

Connective Associates

The Sharp Edges of Networking

Today I read a great two-part article in [Salon.com](http://www.salon.com) about social networking software, entitled [“You Are Who You Know”](#) by Andrew Leonard.

Leonard raises challenging questions about the world of [Orkut](#), [LinkedIn](#), and other social networking tools. Are people flocking to these tools in the vain hope that computers can somehow overcome ordinary human obstacles to building relationships and communities? And what about privacy? The information we willingly submit to these digital communities is enough to make sociologists and market strategists salivate, and we all stand to benefit, but are we giving up too much in the deal?

Leonard’s pointed questions bounce in my mind off recent memories of three excellent books on various aspects of networks: *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam, *Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell, and *Six Degrees* by Duncan Watts. I’ll reflect more on the connections between these authors in future posts.

 Bruce Hoppe / June 23, 2004

36 thoughts on “The Sharp Edges of Networking”

 Anonymous

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You are who you know

The new social software turbo-charges friendships, sexual hookups and the business of human relationship — and could turn our lives into an open book. Part 1 of a two-part series.

By Andrew Leonard

printe-mail

June 15, 2004 | Marc Canter is a social networking addict. On the day I had lunch with him in a Chinese restaurant in downtown San Francisco, he boasted a whopping 558 “friends” on the Web service Orkut. For most people, that might be enough. But Canter wanted more. Not only more friends, but more friends of friends.

His situation was dire. In a prankish campaign for the dubious honor of most friendly man in cyberspace, he had recently lost ground to another highly connected Orkut superstar, the Japanese new-media maven Joi Ito.

“SO — that means you all need to go out and make new friends!” read an e-mail sent by Canter to his network that morning. “Try it — it’s easy, just click!”

Social networking Web services are online gathering places that encourage their members to build explicit, hyperlinked networks of their friends and acquaintances. Since I am one of Marc Canter’s Orkut “friends,” I am connected to all of his other friends, and to all the friends of all those friends. Looking for a job or a date, or merely curious, I can point-and-click my way through the pictures, profile information and communities of the other members of my network.

There’s no question that Marc Canter is a friendly guy, both online and off. Sitting in front of me, stealing bites of Hunan pork in between one sizzling proclamation after

another about the future of the digital lifestyle, Canter is the epitome of gregariousness. And Orkut isn't his only playground. On Friendster, the most popular social networking venue, he has 124 friends. On Tribe.net, a kind of Friendster spinoff, he has 444. At press time, he was up to 749 on Orkut.

But to me, Canter's numbers did not compute. How can a person have 500 friends? I struggle to keep close to half a dozen, much less half a thousand. When so many people are your friends, can those "friendships" be worth much?

Canter acknowledges that his Orkut network isn't what anyone would call a closely knit pack of bosom buddies. The word "friend" is a bad term for describing someone you link to online. Reducing friendship to a click on a yes/no button is, Canter notes, "a complete joke."

The accumulation of those connections on Orkut, for Canter, was part game, part marketing exercise and part simply a test of what in early March was the newest, hottest offering in the swirling nexus of hype and hope that is online social networking. Not since the glory days of the dot-com boom has a buzzword so thoroughly captured the attention of the media, the geeky early adopters, the venture capitalists and the mainstream. Social networking has arrived on your PC, and is coming to your phone, your favorite computer game, your chat program and anywhere else you might consider tapping into the Net. Depending on how you define the term, there are already at least 250 social networking sites or companies, and the mergers-and-acquisition crowd is eyeing them all hungrily. (On May 24, in the most recent such move, Monster.com bought Tickle, a site that includes social networking and boasts millions of users. On June 3, Friendster brought in NBC Entertainment veteran Scott Sassa to run the company.)

The promises made by social networking proponents are sky-high: They'll get you jobs, get you laid, get you a party invite or a mountain-biking partner for next Tuesday. Social networking will empower communities, combat existential alienation and, best of all, could even be the key to ending spam. Social networking software — with its idea that human relations can be hacked, that community can be programmed — is a geek wet dream.

On the flip side, the critique is equally charged. Social networking sites are a hotbed for data-miners and marketing strategists, controlled laboratories in which the question of what human beings like to do and with whom can be studied with greater accuracy and detail than ever before. That geek wet dream turns into a nightmare; the social network is a state-of-the-art Panopticon. (Not that most people appear to care. Promise someone a date, or a chance at a job, and they'll happily expose their most intimate secrets.)

Panopticon or panacea, social networking is hardly new. Most people started networking socially online, one way or another, the first time they logged on. It's the fundamental fact of network existence: You connect. But what once was done by early-adopter pioneers typing from the command line over puny modems in primitive chat rooms and bulletin board systems is now standard practice for the broadband-hooked up, digital camera-equipped, blog-and-instant-messaging obsessed masses.

The venture capitalists and start-up CEOs call this “the return of the consumer Internet,” but the truth is that nothing ever went away. Our attention may have lapsed — I know mine did. After the dot-com crash, 9/11, corporate scandal and war, what people are doing online just doesn't seem as world-changingly important as it once did, last century. But that doesn't mean that we stopped doing things online — on the contrary, more people are doing more things online than ever before, and social networking is an essential part of it. Like e-mail, like using a search engine, social networking is a part of the Internet way of life. And it's barely getting started.

One evening this spring, I attended an event at Trader Vic's in Palo Alto, sponsored by the Commonwealth Club of California. The topic was social networking, a subject that members of the club were predisposed to be interested in, since, although it bills itself as a “public affairs group,” the Commonwealth Club is really an old-school social network.

The panelists that night included Jas Dhillon, CEO of ZeroDegrees.com, recently purchased by Barry Diller's Interactive Corp.; Stanford sociologist Mark Granovetter, whose 1973 paper “The Strength of Weak Ties” is a foundational document in the young discipline of networking science; Ben Smith, CEO of

Spoke.com, which provides social networking services to corporations; and Valerie Syme, executive vice president of Tribe.net, a company that aims to employ social networking as a tool for the delivery of local online classified ads.

A posting on Tribe.net had led me here. I found out about the event after joining a “tribe” called “social software intellectuals” — originally created by Marc Canter. A tribe, on Tribe.net, is what would be called a “group” or a “conference” or a “forum” on other community sites. Tribe.net is part of the second generation of social software networking sites (along with LinkedIn, Orkut, MySpace and others) founded by people who witnessed the explosive growth of Friendster in 2003 and wanted a piece of the action. (The founders of both Tribe.net and LinkedIn were early investors in Friendster.)

If you join a tribe, notice of relevant events to that group will be posted on your Tribe.net home page. It’s a simple, intuitively useful idea. Who wouldn’t like to be able to check their home page and be spontaneously informed of local events of interest, as recommended by your friends, or even as advertised to the specific communities you’ve chosen to join? Your network becomes your filter on the world, and the more carefully you cultivate and nurture that network, the better the filter becomes.

At Trader Vic’s, the audience had come for some clarity, but arrived armed with skepticism. For some Silicon Valley veterans, their carefully and painstakingly accumulated personal networks were their stock in trade, their competitive edge; why should they lay them out for all to see on the Web? For others, burned one too many times before by venture capital-spawned fool’s gold rushes, social networking sounded like the latest sucker’s pitch. To still others, the whole idea of linking up with friends — complete with a picture showing you to your best advantage and a profile calculated to make you look cool — seemed distastefully high-schoolish. On Orkut and elsewhere, random strangers were asking others to be friends on the flimsiest of bases. I read your blog, can I be your friend? Like you, I’m a Yeah Yeah Yeahs fan, can I be your friend?

But the not-so-secret secret of social networking is that flimsy is good! Flimsy is where the action is. Seek out flimsy, and you shall be rewarded. As Mark Granovetter

explained, for what must have been the thousandth time this year, the counterintuitive key to social networking is that its value doesn't inhere in linking up to your best friends and soul mates. You are far more likely, argued Granovetter, to find leads on a good job or a prospective date from the networks of people you don't know very well.

You are already probably familiar with the friends of your best friend, or spouse, or close office colleague. There's no fresh territory to plunder there. It's those people with whom you have "weak ties" — the vague acquaintances, that guy or gal you once kind of knew, a little bit — who offer a path into possibility that you didn't know was there. The essence of social software networks is that they are a clever way to organize access to the networks of people you aren't actually friends with.

People, especially in the business world, especially salespeople, have been trying to figure out how to do this forever. But it's a tough problem, because once you start dealing with a network that consists of the friends of the friends of your friends, you are confronting big numbers and big complexity. I have 50 "friends" on Orkut — my resulting network has 410,000 members, and is growing by 20,000 every week!

The human mind is not built to deal with networks that large. But computers make it easy. As sociologist Duncan Watts argues in "Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age," serious research into network theory wasn't really feasible until the development of fast, powerful computers. Doing the math involved was simply too arduous.

In the past, the supernetworkers, the salespeople with the fat Rolodexes and the eidetic memory of names and faces, were exceptional cases. But today, creating an online Rolodex has never been easier. Point and click a few times, and boom, not only do you have a little network of your own, but you can suddenly browse through the hundreds of thousands of people you are linked to. Keeping all those hordes of almost-but-not-quite-complete strangers organized is a snap.

But if you can keep track of all those strangers, they can also keep track of you.

“There is something fascinating about collections of people,” says Bernardo Huberman, the director of the Information Dynamics Lab at Hewlett Packard Laboratories. Huberman boasts a résumé that stretches back to the famous Xerox PARC and includes groundbreaking work in a multitude of disciplines. Of late, one of the things he and his team of researchers have been studying is what you can learn about people from their interactions on a computer network.

In 2003, Huberman, Joshua R. Tyler and Dennis M. Wilkinson published a paper titled “E-mail as Spectroscopy: Automated Discovery of Community Structure Within Organizations.” In it, they reported on their analysis of a year’s worth of e-mail sent back and forth between the 500 or so employees of HP Labs. They paid no attention to content; they concerned themselves only with the “to:” and “from:” sections of the e-mail header. But from that data set they were able to create an intriguing map of relationships — clusters of HP workers who e-mailed among themselves at particularly high rates.

Many of these clusters mapped directly to explicit HP Labs work groups or departments, as one might expect. But others jumped across groups and transcended departments, revealing communities that did not exist on any official corporate map.

“Discovering that you and a great bunch of other people that are not obviously in the same organization seem to be exchanging a lot of messages and have some things in common might be very interesting,” says Huberman. In the paper recounting their research, the authors note that one potential application could be to identify terrorist networks.

“The Internet is a fantastic opportunity to learn about the behavior of very very large groups of users,” says Huberman. “There is, wafting around all of us, a cloud of information — we have cellphones, we have PDAs, we have the e-mail that we read ... There is information that is implicit there ... and we have been very interested in seeing whether we could do something with it.”

A growing number of companies are already applying similar research to their social networking services. If a corporation signs up with Spoke.com, Spoke will analyze

corporate e-mail traffic to see who is connecting to whom and map the networks that result. So rather than have you assemble your own network, as one might do on LinkedIn or Ryze, Spoke derives your actual network from an automated analysis of your behavior.

“The real value to businesses in the current groundswell of social networking services is in the potential utilization of the conceptual underpinnings of these services to help uncover and connect to, as appropriate, the human nodes in their organizations,” says Judith Meskill, a technology consultant who maintains the Social Software Weblog.

Increasingly, pundits like to tell us, we live in a “network society.” Our most important relationships and communities are no longer primarily determined by family and geography. Particularly in the developed world, our atomized, alienated, transient lifestyles have resulted in our seeking community from those who share the same interests, or workplace, or some other kind of tribal loyalty.

“Networks,” writes Duncan Watts, “are the signature of social identity — the pattern of relations between individuals is a mapping of the underlying preferences and characteristics of the individuals themselves.”

“One of the main questions I start asking myself is about constructions of identity,” says Danah Boyd, a graduate student at the University of California at Berkeley who is a ubiquitous pundit on the topic of social software. “How do people make sense of their identity? And over and over again it kept coming back to the fact that people make sense of their identity by the people around them.”

In other words, to quote one of the panelists at the Commonwealth Club: “You are who your network is.” You are who you know.

If all this is true, then online social networks are God’s gift to sociology. As late as the mid-’90s, notes Watts, sociologists who wanted to research social networks — how people related to each other, who became friends with whom, how information traveled through a social network — found their job very difficult. Information had to be gathered by hand, by passing out surveys, and the data was always suspect,

because people might not answer truthfully, or even if they attempted to be truthful, might not be accurate. “A much better approach is to record what it is that people actually do, who they interact with and how they interact,” writes Watts.

And that is exactly what an online social network enables. When we sign up on a social networking site, we are diving into the petri dish, and gladdening the heart of every scientist with a key to the lab. If the network can figure out what groups you are part of simply by the patterns of e-mail sent back and forth, imagine what it can learn when it knows every last bit of data you have input into a five-page profile, which might include everything from your favorite breed of dog, your sexual orientation and marital status, to your turn-ons, bedroom accessories, and tastes in music, movies and books?

But that’s only the tip of the data iceberg. What if, in addition to that, it knows everything you’ve ever searched for on the world’s most popular search engine, it has access to your blog and it has been scanning the content of your e-mails so as to better target ads to you? Researchers with access to that network — to that online neighborhood where modern men and women spend ever greater amounts of their disposable time — will know more about you than you do about yourself.

Read Part 2 Orkut, the satisfaction of lust, and a promising antidote to spam: Where social software is headed

About the writer

Andrew Leonard is the editor of Salon’s Technology & Business department.

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You are who you know: Part 2

Social software pioneers have the Internet biz buzzing again. But their new networks are even more valuable as booster shots for human connection.

Editor’s note: Read Part 1.

By Andrew Leonard

printe-mail

June 16, 2004 | In May 2003, Stanford graduate students Lada Adamic, Orkut Buyukkokten and Eytan Adar published a study in the online journal First Monday discussing research they had conducted about an online gathering place for Stanford students called Club Nexus.

“The electronic nature of online community participation presents an opportunity to study human behavior and interactions with great detail and on an unprecedented scale. Traditional methods of gathering information on social networks require researchers to conduct time-consuming and expensive mail, phone, or live surveys. This limits the size of the data sets and requires additional time and effort on the part of the participants. When studying an online community, our ability to learn more about the social network is simply a side effect of users transmitting information digitally.”

What kinds of things could they learn?

“The richness of the profiles allowed us to characterize social ties and identify what factors influence friendships ... The richness of this information can be used to model dynamics such as the spread of ideas on a network or the way that people can find each other through their contacts.”

After leaving Stanford, Buyukkokten, one of the designers of Club Nexus, took a job as a user interface designer at Google, where he designed and built Orkut “in his spare time.” (Google programmers are encouraged to spend 20 percent of their time on their own side projects.)

Google’s rebuffed attempt to purchase Friendster casts some doubt as to whether Buyukkokten’s venture into social networking design was a hobby as purely innocent as he maintained in a phone interview. Equally revealing were Google CEO Eric Schmidt’s comments in April that Orkut and Google’s search capabilities would probably be combined. In any case, the advent of the eponymous Orkut spawned a minor Net frenzy throughout the spring of 2004. For those who found Friendster too juvenile, Tribe.net too Burning Man counterculturish, and LinkedIn and Ryze too buttoned-down, Orkut exerted an irresistible attraction.

Its position as part of the Google empire conferred additional cachet on Orkut. As rumors of Google’s upcoming public offering began to circulate, a rosy glow suffused the entire enterprise. The Internet was coming back! Silicon Valley was safe for capitalism again! And not only was Orkut comforting for grown-ups, but it was just so easy — ridiculously easy. Within weeks of its launch, it was, as technology writer Annalee Newitz dubbed it, “the crack cocaine of social networking.” What Google had done for search, it was now going to do for an even more essential human activity — being social.

But you can’t gather too many Net geeks in one place without a backlash sure to brew. No sooner had Orkut begun to take off than outraged users were sputtering over the wording of Orkut’s Terms of Service, which appeared to give Orkut ownership for all time throughout the known and unknown universe of all intellectual property associated with an Orkut profile. The ensuing debut of Gmail, which for some raised the terrifying specter of e-mail content scanned so as to better allow targeted advertising, was followed by the revelation that Google was using the same software cookie to register user identities on all its services.

The alarm went out, across the blogs and mailing lists of the Net: A new 8,000-pound terror of privacy invasion had been born. Call it Googlezilla.

At first glance, Googlezilla is scary indeed. Google appears better positioned than any other Net service to successfully amass a truly staggering database of user behavior. If we care about privacy, then we should be leery, right?

But as I watch my Orkut network jump by 10 percent a week without my lifting a hand, and listen to the clamor of people begging for a test Gmail account, I wonder just who is being frightened. Seven million people have accounts on Friendster, and 200,000 new users are reportedly joining every week. Two million are registered to MySpace. A whopping 16 million are supposed to have registered on Tickle for a chance to take a personality test. Judging by the documentary record, privacy doesn't seem all that important a value for today's online masses.

The growth of social networking brings to light a contradiction inherent in the structure of the Internet. The geeks who built the Net tend to be among the more privacy-obsessed individuals in our society. But the network they have constructed is inexorably abolishing every last scrap of privacy that we may have once enjoyed. And yet the masses of people who use that network do not appear to share the values of the people who designed it.

Some observers of new media, like NYU professor Clay Shirky and social software analyst Danah Boyd, speculate that there is a generation gap at issue — that we are watching the first generation to have been weaned on the Net grow up, and they simply accept, as one Friendster über-user told me, that their lives are open books.

“We're dealing with a generation of people — the first generation of people — for whom the Internet is normal,” Shirky says.

Their attitudes may change as they grow older and suddenly become alarmed at the thought of their children viewing their let-it-all-hang-out Friendster profiles. A privacy backlash may still be imminent. There may also be, in the future, technological innovations that allow us exquisite control of what information we reveal to others and what we keep private. But at the moment, the point is moot. Most people, by their behavior, are stating that they don't care if all their online activities can be collated in a dossier somewhere on a server in Silicon Valley. If joining a social network leads to one hot date then it's all worth it.

The payoff of social networking doesn't even have to be about lust. The lure can be much more pragmatic. Tribe.net already offers targeted classifieds. What if it also offered freedom from spam?

If social networking sites are the gated communities of the Web, doesn't it make sense that when you walk through those gates and submit to their rules, you might gain the security and peace of a controlled environment?

Virtually all social networking systems offer, or plan to offer, some way of rating your friends or acquaintances. On one level this is ludicrous. If breaking the concept of friendship down into binary terms is absurd, so is breaking it into seven categories, or even 70. Such classifications may not be, as author David Weinberger has suggested, an actual "act of violence" against the concept of friendship, but they strike many people as artificial and repugnant. Pondering whether someone is merely an acquaintance, or an actual friend (if not a close friend), is not a task on which I wish to waste any of the precious remaining seconds of my life.

But such ratings may be necessary if social networks are to become "reputation systems" — a kind of holy grail for human-relationship hackers. If I get e-mail from a stranger, but my social network rates that stranger high (because a friend of my friend rates him a close friend, for example), then I'll be more likely to let the mail through. But if somewhere along the way the sender had been judged unreliable, then the mail would be stopped.

Jennifer Golbeck is a researcher at the University of Maryland working on exactly such a reputation system — she calls her application-in-progress TrustMail. She posited a situation in which, I, as a reporter, sent her an unsolicited e-mail. She doesn't know me from Adam, but her social network does.

"If it turns out that my advisor had read an article by you that he likes, and given you good rating ... then your mail gets a high rating," Golbeck says.

As networks get larger, they get noisier, and their utility decreases. We've all experienced this as we've moved our lives onto the Internet platform. We no longer thrill to the sound of incoming e-mail, because we know that more than likely

another truckload of foul-smelling junk has just been dumped in our in box. But what if the sound of e-mail coming in rang with a chime that told us it was a good e-mail? And what if we don't even need to bother to do the ratings of our friends ourselves? Can't the network take care of that by itself? Our behavior on the Net, who we send e-mail to, what communities we join, what blogs we read, all add up to a data trail that will permit reputations to be derived automatically. We don't need to do anything but be ourselves.

Clear trends in Internet software development — the easy merging and management of content streams via systems such as RSS aggregation, the evolution of distributed rating systems such as those employed by Slashdot, the ongoing attempt to decentralize the control of information while making it fast and easy for people and software to forge “weak ties” — will contribute to the network's ability to determine if we are good or bad actors. This is happening all over the Net. Social software networks provide distillations of that overall evolution in tidy, user-friendly packages.

It's a classic cyberpunk construct — humans as patterns of information, their “worth” or “value” deducible from the electronic paths they tread and the bread crumbs of data they leave behind. Yet it is hardly science fiction — it's already becoming a fact of network-society life. So far, we're only getting our feet wet in this data pool. But we'll continue to plunge deeper.

As Bernardo Huberman, the director of the Information Dynamics Lab at Hewlett Packard Laboratories, mused to me at the end of our phone conversation, “I think we are on to something big.”

Marc Pincus, the CEO and founder of Tribe.net, waves apologetically at the dog following him into his office.

“I know, I know, it's a start-up cliché to have a dog in the office,” he says.

I can only nod my head. I'm suffering an extreme dot-com flashback.

About 25 or 30 employees are quietly hunched over laptops, sitting at desks built out of sawhorses and planks. There is no receptionist, but a Koosh-ball net hangs from a file cabinet. On giant whiteboards lining one entire wall, buzzwords sprawl — words like “community” and “personalization” and “persistent identity.” Words that once blasted forth from every start-up minaret in Silicon Valley. It’s as if the bust never happened.

Marc Canter has a theory that the software innovations involved in social networking software, along with a host of other advances in what is called, more generally, “social software,” are directly attributable to the dot-com bust. All those brilliant but laid-off programmers were sitting around at home with nothing to do. So they started hacking.

“We had an amazing phenomenon happen the last three years,” says Canter. “Some of the best and smartest people all got laid off, and they were forced to sit at home and come up with shit on their own. [And they decided] that ‘social networking’ and ‘social software’ will be part of the infrastructure.”

It’s a kind of twist on the old “creative destruction” meme. Out of the demolition of the dot-com economy, the next stage of Internet evolution was born! By the spring of 2004, the excitement over social networking software wasn’t just confined to the geeks and the millions of people trolling Friendster for dates. It had spread to the business community. The venture capitalists were coming out of hibernation.

“We’ve been getting calls every day, bottles of wine sent to our office...,” James Currier, the CEO of Tickle, told me, just a few weeks before his company was gobbled up by Monster.com.

Software companies that had been doing business for as long as 10 years were suddenly reinventing themselves as “social networking companies.” Kleiner Perkins invested in Friendster and Knight Ridder bought into Tribe.net. The dark ages were coming to an end; the renaissance lurked, just around that next IPO.

Locked in a symbiotic embrace, the naysayers were back in force as well. Because what was social networking if not another play on the same old “community” trope?

Friendster, Orkut, MySpace, Tribe.net — they were all free. Where was the business model? Why would anyone pay for these services? So what if 200,000 new users were joining Friendster every week — how many hundreds of thousands had already abandoned their Friendster accounts for some brighter, shinier gathering place?

The typical pattern of user behavior for any of these services, says Clay Shirky, can be compared to the shape of a comet: furiously hot and active and swirling at the beginning, and then gradually trailing off into the chill nothingness of dead outer space.

You know you've got a problem when even as energetic an advocate of social networking as Canter acknowledges that "everybody signs up, it's really fun, and then you've got all your friends there, and you're all dressed up and there is nothing to do."

Was social networking just the latest addition to the emperor's wardrobe? As spring moved toward summer, the bloggerati who documented every new iteration were getting bored almost as quickly as they had become excited. Very early on, they had coined an acronym that oozed with jaded disdain: YASNS, for "yet another social networking service."

Pincus struck me as ideal person to press on the issue of business models. Tribe.net had some interesting innovations, but it did not appear to be experiencing the rapid growth of a Friendster or an Orkut. So how was it going to succeed in generating revenue? More importantly, Pincus has been through this all before. He's a serial entrepreneur, a veteran who was right in the middle of one of the biggest early waves of Internet hype.

Remember "push media"? Pincus founded Freeloader, one of the earliest of the push clients — a program that would download Web sites for you while you weren't at your computer. Pincus and his co-partner managed to do quite well out of Freeloader, selling it to another company and cashing out, while the technology itself went nowhere. Not long after, "push media" became an Internet laughingstock.

Pincus nodded sagely when I asked him what made social networking different from push media. But it was difficult to tell whether he was conceding that the question was valid, or had already been asked the question too many times. And then he executed a classic side step.

“The business you’re in is not social networking,” says Pincus. “You need to apply that innovation and the consumer interest in it to something that’s a real business ... Social networking is something that we found along the way and it was a means to an end.”

Tickle’s Currier could have been reading from the same playbook when I talked to him a few weeks later. “The excitement around social networking is not about social networking ... [The term] is a proxy for the excitement, for the re-excitement, about how Internet technology is changing consumers’ lives.”

And then Currier made a simple point: The Internet, he said, gets only 2 percent of the total national ad budget, but it already swallows up 16 percent of media viewing time. And after a few bad years set off by the dot-com bust, Internet ad sales were already growing again, quickly, with lots of obvious room to expand.

So why worry so much about whether there is a revenue model in “social networking”? After the bust, while dot-com naysayers were so busy congratulating themselves on their prescience, millions of people continued to spend more and more time online. It’s not that complicated. The classic revenue model for media services has been in aggregating eyeballs for advertisers. With all those millions of people flocking to sites that, one way or another, offer social networking, somebody will figure out how to turn a profit. It may not be Tribe, it may not be Tickle, it may not even be Friendster that ends up keeping millions of people hanging around. But someone surely will.

One Saturday morning early this year, I checked my e-mail and discovered two messages from friends inviting me to join Orkut, and one asking me to check out a network called LinkedIn. A few days earlier, another friend had instant-messaged me, begging me to be his “Friendster.” One friend, recommending Orkut, even went so far as to tell me, “It’s really cool, really viral.”

As a battle-scarred veteran of the dot-com boom and bust, I reach for the Delete key when I hear the word “viral.” The last thing I want is another infection.

I was guilty of the been-there done-that syndrome. At Salon, we had run a story on sixdegrees, the first explicit social networking site, way back in 1998, and followed up with a story about Ryze in late 2002. When the pitches poured in last year from freelancers eager to wax lyrical about Friendster, I brushed them off. What was there possibly left to say? As Shirky notes, “Online social networks go all the way back to the Plato BBS 40 years ago!” You mean to tell me that people are gathering together online in affinity groups, making friends and creating personal networks?! My God — it’s just like Usenet in 1988, or the Well in 1993! Stop the presses.

But like most other people I crave human connection. And as a chronicler of geeks and a geek myself, I also still hang on to the hope that digital networks and computers can bring people closer together, even though I am weary of a life in which most waking hours are spent in front of a monitor screen. I also well recall the days when I first logged on, in 1993. My friends and relatives ridiculed me for disappearing from the world into the modem. But as a full-time freelancer with a baby at home, I found the opposite was true. The Internet introduced me to a new life, a new social world, and many, many friends and colleagues who are still a part of my life. Who was to say new, improved software tools couldn’t continue such good works? Plus, I needed a date.

So I joined Friendster, Orkut, LinkedIn, Tickle and Tribe.Net. I spent many a late-night hour tweaking profile information. What to leave in, what to leave out? How honest a representation do I want to make of myself to the world? Do prospective dates really need to know about my split-custody situation, or how much NBA I watch on television, before they’ve even met me?

I soon found myself behaving in different ways on different networks. On Friendster, I looked for people to date. On Tribe.net, I joined tribes and participated in discussions. On LinkedIn, a business-oriented service, I didn’t do much of anything at all. On Orkut, I went friend-crazy. Orkut was where “my” people were hanging out, the geeks and techies and online journalists. I started slowly, inviting into my network only people I was pretty close to, but soon my diffidence dropped.

Flipping through profiles, I would see someone I had worked with briefly 15 years ago. Point. Click. Part of my network. Likewise, a writer I had edited once, or someone I had met at someone else's party. And as I started reporting this story, I began asking some of my interview subjects to join my network. I was interested in seeing what constellation would be created. What was the map of my social structure? If the network theorists were correct, and the network was some kind of key to my constructed personal identity, then what would I learn about myself from my evolving social networks?

There were some early rewards. I struck up a conversation with a guy on Friendster that I had met once at an old girlfriend's party, and ended up scoring a bunch of cool new CD mixes. I reconnected with people I had lost touch with for years. Someone who had been a source for a score of articles over the years morphed into a friend. I even went on a couple of dates.

I can see the future, in theory. I can easily see myself with a MyGoogle page, where my blog, my search, my network and my e-mail are all centralized. I can see that space as not just a static HTML representation of my interests but as the dynamic center of a set of interlocking services. Whether this is the "digital lifestyle aggregator" that Marc Canter likes to talk about, I'm not sure, but I see the potential. After so many years of writing about geeky things, I am not immune to the siren call of software — I'd like to believe that a killer application can be a human relations boon, that clever code can circumvent social awkwardness.

But friendship is hard. Over the past several months, as I've gotten caught up in work, or the NBA playoffs, or parenting, or other distractions, my social networks just sit there. Nothing happens. Occasionally, someone asks me to be part of their Orkut network, but after I click my acceptance, I never hear from them again. I did get hit on by a couple of Filipinas who appeared to be trolling Friendster for green card husbands, but other than that, my networks remained static if I didn't exert myself to reach out to the people on them.

There are no truly easy short cuts to real human connection. No matter how clever the programming, one still has to reach out, to brave rejection or chance ridicule.

Maybe it's best, to paraphrase John F. Kennedy, to ask not what social networking can do for you, but what you can do with social networking.

We do need all the help we can get. If there isn't a short cut, is it possible that at least some obstacles have been removed from the road? It's easier to send an e-mail than to cold-call someone, and it's easier to look someone up on a social network than approach them in a bar.

The geeks are excited about social networking because they never give up believing that they can apply their favorite tool, an algorithm, to the processes of human nature. The VCs are excited because they see so many eyeballs flowing to these sites, and if just one site turns out to be a Google, or a Yahoo, or an Amazon, or an eBay, somebody is going to get filthy rich. Everyone interested in studying human behavior is excited — never has so much up-close-and-personal data been so accessible. The masses are excited because, well, hell, their hormones are pumping and there are a lot of pretty pictures out there.

But we're also all desperate, amid our excitement. Being cogs in the network society is no pleasure cruise. As we go about generating our clouds of data, lines between work and play dissolve, and the oppression of never truly being at rest hovers over us. Some of the excitement about social networking is no doubt generated by our hunger for tools that will help us cope with the stresses engendered by our always-on, information-overloaded, frenetic lives. As our ties to local communities and our families have become attenuated by the pressures of modern life, and our sensibilities bludgeoned by the awful rhetoric of politics and media, don't we need reminders at every opportunity that connection with other people is a fundamental part of being alive, and anything that helps us do that, no matter how trivial, should be cherished?

Try it, it's easy. Just click.

About the writer

Andrew Leonard is the editor of Salon's Technology & Business department.

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By Andrew Leonard

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Anonymous

October 1, 2005 at 6:27 am

This blog is awesome! If you get a chance you may want to visit this [marketing software](#) site, it's pretty awesome too!

 **Marketing man**

October 1, 2005 at 8:48 pm

You have a nice blog here! I will be sure to book mark you.
I have a [mlm email lead](#) site. It pretty much covers mlm email lead related stuff.
Check it out if you get time 😊

 **Phoenix**

October 1, 2005 at 11:40 pm

Just a quickie to say that I like your blog a lot. Lots better than most I've seen! I'll return soon!

Hey, come see my site too! It has to do with Download Free Instant Messaging No and it's here: [Download Free Instant Messaging No!!](#)

Regards

 **Webhitsxtreme**

October 2, 2005 at 12:55 am

Just thought i would say hi from new zealand while im here. Doing some blog surfing and found your site. Im looking for some cool styles to help design my own blog. Theres some really amazing blogs about. if you have time check out my site you will find information on how to get [Targeted Traffic](#) to your web site or blog. Well when i get my blog running hope you come and check it out.

 **TS**

October 2, 2005 at 3:48 am

Nice Blog!!! I thought I'd tell you about a site that will let give you places where you can make extra cash! I made over \$800 last month. Not bad for not doing much. Just put in your zip code and up will pop up a list of places that are available. I live in a small area and found quite a few. [MAKE MONEY NOW](#)

**TS**

October 2, 2005 at 8:16 am

Nice Blog!!! I thought I'd tell you about a site that will let give you places where you can make extra cash! I made over \$800 last month. Not bad for not doing much. Just put in your zip code and up will pop up a list of places that are available. I live in a small area and found quite a few. [MAKE MONEY NOW](#)

**Bob Bastian**

October 2, 2005 at 8:08 pm

I've stumbled across your blog when I done some internet marketing research in Google. You're doing a pretty nice job here, keep up the good work 😊

Sincerely,

Bob

Webmaster/Publisher

PrivateLabelPublishing.com

**Steve Austin**

October 2, 2005 at 10:09 pm

Tasty blog! Please check out my [kit making wine](#) blog.

 **Admin**

October 3, 2005 at 1:23 am

Great blog, keep up the good work. Glad to see sites like this.

Here is another good site I said I would pass along.

[Free Dish Network](#)

Thanks

 **Admin**

October 3, 2005 at 1:50 am

Great blog, keep up the good work. Glad to see sites like this.

Here is another good site I said I would pass along.

[Free Satellite](#)

Thanks

 **jon**

October 3, 2005 at 2:40 am

I was searching for [pomeranian dog](#) info and found this post. I agree totally!

Paul

 **Dave**

October 3, 2005 at 4:46 am

I really enjoyed all the great information on your blog. It really is about time I started my own. I will be linking it from my website about [opportunity to make money online](#) Would love to know what you think.



Dream Builder

October 3, 2005 at 5:17 am

Remarkable blog here! I really enjoyed the topic you chose to write about. I'm definitely going to bookmark you! I have a [how to make money selling on ebay](#) site. It pretty much covers how to make money selling on ebay related stuff. Come and check it out if you get time 😊



Clickbank Mall

October 3, 2005 at 11:18 am

If you are looking for very easy to do tasks that pay literally thousands of dollars a month then this is a must for you.

[get paid surveys](#)



PolarTrader

October 3, 2005 at 2:23 pm

Great Blog! I wanted to share this with you. Are you tired of the Internet Marketing Rat Race? [based business home internet online opportunity](#)

Check this out when you have time 😊

—

 **Cyber Financial Corporation**

October 3, 2005 at 11:50 pm

Hi,

I liked your blog. I found many interesting information here.

I also give free info about post card advertising. You can see it on my [post card advertising](#) site.

If you have time please visit my web site to get some free post card advertising information.

Kind regards,

Nick

 **St Louis Cardinals BUFF**

October 4, 2005 at 2:54 am

Finally a real work at home opportunity that you can depend on sending you a paycheck every month.

[surveys for cash](#)

I myself have been earning over \$2200 a month working no more then 4 hours a day, When ever I want.

[surveys for cash](#)

This really works.

[surveys for cash](#)

I just thought I'd tell you about it.

[surveys for cash](#)

If you don't take me up for the opportunity hey it's your loss not mine,
[surveys for cash](#)

 **Anonymous**

October 4, 2005 at 11:37 am

Your blog is excellent – keep it up! Don't miss visiting this site about [computer sale](#)

 **Anonymous**

October 4, 2005 at 11:46 am

Great Blog, check out this business. This is the Goose that lays you Golden Eggs! [base business home list mailing](#)

Enjoy!

 **Anonymous**

October 4, 2005 at 6:18 pm

Hey, you have a great blog here! I'm really enjoying business

I have a [unlimited business lead](#) site/blog. It pretty much covers unlimited business lead related stuff.

 **Anonymous**

October 4, 2005 at 7:29 pm

I've stumbled across your blog when I done some nickelodeon game research in Google. You're doing a pretty nice job here, keep up the good work 😊

Sincerely,

Tosh

Webmaster/Publisher

[nickelodeon game](#)

 **Josh**

October 4, 2005 at 8:24 pm

I love your information on social networking I bookmarked your blog and will be back soon. If you want, check out my blog on [social networking exposed](#) – please come by

 **blaze**

October 5, 2005 at 3:58 am

You have a very good site on based business home work This is something I also have a large interest in and have set up a blog about [based business home work](#) please visit and let me know what you think.

 **Dream Builder**

October 5, 2005 at 6:47 am

Nice blog here! I'm definitely going to bookmark you! I have a [online home based business opportunity](#) site. It pretty much covers online home based business opportunity related stuff.

Come and check it out if you get time 😊

 **Mikey**

October 5, 2005 at 9:00 am

I really liked the information on your blog about social networking I have my own [social networking exposed](#) blog if you would like to come and see what I have on mine

 **jenna**

October 5, 2005 at 11:23 am

I really liked the information on your blog about social networking I have my own [social networking exposed](#) blog if you would like to come and see what I have on mine

 **Jason**

October 5, 2005 at 4:20 pm

Your blog is brilliant! Keep it up. Here's something for you if your looking for some free advertising: [free ezine advertising](#)
Check it out for some great free ezine advertising solutions.

 **Anonymous**

October 5, 2005 at 9:58 pm

Keep up the good work! I look forward to reading more information on your blog

Are you interested in business home make money online? If so, I have a [business home make money online](#) site.

Feel free to drop by and tell me what you think.

 **credit cards now**

October 5, 2005 at 10:19 pm

wanna hook up later Chris? meet me on that online personals dating site site .. here
>> [online personals dating site](#)

 **Ray**

October 5, 2005 at 10:25 pm

Hi,
I am an avid blog surfer and came across your blog by chance. I think it's great to offer your thoughts and ideas across to a worldwide audience for comment. At present, this is my own blog [broadband phone](#) and although the subject matter is totally different from the one you're writing about perhaps it does affect us all in some way. Cheers!

 **David**

October 6, 2005 at 9:57 pm

Hi,
Some of these blogs are awesome, I have spent the whole day going from one to another collecting information if you are interested in ebook store then you you can find out more about [ebook store](#)

See you over there

 **bill naka**

October 7, 2005 at 5:10 am

Keep it up. I enjoy your nice blog. check out my [xylophone book fcsdebug 1 nocache 1 aggregatortquerydebug 1 aggregatortcaptiondebug 1](#) site. It pretty much covers

xylophone book fcsdebug 1 nocache 1 aggregatorquerydebug 1
aggregatorcaptiondebug 1 related stuff.



The Critic

October 7, 2005 at 6:28 am

I was just searching for a product, service or web page to review for my site [SEO Traffic Rank](#), I'm constantly trying to find related info for computerbrat.com email email matrix matrix seo tool. Any way I liked your page!



Kenneth

October 7, 2005 at 7:02 am

I have a [##KEYWORD##](#) site/blog. It pretty much covers ##KEYWORD## related stuff.

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