

# Focus on Facebook: Who Are We Anyway?

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The current media frenzy over Facebook, and our own fascination with it, has motivated many discussions among fellow social scientists, friends and professional colleagues, ultimately leading to research and questions about what makes Facebook so “sticky.”

We find that Facebook shifts identity-making on the Web away from the individual to the collective in a new way, enabling low-maintenance, automatically generated, interaction-based content creation. Participation in Facebook involves playful interactions with “friends” and communication that may be one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many. Facebook users enact multiple identities and relationships through the same site. We believe that Facebook’s appeal reflects a culturally rooted desire for people (Americans in particular) to be connected in a world where disconnection and a value on individuality predominate. Facebook allows people to actively establish and maintain connections with very little overhead.

## What is Facebook?

When Mark Zuckerberg first launched Facebook (<http://Facebook.com>) in 2004, he intended it exclusively as a site where college students could interact with and find friends. In 2005 membership opened to high school students, and finally a year ago, amid considerable controversy, non-college-affiliated adults were permitted to sign up, which they have done in droves.

The 25 and older demographic is Facebook’s fastest-growing segment, and non-student membership has surpassed student membership, with overall membership expanding from 12 million to a staggering 60 million people in the past year (2007).

Facebook describes itself as “a social utility” intended to help people communicate more efficiently with friends, family and coworkers, but the same might be said of email, text messaging

or even the telephone, so what is Facebook really, and how does it differ from some of the other web-based “social utilities”? Facebook is most often compared with MySpace, and many consider MySpace to be Facebook’s greatest competitor, but we would argue that this is mistakenly so. What each of these sites does is fundamentally different. MySpace is a platform for self-representation, self-promotion and content sharing through user-generated content (individualistic), while Facebook is an application platform on which the interactions between individuals through applications create the content (collective). The main overlap between the two is that both platforms allow members to present profiles of themselves, to recruit “friends” to be a part of their social networks and to search for individuals with active profiles. Unlike MySpace, Facebook is not about page content; it is about

social interactions between individuals and groups. These exchanges can take many forms, depending on the applications a particular user chooses to use.

Many Facebook applications are lightweight—some even considered inane. Take, for example, the “Vampire”/“Zombie” applications and various “poke” and “gift-giving” applications that are ubiquitous on Facebook. With these applications, amongst other things, one may interact with friends by virtually “biting,” “poking,” “hugging,” “kissing” or sending a “gift” or “drinks” to them. Most people are time-pressed, with few extra minutes to spare during the day for relationship maintenance, and Facebook offers a lightweight way to keep in touch with people. One can spend seconds on Facebook interactions, or hours. Other applications are intended to help people get to “know” each other better. This category of application is comprised of a wide variety of

applications that shed light on everything from political views to sexual preferences to movie tastes. Online games also play a big part in facilitating social interaction on Facebook. Scrabulous, an online variant of Scrabble, is perhaps one of the favorites among the 25 and older crowd, but there are hundreds of other games to choose from.

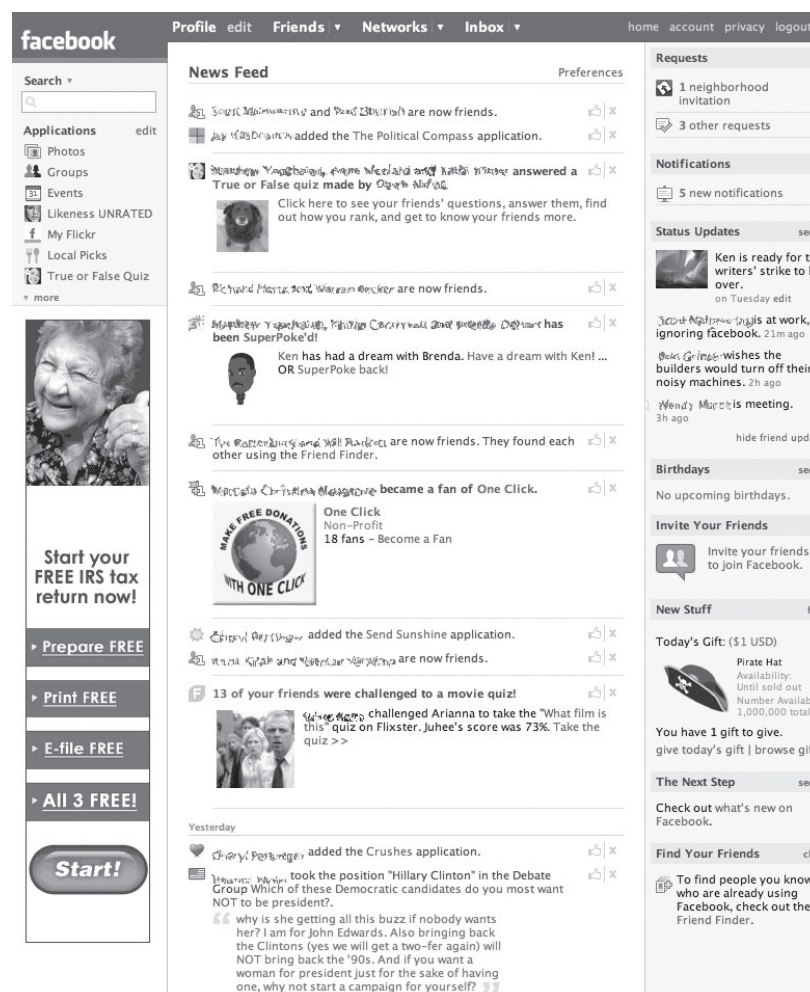
## Identity: We Are Not Simply Who We Say We Are

While Facebook users begin the sign up process by creating a “profile” in which members enter information about themselves, including information about education, interests and musical tastes, this information is often suppressed by the user, or relegated to a part of the profile page that is seldom seen.

The content that comes to the fore of profiles includes interaction summaries that are automatically generated by the profile owner’s own and other “friends” social interactions. The summaries reflect what the profile owner has done, and also other activities within the networks to which they belong (see image left). The home page of a person is all about activities and events happening within that person’s network

Although communication in this framework may be one-to-one (as with email) or one-to-many (as on other social networking websites), it is predominantly many-to-many. The “news-feed” that reports on one’s social interactions goes out to one’s friends and also one’s friends’ friends—people one might not know or ever meet.

A typical Facebook communication and content-generation scenario might look something like this: One receives an invitation to participate in a movie-rating application. The invitation has been sent to many other people as well. The recipient member rates the movies and the results (matches and mismatches) appear in one’s profile page, the pages of friends who had previously taken the quiz, as well as in the news feeds (home pages) of friends who have never taken the quiz. Members participate, watch



The Facebook homepage provides information to you about what your friends and friends of friends are doing. Courtesy ken anderson

## Indian Nations

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to local items on eBay, a commercial sales/auction site.

### Multi-Group Websites

Exceptions to the pattern of strongly independent development of internet sites are provided by native governmental entities, often under the name "Council," that represent a number of related or contiguous smaller groups, villages or bands. One of the most established, extensive unified websites is maintained by the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska (CCTHITA), which represents 26,000 people worldwide. Formed 50 years ago during the southeast Alaskan native rights struggle, the council still speaks out for strength and unity.

Tribes with geographic or other ties but not bonded in governance have been slow to collaborate in creation of multi-group Internet sites. A promising model for the interconnecting process, however, is the effort of the Hopi, Zuni, Apache

and Tohono O'odham of Arizona in the San Pedro Ethnohistory Internet Project, the proof of which appears in a demonstration website [www.cdarc.org/spi/spi.html](http://www.cdarc.org/spi/spi.html).

### Webring and Access

Most essential to convenient access and comparisons for research are the numerous webrings, or portals, that interconnect the web pages maintained by separate American Indian entities. One of the largest and most useful webrings for US groups is Indian Circle, maintained as a public service by the Seminole Tribe of Florida. IndianCircle.com presently links to nearly 40 percent of federally recognized Indian tribes listed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs in the contiguous US, with all regions of the country represented, Plains Tribes prominent and small groups in Oklahoma especially well represented.

Aboriginal Canada Portal provides links to First Nations, Métis and Inuit online resources. The Directory of North American Indian Portal Websites, a privately maintained site, provides a strong listing of Canadian native entities

as well as US groups, all organized linguistically.

### Final Comments

The official and quasi-official virtual world of the American Indian described in this commentary is a considered presentation by a large constituency of contemporary Indians about who they are and what they do. It is in constant flux. Googling tribal names yields continual additions to nations online and, for those long there, filled-out pages and altered content in tune with changing fortunes and needs. As computer use grows "on the rez," I foresee more official catering to local interests and information as well as the extension of closed circuits for tribal members, like storerooms of sensitive knowledge and virtual objects. At the same time, links and webrings will grow, offering more context and access to visitors.

Furthermore, a major trend is the involvement of native people as individuals in virtual worlds where cross-tribal ties are explored, unhampered by official approaches. Far beyond present comments are the burgeoning

American Indian personal and special interest weblogs; commercial and organizational websites; and online forums sponsored by such publications as *Indian Country News*.

While the netscape described in this commentary does not constitute a virtual *Handbook of North American Indians*, steeped in researched detail and relationships, in it we can more than glimpse the tribes today. Formal and market-wise, reflexive and homely, these websites stand, I submit, as the Nations' best versions yet of self-description and self-image for home and world consumption.

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## Facebook

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and are watched. Multiple sets of people engage with other multiple sets of people.

The face that one presents to the world on Facebook is highly dimensioned. One's identity is not characterized by demographic data or other information that one has supplied upon signing up, but by the interactions in which one engages. The static likes and dislikes, education and demographic information one provides is less for "friends" and more to feed the Facebook advertising model.

### All Facebook Friends Are Not Equal

The application-based aspect of Facebook, in contrast to other social networking sites, is important because it allows people to interact with "friends" and groups of friends in specific ways depending on a number of factors: how well the friend is known in

real-time, what relationship with a friend of any sort is desired (eg, a closer bond or a more collegial bond), and a knowledge of what kinds of social interactions a friend might enjoy participating in.

How one interacts with a potential mate is different from how one interacts with one's niece, mother-in-law or boss. These online relationships are created, as much as defined by, the applications chosen and those applications friends decide to add.

For example, a member might add the Vampire application and choose to "bite" a friend or a peer who they think might enjoy the play of "biting" and competing for points as Vampires, but that member probably would not bite her mother-in-law, who might think of vampire biting as a childish.

### Playing with Friends is Fun: We Are Ourselves, Changing

The application-based aspect of Facebook is appealing because it allows a representation of iden-

tity that is fluid. One's identity is not fixed, nor is it wholly self-defined. One's "image" is created by what one does, who one does it with and how it is done; it is constantly in flux. Compared with other social networking applications we have used, Facebook requires little or no maintenance, other than interacting occasionally with friends.

On Facebook life is a game. Although participants can open chat windows or belong to special interest groups of a more serious nature, the daily drivers of Facebook exchanges are games and quizzes. As technology mediates more and more of our daily social exchanges, the forms of our interaction change. Gaming—light, breezy and fun interactions with friends near and far—keeps ties alive without being burdensome.

Interacting through games and having fun online is hardly new; multiple-player online games have been around for a very long time and are immensely popular. What is new about games in the

context of a social interaction website is the centrality of the game for identity creation and relationship maintenance. Virtual gaming allows participants to take on new roles and identities.

Facebook, unlike professional social networking sites or MySpace, is dynamic rather than static; it constantly updates itself, providing an online presence in which one's online identity is not reduced to a list of facts. Facebook may be yet another passing trend, or it may have more staying power—another Google. Time will tell. Meanwhile, Facebook has given us an opportunity to play and learn a little more about ourselves, our friends and social interaction in the age of Internets.

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*When ken anderson isn't throwing sheep on Facebook, he is a senior researcher at Intel in the People and Practices Research Group. ☐*