

Genevieve Costello  
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The following is an extract of my undergraduate thesis, “Legitimacy and Dependency: Qualifications of Social Realities on Facebook,” written within the Visual and Critical Studies Department at School of the Art Institute of Chicago, submitted in May 2010.

To provide context, I have included my original thesis Abstract and Contents page (the page numbers reflect those of my thesis in its entirety). The writing sample is an edited compilation of sections I.IV Dissemination - Closing. Please note that the style is MLA and statistics and functions of Facebook referenced are from 2010 or earlier.

**Legitimacy and Dependency: Qualifications of Social Realities on Facebook**

**by**

**Genevieve Costello**

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## Abstract

In this thesis I address the fundamental elements of Facebook's functions effects on social behaviors from participation with the site. In my exploration I first define the relationship between communication and social realities. It is through this relationship we begin to understand Facebook's significance in our culture. I then consider the forms of communication media by which Facebook exists and their qualities. After briefly describing the inclination of news media interactions to embody entertainment, I argue for Facebook's presence as a news media platform. Once establishing this I discuss inconsistencies in the site's social qualification and legitimacy due to the localization of users' participation within the realm of a vast network of the possibly accessible information. Facebook space is qualified; that is, it has degrees of value that differ among users. These inconsistencies are the cause of new yet subtle movements within socially acceptable behaviors. It is the trust and reliance of other users to give and gain information, inter-user dependency, which realizes and perpetuates these movements.

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## **L.IV Dissemination**

The spreading of information is similar to how animals spread seeds. When users visit an online page frequently we often carry something from it to another place, online or not, thus developing a bounty of budding presences. Within this come some issues of privacy, but the overall theme of connectivity is one of reciprocal dependence and desire. The most popular search engines and social networking site grasped onto this inclination of users and now encourage independent website integration. For example, Facebook offers an “imported stories” application, meaning activities done or content of interest on other sites may be shared as posts directly from the other sites onto your Facebook profile as well as your friends’ News Feeds. What this fluidity between such popular sites entails goes beyond the mere cooperation for the sake of the user. As communication theorist James Carey articulates, “...each modern media has increased the capacity for controlling space...by reducing the signaling time (the gap between the time a message is sent and the time it is received) between persons and places” (104). While participation is free, the controlling of communication on sites commodifies the information. Most appealing is that this information is of social value, not particular to a function, but conducting social effects that subtly infiltrate and evolve realities in popular culture through drawing in mass amounts of people who further spread the popularity, usage, and influence of the site.

The way we interpret mass amounts of virtual visual information is through ambient awareness, "...this sort of incessant online contact...it is very much like being physically near someone and picking up on his mood through the little things he does...out of the corner of your eye" (Thompson, 2). *New York Times* and *Wired* writer Clive Thompson coined the term "ambient awareness" in his article "Brave New World of Digital Intimacy" published in Fall 2008, referring to websites like Twitter or the News Feed homepage on Facebook. Users keep updated through ambient awareness because it is faster, easier, and all-inclusive.

The consistent, infinite, and neutral presentation also equalizes information. The flattening of presentation decontextualizes within the already bizarre aggregation of information. The personalized "omnipresent knowledge" that the News Feed provides is addicting and easily swallowed because of ambient awareness. We are able to read these updates, tabloid-style, like a newspaper on the train on the way to work; scan over, remember key points of interest, and go on with your day with the feeling of social happenings without dedicating effort. The persisting immediacy of documentation and permanent recording of social information is a new phenomenon due to accessibility and speed. In earlier communication history, the cataloging of events were those of broadcast media, such as TV or newspapers, or infrequently popularized private diaries of the individual. The social activity recorded on the Internet requires such little effort and represents such a large demographic of menial activity, its brewing effect on the state of contemporary and future historical materialism should be acknowledged. The dialogue within our virtual habitats quickly amasses and becomes "...an invisible dimension floating over everyday life" (Thompson, 2).

Interpreting this varying information consolidated through simultaneous presentation loosens the construction of what previously would have been the foundation for relationships of depth. Facebook's News Feed and "tweeting" corrodes distinctions of newsworthiness and plays into the fact that previously irrelevant and banal occurrences can now be treated as events, worthy of broadcasting to the average user's 130 friends. As Henry David Thoreau responds to the telegraph in "Walden,"

We are eager to tunnel under the Atlantic and bring the old world some weeks nearer to the new; but perchance the first news that will leak through into the broad flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough (36).

It is quite entertaining to consider Thoreau's quote in reference to the available and popularized sharing of information on the Internet, but more importantly we can draw from this quote the integral role of the attributes and function of popular communication mediums, an idea popularized by communication theorist Marshall McLuhan.

Media theorist Neil Postman argues in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* that "the telegraph made a three-pronged attack on typography's definition of discourse, introducing on a large scale irrelevance, impotence, and incoherence...aroused by the fact that telegraphy gave a form of legitimacy to the idea of context-free information" (65). Postman addresses issues of communication mediums that have remained the same for over a century, but are irrelevant themselves. Upon their popularization, fast-paced, cheap, and easily accessible communication mediums legitimize their content, no matter the content- it reflects its carrier's function. From this we can view virtual places like Facebook and examine how it reels us in with the speed at which we can acceptably attain social information that would otherwise be considered inappropriate and/or unworthy of sharing with

an audience. It is this change in what is socially acceptable in which we see the extension of McLuhan's argument.

McLuhan states that "electric circuitry has overthrown the regime of "time" and "space" and pours upon us instantly and continuously the concerns of all other men" (16). In context to the Internet, there is a current collapsing of space through fluidity between communication places and new experiences of time, as time may simultaneously be experienced in multiple places. You may be online at home, in transit, nearly anywhere and anytime, while maintaining a record of activity through standardized time and dates.

We integrate new places into time while space simultaneously stretches and tightens like an endless pulling of a Chinese finger trap. The Internet offers seemingly infinite space yet the more information and communication that occurs within-through-on it the closer the information and communication becomes. Concerning content within this context, for example, the more videos of kittens playing with mittens added onto YouTube [**expansion**] the more likely they will consist of the first links appearing on Google when you search "kitten mittens," which will lead you to the YouTube page of postings and the many pages on which people have embedded the video[s], connecting you to more people who like kitten mitten searches [**compression**]. This broad and systemized horizon leads to places that would have never been otherwise experienced while tightening the gap between you and others, thus making the world smaller through expansion.

### **I.V News as Entertainment**

During our daily routine we frequently encounter images of people who are "in the public eye." A generalized term for this is "celebrity," and can include politicians, movie stars, soap

stars, a local football hero, as well as newscasters. News networks publicize and brand their social actors to represent a specific news program within a particular, somewhat signature, aesthetic. In the spirit of any other indistinguishable stylization of branded genre for the masses (ex. network sitcoms), news networks inundate out-of-home ads and commercials with the faces of their newscasters, their representatives, to encourage familiarization. Networks celebritize, that is, the making of a celebrity, their roles as social representatives.<sup>1</sup> We can google their names and find highly stylized portraits clustered together accompanied by lettering and symbols with suggestions of metallic in front of an abstract spatial graphics-covered background, such as the image below.



(Juliebee, *02 News Billboard*)

American's are quite accustomed to the dramatic airbrushing of our news representatives, but it is important to recognize the “show biz” quality of presentation. News flows through many filters, and it is our celebritized presenters who represent, as the surface of it, the nature of news creation. It is important to recall that we create news; news does not exist in and of itself. The conductors of news discernment shape unfiltered or less-filtered information to fit into their program.

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<sup>1</sup> I have coined the word “to celebritize” and all reasonable forms of it, such as celebritization or celebritizing, in my work because of its relevant nature to my topic and actual presence in the media world; thus, please recognize: Celebritize; (v) to make a celebrity.

The development of society's obsession of being "newsmakers" and surrounding ourselves with instant updates through the opportunities from technological advancement speaks to the attributes of popular platforms and freedom for anyone to become a broadcaster. An article published in *American Sociological Review* in 1974 suggests "...one approach to mass media is to look not for reality but for purposes which underlie the strategies of creating one reality instead of another" (Lester, Molotch, 111). By rendering "...otherwise remote happenings observable and meaningful" (Lester, Molotch, 101), broadcasters are able to show what they think will peak interest. Digital social media provides the best yet realm for our interest in "trivial" news, however because of its widespread practice, it is no longer trivial.

As sociologists Lester and Molotch state, "All events are socially constructed and their "newsworthiness" is not contained in their objective features" (110). This shows that any event has the possibility of being broadcast-worthy. Qualities of entertainment pervade, and I suggest we no longer consider this to be an issue but rather a neutral attribute our culture prefers and perpetuates, from which we interpret effects of the good-bad value scale. As communication theorist James Carey articulates, no matter the

...invented cultural form, news both forms and reflects a particular "hunger for experience" ...news is not information but drama. It does not describe the world but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action...it invites our participation on the basis of our assuming, often vicariously, social roles within it (17).

What Carey refers to as "an arena of dramatic forces and action" is our world, and it is our world, not the world, in which our realities occur.

## **Section II.**

### **II.I Facebook as News Platform**

Facebook is a space based on connectivity. In the most rudimentary comprehension of the site, users provide personal information and learn of others' information. Information-availability varies, but ultimately, if no one shared personal information none would be gained. Facebook is titled as a social networking site, but with the ceaseless flow of personalized and current information, it offers a space for individually relevant news. This sort of news directly affects our daily lives and informs the gestures of our social participation. It must be recognized as a news platform that provides localized and grand presentations to a simultaneous broadcasting network and audience of over 400 million people, 120 million Americans; its medium is the Internet.

The flow of information is immediate, infinite, accessible, easily digestible, and hand-crafted to be of interest to users in that we only see the activity of those we choose. The News Feed displays only our friends' activity, and if we don't care about certain friends' activity, we may change our settings so it doesn't show up in our News Feed. We not only have come to enjoy the passing update of what our co-worker had for lunch, but we are able to see what group they just joined, in which we might see a tagged photo of someone whose name we didn't know but face we recognize, whose profile we might click on, on whose wall we might notice a photo of a tree in the park one block away from our apartment, from which we might be inclined to ask if they live in Logan Square by Unity Park next time we haphazardly or purposefully bump into each other [depending on their privacy settings, we might be able to see their status, updated 3 minutes ago, which might say "representin' at Filter Cafe"].

Having the ability to move from person to person while controlling our visibility is exciting and means being the ultimate news conductor, interpreter, and producer. Facebook

simulates the teenage sensation of being at the shopping mall on a Saturday afternoon. Users are able to cruise around the site and feel a sense of "...hanging out in public...of seeing and being seen... You're with friends, but you're also creating the possibility that you'll bump into someone else, in which case you might meet them, or at least be noticed by them" (Cassidy, 10). Instead of food courts and Hot Topic, it is Facebook that molds the setting in which we cruise. You may meander alone, with the "online mode" turned off so no one can see that you are on. You can be online but not talking directly to anyone. You can send messages, directly communicating, you can alter your profile, write on others walls, and all the while your choices are visible to all you care to see, creating a broadcast of previously menial social movements.

In our published activity we build our social credibility, our presence. We self-celebritize. Seeing posted photographs of you that are made visible to friends establishes an event from what once would have been mere participation in social engagement. Looking at others' profiles isn't even necessary to feel a sense of connectivity and presence. Users reconfirm what sort of social person we are through obvious yet significant elements within the image such as time, setting, location, dress, facial-expression, or relationship to others in an image, but have public documentation of a social and individual self. You reaffirm to yourself your presence, existence, and significance in relationship to others. You have documentation that helps you evaluate what others think of you, and you have a good amount of control in specific self-representation within the social boundaries of the site, such choosing to remain tagged in photos. A friend of a friend, Kristin, tagged me in the photo below.



(Caitlyn and Genevieve, Two-Way)

This immediately provides links from Kristin to I, her networks of Richmond, VA, Virginia Commonwealth University, those prospective shared friends and anyone else who is able to see the photo depending on privacy settings. This photo exists among 25 other tagged photos of me, and it can be assumed that viewers may scroll through if not click on some of those photos. These other photos inform any singular photo and its contents and attributes within the tagged collection. There are some obvious articulations, such as the title of the album, when it was uploaded, the background outlined in tacky string lights and the suggestion of a pool table lamp distinguishes the setting to be a low-lit bar, the casual sweater-clad young women indicating the bar to be more of a dive, the pictures in the rest of the album [it appears to be from a “visiting – friend” trip, discerned through album title and photos of popular tourist locations]. This information can be viewed, interpreted, and stored within 10-40 seconds, depending on the level of interest. In addition to those more atmospheric, time, and location-based observations, there are the emotions of the photo, that of casual fun and silliness. These quick connotations affect observers' thoughts on dive bars, sweaters as “going out”-wear, animals on clothes, the peace sign, scrunched noses, teeth and skin color, and so on. The relationship to the

photographed, the documenter, and up-loader alters the affect and can also encourage purposeful efforts to either increase or decrease the degree of that relationship as well.<sup>2</sup>

The fast pace at which the stream of relevant changes [to YOUR life] and the movement of information are a personalized collection of images that we see, consciously and subconsciously. This is like advertisements in between television shows. Even if we don't care about the ad we retain some sort of cultural nod. If we were asked to describe basic elements of TV commercials that are broadcasted during a show we watch regularly, no matter our interest or lack thereof in the advertisements, we could indeed provide some sort of recollection. We see images of text, communicating activities, and participation. We see images of ourselves, friends, acquaintances, strangers of interest, family, and professors. We see images of advertisements, friend suggestions, questionnaires, and fan pages. The movement of current activity is relentless yet subtle and comforting. Whatever we don't care to interpret becomes a slight background buzz while so and so's new photo album surfaces, quickly to be replaced by the infoMania fan page.

Cultural conditioning through fast images affects the ways in which we see, look, consider, and act and we have adapted. We move seamlessly through according behaviors of different mediums but by storing social connotations. As Postman states, "Americans no longer talk to each other, they entertain each other. They no longer exchange ideas; they exchange images. They do not argue with propositions; they argue with good looks, celebrities and commercials" (92-93). This quote indicates the importance of image flow through the

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<sup>2</sup>

Information is modulated and repeated in many different areas of the site, like a profile photo update. The photo changes on your page, it can be announced on the News Feed and simultaneously posted on someone else's wall.

entertainment-bedazzled communication media. We now unfurl our social selves through ever-updated constructed presences based on the dissemination of purveyed particularities.

### **II.III Legitimacy**

In Section I, I outlined how social realities are relative. In the following sections, I will explore the occurrence of inconsistent behavioral norms within this framework:

***Localized social truths [→realities]***<sup>3</sup>  
Determine  
The ***terms of qualification*** of the social space  
Which determine  
The ***legitimacy of social behaviors***  
Thus we observe  
***Inconsistent behavioral norms.***

I came to the term legitimacy from political theorist Chantal Mouffe's usage of it in her work "The Democratic Paradox," where she applies it to the idea of a political adversary. I find "legitimacy" useful due to her characteristics of it, including the respectability of something even if you do not agree with it or act in such a way. The acceptability or appropriateness of social behaviors directs whether we are able to respect its presence or practice. While the behaviors on Facebook are not usually adversarial or at extreme odds, they do cause the sort of movement which Mouffe suggests should occur within ongoing confrontation. Facebook acts as the platform for this movement.

### **II.IV Qualification**

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<sup>3</sup> As defined in Section I.I On the Formation of Social Realities, The telling of ***singular material occurrence[s] of actions*** can but does not always equate to ***facts*** which can and almost always will induce ***social and individual truths.***

Social truths are localized because they are specific to smaller groups of people.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, there will be differing expectations and desires among these localized groups when considering social spaces, i.e., terms of qualification. For example, if you hurt your foot, you go first to a doctor to determine the severity and possibly a treatment, which you trust due to her degree earned in general medicine and practice in a medical office. In turn, she may send you to a podiatrist for further examination from someone she feels is better qualified to determine the injury due to their degree earned in podiatry. We would not go to the foot doctor if we have bronchitis because our regular doctor is specifically qualified to treat general illness. We evaluate social spaces with the same use of qualification. This is the basic function of qualification.

This aspect serves as a social truth among a small group of people. When considering the various online social spaces, a small group of people will determine what best suits them by noting which site offers the best space for sharing their prioritized commonality. If the majority of my friends were in bands and mostly used Myspace for their band sites, I would be inclined to also use Myspace. Thus, as you trust the doctor is better qualified to determine an injury than you because of her medical degree and active practice in a medical office, you trust Myspace is better qualified to serve you and your friends than Facebook because of interface formulated for music sharing.

The qualification of a social space also occurs through inclinations of how seriously we consider activity on the site, how relative it is to other sectors of our lives, how we are inclined to use specific functions of the site, etc. For example, a group of 14-year old girls on Facebook will

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<sup>4</sup> Some social truths can be relatively true on a larger scale, such as the appropriateness of fashion trends or human rights. The general acceptance and use of Facebook as a site for social networking is a large-scale social reality, still considering certain countries and different age groups.

use the site differently than a group of young professional adults. Breaking up with a boyfriend via a relationship status change may be less appropriate in a group of young professional adults than it is with the group of 14-year old girls. While it may be common practice and a sign of social status within the group of 14-year old girls to acquire fifteen siblings, eight children, two parents from twenty-five best friends, and claim a birthday six years prior to the actual day, such actions would be uncommon and odd if enacted by group of young professional adults.

The purpose of the site is accepted by nearly all users, to “help you connect and share with the people in your life” (Facebook.com), but various interpretations of the qualification and approach to functions of the site directly conflicts with the fundamental function of dependency among users. These examples are more obvious than social differences found among people in similar age groups or with shared intentions but contextualize the basic idea of inconsistent legitimacy of social behavior, stemming from the site, but relevant on and off the site. The slight schisms that occur in the possible qualifications of the site and its effects on legitimacy of behaviors in a relatively localized setting result in constant adaptation by participants.

Facebook can be a qualified place of transparent and conservatively literal social communication. It is not self-contained. If I RSVP “attending” to an event, on or offline, I mean I will be there. If someone friends me, I believe that means I am welcome to look at their profile or notice and recall a status updates that catch my eye, which I may bring up in conversation. This is not what qualifies the site as a communication platform, though, and interpretations are consistent. For many, the site is qualified as a tool to find their long lost childhood classmates, but completely inappropriate, i.e., not legitimate, to vocalize they notice someone’s status update in an offline conversation. Despite these skewed planes of qualification and legitimacy, users

still depend on one another to give enough and get enough. Because of these inconsistencies, this mode of dependency can be problematic yet pluralistic.

### **II.V Function of Dependency**

The desire for human connectivity fuels this cycle of social networking spaces of which commodification seems to always pursue since the mass production of communication mediums.

<sup>5</sup> The interest of the self, the other, and reliance on one another for such communal relations nurses the growth of communication mediums. Because of the dependent nature of communication relationships, issues of public and private accessibility persist. Though McLuhan believes, “electrical information devices for universal, tyrannical womb-to-tomb surveillance are causing a very serious dilemma between our claim to privacy and the community’s need to know” (10), we willingly give up privacy for community and ease of access to information. These spaces of online social networks, as well as participation on sharing-based sites including photo sharing, video sharing, business information sharing, product information sharing, etc., inform our realities because we feel comfort in shared norms and gain information based in a recognizable identity and place. We lean on the ability to trust a product review on Amazon or a job posting on Craigslist<sup>6</sup> because of the fact that the site functions on the integrity of the shared need of participants. People identify through, within, and amongst one another, and we want our traces to be documented, desired, and recognizable.

Popular American culture idolizes celebrities, encourages popularity, and pursues material mass production of our idols. The Internet offers a place for not just the few elite to control what is worthy of broadcasting but instead offers a fully accepted, integrated, and

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<sup>5</sup> Qualification of Facebook space and relations among users stands as a form of commodification.

<sup>6</sup> Resolution of illegitimate uses of such spaces commences with the community’s scam reports.

appropriate medium for socialized venues of what would have been previously considered shameless self-promotion or stalker-like behaviors. We want to participate because of the accessibility of sharing functions and ultimately we control what information is publicly accessible.

Socialized Internet spaces offer the buzz of ambient love as well as open-sourced networking. As James Carey states, it is not "...the extension of messages in space but...the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (15) which communication mediums embody. The movement of information between cultural spaces must resonate in the expansion of communication production. It is the mass virtualization of the everyman's learned social coordination that embeds our historical presence, updated by the millisecond.

Dependency among the mass amounts of users for personal gain facilitates and maintains social networking sites. This self-enhancing induced reciprocation is not selfish or negative, though it could become such, but instead an innate element of organized social relation spaces. For example, in established and safe structures of social relations, such as a graduate thesis group, two core aspects of successful functioning of the group involve the co-creation and perpetuation of the setting and the personal gain that evolves from the setting.<sup>7</sup> There is a trust amongst participants that each will put forth corresponding individual efforts. Through the dependency for personal gain comes inclusive space no matter differences in thought or relation, thus representing a safe territory for possible contestation. As described in Section IV, it is the inconsistencies of Facebook's qualification and legitimacy, or in this example, the ideas in the

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<sup>7</sup> This example of offline relations is important in exploring online relations as it takes precedent and offers a firm reflection of relational behaviors that may occur off and online.

grad thesis group, that induce movement (of behaviors or ideas). Though there are many aspects of how this could fail, the most basic is if someone does not exert expected efforts. How Facebook avoids such failure is by offering no expected efforts.

Localized expectations affect Facebook participation and by no means must participation to be evenly distributed among groups or individual users. As Internet technology writer and consultant Clay Shirky states,

The most active contributor to a Wikipedia article, the most avid tagger of Flickr photos, and the most vocal participant in a mailing list all tend to be much more active than the median participant, so active in fact that any measure of “average” participation becomes meaningless...though the average is easy to calculate, it doesn’t tell you much about any given participant.

Though Shirky describes different social communication sites, he encapsulates the pertinent fact that users of like-sites are inconsistent in their activity. Again, this speaks to differing qualification and legitimacy of Facebook space, which perpetuates from the unnecessary unification of such participation and interpretation.

The localization of expectations is fluid. That is, Facebook space moves information by user volition. Yes, the site does its best to appease and perpetuate users’ desires to move information, but ultimately if no one cared about other users and self-perception, the space would cease to exist. Facebook friends, usually those who we most communicate with on and/or offline, articulate participation expectations. It is in this setting that a sense of social pluralism formulates. Art critic Grant Kester’s assertion that, “...dialogical exchange [is] based on reciprocal openness ...see[ing] the identity of the...[relations, participant to participant]... as produced through situational encounters...” (90), reiterates this idea. Localized relations act as suggestive guidelines for acceptable behavior in situational encounters.

The terrain of Facebook could be considered as one based on likeness, not conflict, but the purpose of the site is neither, serving to give "... people the power to share and make the world more open and connected" (www.Facebook.com). It is true that people often connect through likeness and the space of one's profile offers a brief on who one is, or, rather, how they want to appear. There have been studies done to prove people mostly manipulate their profiles as well as that profiles do well – represent the user.<sup>8</sup> Exploration into the accuracy of self-to-profile representation is unnecessary to this current exploration. People frequently alter self-representation, on and offline, and though in extreme cases the detachment between shades of identity can be troublesome, accuracy of profile identity does not dictate the activity on the site. Facebook simply offers a standard framework.

It is not grand-scale likeness that perpetuates the social pluralism practiced on the site. The localization of participation quality and self-controlled exposure, to others and what you see of others, affects users. Most people participate because their friends, known offline, participate. Once people add online relations to their offline relations, they instigate a new space for interaction. This addition and change often goes unrecognized, but the new social space indeed commences many kinds of confrontations. These confrontations are often considered and treated as trivial, frequently not openly discussed, but these "trivialities" bring changes to social realities; changes in acceptable behaviors, expectations, roles, etc.

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<sup>8</sup> See Patrick, Costello. "Facebooksurvey." My3q.com. 11 Apr. 2009 <<http://www.my3q.com/view/viewSummary.phtml?questid=117109>>. The survey conducted in June 2006 asks 102 college students, 45% male and 55% female, about their Facebook experience and reasons for membership. The survey also questions users about any expected responses as Facebook becomes more commercialized; and Parker Pope, Tara. "Is Your Facebook Personality Genuine?" *New York Times* 2 Dec. 2009: n. pag. Web. 2 Dec. 2009. <<http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/12/02/is-your-facebook-personality-genuine/?hp>>. University of Texas study done with 236 Facebook profiles of young adults exploring the accuracy of profiles to offline user personality. The collected research suggests that participants do indeed well - represent offline identities, not their ideal personality traits.

There are significant issues supported or attacked in Facebook groups but it is the usually disregarded subtle social conflicts that speak to the subtly confrontational nature of the communication documented on the site. Varieties of confrontations occur between user and user (ex. my friend and I), between user and localized acceptable behavior (ex. relationship status confirmations and readings), between user and Facebook interface (ex. lack of “dislike” buttons, changes in News Feed), and between user and stranger (ex. photo sharing privacy settings; user may be tagged in 45 photos but a friend of theirs may only be able to see 19). It is the perpetual movement between these documented social conflicts in which the push and pull among user’s divergent qualification of the site bubbles, thus encouraging changes in social standards of different scales and in different social arenas.

This flux and flow of possible forms of communication and representation within an established space creates disparate interpretations of what relations are legitimate, but because the space itself sustains non-conclusive and documented relations, no matter the sundry shades of participation, there is a core legitimacy gained from the participation, in and of itself.

## **Closing**

Understanding the nature of Facebook and its effects on social behavioral norms is significant because from these norms have come cultural communication trends. My examination helps explain this contemporary form of transporting information. We see differently, thus we interpret differently. These changes in how we interpret are subtle, fast-paced, and widespread. Ideas of privacy have been redefined because of sharing-based online communities like Facebook. We give and take information quicker to spread it faster with less effort and adapt to inconsistent behavioral norms.

It seems that not a day goes by, though, without a new blog post or editorial harping on Facebook's privacy "issues." Despite all the blowback, the majority of users don't care about their privacy (or at least don't care enough or yet). The individuals that do care simply put in the effort to change their settings when Facebook creates a function that affects privacy settings.

Social media researcher danah boyd argues that, "most people signed up for Facebook with the understanding that their information would be available only to an approved circle of friends" (Worthman). Even if that was their original understanding, the changes in Facebook over the years have been to enhance visual capabilities of as much as possible. Meanwhile, Facebook user numbers have risen dramatically. This idea of Facebook users signing up to only give and have access to an "approved" circle of friends seems incorrect as well. According to Facebook.com, the average number of friends is 130 and if we consider the Clay Shirky quote in section II.V, "...though the average is easy to calculate, it doesn't tell you much about any given participant," this isn't saying much. I have been a member of Facebook for only eight months and out of my 140 friends, the majority of them have between 400 and 900 friends. These numbers don't seem to fit into the modest idea of a "an approved circle of friends," but rather a giant network of varying levels of acquaintances, classmates, coworkers, general people we have some awareness of, as well as actual friends.

If we think about the changes Facebook has conducted in the past few years, they have nearly all been to enhance user visibility. One of these changes pertains to wall comments. If a friend wrote on my wall a few years ago I would have to either click "see wall-to-wall" or would have to go to their page to comment back. Now, a friend (or I) can write on my wall and I (or any of my friends) can comment on their comment. Any friend of mine can comment on other

comments on my wall, even if two friends of mine aren't friends themselves. I act as a neutral "base" as a mutual friend among disparate friends. If one of them posts and tags me in a photo, that photo will show up on my friends' News Feeds even if they are not friends with my friend who posted the photo. They will not be able to comment on a non-friend photo even if they are able to see it unless it is posted on my wall. Though this may seem like a ramble of insignificant particulars, much information can be observed from these particulars.

These additions to the site have not been among the popularly complained topics. Nor have I heard anyone acknowledge the usefulness of visibility to non-friends that the comment-on-comment addition provides. What I have heard is the recognition and discussion of previously unknown people, events, and information gained from reading comment-on-comments and seeing tagged photos from specific albums. These smaller changes move popular concepts of privacy and the stranger, while enhancing our comprehension and motions from visual transparencies.<sup>9</sup>

Within the click-causality<sup>10</sup> of visual transparencies comes transference. Participants indirectly give and take images, interpret, and give images of words meaning. An example of this is when I see on my News Feed a friend became a fan of a page of which I was previously unaware of and I go ahead and join because the page was of interest to me. This kind of response is often considered within the framework of 'word of mouth marketing' in business, and the widespread visual-based transference in social networks offers a new arena within which

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<sup>9</sup> Defined in section I.III, I use "visual transparencies" to refer to when we are on the Internet and moving between multiple tabs in our Internet browser, a few windows either up or minimized, and a few different windows of other basic computer applications like Microsoft Word.

<sup>10</sup> Defined in section I.III, I use "click-causality" to refer to what could be considered "surfing" the Internet, but references the necessary comfort and confidence in the explorative spaces of and in between sites and movement, where movement is directly between the cause and effect of the click.

marketing plays. Businesses employ such transferences within Facebook functions and user volition within those functions.

This past Earth Day, Starbucks created a page promoting a cup of free coffee for people who visited a store with a personal mug. Though Starbucks could have stayed with advertising posted on the side of users' Facebook pages, the store utilized visual transference and made an open event, "Make a Difference and get FREE Coffee." Because the event was open, users didn't have to be invited to join. This group reached out to at least 672,364 users. This number only includes the people who were invited and responded, many were able to look and take note and not join and still participate and tell other people. By advertising the brand and the free coffee promotion this way, actively engaging with users' social realities instead of passively posting ads for hyper-targeted consumers, Starbucks avoids a detached corporate identity to users.

Though it may not appear a groundbreaking concept for businesses to create Facebook fan pages, group pages, or events, it places the business as a brand into the social reality of the user. As Facebook doesn't allow non-persons to create a personal page, there remains the distinction between an individual and a business. Nonetheless, becoming an active participant, not just a side advertisement, the company enables the localization of its own identity through integration with users' social network. Starbucks has its fan page and it creates events. No one is oblivious to the enormity of the company but when a Starbucks event is wedged between "Ladies Who Lunch," "All School Meeting," and "Party City! Block Party Film Screening," in my Facebook Events calendar, it has become apart of my localized reality. In doing so it becomes socially qualified, given some sort of legitimacy, and settles in with various behavioral norms.

In the advertising mindset, Facebook gives users the opportunity to rebrand any previous notions of Starbucks identity once it becomes apart of our social realities within the Facebook platform. Though people who become fans of Starbucks on Facebook or RSVP to its event already have some sense of Starbucks in their general social realities, when the company participates within the specific social platform of Facebook it subtly creates new, more specific, user-created brand identity through users' identity.

This thesis is meant to provide insight to an area of culture in a way that doesn't demean the popular spirits of social and youthful communication. The explored Facebook-derived social realities, their foundation and their massive breadth, should be acknowledged for their impact and influence on contemporary mass culture. We cannot deny the usefulness of Facebook and its innovative play on popular social participation. My thesis offers conception of how the largest social networking site engages users social realities, how the movement of communication on the site relates to notions of acknowledged media, and how we should define recognizable attributes of Facebook relations.

In understanding these fundamental gears, users are able to be conscious of their participation on a larger, cultural scale, as well as better comprehend how businesses act as birds and squirrels within users' social networking tree. How users choose to respond to a new presence of advertising and the role of marketing strategies integrating into the movement of originally less capitalized social seedlings should be individually defined. Users' site navigation derives from natural inclination, to which Facebook responds and expands its offered functions. The shifts in user behaviors from Facebook participation may be localized but have been influential on a global scale in all aspects of contemporary communication culture.

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