

## Myspace: a network without borders

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MySpace is the current hot little number in the world of online social networking sites, boasting 66 million members, and [growing](#). It is ranked 8th in [alexa.com](#)'s global top five hundred websites, and 5th on the English Language top five hundred. What started sixdegrees.com (no longer online), lead to [friendster](#), and the current groundbreakers, [Myspace](#) and [Facebook](#). There is no need to get nitty-gritty about all the little distinctions between the various OSN (online social network) services that have come and gone over the years. The important facts to remember is that anyone with an email account can register on Myspace, and that Facebook (ranked 53 in the global five hundred) is only open to individuals with email accounts accepted university mail servers. Friendster is considered a past trend in North America, having faded from administration/user conflicts and a period of technological trouble, but still claims 27 million accounts. Facebook rests at 7 million participants. At more than twice the population of Canada, Myspace is by far in the lead and has a significance all its own.

Social networking sites are characterized by a "self-descriptive profile" featuring photos, personal information and a public display of "personal connections" ([Donath & Boyd](#)) Though OSN websites have risen and fallen over the year, the popularity of this type of service has only increased. Offline, a study by Wellman has observed that "a typical personal network included 3-6 close and intimate ties, 5-15 less close but still significant and active ties, and about 1000 more distant acquaintances" (Wellman in [Donath & Boyd](#) 80). Networking sites are very efficient at allowing users to maintain an increased number of weak ties and an overall larger network of connections ([Gross & Acquisti](#) 73, [Donath & Boyd](#) 80). Granovetter's "Strength of Weak Ties" describes how a weak tie should not be undercredited as a "trivial acquaintance tie but rather a crucial bridge between the two densely knit clumps of close friends," in a context where otherwise these "clumps" would have no connection whatsoever and would be isolated from each other (Granovetter 202). By connecting different groups, weak ties give access to the different resources and opportunities available in different groups. In terms of privacy, a social network structure supporting an inflated number of weak ties (users boast anywhere from 1 to 1000's of Myspace "friends") is an environment where a huge amount of information is moving very freely – and in a network of 66 million individuals, this can be quite significant. (On Monday, April 10, Tom had 69,998,034 friends connected to his profile – and while every new member is given Tom as a friend, not all of them chose to keep him on their friend lists. This would put Myspace membership somewhere above Tom's 69,998,034). If gossip and rumour are considered social concerns in an offline network of 1000 connections (Wellman), imagine the consequences in a network of 70 million paired with increased weak, "bridging" ties.

[Dana Boyd](#)'s concept of the "super public" is also very relevant to this discussion. It is recognized that in our daily lives we actively manage our identity, performing different faces in different situations (Goffman). We perform work to maintain our various faces in separate publics, and to avoid overlapping these performances. Boyd proposes that as Myspace.com shifts from a niche service for musicians, to a mainstream community, a super public is emerging. Where else can we find a context where we would present the same face so openly to such a large body of individuals? Previous network sites have involved features that allow members to adjust

Previous network sites have involved features that allow members to adjust how visible their profile is to different degrees of connection. For example, [Donath and Boyd](#) discuss a situation where a teacher with a friendster account was confronted with having students from her classes add her as a "friendster" and having to decide whether she was comfortable with students being able to view the profile she had created with friends in mind. Friendster allowed her to set who was able to view her profile but this option is not offered by Myspace. Myspace, in fact, has [no privacy options available for adult users](#).

[Acquisti & Gross](#) discuss that while offline ties or connections can be "loosely categorized as weak or strong," they are actually "extremely diverse in terms of how close and intimate a subject perceives a relation to be. Online social network, on the other side, often reduce these nuanced connections to simplistic binary relations: "friend or not" (73). Nowhere else is this more true than on Myspace. In the absence of privacy settings, the only way to deny a member complete access to your Myspace profile is to deny their friendship – and even then, they can still view all your content (except for blogs posted as private or "friends only").

Those of us who were present at the SSHRC site visit in February might remember Joel Reidenberg's question about Myspace, regarding how he could witness his son's (or any other member's) behaviours within the network without explicit permission. All you need to start surfing Myspace is a membership, you don't need any friends. This is one of the primary differences between Myspace and Facebook (Facebook was the topic of a talk given by Alessandro Acquisti). While Myspace allows anyone with an email address to start an account, only emails from approved university domains are able to start accounts on Facebook – and you can only freely "lurk" people who attend your specific school. Facebook also has a variety of different privacy settings, that Acquisti finds are rarely used. Anyone, even without a membership, can click through the Myspace network viewing almost everything. Membership gives you access to individuals photo galleries and blogs. Being someone's "friend" gives you permission to leave a public comment on their profile page, and will also cause all of their "bulletin" broadcast messages to be listed on your Myspace console page.

Users are given the option of making posted photos entirely private, or entirely public (no middle ground). A setting is available that allows members to screen public comments before they are posted on their profile for everyone else to see. Individuals under 16 are able to create "private profiles" so that their content is only available to "friends," however, the individuals display photo, name, age and location information are still publically displayed.

Beyond the clashing of "publics" into a super public, and the inability to control how visible your profile is to other 66 million members of the site, there are further privacy concerns considering how much information users tend to disclose on their personal profiles. This is a phenomenon seen on most online social network sites, but swelling the potential network to ten times the average size of other similar services makes the situation a little more significant in the case of Myspace.

As I browse through the Myspace directory (publicly available without an account), I notice that almost every member has opted to upload a display photo. The vast majority of these photos appear to include the individual him/herself and clearly show their faces. Most members seem to prefer presenting themselves with real, or realistic, first names. Clicking through the network of profiles reveals each page filled (to the limits in some cases)

with endless lists of favourite movies, books and music, age, sexual orientation, hometown, current town, motivation for joining myspace, who they'd like to meet and open ended fields such as "about me" where users type out mini (and sometimes lengthy) diatribes about what makes them "them" and express whatever parts of their identity aren't covered by the previous categories. In light of the [discussion](#) put forth by [Jackie Strandberg](#), "Giving it up for free: Teens, Blogs, and Marketers' Lucky Break," myspace seems not only to contain a similar wealth of information just asking to be exploited, but also does it in a standardized series of tables and headings that can only facilitate the process. "dbickett" [posts](#) on the Kuro5hin website, the many technological flaws of myspace that leave users open to serious privacy and security breaches caused by loopholes in the sites coding, leaving the submitted information further open to violation.

Datamining is not the concern that the media are warning us about however. A Google [News search on myspace](#) gives us almost 5500 results, most of which are on the topic of youth safety and the dangers of strangers online. Catherine Saillant, LA Times, starts her [article](#) with the following:

I've covered murders, grisly accidents, airplanes falling out of the sky and, occasionally, dirty politics.

But in nearly two decades of journalism, nothing has made my insides churn like seeing what my 13-year-old daughter and her friends are up to on MySpace.com.

And just what was her daughter up to that lead to the loss of her myspace privileges? "Giving a one-fingered salute." This comparison might seem extreme, but in fact this is the tune of most mainstream media coverage of the myspace phenomenon. March media were flooded with accusations that using myspace had lead to the abduction of two teenage girls. Interestingly enough, danah boyd's [interview](#) with [Bill O'Reilly](#) – one of television's most conservative journalists – was able to present a less loaded portrayal of the website. But maybe this could be connected to FOXnews' parent organization News Corp. having purchased myspace.com.

So is myspace significant to those of us interested in privacy: socially, technically or legally? I know my opinion, but I might be biased as self-proclaimed myspace addict. Whether or not myspace lasts, it is certainly here for the moment. It might just be a fun way to keep in touch and up-to-date on your friends but it's not just you, me and joe who are watching. Myspace isn't just self-expression among friends, it has recently become [a form of legal surveillance](#).

A year of thank you's to Dr. Jacquelyn Burkell who has given me advice, experience, and encouragement (through the Anonequity project, on this ID Trail Mix, and in my own studies as my undergrad comes to a close). And to everyone that has listened to me prattle about myspace over the past few months, it's almost over!