

In person, if we constantly asked ourselves whether our friend is telling us something significant or interesting while we're talking to them, we would be failing to be a friend in a very basic way. Is it so different just because our friend is writing it down, and sharing with many people at once?

So is Facebook a colossal waste of time? Well, are people? Is friendship? To be fair—sometimes, yes. Some people are a waste of time, and some friendships are valuable and important, while others aren't. But none can be valuable unless we invest ourselves in the relationship. And with Facebook as well, some people and parts and aspects of the feed may be challenging and exciting and intimate, and some won't be. But none can be without our caring investment in the members of our own personal communities—by choice, by circumstance, or by birth.

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From Facebook + Philosophy

## Who Uses **facebook** and Why?



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and



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Since Facebook was founded in 2004, the Social Network Site (SNS) has profoundly altered our lives. Facebook now has over four hundred million active users worldwide, with half of them logging in on a daily basis. With about thirty percent of those users being from the United States, and the US population now about three hundred and eight million people, that means one out of every three Americans—men, women, and children—is a Facebooker.<sup>1</sup>

This figure may not seem that much when compared to the number of people that have access to the Internet in the US. According to the most recent report of the Pew Internet and American Life Project, over two thirds of American adults have Internet access, and many of them also report that they have broadband access at home (65 percent White, 46 percent Black, and 68 percent Hispanic).<sup>2</sup> However, there's a big difference in the diffusion timeframe by which the Internet and Facebook have spread among the American population—it took Facebook barely five years to reach these figures and it's still growing. Additionally, there might be notable differences depending on certain demographic characteristics. For instance, while 46 percent of blacks have access to broadband Internet, about 44

<sup>1</sup> Population projected by the US Bureau of the Census for the resident population of the United States to December, 2009, <[www.census.gov/population/www/pop-clockus.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/pop-clockus.html)>. Other statistics from Official Facebook Press room, *Statistics*, <[www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics](http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics)>.

<sup>2</sup> Pew American Life Project, *2009 Report on Internet Access*, <[www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/12-Wireless-Internet-Use/4-Internet-access-on-the-handheld/5-Handheld-online-users-and-the-overall-internet-penetration-rate.aspx?r=1](http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2009/12-Wireless-Internet-Use/4-Internet-access-on-the-handheld/5-Handheld-online-users-and-the-overall-internet-penetration-rate.aspx?r=1)>.

percent of blacks report that they use Facebook or other SNS (see Table 0.1).

The fact that Facebook's got the numbers is not a surprise. Today most of us seem to have a Facebook account or an account at another SNS such as Twitter, MySpace, Hi5, or something similar. And if this isn't the case, it's very likely that you at least know someone who actually does have an account on Facebook or the SNS of their choice. But, beyond what these numbers 'at large' reveal about Facebook, little is known about the impact that its use may have in people's daily lives. We also don't know much about the different ways people utilize SNS. What are users really getting out of these Social Networks? Perhaps they simply intend to remain in contact with their friends and family members. Or SNSs may help them stay better informed about what is going on around the world or in their more local communities. It may also be that SNSs are useful tools to engage in activist causes and get mobilized, as well as mobilize others. In any of these instances, it appears that Facebook could open many doors to newer or stronger social connections that may facilitate important communication tasks, whether they relate to friends, sources of information, or political and civic causes.

According to Facebook's founder, Mark Zuckerberg,<sup>3</sup> the site thrives by giving its users the "power to share and make the world more open and connected." SNSs such as MySpace and Facebook have become one of the most popular Internet services in the world. As of December 2009, Alexa, a company that tracks web traffic, ranked Facebook as the second most often accessed website in the world—behind only Google.<sup>4</sup> Other SNSs are also highly ranked; MySpace and Twitter rank twelfth and fourteenth, respectively.

Other writers will discuss many issues about what Facebook means to us individually and socially. But before that takes place, we intend to provide an accurate picture of Facebook and social network site users. Knowing who the users are, their demographic composition, their motivations and how they engage in performing different activities within a SNS may be interesting by itself, but it also seems appropriate in order to provide a valuable context to forthcoming chapters.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Zuckerberg, *About Facebook*, <[www.facebook.com/facebook?ref=pf](http://www.facebook.com/facebook?ref=pf)>.

<sup>4</sup> Alexa, *Alexa Top 500 Global Sites*, <[www.alexa.com/topsites](http://www.alexa.com/topsites)>.

TABLE 0.1

Demographic Profile of SNS Users (January 2009)

% of Americans in each category who use social network sites		
All adults:		41
Gender	Female	44
	Male	36
Age	18–24	74
	25–34	74
	35–44	40
	45–54	34
	55–64	24
Race	65 or more	11
	White non-Hispanic	40
	Black non-Hispanic	44
Education	Hispanic	56
	Less than high school	17
	High-school graduate	47
	Some college	39
Income	College graduate or more	41
	Less than \$30,000	42
	\$30,000–\$49,999	40
	\$50,000–\$79,999	41
	\$80,000–\$99,999	51
	\$100,000 or more	37

Notes. Number of cases = 1,159.

Source: Center for Journalism and Communication Research, University of Texas at Austin.

### Our Survey

We did an online survey, in which we tried to capture information that represented most of the people in the US who were currently using SNS. Although it's always difficult make sure that data actually speaks for the three hundred and eight million Americans, there are a number of statistical procedures and methods to ensure

that the data actually is representative of the US population.<sup>5</sup> We interviewed 1,482 individuals and the survey yielded a response rate of 17.3 percent.

### What We Found

Social network sites are not the exclusive domain of children and teenagers. Table 0.1 shows that 41 percent of US adults use Facebook, MySpace, and similar websites. If you consider that adults make up a larger share of the population than teenagers, you'll see that adults make up the bulk of users of these Internet services. Still, younger people are almost twice as likely to use online social networks as their older counterparts, with 74 percent of those in the 18–34 age group using these websites compared to 40 percent or less of those aged thirty-five or more.

Most people may not know that women, African Americans, and Hispanics use social networks more heavily than men and non-Hispanic whites, which may say something very significant about this technology's potential to empower minority groups. Socio-economic status does not clearly distinguish users from non-users. While 17 percent of adults with less than a high school education report using a SNS, high-school graduates use social networks more

<sup>5</sup> For a number of reasons, previous research has noted that online surveys may not constitute the preferred way to conduct survey research. For instance, academics may not achieve generalizability since 1. not all the citizens have Internet access and 2. it becomes difficult to acquire a sampling in which every subject carries an equal chance to be selected. Bearing in mind these limitations, more recent efforts show viability within this kind of methodology when matching the drawn sample to key variables of the National census. The data used in this investigation is based on an online panel provided by the Media Research Lab at the University of Texas at Austin. According to the Media Research Lab, study participants are first randomly selected unless researchers request a different method. The selected panel members for a study will receive the survey URL through an email invitation. This invitation provided respondents with a time estimate to complete the survey. It also included an explanation about how they were participating in a drawing to obtain a monetary incentive, both monthly and study specific. Additionally, in order to assure a more accurate US national population representativeness, the Media Research Lab based this particular sample on two US census variables, gender—male 50.2% female 49.8%—and Age—18–34 30%, 35–54 39%, 55+ 31%—and attempted to match a 10,000 drawn to these characteristics. A first invitation was sent December 15th, 2008, and three reminders were submitted in the following three weeks to improve response rates. A concluding reminder was sent January 5th, 2009. A sum of 1,432 invalid addresses were accounted for a total number of 1,482 final cases yielding a 17.3 percent response rate, which falls within an acceptable rate for online panel surveys. To some degree due to the fact that incentives and lotteries reduce the non-response component on panel surveys.

than college graduates, with 47 percent against 41 percent. The story with income is similar. Only 37 percent of those with a household income of \$100,000 or more rely on these services, while 40 to 51 percent of those in lower income categories do. These findings are interesting when taken from the perspective of the Digital Divide (DD). The DD is the division between those who do and those who do not have effective access to digital communications—whether the lack of access is caused by a lack of material resources (for example, not having a computer, or living in an impoverished nation without sufficient infrastructure) or a lack of immaterial resources (for example, user skills, informational literacy, and positive psychological perceptions about the medium<sup>6</sup>). Our findings suggest that the SNS could emerge as a digital tool that promotes a more balanced and democratized use of the information contained in their pages. And that occurs regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, or gender. Therefore, SNS use may also contribute to dissipate the growth of a digital gap between those more privileged and those who are not so fortunate, perhaps empowering less privileged groups.

Further evidence about the prevalence of online social networks in Americans' daily life is provided in Table 0.2, which shows that more than half of adult users spend at least ten minutes on these websites every day. For most people, the number of contacts included in their profiles is relatively small; below fifty.

What motivates adults to participate in Facebook and similar sites is, mainly, to stay connected with people they know already. As shown in Figure 0.1, "staying in touch with family and friends" is the most common reason for using online social networks, well beyond "meeting new people with common interests." However, these websites seem to fulfill a variety of other purposes as well, such as taking part in social or political causes, discussing issues, and staying informed about news and the community. So it seems that both private and public interests can be satisfied by Facebook.

### facebook and Democracy

Some of these findings may come as a surprise. Granted, most of us had a clear sense that using Facebook and other SNSs provided

<sup>6</sup> Homero Gil de Zúñiga, "Reshaping Digital Inequality in the European Union: How Psychological Barriers Affect Internet Adoption Rates," *Webology* 3:4, <[www.webology.ir/2006/v3n4/a32.html](http://www.webology.ir/2006/v3n4/a32.html)>.

TABLE 0.2

*Behaviors of Users of Social Network Sites*

	% of Americans in each category
<i>Time spent on favorite SNS on a typical day:</i>	
No time at all	12
Less than 10 minutes	33
10 to 30 minutes	26
More than 30 minutes up to one hour	14
More than one hour	15
<i>Number of friends in favorite SNS:</i>	
Less than 10	16
10–49	36
50–99	19
100–149	9
150–199	6
200 or more	14

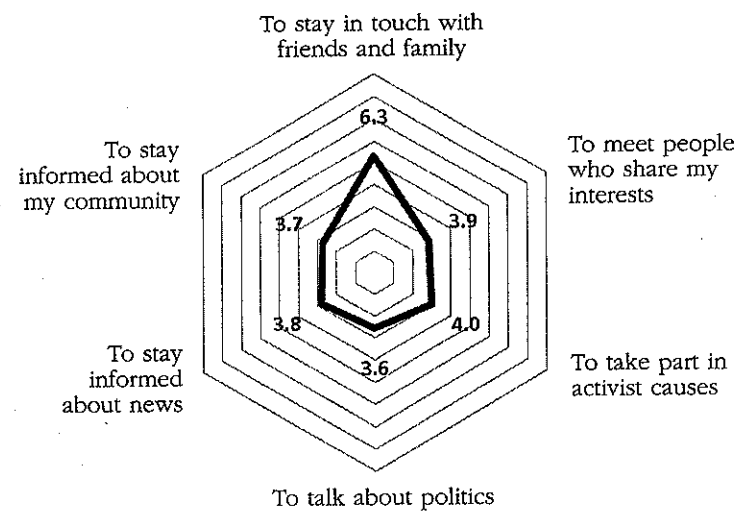
Notes. Number of cases = 475 (subsample of SNS users).

Source: Center for Journalism and Communication Research, University of Texas at Austin.

users with opportunities to remain in contact with friends and family, an important and necessary aspect of human lives.<sup>7</sup> However, it wasn't so apparent that these tools are also used to meet new people and to be well-informed. And these uses are equally valuable to citizens for other aspects that deal with the way people participate in their communities and how well the overall democratic process gets constructed. Being exposed to new people, new ideas, and new opinions—coupled with seeking information about public affairs—helps us learn more about what happens in our community; similarly, it may also enhance our reflection on and understanding of what is important for our community and our society. And thus, it may make it easier to contribute to a better neighborhood, community, and society.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Gurstein, *Community Informatics: Enabling Communities with Information and Communications Technologies*

FIGURE 0.1

*Motivations for Using Social Network Sites (January 2009)*

Notes. Figure displays means for each category, ranging from 1 = *never* to 10 = *all the time*. Number of cases = 475 (subsample of SNS users).

Source: Center for Journalism and Communication Research, University of Texas at Austin.

The idea that SNSs are an efficient tool for communication and networking seems obvious. However, their use to foster the democratic process is both fascinating and of great importance as the influence of SNSs increases daily. Facebook and other SNSs are here to stay and the more and the sooner we understand how they're used and what effects they have, the better.