

Welcome to Twitter Nation

Thanks to social networking sites, community is wherever you set up shop **BY STEWART SCHLEY**

HARDLY KNOW "ELLIS," a guy on the East Coast. I remember him from 15 or 20 years ago, when the two of us occasionally ran into each other at meetings and conferences. Haven't seen him since. But that doesn't stop me from knowing intimate details about his life. I know that a few days ago he hung out with his cousins at his sister's house in Brooklyn. I know that last autumn he celebrated Syracuse's football upset over Notre Dame. And apparently he had a bad experience shopping for tools or paint recently, because last night at 7:42 Eastern Time he declared that he "hates the Freeport Home Depot."

I know these things because at the moment I'm poring over today's "News Feed" on Facebook, the Internet site that captures and displays bite-sized snippets of who's doing what in my world of acquaintances and relationships.



The fact that I know who Ellis voted for in the 2008 presidential election, what his wife's name is, how he makes a living and who recently accompanied him while shopping for a microwave oven is unexpectedly comforting. It's sort of like hanging out the laundry in the backyard and observing that the neighbors appear to be planning a big lawn party for Saturday night. Or stopping to chat briefly with the mail carrier about her husband's acid-reflux condition, which she says seems to be getting better except now he's starting in again on the spicy pepperoni but heaven knows you can't tell him a thing about that.

Facebook and a handful of other popular websites that specialize in socializing manage to create a sense of community out of the digital ether, keeping people in touch – OK, maybe sometimes a little too much in touch – in a way that millions of people can't seem to get enough of.

If you're a convert, you already know this. If you're not, chances are your inner skeptic is revving its engines, wondering why other people seem to be willing to waste so much time on a superfluous fad.

Admittedly, trying to explain the appeal of Facebook, Twitter.com, MySpace and dozens of other sites that let you know who's dating who, who's listening to what music, what's stressing somebody out or what movie was worth seeing is a challenge. If you haven't actually done it, it's difficult to fathom the appeal. But at its heart, it's less about the zing-zing-zing of modern Internet technology and more about old-fashioned socializing.

"It's the old style of socialization that supposedly we all long to harken back to," says Paul Rodriguez, a Washington, D.C., public relations professional who typically posts 10 or more updates a day to Twitter.com. "My wife likes to describe it, quite accurately, as like an old-style [telephone] party line. And it's true."



The analogy to the shared telephone lines of small-town America in the 1950s seems apt. Somewhere in the swirl and hubbub of daily life, millions of people are taking a few moments each day to catalog and share the minutiae of their daily lives. Each brief sentence tapped into a Facebook page or a Twitter feed can be seen as a tiny declaration of humanity. By openly sharing details about what they're doing, how they're feeling, what organizations they belong to – and by decorating their stories with digital photos and video clips – people have opened up the book on their personal lives in a way nobody could have expected.

It's all happening within the occasionally bizarre, unmistakably trendy, anthropologically fascinating and completely absorbing world of "social networking" over the Internet. It's a clunky term, one of those creations of sober academic types. But to your typical 18-year-old college freshman, it goes simply by the name of "Facebook," which, although it officially stands as the name of an über-popular social networking site, can in fact just as readily be used these days as a verb. (As in, "I just Facebooked Kelly about Jeremy's party.")

Facebook was founded in a Harvard University dorm in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, now an innocent-looking 24-year-old who has pretty much changed life for millions of people. It started as a sort of glorified bulletin board for college students, who quickly embraced its speedy and simple interface and its facility for letting them spread the word about basic life stuff: their favorite music, where they attended high school, where they planned to go for spring break. A user could send a message to another listed user, ask his or her permission to add a profile page to the user's roster, and from that point forward take a look at what they were up to whenever one desired. It was a college yearbook, but always updated and able to accommodate interactions using text-messages and an inventive concept Zuckerberg called "the wall," which is basically a public graffiti board of back-and-forth correspondence between two people.

College kids flocked to Facebook like mad as it quickly became the chosen method to keep in touch. By September 2006, 9 million students were registered, and Zuckerberg was about to open up membership to anybody – not just young people with an .edu suffix to their e-mail address.

But first, he made an important update that changed everything. Zuckerberg slipped into the Facebook code a new application called "News Feed" that

5 Social Networking Sites You Should Know



WHAT IT DOES

Users can send every small, unfiltered thought to a profile page or directly to other users who have volunteered to receive them.

WHO USES IT

Everyone. Constantly.



WHAT IT DOES

Promotes digital voyeurism. MySpace encourages users to share the treasures and detritus of their lives with the universe.

WHO USES IT

High school kids; your mom and Al Gore



WHAT IT DOES

Connects people for professional reasons. It can help users develop business contacts through the contacts they may already have.

WHO USES IT

College graduates and professionals



WHAT IT DOES

Facebook is MySpace for people with regular jobs. In fact, employers often use it to vet job applicants. (So keep it clean.)

WHO USES IT

Mostly 20s - 30s. Young professionals and nouveau yuppies



WHAT IT DOES

Meetup encourages real-life connections. Users join groups based on interests rather than prior acquaintances.

WHO USES IT

Knitters, oenophiles, sports junkies and Harley fans. There's probably a group that's perfect for you.

would pluck out new postings, messages and status updates from a list of Facebook friends, and display them in a single page.

Just like that, the entire Facebook experience exploded. Now, rather than having to roam across dozens or hundreds of individual pages to see what your friends were up to, little details about anything friends posted would automatically be collected and displayed on your screen in a single stream of headlines and messages. It was like opening up a backdoor view of the neighbor's yard to hundreds of people at a time. It worked the other way around, too. When you published an update about your status – “Doug is finally going to get to see *Slumdog Millionaire* this afternoon” – it didn't just sit in lonely isolation on your page. It was broadcast instantly to anybody who had you logged in as a Facebook friend.

The News Feed was instantly controversial. Faithful users objected to their humble little posts being thrust into the Facebook spotlight. But quickly the sentiment changed. Users realized they were on to something big here. When Stacey wrote that she'd become a fan of the band *Fallout Boy* or when Tyler joined a fundraising group for Darfur refugees, the news spread instantly. People who read Tyler's post could click the link to his organization, join it, and just as quickly post the

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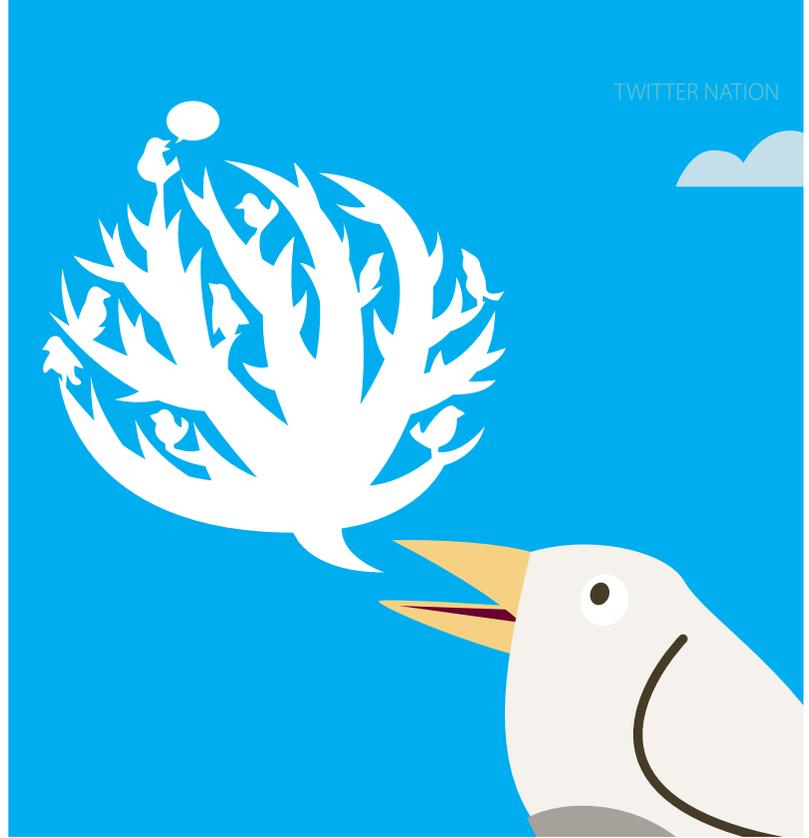
fact that they'd joined it. It was like a wildfire that transcended geography. The News Feed hadn't just changed Facebook. It opened up the Internet to a new idea of connectedness.

Today 120 million people are active Facebook users, and the privately owned site is estimated to be worth billions of dollars, based on its astonishing user levels and the inclusion of paid advertising within its pages.

Facebook, and a popular predecessor, MySpace.com, have spawned dozens of like-minded sites both for business professionals (like LinkedIn.com) and consumers.

Among the most inventive is Twitter, a sort of social beehive made up of users who, like Facebook devotees, post brief snippets describing what they happen to be doing at that exact moment: “worrying that we don't have soy sauce for dinner,” or “waiting to watch *Mad Men* with Lisa” or “on hold while I wait for an appointment to get the tires rotated. Urgh.”

Twitter contributors (when they type in a message, they're said to be “tweeting”) can make their updates available for viewing by anybody who signs up as a “follower.” Thus, it's possible via Twitter to keep track of a running list of chores and routines conducted by friends you know—or strangers you don't. Your choice.



The question is: Why?

For many of us, the idea that mundane activities of somebody else's life – or yours, for that matter – could be interesting enough to bother with seems ridiculous. It's a point made over and over, ironically enough, on social networking sites themselves. One bulletin board contributor called Twitter a “home to useless bantering about what people had for lunch.”

But still. Twitter and its kind have a way of infiltrating your life with such regularity and certainty that you come to appreciate their presence. The steady murmur and chatter of Life Lived Small by dozens or hundreds of your friends and followers creates a collective connectedness that can be steadying. Small moments, insignificant chores, little outbreaks of turmoil that rise up and are soon vanquished can add up to a mosaic of individual lives that Twitter, Facebook and MySpace users chronicle.

There are utilitarian aspects, too.

With a following of several hundred friends and acquaintances, your Twitter network quickly becomes your personal bounce-things-off-of-people reality check. Twitter users regularly rely on their networks for advice on which camera to buy, which airline to book, which novel to read and why the washing machine seems to be stuck on rinse. Within seconds of a Twitter post, people often get the answer they want from a source they trust.

But by no means are social-networking sites substitutes for real-life, flesh-and-blood friendships. For many users, the opposite is true. Rodriguez, who lives in Maryland, has cultivated real-life friendships with people he met on Twitter. Facebook and MySpace are routinely used to rally people to attend events, parties and gatherings. There's even a word for a real-life gathering of people who met on Twitter: a “Tweet-Up.” OK, so that one veers to the hokey side. But there's no way to ignore the fact that there's a revolution going on in the way people interact, socialize and communicate.

Thanks to a new breed of highly interactive websites that trade on the age-old human desire to belong, there's a new conversation going on. Log in, and you can hear its steady drumbeat. Or at least its tweet. ■

Stewart Schley writes about technology.

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