

“Crackbook: How Status Updates and Tweets Help Us Tell Our Story”

Abstract: This academic paper was written for my Capstone course, Dialogues in the Humanities, HUMN 2440. I was instructed to write on any topic that falls under the term “storytelling.” In this paper, I discuss the many ways people tell their daily and life stories through social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus. I discuss the problems of cyberbullying, the ongoing privacy debate, and the psychological effects social media use can have. Every aspect of these social networking websites changes each user’s story in one way or another. We, the online people of the world, tell our stories in statuses.

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Nobody knows who wrote the first status update. Nobody knows for sure what social networking site they used or what they wrote. It could have been a brilliant idea or a clever joke or complaint. What we do know is that status updates and social networking website profiles have changed the way we tell the world about ourselves. Where once people wrote autobiographies, now they simply point to status updates from important days in their lives. Instead of writing and collecting letters, people can track interactions online.

Status updates, for the uninitiated, are short text-based entries telling friends whatever you, the user, deem worthwhile. These friends are other users of the site who either request or are requested by the user to be “friended” and approved to view the user’s profile, status updates, comments, etc. Each social networking website works differently, but nearly all have these two features.

The three largest, and, in the U.S., best-known social networking websites are Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus. These sites are going to be examples within this paper because their names are so well-known and they’re popular tools to tell one’s story.

Facebook is by far the largest social networking site at roughly 845 million users and climbing, according to the company. Facebook’s (formerly called Thefacebook) inventor, Mark Zuckerberg, invented the status update, which was inspired by the “away” messages of America Online chat users. “These short, pithy phrases were often used by AIM users to show off their creativity,” writes former *Fortune* magazine editor David Kirkpatrick in his book *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company that is Connecting the World*.

Though there was room for only a few words, users included political statements and humor as well as practical information about the account holder’s whereabouts. AIM away messages were so important to Zuckerberg that another of his earliest software

projects was a tool that alerted him when friends' messages changed. Thefacebook was going to be a robust combination of the AIM away message and that alert tool – a place where you could host more information about yourself so friends could keep track of you. (Today's Facebook status update traces its heritage directly back to those AIM away messages.) (Kirkpatrick)

Currently, Facebook also features profiles of each user, photos, games, instant messaging, the ability to “check in” at any location, the ability to comment on the statuses of others, and the ability to tag any of one's friends in any photo or status. Users can even play games on Facebook created by other users. Facebook has also grown to include profiles for politicians, companies, events, and pop culture figures. However, Facebook runs the risk of overwhelming users with information and activity. It's a never-ending buzzing hive of activity with dozens of paths to take after hitting “sign in.”

Twitter, while also popular, is just creeping up on the 500 million mark. Twitter is all about the status update, called a “tweet” in this case, that is constrained to 140 characters. Rather than friends, however, users become “followers” of another user – *any* other user. Any Average Joe can now see what Channing Tatum had for breakfast or what Snooki is wearing today. User A, though followed by User B, is not required to follow User B back. Users can “retweet” any other user's tweet if they choose, as well as share photos and videos through URL links. While the bite-sized format of Twitter is appealing to many, the system of following can be rather unnerving. It's exciting to realize one has 100 followers – until the realization sets in that 40 of those followers are either porn stars or spam robots.

Google Plus, the newest widely used social networking site, currently claims roughly 50 million users a day. Some say Google's attempt to elbow into the social networking scene is

destined to flop, others say it's the next big thing; the one thing everyone seems to agree on, however, is the fact that Google is trying to steal Facebook's ideas and improve on them. Google Plus also features the ability to create a personal profile and update one's status, but without the character constraints of Twitter. Google's biggest draw, however, is the ability to separate friends into "circles." Certain friends can go in the "friends" circle; others go into "family" or "work." Users can customize circles as they wish – say, to create a "bridesmaids" circle or a "frat brothers" circle. As Jeff Beer of *Canadian Business* magazine put it, "As Google sees it, you'd probably describe last night's party one way to your best friend, another to your cubicle mate, and have yet another version for your mom, and a social network should accommodate that." These circles can also "hang out" online by connecting via live webcam feed. Users do not, however, detail their relationship status, one of the features that first made Facebook so very popular.

What all of these sites have in common, however, is the storytelling each user does through their social media activities like statuses, tweets, photos, and comments. It's like keeping an online combination diary and scrapbook. Social media is a form of journaling in that miniature stories told in status updates and tweets add up to a larger life story. Social media will be historically important beyond the individual; it will be important in terms of relationships, news, and regional or global events.

A status update or tweet is more than the 140 characters of which it is composed; it's a snapshot of how the user feels at that moment or that day. These stories add up, through a history of updates and tweets, to become a much longer story of a person's years throughout being a user of the site. Facebook's "Timeline" feature is an excellent example of this storytelling of the self. "Timeline is a social blow by blow of a person's total Facebook past, an easy-to-parse, easy-to-

navigate account of his or her entire experience on the platform. ‘It’s how you can tell the whole story of your life on a single page,’ Zuckerberg said” (Townsend 36-39). A user of Twitter or Google Plus can also review all their tweets or statuses, though doing so on these sites is somewhat more time-consuming than perusing Timeline’s compartmentalized format.

Though Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus are all very popular, they were hardly the catalysts of the social media craze. According to Kirkpatrick, the history of social networking websites goes back even before the fall of the dot-com bubble – and even before the Internet.

Something like Facebook was envisioned by the engineers who laid the groundwork for the Internet. In a 1996 essay by J.C.R. Licklider and Robert W. Taylor titled ‘The Computer as Communication device,’ the authors asked, ‘What will on-line interactive communities be like? In most fields they will consist of geographically separated members, sometimes grouped in small clusters and sometimes working individually.

They will be communities not of common location, but of common interest.’ The article crept further toward the concept of social networking when it said, ‘You will not send a letter or a telegram; you will simply identify the people whose files should be linked to yours.’ As a key employee in the Advance Research Projects Agency of the Department of Defense, Licklider helped conceive and fund what became the ARPAnet, which in turn led to the Internet. (Kirkpatrick)

Shortly after the rise in popularity of personal computers and the Internet, the first social networking website was created. “In 1997, the first social network site (SNS) of the kind we know today arrived — New York-based SixDegrees.com. The earlier social Internet mainly involved one-to-one or one-to-few conversations, via e-mail or chat, or postings on interest-based groups. But the first true SNSs [social networking sites] — forerunners of Facebook and

MySpace — integrated several pre-existing software features into a package that closely resembles the social networking sites that gained blockbuster status in the 21st century” (Clemmitt). The downfall of Sixdegrees, say its creators, was twofold: no photos of users (this was well before most people owned a digital camera), and the slowness dial-up Internet connections. It’s amazing to think that not only did the grandfathers of the Internet predict something like Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus, but these popular social networking websites took the successful elements of early social sites and built on them to become the popular social sites they are.

While the stories that each user tells about themselves are important to their story, so are the online relationships they forge with other users. Online social networking relationships, however, are diluted versions of the real thing, and real-life romantic relationships now go through an online protocol before they are “official.” Many young Facebook users in relationships do not consider the relationship valid until it’s “Facebook official.” This new complication arose immediately after Thefacebook’s creation. “Now if a girl met a guy at a frat party, an elaborate set of online rituals was set in motion. They took on even more significance if you had already ‘hooked up’ (slept together). The first key question was whether the guy immediately friended you on Thefacebook. If he didn’t, that was a disastrous sign” (Kirkpatrick). Meanwhile, “friending” and “following” have devalued the real meaning of friendship. As journalist Max Davidson wryly noted in a November 2011 article in the *Telegraph*, “How many of your 99 ‘friends’ would lift a finger to help you if you were in trouble?” The effects of this decline in the value of real relationships are troubling, especially in light of facts *Alone Together* author Sherry Turkle cites:

A 2010 analysis of data from over fourteen thousand college students over the past thirty years shows that since the year 2000, young people have reported a dramatic decline in interest in other people. Today's college students are, for example, far less likely to say that it is valuable to try to put oneself in the place of others or try to understand their feelings. The authors of this study associate students' lack of empathy with the availability of online games and social networking. (Turkle)

A lack of empathy among the so-called millennials, a generation notorious for being self-centered, is a frightening thought. After all, a lack of empathy is commonly associated with sociopathy, and sociopathy is associated with criminality.

This "lack of empathy," combined with the anonymity of the Internet, provides a perfect opportunity for dangerous people to "friend" younger users and make them their victims. Profiles can disguise someone's true personality or even hide their true identity altogether. Someone posing as a 15-year-old girl from Los Angeles could actually be a 54-year-old man living in Tallahassee. This has changed the dynamics of trust in others online and how users portray themselves. "Teenagers make it clear that games, worlds, and social networking (on the surface, rather different) have much in common. They all ask you to compose and project an identity. Audrey, sixteen, a junior at Roosevelt, a suburban public high school near New York City, is explicit about the connection between avatars and profiles. She calls her Facebook profile 'my Internet twin' and 'the avatar of me'" (Turkle). It's not uncommon for teens to act one way on Facebook and another way in person. The danger is in a teen using their online identity to bully or harass other users.

The ability provided by the Internet and allowed by some social networking sites to shield one's real identity has increased the chances of young victims falling into the traps of

kidnappers and pedophiles. “CyberTipline, the nation’s hotline for reporting sexual exploitation of children, received 223,374 reports in 2010, nearly double the 2009 number. The soaring use of social networks, online games, smartphones and webcams has translated into ‘more opportunities for potential offenders to engage with children,’ says Ernie Allen, CEO of the Nation Center for Missing and Exploited Children” (Acohido). It’s no wonder the minimum age to have a Facebook profile is 13, and perhaps the age limit ought to be upped. Google Plus has a minimum age of 18, a fact that frustrates younger teens. Though 18 is rather excessive, few 13-year-olds are ready for the responsibilities of an online life.

The anonymity of social media also gives bullies an opportunity to harass others without having to deal with them face-to-face; and thus, without requiring them to observe the effects their words have on their victims. “Even as some are able to better function because they feel in control, online communication also offers an opportunity to ignore other people’s feelings. You can avoid eye contact” (Turkle). Online bullies are often called “trolls” because of their similarity to the fabled grumpy, rude creatures who live under bridges. “Trolls” can say things and do things they would never have the audacity or the ability to do in person. “Trolls may commit the virtual equivalent of a physical assault. In a particularly nasty case in 2006 online bullies emailed photographs of a teenager’s corpse, badly mutilated in a car accident, to the grieving family” (Economist). The evolution of the troll dates all the way back to sixdegrees.com, according to Kirkpatrick. “[Sixdegrees.com] also started to have public relations troubles – it engaged in a very public battle with so-called ‘fakesters,’ users who were deliberately creating Friendster profiles using phony names and identities, including cartoon characters and dogs.” With the endless possibilities the Internet affords pranksters, it was only a matter of time before trolls figured out a way to infiltrate and cause trouble for social networking

sites. However, even trolls have a story and reasons for doing what they do. Perhaps some former trolls will someday remember their trolling days with fondness: “Oh yes, I once got 100 people to friend me on Friendster... and I was pretending to be Scooby-Doo! It was all harmless fun.” Others may use their trolling experiences as cautionary tales for their children and grandchildren, a sort of “do as I say, not as I do” – especially since those esteem-damaging comments, catty status updates, and inappropriate tweets will likely be visible to future generations, given the increasing documentation social networks keep of each user’s online actions.

One fundamental issue on all social networking websites is that of privacy. Part of this issue lies in the username, email address, and password combination all such sites use. Many users have found their profiles compromised by hackers, whether friends or strangers. Turkle notes the irony that when someone tampers with physical mail, they’re a criminal, but someone hacking into a profile walks away without consequences, as shown by Turkle’s example of a young girl whose MySpace was hacked.

She explains, “Hacked is when people get on your page and change everything. Yeah, it happened to me once. I don’t know who did it. But it happened. [voice gets quiet] They changed the whole layout. And they made it as though I was a lesbian. I had to go and erase everything. A lot of people asked me, ‘Oh, are you a lesbian now?’ I had to explain to everyone, ‘No, I got hacked.’ It took me a long time to explain. And they’d say, ‘Oh, that sucks.’” (Turkle)

Hacking can be fairly innocent; many best friends hack into each other’s pages and post silly, non-threatening statuses. However, most hackers have more malicious ideas in mind. Some professional hackers use social networking sites to create a sort of domino effect: a user’s profile

is hacked, he or she seems to post a link, his/her friends click on it, and their profiles are subsequently hacked. And then there are the hackers who simply want to cause emotional pain, the hackers who share the same interests as trolls: wreaking havoc online. For all the emotional damage hackers cause, one would think there would be legislation preventing or prosecuting it. There is none, but there should be. Hacking into a person's profile is the same thing as breaking into their home; it's invasion of one's private online space.

The other half of the privacy debate lies with who sees what a user posts and how much. Users call the habit of spending a great deal of time viewing the statuses, profiles, and photos of others "stalking." It's an eerie term reminiscent of a predator stalking prey. Though some users consider the practice a harmless pastime, others see it as unsettling and invasive, like one young man who confided in Turkle in *Alone Together*.

On Facebook, one can search for the all pictures of any given person. This is often where stalking begins. Chris is handsome and an accomplished athlete. He knows that a lot of girls look at his pictures. "The stalking is a little flattering, but it also makes me feel creeped out... Some of the pictures creep me out, but everybody has these kinds of pictures online." And he is not in a position to cast the first stone. For he, too, stalks girls on Facebook who interest him: "I find myself choosing some girl I like and following the trail of her tagged pictures. You can see who she hangs with. Is she popular? Is there a chance she has a boyfriend? I start to do it in a sort of random way, and then, all of a sudden, a couple hours have passed. I'm stalking." (Turkle)

Privacy was part of Zuckerberg's original agenda when Thefacebook was first created, according to Kirkpatrick, who interviewed "Zuck" himself.

Privacy controls were part of the original design. And there were some big restrictions: you couldn't join unless you had a Harvard.edu email address, and you had to use your real name. That made Thefacebook exclusive, but it also ensured that users were who they said they were. Validating people's identity in this way made Thefacebook fundamentally different from just about everything else that had come before on the Internet, including Friendster and MySpace. On Thefacebook you could set your privacy options to determine exactly who could see your information. You could limit it to current students, just the people in your class, or only those in your residential house. (Kirkpatrick)

Twitter posts, of course, are entirely public. Google Plus emulates Facebook's privacy options, to some extent. Designated status updates are shared with designated groups of people. This ability to limit who sees what can be effective at screening out unwanted messages, wall posts, and friend requests. Thus, each user is allowed more individual control and privacy.

Social media sometimes acts as a tool to connect protestors, fueling and bringing attention to all types and sizes of protests. These protests tell a story, too; the simple act of organizing or joining a protest indicates a dissatisfaction with the government or an aspect of society. The Occupy Wall Street movement here in the United States was organized and fueled by Twitter attention. Many protestors who could not bring their computers to the protests tweeted minute-by-minute narrations of the Occupy Wall Street phenomenon. Future historians may look back on the Arab Spring, the series of uprisings in the Middle East in the spring of 2011, and pinpoint the first protestors who connected via Twitter. In Egypt, Facebook and Twitter were vital tools for communicating after cell phones and landline phones were blocked. These tools also served to connect protestors faster than ever; protests caught like wildfire. "So,

faster protests are different kinds of protests, in part because our emotions work much faster than our intellect. So, when you get people angry quickly, things can spread like wildfire, in a way that they can't on slower media" ("Social Media Acts as Catalyst for Policy Change").

Governments will now, more than ever before, need to keep up with the attitudes of their citizens on social media to at least see protests coming before they happen, if not change policies before the trouble arrives.

Social media will have a unique impact on history in that the number of people who were tweeting about an event as it occurred and in the days that followed will accompany current and future events in history books. Natural disasters, political upheavals, and entertainment events will all be catalogued in the archives of Facebook, Twitter, and Google Plus. "Last month an anticommunist uprising in Moldova was organized via Twitter. Twitter has become so widely used among political activists in China that the government recently blocked access to it, in an attempt to censor discussion of the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre." (Johnson). Sites like Trendistic.com track the peaks of trending topics on Twitter over the past 180 days, revealing what users are tweeting about. For example, this year the term "super bowl" peaked on Feb. 5; unsurprisingly, it was the very day of the big game.

This mass sharing of events, rather than diminishing how people discuss events, provides a common platform for users to talk about and experience them secondhand. "For as long as we've had the Internet in our homes, critics have bemoaned the demise of shared national experiences, like moon landings and "Who Shot J.R." cliff hangers — the folkloric American living room, all of us signing off in unison with Walter Cronkite, shattered into a million isolation booths. But watch a live mass-media event with Twitter open on your laptop and you'll see that the futurists had it wrong. We still have national events, but now when we have them,

we're actually having a genuine, public conversation with a group that extends far beyond our nuclear family and our next-door neighbors” (Johnson). Rather than separating us, then, social media is doing exactly what it’s intended to do – connect people. This is perhaps social media’s greatest achievement: the ability to connect with friends and family anywhere, at any time at their convenience.

Social media also acts as a tool for citizens to put more pressure on their government, even when most social media sites are banned in that country. Social networking sites often provide a semi-underground forum for citizens to gather and talk in ways they couldn’t in “real life.” After celebrated Chinese official and police chief Wang Lijun mysteriously disappeared after visiting a U.S. Consulate, social networking sites in China exploded with rumors. “Copies of airline tickets were posted online that indicated Wang flew to Beijing in the company of state security agents” (MacLeod 02a). Though China attempts to censor social media, MacLeod notes that “a large volume of content can get through before it is altered or removed by the government.” Many speculated that Communist Party leader Bo Xilai was involved in Lijun’s disappearance. Not long after the incident, Xilai was booted from his post (Buckley and Blanchard). To see such a change in the structure of China’s government, notorious for its nepotism, is encouraging.

Conversely, politicians can use social media to put pressure on would-be voters. Social networking profiles of politicians have shown a possible influence on voters; an advantage politicians will surely value in future elections. President Barack Obama was the first to take full advantage of Facebook and Twitter to garner media attention and connect with young voters. “Exit polls revealed that Obama had won nearly 70 percent of the vote among Americans under age 25 – the highest percentage since U.S. exit polling began in 1976. Obama counted more than

2 million American supporters on Facebook, while McCain had just over 600,000. On the microblogging platform Twitter, Obama could count on more than 112,000 supporters ‘tweeting’ to get him elected. McCain, for his part, had only 4,600 followers on Twitter” (Fraser and Dutta). Many politicians use the number of friends or supporters their profile has as a tactic to make them seem more accessible to the common voter, *Anthropology Today* contributor Steffen Dalsgaard writes:

The politician in question stands as a central node in a network of supporters with the aim of reaching further out along the links provided by these supporters. Like the big man, the politician on Facebook is also constituted relationally, in that by gathering a large number of supporters, s/he appears as a candidate with widespread public appeal— an appearance which is necessary in order to be taken seriously in an electoral contest.” (Dalsgaard 8-12)

Americans are so attached to their social media that it is becoming an integral part of how people read the news, how they report the news and how journalists gather information.

The balance of power between news providers and news consumers has shifted. Web publishing tools and powerful mobile devices, combined with an increasing skepticism toward mainstream media, have prompted readers to become active participants in the creation and dissemination of news. Video and text bloggers, DIY media activists, and professional journalists are struggling over the right to define the truth and to determine what form and practice of news production yields more credible product (Varnelis 66-67).

The consumer’s part in media has been changed by the ability to submit news, TED Talk presenter Clay Shirky says. “Every time a new consumer joins this media landscape a new

producer joins as well, because the same equipment— phones, computers— let you consume and produce. It's as if, when you bought a book, they threw in the printing press for free; it's like you had a phone that could turn into a radio if you pressed the right buttons" (Shirky).

In this age of instant gratification, however, the authenticity of news matters less than who knows about it first.

"It strikes me that most people don't care as much about who publishes news (or what are often rumors) first these days as they do about whether the sites they rely on have it right when they want it. Now, as we all know, news and information need to be on the platform we're checking, wherever we are. Being there and being accurate are how journalistic credibility is brought to the social media ocean. Yet many legacy media have fallen behind in delivering this one-two punch combination. While it's a given that there will always be a need for reliable verification, what must be better understood is how people seek out news and information and how they learn through their use of social media" (Overholser 4).

A profile on a social networking website can make or break a potential employee's chances of a job offer from a growing number of companies. Facebook allows users to post past and current places of employment and link to the Facebook pages of those employers. However, companies are increasingly including social networking profiles in their background checks on employees. One offensive post or inappropriate photo and a potential employee could find him- or herself blacklisted from open positions. Current employees are not exempt from their employers' snooping either; one unsavory comment could lead to a new job status: unemployed.

"38% of technology companies check out potential employees' profiles on social media sites such as Facebook, according to an international survey by Eurocom Worldwide, the global

PR network, and its member agencies around the globe” (“Staffing Industry Analysts”). Paula Whelan, an employment partner at Shakespeares law firm, notes the precarious situation in the triangle of employer, employee, and social networking site. ““By posting something even vaguely negative about your work on these social media sites, it’s breaking the relationship of trust and confidence between the employer and employee and the company reserves the right to sack the employee”” (Barnett). Recently, the battle between Facebook-using employees and paranoid bosses became even more heated: some businesses decided to ask employees or job applicants for their Facebook password. Others required employees to “friend” their superiors. According to Doug Gross of CNN:

Robert Collins of the Baltimore area testified before the Maryland Legislature in February that he was trying to reapply for his corrections officer job after taking a leave of absence when he was told he needed to hand over his password to prove he had no gang affiliations. “I did not want to do it, but because I really needed my job and he implied that this was a condition of recertification, I reluctantly gave him the password,” he told Maryland lawmakers, who are considering outlawing the practice. Erin Egan, Facebook’s chief privacy officer, says Facebook will “consider going to court if the practice doesn’t stop.” (Gross)

It’s true that employers are wrong to ask for these passwords, but when employees just won’t stop updating statuses, what’s a boss to do? Drastic measures may be the only answer to stop employees from updating profiles and tweeting during work hours.

Some of these employees who can’t seem to stop tweeting and commenting may suffer from an addiction to social media. Many social networking website users of all ages and occupations develop addictions to these sites. To put this addiction in perspective, according to

Leslie Horn of PC Magazine, a recent University of Chicago study found that Facebook can be more addictive than cigarettes or alcohol. “[Researchers from the University of Milan and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology] found that users exhibit physical and psychophysiological responses when they log onto Facebook, similar to the sensations experienced by people when they play an instrument or engage in some kind of creative activity” (Horn). These addicts are enabled by the fact that social media is increasingly more available; an increasing number of social networking sites offer applications that can be downloaded to a user’s smartphone or tablet. “A woman in her late sixties describes her new iPhone: ‘It’s like having a little Times Square in my pocketbook. All lights. All the people I could meet’” (Turkle). For those who are lonely, the always-on social networking sites are like a party that can be turned on and off with a click.

While social media addictions can be detrimental, to those with low self-esteem or shyness issues, they can also be a blessing, says *Scientific American* journalist John H. Tucker.

“...people with low self-esteem were more likely to spend more than an hour a day on Facebook and were more prone to post self-promotional photos (striking a pose or using Photoshop, for example). [Soraya Mehdizadeh, a psychology researcher at Toronto’s York University] also notes that social-networking sites might ultimately be found to have positive effects when used by people with low-self esteem or depression. ‘If individuals with lower self-esteem are more prone to using Facebook,’ she says, ‘the question becomes, “can Facebook help raise self-esteem by allowing patients to talk to each other and help each other in a socially interactive environment?” I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad thing that people with low self-esteem use Facebook.’” (Tucker)

In fact, some speculate Mark Zuckerberg may have created Facebook partially for himself; as a quiet, reserved Harvard student, it wasn't always easy to make friends. With Facebook, however, even introverts can be popular.

Many with social media addictions say they find it difficult to “leave the party,” to stop keeping an eye on who's in a relationship, who's going where for spring break, who's having a baby, who just got a new job, and who is still living at home. In terms of keeping tabs on who's doing what, social media has its roots in gossip. To understand why people use social media to keep up on friends, family, and acquaintances, it is necessary to understand the function and history of gossip. “...our ancestors faced a number of consistent adaptive problems such as remembering who was a reliable exchange partner and who was a cheater, knowing who would be a reproductively valuable mate, and figuring out how to successfully manage friendships, alliances and family relationships” (McAndrew). It makes sense that in today's world, a college girl would want to know if the boy she has her eye on is already taken; she could get into an ugly fight with his girlfriend and lose her place on the social ladder. Such a devastating blow to someone's social life can spiral him or her into a completely different life.

Though the future of social media is unclear, it's unlikely social networking itself will die off anytime soon. The fates of certain individual websites, however, are beginning to look less certain. Rob Reuterman, Reynolds Visiting Professor at CSU-Fort Collins and freelance business journalist for MSNBC, predicts that Facebook's future might not be so bright. Facebook's gaming partner, Zynga, recently branched out into its own website and decided to offer its games there for free. What this means for Facebook is that the games users once payed real, tangible money for will now be free elsewhere. With its new status on the stock market, Facebook needs to keep making money to survive. Reuterman suspects the death of Facebook will be advertising.

“I would suggest to you that this is the first step toward a divorce between Zynga and Facebook, at which point Facebook will lose 12% of its revenue. What I think will happen is the main part of the page will become smaller and smaller as the ads get bigger and bigger. Expect to see a lot more ads on each page. The user experience will probably change dramatically, and will likely become more diluted.” (Reuterman). Reuterman says a social website might replace Facebook, but it won’t be Google Plus. No matter what happens to these websites, however, nobody seems to see an end to online social networking in general. These modes of communication are becoming increasingly embedded into the American culture of “need it now.” If anything, social networking websites will thrive and entrench themselves in our daily lives. For many millions of Internet users, they already have. As the Internet grows and expands into the lives of more and more people, so too will social media grow. Humans, as selfish creatures, are eager to share about themselves, to tell their history, their desires, and their preferences to anyone who will listen. Social media facilitates this impeccably. It’s easy and enjoyable to document one’s daily life, down to the minutiae; it’s just as enjoyable to trawl through all that documentation and see the bigger picture of one’s life. Each user’s profile is a profound, detailed multimedia journal.

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