

The Two Faces of Facebook.com

Being just as uninformed about this new phenomenon as most of our faculty here, I wanted to examine just what this new obsession is all about. Since I had already lost my brother and sister to the addiction, I figured they owed me the pleasure of orientating myself with the site, and with permission, I entered the lion's den through my brother's account. However, before doing so, I had to promise to paint a neutral picture of the site, and that is my noble intention.

After orientating myself with the Terms of Use page, I learned that Facebook.com identifies itself as an online directory that connects friends regardless of geographic location. It was founded as a virtual yearbook in February 2004 by a Harvard student who attempted to connect those at his campus online. Because of its popularity, it spread like wildfire and now exists at some 2,100 colleges and has over 6 million members nationwide. A Facebook.com spokesman informs that about 15,000 new accounts are made everyday. (Coomes, 2005) There are two separate networks: one for college students and now, one for high school students. Both operate in a similar fashion but to join, all a college student requires is a .edu email address and all a high school student needs is a personal email address, opening the doors to basically anybody.

Facebook.com attempts to deter abusers by outlining conduct that requires members to refrain from cyberbullying, identify theft, contributing to spam, viruses, fraud, and other computer crimes. It is also assumed that members understand the site is used for personal, non-commercial use only and that its existence is intended for those who respect the terms outlined in the Privacy Policy section. All content posted on the

site, including personal pictures, are claimed as proprietary rights of Facebook.com or its licensors. Facebook.com states its rights to remove any member content that violates the agreement if it breaches any of the claims stated in the Terms of Use section. I contacted Facebook.com but did not receive any information that reported how many people are actually terminated for such reasons.

As with most sites, Facebook.com collects the user's browser type and IP address (Internet Protocol address, which work similarly to cyber phone numbers). It then stores certain information, using "cookies," which are pieces of text stored on the user's computer tied to information about that user that a web server can store on a hard drive. Cookies allow a Web site to store information on a user's machine and later retrieve it (www.computer.howstuffworks.com). Facebook.com can also collect information about the user from other sources, such as instant messaging services, all of which is explicitly stated in their Privacy Policy. This is probably information that students do not necessarily take the time to read and therefore are not aware of how much information about them is available. For example, once someone registers and creates a profile and privacy settings, Facebook.com has access to a member's profile information and may send this person notifications about the site and other services it believes might be of interest to that person. Additionally, any member of the groups with which one belongs and is permitted to view that page has access to this information.

The site itself is fairly detailed. After registering, creating a log-on name and password, you have the ability to upload a main picture that identifies your profile, as well as add many more pictures to your album for your friends to view. And while you must confirm a friendship through a notification from an outside party in order for them

to view your actual profile and page, anyone can do a search on your name and access your main photo, school, and name.

So what can you post on your site? It might be easier to answer what you cannot post, since the options seem almost limitless. These are basically portals into your soul; you can list your full name, how long you've been a member and when you last updated your page, what school you attend, your major, status, sex, birthday, hometown, high school, school email, address, screen name, phone number, and any websites with which you want to be associated. With all this information available, I was surprised no section existed that required a posting of one's social security number and all major credit card numbers. Also included in this list of personal information are your interests, political views, clubs and jobs, favorite movies, books, music, and quotes. Listed below this area are the groups with which you associate, which are formed and joined by other Facebookies. And the options continue with The Wall, which is basically a post area where your Friends can leave you messages (associated with their pictures), uncensored for anyone visiting your page to read. The page also lists how many Friends you have at other schools, as well as the friends at your own.

Wow, if you think compiling all this information is intense, try surfing through the actual site. From my brother's site, I could access any of his Friends' pages, and anyone on their page (as long as they mutual Friends with him). It is fairly easy to see how addictive this could actually be, which brings me to some obvious concerns of those opposed to the site. This cult-like phenomena is distracting many students from the real reason they are in college; why open a textbook when you could browse Facebook.com? It is only natural for human nature to be curious about other people, but is this taking it a

little far? Because people have been so open about who can see their pages and are ignoring discretion about what they post, trouble is undoubtedly brewing around the issue. Since all that is needed to join is a college-affiliated email address, a school's staff, professors, and alumni can all be part of the network, and with a little persistence, can track down a student or potential candidate's profile. Students all over are getting in trouble for information posted on sites. For example, underage students who have posted pictures of themselves drinking in dorm rooms basically incriminate themselves. Penn State used Facebook.com to identify those students who illegally stormed the field after a victorious upset against Ohio State (Cooney, 2005). Although the guidelines are listed in the Terms of Usage, college students neglect many of these rules. And let's be serious, who is going to take the time to investigate all 6 million Profiles for violations?

So with a little networking and research, administrators and possible future employers are finding that such accessibility is providing them with access to many Profiles. Steve Jones, a communications professor at the University of Illinois speculates that somewhere in the future, some political candidate will be facing questionable behavior because of the cite. (Withall, 2005) Additionally, students do not realize the implications of posting something on the Internet. As the Proprietary Rights state, all postings on the website are the property of Facebook.com and its licensors. Information about students, photos, and other contributions posted on the site can be sold to marketers. Not to mention how many cases of slander and cyberbullying occur because of the site.

As a front page article in a recent Washington Post newspaper states, "In recent weeks, several Washington area schools have taken action against the use of blog sites, in

particular Facebook.com but also the sites of MySpace.com and Xanga.com, which allow teenagers – and sometimes younger children – to post details of their lives for all to see.” Sites like Facebook.com allow anyone with access to an .edu address become anybody they want to be: post false photographs of who they are and contribute to blogs that can entirely misrepresent themselves. Situations like this appear to be an adult-stalker’s dream come true. In fact, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children reported over 1,224 incidents last year of “online enticement” of children by adults and estimates that one in five children gets sexual solicitations online. Surely, Facebook.com is not helping to eliminate issues of stalking, bullying, fraud, and other computer crimes. So what will?

Perhaps by educating our youth in both high school and in freshman orientation about the increasing dangers of posting personal information online, we can create less opportunity for fraud and stalking. Additionally, by exemplifying realistic situations where certain individuals have faced serious repercussions for degrading and illegal postings, educators can attract students to use the site for more beneficial purposes, such as its original intention of networking among friends. Facebook.com needs to be seen more as an updated yearbook page, one that requires approval from administrators before allowing certain postings, and one that prevents strangers from tapping into personal lives of these young people. Until this understanding is reached, Facebook.com will continue to contribute to computer crimes and endanger students everywhere.

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