

## 2008 - International Symposium on Online Journalism

### Day 2, Panel 3: Social Networking and User - Generated Content

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#### **Moderator/Chair:**

**Elizabeth Saad**, Professor, School of Journalism, São Paulo University, Brazil

#### **Panelists:**

**Sebastian Valenzuela, Namsu Park, and Kerk F Lee**, University of Texas at Austin: Lessons from Facebook: The Effect of Social Network Sites on College Students' Social Capital\*

**Cindy Royal**, Texas State: What Do People Do Online? Implications for the Future of Media \*

**Jacqueline Vickery**, University of Texas at Austin: The Megan Meier MySpace Suicide: A case study exploring the social aspects of convergent media, citizen journalism, and online anonymity and credibility \*

\* Refereed research papers (blind reviewed)

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**Elizabeth Saad:** Good afternoon, everybody. I'm Elizabeth Saad, a teacher from the University of São Paulo, Brazil. I'm very glad to come here to moderate this first panel of the afternoon. And first, I'd like to present the panelists. We have here Sebastian Valenzuela from U-Texas, Cindy Royal from Texas State, and Jacqueline Vickery from U-Texas also. And I'd like to tell you something about this panel. The papers are related to the use of social network sites, from the point of view of academic research experiments. And in my view, they are a complimentary response for the same thing related and discussed yesterday by the [unintelligible] representatives. I'd like to emphasize the relevance of this team for editors and reporters to know the user behavior, and their researches are very important in this issue, especially when media operations promote community and participatory initiatives. It's important to keep constantly in touch on user behavior, their habits, tendencies, and so on. So we can envision by user behavior in network websites how can we build community,

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content, offer audience activities, Digg information, Digg sources, and so on. So I believe that what they will present can bring to us and bring especially to editors some different information and different tips on how to relate with users and how to know better users. So let's see first Sebastian Valenzuela.

**Sebastian Valenzuela:** Is this working? Yeah? Okay. It's interesting to do a panel on technology and I barely can manage these things. So thanks, Elizabeth. Today, I'm going to present a research we've been doing here at the University of Texas at Austin. It's about Facebook and social network sites in general. There you have the title. I'm Sebastian Valenzuela. I'm from Chile. Perhaps you notice that from my big accent. And my partners Namsu Park and Kerk Lee, they are there in the second row. So if I cannot answer a question you have at the end of the presentation, perhaps they can do a better job than I do. So here we go.

So first, a bit more information about who we are. We are three students, PhD students, in the College of Communication here at UT. And I think we cover all the departments within the college, because I'm in Journalism, Namsu, she's in RTF, in the Radio, TV and Film Department, and Kerk is in the Com Studies Department. So I think although we're all connected by the College of Communication, we all bring different perspectives. And I think that was a good thing about this project, because we all had one common interest, which was Facebook, but we come from different traditions. And given that this is a Facebook project, it was, I think, appropriate to put our Facebook websites there.

So first, a bit of background about this project—why we decided to even study Facebook and social network sites. And we all had this idea that in general if you follow the mainstream media and if you follow the news, you'd see that often stories about social network sites and Facebook, in particular, are -- you know, you could say they are bad news in terms of people are concerned about security, you know, teenagers, cyber bullying, risky behavior, dangerous communities. I think there was a PBS special the other day on, you know, how kids, you know, the risks for teenagers when they use MySpace and Facebook. And we thought that if you take this from a perspective, a broader perspective, you could argue that all these stories in the mainstream media about social network sites reflect in a way a moral panic. And I think this is not something particular of social network sites, because I think each time a new form of communication arises,

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you have all these stories about, you know, how people are going to be affected by them. You know, TV in the sixties, you know, fears of mass [unintelligible]. When the internet spark became popular in the early nineties, you would have Putnam and all those researches saying that people are disconnected through the internet, because they are spending hours on the internet rather than face-to-face interaction. So I guess the story with Facebook and social network sites is not any different.

So we decided that against this background we wanted to investigate a positive light, on a more positive, light social network sites. And one way of doing that, and I think there are many ways, but we thought that the literature on social capital -- and I'm going to define then what's social capital, which is a very fascinating concept. Basically, the question is, is there social capital to be found in Facebook? And Facebook as an example of social network sites. And that's our main question that drives this project. And then given that this is an online journalism symposium, of course, the question then would be, okay, whatever we find, whatever relationship we find between social capital and Facebook, then what can journalists and media organizations learn from this research?

So given that this is a new topic in terms of academic research--(there's not enough literature about social network sites)--we decided that a good starting point would be to conduct a survey among a specific population: those that are heavy users of social network sites and specifically Facebook. And given that we are in an academic institution here and as grad students we can relate better to fellow, you know, students, we thought that a good population of study would be college students in Texas. And to do that, we decided to do a random web survey and to ask them about behaviors regarding Facebook, regarding social capital, and a number of other variables that I'm going to explain later. It seems that the topic is interesting to students, because our response rate was quite high in terms of, you know, 2,600 people answering our survey. It's not something you see very often, at least in the other surveys we have conducted before in our grad research.

So before going onto the results and into more detail about the project, I think it's important to define, what are we talking about? So when we decided to study patterns of Facebook use, we could adopt two approaches, right? One is the traditional media effects approach, which is to measure whatever behavior you have with a media in

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terms of frequency of use or duration of exposure to the medium in question. But we thought that with social network sites that's a poor measurement. I mean, perhaps when you are studying TV effects, it makes sense to ask, for example, this question, how many hours do you watch TV? And then from there, start building your research. But social networks are much more complex in terms of medium, so we thought that it was also important to take into account the emotional attachment, the personal attachment that users of these social network sites put into or invest when they use Facebook.

So our measure of Facebook use. And when I show you in the rest of the presentation different mentions about Facebook use, I want you to have in mind that when we are talking, it's not only about frequency of use of the technology, but also some measure of personal attachment or emotional attachment to it. And the way we measured that in the survey was with a number of questions asking students and our respondents how they felt about Facebook. For example, we had a question in there about, "Do you have agreement or disagreement with statements like, would you feel sorry if Facebook shut down?" And you would have many people saying, "Yeah, we would be very sorry." Or we would have a question there about, "Do you think Facebook is part of your daily life or your daily routine?" Right? So that's one concept.

And the other concept, of course, is social capital, which is this big important word, it seems to be, but no one agrees, what is it about? And we thought that rather than discarding the concept, we thought that a good way of trying to come around this very complex and abstract concept was to break it down into different dimensions. So we didn't invent these three dimensions, rather as we are grad students who follow existing literature, we decided to pick from previous researchers, and we thought that we could conceptualize social capital as three different dimensions. One is the interpersonal dimension, which refers to personal contentment or life satisfaction, how well you feel. And that's one dimension of social capital. The second one, which is perhaps the most popular one, refers to the interpersonal dimension, which is social trust or how you behave with other people. And Putnam made that dimension of social capital very famous when he talked about the importance of networks and social trust and how trust has been diminishing in the American society. And then we thought that a third dimension of social capital refers to action, right, to behavior, engagement. And when we talk about

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political participation and civic participation, we think that those realms fall into the behavioral dimension of social capital.

So the big question then was, in our project, to combine measures of intensity of Facebook use, and how do they play out on different outcomes regarding social capital? So first, here's a descriptive of the main variables. And in the first column, you seen the first bar, you see "Intensity of Facebook Use." And basically, what we did was to divide our sample into low, moderate, and high categories, and that's very easy. Basically, for example, the index of Facebook intensity of use, we divided it from zero to .33 into low, from .34 to .66 into moderate, and then to high. And as you see there, almost 80% of our respondents are in the moderate to high category, meaning Facebook for them is something that is very important, because it's integrated into their lives. Only less than 20% or around 20% fall into the low category. And even then, you are including people who have an account in Facebook and log into it, just that they don't do it that often. Perhaps they are using another platform. We don't know.

Then also we asked about a specific application within Facebook, which is Facebook Groups. And that's an important part of the project, because we think that the behavioral part of social capital, where people engage and get together for political reasons or for civic reasons, goes mostly, in Facebook at least, through the use of Facebook Groups. These Facebook Groups are, for example, a political one would be Texans for Obama, right, in Facebook. That would be... You know, and people who log into Texans for Obama in the Facebook Group would be in that category. And not surprisingly, 80% are in the low category. Basically, people, what they do was -- is to put a group in their profile, but they never actually engage with the group. They never post a comment. They never do any discussion. So people use Facebook, but Facebook Groups, most of them don't do it.

And then, how do they play our sample in the social capital dimensions? You find that most of them report high levels of life satisfaction. And that shouldn't surprise, because college students, in general, you don't have responsibilities. Someone else is paying for your fence. You--you--you... For your bills, I mean. You have friends, you know, so basically life is going great, right? And we're not the first ones to find that. I mean, generally, you know, when you are between 18 and 29, it's the best years of your life.

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But then in social trust, you see something different. Either because, you know, we are growing [or] we don't have the wisdom of older people. But it seems that we are less trustful, either because the media is -- the traditional media is exposing stories about crime. You know, you cannot go out there, because someone is going to bump into you and do something. Well, we don't know really, and we don't get into that in the paper, but it turns out that most of our respondents are into the moderate and low end of social trust. And then you see on political engagement, you see something that is expected. Our students report low levels of political engagement, but higher levels of civic engagement.

Oh, I don't think I mentioned that these students are not University of Texas students, but Texas A&M and the University of North Texas. And hopefully, we are going to be able to incorporate in our sample afterwards UT. But those are the students when I refer to who they are.

So now the big question was how to integrate both things. And we didn't -- I didn't want to show you this statistical part, because it's boring, but the important part is that we did some multiple regressions basically seeing if, controlling for gender, age, and a number of other controls, is there a relationship between intensity of Facebook use and Facebook Groups you use and our dependent variables, which are the social capital variables? We found that in general there are statistically significant and positive relationships. For example, in life satisfaction, heavy users compared to light users report 15% on average higher levels of life satisfaction. In social trust, because there's less variance in social trust, it doesn't surprise that the impact -- not the impact, but the association between Facebook use and social trust is still positive, but not as high as in life satisfaction.

And then with participation, it's interesting, because it seems that in the political realm, most of the associations go through Facebook Groups. It seems that students who use -- who report higher levels of political activity, when they use Facebook, they express that activity mostly through Facebook Groups and not through the traditional profile, you know, in Facebook, which is contacting friends or posting messages on the walls of your friends or stuff like that. But in civic participation, it's the other way around. In civic participation, that doesn't -- that also makes sense, because our measure of civic participation asks about, for example, how often do you get together for charity? Or, how often do you coordinate to do volunteer work?

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And to that, you don't necessarily need to create a group. You basically just tell your friends, your contacts in your list, you know, "We're going to do this for 'x' reason," and so we don't have to create a group. But for political reasons, we were asking about, "For whom do you vote?" Or, "How often do you vote?" And it seems that that's a more sophisticated activity, and it gets expressed through Facebook Groups.

So, what do we make out of these results? First, Facebook users, it seems are more connected, happy or life satisfied, and engaged than what they get credit for in the mainstream media. So that's, I think, our most important finding. But of course, then again, their relationships are not that strong, which perhaps gives credit to, you know, the more pessimistic view about saying that social network sites and the internet and new technology, in general, is not a panacea for democracy. And I think that's because you see the relationships were positive but not that strong.

Now in our sense, we are more agnostic about it, because we think it's good that a technology doesn't have a huge impact on something as important as social trust or social capital in general. I mean, it would be very troubling that heavy users report 80% higher social trust levels than the other was. I mean, something should be wrong there. So I think, you know, you can interpret our results both ways.

Now, I must -- we must insist that this is not a causal effect relationship. I think in the paper the title said "The Effects of Social Network Sites." I think that's just to grab your attention, because using a cross-section, you cannot really test causality, right? You have to do an experiment or you have to use a longitudinal analysis, but that's the thing we're going to do. So I think there's, you know, at least there is some reason to believe that there might be a causal effect relationship, but I don't want to get into that, because usually academics say, "Oh, you did just a survey, and you cannot test causality." So all the time I'm saying, "There's an association there," you know, I'm very careful about it. And then... Do I have time or...?

**Elizabeth Saad:** No.

**Sebastian Valenzuela:** Okay. So this is... Good, this is the last slide. I think it's the first time I don't...

**Elizabeth Saad:** [Inaudible.]

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**Sebastian Valenzuela:** Yeah. Good. So lessons for journalists. First thing, although this paper was not developed to study social network sites for journalists, but I think that we can still think that some of our findings could be useful for journalists and the media, in general, that are interested in knowing, what's this thing about social network sites? So first thing is that we think that Facebook, at least, is a good structure for connecting people. It's very efficient in that. Also, when they want to share an interest and news, it's also a good technology for that. But in general, given the low participation of students in Facebook Groups, it seems that this technology is not that good when you want to create a forum for exchanging opinions and to deliberate.

There's this idea that with social networks you get people from different backgrounds together and they're going to exchange points of view and democracy in general is going to benefit from that. Well, basically, when you have 90% of students basically logging into groups, but not doing anything with them, I mean, you have to be more skeptical and say, okay, you know, Facebook seems to be good for connecting people, but actually to produce content, you know, different points of view, stuff like that, it's not that good, at least from what we found.

And one thought about all these news organizations like Gannett and USA Today creating, you know, their sites, transforming them into social network sites, we think that there's a problem there. Because, first of all, I think these organizations must ask themselves, like, who's using these social network sites? Facebook is very popular among college students, but that doesn't mean that when these college students graduate they are going to still be using that technology, right? So I think that's a question that time will tell, but I think USA Today, for example, who transformed its site into a social network site, I don't know, really, if they have clear who's using these kinds of technology.

The second question is, why on earth would someone log into a USA Today social network site if you can get something already from Facebook, which basically doesn't have a boundary, a geographic boundary, and you use Facebook to connect with people who basically you don't see on a face-to-face tradition? What I'm saying is, I think news organizations must ask, why would people switch from their traditional social network sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, you know,



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CyWorld, and Friendster—(well, Friendster doesn't exist anymore here in the U.S., it's more popular in Asia)—and turn to a USA Today social network site? I think that's a question that no one has answered. And I think it seems to be another example of news organizations emulating a social network site, but not exactly why they are doing that. They think that just because it's a social network site, it's going to be used by people.

And the third question is, it seems that, for example, The New York Times and other organizations who have created applications within Facebook, we think are doing a better job. Because since we found that Facebook is a good way of spreading the word about events and issues and engagement, then if you can use as a news organization this technology to put out your message, I think, that's more successful.

And then, a final caveat is that what we found now perhaps is already old. Perhaps our students who responded two months ago [to] our survey are doing something else right now. Perhaps they closed their account in Facebook. What I'm saying is that all we found, all we are showing you here is very tentative, because these things are evolving. So perhaps next year, we're going to have a different story.

Thank you very much.

[Audience applause.]

**Elizabeth Saad:** At the end, we hope we'll have questions about [inaudible]. And we hold this till the end of the presentations. Now we will hear Cindy Royal from Texas State. Please, Cindy.

**Cindy Royal:** Hi. Thank you. Can everybody hear me? Okay. I'm happy to be here today to speak with you about this topic that dovetails nicely with what Sebastian just talked about. I'm an Assistant Professor at Texas State University. Several of my students have been here, and so we're happy to be involved with this. And [I] did my PhD here starting in 1999. And one of the reasons why I came here to do my PhD was my fascination with this idea that users could publish. It wasn't called user-generated content at the time. There was no social networking. There weren't really blogs. I came here thinking that everyone was going to have their own website, and everyone was going to learn HTML and FTP, and that's how we all were going to communicate, because I wasn't visionary enough to envision

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the type of environment that we're in right now, that we're talking about right now. But this idea of users being empowered to create content is what has always fascinated me from the beginning. And so this is really an exciting time to be talking about this and to be talking about the implications for media. These aren't just fun tools or toys that kids are playing with. These are ways that the communication infrastructure of the future is going to be impacted.

So basically, the study that I wanted to perform was to look at users of social networking sites and to look at social capital, but maybe in a different way than what Sebastian considered it. I wanted to know *what* people were doing first. You know, you can talk about social networking as one thing, but there are *many* things that people do when they are on a social networking site. Just like there are many things that people do when they are on the internet. It's not just one type of usage.

And then a second part of the study, which isn't exactly what I'm talking about today, but I've got a slide at the end that sort of teases it for a second half of the study, is why do they do it? Why do people spend time on social networking sites doing the kinds of things that they are doing? What do they get out of it? So not really measuring satisfaction like Sebastian did, but just, why are you doing it? What are your reasons behind it? Referencing a bit of Putnam's research in terms of bridging types of social capital, capital that you create with—I'm sorry—bonding is capital you create with people you already know versus bridging, which is the type of social capital you create by your network and your broader community environment or your weak ties.

Now, social networking sites rely on the content created by their users. If they weren't creating content, they would cease to exist. They are the people who are the publishers, the journalists that are actually creating the content and making these sites ridiculously successful. And we'll maybe talk about some numbers in a moment. But without people posting comments to weblogs and creating multimedia and engaging with their friends, these sites would not be successful at all. So I'll take a look at the usage of and the activities performed within the social networking sites for this project.

And so just some numbers here in terms of February 2008, and these numbers change all the time. If you go to ComScore, you can get the most recent ones. 68 million— and these are U.S unique visitors—in February for MySpace, 32 million for Facebook, and 64 million unique

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visitors for YouTube. You know, Facebook is kind of a closed environment. You have to be a member to really do very much on Facebook, and so that might explain some of the low usage. MySpace is kind of open for most people, and it's used as a website for a lot of bands or other types of artists, and so it's a lot more open, and that's maybe why they get more traffic. Same thing with YouTube. You don't have to be a member necessarily to go on and watch YouTube videos.

And as we all know, MySpace was purchased by Fox News for a mere \$500-million just a few years ago. YouTube was purchased by Google for a little more money in 2006 – \$1.65-billion. So, I mean, we are talking about the value of these things. And if people didn't shoot videos of their dog on a skateboard, they would not be worth \$1.65-billion. And as Sebastian said, social networking is global. Friendster is not as popular as it once was in the United States, but it's very popular in Asia. 88% of its users reside in Asia-Pacific. Bebo, which was just purchase by AOL for \$850-million, 63% of their users are -- they reside in Europe. So it's an international phenomenon.

So Elizabeth so nicely at the beginning of this panel talked about why this is important to journalism. I'll go over a few of the things that are reasons why I think it's important. Obviously, we've talked about citizen journalism here and in past conferences that Rosental has put on for us. Also, sites like USA Today have this sort of Digg model, and then we have sites that are not traditional media sites, like Digg, that allow people to rate stories and really judge what gets published by the popularity or what rises to the top, what people get to see. And there's this growing expectation of participation via all the user-generated content that people are engaging with. If you're going on your Facebook or working on your MySpace page or any number of other types of social networking sites, well, when you go to a newspaper site, you're probably going to expect to do something when you get there. You're not going to suddenly change your brain and say, "Okay, well, I'll just sit here and read this story or I'll passively watch this video." "What can I do while I'm here?" A Pew Center study that was done recently said that young people are savvy with technology. They called them digital natives. They are frequently creating and contributing online content. More than half of American teenagers have created a blog, posted an artistic or written creation online, helped build a website, created an online profile, or uploaded photos and videos to a website. So that's more than half, and it's

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growing all the time. As Sebastian said, these things, you know, they get old very quickly, so the results are growing.

Also, social networking can really be a tool for journalists. Journalists can use social networking sites to do research for a story, to engage with communities. And they need to be able to understand how to use them and how to engage with them, what the pros and cons are of using them, to be able to utilize them properly in journalism.

One thing that we didn't talk much about today, the past two days, I'm surprised, is this idea of OpenSocial. How many of you are familiar with OpenID or OpenSocial? A few people. Okay. That's the concept that the entire web is going to be social someday. So instead of having to log into your Facebook and then maybe be separate when you go onto the Statesman's website, there would be one ID that you could go across the web and you could take your friends and your community with you. One example of that would be, say, I go to the Statesman's website and I post a comment about an article written about Barack Obama. So I'm logged into the Statesman's website. If they have a relationship with my Facebook, then automatically on my news feed, "Cindy just commented on this article in the Statesman about Barack Obama," if I want it to be that way. You know, a lot of people are like, "Ugh, I don't want that to happen." And when I heard Mark Zuckerberg at South by Southwest just a month or so ago talking, he used this term 'granular privacy controls' a lot, in which you have control of what you're going to see and what's going to go where in your Facebook environment as well as how it engages with the rest of the web. And another thing he said was that Facebook strategy has changed since 2007 in that they are more involved with engaging with the entire web than deeply engaging with the platform of Facebook by itself. So these are cutting edge, you know, the things that are happening right now and that are changing. So as the web becomes more social, journalism sites are going to have to decide what their participation and what their role is going to be involved in that.

Finally, another implication are these business models. We had a whole panel on business models, and we've talked about them a lot. Another topic that Mark Zuckerberg talked about was the social ad model. So if now suddenly my comment to the Statesman is in my Facebook newsfeed, that's an ad for the Statesman, but they didn't necessarily have to generate it. They may have to pay for it ultimately when it shows up there, but it's more like word of mouth through

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social networking. So it's more of an organic social ad model that we need to start considering in regard to journalism.

So just quickly, the relevant theory. Obviously, uses in gratification is enjoying a resurgence now that people [are] using and engaging with media in much more deep and passionate ways. There's also the idea of collaboration, the Open Source model, the Wikipedia model, and then community theory that I engaged here. And then the book *Convergence Culture* by Henry Jenkins was also very influential in talking about a culture where people participate. Driven by digital technologies, he described a world that is bound not by a particular medium or industry, but one in which consumer and producer are merged and culture is created by means of sharing and participation. And advertisers might want to associate themselves with all this passion that people have for participating. That's sort of the second part of *Convergent Culture* -- *Convergence Culture*.

So what I did was a survey sort of... Okay. What I did was a survey. So I'll go quickly into my results. And the survey was generated in not a random manner. I started on social networking sites. I engaged my students and asked them to get their network of people. And it spread pretty quickly. I got... I'll show you the numbers that I got in a minute. But users were asked to discuss the topic of user-created content, and then they were also email correspondences that I did, and I asked users to forward to their friends.

And these were the research questions that I look like -- looked at on the study. I wanted to know what percentage of members performed specific activities, what activities differ based on some different demographics, and then how do these activities differ based on social network membership. So I ended up with 384 respondents. I had to discard some based on incompleteness of the survey or several of them indicated they were not users of social networking. They probably got my invitation via email and not a social networking site. The majority of them were, you know, being generated through social networking sites.

So instead of doing it with a college classroom or a college population, I was able to get a population that had some older users. And it shows that... Research shows now that older users are one of the fastest growing users of social networks. So the age percentages are available down at the bottom. Obviously, a lot from the 18 to 24

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group, but almost the same amount from 25 to 34, and still a significant amount from 35 to 44—my friends, the old people.

So the geographic representation was primarily the southwest, because here's where I am, but you can also see how it spread very quickly to southeast, northeast. I even had a lot of people outside the U.S. responding to the survey.

So in terms of membership in social networks, 46% were members of just one, 40% indicating they were members of two, 8% with three, and only 2% at that time in four. Since then, I am now a member of like five social networks, so I'm sure that the number has increased. And I did this research last fall, so these things do change very quickly. 37.8% said they used both MySpace and Facebook, and then only 17% said MySpace, 34% only Facebook. And I asked people just an open-ended question about which other ones that they used, and none of them had the significant amounts that Facebook or MySpace had, but those were some of the other ones that were mentioned.

Then some of the activities performed on the sites. The most popular activities were uploading photos, commenting, and making wall posts—(because they are called different things in each social network), and joining a group, network, or channel. You can see some of the things that were done least were creating a survey or poll, selling something on a social networking site, uploading audio was less popular than uploading video, but still not a lot of people are doing those things yet, and less than half the people were actually blogging on the social networking sites.

Then I looked at things by gender to see if there was any difference there. And the only places that I found significant differences in gender were in the changing their profile layout, uploading photos, and sending or receiving IM messages. So in gender wise, they are doing - they are doing basically the same things except for those three particular areas. And a lot of times we think, oh, well, men and women do different things online, but in social networks, it seems to be these ideas are converging.

Then I looked at it by age, and this chart is probably pretty confusing, but the blue bar is the 18-24 year olds. That's big in most cases. And so significant differences were found in the first several here: changing profile layout, uploading photos, sending IMs, commenting, making wall posts, [joining a] network or channel, and then playing

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games. So by age indicates a little bit more. But then I started thinking, well, maybe the younger people just have more experience with social networks. They have used it longer or maybe they use it more frequently. So I looked at login frequency, and more differences were explained by login frequency, except for selling something—I'm sorry—significance were found in everything except for selling something, purchasing something, and creating a survey or poll. So more difference was explained there in terms of their frequency of login. And then the number of years that they had been using a social network. The differences were in everything except for uploading audio and uploading video.

So I was finding that the experience that people have, which will change now... I mean, that's not something that's fixed. As people get more experience, they are going to be more likely to do these things. And then if you look at it by social network, most people are doing the same things on all social networks. It's pretty obvious that people on YouTube are uploading video more frequently, but these bars are all pretty much the same size across all these different activities.

And then, you know, I'll wrap up now. There's a broad range of activities, and I probably didn't even touch on half the things that people are doing online with my survey. The activities reflect a strong trend in the frequency and variety of content created by users and the growing expectation of that participation. Activities that were most frequently mentioned were things like uploading photos and making comments. Those are the most common things that people do. And then the gender differences predicted only some of the difference, but experience and frequency of login predicted more. Though again, activities such as blogging, creating surveys or polls, creating varied forms of multimedia may become relevant as users gain more experience.

And then there's new implications to business models. Dallas Smythe. And I'm going to explore this a little bit further, but this theory of audience labor, talk about audience labor. I mean, if you're doing the one -- if you're the one creating all the content, that really is audience labor. His idea was it was audience labor if you watched a television commercial and advertisers were willing to pay for the fact that you were spending time doing that. Now, audience labor takes on a whole new meaning. So basically, he says rather than selling cultural works, charging for the thing, you know, the product, you're actually selling

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the culture to -- the culture industries to audience ... selling to advertiser's audiences.

And then here's what I mentioned, just my future research is going to go in this direction. I'm going to look at why people do things. I created several scales that had a variety of looker<sup>[?]</sup> type questions involved in it to find out why users created content and what their attitudes were towards the content they were creating. And the highest means so far have been in the area of privacy, concerns about their privacy; friendship community, which is my only bonding scale, so connections with your existing ties; and then issues about copyright. People are a little bit confused about how copyright works in all this and what they are allowed to engage with, and they want it to just... The way the questions were structured was that they wanted things to be more open, and they wanted to have access to copyright, things that maybe have copyrighted information available on it. And then the last one was this idea of the value of the content they create. People are still kind of confused about what the value is. They maybe don't even see it as value, even though it is very valuable to these organizations that they are creating it for.

And that's the end.

[Audience applause.]

**Elizabeth Saad:** And the last one, Jacqueline, please.

**Jacqueline Vickery:** All right.

**Elizabeth Saad:** Now it's MySpace, no?

**Jacqueline Vickery:** Yes. So my paper ties in nicely, because I'm looking at both a case study that reveals both positive and negative implications of participatory culture. In his book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins explores the changing relationship between media audiences, producers, and content, in what he refers to as convergence culture. These changes are not only evidenced by changes in technology, but rather involve social changes as well. As historian Lisa Gitelman says, "A medium is not merely a communication technology, but is also a set of cultural and social practices enabled by the medium." The internet as a medium challenges traditional top/down approaches to news gathering and reporting by affording opportunities for average citizens to participate



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in the journalistic process. Anyone with access to a computer and an internet connection can in theory at least participate in the journalistic process by gathering information, offering an alternative opinion, and engaging in dialogue via message boards and blogs. However, a social concept entwined within this is the practice -- within this practice is the formation of disembodied communities and identities in which participants can opt to remain anonymous. Such anonymity brings to the surface new questions of credibility, questions which seem to have few if any definitive answers as of yet.

So I'm going to be examining the Megan Meier MySpace hoax--and I'll explain what that is in just a moment--as evidence of convergence media and as an entry point into the unintended consequences of citizen journalism and online anonymity. My goal is to look at the role blogs and alternative news, online news sources played in providing information about that case, and I'm also going to be examining the reactions to the blogs and news sites and analyze the disembodied social communities that evolved around these sites, and then consider the roles that anonymity and credibility played in this hoax, which actually led to another hoax. So let me show a quick video on YouTube. This is just on Fox News in St. Louis and it is telling the story of the Megan Meier case on November 10<sup>th</sup> is when it originally aired.

[Video plays. No audio.]

Okay. So here's a timeline of what really happened here. October 2006 is when Megan committed suicide. Six weeks later a neighbor came and told the Meier's that another neighbor in the neighborhood had created the Josh Evans profile, and under advise of the police and FBI, they were told not to say anything about it. November 10<sup>th</sup>, so over a year later, is when the story first aired. And if you noticed in that story, this neighbor remains anonymous. We don't know the name of who created this Josh Evans profile. People wanted to know. People felt that the public had a right to know. On November 13<sup>th</sup>, Sarah Wells, who was an unprofessional blogger in Virginia, got a copy of that police report, which has to do with damaging a foosball table, and identified Lori Drew. She posted this on her blog. It took her a couple of days to decide if she wanted to do that, but she felt that the public had a right to know. And this is actually a typo. It should say November 17<sup>th</sup> is when major news networks then also released the name of Lori Drew. And they credit Sarah Wells and the online

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blogging community, because it kind of became a viable effect, for actually identifying Lori Drew.

So, why does this matter? It was the professional news sources that were forced to respond to the online blogging, very unprofessional news community. And it was not until the blogging community kind of took off with this information and there was a lot of outrage towards the Drew's—the online community started publishing her email address, her cell phone, her family's advertising business, her husband's name, her school, everything trying to basically get this kind of vigilantism justice against the Drew's—and then that's when the professional news sources responded. And then the second point is that the internet community was responding more actively to [internet] news sites, such as Sarah Wells's blog and other alternate news sources, which I'll discuss in a little bit more detail.

So, what are the consequences of this? The professional news sources decision to protect Lori Drew's identity created a gap between those who knew what was going on, people that use the internet as their main source of news, and people who didn't. Despite the fact that people did not know anything about Sarah Wells—she was just a blogger, on-blogger, actually the server—people believed her, and other people started confirming this as well. And so someone without any credentials or journalistic training was being accepted into this community as legit.

In his book *Cult of the Amateur*, Andrew Keen says [that he] dismisses this kind of citizen journalism, and he says that citizen journalists do not have the resources to bring reliable news, and that they not only lack expertise and training, but connections and access to information. And yet, Sarah Wells proves this argument completely wrong. She had access to information that was deemed unavailable. She was not credentialed or trained, and the online community didn't feel like they needed those credentials to accept her outing of Lori Drew.

Oh, the second point being that the online community was engaging more with blogs and amateur news sources than professional news sources. Sites like Fox, MyFox Austin, or any MyFox, and CNN were eliciting maybe a couple hundred comments. Obviously, this was a really big story that had a lot of people upset. Most of the comments on those sites were offering condolences to the Meier family. Comments on blogs, however, were into the thousands, and there was a debate and dialogue going on. And this could be in part due to

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editorship with corporate sites not allowing for cuss words and stuff like that, but nonetheless, within the blog community and other alternate news sources, there was a lot of debate. Some people blaming MySpace as the cause. People blaming Megan's parents for not monitoring her better. People blaming the Drew's. Other people defending the Drew's, saying, how did they know that this would happen? And people blaming depression, and other people dismissing that as not enough reason to kill yourself. So there was a debate and dialogue, and it got very heated within these blog websites.

This leads me to my second point, and that is, whereas with Sarah Wells and that blogging community, it was positive implications from citizen journalism. People were in debate, people were in dialogue with each other, and Sarah Wells provided the public with information that professional news sources had deemed to keep private. To give a counter to this, there was a blog that went up called Megan Had it Coming. And basically, there were the first two entries called "Set the record straight" and "Who's really at fault?" The author of this blog called herself Kristen and basically claimed to be a classmate of Meier's and related these details that she was a bitch and that she was psychotic and that nobody liked her. Basically, she had this coming to her. Immediately, commenters began to question the alleged identity of this blog's author. Some people thought that it was actually Lori Drew herself pretending to be a classmate. Some people that that it was just a friend of the Meier's or a friend of Lori Drew's who had inside information. And then a third assumption was that Kristen was actually Lori Drew's 14-year-old daughter, Sarah Drew. Those with enough internet savvy saw through this blog immediately as a fake and outed it as such. But despite these allegations, other people just ate it up, and believed it, and kind of became obsessed with trying to figure out who was authoring this blog.

The overall tone and nature within these first two entries—there were over 2,000 comments—in them was very vengeful. No matter what people were blaming, people were angry. They're very, very angry. A lot of the comments were also policing each other. Very hateful place. One person, one commenter said that they hoped the whole family gets raped in hell. And I'm giving you like the moderate part, because there were really horrible comments. Really horrible comments. So what was most interesting, though, within this is that a lot of that hatred was being directed at Sarah Drew. Lori Drew's 14-year-old daughter. So it seems kind of ironic that the source of all this anger

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was that a 13-year-old girl killed herself because of online bullying, and yet, people are calling for hatred towards a 14-year-old girl.

The third entry appears called "I am Lori Drew." And she posted an entry claiming to be Lori Drew herself and shares her side of the story to elicit sympathy. And it's a very detailed story, a very emotional story, and even social networking scholar and blogger Dana Boyd started to buy into this, and thought, "This story has too many details. It's too emotional to be a fake. Perhaps this really is Lori Drew." And that entry got over 3,000 comments before the thing was removed.

So basically, this internet mob forms within this community, but it is dialogue going on. I'm going to speed this up a little bit. As Professor of Psychology, Robert Kurzban says, "People don't mind doing this kind of thing as long as it doesn't cost them anything." So because this was a disembodied community and because there was anonymity, people were expressing things that they wouldn't have necessarily expressed in their offline lives. Eventually, other news sources started reporting on this. Lori Drew's lawyer came forward to say that Lori Drew was not authoring this blog. She has never posted on any blog or any news site. The police got involved, the Cyber Crime Unit of St. Louis Police Department, to see if any laws had been broken, so that they could take this site down. Before any decisions were made, the community got their wish. The first three entries were removed and all of their comments, and a final entry went up called "The final story." And it said, still claiming to be Lori Drew, "For everyone who doubts who this is and the truth of what I write, I want you to watch this video carefully." And the link took to a Rick Astley video.

So the blog had been a joke all along. To be "Rickerolled" is to be misguided to a Rick Astley video. This was done by a community that refers to themselves as the "lulz." You're familiar with the lulz cats. It's the same people. They are an anonymous group that basically either report pranks online or create pranks online for the laughs. Lulz being a plural of lol. There was also a link to Encyclopedia Dramatica, which is the lulz community, like, Wikipedia, but it documents all of their activity. They put, "While the blog appeared to be defense of Lori Drew, it actually demonstrated the collective stupidity of thousands of internet users who confuse replying to blogs for having intellectual discourse." So they did it for a joke.

Did the blog elicit anger and create this internet mob and fuel more fire into this? Absolutely. It was horrible. But did it also prove a

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point? And unfortunately, it did. While the lulz community claims that the commenters mistook comments for intellectual discourse, I think the greater issue that surfaces is the issue of credibility, in that people were believing this, and it was adults who were believing this.

So in conclusion, basically, for citizen journalism and, in turn, convergent media to successfully operate, there needs to be a system of checks and balances in place that ensure credibility.

As Nancy Willard said in an interview with ABC in relation to this Megan Meier's thing, she said that, "When emotionally vulnerable young people get online, they can be very easily manipulated." But I would say that, if anything, what this has shown us is that internet education needs to expand the conversation to include adult as well as children. By conceptualizing childhood as a period in which children are viewed as vulnerable victims lacking agency, who must then be sheltered, protected, educated, a false dichotomy between childhood and adulthood is created. I am in no way insinuating that children should *not* be protected and educated. I am arguing the discourse needs to move beyond these idyllic [inaudible] childhood to begin to recognize their own limitations, and that adults and children alike need lessons in internet safety. And a good place to start would be mechanisms in education to ensure credibility even when sources are anonymous.

One common critique when these Megan -- the Megan Meier message boards was the dismissal of cyber bullying as no big deal. A lot of commenters came forward to say, "Hey, I was [inaudible] on. I was lied to. I was bullied. And guess what? I didn't kill myself. So this is silly." A lot of people also said that Megan was really foolish to get so involved in a MySpace profile, to fall for this Josh Evans guy. Why was she so emotional about it? But as "Megan had it coming" proves, it's easy for anyone to be deceived online. And it's easy for anyone to be emotionally involved in it, because regardless of how you interpret the comments, one thing is for sure, it was an emotionally charged space.

So if convergent media is indicative of a changing media landscape, one in which consumption and production [inaudible], the Megan Meier case stands as evidence for both the positive and negative consequences of the evolving technologies and the social practices found in today's media culture. It would be foolish to blame MySpace for Megan's suicide. Bullying and deception and rumors are nothing new. Merely, the media must change. Likewise, it would be foolish to

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overly praise the positive role of blogs that they played in this case, and it would be equally as thoughtless to dismiss the role based solely on "Megan had it coming."

Convergent media is more than changes in technology. It includes changes in the social practices functioning within technology. And until the discourses are expanded to include education of adults as well as children, anonymity and a lack of credibility will continue to demonstrate the pitfalls rather than the benefits of convergent media.

[Audience applause.]

**Elizabeth Saad:** Okay. We have some minutes for questions. I think we have some serious questions here. Some of the journalists have two sides of the new issues of the new media landscape. One side of resources of data and the databases and the information of these two researches, and the other side, how to deal with hoaxes and with credibility and with this new form of citizen journalism. So is there any question? Candidates?

**Audience Member:** [Inaudible.]

**Elizabeth Saad:** Yes, please.

**Audience Member:** I have a few questions actually. One was, have you found any literature related to researching MySpace at all? Because I've done a little bit of literature review on Facebook, and it seems like all the studies tend to focus on Facebook. But I was wondering if you've found anything that's been done on MySpace. My first question. Either of you two?

**Cindy Royal:** I can't think of anything right off the bat that was specifically in regard to MySpace. There were a lot like what I was doing that was going across social networks, and then more of the ones that I found that were specific were about Facebook. I think because of the college sort of origin of Facebook.

**Audience Member:** Do you think you would find very different results with Facebook?

**Cindy Royal:** Well, I mean, I did look at different types of users in my research, but I don't know of any research where they just looked at MySpace. And when I looked, I mean, that chart that I showed that

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showed the activities that people were doing across the social networking sites, they weren't that different except for the fact that YouTube is about video, MySpace has a lot of bands on it, so there was a little bit more audio in that space. But basically, the things that people were doing online didn't really matter across the social networks.

**Jacqueline Vickery:** Dana Boyd's research tends to focus on MySpace a lot, and she has an article "Why Youth Heart MySpace." And she looks at different class issues that are evolving between the two.

**Audience Member:** Yeah. She says that there's two extreme differences between MySpace users and Facebook users.

**Cindy Royal:** Yeah.

**Audience Member:** So I guess that's one of my concerns is the generalizations coming from what tends to be heavy Facebook research. Then my other question is, how did you define emotional attachment with your particular study, Sebastian?

**Sebastian Valenzuela:** Actually, we took that measure from a piece that was published in the Journal of Computer Media Communication by Nicole Ellison. She... Actually, the whole scale of intensity of Facebook use was adapted from her piece. And the emotional attachment is a name that we gave it, to that part of the index of intensity of Facebook use, and it's basically five [unintelligible] type questions. In the paper we have them detailed, but they are basically agreements or disagreements with a number of statements. And all of them refer to some kind of, how attached you feel to the technology in terms of your daily life, and some of them are, as I said, "Would you feel sorry if Facebook shut down?" or "Do you think Facebook is part of your -- enhances your college life experience?"

**Audience Member:** Would that be somewhat related to the informational and emotional support literature that kind of looks at -- that's been done on online communities?

**Sebastian Valenzuela:** Yeah, well, actually, part of our study was to -- and we didn't have time to include that in the paper, because that would have been a huge part, but in our survey, especially regarding the uses of Facebook groups, we had a number of questions on

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motivations to use groups. And specifically, we had questions about, "Do you participate in groups, for example, to give peer support or to get support?" "Do you participate there to do networking—more a goal-oriented activity?" And there are a number of other questions that have not -- that we didn't address in this paper, but are there in the survey that eventually we will do, but it has mostly to do with motivations and, as you say, yeah.

**Audience Member:** Okay. Thank you.

**Audience Member:** I'm a little curious about how did this audience, this young audience relate to news websites, major news websites? Because somehow I think that they don't have a—(how do I say)—brand experience with major news websites. And these social networks and other sites that relate them with their friends, they some kind of -- they somehow give them news in a way that *they* believe, that it's enough for them. So you have any [inaudible] about this?

**Cindy Royal:** I didn't ask about their engagement with major media sites, but I think your comment is accurate, that it's a different way of engaging with news. And that's why major media sites need to kind of understand the model that young people are engaging with news on these sites. It may not be our traditional understanding of news, but they call it a newsfeed on Facebook for a reason, and it's news to them. It's what's going on in their lives and what's important to them. And then as the web becomes more open with Open Social, maybe things that we would categorize as traditional news [will] start becoming part of that feed, as long as those organizations want to participate. But I don't know if anybody else has a comment about that.

**Sebastian Valenzuela:** Yeah. Related to that, we found that, in general, there seems to be a difference between getting the news through Facebook and social network sites and the traditional media. And I think that goes because when you have a list of friends who are watching something, then you give it more credibility, or at least you have an interest, "Okay, you know, all my friends, all my contacts are doing something, and perhaps I should take that into account." And especially in the election site, for example, on Super Tuesday and all that, you would see a lot of Facebook profiles there having a link to the candidates and stuff like that. I think there's something there in that perhaps these kids are not using, accessing the media sites, but they are indirectly doing so when another one, you know, when a



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friend or a contact is doing that, because then you give it more credibility. "Okay, friends who share my interest, who share my knowledge, I mean, my world, and so on and so forth, are paying attention to that. Well, perhaps I should do that." So I think, you know, that's something that definitely should be investigated more, because as media organizations learn that behavior, they can, I think, use these sites to their own benefit in terms of enlarging the audience and getting students to read more news.

**Elizabeth Saad:** Well, thank you for the researcher panelists, and thank you. We'll now go to the next panel.

[Audience applause.]