

Mediating Social Media: Examining User Risk Perception on Facebook

Daniel Borbey

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**Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa**

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Abstract

This thesis explores how social networking sites are changing the way individuals socialize in everyday life, and how users mediate this social media. The hypothesis explored is that Facebook user's perception of risk, when using the site, is related to how they frame the technology. Drawing on conceptual and theoretical tools from science studies and the sociologies of friendship, risk and surveillance, interview data is collected and analysed in order to identify the dynamics that structure Facebook use. It is concluded not only that, as hypothesized, participant's awareness and perception of risk is based upon their framing of the social networking technology, but also that the framing processes arise from the technosocial hybrid nature of Facebook. That is to say, it is not exclusively based on technological possibility or on existing social practices but instead by a constant balance between the two.

Introduction

It may be argued that modern society is characterized by the ubiquity of technology. In an era characterized by computers and constant development of technological artefacts, these are considered an everyday part of the lives of individuals. Technology can arguably no longer be considered as separate from the people who create and use it. While technologies are influenced by individuals, individuals are also influenced and shaped by these technologies. In particular, youth seem to embrace continual technological change. This change has now made its way to the realm of social networking. Specifically, online social networking sites appear to be growing at a tremendous rate as a means of socializing. When looking at the emergence of social networking sites in North America, none has seen a growth in membership and popularity as Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>). Since its creation by two Harvard graduates in 2004, Facebook has ballooned to an active user population of 500 million users'. These users' are separated into over fifty five thousand separate networks based on region, work-related, collegiate or high school connections (<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>). With such a tremendous growth in users and a large scale scope of social networks, Facebook may be considered as the ideal environment for sociological research. Furthermore, Facebook has a vast user base that could prove fruitful in studying the sociological effects of social networking sites on its users.

What is unique about social networking sites when compared to other websites is the sheer amount of personal information that is disclosed online by millions of

individuals. Based on the amount of personal information posted by users in Facebook profiles, it could be argued that Facebook users make use of the site as a significant means of socializing. As shall be explored, it seems that users consider Facebook as a private domain where they are able to share information with members of their social networks. The reality however is that the posting of information on the web is associated with various risks to privacy. We must ask ourselves what Facebook represents for its users. A starting point for sociological research would be to explore what Facebook represents for its core users, university and college students.

This thesis explores to what extent social networking sites are changing the way individuals socialize in everyday life. In this thesis it shall be argued that the perception of risk on Facebook is connected to how individuals frame the technology. The building and maintaining of social networks and friendships, once a fairly closed and private affair, is now taking place online and is being made available to individuals who can access online social networking sites. While online social networking sites do not replace traditional face to face socializing, socializing and friendships are now being staged and displayed online. There is a very important dichotomy to consider here. The building and maintaining of friendships is traditionally situated within the private sphere. What social networking sites like Facebook do is take this private act, and put it on display on the public forum of the internet. As a result of what Lyon terms ‘disembodied relationships’ there is increased confusion and blurring between the notions of private and public. This is because the private lives of individuals, specifically for example through the posting of information in profiles, takes place in the public space of a website (Lyon, 2001: 17). Moreover, other aspects of Facebook such as searchable databases of

friends within various networks also blur the public private distinction. This leads to a tension on online social networking sites between the private building and maintaining of friendships and the public forum of the Internet.

Why do individuals expose their once private relationships and networks in such a public manner? Might users of Facebook believe the site to be like their own private fora that allows the maintenance and creation of friendships? Facebook however, is not a closed domain. At its core, it is a website that collects personal information of its millions of users and makes available this information for all who can access it, including marketers, to see and in turn to exploit it. An example of this would be Facebook's social ads. Essentially, this service allows for targeted ads based on individuals preferences listed on their profile and their usage of the site.

(<http://www.facebook.com/business/?socialads>). Consequently, are individuals putting aside the potential risks associated with the posting of information online in return for the benefits gained from increased networking with others? What is the nature of these benefits?

Consequently, the use of online social networking sites can be situated within the context of the notion of risk society. How do students perceive the risk with regards to the information they post online in these social networking sites? Another relevant question might be if students perceive any risks at all. This thesis develops a conceptual framework that can be used to examine student's perception of risk in the context of the posting of information and maintaining of friendships on the social networking site Facebook, taking into account issues of privacy, risk, online surveillance and the ubiquity of technology in everyday life. In essence, the thesis examines how individuals mediate

social media. The hypothesis to be explored is that the perception of risk on Facebook is connected to how individuals frame the technology.

In Chapters One and Two, existing literature of relevance for this thesis is explored in order to both grasp the work that has already been done on social networking and explore some theoretical concepts that are pertinent to this thesis. Specifically, Chapter One examines Facebook and serves as an explanatory chapter on social networking sites. As these sites have not been around for very long, there is a lack of large amounts of existing literature on the topic. However, some significant research is presented, along with an outline of how social networking sites work in order to properly define the technology that this thesis seeks to explore sociologically.

Chapter 2 serves as a theoretical literature review through which relevant sociological concepts for this thesis are identified. The chapter examines the growing links between individuals and technology through a discussion of work in the field of technoscience. The chapter then examines literature in the field of network analysis, examining the link between social networking sites and concepts such as social cohesion and the strength of network ties. As Facebook is fundamentally centered on the concept of creating and maintaining friendships, the next section of the chapter focuses on the sociology of friendship and its relevance to this thesis. The chapter then shifts in direction and focuses on the potential dangers related to the posting of personal information online, by drawing on both the sociology of risk and surveillance studies literatures.

Chapter 3 takes the concepts presented throughout the preceding chapter, outlining the relationships between one another and frames them as the theoretical

framework for the research undertaken in this thesis. The chapter will then discuss the relevant methodology issues, outlining the recruitment method, research sample sought as well as problems encountered during recruitment. The chapter provides a breakdown of the research participants in a summary table as well as outlines other methodological issues such as how the data was analysed and participant anonymity ensured. Finally, the key research observations are presented, setting the stage for the detailed analysis of the next chapter.

In Chapter 4, the principal research observations are analysed in terms of their relevance to the hypothesis that students' framing of social networking technology subsequently affects their perception of the risks inherent with Facebook use, including those linked to posting personal information online. Key observations include participant's views on Facebook's status as an invaluable tool for socializing, and its embeddedness in their everyday lives. In addition, attention is drawn to the fact that the students interviewed make a clear distinction between offline or real life friendships and the online friendships they build on Facebook, which impacts their use of the site. Moreover, the fact that participants' sense of control over the personal information they post on Facebook is due in large part to their use and trust in the Facebook privacy settings is also highlighted. Finally, we discuss how users' awareness of the risks of posting personal information on Facebook is outweighed by the benefits of online social networking. The chapter further explores each of these observations and discusses them in relation to the hypothesis. The final chapter provides a conclusion where the research results are summarized and discussed in the context of the original hypothesis being. In addition, areas for future research are considered and discussed.

Chapter 1: Facebook

Before exploring the literature on the various topics which theoretically and conceptually frame this thesis, we begin with a general description of the Facebook website. What is Facebook, how does it work? Facebook is a social networking site that was initially conceived in order to allow Harvard college students and faculty to network and share photos and class schedules with each other in 2004. Individuals join up and create their own personal profile, which displays such information as full name, date of birth, sexual orientation, religious views, relationship status, photos etc (<http://www.facebook.com>). It is estimated that ninety percent of Facebook users use the service as a way of keeping in touch with or informed about the activities of existing acquaintances such as for example high school friends (cited in Walther et al. 2008: 30).

Facebook's design is centered on specific social networks that originally corresponded exclusively to colleges and universities. Individual users were grouped together based on their college or university. Facebook has since expanded to include other networks based on relationships such as secondary schools and geographical locations including most notably cities (Lampe et al. 2006: 167). Of note is that Facebook has recently eliminated city networks due to their large size, leading to concerns surrounding privacy and the amount of personal data available to strangers. The idea behind the networks is that "being a member of a network grants the users permission to view most of the profiles in that network and join most of the groups" (<http://www.facebook.com>). Individuals are therefore categorized into various networks and allowed to browse the profiles of the other users that correspond to the network(s) with which the individuals are affiliated.

Users of the Facebook service are able to interact with others within their networks through various means. These include for example the ability to communicate with a user both publicly and privately through the posting of comments and messages. Individuals will add others as their friends and begin to interact online. There is however ambiguity with respect to the notion of “friend” not least because the “definition of friends on Facebook ranges from established intimate relationships to simply being acquainted” (Walther et al., 2008: 30). Posting comments on another friend’s wall, which is a public bulletin board for each user’s profile, is another method of socializing enabled by Facebook. An individual may also choose to send a private message to somebody and may do so through the private messaging system. Finally, Facebook offers an instant messaging service which allows individuals to talk to others who are online on the site in real time (<http://www.facebook.com>).

Besides the methods by which Facebook allows individuals to communicate with one another, the service also allows for broad communication and networking between large groups of individuals. One means of such communication involves the joining and creation of groups. The group feature allows the users to browse and navigate groups on Facebook on various topics ranging from the political to the trivial and casual. Users are able to create groups or join ones that are of interest to them. In addition, users may interact with each other within the group using a public message board (<http://www.facebook.com>). Social networking sites such as Facebook therefore provide a number of ways for individuals to enter in social relations with each other. The significance of this can be understood in terms of the classical argument made by Tocqueville where he states “sociability is of the utmost political importance because it

creates new bonds between individuals” (Hoffman, 2003: 274). Facebook may therefore potentially be a new medium of sociability, and take the once private aspects of socializing into the open and public forum of the Internet.

Consequently, it may be useful to explore some of Facebook’s policies concerning the information posted on the site more closely. A first point to consider is that it is very difficult for a Facebook profile to be completely deleted. As noted in an *Ottawa Citizen* article, “you can’t really close your Facebook account once you open it; you can only deactivate it” (Mansour, 2008: B3). In essence, Facebook will allow you to deactivate your account, but all of the information will remain on their servers. Should you choose to reactivate your account, you will be able to find it just as you had left it, regardless of how long ago it was deactivated. In fact, in order for Facebook to delete your account completely, you must manually delete what may amount to thousands of posts, messages, photos, friends etc. (Mansour, 2008: B3). This is explicitly stated in Facebook’s privacy policy in numerous ways, including the following: “When you update information, we usually keep a backup copy of the prior version for a reasonable period of time to enable reversion to the prior version of that information” (www.facebook.com/policy.php).

Facebook has also recently come under fire with a complaint and subsequent investigation conducted by the Canadian Privacy Commissioner’s Office. Key concerns raised relate to Facebook’s transparency and a need to better explain how personal information of its users’ is handled and shared with third party advertisers (Schmidt, 2010). It is therefore clear that there are founded concerns related to online social networking, privacy and risk, as shall be further explored throughout this thesis.

Now that a general understanding of how Facebook works has been established, we will examine the small body of literature that has been established dealing with online social networking. Given that social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace are fairly new, there is a clear lack of research on the topic. However, a small number of works have begun to emerge and they will be explored below. The important concepts and questions raised shall be presented in an attempt to place the research being done in this thesis within the newly emerging literature on the topic.

Since they were first conceived, social networking sites have attracted millions of users, many of whom have come to integrate these sites within their everyday social practices (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 210). These sites have a variety of purposes, from connecting strangers together, being geared toward specific ethnic communities or, as Facebook does, allowing individuals in offline social networks to interact online (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 210).

What exactly does a social networking site consist of? While Facebook itself has been outlined earlier, it may be useful to define what makes a website a social networking site. As Boyd and Ellison explain, a social networking site is a site that allows individuals to construct and post personal profiles containing information about themselves. In addition, social networking sites display a list of users with whom a particular user shares some sort of connection, defined as ‘friends’ on Facebook for example. Finally, social networking sites allow a user to browse through their list of connections as well as those of other users (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 211). Social networking sites are primarily focused on its users, on people. Specifically, they are focused on fostering an environment for people to network with existing offline

connections. While the sites allow for connections with strangers, this is not their primary purpose (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 211). However, as we show in our analysis of the data, the very notion of what constitutes a stranger remains fluid and is defined by both technological potential and social practices.

If we are to base ourselves upon Boyd and Ellison's definition, the first social networking site that simultaneously allowed a user to create a profile, list their connections and browse other users and their connections was SixDegrees.com in 1998 (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 214). The site had been originally conceived to allow its members to build connections but failed to obtain popularity and was closed in 2000. As Boyd and Ellison describe, its founder believes the site was simply ahead of its time, a valid argument considering the enormous current success of social networking sites (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 214). Since that first site launch in 1998, a number of other social networking sites began to pop up, including existing sites that had essentially redesigned themselves into social networking sites. Perhaps the most prominent early example of social networking site was the rapid climb to popularity and subsequent decline of Friendster. It was originally conceived as a dating site around the notion that it was better to date friends of friends than complete strangers. While the site grew at a tremendous rate since its foundation in 2002, it was plagued by technical difficulties and an eventual alienation of its users caused people to move on to other social networking sites (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 215-216). The history of social networking sites is filled with examples of other sites coming and going, with principally MySpace and Facebook currently leading the way in terms of popularity, although Twitter has also been gaining much ground in the past few years.

Important for consideration when looking at online social networking is the sheer size of the networks involved. Unlike personal networks of friends, online networking sites are made up of millions of users. Dwyer et al. appropriately place this into context in stating: “Is it possible to join a network of millions of people and be able to trust all of them? This does not seem realistic.” (Dwyer et al., 2007: 2). Social networking site users also make use of the site on a regular basis. As figures from 2006 indicate, “Facebook tallies 250 million hits every day and ranks ninth in overall traffic on the Internet” (Bugeja, 2006: 1). Recent numbers from 2007 place the site as the seventh most visited on the Internet, just behind Google in the sixth spot. In addition, it has been reported that the average Facebook user will check their profile six times a day (Hodge, 2007: 96). It may thus be argued that the site is a vast domain where it is most likely impossible to have the kind of personal relationship with all of its members as one would in their personal private network. In choosing to make use of social networking sites as a means of socializing, individuals are creating online profiles and sharing large amounts of personal information with numerous friends, but also countless amounts of strangers (Gross and Acquisti, 2005: 71).

An important question raised within the work on online social networking is how users are willing to expose their personal information in such a public way and still expect to find some privacy within the confines of social networking sites. What Dwyer et al. offer as an answer to such a question is that privacy is both undefined and in some cases unexpected within sites such as Facebook (cited in Dwyer et al., 2007: 2).

Although Facebook does offer some privacy settings for its users, it appears that most users are unaware of these options. Previous studies by Acquisti and Gross in 2006 have

demonstrated that “Facebook members reveal a lot of information about themselves, and are not very aware of privacy options or who can actually view their profile”(Dwyer et al., 2007: 2). The argument may thus be made that the individual user must have an active interest in protecting his or her privacy, failure to do so leaves ones profiles for strangers to view (Hodge, 2007: 111). However, as Gross and Acquisti demonstrate, “while personal data is generously provided, limiting privacy preferences are hardly used; only a small number of members change the default privacy preferences, which are set to maximize the visibility of users profiles” (Gross and Acquisti, 2005: 79). They further find evidence in their studies to support a hypothesis of users accepting, or simply ignoring all together, privacy settings (Gross and Acquisti, 2005: 80).

From a sociological perspective, the way in which users frame the space and the activities that take place on Facebook might provide an explanation for this apparent disregard of questions around privacy. For example, “Facebook is sometimes perceived as a ‘walled garden’ because of its separation into distinct networks” (Tufekci, 2008:22). In this case, Facebook would be seen as a safe and personal space in which to express oneself with friends, and as a tool with which to keep in touch with friends, family and acquaintances. Consequently, while students do not change their default privacy settings, they might still believe Facebook to be a safe space to hold their personal information (Hodge, 2007: 99). Even if a user were to limit his or her profile to viewing by friends only, this still amounts to individuals exposing themselves much more than with traditional forms of networking such as occasional face to face interactions with a few people at a time. This is linked to the perception of the term ‘friend’ on Facebook. As was discussed earlier, Walther et al. explain that “[t]he implicit definition of friends of

Facebook ranges from established intimate relationships to simply being acquainted” (cited in Walther et al., 2008: 30). Friends on Facebook could therefore include individuals who would not normally have access to so much personal information about an individual outside of these virtual networks. Gross and Acquisti further argue that “[m]any individuals in a person’s online extended network would hardly be defined as actual friends by that person; in fact many may be complete strangers. And yet, personal and often sensitive information is freely and publicly provided” (Gross and Acquisti, 2005: 79). As such, by not using privacy settings found on Facebook, the vague definition of friends, and since the default privacy options are very open, Facebook is seemingly not a walled garden but could instead be seen as a glass box.

Another argument that may be explored is that users are voluntarily and knowingly exposing themselves using Facebook and the internet as their medium. As Tufekci argues, “in the self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) context provided by these Web sites, privacy should be understood as a process of optimization (Altman, 1975) between disclosure and withdrawal. The kids *want* to be seen” (Tufekci, 2008: 20). Thus users make a choice to manage social networks through this new medium. As Hodge states, “(b)y signing on to Facebook or MySpace and providing personal information for others to see, a user is, in effect, not seeking to preserve the information as private, but is instead making a choice to publicize this information for others” (Hodge, 2007: 107). Arguably the belief, if adopting this position, would be that users assume the benefits of exposing themselves outweigh the potential privacy risks (Gross and Acquisti, 2005: 80). We must therefore ask ourselves why this may be the case. The research conducted in this thesis generally aligned with other studies, such as Tufekci for example arguing that “previous

research has shown that students are generally aware of the visibility of their profiles, so it is not unreasonable to suppose that they are making a choice about publicity based on their *current* concerns and may be shortsighted about *future* problems” (Tufekci, 2008: 34). The research conducted for this thesis found that users were generally aware of the risks related to Facebook use but believed the benefits to outweigh these risks, as shall be further explored in our discussion and analysis.

What might we consider the current concerns or interests of users of social networking sites to be? In order to explore this question it is useful to quickly touch on literature concerning the omnipresence of technology in everyday life, which will be expanded in Chapter 2. As shall be further explored in the next chapter, it may be argued that users join social networking sites as a result of the desirability of embracing new technological developments and of a familiarity with computer technology in general. Consequently the use of sites such as Facebook grows at a tremendous rate, with little or no regard for any potential risks or consequences. The notion of a choice to disregard risk by users of social networking sites shall be expanded on throughout the next chapters of this thesis.

It may be useful to once again touch on the arguments concerning the ubiquity of technology within everyday life which shall be explored in Chapter 2 in attempting to understand why users adopt social networking sites without considering potential risks. The argument may be made that users of social networking sites do not consider any dangers associated with the use of the technology based on the way they perceive and frame it. As shall be detailed in the following chapter, individuals (in particular youth which are the target audience for sites such as Facebook) may perceive technology

designed for socializing as an extension of existing forms of networking and friendship instead of as an external tool gathering data which may pose risks. This is based on the interdependence of technology and individuals which will be further outlined in the next chapter of this thesis.

While themes of risk and surveillance shall be discussed in Chapter 2, examples may still be offered of some consequences related to the posting of information on Facebook. One such example concerns illegal practices on college campuses. As Bugeja explains, “college administrators are known to troll the profiles on Facebook for evidence of illegal behavior by students” (Bugeja, 2006: 2). Moreover, Finder reports on college recruiters and other employers screening potential job candidates on the Internet, including social networking sites. Finder further states that in order for employers to access the data found on social networking sites, “companies ask college students working as interns to perform online background checks” (Finder, 2006: 2).

For its part, Facebook makes the argument that they are not liable for any information posted becoming publicly available. Specifically, their privacy policy states that “[y]ou post User Content (as defined in the Facebook Terms of Use) on the Site at your own risk. (...) Therefore, we cannot and do not guarantee that User Content you post on the Site will not be viewed by unauthorized persons” (www.facebook.com/privacy.php). They also further state that if a user posts any kind of personal information on their site, that this information may become publicly available (www.facebook.com/privacy.php). It is clear that Facebook wishes to strip itself of any liability vis-à-vis very personal information becoming publicly available.

It must be argued however that the sheer size and vastness of social networking sites such as Facebook can lead to some benefits for its users. Primarily, the sites are designed to allow individuals to openly connect with others. In the case of Facebook, as has been seen, the site is organized by various networks. The design of Facebook allows an individual user to connect and interact with countless individuals within these many networks. Lampe et al. reiterate this point in noting that “[w]hile participation in sites like Facebook raises some concerns about privacy, there are potential benefits from participation, such as meeting new people through the site, or learning more about people in one’s offline community” (Lampe et al., 2006: 167). Despite potential risks involved, users choose and are able to connect with old or lost acquaintances and in some cases develop new friendships and or connections. Furthermore, studies have suggested that Facebook is primarily used to find out more information about offline relationships as opposed to the building of new online relationships (Lampe et al., 2006: 169; Walther et al. 2008: 30). As such, the argument can be made that Facebook is seen as complimenting traditional offline methods of social networking.

While Facebook may prove to have some benefits with regards to its effectiveness as a social networking tool, these benefits cannot be considered while ignoring the risks posed by the use of social networking sites. Taking the private affair of friendship formation and maintenance and throwing it on the public medium of the internet can arguably lead to serious privacy and surveillance risks. The body of literature that has thus far been established on online social networking may be small, but important concepts and questions have still emerged and can be taken into consideration for this thesis. Questions surrounding technological adaptation, friendship definitions, youth

networking practices and privacy have all been previously raised and shall form the basis of the literature review chapter for this thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will present an overview of the relevant literature that informs this thesis. The relevant academic fields include research on technoscience, social networks, risk, friendship and surveillance. Important concepts are derived from each of these fields and are used to develop questions revolving around the perception of risk associated with the use of social networking sites. This chapter begins with an examination of technoscience and the increasing links between technology and the individuals who use them. It then examines concepts found within social networking literature, and how they can be applied to online social networking sites. The chapter further examines arguments within the sociology of friendship, and how these may be used to understand individuals' behaviors online. In beginning to examine the dangers of social networking sites, the two last sections of the chapter will delve into risk and surveillance literature and their bearing on social networking on the internet.

Technoscience:

The goal of this first section is to outline the links between communication technology and the individuals who use it, which will then be examined within the context of social networking sites. It can be argued that technology may no longer be considered as separate from the people who use it. As such, it is important to take into account not only how individuals use technology, but also the relationship between individuals and technology, including how technology shapes and is shaped by individuals. As McCarthy and Wright argue, “[w]e don’t just use or admire technology, we live with it. Whether we are charmed by it or indifferent, technology is deeply embedded in our ordinary everyday experience” (McCarthy and Wright, 2004: 2).

Michael (2006) further explores the argument of the omnipresence of technology within everyday life in *Technoscience and Everyday Life*. By technoscience, Michael refers to the “interwovenness of science and technology, or of knowledge and technique in which technology is indispensable for the production of scientific knowledge” (Michael, 2006: 3). As such science and technology are linked and interdependent to each other. Moreover, both science and technology manifest themselves constantly in everyday life. In outlining the various complex perspectives on everyday life, Michael explains everyday life as taken for granted and rooted in sociality. As such, everyday life can be seen as “a constitutive part of what it means to be a human social being” (Michael, 2006: 18). Michael explains that technoscience is manifested within everyday technologies that are often taken for granted such as refrigerators, computers, radios, clothes, motor vehicles, shoes, chairs, doors and an endless list of other artifacts (Michael, 2006: 33).

Furthermore, Michael argues that “science serves as the empirical and theoretical basis upon which technology is innovated and developed” (Michael, 2006: 28). By this Michael means that technological innovation led by industry has traditionally been founded upon separately conducted scientific research and knowledge. It must however be noted that researchers have argued that this traditional distinction of the role of science in creating knowledge and industry in applying that knowledge to technological innovation no longer applies and that the roles are increasingly beginning to converge (Michael, 2006; Nowotny et al. 2001). As Nowotny et al. explain “the sources of scientific and technological knowledge were reshaped by the processes of internationalization and, more radically still, globalization, largely (but not solely) supported by the development of new information and communication technologies

(Nowotny et al., 2001: 7). Moreover, it must be reiterated that while science and innovation has been transformed by society, social transformation has also been fueled by scientific and technical change (Nowotny et al., 2001: 3). To further outline the erosion of the differences between science and society, Nowotny et al. argue that all societies can now be considered knowledgeable societies. Similarly, “science has burst through the boundaries of professionalization and institutionalization; ‘researchers’ are now socially and globally distributed” (Nowotny et al., 2001: 49). By this, what is meant is that science has both entered and been entered by the social, with both spheres increasingly linking into one another and, as described by Nowotny et al., increasingly co-evolving (Nowotny et al., 2001: 49).

As such, the development of a concept such as technoscience attempts to outline the growing relationship between science and technology, as well as the important role now being played by the social in determining technological innovation and the subsequent framing of that innovation on society. Technologies are not simply material artifacts; instead they carry with them specific cultural and social baggage that for example dictates how they should be used (Michael, 2006: 33). Technoscience as a concept is therefore useful as it defines the links not only between science and technology but also the increasing interdependence between technology and society in general by manifesting itself within the everyday as well as being in part shaped by it, as shall be demonstrated later in this section when looking at mobile phones.

An example of the integration of technoscience within everyday life offered by Michael is that of Velcro. Velcro at first glance can be considered as a very mundane invention, but one which serves a very real purpose for a multitude of applications and as

such is deeply integrated within everyday life. Michael further explains that “velcro, by virtue of its basic principle of operation, meshes with many other technoscientific artifacts that are found across a wide range of activities – leisure, work, communications, domestic, travel, medical, scientific” (Michael, 2006: 5). As such a technoscientific invention such as Velcro is developed and shaped not only by technology but by societal factors such as cultures and knowledges (Michael, 2006: 5). Michael’s arguments regarding technoscience are important in helping us understand that by looking at how technologies embedded in everyday life unfold we can develop an understanding of how technoscience both shapes and is shaped by social interaction.

Now that technoscience has been defined, it is necessary to develop an understanding of the relationship between the everyday and technoscience and the means by which technology both shapes and is defined by social practices. By social practices, we mean the patterned reflexive ways that structure the various exchanges and interactions between individuals. The example of mobile phones is particularly relevant here due to the fact that it is a technoscientific artifact that is completely portable and remains with users throughout the different dimensions of her or his everyday life. In addition, mobile phones intrinsically allow their users to connect with others at a distance, potentially replacing face to face connections with interaction over a type of virtual society (Michael, 2006; Castells et al., 2007). As such, mobile phones have shaped communication practices where “local reciprocal forms of recognition are seemingly replaced by forms of recognition conducted at a distance, across a ‘virtual society’” (Michael, 2006: 98). Moreover, the technology itself has evolved and been defined to greatly represent the individual who is using it. The ability to customize the mobile

phone using ringtones, brands, colors and shapes, while not unique to these technologies, adds to the distinction of the technology being inherently social and personal (Campbell and Jin Park, 2008: 373; Castells et al, 2007: 113). Customization of the mobile phone allow individuals to express themselves in various ways, and given that the device is constantly on the person, takes on the same role as an article of clothing (Castells et al., 2007: 111). As Michael further explains, from users with custom ring tones and flashy devices to those with plain and older phones, these features describe the user as fashionable, popular and connected or as traditional and resistant to technological innovation (Michael, 2006: 98). It is thus clear that the technological artifact that is the mobile phone has also come to be defined and molded by specific social practices.

In further outlining the impact mobile phones have had on social practices, Michael provides the example of individuals carrying mobile phones as being “in a permanent state of electronic communicative readiness” (Michael, 2006: 99). As such, for Michael technologies such as the mobile phone serve to demonstrate the extension of an individual’s network while at the same time seemingly withdrawing one from the immediate social network around them. What Michael explains however is that instead of withdrawing themselves from their immediate sociality, they are instead in part re-shaping it, thus demonstrating both the impact of technologies on social practices and the subsequent framing of technology based on these practices (Michael, 2006: 99).

It is clear that due to the nature of personal communication technologies such as mobile phones, individuals are able to embrace the technology and integrate it as part of their everyday social relations. Furthermore, these same social relations and practices have helped shape technological artifacts and innovations. Technology therefore has

gone beyond being a simple tool used in everyday life. Instead, modern technology is embedded within almost every aspect of our everyday life: from transportation, to healthcare, work, entertainment, etc. technology can be found just about everywhere. In claiming that technology and the people who use it are increasingly interdependent, Goyder argues that “[h]uman beings use technology and are affected by it in various ways, but even more we, in a manner of speaking, *are* technology” (Goyder, 2005: 213). By this, Goyder means that technology affects the way people behave in that technology changes the way people perceive themselves and each other, and how they perceive their relationship with the world (Goyder, 2005: 215). As such, this reaffirms the notion that individuals and technologies can no longer be understood in separation from each other. This technological interdependency is also reiterated by Castells, who argues that technology does not determine society, nor does society determine technological innovation; it simply makes use of it. Instead, he argues that “many factors, including individual inventiveness and entrepreneurialism, intervene in the process of scientific discovery, technological innovation, and social applications, so that the final outcome depends on a complex pattern of interaction” (Castells, 2000: 5).

Before further delving into a discussion of modern technology and its growing links and interdependencies with society, it may be useful here to distinguish what makes information technology, specifically the internet and social networking sites, different from other communication technologies that have evolved throughout human history. While this thesis focuses on individual use of social networking technology, it is evident that many other communication technologies have had tremendous impacts upon society. One of the first such technologies is the radio. The radio allowed individuals to

experience entertainment in the privacy and comfort of their own home, enabling them to control what they choose to listen to (Cross and Szostak, 2005: 282). A similar impact can be detected when the television was first brought into people's homes. Television however had a much stronger social impact as its images were considered a true representation of reality. The argument made was that while words in a newspaper or in a radiobroadcast could lie, images on a television screen could not (Cross and Szostak, 2005: 286). Television therefore was seen as a powerful source of knowledge and information that has only more recently been rivalled by the internet. Both the radio and television have fundamentally changed the way we live and interact with each other. These early technologies changed social interactions in that information could be rapidly distributed to an immense audience. McLuhan noted that television specifically engages individuals and creates a sense of community, citing the example of the broadcasted funeral of President Kennedy (McLuhan and Fiore, 1967: 125). While the social impact of television and of the radio before it are clear, it may be argued that the internet has brought forward possibilities for social change greater than the radio and television (Cross and Szostak, 2005: 213). While the radio and television represented the reality of a mass media society, mobile and networking technologies have brought about a new personal communication society (Campbell and Yin Park, 2008: 378).

It is important to re-iterate that personal communication technologies are also unique in that they keep the individual continuously connected to his or her social world. At the touch of a button they are able to call someone who may be at the other end of the planet, and with another touch of a button are able to retrieve any information they desire.

This of course eliminates previous limitations of technologies based on geography for example. As Castells et al. outline:

Essential to the sociability function of mobile technology is the permanent and ubiquitous form of connectivity that allows mobile users to stay in touch anytime and anywhere in a habitual mode of communication. As such, personal communication technologies are able to distinguish themselves from previous communication technologies, as well as establish themselves as extremely interconnected with the individuals who use them (Castells et al., 2007: 92).

As such, personal communication technologies are fundamentally different from communication technologies of the past insofar as they allow for interconnectedness with the individuals who use them.

Authors further argue that mobile communication technologies strengthen the personal bonds of social network ties. By being constantly connected to their social networks, individuals are able to build and strengthen ties with individuals (Campbell and Yin Park, 2008: 376; Castells et al., 2007: 156). Problems may of course arise from this constant connection, and a blurring of public and private spaces being another characteristic of mobile technologies. Specifically, the portability and personal nature of mobile technologies allows for its use in public settings where it may disturb other individuals, such as classrooms (Castells et al., 2007). As such, the technologies blur the line between the private interactions taking place between individuals and their networks as well as everyday public social interaction (Campbell and Yin Park, 2008: 377-378).

Furthermore, Russo argues that technology not only affects individual's relations with others but also ultimately changes the individuals themselves, specifically making

reference to youth. In sum, he argues that the current student generation is accustomed to thinking with a technical mentality, finding a linear pathway through complex digital systems with relative ease. Students will for example surf the net and learn and adapt to new programs for downloading and playing music as if they had been trained to do so. Furthermore, they grow up in a world where they are constantly surrounded by technological artifacts and as such students are essentially thought to think and act in terms of how computer mediated information is organized. This leads to the individual and technology coming to take on a very similar identity and purpose. As Russo explains, we find ourselves in an age where the individual is constantly gazing within the computer screen, absorbing themselves deeper and deeper within the modern information technology world (Russo, 2004: 501). It can be further argued that young people are quick to adopt and appropriate mobile communication technologies for example as they use these new services with more intensity for all kinds of purposes in their everyday lives (Castells et al., 2007: 167). As such, youth find these modern technological worlds familiar and part of their environments, thus they are more likely to take these technologies for granted and might not stop and think of their actions when engaging in activities on the internet. The individual becomes so absorbed within the world offered by the computer, the mobile phone, and the Internet that they are left vulnerable to the risks inherent within this technology.

In making reference to the internet in particular, Barg and McKenna outline two principal positions concerning its impact upon social life. The first position argues that the internet cannot compare to face to face traditional communication and as a result can produce negative consequences on its users such as loneliness and depression. In

addition, the possibility exists for the weakening of neighborhood and community ties (Barg and McKenna, 2004: 575). The second position however contends that the internet is a new and different medium of social interaction that in turn allows for the development of social bonds and ties that might not previously have been possible. This may therefore lead to an enhancement of social connectivity between individuals (Barg and McKenna, 2004: 575).

Finally, the argument can be made that our current modern information age is one that is also characterized by constant technological development. This may be due in part to interdependencies between individuals and technology, as outlined earlier in this chapter. As described earlier, all technologies, even the most basic or simple, could conceivably be considered as products of technoscience in that they may be updated through innovation based on societal need. The internet itself provides an excellent example of technological innovation. When first conceived, the internet was not designed to foster online collaboration, let alone connecting networks of individuals. In fact, it was first conceived as a US Department of Defense project as an experimental network connecting three US research facilities (Mowery and Simcoe, 2002: 1371). However, it has since evolved and adapted to societal needs to become a medium for supporting long distance communication and networked communities across the globe (Wellman, 2001: 2031). As such, there is a clear connection between technoscientific innovation and what appears to be a never ending technological development present in our modern world.

Now that some important concepts with regards to technoscience and the growing interconnections between individuals and technology have been established, we

may tailor them to the research question pursued by this thesis by specifically examining how they relate to social networking technology. To begin, it is clear that social networking sites are technoscientific artefacts embedded in everyday life which allow for increased links between people and technology that in turn mediate forms of sociability, thus making them inherently social technologies. Sites such as Facebook and the technology that allows them to operate including the computer, internet, and specifically social networking technology can clearly be considered as a growing part of many individuals' social lives due to their tremendous growth in popularity since they were first conceived. Viewed from the perspective of technoscience, social networking sites would be understood as being constantly shaped not only through technological and scientific innovations but also by the context of their use; that is to say the practices or the patterned ways in which groups of actors make use of them. In modern society multiple aspects of individuals' lives from their work to their transportation and, more importantly for the purposes of this thesis, their methods of keeping in touch with one another are deeply interlinked with technology.

The notion of technoscience also draws our attention to the ways in which social actors in using technologies customize and increasingly personalize them. As discussed in Chapter One, online social networking users tend to customize their profile spaces in an effort to distinguish themselves and build their identity. These communications technologies can therefore be distinguished from those that came before in that they are much more apt to be used by individuals to express their social identities. Earlier technologies such as the radio and television brought people together through the rapid availability of information and contributed to changing individuals' identities by fostering

a sense of regional, national or even global community. While personal communication and online networking technologies allow this as well, they are woven more directly and more continuously in users' everyday lives. While the television and radio before it might have allowed for continuous information, personal communication technologies including online networking now allow for uninterrupted contact (Campbell and Yin Park, 2008: 374). It may also be argued that technologies that allow social networking over the internet provide ever increasing technologically mediated closeness. What is meant by this is that social networking technology, more than technologies that have come before it, might bridge the gap between being a social tool to being part of the social. Information technology seems to have carved out a place within everyday social interactions. Social networking technologies allow users to engage in social interaction rather than simply being a tool which compliments everyday interactions. Given the ease of access to the internet through mobile telephony, constant connectivity not only enables links to individual others, as is the case with mobile telephony, but also to networks mediated by social networking media. The social significance of this cannot be ignored. If anyone is able to access their Facebook profile at any time, their profile essentially becomes an extension of their everyday social lives. They may use it to plan out their day and keep in touch with people just as they could retreat into Facebook and interact with the social world only through this online medium. In addition, authors have argued that mobile communication technology eliminates the boundaries of time and location. No longer are individuals bound by limitations of communication based on places or times, as they are now able to have mobile interactions anywhere and at anytime (Campbell and Yin Park, 2008: 375; Wellman, 2001: 2032). With regards to online social networking, individuals

now have the capacity to stay in touch and interact with all their family and friends without ever having to call or physically see them, and they could do this from anywhere a cell phone and internet connection can be used.

Clearly one of the consequences of this level of continuity and embeddedness is that these technologies blur the line between public and private. It is evident that online social networking can be usefully conceptualized in this way as it allows for a strengthening of bonds between individuals and their various social networks while simultaneously creating confusion between public and private relations as well as spaces. This thesis further elaborates this public and private dichotomy in an attempt to answer questions relating to user perceptions of social networking technology.

As noted above, some scholars have argued that contemporary youth have a distinctive relationship with new information technologies insofar as these technologies have been taken for granted background to their lives. This is clearly applicable to online social networking. Several authors make the argument that humans, particularly youth, and technology are intrinsically linked. As Russo outlines, “[t]oday’s children are growing up in the computer culture, all the rest of us are at best its naturalized citizens” (cited in Russo, 2004: 500). As such, students were an ideal population to study with regards to their use of social networking sites, as the world they have grown up in has been highly influenced by social networking technologies. In having only known a world surrounded by digital technological innovation, students may potentially prove to be particularly susceptible to its negative consequences. Furthermore, they are much less accustomed if not unaware of traditional methods of networking and, as shall be demonstrated in the next section, are as a result particularly receptive to social

networking sites. As Castells et al. explain, “these new technologies move young people away from the sphere of influence of traditional socialization structures, such as the home, educational system, and broadcast media, while providing an ever-widening range of socializing and identification options” (Castells et al., 2007: 141). Of further importance for the purposes of this research, the use of technology leaves electronic traces and, unlike past generations who grew up in a world where privacy was of central concern, “children are accustomed to electronic surveillance as part of their daily lives” (Turkle, 2004: 2).

Finally, it is clear that social networking technology is technoscientific in that it is subject to constant development driven by both technological change and social pressure. As established in Chapter one, online social networking sites were very quickly developed and subsequently membership and use has also grown exponentially. Furthermore, the technologies have gone through many phases to reach their current iteration, with no sign of a slowing of upgrades or changes to the sites. The most obvious change made by the site has been opening up the site to everyone and not only members of colleges and universities. Moreover, Facebook has recently changed its layout, adding new features, disabling less popular ones and generally striving for an improvement of their site through constant re-development and changes.

It is therefore evident that thinking about online social networking from the perspective of technoscience, which draws our attention to the ever growing link between technology, society and individuals can be extremely productive. Indeed as we show in our analysis of the data, an individuals’ perceptions of online social networking sites is linked to their experience and to how it is embedded in their everyday social life.

Networking:

In this section, some relevant concepts from network analysis are examined and tailored to further frame the exploration of online social networking. In introducing network analysis, Bruggeman states that humans “prefer to affiliate themselves with others in groups and communities of all sorts, such as families, settlements, religions, organizations, and sometimes virtual communities as well” (2008: 1). Moreover, humans are considered to be interdependent in so far as they rely on the knowledge they gain from interactions with others. For this reason, social scientists in particular can gain much more insight into humans by studying them within their natural social environment as opposed to individually (Bruggeman, 2008: 1). In examining the importance of studying the social environment of humans, we may outline an important facet of networking studies, social relations. As Jeremy Boissevain explains, “[n]etwork analysis asks questions about who is linked to whom, the content of the linkages, the pattern they form, the relation between the pattern and other social factors” (cited in Bruggeman, 2008: 2).

If we are to touch on social relations, an important facet to consider is that of social cohesion. In essence, social cohesion refers to the relations which keep individuals and groups together (Bruggeman, 2008: 12). Specifically, Granovetter argues that social cohesion refers to relations between groups of individuals that reconfirm shared ideas, norms and values (cited in Bruggeman, 2008: 12). This sharing of information through individuals can take place at multiple levels, for example through familial relations or through more distant acquaintances. Regardless of the way individuals are connected

with each other, we may examine whether or not they have social relations, which develop as a result of these various interactions. Specifically, as Durkheim argues, if the interactions endure for long enough, they lead to mutual expectations and solidarity between individuals, and eventually expectations and solidarity, or cohesion at the group level (cited in Bruggeman, 2008: 12). It is therefore clear that the concept of social cohesion should be kept into consideration when examining the social relations between individuals on social networking sites.

While Bruggeman's analysis of networks is centered upon relations between individuals, Castells expands this thinking in his development of the concept of the network society. In sum, Castells argues that, through the various relations between networks, we now find ourselves in an information age which is characterized by a new network society (Castells, 1996: 469). To clarify this statement, we must first define networks according to Castells. He states that a network is a series of nodes and that these nodes can vary depending on the network that is being described and are not limited to individuals or groups. Examples given include stock exchange markets within market networks, ministers and other politicians within political networks and coca fields within drug trafficking networks (Castells, 1996: 470). As such, Castells explains that society is filled with networks, and that networks are open structures able to expand infinitely and integrate any newly emerging or existent node during this expansion. For Castells, "a network-based social structure is a highly dynamic, open system, susceptible to innovating, without threatening its balance" (Castells, 1996: 470). The network society is thus a flexible adaptable social system which may take into account new means of

connecting with one another, as seen earlier in the chapter with regards to the role of mobile communication technologies within the network society.

Another concept of significance within network analysis is social capital. Social capital may be described as an individual's social connections within various networks (Erickson, 1996; Burt, 2002). As such, the more social capital an individual possesses the greater advantage he or she might have as far as networking opportunities (Burt, 2002: 334). In exploring social capital, Granovetter developed the strength of weak ties hypothesis which was further expanded upon by Erickson, Burt and many others. In essence, it states that because individuals are less socially involved with their acquaintances than with friends these acquaintances can potentially be valuable for increasing social capital through networking and information gathering as they represent and interact with different social networks than close friends (Granovetter, 1983: 201-202). One of the principal reasons for this is that weak ties or acquaintances will make up a much larger social network representing more variety in terms of culture, experience and information while friends will tend to be part of the same or very similar networks (Granovetter, 1983; Erickson, 1996; Burt, 2002). As such, the weak tie between individual A and individual B will allow for two completely separate groups and or networks to be linked, and for each individual to benefit from these linkages (Granovetter, 1983: 202). This of course is only possible if there is some form of bridge between the weak ties, as it has been demonstrated that an individual's weak ties are unlikely to be otherwise socially involved with one another. As such, tools allowing for the formation and maintenance of weak ties could foster social capital.

An important benefit of social capital that is significant within network analysis relates to the sharing of information. Specifically, authors often make reference to information relating to job opportunities. The argument is that information is more widely available through the vast circles of weak ties belonging to individuals with lots of social capital rather than those who rely mainly on circles of friends. Granovetter then demonstrated this hypothesis and determined that individuals received information concerning future employment more often through the network of weak ties (Granovetter, 1983: 205). Furthermore, Erickson, Burt and others argue that individuals with larger social capital use these connections to obtain more information and opportunities with regards to employment (Erickson, 1996; Burt, 2002). Specifically, Erickson states that “research related to the topic of social connections and class has shown that people with more advantaged origins and more prestigious jobs have better networks and that having richer networks can lead to better jobs” (Erickson, 1996:218). As such, the advantages offered by increasing one’s social capital in various ways could factor into explaining the motivation of individuals to post personal information and network themselves online.

Moreover, in examining networking and the rise of social capital from a technological standpoint, Witter takes Castell’s view of the network society and uses it to ground his analysis of the formation of networks in the information age (Witter, 2001: 51-52). His analysis differs from traditional network analysis in that he is not concerned with networks themselves or the social properties that may emerge from them but instead focuses on the practice of networking and how individuals build and maintain the various social ties within networks (Witter, 2001: 52). The argument, as explored earlier in this

chapter is that the increase of networking practices is directly tied to the rise in information and communicative technologies (Wittel, 2001: 52).

Other networking studies have been conducted to examine technological networking practices, including Hampton's e-Neighborhood study examining new means of social networking (Hampton, 2007). Hampton determined that the implementation of various technological tools including community blogs and chat rooms within specific neighborhoods not only fostered increased weak ties but also lead to a strengthening of existing strong ties (Hampton, 2007). While the data collected for this thesis did not focus on this, social capital remains an important notion to keep in mind when examining the reasons why individuals both perceive and use social networking technologies in various ways.

Some of the important tenants of network analysis have been presented and now their relevance to this thesis needs to be addressed. In essence, network analysis asks who is linked to whom by what type of linkages, the pattern formed by these linkages and how these linkages create social relations that are productive or destructive of different forms of social communication and cohesion. Although it is clear that Facebook could be productively studied in this way, in this thesis our concern is to attempt to grasp the specificity of the connections made possible by this technologically mediated and enabled form of sociability.

The distinction between strong and weak ties in the network literature is of great importance. It is arguably the case that technologically, technically and socially, Facebook is geared up for the production of open networks characterized by weak ties. Thus social networking sites lend themselves to this type of study. However, it is

important to realise that, as the data for this thesis shows, Facebook raises important questions with respect to the distinctions between strong and weak ties. The distinction is questioned in that, for example, both strong ties (family and friends) share the same space, time and information with weak ties (acquaintances and strangers). This is also clear, as we will show, in our analysis of the data in the context of the blurring of the public/private distinction of friendship formation. Therefore, although these network concepts are important in our analysis, we do not actually directly use them. Instead what we try to do is explore the extent to which it is meaningful to invoke the weak/strong tie or the public/private distinctions in the context of the types of technoscientific practices that underpin Facebook networks. In order to do so, we try to grasp how the framing and the use of Facebook by our interviews produces practices that keeps the network going without actually providing a measurement for social cohesion or social capital, among other networking concepts. As such, the potential for future research which would comprehensively make use of these Network analysis concepts will be further defined in Chapter 5. With concepts from network analysis outlined and their relationship to our analysis explained, we now examine the sociology of friendship and its role within the context of this thesis.

Friendship:

As noted in Chapter one, Facebook's social networking features are centered on the maintenance and formation of friendships. Social networking sites have taken the act of friendship formation and maintenance, traditionally reserved to face to face interactions and have placed it on an online forum. Consequently, friendship and how Facebook users define friendship online has played an important role in the data collected

and how it is analyzed in this thesis. Some relevant facets within the sociology of friendship will therefore be reviewed.

To begin, an important concept within the sociological study of friendship is the notion of personal choice. One chooses who they wish to be friends with, both offline and online with the online counterpart being much more explicit as all Facebook friends must be individually confirmed by the user as such. The notion of choice however is also clearly limited by outside factors such as cultural capital and social background. It is by making this personal choice that some theorists, including Beck, argue that individuals are in part forming their personal identities (Pahl, 2002: 411). Personal identity can be understood as “the distinctive combination of personality characteristics and social style by which the person defines himself or herself and by which the individual is recognized by others” (Grotevant, 1997: 145). As such, identity formation can be seen as the various ways in which personal identity is shaped and developed by structural constraints and social practices. Identity formation through the building and maintenance of friendships serves to specify further the broader technoscientific argument developed above with respect to how technology affects and is affected by practices of identity formation. In other words Facebook makes possible a technological mediated form of friendship that not only supports existing friendships but also enables new friendships and in doing so contributes to identity formation.

Another issue that figures importantly in the sociology of friendship deals with the definition of the term friend. As we show throughout this thesis, ‘friend’ is an ambiguous concept when used in social networking sites and can encompass all sorts of relationships ranging from family to acquaintances and even strangers. The same may be

said of friends in an offline sense, as the definition of the term varies greatly depending on the individual (Pahl, 2002: 412). What one person may define as a friend another could define as simply an acquaintance, and so on. This of course makes the concept extremely difficult to examine sociologically. Pahl therefore argues that the notions of friends and friendship can only be studied in specific historical and social contexts (Pahl, 2002: 414). We would add that it needs to be studied in specific technoscientific contexts as well.

Furthermore, in friendship formation studies it has been found that there seems to be a tendency to include many groups of individuals using friends as a general term. Kinship networks and friends seem to be analyzed as one in the same, often for example being grouped together in sociological statistical data (Eve, 2002: 390). As such, it appears that there is a tendency, as Eve describes: “to subsume the study of friendship under that of community” (Eve, 2002: 390). Eve further expands on this point in a footnote citing Silver (1990) stating that American Sociology seems to have deep rooted concerns over the theme of the community. As such, research on friendship has often emerged as a result of either the fears of a weakened community (the decline of the community thesis which includes the work of Fischer 1977, 1982) or the idea of communities being too strong and the research surrounding ethnic communities and their isolation from the mainstream (Eve, 2002: 390). Consequently, it is clear that the study of friendship must include a community dimension, as both are inevitably interlinked with each other.

Eve further argues that the actual sociological role played by friends is minimal, with the greatest impact of friends being on a personal, emotional level and not

necessarily one of social support or exchanges (Eve, 2002: 391). This is further supported, as seen earlier, by literature on networking which posits that individual weak ties or acquaintances have more value in terms of providing networking opportunities than close friendships. Moreover, while some may argue that friendships might not prove to be as sociologically significant as communities more generally, they could arguably be an important factor in contrasting between offline and online relations between individuals. In attempting to examine the differences between friendships formed in social networking sites and traditional offline friendships, Beer notes that in fact the two usually are one in the same or at least end up being so. In examining the case of friends on the social networking site MySpace, Beer notes that the friendships and connections that occur between people online are usually as a result of previous offline connections. In addition, purely online friendships often end up engaging offline at organized events such as music concerts (Beer, 2008: 231). This is confirmed in other studies which have determined that social networking sites are often used as a means to maintain existing friendships and connections, as opposed to developing new links (Boyd et al., 2010: 89). Furthermore, the data found in this thesis support the view of social networking sites being used principally for existing offline connections, as shall be further outlined in Chapter 4.

Finally, Pahl develops the hypothesis that trust may prove to be key in examining friendship and its impacts upon society in general. He argues that friend-relations can over time lead to a sense of trust between individuals. As such, Pahl argues that “the case for seeing friendship as a significant form of social glue becomes very powerful” (Pahl, 2002: 421). A similar argument is made earlier in the network analysis section of this

chapter when making reference to social cohesion, in that the relations between individuals can lead to solidarity and as such a sense of trust. This notion of trust is arguably important not only with regards to friendship studies but also for this thesis in general, as it may explain some of the reasons why individuals choose to disclose personal information online. In addition, trust could help explain how friendship relations are not only built but also maintained over long periods of time.

Now that a few of the tenants of friendship studies have been discussed, we may develop them to explain their relevance to our analysis. We may begin by returning to the notion of personal choice and identity formation through friendship. Previous friendship studies have demonstrated that youth tend to befriend individuals who are approximately of the same age and these groups tend to be homogenous, partially explained by the stratified school system and other systems that classify children by age (Boyd et al., 2010: 88). What online social networking sites potentially allow is for individuals, as previously described, to reach beyond limitations of geography in order to make new connections (Boyd et al., 2010: 88). Moreover, if we follow the logic that users of online social networking sites are using the services to build and maintain relationships, it could be argued that through their Facebook use they are, at least in part, forming their identities. This has in fact been confirmed by studies in the United States which found that just as teens flocked in the past to malls to socialize, they are now increasingly doing so using online social networking (Boyd et al., 2010: 79). Furthermore, they use the constant interactions online as a means of establishing and maintaining peer status and identity (Boyd et al., 2010: 83). Consequently, this thesis attempted to a certain extent to gauge the role of identity formation in the form of

Facebook friendships in contributing to making individuals disregard the potential risks of posting information. Specifically, of interest for this thesis was how Facebook is perceived by its users as a possible forum for friendship formation and maintenance and that perception potentially leading to an explanation of their online behavior.

With regards to the difficulties surrounding the definition of the term ‘friend’, this certainly spills over into the realm of online social networking. Just like its offline counterpart, that is society in general, there is ambiguity and confusion over the term friend used to describe users’ various connections. This confusion is as we show in our data analysis the outcome of technological structuring and social practices. Social networking sites label all connections under the term friend, regardless of the intensity of the relation, be it family or colleagues for example (Boyd et al., 2010: 94). In response our interviewees describe strategies that attempt to reintroduce the distinction. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that individual friendships in everyday life are never truly formalized per se. As such, one of the ways in which social networking sites such as Facebook change traditional friendship practices is by formally and explicitly allowing individuals to identify who they consider as friends (Boyd et al., 2010: 94-95). This in turn allows social networking site users to manage and control social relations online.

Facebook has also taken steps to attempt to clear up the ambiguity behind their friend labeling, offering its users the possibility of customizing their friend lists in categories based on how they are known to each other (school, work etc.) (<http://www.facebook.com>). Regardless of such efforts, confusion and fluidity remains in the social definition of friendship. Therefore, this thesis explores friendship definition

and formation in the context of a seemingly ever changing world defined by the rise in techno-science within the everyday, as previously outlined at the beginning of this chapter. More specifically, our research explores how friendship formation and maintenance through Facebook plays a role in their perception of the site, which may in turn alter their behavior and willingness to take risks online.

In addition, it may be argued that online social networking sites are fostering, if not creating online communities of sorts where individuals are able to group together and share similar thoughts and interests. The perfect example of a Facebook feature that fosters these kinds of connections are Facebook groups which, as described in Chapter One, have as their goal to regroup users with similar interests in a central location where they can socialize and connect in various ways. Boyd et al. found that teens regularly make use of social networking sites to maintain friendship and connections with their peers. While they might see each other at school or during other social activities for example, they make use of social networking sites to keep in touch when getting together is not possible (Boyd et al., 2010: 79). Social networking sites might therefore not necessarily create a new virtual community, but instead be an online representation of existing offline communities. Thus it might be the connection with the offline community that provides individuals with a certain sense of security and comfort when posting their personal information online. In support of this view, it was found in this research that participants felt a sense of security in using Facebook exclusively for existing friendships, therefore creating a sense of Facebook as a forum to maintain their existing offline socializations. As such, Facebook could be seen as a representation of offline communities for the participants interviewed.

With regards to explaining the difference between online and offline relationships, this thesis looks at questions pertaining to the intimacy of certain friendships being exposed in a public medium. As was established in chapter one, Facebook is centered on the notion of friendship, and seems to be taking friendship formation and placing it online in a radical step away from traditional networking processes. While offline an individual may have certain close friends that he or she would personally confide in, on Facebook these interactions take place on the public forum of the user's profile. In turn, the information found on the profile can, even with some of the most restrictive privacy settings on, be available for all acquaintances labeled as 'friends' to view. Questions therefore arise about the public private dichotomy mentioned earlier in this chapter, regarding intimate socialization and friendship formation and maintenance taking place in a public domain. Thus it is important to examine if trust in relationship to friendship formation serve to explain why Facebook users appear to blatantly disregard potential risks posed by the use of social networking sites. Is it possible that social networking sites are changing the way in which friendship is both developed as well as maintained? In analyzing the data obtained for this research, it was found that social networking sites do in fact change the nature of friendship formation. Further analysis of the use of Facebook to maintain existing friendships is will be outlined in Chapter Four.

Risk:

As has been established in Chapter 1, participation in online social networking sites can generate numerous risks. As such, it is important for the purposes of this thesis to place sites such as Facebook within the context of a sociological analysis of risk.

Ulrich Beck explains that “[r]isk is the modern approach to foresee and control the future

consequences of human action [as well as] the various unintended consequences of radicalized modernization” (Beck, 1999: 3). The concept of risk therefore centers on the control and prediction of potential pitfalls of various actions, especially in the context of new technologies. Beck places the concept of risk within a larger social context in arguing that the industrial society has now been surpassed by a new form of society, the risk society. Marshall explains that while industrial society was primarily concerned with the production and distribution of goods, the risk society is centered on the management and distributions of dangers or risks (Marshall, 1998: 557). These risks are associated not only with physical applications of new technological processes of for example nuclear energy but also “the consequences of risky organizational activity and social relations” (Marshall, 1998: 557). As such, the risk society thesis argues that contemporary society is a society that generates risks that cannot be eliminated but must instead be constantly managed.

Mythen further argues that “Beck has consistently maintained that contemporary western society is embedded in a culture of risk which has profound impacts on the nature of everyday life” (Mythen, 2004: 12). Just as technological development has had a significant impact upon society as has been previously established, so to has the development of a risk society. There are important links between technological development and risk society. Technologies for example, we know today are developed without the possibility of accurately predicting all potential hazards or risks. Beck uses the example of nuclear reactor development: “[t]heories of nuclear reactor safety are testable only after they are built, not beforehand” (Beck, 1999:60). Thus rather than prediction and knowledge, only probabilistic risks can be calculated in the attempt to

anticipate future scenarios. Consequently, experts rule in the world risk society and they serve to quantify and manage dangers, without ever being able to eliminate them. With new technology, the persistence of unknown and unforeseen dangers engenders a sense of uncertainty.

Risk society is thus seen by Beck in terms of uncertainty: “the new political economy of uncertainty, financial markets, transcultural conflicts over food and other products, emerging ‘risk communities’, and, last but not least, the anarchy of international relations” (Beck, 1999: 5). Risk society therefore produces and manufactures uncertainty, which is managed through risk strategies. Furthermore, Beck argues that “[i]n the risk society, the past loses the power to determine the present. Its place is taken by the future, thus, something non-existent, invented, fictive as the ‘cause’ of current experience and action” (Beck, 1992: 34). As such, the past cannot predict future risks as the risk society is one that is clouded in uncertainty which may in turn lead to potential unknown risks.

A significant theme within the risk society thesis is the notion of risk perception. Beck makes the argument that it is unclear whether actual risks have increased or instead simply their perception has (Beck, 1992: 55). This argument is however irrelevant, as he states that risks only exist in so far as they are perceived by individuals. In explaining both sides of risk, that is the risk itself and the perception of risk, Beck argues that “both sides converge, condition each other, strengthen each other, and because risks are risks in knowledge, perceptions of risks and risks are not different things, but one and the same” (Beck, 1992: 55). The manufacturing and acknowledgement of risks is therefore tied into the perception of these risks by individuals. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind

that what is understood or defined as risk will change over time as well as place. Risk may prove to be defined by perception in that what may be interpreted as risk for one may be defined as an opportunity for another (Mythen, 2004: 14-15). As such, risk is tied to perception and it is evident that what may be perceived as a risk varies between individuals, thus creating more uncertainty. Furthermore, when examining whether the risks taken by individuals are imposed or voluntary, the argument made by Mythen is that “what is significant is not whether the risk is voluntary or imposed, but whether it is perceived to be so” (Mythen, 2004: 101).

While Beck focused his arguments on newly developing ecological risks of the early 90’s, for example nuclear energy, he also hinted at the potential for the development of new future risks. Namely, Beck makes the following argument:

In the struggle over risks of modernization we are no longer concerned with the specific value of that which appears to us in perception. What becomes the subject of controversy as to its degree of reality is instead what everyday consciousness does not see, and cannot perceive (...) threats in the future (Beck, 1992: 73).

Beck therefore leaves room within his conception of risk society for unknown future threats.

Now that some important facets of the risk society thesis have been outlined, we draw attention to how they contribute to the analysis developed in this thesis. Risk society is seen by Beck as being characterized by uncertainty, where by its very functioning risks are created and must therefore be managed. It is clear that this is relevant to our understanding of online social networking sites, where risks are created

through the posting of personal information online. Of interest for this thesis is to develop an understanding of individuals risk management strategies, if any, with regards to online social networking and how these connect to technoscience and its associated practices. As has been described above, risk society is seen as generating uncertainty. Moreover, as online social networking is a new phenomenon, the past does not provide basis for predicting what risks may or may not emerge, and what impact sites such as Facebook may have on users. As a result, the world of online social networking, arguably, is one that is clouded in risk, both present and future. This also ties into some of the issues raised by technoscience insofar as technology is sufficiently malleable to be shaped by users and usual context. As such, it is impossible to foresee its future development independently from the actual social processes that shape it. By definition then uncertainty is connected to novelty. In turn, use of the technology will also depend on how users frame and experience risk.

Risk perception is in fact one of the central aspects being explored in this thesis that tries to understand the relation between individuals' perception of risk on Facebook with their use of the technology. As has been previously established through the discussion of the social networking literature in chapter one, the risks associated with posting information about one's self online could be interpreted by another as an opportunity to reveal his or herself through the medium of the Internet. Therefore, individuals who choose to join Facebook and reveal themselves to the world may be seen by skeptics as actively and voluntarily partaking in the various privacy risks that may result from this action. In contrast, as it has been suggested Facebook users may also be oblivious to these various risks and as such are not in fact voluntarily exposing

themselves but instead being subjected to these risks without being aware of them. This question is explored in this thesis by attempting to establish research participant's views on privacy among other risks that may emerge on Facebook. The data collected suggests that participants do not believe they are subjecting themselves to any immediate risks as they feel they are in control over the information they post. This is based in part on the technological privacy settings offered by Facebook as well as the social practices surrounding the type of information that is shared online. This dichotomy is further explored in Chapter 4.

In addition, a distinction must be made between immediate risks related to individuals exposing themselves on Facebook as well as future risk. It is clear that present risks related to the posting of personal information on the internet are much more straightforward to identify and as such analyze. Future risks must nevertheless also be considered. With the tremendous growth of social networking sites, it is evident that the future direction of social networking sites is unknown. There is no way to predict what future uses of the information provided on Facebook will be. As a result, this thesis examines participant's views not only on current risks but on the possibility of future unknown threats to determine if this has any bearing on their use of the site.

It is thus important to bear in mind that, as has been in part demonstrated thus far, the risks associated with online social networking are for the most part not immediate threats to the safety or security of individuals, especially if compared to the ecological risks described by Beck in his work. This is not to say that they do not pose a threat, simply that they may not be seen with the same sense of urgency by individuals. As a result, "it seems reasonable to argue that, for the majority, the immediacy of risks within

the everyday lifeworld will take cognitive precedence over potentially catastrophic but distant risks” (Mythen, 2004: 109). This may lead to a sense of false security and failure to look towards future consequences concerning the social networking use of Facebook members. In fact, it was found in this thesis that participants expressed an awareness of immediate risks related to their Facebook use but very few took into consideration any future consequences related to the posting of their personal information online.

While the risks posed by posting information online may not seem to be of any particular urgency at first glance, this may once again prove to be due to risk perception. As has been previously demonstrated, Facebook gathers data on its users that it uses for commercial and marketing purposes. This poses a very immediate threat to the privacy and security of users of the site. However, so long as these users remain unaware they will continue to consider any privacy risks as unimportant or not applicable to them. What follows however is an examination of yet another risk that is manifested as a result of the sharing of personal information over the internet, that of the potential for online surveillance. The argument could be made that if users were reminded of traditional forms of state surveillance, they would realize how such surveillance remains a possibility by making use of the vast amounts of personal data that they themselves have willingly provided online.

As such, to reiterate some of the concrete risks associated with Facebook use, this includes immediate risks to the privacy, safety and security of individuals due to the personal nature of the information posted online. As an example, it is clear that the posting of a home address or phone number can be linked to numerous risks, varying from use for marketing purposes to potential invasion or privacy or violence.

Furthermore, Facebook use may be seen as risky in terms of the possible impact on career opportunities, with the potential for employers to check applicants' profiles prior to hiring as well as current employers accessing employee profiles. These risks once again touch on the public private dichotomy that is Facebook. While its users might believe the site and their profiles to be situated in the private sphere, the reality is that they are in the public domain and as such are at risk.

The second large category of risks, while not as concrete, are the multitude of potential future risks associated with Facebook use. The simple fact that all information posted is owned and retained by Facebook can clearly be seen as a risk. For example, there could be a possibility of Facebook selling this information to advertising companies, which could then mine the data for various uses. Consequently, it is evident that Facebook use is a risky activity, both in terms of immediate risks as well as the potential for future risks, including online surveillance, as shall be detailed below.

Surveillance:

To begin, in defining surveillance it must be noted that traditional, bureaucratic, state controlled forms of surveillance are no longer considered the norm. Indeed, there is a changing nature of surveillance practices themselves. Modern surveillance, it would seem, falls very much in line with new technological developments. As Lyon argues, “[t]oday, the most important means of surveillance reside in computer power, which allows collected data to be stored, processed, marketed and circulated” (Lyon, 2001: 2). Furthermore, surveillance is less and less bound by particular geographical boundaries,

particularly due to the development of technologies permitting to break through previous spatial limitations (Boggard, 2006: 59).

Traditionally, when one thinks of surveillance, what usually comes to mind are images of state controlled bureaucratic surveillance of the populace, such as for example the Stasis in East Germany. However as Marquis explains:

Communications and information technology (CIT) has broadened the scope of surveillance of individuals, and raised important questions pertaining to privacy, accuracy, accountability, and uses of information held in state and private data banks. By way of example, consider the detailed files kept by the Ministry of State Security or Stasi on more than sixteen million East Germans prior to the 1990s. Through a network of hundreds of thousands of citizen informers, state agents, and surveillance equipment, the Stasi amassed security files that took up two hundred kilometers of shelf space. Each kilometer of dossiers contained ten million sheets of paper. This unwieldy system, which spread fear and suspicion among the population, was searched manually. Computerization would have made this huge security apparatus even more oppressive, but file cards were sufficient (Marquis, 2002: 227).

To imagine such a system in place in the modern age of computerization would be to make an extremely efficient system even more effective. As such, while traditional forms of surveillance such as those performed by the Stasis may still find some relevance, they have essentially been replaced by online and technological mediated surveillance (Marquis, 2002: 227).

Furthermore, the shift towards modern technology based surveillance also implies a reduction in opportunities for active resistance by individuals. In the past with traditional modes of surveillance, the monitoring could be attributed to a central figure, in most cases the state. This in turn led to the possibility of active resistance against this figure of authority. With online surveillance however, we are witnessing a shift in the way it is conducted. As Campbell and Carlson argue:

We do not believe such resistance will be found within the online Panopticon. Because the agent of surveillance is not as apparent in cyberspace – neither the guard nor the central tower can be seen even though they can be assumed to be omnipresent – it is less clear whom to resist (Campbell and Carlson, 2002: 603).

In addition, those conducting modern surveillance pose less of an intimidating threat than would the state or its representatives such as for example the Stasis. Less intimidation means more trust on the part of the individual and as a result more of a willingness to part with one's information. People will adopt an attitude that they have nothing to hide and therefore are safe (Arntfield, 2008: 38). However to those who make the argument that if they do not violate any rules, then they have nothing to worry about Lyon offers the following:

The whole point of this generalized routine, everyday surveillance is that you may well have done nothing out of the ordinary, let alone violated some rule or broken some law, yet your transactions, exchanges, conversations, movements and calls still come to the attention of agencies and organizations for whom these activities are significant (Lyon, 2001: 2).

It is therefore clear that the attitude that if you have nothing to hide there is nothing to worry about is somewhat flawed and is thus also relevant in the context of social networking media.

An important facet of online surveillance is that while some information is voluntarily provided, for example credit card information, other information may be gathered without individuals being aware. In this context, Andrejevic states that “[i]n many cases – as when search engines gather information about our Web-surfing behavior – we are largely unaware of what information is being gathered, how, and for what purposes” (Andrejevic, 2007: 301). While online sites seem to be providing users with a free service, the argument may be drawn that the site will attempt to receive something in return. An example would be Google and their Gmail email service, which provides its users with large amounts of storage for their documents and correspondence. In return however the users, whether implicitly or not, give Google the right to mine this information to later use for commercial purposes (Andrejevic, 2007: 296).

As an example of the ways information gathered from online users may be used for commercial purposes, we may consider modern advertising. Kellner (1995) discusses the nature of advertising in his text *Advertising and Consumer Culture*. Kellner explains that “[l]ittle advertising is purely ‘informative’. There are informative ads in the classified sections of newspapers, but television ads are mainly image based, creating associations between products and desired conditions, such as happiness and success” (Kellner, 1995: 333). Andrejevic further expands on this type of advertising in a discussion on the customization of advertising:

Customized advertising is offered as a technological solution to the problem that advertising itself created. Consumers are being blackmailed with the question: Wouldn't you rather be targeted by ads for products you're actually interested in than barraged by advertising for products that are completely irrelevant to your needs and wants? (Andrejevic, 2002: 263).

Moreover, as a form of customized advertising, companies are beginning to look into behavioral targeting ads using software which gathers data tracked by internet service providers on user activities and preferences (Butler, 2009: A8).

An important point to consider here concerns what users know with regards to the traces left by their online activity. As Wall argues, “[m]ost internet users are not yet aware of the transparency of their actions and the volume of surveillable ‘traffic’ data they currently generate in their Internet transactions” (Wall, 2006: 344). In his discussion on data-mining techniques, Gandy explains that “a variety of techniques, many of which are hidden from, or not disclosed, to website visitors are used to gather transaction-generated details about them (cited in Gandy, 2006: 366). This of course further strengthens the ties between the potential for modern surveillance and the risk society thesis. As such, modern data mining surveillance happens constantly and cannot be eliminated; the risks can only be managed.

As has been previously established, an important question for the purposes of this thesis is to understand why individuals choose to disclose personal information online. When making reference to online commercial transactions, Campbell and Carlson question “why individuals would provide any more information to corporations than is absolutely necessary to complete some commercial transaction” (Campbell and Carlson,

2002: 591). It could similarly be questioned as to why individuals provide personal information on social networking sites, where no commercial gain can be made from their disclosure. There is a visible tension that has established itself thus far throughout this chapter. In essence, what is revealed is “the tension between the need for users to share information in order to participate on the Internet while maintaining the individual’s right to control his or her most private information” (Wall, 2006: 357).

Campbell and Carlson further reaffirm this notion in that there seems to be a view that if you do not fully disclose yourself online, as it seems all others are doing, you will be punished by a lack of rewards from the online marketplace (Campbell and Carlson, 2002: 592). This view is further supported by the data obtained in this thesis, with participants describing their need to check Facebook to stay informed about their social world. They expressed concern in missing out if they did not regularly check their Facebook accounts, as the site has become a tremendous source of social information.

Now that some of the important facets of modern surveillance studies have been presented, we shall look at what these concepts contribute to our analysis of social networking sites. First, when it is recognized that traditional forms of bureaucratic state controlled surveillance have been enhanced by modern information gathering databases, it is clear that this aspect of surveillance is relevant to Facebook, as the site can be used by its providers as a giant information gathering mechanism. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that if Facebook may be considered as a modern data mining surveillance mechanism, its users are the ones who have made this possible. Indeed it appears when examining the practices of Facebook users from afar that they are voluntarily posting their personal information on the site and as such exposing themselves to the risk of

surveillance. In further supporting this perspective with the research data obtained, participants did not particularly express concern over any risk that was not immediate, including future unknown risks or those surrounding the potential for online surveillance.

Furthermore, the lack of a central authoritative figure such as the state within modern surveillance has been outlined as leading to a reduction in active resistance to surveillance. As a result, sites such as Facebook which may conduct practices and gather information which would traditionally have been resisted as forms of surveillance could encounter much less resistance on privacy or other related concerns. It is again important to re-iterate here that this lack of resistance may not appear to pose a problem due to a lack of immediate visible threats. However, as was discussed earlier in this chapter, the potential for future unknown threats and risks, for example modern surveillance practices which make use of the vast amounts of data provided by Facebook users, cannot be ignored. It becomes important to understand how the specific ways in which individuals use Facebook technology makes them aware or preempts an awareness of the risks associated with this type of surveillance. Hence the importance in understanding users' perceptions of risk, specifically with regards to privacy and the openness of their Facebook profile to others. Do certain Facebook users adopt the nothing to hide attitude with regards to their personal information while others remain wearier of exposing themselves to potential online surveillance? And more importantly, can these attitudes be related to specific practices through which Facebook is embedded in everyday life of users and its relationship to both friendship and identity formation? In drawing on the research data obtained, it may be stated that some users did indeed express more concern over the privacy of their information as opposed to others who were less concerned. In

specifically relating concerns over privacy to social practices including friendship formation, a detailed analysis is provided in Chapter 4.

Above we noted that information that is collected online without the user's knowledge could arguably be of greater cause for concern. This is also the case in the context of information provided on Facebook. It should be noted that Facebook's news feed is simply the information that is gathered by the site that is generally known by other users and is a means of information distribution. However, the information that is gathered by Facebook but is much less evident than those displayed on the news feed feature include data used for marketing and advertising purposes. One such example of a Facebook information gathering mechanism, as discussed in Chapter one, is Facebook social ads. Facebook social ads further seek to create associations between products and conditions, in this case interest based on friendships. As has been previously discussed, features on Facebook such as Social Ads and the program Beacon associate a user's friend with a particular product, prompting the user with an advertisement stating that their friend recommends this or that particular product (<http://www.facebook.com>).

Another example of this type of customized advertising on Facebook includes the types of ads an individual will see on his or her profile page. If a user indicates that they are engaged to be married, they will be prompted with ads concerning wedding photography as well as other wedding related ads that they would be more likely to visit (<http://www.facebook.com>). As a result, individuals who participate in online social networking sites and disclose personal information can be seen as arguably producing "free labor" which is in essence "willing or unknowing submission to monitoring practices that generate economic value in the form of information commodities"

(Andrejevic, 2007: 304). In discussing modern surveillance and information, scholars have pointed out that individuals are generally unaware of just how much or what information they are leaving behind when they go online. It is evident that this may be applied to users of social networking sites who may not be aware of just how much trace information they are leaving behind online, as they are preoccupied with engaging in social networking activities with a host of other users.

In reaffirming a principal research question of this thesis, Lyon argues that “understanding how ordinary people experience surveillance in everyday life is a prime task for sociological research” (Lyon, 2002: 26). Some questions in line with obtaining such an understanding proposed by Lyon include the following: “Under what conditions do social actors trade off personal data against commercial or positional advantages? When might intended data subjects simply refuse to disclose the data?” (Lyon, 2002: 26). Such thoughts are unquestionably relevant to an understanding of why students post personal information on social networking sites. The chapter on discussion and analysis examines such questions in detail in order to grasp an understanding as to why students choose to disclose their personal information. The reasons found include various social advantages and benefits such as keeping in touch with distant acquaintances and staying informed about their social world. These shall be further expanded upon later in this thesis.

In closing the discussion on surveillance, it is interesting to look back at the advent of certain surveillance technologies and wonder what lies ahead for the future. While some potential future practices would seem ridiculous “such as submitting children to a portable lie detector test, others have become so commonplace that they have passed

into unreflective use, such as caller ID, once a technology paid for by those with security concerns, now a service as ubiquitous as cell phones” (Andrejevic, 2005: 489). This simply serves as a reaffirmation that the intrinsic links between individuals and technology have also lead to an increase in personal surveillance, while the online medium of the internet has potentially led to a lessening of privacy concerns by the individuals who make use of it.

In sum, it has been suggested throughout this chapter that there is an intrinsic link between individuals and technology, so much that it may be argued that technology both shapes and is shaped by society. As a result of the trend to quickly embrace technological innovation, social networking sites have seen tremendous growth as a new medium for the building and maintenance of individual social networks and friendships. As has been seen, Facebook takes the private act of friendship formation and maintenance and places it in the public medium of the internet. It has further been established that socializing through social networking sites, including the posting of personal information, creates various risks related to privacy and online surveillance. As a result, this thesis contributes to our understanding of how Facebook users frame the social networking technology and in turn how this affects their perception of risk with regards to the posting of their personal information online.

In closing, it is appropriate to examine an argument made by Beck, the founding father of the risk society thesis. When discussing the role of technocratic experts with regards to risk, including nuclear disasters, Beck makes an interesting comparison with sociology. Specifically, he argues that “[j]ust as sociologists cannot force society into a test tube, engineers cannot let people’s reactors blow up all around them to test their

safety, unless they turn the world into a laboratory” (Beck, 1999: 60). Beck’s words are interesting here when taken within the context of social networking sites. It may be argued that sites such as Facebook can be considered as a giant social experiment, where the world, at least in an online sense, is turned into a laboratory. Sociologists do not need to force society into a test tube, as it appears, based on the risks found with posting personal data online, that some have voluntarily placed themselves within the proverbial tube.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Theoretical Framework:

The research in this thesis is theoretically framed by the conception of technology being inherently social in nature. Furthermore, this research frames social networking sites, including Facebook, as an instance of technoscience. This means that our analysis has to establish to what extent and the ways in which Facebook is embedded in the everyday lives of our interviewees. In other words, we must examine how individuals mediate social media. Consequently, we are interested in understanding how Facebook use arises out of the dynamics between technological and technical potential and particular social practices because the evidence produced by the body of research developed by technoscience scholars, leads us to expect that Facebook as a social networking technology is neither pure technological possibility nor defined exclusively by what people do. It has to be understood as being a combination of both. Furthermore it is this combination of technology and social practice that can provide us with an understanding of how individuals frame the technology hence also how they perceive risk. By framing, we mean the way in which respondents incorporate Facebook into their everyday lives, the role and utility they assign to it and the extent to which they see Facebook as belonging to their private or public sphere. While the particular framing depends on how social practices and technological potential intertwine the two are different.

By social practices, we mean the various patterned means by which people exchange and interact with other social agents, often social practices are mediated through technology but they do not have to be. Furthermore, social practices, as we

understand them here, are not the conscious scripts that people use to make sense of their lives. Social practice is an analytical term whose use is that it groups together and tries to explain patterned behavior. Because the idea of and the online practices of friendship are crucial to Facebook we can theoretically expect that they will be an important dimension of how the technology is framed by users. However as shown in Chapter 2 in our review of the friendship literature, friendship is not stable. Consistent with our technoscientific approach, we understand friendship practices on Facebook to develop at the intersection of technological potential and social practices. In particular, based on our discussion of the literature review, we think that the following notions are theoretically important:

- 1) The possibility of “permanent and ubiquitous connectivity”
- 2) The blurring of the private/public distinction of friendship formation due to Facebook maximizing network connections
- 3) Practices whereby friends are defined more broadly than they are offline
- 4) The emergence of hybrid notions of socializing that connect the offline and the online
- 5) Notions of trust that are based on technical dimensions such as privacy controls,
- 6) Notions of trust connected to practices of friendship formation and maintenance
- 7) Customization of technological potential to express identities

The hypothesis to be explored is that Facebook user’s perception of risk when using the site is related to how the above contribute to the users’ framing of Facebook. In

order to explore this relationship in our data collection we asked our interviewees about the ways in which they use Facebook, including specifically the use of Facebook as a means of keeping in touch with friends and family. Moreover, users were asked about friendships on Facebook and comparisons were drawn between their online Facebook ‘friends’ and their offline or ‘real life’ friendships. Users were asked about the ways in which Facebook may be used to openly network with strangers as well as the practice of accepting all friend requests. In exploring these questions, participant thoughts were obtained on the hybrid sociality which emerges from Facebook use. In addition, users were asked to express their thoughts on both Facebook and the internet as a safe place to post their personal information, subsequently framing their perception of privacy online. Further data on the technosocial nature of social networking sites was obtained through a series of questions surrounding both their thoughts on privacy and the inherent openness of Facebook profiles as well as Facebook privacy settings. Finally, users were asked about their thoughts on both immediate and future risks related to their Facebook use, allowing the researcher to analyze their risk perception based upon their framing of the technology established through earlier questions.

Methodology:

This thesis explores students’ perception of the technology and the experience of the social networking site Facebook. As such, a detailed account of individual experiences and perceptions along with the relevant theoretical dimensions highlighted in the preceding section is required. Both the survey or questionnaire methods therefore do not apply in terms of the data required for this thesis as they would not provide sufficient qualitative data of the lived experience of the technology. While the focus group method

could have proven useful with regards to obtaining multiple sets of data from students on their perception and use of Facebook, it was ultimately not used for this thesis. One of the issues being explored concerns friendship and intimacy, and in order for individuals to feel comfortable in providing accurate information, it was decided that it would be best handled in the context of individual interviews as opposed to focus groups. As such, the method used for obtaining the required data for this thesis was one-on-one interviews with individuals. Through interviewing participants, the researcher expected to gain insight into how a particular individual uses Facebook everyday, and thus be able to analyze the theoretically relevant factors leading to this framing. Furthermore, this would allow for the researcher to learn how particular individuals frame the technology of social networking sites and perceives risks based on how they frame it.

Now that the method of data collection has been established, we must examine who was to be considered as the sample population for the thesis. As has been established throughout Chapters One and Two, Facebook was originally oriented and remains geared towards university and college students. It is designed as a web site for younger individuals to network, develop and maintain friendships. Moreover, young student generations fall into a category of individuals who have known nothing but a world surrounded by information and communication technology. The ubiquity of technology within everyday life has been previously described, and it is believed that young university students find themselves as having grown up uniquely in this technological world. As a result, it is believed that online social networking sites would be of particular appeal and influence to this segment of the population. For this reason, university students were chosen as the target audience for the interviews. It must

therefore be noted that the results obtained from this thesis cannot be applied to the Facebook population in general, as the social networking site encompasses over 500 million users (and growing) from multiple social backgrounds. Instead, this thesis focuses on the original Facebook core users composed of young university and college students. The researcher focused on current university students between the ages of 18 and 25, and no preference was made with regards to culture or ethnicity. For this thesis, 18 students were recruited for individual interviews. The individual interviews were recorded using a digital recorder. A detailed analysis of the individuals interviewed is presented in the table below.

Research Participants Breakdown:

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Recruitment method	Frequency of Facebook use	Concerned by privacy of information
Thad	25	Male	Facebook	Rarely	Concerned
Melissa	20	Female	Facebook	Daily	Somewhat concerned
Jane	22	Female	Facebook	Daily	Somewhat concerned
Markus	21	Male	Facebook	Daily	Somewhat concerned
Christine	23	Female	Facebook	Daily	Somewhat concerned
James	21	Male	Facebook	Daily	Concerned
Joan	21	Female	Facebook	Daily	Unconcerned
Pat	20	Male	Facebook	Every few days	Unconcerned
Emily	20	Female	Classroom presentation	Daily	Concerned
Laura	21	Female	Classroom presentation	Every few days	Somewhat concerned
Pamela	18	Female	Classroom presentation	Daily	Unconcerned
Michelle	19	Female	Classroom presentation	Daily	Concerned
James2	21	Male	Classroom presentation	Daily	Somewhat concerned
Lilly	20	Female	Classroom presentation	Daily	Concerned
Max	18	Male	Classroom presentation	Daily	Unconcerned
Sandra	22	Female	Classroom presentation	Daily	Concerned
Robert	18	Male	Classroom presentation	Daily	Somewhat concerned
Tony	22	Male	Classroom presentation	Daily	Concerned

Furthermore, focus was placed on interviewing university students from the University of Ottawa. This is due to questions of accessibility. The researcher attempted to obtain an equal number of men and women for the study. Students were initially recruited using Facebook. The researcher logged onto Facebook and searched individuals who were members of the University of Ottawa network. The University of Ottawa network on Facebook is composed of approximately thirty one thousand members and the Facebook search function of this and any network displays its members in random order. In order for Facebook to verify the validity of network members, individuals can only join the University of Ottawa network if they have a valid uottawa email address. From the randomly generated list of names, the third name from every second page was selected and sent a Facebook message asking if they wished to participate. Exceptions were made when the individual was found to have a 'mutual friend' with the researcher, as in a common acquaintance between the two. To ensure non-bias, when Facebook indicated a potential participant had one or more mutual friends with the researcher the next individual down was chosen to be sent the recruitment message. It is clear that if recruitment is done through Facebook that the participants obtained from this sample can be assumed to have a reasonable amount of experience and understanding of Facebook. In addition, the message sent to potential participants specified that the researcher was looking for individuals who used Facebook at least once every two weeks.

It must be noted that problems did arise from this recruitment method, as it proved difficult to receive enough responses from individuals who were interested in

participating in the research project. There could be several explanations for this. One such explanation would be that some individuals are not active users of Facebook and as such either did not check their profile to see the message or simply ignored the research request. Another reason might be that recruitment was principally conducted during the summer months when many students may have returned home and would as such not be available for an interview in the Ottawa area. However, a second wave of recruitment using Facebook was made at the beginning of the winter semester, presumably when students would be the most available as university classes were just beginning and a similar lack of responses was found. Moreover, it could also be argued that recruitment using the medium of Facebook could be seen as impersonal and as such much less effective than traditional methods of recruitment. As a result, participants may have dismissed the message as some sort of spam and as such chose to ignore the recruitment message. The above mentioned reasons all factor in explaining why the researcher was required to send over four hundred recruitment messages on Facebook in order to gather only nine participants with this recruitment method.

Furthermore, this type of sampling method may no longer be possible for future research. The reason is that Facebook appears to have put a system in place that detects if an individual is sending multiple messages out to individuals quickly. The researcher experienced this while finishing the recruitment process when a message from Facebook was displayed warning the user that messages were being sent to multiple people much too fast and threatened the suspension of the Facebook account if this action continued. It is clear that this process was established in order to prevent the dissemination of spam email to Facebook users. Recruitment messages could therefore only be sent a few at a

time in order to avoid being considered junk correspondence and suspending the researchers Facebook account. It could have been possible to bypass this process by contacting Facebook and indicating the messages were being sent for social research, although this was not attempted. As such and as previously mentioned, due to the need to send out messages to many people in order to produce even a small sample, this sampling method may no longer prove to be a reliable method for any future research.

As a result of these difficulties, further recruitment for individual interviews was conducted in person by the researcher through visits to classrooms at the University of Ottawa. The researcher briefly presented his project and sought to find individuals interested in participating in interviews. While a similar recruitment message as sent on Facebook was used, minor modifications to accommodate the type of recruitment being done were made. In addition, an incentive was added for research participants in the form of a random draw for 3 gift certificates to the Rideau Centre of 100, 50 and 25 dollars respectively. All participants to the research were equally eligible to win a gift certificate in the draw, including those interviewed through prior Facebook recruitment. The researcher asked for the Professors permission and presented for approximately five minutes and distributed the recruitment message for the students present in the classroom. In order to ensure anonymity, the researcher's contact information was present on the recruitment message in order to allow individuals to get in contact anonymously at their leisure. Despite this more proactive recruitment process and the addition of incentive in the form of the draw for gift certificates, only minor results in terms of participants interviewed resulted as nine more students were recruited. While students seemed interested when the project was presented to them in their classroom, few followed up by

contacting the researcher to schedule an interview. As a result of these difficulties with recruitment, the researcher was not able to conduct more than 18 total individual interviews.

During the interviews themselves, participants were provided with a consent form before the interview began and were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The data gathered from the interviews was analyzed using qualitative analysis methods. All interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed using in part the services of a professional transcriber. Some interviews were also transcribed by the researcher. The data found within the transcriptions was then broken down using open coding, with information being categorized in multiple codes or themes including but not limited to risk, friendship, privacy and social perceptions of social networking technology. The codes were then cross referenced to find similarities and trends between them. To ensure anonymity, all participants were asked to provide or were provided with a pseudonym. As such, when making reference to specific participants within this thesis, the pseudonyms shall be used.

To further describe the coding process, interview transcripts were examined in terms of relevance to the major research themes examined thus far. Furthermore, the resulting coded sections were analyzed in the context of some of the major questions raised earlier in the thesis. Issues of risk perception, friendship, and use of Facebook for socializing were all considered among others while reading through interview transcripts. As an example an examination of Annex B shows that participants were specifically asked to describe the ways they use Facebook to socialize and maintain friendships. As such, the data which emerged from their responses was used to form the research

observation found in terms of the differences between offline and online friendships. Interview transcripts were used in a similar manner to develop and expand upon the other principle research observations, and ultimately towards an examination of the hypothesis in question.

Now that the basic research methodology has been outlined, we may present an overview of the research findings. The key research observations found summarizes views of the majority of research participants which shall be further analyzed and expanded upon in the next chapter. Before continuing, it is important to outline that while general observations are presented; in almost all cases the opposite perspective was also observed. Some of these opposing views will be further outlined in Chapter 4, while focus here will be placed on outlining the general trends.

To begin, it was found that participants described Facebook as an invaluable tool for socializing. Specifically, they described Facebook as addictive and most stated using Facebook daily if not multiple times per day. They further depicted Facebook as extremely useful for easily keeping in touch with people. It is important to note that participants however found Facebook to be most useful for quick interactions with family and friends, or more in depth socializing with others when not possible by other means such as phone or in person due to various factors including distance. They generally did not believe social networking sites to be an adequate replacement for traditional means of socializing, but instead a complimentary tool that they seemingly could not do without.

A second observation to be further developed is that participants made a clear distinction between their friendships on Facebook and their offline friendships. For them, they are to be considered two separate things, as not all Facebook friends are also friends

in a traditional sense offline. It appears that participants use Facebook friends to showcase everyone that they know, including friends, family and distant acquaintances. This might be rooted in various online social norms developed on Facebook, whereby it is frowned upon to not accept friend requests. There seems to be an expectation to accept friend requests in order to allow others to build and maximize upon the socializing provided by online social networks. Participants expressed a desire not to want to hurt an individual's feelings by not accepting their friend request, particularly given the fact that Facebook makes it visible if you have added them or not. As such, Facebook friends appear, for the most part, to be a collection of everyone a user has ever known, and these individuals are therefore privy to any personal information posted on the user profile. It should be noted that many participants expressed a need to 'clean up' their friend list by going through and deleting individuals that they did not talk to or simply did not know. The fact however remains that new Facebook users seemingly build up and add many friends to their profile with the purpose of building up an online social network. Also important is that, for the most part, participants' offline friends were also included in their Facebook friends, and Facebook was regularly used to keep in touch with or send quick messages to these friends. The ways in which Facebook users make use of the site in terms of having both close friendships and distant acquaintances may serve to further define how the site is framed by its users and ultimately how this framing effects their perception of risk.

Another observation to be expanded upon concerns user's personal information on Facebook. It appears participants feel a sense of control over the information they post on Facebook due to the privacy settings that are offered to them. Most participants

found the privacy settings to be sufficient in controlling their information and while they did not disclose extremely personal information, such as credit card numbers for example, they were comfortable with the information they did share on their profile. There seems to be a common trust placed in both Facebook and its privacy settings, alleviating users of any initial concerns of sharing their information and encouraging them to share and network as the site promotes. Participants seemed unaware of the various ways in which Facebook could use information once posted on its site and generally unconcerned with Facebook owning all information posted, whether deleted by the user or not.

To expand on this last observation, it was also found that participants were seemingly aware of the risks of posting information on Facebook. Despite this awareness, they were generally willing to take these risks in order to take advantage of the networking benefits offered by the site. It is important to note that participants interviewed were generally experienced Facebook users who had been using the site for some time. In addition, many pointed out their ignorance to privacy risks when they first began using the site, only afterwards beginning to express concern over the information they posted. Also of note is that many individuals described using social networking sites as the sole mean of keeping in touch with distant acquaintances and family members, therefore representing a necessary means of communication. As such, users would either disregard or be unconcerned by risks related to the posting of their personal information online. Furthermore, few participants took into consideration any future long term risks related to the information posted.

Chapter 4: Discussion and Analysis

In this chapter, the key research observations outlined above will be analyzed and discussed in terms of their relation to the hypothesis being explored in this thesis which is that Facebook users framing of the technology affects their perception of risk online when posting their personal information. In this chapter we want to go beyond the summarizing presented in the preceding chapter. In order to do this we will use the theoretically important practices and technological potentials outlined in the previous chapter to make sense of the principle observations

Facebook as an invaluable tool for everyday socializing:

To begin, as outlined in the previous chapter, a first observation was that Facebook was described by participants as an invaluable tool for socializing. As participants explained how they use Facebook, they portrayed it as a quick and convenient way to stay in touch with their friends and family. As described by Melissa: “it allows me to keep in touch with people more because I’m not going to pick up the phone and call all my friends every day but now I can kind of know what everyone is up to and know what’s going on without having to call them” (Melissa). The majority of participants expressed similar feelings, with Facebook being used as a complimentary tool for other means of socializing, as expressed by Joan: “I think that Facebook is good for connecting with people that you haven’t seen in a while or people that you wouldn’t see because maybe they are too far away or something” (Joan). In fact, almost all participants acknowledged that they used Facebook, although to a varying degree, to keep up with distant acquaintances and family.

This research has determined that the majority of this sample group of users makes use of Facebook as an important means of keeping in touch with others. It is therefore clear that for these research participants Facebook has come to play a prominent role in their daily social lives. As one individual described, Facebook “brings so many pieces of your social life together, like, just direct communication from person to person, just generally telling people who you are (...) and having all of those tools accessible on one site, and that site being organized so well, it’s a good tool to use” (James2). As such, for these users Facebook has shifted from an entertaining website where users are able to network and share information to becoming a tool for the everyday maintenance of their social relations. This finding of course supports the argument found in the technoscience literature with respect to the technosocial links between communication technologies and everyday social interaction.

Before further delving into this topic, it is important to examine some of the reasons why participants have chosen to use Facebook in this way. As previously described, participants interviewed portrayed Facebook as quick, easy and convenient to use. Christine explained that Facebook “has made it easier to keep in touch with people, like a lot of my friends (...) it’s made it a lot easier to keep at least tabs on what they are doing in their lives still” (Christine). Furthermore, Facebook’s design groups all friends and acquaintances in one place, allowing for quick interaction with any one person or multiple groups of people at the click of a button. As one participant described:

It’s a great way of socializing because it has all of the people that I’ve met in the last...three or four years, all in one place. I don’t have to keep track of all of their emails, I don’t have to keep track of all their phone numbers, I don’t have to make

sure that all of their contact information that I have is up to date, they're all there, they're all staying there (James2).

As such, Facebook has been described by some participants as helping manage and keep track of their social lives, as well as allowing them to keep track of a much larger social network that would normally be possible without this technological mediation. Once again, this finding is of importance as it further demonstrates the extent to which social networking sites are embedded in everyday socializing practices. Given the large amount of people who now use Facebook daily, there could arguably be a social expectation that non Facebook users be able to network and keep track of larger social networks just as those who use Facebook do, in other words the technical potential of the “possibility of permanent an ubiquitous connectivity” not only intensifies socializing online; it also spills over offline. This could cause significant pressure for non Facebook users to join and use the site in this way in order to avoid being ‘left out’ of current social events for example, and this can be understood as the emergence of a hybrid (offline/online) conception of socializing. The perception and pressures surrounding feeling ‘left out’ will further be discussed when examining reasons why participants choose to disclose personal information online.

Another reason described by research participants as to why they use Facebook as a complimentary socializing tool relates to the nature of the site itself. Participants were asked whether they believed Facebook to be addictive, with almost every respondent indicating that they at least to some extent believed it to be. In fact, as outlined in the research participant breakdown table in Chapter 3, the vast majority of individuals interviewed indicated they used Facebook at least long enough to check their messages

and any other major updates daily. As Robert explains, “I am on it a couple times a day and if its, usually its one of the first things I will do in the morning I will go and look through it and by mid day I will check again you know as the day goes on” (Robert). Interviewees described their Facebook addiction as fueled by a need to know what is going on in their social world, as Facebook has become as source of tremendous information and not checking it would result in a lack of knowledge of current social events. Once again this could be understood in terms of the development of a hybrid offline/online mode of socializing that is made possible but not exclusively determined by the “possibility of permanent and ubiquitous connection”.

As outlined in Chapter 1, the Facebook news feature in particular is designed to provide users with select updates of their friend networks. With most participants explaining that the majority of their friends are also on Facebook, it is clear that much can be learned from simply keeping track of the news feed. Joan explains that “you want to know what’s going on with your friends sometimes and it’s one of your best sources” (Joan). Other participants described Facebook ‘creeping’ (the act of perusing through friends Facebook profiles) to be a good for procrastination when other tasks such as school work were being worked on. It is clear that the information presented on the news feed, being social in nature, may also be considered as a form of entertainment. While also being useful insofar as informing a user as to what is going on in their social life, Laura also describes it as “just something like it doesn’t take a lot of brainpower it’s just like an easy, I use it if I just want to relax like after a stressful day at school or something I can just like go through Facebook and (...) I can check up on my friends and stuff” (Laura). It is therefore clear that research participants expressed generally positive

feelings from regularly checking their Facebook profiles and also admittedly expressed some form of addiction to or at least need for the information and entertainment it provides. As a number of reasons have been presented as to why Facebook users use the site as a social tool and a clearer picture is being painted of the relationship between social networking sites and their users: a certain technological potential (the need to effortlessly maintain and intensify social ties) is becoming attached with social practices that allow individuals to simultaneously keep up with distant acquaintances, maintain existing friendships and stay informed about their social world.

As a caveat, it is important to note that participants were abundantly clear with regards to the role of Facebook within existing socialization practices such as phone calls and face to face interaction. While almost all participants agreed that Facebook was an invaluable tool for socializing, as outlined above, they did not believe the interactions to be as genuine or an alternative to all traditional means of socialization. For example, Christine explained that Facebook was “a way to make due I guess, more so than it doesn’t replace, like I would never consider Facebook replacing personal interactions. It’s just a way to keep in touch until you can have the next one I guess” (Christine). As such, while participants were more than willing to describe Facebook as an extremely useful tool to compliment existing modes of socializing, they stopped short of saying the interactions made over the internet would replace other communication methods. This attempt to mark a distinction between the technologically enabled blurring of the private and public sphere can be understood as an instance of individuals attempting to customize technological potential to their own needs. By drawing on the authenticity of offline friendship maintenance and formation they disturb Facebook’s technical drive to make all

friends equal and to share information with them equally. However, as we show below it also leads new forms of hybrid offline/online socializing.

Moreover, users also specified that Facebook interactions were limited in their context. What this means is that participants stressed that Facebook was to be used for short messages or to plan further social events. Unless limited by means of geographical constraints that would not make other forms of socializing possible, interactions over Facebook were generally geared towards ‘checking in’ to see how people were doing. As Christine describes it: “I would say it’s individual thoughts as opposed to a whole conversation (...) it’s not for, not that it’s shallow but that it’s not for deep conversations, it’s not for deep interactions it’s for ‘hey how are you doing, I was thinking of you’”(Christine). As such, given the nature of the socializing taking place, it need not be limited to close friends only, as shall be expanded upon in the next section of this chapter.

Participants described using Facebook to keep in touch and send quick messages to people they might not have previously kept up with. Melissa explains this in stating “I think it’s a lot more convenient in the sense that you can have quick chats with people that you normally wouldn’t have like a long conversation with. So you can kind of keep more friends in your social network” (Melissa). It has thus been established that the majority of research participants make use of Facebook as an everyday tool to aid them in socializing and managing their social networks. While users fully embrace the use of the technology for increased everyday networking, they also attempt to re establish the distinction between their offline and online socialization drawing attention to the technosocial nature of Facebook, in that it is not based exclusively on technological potential or on existing social practices but a combination of both.

Now that the perspective of the majority of participants concerning Facebook and its use as an invaluable tool for socialization has been outlined, we must examine some of the opposite perspectives observed from a few individuals. While no participants described themselves as not using Facebook at all for quick interactions, some did have mixed feelings as to how genuine these interactions were when compared to for example face to face interaction. Michelle expressed her concerns by stating that “I would say it’s not genuine because people try to portray themselves as, I guess up their better qualities and down their, get rid of their least wanted qualities” (Michelle). It must be noted that traditionally there is indeed some level of anonymity provided when interacting with others on the internet. What makes social networking sites such as Facebook unique is the attempt to break down these barriers and encourage people to be as genuine as possible. As such, real names and pictures are expected on Facebook profiles and those who blatantly circumvent this policy have had their profiles deleted by administrators. There still remains the possibility of, as Michelle described, falsely representing yourself online. The solution to this problem appears to have evolved from the way in which people use the site. As described in early literature on Facebook and further confirmed during this research, Facebook users primarily use the site for connecting with people they already know, not strangers. This shall be expanded upon further in this chapter when examining participant’s views concerning friendships on Facebook. However it is important to note that the process of connecting is also an instance of identity formation.

Two participants further elaborated on the notion of a Facebook profile not being a true representation of an individual when asked to describe what Facebook was to them. Thad stated that to him Facebook “is an electronic means for people to represent

themselves and interact with those representations rather than interacting with real people” (Thad). It is evident that the types of interactions conducted over Facebook cannot be contextually compared to other means of socializing, hence the opinion of all participants that Facebook interactions should not and will not replace traditional methods of socialization. Pat further expressed concern in stating that Facebook “is a fabricated version of what you want people to think of you who don’t know who you are on the internet” (Pat).

Another perspective offered by a participant is that Facebook is not all that unique in terms of its ability to reach multiple people. Thad outlines his thoughts on this by explaining that “if Facebook didn’t exist then they (friends) would probably just check their email or they would check something else instead of their email” (Thad). Therefore, while not all participants agreed upon the extent to which Facebook was useful to them everyday, they all indicated that Facebook was in some form or another to be a significant tool to enhance their everyday socialization. In however making this assertion, they clearly distinguished the types of interactions which are seen as acceptable on Facebook, thus attempting to reestablish a distinction between their private social lives and the public nature of the internet.

Distinction between online and offline friendships:

The second research observation to be expanded upon concerns friendships on Facebook. It was found that participants made a clear distinction between their online Facebook friendships and their offline ‘real life’ friendships. While Facebook labels all the individuals you add to your profile as your friends, almost all participants indicated

that they did not use Facebook in this way. Instead, their close friends and family were listed as friends on their profile, but also included were in many cases a large amount of distant acquaintances that the person simply knew or had simply known at some point in their lives. As was partially described earlier in this chapter, Jane describes her Facebook page as “a collection of everyone I have ever met” (Jane). In attempting to determine how research participants frame social networking sites, it is important to determine some of the reasons why individuals would voluntarily choose to add or accept friend requests, subsequently allowing access to their personal information to people they were not close to. Laura explains her personal motivation for adding people she might not necessarily know as much by stating “its people I that I went to school with anyways and at least I can recognize them so it doesn’t really bother me having them as a Facebook friend” (Laura). This of course once again reinforces the notion that while Facebook users do not seem comfortable connecting with strangers, with multiple participants stating they did not add or socialize with strangers, distant acquaintances are seen as acceptable. This proverbial line in the sand once again establishes the distinction between the technosocial nature of Facebook in that while networking with strangers is possible, the site is not used in this way due to social practices that derive from offline interactions. This could also touch, as discussed in the literature on friendship in Chapter 2, on the issue of trust. Users might feel a sense of trust when it comes to allowing distant acquaintances into their online lives and sharing information that they might not have otherwise shared offline. Furthermore, in the analysis of networking literature it was established that social networking sites might foster a sense of community as an online representation of

existing offline communities. We must therefore attempt to determine why participants make a distinction in terms of online and offline friendships.

In attempting to further explore the reasons why Facebook users generally add individuals with whom they are not close friends, participants were asked if they felt obliged to accept Facebook friend requests, where declining a request could be taken personally or seen as closing someone off from your online network. As seen in Chapter 1, Facebook encourages open networking between its users. Participants generally agreed that while Facebook did not explicitly oblige you to accept friend requests it was seen as the norm to accept requests, regardless of how well you knew the person adding you. In discussing some of the reasons why users accept friend requests, Tony explains: “let’s say somebody finds you on Facebook and you know adds you as a friend but you don’t accept him because you’re not as close it might create a problem because he might think you are rejecting him” (Tony). Other participants expressed similar concerns with not wanting to make others feel left out by not accepting their request. This sense of guilt is of course interesting as individuals who are accepted as friends are given access to the personal information posted online by the user and increasingly blurs the line between private and public. As such, it is curious to see the struggles of participants in deciding whether to accept or decline a friend request, regardless of how well they know the person who is adding them.

However, with Facebook promoting active large scale networking, participants described forms of social norms which generally dictate that friend requests should be accepted in order to expand both yours and others networks. In expanding on this, Sandra explained during her interview that “online networks on their own have become

such an open space that if someone blocks you out of it you take it personally and it shouldn't be taken personally. And so I think I don't want to make someone feel bad or offended that I didn't accept their request" (Sandra). Almost all participants expressed similar thoughts of not wanting to hurt people's feelings by declining friend requests, and as such would subsequently add people that they are fairly distant acquaintances with. Another participant further indicated that there is an increase in pressure if the person trying to add you as a friend has mutual friends with you as they are able to tell if you are active on the site, eliminating the possibility of the request simply not being seen or noticed (Jane). Users therefore feel pressure to allow others access to their profile and friend list, giving others the opportunity to further network but also allowing them access to any personal information posted by the user online.

Another reason described as to why distant acquaintances are either added or accepted as Facebook friends is that this could prove to be socially useful. As described earlier in this chapter, Facebook can be used as an information gathering tool to be able to keep in touch or reconnect with distant friends. In providing an example of how keeping old elementary school contacts could be useful, Lilly states: "I am a very social person, I like to organize events like let's say we have a reunion and I need to get in contact with them Facebook is probably the easiest way (...) so I will keep them on" (Lilly). This touches on the description outlined in the first part of this chapter of Facebook as an invaluable tool for socializing and keeping in touch with people, as it regroups all individuals and their contact information into one location. Another reason provided for accepting almost all friend requests relates back to the entertainment value provided by Facebook. Accepting friend requests not only allows that individual to see your profile

but also grants you access to theirs. As James puts it “friends on Facebook I don’t count the same as friends in real life, it’s just more to keep a social tracking of them, to follow them sort of see what’s new in their lives” (James). Based on the above description, it would appear some Facebook users could feel inclined to accept friend requests from distant acquaintances as in turn it would allow them to view the requestor’s online information.

Finally, some participants indicated that they accept all friend requests as this is simply how they choose to use the social networking site. As stated above, all participants made a clear distinction between their offline or ‘real life’ friendships and the people they have identified as friends on Facebook. For some, the online network of Facebook is meant to be an open space without restrictions that would normally be found offline. As such, Tony explains that he does not decline any friend requests that come his way “because I’m the kind of person who likes to have a big social network” (Tony). Pamela further explains that for her it seems like you meet people through others and people just add each other, it has become a common practice (Pamela). One participant related Facebook to the social networking site Twitter in stating that she likes to add people as a friend who she would be interested in seeing information from, using as an example the president of the University of Ottawa student federation (Emily).

While most participants agreed that there is pressure to accept friend requests, several have begun to question blindly accepting requests. Tony described one of the problems in accepting all friend requests by stating “it’s hard to show your feelings or your life because you know some people are just watching you, they’re not close so you have to check the pictures you’re tagged on (...) you have to watch so you don’t do

something wrong and people can judge you” (Tony). As such, Tony does not feel comfortable in disclosing certain information or for example having certain pictures displayed on Facebook as there are repercussions that he did not originally envision when first signing up for Facebook (Tony). While Facebook touts itself as a forum for interacting with close friends and family, this is clearly a demonstration of the blurring of the public and private created by social networking sites. While participants make a clear distinction between offline and online friends as well as friends and distant acquaintances, Facebook by its very design in fact erodes these distinctions by allowing all accepted ‘friends’ to have access to the same amount of information online. This is further supported by the online social norm previously described of accepting all friend requests, further blurring the notion of public and private.

However, it must be emphasized that while it might appear that the technological openness offered by Facebook would in turn allow for users to openly connect with strangers, it is contrasted by participant views described earlier where Facebook is generally used for maintaining existing friendships only. Therefore, the technological networking potential along with the created norm of accepting requests is countered by the desire of users to use the site for existing offline connections. This demonstrates the technosocial blurring of social networking sites and their balancing of technological possibility and social practices.

In relation to the norm of accepting friend requests, other participants described a trend of some Facebook users adding multiple people to their profile in order to have a larger friend list. This is seen as some sort of online status of popularity. It is evident that, for the most part, when receiving a friend request from such people there is no

intention for any kind of information sharing or socialization. Joan explained that “sometimes I did feel guilty at first when I was declining certain people who would keep trying to add me but for most people I don’t really because I just figure like people are trying to add you so it looks like they have more friends” (Joan). Once again, this rationale is much easier for Facebook users to apply when making reference to strangers sending friend requests, and more ambiguous when applied to distant acquaintances.

Moreover, several interview subjects outlined the practice of ‘cleaning up’ their friend lists on Facebook, that is going through their Facebook profile and removing individuals they either don’t really know or no longer want to share their information with. Michelle explains the process: “I guess I go online 3 times a year and basically delete the friends that I basically don’t want seeing my life and don’t want seeing what I’m up to, and then the people that I just haven’t been in contact with” (Michelle). This can be seen as a response to Facebook’s blurring of the private and public as an active attempt by the user to reestablish the distinction between the private and the public by closing off their profile from those who would not normally be privy to their private information. With others expressing similar behaviour, it is clear that some of the users interviewed are questioning simply accepting friend requests without much thought. This process is not necessarily an easy one however, with some having difficulty deleting individuals from fear of hurting their feelings or making them feel excluded. In giving her thoughts on the issue, Sandra explained:

It’s all sort of silly because if I don’t want to let them into my online life I shouldn’t feel guilty but there is guilt associated to it. Like if you delete someone and you see them in person there is always that sort of ‘oh god I deleted them,

that's so embarrassing' and there shouldn't be that shame or that guilt, like you are protecting your own, what you want to share with them (Sandra).

It is therefore clear that the process of accepting friends or clearing through your list and deleting friends is filled with pressures created by Facebook through its interweaving of online and offline social worlds and its philosophy of open online networking.

For the reasons outlined above, participants indicated that they had accepted multiple requests from people who they did not consider friends in the traditional sense of the word. While some are taking steps to clean through their lists and filter out the most distant of Facebook friends, the fundamental issue lies in these individuals being added to the profile in the first place. As such, it is evident that research participants made a clear distinction between their offline and Facebook friends, and subsequently would act accordingly while socializing online. As outlined earlier in this chapter, participants indicated that Facebook was for quick interactions and not necessarily for in depth personal socialization, with the exception being individuals with whom they could not otherwise connect. As such, it could be argued that this type of socializing is connected to the openness of online networks in contrast to the more private and closed offline connections. It appears the majority of the research participants frame Facebook as an important tool for keeping in touch with close friends and family, but the inclusion of distant acquaintances might limit the amount of personal and private interaction conducted exclusively online. Tony explains the difficulties in having more than close friends on your profile with someone posting on his public wall:

You have to watch and be on Facebook almost like 2-3 hours a day because let's say that two or three hundred people are on your Facebook, it takes only five

minutes and then maybe 10, 20, 30 people know them and then they talk about it with their friends and now like a thousand people know what's happened with you (Tony).

This of course serves to further reinforce the notion that the online interactions done over social networking sites could not replace traditional means of socializing such as phone calls or face to face interactions. While most participants outlined the usefulness of Facebook as a tool for socializing, managing friendships and keeping in touch with more distant acquaintances, they also recognized the limits of its use, leading to the development of a hybrid sociality dependent on technological potential and social practices that are grounded on offline conceptions of friendship.

Control of personal information through privacy settings:

In further explaining the trust Facebook users have which allows them to freely post their personal information online, we may shift to the next major research observation seen. While fourteen of the students interviewed expressed at least some level of concern over the privacy of their information online, it was evident that the majority of those interviewed expressed a sense of control over the personal information they posted online for various reasons. One of the primary reasons for this is the active use of the Facebook privacy settings available and customizable by each individual for their profile. By using these settings, users are able to control who is able to see their information within their friend list as well as how much information posted online is shared with the rest of Facebook's users. If the privacy settings are set to their highest, you are not searchable on Facebook and must actively add people in order to build up

your network. In contrast, the default privacy settings are set so that anyone within your network or networks can have access to your profile. Research participants were asked if they thought the privacy settings offered on Facebook were important and stringent enough. Generally, the opinions expressed were that the settings were enough, so long as users made use of them. When asked if she believed the settings to be adequate, Christine stated “I think as long as you know the privacy settings and understand them like how private they are then they’re probably adequate” (Christine).

The above statement can be understood as implying that Facebook users should know and understand the privacy settings in order for them to be most effective. While early literature presented in Chapter 1 indicated users were not generally aware of the extent or even the existence of privacy settings, the research conducted seemed to somewhat confirm this. Participants generally seemed aware of the privacy settings, however most admitted to learning or discovering them much later after initially signing up and providing information online. Jane explained by stating: “when I first started I had no idea that was the case (default open settings) so my profile was open for a long time until I realized that was something I would have to go back and do by myself afterwards” (Jane). As several other participants expressed similar statements, it is evident that users interviewed have actively attempted to limit or customize the openness that is inherent within Facebook’s default settings. As such, they are actively expressing themselves in terms of what is technologically possible with social networking sites and their framing of the technology. Furthermore, their sense of trust on Facebook may also be tied to the nature of Facebook as a tool to manage relationships with friends and

family. Therefore Facebook both technically and socially allows for the building of user trust, demonstrating the technosocial nature of the site.

Furthermore, the above statements emphasize a lack of communication in terms of privacy settings which continues to be an issue for Facebook. While they might be taking steps towards rectifying these issues as they were raised in a recent complaint by the Canadian Privacy Commissioner, the fact remains that the awareness of methods to control privacy continues to be an issue that may put individuals at risk when posting personal information on Facebook. Participants described their previous frustrations in attempting to understand the privacy settings available to them. Notably, they are buried into the lengthy terms and conditions accepted by new Facebook users, with participants stating that these were too difficult to understand even if the user bothered to read them. Thad expressed his frustration in terms of lack of knowledge on the privacy settings: “I don’t know that much about them even though I have read their thing it was very confusing and legalistic. You know I’m not a genius so maybe you have to be some kind of legal eagle to figure it out” (Thad).

It is believed that a number of factors explained interviewees’ general awareness with regards to Facebook privacy settings. These include the fact that research participants were generally social science students who have been educated on potential dangers, the experience of having been Facebook users for a number of years, and recent steps taken by Facebook to educate users following privacy complaints. As an example, one participant explained:

I am really thankful for the sociology class that I have like the technology class I have learned so much from I and I feel like we need more of that. Like the people

in our lives that are supposed to be teaching us don't know enough about the technology so that it's hard for them to do that. So we have to rely on each other when we are also just learning about the technology too (Lilly).

A notable issue to take into consideration is therefore individuals who are not informed or who do not otherwise learn about Facebook privacy settings. As was outlined earlier in this thesis, it might appear that some individuals are voluntarily exposing their personal information as a means of social networking while in reality they are doing so unknowingly as they are not aware the extent to which their information is being shared. The example elicited by the researcher in participant interviews on this topic concerns the default Facebook privacy settings which are set as open to a users networks. Generally, users interviewed were in agreement that the default privacy settings should either be more explicitly communicated to all users as open or should just all together be changed to closed, with the user having to actively decide that he or she wishes to make their personal information available to many people. Sandra explained that she believed Facebook needed to do a better job in making people aware of the settings when they first signed up (Sandra). This would subsequently give them the opportunity to frame the technology based on their particular beliefs and needs, for example by allowing them to narrow the networking technology to a more narrow conception of network, hence for example not including strangers. Furthermore, she stated that "people should know the risk that they are taking and if they are unaware of it in some way (...) like if you are not letting the user know then they can't make an informed decision whether or not they want it open or closed" (Sandra). Several other interviewees agreed with this opinion, which places the responsibility on Facebook of

properly informing its users of all privacy implications prior to them posting personal information online. Another participant explained that Facebook seems to encourage users to share as much information as possible as quickly as possible from the moment you first sign up. She believes that Facebook “encourages people to post a lot more information at the get go. Just as you build your profile it seems to sort of gear you into, you have to kind of go back and change your privacy settings” (Jane).

An argument could be made that for Facebook to properly inform its users in these matters would be to do itself a disservice, with Facebook having much more to gain from an open profile than one that is closed up. In outlining this perspective, James 2 explains:

Facebook, as far as I’m concerned, makes a point, you know, of educating users...I wouldn’t say as little as possible but limiting the education of users of what they can and cannot have private or open on their profile because that information is really really valuable to Facebook (James 2).

As outlined earlier Facebook has received some complaints with regards to this issue and has since taken steps to better inform its users, although it remains to be seen how effective or thorough these methods will be.

Moreover, the loose default Facebook privacy settings represent the conception of a completely open social network, something that was not shared by the majority of participants interviewed. As such, this disparity represents an instance in which the technological possibilities offered by social networking sites do not match up with the framing of the majority of users resulting in a hybrid network that is both more closed than what Facebook would enable yet also more open than traditional offline socializing.

For the participants interviewed for this research, once again all were aware of the various privacy settings offered by Facebook, with the majority making use of them to limit their profile information. While research participants were generally aware (albeit retroactively) of Facebook privacy settings, it is necessary to explore the reasons why they trust them in protecting the personal information which they post online. One of the most important factors has to do with the nature of the personal information posted on Facebook. When participants were asked what kind of information they shared on their profiles, the majority indicated that they did not post much personal information online. In explaining this, Laura indicated that “I just think of it like I’m like whatever I’m posting do I feel comfortable in having like absolutely anyone see that and if I don’t I don’t post it” (Laura). As such, participants use a filter when posting personal information on Facebook, and are not compelled to put up all of their personal information. Their concern over privacy issues is lessened due to the nature of the information posted: participants indicated they would not post credit card numbers or home addresses for example. This ties into arguments surrounding the nature of friendships developed earlier, whereby Facebook is used for socializing with both close friends and distant acquaintances. As a result, the interactions done online as well as the information shared and made available on Facebook reflect this. For any information they do post on Facebook, privacy settings are used to control whom has access to the information.

Moreover, as previously stated, user trust has to be understood as being facilitated by the fact that Facebook is used for keeping in touch with close friends and family, which fundamentally represents a trustworthy environment. As such, social networking

sites may be described as technosocial in both enabling technological protection of information through rigorous privacy settings and also incorporating existing social practices surrounding friendship formation and maintenance which inherently lead to a sense of trust.

In attempting to determine the balance between an open and closed profile, participants were asked whether they would prefer to have a more open profile to allow for greater networking and socialization or whether they would prefer to keep their profile closed off while potentially missing networking opportunities. While most agreed that it was useful to have their profile open to a certain extent to allow for increased networking, they generally leaned towards keeping their profiles more closed off in order to control their information. Once again, this can be seen as users actively intervening to control the technological potential of Facebook's networking based on their own framing of the technology. In providing her thoughts, Melissa explained: "I think that it's good that people can know that you exist, so that they can add you as a friend if they want but I think it's also important to not disclose that information to people who are just Googling you" (Melissa). As such, while participants did see the value in sharing their information online, they also preferred to keep a sense of control over their profiles by making use of the privacy settings. This ties into arguments presented earlier surrounding Facebook being used to socialize with existing connections and generally not being used for strangers.

In attempting to further determine the reasons why research participants feel a sense of control over the personal information they post online, we may return to the literature outlined in Chapter 2. It has been found in early literature on social networking

sites that users have the sense of being in a walled garden when on these sites in that they are free to socialize and share information and are immune to outside influences.

Participants were asked if they felt a similar sentiment when using Facebook and the majority indicated this to be the case, particularly due to the use of privacy settings. Lilly stated that “in a way that’s kind of how I think too like by privatizing my profile like that’s my bubble where I feel safe but I might not be in the future but I hope I don’t have anything on it that would ruin my [life]” (Lilly). Furthermore, by being divided into distinct networks, Facebook’s very design makes it very easy to forget just how many people are actively using and posting information online. As an example, the Facebook news feed only shows information from people you have added as a friend on your profile, giving a sense that this is the extent of content available online. As Max further explains “it is easy to forget that it’s like a website because really all you have on there is people you know so it seems like a little closed box that only you and your friends can see” (Max). As such, it is clear that Facebook creates a forum for information sharing, without clearly outlining the various ways for individuals to protect their privacy.

Moreover, the users’ framing of Facebook as a walled garden further serves to blur the distinction between the public nature of internet sites and the private nature of traditional friendship formation and maintenance, as outlined throughout this thesis. This perception serves to establish the hybrid nature of trust on Facebook, in part fueled by the need to close off ones profile through technological controls but also by the social practices which creates the trust users feel with one another when online. Consequently, this dimension also lends support to the utility of theoretically defining social networking in terms of their technosocial nature.

The research participant's confidence in Facebook's privacy settings remains intriguing. As noted above, the Facebook site actively promotes information sharing and creates a sense of a walled garden for its users. Furthermore, users trust the privacy settings offered to them as adequate to control their information. However, since social networking sites being a fairly new social phenomenon, there could arguably be a lack of stringent regulations to ensure the best interest of its users, as James 2 explains:

Manufacturing products have been out for hundreds of years, those regulations are, you know, fairly set and they are well known and they can be protected as well. But these new social networking regulations and privacy regulations are fairly new (...) and since social networking sites like these constantly change, and the type of information that you can share on Facebook is increased, you know it's hard for regulating bodies to keep up with (James 2).

Despite such potential dangers, users expressed a confidence in Facebook's ability to protect their information through the use of their privacy settings.

Before delving into the next topic, it is important to outline some of the opposing perspectives on privacy settings and personal information on Facebook that arose during interviews. When asked what his opinion was on Facebook users who used the site to put all of their personal information, essentially to put their whole lives online, Markus was frank in stating that "if you're on Facebook and you think that you're protected by these concrete walls, you're not. The concrete walls are windows" (Markus). This statement once again draws our attention to the blurring between the public forum of the internet and private friendship formation and maintenance. He maintained a position that the posting of personal information on Facebook was not a safe practice and as such used the

site accordingly. Emily expressed similar feelings in explaining that for her Facebook was not private at all. Instead, she believes that people post personal information on Facebook as a type of social norm and that the site does a good job of manipulating individuals into thinking they are simply following the trend instead of giving up their privacy (Emily).

Another participant explained that he did not see any harm in posting personal information online and as a result did not see the point in using the privacy settings. In explaining this point of view, Pat states: “I don’t really care; I don’t really see how someone is going to go on there like I don’t even know what they are going to do with my information like my house address isn’t on there but pretty much everything else is” (Pat). As such, he is unconcerned with his information being available online as he does not see any risks with posting it, clearly associating himself with the technological possibilities which are offered by Facebook and less with existing social practices surrounding privacy.

Finally, one participant questioned the act of closing ones Facebook profile using privacy settings. The argument made was that “if you are able to through your settings make it not a social networking site then why are you on Facebook? (Markus). Clearly, this brings back the discussion revolving around the balancing of having your profile open in order to allow for networking opportunities offered by the site while at the same time keeping it closed in order to control your personal information. Arguably, the balance between the two is the decision of the individual Facebook user, with the majority of research participants choosing to have their profile more closed. This balance supports our framing of the hybrid nature of social networking sites, as established

throughout this chapter. As such, it has been demonstrated that the majority of participants believe Facebook privacy settings to be a sufficient means to keep control of their personal information, due in part to their framing of the site as useful for short interactions which include distant acquaintances, leading to a limiting of the amount of information posted.

User risk perception:

The final significant observation which will be further analyzed is risk perception. It was generally found that the participants interviewed were seemingly aware of the risks associated with the use of social networking sites and were willing to take these risks in order to take advantage of the social benefits offered by Facebook. As such, in this section the risk perceptions of research participants will be outlined as well as their thoughts in weighing them against benefits of social networking. All participants were asked if they believed there was a risk with regards to posting personal information on Facebook. Most agreed that there was a risk, while there were varying opinions on how risky an activity this actually was. In explaining how the risk can be considered relatively low, Markus stated that “there is a risk but I don’t think the risk is incredibly high. Like you always hear of like you know identity theft over the Internet, like credit card scams but if like, if you’re even semi-careful about stuff like that you’re fine” (Markus). He went on to compare Facebook to any other activity where you might put yourself at risk. While there is always a certain amount of risk, the opinion expressed was that the immediate risk was relatively low, with Christine also explaining that you cannot control what other people do on the internet and therefore Facebook being no

different than any other internet site (Christine). As these examples outline, the majority of participants interviewed did express an awareness of risk related to Facebook use and as a result make use of the site accordingly.

Furthermore, another reason why participants might have expressed an awareness of potential risks but were willing to take them might be related to the previous observations seen concerning Facebook privacy settings. Notably, interviewees were seen as feeling a sense of control over the personal information they post due to the use of privacy settings and this could in turn offer them a sense of being able to manage risks of using the site. Max explains this in stating: “I guess with Facebook like random people can’t see that (personal) information unless you are the one clicking accept on them so it’s really up to you anyway” (Max). In once again outlining the technosocial hybrid nature of Facebook, this statement outlines the dual nature of security on Facebook, in that it is partly technically enabled by privacy settings but also socially controlled due to the fact that users only trust friends and acquaintances and as such only allow these individuals access to their Facebook profile. As such, just as users would feel a sense of control of their information because of privacy settings, this same sense of control would also give them a sense of being able to control and mitigate the risks that might present themselves from using Facebook. This of course brings back questions of blindly trusting Facebook and its privacy settings to do what is best for users instead of what might be more commercially viable. In outlining her and other Facebook users trust in the site, Lilly stated that “they figure well come on if there is like a million people using this site how could I not trust it right?” (Lilly). While this might seem like a valid reason for trusting Facebook, it must be reiterated that Facebook is in essence a private business,

not a public institution and as such users must keep in mind that the site could arguably always keep its best interests in mind with regards to the conservation of user personal information.

An additional reason why the interviewed users might feel that they can effectively manage risks related to Facebook could once again tie into their education and past experience with the site. As outlined earlier in this chapter, participants were generally social science students who had or were taking classes which touched on the various privacy issues with technology. Furthermore, their past experience using the site has allowed them to learn how to control the amount of information they post online, with most reporting having only learned about the privacy settings much later after originally signing up. Users whom actively made use of the knowledge gained both through technical means of privacy settings and changing social practices could thus be seen as attempting to reestablish the distinction between private and public. Furthermore, participants expressed concerns for younger Facebook users who might not necessarily have the education or experience to fully understand the implications of their actions on Facebook. Sandra expressed her concern in stating:

I think for someone at the age of ten, eleven, twelve or even just sixteen I don't think you understand the risk that you are taking until it's too late. And the fact that you can never get that information back, it's someone else's; I don't think you know the risk because you are so young. Like you might think you understand but I don't think you can think of all the consequences that could happen (Sandra).

Other participants expressed similar concerns, in that since Facebook has been expanded to include everyone, including high school students, these users could simply lack the experience and knowledge to allow them to appropriately and safely use the site. One needs to look no further than the participants themselves when they first began using the site, with the majority admitting they shared more information than they probably should have and were generally unaware or did not make use of the privacy settings.

While users interviewed expressed an awareness of the risks, it is necessary to briefly touch on the benefits of Facebook use which, for them, seemingly outweigh the risks. Christine outlines that while “I definitely think there is a risk; I also think that it’s way too convenient to pass up. You know you just take as many precautions as you can and you know it is what it is” (Christine). The various benefits of Facebook use have been outlined throughout this thesis, with the principle benefit being the ability to connect with a large number of individuals in a quick and convenient manner and to provide the possibility of “permanent and ubiquitous connectivity”. As also described earlier in this chapter, users might feel a sense of being left out if they do not actively use the site to stay socially informed with their various networks.

While participants expressed an awareness of immediate risks in terms of the exposure of their personal information, few took into consideration any potential future unknown risks. As outlined in the Chapter 2 section on surveillance, a case could be made of the information provided by users being used in a variety of negative ways with perhaps the most extreme being forms of online surveillance. As explained earlier in this thesis, it is impossible to plan for future unknown risks, but simply to mitigate them when they become apparent. In demonstrating a lack of concern, Pat states that “I just don’t

see what the point is in worrying about it; I don't see that there is anyone that is going to use Facebook to come harm me in any way so I just don't worry about it" (Pat). The above statement further emphasizes the argument made within the risk literature presented in Chapter 2 that immediate risks are of much greater concern to individuals while future unknown threats are often ignored. When asked about specific risks tied to Facebook use, such as for example employers browsing profiles, some users did have concerns, but once again felt confident about being able to control their information online. In addition, they believed that any information that was made available online did not counter the tremendous benefits associated with Facebook use. As such, it remains that the majority of Facebook users interviewed, for reasons outlined above, do feel a sense of awareness in terms of the immediate risks of using Facebook and have decided that the various benefits of social networking site use outweigh these risks.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis we have theoretically framed Facebook as a product of technoscience in that the technology both shapes and is shaped by society by being embedded in everyday practices. We have in turn examined how Facebook users mediate social media. In support of this view, users interviewed framed Facebook as an invaluable everyday social tool that was used to keep in touch with both close friends and distant acquaintances. We have also provided evidence to support our contention that Facebook is based on a combination of both technological possibility and social practice. Despite Facebook's technically enabled drive to blur the distinction between friend and stranger, public and private our respondents, as shown in the previous chapter, our participants attempted to find ways to introduce it.

Furthermore, participants explained that Facebook is being used not only for close offline friendships but also for more distant acquaintances. As such, the same amount of personal information which could be exchanged offline with close friends would be reduced when socializing online with these same offline friends but also with distant acquaintances, strongly suggesting that a new form of hybrid offline/online socializing is emerging. While Facebook is technically designed to allow for open networking with strangers, participants did not use it in this way, instead referring to pre-established social practices of friendship formation and maintenance. However, the technical possibilities and open networks and the emerging norms (i.e. the pressure to accept friend requests) tied to online socializing also forced our interviewees to expand the boundaries of friendship formation and maintenance found in these pre-existing social practices. This highlights the hybrid nature of Facebook as technosocial artifact. Similarly, while the

blurring of the private nature of socialization and the public nature of the internet has been outlined throughout this thesis, individuals can be seen as attempting to reestablish this distinction through their framing of online networks, while not entirely overcoming the technically enabled trend to erase it.

Moreover, users interviewed expressed a sense of control over the information they did post on Facebook through the use of the privacy settings. While they did not necessarily use the settings to their full capacity when first signing up, they expressed a current sense of control over their information as well as trust that the privacy settings would grant them that control. This sense of trust may also be seen as hybrid in that it is based on technical privacy settings as well as the nature of the socialization taking place, that is family and friendship maintenance which in essence creates a sense of trust.

Finally, participants expressed an awareness of the risks inherent with Facebook use but believed to be able to effectively manage these risks. In addition, the benefits inherent with the use of social networking sites far outweighed any potential risks, in their opinion. Participants, as predicted by the risk society literature, generally did not consider any future risks resulting from their Facebook use, instead focusing on (a lack of) immediate risks. All of the above mentioned factors, as outlined throughout this thesis, are used to frame user's perception of Facebook which subsequently affects their framing of the various immediate risks resulting from their use of Facebook.

Thus we conclude that as originally hypothesized, the interviewed participants awareness and perception of risk is based upon their framing of the social networking technology. We have also been able to show that this framing arises from the technosocial hybrid nature of Facebook in that it is not exclusively based on

technological possibility or on existing social practices but instead by a constant balance between the two.

In terms of areas for future research, a few interesting avenues can be identified in relation to the literature on network analysis presented in Chapter 2. Notably, future research may draw upon Castells network society argument. In his work, Castells mentions that the network society is limitless and flexible when it comes to the possibility of change. New means of networking and connecting with one another online are what social networking sites such as Facebook promise and are built upon. As such, network connections and relations online through the medium of social networking sites could be potentially applied within the network society argument. A comprehensive analysis of the links between the network society thesis and social networking sites therefore could be a relevant topic for future studies. However as our data suggest the notion of limitless and flexibility might need to be made problematic, technological potential is limited by broader social practices.

Furthermore, as touched upon in Chapter 2, it could prove useful to examine in detail individual networking practices in conjunction with an analysis of the ways in which Facebook might promote open networking. Research could potentially focus on social capital within the context of social networking in an attempt to explain certain behaviors. While it may mask the ties as friends, going so far as deeming all connections an individual makes as 'friends', the site may perhaps in fact foster social cohesion by allowing its members to build and maintain weak social ties thus increasing their social capital, along with all the benefits that may result from this. Of particular relevance when examining the concepts of strong and weak ties would be if and how these distinctions

might break down on Facebook. The differences between strong and weak ties are fundamentally based on the intensity, time and amount of information shared between individuals. However, when examined within the context of social networking sites, both strong and weak ties would have the same access in terms of interaction with other individuals, potentially leading to a breakdown of these separate distinctions. Future research could therefore focus on a hypothesis of whether social networking sites foster open networking, drawing on concepts such as weak ties, social cohesion and social capital.

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APPENDIX A: Recruitment Text

Hi, my name is Daniel Borbey and I am a master's sociology student at the University of Ottawa. Are you interested in sharing your thoughts about Facebook? I am currently in the process of recruiting participants for my thesis project concerning Facebook. This research is being supervised by Professor Jose Lopez of the department of Sociology and Anthropology. I am interested in researching how individuals perceive risk with regards to the information they post on Facebook. I have randomly selected your name in the search results of members of the University of Ottawa Network on Facebook. As a participant, you would be asked to participate in a 40 minute interview or focus group where you would be asked questions concerning your Facebook use.

If you are a current student at the University of Ottawa, are between the ages of 18 and 25 and use Facebook at least once every two weeks then you may be considered as a candidate for my research project. Once I receive enough responses, participants shall be chosen at random for the interviews. As such, not all individuals who receive this message shall be able to participate. Please bear in mind that you may withdraw from this research project at any time, including after being selected as a candidate and before the interview. **All participants in this research project shall be entered into a random draw for 3 gift certificates valued at 100, 50 and 25 dollars respectively.**

Please note that this research has been approved by the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board. If you are interested in participating in this project, you may send me a Facebook message or email me

Thank you for your time,

Daniel Borbey

APPENDIX B: Interview Guide

Interview Schedule Questions:

1-To get us started lets talk about how you began to use Facebook?

- how did you find out about it?
- reason began using it

2-Could you describe to me some of the ways you use Facebook now?

- frequency of use
- amount of time spent on the internet
- use of other internet sites, comparison to Facebook
- what kind of things do you do on Facebook
- Facebook as addictive and fun

3-Approximately how many Facebook 'friends' do you have?

- friends on Facebook = friends off Facebook
- accepting friends on Facebook (true friends vs accepted friends)
- accepted friend turning into a true friend
- Facebook obliging you to accept friend requests?

4-If you had to explain what Facebook was to someone who knew nothing about it without referring to it as a SNS, how would you describe it?

- comparing the social aspects of Facebook to the social aspects of everyday life
- what does Facebook remind you of? (Photo album, high school)

5-Do you think that you are able to socialize more using Facebook than you were before it was available?

- what does socializing mean to you, what does it involve, what activities

- better able to keep in touch
- issues of trust and intimacy
- Facebook socializing as genuine

6-Do you believe Facebook to be a safe place to post your personal information?

- if yes why do you believe this website to be safe
- if no what makes you think Facebook is an unsafe environment to post personal information?
- prompt: do you post personal information on your Facebook profile?
- prompt: what kinds of information do you post on your Facebook profile?
- prompt: do you believe there is any risk with regards to posting personal information on the internet?

7- Have you made use of the privacy settings for your profile offered on Facebook?

- if yes what settings have you modified and why?
- if no why have you chosen not to change the default settings?
- privacy settings on Facebook to be important or necessary?
- concerned with keeping your personal information as private as possible on Facebook or would you rather keep it public in order to maximize the possible networking offered by the site? (Expand on this point if required)

8- How do you feel about disclosing personal information on Facebook?

- prompt: using Facebook different from using other sites
- prompt: the people who can potentially view your profile
- prompt: Facebook as a walled garden? Socializing with friends and acquaintances only and not strangers – why?

APPENDIX C: Consent Form and Ethics Approval

Consent Form

Title of the study: Mediating Social Media: Examining User Risk Perception on Facebook

Daniel Borbey and Professor José López from the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Faculty of Social Sciences

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Daniel Borbey and Professor José López.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to determine how individuals use Facebook and how they frame the site within their everyday socialization.

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of participating in one 40 minute interview or focus group session during which I will be asked questions pertaining to my Facebook use. The interview or focus group session has been scheduled to take place on the University of Ottawa Campus at a time and date that would be convenient to me.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer some amounts of personal information regarding my Facebook use and this may cause me to feel uncomfortable. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize these risks in that I am not obliged to answer any question that may make me feel uncomfortable.

Benefits: My participation in this study will contribute to an advancement of knowledge concerning how individuals interact and make use of social networking sites, a fairly new sociological phenomenon.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for analysis within the research project and that my confidentiality will be protected as the data collected will only be available to the researcher and supervisor and shall be securely stored. **Anonymity** will be protected in the following manner: names or any other information that may identify an individual shall not be used. In the case of names, pseudonyms shall be used if a particular research participant must be referred to. In addition, the identity of research participants shall not be revealed in the publication of this research project.

Conservation of data: The data collected which include hard paper copies and electronic copies of tape recordings of interviews, interview transcripts and researcher notes will be kept in a secure manner in Professor López's locked office. The only people who will have access to the data will be Mr. Borbey and Professor López. The data will be conserved for the standard 5 to 10 year period applied to sociological research data.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be removed from the research project if the participant so wishes and shall be destroyed by shredding.

Acceptance: I, _____ (*Name of participant*), agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Daniel Borbey of the Department of Social Sciences, Faculty of Sociology and Anthropology, which research is under the supervision of Professor López.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: (*Signature*) Date: (*Date*)

Witness (*needed in the case where a participant is illiterate, blind, etc.*):
(*Signature*) Date: (*Date*)