

A COZY PLACE FOR INVISIBLE FRIENDS

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Social networking sites appear to be cozy environments where we can chat with friends and share our daily experiences. But through our continual participation in these spaces we run into new definitions of power and privacy. This talk looks at how our personal data is turned into capital, how we engage in participatory surveillance, and how we have become increasingly dependent upon these market-oriented platforms.

Social networking sites lead us to believe that our social spaces can be expanded using online services. We presume that communication becomes faster, easier and more efficient. Having a profile on a site like Facebook opens up the endless possibilities of online communication, promises constant connection and offers free sharing with the people in our lives. Facebook claims to be a space for real people, giving them the power to share and make the world a more open and connected place. But how are we handling this power?

Before connecting to Facebook, one must fill in a registration form and set up an account. Only registered users can access Facebook, allowing them to find friends, send messages, upload photo albums, write stories and comment on other people's activities.

What social networks are really interested in is their users' personal data, which is of great value to anyone eager to find potential customers (rather than an old high school friend) on Facebook. Personal data is valuable to marketing specialists, since it allows them to identify, understand their target groups, and aim their advertisements directly at potential customers, thus maximising profit.

The data required for setting up a Facebook account includes one's full name, e-mail address, birthday and sex. Providing this data to Facebook turns the anonymous web user into a person with a name, an age and a gender. This data then makes it easier to locate and identify the real-life person behind the profile. Also, the personal data is adapted to fit the requirements of databases. By filling in a registration form, the user agrees to the structure and requirements of text fields and drop-down menus, so that the network can generate a compatible set of data. Jaron Lanier calls this "personal reductionism," something which has always been present in information systems:

"You have to declare your status in reductive ways when you file a tax return. Your real life is represented by a silly, phony set of database entries in order for you to make use of a service in an approximate way. Most people are aware of the difference between reality and database entries when they file taxes." [1]

Social networking turns digital reductionism into a casual element of mediating contacts between new friends. The Facebook 'like' button is a good example of how human affection can be translated into a binary value. Simply clicking a button supersedes the need to think about writing a personal message. The phrase '1 person likes this' then refers to this one person at least taking note of the content and wishing to make this acknowledgment public to other users. Nothing more, nothing less.

Words like ‘friend’ and ‘like’ are overused terms in the realm of Facebook. They can be deployed to express our appreciation not only of actual people, but also activities, companies, brands and products. Such terms create the feeling of a seemingly personal environment. Everything we ‘like’ on Facebook becomes part of our profile. We are described through categories such as music, books, games and sports as well as political views and religious beliefs. These descriptions are a perfect base for a categorising our personal preferences into a target group, which is of interest to marketing specialists. While Facebook suggests that creating a profile of ourselves is a way to express who we are to our friends and family, what we are actually doing is filling in a form that makes it easier for algorithms to analyse us.

We even assist in optimising these categorisations of each other’s content through participatory surveillance. Because we are visible to people who actually know us, we live under constant mutual scrutiny. The ability to comment and react to each other publicly creates a more clearly defined profile. Our friends will share and tag photos of us, which normally we would not proudly present to the public. This form of participatory surveillance subjects us to the feedback of our circle of friends. We control and govern each other by constantly keeping an eye on our thoughts and actions and the accuracy of our data. In other words, we are faced with (and participate in) something Danah Boyd has described as “invisible audiences.” [2] Incidentally, there is no possibility for ‘taking back’ content once it has been posted online. What we are actually dealing with here is a new form of publicity in an environment that wrongly suggests that we are surrounded by nothing but friends and likeable things. And we must constantly reassess our demands for privacy, as both the rules of the platform and the content are constantly changing.

“Even though people obviously communicate online with a specific audience in mind, *e.g.*, their friends, the public nature of online social networking makes the information available to a much larger audience, potentially everyone with access to the Internet.” [3]

The privacy settings on Facebook allow us to control what we are comfortable with showing and sharing. But we can only choose between a set of options relating to the visibility of content. There is no option for deleting content from the Facebook databases. So being visible is key to having a profile on Facebook. When privacy and visibility are so closely tied together, openness can be mistaken for over-exposure, while reticence may raise suspicion. And perhaps the content that we are not comfortable with publically sharing, says more about who we are and who we want to be, than the content through which we allow ourselves to be defined. We can easily become overwhelmed by the complexity of our social circles, and the multitude of our own identities within those circles, not to mention the possibility of these identities interfering with each other. In the swamp of hundreds of online friends, it’s hard to draw a sharp line between public and private content. And as our online networks grow, we run the risk that our engagement with each other becomes less personal and more standardised.

“After our initial introduction to the place and its orgy of transient friendships, most of us only want to bother with people at one degree of separation from ourselves.” [4]

Managing a multitude of online profiles and contact lists becomes a time-consuming business, whose main benefit is to help maximise the profit of advertisers. So why are we participating in this business of sharing and being shared in order to optimise the profit of others? Mark Andrejevic quotes Toby Lester, who refers to the way consumers are compelled to go online as the “tyranny of convenience.” [5] Just as the convenience of shopping online spares us the trouble of going to a store, socialising online spares us the trouble of going out and actually meeting our friends. We should not make the mistake of confusing friendship with a product, which can be easily maintained through a few mouse clicks. And we should be

aware that all the time spent on a social networking site, is ultimately feeding databases with personal, perhaps even intimate data, which is invaluable for Facebook's marketing strategy.

This marketing factor, and the exploitation of user openness, is the basis of Facebook's success. The promise to only bother users with advertisements, which they might actually be interested in, seems to be a winning marketing strategy. Obviously, we accept to generously provide free labour for marketing research, so that we may enjoy the convenience of the social network. Our online presence becomes a product, interesting for marketers and Facebook.

As long as we believe clicking a button can really improve our social status, the trade in our user data will remain big business. While we spend time with our invisible friends online, we risk neglecting our offline relationships. Not only are we responsible for the content we share about ourselves, but also for that which we share about others. In the end we must decide for ourselves, what the role of a commercial website should be when it comes to managing our friendships; and also, how much the limitations of a blue-and-white user interface change the way we see ourselves and our friends.

References and Notes:

[1] Jaron Lanier, *You Are Not A Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 69.

[2] Boyd Danah, "Social Network Sites: Public, Private, or What?," *Knowledge Tree* 13 (May 2007).

[3] Anders Albrechtslund, "Online Social Networking as Participatory Surveillance," *First Monday* 13, no. 3-3 (March 2008).

[4] Harkin James, *Cyberbia* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2009), 248.

[5] Mark Andrejevic, "The Work of Being Watched: Interactive Media and the Exploitation of Self-Disclosure," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19, no. 2 (2002): 230-248.