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THURSDAY, MAY 04, 2006

## danah boyd on "myspace"

### "Identity Production in a Networked Culture: Why Youth Heart MySpace"

danah boyd

American Association for the Advancement of Science

February 19, 2006

<http://www.danah.org/papers/AAAS2006.html>

excerpt:

#### **What is MySpace:**

So what is MySpace?

MySpace is a social network site. In structure, MySpace is not particularly unique. The site is a hodgepodge of features previously surfaced by sites like Friendster, Hot or Not, Xanga, Rate My Teacher, etc. At the core are profiles that are connected by links to friends on the system. Profiles are personalized to express an individual's interests and tastes, thoughts of the day and values. Music, photos and video help users make their profile more appealing.

The friend network allows people to link to their friends and people can traverse the network through these profiles. An individual's "Top 8" friends are displayed on the front page of their profile; all of the rest appear on a separate page. Bands, movie stars, and other media creators have profiles within the system and fans can friend them as well. People can comment on each others' profiles or photos and these are typically displayed publicly.

Originally, the site was 18+ and all data was public. Over time, the age limit dropped to 16 and then, later, to 14. The youngest users are given the option to make their profiles visible to friends-only and

they do not appear in searches.

When someone starts an account, they are given an initial friend - Tom Anderson, one of the founders of MySpace. By surfing the site, they find and add additional friends. Once on MySpace, most time is spent modifying one's own profile, uploading photos, sending messages, checking out friends' profiles and commenting on them. Checking messages and getting comments is what brings people back to MySpace every day.

When MySpace was initially introduced, skeptics thought that it would be just another fad because previous sites like Friendster had risen and crashed. Unlike the 20-somethings who invaded Friendster, the teens have more reason to participate in profile creation and public commentary. Furthermore, MySpace's messaging is better suited for youths' asynchronous messaging needs. They can send messages directly from friends' profiles and check whether or not their friends have logged in and received their email. Unlike adults, youth are not invested in email; their primary peer-to-peer communication occurs synchronously over IM. Their use of MySpace is complementing that practice.

Many teens access MySpace at least once a day or whenever computer access is possible. Teens that have a computer at home keep MySpace opened while they are doing homework or talking on instant messenger. In schools where it is not banned or blocked, teens check MySpace during passing period, lunch, study hall and before/after school. This is particularly important for teens who don't have computer access at home. For most teens, it is simply a part of everyday life - they are there because their friends are there and they are there to hang out with those friends. Of course, its ubiquitousness does not mean that everyone thinks that it is cool. Many teens complain that the site is lame, noting that they have better things to do. Yet, even those teens have an account which they check regularly because it's the only way to keep up with the Jones's.

Of course, not all teens are using the site, either because they refuse to participate in the teen fad or because they have been banned from participating. Such non-conformity is typical of all teen practices.

With this framework in mind, i want to address three issues related to MySpace: identity production, hanging out and digital publics.

### **Profiles:**

Every day, we dress ourselves in a set of clothes that conveys something about our identity - what we do for a living, how we fit into

the socio-economic class hierarchy, what our interests are, etc. This is identity production. Around middle school, American teens begin actively engaging in identity production as they turn from their parents to their peers as their primary influencers and group dynamics take hold.

Youth look to older teens and the media to get cues about what to wear, how to act, and what's cool. Most teens are concerned with resolving how they perceive themselves with how they are perceived. To learn this requires trying out different performances, receiving feedback from peers and figuring out how to modify fashion, body posture and language to better give off the intended impression. These practices are critical to socialization, particularly for youth beginning to engage with the broader social world.

Because the teenage years are a liminal period between childhood and adulthood, teens are often waffling between those identities, misbehaving like kids while trying to show their maturity in order to gain rights. Participating in distinctly adult practices is part of exploring growing up. Both adults and the media remind us that vices like sexual interactions, smoking and drinking are meant for adults only, only making them more appealing. More importantly, through age restrictions, our culture signals that being associated with these vices is equal to maturity.

The dynamics of identity production play out visibly on MySpace. Profiles are digital bodies, public displays of identity where people can explore impression management [2]. Because the digital world requires people to write themselves into being [3], profiles provide an opportunity to craft the intended expression through language, imagery and media. Explicit reactions to their online presence offers valuable feedback. The goal is to look cool and receive peer validation. Of course, because imagery can be staged, it is often difficult to tell if photos are a representation of behaviors or a re-presentation of them.

On MySpace, comments provide a channel for feedback and not surprisingly, teens relish comments. Of course, getting a comment is not such a haphazard affair. Friends are expected to comment as a sign of their affection. Furthermore, a comment to a friend's profile or photo is intended to be reciprocated. It is also not uncommon to hear teens request comments from each other in other social settings or on the bulletin boards. In MySpace, comments are a form of cultural currency.

For those seeking attention, writing comments and being visible on

popular people's pages is very important and this can be a motivation to comment on others' profiles. Of course, profile owners have the ability to reject comments and Tom rejects most of them. Some people literally spam their network with comments. Last week, there were "Valentine's cards" that people made and added to the profiles of all of their friends via comments. People advertise events through mass comments. Some comments are also meant to be passed on, creating virus like memes.

The rules of friending are also very important. It is important to be connected to all of your friends, your idols and the people you respect. Attention-seekers and musicians often seek to be friended by as many people as possible, but most people are concerned with only those that they know or think are cool. Of course, a link does not necessarily mean a relationship or even an interest in getting to know the person. "Thanks for the add" is a common comment that people write in reaction to being friended by interesting people.

While these dynamics may not seem particularly important, they are essential to youth because they are rooted in the ways in which youth jockey for social status and deal with popularity. Adults often dismiss the significance of popularity dynamics because, looking back, it seems unimportant. Yet, it is how we all learned the rules of social life, how we learned about status, respect, gossip and trust. Status games teach us this.

### **Hanging Out:**

So what exactly are teens doing on MySpace? Simple: they're hanging out. Of course, ask any teen what they're doing with their friends in general; they'll most likely shrug their shoulders and respond nonchalantly with "just hanging out." Although adults often perceive hanging out to be wasted time, it is how youth get socialized into peer groups. Hanging out amongst friends allows teens to build relationships and stay connected. Much of what is shared between youth is culture - fashion, music, media. The rest is simply presence. This is important in the development of a social worldview.

For many teens, hanging out has moved online. Teens chat on IM for hours, mostly keeping each other company and sharing entertaining cultural tidbits from the web and thoughts of the day. The same is true on MySpace, only in a much more public way. MySpace is both the location of hanging out and the cultural glue itself. MySpace and IM have become critical tools for teens to maintain "full-time always-on intimate communities" [4] where they keep their friends close even when they're physically separated. Such ongoing

intimacy and shared cultural context allows youth to solidify their social groups.

### **Digital Publics:**

Adults often worry about the amount of time that youth spend online, arguing that the digital does not replace the physical. Most teens would agree. It is not the technology that encourages youth to spend time online - it's the lack of mobility and access to youth space where they can hang out uninterrupted.

In this context, there are three important classes of space: public, private and controlled. For adults, the home is the private sphere where they relax amidst family and close friends. The public sphere is the world amongst strangers and people of all statuses where one must put forward one's best face. For most adults, work is a controlled space where bosses dictate the norms and acceptable behavior.

Teenager's space segmentation is slightly different. Most of their space is controlled space. Adults with authority control the home, the school, and most activity spaces. Teens are told where to be, what to do and how to do it. Because teens feel a lack of control at home, many don't see it as their private space.

To them, private space is youth space and it is primarily found in the interstices of controlled space. These are the places where youth gather to hang out amongst friends and make public or controlled spaces their own. Bedrooms with closed doors, for example.

Adult public spaces are typically controlled spaces for teens. Their public space is where peers gather en masse; this is where presentation of self really matters. It may be viewable to adults, but it is really peers that matter.

Teens have increasingly less access to public space. Classic 1950s hang out locations like the roller rink and burger joint are disappearing while malls and 7/11s are banning teens unaccompanied by parents. Hanging out around the neighborhood or in the woods has been deemed unsafe for fear of predators, drug dealers and abductors. Teens who go home after school while their parents are still working are expected to stay home and teens are mostly allowed to only gather at friends' homes when their parents are present.

Additionally, structured activities in controlled spaces are on the rise. After school activities, sports, and jobs are typical across all socio-economic classes and many teens are in controlled spaces from dawn till dusk. They are running ragged without any time to simply

chill amongst friends.

By going virtual, digital technologies allow youth to (re)create private and public youth space while physically in controlled spaces. IM serves as a private space while MySpace provide a public component. Online, youth can build the environments that support youth socialization.

Of course, digital publics are fundamentally different than physical ones. First, they introduce a much broader group of peers. While radio and mass media did this decades ago, MySpace allows youth to interact with this broader peer group rather than simply being fed information about them from the media. This is highly beneficial for marginalized youth, but its effect on mainstream youth is unknown.

The bigger challenge is that, online, youth publics mix with adult publics. While youth are influenced by the media's version of 20somethings, they rarely have an opportunity to engage with them directly. Just as teens are hanging out on MySpace, scenesters, porn divas and creature of the night are using MySpace to gather and socialize in the way that 20somethings do. They see the space as theirs and are not imagining that their acts are consumed by teens; they are certainly not targeted at youth. Of course, there \_are\_ adults who want to approach teens and MySpace allows them to access youth communities without being visible, much to the chagrin of parents. Likewise, there are teens who seek the attentions of adults, for both positive and problematic reasons.

That said, the majority of adults and teens have no desire to mix and mingle outside of their generation, but digital publics slam both together. In response, most teens just ignore the adults, focusing only on the people they know or who they think are cool. When i asked one teen about requests from strange men, she just shrugged. "We just delete them," she said without much concern. "Some people are just creepy." The scantily clad performances intended to attract fellow 16-year-olds are not meant for the older men. Likewise, the drunken representations meant to look "cool" are not meant for the principal. Yet, both of these exist in high numbers online because youth are exploring identity formation. Having to simultaneously negotiate youth culture and adult surveillance is not desirable to most youth, but their response is typically to ignore the issue.

Parents also worry about the persistence of digital publics. Most adults have learned that the mistakes of one's past may reappear in the present, but this is culturally acquired knowledge that often comes through mistakes. Most youth do not envision potential future

interactions.

Without impetus, teens rarely choose to go private on MySpace and certainly not for fear of predators or future employers. They want to be visible to other teens, not just the people they they've friended. They would just prefer the adults go away. All adults. Parents, teachers, creepy men.

While the potential predator or future employer don't concern most teens, parents and teachers do. Reacting to increasing adult surveillance, many teens are turning their profiles private or creating separate accounts under fake names. In response, many parents are demanded complete control over teens' digital behaviors. This dynamic often destroys the most important value in the child/parent relationship: trust.

### **Conclusion:**

Youth are not creating digital publics to scare parents - they are doing so because they need youth space, a place to gather and see and be seen by peers. Publics are critical to the coming-of-age narrative because they provide the framework for building cultural knowledge. Restricting youth to controlled spaces typically results in rebellion and the destruction of trust. Of course, for a parent, letting go and allowing youth to navigate risks is terrifying. Unfortunately, it's necessary for youth to mature.

What we're seeing right now is a cultural shift due to the introduction of a new medium and the emergence of greater restrictions on youth mobility and access. The long-term implications of this are unclear. Regardless of what will come, youth are doing what they've always done - repurposing new mediums in order to learn about social culture.

Technology will have an effect because the underlying architecture and the opportunities afforded are fundamentally different. But youth will continue to work out identity issues, hang out and create spaces that are their own, regardless of what technologies are available.

### **Phrase Bibliography:**

[1] Thomas Hine's "Rise and Fall of American Teenager" p. 104-105

[2] Erving Goffman's "Presentation of Self in Everyday Life"

[3] Jenny Sunden's "Material Virtualities."

[4] Misa Matsuda in "Personal, Portable, Pedestrian"

*Note: A great deal of other literature informed this talk even if not*

*explicitly cited. Citations are used to explicitly reference people's turn of phrases.*

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posted by v | [10:52 AM](#) | [4 comments](#)

## Being Safe - Info for Parents, Teachers, and Kids

### WiredSafety

<http://wiredsafety.org/>

is headed by Parry Aftab (also a volunteer), a mom, international cyberspace privacy and security lawyer and children's advocate. Parry is the author of *The Parent's Guide to Protecting Your Children in Cyberspace* (McGraw-Hill)

Wired Safety offers:

- help for online victims of cybercrime and harassment
- assisting law enforcement worldwide on preventing and investigating cybercrimes
- education
- providing information on all aspects of online safety, privacy and security.

[MySpace.com](#) and other similar sites are designed to allow people to share their creativity, pictures, and information with others. Sometimes people do this to find romance. Sometimes they do it to find friends with similar interest. While this may be okay for adults, it is not okay for kids.

[MySpace.com](#) recognizes this, and prohibits anyone under 14 years of age from using their website. Unfortunately, while they may set rules to keep younger kids off the site, they can't prevent kids from lying about their age, pretending to be 14 years of age or older. To address this, [MySpace.com](#) has developed special software to review the profiles of their members, to try and find anyone under age, based on information the members post about themselves. It's not perfect, but it does help spot the underage members.

While [MySpace.com](#) is doing its best to keep your children from using their website and lying about their age, it's up to parents to do their job too. Parents need to talk with their children about not sharing personal information online. Personal information includes pictures, names and addresses, schools they attend, cell and phone

numbers and many other less obvious things, such as the name of their school team, ethnic background and even a mall near your house. (You can learn more about how to talk to your kids and what you should be asking at [WiredKids.org](http://WiredKids.org) or [WiredSafety.org](http://WiredSafety.org). I am an Internet privacy and security lawyer and founded the all-volunteer Wired Safety Group. We can help you if things go wrong online, or you just have questions. We provide information, education and one-to-one help for victims of cyberabuse.)

We at [WiredSafety.org](http://WiredSafety.org) are developing a special program just for parents concerned about their kids using social-networking and online dating sites. It will teach you what you need to know about finding out if your child has a profile on one of these sites, how to review them and remove them, if you want to. It will also help you if your child is being cyberbullied using one of these sites or members from these sites, or is cyberbullying others.

So what do you, as a parent, do? First you need to find out if your child has a page on one of these sites. The best way to find out if your child has a profile on this or another similar site is to ask them. If you're not sure that your child is being honest with you, you can search [MySpace.com](http://MySpace.com) (or the other sites) using their e-mail address, or by searching for their school. (You click on "search" and enter their email address or full name in the appropriate search box.)

If you find that your child has a profile on the Web site, you should review it. It's amazing how much you can learn about your child by reading their profiles. Does it contain personal information, such as their full name, address or phone numbers? Has your child posted photos? Are they photos of themselves or someone else? Are they sharing poems they write or provocative comments about themselves or others?

If you want the profile removed (you must remove your child's profile if they are under age), first ask your child to remove it themselves. If that doesn't work, [MySpace.com](http://MySpace.com) has a section explaining how to remove a page. If you find someone who is underage, you can report it there as well. It's not as easy a procedure as the other Web sites.

While [MySpace.com](http://MySpace.com) is working hard to keep kids off their Web site, ultimately, protecting your child is your job. But you have lots of help. At [WiredKids.org](http://WiredKids.org) and [WiredSafety.org](http://WiredSafety.org) thousands of volunteers donate their time to helping parents and children surf responsibly and safely. And we will be building a few tutorials help parents and their children understand how to be careful when communicating

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publicly online.

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A good thing to do is to ask your kids why they created the profile. You might learn that they wanted to share their thoughts with others, make new friends or even allow others in their school to get to know them better. But not all of their motives are as noble or safe. Some may be interested in meeting new romantic interests or role-playing inappropriately online. And when a young preteen lies about their age posing as a seventeen year old at the site, that can be a serious problem. Others in their late teens might approach your child thinking they were older. That's bad for everyone.

If you discover that your child is posting provocative comments or inappropriate images online, it's time for the tough talk. The one about stranger dangers and how that cute fourteen year old boy they meet online may not be cute, may not be fourteen and may not be a boy. (Parents of young boys need to understand that their children are equally at risk. About one-third of the cases of Internet sexual exploitation are men exploiting boys.) Our children need to realize that there are real risks relating to meeting strangers offline, including murder.

The first confirmed murder victim by an Internet sexual predator was thirteen when she died, three years ago May 2002. The risks are real, not matter how smart, sophisticated or tech savvy your kids are. We recommend the book, *A Girl's Life Online*, by Katie Tarbox. We are also developing a few videos for teens teaching them about standard ploys used by Internet sexual predators to lure a young boy or girl into an offline meeting or sexual exploitation situations online.

It's not easy raising children anymore. It is even harder when the parent is expected to be expert in Internet, cell phone and interactive game risks. The good thing is that you're not facing these challenges alone. We're here to help.

Just remember that while your kids may know more than you do about technology, you know more about life. And you are allowed to set the rules and enforce them. You're still the parent! There is software you can install that will record what your kids say and post online. There is even one that will e-mail you reports at work. The ones I like best are made by Spectorsoft, and can be found at [software4parents.com](http://software4parents.com) or [spectorsoft.com](http://spectorsoft.com). But don't use them just to spy on your kids. Treat them like a security video camera in the corner of a bank. No one views the tapes unless and until there is a break-in. Do the same here. Check the program reports if something goes wrong. It will collect whatever you need for evidence and to help

your child if something goes wrong.

Also, check your parental control programs. Many, such as AOL's and MSN's, can block access to social-networking Web sites. or other sites you think are inappropriate for your younger child. There are many other products you can purchase to block sites as well. (Check out software4parents.com to learn about and purchase some of these.) Just remember that the best filter is the one between your children's ears.

If you child is being bullied by another child online, check the terms of service first. If the bullying violates the Web site's terms of service, report it to TOS and the offending comments and/or profile will be removed. If something serious occurs and you need to reach out to law enforcement, let them know that WiredSafety.org is here to help them, if they need it. Cyberbullying is a growing problem. You can learn more about it, as well as how to prevent and handle cyberbullying incidents, at our StopCyberbullying.org and InternetSuperheroes.org. We also has a report line link for victims of cyberbullying, their schools and parents where specially-trained volunteers assist victims of cyberstalking, harassment and cyberbullying without charge.

If schools are looking for a presentation or program to address their students' posting inappropriate profiles or using these Web sites. while underage or other parent concerns, they should visit WiredKids.org or Teenangels.org. Schools may find many of their students using a particular Web site If the students are under 13, please notify MySpace.com's help staff and their profiles will be removed immediately. Working together with schools and parents, we may be able to keep our kids off of Web site that are inappropriate for young children and teach them to make good choices online and offline.

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:: [Bug Report](#) :: [webmaster@wiredsafety.org](mailto:webmaster@wiredsafety.org)

<http://www.wiredsafety.org/internet101/blogs.html>

<http://www.wiredkids.org/parents/parentingonline/index.html>

MySpace cheat sheet for parents

<http://www.wired.com/news/technology/0,70287-0.html>

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posted by v | [12:13 AM](#) | [0 comments](#)

WEDNESDAY, MAY 03, 2006

## Six Degrees of Separation Our Social Network

Our Social Network as defined in wikipedia

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small\\_world\\_phenomenon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Small_world_phenomenon)

The **small world phenomenon** (also known as the **small world effect**) is the hypothesis that everyone in the world can be reached through a short chain of social acquaintances. The concept gave rise to the famous phrase six degrees of separation after a 1967 small world experiment by social psychologist Stanley Milgram which suggested that two random US citizens were connected by an average of a chain of six acquaintances.

However, after more than thirty years its status as a description of heterogeneous social networks (such as the aforementioned "everyone in the world") still remains an open question. Little research has been done in this area since the publication of the original paper.

### Contents

Milgram's experiment

Milgram's original research - conducted among the population at large, rather than the specialized, highly collaborative fields of mathematics and acting (see below) - has been challenged on a number of fronts. In his first "small world" experiment (documented in an undated paper entitled "Results of Communication Project"), Milgram sent 60 letters to various recruits in Wichita, Kansas who were asked to forward the letter to the wife of a divinity student living at a specified location in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The participants could only pass the letters (by hand) to personal acquaintances who they thought might be able to reach the target — whether directly or via a "friend of a friend". While fifty people responded to the challenge, only three letters eventually reached their destination. Milgram's celebrated 1967 paper refers to the fact that one of the letters in this initial experiment reached the recipient in just four days, but neglects to mention the fact that only 5% of the letters successfully "connected" to their target. In two subsequent experiments, chain completion was so low that the results were never published. On top of this, researchers have shown that a number of

subtle factors can have a profound effect on the results of "small world" experiments. Studies that attempted to connect people of differing races or incomes showed significant asymmetries. Indeed a paper which revealed a completion rate of 13% for black targets and 33% for white targets (despite the fact that the participants did *not* know the race of the recipient) was co-written by Milgram himself.

Despite these complications, a variety of novel discoveries did emerge from Milgram's research. After numerous refinements of the apparatus (the perceived value of the letter or parcel was a key factor in whether people were motivated to pass it on or not), Milgram was able to achieve completion rates of 35%, and later researchers pushed this as high as 97%. If there was some doubt as to whether the "whole world" was a small world, there was very little doubt that there *were* many small worlds within that whole (from faculty chains at Michigan State University to a close-knit Jewish community in Montreal). For those chains that did reach completion the number 6 emerged as the mean number of intermediaries and thus the expression "six degrees of separation" (perhaps by analogy to "six degrees of freedom") was born. In addition, Milgram identified a "funneling" effect whereby most of the forwarding (i.e., connecting) was being done by a very small number of "stars" with significantly higher-than-average connectivity: even on the 5% "pilot" study, Milgram noted that "two of the three completed chains went through the same people".

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