

The high priestess of internet friendship

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In January 2003, Danah Boyd moved to San Francisco just as a new internet phenomenon was taking off: online social networking sites. They were virtual meeting places where people could log on to their computer, meet friends and talk. San Francisco was at the heart of this boom. Boyd, who had studied how internet users represent themselves to others online for her masters degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was intrigued. She went into cafes in the city's Mission and SoMa districts, where people were sitting chatting on their laptops, and asked why they used these new sites. She published her findings on her blog and they became the basis for the PhD she started later that year at the University of California at Berkeley.

Boyd was monitoring the social network sites in 2003 around the time a new site called **MySpace** was launched. Since then, MySpace has attracted more than 116 million registered members, cementing online social networks as a global cultural phenomenon and as big business. Around the globe, it's thought more than 250 million people now regularly use an online social network site. Last year, Rupert Murdoch paid \$580m for MySpace. This month, Google paid \$1.65bn for YouTube, another networking site where people post home-made video clips, while **Facebook**, a popular service aimed originally at college students, is currently attracting bids of close to \$1bn.

Through her observations, Boyd has become one of the chief thinkers of the MySpace age. Her work tells us about the people who inhabit this new world, what they do there, and why. Boyd says online social networks have become a vital space for young people to express themselves and build their personal identities. While adults worry about the culture and dangers their children are exposed to on the internet, she says that what parents think children do online and what they are actually doing is very different. She defends a technology that has repercussions far beyond teenagers and could change the way all of us order our world, interact with each other, get information and do business.

"[Talking to people online] was so empowering for me as a kid, as a teen," Boyd said recently when I visited her small white-stuccoed home near Venice Beach in Los Angeles. Boyd is 28 and has blonde spiky hair, brown eyes, rings on her toes, and today was wearing an orange T-Shirt that asked, Got Attitude? She speaks in a lively high-pitched voice that grows even more excitable when she talks about her all-consuming passion: social networks. She had just moved to LA to take up a one-year post at the University of Southern California, where she will study technology's impact on society. "I am what I am because of what I have done online," she said as she sat cross-legged amid the clutter of her move, cradling her beloved Apple Mac laptop. "I want teens today to have the same power."

Boyd grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania. The internet was a connection to the world outside. When she was 17, she started a website of feminist song lyrics on the school computer and struck up friendships with some of the high school students who sent e-mails to her. She was contacted by one girl who said her parents were cutting her. Boyd tried to get her to seek help but one day the messages stopped. Boyd says she's pretty sure the girl killed herself. "These were kids who were having fights with their parents... nasty shit."

While MySpace and Facebook are a new phenomenon, many of the links that connect each of us with our family, friends and colleagues have been set down for years in our address books or our e-mail inboxes. In 1997 a new website, sixdegrees.com, began to map the connections. The theory was that users could see who was connected to whom and then use a friend's introduction to get a job or a date. Sixdegrees.com closed after a few years, but another site, Friendster.com, launched in 2002 and fared better. As well as showing a photograph of yourself, you could collect electronic links to your friends' pages on your Friendster page and leave messages for your new circle of "friendsters" when you visited their home pages.

"It hit me that the way people interacted on the internet was very random and anonymous," said Jonathan Abrams, Friendster's creator, who was then a 33-year-old software engineer from Toronto. "We interacted as if we were strangers. I wanted to bring the real-life social context that people have offline to the online world."

Initially, Friendster was used for socialising and dating by young professionals in San Francisco. Its popularity spread among Silicon Valley computer programmers, the New York gay community and fans of the Burning Man festival who used it to keep in touch with people they'd met at the annual event in the Nevada Desert. "Freaks, geeks

and queers all invaded Friendster in the early days and they made certain that all of their friends were there," Boyd wrote this year on her blog.

As more communities joined, Boyd noticed new and unexpected behaviour. Some people - nicknamed "friendster whores" - competed to see who could gather the longest lists of friends. Some users - known as "fakesters" - registered under pseudonyms such as Ali G, LSD or Homer Simpson. This behaviour was playful and experimental. People were exploring their new world and testing the limits of its technology and rules. Boyd saw that the users were also trying to improve communication. You couldn't really do much with your Friendster page beyond what the rigid template allowed you to do, so people began to devise new ways of saying something about themselves. Gathering hundreds of friends signalled sociability or importance, while you could declare a lot about your interests and meet people with similar interests by linking to LSD, for example.

In Boyd's opinion, this was healthy behaviour, but it was not what Friendster wanted on its site and Abrams began to delete the fakester profiles. Following the clampdown, many users left. They were also put off by Friendster's slow technology, which was struggling to cope with the increase in traffic. Some people went back to using e-mail, forsaking online social networks altogether. Others switched to rival websites, the most significant being MySpace.

MySpace was founded by Chris DeWolfe, now 40, and Tom Anderson, 30, who had been involved in internet businesses in Santa Monica. They were getting "antsy" about doing something new, especially in social networks, they told me, and thought they could get away from the pre-programmed "box" that Friendster locked users into and instead let people "really open up and do all sorts of things with their profiles".

"Our site worked," said DeWolfe. "You could actually log on, surf, customise your web pages and really be creative."

In contrast to Friendster, MySpace encouraged people to put up wacky art or even pipe music on to their pages. Music, and the culture around it, became an important part of the site. Most fakesters and other group characters were allowed. Bands and movie stars could all be your friends on MySpace. To get access to Friendster you had to be a member, but anyone could go on to MySpace and browse through the profiles. Friendster enforced an age limit of 18, MySpace lowered its age limit successively from 18 to 16 to 14, reflecting the growing reality that, while social networks originally centred on twenty- or thirtysomething users, they were becoming hugely popular among teenagers. As Friendster fell back, MySpace became the leading social network site, its millions of pages a cacophony of teenage self-declarations, friends' testimonials, flirting, provocation, scrawls, art and music.

As MySpace expanded, other sites also took off. Some maintained a less chaotic air, such as Bebo, which launched officially as a social network in July 2005 and today has 27 million members. Orkut gathered a loyal following in Brazil and has spread to India. QQ, in China, has more than 78 million users. Japan has a site called Mixi. Cyworld in South Korea has about 19 million members, or more than a third of the population, and opened in the US this autumn. Other sites focused on building networks for specific social groups. LinkedIn.com helps business executives find people who could offer them a better job. Facebook was started in February 2004 by a then 19-year-old Harvard University undergraduate who wanted to put the student yearbook directory online. Today it has 10 million registered users and last month opened to anybody with an e-mail address. BlackPlanet appealed to African American users, MiGente for Latinos. (Many people who use online social networks are often registered on more than one site.)

As Boyd watched these millions jump on to the networks, she began to develop clearer ideas about what deeper purpose the sites served. A large number of members were obviously still using them as a tool to meet new people. But while some were interested in extending their social network, most were not doing that at all. Instead, they were using it to reinforce existing relations with the group of friends they already had from their offline lives. For them, MySpace had become an electronic version of the local mall or park, the place they went to with their friends when they just wanted to hang out.

"When I have to explain it to parents, I say it is the place kids rush to when the bell goes," said Boyd.

This analogy may be familiar to generations of parents whose children have returned from school and immediately picked up the telephone to talk endlessly to the very people they've just spent the day with. Yet the need for such a place is even more acute today, according to Boyd, as traditional real-world public spaces have disappeared or have been declared out- of-bounds by worried parents.

"These sites act as digital public spaces, replacing the malls and parks that most of us took for granted when we were growing up," said Boyd. "They are no longer accessible. So the kids have gone virtual."

Many of the personal messages on MySpace are "Hi," and "Hi back," rarely anything more elaborate than that. Boyd found teenagers were logging in each day for a few minutes at a time, checking their messages, seeing whether friends had made changes to their profiles, and leaving their own messages. It is what Cory Doctorow, a prominent

technology blogger I spoke to in Los Angeles, explained as “simple grooming exercises” - in the same way that other primates groom each other to reinforce their relationships.

Boyd was interested in what lay behind the explosion of self-expression on the sites. These included poems and lists of favourite bands and movies. Users also posted songs, video clips or photographs, often of themselves. It was one of the surprising aspects of the social networks that people were ready to express themselves so creatively and in such a public fashion. A survey last year by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 35 per cent of all internet users in the US, or 48 million people, have generated content and posted it to the web to share with other users. (The survey also found that poorer people were more likely to do this than richer people).

“It has become about sharing content,” said Michael Birch, the British founder of Bebo. “Music has worked well. The thing that has really happened is video. People are just going out there and making funny videos. At the moment one of the popular ones is a rap song about tea.”

The networks have become a venue for new art forms, some more interesting than others. YouTube is a site where users post homemade short videos for their friends to see. It started 18 months ago and since then has become the mass-market rival to MySpace: it says 100 million videos are watched each day. On YouTube, you can see two boys reinterpret the Pokemon theme tune, or a six-minute retelling of *The Shining*, this time with a happy ending, or a compact splicing-together of *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars*. The creative urge goes beyond video. On *Second Life*, a 3-D online networking game, one member has recreated the whole of the city of Dublin for other members to see - including cafes, squares, bookshops and streets.

What is going on? The willingness to express oneself in public seems to mark a generational shift in attitudes to privacy. Younger generations raised on the internet have fewer qualms about revealing their secrets in public. “This is not happening in isolation,” said Judith Donath of the MIT Media Lab in Boston. “They are arising in an era of reality TV and Paris Hilton, when one of the metrics of success is how much attention you get regardless of for what.”

Part of it is the quest for celebrity. They want to be discovered, and the sites have created new stars such as Christine Dolce, aka ForBidden, a MySpace sex symbol, and Lonelygirl15, a young girl who posted her video diary from her bedroom on YouTube, and last month caused a storm in cyberspace when she was revealed as a fake played by a New Zealand actress. These arrivistes have taken their place alongside real world celebrities such as Bjork, Kiefer Sutherland, Madonna and Billy Bragg, who have migrated into the social networking arena and opened up MySpace profiles so they can be “friends” with their fans.

But apart from a few intense self-promoters, most people, Boyd found, were using the sites to present themselves to a small group of friends and get their recognition and feedback. The sites are an opportunity to define in public who they are. By providing an audience, and the tools to interact with that audience, the social networks are satisfying that need. Boyd calls this behaviour “identity production” and, employing a favourite phrase of hers, says that young people are trying to “write themselves into being”. The MySpace page is like an online version of a teenager’s or student’s bedroom wall. “They are tuning into an audience,” said Fred Stutzman of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who studies student behaviour on Facebook. “One of the things students do at college is they test out identities. Maybe that is one new thing we are seeing now - more rapid changes of identity. Online you get feedback and you can change at a moment’s notice.”

Since the social networks launched, a newer generation of sites has emerged that on the surface seems to be about users doing something different but which are fundamentally social and have the attributes of networking sites - creating personal content and sharing it publicly with others.

On Flickr, a site bought by Yahoo in 2005, members show off their home photographs. On del.icio.us, also bought by Yahoo a year ago and which has a million members, people share their favourite online bookmarks and internet searches so that other people can use them. On Digg, users post noteworthy news stories, compare them and vote on them. Even Wikipedia, ostensibly about millions of ordinary volunteers building a free online encyclopedia, has aspects of belonging to a community of like-minded people.

The dynamics of social networks are evident in some of the multiplayer online games, such as *World of Warcraft*, owned by Vivendi, where players inhabit characters in an animated world of orcs, dwarves and dragons. Launched in November 2004, by May it said it had 6.5 million members. “It is ultimately social,” said Alice Taylor, 35, who works on digital content for the BBC in Los Angeles and as part of her job researches online games. She plays *World of Warcraft* under the name Crystaltips, and writes an online gaming blog.

The social networks are spreading into business. Companies are using new types of software to map their organisations electronically. By analysing who is working on what or who is sending e-mails to whom they can locate experts or bring likeminded workers together, says Nikos Drakos of Gartner, a business consultancy.

Other companies are exploiting external networks of freelance researchers. On InnoCentive.com, a site built by pharmaceutical group Eli Lilly, companies post difficult research problems and offer generous rewards to anyone who can solve them.

For researchers like Stutzman and Boyd, all the new sites and games provide an invaluable microscope on human behaviour. Academics have begun to study how news spreads like ripples through these loose associations of people and the way in which some people, "celebrities", become particularly important disseminators of information with their regular postings. Other categories are "newbies", young, low-status members; "lurkers", who silently browse others' pages but don't participate themselves; "trolls", deceivers who feign honesty to provoke, and openly aggressive "flamers".

The millions of people on the networks also hold vast potential for experimentation. In 2004, Duncan Watts and two of his students in the sociology department at Columbia University put a sign on bolt.com, a social network site, and managed to corral 14,341 volunteers. He and his colleagues wanted to show how much people are influenced by other people's choices - and came up with a result that challenged the notion of causation.

The academics divided the users into groups and asked them to rate a list of previously unknown pop songs by unknown bands, steadily increasing the amount of information the users had about what other people had chosen. "You might expect the same songs to become popular under all conditions," Watts said. "In fact, as the level of information that people have about each other's decisions increases, things become more unpredictable. Those that win are not necessarily the best - in fact there is not necessarily such a thing as 'the best'. Things that are popular tend to become more popular still, so that small, possibly random, fluctuations early on can get 'locked in' and generate a large difference in popularity over time. The potential to learn how people behave and influence each other is really exciting."

Yet even as the sites have grown and become funds of insight for researchers, there are questions about their future. Last month, according to the Palm Beach Post, police in Florida charged a 22-year-old single mother with soliciting a minor and three counts of sexual battery after she left messages for a 14-year-old boy on his MySpace page and went to meet him for sex. As the sites have grown they have awakened fears that the internet is unhealthy - why not socialise with real-world friends in the fresh air? - and brings children into contact with adult culture such as pornography. Worse, the social networks may be an unparalleled tool for sexual predators. In June, a Texas woman and her daughter filed a \$30m lawsuit against MySpace, claiming the daughter was raped by a 19-year-old man she exchanged her phone number with on the site. MySpace would not comment on litigation matters.

"What we are seeing is that there are many more offenders that are targeting kids online than we ever dreamed was possible," said Ernie Allen, president of the US National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, which is now working closely with sites such as MySpace.

A 2004 study by NCMEC showed that 13 per cent of 10-17-year-olds received unwanted online sexual solicitations. This was less than in 1999, but the proportion of aggressive contacts had gone up. Allen said online social networks were attracting the more determined predators. "These sites were created for young adults and when young adults are doing something it appeals to older teenagers and then young kids want to do it. The challenge is how do you protect younger kids, and our strategy so far has been to keep them off."

In May a US Republican senator, Michael Fitzpatrick, proposed the Deleting Online Predators Act, which (if passed) would in effect shut down access to social networks in US public schools and libraries. The sites, however, want to head off any backlash and are taking the online dangers seriously. Bebo hired Rachel O'Connell, an expert on internet safety from the University of Central Lancashire, as its chief safety officer and she has taken steps to stop online bullying. On MySpace, the profiles of 14- and 15-year-olds are automatically set to private so that only people on their list of friends can view them or send them messages. (Boyd says many children override this setting or register as 18 or over. But MySpace says it has electronic algorithms that can detect if a child is not telling the truth.) Users under 18 can't view content designated "mature". MySpace hired Hemanshu Nigam, a former US federal prosecutor, who heads a team of 150 that continuously monitors the site for hate speech, offensive material or nudity. He removes more than 30,000 under-age profiles a week. Quite a bit of bare flesh still gets through but Nigam insists there is no pornography.

"The fears are so painfully overblown," said Boyd. "Is there porn on MySpace? Of course. And bullying, sexual teasing and harassment are rampant among teenagers. It is how you learn to make meaning, cultural roles, norms. These kids need to explore their life among strangers. Teach them how to negotiate this new world. They need these public spaces now that other public spaces are closed to them. They need a place that is theirs. We should not always be chasing them and stopping them from growing up."

While the safety issue rumbles on, a second question that will determine whether the networks have a sustainable

future is whether they can begin to make money. The sites have remained free to users, while several are trying to sell their audiences to advertisers. But many companies have been reluctant to feature their products on pages where the rest of the content is unpredictable and, well, teenage.

MySpace has begun to get around this by helping companies to set up profile pages for their products - in effect, they become a member of the social network. This gives companies control over the content associated with their brand and it has been popular. In January, the Wendy's hamburger chain introduced a MySpace profile for its square hamburger. (A hundred thousand "friends" linked to it.) Adidas and Honda have MySpace profiles. Volkswagen set up a page for Miss Helga, the short-skirted star of one of its commercials (who now has 9,000 "friends"). Profiles have become a popular way to promote movies. Paramount introduced a page for Ricky Bobby, the hapless hero of its film Talladega Nights. "News Corp doesn't say but it is more than likely that MySpace is very profitable given the amount of advertising already sold against this audience," said Joe Laszlo, an analyst at JupiterResearch in New York.

Boyd fears that this sort of commercialisation will alienate teenagers. "Everybody and their mother are trying to sell things," she said. "They are turning the public space into a public market place." She said the increased parental surveillance and commercial intrusion is already causing kids to leave; you just don't notice because they don't delete their profiles.

The sites recognise that it is not in their interest to drive away users and have so far tried to keep advertising on the periphery of the pages and make it relevant to users' interests. (In August, Google and News Corp agreed a \$900m three-year deal under which Google will sell advertising on MySpace that is linked to what people search for on the site.) The sites are also promoting activities that teenagers find cool and then getting sponsorship for them. YouTube is holding a battle of the bands competition sponsored by Cingular and ABC. MySpace runs secret music concerts for select members, sponsored by Chili's, and exclusive movie screenings. Its first screening, last month, was for Borat, a film from 20th Century Fox, part of News Corp.

It is not altogether clear whether MySpace kids dislike commercial culture. The popularity of Wendy's square hamburger attests to that, and millions have become "friends" of bands such as Oasis or of Hollywood movies. The biggest MySpace user-group is a fan club for Abercrombie & Fitch, the clothing line. On the virtual network game Second Life, which has about one million "residents", users can now use their Second Life dollars to buy Adidas shoes for their "avatar" character to wear, or a 3-D customised Toyota Scion car to drive in the virtual landscape. The companies exploit information from this online behaviour, such as what colour most prefer, to develop products in the real world. "Companies want to engage with these networks of cultural tastemakers," said Reuben Steiger, founder of Millions of us, which helps businesses market themselves on Second Life.

A further threat to the sites is posed by big media companies that have started to assert ownership over the video or music clips uploaded by users to sites such as YouTube and MySpace. The clips are often taken from television, movies or commercial music without permission. In February, NBC forced YouTube to take down "Lazy Sunday", a rap spoof from its Saturday Night Live show after the sketch was uploaded to the site and viewed by more than five million people. Last month, Mark Cuban, an influential US technology blogger, said publicly he thought that YouTube could one day be "sued into oblivion" because of copyright violations.

The way that millions of young people have seized on online social networks and embedded them in their lives suggest they will survive. Their rise is a function of the availability of cheap internet access and technology such as web cams, and they are likely to be transformed further, probably beyond recognition, as these trends accelerate.

Clay Shirky, a US technology consultant and academic, thinks that businesses' ability to use networks to reach customers and suppliers will become a recognised part of their corporate value, just as goodwill is marked on balance sheets today. "The big change is that social networks are becoming visible and therefore manageable in ways that they have never been before."

Social networks are likely to change the way we present ourselves. It may become a matter of course to have an online public web page where people we want to deal with will turn to find out more about us, in the same way that having a telephone number or e-mail address is routine today. Otherwise we will not exist. We will be part of a network with links to trusted figures and recommendations and testimonials that bear out our claims about who we say we are. I will declare who I am by the people I am holding hands with on my network.

They are likely to change the way we learn things. People will get information and news not from one news source but many. We may be amazed in the future that we ever chose to buy anything, go anywhere or do anything without the chain of recommendations that online networks make possible.

For their critics, they have started an impossible conversation, a cacophony of views that never go anywhere or get close to some underlying truth. But for Boyd the conversation is the whole point. "I genuinely think it is helpful," she

said. "It helps people connect and learn from one another. It is all about tolerance. One of the best things you can do is get people to learn about people who are not like them."

WHAT ARE SOCIAL NETWORKS?

On an online social network, you register to join the community and are given your own personal web page. This is your profile. It's what everyone else sees when they look you up. Your profile shows your name, age, a few personal details and a picture of yourself.

You may choose to list some of the things you like doing, your favourite music or films. You can write an online diary (blog) about what you are up to in your life. There is also space for other members to leave messages for you, or about you, for other people to read.

Other users in the community might notice your profile and ask if they can become your friend. If you say yes, their pictures appear on your profile. If you click on one, it will immediately take you to your new friend's profile where you can learn more about them and see their list of friends.

Millions of people have joined the new sites. They have been hugely popular among young teenagers, although MySpace, the biggest US site, says 86 per cent of its members are 18 or over.

DO THE SITES MAKE MONEY?

Most of the big online social networks were just small loss-making start-up companies two or three years ago. YouTube was founded in February 2005 in a garage. Facebook was started a year earlier by a student at Harvard.

But as users flocked to them by the millions, the sites began to attract the attention of bigger, more established companies. Media businesses in particular were anxious that they were losing their young audiences to this new medium. MySpace was the first one to be snapped up - in July 2005 by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp for \$580m.

No one really knows how much the sites are worth, or whether they will produce any lasting revenues. Still, YouTube was bought by Google this month for \$1.65bn in stock, transforming YouTube's twentysomething founders into instant millionaires.

The sites are generally free to join, so they rely on advertising to turn a profit. They are working hard to make nervous advertisers feel comfortable enough to put up ads for their goods in an unpredictable environment where teenagers create most of the content.

The other challenge is to avoid scaring away the young audiences with too much commercialisation.

PLUGGED INTO SOCIAL NETWORKING

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