Archiving the self?
Facebook as biography of social and relational memory

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the claim that online communication technologies are detrimental to off-line communication practices.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on material from focus groups with students from the University of Cambridge and Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), and in-depth interviews from a mixture of employed people and students. The breakdown is as follows: three focus groups in total are ran, two cohorts of participants were students from University of Cambridge, and the third group from ARU. Six individuals aged between 21 and 36 were interviewed in-depth on their Facebook use. Questions relating to personal use of Facebook are asked. All names of participants have been changed.

Findings – The research findings show that opportunities for communication are increased by using Facebook. Facebook use also impacts on how other types of communicative technologies are used – such as the phone and email. From the small participant sample, it is founded (with only one exception, the Facebook user had accepted a request from a “stranger” on recommendation from her friend, only to reject this friend within a short time from her network due to his reliability. Since the study, it is founded that one individual who has befriended individuals that were not known to him. When asked about this, he explained that many of these friends were developed after playing online games with them. In his mind, he had built up trust through game-playing and used this as a measure of their reliability. Whilst he only joined Facebook in early 2008, he has now accumulated over 350 friends.) that off-line encounters were a prerequisite for a friend connection to be made online in Facebook. Finally, it is founded that the participants rarely interact with the majority of their Facebook friends and it is this dormant archive of relationships that hold the most interest as it provides an archive of relationships that would have dissipated without these technologies.

Originality/value – The key value of the paper lies in understanding this technology as an archive of human relationships.

Keywords Surveillance, Students, Communication technologies, Electronic media, Networking, United Kingdom

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction: disintegrating relationships

This paper will explore how participants in this study negotiate, organize and manage their off-line and online relationships through the social networking

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site (SNS), Facebook. This study adds to a growing literature on student usage of social networking technologies (Lampe et al., 2007; Ellison et al., 2007). Boyd and Ellison (2008, p. 211) define SNSs as web-based services that allow individuals to:

- Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system.
- Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection.
- View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

There is a combination of fear and reverence (Ellison et al., 2007) for SNSs. There are a diversity of SNS including Boyd (developed in 2004); MySpace (created mid-2003); the professional SNS LinkedIn (developed in 2003); Cyworld (China) (2005), and Facebook, which was launched in 2004 and then opened to selected high schools and universities across the USA and UK[1]. The first SNS was sixdegrees.com which included a framework with which to create a profile, search and add friends (Boyd and Ellison, 2008 for an overview and history of SNS). Six degrees of separation is based on the notion that there are only six persons separating every individual (Donath and Boyd, 2004).

Our interest in SNS was inspired by sociological debates about the breakdown of community (Putnam, 2000) and the “liquidity” of interpersonal relationships (Bauman, 2005) brought about by changing arrangements in capital (Sennett, 1998). A seminal work discussing these problems is bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community (Putnam, 2000). Putnam charts the decline of public organizational membership through the course of the twentieth century. For Putnam (2000, p. 19), organizational participation generated forms of social capital that are beneficial to individuals and communities, writing “The term social capital itself turns out to have been independently invented at least six times over the twentieth century, each time to call attention to the ways in which our lives are made more productive by social ties.” Putnam is pessimistic about a return to former levels of organizational participation, but does point to three trends that are exceptions to this rule. Whilst most major organizations have seen a decline in support Evangelical Christians and the environmental movement are able to boast widespread involvement at the level of local chapters in the former, and mass (paper) membership in latter. Another exception is the net and this is reflected in the many chat rooms, support groups, online social networks and blogs found on the internet. Putnam holds out hope for the internet to provide a vehicle which individuals and communities can use to associate and develop social capital (see also Ellison et al., 2006, 2007 for further discussion on social capital). Putnam (2000) sees the internet as a potential site for civic reengagement. Putnam (2000, p. 171) explains it thus “Telecommunications in general and the internet in particular substantially enhances our ability to communicate; thus it seems reasonable to assume that their net effect will be to enhance community, perhaps even dramatically. Social capital is about networks and the net is the network to end all networks.”

These concerns have beset much sociological writing about social life in the latter part of the twentieth century (Putnam, 2000; Toffler, 1970). Writing in the 1970s, Toffler (1970) described how new technologies, urbanization and changing work patterns were altering the very fabric of existence, generating in turn, ever proliferating relationships. Toffler (1970, p. 88) described this new man as “Modular Man” and “rather than entangling ourselves with the whole man, we plug into a module of his personality. Each personality can be imagined as a unique configuration of thousands of such modules.”
Toffler (1970, p. 90) notes how in an average week you are likely to meet more people than during your entire lifetime in more sedentary close-knit communities such as those under feudalism. SNS such as Facebook are part of a lineage of communication technologies that alter the day-to-day organization of individual and collective life. And whilst traditional forms of public association may be in decline, membership and use of SNS are flourishing (Ellison et al., 2006, 2007; Boyd, 2004; Lewis, 2008). Yet computer-mediated communication (CMC) is viewed as an inadequate counterpart of face-to-face communication (Stefanone and Jang, 2008) and more unreliable for social cues (Walther et al., 2008), but CMCs are a prominent mode of communication for billions of people (if we include the telephone, email, gaming, dating and SNS) and are as vital to maintaining relationships as face-to-face interactions. Watt et al. (2002) as, the provocative question “How social is internet communication?” writing:

[...] the internet is a medium characterized by intense social activity. However, this image is in many respects belied by the theoretical approaches to CMC. These have tended to stress ways in which the medium is inadequate for supporting social interaction – or at the very least is suboptimal in comparison with face-to-face interaction. Social psychological theories of new communication media from the telephone onwards have tended to downgrade or even deny the sociality of new media (Watt et al., 2002, p. 62, authors’ emphasis).

Watt et al. (2002) critically challenge the view that new technologies represent a qualitative degradation in social and interpersonal communication. Putnam’s (2000) fears about declining social engagement are more about a decline in particular kinds of social engagements that were the product of an altogether different set of political, social and cultural arrangements. As the kinds of organizational participation and collectives that Putnam sees in decline were primarily built out of face-to-face interactions (bowling, demonstrations, church attendance for example all require off-line and face-to-face forms of engagement) this may also explain why forms of interaction that are not face-to-face are treated with suspicion. It may also account for the finding in the study that follows which illustrates generational differences on uses Facebook.

2. Resistance, acceptance and the rise of SNS
Mary was not interested in Facebook at all, yet after her fifth friend request she gave in. It seems to vary how many friends are on the network before a user is motivated to join. For Mary it was five, for Jane it was more. Mary and Jane are both in their 30s and were reluctant to join Facebook at first. After time, their resistance gave in and they both registered for accounts. University undergraduates have less resistance to joining Facebook, which for many was their second experience of a SNS, MySpace being their first (Hargittai, 2008 for a look at users and non-users of SNS). Facebook was cultivated and developed in selective academic networks before it was opened to mass membership in 2006 (Boyd, 2004; Boyd and Ellison, 2008). In this study, users over 25 years old refuse to join for a myriad of different reasons, giving reasons such as the following: “it’s boring” or “it’s not for real friends.” As Ludek, a 30 year old former PhD student explained, “I don’t see the point in doing it, I prefer old fashioned email.” How quickly email is seen as old fashioned in the light of SNS technologies! Amongst the younger cohort of focus group participants, membership of a SNS site was almost automatic. For our participants under 25 there was less agonizing about the meaning of real friendships or preference for meeting people face-to-face, which were often the reasons given for older users’ initial resistance to joining this site. Younger users tended to slot in
Facebook into their repertoire of technologies for their social interactions and communications and be more open about who was their “Facebook friend.”

For a SNS to be successful, it must have members, and this relies on both voluntarism and social pressure. Sites that have many members are more inviting for others to join. Though many SNS originate from the USA (Friendster, MySpace and Facebook), others such as China’s QQ has over 300 million users (compare that to approximately 8 million Facebook users in UK). Mixi (Japan) has 14 million users whilst CyWorld in South Korea boasts 20 million. This shows their mass and cross-cultural appeal. As Boyd and Ellison (2008, p. 213) explain of SNS, they are not confined to the West, nor as Lewis argues are they adopted without innovation in Asia (Lewis, 2008). Sites such as Friendster, MySpace and Friends Reunited have millions of users – yet such sites have plateaued or even plummeted in their usage and new member rates. Boyd and Ellison attribute some of these issues to technical difficulties, such as greater restrictions on membership as in the case of Boyd (2006, p. 215). One of the most common features of these SNS is that it is almost impossible to cross networks, SNS have developed mechanisms for greater social stratification, Friendster’s top eight is one example (Boyd, 2006), but other mechanisms are available such as facilities that randomly select your “Top Friends” (Light et al., 2008, p. 8). A member of Facebook cannot be a member of Cyworld for example. In this sense, such networks rely heavily on the idea of the herd or the homogenization of user-participation. This homogenizing of sites is most clearly illustrated with Facebook, which has a simple blue and white background. This simplicity appealed to some former MySpace enthusiasts. Tim a graduate student at Cambridge explained:

I have a MySpace account but I don’t really use it. Mainly because it annoys me! Well, why it annoyed me was that [...] what I like about Facebook is that [...] everyone’s profile looks the same and you know where to look for various things. It allows you to find the information you want quickly. Whereas with MySpace it takes ages to load up because you’ve got to load a song and some background and I just found it very irritating [...]  

In our studies, we found that patterns of migration from SNS MySpace to Facebook were common with one of the central reasons given was that more friends had adopted Facebook:

I created a MySpace one when that was universal and MySpace wasn’t when Facebook was limited just to universities and then once everyone went on Facebook it made my MySpace account fairly redundant.

[...] it became obvious very rapidly that more of my friends were on Facebook than MySpace so it didn’t seem worth keeping up two accounts.

Whilst Facebook had limited membership which was initially confined to specific universities in the US and then UK, the relaxation of standards has contributed to the ability of Facebook to flourish. Friendster, a US-based SNS experienced the opposite situation. “Because organic growth had been critical to creating a coherent community, the onslaught of new users who learned about the site from media coverage upset the cultural balance” (Boyd and Ellison, 2008, p. 215). These factors indicate that users travel in virtual space, and spaces in it can be evacuated within a short time of becoming popular (Friendster). It is unclear where the next big SNS might be. In UK and the USA, MySpace replaced Friendster, and Facebook is slowly catching up with the huge number of active members of MySpace in the US and is the leading SNS in UK (Light et al., 2008, p. 5).
Yet individuals invest considerable resources into setting up their profile, adding photographs and establishing a network of friends. It is therefore no surprise that our participants felt more reluctant to change to other SNSs. Yet the short history of SNS has demonstrated that shifts from site to site do occur (Boyd and Ellison, 2008).

3. What is friendship?
Friendship is a controversial arena in studies of SNS (Boyd and Ellison, 2008; Beer, 2008; Light et al., 2008). SNS sites like MySpace and Facebook use friend as the designating term for relationships in these networks. Friendster in keeping with the friend theme adapted friend into friendster, the label for a contact in its social network (Boyd, 2004, 2006). The term friend is a complex, heterogeneous and variable category, and this is reflected in conflicts between users behaviours and social ties (adding friends to their list which they do not consider “real-friends”). SNSs such as Facebook can boast 8 million active users in UK alone, but critics (including participants in this study) point to the “falsity” of the relations created through these networks. There is even a vocabulary to describe these Facebook friends – “they’re not my real friends, they’re my Facebook friends” said Mark, a 26-year-old PhD student at the University of Cambridge. Donath and Boyd (2004, p. 74) also note this phenomena, “she’s not my friend, she’s my friendster” to describe a relationship with a person through the site. Yet these descriptions refer to different kinds of relationality. In the former, Mark had met his Facebook friends face-to-face before befriending these persons on Facebook, but his encounters with these types of friends were brief and transient. For the Friendster networker, the relationship was created online. Facebook users prefer to have a face-to-face encounter before any befriending takes place. Social networking technologies allow us to explore the changing dynamics of relationships in twenty-first century capitalism.

Spencer and Pahl’s (2006, p. 3) Rethinking Friendships asks if the classical sociological perspectives on capitalism, technology and social relations need to be reassessed altogether:

Our aim in this book has been to challenge the view of those social theorists and commentators who have adopted an overwhelmingly pessimistic, if not despairing, response to the society they describe.

Spencer and Pahl argue that “social connections are taking place at the wrong level or at only one level” (Spencer and Pahl (2006, p. 15, authors’ emphasis) and that “the quality of social relationships has deteriorated and that social connections of all-kinds are weakening” (Spencer and Pahl, 2006, authors’ emphasis). For much of the twentieth century, the decline of place-based communities has been accompanied by pessimistic notions that “people in the Western world are selfish, isolated and irresponsible, turning away from public and private responsibilities” (Spencer and Pahl, 2004, p. 8). On the other hand, the Web 2.0 offers a level of public participation and interaction where individuals can become authors of their own narratives. Online social networking comes into play here. As sociologist Barry Wellman explains “Computer-supported social networks sustain strong, intermediate and weak ties that provide information and social support in both specialized and broad-based relationships … Computer-mediated communication accelerates the ways in which people operate at the centre of partial, personal communities, switching rapidly and frequently between groups of ties” (Wellman cited in Putnam, 2000, p. 171).
Spencer and Pahl (2006) note how modern notions of friendship are often contrasted with traditional ones—yet their work interrogates these assumptions by calling into question the traditional versus modern dichotomy of friendship relations. We began our focus groups by asking the participants to tell us about the people they come into contact with day to day—and try to put a name to that relation. We found the results revealing. Focus group participants tended to have a rich vocabulary for kin—mother, father, brother, sister, cousin, and grandparent were amongst the obvious nomenclatures. When it came to non-kin, the group were decidedly less articulate, after friend, acquaintance, buddy, colleague, supervisor, and co-worker the participants became increasingly unable to give a name to many of their relationships and began to describe relationships by activities that were performed:

People who work in servicing counters; teachers or supervisors; sometime random passers-by who you don’t have to talk to; people on trains; acquaintances; students; children.

[...] the electrician, the mechanic, the plumber [...] service encounters.

After these examples the list became even more unusual in participants descriptions:

[...] communities of practice. Say you’re involved in a student community action or active on one of your committees or whatever you get engaged with whilst you’re at university.

[...] co-religious; if you’re religious or non-co-religious you might interact with someone if you have an opposing religious view.

[...] fellow dog-walkers.

Celebrities.

People whose blog you read.

Au Pair families.

Name the relation was a warm-up exercise we played with our focus-group participants. The exercise was intended to encourage our participants to think about all the types of people they come into contact with during the course of their lives, and think about the terms for these respective connections. As you can see from Figure 1, our participants also include people they did not come into contact with, but felt a relation (celebrities), and also casual but regular encounters (guy in chip shop), as well as more conventional associations (housemate, siblings, work colleagues).

These exercises demonstrated how rich, varied and complex encounters can be through the course of a person’s life, yet at the same time they illustrate the varied ways in which people assign and utilize categories and terms to organize their social interactions (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Pahl, 2002). When we asked our participants to explain their understanding of the meaning of “friendship,” their responses were likewise ambiguous and complex. One of the key problems in the social sciences’ analysis of friendship is that no one can quite agree what a friend is, whether it is specific to the modern capitalist era, or even how to understand a common, yet jumbled relational statement such as “my mother is my best friend.” Spencer and Pahl’s (2006, p. 59) approach to this is to examine the meaning of friendship:

So what is a friend? In the abstract, it seems that friendship is associated with a whole raft of qualities [...] Friendships have to be established [...] because it affirms that someone has
chosen you for “who you really are” [...] as people who have something in common [...] belong to the same organization, live in the same locality, come from a similar background, lead a similar lifestyle, work in the same occupational field, or are at the same stage in life’ and the list is not exhausted [...] “friends are people who enjoy each other’s company, sharing activities, going out together, chatting on the telephone [...] offer each other practical help, or give emotional support.”
The category of friend is varied and ambiguous and appears to have no specific meaning. This is perhaps why it has become the catch-all category of SNS in the West. The Korean SNS Cyworld has an altogether different approach to describing relational links in its network:

A designation term for an equivalent to “friend” for Facebook (open to most of the contents which are hidden from others) is called “il-chon.” “il-chon” is a unit of relatedness amongst kins in Korean. “Chon” is an algebraic term measuring consanguinity in Korean. “il” means “one.” So il-chon means people related consanguinity with one division, such as parents-children. So cousins are called in Korean “sa-chon” meaning “four divisions” as you need go through four persons or relations (ego-father-father’s brother-father’s brother’s son, for example) to be related as cousins. So metaphorically “il-chon” means very “close persons” such as “parents-children” (Hyun-Gwi Park[2], personal communication).

Facebook friends can vary from close relationships to intermittent contacts to casual encounters. In our study, Facebook users (aside from one participant who had befriended only one stranger in her network of over 300 friends) prefer to have met a person at least once physically before accepting them as a friend on Facebook. This may be because of Facebook’s more closed architecture than MySpace where it appears people are more amenable to accepting friends who they do not know and have never met (and are not likely to) but in some way share a common interest so they may continue the relationships online. In this study, once a person has been accepted as friend (however tenuous the link is between them initially) there is no obligation on either side to keep up the relationship by constant e-mails or communication, often people are happy to leave their friends lists dormant, with simply the fact that they are there being good enough. This provides evidence for Beer (2008) who problematizes notions of online and offline friends as separate:

We can imagine this as a recursive process where SNS come to challenge and possibly even mutate understandings of friendship. It is conceivable then that the understandings and values of friendship may be altered by engagements with SNS (520).

It was noted in our research that Facebook may be changing the way that people create new relationships and reinforces Beer’s (2008) reflections on friendship and social networking. This is expressed in changing courting rituals and given here in an example given by one of our female student participants. Dating is a minefield of confused signals and unknown expectations (Light, 2007). Facebook may be altering the way in which people exchange information that can lead to dates or potential intimate relationships. Rather than exchanging telephone numbers and waiting for one of the parties to call, you now ask “are you on Facebook?” If the answers yes, details are exchanged, friend requests are sent and it is taken from there. In the Facebook generation these obligations seem to be put to one side, allowing an equality which did not previously exist and allowing for the one face-to-face contact before acceptance rule being met – an equal friendship is set up on Facebook. There seems to be then no obligation by either party to continue the relationship – it is just there.

4. The ethics of surveillance
It is striking that our participants listed celebrities and bloggers in their list of relations in our warm up exercise name the relation (Stefanone and Jang, 2008 for a discussion on blogs). It is more surprising because our participants did not know of these people
in person, yet felt like they knew them and their lives. “Big Brother” culture as it has been called, shows the boundary between private and public has been breached, where private life is lived in public view (Spencer and Pahl, 2006; Bradwell and Reeves, 2008). We found that many of our participants use Facebook purely for the purpose of peering into other lives. Amongst the favoured activities of our Facebook participants was looking at other people’s profiles (Joinson, 2008). Yet this comes at a cost! When our recipients thought their own searching activities could be tracked, most recoiled in horror, another said it would be the “death of Facebook” if it were possible, though Light et al. (2008, p. 11) point to a tracking facility that allows users to see who have looked at their profile. This supports the interest in, and success of, SNS, and what is posted is usually considered fair game for consumption by other Facebook users, especially where privacy settings have been implemented for security, Facebook users (particularly younger users) are able to mine data about their Facebook friends which previously would not have been accessible. For example, photos of events, family, etc. can provide insight into a person’s life in ways that differ from a telephone call or a letter. Is it the quantity of information which can be conveyed which may be pushing the boundaries of what is considered appropriate – or ethical – in human relationships? Until the arrival of SNSs it was hard to publish anywhere the same amount of information that can be posted to a Facebook profile unless a person had their own web site (which is harder to set up and maintain than a Facebook profile). Our research participants were all fully aware of the potential to mine Facebook and MySpace for information about other people to the level of looking at their wall postings to see who they are talking to, about what and why. This does not seem to be an issue and it can be argued it only adds to people becoming more sociable via Facebook. Why are the users so keen to maintain their invisible presence? Perhaps, these reasons have to do with how they perceive their own and others behaviours. Our participants described their activities on Facebook in terms of surveillance and stalking. Jamie, a graduate student at the University of Cambridge described his use of Facebook:

I think there is probably a life cycle with Facebook. When you first start off on Facebook then you’re interested in everybody and everybody’s profiles and who’s they’re friends with, and you are just discovering all the people who are about you in college that you didn’t know who they were before […] Obviously the other kind of thing that we have talked about on Facebook is that a lot of people use it for looking at people they really fancy. Which is a huge thing! We might actually laugh about it. But if you really like such and such a girl or guy then that comes into a lot. You might obsess about it a bit. “Facebook stalking” as you’ve heard it called[3].

Mark, a graduate student at Cambridge talks about the general technology available for stalking in which Facebook is added to the repertoire of CMCs available:

There’s a whole kind of thing that you can do apparently if you want to stalk someone, you acquire an incredible amount of information about people. My housemate is some what obsessive. So sometimes he lets slip about the people he kind of finds out information about. And seriously, it’s incredible! There’s Facebook! There’s Google! There is Google Earth so you can get pictures of their home! It’s incredible!

Stalking evokes negative connotations of predatory behaviours and Jim along with other recognized their use of Facebook was for this purpose. A colleague who is an
anonymous member of Facebook explained why his identity is hidden: “it’s voyeuristic!” Yet in the next breath he admitted he had set up a fake user account precisely so that he could “surf” Facebook and do precisely the activity that repulsed him from “joining” it in the first place. Tom explains another account:

Some people will go on it to see how ex-girlfriends or ex-boyfriends are doing and stuff like that. I don’t personally but I know people do that. I think that’s an index of intimacy with the sort of person. So you might be curious about an ex-girlfriend or boyfriend and you might want to look them up, but that’s quite a different impulse from being interested in someone you see at college and you want to see what they do on a day to day basis and where they are and what photos they put up on their site. I think the two are quite distinct things.

This interest in the lives of others is not confined to ex- or desired partners. There was a sense that just looking into others’ lives was for its own sake, with little motive other than curiosity. The virtual world is becoming the way we learn about others’ life-worlds (Joinson, 2008).

5. Liquid work and friendships?

“Facebook is like a biography” explained Charlie, a 22-year-old undergraduate student from Anglia Ruskin University. We will not go into detail here about the process of setting up and establishing accounts, this is done excellently here (Boyd, 2004; Light et al., 2008; Walther et al., 2008), including amongst the college community (Ellison et al., 2007) and gay networks (Light, 2007). We will only touch briefly on the set-up process here. The page is set as a blank canvass on to which the new subscriber can import their personal details. The selection of the photograph is the first step in how the user begins to articulate and express the “I”. This image, usually seen by any users is the first of a composite package that is then assembled by the user, further augmented by photographs, comments, descriptions of interests, and group affiliations. This composite package of the self is further updated by newsfeeds and status updates that constantly monitor and alert the users what information is new on the site. Bauman (2005, p. 46) notes that modern identity is transitional, this “I” is constantly renegotiated and warns of the impending effects of modern capitalism on the individual: liquid modern consumer society degrades the “ideals” of the long-term and of “totality”. Sennett’s (1998) work has contributed to our understanding the effects of changing working patterns on human relationships, as flexible working patterns replaced the “job for life”, it also replaced a fix set of associates for life and multiplied the number of opportunities for new social interactions. They are an altogether more mobile workforce that is less attached to organizations, communities and family[4], with flexible and distributed working arrangements replacing inflexible and fixed working patterns. The meanings and practices of “the work-day”, “the work-place” and the boundaries between “the public and the private” have changed irrevocably (Bradwell and Reeves, 2008).

The journey from primary school – to secondary school – to college – to university and/or work leaves a trail of associations. The conventional diary was a pre-SNS way of saving these associations, but such associations fell through the diarized net. SNS provide a means to collect these associations: a “depository of people you once used to know” said Margaret, a 20-year-old focus group participant.

We agree with Stefanone and Jang (2008, p. 127) who write “as social beings, people adapt new forms of communication technology to meet the objective of maintaining relationships,” and our participants described Facebook as a technology for this
precise purpose. Facebook allows an alternative contact medium which facilitates maintaining contacts with seemingly more people than before, such as old school and university friends who would have previously been lost as they move to different parts of the country, abroad, or take on new jobs. Donath describes CMC such as email, as “contact tools” that help “maintain an expanded collection of individual relationships” (Donath, 2007, p. 2). Whether or not active communication then occurs with these old acquaintances seems irrelevant, just having them back in some form of contact is enough to re-establish the link. Not only does Facebook allow us to keep in contact with these older acquaintances, it is also affecting the way we develop relationships with new people that come into our lives. A point of difference should be illustrated here. MySpace users are more likely to contact strangers and use hobbies and interest as a point of contact. Facebook users are less likely to do this.

Citing Georg Simmel, Toffler (1970, p. 87) writes: “if the urban individual reacted emotionally to each and every person with whom he came into contact, or cluttered his mind with information about them, he would be “completely atomized internally and would fall into an unthinkable mental condition”. But both Toffler and Simmel were writing before the invention of SNS, which allow a new system of relational management. Donath (2007) writes about ‘social supernets’ in which these transient and proliferating encounters are able to be organized and managed through SNS. There are some noticeable generational differences between younger and older users of SNS. Patricia, in her early 20s, works for a telephone helpline and many of her colleagues are aged in their 60 and 70s. Despite volunteering together at a helpline (and therefore using phones as the connective tool between themselves and callers) her colleagues expressed concern that young people were losing their social skills and abilities to interact face-to-face because of their intensive use of gaming, SNS and computer-mediated devices for social interaction. Yet as Patricia explained, she is in touch with her friends from junior and secondary school, college, university, and work. Moreover, because of email and Facebook she was able to keep in regular contact with a close friend overseas and communicate with her two to three times a month. Facebook allowed her to expand, maintain and organize her social connections rather than diminish them. Facebook allows users to remain connected to individuals who they would not have remained connected to. Rather than diminishing social interaction, Facebook offers people more choice in how they do continue relationships. We found that Facebook adds to the repertoire of communications media that people use, with its application for different types of relationship very much evident, depending on the quality, longevity, intimacy and regular face-to-face contact nature of the existing relationship. Existing close relationships do not appear to be affected by Facebook. For those to whom one is close, say parents and partners, whether Facebook is in the equation or not is irrelevant[5].

6. Conclusion – Facebook as archive and biography of social memory
A “diary” has two meanings – the first reflects the capability to store ones contacts (friends, phone numbers, addresses). The other provides a reflection of the individual’s life, e.g. a record of what they have been doing today, who with and why. With high levels of mobility, especially in student and working populations who have “home friends”, “work friends” and “college friends” this is especially important. Our research findings suggest that Facebook use has had a number of effects on relational practices.
For close ties where individuals communicate regularly, Facebook has started to displace other CMC technologies such as email and the telephone. Facebook has had the effect of reshuffling all existing CMC technologies. However, the vast majority of our participants’ contact lists are not contacted at all. These friends lay passive in the system. We found roughly 10-20 percent of participants’ contacts were communicated with on a regular basis and the majority of Facebook contacts remain dormant. For us this fact was striking and revealing. The dormant status of many contacts does not necessarily distract from its use as a relational technology, as these contacts can be monitored and potentially be reactivated. Users update their profiles when they move, get new jobs, start a new course of study, and they add status updates and regularly maintain relations with their key contacts by writings on their walls and adding photographs, and by default, they maintain contacts with their entire network of associates. Facebook acts as an archive of social relationships and provides a means of recording ongoing interactions. SNS may change the way we associate at a very fundamental level – it will mean as one journeys through life these associations can be captured and up-to-date information about our former relationships is ready to be recalled and revived along the way. Like other individuals in their 30s brought up in UK, from our personal experience, we have had many associations along the years. Yet, though we remember some faces, we rarely remember the names. Perhaps, a new generation of SNS users will be better than at relating than their older counterparts hung up on notions of defining friendship and rigidly applying it to those around them. The young embrace this technology and desire to keep in contact with those they meet (and children now build up these networks from as young as eight years old, so who knows how many relationships will be archived by the time these individuals reach their 30s). There is a strong desire to maintain, organize and trail associations illustrated by the mass popularity of SNS and these technologies that offer these capabilities. As a result, rather than social amnesia, Facebook is a way of archiving the self, storing biography and enhancing social memory.

Notes
1. University of Cambridge’ students were amongst this first cohort of UK-based Facebook members.
2. Dr Hyun-Gwi Park is a social anthropologist at the University of Cambridge.
3. Jamie then went on to declare “No I’m not talking about me I’m talking about a theoretical point that wasn’t valid . . .”
4. We found that about half of our focus group participants and interviewees had one or more family member amongst their contacts list. Many wanted to keep family and friends separate (but would allow for same-aged kin such as brothers, sisters or cousins). This may change now that Facebook is open to all and SNS becomes the norm as a way of keeping different generations in contact.
5. Phone calls, requiring real-time interaction may still be the communications method of choice for these relationships. A certain level of pre-determined intimacy seems to be the catalyst for phoning.

References


Further reading


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