

Internet Social Networks: What the \*Tweet\* Do They Say About Us?

Quest Club

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A young professional organizes some friends and some friends of friends to participate in a United Way service project. A businessman tries to find an introduction to a potential associate in another city by asking a colleague if she knows the person. Old high school classmates reconnect and mourn the death of one of their own. Distant family members stay in touch. Event organizers spread the word about upcoming activities. A businesswoman checks references on a job candidate by consulting mutual acquaintances. Businesses advertise their products to likely customers. Politicians share their thoughts with anyone who will pay attention.

Each of these rather routine activities is very commonplace in American life. And each of these activities is something that on-line social networking makes faster and easier.

And so, one answer to the question of what on-line social networking says about us is that we are more or less the same as we have always been.

But not only is that an unsatisfying answer that will get you all back to work much too soon, it isn't completely true.

And that is because technology impacts productivity – when it works properly, technology makes everyday tasks easier. And that very fact means that on-line social networking is different from other ways of communicating.

Sometimes because something is very time-consuming and difficult, it doesn't get done. For instance, if I want to meet a specific person in Indianapolis to check on a business reference, I could call everyone I know who knows people in Indianapolis to see whether they know this particular person. That would take a lot of time and is therefore something I am unlikely to do. It would just be faster and easier – although perhaps not more effective – to cold call the individual. I could track down old high school classmates because it is fun to learn what they are up to, but that, too, would take a fair amount of effort. Because of that effort, frankly, the entire enterprise might seem a bit creepy. Why, indeed, do you so badly want to know the whereabouts of that girl from the high school newspaper that you are

calling around trying to find her? And the fact is that you probably DON'T care that badly, and absent a very convenient method to find her, you probably hadn't even thought of trying.

So speed and ease can create connections where they were unlikely to previously exist. We have always wanted to learn more about potential business associates. We have always been curious about "whatever happened to" – why else would we have high school reunions? But without a forum to quickly and easily find that information, those needs and wants have generally gone unmet.

And on the other end of the connection spectrum, traditional ties of spare time and geography that used to keep us more closely in touch with family and a small circle of friends and acquaintances have been strained. People are busier, and the trend of moving away from one's hometown, although not new, certainly means that it is easy to fall out of touch without the time and commitment to write letters, make phone calls, and visit in person.

But not if there's a technological fix that can make those connections and re-connections easy. And that, of course, is the whole point of on-line social networks.

Let me first briefly explain Twitter and sites like Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn.

Twitter is known as a "social networking and micro blogging" service, which enables its users to send short messages – 140 characters or less – known as "tweets."<sup>i</sup> People can send messages about what they are doing or thinking to either a select group of friends or a broader audience of anyone who wants to follow them.

Facebook and MySpace are on-line social networking sites where users identify other users as friends. Facebook began as an on-line network for Harvard students but has grown to be the dominant social networking site used by people of all ages and most demographics.<sup>ii</sup> Friends have access to one's information such as thoughts that are posted on-line, and users have access to those of their friends. People post "status updates" which can be comments on current events but are mostly just notes about

what they are doing. Imagine a water cooler where everyone you know walks by. It is incredibly trivial and incredibly appealing.

MySpace is a similar program, owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation.<sup>iii</sup> Although it had been the dominant networking site earlier in the decade, it was overtaken by Facebook in 2008, based on monthly unique visitors.<sup>iv</sup> Facebook has continued its dominance over the past year.<sup>v</sup> The numbers here are really impressive: Facebook has approximately 250 million users, with more than one of every five Internet users on earth accessing the site within the past week. It is the third most popular Internet site according to the website ranking service Alexa.com, with only search engine portals Google and Yahoo receiving more hits.<sup>vi</sup>

MySpace and Facebook are reasonably similar, although MySpace remains focused on younger users and is very Latino-friendly. Facebook, more than MySpace, has encouraged third party developers to create applications that run in Facebook. As of last year, over 24,000 such programs have been created, providing users such vital services as sending each other virtual hugs, playing games and recommending movies.<sup>vii</sup> Facebook is also more attractive for companies that seek to use the medium as a way to connect to potential customers, according to Christopher Guerin, Director of Program Development for Sweetwater Sound, because Facebook allows companies to share information with users who wish to receive that information, rather than relying upon users coming to the company's page.<sup>viii</sup>

LinkedIn is one of a number of professionally-focused networking sites, geared toward people looking for jobs or business connections. One posts work and educational history – essentially a resume – and creates a network of colleagues and associates. People can check LinkedIn for references on a specific individual, or if looking for a particular person someone can find out if he or she has a mutual connection who might be handy for an introduction.

There are many other social networking sites: Wikipedia lists 155 active sites, ranging from general social networking to those aimed at scientific researchers, people with an interest in music or religion or genealogy, or people from specific countries.<sup>ix</sup>

Increasingly, organizations are creating internal social networking sites for their employees. For instance, Ivy Tech has created “IvyComm.” Whether these sites are well used by employees – knowing that they are created by and monitored by employers – is an open question.

This is a fast moving landscape. Guerin’s 18-year-old daughter says that Twitter is “lame” and has moved on to Tumblr, a customizable program that lets people easily share all sorts of media – text, photos, video, music – from both desktop and mobile hardware.<sup>x</sup>

So that is what on-line social networking is, but to get back to the topic, “What the \*tweet\* does it say about us?”

Human beings need to connect and share.<sup>xi</sup> This connection and sharing takes on many forms, but generally these forms may be classified as personal and purposeful. Personal connections are those such as with family, friends, or people with similar experiences and their importance has to do with self-actualization. For purposes of this paper, personal connections serve internal needs. Love, friendship and support are what humans get from these types of connections. Purposeful connections are more externally focused and include goal-oriented relationships such as business associates and consumers – and voters. Such connections also include the desire for impersonal information, whether recipes or traffic reports. These purposeful connections are genuine but they serve a more material purpose than a personal connection does. Of course, there are many examples of relationships where both types of connections exist but in analyzing social on-line networking it is useful to consider them separately.

Personal connections used to be enabled and reinforced by time and geography. Prior to World War II, nearly all Americans lived close to their families and a small circle of friends and community. Geographic proximity made it easy to stay connected. However, in 1948 the Census Bureau reported

that “Probably never before in the history of the United States has there been internal population movement of such magnitude as in the past seven eventful years.”<sup>xii</sup> This began a literal movement that has lasted to this day, although recent data shows that Americans are much less willing to relocate, perhaps due to the housing market and general economic downturn that began in 2008.<sup>xiii</sup> Despite this recent reversal – and whether that is a blip or a sea change remains to be seen – at the millenium, two in every five Americans lived in a state different from his or her state of birth.<sup>xiv</sup>

This trend has obviously been around a while. So has the human need for connection. So has the desire of Americans for instant gratification. What is new is the technology that makes instant connections across the miles not only inexpensive, but easy.

When assigned this topic in June, I had just been using Facebook for a month or so, and only experimenting with Twitter. I had been using LinkedIn at work, although not very much, for probably five years and had noticed a big increase in people I knew signing up over the past couple of years.

I had previously decided that Facebook was a frivolous waste of time, and really more appropriate for teenagers than for women of, shall we say, a certain age. But finally a friend convinced me that Facebook was a great way to communicate with people and so, hesitantly, I stuck my toe in the water. Being an extraverted geek, I guess it should have been no surprise when I quickly became hooked.

And I am certainly not alone. More than four in five on-line adults use some form of social media at least once each month, and half of on-line adults use a social network like Facebook.<sup>xv</sup> Adults 35 and older are the fastest growing demographic in this media, although young people remain the group with the highest participation in on-line social networking.<sup>xvi</sup>

What one finds on social networking sites like Facebook are random comments left by friends and acquaintances on topics ranging from the weather to movies to politics to major personal events like job losses, births and deaths. Sometimes there are discussions of important issues of the day –

health insurance reform being lately a big one – but more often people make small talk, let their friends know about an upcoming event or a really good or really awful movie, and share their condolences and good wishes. It's not really any different from the kind of conversations that one has with people in one's real communities, except that these conversations can occur with people from across the globe.

In the name of research and curiosity, I began one Facebook conversation on the topic of this paper. Within a few minutes, I had a response and within a few hours, I had ten. Most said that Facebook provided them with connections to people, either those they already knew well or, as one respondent stated, "Facebook is a great way to put a 'face' to people who may be just acquaintances. You learn their political and religious views, who their friends are, and what they ate for dinner. Plus, it's a way to relax and communicate with a bunch of people without picking up the phone. I have learned a lot about my Facebook friends that I didn't have a clue about before."

Two respondents referred to the both exhibitionist and voyeuristic nature of the media. After all, a post is seen by a potentially wide number of people – although exactly who sees it is controlled by the user – and posting takes a certain amount of confidence that anyone cares about what one has to say. Similarly, reading the posts gives a user a window into the lives of his or her friends. But back to the water cooler metaphor, is it exhibitionist to say to the people at the office, "I am going to Ohio this weekend to see my family," or "When will this rain end?" Is it voyeuristic to look at the pictures of a friend's vacation that they hand to you when you run into them at the grocery store? Social networking is simply an on-line version of these common interactions, and having experienced the media for a few months it does not seem invasive of anyone's privacy. And as a forum for people to spout off their verbose or obnoxious views – let's face it, such people never have trouble finding a forum and at least these sites give the user a chance to turn off their comments.

Now let's talk about Twitter. Twitter is less interactive than a Facebook or MySpace type of media. It lets the user make fairly short comments and then distributes those comments to anyone who



has signed up to follow that user. Think of it as texting, only to a larger audience. The user's "tweet" is supposed to answer only one question: "What are you doing?" and no reply is typically anticipated or made.<sup>xvii</sup>

From a technological perspective, Twitter is very easily accessed from cell phones and is therefore more mobile than Facebook or MySpace, although those sites have been developing mobile interfaces as well. And so it is easy to tweet to one's friends, "Stuck in traffic" or "This class is so boring." Or, perhaps, "This Quest paper is so boring." Some parents use Twitter as a way to stay in touch with their children, asking them to notify the parents when they leave a party or basketball game, for example.<sup>xviii</sup> People tweet about many of the same things that they discuss on Facebook, although with less expectation of starting a conversation. In that way, one can see Twitter as being less a personal connection tool and more one that is well suited for purposeful connections.

And so on to the role of on-line social networking in connections with an external purpose.

Celebrities and star-struck fans seem to love Twitter. A website called CelebrityTweet.com provides a list of over 250 celebrities – mostly movie and music stars, but including some politicians such as Arnold Schwarzenegger and Al Gore – that fans can follow.<sup>xix</sup> Celebrities, for instance, post links to pictures of themselves from parties.<sup>xx</sup>

A number of politicians – or at least, their staffs – have adopted Twitter as a way to communicate with their constituents.<sup>xxi</sup> For reasons that remain unclear, Twitter initially became more identified with Republicans although Democrats seem to be catching up.<sup>xxii</sup> Social networking is like a dream come true to a politician: the opportunity to inexpensively communicate directly with constituents, without the filter of reporters or editors, and to do so in a way that makes the politician seem accessible to the public without truly being so.

Marketing guru Guy Kawasaki encourages anyone with a message to use Twitter as a tool, which he does for both his website and his book.<sup>xxiii</sup> This includes not only clearly self serving messages but more practical ones as well.

Earlier this year, for instance, Allen County began a Twitter program as an adjunct to its more traditional news releases for short messages such as road closings or emergency information.<sup>xxiv</sup> Although technically not an answer to the question, “what are you doing?” this is a logical use of the medium. It provides immediate and mobile information and does not rely upon a third party such as a newspaper that may or may not reach the intended audience in a timely manner.

Clifford Clarke of C2 IT Advisors, in a video interview on the Fort Wayne-based website SharetoGain.com, observed that some universities are using Twitter as a very fast way of notifying their students and staff in case of emergencies.<sup>xxv</sup> Twitter has some technical advantages over a system that requires phone numbers to be used. However, the owner of the patent on which Twitter is based has recently sued Twitter for allowing their system to be used for emergency notifications. Presumably the company will fight this suit and it is far from clear what the resolution will be.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Traditional media is also using Twitter in their marketing efforts.<sup>xxvii</sup> The goal is to send tweets that drive followers to one’s website for additional content, whether that content is pictures of starlets at the Academy Awards or a news release about construction of a sewer or a newspaper article about a new restaurant in town.

And speaking of food, one amusing application of Twitter is in the development of recipes that are reduced to 140 characters. An early creator of this genre is Maureen Evans, a 27-year-old creative writing master’s student in Northern Ireland. An amateur cook, she takes complex recipes and shrinks them to 20 or 25 words and abbreviations and does so for the same reason that other people like solving Sudoku or crossword puzzles.<sup>xxviii</sup> In that way, perhaps this application should be considered a

personal use of the media rather than a purposeful one, but Maureen has many followers who receive and, presumably, decode and cook her recipes.

On the other end of the significance spectrum, a very important use of Twitter occurred earlier this summer, during the protests that followed the elections in Iran. To crack down on information coming out of the country, the Iranian government shut down the traditional press and most websites. However, Twitter –easily accessible through cell phones – was frequently used by Iranian protestors to communicate both with each other and with the outside world. Since the U.S. government has no embassy in Iran, it relies on media reports for much of its intelligence. With traditional media stymied by censorship inside Iran, the U.S. government, and the rest of us, were left to learn what was happening through the tweets of Iranians.<sup>xxix</sup> Certainly the murder of Neda Soltani, the young Iranian protestor shot and killed on a Tehran street, became iconic when a cell phone video of her death was posted on websites and blogs across the globe and quickly spread via Twitter.<sup>xxx</sup> Obviously this is an extremely imperfect system, as there was no way of balancing comments made on Twitter with a more objective view of events in Iran. There is still a critical role for “real” journalists since not all information is created equal. Still, the situation showed just how powerful social media can become.

The other on-line social networking sites are also full of purposeful connections.

For instance, many companies use Facebook as a way to spread their brand image and connect with current and potential customers. In August, Facebook changed its rules to reduce one’s ability to use a personal profile for commercial gain. In other words, someone is no longer supposed to use the brand she or he has developed as an individual on Facebook in order to make money.<sup>xxxi</sup> This is a topic of some controversy among people who pay attention to such things, with the question being whether it is realistic or even possible to separate someone’s positive view of Jane Doe from an interest in buying, for instance, sweaters that she has created and is selling.

In addition to finding friends, Facebook allows the creation of pages that are not personal profiles, where users become fans of those page creators – whether they are companies, non-profit organizations, celebrities, or politicians – which then send the users information. For instance, if one becomes a fan of National Public Radio, one receives status updates on NPR stories with a link to the full story on the NPR website. It appears that Facebook is driving people with purposeful messages toward that type of profile rather than a personal profile – presumably with an eye toward someday actually making a profit.

One company that has jumped into Facebook and Twitter “with both feet” is Sweetwater Sound. Sweetwater, which sells musical instruments and equipment worldwide from its headquarters on Highway 30 in Fort Wayne, has a Facebook page, a MySpace page, and a Twitter feed, in addition to its website and a YouTube channel. Christopher Guerin said that they feed daily content via social media, including videos, as well as directing people to their website for more information and, hopefully, ordering product. Video content varies widely, from demonstrations of products and product descriptions, to interviews with Sweetwater staff and others, to musical performances by artists who stop by their facility. Each week the company creates a “Sweetwater Minute” on its Facebook page which is a short commentary by their editorial director. The company’s Twitter feed, originally set up to provide information to users on special sales, has evolved into a way that Sweetwater maintains a top of mind presence with its industry partners and consumers who want to feel that they are insiders.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Guerin calls social networking “the necessary alternative to e-mail.” Social media is more voluntary than e-mail, and users are significantly more inclined to view information they receive via a networking site than if it were sent in an e-mail.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Other networking sites such as LinkedIn are inherently more purposeful than a general social networking site, since they are targeted toward the workplace. LinkedIn is built around networks, and the larger one’s network, the more likely it is to overlap another person’s network and thus be a tool for

the user to find a business introduction or reference. LinkedIn is somewhat unique among social networking sites in that it is profitable. Like all websites, part of its revenue model comes from advertising, but most of its income is from premium services that cost users between \$5 and \$200 per month.<sup>xxxiv</sup> While many of the site's networking services are free – or, rather, supported by advertising – LinkedIn has been successful at selling services such as job listings, recruiting tools or utilizing one's networks to find lawyers, accountants and other professionals.<sup>xxxv</sup> Their success may contrast to that of other social media because most of LinkedIn's users view the site as a business tool rather than a toy and can justify a clear value proposition to their bottom line.

If on-line social networking sites illustrate that people crave our strained social bonds and want to spread their message, it is fair to ask whether this new medium accomplishes those goals.

Let's first examine personal connections. Are Facebook and Twitter able to build or rebuild social bonds?

"Facebook and MySpace might contribute towards communities, but I'm wary about it," said Archbishop Vincent Nichols of England and Wales in a recent interview with the Sunday Telegraph.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The Archbishop described social networking sites as encouraging young people to aim for a large number of more superficial acquaintances, seeing friendship as a commodity and being vulnerable to suicide when such weak networks collapse. He said that skills for interpersonal communication – reading a person's mood or body language, for instance – were in decline.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

The 2006 suicide of 13-year-old Megan Meier after receiving cruel messages on her MySpace page certainly shocked the country.<sup>xxxviii</sup> And one must question whether people, especially young people, spend too much time at the computer and not enough interacting in person. But is that the fault of the medium? After all, the fact that some people drive badly, with dire consequences, does not inherently condemn automobiles as a transportation method.

Interestingly, a 2007 study at Michigan State University found that certain types of social capital – the ability to draw on the resources of people in one’s group of family, friends and acquaintances – were enhanced among college students who used social networking sites.<sup>xxxix</sup> The researchers concluded,

Our empirical results contrast with the anecdotal evidence dominating the popular press. Although ... the potential does exist for privacy abuses, our findings demonstrate a robust connection between Facebook usage and indicators of social capital, especially of the bridging type. Internet use alone did not predict social capital accumulation, but intensive use of Facebook did. The strong linkage between Facebook use and high school connections suggests how SNSs help maintain relations as people move from one offline community to another. It may facilitate the same when students graduate from college, with alumni keeping their school email address and using Facebook to stay in touch with the college community. Such connections could have strong payoffs in terms of jobs, internships, and other opportunities. ... Online social network sites may play a role different from that described in early literature on virtual communities. Online interactions do not necessarily remove people from their offline world but may indeed be used to support relationships and keep people in contact, even when life changes move them away from each other. In addition to helping student populations, this use of technology could support a variety of populations, including professional researchers, neighborhood and community members, employees of companies, or others who benefit from maintained ties.<sup>xi</sup>

Bridging capital, which is the kind most positively affected by social networking, is related to loose social ties, or ties with people outside one’s immediate social group. The theory is that people who have many acquaintances rather than only a few close friends will have access to non-redundant information and therefore be more aware of job opportunities and other points of view, making them more successful.<sup>xii</sup>

Nicole Ellison, the lead Michigan State researcher, reported that Facebook usage in fact caused the increase in social capital, as students who used Facebook were more likely to find old high school acquaintances and strengthen or renew those relationships.<sup>xiii</sup> The conclusion here is that social networking can assist in the development of loose ties, which can increase one’s exposure to people of different backgrounds.

But other observers fear that social division is bred by social networking, with users of a particular race and class more likely to use one network site over another.<sup>xliii</sup> This is not particularly

surprising, since people tend to use the network where they know the most people, and most people have friends who are demographically like themselves.<sup>xiv</sup> Eszter Hargittai, an associate professor of communication studies at Northwestern University, said that when she made these findings in 2006 and 2007, the conventional wisdom was that within a couple of years the differences among sites, particularly MySpace and Facebook, would disappear. In 2009, she released updated data that showed the trend was, in fact, continuing.<sup>xlv</sup>

William Reeder, a professor of psychology at Sheffield Hallam University and social networking site researcher, views the sites as both good and bad. He maintains that humans will always want in-person interactions and doesn't see the Internet replacing that.<sup>xlvi</sup> On the other hand, he seems to agree with the fear of social division. Some people use Facebook as a place to meet friends before meeting them in person, for instance, and if the selection method screens out people who are too different, Reeder fears that people will lose the diverse experience that can come from serendipitous meetings of people different from oneself.<sup>xlvii</sup>

Although there are certainly young people who have learned that it is a bad idea to put pictures of themselves drunk at a kegger on a website that future employers might view, the decision making process about what to share with the on-line world is not terribly different from learning how to decide what one shares with the world in general. Because of its ease, perhaps, there can be a tendency for people to write as they speak which can lull a person into making comments that they later regret. Electronic communication may not seem as permanent as more formal written communication, but it is, and perhaps more so. Realizing that is simply part of living in the digital age. It is a difference in degree of the lesson learned by previous generations, but not a difference in kind. People have always needed to learn when to make a smart alec comment and when to let it go. People have not always learned to, but the lesson has always been there. Having said that, Clifford Clarke observed that people can feel

anonymous on-line which can lead to different types of behavior than would be likely to occur in front of real people. “It isn’t a diary,” he said.<sup>xlviii</sup>

Perhaps ironically for someone whose career has been as a marketer for companies like Apple and the web conference company DimDim.com, Steve Chazin longs for an ability to disconnect from the web and reconnect in real life. He said, “I remember one day a few years ago when our office phones and Internet stopped working. No e-mail, no voicemail, no Facebook, no Skype, and no Twitter. People came out of their offices and talked. I enjoyed that day.”<sup>xlix</sup>

What about the use of on-line social media for purposeful connections, for selling products or politicians or finding out new information?

Short answer: the jury is still out on this one.

A study by WorkPlace Media found that 96% of employed consumers say that they are not influenced by social media in their feelings about brands. Nearly nine in ten users say that the real benefit of social networking is to stay connected to friends and family – in other words, the personal connections – rather than being consumption-related.<sup>i</sup>

Having said that, it is important to recognize that most people are quite unaware of all of the criteria that they use when they determine whether they like a brand or a product, a point well illustrated by Malcolm Gladwell in his book, Blink.<sup>ii</sup> So the fact that people say they are not influenced is not a strong indicator of whether they are, in fact, influenced. Whether that influence is significant or will become better recognized in the future, of course, is unknown.

Facebook’s new platform, Facebook Connect, is being designed to provide real time marketing data to advertisers. What are people talking about? What do they like and dislike?<sup>iii</sup> It would be naïve not to expect that this sort of data will be analyzed by corporations with the goal of delivering it back to us, wrapped neatly around their products. Whether this will work, again, remains to be seen.



Christopher Guerin reported that Facebook represents about two percent of the traffic that goes to the Sweetwater Sound website, and Twitter is about one-half of that. He said that social networking is “way at the bottom” of their overall media plan because these numbers are still small. Magazine advertising, direct mail, and their website are all much more important to the company.<sup>liii</sup> Still, on-line social networking has no out of pocket costs – although Clifford Clarke points out that one must decide to invest the time it takes to maintain regular, meaningful updates that reinforce the company’s brand.<sup>liv</sup> And Guerin points out that these media appeal to a group of people who do not want traditional advertising which means that social networking can broaden a company’s advertising reach to new consumers.<sup>lv</sup>

The huge growth of Facebook among adults largely occurred after the 2008 election, and since the primary goal of political communication is to win elections, it is too early to tell whether tweets from Senators will be significant in motivating voters. Another respondent to my extremely unscientific Facebook survey answered the question of what social networking says about us with two words: “Echo chamber.” Nowhere is his assessment more true than in the political dialogue that occurs on-line. As seems to be true of all political dialogue in the United States, opposing sides snipe at each other for a while and then retreat into supportive camps where they shake their heads at the stupidity of the other side. On-line social networking did not cause this problem but certainly will not cure it.

To return finally to the question, “What does on-line social networking say about us?,” let us close with a Twitterable answer of under 140 characters: *We are the same people we’ve always been, but with less time, less patience and more bandwidth. Is this good or bad? Time will tell.*

## NOTES

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