generation of the United

States today. Members of online social networks, in turn, have begun utilizing the sites to

display their support for particular candidates on their Profiles (much like bumper

stickers), research and discuss political issues, and run local campaigns in the form of

Groups.

Promoting Individual Endeavors

The public nature of the Internet makes it an ideal medium for promoting one's

craft or agenda to large groups of people. Online social networks are particularly useful

vehicles for finding others who share similar interests, due in large part to their

"searchability." By articulating that I am interested in psytrance, for example, psytrance

DJs and producers around the globe can find my Profile and request my Friendship.

Shared interests, especially with regard to music tastes, serve as a foundation for

expressions of camaraderie and implied intimacy, as exhibited by the following

Comment on my MySpace Profile:

> Hey! Thanks alot for add! I think I'll continue with my new tracks and the mixing
> of everywhere u look this weekend. I might put up a new sample of the other
> new track sometime within this weekend :) have a really great Friday evening!
> Peace.
>
> <div align="right">(Psytrance Producer, Sweden)</div>

For emerging artists, MySpace is <u>the</u> place to promote one's creations online. Rather

than being relegated to the ethically controversial and illegal practice of pirating music

that is protected under copyright, MySpace serves as a legal platform for listening to a

wide variety of music. Musicians can upload audio files directly onto special MySpace

Music Profiles, allowing visitors to listen to their songs for free with a simple click of the

"Play" button. Many also allow fans to purchase albums directly from the site if they so

choose. Established artists are likely to draw their own following of "Fans" (the term

used in place of "Friends") and thereby accumulating cultural capital (as opposed to

social capital), while emerging musicians often search for and send Friend Requests to

large numbers of users in hopes of drawing potential Fans and converting social into

cultural capital. Musician Profiles also serve to inform Fans about upcoming shows and

concerts, either through a calendar on their Profiles or through event invitations. Fans

may RSVP to upcoming events and share invitations with their Friends, a form of

secondhand promotion that is often highly effective.

   Because MySpace Profiles are so highly editable, allowing for user-generated

HTML and Javascripts to be utilized, Profiles may be works of art in and of themselves.

One of the authors cited in this thesis, Paul Levinson, recently Friended me on MySpace, notifying me via Facebook that "I 'Stumbled' your MySpace page - poetic images and words - should attract a few gazes…" While I have indeed endeavored to create a "poetic" MySpace Profile, his own Profile far surpassed mine with its use of various media forms. An established science fiction author and professor of media studies at Fordham University, Paul's MySpace Profile is replete with scrolling images of the covers of his novels, in-depth blog posts on television as well as politics, podcasts of readings of his books, YouTube videos of interviews as well as a film adaptation of one of his novels, and images from his excursions on the 3D virtual world Second Life (see *Appendix A*).

Tribe also allows users to edit their Profiles substantially, and particularly emphasizes group discussion in the form of message boards. Tribes such as "Creative Writing" and "Electronic Music Production" encourage members to post links to original material, comment on and critique the work of others, and engage in dialogue with other artists involved in the field. One of the unique features of the site enables members to write reviews of artists, musicians, bands, DJs, writers, and filmmakers, which can then be posted to appropriate Tribes as well as on one's Profile:

PsyOps

44
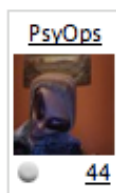
★★★★★ **Most Danceable album of 2007!! VA- Problematic Planet, Debut release from Free Radical Records**
Every track on this album is killer, from start to finish. With brand new tracks from dance floor masters Electrypnose, Highko, and Grapes of Wrath, and wicked new tracks by newly discovered underground artists Coma Sector, Darknoizz, Illegal Machines, Psymmetrix, Guinea Pigs, Terraniose, and Crazy Ducks. With Free Radical Records we intend to tap into the bountiful supply of talent on the underground scene and bring what we consider to be the best, most kicking and ultimately dancable tunes into your lives!!! - PsyOps (1°), posted 11/22/07

The viral nature of social networking sites also makes them ideal platforms for promoting activist causes and generating political support. On Facebook (originally a service geared toward upper-tier college students), student activists across the country form groups aimed at raising awareness of various issues and garnering collective solidarity and support. In order to gauge how the site is used for activist purposes, a research partner and I interviewed the founder of the Facebook group "400,000 Faces," which sought to promote public awareness of the genocide in Darfur in the following manner:

> Each person in the 400,000 represents 1 person that has died in Darfur (400,000 is an average of statistics). The pictures will be printed 100 per a page at every participating school (on recycled paper). On April 28th 2007 all 4,000 pages will be lain out over public areas at each school during a rally for Darfur. A picture of the display will be taken and sent to senators, representatives, UN officials, local and major news stations, and those whose influence matters. The resulting packets of 4,000 pages will be sent to the officials that have the best chance in creating change.

A widespread critique of this kind of Group is that little is actually accomplished: one can consider herself an "activist" simply by clicking a button to join a Group. This perspective was expressed by Isabelle:

> **Isabelle**: The only time that people really get devoted to a cause on Facebook is when it's a stupid, useless thing that barely affects their life. If everyone in the 400,000 Faces group volunteered to do awareness work for Sudan that would be one thing, but joining the Facebook group does not make you an activist.

Ben, the founder of the group, responded to this critique more optimistically:

> **Ben:** I would say that most members of the group are people who care but aren't willing to do anything, but in every 100 members there are 4 or 5 that are willing to put forth the effort to make change in whatever way they can. This is collecting those people and spear heading their efforts into one movement…while their effort is small, when you get 400,000 members to stand together, even if passive their efforts accumulate and have an extremely powerful result.

"400,000 Faces" reached their goal about four months after its inception, and, Ben

states, "[it was all done by] friends inviting friends inviting friends…I would guess that

there are very few schools throughout the entire nation that do not have at least one

member of 400,000 Faces." This form of viral networking is how a similar Group, called

"For Every 1,000 People That Join This Group, I Will Donate $1 to Darfur,"

accumulated over half a million Facebook members in less than a week. When my

Friends began joining this Group, I (like nearly every member on Facebook) watched its

popularity evolve through my News Feed. Given their demonstrated success in

conglomerating individuals around shared attitudes and tastes, it is little wonder that

online social networking sites have attracted the vociferous attention of advertisers,

corporations, activists and artists alike.

A common promotional practice on MySpace is the use of robots, commonly

called "bots," that will send Friend Requests to users *en masse*:

This practice is greatly disparaged by casual MySpacers and often cited as its most unappealing facet. However, the average user is typically unaware of the extent to which content is proliferated throughout the site. Bots are used by spammers as well as musicians, pornography sites as well as young entrepreneurs- with varying degrees of success. One such entrepreneur, a 21-year old Wesleyan sophomore who runs his own line of t-shirts, commented bleakly: "I have a bot that 'friends' people on MySpace. I have over 7,000 friends, but I've only sold 3 or 4 shirts this way!" He proceeded to ask me how he could more effectively promote his business, as my friend standing next to me responded derisively, "oh, you're one of *those*!" I suggested, first, a more personal approach through direct messages rather than mass "friending." Secondly, I recommended that he check out Tribe as a source of networking with other artists and aficionados of DIY (Do It Yourself) enterprises.

Technoshamanism and Neotribalism

> Let us admit that we have attended parties where for one brief night a republic of gratified desires was attained. Shall we not confess that the politics of that night have more reality and force for us than those of, say, the entire U.S. Government? Some of the "parties" we've mentioned lasted for two or three years. Is this something worth imagining, worth fighting for? Let us study invisibility, webworking, psychic nomadism--and who knows what we might attain?
>
> -Hakim Bey, *The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (1985)

In my virtual wandering through the thousands of bulletin boards that make up Tribe, two terms I'd never heard of before quickly caught my attention: technoshamanism and neotribalism. Both terms evoke a romantic notion of merging modern technologies with ancient tribal wisdom. For instance, certain kinds of electronic music are attributed the capacity to induce trance-like states that can be shared by a group of people through ecstatic dance, evoking images of shamanic tribal rituals in various parts of the world (such as South America, India, and Africa). Synthetic drugs such as LSD (acid) and MDMA (ecstasy) are frequently ingested as well, to aid in inducing trance-like states, altering visual and auditory perceptions, and enhancing feelings of connectedness to others and the "divine within." In the words of one Tribe member:

> To me, [technoshamanism] is getting in touch with the past and uniting it with the present. Our species has danced the night away to a rhythm and beat for as long as we have had consciousness to do so. Whether it be an animal hide-based drum or a drum machine, the sound is the same. If music in general was compared to say, the English language, its beat and rhythm would be the vowel sounds that make up every word in existence. Understood by all who hear it regardless of ethnicity or creed.

Underlying the ideology of neotribalism is the concept of a universal consciousness that has been lost and forgotten in the wake of civilization, and that must be rediscovered if humanity is to survive.

These ideas/beliefs have parallels in many religious or "cult" movements: prophetic figures have emerged throughout the past half-century (such as Timothy Leary, Terence McKenna, Alex Grey and Daniel Pinchbeck), some of whom espouse the apocalyptic belief (traces of which can be found throughout the site) that the world will come to an end in the year 2012.[34] "The tribes and the primitive people will survive," predicts a 50-year old Californian man, "know how to get all that you need from the earth. Nothing else can be expected to survive." Like the Back-to-the-Land movement of the 1960's, neotribalists seek a return to humanity's "ancestral roots" through developing local, self-sustaining communities, with an emphasis on creating a global network of interconnected "tribes." With its unifying power, the Internet is one of those modern technologies that is utilized by technoshamans as a means of tapping into the "collective neural network."

As I previously mentioned, Tribe was founded on the principals established by Craigslist- namely, local trust-based communities sharing information, unhindered by advertising and aided by displaying how members are connected to one another. Members join "Tribes" based on shared localities, lifestyles, interests, and niches. When asked why he spends so much time on Tribe, a party promoter I have befriended and partied with after meeting on the site replied, "there are just so many cool people on

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[34] The belief that the world will end in 2012 is derived from various interpretations of the Mayan calendar, which ends its thirteenth cycle on December 20th, 2012.

there, people who know what's up." Being "in the know" is a key value in the formation

of the "underground," through which members of a subculture pride themselves on

possessing special knowledge (subcultural capital) that distinguishes them from the

imagined "mainstream." A primary use of the site is to organize and promote artists'

collectives. Last year, a friend of mine created the Tribe "Chrysalis Cuddle," in reference

to a group of Wesleyan students (myself included) dedicated to throwing "underground"

raves on and around campus. The Tribe had a short-lived period of activity over a winter

break period, during which five of us exchanged ideas about future events. Though we

were all in separate parts of the country, we could participate in the conversation at any

time. The thread remains accessible today, though it has been inactive for over a year.

Most importantly, the nature of message boards is such that our posts were well thought

out and attentive to previous responses, allowing for a constructive dialogue unhindered

by the burdens of co-presence (such as hesitations, interruptions, and "filler" words).

In 1962, Marshall McLuhan's landmark novel The Gutenberg Galaxy: The

Making of Typographic Man described the changes that had been taking place since the

invention of the Gutenberg press; namely, the increasing collapse of spatial and temporal

barriers, enabling people to communicate on a global level. His notion of the "global

village" has since become a popular metaphor for describing the Internet and the World

Wide Web. Utopian visions of a vast, interconnected global community, connected

through cybernetic technology, abound in books, movies, and television. Equally

common, however, are apocalyptic and ominous depictions of a world governed by Big

Brother, divided by war and poverty, or destroyed entirely by the ignorance of humanity.

"Technoshamans" seek to put forth positive energy in order to bring about the healing seen as imperative for creating a better world and reclaiming our ancient roots:

> A lot of visionary artists are reflecting states or planes that are certainly more primordial and edgier than the technicolor flower-powered sunshine of the 60's. Goa/psy trance also reflects the aural elements of the shadow plane, and this is in response to the fact that we are dealing with heavy amounts of darkness. We could lose our planet in 50 years, for goodness's sake! 2005 was the hottest year on record, and Africa is suffering from a massive AIDS epidemic.
> (Posted to the Tribe "Techno Shamanism")

Conclusion

Despite the anxieties and fears that online social networking evokes, the medium continues to be integrated into the everyday practices of many. Its immense popularity can be attributed to a number of factors, such as extending older forms of two-way communication (like the radio and the telephone) to include new possibilities for interaction through multimedia, as well as allowing for the voyeuristic pleasures of one-way observation. I have frequently found myself signing into Facebook when telling a story or mentioning someone unknown to my listener(s); this is a common practice amongst my friends. By scrolling through our "Mutual Friends," the individual in question may be recognized, albeit unilaterally. When I lost my phone, Facebook became my primary means of getting in touch with my friends; when I got a new phone, the site was extremely useful for obtaining phone numbers. As I am looking to move to New York City in a few months, I posted a "Request" for housing recommendations on Tribe, where my chances of finding potential housemates compatible with my lifestyle and worldview are considerably increased. Unlike MySpace or Facebook, which are more place-based in nature and involve social class, Tribe is less place-based and prioritizes

shared subcultural preferences. All three sites serve as sources of social and political information tailored to my personal network and interests, and keep me informed about upcoming events I might be interested in and which of my friends are planning to attend.

Online social networking has become a highly effective tool for promoting such events, as well as engendering visible support for musicians, writers, activists and politicians. When a friend recommends a musician to me, I invariably ask for their MySpace address (unless, as is often the case, I'm introduced to the musician by being shown their MySpace Profile) in order to listen to some of their music easily and freely. Novice and established authors alike can find an audience for their written work, effectively sidestepping the middleman through publishing freely and publicly online. In a similar vein, both activists and politicians have discovered that these sites enable not only discourse and dissemination of ideas, but also a means to build *quantitative* support. Indeed, the more Friends one is connected to or members who join one's group through online social networks, the more one's name will appear in the networks of others, instigating a form of viral proliferation that exponentially increases one's social capital.

A recent survey by the PEW Internet & American Life Project (2007: 27) found that 1 in 3 adults have posted creative content online. Alongside blogging, wikis, and other forms of collaborative and interactive technologies labeled "Web 2.0," social networking sites are one of the primary tools heralded as enabling the "Information Revolution." The term "revolution" is somewhat grandiose, thus "evolution" may be a better fit. Print media became secularized with the advent of nation-building; electronic media has arguably become democratized in this period of globalization. Thus, one of

the primary pleasures emphasized by my informants is the way in which these sites allow members to experience themselves as producers of culture, rather than simply audiences or consumers. "We're making the media," Demetri asserts, "We're the content creators." This is certainly true, particularly within online social networks that enable members to post and share personal photo albums, homemade videos, blogs, and other various forms of art. In this way, users feel empowered to take on active, productive positions as producers of culture, sources of information, and agents of the observational gaze.

Furthermore, "Web 2.0" technologies have instigated a shift in the role of the media from "gatekeeper" to "matchmaker" (Levinson 1999: 129-131). Once upon a time, information was something either pre-packaged (in the case of newspapers and network television) or sought after in libraries. With the advent of modern web technologies, one can not only find information on any subject conceivable, but also filter such information through recommendations and referrals. For example, my iGoogle homepage, which appears whenever I open my web browser, neatly displays the "feeds" of my choosing: popular technology blogs, blogs of fellow anthropology and media researchers, the blogs of my friends, my email inbox, and the most popular stories recently posted to Digg.[35] Such an emphasis on individual taste preferences reflects and reinforces the growing importance of "lifestyle" in identity formation, especially among young people, linked in turn to the increasing importance of global media culture and patterns of consumption.

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[35] According to Wikipedia, "Digg is a community-based news article popularity website. It combines social bookmarking, blogging, and syndication with a form of non-hierarchical, democratic editorial control."

In 1962, Marshall McLuhan popularized the notion of the "Global Village" in a book entitled The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man. His discussion of the Global Village predicted the onset of an era of "electronic interdependence," characterized by a shift away from individualism and fragmentation and toward a collective, "tribal" identity based in the aural and oral nature of electronic media. His ideas became embedded in the cultural vernacular to such an extent that the Internet is often referred to as a global village. The "neotribal" ideologies of "technoshamans" seek to ensure that the cognitive changes currently under way do not become usurped by totalitarian rule and fear, as McLuhan warned, but rather are guided by those who see themselves as in tune with man's original "tribal" nature and the collective good.

The metaphor of the "virtual campfire" has been extended in this chapter to describe the ways in which these sites allow members to reinforce individual and collective identity, extend and diversify social ties, promote their art and ideas to others, tailor information to their particular interests and network of trustworthy referrers, and potentially connect to a kind of "collective consciousness" that some see as having the capacity to transform humanity into a "neotribal" state. The question then becomes: to what extent and in what ways can these media be made truly "empowering"? In the next and final chapter, I discuss a particular ancient ritual- that of memorializing and commemorating the deceased- as it is recreated by members of online social networking sites.

Chapter 6:

The Digital Graveyard: Frozen Performances, Remembrance, and Commemoration

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This past winter, my grandmother was diagnosed with the cancer that led to her death the following spring. A devoted mother, she and her 14 children together grappled with many difficult spiritual and medical decisions throughout her illness. One evening, I witnessed firsthand the incredible unity and strength that comes about in the toughest of life's challenges, and the capacity for technology to extend our possibilities for collectively coping with them. Ten of my aunts and uncles took part in a conference call to discuss plans and options: my mother, a nurse, gave medical advice; my uncle Joe, manager of a medicinal supply company, arranged the delivery of a special bed; my aunt Mary, who works for an insurance company, discussed insurance options; my uncle Jack, a devout Christian, had been researching spiritual healing centers; my grandmother herself contributed to the conversation with words of love, faith, and strength. However, it became apparent to me that some voices were not being heard, and my father later commented on the high expense of conference calls. Fueled by a desire to help, I realized that I could tap into my specific area of expertise, online social media. In a matter of hours, I set up a public wiki and encouraged my family members to write in the communal blog, help in the creation of an extensive address book, maintain an active "To Do" list, and coordinate visits on a digital calendar.

The wiki was quickly adopted by a substantial majority of my family, including the many out-of-town grandchildren. It became a source of ongoing updates about my grandmother's condition, and the calendar proved particularly useful for organizing a continuous stream of visits and appointments. When she passed away this past spring, my family continued to regularly update the blog with tales of their daily struggles, fond memories of the past, inspirational quotes and Biblical passages. They also posted photographs and videos. The site became a living memorial in some ways. Fundamentally, however, the wiki remained a tool for ongoing communication pertaining mostly to present circumstances. For the past six months, it has been the source of daily updates about my grandfather and his care, and of gossip that fuels the complex rifts and duels that define the relationships between my dad's brothers and sisters, my grandmother's presence relegated to archived posts and photo albums. Such a shift exemplifies the need to move on, to collectively heal through renewed emphasis on and active engagement with what is happening in the present moment, while also preserving and commemorating the past.

The Internet is a complex new medium that allows for the intimacy, interactivity, and casualness of speech as well as the permanency and permeability of writing. The principal aim of this project is a phenomenological exploration of the ways in which these facets of the Internet have enabled mourners to expand upon the process of remembering the dead. Specifically, I have examined examples of "online shrines" on MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe, positioning them as vehicles for individual and collective remembrance of the dead. Each of these three sites differs significantly in terms of demographics, site features, and normative practices, and thus each will be analyzed in its

own section. My analysis of this phenomenon is supplemented by online news articles,

Internet forums, conversations with my friends, and literature from a variety of

disciplines (philosophy, media studies, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and cognitive

psychology). Furthermore, this analysis incorporates a variety of perspectives in the aim

of providing a framework for understanding the complexities inherent in new

technologies, which blur pre-existing boundaries of space, time, privacy, communication,

representation, and memory.

Background

In <u>Remembering: A Phenomenological Study</u>, Edward Casey describes what he

calls the "primary traits of remembering": *search, display, encapsulment, expansion, persistence,*

and pastness. These traits are strikingly manifested on the Internet. Because most of the

information available on the Internet is archived by *search* engines such as Google, the

medium significantly enhances one's capacity to recover and remember. Social

networking sites like MySpace *display* individual personas through the construction of

dynamic member Profiles. These Profiles serve to visually and textually articulate various

aspects of one's personality (such as interests, favorite books and movies, and

photographs), one's social network, and ongoing interactions via the medium (such as

public messages, blog posts, and group discussions). In the event of a member's death,

this online presence becomes frozen, a potentially permanent *encapsulation* of a life as it

was being lived online. Loved ones of the deceased often find that the persistence of this

online identity reveals aspects of a life they may have been partially or wholly unaware

of, and thus it enables the *expansion* of remembering. These online shrines, created

through repeated visitation practices marked by the nostalgic public messages of loved ones, allow for the *persistence* of the deceased's memory, which simultaneously and inevitably evokes hir very *pastness*.

The increasing ubiquity of online social networking in the everyday lives of youth has made the public archival of personal information into a normative practice. Despite popular discourse that perpetuates a distinction between "virtual" cyberspace and "real life," it is evident that people are integrating technologies of the Internet into their lives as extensions of everyday communication and identity performance. By virtue of its embeddedness in the everyday interactions of young people, the Internet is in some respects a "cool" medium (Levinson 2000: 113).[36] To invoke another McLuhanism, "the medium is the message"- that is, media develop as extensions of ourselves, shaped by changing cultural conditions that are in turn affected by these new technologies. In his book discussing the impact of electronic media on social behavior, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985: 7) writes that "one of the reasons Americans may no longer seem to 'know their place' is that they no longer *have* a place in the traditional sense of a set of behaviors matched to physical locations and the audiences found in them." Modern communications technologies have altered our perceptual fields by extending them beyond the realm of direct, face-to-face interaction. In turn, the perceived relationship between physical place and our social environment has been expanded into the seemingly nebulous virtual realm, allowing for the emergence of new pathways and

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[36] "Hot" media, on the other hand, absorb our attention entirely and leave little room for participation. For example, printed text that can only be read is considered "hot," while spoken communication is participatory and thus "cool" (McLuhan 1964).

horizons of experience. Casey's discussion of place memory is an especially apt paradigm

for understanding online social networks as a kind of place:

> It is in providing outward display for things and pathways as they exist within the
> horizons of landscape that places enable memories to become inwardly inscribed
> and possessed: made one with the memorial self. The visibility without becomes
> part of the invisibility within (Casey 1987: 213).

As previously noted, the primary function of online social networks is the explicit display

of an individual's social connections, cultural tastes, and interactions within the medium.

To become a member of such sites is to construct a meaningful horizon, oriented about

the self, within the vast cybernetic landscape. Within this horizon, memories are literally

"inscribed and possessed"; the site serves as a container of past events, preserved and

accessible through one's personal Profile.

All technologies extend the possibilities of humankind, and in turn, they become

humanized and embedded in everyday experiences. Thus, the notion of "embodiment"

must be reconfigured in light of the highly participatory and immersive nature of online

interaction. Just as the telephone evokes a sense of co-presence, so too can viewing and

interacting with an online Profile make one feel as though the other is in some way

"there." It is common to observe continued interactions with the frozen online

"presence" of the deceased in the form of conversational messages, as if the Profile were

a medium that enables active communication with those who have departed from the

physical world. However, such acts often elicit confusion and discomfort in those who

would prefer to bury their dead. Furthermore, the casual and at times superficial nature

of the Internet elicits a new set of issues concerning proper respect for the dead. What

follows is a more nuanced exploration of the practices and attitudes surrounding this new form of commemoration.

My(Death)Space

MySpace, with over 200 million members, is the fifth most-visited website in the world (Alexa Web Inc., 2008). The site's original niche membership was composed primarily of musicians, 20-somethings, and high school students. For teens in particular, the site serves as a medium through which they can "hang out" with their friends and express themselves freely. In the event of a member death, friends and family members will often continue to post Comments on the MySpace Profile of their loved one. These acts serve to reconstitute the site as a virtual shrine. The overwhelming majority of the "MySpace shrines" I found were instances of young and often tragic deaths, such as murder and suicide, perhaps modeled after spontaneously-created physical shrines commemorating sudden, unexpected deaths (such as the Princess Diana tragedy and the victims of 9/11). In nearly every case, such Profiles continued to serve as active sites of commemoration by family and friends even years after their creators' deaths.

Unfortunately, the extremely public and corporate nature of MySpace allows for a high level of robot-spam, which may (however inadvertently) intrude on the "sacred" Profiles of the deceased. It is not uncommon to find Comments left by spam robots promoting pornography sites and diet pills in the midst of the heartfelt messages of Friends. This comes across as profanation of a "sacred" and set-apart space to those seeking to preserve and respect the "living memory" of the dead, a sentiment paralleled

in cases of desecration of monuments and cultural artifacts. As one MyDeathSpace[37] member put it, **"**My deal I have since I have been on here, is all the spam left on these peoples Profiles after they have passed...that is a blight to see on any page, but it just seems wrong to see it…" For the most part, however, the Profiles of the dead become sites through which loved ones express their love and grief. Such messages are nearly always directed to the deceased, often as if ze was still checking hir Profile from beyond the grave. For example:

> miss u b. just havin a long nite i guess. cant sleep. or dont want too.. workin on my future interview questions. & was thinkin of u in them. watcha think of them? you can help me remember wat to say when the time comes hopefully. cuz you know you were my memory since i dont have one as good as yours...

The above message is representative of the way in which many "native" MySpacers communicate through the medium, reflecting the manner in which the Internet transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries of the physical world. Communication within online social networks is unlike other forms of online communication (such as instant messaging and e-mail) in that reciprocity is not always expected. For instance, earlier today I posted words of encouragement on a friend's Profile, simply to let her know that she's not alone in spending her final weekend at school writing papers. More often than not, messages posted to online Profiles are intended as public displays of connection, serving primarily to affirm social bonds.

Online Profiles are far more than textual representations. Typically, one's online persona includes photographs of oneself, one's friends, and past experiences. The power of visual representations is best exemplified by their capacity to evoke visceral memories,

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[37] I will discuss MyDeathSpace in more detail later in this section.

enabling one to remember another with the immediacy and presence of the visual in tension with the very pastness of the person it represents. "Damn B! Itz takin me so long to even click onto ur page kuz of all the tears that wanna come out from just puttin the curser on ur pic," writes one grieving friend. On the other hand, photographs are also open to subjective interpretation, and thus online Profiles may be judged in unintended and potentially negative ways. Furthermore, MySpace Profiles are, paradoxically, often rife with highly personal information, such as revealing photographs, online diaries, and emotionally fraught conversations played out through Comments. The casual and fun nature of the site can challenge the spirit of commemoration, confusing the boundaries between the casual nature of social relationships and the "sacred" nature of memorializing the deceased. Also, it is important to note that, though Profiles are often publicly accessible, they are frequently made publicly *visible* in the event of their owner's death.

Death undoubtedly provokes some of the deepest fears and fascinations. Some, driven by fascination, seek out open and safe spaces on the Internet to discuss issues surrounding death with others who share their frank curiosity. In searching for the MySpace Profiles of the deceased, I was led to the controversial site MyDeathSpace.com. This popular "death networking" site serves to catalogue obituaries that include links to the MySpace Profiles of the dead. MyDeathSpace maintains a heavily active message board, home to a solid niche community teeming with camaraderie. The vast majority of message threads on the site are found in the "Off-Topic" forum, where it is made evident that the community is composed of a diverse group of individuals drawn to the site for myriad reasons. Through regular, thoughtful, and playful text-based

communication, members of MyDeathSpace may rightfully be called a "virtual community." As the name "MyDeathSpace" implies, there is certainly a dark and morbid element to the community, whose members would be the first to acknowledge.

This dark side can be found in the second most active forum, "Article Discussions." Here, conversations center around reactions to specific obituaries posted on the site, particularly those pertaining to murder, suicide, and stories considered to be of "public interest" (such as the Virginia Tech shootings and the death of Anna Nicole Smith). Such public "chitchat" about deceased individuals frequently provokes outrage in grieving individuals discovering that their dearly departed is a subject of public interest and, at times, hurtful gossip. The anger and confusion that may result from coming across casual public discussion of the deceased is evident in the following post, titled "Confused, Help Me Understand":

> I really don't mean to offend anyone but I wonder if I am the only person that discovered this site and felt as though someone stabbed me in the heart. I was searching Yahoo for my best friends obit the other day to send to a friend out of state. I simply typed in her name and noticed that a link to this site came up. I was horrified to see her name as the topic of a discussion board. Not only that, but there were blogs and poems taken from her friends and family's MySpace pages. After taking a hard look at the site it is obvious that suicide seems to be the favorite topic. Now, I understand that the psychology behind suicide can be extremely interesting but when I read comments like "suicide is my favorite" and "I like the ones where they inhale dustoff or some other cleaner, because those are ones I can laugh at," I feel so frustrated. There are friends and families that are grieving and feel that there is no reason people halfway across the country needed to be speculating "what sent them over the edge." Unfortunately, the family is having her MySpace page removed and the memory page turned to private after reading this. I can't even begin to tell you what it felt like seeing what I saw today or what her mother did when she saw it. Like I said, I don't mean to offend anyone and I don't want to get in a name calling heated debate. I just want you to remember what your comments and jokes can do to grieving loved ones. If it was up to me this site would not exist, but it is not, all I ask is that you have respect and I would assume that if a family member requests you to remove a death you do so. Thank you for your time.

The community nature of the site manifests itself in times of unity in defense of their actions. Members argue that the MySpace Profiles of the dead help to humanize life and death, providing a window for understanding the greatest of mankind's mysteries. Others take a less romantic perspective; as one member put it, "MySpace has given dead people their 15 minutes." Nevertheless, it is generally agreed upon that "if you don't want certain aspects of your life to be made public, then YOU have to keep it out of the internet. If you project yourself as a 'bad ass gangster' or such, chances are that's how people are going to remember you when you are gone."

For family members and friends, viewing the online Profiles of the recently departed is often both comforting and painful. In an online news article about the trend, a grieving father articulated his experiences of regularly visiting his deceased daughter's MySpace Profile, much as one would regularly visit a grave: "Some days it makes me feel she's still there," he said. "And some days it reminds me I can never have that contact again (as cited in St. John, 2006)." These sentiments are made apparent through the public messages inscribed on the online Profiles of the deceased, which tend to express a mix of pastness as well as a sense of continued co-presence:

> I was listening to some salsa... and of course u came to mind my dude!!!! The song finished just as i started thinking about u teaching me how to dance salsa wit a little more style..... And then "Vamones Pal Monte" comes on..... Damn bro... I miss ur ass bee..... [Comment on MySpace Profile]

The above message demonstrates a common process of remembrance: external reminders follow internal mental pathways, evoking emotional memories that find their fulfillment in external, outwardly-directed expression. It is through language that we represent and understand our experiences; they take on meaning through the process of

articulation. In this particular form of articulation, these experiences become recorded in a "place" that serves to encapsulate the identity of another. In this way, online social networks serve as extensions of our memory, tangible pathways that connect us to the past.

Tribe.net

Individual Profiles are but one way in which online social networks allow for remembrance of the dead. On Tribe, most communication occurs through participation in the message board forums of various online groups, called Tribes. The site is notably "alternative" in nature, with a substantial population of intimately connected but geographically dispersed members of a community revolving around the annual Burning Man arts festival. Because they are often geographically dislocated from one another, Tribe is a crucial platform through which this community communicates. When a member of this community dies, she is often commemorated in forum threads of the Tribes she was a member of. Friends share stories, personal feelings, images, and links to artwork created in honor of the deceased. Unlike the default option for MySpace Profiles, public messages posted to individual Profiles (called "Testimonials") must be approved by the owner in order to be displayed, and thus individual Profiles themselves do not become sites of collective commemoration or personal communication.[38]

It should also be noted that Tribe.net is generally "information-centric" in nature, while MySpace is more "ego-centric." Like MyDeathSpace, these forums are

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[38] This may not always be the case, as evidenced by the following post on a Tribe.net forum: "Back in the Day, tribe would also let customer service approve testimonials for people who had passed. I'm sure they still will, if asked."

replete with camaraderie and intimate, long-distance friendships that are more likely to have formed online than off. In the events of deaths among the Burning Man community, whose official Tribe is the most popular group on the site with nearly 18,000 members, the group's forum is used to disseminate news about memorial services, expressions of condolence, words of wisdom and support, sharing cherished memories of the deceased, and providing links to groups and websites formed in their honor. The strong community nature of the site is exemplified by the fact that the site owners themselves often post messages such as the following: "To Shoshana and Nathan, their families, friends, and everyone else effected by this accident, the prayers and well wishes of all the Tribe staff are with you."

Because the site is not well known and most members identify themselves by nicknames, many of the problems that arise in more public sites (such as MySpace) are negated. Rather, in this realm the deceased is memorialized as a member of a particular community, inspiring a strong online support network. Through such forms of collective remembrance, many find a renewed sense of community:

> Something that Spyral points out, that really resonates with me, is the way in which an event such as this lays out so clearly how very deep and good the people in this community are. You see really good things in people and it does make you proud to be connected to them.

Many of the deaths reported on Tribe forums serve to highlight pertinent issues for the communities involved. For example, deaths at Burning Man are oftentimes the result of unsafe practices that occur in the unique environment of the Playa, such as bicycle and automobile accidents, drug overdoses, and dehydration. Such tragedies inspire others to learn valuable lessons that are passed on to the wider community. This is but one way in

which the deceased "live on" in the community. Deaths may also serve to strengthen

community by enabling new relationships to form on the basis of shared love and loss:

> I woke up this morning with a terrible sinking feeling and the image of a large black hole amidst a vast spider's web. The hole is where Allison used to be. Frayed threads hung and pulled against the stark darkness. Limp, dim strands extended all around.
>
> I've had a notion which I'm throwing out there for everyone's personal consideration.
>
> That is, the healing that can come from recognizing and honoring Ally's connective force by looking around this tribe and choosing even just one new person to get to know. As part of this, we should each remain receptive and open to anyone who approaches us in the same light.
>
> Forever changed, we can mend this broken web.

The nature of Tribe.net is such that "alternative" lifestyles and viewpoints are

normalized and encouraged. Those connected through Tribes like Burning Man have

often come together through underground happenings that promote shared values of

creativity, generosity, acceptance, and collective ecstatic experience. The nature of

remembrance often reflects these sentiments:

> Doing stuff for BM [Burning Man] and talking to people about my experiences there has made me think of her alot as she invited me to her camp and was so tied up in so many happy experiences there for me. I was used to not seeing her for months but I don't think you ever get use to not seeing someone forever. I still keep expecting that I will see her.

Members of Tribe often form relationships with one another online with those they

physically interact with only occasionally or never at all. Thus, traditional memorial

services may be geographically distant, or simply awkward for those who knew the

deceased only or for the most part through the Internet:

> i attended the memorial, but left just before it started b/c i felt disconnected from the crowd. i didn't know allison very well, but she still touched me and i am

mourning her loss. the thing is, i wasn't comfortable being upset in a large group
of people i didn't know and thought it best to leave and be alone for a while.

Nevertheless, online mourners find support in commemorating the dead through a

medium that, for some of the Tribe population, is well-known and comfortable. Loved

ones of the deceased, if they discover the site, may encounter an entire community of

grieving friends they weren't aware of, and this can help them feel closer to who they

really were:

> I'm not sure if Mary [the mother of the deceased] is in this tribe, but she has
> created a tribe account. She would like to stay in touch with Allison's friends as a
> way to feel connected to her. If you have positive stories to share about the way
> Allison touched your life, or even just a fun or funny story, or have time just to
> say hello I would ask that you please send her a note.

Unlike MyDeathSpace, where anonymous strangers often casually engage in what could

be construed as disrespectful or "profane" conversation about posted deaths, deaths

discussed on Tribe are much more sensitive. When strangers do contribute to these

threads, I have observed only words of respect and sympathy. Such a contrast

exemplifies the manner in which small, niche-based online communities differ greatly

from massive and more publicly visible sites such as MySpace.

Facebook

Though Facebook is currently one of the most popular social sites on the Web,

membership was originally limited to American college students. The site serves as a

container of information pertinent to the offline social worlds of its members, and is a

fairly accurate representation of the typical campus community. One of the unique

features of Facebook is the constantly-updated stream of "headlines" delivered to a

user's homepage, which detail the recent activities of Friends in one's network. This feature, called the "News Feed," enables the spread of social information that would otherwise be relegated to more active and unilaterally directed forms of communication, such as face-to-face conversation and telephone calls. As such, it is possible that geographically distant friends may learn of a common friend's death upon logging into the site, for even the personal messages posted on the Walls of those in one's social network may appear as a "headline," as well as newly-formed Groups created or joined by friends in honor of the deceased. On Facebook, the personal Profiles of individuals are typically visible only to those within their social networks, and thus I was unable to personally view any examples of memorialized Profiles. Nevertheless, secondhand accounts attest to the fact that friends post messages on the Facebook Profiles of the deceased in a manner similar to that of MySpace. Though my friend Celia personally believes Facebook Profiles to be "immature," she related to me that she regularly comes across new messages posted on the Wall of her brother's girlfriend, even nearly two years after her tragic death. In this way, the site serves as a vehicle of individual remembrance, permanently encapsulating the dead and providing an outlet for publicly exhibiting their ongoing presence in the minds of the living. These messages, depending on one's News Feed settings, may appear on the Facebook homepages of those in her social network, and thus serve as reminders for the remembrances of others.

Unlike MySpace, individual Facebook Profiles are typically inaccessible for strangers, eliminating the privacy problems faced by the former. Groups, on the other hand, are more often than not publicly accessible, and it is a common practice for friends to create Groups in memory of the dead. These Groups facilitate collective

remembrance much like those on Tribe, enabling the dissemination of information and encouraging commemoration. Due to the ease with which Facebook enables the sharing of various forms of media, I regularly came across a plethora of homemade videos, captioned photographs, and shared links to online news articles that serve to commemorate and preserve the deceased, encapsulated within the online shrine of a Facebook Group. Additionally, Group members will often Comment on these individual objects of memory, as well as share memories, poems, and other sentiments on the homepage of the Group itself. In fact, it was through coming across (via headlines on my News Feed) just such a Group, joined by 29 of my Friends, that I learned of the death of an old high school acquaintance. Such Groups, like those on Tribe, provide a means of collective remembrance that serves to strengthen community bonds (though rather than communities based on shared interests or lifestyles, communities on Facebook typically represent college campuses and high schools).

Though I'd barely known Chris, I felt proud of my friends for respecting his memory in a manner truly befitting of our "digital generation," and thankful for the medium that allows the deceased to be commemorated by people who were connected to him, regardless of geographic distance or how much time had elapsed since they'd last communicated with him. The stories and photographs shared about Chris helped me get to know this person who was a cherished member of the community I grew up in. In the same vein, Celia was able to learn more about her brother's girlfriend, whom she had met only twice. Though she was thankful "that people have this venue to honor/remember/communicate with her by," the content of the messages posted did not sit well with her:

> The religiosity of the posts (eg. "you're in my prayers") and the references to commercial/materialistic things (about her, or that remind them of her) gross me out and make me feel like this is a bad way to honor her life. On the other hand, these were her friends and interests so it's not my place to judge.

As is evidenced also on MyDeathSpace, the public nature of online memorials enables others to pass judgment on the deceased on the basis of mediated information. "In the end," Celia concluded, "I didn't approve of her lifestyle or values so I'm most saddened by the fact that she would probably approve of this as a form of remembrance."

Despite Celia's distaste for the site, it is clear that many feel strongly about the medium as a way of honoring the memory of the deceased. Facebook's policies regarding the status of deceased members' Profiles have been the subject of much controversy. Originally, their policy was to "memorialize" such Profiles, removing them 30 days after becoming aware of member deaths (Walker 2006). However, following the murders of 32 students at Virginia Tech, this policy was revoked, allowing Profiles to remain (in a "memorialized state") indefinitely.[39] The campaign behind this change was spearheaded by John Woods, a friend of the fallen students, who organized a Facebook Group entitled "Facebook Memorialization Is Misguided: Dead Friends Are Still People" that amassed 2700 members in two weeks. Despite the change in policy, the Group continues to be quite active with 1,518 members (as of April 2008). The Group Description lists the following current issues:

> Firstly, their interests, favorite books, favorite movies, favorite television shows, "about me," and quotes are gone.

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[39] Certain elements of Facebook Profiles designated as "memorialized" are hidden, such as contact info and personal information (interests, favorite books, favorite movies, favorite television shoes, favorite quotes, and "about me" section). However, Friends are still able to view photo albums, basic info, education info, and can post messages on the public Wall of these Profiles (Hortobagyi 2007).

Secondly, we who were their friends cannot say that we met someone through them. This information is gone. (I, for one, met many people through Maxine before and after she was killed.)

Thirdly, their groups are no longer listed. These groups reflect the things in life about which they cared, the things that made them laugh, and the ideas that moved them.

The founding principle behind the group is that dead people deserve to "live on" through Facebook, just as they do in the memories of others. Furthermore, many Americans believe that those who have died continue to look after those they have left behind from heaven. "I went to it and saw how many people are still leaving comments about missing her, wishing her happy birthday, and just saying random things that they would say if she were still alive," Lewis wrote. "I find this so touching and I'm sure that she does to, up there in heaven (as cited in Stelter 2006)." Interestingly, I rarely came across instances of communication *between* members of these Groups, whereas interpersonal support is prominent on Tribe.net. This is likely due to the fact that Facebook networks are spatially-bound representations of offline communities, and thus grieving friends likely provide support for one another in face-to-face contexts.

In describing her experience with viewing the Facebook Profile of a deceased high school acquaintance, my friend Alice expressed discomfort with the "strangeness" of others' use of the medium to continue communicating with the dead. However, it would seem that communication within online social networks is simply preferable for some, particularly those who regularly interact electronically. The relationship between "native" users of the Internet and one's interactions with the medium can be likened to the habitual nature of "body memory," which Casey discusses at length. For example, as

I sit here writing on my laptop, I find myself instinctually responding to the "ding" that signifies a new e-mail, and in moments am clicking on a link that sends me to my Facebook Profile. Drawn down this familiar pathway, I reflexively scan the News Feed and check to see which of my Friends have recently updated their Profiles. The faces of my friends peer back at me, reminding me of their existence. Scarcely a day goes by without some form of communication through this medium, which does not require the immediate presence of others, nor their reciprocity. The simple act of pressing "send" is a fulfillment of the intention behind this particular communicative act, for seeing the message displayed on the screen confirms that communication has occurred. For "digital natives," it is often more comfortable to communicate with unseen others through the online medium than it is to communicate with the dead in more traditional ways, such as kneeling in prayer or lighting a candle in church. Thus, it does not seem particularly strange to me that those accustomed to this form of communication may continue to post messages directed to a dead friend, reinforcing a habitual act that serves to express the ongoing presence of another in one's memory.

Conclusion

Through this elucidation of the myriad ways in which the dead are commemorated in the "online shrines" of MySpace, Facebook, and Tribe, it is clear that the Internet extends the possibilities for the persistence of memory. Though Casey's traits of remembrance remain pertinent (if somewhat altered), I contend that his emphasis on physical "place" on the process of remembering must be extended to include "virtual space" as well. As the term "cyberspace" implies, people conceptualize

the abstract realm of the Internet metaphorically, relating it to more familiar domains of embodied experience and physical place. Thus, this modern cybernetic process of memorialization is modeled on prior practices of mourning in physical places, such as creating memorial walls and visiting gravesites. However, at times new technologies may seem alien and incomprehensible, instigating fear and a sense of powerlessness (Jackson 2005: 131). Through modern technology, our experiences of the social world are increasingly disconnected from the physicality of the body and the place it is located in. On the Internet, we are everywhere and nowhere at once. Online social networks expand one's horizon of social interactions, simultaneously blurring the pathways between them. As a result of these new formations, a whole new set of anxieties and possibilities arise, challenging preconceived notions regarding the boundaries between public and private, respect for the dead, rituals of mourning, and the persistence of individual identity.

Though death is a universal inevitability of humankind, and though it may come at any time, it is precisely for these reasons that we go about our everyday lives without consciously factoring in its imminent possibility. If we did, we would forever be locked in existential stasis. To act, at least in American society, is often to direct oneself toward some future possibility- of happiness, reward, prestige, love, security, and on and on. Thus, when we "type ourselves into being" online, we are motivated by such possibilities and often fail to factor in that we are creating traces of ourselves that will outlive their creators. However, just as traces of a deceased individual persist in the remembrances of others and through objects such as graves and photographs, so too do they persist in the ethereal realm of the Internet. Like traditional memorial services, the sites of these traces can serve to connect previously unaffiliated individuals through their shared grief. The

Internet expands this possibility of connection, for it is in many ways easier to articulate

deeply felt feelings to strangers through the anonymity, convenience, and immateriality

of online communication. Despite the concerns of those still not comfortable with the

medium, online social networks enable grieving friends to share stories, media, and

words of support at any time, regardless of the distance between them. Though it is not

particularly pleasant to ponder the traces we leave of ourselves after death, this project

has hopefully illuminated the ways in which online Profiles evolve into ongoing sites of

commemoration, suggesting that we take into consideration how we choose to represent

ourselves through them.

Conclusion

Online social networking sites combine the casualness and directness of speech with the evocative presence of the visual to create the "virtual campfire." Orality and visuality converge and merge in the online medium, reaching simultaneously for both the hearth and the cosmos. This hearth is the realm of the domestic, where we nourish our desire for the security of intimate relationships and the capacity to be our "true" selves. At the same time, there is the desire for belonging to the cosmos, the expansive social universe wherein we accumulate knowledge and perform our identities, themselves the products of the particular cultural and institutional systems within which our everyday lives are embedded. Though accessible only to those possessing the resources and cultural capital necessary for participating, online communities offer an array of possibilities for meaningful human connection that are fast becoming available to all through public service and international aid initiatives.

Over the course of human evolution, knowledge about the world and the individual's place within it has traditionally been imparted by storytellers and ritual experts. While religious leaders had previously embodied these roles, with the popularization of the printed word their authority became secondary to that of the liberal, secular bourgeois intellectuals, whose activities have expanded in the wake of Industrial Revolution. Mass production requires mass consumption, and over the 20th century advertisers and other cultural producers have marketed an ever-expanding array of symbolic goods and media forms targeted at the increasingly fragmented tastes of

consumers. The construction of individuals as "consumers" reflects and reinforces longings for the connectivity of true community, for meaningful engagement as members of the world. From its grassroots beginnings, the Web has become another medium through which cultural forms are bought and sold; however, it is also a new space where individuals, regardless of gender, age, class, nationality or race, can themselves become *producers* of culture, and engage with like-minded others across barriers of time and space.

What makes the online medium unique is its capacity to bridge the gap between the place of the hearth and the space of the cosmos, potentially reversing what has been called "the disintegration of the public sphere" (Habermas 1962: 175). Over the course of the 21st century, new technologies of communication have increasingly brought the "public sphere" into the home. Both reflecting and reinforcing widespread sociocultural processes of "individualization," modern media have become integral in the formation of identities based on cultural tastes. The Internet has helped to extend this process of individualization, and in the process has heightened the degree of agency people have in learning about the wider world, and most importantly, granting them a voice with which to participate in that world.

Though we are significantly closer to this ideal, it would be premature to claim that the technologies I have studied have made the Internet into the "global village" prophesied by Marshall McLuhan half a century ago. Rather, most of my participants use social network sites to extend their offline communities into online practice in a manner more closely in line with the concept of "networked individualism," which suggests we are expanding our social networks (weak ties in particular) according to our cultural

tastes and communities of membership. In this study I have sought to expand upon this theory by examining the ways in which engaged members incorporate computer-mediated communication into their everyday lives in meaningful ways, extending the possibilities for self and community formation through the "virtual campfire."

Throughout the evolution of modern media, public and private spheres have become increasingly blurred. The transparency and permeability of this new "virtual" medium not only makes it possible to access public spaces from the privacy of home, but also renders the private sphere susceptible to public visibility. The popularization of online communication precipitated a familiar moral panic, similar to the initial reception of television, inciting a discourse of fear regarding the potentially transgressive nature of virtual intimacy as well as corporate interest in exploiting the Web for its economic potential. It is important for Web users to be aware of the extent to which their personal information and activities on these sites are tracked and archived by corporate and government authorities, and, when possible, to collectively organize protests demanding changes in privacy policies and design architecture.

Nevertheless, for the most part the intangible dangers of being observed by unintended audiences are considered secondary to the convenience of instantaneous access to this "virtual campfire" from the comfort of the home. While online social networking sites are often disparaged as poor replacements for human interaction that encourage superficial relationships, my ethnographic analysis reveals how some people, American youth in particular, are incorporating this medium into their everyday practices in more or less meaningful ways. Through elucidating both the dangers and possibilities of this medium, I seek to encourage people to create their own "virtual campfires" as a

supplement to, rather than a replacement of, their offline lives. Through participation

and sharing in meaningful ways- from conversation to creating art- we might begin to

see these sites as vehicles for healing the widely-felt loss of community and the pervasive

sense of alienation experienced by so many.

"Technology is the campfire around which we tell our stories."

Today, at the culmination of my fifth year at Wesleyan, most of my friends have

already graduated. Few of the friends I do have left on this campus have ever met those

who feature most prominently in my memories of college. As a result, I sometimes find

myself telling romanticized tales about my former classmates, accompanied by the

perusal of Facebook, where I find myself drawn to the faces and expressions of old

friends, much as I might peruse a yearbook. For this reason- the sentimental mementos

of personal relationships collectively stockpiled and interlinked within the vast archives

of the site- Facebook has become an important place for remembrance, a nostalgic

campfire that draws together old friends in my memory. It is also a virtual medium

through which my now-distant friends and I keep track of the ongoing stories of each

others' lives, enabling us to "groom" one another in a variety of ways- sending Gifts,

playing Scrabulous, or taking the time to write a humorous or thoughtful Wall Post. The

glow of this campfire may make invisible the surrounding forest and the wolves that lurk

within, waiting for their chance to steal our source of sustenance for their own gain.

MySpace has become a place for broadcasting "my story," much like the

personal homepage I created as an adolescent. It serves the primary function of enabling

creative self-expression for the entertainment and (hopefully) inspiration of a doubtlessly

wide yet generally unknown public audience. By attracting the gazes of visitors to my

MySpace Profile, I become the message of the flickering flames that might entrance and,

through the ineffable power of poetry, incite transcendence. However, although I believe

my flame burns bright, its warm glow may be overshadowed by the blinding fluorescent

bulbs of capitalism. Nevertheless, the stories told to me by those who value their

performances on the site reveal its possibilities for creative imaginings of the self.

The "virtual campfires" that constitute Tribe make up a virtual "tent city," like

those found at art and music happenings such as Burning Man. Connecting

geographically distant individuals through their eclectic interests, the Tribes I came

across reminded me that meaningful relationships can, in fact, be formed through the

screen. My personal engagement with the site helped me connect to other groups and

individuals outside of the university sphere I was embedded in, and allowed me to

imagine other possibilities for being. Inspired by the group discussions that took place

on the message boards of various Tribes, it is here that community is created through

the collective participation of those seeking to share their own magic and wisdom with

those receptive enough to listen and respond.

I hope readers will take away from this thesis a "middle-path" approach to their

own online activities. While it is important to be aware of the unintended audiences to

whom you may make yourself visible, the Web also extends the possibilities for

communication in potentially extraordinary ways. Successfully building a "virtual

campfire" first entails deciding upon a site that aligns with one's interests; for instance, I

frequently recommend Tribe for those seeking information and discussion about

Burning Man, or MySpace for those wishing to promote their music. To truly fuel the

flames of the campfire, I also suggest genuinely connecting to Friends through either one-way or Group conversation, thus explicitly "grooming" others in ways that encourage reciprocity. We may also use these technologies to collectively organize for political and activist causes as well, brainstorming ideas and circulating information in ways that may indeed contribute to progressive change. Participation with others is thus paramount to deriving a sense of meaningful connection through what can be an isolating medium. By sharing information and telling stories, it is indeed possible to create meaningful connections and refashion our world, overcoming the sense of alienation that so many experience in late capitalist modernity.

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