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Social Penetration Theory, Social Networking and Facebook

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Abstract

Social Penetration Theory can be related and evolved by using social networking sites (SNS), specifically facebook.com. This paper explores social networking as related to self-disclosure in social penetration theory. Also included is a brief history of social networking, and where it is going in the future, as new SNSs constantly form. Facebook.com is one of the most popular social networking sites. A Facebook user is constantly using social penetration theory by displaying self-disclosure. A Facebook user can set their privacy settings to determine their levels of self-disclosure. By using SNSs, and Facebook, users grow relationships by exhibiting behaviors that evolve social penetration theory.

Social Networking and Relationships from Networks

The Internet generation consists of people who are comfortable putting their lives online, conversing on the Internet, emailing, updating statuses, writing on each other's Facebook walls, and having many friends, whether they know them from the off-line world or only from the online world. Using social networking websites allow users to exhibit voyeurism and exhibitionism. People like to express themselves, and they are curious about other people.

The terms Facebook and Twitter (popular social networking sites today), have been around for many years. According to a recent New York Times article, "A Boston Daily Globe article from August 24, 1902, titled, "Face Book The New Fad," describing a party game where revelers sketch out cartoony caricatures for fun." (Wortham, 2009). Additionally, a 1942 Washington Post article was found titled "Think Before You Twitter" about gossiping, and a 1903 article referring to the first "pocket telephone." (Wortham, 2009)

As Facebook celebrates its fifth anniversary in 2009, it continues to change how we communicate. "By digitally mapping and linking peripatetic people across space

> and time, allowing them to publicly share myriad and often very personal elements of their lives. Unlike search engines, which ably track prominent Internet presences, Facebook reconnects regular folks with old friends and strengthens their bonds with new pals." (Stone, 2009)

Users form relationships with each other in social networking online groups. Heath and Bryant (2000) stated how relationships can be symmetrical which is influence balanced; or asymmetrical, where one party has more influence than the other and that networks are dynamic, and are in a constant state of emergence, growth, maintenance and decline.   Relationships are caused by interactions and mutual understandings. Relationships are both social and personal, each side is constantly updating, thinking and communicating, until one discovers what the relationships means, or an affirmation occurs.

The media, how we function, how we view the media and our culture and society contribute to people's technology use, and how we form relationships in both the on and off-line worlds. One's perception is not necessarily true of another's in any given relationship. Relationships can be compared to games and relationships are evaluated in a process, reconsidered, and the thought process leads to thinking about the future of the relationship (Rychlak, 1984). Social networks and relationships can also be seen as a pattern of behavior.

Facebook has become a cultural phenomenon. There's even a website, Insidefacebook.com to help users, and there are countless applications, groups, fan pages, and quizzes that users participate with on Facebook. Facebook has surpassed other popular SNSs such as MySpace and LinkedIn (see Appendix A).

Business professionals have adopted the use of Facebook at a rapid pace. For the business professional, Facebook is a fun, less formal alternative to LinkedIn. Conversation can be found through discussion threads within Facebook groups, with users engaging in self-disclosure. Finding groups that both match a user's interests, and

which are consistently active, can be hit or miss depending on what topics the user is looking for.

Another more recent SNS site, Twitter, does one thing and it does it well. It answers the question, "What are you doing?" It's all about the conversation and there is always someone there to who will see your message. However the "Tweet" is only 140 characters. Twitter is great to use from a cell phone because of the minimal character length. Twitpic.com allows users to post pictures on Twitter. From the outside looking in, it's often hard for users to understand the value that Twitter brings to the table, especially if Facebook is the more popular SNS. For users who use both Twitter and Facebook, there's an application which allows users to connect with both SNSs by using TweetDeck (see Appendix B).

Many users use Facebook as a method of primary communication, rather than using the phone, face-to-face or even email communication. Interpersonal communication now extends to the Internet. Who needs email when you have a Facebook wall? Besides reconnecting with friends and making new ones, users create events and join fan pages and groups. According to Facebook (2009) they have over 200 million active users, and an average user has 120 friends on the site. (See Appendix C).

Black (2004) explored how social-networking sites will continue to search for the most efficient way to make people more visible and more connected to people they know without exposing them to unwanted solicitations and information. The balance between sharing and protecting personal data is the key to their success. It's human

nature to want to connect and be part of a group. Social networking sites like Facebook allows for relationships to form, reconnect, and grow.

Social Penetration Theory

The term Social Penetration Theory was formulated by psychology professors Irwin Altman and Dalmas Taylor in 1973, to describe the dynamics of relational closeness. Relational closeness can progress from superficial to intimate. Social penetration theory explains why relationships are formed, why they end, and the process that they must go through to prosper.   Closeness develops through self-disclosure. Closeness varies according to the following factors: rewards versus benefits; costs versus vulnerability; satisfaction; stability and security.

Self-disclosure characteristics include the storyteller (the person disclosing), while it also stimulates feedback from the receiver. The quality of the feedback is related to the amount and relevance of self-disclosure users receive and share with others. Self-disclosure can be very revealing or not revealing.

Social Penetration Theory states that as relationships develop, people move from relatively shallow levels of self disclosure to more intimate disclosures (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Using interpersonal communication one can explain another's behavior or make predictions about behavior based on psychological data, which comes from knowing an individual well. Impersonal communication makes predictions based on sociological data largely connected to one's external roles.

Social penetration can be compared to different types of relationships and to different aspects of relationships. These layers are a key aspect of the theory. Although self-disclosure is a behavioral component of the self-penetration process, it includes any behavior that is interpersonal—verbal, non-verbal, or environmental—that affects relationship development (Sprecher, Wenzel, & Harvey, 2008). Social penetration theory generates predictions about the pattern of relationships as they develop. As Sprecher, Wenzel, & Harvey (2008) described at each stage of relationship development there is a distinctive "wedge-shaped pattern" to disclosure associated with greater disclosure than with disclosure at less-intimate levels. It moves as self-disclosure becomes more intimate from superficial and privacy levels change. A wide range of topics is explored in a relationship, since self-disclosure grows as the relationship grows.

Sidney Jourard argued that willingness to disclose to others increased understanding in relationships and built intimacy. Jourard (1971) defines self-disclosure as making ourselves "transparent" to others through our communication--i.e., when we tell others things about ourselves which help them to see our uniqueness as a human being. Jourard (1971) found that reciprocity of self-disclosure between individuals is based upon trust, and it is only when an individual sees another as trustworthy that the disclosure will undertake the risk of disclosing themselves to the receiver.

Self-disclosure occurs on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral levels (Sprecher, Wenzel, & Harvey, 2008). It varies in content and depends upon how much one discloses to the recipient. It may be perceived as intended for one recipient, or intended for anyone. There is a difference between self-description vs. self-disclosure (Sprecher,

Wenzel, & Harvey, 2008). Self-description involves communication that levels "public layers" whereas self-disclosure involves communication that reveals more private, sensitive, and confidential information. Taylor and Altman (1987) theorized that self-disclosure is a component of communication in which individuals make themselves known to other people.

Pearce & Sharp (1973) make an interesting distinction among three related terms: Self-disclosure, confession, and revelation. Self-disclosure is voluntarily communication of information about one's self to another. Confession is forced or coerced communication of information about one's self to another. Finally, revelation is unintentional or inadvertent communication of information about one's self to another.

Other Findings of Self Disclosure Research

Self Disclosure increases with increased relational intimacy. Self-disclosure is a key component of relationship development because it fosters closeness (Derlega, Winstead, Wong, & Greenspan, 1987). Additionally, it plays a central role in the types of relationships that develop, and how satisfied each partner is within these relationships. Social penetration rests upon the premise that face-to-face relationship development proceeds from the superficial to intimate levels of exchange (Altman & Taylor, 1973).

The theory of social penetration can be applied to computer mediated communication. The path to social penetration theory comes from sharing a wide range of topics and revealing the core of a person's self concept, according to Taylor and Altman (1973). On the computer, people tend to share the same information they would in face to face interaction. This is especially true with Facebook users.

Disclosure increases with the need to reduce uncertainty in a relationship. Disclosure tends to be reciprocal, incremental and symmetrical (Altman & Taylor, 1973). Liking is related to positive disclosure, but not to negative ones. Positive disclosure does not necessarily increase with the intimacy of the relationship; but negative disclosure is directly related to the intimacy of the relationship.

Social penetration theory does not apply to relationships with people that already know basic data about you, such as parents, significant others, children, and other family members. Social penetration theory does not explain why when a relationship participant slowly begins to draw back; the other participant does not always do so. Additionally, this theory does not explain what the other person must do to go backwards through the layers. Perhaps most importantly why further study in social penetration theory is needed, is that it fails to factor in death. When a person dies their relationships ends. However, it could be argued that the relationship will then become one-sided. The costs and rewards of maintaining the relationships did not change; this may be why people have such a difficult time with death (Altman and Taylor, 1973).

Relational satisfaction and disclosure have a curvilinear relationship -- satisfaction is highest with moderate levels of disclosure. By using Facebook and other social networking sites you grow relationships using self-disclosure.

Popular Social Networking Sites and Media Research

Social networking sites (SNSs) first appeared and became popular in the late 1990s, but really began to grow in 2003 when major social networking sites were

launched. Many argue that Classmates.com, founded in 1995, was the first popular social networking website and in many ways laid the foundation for future sites like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn.

SNSs are defined by Boyd & Ellison (2007) as web-based services that allow individuals to "(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." Participants in SNSs are not necessarily "networking" or looking to meet new people; instead, they are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). SNS have a high level of offline–online integration.

Founded in 2004, Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers. (Facebook, 2009). Facebook is founded on the premise of sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections. Facebook is a SNS that originally restricted its membership to college students. Rosen (2007) explained that the name Facebook originates from "the small photo albums that colleges once gave to incoming freshmen and faculty to help them cope with meeting so many new people" (p. 17). In September 2006, Facebook became open to the public such that anyone with a valid e-mail address could access the site and create a Facebook profile (Mitrano, 2006). Although Facebook is now open to the public, in order to be a member of a particular university "network" an individual must have a valid email address as issued by the

institution to be a member of that network (Mitrano, 2006). A user can also be part of a geographic network, workplace network, or not choose to be part of a network.

Facebook is a social networking website that resembles a virtual community where members subscribe to particular behavioral or cultural norms by participating in Facebook walls, pokes, notes, events, and quizzes. One of Facebook's most popular features is the appearance of a friends' list that is linked from the user's profile page. Users can select other users to be friends with and this grouping of friends will appear in an alphabetized list on the linked page.

Beyond profiles, friends, comments, and private messaging, SNSs vary greatly in their features and user base. Some have photo-sharing or video-sharing capabilities; others have built-in blogging and instant messaging technology. Even websites such as eHarmony.com and Match.com, introduced before Facebook, rarely reached the college or younger demographic because membership to those sites cost money and was seen as a desperate move for the average college student. Currently, there is no reliable data regarding how many people use SNSs, although marketing research indicates that SNSs are growing in popularity worldwide (comScore, 2009).

Boyd & Ellison (2007) explained that some sites are designed with specific ethnic, religious, sexual orientation, political, or other identity-driven categories in mind. There are even SNSs for dogs (Facebook has a Dogbook), although their owners must manage their profiles (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Other Literature Review and Findings

The Internet has changed the traditional conditions of identity production. As the corporeal body is detached from social encounters in the online environment, it becomes possible for individuals to interact with one another on the Internet as their real self or hidden self as Zhao, Grasmuch, & Martin (2008) explored. Anonymity can be maintained through withholding information about one's personal background, such as name, residence and institutional affiliation, or on the other hand, one can use self-disclosure to reveal information such as name, residence and institutional affiliation to the receiver. Tufekci (2008) found that honesty and accuracy of self-disclosure is considered an ethical behavioral standard within Facebook and is expected during Facebook interactions.

Facebook can be viewed as a public sphere, which is an area in social life where people can get together to discuss issues, mostly in politics. Cook (2004) stated that a public sphere and public communication are important for maintaining relationships and creating dialogue. Facebook can be viewed as being developed as capitalistic, since it has grown exponentially in users and revenue.

Self-disclosure regularly occurs on Facebook with many users posting a range of photographs that can depict a wide variety of images. Users are eager to place photographs that their represent their most positive self.

Facebook is used to maintain existing offline relationships or solidify offline connections, as opposed to meeting new people, as found by Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2006). Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) found that Facebook users engage

in "searching" for people with whom they have an offline connection more than they "browse" for complete strangers to meet. Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) explored social capital, and their research showed that Facebook does appear to play an important role how students maintain social capital and relationships. Gross and Acquisti (2005) found that the majority of Facebook users disregard control of their personal information and the vast majority of users do not alter these privacy controls. However, no studies to date have examined the anticipation of future interaction and self-disclosure within the Facebook community.

Little research has been done to evaluate the impact that computer-mediated technology has had on the theoretical view of relational closeness. With hundreds of social networking websites linking people together around the world, the research looks to suggest that the theory has evolved, eliminating layers in this global online world.

Privacy Concerns

Virtual communities can bring users closer together to form relationships, and users are seemingly not concerned with privacy, but want to feel connected and make new "friends." Facebook users have tools available to protect their privacy, as users can restrict the accessibility of their profiles using a variety of means, particularly by restricting full profile viewing to their Facebook "friends" or friends of friends and networks.

Facebook users must determine how to reveal, or conceal, their private lives within a public forum. Despite the inherent dangers of high levels of self-disclosure on

Facebook, users continue to disclose large amounts of personal information on a publicly accessible network.

Social networking sites prior to Facebook, such as Friendster and MySpace, had users who were not acting as their true selves, they were playing roles. Cassidy (2006) explained how there could be thirteen-year-olds pretending to be nineteen, virgins pretending to be vixens, forty-two-year-old F.B.I. agents pretending to be adolescent girls, and the list goes on. When Facebook began in 2003, Facebook users were required to have a valid college e-mail address (first at Harvard, then it slowly expanded and today anyone can join), most were students, and many were willing to post their e-mail and home addresses, their cell-phone numbers, and even their sexual orientation. (Cassidy, 2006). Most Facebook users worried more about wasting time than about their privacy or security concerns. This trend arguably continues today, since many users are not concerned with their privacy; many users consider their friends to be real friends, and therefore it is not harmful to post revealing personal information.

On most social-networking sites, a search box allows users to lookup profiles of people anywhere on the site. "[Mark] Zuckerberg decided that Facebook members

would be allowed to view only the profiles of other students at their own colleges, with one exception. If they obtained the permission of a student at another school, they could add that person to their list of friends. In retrospect, this decision was critical to Facebook's success, because it preserved the site's intimacy." (Cassidy, 2006).

Social networking site users, especially college students in the U.S., have high connectivity levels; therefore offline identities carry over to online behavior, and vice

versa. (Hargittai, 2007) This can be seen today with users constantly updating their status, or RSVPing to event invitations on Facebook.

The Internet has changed the traditional conditions of identity production. Facebook users typically use real names and real information, and therefore, are not anonymous, as many other social networking sites let you be. One of the appeals of Facebook is that you can find someone by their real name and reconnect with friends from the past, as explored by Zhao, Grasmuch & Martin (2008).

We love to share, it is part of human interaction, and on social networking sites its fun and easy to do. What you share with "friends", who could be real friends, acquaintances, co-workers, or strangers, could potentially be for all to see globally. Websites do allow privacy settings and users are increasingly changing their privacy settings, or not posting content that could be potentially damaging to them, socially, or in the workplace if a friend on a social networking site like Facebook is their boss.

SNS users can potentially find themselves in hot water over pictures and comments about themselves, and questions of libel and copyright come into play when users post content created by others or comments about other people. Educase Learning Initiative (2006) stated how Internet caching exacerbates this problem, making Web content available even after it has been changed or removed from a website. Stories of "Facebook addiction" have also been known to occur. Many users say that after creating a profile, they found themselves spending hours a day updating their pages, looking for people with shared interests, and reading others' profiles and looking at their photos Educase Learning Initiative (2006). Mitrano (2006) explained that all information, personal or otherwise, posted on Facebook, immediately becomes the

property of the Facebook network. SNS users need to be aware of both the benefits and dangers of sharing themselves on SNS sites such as Facebook.

Tufekci (2008) found that the true concern with both privacy and trust is temporal in nature, and many participants in Facebook studies are unaware of the interaction between current concern for visibility on Facebook and the possibility of future consequences.

SNSs are also challenging legal conceptions of privacy. Hodge (2006) argued that the fourth amendment to the U.S. Constitution and legal decisions concerning privacy are not equipped to address social network sites. Boyd and Ellison (2007) asked, "Do police officers have the right to access content posted to Facebook without a warrant? The legality of this hinges on users' expectation of privacy and whether or not Facebook profiles are considered public or private."

Although it may be common sense, a good rule of thumb is to not friend your boss or other people that could take offense to what you and your friends may be posting to your profile(s). Kuchinskas (2009) explained how content on the internet never goes away; anything you say can and will be used against you. If you write something it's out there, and that's great if you want it to be, but you also need to be careful because everyone has access to it. Just Google yourself, or search pipl.com, and see what you find. If you're ok with what you find then you're on the right track.

Future Growth and Research

The balance of positive and negative exchanges within an interpersonal relationship must preserve a ratio where rewards outweigh the costs. This is essential for social penetration, or depth of self disclosure to form a foundation of a relationship.

It is unclear whether the anticipation of future interaction can serve as the catalyst for continued interpersonal interaction, since creating Facebook friends within the Facebook network is defined differently than acquiring friendships face-to-face. Facebook members may not see any difference with what they disclose within either Facebook or face-to-face in the off-line world. Therefore, they will view what they share on Facebook and their offline self-disclosures as the same.

As we live more frictionless lives, no longer struggling for physical survival, every thirst quenched, every appetite sated, every desire fulfilled, we can live in ever-increasing isolation because we no longer "need" people to provide for us, except psychologically. We can find whatever we need online. Individuals can participate in media (e.g. blogging, facebooking, tweeting, uploading videos of their dogs), but it is not a "real" experience, or is it? It is at best a surrogate for experiences, but it provides the illusion of participation.

Social penetration theory will change in the future because of the Internet. A person can meet someone on a SNS such as Facebook and know everything about them before a conversation ever takes place. The phenomenon of Facebook needs further study as well. Future research should examine what features users are using to

report factors such as making new friends, changing profiles, pictures, interpersonal attraction, and perceived similarity.

Anticipation of future interaction both in the on and off-line world represents external influences which alters the way in which individuals present themselves to another, or in the case of Facebook, a community. This paper has explored Facebook research and has found that more research is needed about privacy and self-disclosure on social networking websites, specifically Facebook.

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Appendix A

Facebook vs. MySpace vs. Twitter

Unique visitors over a 3 month period (1/09-4/09)
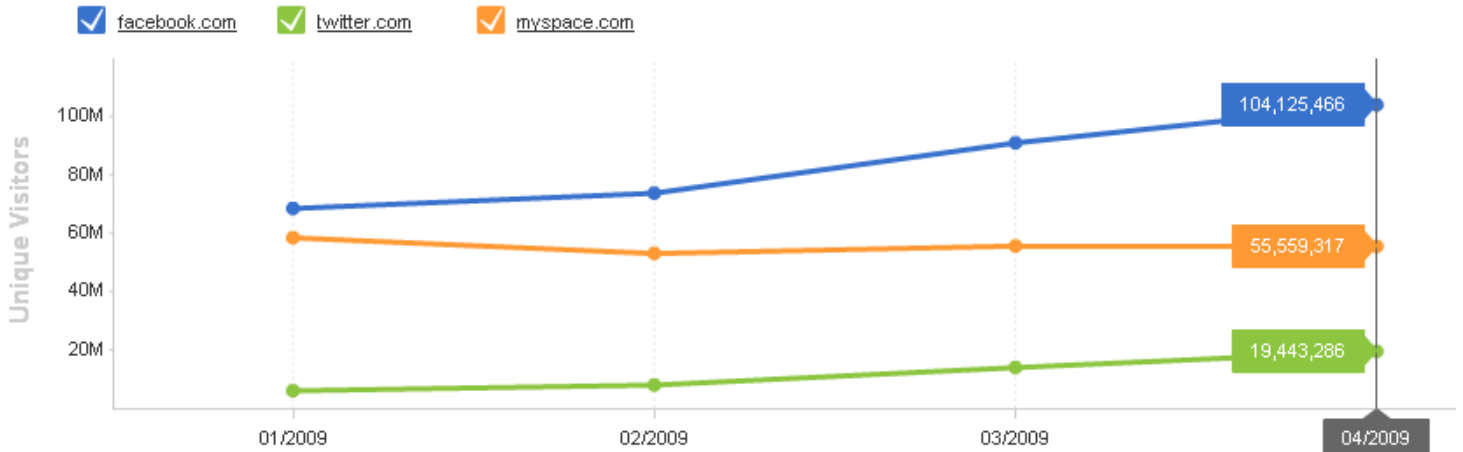
Facebook vs. MySpace vs. Twitter (2009, April 28). Compete. Retrieved April 28, 2009, from

http://siteanalytics.compete.com/facebook.com+twitter.com+myspace.com

Appendix B

TweetDeck

Facebook Connect

Schonfeld, E. (2009, March 16). TweetDeck Joins The Facebook Connect Army. TechCrunch.

Retrieved April 28, 2009, from http://www.techcrunch.com/2009/03/16/tweetdeck-joins-the-facebook-connect-army

The Road to 200 Million

Facebook began as a private network for colleges and universities, but has grown into an international social networking site with almost 200 million members. Lee Byron, a member of Facebook's data team, created maps and network diagrams that show the site's expansion and use.

**February 2004 to January 2005** Facebook begins at Harvard, and expands to a few universities at a time.
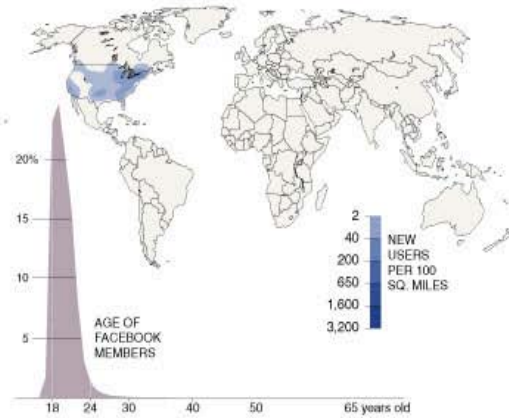
February 2005 to January 2006 Facebook expands to include most American colleges and high schools.
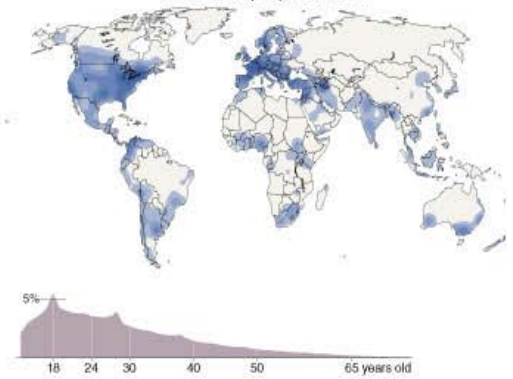
AGE OF FACEBOOK MEMBERS

2
40
200
650
1,600
3,200

NEW USERS PER 100 SQ. MILES
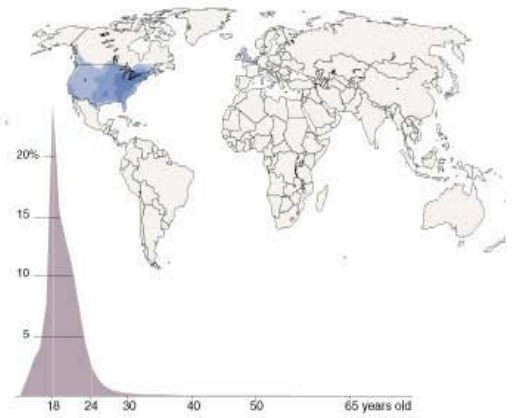
February 2006 to January 2007 Facebook opens registration to allow anyone to join, which brings in older members.
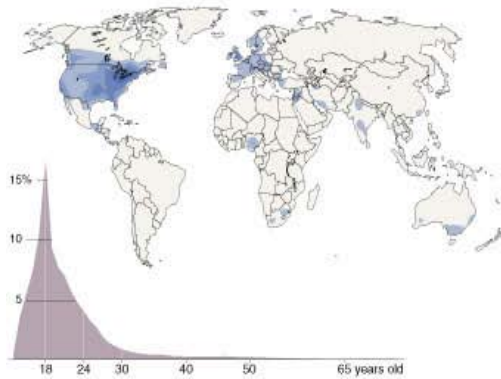
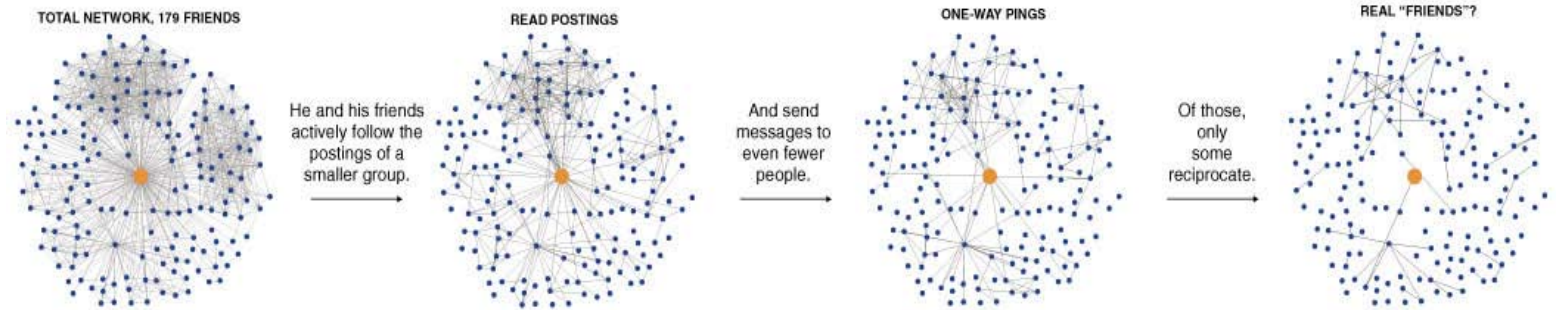**February 2007 to January 2008** Facebook reaches 50 million users, with Canada and Britain growing fastest.
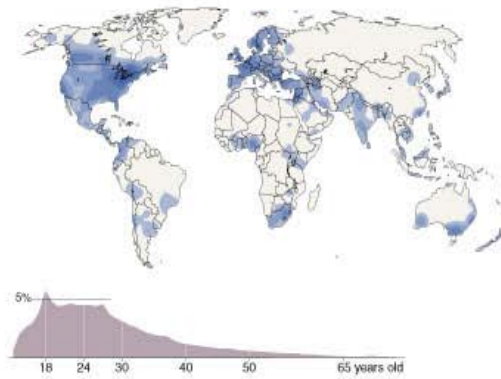
February 2008 to January 2009 Facebook is translated into more than 40 languages. The fastest-growing group of members is people over 35.

Depends How You Define 'Friend'

Although most people have a large network of Facebook friends, members maintain real relationships with a much smaller collection of those friends by reading profiles, sending messages and "wall posts." Here is an example of the way one Facebook employee interacts with his network during one month.

TOTAL NETWORK, 179 FRIENDS

He and his friends actively follow the postings of a smaller group.

READ POSTINGS

And send messages to even fewer people.

ONE-WAY PINGS

Of those, only some reciprocate.

REAL "FRIENDS"?

Source: Facebook.com

Stone, B. (2009, March 28). Is Facebook Growing Up Too Fast? *The New York Times*.

Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/imagepages/2009/03/29/business/29face.graf01.ready.html