

Identity within Social Networks: The Creation of FreeFormed.org

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We live in a networked world, where anything or anyone is accessible in virtual spaces or through virtual channels. The ability to initiate and maintain connections in this way has not only redefined our methods of communication, but our concept of identity. Interaction online not only affects our personal sense of self in the physical world but, more importantly, feeds our collective social and global identity. Emerging technology utilized by online social networks has allowed large populations of people to publish themselves to a degree that has not been afforded before. The power of this technology lies in its nature to allow communication and networking for people who have not previously possessed a public voice. This enables them to contribute valuable content for a global audience that is willing to pay attention. However, the implementation of the current popular networking applications has flourished on the voyeuristic exploration of online identity, resulting in content serving primarily as entertainment. In spite, or perhaps because, of their tremendous popularity, many of the current social networking and media sites have failed to tap into what is the ultimate power of possessing an online identity; the creation of relevant conversations built upon and extending beyond the context of the online platform itself. The extraordinarily large user-base of many of these sites also means that much of the information visitors are looking for is buried amidst the many levels of media, rather than being easily accessible and searchable.

The concepts behind many of the current more popular social networking sites have undergone tremendous development over recent years. While there was initial speculation that the use of, and attraction to these sites would die out, popularity seems to be continuously escalating. According to a recent Neilson/NetRatings press release from May of this year¹, the top ten social networking websites grew 47 percent since the previous year, increasing from 46.8 million unique users in April 2005 to 68.8 million in April 2006, and collectively accounting for 45 percent of active web users. The number one site on the list was the controversial and predominantly teenage populated Myspace.com, with an amazing 367 percent growth since 2005. The widespread popularity of Myspace has produced a great deal of attention. Some attack the danger of its public display of traditionally private information, others proclaim it as the future of online communities, while many dismiss it as yet another fad among young people. Regardless of one's individual standpoint, it is hard to ignore the numbers. According to web tracking company comScore MediaMetrix², Myspace was ranked number eight in a list of the top 50 global US web properties in May of this year, behind giants Yahoo!, MSN/Microsoft, Time Warner, Google, e-bay, Ask Network, and Amazon. According to an article in the Herald Tribune from September 2005³, Myspace even managed to surpass Google in hits during April of that year. Regardless of whether this trend continues, the success of Myspace has unequivocally proven that there is the desire to create an online identity which functions as an active part of a larger community.

In her essay, "Friendster lost steam. Is Myspace just a Fad?"⁴, Danah Boyd, a PhD student at the School of Information at the University of California, Berkeley, looks at Myspace's popularity in relation to the failure of other social networking sites, specifically Friendster. She argues that Myspace gained popularity because it encouraged user individual contributions to personal profile design with an "anything goes" strategy. Other sites such as photobucket.com and videocodezone.com responded to the success of Myspace by creating easy to copy html code allowing any user to embed their own or popular video, audio and photographs into their page. Such activity thrives on the idea that users want to create a space that is uniquely identifiable of their personality. This was a flip from the approach that Friendster took, discouraging most, if not all forms of user-generated hacking and preferring to take away functionality rather than add it. Although code hacking attempts to shift the balance of power from the site to the users themselves, it often serves as a means of formulating an alter ego rather than an accurate representation of self. However, with over 50 million users and the highest retention rate of any social networking website thus far, Myspace's approach is succeeding in capturing national attention.

Despite the success of Myspace, its interface and operation is not necessarily the future for social networks. The Neilson/Netratings suggest that the trend may be moving away from such sites that focus on the user-defined profile and towards sites that incorporate media uploading and sharing as the driving force behind member relationships and user retention. YouTube.com, which launched in February 2005 and allows any registered user to upload video into a large public repository, entered the number five spot this year after not even registering in the statistics in April of last year. The site enjoyed 12,505 new visitors in April of this year and their popularity more than doubled from April to May, surpassing similar sites like Google, AOL and Yahoo! Video.

By visiting YouTube one can gain an understanding of why its popularity has skyrocketed. Among the most popular videos there are enough music videos, blue comedy and mindless entertainment to engage users for hours. However, dismissing the potential of the site as only a cache of video to watch when you're bored would be to ignore the significance of its success. While sites like Myspace focus on the importance of creating the greatest number of friend connections, relying on users to come back for messages and to post comments, YouTube relies on user-generated media content to retain interest. It assumes that an already endearing connection to media will push people to search content, return to see the latest uploads and contribute their own creations. That YouTube is able to maintain such a successful platform is a sign that people are ready and able to contribute more to the online community than personal photographs and written comments.

Despite its sudden popularity, YouTube falls short of being the media-sharing platform that it could be. Like Myspace it is suffering from too many users and a great amount of unorganized content. As Tristan Louis, former publisher of iWorld, who has been involved in Internet development since 1993 and in the development of RSS since 2000, points out in his blog post, "5 reasons why social networking sites fail"⁵ the younger generation is less likely to have concerns about making their personal information and media content available for anyone to view, while older audiences tend to shy away from such online sites for fear of identity theft and unwillingness to have their private lives in the public eye. The resulting domination of these sites by teenagers could be attributed to this generation gap. Myspace and YouTube have done little to address the privacy concerns of many potential users, short of the limited capability to decide if certain information is public or private. With this lack of granularity of information accessibility, user content is either public or invisible. Even with the success of these sites, the users do

not expand beyond a few distinct niches, forfeiting substantial conversations that can occur when diversity of the user enters the picture.

In response to issues of privacy, other sites have built protection features into their applications or made their communities all but undetectable to non-members. Flickr.com, a photo-sharing website, well designed in functionality and interface, comes the closest to a reasonable model. When uploading, either from your computer or camera phone, you can designate your media content to be public, private, or visible to friends or family only. This distinction in the levels of accessibility is important because for most sites all user contacts hold the same value, prohibiting the uniqueness that relationships in the physical world thrive on. This prevents the development of unique conversations that can grow in different and distinct communities. Some sites such as Radar.net and asmallworld.net have moved to the opposite extreme by creating completely private communities of users who know each other prior to joining the site. A Small World community is completely invisible to anyone but its group of members, which expands only from invitation. Even after becoming a member, one is on a probationary period before being allowed to invite anyone else. Radar allows you to join with no restrictions, but the media on their site, exclusively photographs taken and uploaded via a user's mobile phone, are extremely private. Photos are only viewable by friends, which are created on Radar by personally inviting someone through their e-mail address that the user must know independently of the site.

While both of these private and exclusive websites may address some of the concern of online privacy, they fall short of answering the problem in a realistic way. Social networks succeed because of their viral nature; someone invites a friend who invites their friends and so on. In the cases of Radar and A Small World, all it would take to invade the network is for one person to invite enormous amounts of people. More importantly, many people are equally as concerned about joining something which they cannot independently explore as they are about joining hugely popular public sites. While both of these sites may succeed in furthering the relationships one has in the real world, they make no attempt to address how the sharing of information and media could be relevant in the virtual world. They instead exist as applications of an online email list-serve rather than platforms for online communication. Due to the resulting lack of searchability, photographs or discussion threads that may be relevant can never be viewed outside the community.

Despite the apparent differences between how media is shared on current sites, there is an underlying structural dynamic that encourages individual spaces rather than communal interaction. Specifically YouTube places little, if any, emphasis on the actual connections between people on the site, instead focusing on promoting the creation and posting of content that will appeal to a large audience. Flickr lacks in a different way. Many users share photographs with their friends and family and much of the content on Flickr is searchable. But, the design of the site places emphasis on user created identity through their personal photo stream, which does not encourage communication beyond this point. The site does allow people to add your photographs as 'favorites' and allows users who aren't your friends to comment on your pictures, but more often than not the communication ends there. There are Flickr groups, which enable some form of community development, but the limited means to extend the conversation beyond the media itself or short comments on the media seems to be a barrier in developing any sense of actual community identity. As a media-sharing site it is probably the most robust, but its lack of social connectivity shows in their statistics, which lag compared to the social networking giants.

Currently, there are a few sites that are experimenting with media interaction in ways that do not rely on posting, commenting and organizing. Motionbox.com, Jumpcut.com and Eyespot.com are all sites that provide users with the ability to edit their uploaded video content online and mix clips with other users. The sites also allow members to share video content on other websites or with friends and contacts via email. Groups are heavily integrated into each of these applications for ease of communication and sharing. The media uploaded and tagged as public is available to all users for incorporation in their own videos. All three sites still utilize the concept of a personal profile and the ability to tag and comment on selected media, but they encourage the users to interact with each other's content in ways that extend beyond meaningless friendship/contact connection or simply viewing work already created. Although a very exciting, hands-on use of media, focusing thus far on a the small niche of users, it still seems to encourage the production of video content solely for entertainment value

Eyespot, however, may be in the process of changing this paradigm through its current development and promotion of MobileTV. Within Eyespot's site, MobileTV will function as a media portal where remixed and edited video from mobile phones will be screened with the possibility to be broadcast on CurrentTV's national network. CurrentTV (www.current.tv) is a large media repository similar YouTube, but its content has tended towards more socially aware and artistic videos. The user base of CurrentTV focuses their discussions towards voting on video content for broadcast. Other sites, such as YouTube and Flickr have enabled mobile posting, but they have done so almost as an afterthought. Neither site has properly promoted the feature or designated a very visible location on their site to explain the process. In addition, neither site seems to be aware of the vast distinction between media uploaded remotely versus media uploaded from a computer. Mobile video immediately uploaded and shared with an online audience has a tremendous potential to empower groups of people who may not have considered participating in online media communication. It also has the ability to make issues of relevance visible instantaneously and unfiltered, without the delay or the obstacle of transferring to a computer, editing and then uploading. There are also inherent dangers in mobile video or photography. Camera phones are so small and ubiquitous that the possibly of surveillance and the taping of people without their knowledge or consent increases considerably. It is difficult for any site to regulate such content, but given the nature of existing content, especially on YouTube, it seems almost irresponsible to not address the issue in some relevant way. Eyespot's partnership with CurrentTV seems to insure that material within their posting portal will have a greater accountability. Appearing as a response to the lack of tangible rewards for creating quality media for the web, once a mobile video is chosen by the community for broadcast the creator will be paid \$100.

CurrentTV represents a valuable trend toward grassroots video activism that is becoming increasingly present in various online communities. Its concept in creating a reward for online connections and interesting content is very smart and different, but many of its discussion forums have less than ten posts and it still lacks robust development of groups or forums where members can post media to have conversations rather than simply tagging, commenting or creating blog post style threads. It also lacks extensive ways in which users can develop connections to each other beyond viewing published content. Users may feel a part of an organization dedicated to a new take on television, but not as members of unique and distinct communities that share a connection beyond the site itself. It appears that CurrentTV is focusing on adapting the traditional television structure, rather than promoting the opportunity for interaction within an online media community.

The current models of social networking rely on personal connections through either completely public or intensely private platforms. What is needed is a combination of the positive attributes of both models, stressing content-based connections between members while allowing them to communicate directly and easily, within and beyond the online structure. It is with this intention that the concept of FreeFormed.org was conceived. FreeFormed strives to incorporate the working parts of the social network that make it attractive by allowing users to develop an online identity, yet this identity is contextualized by the media uploaded and the users' participation in the site, rather than relying on individual personality descriptions.

Using FreeFormed's unique definition of a forum, individuals can create spaces intended to function as communal media blogs. Within this adaptation of the traditional text forum, users can speak to each other using media itself, comment on media uploaded by other members or begin a traditional dialogue with text. Most importantly FreeFormed is designed around posting media remotely, to encourage the immediate publishing of content in the spirit of grassroots journalism. This design will enable a streamlined method of sharing information that, while available to the public, is focused on relevance to specific communities rather than trying to cater to mass audiences._

FreeFormed also understands the value of distinguishing between relationships that are created within the platform. Upon creating contacts on FreeFormed, users place them in context by designating them a title 'friend', 'family member' or tying the unique relationship to a specific forum. Further contextualizing the FreeFormed experience, a FreeFormed forum can be created with varying degrees of privacy. A forum can be completely public and thus visible by anyone online and open for any user to join, completely private and invisible to the online community with an 'invitation only' policy, or semi-private allowing members of FreeFormed to view the forum's media and discussion but needing an invitation in order to join. This allows users to have different levels of communication and provides privacy protection for those who would prefer not to have their content or conversations exist in a public sphere. FreeFormed is also developing the option of anonymous posting to further protect users who may be publishing sensitive information, specifically concerning crimes or human rights violations in countries where governmental interference in free speech may place the poster in serious personal danger for sharing certain content.

The current development of a mobile phone application that allows users to post media directly to their profile or forums with greater ease and without the added cost of sending an MMS message conveys some of the unique aspects of FreeFormed that set it apart from other networking sites. The application will allow users to specify the title, description, forum and privacy of each media post and allow the user to remain anonymous if necessary. The application also allows for the deletion of media from the mobile device once it is sent, looking forward to possible repercussions in activist situations as well as to prevent regular users from clogging up their phone with data once it is posted elsewhere. The application also allows most users phones to send greater video length than many phone plans will allow. By integrating a mobile device external to the main site, FreeFormed is expanding functionality by allowing users to view the site remotely and allowing the option to receive phone and email alerts. These alerts will notify users of new comments on their media, new posts to specific forums they are subscribed to and/or bulletins sent out by forum members about events or news of interest. RSS will also be incorporated so that users can subscribe to the forums and be notified online if new material is posted.

FreeFormed is dedicated to allowing all members to post material even if they do not have media-enabled phones or phone plans that support inexpensive MMS. The site has enabled uploading straight from your computer and will soon be enabling functionality to post audio, from any phone in Mp3 format, as comments to specific media files or as a unique post to certain designated forums.

FreeFormed creates virtual spaces that respond to specific user needs. By relying and focusing heavily on user categorizing and tagging, FreeFormed also allows content to be easily searchable and provided in the context of the conversation it relates to. By combining functionality that has made other sites successful with FreeFormed's unique environment, it will become a platform for virtual communities that are able to develop positive online communal identities and promote discussion that breaks down geographical and language barriers in ways that social networking sites thus far have been unable to attain.