

Curtain twitchers, the CIA and the rise of Facebook

New technology and old-fashioned curiosity have made social networking so hot that everyone is cashing in. *Nico Macdonald* helps you sort the tweets from the bots

If everyone felt like Jerry Seinfeld, Facebook wouldn't exist. The comedian observed: "As an adult, it's very hard to make a new friend. Whatever group you've got now, that's who you're going with. You're not interviewing, you're not looking at any people, you're not interested in seeing any applications."

Yet, for most of us, the social instinct is deeply ingrained. So deeply that, by the age of seven, research suggests, two thirds of American children have an imaginary friend. Technology has made it possible for us to connect with real friends in undreamt of ways. When Tom Coates, a staffer in a London office of Yahoo!, needed a break, he decided the best way to round up some company was to post this message on Twitter, a hip social networking service: "I need to go for a walk to clear my head. Yauatcha for macaroons anyone?"

Asking all your friends if they'd like to join you for lunch would once have been impractical. But sites like Facebook allow us to gossip and curtain-twitch online, be bored by someone else's holiday snaps without visiting their house, plan a business meeting and accelerate the getting-to-know-you process. Instead of taking months to realise that a new acquaintance, like you, can quote Seinfeld scripts verbatim, you can join a group of like-minded souls in minutes.

New technology, old-fashioned curiosity and a dollop of 'wisdom of friends' psychology have made sites like Facebook, MySpace and Bebo immensely popular. A 2007 survey found that 48% of American teenagers online visit social networking sites at least once a day and 72% use them to make plans with friends. In the network age, computing power is in the hands of more people and is tackling new challenges. We've moved from using computers as work objects to the widespread use of computing-enabled things – laptops, mobile phones, games consoles – to manipulate emails, diary entries, instant messages, contact information, URLs and blogs wherever we are.

Social networking is such a phenomenon that many employers – even the CIA – now have Facebook pages and use the site as a recruitment tool. The agency plans to launch its own staff social networking site called A-Space.

Social networking refers to the creation of computer-mediated networks between people that capture their familiarity (usually called their 'degree of separation'), how they are connected, their location, job, activities and interests, >>

The wisdom of friends: the psychological argument for using social networking sites full of 'people like us' is compelling. But how long will the fashion last? And what do the sites need to do to increase their reach?



The quick guide to social networking

www.bebo.com
Hipper site for young Brits too 'in' to be on MySpace.
www.ecademy.com
Relationship-building for the self-employed.
www.facebook.com
The site that has become synonymous with social networking.
www.flickr.com
The obvious place to share your photographs.
www.friendster.com
Personal relationship site. Popularised the idea of social networking, but is now most commonly used in Asia.
www.jaiku.com
Finnish 'presence sharing' site which aggregates a user's content – haiku-length messages, photos, songs – in an easy to access way.
www.linkedin.com
Founded on the observation that 'relationships matter' to professional success, this has over 13 million users.
www.myspace.com
The first social networking site to be snapped up by a traditional media baron (Rupert Murdoch). Massively popular but not as 'in' as Facebook or Bebo.
www.orkut.com
Social networking site launched by Google, now mainly used in Latin America and India.
www.sixdegrees.com
First true social networking site, rose to fame in the late 1990s and shut in 2001.
www.twitter.com
Social networking site on which users post updates – 'tweets' – up to 140 characters long for free. US presidential candidate Barack Obama is a famous user.

and use this information to enhance or support users' activities. Coates (the macaroon fan, also a social/media technologist) calls social networking "the building of reciprocal trust links through a population". A 2003 publication for The Work Foundation's iSociety project observed that, "the principle of social software is to break down the distinction between our online computer-mediated experiences and our offline face-to-face experiences".

Social networking is driven by significant technical developments and rapid social change. The current fears for – and of – teenagers – may explain why they have become core users of social networking sites, spending more time at home on the internet. As a rule of thumb, for every hour we spend on the web, we typically spend 23.5 minutes less with friends and family.

The culture of fear and decreasing trust have made some wary of encounters with strangers and reluctant to embark on deep personal relationships. Surveys show that a record one in four Americans say they have no close friends at all. Many prefer 'safer' relationships mediated, to an extent, via a screen, where they can connect with a wider circle of friends in a non-committal fashion. Consumer trends analyst Linda Stone calls this "continuous partial attention", adding: "To be busy, to be connected, is to be alive, to be recognised and to matter."

Cheaper travel and a more integrated global economy, where staff change jobs more often and are more likely to work abroad, have played their part too.

Keeping in contact, avoiding cowboy plumbers

The functions social networking best supports are, in a nutshell or seven:

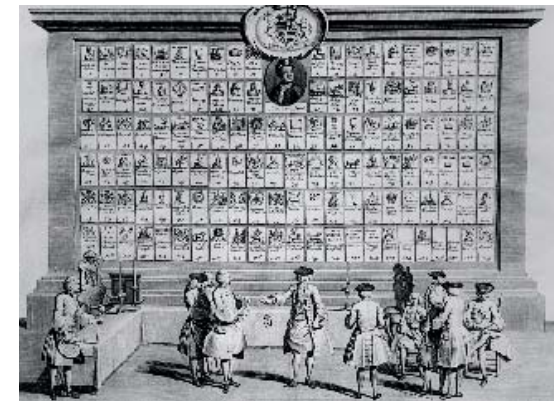
- Familiarisation and maintaining contacts. From status updates and edited profiles you build a rounded picture of an individual. People you know may share this with you – to varying degrees – if asked. Essentially, human knowledge is being connected by the network (rather than embedded in it – the goal of so many past computing visions).
- Swapping, sharing and storing of 'objects' – photos, movies or songs – online. We can be told when something of interest has been uploaded.
- Group discussion, which is moving to social networking sites. Contributors' real names and pictures can be displayed and you can check their profile.
- Finding and hiring skills. The self-employed already use sites like LinkedIn to get in touch with businesses and customers regardless of location.
- Online or internet-enabled applications which allow us to manage tasks, meetings and diaries. You can, for instance, open up your diary to contacts.
- Campaigning. You can network with people with the same ideology. But the likes of Facebook can't, by themselves, reinvigorate the democratic process.
- Searching the web. Social networking can reveal, filter, enhance or shape the data we find when searching. We can link, recommend or rate almost anything and form an opinion influenced by our knowledge of the contributor or the number of recommendations. In a world full of cowboy plumbers – or so reality TV shows would have us believe – we might be relieved to find one implicitly recommended because they're linked to someone we know. Friends or contacts are acting as 'trust engines', and by answering, friends build their relationship with you and increase their kudos with others.

While Google focuses on computer science, engineering and performance, Yahoo! has focused on what Bradley Horowitz, vice president of product strategy, calls "better search through people", buying bookmark-sharing tool del.icio.us and photo-sharing site Flickr and developing such services as Yahoo! Answers.

Junk mail, smart address books and over-engineering

Social networking sites need to improve. As Facebook's personal profile – which includes favourite music, TV shows, films and books – is completed manually, it is of limited use and soon out of date. Profiles would be richer if they drew on actual activity, such as the music we buy or play. Artificial intelligence-based tools could help others access a user's locally stored information. There is a risk of over-engineering, though. An element of a profile or relationship can be extracted or inferred but do we want to share it with everyone? Giving users visibility on – and control of – what they share is a design challenge. Already LinkedIn lets you 'View my profile as others see it'.

Old school social networking: the masons, right, have proved more enduring than many online pioneers of social networking. It takes less time to bond with a goth, far right, than to fill in your Facebook profile. All you have to do is check out the eyeliner



Advice for design

Lee Bryant is co-founder of digital media consultancy Headshift, which specialises in development around social software tools.

Given the immaturity of social networking tools, he counsels the need to design for "emergent behaviours", counterposing the "desire to control and curate content" with creating "a space that people can mess up".

For mobile devices, he suggests sticking to one very simple tool or mode of interaction, citing Facebook's mobile web interface, which shows just three status updates and allows the user to change theirs.

Social networking may help combat junk mail. Any junk received through your social network 'filter' would be guaranteed to come from someone you know. Social networking sites could become your default, always up-to-date address book, accessible from computer, laptop, handheld or mobile.


Sites need to be accessible and to hand, as easy to use as a stapler. Modern mobiles and smart phones like the iPhone have feature-filled browsers. A site such as Jaiku offers a dedicated application for modern Nokia devices that identifies your geographic location to your circle of friends. You could have a smart address book that tells you if a contact you plan to call is busy or abroad. Giving physical form to such ideas is the Availabot, a pop-up figure that stands up on your desk when the contact it represents comes online and falls into a flaccid heap of despair when s/he goes away.

Exhaustion, Rupert Murdoch and evolutionary psychology

The subtlety of human relationships can't be over-estimated. We finesse what we tell different people, even lie. There is a danger that concerns about privacy, and scares based on extraordinarily rare – but shocking – abuses of social networking tools, may deter people from using these sites. Worries over security, time wasting and other abuses has led employers to block access to Facebook.

On a practical level, there is a danger of exhaustion. Coates says: "The amount of sites using social networks is so substantial that [registration] is no longer something people will go through again for no obvious reason." Sites could be integrated as an external service to other sites. If LibraryThing could access your Facebook profile, it could show you books your friends liked. Profiles could be abstracted so they can be 'applied' to any site or service. So far, this has had little success, but as social networking profiles are made easier to edit and when this approach presents a competitive advantage, the 'abstract' approach may flourish.

Rupert Murdoch's strategy for MySpace raises another issue. MySpace plans to run a TV series about showbiz wannabes as it strives to persuade users to linger longer, so they can be targeted by ads. If these sites are not full of user-generated content but have content developed by professionals, does that extend their appeal or fatally undermine it? Facebook has announced it will start targeting ads based on user profiles. Will users be deterred by advertising or welcome it? Concerns about privacy have been heightened by Facebook's plan to allow (user-controlled) elements of profiles to be indexed by Google.

Historically, human relationships have built over time from face-to-face encounters, in which we use body language and other cues to assess honesty. By contrast, the ease with which we can indicate friendship with social networking allows us to appear to have a cohort of friends. There is some science behind Seinfeld's gag. Evolutionary psychology suggests we are hardwired to remember no more than 150 people. These smaller, more intensely focused groups have often been responsible for scientific, technical and intellectual breakthroughs. The trajectory of social networking is in our hands. Will we, as a society, take these services seriously – or be satisfied to play online with our new 'friends'? 

Does the launch of a TV series about showbiz wannabes extend the MySpace concept or fatally weaken it?



Available or not? Worry not, the Availabot will tell you