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Content

About Facebook

By bringing order to the Web, Facebook could become as important to us as Google

by Michael Hirschorn

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Facebook's announcement in May that it was opening its Web-development tools to outsiders has been the biggest news in the Web world since the arrival of YouTube, in 2005. The announcement came amid a massive increase in the number of Facebook's visitors—it doubled to 26 million between September 2006 and May 2007—and a growing sense that MySpace's reign as the unchallenged kingpin of social media was coming to a close.

JOHN KRAUSE

I still believe that a lot of the "Web 2.0" hype is just that—hype—and that many of the putatively revolutionary advances in sites like MySpace, not to mention the scores of copycat sites still springing up around the Web, will quickly become commoditized (see "The Web 2.0 Bubble," April *Atlantic*). They rely too much on the packaging and marketing of tools that exist elsewhere on the Web, and they lack a compelling retention mechanism, which leaves them open to the quickly changing loyalties of their (mostly young) users. This is what happened to Friendster, which lost most of its mojo almost overnight after MySpace—shinier, sexier, scarier to grown-ups—hove into view.

I stand by this general principle, but at the moment I'm completely entranced by the new, turbo-charged Facebook. It's the best mousetrap I've seen since I first laid eyes on eBay. No wonder that, in a moment of perhaps accidental honesty, Rupert Murdoch, CEO of News Corporation, the owner of MySpace, said when asked about the flood of people signing up for MySpace, "I wish they were. They're all going to Facebook."

Facebook was started by Mark Zuckerberg, 23, while he was a student at Harvard in 2004. The general concept was to digitize the legendary freshman-year "facebook," and allow students not only to gawk at one another's photos but also to flirt, network, interact. The site's instant popularity prompted Zuckerberg, showing a restraint beyond his years, to roll out the site to other colleges rather than opening it up to everyone—first elite schools, then more broadly. The mode of expansion was itself ingenious because it forswore willy-nilly growth in favor of building meaningful communities whose interlocking

loyalties tied them more closely to Facebook. Eventually, the site moved beyond college to high-school networks, then company networks, then everyone. At the same time, it began adding features, most notably one last year that allows you to track what your friends are doing on Facebook.

At the moment, Facebook is the site that, in my experience, comes closest to fulfilling the promise of social media. In so doing, it raises some bigger questions about how we're going to be using the Web in the future and whether some of the received wisdom about the Internet—that we're headed inexorably toward a digital universe of chaotic, endlessly shifting interactivity—is true.

The catchall term *social media* encompasses Web applications that allow individuals to create their own pages—filled with postings, photos, video, and portable applications generally called "widgets"—and interact with other users. The theory is that these networks will create a virtual environment in which like-minded people can find one another. In practice, as with Goldilocks and the porridge, the gruel tends to be too hot or too cold. On MySpace, the flood of pseudo-buddies and marketing come-ons disguised as offers of friendship quickly becomes suffocating. Too hot. On a business-networking site like LinkedIn, the very nature of the concept becomes self-defeating: The subset of people you want to schmooze with and who want to schmooze with you is simply too small, and too difficult to separate from the much larger group of people you are trying to avoid or who are trying to avoid you. Too cold.

Facebook is getting the temperature just right, and in the process has been able to give social media real social capital. Gathering friends on MySpace requires nothing more than banging through a lot of profiles and "friending" everyone you find. I know relatively few of my MySpace friends. I know most of my Facebook friends; I even like some of them. This is because Facebook prompts users to explain how they know one another. It's no idle feature, since, as you quickly discover, allowing users into your circle allows them to track your moves on Facebook and vice versa. Even more compellingly, it allows you to track, if you wish, their interactions with other users, all from your own user page. You can play with your privacy settings to prevent this, but as you become acculturated to the site, you realize that you have to give information to get information.

Meanwhile, unlike almost any other service on the Web, Facebook lets you decide to restrict this activity to your friend group and/or hide it from Google's prying eyes. The experience is initially unnerving, but once you get the hang of it, you start feeling like you're part of some great undulating, pulsing virtual experiment—like that scene in Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* when Cassiel and Damiel wander Berlin hearing the innermost thoughts of everyone around them, except funnier and less pretentious. There's even a cool little app called Friend Wheel that charts the connections among your friends and presents it as a nice spin-art-type graphic.

Moreoever, Facebook's stricter registration process has, to date, largely spared it from the spam and other commercial elements that are making MySpace so unsatisfying. You can, of course, simply refuse to "friend" a direct-marketing come-on on MySpace, but when you start getting five, six, or a dozen of them a day, you dread logging on. Facebook's solution to this problem is cunning: As in real life, the Facebook interface makes it hard to access new people unless you have friends in common or are part of a preexisting network, often policed through e-mail addresses (for example, I can join the *Atlantic Monthly* network, which is filled with *Atlantic Monthly* employees, only if I have an *Atlantic Monthly* e-mail address). This system not only makes spamming imposingly difficult, but has engendered a culture that makes it simply unacceptable.

Facebook's announcement that it would be opening itself to outside applications, which are more-sophisticated versions of those aforementioned widgets, was the perfect example of how the company has balanced the yin and yang of openness and control. It strikes a blow for Webby openness, allowing these outside applications to integrate fully into its internal operations and creating a seamless experience for the user. And Facebook has promised that it will share revenues generated by these applications, something MySpace, with its more rigid platform, has so far not matched. But Facebook has opened up to the world on its own terms. It effectively rezones the fun out of YouTube videos by allowing them to be posted only in discreet little boxes. (This may be no accident, since there is something almost Richard Meieresque about Facebook: The garishness of most YouTube videos might despoil the high-modernist aesthetic of the Facebook user interface.)

The result of the decision to open Facebook was a frenzy of interactivity and creativity, and thousands of specially created apps were available by midsummer. Most of these apps are small pleasures—virtual food fights, cheesy digital "gifts" you can "buy" for your friends, maps you can customize to show where you've lived and traveled. But given the maelstrom of wildcat entrepreneurship that Facebook's announcement unleashed, it's pretty clear that these simple games will be replaced by tools of ever-greater sophistication. In just one telling case, the popular music-sharing social network iLike has created an app that lives inside Facebook. Increasingly, Facebook users will be able to collect and perform functions from their home pages that you once could find only by visiting dozens of Web sites. It's become a mini-Web for people who don't like clutter.

In opening up to outside applications, Facebook could become a transformational brand, altering the Webisphere around it rather than simply being a site du jour. It could become the way the majority of us (i.e., non-teens) project our identity online: the "Google of people," as BuzzMachine's Jeff Jarvis put it. With its enforced limits and formal and aesthetic rigor, it calls to mind nothing so much as the iPod/iTunes system, a similarly elegant solution that defied the prevailing free-form logic of the digital era and reshaped the music business to its own ends.

Of course, given the ever-accelerating cycle of innovation on the Web, nothing has tenure. Like MySpace, Facebook has yet to convincingly demonstrate how it can become a full-fledged business, and to date it's shown almost tantric restraint about exploiting its ever-growing audience. Its iPod-like purity makes the monetization puzzle all the more complex—not a problem for MySpace, which has the formal cohesion of Times Square circa 1977. Potentially, Facebook could follow the Google path and monetize what it knows about its users. Facebook has detailed and deep information about their interests and preferences, but even at 30 million or 40 million members, it's not clear if there's enough scale to make Google-style money. In the process, Facebook could lose people like me who came to it precisely because it isn't a carnival midway. More promisingly, it could use its base to start offering more-advanced e-mail and IM applications, universal search, photo and video sharing.

In the meantime, MySpace is quickly revving up its own open-source strategy, and presumably will have countered Facebook's gambit in some substantive way by the time you read this. (In July, for example, MySpace introduced a very Facebook-like feature that allows you to track what your friends are doing on their pages. Because you have to click through to a separate page to see this info, however, it's far less satisfying.) The influential tech/design blogger Jason Kottke has suggested that Facebook's new strategy is intrinsically flawed. It is, he argues, merely recapitulating the subscriber-era AOL's failed strategy—often called its "walled garden" strategy—by making most Facebook pages inaccessible to Google search, and generally behaving like a large corporate intranet: in short, "AOL 2.0." "In competitive markets, open and messy trumps closed and controlled in the long run," Kottke wrote:

> Everything you can do on Facebook with ease is possible using a loose coalition of blogging software, IM clients, email, Twitter, Flickr, Google Reader, etc. Sure, it's not as automatic or easy, but anyone can participate and the number of things to see and do on the web outnumbers the number of things you can see and do on Facebook by several orders of magnitude (and always will).

I'm instinctively sympathetic to this argument, having thought the same of MySpace, but I'm beginning to wonder if it's wrong. Openness and messiness are indeed the characteristics that make the Web so different from other forms of media, if indeed the Web can be called "media" at all. But it has always been the push-me/pull-you between order and disorder that has made the Internet more than merely a vast agglomeration of stuff. Search engines, for starters, gave shape and order to this infinitude, while also transforming most everything else on the Web by forcing it to compete on a search-keyword basis. The search engine, for example, is why AOL's subscriber service became vestigial and why Yahoo is in trouble now. Who needs a portal to choose generic pieces of information for you when Google can find you anything you need in a flash?

The iTunes system is further evidence that people do not always prefer infinite choice: It is dominant despite being more expensive and less flexible than its rivals. It succeeds because it is simple, intuitive, and functional. Ditto for Nintendo Wii, which became the breakout hit of the last round of video-game player wars by offering fewer bells and whistles, but better packaged. Facebook, likewise, is imposing the right limits—it's almost New Victorian in that regard. It is a connection engine that successfully mirrors how most of us want to live our lives. (Most people live in suburbs for a reason.) If the overall trend on the Internet is the individual user's loss of control as corporations make money off information you unwittingly provide, Facebook is offering a way to get some of that control back. In Facebook's vision of the Web, you, the user, are in control of your persona. As BuzzMachine's Jarvis has argued, you decide how much leg you want to show (literally or metaphorically, as the case may be), and to whom. And if this model comes to dominate, which is not impossible, it could force us to rethink our disdain for the "walled garden." This walled garden is not just AOL 2.0, because the garden has a door, and you, the user, have the key. Tea sandwiches, anyone?