

Facebook: So Far a Successful Formula for User-Centered Internet Community

“Man is by nature a political animal” -- Aristotle

“The Internet is becoming the town square for the global village of tomorrow.” -- Bill Gates

“People are learning how to use the site and what's OK to share. As time goes on, people will learn what's appropriate, what's safe for them — and learn to share accordingly.” -- Mark Zuckerberg

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Bobby Ramsey was born in 1979 to authors/educators Russell W. and Roberta S. Ramsey in Gainesville, Florida. He enjoyed a nurturing childhood in Albany, Georgia in a loving and scholarly home. He attended [Deerfield-Windsor School](#), where he was active in sports, social life, and academic challenges such as Math Team and Knowledge Bowl.

Bobby enrolled at [St. John's College](#) in Annapolis, Maryland in 1998 and graduated in 2003. Through the Great Books curriculum and discussion format of St. John's, Bobby was immersed in the liberal arts and developed a life-long love of dialogue and philosophical inquiry, which imply and require community. He made a strong group of friends with whom he remains connected both in real life and in the virtual world of Facebook and other sites.

With this paper, Bobby is completing his inaugural course in the [Certificate in Technology and Communication](#) program, offered through the [School of Journalism and Mass Communication](#) of the [University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill](#). He hopes to use 110% of what he learns in the Certificate Program to engage in meaningful virtual community and continue to write original content for internet publication.

UNC Honor Code Pledge:

“I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance while preparing this assignment and I have written this myself.”

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Status Update July, 2008: Facebook is... First in Global Rankings

Facebook, Inc. of Palo Alto, California, is a computer-mediated social networking site (SNS), or, in simpler words, a social utility. Its [Terms of Service](#) state that “this Site is intended solely for users who are thirteen (13) years of age or older, and users of the Site under 18 who are currently in high school or college.”¹ According to the statement of purpose on its [homepage](#), “Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life.” It currently ranks as [the 5th most popular website in the world \(all categories\)](#), behind only the corporate behemoths Yahoo!, Google, YouTube, and Windows Live. It is by far the world's most popular social utility, according to the traffic-monitoring website Alexa.com (2008). It also has a huge interlinked presence with the rest of the internet, with 155,220 other sites reportedly linking to it. And yet, Facebook remains independently-owned and operated, even while competitor MySpace's controlling firm InterMix was acquired by media mogul Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation for \$580 million dollars in mid-2005 (Scott-Joynt 2005).

Facebook's main North American competitors include [MySpace.com](#), the 7th most popular website globally, the older social utility [Friendster.com](#), which was in many ways the forerunner of MySpace, and [Bebo.com](#), which is also highly popular in the U.K. Facebook is rivaled abroad by such native-language and locally-created sites as [Vkontakte.ru](#), [the most popular website in Russia](#), and [Mixi.jp](#), which ranks as [the number 6 website in Japan](#) (Alexa 2008). Facebook is also rivaled abroad by MySpace's international wing, which has created at least 28 country-specific and native-language domains since 2006.

Thesis

It is the position of this paper that Facebook will continue to grow, edging out competitors for even more market share both in North America and abroad, as long as it sticks to the organizing principles that have made it successful, such as its basis in real-world networks and user-friendly ad programs. The site will also need to continue to jettison some of its more insidious tendencies, which will be discussed. Facebook has thus far been able to generate significant ad revenue without entirely overwhelming its users with omnipresent ads or otherwise over-commercializing its interface.

Beacon

This is not to say that there haven't been bumps along the road. In 2006, Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg announced the creation of a new ad service, Beacon, which would allow users to share information on their profiles and News Feeds about [Ebay](#) postings

¹ The opening paragraph of the “Terms of Service” make it clear that Facebook maintains to this day its scholastic origins. It does not simply want more users *per se*. It wants a certain type of user, either minors who are students in a secondary school or college, or else legal adults. By contrast, MySpace defines eligibility simply by age: “[Eligibility: \(c\) you are 14 years of age or older.](#)” Of the two, then, Facebook has the lower age requirement, but MySpace has no stipulation about being in school.

they had made and other commercial activities they had engaged in on at least 40 websites, including [Fandango.com](#), [Blockbuster](#), The New York Times, and Sony Online Entertainment LLC (Hof 2007 and Facebook 2007).

Zuckerberg's creative idea seemed to be to allow *users* to do the legwork on sharing their own commercial activities, rather than only presenting them with top-down ads chosen by Facebook's corporate office. In a sense, this was an extension of the Google Ads idea, which puts ad selection and placement in the hands of individuals who own or operate their own websites. However, in his initial implementation of the program, Zuckerberg seemed to forget the most important word from his statement -- "allow." Beacon was originally introduced as an opt-out system, in which all members were enrolled by default. Only after substantial outcry from Facebook users did Zuckerberg issue an official apology, after which Facebook changed Beacon from an "opt-out" system to an "opt-in" system. A line from Zuckerberg's very sincere apology on the Facebook Blog reads:

Facebook has succeeded so far in part because it gives people control over what and how they share information. This is what makes Facebook a good utility, and in order to be a good feature, Beacon also needs to do the same (Zuckerberg 2007).

The relationship of Facebook to advertising will continue to be debated and honed, with Facebook succeeding insofar as it continues to learn from user feedback. One of the strengths of Facebook is the ability of users to form *ad hoc* groups around causes, some of which have directly influenced the course of development of Facebook itself. One example among many is "[Facebook Users Against Facebook Beacon](#)," which continues to exist and flourish even with the changes made to Beacon in 2007.

Facebook's Strengths

Perhaps Facebook's greatest strength is its intuitive, attractive, and "clean" user interface, which allows users to post basic profile information, exchange greetings on each other's Walls, upload and comment on photographs and other media, and post and comment on links to the larger World Wide Web. Unlike the look and feel of competitors such as MySpace, these features are presented in a clear, visually non-confusing, straightforward manner, with each profile page having the same basic layout and differing only in user-provided content. Users do not feel overwhelmed by gaudy ads, and they are not inundated with dozens of pseudo "friend requests" from spammers and bots, which is unfortunately all too common with some of Facebook's competitors.

Another important strength is Facebook's rich array of Applications ranging from "Causes" to "SuperWall," and from "Books iRead" to "Slayers." "Causes" currently has 18,906,911 active monthly users, according to Facebook's [Application Directory](#). Whether it be through giving "gifts," promoting social causes, or participating in diverse types of games and diversions, Facebook's applications embrace users' interests and imaginations and always

encourage more social interaction and adding more friends. Users always have the ability to accept or deny invitations to add an Application.

Facebook has also had great relative success in keeping out fake profiles and pseudo-users which are really scripts of code. These impersonal creations have plagued MySpace and other competitors and can lead users to mistrust those sites. Jeff Ginger argues that Facebook has been able to earn a high degree of user trust through its strong basis in real-world “networks” such as colleges and universities, high schools, workplaces, and geographical regions, and that this organizing principle has been the root of its relative success in keeping out unwanted, impersonal intrusions (2008:17).

Ivy League Origins, or Social Darwinism?

Facebook was founded in February 2004 by Harvard University sophomore Mark Zuckerberg as “the facebook.” The name was taken from “the sheets of paper distributed to [entering Harvard] freshmen, profiling students and staff” (Phillips 2007). Its original hostname was www.thefacebook.com, which still redirects to the site. Zuckerberg, an amateur computer programmer and psychology major, was interested in harnessing computer technology to satisfy social needs among the Harvard student population. He had already worked on projects called “Coursematch,” which allowed students to view others in their major field of study, and also the more controversial “Facemash,” which allowed users to rate the comparative physical attractiveness of other students.

According to several sources, Facemash got Zuckerberg into serious trouble with the Harvard administration, as he violated students' privacy by illicitly using identification photos taken from the networks of Harvard's Kirkland, Eliot, and Lowell residential houses. (CollegeBars 2008, Goldstein 2007, and “M*A*S*H* 2003). The story is that Zuckerberg lost his college internet connection and was placed on a disciplinary probation for hacking into the websites of these residential houses to obtain student photos without student or college permission. The following is an alleged post by Zuckerberg to a Harvard message board on the evening of October 28, 2003:

I'm a little intoxicated, not gonna lie. So what if it's not even 10pm and it's a Tuesday night? What? The Kirkland facebook is open on my computer desktop and some of these people have pretty horrendous facebook pics. I almost want to put some of these faces next to pictures of farm animals and have people vote on which is more attractive. It's not such a great idea and probably not even funny, but Billy comes up with the idea of comparing two people from the facebook, and only sometimes putting a farm animal in there. Good call Mr. Olson! I think he's onto something (College Bars 2008).

Of course, the idea of placing two people's pictures side-by-side and clicking on who is more physically attractive did not completely die with Facemash. It can currently be found in the popular Facebook applications “[Social Profile](#)” and “Compare People,” where two members'

profile pictures at a time are juxtaposed with a wide array of comparison questions such as “Who is more trustworthy?,” “Who is more intelligent?,” “Who is more powerful?,” and “Who has a better body?” Members are ranked according to an algorithm that calculates and interprets users' votes. Users are even given the ability to write in their own reason for voting a person as more attractive. Some of these write-ins contain off-color and sexually explicit language, and are not always deleted by Facebook staff.

MSN Encarta says the following about [Social Darwinism](#): “The term 'social Darwinist' is applied loosely to anyone who interprets human society primarily in terms of biology, struggle, competition, or natural law (a philosophy based on what are considered the permanent characteristics of human nature). What Zuckerberg may have had in mind with Facemash was simply a fun – if not entirely tasteful – way to rate and comment on students' appearances. But his personal statements likening students' faces to farm animals should be troubling to those who advocate openness and tolerance in cyberspace. This tendency to judge people caustically on the basis of unchangeable attributes such as their face could be seen as part of a sophomoric and darker side of Facebook.

The Harvard Crimson Staff (2003) had this to say about Facemash:

Witness the glory, the range of Ivy-League neuroses soothed by this simple electronic formula: We Harvard students could indulge our fondness for judging those around us on superficial criteria without ever having to face any of the judged in person. On the “facemash” website, we were all masters of our own domains of rejection and approval...

For a moment, the possibilities seemed endless. Why not expand the system to a more comprehensive array of superficial attributes by which to judge our peers? Facemash.com could do wonders for the campus hermit's pained heart, but how much more hypercritical fun could be had with GPA-Mash.com, Parents'-Income-Mash.com and Elite-Summer-I-Banking-Internship-Mash.com!

In the end, the Crimson Staff applauded the Harvard administration and community for “quickly and rightly condemn[ing] the facemash as hurtful and demeaning,” as well as illegal. From its inception, then, Facebook has reflected both the virtues and some of the vices of the collegiate community that spawned it.

Zuckerberg should be celebrated for his creativity in combining computer programming with social networking. He has certainly been rewarded financially. He will perhaps go down in history as one of the creative geniuses and self-made [billionaires](#), like Bill Gates, who equipped the masses with a new and useful form of technology, and did so with little or no formal college education (Forbes 2008). In Forbes' 2008 list of “The World's Billionaires,” Zuckerberg, 23, is listed at #785, with an estimated net worth of 1.5 billion dollars, a fortune described as “Self Made,” and an educational status that reads, “Harvard, Drop Out.” He is also featured in a Forbes [video](#) titled “The Youngest Billionaire,” in which the net worth of Facebook, Inc. is

estimated at about 5 billion dollars. The video's narrator rejects the proposed valuation of 15 billion dollars as unrealistic and also suggests that Zuckerberg should sell quickly in case Facebook is a passing fad.

Though they have been highly successful thus far, Zuckerberg and Facebook should do everything they can to continue to live up to their admirable motto: “Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life.” This should include staying away from practices that either violate users' privacy or subject users to “hurtful and demeaning” comparisons and judgments. This will go a long way towards eliminating the negative stereotype of Facebook as “hegemonic” or elitist – which we will explore more deeply momentarily -- and will do much to ensure user satisfaction in the coming years (boyd 2007).

Continued History and International Expansion

According to Sarah Phillips' “A Brief History of Facebook,” within 24 hours of the site's launch, “1,200 Harvard students had signed up, and after one month, over half of the undergraduate population had a profile.” The network was then offered to other Boston universities, then to all Ivy League colleges, and over time to all colleges and universities, both in the U.S. and Britain. In late 2005 the site was moved to its current hostname (www.facebook.com), which was purchased for \$200,000.

In its early days, Facebook required people registering as members to provide a valid school email address (ending in .edu). This requirement was lifted in late 2006, when Facebook was opened to the general public (Phillips 2007). The site quickly saw the addition of millions of new members, including both younger users from high schools and older users who were college graduates and working professionals. By roughly June 2007, Facebook had begun to reach “saturation” levels in North America, and it began to focus its efforts on expanding abroad, as well as continuing to chip away at MySpace's lead domestically. By April 2008 Facebook had surpassed MySpace in the total number of unique monthly visitors, and by June 2008 “it attracted 132.1 million unique visitors, compared to MySpace, which attracted 117.6 million” (Comscore 2008).

But the truly fascinating statistics from the traffic-monitoring website [Comscore](http://www.comscore.com) are those which measure the increase of Facebook's unique visitors in other world regions outside of North America in the past year. Between June 2007 and June 2008 Facebook saw only a 38% increase of unique monthly visitors in North America, compared to an astounding 303% increase in Europe, 458% in Asia Pacific, 403% in Middle East-Africa, and an unbelievable 1055% in Latin America. Jack Flanagan, Comscore's Executive Vice-President, said “By increasing the site's relevance to local markets through local language interface translation, the site is now competing strongly or even capturing the lead in several markets where it had a relatively minor presence just a year ago” (Comscore 2008).

MySpace has worked hard to keep up internationally, opening at least 28 distinct country-specific domains such as MySpace Australia (au.myspace.com) and MySpace Mexico

(mx.myspace.com) (which, of course, opens in Spanish). These sites feature carefully tailored, country-specific News, Music, Videos, and People of interest to the users from each particular nation. While MySpace has hired professional translators and created distinct sites for different countries, Facebook has relied more on user-submitted translations, through an Application called “Translation,” and Facebook has not fragmented its original domain into multiple country-specific domains (Eldon 2008).

The Importance of Networks

Though it hasn't devoted energy at the international level to becoming country-specific like MySpace, Facebook has never entirely left its roots in modular, local, real-world networks, and I assume it will continue this practice as it expands abroad, simply incorporating the local networks that international users from each country will supply. Facebook users who are minors are required to be attending a school or college, and all users are still organized according to a broad system of overlapping networks – including mostly colleges and universities, high schools, workplaces, and geographical regions. Members type in or select from a list their real-world affiliations when they create their profiles, and are then given the opportunity to add friends primarily from these networks (as well as friends of friends). A member's networks determine which people will appear to the right of their profile page as “People You May Know,” who they are then encouraged to add as friends. This gives Facebook a kind of personalization and feeling of safety and familiarity that is absent from its competitors.

On MySpace, if a member wants to “Browse People,” they can narrow down the tens of millions of profiles that appear only by entering impersonal information such as “Postal Code,” and specifying members who live 5, 10, 20, 50, 100, or 250 miles from that postal code, or by checking boxes that specify a desired relationship status, ethnicity, age, education level, etc. This is a more abstract form of friend-finding, and has no basis in pre-existing real-world networks.

Jeff Ginger conducted two extensive surveys of Facebook users in the undergraduate student population of the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign in May 2006 and May 2007. Using the findings from these surveys, Ginger argues in his Masters paper that the real-world network organization of Facebook gives it a higher level of trustworthiness among users, and a closer correspondence to the offline world in terms of what they will share about themselves (2008: 78). He says that users tend to share roughly the same level of detail about their lives, through Status Updates, personal pictures they post, etc., that they would share with real-world friends.

Further Comparison and Contrast with MySpace: Different User Cultures?

Footnoted by Jeff Ginger (2008) is a fascinating quotation from the SNS critic and student of youth culture, danah boyd:

The look and feel of MySpace resonates far better with subaltern communities than it does with the upwardly mobile hegemonic teens. (2007a)

Intrigued by the meaning of this statement, I found the term “subaltern” on Dictionary.com:

subaltern (adj.): –adjective

1. lower in rank
2. British Military. Noting a commissioned officer below the rank of captain.
3. Logic. (in Aristotelian logic) denoting the relation of a particular proposition to a universal having the same subject, predicate, and quality.

boyd is saying that the real difference between Facebook and MySpace is not a difference in the target age-group, nor even in aesthetic preference, but in social class and cultural values. Specifically, among American youth, Facebook (for boyd) is the home of the upwardly-mobile sons and daughters of primarily white, middle-class, college-educated professionals, who conform to the “dominant high school popularity paradigm.” boyd calls this the “hegemonic youth.”

MySpace is, for boyd, home to what she calls the “subaltern youth”: “Latino/Hispanic teens, immigrant teens, 'burnouts,' 'alternative kids,' ... punks, emos, goths, gangstas, queer kids, and other kids who didn't play into the dominant high school popularity paradigm.” I admit I've noticed something like this in my three or four years of personal experience with both Facebook and MySpace as well. In particular, I've encountered many more minority users on MySpace than on Facebook. I've also seen many more enlisted soldiers and sailors on MySpace, as opposed to college-degreed professionals on Facebook. And I can completely confirm the attraction of MySpace to “punks, emos, goths,” and other young people who wish to express themselves in an artistic manner that is not quite possible on the standardized Facebook (boyd 2007a).

boyd begins her essay by discussing the common theory that MySpace is targeted to, and popular among, high school students, while Facebook is so among college students – in short, the theory that what distinguishes the two sites is mainly *age difference*. She argues that this age distinction is partly true but not sufficient to describe all the data. One problem with it is that age difference is only a recent historical trend, at least for MySpace. MySpace, she argues, was primarily used by “20/30-somethings” when it was first released. Then, as musical bands created profiles and starting posting their music, the age gradually decreased. By the end of 2004, more and more teens starting using MySpace, and by 2005 it was the “in thing” for teens (boyd 2007a).

Facebook, however, has a history that is compatible with the “different target age-group” theory. It was originally for college students only. When it was opened to high school students around 2005, it was first by invitation, so college students tended to invite only the high school students they preferred or favored. This led to the perception that Facebook “was... the 'cool' thing that college students did.” Giving further advantage to Facebook, boyd argues, was the extensive negative press coverage of MySpace that occurred around 2005 to 2006. She says “the

press coverage of MySpace as dangerous and sketchy alienated 'good' kids. Facebook seemed to provide an ideal alternative. Parents weren't nearly as terrified of Facebook because it seemed 'safe' thanks to the network-driven structure” (boyd 2007a).

Facebook and MySpace, boyd concludes, reflect voluntary participation in a social network that perpetuates very distinct cultural values. It is something like the difference between the cultures of an elite restaurant and a Burger King. And it's not just about money. The divide, she says, is not so much about mere income or net worth. boyd says, “[Class divisions in America] have more to do with social networks..., social capital, cultural capital, and attitudes than income.” (2007a).

boyd points out that when the U.S. military blocked deployed soldiers' access to MySpace, they originally did not block Facebook. She argues that a contributing factor may be that MySpace is more popular among enlisted soldiers, whose highest level of educational attainment is often high school graduation, while Facebook is more popular among officers, who are college-educated and are typically in a better position to influence policy decisions such as internet use. It is this social status and power that come with a college education that boyd is presumably referring to when she uses the term “hegemonic” to describe the Facebook culture.

I see some merit in boyd's argument. I can attest from my own experience that the friends I have on MySpace are much more likely to be graduates of a high school or community college, and are more likely to be working non-professional jobs. My Facebook friends are far more likely to be college graduates and people working in professions. However, another fact serves as a serious counterargument to boyd's position. Facebook, the supposedly “hegemonic” site, is still independently owned and operated as a relatively small company whose CEO created it with help from fellow students in his college dorm room! MySpace, boyd's “subaltern” community, is owned and operated by a global news behemoth (News Corporation) that acquired it as part of a calculated strategy to remain profitable in the internet world! So I take boyd's argument to show that there are some pronounced cultural differences between the two sites, but I conclude that in no way is one more “hegemonic” than the other.

Comparative Aesthetics

MySpace has a flashy interface. On any user's profile page, one is likely to find mood-status emoticons that use bright, colorful animations such as eyes popping out of their heads. MySpace profile pages are more likely to have multi-colored, animated backgrounds, music embedded in the page, and other more lively, attention-getting features than Facebook. In my experience, MySpace profiles are also more likely to be postered with photoshopped pictures of body builders, models, or celebrities with other people's heads pasted onto their bodies. Profiles often feature pictures of action movie heroes fighting or flexing their muscles, or scantily clad female models in provocative poses. Other common themes are neon-colored pictures of modified street-racing cars and dark-colored, gothic images of “fallen angels,” vampires, and the like. There is a pronounced aesthetic difference between the two sites.

For a long time MySpace's most prominent feature was a “Mood” bar where the user is allowed to select an adjective, ranging from “Accomplished” to “Worried,” to describe their current mood. More recently a Facebook-mimicking “Status” bar has been added.

Facebook's user interface is cleaner and more streamlined. The profile colors, layout, and structure are simple and standardized for every user. In short, Facebook users do not get to design their own profile pages using HTML or CSS. Even with the addition of hundreds of Applications to the system, Facebook remains a digital plain Jane compared to MySpace.

Comparative Culture

Much has been written about a “digital divide” between internet users and non-internet-users, but these observations about the differences between Facebook and MySpace point to a digital divide among internet users themselves. Take the military for example. Certainly a military ban on MySpace that doesn't extend to Facebook seems unfair, as there is nothing inherently more serious or urgent about Facebook communications than those on MySpace. It is possible that officers receive more training in the art of not giving away important information such as troop location in personal communications, but they can still make mistakes.

One counterargument may be that MySpace typically requires more bandwidth, has a slower loading time, and may clog lines of communications. But the military is certainly aware of the decrease in morale that could result from enlisted soldiers being unable to communicate with friends and families, especially if they are aware of officers enjoying that privilege at the same time.

Some people, myself included, somewhat bridge this gap, having accounts on both sites. But I do tend to spend much more time and energy on Facebook, for two reasons. First, I have more friends who use Facebook on a regular basis, posting both thoughts and updates as well as notices about upcoming events and activities that are important to me. Second, at this point in time the ability to read and write content – mostly using text – is of higher value to me than being able to manipulate the design of my profile page using HTML or CSS. But this last priority may well change when I begin my next course in the Certificate in Technology and Communication program, [JOMC 712: Visual Communication and Web Design](#).

Conclusion

Facebook has a rich history and a promising future. From its origins in Harvard's Kirkland residential hall, to its expansion to high school students and working professionals, to its competition for overseas users, Facebook has sought to remain true to its mission statement: “Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life.”

The Beacon advertising program was originally designed as a way to place ad content selection and placement in users' hands. Its initial implementation left something to be desired, and posed a serious privacy threat to millions of users. But through the creation of groups

protesting Beacon, users were able to “talk back” to Zuckerberg's company. Zuckerberg showed both good judgment and humility in publicly apologizing about the opt-out manner in which Beacon had been presented, and subsequently changing it.

Facebook has been rivaled since its inception by MySpace, which allows users more creative control over the design elements of their profiles. There are also some pronounced cultural differences between users of the two sites. Facebook, unlike MySpace, has remained independently-owned and operated, and has exercised great creativity in developing hundreds of Applications, which all tend to engage the imaginations of users in various ways and also promote socialization and play. MySpace has now fallen into the role of having to “borrow” Facebook's more successful elements, such as these Applications and Status Updates, in order to remain relevant and competitive.

One of Facebook's greatest strengths is its modular, real-world network structure, which has caused it to be perceived as “safer” and more trustworthy by its users, who are subsequently more likely to share their lives to roughly the same degree as they would offline (Ginger 2008:17). It is the conclusion of this paper that Facebook's hopes for future success lie in its continual reliance on pre-existing real-world relationships, as well as finding ways to place ad-selection and placement in the hands of users. Facebook, under Zuckerberg's leadership, has shown a healthy and promising ability to receive and respond to feedback and criticism from its users regarding ads, design features, and just about everything else it has done in its fledgling history. If it continues to allow its users to “talk back” and participate meaningfully in its development, Facebook has a virtually unlimited future and represents the very cutting edge of a truly democratic, user-centered online community.

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