

What's Next in Studying Online Social Networking? Future Research Directions for Creative, DIY-Based Sites

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Abstract: Social networking sites (SNS) have garnered a great deal of media attention (and some research interest) in recent years. Among these, sites which focus on the making and sharing of media, or Do-It-Yourself (DIY) social networking forums, are surfacing as spaces with great potential for learning and as supportive, engaging communities. In this Workshop, we seek to map out a new agenda for research on these types of sites over the next decade. We bring together several scholars who have studied DIY-based social networking forums to engage with graduate students and interested researchers in identifying the key questions, themes, and distinguishable attributes that will propel study on this genre of sites into the next generation.

Introduction

The growing number of children and youth now using online 'social network sites' (SNS) has led to a veritable surge of news stories, media attention, and economic investment. In tandem with these developments, there is a need to develop a better understanding of the ways that these digital technologies mediate children's socializing as well as the relative opportunities and limitations for their participation in them. In reviewing the existing research in this area, however, it quickly becomes apparent that there remain a number of important gaps in the literature (see Grimes & Fields, 2012). One of these gaps is a myopic focus on traditional social network sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace) that are often the focus of popular media, to the exclusion of other social networking forums, such as games, virtual worlds, and online communities. Yet these forums have an underlying social-ness to them that begs consideration and comparison. In this Workshop we will consider one particular type of online social networking forum that is often overlooked in popular discussions of social networking: DIY-based social networking forums that focus networking around kids' own creations shared online.

We situate our discussion under the broader topic of online social networking to highlight the ways that social networking and creative design can be mutually supportive. This Workshop is intended to draw together graduate students and interested scholars and to coalesce this field and identify questions that will propel us into the next phase of study of this specific genre of social networking forums. Bringing together several researchers who have studied kids' engagement in DIY-based social networking forums in addition to conference participants, we will discuss questions such as:

- What defines DIY-based social networking forums as opposed to other genres of online social networking?
- What productive practices are emerging in these sites that support kids' learning-by-making and their engagement with creation, sharing, and critique?
- What influences do site-design, community roles, and genres of DIY media have on the social fabric of the sites?
- What policy issues are emerging from kids' sharing self-created content online, including but not limited to copyright, privacy, ownership, and age-based regulations (e.g. COPPA)?

Below we provide a brief background on current issues in the field and why DIY-based social networking forums should form a key new field of research. Then we suggest some directions for conversation in the Workshop, outline the format of the Workshop, and describe the participants. In this Workshop we bring together several scholars to compare research and findings from different sites and perspectives, to consider overarching issues beyond just specific websites/affinity spaces, and to seed conversation on next directions. We strongly encourage graduate students and scholars of online social networking to participate!

From Social Networking Sites to DIY-Based Social Networking Forums

Taken as a whole, existing large-scale reports on SNS usage paint a rough, but multi-faceted, picture of the rise of social networking among increasingly younger users and its ongoing spread across a diverse array of platforms and contexts (Grimes & Fields, 2012). While participation in social networking forums has increased steadily over the past several years (e.g. Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010; Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Olafsson, 2011), we still know very little regarding who the participants in these spaces are, what makes up these spaces, what kinds of activities kids engage in, and what those activities mean for their learning and development. In particular, when studying kids' online social networking, we should consider not just traditional social network sites like Facebook and MySpace but also virtual worlds, networked games, and project-sharing sites. To this end, Grimes and Fields (2012) suggest moving beyond the more specific "social network sites" (SNS) as defined by Ellison and boyd (2007) to consider a more inclusive range of online social activities, practices and platforms, defined more expansively as "social networking forums" (SNF) and including virtual worlds, networked games, and project-sharing sites that have an underlying social-ness to them. In this Workshop, we particularly highlight social networking forums focused on sharing and socializing around kids' own self-created media.

One key online social networking practice that has emerged in recent years involves creating, sharing, and socializing around user-created content. Pew reports that "Online sharing of content that teens have created themselves has remained steady since 2006; 38% of Internet-using teens say they shared content online in 2009, similar to the 39% who said the same in November 2006" (Lenhart, 2009, p.23). Despite these statistics, there is reason to believe that trends of online sharing are nevertheless trending upward. In 2002, research by the National School Boards Association revealed that only 13 percent of students aged 9 to 17 years were involved in sharing or looking at art and stories created by others online. Equally intriguing is a trend towards kids' gaming activities overlapping with the production of digital content—a key, yet often overlooked, way in which young users act online. Console games targeted at children and teens, such as Media Molecule's *LittleBigPlanet* for the Sony Playstation 3, Microsoft's *Kodu Game Lab* for the Xbox360, and Nintendo's *D.I.Y. WarioWare* for the NDS, feature tools for creating game items, characters, levels and mini games that enable non-expert players to contribute much more directly to the game than was previously possible. Because these games are Internet-enabled, players can share their finished products with others, contributing to vibrant networks or 'communities' of user-creators. Each of the major console manufacturers (Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo) now provide online services through which players can download (free or purchased) content submitted by other players, and upload their own creations. A wide variety of social affinity spaces—ranging from off-site forums to in-game publications that encourage player-created content—also allow players of games like *The Sims* and *Neopets* to contribute fanfictions, game guides, graphics, and movies to share with fellow players (e.g. Lammers, 2012; Magnifico, 2012).

Since children and youth are generally excluded from participating directly in public life, it is worth highlighting the significant opportunities for creative collaboration that kids are given in DIY-based social networking forums. Sharing digital artifacts with others online, especially in an online SNF where others are creating similar types of artifacts, affords many educational opportunities, including designing or writing for a specific audience (Magnifico, 2010), giving and receiving constructive criticism (Black, 2008), creating projects collaboratively (Brennan et al, 2011), studying the design of others' projects, remixing or redesigning the designs of others (Monroy-Hernandez et al, 2011), and making mods of games (Hayes & Gee, 2011; Grimes, forthcoming). At the same time, kids' newfound roles as cultural producers raise important questions about copyright and fair use within SNF that feature "remix" and fan activities, as well as young people's knowledge of these processes and the challenges that creative work may present for the various stakeholders involved. For instance, kids' newfound roles as producers introduce a number of important challenges to existing legislation on authorship, intellectual property ownership and copyright (Grimes, forthcoming; Shade, Porter, & Sanchez; Steeves, 2006; Turow, 2001). These roles also raise complex new questions about kids' cultural rights including freedom of expression and access to fair use exemptions.

Further exploration of these issues is especially important given that the existing literature appears to contain fragmented and occasionally conflicting data about how participation in DIY-based SNF extends beyond basic questions of access and usage rates. For instance, in a study of online content creation and sharing among US teens, Lenhart et al. (2010) found "no differences in sharing content by race, ethnicity, family income or parent's education level" (p.23), either in 2006 or in 2009. In contrast, Hargittai and Walejko (2008) found that young adults whose parents had higher levels of education were more likely to create and share content online, while young adult men were significantly more likely to share creative content online than young women. These conflicting findings highlight the need for a more comprehensive understanding of such content-sharing practices and a much more consistent incorporation of social equity questions within future research in this area.

Mapping the Research in DIY-Based Social Networking Forums

Despite the breadth and diversity of practices and technologies involved, we suggest that DIY-based SNF share a set of recognizable attributes that distinguish them from other websites and other SNF in general. Grimes and Fields (2012) argue that SNF can be identified and compared by several key features, including *forms of communication*, *personal profiles*, *networking residues*, and *hierarchies of access*. As a composite, one could say that this set of features defines the 'genre' of a social networking forum. In using the notion of genre as a framework for mapping the social networking terrain, they draw inspiration from Ito et al. (2010) who applied a similar approach in identifying a key distinction between 'friendship-driven' and 'interest-driven' types of online youth participation. Ito and colleagues articulate that the distinction corresponds to "different genres of youth culture, social network structure, and modes of learning" (p. 15). Generic categories of use (or participation) are particularly relevant to our discussion as they allow for analysis across platforms, which is an important methodology for challenging the binaries (e.g., offline vs. online, SNS vs. virtual world) that dominate discussions of kids and social networking. Building on the categories suggested by Grimes and Fields (2012) as a starting point, in this Workshop, we will anticipate further directions by adding to, expanding, tweaking, and developing their model of SNF to the specific genre of DIY-based SNF, just as they built on the model of social network sites suggested by boyd and Ellison (2007).

With this Workshop we are concerned with mapping out key features of DIY-based SNF that can propel this social networking genre forward as an emerging field of research. Although we cannot fully anticipate what directions this discussion will take, below we suggest some key areas of DIY-based SNF to consider, including the categories suggested by Grimes and Fields (2012) but also building beyond them.

Forms of Communication

A defining characteristic of online social networking forums is their support for participants to communicate with one another. This function is provided via options such as live chat, voice chat or even video chat (e.g. via Skype or Google Circles) in addition to threaded posts, comments, and traditional messages akin to within-site emails.

- What different forms of communication are available (designed-for) and how are they utilized?
- What user-driven types of communication are evolving and how are sites changing based on user-input?
- How does the type of content created and shared influence the forms of communication used, such as gendered-expectations (i.e. assumptions about gender of participants who make certain types of media like fanfiction or video games) or forms of communication embedded in the very media users create (i.e., messages for other users in stories, video games, or art projects)?
- What different genres (vs. forms) of communication are present in a site, for instance constructive criticism, praise, demonstration of affinity, and not-designed-for communication like role-playing and general socializing?

Personal Profiles

Another key element of the SNF genre is the user profile. As a personal representation on an SNF, the profile is the means by which people learn about each other. At minimum, a profile usually consists of a username and one or more images or text descriptions.

- What kinds of personal profiles are there and how are they defined by user-created content? For instance, portfolios, or a display of user-created works, are often a common type of profile on DIY-based SNF in places like *Scratch* and *Storybird*. Alternatives include pages, avatars, and homes.
- How are design elements such as badges and site achievements included in profiles?
- How do users incorporate their content around and alongside this site-generated content?
- How do personal profiles serve as identity displays for users?

Networking Residues

Networking residues, or the traces of one's social connections to other users on a site, are another generic aspect of online social networking in which users can demonstrate their affinity with one another. These residues establish and reify connections in several visible ways on SNF and are highly popular forms of participation. Networking res-

issues include posting *comments* on walls or projects; *liking* or <3 (*hearting*) posts, comments, or projects; creating lists of *favorite* projects; associating in interest- or person-based *guilds, groups, and galleries*; exchanging *gifts* of objects or virtual wealth; and creating friend lists. They overlap with some forms of communication like visible comments on projects or posts, but make social networks visible in ways that live chat or private asynchronous in-system emails and other messages do not.

- What forms of networking residues are common in DIY-based SNF and how are they utilized?
- What value do networking residues have related to user-generated content?

Hierarchies of Access

Social networking forums also have different hierarchies of access, allowing some users more kinds of participation and privileges than others. Documenting these can help illuminate different avenues to participation on a site, showing who has access to what. Some hierarchies might be controlled by designers (e.g. chat filters, special types of membership defined by fees or high levels of participation) and some by individual users (e.g. friend lists).

- What hierarchies of access are common in DIY-based SNF and how are they used?
- What user-generated hierarchies of access are present and how are they used?
- How do user-developed groups such as design collaborations or communities within a site define new hierarchies and to what end?

User-Generated Content

DIY-based SNF are defined by users creating content, often of a specific genre (story, fanfiction, programming projects, art, music, etc.).

- How does the type of user-generated content shape the design of a site, the participation in a site, and the forms of communication, personal profiles, networking residues, etc. on a site?
- What values emerge regarding the quality, quantity, and range of content users produce in a forum? For instance, are certain types of content valued as more difficult, more rigorous, or more creative types of content?
- What different types of content are present in a site, including personal content, curated content, favorited content?
- What are the attitudes and usage of new media practices such as remixing, and what issues of ownership emerge within a site?
- What are specific sites' rules and attitudes toward user-ownership, copyright, and privacy? How visible are these rules to users?

Roles and Trajectories of Participation

Participants in DIY-based SNF have the opportunity to take on different roles, including more obvious content-producing roles but also including many other roles, perhaps as yet undocumented or hidden.

- What range of roles do users take up, including content-producing, socializing, lurking, advising, etc.?
- How do users shift roles over time or take up multiple roles? How do these different trajectories shape the site?
- How do these roles relate to personal interests, relationships, and backgrounds?

Methods of Research

There are many different ways to research DIY-based SNF and we wish to consider a range of methods, their different affordances for research, and related issues such as ethics in this discussion. Here we include different methods such as data mining of backend collected data, ethnography, discourse analysis, collective or multi-site ethnography, artifact documentation and analysis, and others.

- How do different methods of research lend themselves to specific kinds of findings?
- How can multiple methods of research inform each other? How have current teams of researchers combined multiple methods, and to what ends?
- What ethical issues arise from different forms (e.g., privacy, waivers of consent, lurking, etc.) and how are researchers dealing with these?

Leading Participants

Several different researchers will participate in this Workshop, bringing experiences in researching a range of sites with different methods. Below we briefly describe the background and relevant research of each participant.

Deborah A. Fields: Chair

Deborah Fields is an assistant professor at Utah State University who focuses on how interests, identity, and learning can come together in kids' lives: in ways that connect across different social settings. These interests have guided her studies in virtual worlds and STEM (science, technology, engineering & math) education in and across classrooms, clubs, and digital social environments. She spent several years using ethnographic and big data methods to study the virtual world of Whyville.net, which led to writing about identity, avatar design, ethnicity, gender, and cheating in that world. Related, she recently co-authored a critical review of children's participation in social networking forums for the Joan Ganz Cooney Center. Currently she is applying this background on studying kids' social activities online to Scratch.mit.edu, a DIY-based social networking forum focused on kids' sharing, commenting on, and remixing computer programs in the form of stories, music videos, animations, and video games. Thus she is especially interested in digital media platforms that draw together creative production, personal expression, and social sharing of kid-created media.

Sara Grimes

Sara Grimes is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto, and Visiting Professor in Book and Media Studies at the University of St. Michael's College. She researches primarily in the areas of children's digital media culture(s), play studies and critical theories of technology, with a special focus on videogames. Sara has published work exploring the commercialization of children's virtual worlds and online communities, the articulation of a critical theory of digital game play, discussions of intellectual property and fair dealing in digital game environments, as well as the legal and ethical dimensions of marketing to children online. Sara's current research tracks the growing phenomenon of "child-generated content" (user-generated digital content created by children aged 12 years and under) in digital games and online environments, focusing on what this development means for children's cultural rights, as well as for existing regulatory frameworks and standards of practice. She has applied this focus to sites such as LittleBigPlanet and Storybird where children share videogame mods and stories respectively.

Alecia Magnifico

Alecia Magnifico is a learning scientist who is particularly interested in adolescents' literacy learning, participation in digital media, and critique practices. She has conducted ethnographic research in *Neopets*, working to capture players' multimodal composition across various areas of the site, how they carry DIY creative practices across multiple sites and contexts, and how literacy practices like critique and audience analysis become elements of play (Magnifico, 2012). Additionally, Alecia is interested in how teachers incorporate online collaborative writing and critique in their classrooms using peer review software tools like *Scholar* (e.g. Magnifico, Kline, Woodard, Letofsky, Carlin-Menter, & McCarthey, under review). By studying both classrooms and DIY social networking forums, she hopes to gain a better understanding of adolescents' formal and informal literacy practices, how these practices translate (or do not translate) from home to school learning activities, and how composing for real audiences and with real purposes affects adolescents' impulses to write and create.

Jayne C. Lammers

As a literacy scholar interested in digital media and learning, Lammers conducts ethnographic research of young people's literacy learning in fan-based DIY social networking forums. Her work studying *The Sims* affinity space examined young women's production and sharing of *Sims* fan fiction – multimodal, hybrid texts that pair images and words together to tell stories using the videogame to visually represent the characters and settings. This research offered insights about tensions that arise within these DIY spaces (Lammers, 2012) and the pedagogic

discourse used to create official knowledge within fan spaces (Lammers, 2013). Her current project is a longitudinal investigation of a developing adolescent writer's practices in three contexts: school, Fanfiction.net, and home. Through this and other projects, Lammers is interested in further exploring the potential of DIY social networking forums as sites of informal literacy learning and identity development for adolescents with the aim to inform in-school literacy instruction and practice.

Kimberley Gomez

Kimberly Gomez is a professor of learning sciences who researches digital technologies and new media literacies centered in two areas. First, she explores the affordances of social learning network sites investigating how youth, and the adults who mentor them, build knowledge, share knowledge, and engage in meaning-making opportunities in out of school contexts. To explore the affordances of such sites, she engages in-depth analysis of new media artifacts, including video, blogs, discussion threads, photos, and personal profile pages. The second line of research explores the affordances of learning technologies in high school science classrooms, and examines the adoption of these technologies by students and teachers. For example, she considers the impact of classroom use of Latent Semantic Technologies on changes in students' ability to summarize biology content. Similarly, she is documenting the impact of the use of such technologies on teacher science pedagogy. Recently, she has begun to explore the impact of medical wireless technologies on how patients' learn to monitor and support their health. Her work is guided by cognitive, constructivist and situated perspectives on learning.

Jen Scott Curwood

Jen Scott Curwood is a lecturer in secondary English and media studies at the University of Sydney in Australia, where she is a lead researcher in the Sciences and Technologies of Learning Network and affiliated with the Centre for Research on Computer-Supported Learning and Cognition. Her research focuses on adolescent literacy, technology, and teacher professional development. Jen is a former middle school language arts teacher and high school English teacher who completed her Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In addition to her research on secondary teachers' participation in learning communities, she is engaged in an ongoing ethnographic study of young adult literature and online affinity spaces, which include social networking forums such as FanFiction.net, Mockingjay.net, TheHob.org and social media tools like Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook. Jen's recent work has appeared in the *International Journal of Learning and Media*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, *E-Learning and Digital Media*, *The Reading Teacher*, and *Literacy*.

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