Randoms in my bedroom: Negotiating privacy and unsolicited contact on social network sites

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Abstract

The immense popularity of social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook has caused a significant shift in the way social interactions occur on the internet. Online interaction is no longer the sole domain of people seeking contact but rather it has become a key medium for maintaining and strengthening social relationships. This article draws on empirical research investigating emerging social practices being developed by young Australian internet users on social network sites. Consistent with other current research, this article argues that social network sites are increasingly regarded as private spaces where young people are 'hanging out' and articulating or playing with notions of identity and belonging. Some social networks have even been likened to bedrooms for teenagers, or are arguably replacing shopping centres and parks as spaces for casual youth interaction. Based on empirical research, this article tests these metaphors and suggests measures to strengthen their validity. As multiple social relationships are collapsed under the banner of Friendship on social network sites, important issues about privacy and audience management need to be addressed. What constitutes 'Friendship' in the Facebook era? How do young people deal with unsolicited contact in these private spaces? This article argues that young users of social network sites on the Gold Coast in Australia are, consistent with research being conducted throughout the world, developing increasingly complex strategies for managing their online privacy and social interactions.[1]

Introduction

The large-scale adoption of social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook in the last five years has generated an online environment that is difficult to avoid. For many young people, participation has become mandatory. Abstaining can often equate to social exclusion, given that many offline social events are organised through social network sites: "[without Facebook] you wouldn't know what's going on with people… you'd forget about them" (Alison, 19). As the most popular of the two, Facebook has over 400 million active users worldwide and eight million Australian users, with 50 percent of users logging in at least daily (Facebook, 2010).

With Facebook and MySpace in 2010 being the second and 12th most popular online destinations in Australia respectively, this emerging phenomenon shows no sign of decline (Hitwise Australia, 2010). A recent Neilson Online (2010) survey found that Australian internet users spent more time on social media (including blogging websites and social network sites) than any other national demographic. Based on empirical qualitative research conducted on the Gold Coast in Australia, this article develops an understanding of the practices individuals in their late teens and early to mid-twenties are developing to negotiate privacy and unsolicited contact on social network sites. The central concerns this article will address are a) what constitutes 'Friendship' for young users of social network sites; and b) how these spaces are being spatially conceptualised in terms of privacy and imagined audience. This article will rethink the deployment of the

teenage bedroom as an appropriate metaphor or model for understanding these emerging social spaces.

Background

This article is based on a qualitative project involving 38 people living in the Gold Coast region of Australia and aged between 15 and 27, a demographic sometimes referred to loosely as 'Generation Y'. Although this classification can be problematic, limiting the research to this age group was critical for two reasons. First, one of the aims of this research is to resist discursive constructions of youth engagement in online social spaces as 'risky' and dangerous (Tufecki, 2008). Secondly, this focus is embedded in the need for testability and comparability with other research currently being conducted, to determine whether the online social practices young Australian people are exhibiting deviate or conform to those of young people in other parts of the world.

Data has been collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews where participants were asked about their online social practices. Each interview was between 30 and 60 minutes in duration in a neutral location. With the exception of several of the youngest participants, each interview was preceded by an analysis of the interviewee's profile(s), which was subsequently used during the interview to encourage the discussion. Discussion of the profile itself also allowed the interviewee to comment reflexively on their engagement with the social space and the practices they have developed to maintain it. Participants were initially recruited from within the undergraduate population of Griffith University on the Gold Coast, then externally through a process of local, selective snowballing that targeted potential participants from varying educational backgrounds to maximise diversity. Interviewees referred to in this article have been assigned aliases to ensure anonymity.

Through a focus on the notion of friendship as a socio-cultural system of belonging, this article will begin to chart emerging social strategies that the young participants in my project are developing to manage their online 'Friendships' and their 'Friending' practices. I capitalise these terms here (consistent with boyd, 2007b, p. 134) to denote their usage on social network sites, where a Friend describes a varied set of relationships that also includes family, colleagues, long-lost school friends and casual acquaintances.

The popular conceptualisation of friendship has undergone some alteration in the context of social network sites. Before it was adopted as an umbrella term to describe the online articulation of a social tie, the notion of friendship implied some sense of intimacy or at the very least, familiarity. Early 19th century cartographer Matthew Flinders wrote in a letter in 1805 that friendship is "the almost indescribable communion of mind, the similarity of sentiment and of taste, and that jumping together of the heart" (qtd. in Little, 1993, p. 1). The sociological understanding of friendship positions it as a personal, unspecialised relationship that appears to serve no singular, immediate or readily definable purpose. In terms of what makes a good friendship, homogeneity appears to be a "correlate or facilitating condition", but not a pre-requisite (Silver, 1990, p. 1476). Further, Silver argues that while friendship has no formal classifications (or defined value) in systems of law or governance, there is some underlying implication that friendships are based on an exchange of utility. However, given that he was interested in coming to terms with the impact commercial society has had on the notion of friendship, Silver also observed that "friendship is diminished in moral quality if friends consciously monitor the balance of exchange between them" (1990, p. 1477).

Allen (1998) contends that "friendship is patterned according to social conventions" (p. 687), and that it is therefore inappropriate to regard friendship as a 'natural' relationship. Rather, according to Allen, friendship is influenced by structural characteristics such as gender and class and economic formations. However, Allen does recognise that these structures are dynamic and thus what constitutes friendship for the individual is also susceptible to change. Friendship, which Allen

2

argues is also central to understanding individual identity, "can signify the people we 'really' are" (p. 700).

In a study of same-sex friendships, Caldwell and Peplau (1982) found that while no clear gender differences exist in quantity or time spent with friends, the way individuals interact with friends does appear to be gendered. While women reported primarily sharing emotionally and talking more with other female friends, men reported engaging in activities and doing things together. In a more recent study, consistent with Caldwell and Peplau's findings, Benenson and Christakos (2003) found that female friendships are characterised by a greater sense of intimacy. Subsequently, women are positioned in this research as exhibiting "greater vulnerability" (p. 1123) in their friendships, and appear to experience higher levels of distress when friendships are terminated. The subtext to this gendered analysis of friendships is that these relationships can potentially be both rewarding and traumatic if invested with a sense of intimacy.

Thus the notion of friendship is at once central to social cohesion, ubiquitous and rewarding, while also being taboo to quantify, difficult to pin down and even traumatic. To return to Flinders, who wrote his letter to a friend from exile in the hopes that his friend could secure his pardon (Little, 1993, p. 259), it is clear that friendships are built on exchanges, but that these exchanges do not themselves constitute the relationship. While "similarity of sentiment and of taste" (Flinders in Little, 1993[1805], p. 1477) or homogeneity between individuals appears to facilitate friendships, sameness is certainly not a requirement. Thus, we are left with Flinders' "jumping together of the heart" (qtd. in Little, 1993, p. 1). Regardless of context and gender differences, friendship is an important socio-cultural phenomenon that is difficult to define. It occurs in multiple configurations and styles, and results in varying levels of utility. Users of social network sites, however, are regularly asked what it is that constitutes friendship. For the average user, they have had to undertake this process literally hundreds of times. Thus,

this article aims to document and chart the deliberate and pre-determined set of Friending strategies that young Australian users of social network sites are deploying to exert a sense of practical control over their online social spaces.

Friendship and privacy

Central to the importance of Friendship on social network sites is the access Friendship grants individuals. Generally, and usually by default, the profiles that constitute these networks are largely private. That is, they cannot be accessed by the average internet user. To gain access to a full profile, the individual must first create an account and subsequently send a 'Friend request' to the creator of the profile they wish to access. The user on the receiving end of that request must then determine whether or not they will accept the request and thus articulate a social tie (boyd & Ellison, 2007; see also Haythornthwaite 2002; and Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007). This process is referred to as Friending. When both parties have consented to the articulation of this Friendship, mutual access is granted and each user may venture into the other's profile to view images, self-descriptions, hobbies, blogs, favourite books, films, music, television programmes and so on. The range of information that profile authors share online varies greatly – some resist the process entirely by leaving sections blank or filling them with poetry or images, while at the other end of the spectrum, some users list sensitive information such as addresses and phone numbers. Thus, Friendship in this context is not just a social tie or a shared sense of belonging or even "jumping together of the heart" (qtd. in Little, 1993, p. 1), but it also has a very practical purpose in terms of access and control. Even for those users who keep their profiles 'public' by default, there are functions (if not access rights) that Friendship on a social network site grants. Thus, to maintain a sense of privacy and control on a social network site also requires a deliberate strategy for managing Friendship. Friendship and privacy, in this context, are closely related. Friending an

3

individual on a social network site also implicitly requires some investment of trust by granting another individual access to a private space.

The issue of privacy on social network sites has been an element of both scholarly and popular discourse since they begun to be widely adopted. boyd's (2007a; 2007b; 2010) research, for instance, has followed the development of social network sites since Friendster was released in 2003, and argues that these online social platforms are simply new mediums that allow for the maintenance and articulation of existing relationships. boyd notices that users of Friendster, even in 2003, were being challenged by the site's 'flattening' of relationship types into the single category of Friend. boyd points out that "wading through new forms of individual and community interactions can be both terrifying and exhilarating" (2007b, p. 134). In the eight years since Friendster popularised the shift to social network sites, those new forms of interactions continue to emerge and shape the practices of individuals.

In a study of 704 college students in the United States, the majority of whom were users of MySpace and Facebook, Tufecki (2008) found that users of social network sites were not "overly worried" (p. 26) about online privacy. Despite this, Tufecki did find that his respondents exhibited a "complexity… [in their] audience management and boundary negotiation" (p. 33). In a 2009 qualitative study consisting of 16 London-based undergraduates, West, Lewis and Currie (2009) begin to account for the complexity suggested by Tufecki. Their respondents reported Facebook Friends included various kinds of acquaintances including cousins, old school friends and current university friends. When asked about family, especially parents on Facebook, most of the participants in the study reported some anxiety and apprehension:

> I'd probably have a conversation with them about it before I did it. It… seems so awkward to add your parents … but I'd have a conversation about it. I'd be like, 'Look guys, I don't want to be rude but I think it's an invasion of my

privacy if you're looking at my Facebook profile, because it's to do with my friends, and whatever I'm doing at university' and they'd be fine with it. (Participant Sophie in West, Lewis & Currie, 2009, p. 620)

In an ethnographic study of a "small group of socially connected 20-something Facebook users" (p. 2) in Toronto, Raynes-Goldie (2010) argues that privacy, in the "age of Facebook" comes at a cost. She claims that for several decades, privacy has been conceptualised more pragmatically. "In the same way many people give away some of their personal information in exchange for the perks of an Air Miles card, users of Facebook benefit from their use of the site at the cost of their privacy" (n.p.). While the findings in this article, which are consistent with other research in the field, indicate that there are emerging strategies for effectively managing online privacy, this sentiment is difficult to resist. Half a decade ago it was common practice to never use your full name online. Now, Facebook *requires* its users to use their full names on their profiles.

This seemingly minor shift in practice, and indeed the broader shift which Raynes-Goldie is referring to, is enabled by our changing understanding of the internet and our conceptualisation of the medium as a virtual space. Initially, the internet was regarded as an anonymous utopia of experimentation and potential: "[the internet] links millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the forms of our communities, our very identities" (Turkle, 1995, p. 9). While these potentialities still exist, the everyday nature of the internet has caused a shift in the way it is understood. In the 15 years since Turkle's *Life on the Screen* was published, those millions of people have swelled to billions. Individuals with access to the internet are increasingly conducting their everyday lives through it, leaving their "traces" (Bowker, 2007, p. 22) wherever they surf. boyd argues that as our physical space becomes increasingly regulated, especially the space of young people, socialisation is forced to shift out of shopping centres and parks, and into

"networked publics" (boyd, 2007a, p. 9) that exist on social network sites. Some scholars have even begun to liken these online social spaces to bedrooms; spaces in which access is controlled and objects (especially for young people) play important symbolic roles in the performance of identity.

Control: symbolic and practical

In their study of blogging website LiveJournal, Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) conducted a comparative exploration between the virtual spaces inhabited by young people and the bedroom. Established in the late 1990s, LiveJournal is an online social space where users can record reflective diary-style entries. The site also has a system of privacy not too far removed from the privacy practices observable on social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook. LiveJournal, for instance, also included a "Friends-List" (Hodkinson, 2006, p. 190) which users could populate with contacts and allow only those individuals access to their journal entries. Hodkinson (2006) found that, consistent with boyd's (2007a; 2010) work on social network sites, users of LiveJournal emphasised the value of the platform for maintaining contact with existing friends. Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) argue that the bedroom is "the first individually oriented physical space of young people's lives" (p. 28), enabling them to draw parallels between the bedroom and LiveJournal, focusing on both the symbolic and practical control young people have over these spaces. They argue that both spaces tend to be highly regulated in terms of access (practical control) and content (symbolic control): "An emphasis on the perceived safety and individual freedom afforded by personally owned space is also of considerable importance to young people's use of online journals" (p. 32). The parallels between LiveJournal and social network sites allow for an extension of this model to sites like MySpace and Facebook, although there are also clear separations. While the spaces discussed by Hodkinson and Lincoln often involve a strong sense of intimacy, the profiles of social network site users are often, as the

findings discussed below will elucidate, devoid of this strong sense of intimacy. However, individuals in both spaces are clearly exercising a similar kind of symbolic and practical control over the content on their profiles. Symbolic control manifests through text, images and a variety of other tools, and practical control is evident by way of an increasingly strategic deployment of privacy strategies that this article seeks to consider.

The extent to which symbolic exchanges occur on social network sites varies from user to user. Some individuals prefer to populate their profiles with as little content as possible. When asked to explain why she didn't keep information (such as hobbies and interests) on her profile up-to-date, one interviewee explained, "…it's not important to me… meet me and ask me, don't see that I'm a person on Facebook" (Melissa, 20). Similarly, Simon (15) explained that on his MySpace profile he went through phases of information sharing, whereby sometimes he would populate his profile with images, text and backgrounds, and other times he would remove the content and only have a black background. Other users, however, deploy hundreds (eventually thousands) of images and well thought-out descriptions of interests, hobbies, favourite books and television programmes. Lynne (24), for instance, often updated and edited her MySpace profile with different profile pictures and songs on a daily basis to reflect her mood.

Despite tactics of avoidance and playing to the self-reflexive nature of these sites, the profiles which constitute these social networks are undeniably centred on the individual. Even if the symbolic exchange or the presentation of self is limited to a single profile picture and minimal biographic detail, this is a kind of performance in itself, characterised by either a resistance through absence or a strong sense of privacy and an unwillingness to share certain information. In applying Goffman's theatrical metaphor of identity performance to social network sites, Pearson (2009) examines how users construct themselves online, enacting a concept of self to an imagined yet sometimes unknown audience:

5

These performances exist within the imagination of users who then use tools and technologies to project, renegotiate and continuously revise their consensual social hallucination… to create not only online selves, but also to create the staging and setting in which these selves exist. (n.p.)

In the context of the current article, these kinds of projections of self can be described also in terms of the symbolic control exerted by individuals over their profiles. Importantly, Pearson draws attention to how online forms of sociality tend to collapse the front-stage/back-stage modes of performance in Goffman's theoretical framework. Pearson argues that there is a blurring between public and private. At the basis of this argument is a concern about audiences and the notion that what constitutes an audience on a social network site has become difficult to pin down. It is highly problematic performing a sense of self to a heterogeneous audience that can include both intimate relationships, professional contacts and acquaintances. There is no single approach or formula for managing this performative element of online social spaces, as each individual can potentially perform multiple versions of self in the one space. As some individuals are learning, the development of 'Friends lists' and increasingly complex privacy settings allow users to manage their audience in highly specific and nuanced ways. Friends lists allow Friends to be grouped and given varying levels of access to a profile. Several participants reported adding parents or casual acquaintances to 'restricted' lists, allowing them to limit what the users on those lists could see, such as images, wall posts or status updates. Thus, to confuse the metaphor slightly, the performative space of the profile becomes multiple and varied depending on the individual accessing it: multiple bedrooms, each designed for a particular visitor. In Goffman's (1959) terms, the actor is multiplied and simultaneously performs different versions of self on separate stages to multiple audiences.

Rethinking the glass bedroom

As these findings begin to demonstrate, the performance of multiple versions of self in one space on social network sites appears to be a key skill of online sociality that young people are developing and incorporating into their everyday social practices. Discussions tend to construct online privacy in a limited, uni-dimensional format. Pearson's application of Goffman's dramaturgical framework to these sites, for instance, over-simplifies privacy controls in some places. Pearson (2009) deploys the 'glass bedroom' metaphor to conceptualise the profile of a social network site, or at least the interactions that occur there, as both "partially private and public" (n.p.). She argues that various kinds of exchanges occur on these sites, each with different unspoken rules for participation. For instance, some conversations, although they may take place on the 'wall' of the profile's author, may be obviously private and guarded. Other exchanges may be obviously inclusive and invite other members of the profile's audience to join in. Thus, the individual (who is both the actor and a member of the audience) must use their existing social skills to determine what is appropriate in what context.

Combining the LiveJournal-as-bedroom model by Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) with Pearson's (2009) glass bedroom model (as applied to social network sites) provides us with a curious spatial conceptualisation which is at once controlled (both practically by some moderation of who can and cannot enter and symbolically by the content and imagery) and transparent in terms of audience. For this model of 'controlled transparency' to be effective, however, it must also account for the complexity in both privacy settings *between* and *within* different social network sites and the complexity in Friending strategies that users are developing and practicing. Thus far, there has been a tendency in the discourse around these sites to overlook this growing complexity. Notable recent exceptions include the work of Lampe and Ellison (2010) on young athletes' use of Facebook, and a study by Patchin and Hinduja (2010) on adolescents' use of MySpace. Not only does each social

6

network site have a different set of privacy controls to negotiate, but each user also has their own set of strategies for managing their own privacy. MySpace and Facebook, for instance, while both operating on very similar models, are sites of very different social practices. MySpace profiles are more likely to be public than Facebook profiles, and are also more likely to be highly expressive and creative in both content (poetry or images instead of, or as a self-description) and design (through third-party layout customisation). One interviewee, for instance, said that "MySpace is a lot more... *'this is who I am.'* It's a lot more your own side" (Debra, 21). This creative and performative element of MySpace has also led to it being regarded as more "juvenile" by some participants who have "graduated" to Facebook (Charlotte, 19). This sentiment was especially obvious amongst the younger participants (15-18), some of whom were in the midst of moving from MySpace to Facebook. Simon (15), for instance, used both sites but preferred MySpace because it was "less work". Despite this comment on labour, Simon also admitted to "checking" his MySpace account as often as every 10 minutes throughout the day from his mobile phone, the highest level of engagement reported by any interviewee. Amongst the younger participants who used MySpace predominantly, there was a common narrative thread that suggested they would eventually move on to Facebook to maintain contact with their friends.

There are a variety of explanations for the disparity in user-bases between MySpace and Facebook and in the difference of opinions about the sites, but the most commonly reported sentiment in terms of privacy in this study is that MySpace profiles are simply more difficult to track down. Whereas Facebook profiles are almost always identifiable by the user's real name (first name and last name) and a display picture of that person, MySpace profiles are generally less anchored in this way. Rather, MySpace users tend to identify themselves using nicknames or variations of names or even something as generic as 'GoldCoastGuy18'. Users on MySpace can sometimes only be found by searching for the user's email address. Thus, these creators of MySpace profiles are at least partially insulated from casual "searchability" (boyd 2007a) when compared to standard Facebook profiles. Further, what constitutes an appropriate profile picture on MySpace deviates greatly from the standard Facebook profile image. Whereas Facebook profile pictures often clearly identify the user, MySpace profile pictures are often more 'creative', sometimes including lens-flares, Photoshop effects or "MySpace Angles", self-portraits taken from above (Sessions, 2009).

A spectrum of Friending practices

Beyond the differences in privacy settings *between* sites, there is also a myriad of differences in privacy settings that exist *within* social network sites. My findings have indicated a clear spectrum of privacy practices occurring on social network sites. To return to Hodkinson and Lincoln's (2008) model, these practices are grounded by the notion of practical control over these online spaces. At one end of the spectrum is the public profile, which can be viewed (although not always engaged with or contributed to) by any individual with access to the internet. This particular approach to (or non-participation in) privacy is increasingly rare. David (23) was the only participant who reported having a public profile and an open Friending policy, accepting Friend requests from essentially any individual with only rare exceptions: "I won't accept dickheads though." While Debra (21) reported having an open profile, she was also highly restrictive when it came to adding Friends or accepting Friend requests. "When it was set to private I got lots of add requests, so I just made it public so all those people from high school could have a snoop." Her justification for this unusual strategy was that people are simply curious about other people's lives, and she had no problem allowing them to indulge their curiosity. However, for Debra, adding someone as a Friend on Facebook was an important act that she didn't undertake lightly. Debra's public access approach is highly strategic, allowing for the curiosity of

7

her audience (described here as 'snooping', but also known as 'stalking' and 'creeping') but also justifying her strict Friending practices.

When asked to describe her response to Friend requests on Facebook, Julie (22) responded: "I try to see if we have friends in common first to see why they've added me, and if we don't I just delete them or I ask some of our mutual Friends 'Who is this person and why are they adding me?'' When a user initially receives a Friend request, Facebook also notifies them of 'mutual Friends'. Contacting these Friends for information on the unknown person features heavily in many respondents Friending strategies. Presumably picking up on the popularity of this feature on Facebook, MySpace has also begun signalling 'common friends' to facilitate the Friending process.

While Julie (22) simply deletes requests from individuals she neither recognises nor shares any mutual Friends with, Dora (24) prefers to initiate contact through private messages to "find out about them" and come to an understanding of "who they are". This particular approach allows Dora to determine "legitimate" potential Friends:

> Like one person wanted to study at [University], and they found me on the [University] Community on Facebook and they want to speak Indian-to-Indian, so they added me then they say "Oh I'm going to [University] next semester, can you tell me about it?" So that way I'm totally alright, and at the end of the day I can meet up with that person... it should be fun. (Dora 24)

While Dora appeared to have a relatively open approach to her Friending practices, most participants report being more rigorous in exerting practical control over their profiles:

> I'm very picky with who I accept as a Friend. If I don't know them or if I haven't met them or if they're a friend of a friend who I've heard of but I haven't met, I don't accept them… because my personal information is quite detailed, and with all this stuff

like stalking and identity theft you've gotta be vigilant. (Jamie 27)

Jamie went on to explain that she was also concerned about exposing her family on Facebook, and was extremely conscious about restricting the information she shared online, despite having relatively strict Friending strategies. Similarly, Eric (20) saw Facebook as "documenting real life" rather than as a tool to be used to meet new people. Of the 500 or so Friends Eric had on Facebook, only five of them he had never met before and a further 25 to 50 he had only met once or twice. Catherine (20) had a similar approach to meeting new people on Facebook: "I don't know, I just don't think I could be friends with someone I haven't met face-to-face." Tim (18) also prefers to keep his MySpace page just for friends he knows offline, but has also been open to meeting new people online, contingent on the potential for an offline meeting. Similar to Dora, when Tim is added by "randoms" (strangers in the vernacular) he will first initiate contact with them over private messages to determine whether or not he would like to add them as Friends and eventually meet them offline. Adam (16) confessed to a slight bias when determining whether or not to add randoms on MySpace, explaining that "hot girls" were more likely to get the green light.

Network articulation or network expansion

These accounts are consistent with other participants in this study, and corroborate research elsewhere, such as the work done by boyd and Ellison (2008), for instance, who define social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook as separate to networking sites. They argue that social network sites articulate and enable pre-existing social relationships rather than encourage new ones. Similarly, Joinson (2008) found that, although sometimes used for other reasons, users of Facebook were primarily interested in "keep[ing] in touch" (p. 1029) with existing, offline friends. In their study of athletes at a North American university, Lampe and Ellison (2010) generally found that Facebook was used for maintaining contact with existing friends,

8

although males were more likely than females to Friend people online who they hadn't met offline. It should also be noted that while some participants, such as Dora (24) and Tim (18) did indicate they were open to meeting new people on their preferred social network site, this wasn't their primary activity and even in situations where they did Friend someone they hadn't physically met before, they did so based on the expectation they may eventually meet that person offline.

While this is not a quantitative study, these findings do begin to give an indication as to the extent of networks. In a study of MySpace users, Jones, S., Millermaier, S., Goya-Martinez, M. and Schuler, J. (2008) found that the portrayal of social network site users as having impossibly large lists of Friends was highly exaggerated. In their sample of 1,257 users, 58 percent had fewer than 100 Friends. While most participants in this study had more than this figure, very few had networks of 400 or more contacts.

Commercial implications, friendship tiers and the friendship cull

When discussing the presence of commercial entities on social network sites, responses from participants were varied. Emma (20), for instance, used her MySpace page to advertise her alternative music podcast and thought that it was acceptable for people to advertise their own products or services on MySpace and to encourage Friends to do the same. Dora (24) reinforced this sentiment, reporting that she regularly promoted events and products her Friends sent her. Julie (22), however, disliked the fact that for a University course she was required to join a Facebook group. Despite being an active Facebook user, she saw this as "not what [Facebook] is for". Similarly, Camilla (24) did not like it when bands added her as a Friend on MySpace, despite being interested in new music. When contrasting MySpace and Facebook, however, many participants noted that random Friend requests from bands and businesses was more common and thus more appropriate on MySpace.

When asked to describe the different kinds of Friends he had on his site (with a preference for MySpace although 'out of necessity' he had also started using Facebook), Shannon (23) explained that his Friends could be separated into different 'tiers':

> …like 'Tier 1' who I'd see often in real life or talk to on the phone often or even semi-regularly. Then there's 'Tier 2' people who... I'd see maybe once every few weeks. Then there's the dregs. (Shannon 23)

Although his response was probably tinged with sarcasm and humour, the 'dregs' of Shannon's network are actually consistent with how other participants have also described their own extended networks of Friends. Instead, we might refer to these Friends as 'peripheral'. While they don't maintain regular or frequent contact with them, they make up the vast majority of many participants' networks. Julie (22), for instance, has nearly 400 Friends, but regularly maintains contact with as few as five or even two of those Friends. Carl (24) has only 60 Friends on Facebook because he wanted to be as restrictive as possible given the time-consuming nature of socialising online. Charlotte (19) had about 450 Friends on Facebook before reducing her network to just 118 contacts in what she described as a "Friendship cull". After using Facebook for several years, Charlotte had accrued a relatively large network of Friends, many 'peripheral'. She saw this as a gap in her privacy strategy, and no longer wanted these contacts to have open access to her profile.

Conclusion

Adding Friends to specially created, sub-set Friends lists to establish multiple levels of privacy and conducting Friendship culls to trim social networks are both clear examples of emerging trends in the highly strategic management of privacy on social network sites. It is critical that this kind of complexity is incorporated into conceptualisations of social network sites. I would argue that while models such as those developed by Hodkinson and Lincoln (2008) and the glass bedroom metaphor advanced by Pearson (2009) do retain some currency, they require ongoing

9

revision. Indeed, although they did not intend their model to be applied to social network sites, I would argue that Hodkinson and Lincoln's model, particularly in terms of the practical and symbolic control exerted in these spaces, can and should be applied to the profiles of social network sites. Perhaps the central flaw in applying any kind of bedroom metaphor to a social network sites would be the aforementioned issue of intimacy. The online journals described by Hodkinson and Lincoln were intimate places of personal exchange and sharing, whereas some profiles on social network sites lack this sense of intimacy. A discrepancy in the intimacy found between profiles stems from the fact that different individuals are developing substantially different Friending practices. Thus, it is futile for singular models of online privacy to be advanced, or for one-dimensional conceptualisations of online social spaces to exist. For bedroom metaphors to be afforded any rigorous sense of legitimacy, they must attempt to account for the vast complexity being observed in privacy settings and Friending practices between and within social network sites. It is also clear that, consistent with research being done on young users of social network sites globally, young people are not using social network sites to meet new people. Rather, they are primarily being used to articulate and develop existing social relationships. While there does exist the potential for networking and meeting new people on these sites, it is not their central purpose. Instead, encounters with 'randoms' in these predominantly private spaces are rare and incidental.

Based on this research, no clear generalisations can be made about whether users of social network sites rely more heavily on internalised 'feelings' about friendship or the extent to which structural factors have an impact on Friending practices. Rather, the process appears to be specific to the individual's perceived motivation for participating on a social network site. The average individual who is seeking to use these sites to maintain contact with existing friends, for instance, is likely to decline unsolicited Friend requests from 'randoms'. However, motivation and extent of participation is a dynamic process that is open to change and variation. Further, as with Shannon's (23) 'tiered' approach to his Friends, there are some categories of Friends on social network sites (the 'dregs', for instance) who would not be considered friends at all from a more traditional perspective.

Contrary to discourses that construct young users of social network sites as diluting notions of friendship and being blasé with privacy, most of the participants in this study demonstrated a strong sense of agency in the way they managed their online social spaces in both symbolic and practical capacities, consistent with the findings of Patchin and Hinduja (2010). While there are certainly users on MySpace and Facebook whose practices differ from those in this study and who reinforce the aforementioned discourses, it would be my contention that, increasingly, they are in the minority.

While social network sites have been thoroughly conceptualised here as private spaces by their users and by the literature, commercial entities have already successfully penetrated virtually all other private domains and social network sites are not exempt. While advertising exists on social network sites, the challenge for marketers will be to involve their products in the interaction itself rather than exhibiting blocks of images and text that the average internet user has, out of necessity, learned to filter out and ignore. This is an area of research that requires additional consideration.

Clearly there are also several other trajectories of further investigation that need to be pursued. Foremost, the impact of traditional sociological concerns such as class, ethnicity and gender need to be accounted for. While I have endeavoured to provide as much participant diversity within this project as possible, there are clear gaps, especially in terms of Indigenous Australians' access to social network sites. The online social practices of older demographics must also be investigated and considered, especially the extent to which parents and guardians educate

children about online sociality and vice-versa. Finally, given that social network sites are a relatively new phenomenon, long-term studies are needed to account for the growing complexity of online privacy and Friending strategies, with attention given to the relationship between their offline and online practices.

Whether social network sites continue to be one of the dominant forms of online social interaction remains to be seen. However, the enormous impact of these sites on the social lives of their users is clear. While the young people in this study are amongst the first of a generation to be growing up in an environment where online social interaction is increasingly mandatory, it is my contention that the strategies and practices they are developing will become a crucial framework for the social engagements of tomorrow.

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