

4-1-2011

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HONORS THESIS

# The Appeal of Social Networking

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**Spring 2011**

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## The Appeal of Social Networking

Few would dispute the claim that human beings are essentially social creatures (Angwin 4). As a race, we are relentless in our pursuit of sense of security, reassurances, satisfaction and the advantages procured by competition, conferred status and material gain (Angwin 4). We attain these ambitions via personal connections with others; linkages into social networks (Angwin 4). These provide us with contacts, complicity, connections, and collaborations, which we are constantly establishing, expanding and maintaining with those around us (Angwin 4).

Yet, a troubling paradox exists at the very axis of our designs: our genuine identities are generally banished from institutions which formalize our interactions with society. “Apart from genuine eccentrics,” humans usually instinctively keep our personal identities in check (Keen 42). We keep it awkwardly concealed behind “a rigidly polite mask” when interacting or conversing with others (Keen 42). This creates immense tension between our personal and institutional selves. Everyone, with the exception of the “pathologically naïve,” keeps themselves under psychological lock-and-key (Keen 42). For reasons that remain inadequately explained, yet instinctively understood, the unchallenged expression of our genuine selves is regarded as improper in most relations (Keen 42). Very rarely do we cease to repress our social selves for the simple reason of bureaucratic survival.

So why do our personal identities collide so awkwardly with the institutional values that we as a society created? The conflict between network dynamics and institutional structures is not new. It has been playing out since the beginning of civilization, in fact (Angwin 4). Networks function as a representation of social power organizations, vertical constructions that delineate formal institutional power (Angwin 4). The inherent tension between the two results in inevitable ruptures at crucial moments when the forces erupt and threaten established forms of

power. Sites like Facebook and MySpace exemplify this phenomenon and demonstrate that power resides in networks (Angwin 4). The resurgence of network power today comes after an extended dormancy over centuries during which centralized institutions pervaded and served as the dominant forms of social organization. (Angwin 4) The mythological imagery of the era of the Middle Ages has been passed down to us through legend and presents epic illustrations that feature knights mounted upon horses draped with satin and “turreted castles ringed by murky moats” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 69). The richly embroidered tapestry, woven into our collective imaginations, evokes images of the quest for the Holy Grail and the Knights Templar. The story of the Knights Templar perfectly illustrates the rise and fall of network power.

Most know of the Knights Templar from legends of chivalrous tales of heroic expeditions during the Crusades. Although popular mythology fixates on their status as a secret society, the heroic accounts of the Knights Templar reveal only a small fraction of the true story (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). The Templars were a Christian military order established in the 12<sup>th</sup> century to protect the Holy Land (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 70). Initially, the French knights selflessly abided by their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to follow their sacred mission as Defenders of the Faith (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 71). The Knights Templar were effectively the Pope’s standing army. The Templars became the Vatican’s private militia, known as the “army of Christ.” In 1130, Pope Innocent II sanctified the Templars’ official status, essentially allowing them to be only accountable to God (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 71). Because of this, the monastic order was exempted from all earthly laws, including taxes (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 71). This, of course, attracted a great deal of interest that the monastic order extensively enjoyed, along with the medieval status of a multinational corporation free of all tariffs and taxes in all jurisdictions. As expected, news of this spread and attracted thousands of wealthy

nobleman from the Christendom resigned their assets to the Templar (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 72). This made the Templars the medieval equivalent of a modern day “mega-IPO on the New York Stock Exchange” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). Gothic Google, if you will.

The take-up was feverish and utterly overwhelming as the heirless King Alphonse I of Castile left the military knights one third of his kingdom (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). They were granted prime real estate in London, and were even granted the order Lundy Island by the unpopular King John (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). The Templars were exceedingly powerful landowners and merchants throughout Europe by 1300. However, the main source of revenue for the Templar was banking (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). They are, in fact, credited by economic historians with establishing the first merchant banking operation, similar to modern-day traveller’s cheques (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). This status did not please France’s Philippe IV, an infamously brutal ruler. Whatever misgivings historians harbor about this king, most would agree that he was revolutionary in constructing a centrally controlled, territorially defined nation: France (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). However, he faced two strong obstacles, the Pope and the Knights Templar. The Pope, Boniface VIII, was a clever man who was no stranger to many backroom Vatican intrigues (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). He issued a Papal decree to remind Philippe that he held no power to tax Church property (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). Standing his ground, Philippe prohibited all gold from leaving his kingdom. This deprived the Vatican of its income from France (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). Infuriated, the Pope excommunicated the French king. The events that followed were nothing less violent than “one of the more violent episodes of *The Sopranos*” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). Essentially, Philippe placed a contract on the Pope’s life. In September of 1303, Philippe unleashed an army of 1500 soldiers and 600 cavalry to Rome where they united with *condottiere* led by the Pope’s

enemies (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). The Pope, an elderly man, fled Rome for his hometown of Anagni. The King's men, however hunted him down and penetrating his private quarters. He was physically seized and clearly abused before he was dragged back to Rome where he died soon after. The next Pope was hand-picked by Philippe to ensure no chances were taken. The Papacy was relocated –“lock, stock and barrel- from Rome to Avignon so he could keep the Church on a tight leash” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 89). The only things now standing in his way were the Templars, who had established their banking headquarters in Paris, the financial hub of Christendom (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 89). The Templars could not be controlled, or taxed for that matter, by Philippe. *He* even owed *them* money (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 89).

Many people refer to the unlucky Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>; however few know its origins. It originated from the confrontation that began at dawn on that fateful morning. Philippe's hidden police force ambushed and arrested hundreds of Templars in a series of raids. The Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, was among those who were imprisoned after being accused of blasphemy, infanticide and burglary (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 91). The Knights Templar was dissolved by one stroke of a Papal pen when Philippe ordered Pope Clement to issue a Papal bull, *Pastoralis Praeeminentiae*, requiring all Christian monarchs to seize Templar assets (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 89). Molay could not withstand the torture and confessed to all charges brought against him. In 1314, he was put to death in front of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 89). According to legend, while being engulfed by flames, he cursed his two prosecutors, Pope Clement V and King Philippe, predicting they would meet a similar end. They both died within a year (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 92).

The lesson to be gained from this “gruesome medieval saga” is to exemplify how the Knights of Templar, after “two centuries of glory” as the utmost influential society in

Christendom, was destroyed simply for being too powerful (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 96). The relentless logic of centralized organization demolished a monastic order with its very own rituals, agendas, codes, and power. Modernity defeated feudalism. “Rational calculation defeated religious fervour” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). The undeniable logic of “vertical power asserted its iron law over the horizontal influence of dynamic social networks” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). The intricate dynamics involving centralized institutions and horizontal networks form a perpetual progression of conflict and development that persists today, even in cyberspace.

The appeal of social networking seems to cut across all boundaries, uniting networks representing every conceivable interest group. There are sites for the business minded; LinkedIn boasts over twenty million members, for example. Similarly, BlackPlanet, a site for African-Americans holds 16 million members. There is literally a cyber network for every community, including sites for physicians (Sermo), dog lovers (Dogster), movie enthusiasts (Flixter), environmentalists (Care2), gays (OUTeverywhere), book clubs (LibraryThing), and car lovers (CarDomain). While these may seem like broad, more common groups, there are also a plethora of sites focused on highly particular niche categories. There exists an exclusive, invitation-only networking site, aSmallWorld, created for the global celebrity jet-setters.

For the most part, social networking sites can be categorized into five broad genres: egocentric, community-based, opportunistic, passion-centric, and media-sharing (Keen 42).

Facebook and MySpace are the enormously popular sites that fall under the egocentric category (Keen 42). These are generally referred to as the “profile” sites that serve as platforms for “friend” networks. Members are able to “poke” or “throw sheep” at others in their social network. More importantly, however, they function as “virtual platforms” as a means to establish

an identity, which is often a fabrication of maintenance of multiple identities. These sites also allow for personal expression through artistic means such as music, videos and photographs (Keen 42).

Community networks attract members with powerful identity links based on nationality, religion, sexual orientation and so on (Keen 42). This segment of networks typically functions as virtual versions of communities that exist in the real world (Keen 42). A strong attraction to these networks stems from feelings of belonging and acceptance (Keen 42). They serve as micro-communities, similar to an online neighborhood.

Sites like LinkedIn and Plaxo are examples of opportunistic networks (Keen 44). These socially organized sites mainly attract individuals for rational reasons such as business connections. Also, sites like Sermo, for doctors, are incorporated in this category.

Sites that bring people who share common interests or hobbies together are referred to as passion-centric networks (Keen 46). These interest communities are exclusive to those passionate about a niche genre such as dogs, cats, cars, or movies. Examples of these include CarDomain and Dogster.

Media-sharing sites, like YouTube or Flickr, also widely popular, are not defined by membership, but by content (Keen 42). Flickr attracts users who post photographs while YouTube draws in individuals who share or view videos. Networkers visit these sites to access content created by others.

Although motivation for joining social networking sites vary and can often time be rather complex, they can be classified into rational and irrational reasons (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). Professionals joining sites like LinkedIn are essentially motivated by rational reasons



pertaining to career development. However, a teenager accumulating “friends” on MySpace would hardly be doing so for career advancement opportunities. Social interactions for these individuals are likely primarily motivated by irrational instincts to forge bonds (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79).

The Web 2.0 eruption began in 2005 when MySpace and Facebook first emerged globally (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 244). Since then, social networking sites climbed to the apex of global Web rankings. In 2005, only one of the top ten most visited websites was a social networking site, MySpace. But by 2007, the same ranking held seven spots for social networking sites (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 244). An interesting note on this topic is that within the two year period between rankings, a “volatile process of creative destruction among new media players” was taking place (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 133). More interesting, yet, is that the only three sites on the top ten list that were not social networking sites were already investing in Web 2.0 in order to catch up. Two of the websites that lost their places on the list within two years, eBay and Amazon faced no question in their remedy for this issue: add more social features to the already established platforms (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 244).

The domination of social networking has truly proven to be fascinating as none can argue with the “power of us,” incorporating mass collaboration and involvement (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 178). In decidedly ordered societies like our own, social media threatens to strike at the foundations of ingrained echelons and defy existing arrangements. Human instinct is not to “leverage the dynamics” of this powerful entity, but to control and tame them, even stopping them in their entirety (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 166). Institutional resistance to powerful social networking mediums such as Facebook and MySpace is rather commonplace, with hardly a week passing without a media report of such an instance. An extreme example involves governments

banning access to social networking sites because of utter conservatism. This differs from many other situations as it does not ban employees of a business or students in an education setting from utilizing or visiting these sites, but it censors, monitors and blocks access to the Internet. China, for example, partakes in these activities; however they are more indulgent when it comes to the pirating of music or movies (Rosenberg 2). Also, Syria banned Facebook in an attempt to prevent “Israeli penetration” (Rosenberg 2). Some nations fear that social networking may aid in the encouragement of the surfacing of forceful civil societies with the capability of broadcasting information without restriction (Rosenberg 2). Congressional leaders, in the US, have proposed a law that would aim to ban social networking sites in schools and libraries as well (Rosenberg 2). In typically liberal-minded Canada, legislators have prohibited Facebook from being used by bureaucrats in Toronto (Rosenberg 2). In cities like Toronto, Ontario and Ottawa Facebook is considered to be in the same league as online gambling websites, a definite “no-go zone” (Rosenberg 2).

The expression *network* is entrenched in many instances of social transformation (Rosenberg 2). Power shifts from a position of authority to networks, such as those of governmental organizations, foundations, mafias, cults, religions and so on. Antiquated establishments are collapsing as uprising network forces inflict novel expressions of conduct and societal association (Rosenberg 2).

23 year old British woman, Kerry Harvey experienced the shock of her life when she realized her online details were stolen and used to construct an alternate identity on Facebook (Allman 6). At first, she was appalled at the phone calls she was receiving regarding escort solicitation (Allman 6). The real Kerry, an advertising executive, learned at this point of her stolen identity and resulting parallel life on Facebook (Allman 6). So many of us are worried about our identities

being stolen by Internet hackers with the goal of draining our finances. Although these anxieties are well-founded as cyber fraud has become a billion dollar illicit ring, these cases are unique as the cons simply borrow ones identity with clandestine tact in order to steal money; essentially an act that goes unnoticed (Allman 6). The difference with social networking sites like Facebook, is that an identity can essentially be created or deleted with the click of a mouse. “Zap, you don’t exist” (Allman 6). Your virtual self can be brought to life or simply kicked off and you have no say in the matter.

The complexity continues, however, as we play a part in the construction and manipulation of our own online personalities (Wortham 1). Since online social networking exploded circa 2005, millions of individuals have constructed multiple identities as they interact, while building networks and collecting “friends” (Wortham 1). Cyber self-representation, an intangible entity, is exempt from instantaneous consequences of face to face contact. This allows for social networkers to become masters in self-fabrication, misrepresentation, and distortion.

On social networking sites, a virtual identity can serve as a shield for anyone. Plain Janes become hot babes and shy nerds are able to be outgoing extraverts. The overweight miraculously become as thin as models and scrawny boys become towering meatheads. By putting your best cyber-face forward in the virtual social universe, self-presentation has been transformed into a “ritual of self-fabrication” (Rosenberg 2). In this world, status is only conferred through the accumulation of “friends.”

This identity disaggregation refers to the development and maintenance of multiple identities is all too quickly becoming the probable norm. It seems as if the unitary self evolved

into the multiple self. Online identities are simply described as “multifaceted, splintered, concocted, fluid, negotiated, unexpected and sometimes deceptive” (Wortham 1).

Many, understandably, feel apprehension when approaching any form of cyber relationships as multiple cyber-identities can have a wicked shady side. Old men can play the role of a young girl; the bad can play good, and the vicious play virtuous. Dangerous pedophiles can act as if they are children in order to prey on innocent victims. Online identity construction has also been known to destroy marriages and relationships as it can often prove to be difficult to hold together a marriage when one partner enjoys spending countless hours on Facebook or MySpace. More and more often, social networking sites like Facebook are being utilized with the purpose of reconnecting with old flames. Spouses transform into cyber-stalkers when it comes to their own spouses by snooping on their online profiles, sometimes checking a list of “friends” that reveals grave deficiencies in a marriage.

Identity formation has proven to be an intricate process (Wortham 1). Many might argue that, fundamentally, humans are “unknowable mysteries” (Wortham 1). Little disagreement exists, however, about the fact that our identities are essentially socially constructed. Institutionalized values found our social construction. For most people, “our identities have been assembled and shaped by dominant values given social expression by institutions” (Wortham 1).

“Virtual reality is an ideal sphere for *personal* identities” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 219). The quest for individuality on social networks is capable of inspiring extremely creative forms of self-presentation, all too often incorporating fabrication and creation. Virtual identities have been described as multifaceted and ever-evolving. For some people it probably feels as liberating as the hippie culture of the 1960s, when “John Perry Barlow was writing lyrics for the

Grateful Dead” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 221). Young people are free to cultivate highly personalized notions of self, however narcissistically. They are able to do this because they are no longer dependent on socially defined values of established institutions (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 119). One stipulation, however, is unavoidable: the indistinct line between “true” and “false” identities can be alarmingly deceptive (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 119).

In the land of virtual reality, the coexistence of real and false identities is instinctively integrated into social interaction on the web. Society wants to actively construct and manipulate several identities in the online realm. Mass abandonment is the result when any attempt to ban or meddle with this freedom occurs.

Friendster, one of the first American social networking sites launched in 2002 (Willis 32). This site, however, serves as a prime example illustrating the ambiguity between true and false identities, as well as the mass defections that occur when freedom is threatened. Friendster started out with the intentions of connecting people, originally a dating website (Willis 33). The original design incorporated a “four degrees of separation” method of accumulating friends (Willis 42). The owners of this network were, in effect, attempting to control the site with the intentions of creating some air of social cohesion (Willis 53). The two-degree difference from the original “six degrees of separation”, which is said to connect us all as a human race, proved to be a significant reason why members behaved as they did on the site (Willis 62). “Friendsters” joined the site in order to find social validation by amassing the largest number of “friends” as possible. It seemed as if people were not at all troubled by having hundreds and hundreds of “friends” who are at best acquaintances and at worst, complete strangers. Rebelling against the restriction on whom one can be “friends” with on Friendster, users began inflating their “friend” list with fake profiles to eliminate the two-degree filter (Willis 54). These “Fakesters” often

entailed a great deal of creativity to invent. Eventually these fake profiles became wildly popular on the site and it became cool to have as many “Fakesters friends” as possible. It’s important to remember, however, that these people did not, in fact, exist.

Failing to understand the appeal of this absurdity, the owners of the website began eliminating all phony profiles. In an attempt to delete all the fake profiles, however, they actually began deleting profiles of “*suspected* Fakesters.” These individuals, as in the case of British MP Steven Webb, were actually turning out to be real members with true identities (Willis 54).

Needless to say this rash behavior resulted in catastrophic consequences for Friendster as users revolted and checked out of the site. The website was never fully able to recover in the United States, and moved their market overseas to Asia (Willis 64). Had the owners shown more flexibility and embraced the concept of multiple false identities, this website may actually have dominated social networking worldwide (Willis 54).

The false personality phenomenon is not a new one in the real world. However innocently, we are all guilty of fabricating our identities at some point in our lives. Regardless of whether they are formalized occasion such as masquerade balls or fancy parties, they leave us no option but to tap into the same desire to present oneself in a disguise socially. Although Facebook and MySpace are not elaborate affairs, they allow for a spontaneous version of the same social interaction (Willis 412). Social networking has become a daily habit, not an occasional societal event.

Outside the borders of cyber universe, in the real world, social roles are “constricted by an abiding awareness of institutionalized norms and values” (Wortham 1). We are expected to know and follow the social codes established for us by our literal society. On social networking

sites, these codes are less concrete and they are governed by interactions that do not defer to conventional norms (Wortham 1). One is expected to follow appropriate “netiquette”. On these sites you may share a confidence, update a status or tag a photograph, all for people you barely know to see. All of these gestures would never even be thought of conducting in the real world.

In the real world, we lack control. Our identities, as previously mentioned, are socially constructed (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 200). Societal expectations dictate who we are supposed to be and how we are supposed to act. Personal fabrication is only able to be constructed in cyberspace. This allows for the control we crave and lets people be who they wish to be and lets them express themselves in the ways that they want. “Cyber-sociologists describe the fabrication of self on social networking sites as ‘writing yourself into being’” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 221) We pen our own identities. We author the construction of our personalities. The fabrication of one’s personality is done so only with a keen eye on the impression this will create on those who view the profiles. “In the real world the self is *presented*; in the virtual world it is *invented*” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 217).

“Stigma avoidance and prestige enhancement” are chief motivators in online social interaction (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 79). In cyberspace, rewards for fame and punishments for shame are dealt unexpected methods. “The old adage, ‘know thyself’ becomes ‘show thyself’” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 221).

Much like fashion models switch outfits during a fashion show, impression management involves continuously altering identities. In this way, online social networking can be equated to a virtual catwalk. The only difference, though, is that the curtain never comes down on the “ritual of identity fabrication and self-exhibition” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 142).

As humans, we all reach a moment in our lives where we, with trepidation, question how many friends we truly have. How many souls can we truly call friends in this world? Friends, people on whom we can count on for support and consolation, those who will genuinely stand by us regardless of whether our fortunes are up or down. This troubling question induces dreaded anxiety. A sickening feeling washes over us as we realize that the number of true friends we hold is inconsolably smaller than we would like to believe.

Fear not. Online social networking rescues us from the feelings of despair as we accrue hundreds or thousands of “Friends” on social sites like Orkut, Facebook, Bebo and MySpace. With the click of a mouse, new friends are made. Problem solved.

The main appeal of social networking sites is, of course, to collect friends. “In the virtual culture of narcissism, the composition of our ‘friends’ network has become a key identity signature” (Fraser, Matthew and Dutta 123). This simple count has evolved to function as a social barometer that validates self-esteem, measures social capital and even confers status. We are able to project ourselves into the cyber world with greater self-confidence when we have heaps of “friends”.

Critics of cyber friendships argue that these social networking sites have created virtual secondary school scenarios that mimic the sometimes dangerous and always maddening “psycho-politics” that is often encountered in the world of reality. The socially ambitious boast their extensive networking of “friends,” on these social networking sites, using their clout to become pervasive, and even perverse.

The word friend, historically a noun, has transformed into a verb. Social networkers devote an immeasurable number of hours *friending* on the websites in a frantic attempt to attain,



maintain and establish what is believed to be “social capital” (Wortham 3). An online expression, competitive friending, has turned into an invidious comparison. In a jealous rage, millions of social networkers log in to check the profiles of others to see how many “friends” they have accumulated (Wortham 3). Back in the day, men would catch a prize when their friends experienced social envy due to their “trophy girlfriends.” Now, the prize catch is all too often obtained through social networking sites where the prize is a “trophy friend” (Wortham 3). No commitment required.

This online eruption of sorts has bewildered courts of law, which noticeably are perplexed by the distinction between real-world social interaction and that of the virtual world. For example, in March of 2008, Michael Hurst, a 34 year-old British man was the first person in the UK to be charged with harassment on a social networking site. His ex-girlfriend, Sophie Sladden accused him of harassing her in the form of contacting her via Facebook. In his defence, Hurst stated that he simply “sent her an electronic message requesting her friendship.” Agreeing with the man, the judge threw out the case stating that it was innocent because Facebook “friends” cannot be defined as friendship in the traditional sense.” Dillon Osborn, another British man, was sentenced to one week in jail after sending multiple Facebook “friend” requests to his ex-wife, violating a court order stipulating that he not contact her.

The lines remain blurry with petty hypocrisies that lace online “friendships.” Jerome Kerviel, a 31 year-old rogue trader living in Paris, burned through \$7 million that wasn’t his. It belonged to a major French bank and he gained access to it through allegedly fraudulent transactions. Before he was caught for this crime, he could count ten “friends” on his Facebook profile. However, as soon as the media caught wind of his escapades, Kerviel had been “unfriended” by nine out of ten of his online friends. Perhaps the one friend that remained was

away on vacation, without access to the internet. Ironically, though, Kerviel gained thousands of “friends” throughout the world via a page that was created entitled the “Jerome Kerviel Fan Club.” The French rogue trader was now transformed into a modern-day Robin Hood of sorts, thanks to the rebellious, anti-establishment values of cyberspace. Although Jerome Kerviel may have lost his only true friends, he did gain the support of thousands of “friends” around the world.

“The virtual ritual of making, and abandoning, ‘friends’ has raised anguishing matters of online etiquette.” It’s often a difficult predicament when one is “friended” by an individual that, frankly, they feel nothing but animosity for. Or even a more sensitive topic, how does one go about *de-friending* someone? In a story titled “He Didn’t Want to be That Kind of Friend” in the *New York Times*, Saul Hansell wrote of an agonizing experience involving this sensitive situation. Bob Mason, a chief technology officer at a video company in New England, invited Hansell to become an online “friend” on Facebook. However, Mason then had a change of heart. He wrote to Hansell, “I hope you don’t mind, but I am in the process of moving industry colleagues and partners from Facebook to LinkedIn. From a professional perspective I’ve decided to keep my Facebook relationships strictly at a personal level. As such I am planning on removing you as a Facebook friend, but would welcome the chance to link up in LinkedIn.” That is pretty brutal.

However, many can understand Mason’s perspective. Hansell, to him, was not truly a “friend,” he was merely a contact. While Hansell handled the let-down quite well, it cannot be denied that such a downgrade is most definitely a hit to one’s ego.

But in reality, how many friends can one truly have? Reasonable limits seem nonexistent in the virtual world, thanks to “hyper-friendship inflation.” Many adolescents and young adults nonchalantly accumulate hundreds, even thousands, of friends and display them with tagged photographs on their profile pages. One American 17-year-old girl boasts having a total of 5,036 “friends” on a social networking site. Other reports claim that some people may have as many as 26,000 “friends.” It seems overwhelming to think of staying in contact with so many people. There must exist a maximum number of friends that are capable of maintain relationships with without distorting the very meaning of the word.

It seems as if there is a cognitive limit to any one person’s close circle of friends. This concept can be explained by Dunbar’s Law, named after British anthropologist, Robin Dunbar (Vance 62). Based on a complex analysis of primates and the size of the human neocortex, he was able to calculate the maximum number of people with whom any human being can maintain stable social relationships with (Vance 62). This limit was determined to be capped at 150 individuals. This figure, commonly referred to as “Dunbar’s Number,” corresponds to the size of Neolithic villages as functional units (Vance 62). Also, it matched the size of Hutterite colonies prior to their division to form new communities (Vance 63). Another interesting note is that the ancient Roman army was divided into legions of 5,000 soldiers, further split into units of 150 men (Vance 63). This figure endured until modern times as the number of soldiers in an army company. It seems almost magical, as sociologically speak, the number 150 appears to be the greatest number for maintaining functional cohesion in human groupings. Beyond this limit, the necessary ritual of social “grooming” is found to be much too complex to manage and thus, group cohesion is lost (Vance 62). For groupings of larger than 150 people, rules and regulations are necessary in order to enforce stability (Vance 64). Evidence of this is supported by social-

dominant online games like *Castle Marrach* (Vance 65). When 150 active users are reached, group unity collapses, resulting in discontentment and deflection. Wikipedia, similarly, tends to plateau at approximately 150 active administrators of a given topic (Vance 65).

In the event that Dunbar's Law was solitarily applicable to the virtual world, any person audacious enough to boast more than 150 "friends" on social networking sites would most definitely be exaggerating (Vance 62). Friendster, the site previously discussed, originally limited the number of "friends" for any single member to 150. Perhaps the founders of this revolutionary site were privy to Dunbar's Law. Social networkers, however, in the virtual world are known to conduct themselves in ways that defy all known laws of social anthropology (Vance 62).

Dunbar did not argue that humans are capable of sustaining close personal relationships with as many as 150 people. Core circles of friends, also known as "sympathy groups," most often do not exceed 12 people. These groups provide intense relations for an individual. It is interesting to point out that the grouping for "My Top Friends" list is a dozen.

By using imagery from knitting, we are able to describe our social relations. Our close friends, those with whom we are connected by personal ties are referred to as our close-knit group. Our loose-knit network includes our wider network of social acquaintances and contact. So where does this leave the people that fall beyond the magical 150? The people we know only vaguely, that we acknowledge only with a quick head nod or smile. The faces we've seen before at cocktail parties our members of our alumni association. "If the differential between 12 and 150 separates close friends from acquaintances, what about those who belong in the amorphous group beyond Dunbar's number?" Looking beyond the categories containing only 150 people,

fascinating insights with meaningful consequences can be seen. It becomes apparent that the dynamics of “weak” ties within networks are much more powerful than one might believe possible.

In 1973, American sociologist Mark Granovetter made the argument that “weak ties” actually play large roles in our lives in an essay entitled “The Strength of Weak Ties.” Even though we may scarcely know these people, they may actually have more of an impact than we realize. “Weak ties,” as described by Granovetter, are social relationships characterized by sporadic contact and a deficiency of emotional familiarity with no accounts of reciprocal favors. We all know who they are, but we don’t really *know* them. More importantly, however, these are the individuals to whom you owe nothing, and who owe nothing to you. Most people could sit down and list dozens or even hundreds of people who we would categorize in this nebulous social section. We know they are there, but we never give them much thought until we need them.

We actually rely on “weak ties” more often than we think. One classic example of this is the unanticipated dependency while job searching. When one is searching for a job, who do they turn to; family and close friends? Unless you are the pleased beneficiary of preferential treatment or cronyism, they probably will not be of much help. Most successful and driven jobseekers resort to their “network.” People who are in the market for a new job or are switching careers often refer to the transition stage as “reactivating their network.” They let everyone know that they are in the market for a new job. By implication, this means that the “weak tie” networks typically lie dormant. According to Granovetter, “weak ties” can be found in the world of “loose egocentric networks.” We are willing to lend a hand to these hazy social contacts with the hope

that one day we may be able to rely on the same kindness from these essential strangers. There is also the fact that it does feel good to do something nice for someone.

Granovetter confirmed in his 1974 book entitled *Getting a Job* that most people find of job openings through weak-tie acquaintances, not close friends or family (Vance 65). This turned firmly established sociological assumptions upside down. Until the late 1960s, the focus was largely on the importance of “close” ties for social mobility (Vance 62). These notions were so firm that they still stubbornly linger in our subconscious thinking. In our heads, we often think of “networks” as restricted, invitation-only groups that are confined to only like-minded individuals that carry a bond by a common past (Vance 63). It is interesting to note, however, that most business networks are actually based on relatively “weak tie” associations. “Even ‘old boy’ networks, alumni allegiances, Freemasons, Rotarians and other alleged cliques are essentially loose-knit” (Vance 64). How well do the members of these societies and groups actually know one another? Most of them do not know each other very well at all. “So what is their bond? Their bond is the strength of weak ties” (Vance 62).

Jobseekers resorted to email to plug into “weak tie” networks when the internet first exploded. Today, the same function is served by massive social networking sites like LinkedIn and Facebook. In fact, any such site would work, so long as it enables you to a network of “friends.” “Collecting other ‘friends’ – or *e-quaintances* – is not merely a hollow ritual for the vain, insecure and narcissistic” (Vance 62). Online friendships actually do serve a function. They give social substance to a cyber community exploiting the potency of weak ties (Vance 61).

The CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt, is noted as quipping that we should all be permitted to change our names once we turn 21 years-old and start life afresh, leaving behind our old

identities. His point was that members of the “MySpace generation” post so much intimate information, questionable photographs, and revealing details about their personal lives on social networking sites that, in the years to come, when they enter the real world that has social codes and institutional pressures, many people are plagued by a feeling of dread as they realize that their past eccentricities have left an indelible mark on a social networking site that remains in full view of the entire world to see (Vance).

It really is a serious issue that a particular American student, who after graduating from the University of Illinois was poised to land a job at an intern at a Chicago consulting firm. However, after the company searched the young applicant’s Facebook profile, his apparent values seemed alarmingly unsuited for the hard work necessary for this job (Vance). On the profile, he wrote that his main interests in life were smoking marijuana and shooting people, along with other vulgar and graphic activities. The job offer never came through.

It is interesting to point out that this kind of mishap is not restricted only to the youth. Every day, thousands of professional adults discover, with everlasting regret, that the door has just politely been shut in their face because of a questionable bit of information revealed online. It may even just been an embarrassing photograph of a younger version of themselves mooning a camera or tossing back a bottle of Jack Daniels. It might be something much more serious, though, like an event encircled with shame such as an arrest for drinking and driving or drug possession that reveals itself on Google.

More and more people are learning how it feels to wish that they could start anew, *tabula rasa*, as they are haunted by their virtual selves. We often wish we could erase dark facts and colorful fictions from our pasts. Too many people learn the hard way that keeping a blog or even

just maintain an online profile through a social networking site can turn out to be a “wealth hazard.” It seems that our lives are evolving into an open Facebook of sorts. “Everybody’s kimono is open” (Vance).

Inspector Chris Dreyfus, a senior British police officer running special units that were responsible for the protection of the Royal Family as well as top UK government figures dealt with an interesting situation regarding this matter. The 30-year-old underwent interviews while seeking a promotion for a position as Bedfordshire Police Chief Inspector. On paper, it was obvious that he was qualified for this position. Before his current position, he was the head of Britain’s special Counter-Terrorism Proactive Unit where he was responsible for thirty officers. Because of these credentials, he was offered the position as Chief Inspector. Suddenly, however, the officer was withdrawn. It turns out that after a series of background checks on the internet, it was discovered that Dreyfus was actually a homosexual. This was not a problem, however. His online behavior, though, was an issue. It appears that Dreyfus had been advertising, rather flamboyantly, his gay lifestyle on his Facebook profile, including provocative photograph postings and suggestive references. Almost inevitably, Dreyfus was denied the position (Vance).

This sort of professional hindrance can actually be grimly traumatizing (Vance). It seems that scarcely a week passes without hearing about an employee who has lost their livelihood due to some posting on a social networking site. These collisions sometimes lead to agonizing and expensive legal battles. They always end badly for everyone involved in the issue. Reputations are all too often destroyed. Careers are almost always ruined. Financial situations essentially collapse. In the most devastating of situations, families are torn apart. Making a rebound often proves to be impossible (Vance). Deep depressions are almost sure to follow. Employers seem to



attract nothing but negative publicity while employee morale is constantly undermined (Vance). Everybody feels on edge. Nobody wins.

At the close of 2007, Britain's Information Commissioner reported an estimated 5 million young people in the United Kingdom had online profiles that featured content that have the potential of, if consulted by universities or potential employers, damaging their higher education or career prospects. "By ratio-based extrapolation, that would mean that some 25 million American youths are in the same boat and countless millions more worldwide" (Wortham). Additionally, 60% of youths in England that were polled were unaware that profile postings are permanent and that they could come back to haunt them in the future. 70% of those polled also said that they were entirely unconcerned that their online profiles could be viewed by complete strangers, even more interestingly (Wortham).

Due to this alarmingly high level of apathy, the UK Information Commissioner gave a number of critical tips to encourage the British youth to become more aware and wise about the potential consequences of positing intimate details about their lives on social networking sites. "One key warning was: *a blog is for life*. Another message was: *reputation is everything*" (Wortham).

The standardizing groundwork of reputation and privacy has been tested and most definitively transformed by the "e-ruptions" such as the discrepancies between real-world and virtual-world norms and between personal and social identities. The privacy paradox, the paradox being that never before have such a vast number of people exhibited their deeply intimate and personal selves to such an overt level, for the entire world to see. Yet, never before

has the lurking danger of privacy invasion, reputational damage or identity theft been so utterly consuming.

The issue has gone so far, in fact, that some even believe that it is no longer a relevant issue. Sheldon Teitelbaum stated in *Wired* magazine that “Privacy is history – get over it” (Wortham). Perhaps this is true, but as humans, we have constantly been obsessed with privacy and the reputational consequences of its infringement.

Beyond intimate spaces, privacy often translates into secrecy. Social networks, even like the Knights templar, were renowned for their rituals and secret codes known only by the initiated members (Wortham). In current times, Freemasons, the known descendants of the Templars, act as forbearers famous for their strict codes of secrecy. The same also applies for cults and even religious sects. All are borderline obsessive regarding their covert activities and rather invasive about those of others. Even in modern corporations, secrecy is the iron law. The swiftest way for an executive to devastate his own career is through a hasty lack of discretion.

The contemporary notion of privacy originates from the Enlightenment philosophy and the emergence of capitalism, whose basic foundation is based on private property as an essential principle of individual liberty. Privacy, the fundamental essential of individual liberty, is protected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Wortham). The editor of *Privacy Journal*, Robert Ellis Smith, defined this freedom as “the desire by each of us for physical space where we can be free of interruption, intrusion, embarrassment, or accountability and the attempt to control the time and manner of disclosures of personal information about ourselves” (Wortham).

Prior to the innovation of the printing press in 15<sup>th</sup> century, gossip allowed people to infringe upon privacy, along with the help of saucy rumors and the ever-present innuendo. “The advent of books and pamphleteering gave free reign to opinion-making and, despite the constant threat of censorship, gave birth to a mass-produced form of slander and defamation” (Wortham). News papers allowed press barons the influence to shape opinion and destroy reputations during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The sudden increase of electronic mass media and the materialization of professional journalism institutionalized this power in the media’s realm of control (Wortham).

Now, the Web is the most recent technological e-ruption that is challenging conventional perceptions of privacy (Wortham). This innovation is far more powerful than its predecessors. There is no professional class of gatekeepers, or journalists, on the internet to determine what is fit to print (Wortham). There is virtually no self-censorship, no filters, no ethical reflexes or prior restraint. The explosion of blogs, social media and wikis means that that at any given moment, our personal privacy and reputational honor can be exposed to unsolicited scrutiny, and there’s no place to hide.

The rise of social networking sites has established virtual norms that no longer make a significant distinction between private and public realms. The line between personal and social identities has been beyond blurred in the online world, where people craft numerous identities while accumulating “friends.” Perhaps this is why such a large sector of the youth feels so indifferent to the reputational consequences of the information they display on their personal pages (Wortham). To them, they are just being themselves and enjoying their youth. The concept that their actions will come back to haunt them in the future seems incomprehensible and honestly, unfair.

The day will come, perhaps sooner rather than later, when these questions will be no longer be of any importance. Currently, though, the issue is that our real-world values are lagging behind online values. This lag is what could potentially produce serious consequences, namely in the form of tarnished reputation. One can be a superstar on Facebook, and walk into the office the next morning to find themselves all but exiled.

Reputations are mostly tainted in two ways. The first involves people bring disgrace upon themselves through their actions and behavior or the reputational injury is inflicted on someone by others through implication or malicious gossip or even disconcerting revelations (Wortham). In the land of cyber-space, the first form of damage to reputation is most often the consequence of narcissistic self-exhibitionism, or disclosures that come back to haunt someone in the real world (Wortham). The other type of reputation spoilage is caused by destroying online perceptions through privacy violations (Wortham). Shaming involves these deliberately disparaging gestures.

Self-exhibition does not always start out as a narcissistic attempt to gain fame. Social interaction in the virtual world is nothing but an elaborate ritual of self-presentation and intricate impression management – all in an attempt to put one’s best cyberface forward. “Since disembodied interaction is exempt from the normal constraints of space, self-presentation is not immediately subject to face-to-face verification.” (Wortham). You can be anyone you want to on the internet. Imposture is not only indulged, it is to some point, expected (Wortham). The new sense of virtual reality has also altered the conventional social parameters of time. In the real world, people manage social interactions based on a relatively accepted rhythm. For example, romantic and marital relationships are characterized as continuous and intense, keeping close contact with these individuals. However, we keep in touch with social friends less frequently.

Similarly, we communicate with acquaintances only occasionally. In cyberspace, the presentation of self through “friends” is a sociological ritual with a rhythm of daily, hourly, or even moment-by-moment interaction(Wortham). “Online social interaction can be like a webcam that is never turned off – round-the-clock, always-on, full disclosure. Virtual time, paradoxically, in real time” (Wortham).

The immediacy of self-exhibition is facilitated by social media such as sites like Twitter. This “micro-blogging” network site networks itself as a service that allows you to receive constant updates from friends to answer the question “What are you doing?” Twitter, launched in 2006, facilitates messaging via brief text posts limited to 140 characters, referred to as tweets (Wortham). These posts can be mind numbingly banal, pointless and trivial. “Twitter is akin to the hit 1990s television series *Seinfeld*, which was famously ‘about nothing’” (Wortham). The mundane actions and feelings are virtually devoid of meaning; yet relating them to others seems to give them existential significance. “Twitter makes us feel connected” (Wortham).

There are concerns, however, surrounding Twitter, particularly in the business world. The very nature of Twitter encourages people to send quick comments to networked friends, which can work themselves up into the dozens or hundreds. Corporations fear that Twitter poses a serious threat to privacy, reputations and corporate confidentiality (Wortham). For example, a senior manager attending a private boardroom meeting sends an unguarded remark to a network of Twitter followers, perhaps stating “my bonehead CEO is stumbling through a lame presentation about why we should pay a 40% premium to buy our main competitor – this will be his Waterloo” (Wortham). After the news goes around, as it always seems to do so quickly, someone is going to lose their job. But who will it be? Here’s a hint: not the CEO.

Blogging is perhaps the most widespread form of self-exhibitionism. Absolutely anyone with internet access can create their own blog. “The blogosphere is a libertarian paradise where every voice can find expression” (Wortham). In early 2008, more than 110 million blogs had been counted worldwide. Now, there are millions and millions more. Blogging has single-handedly transformed the practice of self-exhibitionism into a narrative form of identity construction. The linkage between virtual narration and identity construction was made by internet sociologist Jenny Sunden when she stated that people use Web-based self-narration to essentially *write* themselves into existence (Wortham). At any given moment, people are using their blogs like Twitter or Flickr, to send the universe a continuously updated report of their thoughts, emotions or mundane daily activities.

This sort of virtual autobiography is certainly a liberating form of self-expression that can even achieve the status of true literature (Wortham). In many ways, blogging embodies a return to forms of literary expression that was in the height of fashion in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when Samuel Pepys kept his legendary diary in Restoration England (Wortham). On the web, however, the very public nature of this form of self-exhibition can have severe consequences on personal privacy and even on the reputation of others.

The “Internet mortality” tale of Jessica Cutler, a 26- year-old Asian-American rode a rollercoaster with such a spectacular rise and fall in Washington DC became a “Tale worthy of *Moll Flanders*” (Wortham). Initially, Cutler appeared to be an ambitious young Congressional aide that worked for US Senator Michael DeWine, a conservative Republican from Ohio. Cutler, however, was juggling six powerful men at the same time. “Then she had a brainwave. Like millions of other young American women, she was a fan of the hit television show, *Sex and the City*, in which actress Sarah Jessica Parker plays a newspaper columnist who writes about her

big-city sexual adventures.” So, inspired by the television show, Cutler began keeping an anonymous blog detailing her exploits in the corridors, hallways, and bedrooms of Washington power politics.

The *Washingtonienne*, as the blog was titled, instantaneously scandalized the capitol with its risqué details of the sultry young Congressional aide and powerful plays that compensated her for her services. The blog revealed extremely shocking details of some of the men. In a twist, another blog, called the *Wonkette*, exposed the *Washingtonienne* seductress as exotically attractive assistant to a United States senator (Wortham). Undoubtedly, this scandal rocked the US capitol. Cutler was promptly fired by Senator DeWine. But it was too late, after the virtual mask had been lifted, her “erstwhile leg-over partners felt exposed” (Wortham).

Cutler turned this unfortunate series of events into profit by marketing her new image. At the end of it all, not only was Cutler’s reputation damaged, but so were those of others. Eventually, she was run out of Washington and found it impossible to find work. She resorted to filing for bankruptcy to avoid liabilities in the many lawsuits against her. Her online discretions cost her in more ways than just financially, though. Her reputation was irreversibly tainted.

The phenomenon of shaming online is more controversial than self-exhibition, for obvious reasons. Shaming, however, must be distinguished from another online act of aggression referred to as flaming. Flaming someone involves making an emotional and forward attack on one’s reputation. Shaming, less direct, is the violation of someone’s privacy with the expressed purpose of humiliation and targeting the person through disgrace. “Shaming is an online pillory and stockade.” Essentially, online shaming is equivalent to a virtual scarlet letter.

Various forms of online shaming exist, including comical, scandalous and tragic methods. Gossip hails as king of the most common type of shaming. Malicious innuendo spreads virally in countless blogs and high-traffic websites. This gossip is often cruel, nasty, brutal and remarkably defamatory. This poison is the basis for many broken reputations. Arguably, gossip, however destructive, serves a function when analyzed as a sociological phenomenon. Gossip inherently heightens the completely rational social instinct to preserve a good reputation. Most of the language in social interactions, as observed by social psychologists, is simply a form of reputation management.

In his book *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language*, Robin Dunbar notes that “you can pass on information about yourself in order to influence your listeners’ perceptions of you. You can tell them about your likes and dislikes, how you would behave (or how you think you ought to behave) in different circumstances, what you believe in and how strongly you believe it, what you disapprove of, and so on. You can be deliberately rude or obsequiously nice; you can insult them or flatter them. It can allow you to sort the sheep from the goats very quickly by driving away those whom you know you would never get on with or encouraging those who might be of interest to stay and further their acquaintance with you. Or, of course, you can engage in black propaganda, sowing the seeds of doubt about enemies in people’s minds or praising a slightly dubious friend to the hilt so that he or she gets the job” (Wortham). However, there is some good news as negative gossip seems to account for only 5% of verbal exchanges (Wortham). Social conversation is mostly devoted to recounting personal experience and gossiping about who is doing what with whom. Gossip, here, clearly proves itself to have a function. Gossip constitutes a form of social control by sending out signals regarding reputational consequences because it encourages conformity to established social norms.



Online shaming has even been used as a tool to force tax deadbeats to pay up within 30 days or have their names posted online for the entire world to see (Shah 12). This form of shaming has also been used to target simply annoying, dangerous or anti-social behaviors as well (Shah 12). A teenage girl in South Korea was labeled Dog Poop Girl after her tiny dog pooped and the mishap was filmed by another passenger using a cell phone camera and posted online (Shah 12). The video haunted this girl to the point that she was left no choice but to drop out of college. Bad drivers, illegal parkers, litterers, abusive nannies and loud cell phone yappers have all been targeted for their embarrassing behaviors as well. These delinquent acts are all commonly caught on camera and posted to websites with photos or videos in order to shame the culprits.

People have not stopped at simply shaming, they have resorted to outright humiliation in some cases. In the distressing story of Robert Olen Butler, an American novelist and Pulitzer-prize winner, we find an example of undeniable humiliation. Butler's wife Elizabeth Dewberry left him for another man in the summer of 2007. Dewberry, also a published novelist, had just published a book entitled, *His Lovely Wife*. Butler, not considered a handsome man by traditional standards, was a 62-year-old bookish looking man, was absolutely devastated when he learned that his much younger, 44-year-old, wife was walking out on him for a rich and famous rival (Shah 12).

In a long, agonizing email to a group of his Florida State University students, Butler told his students of the end of his marriage and claimed that his wife had been "molested by her grandfather" and the resulting trauma was the catalyst for her "decade-long abusive marriage" with her first husband. Butler also made accusations that Dewberry was jealous of his Pulitzer Prize (Shah 13). He then proceeded to speculate on his estranged wife's new relationship

revealing that she would never be the other man's only girlfriend, as he is "permanently and avowedly non-monogamous" (Shah 13).

This moment of irrationality set the blogosphere ablaze. Celebrity blogs went to town with this riveting story of a flamboyant billionaire stealing a literary Southern Belle from a "gnomish, balding, jilted novelist with a high-pitched voice" (Shah 12). In an attempt to shame and humiliate his estranged wife and her loaded lover, Butler was too blind to foresee the consequences these desperate gestures would have on his reputation, privacy and dignity.

Butler, however, is not likely to find himself enduring the anxiety of a job interview, as a Pulitzer-prize winning novelist in his sixties. But this is not the case for thousands of others as the anxiety of a job interview is now often accompanied by the dreaded feeling that some skeleton will resurface and complicate their ability to gain employment. Nowadays, many job applicants shudder to hear the probing words, "We Googled you . . . "

"Call it MySpace versus WorkPlace." It is occurring more frequently than we realize. The Ponemon Institute, the privacy think tank, found in 2007 that 35% of managers were utilizing Google to do background checks online. 23% looked up candidates on social networking sites. Surprisingly, or perhaps not so surprisingly, 33% of Web-based searches led to rejections. There are companies, however, such as ReputationDefender, that specialize in finding and removing negative online content that violates privacy and threatens to damage reputations. "Your CV is no longer what you send to your employer – it's the first ten things that show up on Google." These sites supposedly deal with everything from unsubstantiated criminal accusations to even phony obituaries about a targeted individual's child. Fees are fairly steep, however. One reputation cleanser that boasts many celebrity clients, Tiger Two, charges as much as \$10,000

per month for their services. Andy Beal, an online reputation consultant believes that the most efficient approach is a pro-active stance to online personas. Google can be thought of as essentially a “reputation engine.” The best way to ensure that you do not become a victim of this machine is by taking control and becoming the author of your own virtual identity – before someone else does it for you. Beal also remarked that one should “build up credibility in the eyes of Google. You’re being searched all the time, whether you know it or not.” (Owyang).

Reputational damage from online privacy invasions can sometimes be neither self-inflicted by the indiscretions of self-exhibitionism nor maliciously perpetrated by others. “Imagine discovering, for example, that your entire medical record is accessible on an online database” (Owyang)? This could cause one to suffer severe reputational damage if, for example, you have a history of mental illness, alcoholism or have even contracted a sexually transmitted disease like AIDS.

Does it seem like this Big Brother scenario could never happen? Think again. Microsoft and Google both already store medical records for a number of clinics in the US. Privacy watchdogs are concerned that confidentiality could be violated once medical records are transferred to external services operated by corporations such as Microsoft or Google (Shah). Violations could occur for a variety of purposes including the commercial exploitation for marketing campaigns by pharmaceutical companies. Another concern is that health insurance companies could use this information to deny coverage or increase rate premiums (Shah). Sometimes the most dreaded privacy mishaps can become shockingly real like when government cock-ups led to disclosures of millions of computerized records containing personal information on British citizens in late 2007 (Shah).

In the meantime, millions of online social networkers are ever more suspicious about the monitoring of their virtual profiles by the very sites on which they construct their identities and open up their hearts. There is pervasive apprehension that these sites, like Facebook, are actually prying on their own members (Vance 62). These anxieties are not alleviated by Facebook and other social networking sites that notify their members that they, not the members, effectively “own” all the data posted on profiles (Vance 62). Nor does it help that it has proven to be devilishly difficult to delete personal profiles when users decide to leave a site (Vance 64).

It makes you wonder, who else is watching us? “The CIA? MI5? Religious cults? Criminal organizations” (Vance 62)? There is already evidence that none of these possibilities can be excluded. The CIA, in fact, has openly admitted that it monitors YouTube along with other sites in order to collect intelligence (Vance 62).

But, this brings up the question, should we even care? So what if someone shames us or if an employer finds a decade old picture of us? “Maybe employers should understand what is plainly obvious: life is a long and complex movie, with many plot twist, not a single snapshot” (Owyang). Media critic Jeff Jarvis made a profound revelation: “Young people have a different view of privacy and publicness because they realize you can’t make connections with people unless you reveal something of yourself: you won’t find fellow skiers unless you tell the world that you, too, ski. Privacy advocates would be appalled that I have revealed my most private information on my blog: my health data. But by writing about the heart condition I share with Tony Blair, fibrillation, I have found advice and support from others. Publicness has its benefits” (Owyang).

So, is privacy a thing of the past? Perhaps the answer isn't more fog, but more light and transparency. With all of our information on the internet for the world to view, no one is safe from whistle-blowers. If this is the way of the future, though, we will have something precious to help make up for the loss of privacy: freedom (Owyang). It really does come down to a simple trade-off, less privacy for more freedom. So long as we have freedom from harassment, humiliation, job dismissal and financial ruin, it does sound enticing (Owyang). It is understandable; however, that this leap of faith between lost privacy and gained freedom is still one that many are reluctant to make (Owyang).

Manchester, although often perceived as a quaint town, is actually plagued with one of the UK's highest rates of violent crimes (Goode 3). And this is precisely why Manchester's police are utilizing Facebook to fight crime. "Call if Facecrook" (Goode 3)

The law enforcement in Manchester discovered that Facebook is a more effective and efficient crime-fighting tool than traditional crime alerts (Goode 3). Facebook members that choose to download the application called "GMP Updates" can have immediate contact with the Greater Manchester Police's website as well as its YouTube channel to report crimes (Goode 3). Virtually anyone with a mobile device can report, or even film, crimes occurring in real time. The application also features a "Submit Intelligence" button that makes it possible for Facebook members to send in crime tips anonymously (Goode 3).

Social media are being deployed globally in an attempt to bring mass responsiveness to urgent situations (Goode 3). In China, local residents in the cities of Shanghai and Nanjing use websites like GoogleMaps and Sougou to depict "thief maps" that give precise locations of areas where street crimes are committed (Goode 3).

On a more macro scale, the power of social media is being harnessed for disaster relief efforts. Photos, blogs, and instant messaging, all forms of social networking, have proven extremely effective in providing early warning signs when disasters like tsunamis and earthquakes are about to strike (Owyang). In fact, in May of 2008, *New Scientist* reported that Twitter, Facebook, and GoogleMaps were more efficient than traditional emergency services – which typically rely on mass media – in responding to the devastating wildfires in California and the shootings rampages at Virginia Tech the year prior (Owyang). This is partly explained because the television reports surrounding the Californian wildfires focused on the “celebrity” angle as the flames threatened the luxurious homes of Hollywood’s elite, distorting the actual picture of the impact the disaster had on the residents. Even the American Red Cross is using Twitter to update information on local disasters (Owyang).

These stories exemplify that Web 2.0 tools are increasingly valued as platforms for social interaction and also as effective tools of *social power*. Twitter and Facebook updates, for the most part, form a micro-sociological gossip network that, like *Seinfeld*, is mostly about nothing. But websites like Twitter, Facebook and even GoogleMaps along with other social networking platforms spontaneously mobilize social action with measurable utilitarian value. They truly possess the power to, well, get things done.

“Spontaneous social action underscores a fundamental difference between *institutional* and *network* power” (Owyang). The distinguishing social architecture of institutions is rigidly vertical status hierarchies. Institutional structures are centralized systems in which power is indefinitely assigned and exercised top-down. By contrast, social networks are horizontal and animated by informal exchanges, not formal commands. “The power dynamic of social networks is not centralized and top-down, but distributed and diffused” (Owyang).

Web 2.0 has certainly revolutionized our generation and triggered profound social transformations including how we interact with one another, how we behave in the workplace and how we engage with the world in general. This is, in fact, a great time for change in our society. The internet has empowered us as individuals to take more control of our lives and organize ourselves as spontaneously as we wish. Core assumptions and conventional truths have been challenged, and will continue to be challenged. Old value systems shaped by long-established institutions are being radically overthrown. Some call this the “power of us” ethos. “Self-reliant and unfettered by the institutional biases of the past, we are increasingly putting faith in our instinctive feelings, sudden insights, intimate convictions and collective intelligence as we confront life’s challenges.”

This revolution has captured the social dynamic of this rupture. Social networking sites, phenomenal platforms, provide powerful examples of how our irrepressible social impulses are seeking spontaneous expression. We are in the process of embracing the unbounded possibilities of social interaction and the invigorating unpredictability of life in all its complexity. Accepting the practical limitations of rational calculations, we are actually realizing that the “consequences of our social interactions can be surprisingly unintended, marvelously unexpected and sometimes unforeseeably tragic.”

These eruptions will surely have sweeping consequences. The profound social transformations expected of the Web 2.0 eruption will not occur without great resistance. Like most revolutions, this, too, will hold out great promise. However, most revolutions are also fraught with great peril, and this will not be an exception.

We have been liberated from the burdens of institutional values and their pressures towards conformity, thanks to social networking sites. We are able to break through social isolation and reach out to the world on our own terms. We can harness the strength of weak ties, both personally and professionally. We can accumulate social capital and gain recognition for our talents and efforts, both individual and collective. We can seek fame and fortune online, and even attain both. In organizations, social networking tools have evolved into powerful platforms for cooperation, collaboration and constructive creativity. Consumers feel empowered in markets and citizens are empowered in democratic participation.

Virtual identities, as we have seen, are constructed as “personal, multifaceted extensions of the self whose online expression can be tremendously liberating.” Social networking sites are remarkably open, candid and uninhibited. Few would argue that the democratization of status in the online world has not been a positive result. Status is attributed more democratically according to measurable facts of performance and merit. Finally, power no longer resides exclusively in established institutions. It is being diffused towards the edges, where individuals are instinctively engaging in their own strategies of social interaction and collective action.



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