

The Facebook Frenzy

A Social Platform and the Society That Deems It Important.

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Since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution human society has undergone some tremendous change. The quality of life is better in many aspects as we are living longer, working more varied careers and making use of technology to make our lives a lot easier. With longer life and a more varied living environment staying-in-touch with family, friends, colleagues and all of those that touch our lives is becoming more important. One essential medium that has made this process very easy is a web application known as Facebook. The Facebook platform is providing a wide variety of assistance for staying in contact but at the same rate causing quite a stir with its social capabilities. Simply, it has emerged as society's most prominent communication tool. We will dive further into this phenomenon to see why Facebook has achieved this status and why today's society deems it important.

Facebook (originally named thefacebook) was built in 2004 by three Harvard students that wanted to reach out and get to know students from other dorms. Those students – Mark Zuckerberg, Chris Hughes, and Dustin Moskovitz started it out as a small project. The web site allowed a user to sign-up for an account for free. With an account one could add other users as friends, look up old friends and colleagues, send messages, join groups, and more. The idea proved so popular that it soon spread to other ivy-league schools such as Stanford, Yale, and Columbia (Yadav, 2006).

Unlike other social networking web sites at the time – Facebook offered a more private environment focusing primarily on the varied relationships and interactions of people throughout their lives. With web sites such as Myspace, Bebo, Friendster, and Yahoo! 360 membership was very open to anyone that wanted to join. Facebook originally deferred from that trend because it targeted only college students. By having a .edu e-mail address, college students were granted privilege to join, as were alumni who also kept their college e-mail addresses. Facebook's target audience and restricted membership limited its growth. By only allowing college students to join, it wiped out access to high school students, parents, adults, professionals and more. This however was very appealing to the target audience because it meant college students and only college students would be participating and allowed to join the mix. Just how many college students actually use the application though? Facebook's Chris Hughes has been stated in an article posted on *TechCrunch*, that 85% of college students are using Facebook whereas 60% are logging-in daily (www.techcrunch.com).

Facebook's popularity has increased tremendously since its creation. Due to marketing influence and the lure of high dollar investments, Facebook finally opened its doors to the public, allowing anyone to join. With that one move, its membership has surged since July 2006, moving from 7.5 million users to well over 18.5 million users through January 2007, a 300 percent increase. It has not stopped since then, growing to over 36 million users as of August (Vogelstein, 2007) and 42 million nearing October (AFP, 2007). Facebook's use is even more evident as Facebook is receiving 30 billion page views monthly, whereas comScore ranks Facebook as the 6th most trafficked US site. (Abram, C). It is also currently ranked on the Alexa Web Search web site as the 5th most trafficked site in the United States, behind YouTube, Myspace, Yahoo!, and the almighty Google. The United States isn't the only country that has fell in love with the platform as it ranks at number 1 in Canada and number 2 in both the United Kingdom and Turkey (Alexa, 2007).

Facebook shines above other social networking web sites and former methods of communication by providing communication in a matter of seconds, choosing who may access your content, giving users an easily organized list of their contacts at their disposal, and even ways to describe how and why people are acquainted with you. Messages can be sent frequently at no cost. Not only can you easily organize your contacts, but you may also keep up-to-date with the happenings of your comrades through mini-feeds or "story-feeds" through your Facebook homepage. These feeds are essentially just lists of updated news items, such as relationship statuses, personal news, whose friends with who, or even if your friend joins a group. The information is readily available and posted after a few minutes within the feed. As stated earlier, users can set the privacy of their account – manning full control of who can see which segments of content or personal information about the user. This is what truly sets it apart from other social networking web sites.

Facebook's Positive Influence on Society

Life itself is built upon relationships. This is the highlight of one of Facebook's many varied features in which you may detail how you know your contacts. Examples in which you may have met your acquaintance could be through high school, college, an organization, or even randomly. This makes it easy for people to remember why there are relationships between them and their contacts and allows for great memories down the road.

Facebook's dynamic usage in assisting society with current events is no more prevalent than in the recent tragedies that occurred at Virginia Tech on April 16th, 2007. Proving itself as also a media platform, news quickly spread throughout networks on Facebook that a shooter was on campus. Students flooded to the web site to check in on fellow classmates, friends, and families that were associated with the campus. Groups immediately were created, such as the group "I'm Okay at VT", in which members posted messages stating that they were safe and encouraging other VT students to update their profile status to show that they were okay (Pelofsky, 2007). Not only was this a way for students to express their thoughts and concerns but it also opened a new pathway in which Facebook could lend its hand to society – online memorials. Beforehand, Facebook's policy was to delete profiles after 30 days of inactivity. Due to pressure from the families of the VT victims (and even pressure from Amy Fought, the mother of the late Radford University student, Blake Fought) to keep these profiles online (. Now, profiles may be moved to a memorializing status, which blocks contact information but allows friends to see photos and education details that pertain to their late friends (Hortobagyi, 2007).

The social communication platform has also proved influential in political debates. Steve Colbert, well-known for his hosting duties on *The Colbert Report* and appearances on *The Dailey Show*, declared intentions to run for President. Shortly after the show went off air groups showed up on Facebook in support of the effort. Support groups for actual candidates had already been on created on Facebook months before. For example, the "1 Million Strong" for Barack Obama had grossed over 380,000 members in 7 months. Surprisingly enough, the pop culture star Steve Colbert's group ranked in an astounding 750,000 members in less than a week (Stelter, 2007). The current count on the group's Facebook page is 1.4 million members as of 2:12 PM (EST) on 11/4/2007. This phenomenal coming together of people is a vivid example of the power of Facebook's platform. In under a week, a large number of individuals with the same viewpoint were able to come together to voice their opinion and show their support, even if the candidates efforts may be satirical. It has also encouraged voting among Americans, as more than 6 thousand people have registered to vote through the group and rockthevote.com (<http://radford.facebook.com/group.php?gid=7406420086>).

The Negatives Surrounding the Platform

Much like everything in life, Facebook has downsides too. As stated earlier, the story feed provides a wealth of information regarding people within a member's network. What does this pose for privacy? Could this not be used as a stalker's tool? This was the outcry of the original launching of the feature. Within days, groups appeared on Facebook (such as "I HATE THE NEW FACEBOOK (Stalker) LAYOUT", and "Coalition Against The Mini-Feed") depicting the "stalker feature" as an attack on the privacy of the users. Developers quickly listened and tightened security by allowing more choices in terms of who can see your news, photos, contact information, and other modules that could be added to your profile.

Companies are also feeling the pressure of Facebook's influence. As stated earlier in one light this works as a great way for companies to network out and get to know people within the company. Unfortunately, now employees have yet another "tool" to decrease their productivity. This can deeply affect any company's profits if work cannot be produced at a proper rate. It also poises a threat to potential hires because employers may use Facebook to research an employee even before they step foot into an interview. Considering the wide majority of Facebook's first users were college students, the various posting of party photos could deeply destroy a graduate's chances of obtaining a nice job because of a wrong first-impression.

Facebook itself has felt the wrath of some of its very own rules. Members are allowed to post pictures, just as long as they own the images and that they are not of a pornographic matter. Due to this fact, images of breast-feeding mothers were removed from Facebook. With any action follows a result. Since then, a group of activists have sought legal action against the company because of it removing their photos due to "unsuitable" content. The activists (or lactivists as they have called themselves) feel that breastfeeding is very natural and should not be censored. To voice their opinion, a group was created named "Hey Facebook, breastfeeding is not obscene!". Close to 7000 members had joined the group as of September 7th, 2007 (Moses, 2007). As of November 10th, 2007 the group had grown close to 34,000 members as stated on its group page.

Dissecting Facebook

Facebook's popularity is without a shadow of a doubt increasing. The questions remain the same. Why is Facebook a popular tool for communicating? Why has society deemed it important? Does it pose a positive or negative effect? How does this even tie in with media? In the past, methods of keeping in contact may have included writing letters, the use of a telephone or quite simply there would be none if there wasn't face to face interaction. To obtain news or opinions one would either have to read a newspaper or watch TV. Today the population is growing at a much faster rate. With more people in the world, the opportunities to meet more and more people is almost a given. Not only can we meet more people today than we could in the past, but more people are staying in contact with one another. It is hard to keep everyone in the same area forever, thus the ability to stay in contact with these people is going to be quite the difficult task. This is the niche that has proven to be the thriving point for Facebook.

Let's break down the options available for communicating. You may write a letter. Once written, you must fold the letter and seal it in an envelope, stamp it, and mail it out. The delivery time could be anywhere between 1-5 business days depending on where you are sending the letter to. Another method is the telephone. If you have the phone number of the person you are trying to reach, you may dial it and start talking within seconds if they answer. How easy is it to keep up with or remember the phone numbers of all of your contacts? How about the addresses of all of your friends so that you may write letters? Finding this information can take quite a bit of time if you have to research the person. The overhead itself makes communication a task in its own right.

Facebook tackles a lot of the grievances posed by former methods through easy-to-use features that make communicating fast, easy and simple. Rather than digging through a phone book or researching the online Yellow Pages, users can use a search feature within Facebook to find information on their query in the matter of seconds. A user's profile lays out their information based on their privacy settings. Even if you haven't seen someone in years, you may use the search feature to track a person down. More information can be available to you once they are added as friends and it is confirmed. Time and money are both saved because Facebook conveniently provides fast and effective methods for communicating. E-mail messages may be sent through Facebook. One may also find the screen-names of your contact's various instant messaging programs or even their

address and phone number, if posted. Marshall McLuhan is famous for the publication *The Medium is the Massage*. Building upon mediums being messages – Facebook boldly states that it is not only just a platform for communicating but also a portal in terms of finding the contact information that you depend upon.

Why do people like to communicate through the platform though rather than strictly face-to-face? It is much like letters and the telephone – you can't always be in the same area as your contacts. Also – not everyone is capable of being the social butterfly. Some people are very shy and it by talking online this creates a gateway for them to overcome that fear. Facebook allows an opportunity to gradually get to know your contact and in the future develop a more personable relationship.

Throughout life society has taken great strides in documenting life as it happens. Facebook, albeit unwittingly, is history as we speak. Media has shown us overtime that it is indeed a progressing documentation of the history we create. Facebook showcases its power through the Internet medium. For example - a user's status message can give insight into their mindset throughout the days, weeks, and months. The wall application (in which users may leave each other comments) can give one insight into some of the activities they may be involved or to show who they are interacting with. Photos provide visual imprints of the user in various segments of their lives.

All of the data that virally flows throughout the platform is life as it happens. Personal insights, beliefs, national tragedies, local stories, and much more can be given light by a sea of members. The speed of communication is very mind-blowing, showcasing this platform's power as a new media and a communication medium. Never before has this many options, tools, information and the ability for it to move so swiftly been provided to the public. What was once weeks was turned into days, days turned hours, and now hours are turned merely into seconds. By sharing this wealth of data, it can better help us all understand the people around us. It is indeed a written historical account, a visual documentary, and a community driven project that showcases the world around us.

As one can see, Facebook is truly dynamic. What was once curiosity to know the people around a dorm has grown into an empire of digital expression. It is a breeding ground for society to come together and relate in ways in which it could not in previous times. The platform makes full use of the Internet's true premise – to be a network wealthy of ideas, solutions, and a way to share it all. One cannot see into the future, but Facebook provides a great start for us to see our past, document our present, and to give us insight as to how we are all progressing steadily towards tomorrow.

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An accompanying web site for this project can be found at <http://www.bobbyhash.com/facebook>