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Friend Me if You Facebook: Generation Y and Performative Surveillance

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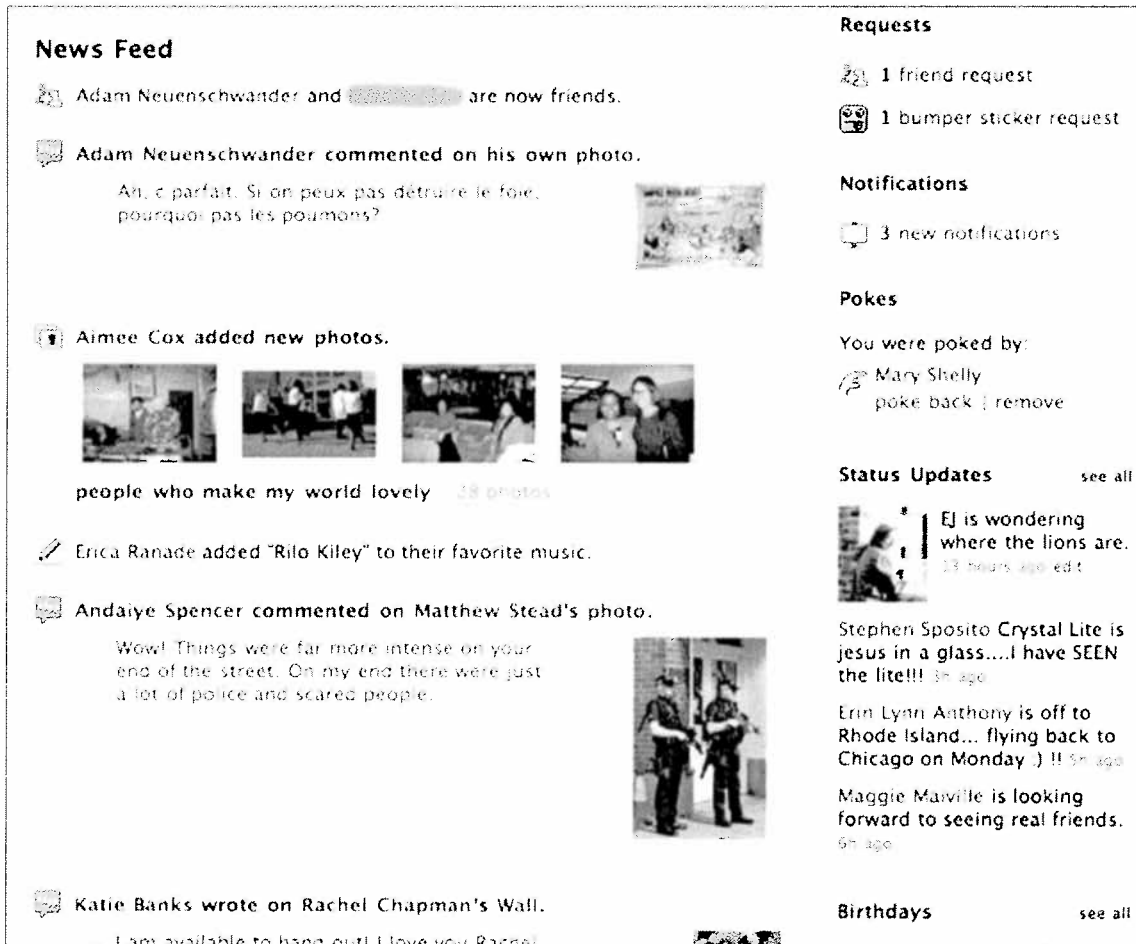


Figure 2. The Facebook home page where one can find an individually tailored News Feed, notifications of friend requests, and notification of a Facebook "Poke."

Understanding Facebook

In February 2004 Mark Zuckerberg, a Harvard undergraduate, launched Facebook.com as an online network to help Harvard students get to know each other. Many Ivy League schools distribute paper "face books" with student photographs and limited personal information to incoming freshmen, and although Zuckerberg has been quoted as saying Harvard did not have such a mechanism, communications industry commentator Andy Kessler notes in his interview with Zuckerberg that it did (2007). Originally, Zuckerberg, Chris Hughes, and Dustin Moskovitz—Facebook's administrators—restricted the network to those affiliated with educational institutions. However, in 2006 Facebook upset many in its user base by opening itself up to everyone (although users are still confined to specific, often local, networks). Facebook has become one of the fastest growing—and some will admit most addictive—pastimes in U.S. youth culture. Since it went live, Facebook.com has grown to include not only every college and university in the United States but also many universities in other countries, most United States high schools, the military, several companies, and now geographically based networks as well.

Like MySpace, an online journal that allows you to connect to friends and meet new people, Facebook recalls the "slam book" phenomenon in junior high and high schools of the 1970s, the spiral notebook that circulated within a group of friends with specific queries about opinions or

musings on particular people or topics. The slam book survives in its physical form and in online versions such as *slambook.com*. In similar fashion, MySpace and Facebook encourage users to share personal information, such as favorite movies and books, favorite quotes, political leanings, spring break and summer activities, and photographs. Users set up profiles and link themselves to friends and relatives to form networks. The Facebook website describes Facebook as “a social utility that helps people better understand the world around them.” It goes on to proclaim that:

Facebook is made up of many networks, each based around a company, region, or school. Join the networks that reflect your real-life communities to learn more about the people who work, live, or study around you.³

While MySpace, which is designed for global connectivity, has many features that allow for greater online creativity, Zuckerberg designed Facebook to allow for real-life social connections. Many artists, and musicians in particular, use MySpace as a promotional tool since it allows users to post video and audio files and change the look of the profile page. Bands especially have found MySpace to be useful for promoting their music. Also, MySpace has a blog (web log)—a regular “diary” of sorts that one encounters on a user’s main page—something Facebook only approximates in its “Notes” function.

Indeed many users have profiles on both MySpace and Facebook to allow them different kinds of performances of self. And many people provide links to direct readers from one to the other. Unlike MySpace, however, most of the content and activity on Facebook is school or geographically specific. Users are required to have a school- or work-affiliated email address to register, or to remain part of a regional network, such as “Ann Arbor” or “New York City.” Most user information is only visible to people within that particular school or geographic designation, and while Facebook now allows for global groups, many Facebook groups remain specific to a particular school. This local specificity supports Facebook’s main purpose—to help students at the same school or nonaffiliated people in a specific locale get to know each other better—and is part of Facebook’s appeal. To this end, one of Facebook’s first features allowed you to list your courses, click on them, and see who else registered for that course. It created a fast way to meet classmates. While using the internet is already performative, social networking is more so. And the performance of self on Facebook always has the potential of carrying over into “real life” and vice versa.

The Performativity of Social Networking

The internet has changed the way we read text and the way we read each other’s performances. One of the early paradigms to emerge for the internet, first with Gopher and later with the World Wide Web (WWW), was geographic. The designers of the Gopher protocol named it for the mascot of their home institution, the University of Minnesota, but also to indicate the user’s ability to travel, or tunnel, from server to server to retrieve files. This paradigm also worked for the web, with users traveling among servers to view pages. The sense of travel was also reflected in the early language associated with the web (“surfing” and “information superhighway”) and the early browser names (Explorer, Netscape, and Safari).

However, reading the web involves more than traveling to read text. Indeed, the web allows—even demands—reading strategies that are not linear, inviting the reader to choose the path and order of text read, as driven by the reader’s own desire and cognitive processing style. This carries over into Facebook’s structure, where users see how they are connected to others through mutual friends and groups. Users can also click on any of the books or movies others have listed as favorites and see who else in that network has listed them. Hyperlinks and search terms have replaced the spiral spine of the slam notebook.

3. “About Facebook” (Facebook n.d.).

But even more than creating different strategies of reading, the web creates a writerly text. As Roland Barthes notes in *S/Z*, referring to modernist printed literature:

Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between [...] its author and its reader. This reader is thereby plunged into a kind of idleness [...], instead of gaining access to the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing, he is left with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text. (1974:4)

This printed text is “readerly,” and can only be read. By contrast, the “writerly” text is:

a perpetual present, upon which no consequent language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduced the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (5)

While Barthes could not have been thinking of the internet in 1970, cultural theorists such as George P. Landow (1997)⁴ have successfully applied Barthes’s definition of the writerly text to the ways in which the web lends itself to a participatory reading in ways much more effective than the reader’s eye movement or page turning work upon the isolated physical book.

An internet reader contributes to the text in several ways, not only by connecting pages and text through links and hypertext, but often by amending or editing content. Consider the ways in which sites such as the IMDb and Wikipedia allow users to edit entries, either with comprehensive administrative supervision (IMDb) or without (Wikipedia).⁵ And as the web developed throughout the 1990s, several sites began to offer free space to people who wanted to create their own web pages. Microsoft Word was upgraded to allow regular users to save documents in html, the markup language necessary to make pages intelligible and visually interesting on the web. Now anyone can create text on the internet, link it to other texts, and create forums where others can add comments, responses, and corrections.

Social networking sites such as Facebook take the concept of the personal web page and the blog further, enhancing the personal profile with tools for users to comment upon or even alter the content of fellow users’ pages. In addition, Facebook adds the more current features of messaging, “poking,”⁶ and News Feed, and ties them to emails that alert the user to content changes. This is perhaps the motivation behind Facebook’s latest move to allow developers such as Microsoft, Warner Brothers, and even Barak Obama’s presidential campaign to launch mini-applications within the Facebook platform for free, which enhances users’ agency by allowing them to modify content and create an even greater volume of traffic (see Forsyth 2007).

Perhaps what makes Facebook often unintelligible to some comes down to preferred modes of communication for people of different generations. The generations of people older than current college students—known as the “silent” generation (1925–1942), the Baby “Boomers” (1945–1960), and the “thirteenth” generation (1961–1981), according to William Strauss and Neil Howe’s *Generations* (1991)—do not have the same perspective on the internet as a means for social networking as the generation that is just beginning to graduate from college. In both

4. I am indebted to George P. Landow’s web page for pointing out the similarities between Barthes’s concept and the internet, as well as showing me where to find the definition of “readerly” (1997).

5. While some pages are protected from user editing, some are protected only from people who have been registered for less than four days. Even with “protection,” the administrative staff are volunteers from the internet community and protection is usually only the result of intense controversy over content.

6. A “poke” involves clicking on the “Poke Him/Her” option on a user’s profile. The user is then notified of the poke on the “Pokes” section of the user’s home page. The user can opt to “poke back.”

Generations (1991) and *Millennials Rising* (2000), Strauss and Howe call this younger generation the Millennial Generation; *American Demographics* called them "Echo Boomers" (Miller 1995). The generation was dubbed "Generation Y" by marketing consultants following the media tendency to refer to the "thirteenth" generation as "Generation X" (Stanley 1995). The crucial generational difference with regard to reading Facebook turns on the need to engage with its more active forms of communication, such as messaging and other users' Walls. Otherwise, Facebook appears static. As one Generation Y user wrote: "Maybe they [people born before 1982] don't know that it's also for communication? I know some people think Facebook is just sort of a reference guide" (Shelly 2006). While older internet users are more comfortable with email or the telephone, the young people of Generation Y are at home with chatting, text messaging, and continually altering the content of their profiles (Fox and Madden 2006). For Generation Y-ers, writing, or "texting," is an act, and Facebook provides a forum for both immediate and asynchronous social interaction, creating a collaborative, interactive, and performative text.

Erving Goffman's well-established model of analyzing the performance of self (1959) applies not only to face-to-face interaction, but also to asynchronous and real-time interaction on the internet. While Goffman could not have predicted the dynamics of computer-mediated interaction, his model works because users, socialized in face-to-face interaction, are often conscious of applying the rules of such interaction to the cyber world. Indeed sociologists have already begun to consider Goffman's performance of self as it relates to the internet.⁷ While certain elements that Goffman defined as part of the "front stage" performance are absent in computer-mediated interaction (visual cues such as clothing and facial expression and aural cues such as tone), they are replaced in chat and on websites by more "staged" elements such as font, photographs, music, and graphics.

Goffman defined performance as "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (1959:22). This "continuous presence" can be in the form of an "unseen audience" provided the performer continues to act as if the observer were observing (81-82). Facebook users employ the static text of the profile in tandem with the more immediate and fluid text of messaging and poking to manage an image of self presented to other users. The Facebook community works as a team in performance to achieve "dramaturgical cooperation" (83) in order to affirm each other's performances and to define the local Facebook community.

After logging in to Facebook, a user will encounter the homepage, where News Feed resides. From the homepage, the user can move among any of Facebook's features, including the individual profile (fig. 3). The profile approximates the personal web page where a person can lay out the features of her or his performance. The profile contains a picture, supposedly of the individual, but sometimes of animals, drawings, superheroes, celebrities, or inanimate objects. Within the profile, users are encouraged to list favorite books, movies, television shows, and quotes. People in that individual user's network can see that person's groups, photo albums, pictures of that person tagged by other users, and anything that has been posted to the user's "Wall," a public space for messages. (Generally, a user can only see the profiles of people in their own institution.) A user may employ these tools to emphasize the characteristics that person feels best express his or her nature: that the user is funny, serious, studious, creative, fun-

7. As Thomas Wells Brignall III and Thomas Van Valey note, scholars "argue that although Goffman was clearly thinking only of face-to-face interactions, his description is useful as a starting point for describing an intact social bond, regardless of whether the participants are copresent or not" (2005:339). In Spencer E. Cahill's article "Toward a Sociology of the Person," he states that although both he and Goffman deal specifically with face-to-face interaction, "Person production clearly occurs through mediated, disembodied forms of interaction as well, and probably increasingly so. Yet, the face-to-face production of persons is arguably the canonical form upon which mediated forms are variations" (1998:136n3).

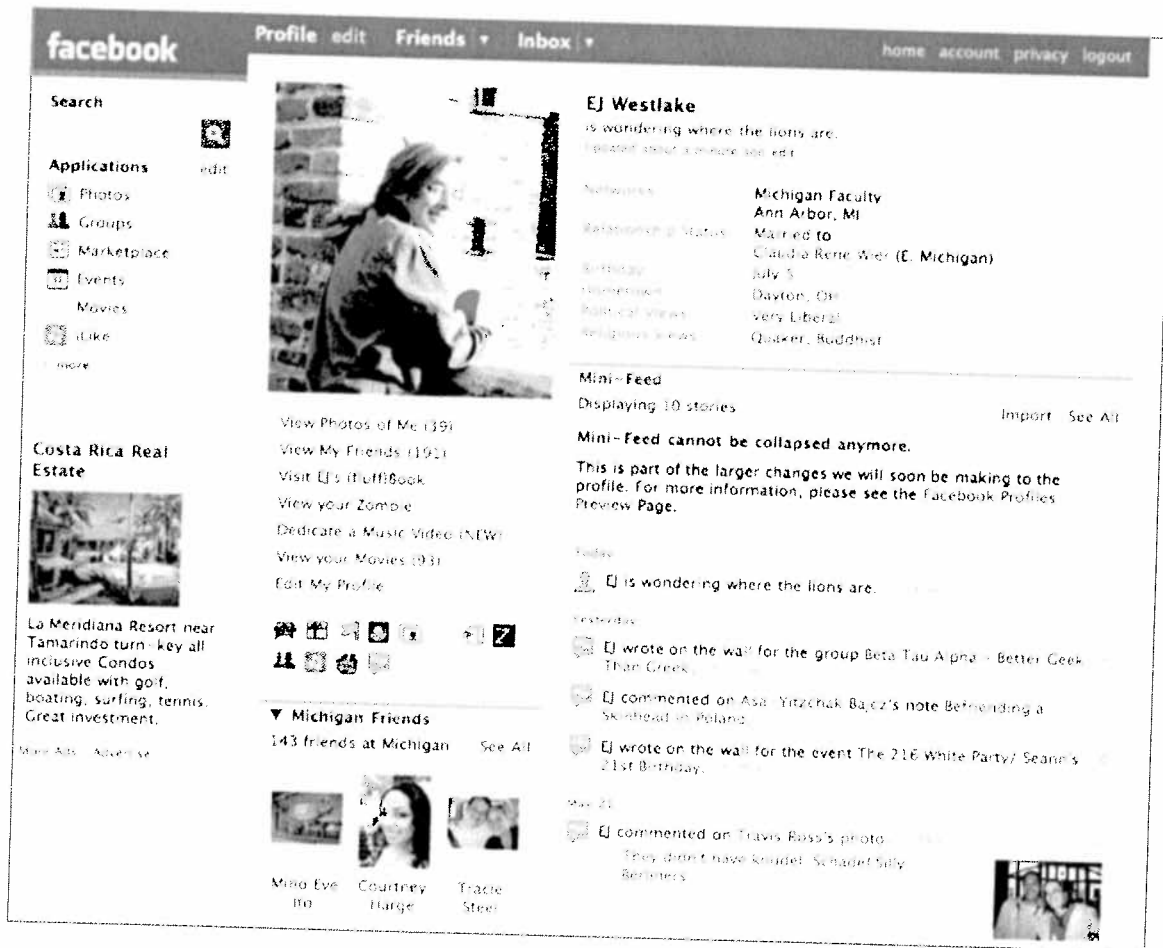


Figure 3. The author's Facebook profile.

loving, popular, deep, or committed to certain beliefs, ideas, or institutions. From there the user can invite an audience. He or she can “friend” people, that is, add people to a list of friends. If a user from one institution friends someone at another institution, the user can see that person’s profile, and when one user views another profile, Facebook will list the friends the two users have in common.

The other way that users connect is the group forum. Anyone can start a Facebook group, and the groups often reflect the actual (as opposed to virtual) groups on campus. Users can form political groups such as “George W. Bush Is Not My President,” groups tied to academic majors or programs such as “I Live In the Frieze,” groups based on enthusiasm for sports such as “OSU Smells” or “Detroit Tigers Fans,” and random groups that are just for fun such as “I Only Go To Class To See What Joe Plese is Wearing.” There are also groups to pressure nonusers to set up Facebook profiles, groups that comment on the addictive potential of Facebook, groups that comment on the evolution of Facebook, and groups that comment on someone else’s use of Facebook. For instance, although a user can potentially friend every other user, when a user has what the community has deemed “too many” friends, that user receives the title “Facebook whore,” and a group may be formed for the purpose of commenting on that person’s status as such.

Two of the more performative aspects of Facebook are the phenomenon of “poking” and the practice of creating fake profiles. Facebookers can “poke” each other (fig. 4), an option that

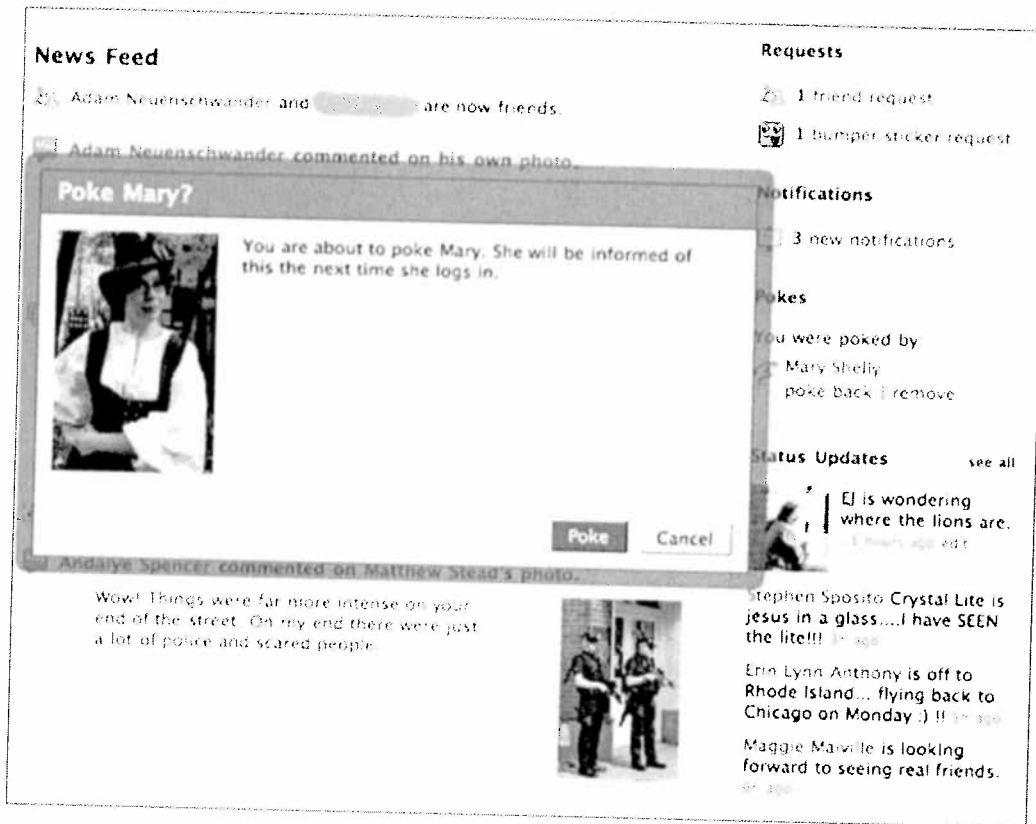


Figure 4. When one user "pokes" another user, a poke dialogue box appears for confirmation.

appears next to the names of people in a search or on a profile page. According to Facebook developers, the poke has no real intended purpose. In the help pages, under "What is a Poke?" the developers admitted: "What is a Poke? We have about as much of an idea as you do. We thought it would be fun to make a feature that had no real purpose and to see what happens from there. So mess around with it, because you're not getting an explanation from us."⁸ Poked users are notified of their pokes when they first log in and land on the home page. While poking can be a way of saying "I am thinking of you," it can also communicate flirtation or playfulness; facebookers become involved in poking "wars" with other parties on Facebook. Poking can also represent a less than pleased "hey!" as I discovered when our campus's resident harmonica player poked me after I insulted his playing on a group formed specifically to talk about him.

While Facebook administrators have forbidden the custom of creating fake profiles, Facebookers perform fake identities such as William Shatner or Sir Isaac Newton, create fake profiles of faculty, and fabricate fictitious profiles for pre-existing fictional characters, pets, or wholly invented personas. People who create fake profiles will often maintain them, responding to people who friend them and joining groups. I was surprised to find that my niece had friended Franz Boas at Kent State (fig. 5); I have encountered fake profiles of faculty. In fact, students were often surprised to find out that I was really me and not just a performed me, since faculty weren't known to Facebook in the earlier months of its evolution. The issue of fake profiles continues to be a contentious issue within the Facebook community.

8. "Messages and Pokes" (Facebook n.d.).

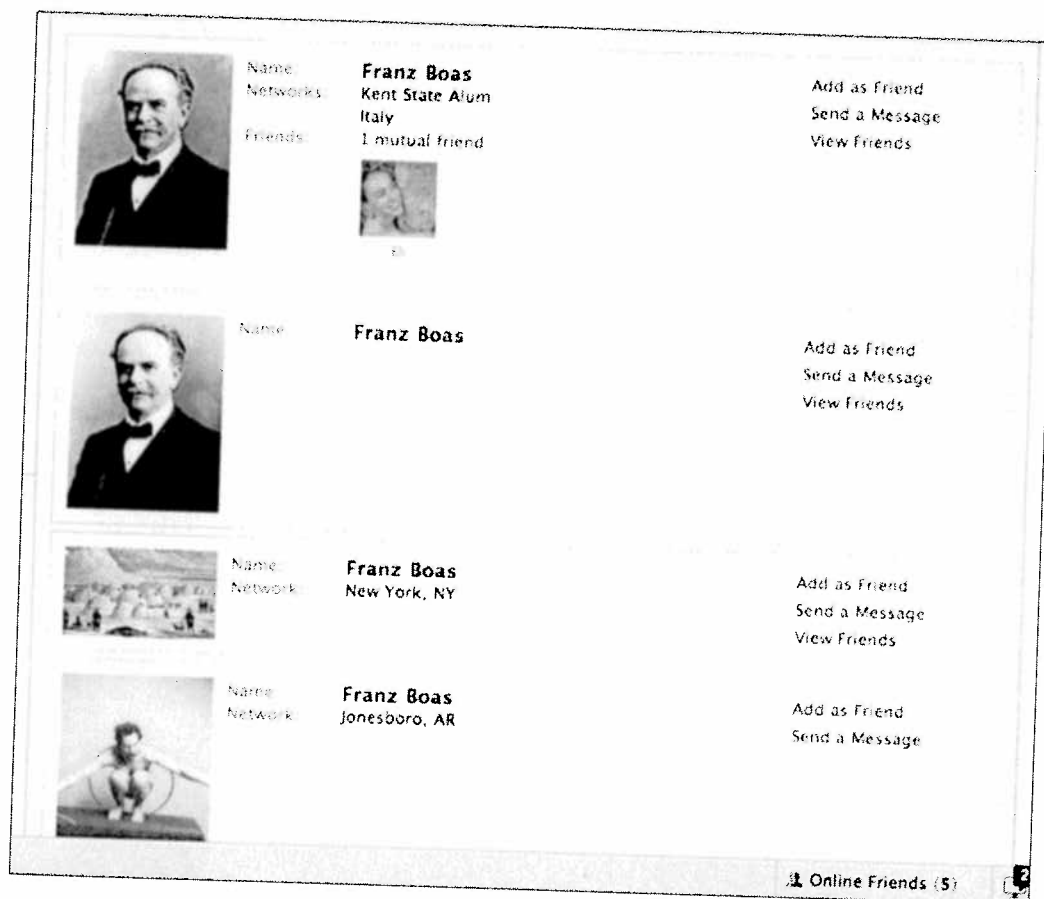


Figure 5. A search for "Franz Boas" turns up several users performing the fictional identity of the anthropologist, including the "Facebook friend" of the author's niece.

Facebook has created its own subculture and language. There are preferences for calling it just "Facebook" or "The Facebook" and variations of using Facebook as a verb or a noun. Typically, students ask each other: "Do you Facebook?" or "Are you on Facebook?" or "Why don't you friend me?" Students get together to "Facebook" or to "go Facebooking." But many sociologists worry that the increased internet use by Generation Y will result in their lacking the socialization needed to function in society. For example, Thomas Wells Brignall III and Thomas Van Valey fear that:

If individuals move to use online forms of interaction as the primary way to communicate, the rules of online communication will begin to compete with and perhaps dominate those of face-to-face social interactions. For contemporary adults, this should not be problematic. They should have sufficient face-to-face interaction skills for them to move among the different modes of communication. However, this may not be the case with some cyberkids who have not properly developed their face-to-face interaction skills. Consequently, they may have problems when engaging in real face-to-face interactions. (2005:341)

While some sociologists fear that computer-mediated communication may shape a generation that is not properly socialized, recent research suggests that computer-mediated contact does not replace more traditional modes of interaction. A study conducted as part of the Pew Internet and American Life Project notes that their own findings were consistent with those of

other studies: "The internet does not reduce in-person or telephone contact, or any other form of social activity; it replaces only sleeping or TV watching" (Boase 2006:22).

One Facebook user reported to me: "Facebook is addicting, and sometimes I find myself looking at random profiles when I have a million constructive things to do." Another posted: "Facebook is like crack, I check it every damn day even if I know there is absolutely no good reason to."⁹ However, a quick gloss of Facebook's features suggests that Facebook is not a substitute for social interaction. In fact, Facebook's "events" feature allows users to inform each other about face-to-face gatherings with amazing success. Students find Facebook to be effective for promoting performances, parties, and political causes within their social networks. Users then use the photo album feature to document the gathering. Facebook's local specificity enhances face-to-face interaction. This is consistent with the Pew study, which noted that: "The findings suggest media multiplexity: people who communicate frequently use multiple media to do so. The more contact by one medium, the more contact by others" (Boase 2006:23). In other words, people who use email more often are more likely to have more face-to-face contact (iv).

Facebook also connects users isolated from their social network. As one user, who lives in rural Michigan and commutes over an hour to attend Saginaw Valley State, noted: "I'm stuck in the middle of nowhere, it's like my lifeline."

Fears over proper socialization are moot for another reason. The rules of social interaction are continuously shifting. Generation Y, as large a demographic as the Baby Boomers, will take what older generations view as a social disadvantage and create new norms for performances of self, and these norms are as likely to be established online as they are in face-to-face interaction.

Baby Boomers and many Generation X-ers have difficulty understanding the public nature of the online performance of self. For this reason, they fail to see the normative nature of these forms of social networking. Boomer journalist Robert J. Samuelson derided Generation Y's desire to perform through social networking sites:

Call it the ExhibitionNet. It turns out that the internet has unleashed the greatest outburst of mass exhibitionism in human history. Everyone may not be entitled, as Andy Warhol once suggested, to 15 minutes of fame. But everyone is entitled to strive for 15 minutes—or 30, 90 or much more. We have blogs, "social networking" sites (MySpace, Facebook, YouTube and all their rivals). Everything about these sites is a scream for attention. Look at me. Listen to me. Laugh with me—or at me. (Samuelson 2006:A25)

Quoting Thoreau's famous line that most live lives of "quiet desperation," Samuelson groans: "Thanks to technology, that's no longer necessary. People can now lead lives of noisy and ostentatious desperation" (A25).

Samuelson and people like him fail to comprehend that Generation Y's proficiency with the internet and other new technologies make them comfortable using these means in tandem with their face-to-face performances. Generation Y has been saturated with messages from media, making them simultaneously skeptical of information and able to package themselves in ways that mimic those messages. Generation Y people have a desire to connect, to join social networks, and to strengthen social bonds in ways that seem foreign to the more individualistic Boomer and X-er generations.¹⁰ To that end, Generation Y-ers are willing to offer themselves up for surveillance through performance and to act as the mechanism of surveillance in a way that takes Bentham's/Foucault's panoptic gaze to the micro-levels of social interaction.

9. User responses, unless otherwise noted, were collected informally with the promise of anonymity through a Facebook event called "Tell Me Your Facebook Story," and anonymously through a "Survey Monkey" survey, both conducted in 2006.

10. See the 2007 Pew Report on "Generation Next" for closeness of family ties (18–19) and the use of social networking sites for connecting face-to-face (15).