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LORAIN PAGE

Getting to Know You Online

In this age of near paranoid concern about privacy, why are Internet users sharing increasingly intimate details of their life and work with absolute strangers?

Perspectives

by WALLYS W. CONHAIM

[Editor's Note: This is the first of a two-part series. Look for Part 2 next issue.]

If you've already dismissed the online social networking boom as a phenomenon for the "party" crowd, you might want to consider taking another look. This is a trend with solid implications for just about all of us—anyone who does research, markets products, wants to work more effectively, is seeking like-minded individuals, wants exposure to diverse ideas, is looking to build a professional network, or is job hunting.

What Are Social Networks?

So what exactly are online social networks? They're relatively new kinds of virtual communities that are structured to delineate and build on the relationship that members have with each other.

Each of these networks differ from one another in several ways:

- **Purpose:** Some clearly focus on advancing business or professional connections; others foster social or family relationships.
- **Focus:** Each online network has a distinct identity based on what its members share (e.g., bookmarks, music, photos, or contact information).

- **Tools:** Social networks integrate tools that may make them more useful to their communities, such as referral protocols and ways to search and index information.

The Social Software Weblog, which provides a meta-list (<http://socialsoftware.weblogsinc.com/sns-meta-list>) of links to 380 social networking sites, has developed a taxonomy for the following major categories: business networking, common interest, dating, face-to-face meeting facilitation, friend networking, and MoSoSo (mobile social software).

Social software has the unique distinction of being able to classify Web-based information and to

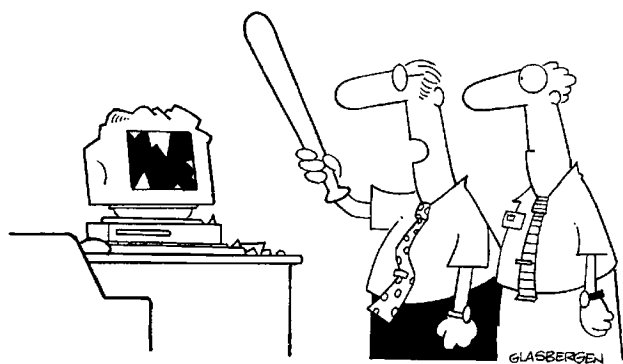
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is a biweekly updated, Web-only section featuring articles, reviews, and more for savvy users and producers of electronic information products and services.

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"It's not the most sophisticated spam blocker I've tried, but it's the only one that works!"

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Posing with Mascots

CyberSports

by DAVID KING

You have to love a Web site with a motto, even if it is borrowed.

Carl's Mascot Photos (<http://www.bigfool.com/mascots>) has a strangely appropriate one, lifted from the comic strip *Dilbert*: "If it had a point, it wouldn't be a hobby."

Webmaster Carl has a simple hobby—traveling around the

country and having his picture taken with mascots at sporting events. He then posts them (with humorous comments) on his Web site.

He has made the rounds too. Included in his ever-growing collection are:

- the San Antonio Missions' Henry the Puffy Taco (the only "food" mascot)

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Amazon.com Still Amazes

by THOMAS PACK

I was one of Amazon.com's first customers. Well, probably not one of the first 10 or 20, but I'm pretty sure I was among the earliest groups of customers to walk through the virtual doors after the bookseller set up shop on the Web in 1995.

I've always liked books. I like the online world; I like the convenience of online shopping. Amazon.com combined all the things I enjoy. The site offered a wide selection of books, and its powerful search engine made it easy to find specific titles.

I quickly became hooked. During the early years, I bought enough books to get a free promotional mouse pad that featured this quotation from Groucho Marx: "Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too

dark to read." The mouse pad is still in pristine condition, because I've never used it. Maybe some day it will bring a nice price on eBay (or on Amazon's own online store for pre-owned items) as an artifact of online retail's early years.

There's a slogan beneath the Amazon.com logo on the pad: "Earth's biggest bookstore." Of course, Amazon doesn't use that tagline any more. Now it offers "Earth's Biggest Selection." Since I don't like malls, I was a bit dismayed when Amazon started selling music, DVDs, software, and electronics. I became even more worried when Amazon started offering toys, jewelry, clothes, and food. Now the company has more than 2 dozen stores selling everything from Post-it Notes and baby bathtubs to

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aggregate people who share common interests. So its emphasis is on people, not data. Some sites feature software for mapping special relationships among their members. Others have software to find people or content using identifying categories or “tags.” (These community-building tools surpass those in blogging software.)

The networks are useful beyond their primary purpose too. Online members also use them as filters for what to do, read, and listen to or whom to meet. Their networks help them clarify their own interests and learn more about themselves, which ultimately fascinates most users. But there is no magic bullet. Just as in real life, you have to “work” a network to get it to work well for you.

Protecting Boundaries

What about protecting your privacy? Privacy protection is actually built into some services. For example, membership in Google’s orkut is by invitation only. Likewise, LinkedIn, a business-oriented network, requires an introduction from a mutual friend before a member may contact someone outside his or her personal network.

Privacy, however, is still an issue. Data gathered by such systems could be combined with that gathered by marketing, financial, or search sites to paint a clearer picture of a person’s interests and behavior.

Spam is also a threat. Web posts are quick to point out that there’s a fine line between receiving a coveted invitation to join a network or be a “friend” and getting a deluge of invites and requests for referrals.

There’s even a move now to establish a “10 Commandments” or “Bill of Rights” for social networking. Some systems already post the TRUSTe approval logo on their sites, and some allow users to earn trust ratings à la eBay.

Tracing the Roots

Internet social networking is between 2 years and 3 decades old, depending on your definition of the term. The trend is believed to have started with the launch of full-featured, research-oriented, computer-mediated communications systems on the Internet, such as EIES (Electronic Information Exchange System), which was pioneered by Murray Turoff at the New Jersey Institute of Technology in the mid-1970s. Other “many-to-many” communications tools, such as bulletin boards, groupware, and real-time chats, followed in due course.

Another point of departure happened in 2003 when a flurry of consumer- and business-oriented start-ups that used “social software” (then a new term) were launched on the Web. The media dubbed the technology “cool,” “hot,” “the next big thing,” and potentially a “killer app.” Venture capitalists took note.

Blogging, journaling online, sharing bookmarks, creating wikis, and participating in dating services—once seen as isolated phenomena—soon were considered part of this burgeoning social networking trend. Together, these group communications tools are now the fastest growing category of services on the Internet.

What’s Their Appeal?

In this age of near paranoid concern about privacy, why are Internet users

sharing increasingly intimate details of their life and work with absolute strangers? Why are they willing to sacrifice their own privacy to learn similar details about the lives of others?

It might just be part of our “high-touch” human nature—our genuine desire to connect with and learn about other people. Perhaps we are naturally driven to reach out to others via the Internet instead of staying within the confines of our office cubicles.

Of course, not all Internet users are involved. The younger generation is more likely to jump in. After all, they’ve grown

up keeping in touch with their friends through instant messaging.

Not surprisingly, the people most likely to benefit here are those whose livelihoods depend on regularly touching base with lots of people and being on top of the latest developments in many fields. The collaborative filtering by-product of these networks is one sure way to work quickly and intelligently.

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Favorites

del.icio.us (<http://del.icio.us>): This social bookmarks manager allows users to share bookmarks of their pages and to subscribe to the links of others.

Flickr (<http://www.flickr.com>): This photo-sharing site, with a reported 400,000 subscribers, gives users the capability of integrating photos with blogs. Capitalizing on the ubiquity of digital cameras and camera phones, Flickr has contributed to a new, interactive style of visual communications.

43 Things (<http://www.43things.com>): This site allows members to network around shared personal or professional goals.

Friendster (<http://www.friendster.com>): With 17 million registered users, this is the largest social network. Founded in 2003, this free service focuses on building and enhancing friendships among friends and friends of friends. It recently added a TypePad blogging capability, real-time instant messaging, mobile blogging, and ad-free premium service levels.

LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>): With 2.6 million registered users, LinkedIn helps professionals find jobs, leads, business information, and each other. The most popular of the business-oriented networks, its basic service is free, but companies post classified employment positions at a cost of \$95 per ad.

orkut (<http://www.orkut.com>): This is a by-invitation-only club that was founded by Google. It reportedly has several hundred thousand members worldwide.

Skype (<http://www.skype.com>): Primarily a rapidly growing Internet telephony (VoIP) company, this service allows users to scan profiles of its members and to place Internet phone calls to others worldwide who have set their computers to “Skype Me” mode. Last April, the service celebrated its 100 millionth download. It has more than 39 million registered users.

Posing with Mascots

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- the Toronto Blue Jays’ Diamond (a decidedly foxy-looking bird and rare female mascot)
- the Las Vegas 51s’ Cosmo (“Glad to see Jar Jar Binks has found work,” Carl noted in his caption. And yes, Cosmo, the space alien/refugee from a sci-fi movie, is that ugly.)

The collection comprises photographs of the costumed creatures of baseball, soccer, and “other sports that aren’t soccer or baseball.” Carl’s trip to see a Baltimore Ravens game resulted in an incomplete photo set—he has pictures with Allan and Poe, but he missed Edgar.

The best—although frequently bizarre—photos seem to be from the minors, from the Harrisburg Senators’ Rascal (“What the hell IS this thing?” Carl wonders) to the Reading Phillies’ Screwball. (“Sorry, Screwball, but you’re damn ugly.”)

Carl even provides a link to the site of Jimmy Chin, a digital photographer who has about as many photos of himself and a buddy with mascots as Carl does. His site (<http://www.crittersbythebay.com/yippee/mascots.html>) doesn’t include comments with the photos, but it does have a photo of the Ravens’ elusive Edgar, who looks almost the same as Allan and Poe.

Curiously enough, neither site has a photo of its protagonists with the famous Spurs’ Coyote, a unicycle-riding, bungee-jumping, flop-eared varmint that—at times—is more entertaining than San Antonio’s talented-but-sometimes-methodical NBA team. Naturally, there’s an extensive bio of the rascal at http://nba.com/spurs/mascot/coyotes_den.html. It contains a pretty funny (by <http://nba.com> standards, that is) media guide-style biography, as well as photos. (Our favorite is the one of him mugging for a TV camera with a sign that says, “Hi Mom, Send Sheep.”)

Get in the spirit for a trip to the ballpark at <http://www.bigfool.com/mascots>, [\[mascots.html\]\(http://nba.com/spurs/mascot/coyotes_den.html\), and \[http://nba.com/spurs/mascot/coyotes_den.html\]\(http://nba.com/spurs/mascot/coyotes_den.html\).](http://www.crittersbythebay.com/yippee/</p>
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Cooling It

Gentle reader, if summer has arrived where you are as it has here in the Land of Sunburns and Heatstroke, there are ways to cool off, at least in a cyber sense. We suggest a trip to <http://www.torino2006.org>, the home page of the upcoming Olympic Winter Games, which will be held in northern Italy.

In various languages (you can choose Italian, French, or English), it’s cool in the land of Fiats and fine food. Photos of winter sports abound on the Web site, along with a countdown to the Feb. 10, 2006, opening ceremonies. It won’t be like the extravaganza the friendly Greeks put together last summer, but you won’t need to dress like Bermuda’s Olympic team did in Athens, either. (Yes, they all wore shorts.)

All the winter sports are explained, some with mildly humorous Italian-to-English translations. There’s also a link

to the Italian Olympic store, where you can buy the official Italo tricolor cotton slippers for just €7.99 (or about \$10 today and \$12.50 a week from now, if the dollar keeps slipping).

Apparently, there still are plenty of good seats to go around. You can buy tickets to follow your (apparently amateur-filled) hockey team through the tournament or your favorite slider in the luge. Better hurry, though—tickets to hot events, including the men’s 20-kilometer biathlon, are going fast. (No kidding—Europeans apparently are wild about standing outside in the cold for hours to watch cross-country skiing and shooting.)

Chill out with some good thoughts about the Olympics and maybe even learn some Italian at <http://www.torino2006.org>.

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