

The Temporary Networks of the Unknown

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Introduction

This thesis is the theoretical research in the course of my graduation at Piet Zwart Institute Rotterdam. My interest in the impact of social network sites, and their impact on our everyday lives was the starting point for this work. My central question is, how do we adapt our way of communication to the medium we use, how technology changes our habits of dealing with each other, and how the binary understanding of “social” applications affects the more general human notion of “being social”.

Since we have become more used to technology playing an important role in our communication I wanted to scrutinize the phenomena that arises when social interaction is mediated by a device. I am concerned about the issues of surveillance and the loss of privacy through the immense participation of data gathering among users of new media that require a person to set up a profile. By doing so the person gives away sensitive data without thinking about possible consequences. I am also concerned about the mainly commercial objectives of most social services, that encourage people to interact through screen-based media only rather than meeting people in person, to be not only in total control of our communication channels but also of all of their content.

In this essay I discuss the issue of social network sites disguising commercial interest as an enhancement of friendship and communication. I analyze the interface of Facebook as a tool to lure people into the business of social marketing. By doing so I set out to criticize how this business is turning our relationship and thoughts into material for consumer analysis.

In contrast to that, I am fascinated with how communication among strangers evolves in public spaces, without the necessity of a clear interface or strategy. A place where people scribble and doodle on a wall seems to be a much more open and natural environment to leave a very personal message in public rather than in an online environment. The only connection between the contributors is the fact that they have all visited the same place and left their visual traces there. To me, these ties between those strangers seem stronger than the links we have with people on Facebook. The communication was not instigated by or solicited for a commercial interest, but by a very natural way of sharing.

This research goes hand in hand with the development of a practical work, an attempt to create an alternative network for communication that functions without the necessity of a registration, a profile or the necessity to only communicate with persons that can be classified as “friends”.

How to fit a person in a template

“Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life.” (Facebook Startpage, 2011)

This sentence is a prominent part of the start page of the social network giant Facebook. It states the promise for prospective users, to encourage prospective users to signup and use their services. When becoming part of the network, the user will be able to connect and share with people around the world for free. This promise assumes the fact, that the people a person wants to connect with are also using Facebook, and that there is actually the need to connect and share with them. “It's free and always will be.”(Facebook Startpage, 2011)

On another starting page, namely the one for the paying customers of Facebook, the ones who actually finance the platform we come across a similar promise. But it additionally illustrates the marketing model of Facebook to prospective paying customers:

“People treat Facebook as an authentic part of their lives, so you can be sure you are connecting with real people with real interest in your products.” (Facebook Advertising, 2011)


When looking at this sentence we see a more detailed definition of what Facebook is actually about. People should not only connect and share with each other. They should also connect to companies, which will be more than happy to sell their goods to “real people”. In other words, we see how the users, whose desire is to connect and share, are fulfilling the promise that is made by Facebook to those who are eager to pay Facebook in order to make profit.

Facebook Ads

Reach over 500 million people where they connect and share


[Create an Ad](#)
[or login to manage existing ads](#)

Overview
Case Studies




Reach Your Target Customers

- Connect with more than 500 million potential customers
- Choose your audience by location, age and interests
- Test simple image and text-based ads and use what works



Deepen Your Relationships

- Promote your Facebook Page or website
- Use our "Like" button to increase your ad's influence
- Build a community around your business



Control Your Budget

- Set the daily budget you are comfortable with
- Adjust your daily budget at anytime
- Choose to pay only when people click (CPC) or see your ad (CPM)

Image 1: Startpage of Facebook Advertising

On Facebook's Ads page it becomes clear how Facebook presents itself as an optimally performing online marketing platform, where an advertiser can “reach over 500 million people where they connect and share”. The effectiveness of campaigns via Facebook result from Facebook's ability to target the exact demographic audience of the clients. “Reach the right people at the right time.” (Facebook Advertising, 2011)

It is no news, that the product Facebook is actually selling is the user-data that is voluntarily filled in by every person who registers to their service. Facebook as a service not only facilitates the relationship among people but also the relationship between people and products. It can therefore be seen not only as a social but also as a highly commercially oriented network. As a company, Facebook is able to optimize marketing efforts by giving businesses the opportunity to get to know their customers within their social surroundings and relationships. Facebook's clients are able to look at their prospect customers from the perspective of a friend, family member, colleague etc. This perspective is possible when people from within a offline social circle become members of the same online social network and transfer their communication to this platform.

Signing Up

Full access to most social network website's content and features is only possible after signing up and creating one's own profile.

As Boyd and Ellison (2007a) formulated it, a Social Network profile is generated through basic information such as age, location, interests, and an "about me" section, and the encouragement to upload a profile picture. In the case of Facebook, you have to provide the full name, email address, a desired password, gender, and the date of birth. After this information has been provided, the new Facebook-user is prompted to let Facebook automatically import the contacts from their e-mail address book, enter Highschool, College/University and Employer. This information seems a convenient choice for people who quickly want to get started with connecting and sharing, but also demonstrates how Facebook gradually asks their users to provide more personal data step-by-step.

“Express Yourself: Set up your Facebook Profile. Now that you’ve created your account, it’s time to set up your profile. Your profile allows you to share your interests, activities, and anything else you want to include with people you connect to on Facebook. Your Facebook profile is about representing yourself and sharing what’s going on in your life with your friends. Each profile information section represents what people will see when they arrive at your profile. Start by filling out the info that will help people identify you—Basic, Education, and Work.

Smile, you’re on Facebook. Having a profile picture makes it easier for friends to identify you as being the real you, especially if you have a common name. In addition, the picture you select is another way to express who you are to your friends and family.” (Facebook Guide, 2011)

This data in the end makes it easier to be found and also to be identified as the “real person” behind the profile. Here the internet user voluntarily and explicitly abandons anonymity online by declaring real-life attributes such as name, sex and birthday to an online database. This also means the adaptation of personal data to the norms of the databases. By filling in a form for registration the user agrees to the structure and requirements of text fields and drop-down menus in order for the network to make a compatible set of data out of you. Jaron Lanier compares this “personal reductionism” as something that 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.” (Lanier, 2010, p69)

Through social networking digital reductionism becomes a casual element, mediating contact between new friends, what Lanier calls a “postpersonal” world. When regarding the registration process as the first voluntary contribution of information to the databases of a social network site the minimum set of data that has to be provided for creating a profile is similar on most services. It is the threshold that has to be crossed in order to be part of the social network. The e-mail address stands in as the unique identifier, so one e-mail address can be used for registering only one account.

Network	founded in	Full Name	E-Mail	Password	Sex	Birthday	Country	Hometown	Username	Zipcode	Career Plans	Company	Job Title	Industry
facebook.com	2004	X	X	X	X	X								
myspace.com	2003	X	X	X	X	X								
twitter.com	2006	X	X	X					X					
hyves.nl	2004	X	X	X		X			X					
uboot.com	2000	X	X	X		X			X					
linkedin.com	2003	X	X	X			X			X		X	X	X
xing.com	2003	X	X	X	X		X	X			X	X	X	X
hi5.com	2003	X	X	X	X									
last.fm	2002		X	X										
youtube.com	2005		X		X		X		X					
flickr.com	2004	X		X	X	X	X							

Image 2: Required Registration Information Data Overview

The most basic information that is generally requested during the registration process for a Social Network Site includes the full name, e-mail address, sex, birthday and a password. Besides the already mentioned fields for creating a Facebook profile there are various other fields of data required in order to sign up an account for other Social Networking Sites: The business websites LinkedIn and Xing additionally ask for the user's zipcode and country, their company, position and their jobtitle. Xing, moreover, includes an required field called "Career Plans." These fields are not visible on the starting page of Sign Up but slowly pop up during the process of registration, after having provided Name, e-mail and password. Some services, among them Skype and Youtube ask the user to create a unique username that then serves as the public ID of the profile, and is also requested for login instead of the e-mail address.

What is crucial for all services, that want to serve as a platform for communication and interaction is to have unique identifiers for every user. The data that is asked in most cases is quite personal, and closely tied to the real identity of a person. As Charles Petersen describes it, the emphasis of websites is shifting away from maximizing the number of page views but they concentrate more "on obtaining and using personal information about their users." (Petersen, 2009, p2)

Not the quantity but the quality of users visiting a website are crucial for making profit, and services that require the users to reveal their real identity turns their visitors into more profitable subjects than services that require no registration procedure.

Edit Your Profile

After having finished the process of registration most services encourage their new users to enter more detailed personal data such as a profile picture or to import contacts from already existing contact lists like the address book of their e-mail account.

“After joining an Social Network Site, an individual is asked to fill out forms containing a series of questions. The profile is generated using the answers to these questions, which typically include descriptors such as age, location, interests, and an "about me" section. Most sites also encourage users to upload a profile photo. Some sites allow users to enhance their profiles by adding multimedia content or modifying their profile's look and feel. Others, such as Facebook, allow users to add modules ("Applications") that enhance their profile.” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007a)

Through every form that is filled in the content of the database improves. As Poster puts it the database

“arranges information in rigidly defined categories or fields, (...) the agency that collects information in this database constitutes individuals according to these parameters. (...) The structure or grammar of the database creates relationships among pieces of information that do not exist in those relationships outside of the database. In this sense databases constitute individuals by manipulating relationships between bits of information”. (Poster, 1990, p96)

These individuals are constituted, in the case of Facebook at least through to the basic data that is required for registration. It expands further through the encouragement from the agency to provide more and more data in order to connect and share more easily. Lanier sees in this possible manipulation that “a tiny group of engineers can shape the entire future of human experience with incredible speed.” (Lanier, 2010, p15) According to Lanier technology can be seen as an extension to a human being, like remote eyes and ears or expanded memory.

“These structures connect you to the world and other people but at the same time change how you conceive of yourself and the world.” (Lanier, 2010, p15)

These structures, within Social Network Sites, can easily be influenced and changed when a re-design is introduced or new features are implemented. A good example is Facebook's New Profile launched end 2010. When Josh Wiseman, software engineer at Facebook, introduced the New Profile on the Facebook Blog the overall reactions of the Facebook users were negative. What has been announced as an even easier way for users to tell their story and learn about their friends received instant reactions like “atrocious”, “a picture book for illiterate children” and “We want the old profile back!” (Facebook, 2011)

When describing the new features such as the overview of basic information or the bar with recent photos Wiseman always names examples, like his own wedding or his affiliation to Ultimate Frisbee, to emphasize his personal excitement of the new features that he is responsible for. “All your interests and experiences are now represented with images, making your entire profile a more compelling visual experience.” (Facebook, 2011)

Josh Wiseman

🏢 Software Engineer at Facebook 🏠 Lives in San Francisco ❤️ Married to Kelly Wiseman
 🎓 Studied Computer Science at Stanford University 🗣️ Speaks English 🏡 From Media, Pennsylvania 📅 Born on December 13, 1982



Featured Friends

You can now highlight the friends who are important to you, such as your family, best friends or teammates. Create new groups of friends, or feature existing friends lists. I opted to feature my Ultimate Frisbee teammates, giving the rest of my friends a way to learn more about that part of my life.

Image 3: Introducing the New Facebook Profile (2010)

This compelling visual experience also changes the way the “edit profile” section has to be filled in. The fields “Current City” and “Hometown” can only be filled in with locations that are known to the Facebook database. Facebook's Help pages are flooded with complaints of users whose hometown is not available from the database and they either have to leave the space blank, choose a town that is closest to their actual location or they can fill in a contact form with a regional request and wait for Facebook to add their hometown to the database. Those fields are therefore not longer simple text-fields where any text can be typed into but they communicate in real-time with a database that contains known names of cities. Above that, all cities in that database have their own clickable profile, that contains a picture, a description inherited from Wikipedia, related posts of people that mention the city name, nearby places through Facebook's Places application and a Like-Button. The same problem of expression occurs in the field “Languages”, where selections can also only be made from an existing set of data. The offered choices, however, seem to stem from a faulty implementation of the old, textual way of providing information to the new, database-driven one when looking at possible options that offer random choices such as “Jibberish” or “70s Jive” but miss out on actual languages like for example several regional Sign Languages. The results seem to link to random Facebook Pages labelled with the category “language”. The response to this glitch on the Help-pages is relatively low, probably because the existence of additional pointless data is not as noticeable as the lack of essential data.

The image shows the 'Edit Your Profile' interface on Facebook in 2010. On the left is a sidebar with navigation links: Basic Information, Profile Picture, Featured People, Education and Work, Philosophy, Arts and Entertainment, Sports, Activities and Interests, and Contact Information. Below these is a link to 'Visit your privacy settings'. The main content area contains several form fields: 'Current City' and 'Hometown' (text boxes), 'I Am' (a dropdown menu set to 'Female' with a checkbox for 'Show my sex in my profile'), 'Birthday' (three dropdown menus for month, day, and year, set to Jan, 1, 2011, with a checkbox for 'Show only month & day in my profile'), 'Interested In' (checkboxes for 'Women' and 'Men'), and 'Languages' (a text box with 'Ji' entered). Below the 'Languages' field is an 'About Me' section with a dropdown menu open, showing a list of options: 'Jibberish' (highlighted), 'Jive', '70s jive', 'Jibberish and Gobbledegook', '精通國語、台語、台灣國語、國語摻雜閩南語', '福建話', and 'slang, jibberish, and uber-jibberish'. At the bottom of the form is a blue 'Save Changes' button.

Image 4: Edit Your Facebook Profile (2010)

The visual way of representing profile-data makes it necessary that every term is linked to a picture. Therefore, every additional description filled in the fields like “Education and Work”, “Arts and Entertainment” or “Sports” creates a new Page for it, in case the term has not yet been filled in by someone else.

“Pages are special profiles that may only be used to promote a business or other commercial, political, or charitable organization or endeavor (including non-profit organizations, political campaigns, bands, and celebrities).” (Facebook Pages Terms, 2011)

As every filled in item becomes a separate set of data, the text-based user profile, that allowed free descriptions and phrasings in a personal style is a thing of the past. It means that the user has a binary choice to either implement a preference on their profile or not. Additionally, the emphasis lies on the visual representation of the data in the form of a 100 by 100 pixel image.

The look of every Facebook profile is based on one fixed, clean Facebook style-sheet, as opposed to its preceding rival myspace.com where users had the freedom to edit the style of their page freely. Jaron Lanier argues that the design for a crowd means de-emphasizing the individual. He calls the web before 2.0-templates a web that had "flavor". (Lanier, 2010, p15)

Like Myspace the Dutch social network site Hyves allows their users to customize the look of their profile page by adapting the colors of the page's elements and add a customized background picture. This function called “Pimp my profile” co-exists next to a button called “Show in normal design” - so that every customized profile can be reset to a standard clean design and then switched back to the “personalized design”. So the offered visual enhancement of ones profile can be turned off by the viewer, while a site like Facebook does not offer to change any style-sheet related designs on profiles at all. This coherent look of every Facebook profile makes the appearance of every Facebook user more standardized and uniform than the Myspace- or Hyves-user.

The slow decay of DIY-profiles

In November 2010, Myspace announced that it is integrating itself into Facebook's login and social tools. Kelleher (2010) found that this was the moment where it would be safe to say “that Facebook is social networking.”

“MySpace, like everyone else in 2004, wasn't sure what would make a social network click. So it let its members figure it out, offering them to design their own pages with widgets, songs, videos, and whatever design they pleased. The result was a wasteland of cluttered and annoying pages that were as garish as the self-designed home pages on MySpace's 1.0 predecessor, Geocities.

Facebook, meanwhile, opted for a cleaner, Google-like interface that resonated with a broader audience. The design was predominantly blue and white, and the company rolled out features piecemeal: email, instant messaging and then live feeds of their activities. The platform was unadorned, intuitive, structured to reflect how people were already communicating online —and in contrast to MySpace's anything-goes approach, it was soothingly Spartan.

So while MySpace appealed to the early adopters of social networking sites, Facebook resonated more with a more mainstream audience. (Kelleher, 2010)

This mentioned mainstream-audience prefers good-looking clean templates that are ready-to-use and need no additional creativity and or extra effort. The “flavor” mentioned by Lanier is perhaps not what a mainstream-audience is aiming for. The clean design that allows no customization from the user side and consists only out pre-defined forms that can be filled in is a perfect condition for a machine to be able to read and process the information.

In that sense, as the trend in social network sites goes away from colorful DIY-profiles towards more sober styles, customization of profiles is only possible through controlling the visibility of content. These options of showing and sharing different pieces of information are not part of the process of editing one's profile, but are summed up in a distinct set of options labelled as “Privacy Settings”. As these settings are clearly detached from the actual process of filling in fields and forms and adding content to one's profile, Facebook narrows down the notion of privacy to a simple field that either allows or disallows visibility of the respective content to others. But changing settings of privacy in this context means that users only have the possibilities to either share or hide personal data. Having a rich and colorful Facebook profile is only possible through sharing lots of content and making it available to everyone. As privacy settings only allow control over the visibility of data such as status updates, photos and other posts the items remain stored in the databases of Facebook and therefore remain a part of one's profile, visible to the social algorithms of the software.

3rd Party Syncing

Sync to Other Services

Sync your Myspace account to your other networks. For example, when you sync to Twitter, you'll be updating Twitter automatically when you update your Myspace status.









Myspace	Account	Status	What's Synced
		Get Synced	Status Update
		Get Synced	Status Update Photo Uploads Playlist Edits See more ▾
		Get Synced	Status Update
		Get Synced	

Image 5: Myspace Settings for syncing with other networks (2011)

Working the identity

Aside the data we entered during registration, the more personal content we added later and the friends we chose to be connected to through Facebook the social algorithms analyze every click we perform online, in order to accumulate a more detailed image of who we are and what we are interested in. This representations of us in database form has through history accumulated various linguistic terms ranging from Deleuze's (1992) "dividual" to Poster's (1990) "second self" and Agre's "digital shadow" (1994). Mark Andrejevic describes how the division of the real person and the "database" version of the person can be traced through history, rooting in Industrialization.

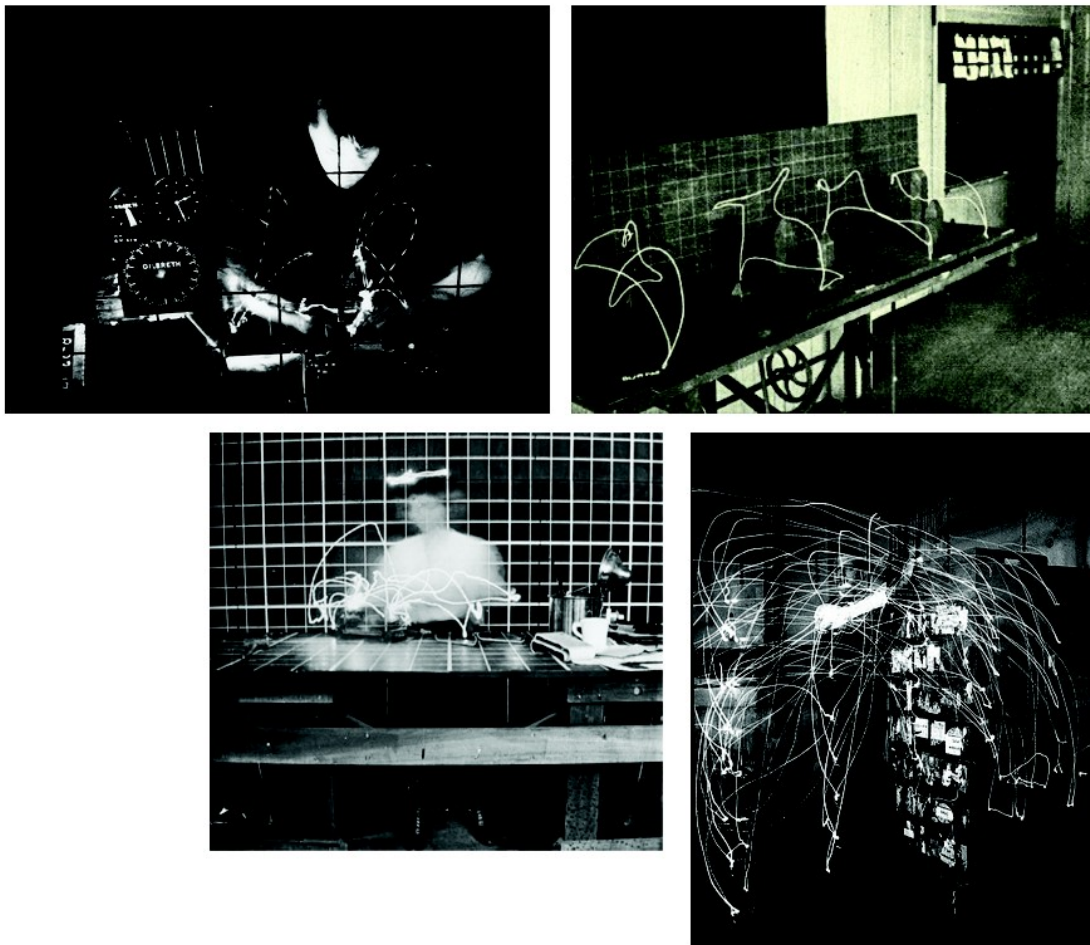


Image 6: Gilbreth, F. B. 190?. Time and Motion Studies

“The pioneers of scientific management abstracted the worker's activities from their immediate context and reconstructed them in the "planning department", where they served as a second self that could be manipulated according to the dictates of efficiency enhancement - and then imposed back on the worker.” (Andrejevic, 2004, p33)

In Industrialization, rationalization and supervision become automated and the need to monitor the worker devolves on the machine itself. Economic monitoring and data gathering as corporate surveillance is a technique for what Andrejevic (2004) calls “exploiting the work of being watched.”

What used to be the work of marketing research agencies is now the work of the consumers themselves. In the terms of Maurizio Lazzarato, not only work that results in a product can be described as labour. An activity, that produces cultural and informational content, like filling in Facebook profile data can also be considered as “work”, as “labour” that is immaterial. Immaterial labour produces a commodity that is not destroyed in the act of consumption but enlarges, transforms and creates the ideological and cultural environment of the consumer. This commodity does not produce physical capacity of labour power but instead transforms the person who uses it. Immaterial labour produces first and foremost a “social relationship” of innovation, production and consumption. (Lazzarato, 2004, p5)

The data is being sent to the servers of Facebook, where the evaluation of data through social algorithms generates recommendations for the user, based on that data. The “People You May Know” can for example be described as a similar measure of the before mentioned dictates of efficiency management. Encouraging users to add more friends based on the people they already added to their friends generates new links and new data for the network. As the new data is imposed back on the user, the algorithms can generate recommendations for that user more accurately.

Info accessible through your friends

Use the settings below to control which of your information is available to applications, games and websites when your friends use them. The more info you share, the more social the experience.

<input type="checkbox"/> Bio	<input type="checkbox"/> My videos
<input type="checkbox"/> Birthday	<input type="checkbox"/> My links
<input type="checkbox"/> Family and relationships	<input type="checkbox"/> My notes
<input type="checkbox"/> Interested in	<input type="checkbox"/> Photos and videos I'm tagged in
<input type="checkbox"/> Religious and political views	<input type="checkbox"/> Hometown
<input type="checkbox"/> My website	<input type="checkbox"/> Current city
<input type="checkbox"/> If I'm online	<input type="checkbox"/> Education and work
<input type="checkbox"/> My status updates	<input type="checkbox"/> Activities, interests, things I like
<input type="checkbox"/> My photos	<input type="checkbox"/> Places I check in to

Your name, profile picture, gender, networks and user ID (along with any other information you've set to everyone) is available to friends' applications unless you turn off platform applications and websites.

Save Changes **Cancel**

Image 7: Facebook Privacy Settings: Apps, Games and Websites (2011)

From rationalization of production during times of Industrialization we have advanced to the rationalization of consumption through digital enclosure. Consumers who submit to comprehensive surveillance in response to offers of convenience and participation perform valuable work for corporation and marketers.” (Andrejevic, 2004)

Mark Andrejevic quotes Toby Lester (2001), who calls the way consumers are compelled to go online for an increasing array of transactions the “tyranny of convenience”. (Andrejevic, 2002) This convenience is expanding through the ever growing range of services offered by Facebook. The marketing aspect and the exploitation of the openness of users will always be the base of Facebook's success. The promise to bother users only with advertisements that they might really be interested seems to be successful marketing strategy. Obviously we oblige to provide generous amounts of free labour for marketing research in order to enjoy the convenience of social network sites in return. Our online presence turns into a product, interesting for marketers and valuable for Facebook.

However, as Tristan Louis (2011) sums it up, there are several levels of engagement in this business with online identities from the side of the user. Louis distinguishes five different strategies of social media presence:

1. **Obscurity:** No participation is a form of management
2. **Controlled:** Heavy use of controlling mechanism to parse communication.
3. **Broadcasting:** Mainly using the services as tools to market one's content in other areas.
4. **Additive:** Sharing content on social networks that is not shared in other realms.
5. **All-in:** Abandoning other forms of media distribution and exclusively leveraging social networks

According to Louis in most cases one's social media presence is a mix of all those levels. What seems interesting, is that he argues that people who decide not to participate at all, are not at all excluded from the business with user data.

“Others have decided on obscurity as away to avoid dealing with any issue that could arise out of conflicts due to their social media presence. This category of people may actually create more problems for themselves as they let others define them in the online social realm.” (Louis, 2011)

These people are therefore not able to see if content that is shared relates to them and they run the risk of being exposed in an environment that they have no control over. This might occur when one user uploads photos to Facebook that show people that are not registered on the website in a compromising situation. Additionally, the possibility to tag people in a picture that are not registered with Facebook creates a data set also for people that have no profile themselves. Regardless, a careful user of Facebook has no control over the content, that is invisibly generated by the algorithms in the background. Whether it might be peer-pressure, lack of interest in privacy or the persuasiveness of Facebook's interface, the software is not a tool to enhance creativity or social relationships. Facebook, as a prime example of social network sites, connects people with each other, in order to optimize revenue based on the data is being gathered through these interactions.

Being Overexposed

“As News Feed became more central to your experience, we added privacy settings so you could control who could see each individual status update, photo album, video and everything else you share into the stream.” (Zuckerberg, 2010)

When Facebook introduced its feature “News Feed” in 2006 it became obvious for the first time to the users that the control over their personal data and activity is not in their hands anymore. Facebook announces their innovation as a personalized list of news stories about what is happening in your social circles on Facebook:

“It updates a personalized list of news stories throughout the day, so you'll know when Mark adds Britney Spears to his Favorites or when your crush is single again. Now, whenever you log in, you'll get the latest headlines generated by the activity of your friends and social groups. (...) We hope these changes help you stay more up to date on your friends' lives.” (Sanghvi, 2006)

Activities like commenting on someone's pictures, leaving a message on someone's profile wall or performing an edit to one's profile were no longer an act that stayed in between the involved users but instantly mutates into a news story that is visible to an ungovernable mass of people associated with the performed action according to algorithms of Facebook's News Feed. A Facebook software engineer even states when explaining that News Feed is a robot that is growing faster and smarter all the time “it turned out we built a friend who knows us so well it can show us stories we didn't even know we wanted to see.” (Bosworth, 2007)

The outcry of the Facebook community about the privacy infringements such a software causes fell silent throughout the years and we got used to being responsible for ticking the right boxes in the right sections of our privacy settings in order to keep personal content away from unintended distribution.

Sharing on Facebook

These settings control who can see what you share.

	Everyone	Friends of Friends	Friends Only	Other
Your status, photos, and posts	•			
Bio and favorite quotations	•			
Family and relationships	•			
Photos and videos you're tagged in		•		
Religious and political views		•		
Birthday		•		
Permission to comment on your posts			•	
Places you check in to [?]			•	
Contact information				•
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Let friends of people tagged in my photos and posts see them.				
Customize settings			Apply These Settings	

Image 8: Facebook Privacy Settings: Sharing on Facebook (2011)

Facebook generally distinguishes their Privacy settings into one part concerning “Connecting on Facebook” and a second part dealing with “Sharing on Facebook”. Connecting in these terms relates to the basic information about one person that is available to other users that are not part of one's friend list yet. These people that one person has no obvious connection to are generally filed under the category “Everyone”, as opposed to those who have been accepted to be part of the friends list and that have generally the most exclusive access to one's profile. People one degree away from a friend are part of an extra group of people labelled “Friends of Friends”, who can be assigned the same status as first-degree friends. The News Feed gives access to activity and information to a number of people that were most probably not the intended recipients of this action. When software is able to show us stories we did not even know we wanted to see about people that come from within our social groups, the machine acts as a generative gossip publisher with it's own will. Once unintentionally spread information, like for example the change of a relationship status or a very personal message to a friend, is hard to remove from the public display. Since each person is customizing their privacy settings, and has the possibility to filter, block and blacklist certain people or certain content, we are not fully aware of what in the end can be seen or not be seen by other people. This is especially the case given the News Feed draws its own conclusions about our interest automatically. The standard settings for News Feed even hide posts from people that are statistically not interesting to you based on the frequency of interaction with that person. This leads to the fact that content that is being spread remains within a small circle of friends that generally interact with each other anyways and feeds back into the same loop of information.

Choose Your Privacy Settings ▶ Connecting on Facebook

◀ Back to Privacy
Preview My Profile

Your name, profile picture, gender and networks are visible to everyone ([learn more](#)). We also recommend setting the other basic settings below open to everyone so friends can find and connect with you.








 Search for you on Facebook	This lets friends and family find you in Facebook search results. Set this to Everyone or you could miss friend requests.	<input type="button" value="Everyone"/>
 Send you friend requests	This lets you receive friend requests. Set this to Everyone to avoid missing out on chances to connect with people you know.	<input type="button" value="Everyone"/>
 Send you messages	This helps you make sure you know people before adding them as friends.	<input type="button" value="Everyone"/>
 See your friend list	This lets you connect with people based on friends you have in common. Your friend list is always available to applications and your connections to friends may be visible elsewhere.	<input type="button" value="Everyone"/>
 See your education and work	This helps you connect with classmates and colleagues, and discover new professional opportunities.	<input type="button" value="Everyone"/>
 See your current city and hometown	This helps you get in touch with neighbors and old friends. Note: you can separately control how you share places you check in to on the main privacy page.	<input type="button" value="Everyone"/>
 See your likes, activities and other connections	This lets you express your interests and experiences, and connect with people who like the same things you do.	<input type="button" value="Everyone"/>

Image 9: Facebook Privacy Settings: Connecting on Facebook (2011)

The division of privacy settings between “Connecting” and “Sharing” on Facebook can be explained with James Harkin's description of social networks being a huge communications feedback loop:

"What most of us would really like is to separate the wheat from the chaff, to keep a small and valued group of friends close while using technology to discreetly manage the demands of the rest. (...) 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." (Harkins, 2009, p248)

“Discreetly managing the demands of the rest” can be described, for example, by the possibility to hide content from certain people or certain groups of people, without these people being aware of their actual status of access. While adding friends and liking things are being published and made part of the successful story of social network sites, negative events such as un-friending people un-tagging photos or un-liking things, are being left out of the narrative of News Feed. Every person that is part of our friends-list, even though we have almost no personal connection to them, demands to be discreetly left out of our information loop but remains part of our network. Harkins criticizes that those links are being promoted by social network sites while generating uncomfortable, conflicting scenarios when personal stories are being exposed to persons that we have no personal relationship with:

"It is not us who benefit from this proliferation of weak ties but the network itself."
(Harkins, 2009, p248)

The network itself benefits from information being spread and communication taking place in order to get to know the habits of their users better and making better predictions on future behavior of their users. This is necessary to provide companies with a clearer image of what stories their possible future customers might want to see or read. If at all, the privacy settings protect the user's private content from being seen by other users of the network that have regular access to information on one's profile. In software, generally this is a question of giving permission to access certain files or not. Daniel Solove criticizes that this binary understanding of privacy can not be easily adapted in a social context. He addresses the difficulty to recognize privacy in public:

"The virtue of the binary view of privacy is clarity. It is an easy rule to apply. Yet the simplicity of this view is its downfall—it seems far too outmoded given new technology. Therefore, although it will be difficult, it is better to develop and protect a more nuanced notion of privacy." (Solove, 2007, p169)

A more nuanced notion of privacy is necessary as it is impossible to strictly divide online available content into private and public content. Social network sites create a form of public space that struggles to fulfill privacy-requirements of individuals by only proposing binary solutions, ignoring the multiplicity of demands and norms that stand between an entirely exposed or hidden.

Mushon Zer-Aviv criticizes that public and private can not be put into contrast as black and white, he proposes the grey zone in between might contain the notions of secrecy, discreteness, confidentiality and intimacy. (Zer-Aviv, 2011)

These are values that do play a role within offline social communication and interaction but are not taken into consideration when looking at the settings that social networking sites propose. Values such as intimacy are not present in social technology, when only drawing a line between content that one person is willing to show to everyone and content that one person would like nobody to see. Social network sites ask the individual to manage their privacy settings not only to protect their content but also to shape their online identity through what can be seen by others. But as Rop Gonggrijp mentions

"...privacy is not in fact brought about by some magic combination of the intentionally confusing privacy radio button page on Facebook." (Gonggrijp, 2010)

If privacy is being presented as something that can be managed through altering permissions to personal data, the responsibility of providing personal data at all seems to be beyond all question. As a hacker, Gonggrijp mainly addresses the responsibility of programmers in this information economy. Programmers have responsibilities when writing code and need to consider how their software relates to issues privacy and anonymity, and how it influences its users. But the users themselves also have to make choices, what importance technology plays in their everyday lives and should be aware of how much responsibility they delegate to the software they use. Social network platforms strive to a web without anonymity and complete disclosure of your offline identity online.

Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google states that this disclosed identity is key to making the world a safer place:

"The only way to manage this is true transparency and no anonymity. In a world of asynchronous threats, it is too dangerous for there not to be some way to identify you."
(Schmidt, 2008)

The registration to a social network site is the first step away from anonymity, since the software asks you to reveal your real identity in order to be able to connect with other real people. When Harkin talks about anonymity in the online social space he mentions the role of equality among peers that is present where anonymity is prevailing. People used to find the anonymity online liberating:

“They want to spend time in a place that allows them to define themselves rather than be defined by others.” (Harkin, 2010, p9)

In a forum where people are able to anonymously post their opinion, there is a sense of equality among the peers, whereas on social networking sites every online action is automatically linked to the profile of a person and all its data. Social networking sites are about not being anonymous. Sharing content that reflects the life of one living subject that connects to others and interacts with them. Now that we are personally responsible for every action we perform online, after losing any sense of anonymity, we have to manage our identity online through adjusting the public content that is linked to us. This balances somewhere between not being anonymous and not being completely exposed within this mediated public of social network sites. Danah Boyd (2007b) mentions four unique properties of mediated publics:

- “Persistence. What you say sticks around. This is great for asynchronous communication, but it also means that what you said at 15 is still accessible when you are 30 and have purportedly outgrown your childish ways.
- Searchability. My mother would've loved the ability to scream "Find!" into the ether and determine where I was hanging out with my friends. She couldn't, I'm thankful. Today's teens can be found in their hangouts with the flick of a few keystrokes.
- Replicability. Digital bits are copyable; this means that you can copy a conversation from one place and paste it into another place. It also means that it's difficult to determine if the content was doctored
- Invisible audiences. While it is common to face strangers in public life, our eyes provide a good sense of who can overhear our expressions. In mediated publics, not only are lurkers invisible, but persistence, searchability, and replicability introduce audiences that were never present at the time when the expression was created.” (Boyd, 2007b, pp2-3)



Image 10: Facebook Scam: Stalker Revealer (2011)

We do have a specific audience in mind, when we write something, share something or post something. But it will be always visible to a larger audience. It is impossible to have full control over the spread of information on the web, also within the closed gates of Facebook. A person that has access to the data of someone else can easily copy the data, download it or forward it to third persons. Once something is visible to another user, he or she is free to retain that data, for example by making a screenshot. Once made public, the owner of the data loses control over the spread of the content. Changing privacy settings or the deletion of data afterwards can not prevent the content from circulating online, anywhere in the Internet. So the list of our friends is just a very vague depiction of the audience that could possibly access our data, not to mention the potential mass of third-party applications and advertisers who are granted access to our content by Facebook. But we do not even know exactly if the people that we granted access to our content do actually see it and look at it. The curiosity to reveal the invisible audiences, at least partially, became a major hype on Facebook in the beginning of 2011.

“An app going by various names, including ProfileSpy and Pro Check, claims it will offer insight into how many people have viewed your Facebook profile if you fill out a short survey and grant the app permission to access your information. The scam has been making its way around the social network via status updates, which include a link to the suspicious service and text that reads, “My total facebook views are: 1245 Find out your total profile views.” (Bosker, 2011)

Facebook not revealing the data about profile views to their users, has obviously been a real gift for scammers. Clicking the malicious link makes the message spread automatically through one's own profile. The spam will therefore appear in the News Feed of friends and resemble an ordinary status update about a website suggested by a friend. Seemingly trustworthy many friends click the link and by doing so become the spreader of the “virus”.

Obviously popular, unfulfilled desires and requests of Facebook users are easy targets for scammers. In summer 2010, for example, a scam application offered the change to install a “dislike” button next to the already offered “like” button, that allows people to rate other user's content. After having installed the malicious application, people are lured into completing an online survey, for which scammers are paid money and spam posts will be posted to one's profile. The messages “appear to come from your Facebook friend, giving it a ringing endorsement.” (Anon, 2010)



Image 11: Facebook Scam: The Official Dislike Button

These are examples for dubious applications, that intentionally aim to harm users. Disguised as harmless applications they function on two strategies: The trust we have in our fellow Facebook users and the curiosity to extend our possibilities on Facebook. Whether the desire to actually see the popularity of one's profile or the wish to escape the unilateral habit of only being able to “like” something —these applications make use of our trust, curiosity and the simplicity of sharing on Facebook. Not only are we responsible for our own data, but also for the data of our friends, as the clicking of a link stimulates the people who trust us to do the same. When on Facebook we not only have to be aware of the luring dangers of scammers, but also of the eyes of our own friends, since they are the key to our precious personal data.

Conclusions

Facebook seems to be a place for sharing information freely among friends. However, its practice of enabling the sharing of personal content as an excuse for harvesting data and the resulting commercial examination of the users is questionable.

The interface of Facebook suggests faith and trust to the user but at the same time acts as a machinery for participatory surveillance and the abuse of human relationships for marketing purposes. The interactivity on Facebook serves the analysis on what product could be sold easiest to which person or identified target group. At the same time, the wish to have an interesting, likeable and popular profile in the online realm drives people to participate in the hunt for prospect customers.

PEOPLE ARE NO DATABASES

The limitations of databases being able to profile a personality lie in the fact that every profile, every social interaction will in the end be just a set of data. The downgrading of complexity of human personas, interactions and relationships in online social network sites threatens to feed back into the way we communicate in offline spaces, flattening out the diversity of human behavior. Social network sites embrace quick and instant communication. Sharing something with hundreds of people becomes simpler than meeting someone in person. As we become more confident in quick and easy mass-communication we might run the risk to neglect keeping depth in our relationships. Being a manager of ourselves and our multitude of online profiles and contact lists is a time-consuming business, that mainly helps to maximize the profit of advertisers.

PRIVACY IS NOT A QUESTION OF VISIBILITY

The exposure that every user of social network sites is confronted with creates a new scenario for issues of personal privacy but also raises the question about how much we value and respect the privacy of others. The interface of Facebook not only suggests the users to add content to their own profiles but also to participate in creating other people's profiles. This form of participatory surveillance should make us aware of the responsibility that we have for ourselves and our contacts. We should always keep an eye on the privacy policies of Facebook but most importantly divulge awareness among our peers. Once information is made public online, we have no control over its spread.

FACEBOOK IS NOT YOUR FRIEND BUT BUSINESS PARTNER

Facebook's blog features happy Facebook employees that personally introduce new features of the platform. They praise every change as something that makes their own social life much easier. However, this remains a facade and is part of a strategy to make users feel part of a global community of friends. Instead of the illusion that everyone is participating and profiting from each others presence online, Facebook is nothing more than a company who does business with us, and so are most of the services offered on the website.

We should be careful not to fully abandon alternative means of communication in order to be entirely dependent on the stability and correctness of social network services. Facebook has shown how to govern people along the thin line of privacy and the desire to share, but everyone should keep in mind that services offering convenience for free always demand a trade-off from the side of their users.

WHAT TO LIKE NEXT

Marketers seem to be interested to make profit out of every social interaction since we generally trust our friends more than a company. The trick of shamelessly abusing people for marketing purposes will not go on forever. However, the exchange of user-data will remain a big business as long as we believe that clicking a button can really improve our social status. Every advertising strategy has a hype until people get the trick and become diluted by the techniques. In the worst case, there is the threat for our valued friendships to break after we have found out, that someone's profile, that we admired so much has a long time ago been sold to an advertising company. And what will happen when all communication has constantly been infiltrated by paid product placements, just that someone can call himself an "Influencer", in order to make money with his friends?

How It Works - Social Publishers

[Sign up for MyLikes](#)

Become an Social Publisher and Influencer on MyLikes and earn money or help your favorite charity by recommending what you like. Create Sponsored Likes for advertisers/sponsors that you Like, post them on Twitter and/or embed it your Blog. You get paid per click and your cost-per-click is set and constantly adjusted based on how influential you are and how relevant your Likes are.

Step 1

Choose advertisers relevant to your audience

Step 2

Create and post sponsored likes to your website or Twitter

Step 3

The more influential you are and the more relevant your likes, the more you earn per click

Featured Influencers:



Robert Scoble



Melissa Ponce
De Leon



J.Reyez



Savvy Sassy
Moms



Khloe
Kardashian



Kourtney
Kardashian



Elle Fowler

Image 12: MyLikes.com - How it works - Influencers

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Images

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