

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AS EMPLOYMENT TOOLS

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

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## ABSTRACT

### SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AS EMPLOYMENT TOOLS

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George Mason University, 2008

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Social networking sites have steadily gained in popularity since their introduction more than 10 years ago. As people increasingly count co-workers and other acquaintances among their networked “friends” on such sites, a natural extension is to use the sites as employment tools. However, while social networking sites are starting to support employment search and recruiting practices, many of their users remain unaware of their inherent professional networking capabilities. This thesis presents preliminary findings about the use of social networking sites by both employers and job-seekers, and provides an exploration of what these findings say about the rhetorical use of social networking sites—including a consideration of the implications and issues associated with the fusion of professional and social networking.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Meet Bill: he is 34 years old, college educated, computer literate, and looking for a new job. He uses the online social networking sites (SNSs) MySpace and Facebook to keep in touch with two extended groups of friends, and he is also a member of the professional networking site LinkedIn. Despite LinkedIn's popularity (17 million members from around the world, representing 150 industries<sup>1</sup>), Bill's connections on the site are largely current and former co-workers; most of his friends do not have profiles there yet. When Bill starts his job search, LinkedIn seems like a natural resource: he adjusts his profile's "overview" section (profiles on the site resemble resumes) to reflect that he is looking for new opportunities, he asks a few of his connections to write recommendations that will show up on his profile, and he keeps an eye on the job openings that are a prominent feature of the site. All the while, one of his Facebook friends knows of an available position that would be perfect for him—but he never learns about it, because it never occurs to him to use Facebook as an employment resource. A simple note on his profile or a status update to let those friends know that he was looking for a new job would have done the trick, but he makes the same mistake that many people do: he puts too much emphasis on the "social" in "social networking site."

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.linkedin.com/static?key=company\\_info](http://www.linkedin.com/static?key=company_info)

Social networking has long been an integral part of either looking for a new job or looking for a new employee, but SNSs have not yet fully caught on to this aspect of their potential services. Actually, to be fair it is the *users* who are grossly underutilizing SNSs as employment tools: anyone savvy enough to have more than a basic profile on any SNS can figure out how to notify their “friends” on that site that they are looking for work—or, that their company has a job opening. It simply isn’t occurring to people to do so. Rhetorically, SNSs seem to be viewed as places for casual personal expression; not the more formal, careful communication required when attempting to hire or be hired. This might explain why the professional networking site LinkedIn is so popular while the professional networking capabilities of SNSs remain overlooked (perhaps deliberately): users still want some line of demarcation between their jobs and their lives.

## 2. SOCIAL NETWORKING

### **Definition**

I have adopted the same definition of “social networking site” used by Danah

Boyd and Nicole Ellison:

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

I disagree, however, with their use of the term “social network sites” instead of “social networking sites.” They argue for the former by asserting that the term “networking” emphasizes relationship initiation, often between strangers, and that such networking is not the “primary practice” on many SNSs: they claim that on many of the large SNSs, participants are primarily communicating with people who are already a part of their extended social network. While I agree that most users connect with people who they already know, I disagree with their definition of “networking” as something that happens largely between strangers. The online version of the Merriam-Webster dictionary<sup>2</sup> defines networking as “the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary>

business,” and I contend that such networking can take place as easily among existing friends or acquaintances as among strangers. Both Facebook and LinkedIn (for example) allow users to specify “networking” as one of the reasons they are on the site, and LinkedIn specifically recommends *against* connecting with complete strangers: their advice is that listing someone as a connection implies a personal relationship. There is nothing wrong with the term “network” in general, and in fact one cannot talk about networking without it, it simply is not what the “N” in “SNS” stands for.

## **History**

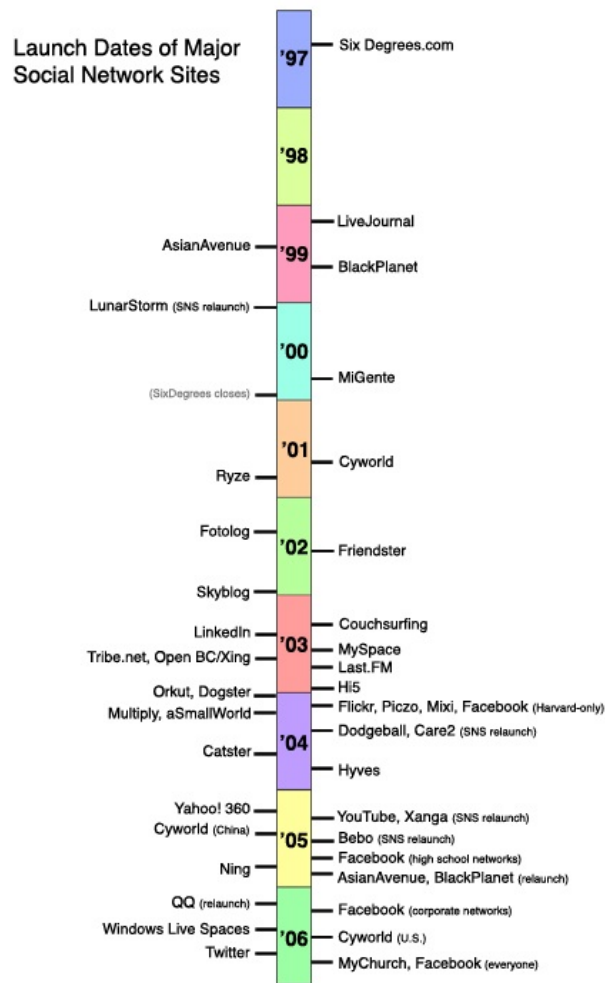
While social interaction on the internet has no doubt been around for as long as the internet itself, SNSs came into being 11 years ago. The Boyd and Ellison article presents the genesis of SNSs:

The first recognizable social network site launched in 1997. SixDegrees.com allowed users to create profiles, list their Friends and, beginning in 1998, surf the Friends lists. Each of these features existed in some form before SixDegrees, of course. Profiles existed on most major dating sites and many community sites. AIM and ICQ buddy lists supported lists of Friends, although those Friends were not visible to others. Classmates.com allowed people to affiliate with their high school or college and surf the network for others who were also affiliated, but users could not create profiles or list Friends until years later. SixDegrees was the first to combine these features.

SixDegrees only survived until 2000, but many SNSs sprang up in its wake—and other sites began to implement SNS features. Figure 2-1 presents a timeline<sup>3</sup> of the launch dates of many major SNSs and the dates when community sites re-launched with SNS features.

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<sup>3</sup> Danah Boyd, “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship.” Used with permission.



**Figure 2-1: Launch Dates of Major SNSs**

## Network Theory

Two theories are particularly relevant to a discussion of the use of social networking sites for job-seeking and recruiting activities: complexity theory, and emergence theory. Complexity theory is the study of systems that are composed of interconnected parts that, as a whole, exhibit one or more properties that are not obvious from the properties of the individual parts. A famous example of a complex system is the ant colony (popularly

described in Malcolm Gladwell's book *Blink*): an individual ant is not capable of creating the complex environments in which colonies live; only the colony as a whole evidences the complexity of the ant way of life. As Warren Weaver explains, a system's complexity may take one of two forms: disorganized complexity or organized complexity.

Disorganized complexity is a matter of a very large number of parts, while organized complexity is a matter of the subject system (that may have a limited number of parts) exhibiting emergent properties. This, in turn, leads to explorations of emergence theory, which refers to the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multitude of simpler interactions. In his book *Emergence*, Steven Johnson discusses the "five fundamental principles" (77) that are a key part of any emergent system: more is different, ignorance is useful, encourage random encounters, look for patterns in the signs, and pay attention to your neighbors. The following paragraphs detail how LinkedIn, as an example, follows at least four of the five principles.

Principle #1: More Is Different: The concept of "more is different" means two things: first, that you cannot get true diversity without a lot of participants – a lot of users, in terms of LinkedIn. The second meaning is that an accurate impression of the overall system cannot be gained by observing just a few users: it isn't possible to tell how well the networking functions from just a handful of user experiences.

LinkedIn follows this principle by encouraging its members to gain a large number of "connections." Every time a user logs in, the main page shows him/her the number of people from his/her current or past employers and educational institutions who have recently joined the site. Users are also encouraged to give the site access to their web-

based e-mail accounts, so that the site can search for people in their address books who are already registered with LinkedIn.

Principle #2: Ignorance Is Useful: The idea that ignorance is useful means that each part of a system does not need to be aware of the “big picture” and that such awareness could, in fact, slow down or otherwise hinder the functionality of the system. Johnson writes, “Emergent systems can grow unwieldy when their component parts become excessively complicated.” (78)

LinkedIn follows this principle by providing second- and third-level connections: people whom a user’s connections are connected to, and the people whom those people are connected to. A user doesn’t have to know every person in this extended network in order for the system to work. For example, the main page displays job openings that were posted by people in a user’s network: he/she could potentially find a job from a third-level connection without having known that person prior to seeing the job opening. LinkedIn also provides a Q&A section, where people can ask and answer all kinds of questions about their field, or even LinkedIn itself, and the main page displays recent questions that were posted by people in a user’s network – again, up to third-level connections. The ability for a user to learn new information from people who know people who he/she knows, without having to know them directly, is another example of this principle in action.

Principle #3: Encourage Random Encounters: The concept of encouraging random encounters allows for the “accidental” discovery of information that is critical to the success of the system.

This principle is similar to “ignorance is useful,” and LinkedIn follows it with the job openings list and the Q&A list that I just mentioned. However, the site also follows this principle another way: by letting a user see the connections lists of his/her first-level connections (if those connections have allowed this in their settings). A user cannot see another user’s connections until they are linked: at first, a user can only see how many connections the other user has. But once two users are linked, each can see who else is linked to the other – their second-level connections. This allows for random encounters with people who the two users have in common, even if (especially if) one of the users didn’t know that the connection was shared, or didn’t even know that the other person had an account on LinkedIn. The user can then invite those people to become first-level connections, or can ask for introductions to people who he/she doesn’t know personally. These “accidental” discoveries are integral parts of the system, because networking – growing your list of first-level connections – is what the site is all about.

Principle #4: Look For Patterns In The Signs: Looking for patterns in the signs – or, “signs about signs” (79) – means that there are often patterns evident in microbehavior, or small groups of users, that affect the system’s macrobehavior.

This is the principle that I feel LinkedIn only tangentially follows, and not deliberately: again, I go back to the job openings and Q&A lists. If there are any patterns to be detected, they are in these two aspects of the site. For example, if the job openings posted by people in a user’s network suddenly include a preponderance of work in one particular field, that might inspire the user to do more research about the job market and find out if there’s a reason behind the surge.

Principle #5: Pay Attention To Your Neighbors: Paying attention to your neighbors can, in a way, be seen as the opposite of “look for patterns in the signs”: this principle discourages close focus on the big picture, and reinforces the importance of being aware of what’s going on immediately around you because that awareness can ultimately form and inform the big picture. As Johnson says, “You can restate it as ‘local information can lead to global wisdom’.” (79)

LinkedIn follows this principle by encouraging its users to remain very familiar with their first-level connections. An example is the automatic update feature of the site: when a user makes a change to his/her profile, his/her first-level connections receive an e-mail notification that a change was made. This function can be turned off, but it is on by default. This is an easy way to make sure that users know when one of their connections changes jobs or completes a degree, and thereby helps to keep the core of the network strong and useful.

### **Social Network Analysis**

Along with general network theories such as complexity and emergence, there is a specific set of theories and methods for studying social networking: social network analysis (SNA). Barry Wellman captured the focus of SNA—the relationships among actors, and not the individual actors and their attributes—in the fourth slide of his presentation “Social Networks & Social Capital: Concepts, Contexts, Methods, Policy” (Figure 2-2)<sup>4</sup>:

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.recherchepolitique.gc.ca/doclib/Wellman\\_Intro\\_0604\\_2004.pdf](http://www.recherchepolitique.gc.ca/doclib/Wellman_Intro_0604_2004.pdf)



## **The Social Network Approach**

- Moving from a hierarchical society bound up in groups to a network – and *networking* – society
- Multiple communities / work networks
  - Multiplicity of specialized relations
  - Management by networks
  - More alienation, more maneuverability
- Loosely-coupled organizations / societies
  - Less centralized
  - The networked society

4

Figure 2-2. Barry Wellman Slide

SNA is important when discussing networking for jobs because of its tenet that the shape of a social network helps determine a network's usefulness to its individuals: smaller, tighter networks can be less useful to their members than networks with lots of loose connections (or “weak ties”) to individuals outside the main network, while more open networks, with many weak ties and social connections, are more likely to introduce new ideas and opportunities to their members. People are more likely to find the right job for them if they have connections to a variety of networks rather than many connections within a single network—to belong, for example, to Facebook and LinkedIn and

LiveJournal rather than focusing on developing a huge friends list on any one site. This idea is reinforced in an anecdote related in Albert-László Barabási's book *Linked*:

Aiming to find out how people “network”—use their social connections to land a new job—[Mark Granovetter] interviewed dozens of managerial and professional workers, asking them who helped them find their current job. Was it a friend? He kept getting the same reply: No, it was not a friend. It was just an acquaintance. (41)

## **Key SNSs**

With an understanding of the history and theory surrounding social networking sites, a discussion of the rhetorical use of three popular SNSs—Facebook, LinkedIn, and MySpace—can take place with the proper context.

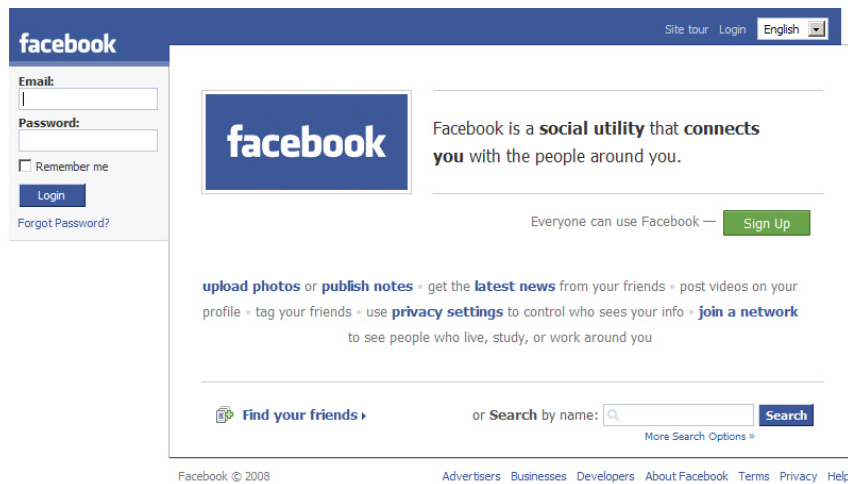
### *Facebook*

Founded in February 2004, Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family, and coworkers. Facebook “is a part of millions of people’s lives and half of the users return daily.”<sup>5</sup> Facebook is a privately-held company headquartered in Palo Alto, California. The Facebook main page<sup>6</sup> is shown in Figure 2-3.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.facebook.com/press.php>

<sup>6</sup> As of February 2008.



**Figure 2-3: Facebook Main Page**

Facebook allows its members to learn information passively: when someone on a user's friends list updates their status or profile, or even uses an application on the site, the user learns about it via their "news feed," which is contained on a home page where users see everything that all of their friends have done recently. Likewise, their information gets pushed to their friends. It is possible for a user to keep up with a friend for weeks without ever visiting that friend's profile page.

Facebook does not currently have a prominent job component, but given the "passive information" described above it is easy to see how job searches might be facilitated—especially in light of the additional privacy controls that the site implemented on 19 March 2008, which give the user finer control over who (from their friends list) can see what (on their profile). As Danah Boyd pointed out in "Facebook's 'Privacy Trainwreck'," "The term 'friend' in the context of social network sites is not the same as in everyday vernacular." On SNSs, "friend" includes everyone from actual real-life

friends to classmates, co-workers, or other acquaintances—even, in some cases, complete strangers (e.g., someone who knows someone who knows a user, and asked to be added to his/her friends list). With the new privacy controls, a user could add a note to his/her profile that contains information about a job opening and be able specify who on his/her friends list can see the note—whereas before, *everyone* on that friends list would have been able to see it.

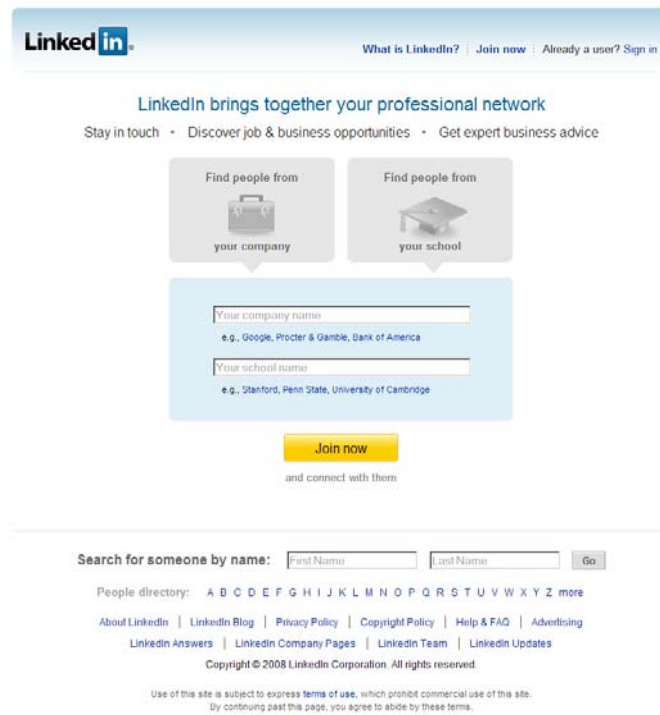
Facebook also has a “network” component, where users can join networks of people who share their geographic location, employer, or school. Each network features its own calendar of events and discussion board, which could easily be used to post job openings. For these and other reasons, Facebook has tremendous potential to be used as an employment tool.

### *LinkedIn*

Started in 2003, LinkedIn is an online network of more than 17 million experienced professionals from around the world, representing 150 industries. The LinkedIn main page<sup>7</sup> is seen in Figure 2-4

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<sup>7</sup> As of February 2008.



**Figure 2-4: LinkedIn Main Page**

LinkedIn specifically focuses on and promotes professional networking (so does a new Yahoo! site called Kickstart, but it does not yet share LinkedIn’s user base or popularity). Users can also “connect” with college classmates, but the emphasis of the site is on connecting with former and current co-workers. Job openings are prominently featured on every page within the site, and users are encouraged to both solicit and provide professional recommendations as a way of “completing” their profiles.

The rhetorical situation presented by this site is clearly different from that of Facebook’s. There is no option to share personal information such as “I went out to dinner last night”; instead, the focus is on strictly professional communication and topics. This further supports my contention that users want to separate their work and personal

lives. However, LinkedIn recently borrowed from Facebook in terms of design: Facebook offers an “update” feature, where users enter short descriptions of their current activity (e.g., “Mark is at the baseball game.”) that everyone on their friends list sees, and when LinkedIn revealed an updated interface in early Spring 2008 users found a similar “what are you working on” feature—but, again, with a different rhetorical purpose.

### *MySpace*

Started in early 1999, MySpace is an online community that “lets you meet your friends' friends.”<sup>8</sup> MySpace’s main page<sup>9</sup> is shown in Figure 2-5.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://collect.myspace.com/misc/about.html>

<sup>9</sup> As of February 2008.



Figure 2-5: MySpace Main Page

MySpace wants to be everything to its users: it provides a journal, a friends list, “groups,” a place to upload personal photos (as does Facebook), and even a “Jobs” area—though it is neither promoted nor very visible. MySpace also offers weather and news to its users, in the same small sidebar as the jobs area.

However, to be effectively used for professional networking MySpace would have to change its information delivery method: while Facebook provides users with “passive” information about their friends, MySpace requires more deliberate interaction. In order to find out about any jobs that a friend had available or was looking for, the user would have to visit that friend’s profile. MySpace is taking steps in this direction, however, with the recent implementation of a “Friend Subscription” service that provides users with notifications whenever their friends take certain actions on the site.

Ultimately, the use of any of these sites as employment tools only makes sense if networking really matters in the business world, and if the implications of such usage are predominantly positive.

### 3. NETWORKING AND BUSINESS

Discussions and theories about networking and social capital far predate the existence/ubiquity of the Internet: the father of social capital theory was Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist who was born in 1930. There are even traces of SNA in some of Bordieu's later works, such as in his article "The Social Space and the Genesis of Groups." The article's main argument is that groups are formed naturally in the social space, upon logical classes:

Constructing a theory of the social space presupposes a series of breaks with Marxist theory. First, a break with the tendency to privilege substances—here, the real groups, whose number, limits, members, etc., one claims to define—at the expense of *relationships*... (723)

This proposal reinforces the point that it is the relationships that matter, not the parts that make up the relationships.

Contemporary scholars and authors repeat the message that relationships are crucial when it comes to business. Antoni Calvó-Armengol and Matthew O. Jackson state:

The importance of social networks in labor markets is pervasive and well documented. Mark Granovetter (1973, 1995) found in a survey of residents of a Massachusetts town that over 50 percent of jobs were obtained through social contacts. Earlier work by Albert Rees (1966) found numbers of over 60 percent in a similar study. Exploration in a large number of studies documents similar figures for a variety of occupations, skill levels, and socioeconomic backgrounds (426).

Even existing relationships within companies and industries are ignored only at one's own risk. Don Cohen and Laurence Prusak's book, in which the authors examine how a company's social atmosphere affects its success, contains a notable anecdote early on:

[Mark] Walsh specifically noted how all the major players in the solid-waste-disposal industry have known and dealt with each other for many years. Their long experience of one another has built robust networks of relationships and a deep understanding of industry players' reputations for reliability, honesty, and quality. Walsh comments, "A technology vendor is crazy if he or she feels that these firms will overthrow these relationships simply by putting new technologies in place. The technologies may make existing relationships more efficient, but they will not transform them" (54).

There is no question that networking and business have gone hand-in-hand for as long as business has existed, and that social networking is important to job success. The question, then, becomes one of "How can I leverage my networks?"

Melissa Giovagnoli and Jocelyn Carter-Miller propose that the answer lies in what they call "Networlding": "a transforming concept in a world where connections to everyone and everything really count" (1). It is about becoming more aware of our connections, and is also about managing them in a more meaningful way. The authors differentiate Networlding from networking by saying that "Networlding is a purposeful process of collaboration that not only achieves mutual goals but also leads to professional and personal fulfillment. In contrast, networking is an often haphazard process of making contacts to achieve short-term and often one-sided goals" (2). The idea is that as technology and the Internet make it easier to create and maintain networks, the careful and deliberate connections will result in more professional and personal success in the long run. There are even ten "golden rules" of Networlding. On the surface Networlding and its rules seem a bit idealistic, but as the notion of networking changes from one of

primarily business to one where the lines between business and friendship may become blurred it is a method of establishing and maintaining connections that may become crucial. This is where the SNS, as opposed to even a professional networking site like LinkedIn, comes into focus: the networks and connections that are more personal are also the ones likely to be most useful.

Another question facing networking and business is whether the newest members of the work force—those who have just graduated, or are about to graduate, from college—are aware of its importance. The answer is “yes.” For one thing, 21-year-old graduating seniors have had SNSs in their lives since they were 10 years old. Fred Stutzman’s 2006 study found that roughly 90% of college students participate in a social network community, primarily Facebook, MySpace, and Friendster (3). Social networking is natural to them. Also, a 2001 study by David Maramos and Bruce Sacerdote of how Dartmouth College seniors use social networks to obtain their first jobs found that “students perceive networking with peers, alumni, faculty and relatives to be an important part of the job search process” (878).

Take how comfortable 21-year-olds are with SNSs and combine that with their awareness of the importance of networking for employment, and we have a generation of young employees who will naturally use SNSs as more than simply social tools. These are the users who will eventually force SNSs to enhance employment-related functionality and applications, and who will eventually force employers to count SNSs among their key recruitment resources.

#### 4. THE USE OF SNSs FOR JOB SEARCHES AND/OR RECRUITMENT

##### **Current Use**

Employers are in the early stages of recognizing the importance and usefulness of SNSs, but they still rely on the social aspect: they see the use of SNSs as primarily a way to gather information on prospective employees. A 2006 *Pacer* article by Sara McIntosh quotes a study conducted by CNN that reports that roughly 43% of employers run internet background searches on prospective employees using internet sites including online social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. However, two other studies from the same year show a much smaller percentage: the first, mentioned in W. David Gardner's article on the site Techweb, is a CareerBuilder.com study of 1,150 hiring managers nationwide that found that 12% of hiring managers have used social networking sites in their candidate screening. The second, published in a National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) press release by Andrea Koncz, is a NACE study of 257 employers nationwide that found that 11.1% review profiles on social networking sites when considering candidates for jobs. At the very least, it can be said that employers are becoming aware of SNSs and have begun to utilize them during the hiring process. The impact of the SNSs, though, will require more research: a 2006 MS thesis by Jason Decker of Iowa State University reports that "most companies felt a Facebook profile either had a negative influence or no influence at all. The study was

unable to determine if any information from a Facebook profile positively influences an employer's perception" (36).

These studies show that employers are slowly getting on board with SNSs; however, job-seekers don't yet think of SNSs as employment tools.

### **Employers vs Job Seekers**

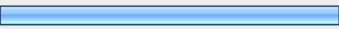
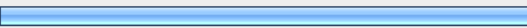

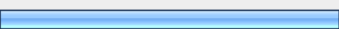
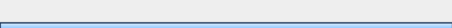
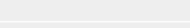
As data sources for this thesis, two surveys were conducted via the online tool SurveyMonkey (the survey questions can be found in Appendix A):

- The first survey was targeted at human resources (HR) professionals, and included questions about how useful they have found social networking sites to be, how many employees they have hired via social networking sites (either through recommendations or job postings), their likelihood of hiring someone via a social networking site, and their opinion about SNSs being used as employment tools.
- The second survey was targeted at job-seekers (both potential and actual), and included questions about their use of social networking sites both in general and for job-related activities, any stories of jobs that were obtained via social networking sites, and their opinion about SNSs being used as employment tools.

The surveys were fielded during the afternoon of March 15, 2008, and were open until 11:45 P.M. (EST) on March 23, 2008. Links were posted on LinkedIn, Facebook, and the Straight Dope Message Board (an online message board selected for its large, diverse, and active membership after a third SNS failed to respond to requests for permission to post the survey links). Both surveys were confidential.

### *HR Professionals*

A total of 16 individuals responded to the “HR Professionals” survey questions. They represented the following industries: health care, education, telecommunications, information technology services, utilities, computer-based testing, manufacturing, law, and media. As seen in Figure 4-1, the most popular place to advertise job openings was on a corporate web site, with online job sites such as Careerbuilder and Monster in second place. SNSs placed last.

3. Please indicate which of the following methods your company uses to advertise job openings.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Corporate intranet		56.3%	9
Corporate web site		87.5%	14
Newspaper classifieds (print)		62.5%	10
Newspaper classifieds (online)		56.3%	9
Job sites such as Careerbuilder, Monster, etc.		75.0%	12
Social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.		31.3%	5
	<b>answered question</b>		<b>16</b>
	<b>skipped question</b>		<b>0</b>

**Figure 4-1: HR Professionals Answers to Survey Question 3**

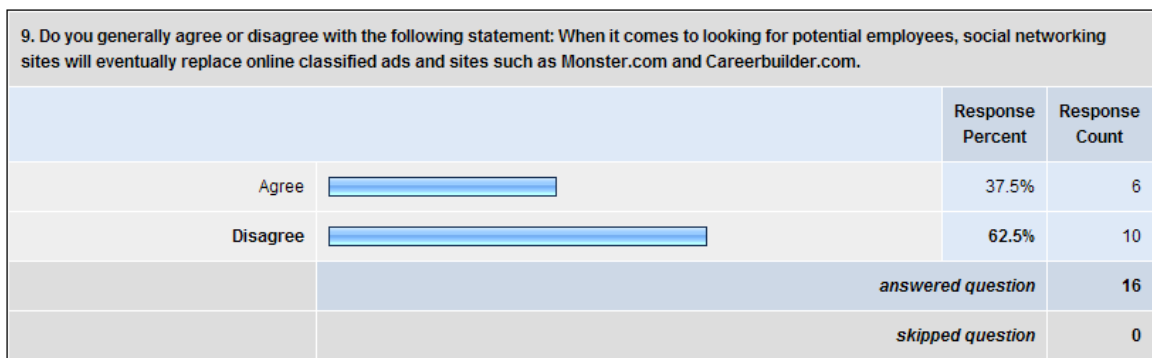
Of the 5 respondents who indicated that they did use SNSs, 1 said that they used MySpace, 4 said that they used LinkedIn, and 1 mentioned Facebook in addition to LinkedIn.

Table 4-1 summarizes the answers given by those who responded affirmatively to Questions 5, 7, and 8 (no one indicated that they had ever hired someone as the result of an ad placed on a social networking site, which was Question 6).

**Table 4-1: HR Professionals Responses to Questions 5, 7, and 8**

<b>Question That Garnered a “Yes” Response</b>	<b>How many total?</b>	<b>How many in 2007?</b>
Question 5: Have you ever interviewed someone as the result of an ad placed on a social networking site?	12	7
Question 7: Have you ever interviewed someone who was recommended via a social networking site?	6	2
Question 8: Have you ever hired someone who was recommended via a social networking site?	1	1

As seen in Figure 4-2, most respondents disagreed with the idea that SNSs would eventually replace online classified ads and sites like Monster and Careerbuilder.



**Figure 4-2: HR Professionals Answers to Survey Question 9**




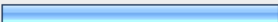
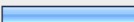

However, when asked to share any other thoughts they had about hiring and SNSs, only 5 respondents chose to comment. Their thoughts ranged from the practical (“the value of sites such as Monster is our ability to access their vast resume data base; social networking sites, right now, don't have the capacity”) to the seemingly contradictory (“I agree that social networking sites will substantially dominate the staffing industry, but for higher volume staffing I think the job sites (monster & careerbuilder) will still be used”).

While it is telling that even among such a small sample there is interviewing and hiring being done via SNSs, there is also a clear indication among HR professionals that SNSs are not the wave of the employment future—a sentiment echoed by the job seekers.

*Job Seekers*

In stark contrast to the number of respondents to the “HR Professionals” survey, a total of 205 individuals took the “Job Seekers” survey. When asked Question 2, “Which of the following social networking sites do you use,” 183 of the respondents answered: nearly 50% of them said Facebook, nearly 40% said MySpace, and LinkedIn finished in 3<sup>rd</sup> place with just over 27%.



As seen in Figure 4-3, the highest level of education completed by most respondents was a bachelor’s degree. This hints at a potential inequality in the pool of job seekers (a type of educational bias) that is explored further in Section 5 of this thesis.

3. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?			
		Response Percent	Response Count
High School		2.9%	6
Some College		15.1%	31
Associate's Degree		8.8%	18
Bachelor's Degree		45.9%	94
Master's Degree		22.0%	45
Doctoral Degree		6.3%	13
		<i>answered question</i>	205
		<i>skipped question</i>	0

**Figure 4-3: Job Seekers Answers to Survey Question 3**

When asked Question 4, “What field do you work in primarily,” the fields most represented were administration, banking, education, engineering, information technology, retail, and software development. The high representation of technological fields might lead to the assumption that SNSs are popular as job resources, but only 27 respondents indicated that they had ever applied for a job that they learned about from someone via a social networking site—and just 20 respondents stated that they had ever applied for a job that was posted on a social networking site.

Additionally, as seen in Figure 4-4, the percentage of “Job Seekers” respondents who do not think that social networking sites will eventually replace online classified ads and sites such as Monster and Careerbuilder was much higher than that of the “HR Professionals”: 84% vs 62%.

7. Do you generally agree or disagree with the following statement: When it comes to looking for jobs, social networking sites will eventually replace online classified ads and sites such as Monster.com and Careerbuilder.com.			
		Response Percent	Response Count
Agree		16.3%	33
Disagree		83.7%	170
answered question			203
skipped question			2

**Figure 4-4: Job Seekers Answers to Survey Question 7**

When asked to share any thoughts they had on job searches and social networking sites, only 74 respondents chose to comment. A majority of the comments indicated that users had not previously considered the SNS as an appropriate venue for job search activities.

## 5. IMPLICATIONS

### **Job Inequality**

What are the implications of using SNSs for hiring and job hunting? Some research, such as the previously mentioned article by Calvó-Armengol and Jackson, claims that social networking itself—physical, local networks as opposed to virtual, online networks—can lead to job inequality, specifically when it comes to unemployment. That article’s conclusion argues:

Another aspect of changes in the network over time is that network relationships can change as workers are unemployed and lose contact with former connections. Long unemployment spells can generate a desocialization process leading to a progressive removal from labor market opportunities and to the formation of unemployment traps. (443)

While Calvó-Armengol and Jackson’s sample group was not limited to the college-educated, white-collar professional that this thesis is about, and though they are not talking about SNSs, there is no arguing that their point is relevant to the world of online networks: layoffs (or “reductions in force”) are not uncommon among the white-collar crowd, particularly among computer professionals and those who work for the U.S. Government as contractors. If John Doe is “out of the loop” for long enough, the nature of his relationship with those in his networks necessarily changes—for one thing, he stops being a potential job source himself. His relationships may become one-sided, and

therefore violate the Networlding golden rules. The “desocialization process” that the authors mention will not be as pronounced or happen as quickly with virtual networks, but Mr. Doe will see some shift in where his local and online networks overlap: without new co-workers to add as connections and friends and with gradually fewer former co-workers who can remember him well enough to recommend him for or to a job opening, some people in his friends lists who were once both physical and virtual connections will necessarily become just virtual connections.

Bourdieu also agreed that social capital can be used to produce or reproduce inequality: his works tend to include examples of people gaining access to powerful positions through the exploitation of their social connections.

## **Privacy**

One of the biggest issues facing SNSs today is that of privacy. One “Job Seekers” survey respondent commented, “Unless security and privacy concerns are better served, social networking sites will not be in a position to overtake dedicated sites such as Monster.com.” In particular, Facebook has faced significant criticism regarding its “Beacon” feature, implemented in November 2007, which allows partner websites to collect information about users’ actions (such as purchases) and send it to Facebook and/or users’ “News Feeds” (which their friends see each time they log in). Users can opt out of Beacon being used in their News Feed, but it remains unclear whether there is an option to opt out of all data collection period. The Facebook group “Facebook Users Against Facebook Beacon” currently has 2,031 members.

Clay Spinuzzi argues that there are two basic ways that networks are formed: by “weaving” or by “splicing.” While he acknowledges that all networks are really a combination of the two, his distinction lends itself to an artificial categorization of some common social networking sites (SNSs) in regards to privacy.

“Woven” networks are those that emphasize personal relationships and friendships, such as Facebook, MySpace, and LiveJournal. There is no point or goal of these sites other than keeping in touch with people the users know (or would like to know), therefore the relationships and individual networks that form are more organic in nature and tend to develop gradually. On the other hand, “spliced” networks include those with a purpose, such as the professional networking sites Kickstart and LinkedIn. These sites emphasize that users’ friends and connections could someday help them get a job, and users are encouraged to connect to anyone they currently or formerly work or go to school with (but only college/university: neither site provides a way for users to list a high school in their profiles). The woven networks provide ways of finding out whether people the users know are already registered at the same site, but they do not encourage users to “friend” or connect with any particular type of user. The individual networks within spliced networks are more politically based, and may often include connections among users who don’t like each other personally but remain connected with an eye toward eventual professional gain. As Spinuzzi says, “A spliced understanding of networks involves understanding them as becoming interconnected in ways that are not necessarily organic, self-contained, or unified” (3). But another differentiator among these woven and spliced

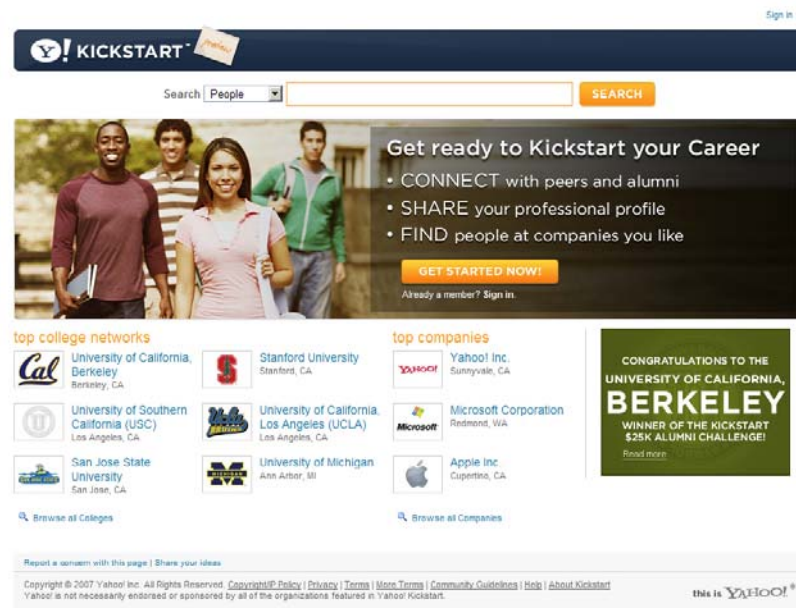
networks is the issue of privacy: I contend that woven networks' expectations and definitions of public vs. private are different from those of spliced networks.

As SNSs continue to affect the definitions of “public” and “private,” so, too, will the various types of SNSs. Users of primarily woven networks will continue to be aware and protective of their private (personally identifying) information, even when writing about or posting private things. But users of primarily spliced networks should start considering issues of privacy more carefully, and should start thinking about what it might mean for their friend Bob's friend Chris's friend Mike to know their full name and where they work—especially when they might not even realize that Mike has access to that information, which can happen with LinkedIn's connections/degrees structure. This difference in privacy approaches also supports my contention that social networking sites are seen as rhetorically different from professional sites.

### **Social Stratification**

Another potential implication of using SNSs as employment tools could be the exclusion of those without a college education: recall that the majority of respondents to the “Job Seekers” survey—all of whom had to use an SNS to even know about the survey—had bachelor's degrees. One reason is the social stratification that already exists among the users of these sites (as described by Danah Boyd in “Viewing American Class Divisions through Facebook and MySpace”); another reason is the bias that is inherent in the SNS applications themselves. While MySpace has never imposed any kind of educational minimum on its users, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Kickstart all specifically target college students and/or graduates (though Facebook has lifted its original

requirement that users register with a \*.edu e-mail address). Neither LinkedIn nor Kickstart provide an option for including a user's high school education in his/her profile, and Kickstart's main page<sup>10</sup> (shown in Figure 5-1) specifically targets college students or graduates.



**Figure 5-1: Kickstart Main Page**

It is possible to mitigate each of these potential barriers to the use of SNSs for employment and recruiting (job inequality, privacy, and social stratification), but it would require education and deliberate action on the part of both the sites and their users: sites

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<sup>10</sup> As of March 2008.

would have to become aware of the issues and be willing to design their interfaces such that, for example, a user's education level or employment status would not affect their ability to use the SNS to its full ability (this has been seen in Facebook's lifting of the "\*.edu" email address restriction, but the social stratification there was already part of the site's identity). Users would also need an introduction to these issues, and would have to ensure that the SNS owners know that they want to reduce their occurrence as much as possible. Users would need to take a more active role in the shaping of the SNSs, as they have already started to do with, for example, the backlash against Facebook's Beacon application.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Social networking is, and always has been, critical to professional success. It is still happening primarily in physical, local networks where people exchange business cards, take each other to lunch, and attend wine-and-cheese events where the purpose is to network. However, the advent of LinkedIn has brought professional networking online, and an awareness of the usability of SNSs as employment tools cannot be far behind. Employers are more ahead of this curve than job seekers are, but the current generation entering the workforce—with their 10 years of experience with SNSs and awareness of the importance of professional networking—could well change all of that.

If the social and rhetorical lines between work and home eventually blur, SNSs could be extremely useful employment tools—perhaps even someday replacing sites like Careerbuilder and Monster, as users become more comfortable with the idea of combining rhetorical situations. That is, as they become used to the idea that personal and professional communication might happen on the same site, and sometimes even with the same “friend.”

This change will result in a significant shift in how employees and companies think about hiring, and might even affect attitudes about working in general: for example, what are the societal ramifications if jobs have their roots in a social process? Further

study is needed to answer that question, and also to build upon the preliminary research that has been conducted in this thesis regarding both the use of SNSs as employment tools and how they are regarded rhetorically.

## APPENDIX A: Survey Questions

For HR Professionals

Edit this survey >>

My name is Jenny, and I am a graduate student at George Mason University (GMU) in Fairfax, Virginia. I am currently doing research for my master's thesis, which is titled, "Social Networking Sites and the Remediation of Monster.com: How Online Social Networking is Replacing Other Digital Methods of Hiring and Job Hunting." I am interested in learning about your experiences with and attitudes about social networking sites as related to hiring.

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey!

\* 1. Have you read the consent form on <http://mason.gmu.edu/~jlgoe/>, and do you consent to answering the following questions?

☐ Yes

☐ No

2. What industry/field is your company in?

3. Please indicate which of the following methods your company uses to advertise job openings.

☐ Corporate intranet

☐ Corporate web site

☐ Newspaper classifieds (print)

☐ Newspaper classifieds (online)

☐ Job sites such as Careerbuilder, Monster, etc.

☐ Social networking sites such as Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.

4. If you selected "social networking sites" in the previous question, which one(s)?

5. Have you ever interviewed someone as the result of an ad placed on a social networking site? (If "no," please skip this question.)

If "yes," please enter the total number of people.

If "yes," please enter the number of people in 2007.

6. Have you ever hired someone as the result of an ad placed on a social networking site? (If "no," please skip this question.)

If "yes," please enter the total number of people.

If "yes," please enter the number of people in 2007.

7. Have you ever interviewed someone who was recommended via a social networking site? (If "no," please skip this question.)

If "yes," please enter the total number of people.

If "yes," please enter the number of people in 2007.

8. Have you ever hired someone who was recommended via a social networking site? (If "no," please skip this question.)

If "yes," please enter the total number of people.

If "yes," please enter the number of people in 2007.

9. Do you generally agree or disagree with the following statement: When it comes to looking for potential employees, social networking sites will eventually replace online classified ads and sites such as Monster.com and Careerbuilder.com.

☐ Agree

☐ Disagree

10. Please share any other thoughts or opinions you have about hiring and social networking sites.

Done >>

Figure A-1: HR Professionals Survey Questions

For Job Seekers
Edit this survey >>

My name is Jenny, and I am a graduate student at George Mason University (GMU) in Fairfax, Virginia. I am currently doing research for my master's thesis, which is titled, "Social Networking Sites and the Remediation of Monster.com: How Online Social Networking is Replacing Other Digital Methods of Hiring and Job Hunting." I am interested in learning about your experiences with and attitudes about social networking sites as related to job searches.

Thank you for agreeing to take this survey!

**\* 1. Have you read the consent form on <http://mason.gmu.edu/~jlgoe/>, and do you consent to answering the following questions?**

☐ Yes  
☐ No

**2. Which of the following social networking sites do you use?**

☐ Facebook  
☐ Kickstart  
☐ LinkedIn  
☐ LiveJournal  
☐ MySpace  
☐ Plaxo  
☐ Other (please specify)

**3. What is the highest level of education that you have completed?**

☐ High School  
☐ Some College  
☐ Associate's Degree  
☐ Bachelor's Degree  
☐ Master's Degree  
☐ Doctoral Degree

**4. What field do you work in primarily?**

**5. Have you ever applied for a job that was posted on a social networking site? (If "no," please skip this question.)**

If "yes," in what field?   
If "yes," was the position entry level, experienced, or senior?

**6. Have you ever applied for a job that you learned about from someone via a social networking site? (If "no," please skip this question.)**

If "yes," in what field?   
If "yes," was the position entry level, experienced, or senior?

**7. Do you generally agree or disagree with the following statement: When it comes to looking for jobs, social networking sites will eventually replace online classified ads and sites such as Monster.com and Careerbuilder.com.**

☐ Agree  
☐ Disagree

**8. Please share any other thoughts or opinions you have about job searches and social networking sites.**

Done >>

Figure A-2: Job Seekers Survey Questions

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## WORKS CITED

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

Jennifer M. Igoe received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Communications from Cabrini College, Radnor, Pa., in 1993. She became a technical writer in 1998, and in 2004 she began work towards a Master of Arts degree in English at George Mason University, Fairfax, Va. She anticipates graduating from the Professional Writing and Editing program in May 2008. She currently works as a technical editor for Lockheed Martin.