

Chapter 53

The Utilization of Online Boundaries: Facebook, Higher Education, and Social Capital

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates how online social networking services function and correlate with social capital, and how this affects higher education and civic engagement. First, the authors examine how individuals utilize Facebook to communicate with others strategically to build and maintain social ties. They argue that limiting in-person interaction time and multitasking increases the amount of individuals with whom any one individual can communicate during any given time. The authors then introduce direct and indirect boundaries and demonstrate how they restrict specific types of information while building extensive trust-based network ties. The authors follow this discussion by modeling the online world, offline world, and world of higher education using these boundaries. Finally, they claim that the distinction between low and high social capital communities may be blurring due to advent of online social networking, so it is necessary to develop new means of measuring social capital and boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of societal evolution consisting of improved forms of medicine, technology, and living standards at the macro-level, the lack of social interaction between groups of people is still a predominant issue in America. Putnam (2000) argues that social interaction, and civic engagement specifically, is decreasing in American

society; and technology, especially television, is largely the cause of the decline. Nonetheless, the advent of new technologies has resulted in an overabundance of new opportunities for the average person: new ways to obtain information, new ways to learn, new ways to buy things, and new ways to travel. Across disciplines and across age groups, technological advances have changed the way people interact and live in society.

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The Utilization of Online Boundaries

New technologies within education have become a particularly exceptional and crucial subject of interest due not only to new methods of knowledge dissemination for different individuals (i.e., students obtaining information digitally instead of through print-based books, faculty publishing research independently on websites and databases versus traditional print journals), but also as a result of the effects these new technologies have upon students. In particular, the emergence of online social networks has resulted in a predominantly new and emergent hobby for students, and especially for undergraduate students, with Facebook captivating the reins as the most popular of those currently available (Bicen & Cavus, 2011, p. 943). The use of Facebook and other online social networks have a profound effect on students, although it is one not yet completely understood within the field of education. Some have come to embrace Facebook, such as Schwartz (2009) who states that, "I now see Facebook as part of the larger commons, a space in which we stay connected." Studies such as one by Smailes and Gannon-Leary (2011) have attempted to understand these effects. Smailes and Gannon-Leary (2011) found that a model involving social networking websites has the greatest potential for supporting advancement through peer mentoring due to the immense popularity of social networking websites among students and as well as the ability to mentor before formally meeting in person (p. 139). As such, the area of education focused upon here is the one with the largest amount of users: higher education.

Although this topic is a significant subject for inquiry, the question to ask is "within what context?" If the desire is to understand the uses and effects of Facebook and similar online social networks, then the theory of social capital is a good starting point. Since one of the primary functions of social capital theory within higher education is to grant undergraduate students access to human, cultural, and other forms of capital, in addition

to institutional resources and support (Coleman, 1988; Hofferth, Boisjoly, & Duncan, 1998; Lin, 2001; Morrow, 1999; Perna & Titus, 2005; Portes, 1998; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995), social capital provides the appropriate contextual basis for this study. Tying everything together, the ways in which online social networking websites, specifically Facebook, serves these functions will be the focus of inquiry within this chapter.

This chapter introduces Facebook as the primary online social networking service for investigation due to its large-scale popularity. We argue primarily that there is a link between online social networking technologies and social capital. We do this by introducing the concepts of decreasing in-person interaction time and multitasking, both of which influence the amount of individuals with whom any one individual can communicate within a given set of time. We then introduce what we refer to as direct and indirect boundaries, which explain how individuals can utilize social networking service strategically. We explain how to manipulate each boundary strategically in conjunction and separately. This section includes a series of social networking models that are used to demonstrate how the structure of the boundaries system functions. A discussion on knowledge-based trust building is also included due to the importance of trust as a factor when dealing with indirect boundaries and the role knowledge plays in social relationships.

We then continue to discuss the relationship between Facebook and higher education by examining the literature on the amount of time students spend on Facebook, and how students' personalities play a role in the way boundaries are utilized by undergraduates to build ties. This section also explores the implications of strategically utilizing these boundaries in terms of civic engagement, higher education, and social capital. The penultimate section provides directions for further research, focusing on how researchers

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