

Paradox and Promise: MySpace, Facebook, and the Sociopolitics of Social Networking in the Writing Classroom

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Abstract

This article situates current theoretical, rhetorical, and ethical analyses of the net's most prominent social networking sites, MySpace and Facebook. It also discusses the implications of bringing these web sites into the classroom, comparing how students, teachers, and administrators use (and abuse) these spaces. Both MySpace and Facebook privilege a discourse based on the construction and representation of an identity. Rather than assert unique identities, these sites ask users to label and classify themselves according to many criteria, including age, religion, political leanings, hobbies, and interests. Users can then list others who share these labels or interests and request to "add them as friends." MySpace and Facebook emphasize categories and aspects of popular culture that teenagers find important. They remediate the traditions of high school for the Web and by doing so greatly extend their reach. Many writing instructors wonder how these sites can be used to teach writing. How users represent themselves online could help students understand postmodern logics of identity construction and political engagement. However, there are dangers for teachers who create their own profiles and add their students as "friends." Like chat and email, these forums undercut concepts of more conventional rhetorical spaces. They both contribute to and undermine student and faculty ethos, although students may not appreciate that their profiles might have a lasting negative impact. Despite the public nature of most profiles, users often denounce these "invasions" as blatant violations of their privacy. Perhaps teachers and scholars should work to protect the integrity of these spaces.

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1. Introduction

In October 2007, the Ohio Education Association sent out a memo advising its 131,000 union members to avoid joining social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook and urging teachers to "complete the steps involved in removing their profile" (as cited in *Wildeboer, 2008*, para. 1). While acknowledging that "this advice might seem extreme," the memo claimed that "the dangers of participating in these two sites outweigh the benefits" (para. 1).

As reported in the online publication *eSchool News* ("Teachers Warned," 2007), the union's action came in part as a reaction to an investigation in which *Columbus Dispatch* reporters *Jill Riepenhoff and Jennifer Smith Richards (2007)* had surveyed the profiles of Ohio teachers. Their results were published under the provocative headline, "Teachers' Saucy Web Profiles Risk Jobs." A sidebar, "Hi-Tech Troubles," provided four cautionary tales of teachers who had been

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reprimanded, resigned, or lost their licenses because of email, IM, chat, online game playing, text, blogs, or postings involving students.

The moral of the story, underscored by multiple quotes from teachers and oversight bodies, was clear: electronic media and social networking is perilous terrain for educators. The Ohio union took the argument further by telling its members, “The fact that a student can attempt to contact an OEA member who has a profile on these sites lends itself to the *possible interpretation* of an improper relationship” [italics added] (“[Teachers Warned](#),” 2007, para. 12). By this logic, instructors who occupy virtual spaces are putting themselves and their students at risk. Regardless of their stated intentions, instructors with Facebook or MySpace profiles are indiscreetly inviting students to contact them on a social level, which some think blurs the line between acceptable communication and the actionable offense of “conduct unbecoming” teachers. It’s putting aside that useful dichotomy of “us and them” that so many teachers depend on for their authority in the classroom.

Contrast this attitude with that of information specialists, linguists, librarians, compositionists, rhetoricians, and others who study and embrace Web 2.0. For these researchers, technologies such as Facebook and MySpace are seen as not only essential but almost inevitable for 21st-century education. Take the following 2007 post to the *techrhet* listserv by [Fred Kemp](#), then-Head of the Writing Program at Texas Tech University. The *techrhet* listserv is populated by a multidisciplinary constituency of educators and others interested in writing and technology:

“Social networking,” which is really in its initial stages, will have to be appropriated by conscientious teachers in some fashion. That means we must back off from pushing words at students and instead develop interactive environments that guide students into learning what we hope to have them learn. . . I think the exceptional attractiveness of Internet interaction offers too compelling an alternative to the instructional force-feeding that the classroom has acclimated us to for traditionalists to survive now that the choice is so clear. (para. 2)

Kemp argued that, far from avoiding participation in social networking spaces, faculty should embrace them, and encourage students to join them. Indeed, Kemp pointed out that student initiative will be key—not only desirable but imperative—for an “interactive environment,” because these environments are effective only when students actively write and post. Obviously, if faculty are to “guide” learning, they must be there to guide it, whether that means being physically present in a classroom or virtually represented in online spaces including Facebook or MySpace.

These conflicting stances are the crux of the problem for those who would study such spaces. On the one hand, social networking sites are public, and thus readily available for scholarly study and pedagogical use. On the other, there are subtexts. For example, like chat and email, social networking sites can undercut concepts of standard rhetorical exchanges, since students often post without consideration of the rules of grammar or formal precepts. In addition, these sites do not operate according to normative notions concerning power and sexual hierarchies between adults and youth. Because of this, teachers might undermine their ethos by creating their own profiles and adding their students as “friends.”

Journalists have mined this situation for stories, seemingly reveling in exposing teachers’ naughty Facebook behavior. In an April 28, 2008 piece in the *Washington Post* entitled “When Young Teachers Go Wild on the Web,” staff writer [Ian Shapira](#) described female teachers depicted with uplifted skirts and shirts, or suggestively posed with liquor bottles, or perhaps simply cursing or making rude gestures. Meanwhile, administrators may monitor the sites for evidence of untoward activity by either students or faculty, undercutting the autonomy of faculty and sometimes seeking legal redress against them. An April 2008 post on the National Education Association Rights Watch page by Michael Simpson, general counsel for that organization, pointed to multiple suspensions and terminations of teachers throughout the U.S. for material deemed inappropriate. Although the courts have not decided on such cases, [Simpson \(2008\)](#) writes that schools can discipline employees when their actions outside of work may have an “adverse impact on the school or the teacher’s ability to teach. And it wouldn’t be too difficult to make that showing if the teacher’s blog includes sexually explicit or other inappropriate content and is widely viewed by students” (para. 14). Nor would the First Amendment likely provide protections, given the precedent of a 2004 U.S. Supreme Court ruling upholding San Diego’s firing of “a police officer for posting a sexually explicit video of himself on the Internet. The unanimous Court said that such speech was ‘detrimental to the mission and functions of the employer’” (para. 15).

In such a charged atmosphere, even to study Facebook can entail risk. However, scholars in the computers and composition community are naturally curious about how these sites can be used to teach writing and authorship. These are vibrant rhetorical spaces, in which students make repeated verbal and visual choices. They are a kind of modern agora, replete with digital graffiti. They also serve as performative spaces that might help students understand

the postmodern logics of identity construction. To abandon their study is to forfeit potential insights concerning how technologies foster rhetorical awareness and mediate identity formation. Yet to study them might put scholar-teachers at risk of professional censure.

Determining whether or how teachers, scholars, and students should use Facebook and MySpace brings up many thorny and difficult issues. This article situates current theoretical, rhetorical, and ethical analyses of social networking sites and explores the implications of bringing (or not bringing) these web sites into the classroom by comparing how students, teachers, and administrators use (and abuse) these spaces. We contend that teachers should not try to colonize these spaces, but rather should enact pedagogical practices and theoretical approaches that employ them as a means of teaching students about identity construction and social networking.

2. Where it's at

Have you MySpaced? Do you Facebook? Your students do—as much as eight hours a day. MySpace, founded in 2003 by Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe, and Facebook, founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes, have become two of the most popular sites on the Web. By mid-2009, each site had over 200 million registered users, according to Wikipedia's figures. Similar sites, including Windows Live Spaces and Habbo, had over 100 million users (“[List of Social Networking Sites](#),” 2009). A study by Amanda Lenhart and Mary Madden (2007) for the Pew Internet and American Life project found that almost half the teens who use social networking sites visited them one or more times a day; about a third, one to five times a week.

Both high school and college students use Facebook and MySpace not only to stay in touch with existing friends and make new ones but also to exchange information about classes, parties, concerts, or whatever else interests them. Users of these sites create identities and social networks primarily with text—composing identities by selecting and arranging dozens of labels and filling out form fields. A well-developed Facebook or MySpace page not only gives the facts of a person's life, such as birthday and hometown, but also (and perhaps more importantly) a look at how that person wants to be perceived by his or her peers. Clearly, Facebook and MySpace, along with other social networking sites, have much to offer information technologists, computer and social scientists, and market analysts, and have been studied extensively by such researchers since the rise of the Internet. Rhetoricians and writing instructors have come rather late to the field, armed with different sorts of questions shaped in large measure by theories from composition studies. They are primarily concerned, as Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe (1991) wrote early in the computer epoch, with “assessing ways in which the use of computer technology might shape, for better and worse, their strategies for working with students” (p. 55).

To what extent should writing instructors observe, invade, police, or colonize these social spaces originally designed by and intended for students? Given the ways in which such sites obscure or obviate such distinctions as age and status, and effectively erase the line between private and public life, should faculty establish identities within these spaces? Does their promise as educational tools outweigh their potential social, ethical, and even legal risks? Further, should we serve as our students' keepers, taking the lead of many educators and educational administrators by warning them away from these sites? We are likely well justified in pointing out to our students that these sites encourage a level of frankness that could have negative ramifications for their future. Should we demonstrate for students how easily “anyone on the Internet” can locate and view their profiles?

As rhetoricians concerned with the political implications of textual acts, should we employ social networking sites as models for the ways in which corporate and institutional agendas can infiltrate spaces that are purportedly “free”? Do these corporate-owned and controlled social networks represent an endangered subculture whose autonomy we should fight to protect? Should we encourage students to protect social networking sites from unwanted incursions of potential employers, vindictive administrators, overeager teachers, and police detectives? Even if Facebook and MySpace are the largest mammals in the sea, they might still need saving.

3. Studying social networking

Since the late 1960s, when psychologist Stanley Milgram conducted his “small world experiment,” social networks have received attention from social and computer scientists, as well as information technology specialists (“[Small World Experiment](#),” 2009). Milgram used the U.S. mail to test how many steps it would take to return a letter from random test subjects back to a specific recipient who was unknown to them. He found that the average number of

links to the addressee was 5.5, thus the maxim that everyone in the world is separated by no more than six degrees of separation. The John Guare play of that title followed and was further popularized in 1993 with a film adaptation directed by Fred Schepisi.

Milgram's experiment, notwithstanding its methodological flaws, helped spawn a body of research meant to explore how networks operate. Currently, most social scientists employ a tool known as social network analysis (SNA) to examine user practices. Even before social networking sites with elaborate graphical user interfaces came to the Internet, information scientists used SNA to examine newsgroups (see for example, Chang, Chen, & Chuang, 2002). As surveyed in the seminal volume by Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust (1994), SNA is a tool for investigating the ways in which members of networks interact and concentrates on the extent, strength, and nature of exchanges, or links, among them. Affording a means of understanding a dynamic system over time, SNA also incorporates visual representations, which have increasingly entailed software programs that can map networks even in real time (see, for example, digg labs's swarm at <<http://labs.digg.com/swarm>>).

Motivations for such studies of online social networks have included developing and improving computer network design, improving software, enhancing security and privacy for systems and users, assessing information transmission, and examining impacts of such networking on behavior, identity formation, and social standing (Mislove, Massimiliano Marcon, Krishna P. Grammadi, Peter Druschel, & Bobby Battacharjee, 2007; Lee & Bruckman, 2007; DiMicco & Millen, 2007).

One of the largest SNA studies of social networking sites was carried out by Alan Mislove et al. (2007), who gathered data on over 11 million Flickr, YouTube, LiveJournal, and orkut users who together had established over 328 million links. They found that the networks structure themselves around certain "high degree nodes," that is, users who form many links and are in turn linked to frequently. Their pages are epicenters—places where online users know they will see or be seen by many other users. Other nodes, or clusters of users, orbit around the high degree nodes. Networks are held together by about 10% of the nodes. All users are only a few links away, via the high degree nodes, from one another (that is, the "small world concept" applies). The implication, concluded Mislove et al., was that information introduced through a core node will travel quickly through an entire network (not unlike popular videos on YouTube). This fact not only opens the way for exploitation of the network but also for the maintenance of trust; for the network to be maintained, core users will, ipso facto, be reliable. Those with many "friends" will, if they spread spam or viruses, lose connections and importance as nodes. In effect, social networks can be self-policing, self-correcting systems. They are, in that sense, cybernetic, as they involve feedback loops that lead to a kind of homeostasis.

Terry Mayes and Chris Fowler (2006), in "Learners, Learning Literacy and the Pedagogy of E-Learning," situated social software within the larger conversations of digital literacy and educators' investigations of how learning occurs in terms of cognitive development and situations. Emphasizing the role of relationships of individuals in learning communities, Mayes and Fowler perceived online social spaces as extending and facilitating classroom discourse, and increasing the likelihood that students will learn not only from teachers and texts but from one another. They called for educators to reframe understandings of learners in terms of meaning, relationship, and identity. Similarly, John Lemuel (2006), "a professor at a small liberal-arts college in the Midwest," writing pseudonymously in *The Chronicle of Higher Education Online* about his social networking experiences, argued that "Facebook can be a medium for faculty, staff, even administrators to be in contact with students, and maybe provide a little adult guidance. Individually one faculty Facebooker might not have much influence, but a collective presence could raise the tone and dial down the antics on this increasingly public student venue" (para. 26). That this faculty member chose to opine pseudonymously suggests a degree of ambivalence about "outing" himself as a Facebook user, but the notion that a "collective presence" of "adults" might alter students' online behavior is not unlike that of rhetorical "modeling," which goes on all the time in composition classrooms, where the assumption is that students gain ethos by emulating the practices of a given discourse community.

4. Remediating non-virtual modes

Although online social networking technology might seem new and revolutionary, sites such as Facebook and MySpace are remediating older high school traditions: cruisin', the high school yearbook (or annual), and courtship rituals (love notes, "going steady"). These rituals have always blurred the line between public and private.

"Cruisin'" as a part of American car culture and teen life emerged during the post-World War II economic boom and coincided with mass suburbanization and the rise in automobile ownership. Detroit and California were the hubs

of cruising, with car customization, hot rodding, and rock'n'roll part of the mix, as portrayed most memorably in Tom Wolfe's 1963 *Esquire* piece on custom car maker George Barris. George Lucas's box office hit *American Graffiti* (1973) popularized what had been a marginalized subculture, making it safe for middle-class Baby Boom teens, as did saccharine songs like the Beach Boys' "409," "Little Deuce Coupe," and "Fun, Fun, Fun." While mass culture generally reflected the Anglo communities, Mexican-American and Chicano youth were at the forefront of the movement in its early days, transforming assembly line cars into one-of-a-kind machine-cum-artworks.

Cruising was about public displays of multiple sorts. In some venues, the car itself was the point. Lowriders bumper-to-bumper on Van Nuys Boulevard in California's San Fernando Valley were, according to some cultural histories, re-mediations of the *paseo*, the *Mexicano* custom of parading one's horses replete with intricately tooled harnesses and silverwork saddles. For many who cruised from the 1940s on, the ride was the object of the attention, and drivers' craftsmanship and pride of ownership were judged accordingly. At the same time, the cars were meant to attract admiration and to spark envy and sexual interest.

Even when the car wasn't the focal point, it was the medium of the message, which had to do with freedom, entertainment, romantic and sexual encounters, and status within the cruising community—and beyond. Road antics became the fodder for gossip in school, and vice versa. Much of the point of cruising was to be seen, but it was also to have encounters of various lengths and purposes, both on the road and at spots known to all. Like Walter Benjamin's Neapolitan cityscape, such gathering spots have a communal, porous nature: they serve as a "popular stage" where private/public dramas can be enacted. Authority figures—those, like the policeman in his (appropriately named) cruiser, expected to make a nightly cameo, and others who occasionally turn up, like the older brother out to protect his sister's virtue, the parent fed up with repeated curfew violations—are temporary interlopers to be tolerated or avoided.

One author experienced both suburban and rural versions of cruising in the Northeast (Stamford, Connecticut) and the South (Premont, Texas) between 1969 and 1972. In an era of cheap gas and limited entertainment options aside from a few TV channels, movie houses showing Hollywood films for weeks on end, books, magazines, and comics (no cable, no VCR, no DVD, no Tivo, no satellite yet invented), those who could graduate from bicycles to cars did.

Stamford schools had long been integrated, but cruising enabled whites and blacks who lived south of Interstate 95 to mingle with the primarily white teenagers to the north. That said, most cruising teens were white, and it was more often the economic divide that was bridged when cars full of kids from the Southfield Village low-income housing project rolled north.

In Premont, cruising enabled teens to penetrate, at least once the sun had set, the ethnic divide—Mexicanos living chiefly to the east of route 281, Anglos to the west. The Dairy King was the epicenter of cruising—the place where everyone gravitated; but any random encounter on the aimless grid of town proved the occasion for the various gestures of cruising, as well as for racing.

The other author experienced cruising in the Deep South (Winnfield, Louisiana) between 1993 and 1995. It is still common in Winnfield to see lines of cars full of high school students in their parents' vehicles, slowly sojourning up and down "the strip," occasionally gathering at the one McDonald's in town but seldom leaving the comfort and safety of their cars (or, more likely, pickup trucks).

We have appropriated the term cruising here to refer to the sets of behaviors that teens engaged in when cruising the strip. But, of course, by the mid-1990s, the trope of the Internet as an "information superhighway" had taken hold, and references to cruising almost invariably referred to the activity of navigating networked computer sites. Lexis-Nexis searches of major U.S. publications for phrases such as "cruising the Internet" or "cruising the digital highways" score hundreds of hits, the bulk falling roughly in the 1994-97 period.¹

How far does cruising go as a metaphor? If, indeed, social networking sites basically morph gestures of conventional cruising into the virtual world, shouldn't we see social leveling or mixing represented there? Researcher danah boyd (2007) employed anthropological methods to explore that question. She analyzed "over 10,000 MySpace profiles, clocked over 2,000 hours surfing and observing what happens on MySpace, and formally interviewed 90 teens in 7

¹ We are also aware of other connotations of the term cruising, that is, the homosexual practice of looking for sex, anonymous or otherwise. William Friedkin's controversial 1980 film, *Cruising*, with Al Pacino as a detective on the hunt for a sadistic killer in the gay night scene of New York City, brought popular attention to the transgressive connotations of the word, while simultaneously invoking older meanings of patrolling the streets in a police car.

states with a variety of different backgrounds and demographics” (para. 34). In an online article, boyd argued that “MySpace and Facebook are new representations of the class divide in American youth” (para. 32).

MySpace, boyd said, was initially populated by “20/30-somethings” but then rapidly colonized by bands eager to promote their music, as a site occupied by teens “socially ostracized in school because they are geeks, freaks, or queers,” whom she termed “subaltern teens” (para. 13). Facebook, initially limited only to Harvard students, soon drew other college students. When it opened to high school students in September 2006, observed boyd,

many more high school teens did join, much to the chagrin and horror of college students who had already begun writing about their lack of having HS students on “their” site. Still, even with the rise of high school students, Facebook was framed as being about college. . . In addition to the college framing, the press coverage of MySpace as dangerous and sketchy alienated “good kids.” (para. 7)

boyd argued that these so-called “hegemonic teens” represent primarily the middle and upper middle class, whereas the subaltern teens come from mixed-class or lower class backgrounds. Just as the earlier generation of youth experienced highway cruisin’ differently depending on their economic status and ethnicity, many of the old Facebook users objected to the incursion of younger and less privileged members—members who would likely have much to gain from being part of this bustling social network, establishing relationships with successful college students.

5. Privacy issues—where the virtual meets the physical

High school and underprivileged students may seek membership on Facebook and similar sites for reasons beyond simply wanting to be “cool.” It’s entirely conceivable, for instance, that a high school senior may wish to befriend Facebook users who are currently attending her chosen college, and others might use them to learn how best to prepare themselves for the transition from secondary to higher education. Of course, this “other crowd” might simply want to create their own social networks and enjoy the same benefits enjoyed by the college students, yet our cultural norms still insist that anyone under eighteen years of age is irresponsible and ill-equipped. Much as women were treated in the years before the liberation movement, young people are assumed to be far too naïve to handle themselves in public without careful supervision and control. Minors are not allowed to buy cigarettes, alcohol, or pornography—and, more tellingly, are only held as legally responsible for their own acts when they commit crimes so heinous that they must surely be “tried as adults.” In short, with the interesting exception of acquiring a driver’s license, the privileges of adulthood are almost universally associated with vice; youth must be protected from such wicked indulgences.

At the same time, many of us also feel that we must protect youth from those who would take advantage of their naïveté—the vile and pernicious predator. Although some studies argue that the rate of maltreatment and victimization of children has markedly declined in the U.S. since the mid-1990s (see, for instance, the work of [David Finkelhor and Lisa Jones \[2006\]](#) at the University of New Hampshire’s Crimes Against Children Research Center), the mass media and legislators seem never to weary of warning us that predators stalk the Internet like big bad wolves searching for tasty young children to gobble up. Dateline MSNBC’s *To Catch a Predator* series, in which adult males were caught in sting operations—to the delight of audiences everywhere—was nominated for the “Best Investigative Journalism” and the “Gracie” awards (“[Setting the Record Straight](#),” 2007). MSNBC claimed the show led to 120 convictions, though a controversy surrounds whether the network may have itself broken laws.

Meanwhile, no other content on the Internet seems to arouse more righteous anger and media attention than “kiddie porn.” That child pornography exists on the Web is one of the most common and compelling justifications for increasing the federal government’s role in monitoring and regulating the Internet. Indeed, even professional journalists are so fearful of over-zealous prosecution that they refrain from investigating child pornography cases too closely: “How can journalists report on child pornography when it is a crime to even look at such images?” ([Malek, 2006](#), para. 1). It all begins to sound like the modern equivalent of the Salem witch trials.

The idea that minors warrant special protection from criminals is certainly nothing new. However, what’s fresher is the concern that virtual spaces are somehow more dangerous for young people than physical spaces.

In physical space, the demarcations between “us” and “them” are readily apparent, and minors can, to greater and lesser degrees, control who gains access to their age-specific behaviors. “Don’t talk to strangers” is much harder to practice when a minor is unsure if the person is a lurker with bad intent or a harmless peer. The virtual world must rely largely on mechanical agents to maintain barriers between insiders and outsiders.

Passwords, authentication checks, and secured connections are the most common means of erecting these barriers, but each method ultimately fails because it's often not possible to know the actual identity (much less the motivations) of a user. Facebook and MySpace users are always susceptible to fraudulent representations. Take, for example, the 2006 Missouri case in which a mother and daughter crafted a fictional MySpace profile—16-year-old “Josh Evans”—in order, apparently, to torment one of the daughter's former friends. According to a story in the *Los Angeles Times* by P.j. Huffstutter from November 22, 2007, “Josh” befriended 13-year-old Megan and engaged in an intense online relationship with her for several weeks. When Josh broke up with her, Megan fell into depression and hung herself in her closet. On May 15, 2008, the mother, Lori Drew, was indicted on federal charges for “conspiracy and fraudulently gaining access to someone else's computer” (“Mom Indicted,” 2008). The Associated Press (Deutsch, 2008) reported that according to U.S. Attorney Thomas P. O'Brien, “this was the first time the federal statute on accessing protected computers has been used in a social-networking case” (para. 8).

The media is also rife with stories of students creating faux profiles for their teachers. One victim of such mischief was Tijuana Julian, Dean of Students of Drury University. The “imposter profile” looked quite authentic—even offering a recent photo and degree information. The profile also informed users that Julian was currently “hangin' in my office” (Otto, 2007, para. 3). Needless to say, unscrupulous users can easily create impostor profiles with far more damaging and libelous claims—perhaps hoping that authorities will detect the profile, assume its legitimacy, and drive the unsuspecting victim out of town. Of course, truly guilty parties can also claim that their profiles are the work of impostors, thereby deflecting professional censure for their activities.

What may be as alarming as a criminal, law officer, or employer finding one's Facebook profile is Facebook doing so. As we've seen repeatedly, both Facebook and MySpace (and their parent companies) are far more concerned with profits than privacy. Neither site claims to keep user information confidential; indeed, their profits come from exchanging this data with companies who are exploiting these sites. The dispute that erupted in late 2007 over the introduction of Beacon, a Facebook feature that “advertises” users' Internet activities on their pages, including providing information about purchases, demonstrates that our students' naïveté about the public nature of the site is compounded by Facebook's frequent tendency to, as one digital advertiser put it in a *New York Times* article, get “out over its skis” (Story, 2007, para. 7). In other words, Facebook introduced a feature without adequately informing users about what it would do. In a December 5, 2007 blog post apologizing for mistakes made in the roll out, founder Mark Zuckerberg (2007) wrote, “At first we tried to make it very lightweight so people wouldn't have to touch it for it to work. The problem with our initial approach of making it an opt-out system instead of opt-in was that if someone forgot to decline to share something, Beacon still went ahead and shared it with their friends” (para. 2).

Of course, magazines and newspapers have been selling their subscribers' information for decades. Any teen subscribing to *Seventeen* will undoubtedly be deluged by teen-focused unsolicited mail shortly thereafter. What makes Facebook and MySpace different, however, is that the information they collect is far more extensive and potentially dangerous than an address and phone number on a magazine subscription card. Furthermore, it's probably unclear to many users how likely this information may be exploited commercially, economically, and perhaps even legally. Users feel comfortable revealing all sorts of private information because they think they are among friends. . . . Millions of them, in fact.

In short, before we rush out to defend MySpace and Facebook from the incursions of “outsiders,” we might do well to caution students against the “insiders,” namely the owners and other members of these sites.

A related and less understood aspect of MySpace and Facebook privacy concerns “add-ons,” or applications that work in conjunction with these sites. Users installing such add-ons are asked to click “okay” to long streams of legalese; a mindless click will likely free the company hosting the add-on (and the social networking site) from any litigation over leaked data or irresponsible use of it. Many of these add-ons seem harmless enough; there are dozens to compare individuals' tastes in music or films, for instance, and many more that allow users to battle other members via colorful avatars (vampires, zombies, and so on). One rather interesting 2007 add-on was “Whereaboutz,” an application that broadcasts a user's current geographic location: “Once linked up to your Facebook account, the mobile app will show you any of your friends' status updates on a map. . . You can also browse by who is nearby, and assuming you've got their number handy, you could attempt to meet up with them” (Lowensohn, 2007, para. 1). While such an application might arouse in our minds images of predators and panopticons, the program could also be used by parents to keep better track of their children—“Where are the kids? I'll log on to Facebook and see.” The theoretical implications here between virtual and physical spaces are as fascinating as a William Gibson cyberpunk novel: a tool such as “Whereaboutz” allows parents to use a virtual space to monitor their children's location in physical space.

6. Identity formation

Perhaps one reason why Facebook and MySpace seem so threatening to some people is their ineluctable emphasis on personal identity. For many critics, these sites disregard traditional cultural boundaries between private and public spheres, not only endangering individual users but also the surrounding culture. What does (or what should) it mean to be a citizen of the modern world? What aspects of one's life should be kept personal and what should or must be shared?

Jürgen Habermas (1998), of course, wrote a great deal about this question in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which he claimed that rational-critical debate is only possible in societies whose members enjoy a carefully preserved wall between their private and public lives. If the wall breaks down, so does the possibility of social and cultural critique; without diaries, there are no editorials. A Habermasian approach to social networking sites would likely be concerned with how they demarcate public and private, group and individual. He wrote, "Nonpublic opinions are at work in great numbers, and 'the' public opinion is indeed a fiction" (p. 244). True public opinions are possible only in cases where the "exercise of social power and political domination is effectively subjected to the mandate of democratic publicity" (p. 244). If students seem to place more credence in social networks such as Facebook (or RateMyProfessor.com, for that matter) than the professor's lecture or university brochure, it's precisely because the opinions they find there are (supposedly, at least) unmediated, subject to publicity, and open to frank discussion.

Although there are differences, both MySpace and Facebook privilege a type of discourse based on the construction and representation of personal and shared identities. Rather than assert that everyone is unique, these sites ask users to apply dozens of labels to themselves (religion, hometown, political affiliation, relationship status), and choose favorite books, movies, and bands. These are the sorts of biographical factoids Habermas might call "the refractory results of socialization shocks that have again become subreflective" (p. 245). Users can search for others who share their labels or interests, and request to add them as "friends." Two users on the system can quickly reach others' profiles by cruisin' their friends' networks, and then their friends' friends' networks, and so on. A regular user will soon be part of a network of dozens, hundreds, and even thousands and tens of thousands of friends. The most popular users are hubs for millions of others—swirling vortexes of shared interests and common goals.

What makes MySpace and Facebook special is their emphasis on categories and aspects of popular culture that teenagers find appealing. "Fixing up" one's profile page is similar to the way students once decorated their book covers or Trapper Keeper binders, which had space for photographs of themselves and encouraged students to write their own "story." The many "groups" that coalesce dynamically on the sites are like the clubs and cliques. In short, these sites bring the age-old traditions of high school onto the Web and greatly extend their reach. They have rendered the spontaneous performative aspects of "cruisin'" more concrete, giving them genuine rhetorical heft and a public permanence not manifested by locker room talk, Dairy Queen drive-bys, or hallway flirtations. David Lehre's (2006) *MySpace: The Movie* explored the highly social and stylized nature of the typical teenager's social networking profile. Lehre's movie is satirical and impolitic, but its candid portrayal of the highly fetishized and superficial nature of most MySpace relationships is illuminating.

7. Training to become symbol analysts?

In *Wealth of Nations*, Robert Reich (1991) argued about the necessity of training a generation of "symbol analysts" who will thrive in increasingly complex professional networks. For Reich, the future of the world's economy depends far less on mastering content than building and maintaining robust social networks, where ideas are quickly disseminated and acted on from points scattered all over the world. As their name implies, symbolic analysts thrive in the abstract world of the virtual. He wrote, "Symbolic analysts solve, identify, and broker problems by manipulating symbols. They simplify reality into abstract images that can be rearranged, juggled, experimented with, communicated to other specialists, and then, eventually, transformed back into reality" (p. 178). Reich's claims seem to be verified, at least in part, by the thriving "open source" and "free software" movements, in which programmers, graphic designers, visionaries, and end-users collaborate to build increasingly competitive alternatives to proprietary commercial software. Worthwhile work is increasingly moving from the concrete realm of "routine production" and "in-person services" to the far less tangible realm of the virtual. The waiting and assembly lines are being outmoded by lines of code and fiber optics. "In the new economy," wrote Reich, "mastery of old domains of knowledge isn't nearly enough to guarantee a good income" (p. 182).

Reich is highly critical of standardized, “banking model” type schools, preferring instead programs that focus on four all-important skills: “abstraction, system thinking, experimentation, and collaboration” (p. 229). It is precisely these four skills that are the core of social networking sites. Sites such as Facebook allow students to abstract themselves, selecting from menus and entering keywords to create a virtual identity. From there, they learn about Facebook as a system, discovering how they are connected to others in a giant web of shared interests. They are encouraged to experiment, both in terms of how they decorate and arrange their profile, but also (and more importantly) socially. Naturally, it’s easy enough to create a profile that makes someone seem much wilder and reckless than in “real life.” A January 2007 article in *Boston Magazine* painted an intriguing picture of just such an experimenter—a shy student given the pseudonym “Dan”—whose Web version of himself was “too exaggeratedly different from Real-World Dan” and drew untoward attention from classmates (Alexander, 2007, para. 4). “He [tried] too hard *online*. . . and in doing so accidentally tripped the silent social alarm, crossing the threshold between quietly nonexistent and exploitably dorky” (para. 4).

The last of Reich’s quintessential skills for the symbol analyst, collaboration, is (of course) the bedrock of social networking sites. The whole *point* is to work with others, and nearly every aspect of the interface is based on communicating and sharing with others. Although there are certainly some mean-spirited and hateful profiles on Facebook, it’s strange to call any of them “anti-social.” A true recluse would never create a profile in the first place. Indeed, as we saw in the “Dan” example above, many ordinarily shy and painfully inhibited people become quite expressive in the virtual realm, a fact that any of us who’ve experimented in our classes with online forums, MOOs, and blogs have long known.

Educational researchers are beginning to examine the ways in which social networking might supplement (or even replace?) traditional curriculums. In June 2008, the University of Minnesota publicized what its news service termed a “first-of-its-kind study” revealing the benefits of using social networking sites. In a video and a press release (“First-of-its-kind study,” 2008), Christine Greenhow, a research associate in the university’s Digital Media Center, commented about her then-unpublished findings, based on surveys of usage and attitudes among students at 13 high schools in Midwestern cities. Greenhow said, “What we found was that students using social networking sites are actually practicing the kinds of 21st century skills we want them to develop to be successful today” (para. 5). Their activities led them to engage in openness, sharing, and peer review of both academic and creative work.

8. Opportunities for social engagement

As rhetoricians, we cannot afford to ignore the opportunities for learning, for social and political engagement, that online networking affords. Indeed, as several scholars argued in *Civic Life Online: Learning How Digital Media Can Engage Youth* (Bennett, 2007), it is vital that we recognize and carefully study how children and youth use networks. In the foreword, Mizuko Ito et al. (2007) wrote,

[T]he alchemy between youth and digital media has been distinctive; it disrupts the existing set of power relations between adult authority and youth voice. While many studies of children, youth, and media have for decades stressed the status of young people as competent and full social subjects, digital media increasingly insist that we acknowledge this viewpoint. Not only must we see youth as legitimate social and political actors, but we must also recognize them as potential innovators and drivers of new media change. (p. ix)

In other words, as teachers, we must embrace the paradox embodied by social networking, rather than opt for panic and place yellow police tape around an entire realm that promises to have impacts on the workplace and the polis.

Indeed, as IT researchers Kate Raynes-Goldie and Luke Walker (2007) document in the volume referenced above, online social networks can promote civic engagement among youth who might otherwise be disenfranchised or uninterested in participating in community building. Such functions have emerged relatively quickly. Early on, Facebook groups tended to center on campus-based issues, many of them frivolous or humorous, but students and other users have in the last year or two shifted to more serious purposes, forming Facebook groups for overt political and social reasons. In Spring 2008, Amy Wilson, a student in one author’s Writing about Science and Technology course, blogged about becoming involved in an international environmental action, the Earth Hour, after having been invited to join that group’s Facebook site. Wilson wrote,

Although many teenagers do not watch the news or read a newspaper, they check facebook more than twice a day. By creating groups and spreading the word about this great movement through websites that reach out to adolescents, thousands more young people became involved in an environmental cause they might otherwise have never heard of. (para. 2)

Commenting on that blog post, another student, Kyle Kocarek (2008), wrote:

While we usually think of facebook in terms of “what parties are going on this friday?” we also use it so many more constructive ways without thinking about it. Personally, my friends and I use it a lot to plan our annual Relay For Life walk to collect donations and recruit people to walk with us. I also notice a ton of political groups which is a great way for college kids to get involved politically and to be able to connect with people of similar demographics and political perspectives. (para. 1)

Both students show a sophisticated understanding of the reach and power of Facebook, and recognize it as different from conventional media. They acknowledge its capacity to reach peers who eschew mainstream news sources and provide targeted messages for distinct categories of users. At the same time, they point to their own experience deploying the technology for their own ends—to promote environmental awareness or to raise funds for favorite causes or charities.

We—and our students—are only bound to learn more about how the capacity to form massive linkages among people via the Web transforms the nature of politics. Clay Shirky (2008), in *Here Comes Everybody*, discusses several cases in which social networking sites have been used to organize political actions in places as far-flung and different as the former Soviet republic Belarus, where students staged innocuous flash mob gatherings to highlight—and test the boundaries of—state repressiveness, and Los Angeles County, where some 10,000 students staged a walkout and marched on City Hall, having planned the assembly in part via MySpace. Such powerful displays of what Shirky terms “organizing without organizations” hold both threat and promise. But then, *mutatis mutandum*, we’ve been hearing this about computers from day one.

9. A tool like any other

Fred Turner (2006), in *From Cyberculture to Counterculture*, discusses at length how the history of computer networking is fraught with paradox. For example, DARPA net emerged from the military-industrial complex that 1960s activists rebelled against, but, by the 1990s, the system “had become an emblem of the sort of personal integrity, individualism, and collaborative sociability that so many had claimed the very same establishment was working to destroy” (p. 16). Social networking sites today both serve and subvert capitalistic and political hegemonies, and challenge conventional standards of writing and learning.

In *The Concept of the Political*, legal theorist Carl Schmitt (1996) argued that “the specific political distinction to which political actions can be reduced is that between friend and enemy” (p. 26). For Schmitt, the enemy “need not be morally evil or aesthetically ugly; he need not appear as an economic competitor, and it may even be advantageous to engage with him in business transactions. But he is, nevertheless, the other, the stranger. . . existentially something different and alien” (p. 27). Schmitt’s comments about the possibility of political action seem especially relevant when discussing social networking sites that claim, above all, to help one make friends. When we as educators force ourselves onto Facebook, requiring that students add us to their networks as part of a routine assignment, surely we are “something different and alien” than their other “friends” in the network. Furthermore, when we support administrations that attempt to ban Facebook or MySpace, we are in effect recognizing our own strangeness and otherness and trying our best to destroy a friend network—there is strength in numbers, as it were, and it’s not to our advantage (economic or otherwise) for students to feel too safe—particularly when they make fun of us in public.

Perhaps the people we choose *not* to befriend on Facebook and MySpace are just as significant, if not more so, than those we do. As Schmitt wrote, “The sphere of the political is in the final analysis determined by the real possibility of enmity” (p. 64). If we desire our students to one day wield true political power, we might consider letting them make choices that will one day force them to wield that power. Let them have their friends; let them forge identities by representing their antipathy towards the system and institutions that would ban their favorite sites, or whose members would come flooding into their private spheres like explorers and missionaries into “darkest Africa.” One day they

might face a dour-faced job interviewer who has seen that picture of them slurping bong water, and they might not get the job. They might wonder where the authoritarian regime (i.e., their teacher) was when they needed it.

But, chances are, one of their friends on Facebook will know another place they can apply. And isn't that what friends are for?

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