

Work and Play in Facebook Profiles

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Facebook is a popular social networking site; a platform on which people build and interact with a network of friends, family, and people they meet online. Most social networking sites have ways to search for people that a user may know, and ways to search for people based on certain characteristics. This second type of searching is often through group functions where people can interact with other people like them even if they are not on each other's "friend" list.

The dictionary definition of a friend is quickly falling by the wayside as social networks arise, and "to friend" someone on a social network does not mean the user knows them, much less knows them well. Also, "friending" on social networks such as Facebook is an act that can be manipulated. Not only has it become a verb, but it is something that people can use to their advantage. When someone is on a friend list they are allowed to view information about that person and see what they post on their profile. This profile is simply a page that allows the user to interact with their network by leaving statements about things they are thinking about, want people to know, or even what they are doing. This means that a person could friend someone for the sole purpose of wanting to know what they are doing and can monitor the other person's behavior, under the guise of sharing photographs of children, staying in closer contact, or many other similar reasons.

Use of social networking sites has grown tremendously over these last few years, and users are spending more time on sites like Facebook. That prompted us to conduct a study of their activities. Facebook is one of the largest social networking sites currently with more than 500 million users (Carlson 2011:1). It is free to sign up and create a profile. It is crucial that we understand how users utilize their time on social networking sites, and what benefits they get out of that time. The two uses of Facebook that we will focus on in this paper are work and play. We were able to find patterns within the data by looking at the different life categories and mood categories that were used to catalog the posts (see Figure 1).

This paper reports on a small series of data from an undergraduate senior seminar at Indiana University South Bend (IUSB), on anthropology and information technologies, taught by Dr. Josh Wells. Students in the class engaged in a research project approved by the IUSB Institutional Review Board, monitoring and classifying the Facebook use patterns of 18 individual subjects. These individuals allowed student researchers to befriend their Facebook accounts. Facebook friend connections provided researchers with access to information that the user shared on their profile. The student researchers logged and analyzed user behaviors amounting to either a period of six use-weeks or 250 entries, whichever came first.

In order to create the most complete pictures of these individuals, we observed their overall Facebook personas, looking at not only their walls, but also the info, photo, and other tabs that are part of their Facebook Profile. We have also looked at other sites which they provide links for in order to help understand them as people and what they are getting out of their use of Facebook. We logged their activities into different life categories, roles and input types that occurred frequently, and communication state categories or moods an individual may use to communicate with family, friends and professional contacts. These categories determined where the posts were placed between work or play behavior.

This section will focus on the professional use of Facebook. Only 7.9 percent of the postings were work related or for professional purposes including education. In comparison a much larger percentage, **53 percent**, were related to play. Our study discovered that 78 percent

of our subjects had postings related to work or professional development.

Some of the subjects using Facebook for professional purposes tended to post sporadically and were less likely to be engaged in the emerging culture of excessive sharing of personal information. Though the professional users do post on their walls, the information shared is very limited. It lacks intimate details about their personal lives possibly to create separation of the professional life and the private life. A subject nicknamed Rhedd, for instance, uses his profile only for professional purposes. Rhedd is the subject noted as number "1" in Figure 1. Compartmentalization of profiles is a growing trend. Although meant to be casual postings they often seemed carefully constructed to project a professional character. Users get to choose the message or image they wish to convey on their profiles. This shows that our subjects who are professional users exercise Mizuko Ito's "controlled casualness" (Ito 2007:124).

If the two extremes are controlled casualness and posting everything about your life, the vast majority of the middle is made of people and posts that are meant to in some way help the user connect with their network and often bring joy or happiness to their lives. While the professional side could be the chance meetings in the break room or lounge at the office, the play aspect of Facebook would be akin to the family reunion for the person keeping in touch with family, the playground for parents looking for support from peers, or a place to coordinate distribution of the pictures taken at the bar and future plans to party for the people that are less concerned about future ramifications from doing so. For this study, we cross-referenced the life categories and communication states that involved happiness or things that could be construed as fun. This was a rather liberal division, but it encompassed things like game play as well as joking with friends.

On average the subjects in our study engaged in play about 53 percent of the time. Of the 18 participating subjects, all but five posted more than half the time in a combination that could be construed as playful. While some of these would include posts from Facebook applications that post automatically this is still evidence of an activity the subjects are using that is a definite form of play. In her study on the social connectedness of portable communities, sociologist Mary Chayko explains games as, "a formal system of play that is rule-based, behavior-constraining, and voluntary, with a quantifiable outcome." She goes on to explain the appeal of these games as "providing challenge in a structured setting, neatly satisfying our often contradictory needs for novelty and for familiarity" (Chayko 2008:64).

Other play based behaviors that occur regularly within our subjects is the social networking aspect. One subject, nicknamed Passion (noted as "15" in Figure 1), for instance spent much of her online time networking with other people involved in her passion for break dancing. While this could possibly be part of her work life, it is also an activity that she seemed to enjoy immensely. It was not just adding people as friends that she did not know, but discussing choices of music and dance moves, or occasionally when she was going to meet up with other people from that community. While it was obvious that some of these people she knew in person, there were others that she did not. For many people on Facebook it is about social networking with people within the bounds of people's everyday lives.

Another subject, Family Female (noted as "8" in Figure 1), uses her Facebook to keep in touch with her adult children and other family and friends. Her behavior on Facebook often involved "liking" local businesses and groups, and commenting on the walls of her friends. Because she did not use Facebook on a daily basis however, it also indicates that this is possibly not the only way she communicates with those closest to her.

Realizing that this is only one aspect of a person's life is an im-

portant part to understand. While many people are prolific posters and post from their iPhones or Blackberries and other mobile devices these people also have activities outside of Facebook. Looking at the life categories in relation to how many posts related to play, it was interesting to note that the top categories were play (this included game posts giving it a boost), friend, mundane, and special interest. Making the mundane something laughable or joking with friends is expected, however, the tendency for the next group of similar amounts: education, professional development, politics, and family was a little more unexpected. This could indicate that people use social networking sites like this to bring joy back into their jobs or more serious life aspects.

The ideas of the structural functionalist anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown provide a useful perspective in relation to the topic at hand. He discussed social structure and the statement that stayed in my mind with regards to this project was, "In social structure the ultimate components are individual human beings thought of as actors in the social life, that is, as persons, and structure consists of the arrangement of persons in relation to each other" (Radcliffe-Brown 2010:197). This is congruent with the thoughts of Anthropologist David Hakken who said in *Cyborgs@Cyberspace* that "Competing' actors recruit other potential network participants into coalitions" (Hakken 1999:185). Applying this concept to Facebook allows us to recognize how it is the structure for the actor network to arrange itself within.

Play and work therefore could be construed as the coalitions that are forming among actors in the network as they recruit friends and family. Those new recruits model their behavior on that of the recruiters and then other actors in that network. This could potentially explain why written illustrations of 3D virtual worlds in books such as *Coming of Age in Second Life* (Boellstorff 2008:184) or *Snow Crash* (Stephenson 1992:35) group themselves together with people like them. To further use this illustration we can look at the separation of accounts for professionals within the context of Facebook as a means to group themselves in one profile with those that they wish to remain professional, but also grouping themselves with family and friends that are more play oriented in profiles on other accounts.

Hakken called the integration of different cultures the "creolization" of cyberspace. Cyberspace doesn't have its own inherent culture but people bring in bits and pieces which are combined to form one distinct cultural phenomenon. When users become technical experts at manipulating the site "creativity becomes the primary asset." (Boellstorff 2008:210-211). Boellstorff describes how a user's understanding of their environment leads to control of craft in that environment. Users have learned how to use the site efficiently and maximize on their emotional investment.

In conclusion, the study of our subjects was very beneficial. It gave us an opportunity to observe how each subject utilizes the site. Facebook allows each individual to decide what they wish to do and how they wish to do it within the provided structure of the site. This can be for work or play, or even to combine the two. This is also not a static choice as people continue to use the site their usage practice can change with them. As this actor network continues to grow and evolve the uses of it by the actors will continue to grow and evolve. By learning more about these uses as well as other uses that have yet to be studied, we will be able to continue to learn and benefit by making informed decisions about our use of these technologies.

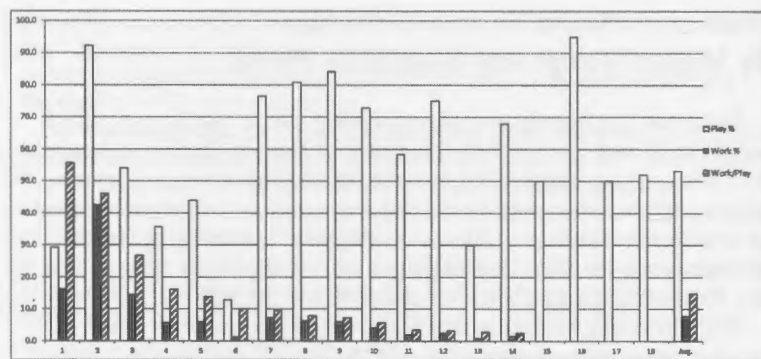


Figure 1: Bar graph of percentages of work and play in subjects' Facebook wall content. Subjects are ordered by the ratio, "Work/Play" to show the relative proportion of work to play in Facebook activity.

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