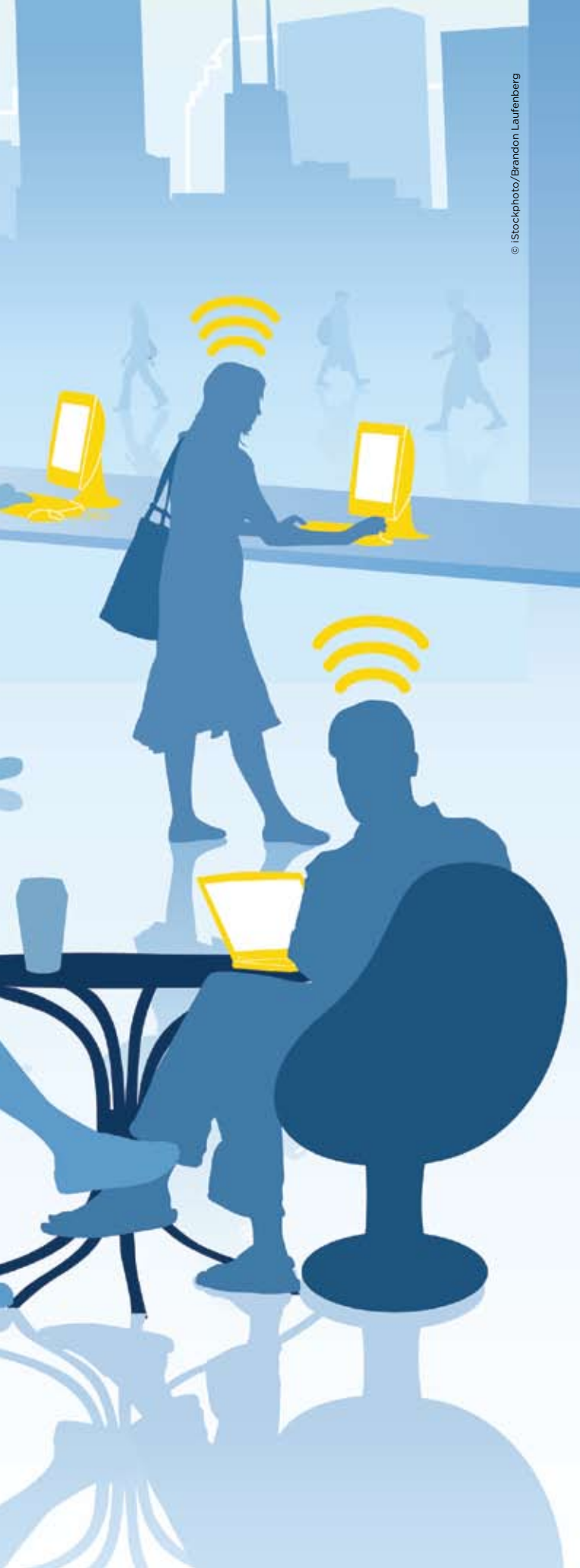


Social Networking Sites

Mirrors of contemporary individualism

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ANYONE PAYING ATTENTION to the lives of teenagers or college students knows that being on *MySpace* or *Facebook* is almost essential to their everyday experience. *MySpace* and *Facebook* are social-networking sites on the Internet that are part-yearbook, part-Rolodex, part-Little Black Book, and part-answering machine, with the advantage of being perpetually updated—by the second. They allow users to publicly develop and display their social connections and exchange messages within larger, overlapping, and intersecting networks. Many college students admit to being “addicted” to *Facebook* and leave the site permanently open on their computers. They check it right after they roll out of bed in the morning, while they study, and even in the middle of lectures on wireless campuses.

The sudden ubiquity of social-networking sites has left some parents of teenagers feeling worried and helpless. These virtual hangouts seem beyond parental control and adult surveillance. While the broader impact of social-networking sites is yet to be seen, it is possible that their significance will be short-lived. *Facebook* and *MySpace* could fizzle out and wind up as another of the “has-beens” among the short-term business failures of the Internet. However, there are good reasons to believe that social-networking sites are here to stay. They neatly “fit” key cultural realities of contemporary life in ways that few institutions do.

Consider the social-networking practice of “friending.” Users who join a social-networking site create personal profiles where they can express their interests and values. Users then browse the site, inviting others to their Friends list, and in the process gain access to their Friends’ networks of personal profiles as well. On a daily basis, users update their profiles, check for new information on their Friends’ profiles, and send messages to each other. Given the time involved in generating all this social information, it is not surprising that the most faithful and active users of social-networking sites are teenagers and college students.

While Friends lists often include actual friends from users’ lives, being a “Friend” in a social-networking site does not necessarily indicate a meaningful relationship. In fact, the value of a Friend connection is often merely symbolic and in many cases, relationally negligible. With a click of a button, one can just as easily add Hollywood celebrities, indie bands, or presidential candidates to one’s Friends list as one might

add a roommate, girlfriend, or cousin. While most observers marvel over the relational cornucopia that these sites create, what is more striking is the fact that celebrities, rock stars, and one's social intimates can exist side-by-side on a Friends list with little or no dissonance. A banality of friendship is designed into the functions of these sites. Its easy acceptance suggests that young Americans are both amenable to a "thinning out" of personal relationships and a "thickening" of ties to public figures conventionally encountered through the mass media. In this way, Friends lists publicly articulate and reinforce the contemporary experience of "pseudo-community," the illusion of relationship that media audiences feel with television talk-show hosts, movie stars, and other celebrities.

The success of social-networking sites also suggests that young Americans are comfortable approaching their personal relationships in the mode of consumer. *Facebook's* "News Feed" feature, for example, keeps users up-to-date on each of their Friends' online behaviors: who has posted on whose page, who has removed whom from their Friends list, and who has joined which group. Users can even keep track of the status of their Friends' changing romantic relationships. The options include "single," "in a relationship," "engaged," "married," or (my personal favorite) "it's complicated." With celebrities and close friends occupying the same social space, the daily practice of "keeping up" with one's Friends' profiles shares a disconcerting similarity with "keeping up" with the news on MSNBC or a Yahoo! page. As the maintenance of social relationships becomes primarily a form of information management, friendships easily shade into a form of consumption. Individuals, in turn, update their profiles and "produce" their identities online for the express purpose of being consumed in this fashion. As with many other contemporary social practices, where the private and public blur together, the value of intimacy declines and the consumer role is amplified.

Finally, social-networking sites may have lasting consequence because their very design articulates what sociologist Barry Wellman has long argued: the local community is no longer a meaningful category for many Americans. While we are clearly embodied beings, the salience of physical location has diminished in how contemporary Americans think about and function in their social lives. The best way to describe contemporary sociability is in terms of "networked individualism," overlapping networks of social ties that have individuals at the

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core of each. People understand "community" in terms of multiple systems of friends, contacts, and acquaintances that span time and place—but are oriented around each independent self. Uses of other technologies, such as cell phones, reinforce this dynamic. People make more and more calls not to places or households, but to individuals, quite apart from their physical location.

In *Sources of the Self*, the philosopher Charles Taylor meticulously documents the transformation of personal identity in Western civilization over the past two hundred years. He argues that the sources of self-identity have shifted from external and transcendent referents to the internal and subjective experience of the individual. Other scholars, like Robert Putnam and Adam Seligman, make similar arguments about the decline of community as an orienting feature of people's lives. That many operate as though the sources of personal identity are within the individual self is strongly suggested by the popularity and easy adoption of social-networking sites. There, networks radiate out from the center—a center that is not a location, a cause, or a common identity, but simply the individual. Sites operate on the presupposition that users are comfortable orienting their social lives around themselves. And so, it seems, they are, as young Americans easily recast pre-existing relationships and practices of sociability according to site prerequisites. While the cultural changes that make this adaptability possible have been long in the making, it may be that as late-modern individuals, we have finally begun to create social institutions that reflect and reinforce basic dispositions towards networked individualism and consumption in the intimate sphere. What is so remarkable about social-networking sites is not, then, how much they change the landscape of contemporary social life, but rather how well they succeed in reflecting its essential dynamic. ■