

The Vibrancy of Online Social Space

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There is something essentially placeful about online social networks; as I log in, I am engaged by a cross-section of my social relationships. In an instant, information is revealed, opportunities are discovered, and a website becomes a social nexus – from which I can derive a sense of gratification, meaning and identity. Over the last few years, millions of us have come to know sites like MySpace and Facebook as social spaces, where the virtual and the real collapse, where a sense of community and interaction is integral to the experience. danah boyd has described social network sites as digital publics; in her extensive research she has discovered these digital spaces to be a third place for youth.

As political campaigns and organizing endeavors attempt to establish their place in these digital publics, should we take a step back and look at the characteristics of these spaces to determine what makes them vital? Can we think of social networks as digital cities, inhabited by permanently in-flux digital bodies? And if we're always in flux, what about an online social space makes us actually want to stick around? In her 1961 work *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs described the “sidewalk ballet” of a vital urban environment.

Jacobs argued that a vibrant and diverse city should possess four characteristic design elements. First, she argues that a neighborhood should be of mixed use, its multifunction form creating necessary activity throughout the day. Second, a city should have short blocks, allowing pedestrians to explore novel paths, creating interest in the city. Third, a city's buildings should

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be of multiple form, enabling residents of differing social strata to convene in a shared place. Finally, Jacobs argued for density, in which different populations intersperse, affording variety and shared resources.

Applying Jacobs' criteria to an online space is a challenge; as a neighborhood jumps from the physical to the virtual, the essential nature of the goods that comprise a neighborhood change. For example, while the cinema is a rivalrous good, a movie viewed in an online space is generally non-rivalrous. If a community is not required to share public goods, will it ever develop the sense of a greater good that seems so critical to Jacob's philosophy? Putting that aside for a second, let's explore some ways we can see vibrancy in online social spaces.

Jacobs' first criterion is that neighborhoods should be multiform, of mixed development. By having a mixture of the commercial and the residential, a neighborhood would be busy at all times. Many eyes would rest upon the street, promoting safety and creating a satisfying buzz of life so vital to neighborhoods. Can we see an analogy in the Facebook Newsfeed? When one logs into Facebook, they are provided a list of recent activity in their social network; a message may inform you that friend has written on another friend's wall, or that a friend has posted an event. Originally unpopular due to privacy concerns, the Newsfeed has become one of the most popular features in the service. The Newsfeed creates the impression of activity; any time an individual logs on she is presented with a plethora of opportunities to engage with their social spheres. In essence, the newsfeed has become a popular form of social surveillance – perhaps not too far from the many eyes on the street Jacobs envisioned.

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Arguing for shorter blocks, Jacobs felt that this type of design would foster exploration by city dwellers. The “short blocks” analogy is alive and well in online social networks, where the ability to browse and explore fellow network participants fuels use. In a social network, we enumerate our identity as we describe our interests, tag each other, and post on walls and message boards. These “digital traces” are often hyperlinked, permitting endless point-and-click exploration of the social space. As it happens, humans are very interesting to one another, and social networks leverage our interests by providing endless opportunities to explore those we know and care about. In fact, the articulation of identity in social networks might be analogized to Jacob’s call for variety in architecture and style in a neighborhood. Love it or hate it, the unending ability to customize Myspace profiles provides significant, desired variety in the space. It drives learning and adoption of the service, as individuals collaborate to make their space better represent their identity.

Indeed, online social networks are concentrated; in this sense they are unlike any neighborhood. Social networks allow for the centralization of one’s network in a single place; geographic boundaries are rendered insignificant as we connect across place and time. The social network allows the work friends to intermingle with grade school friends in an odd, often awkward dance.

While Jacobs’ perspective is instructive, we can also leverage it as an effective critique of online social networks. While the vibrant neighborhood was constructed to afford a variety of individuals the interesting and serendipitous experience of urban dwelling, online social networks often reinforce existing bonds, rather than encouraging exploration. In a study

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conducted at Michigan State University (Lampe, 2006), researchers found that friendships in social networks often began offline and migrated online, rather than the other way around. The city requires individuals of a variety of backgrounds and interests to share space and resources; how would Jacobs feel about an online space designed to self-reinforce bonds rather than encourage the development of new ties?

There is something otherworldly in being able to reach across a community with a search box or hyperlink; in online social spaces, we can access and “be present” with our friends in the click of a button. The social cost of relationship maintenance decreases; the birthday card is replaced with a wall post. We can certainly lament the depersonalization of online interaction, but we can’t impugn the outcome – we are able to manage larger collections of friends with less effort than ever before. Do these extended friend networks increase sociality or simply introduce new digital tethers to our social life? That is a question we’ll work towards answering, as the effects of these digital publics on our real world is explored.

We do know that online social networks represent meaningful digital spaces to millions of people. The daily life of the city, from the mundane to the significant, is being conducted in these spaces. We flirt, we interact, we do business, we seek out information and gratification, finding a complex social world at our fingertips. While the digital spaces we inhabit will have a good deal in common with our cities of concrete and granite, they are unique places with unique challenges. While the technological emphasis of relevance and searchability will create new types of interactions online, it would be wise for developers to pay attention to Jacobs; they will find both the meaning and the letter of her laws instructive.

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