Most online media have social applications embedded implicitly or explicitly in their design. Recently, developers and users have become especially focused on these applications, leading to a newfound enthusiasm for so-called "social software." For example, social networking services have been developed with features explicitly meant to help members expand and capitalize on their social networks.

Popular social networking services include Friendster (for finding dates), Ryze (for finding jobs), and Tribe (for finding recommendations and listings). All of these services require that users publicly articulate their relationships to each other using the system's mechanisms. Often, there is only a single binary mechanism of articulation, which merely specifies whether or not a relationship exists. Articulation of such simplicity destabilizes the meaning of the relationships in the minds of the service's users (boyd 2). While boyd presents a cursory description into this phenomenon, there have been no detailed ethnographic accounts. Acts of articulation on LiveJournal are often the catalysts of explosive drama, making LiveJournal a prime candidate for studying how relationships are affected by social technology. I conducted an ethnographic survey of LiveJournal users, with the intention of asking two questions: What is the significance of friendship amongst users, and what are the social consequences of this significance?

In my participatory study of LiveJournal friendship, I found that users have widely varying interpretations of what a LiveJournal friend is. There is no shared understanding of the different interpretations, which often leads to misunderstandings and destabilization of relationships. Ultimately, the use of the word "friend" to

simultaneously describe all these interpretations leads to the emergence of hyperfriendship: a kind of friendship that is disassociated from the offline, everyday type.

Before presenting my results, I will first describe the LiveJournal system, as well as the methodology that I employed in my research.

What is LiveJournal?

LiveJournal is a free blogging service with a strong focus on social applications. Every user gets a journal page, a profile page, and a friend page. By visiting the profile page of another user and clicking on a button, you can specify that user as a "friend." This action adds the other user's name to a "friend" list on your profile page, and adds the user's journal entries to your friend page. It also adds your name to a "friend of" list on the other user's profile page. Furthermore, if you have any protected journal entries, the other user will now be able to read them.

The term "friend" is not merely used to describe the system. It actually appears ubiquitously throughout the interface. The functional definition of a "friend" is someone whose journal appears on your friend page, and who is able to access your protected entries. Amongst users of the system, "friend" is also used as a verb that denotes adding someone to your list of friends. Likewise, to "defriend" someone is to remove them from your list. Furthermore, "friending" someone is a one-way interaction, and the other user is free to "friend" you back as well as to ignore you.

Methodology

My participatory study is based on interviews conducted with several LiveJournal users, as well as extensive browsing of publicly accessible user journals and profiles. Participants and example cases were selected from diverse backgrounds, reflecting the cultural and behavioural heterogeneity of the LiveJournal user population. Interviews were conducted informally over instant messaging clients. Interviewees were initially asked a number of open-ended questions about usage, in order to stimulate reflexive and open-ended discussion. Theoretically loaded questions were avoided, and participants were instead encouraged to freely explore their habits, motivations and beliefs in concrete terms.

I will now identify some of the different interpretations of LiveJournal friendship. I will then discuss the destabilization of friendship and the move towards hyperfriendship as the consequences of these interpretations. For the rest of this essay, I will use the words friendship and friend primarily in reference to the context of LiveJournal. When I mean to talk about friendship and friends in the context of everyday, offline life, I will qualify the words accordingly.

Friendship as Content

The majority of users interviewed had built at least part of their friend lists as reading lists, just as the designers of the system had initially intended. Although motivations for wanting to read other journals varied, some users specifically sought compelling sources of information unrelated to actual relationships. One user described "probably ninety percent" of his LiveJournal use as "being about the content". The nature of desirable

information varied between users, but amongst other things included amusing web links, provocative conceptual musings, and attractive artistic output. Overall, there was an emphasis on "product."

Other researchers have independently identified this trend. Kate Raynes-Goldie, in a presentation to the Association of Internet Researchers, described how the friend list can act as an information filter, exposing the user to a custom set of specifically chosen content providers. By choosing friends according to the kind of things they write about, a user can ensure that the friend page is always a source of relevant data. In these circumstances, a friend is considered "someone who I like to read."

Friendship as Offline Facilitator

Another common trend amongst interviewees was the use of LiveJournal as a convenient means of facilitating offline relationships. These users made a specific point of friending any of their offline friends who also had journals. Often, these would be people with whom face-to-face interactions occurred on an everyday basis. In this case, communication on LiveJournal sets the stage for future physical interactions, for instance by announcing a party or discussing meeting times. In other cases, friends would see each other infrequently, but use LiveJournal as a means to keep up to date with each other's lives, as one user describes:

> One of my friends is rarely online for chatting and never answers his phone. He posts about once a week. And about twice a year he'll call out of the blue and say, 'Hey, I'm feeling a road trip coming on… mind if I crash at your place next week?' And by reading each other's journals we're enough aware of what the

other has been up to that conversation flows more easily when he's here.

In cases where users choose friends according to who they know in real life, LiveJournal friend networks tend to mimic established social webs. Another user, upon seeing a diagrammatic visualization of his own network, remarked that "the real world and the online world of LiveJournal are becoming one." In these circumstances, a friend is considered "someone I know offline."

Friendship as Online Community

Conversely to the previous trend, many users had never met the majority of their friends in person. Instead, friends were people they interacted with exclusively over LiveJournal, or through other computer mediated communications.

Most users with a large number of LiveJournal-exclusive friends considered these relationships to be relatively weak. Generally, these users found more intimacy in relationships that take place offline, or in varied media. One user related a story about another woman she disliked and avoided offline, but who she counted as a LiveJournal friend because they had some of the same interests. In describing the relationship, she observed that "you don't have to be as discriminating because you could always just not respond to a post." Users often spontaneously friend strangers because they share a thing or two in common, or for similarly trivial reasons. Another interviewee explained how this phenomenon played out for him:

> Friends [in LiveJournal] are more of a means to an external end than a means to internalized personal betterment. I think the medium of interaction allows a greater pragmatism to my approach.... encourages it even.

These words are strongly evocative of the "strength of weak ties," the phrase used to describe how our acquaintances provide highly specialized services to us. Laura Garton et al. echo the common assertion that online interactions employ a network model of community that puts particular emphasis on weak ties (para. 14). Some of the most illustrative examples of such an emphasis in LiveJournal are the various "add me" communities, in which thousands of users attempt to make new friends. Quite regularly, members solicit specific services as a condition of reciprocal friendship. Posts such as the following are common:

> comment on my journal + i'll add you.

> note; if you plan to never comment on my entries don't bother adding me. =)

Nevertheless, users who invest a significant amount of time in their LJ-exclusive relationships have found that a few of these weak ties mature into strong ties, providing significant emotional and material support. One user reported that the process of building friendships with others on LiveJournal was instrumental to getting through his depression. One woman even paid for a month's worth of his rent. Ultimately, it is unclear whether or not the ratio of strong ties to weak ties is the same on LiveJournal as it is in offline community. Yet all users agreed that the ratio is at least higher than in other online communities. Thus, while an instant messaging contact that one has never met is generally considered an "acquaintance," a LiveJournal friend with the same qualification can be considered anything from an "acquaintance" to a "close, personal confidante."

Friendship as Trust

Since only friends are able to read a user's protected journal entries, a significant minority of users sees the friend list largely as an access control mechanism. One woman put it explicitly: "I friend people that, for whatever reason I want to allow to read my locked posts." Many users have privacy concerns that lead them to make their entire journal protected. One such user explained this pattern, saying, "Once the stuff is up there, it's nearly impossible to get rid of it. Friends-only gives me control over what information I disclose." In these circumstances, a friend is "someone I trust to read my private journal."

Friendship as Courtesy

As mentioned, friendship is in general a one-way function, and reciprocity is not guaranteed. Furthermore, most users consider friendship without reciprocation to be indicative of an imbalance of power in the relationship. For that reason, many expect reciprocation by default, or feel that others expect it. Consequently, they develop a common standard specifying that friending begets friending, and that defriending begets defriending. Thus, "If they add me, I'll add them. There's no harm to me to do so, so I do it out of courtesy." For these users, a friend can simply be "someone I don't want to offend."

Friendship as Declaration

Almost all users see friendship, to some degree, as a declarative statement. That is, if a user includes someone else on their friend list, that user is understood to be saying something to the world about the pair's relationship. This conception holds even when it is not clear what precisely is being said. Likewise, the actions of friending someone or

defriending someone sends out messages of their own. Some users consider these statements to be implicit byproducts of publicly accessible friend lists. Others find that the statements are often intentional and directed. For example, one interviewee said, "When someone I am friends with in the real world drops me it feels like a personal statement of 'you are not my friend.'"

Friendship as Nothing

Some users do not perceive LiveJournal friendship as a declaration of any sort. Instead, they have a nihilistic view of the subject. For them, friending someone is merely a matter of adding another name to a list, and is by itself indicative of no relationship at all. A few of these users channel their nihilism into a kind of performance art, friending hundreds or even thousands of users spontaneously and arbitrarily. These individuals are known as "serial adders." One serial adder described her motivation as "boredom." Others do it "just to annoy the easily annoyed." Still others treat friendship like a game, creating "collections" of friends, or "creating puzzles for other people to unravel." Invariably, however, there is no implication of any relationship between serial adders and serial addees.

Beyond Friendship: Hyperfriends

Generally, the actual motivation for one user friending another is a complex interpolation of the explanations discussed above. Likewise, there are usually different motivations behind different groups of friends on the user's list. Many of the users interviewed specified a two-way split between the kinds of friends on their lists. Some of them

identified three or four distinct groups. None of them expressed a singular, unifying rationale behind their choices of friends.

The diversity of accounts is problematic because they all are represented by a single symbol. The word "friend" is used ubiquitously, without qualification, to describe each of the different kinds of friends that actually exist. Thus, when someone specifies someone else as a friend, two questions arise: Does it actually mean anything, and if it does, then what? If two users call each other friends, then how do they know if they are talking about the same thing?

Users rarely acknowledge these questions, and so the ambiguity in meaning manifests as conflict and drama between individuals and in groups. One user interviewed described an ongoing upset between her and a friend because of a defriending:

> Someone I like recently unfriended me and I've been freaking out ever since, which is why the bad mood—we're supposed to talk tomorrow, but I feel like I'm going to be dumped as an actual friend… When I called today, he said we were still on for plans tomorrow and that we'd talk about it then.

Situations of this nature arise, and arise often, because users have no common understanding of friendship. Instead of establishing a shared framework, the typical user simply assumes that the other party is operating under the same understanding as his own. Another user shared a similar debacle:

> I've had one example where I'd friended someone who didn't befriend me back. We seemed to have great conversations whenever we do converse (online), so not being friended felt a bit like rejection of some kind. But then later I read in his LJ

info that his friending patterns have nothing to do with his relationships—just

that he didn't want to read.

In this situation, the interviewee assumed that friending is a declaration of acceptance and

approval. However, the other user thought of his friend list merely as a reading list. Once

the divergence in assumptions became clear, the conflict dissipated.

One of the major problems underlying friendship in LiveJournal is the particular

significance of the term "friend" to each user. This sign is loaded with connotations

developed over years of previous social interaction, so its signified is vital to this

discussion. According to poststructuralist theory, meaning is not an inherent property of a

text. Furthermore, David Weinberger characterizes the internet as a postmodern space,

with a multiplicity of perspectives brought to the table by diverse participants of the

technology, and no authoritative definitions (147). LiveJournal itself is an especially

participatory, especially fragmented hypertext, with nothing resembling a central

metanarrative. Variations on friendship are more or less infinite.

By appropriating "friend" as a signifier within their system architecture, the LiveJournal

designers have exposed the term to slippage of meaning (Derrida 65). Certain meanings

of friendship on LiveJournal have nothing to do with the meanings of friendship in

everyday life. Instead, "friend" sometimes signifies LiveJournal-exclusive constructions,

which do not relate to the referent of everyday friendship. For instance, users who think

that a friend is "someone you like to read," are thinking of friendship as something that

depends on the existence of a friend page. However, there is no such thing as a friend

page outside LiveJournal. Thus, the meaning of a friend page depends on the definition of

a LiveJournal "friend". Yet this definition is clearly reflexive, thus demonstrating that the original referent has been lost. Many of the meanings do not suffer from this slippery reflexivity. However, because they all share the same signifier, the signifier of "friend" as a whole does suffer.

The partial reflexivity of "friend" suggests the appearance of hyperfriendship. Baudrillard classifies hyperreality as the result of disconnect between signifiers and their referents in reality (3). Similarly, hyperfriendship follows from LiveJournal friendship's slide into subjective, circular meaning. In hyperreality, the degradation of established truisms prompts an exaggeration of signifying characteristics well beyond realistic categories (Baudrillard 24). Likewise, hyperfriends expect hyperintensified relationships, leading inevitably to drama when inflated expectations cannot be fulfilled.

Misunderstandings about meaning set the stage for conflict between users, but often it is the presence of hyperfriendship that turn the conflicts into catastrophes. One user interviewed found that LiveJournal friendship is often held to a higher standard than everyday romantic love:

> On [LiveJournal] there's a feeling of animosity if you drop someone and they drop you back. As if, 'well then why did you add me in the first place? You must not really like to read me then if me dropping you changed things!' No one would say that to a girlfriend.

Additionally, friends of serial adders often react with exceptionally violent rhetoric. In these situations, it is typical for users to demand unequivocally to be told why they've been friended. As the following post demonstrates:

Even in the military when you are captured you have to say your name, rank and

such. But not to say I'm overdriving you live in society. And you added me. And

at the moment you added me I want to know who you are. If I do not know who

you are, I will start wondering WTF do you want to add me for then.

Generally, in everyday friendships, such an intense emphasis on disclosure and

transparency is unheard of. To some users, hyperfriendships are so intensified that real

life rejection is less devastating than being defriended by the same person:

One of my friends got very upset when someone she barely interacted with

defriended her. But I know for a fact half the people on her list aren't really her

'friends' in a conventional sense.

Others literally obsess over the number of people who count them as friends. According

to the maintainer of an "add me" community, about half of the thousands of members of

these communities exhibit such an obsession: "Those people are just looking to further

their numbers, and are usually not too concerned about who is on their list." In this case,

patterns of hyperfriendship correspond strikingly to emphasis on a LiveJournal-exclusive

metric of friendship.

Of course, haziness and variability of meaning are not properties unique to friendships on

LiveJournal. Relationships of any sort, in any context, are ambiguous and difficult to

define. The word "friend," in particular, is often a contentious description, because is

typically means different things to different people. For that reason, one may be tempted

to claim that LiveJournal is no less unstable than any other online or offline site of

friendship. One may also be tempted take the universal variability of friendship as an

indication that LiveJournal has no unique meanings to offer, and that hyperfriendship is

purely imaginary. To be sure, some users claim that their experience of friendship inside the service is the same as their experience outside it. If LiveJournal does not actually alter friendship, then the heightened sense of drama amongst its users must be attributable to some other cause.

Robert Putnam expresses the popular academic viewpoint that online relationships are inherently dysfunctional by default, because they do not actually permit the formation of rich social capital. Furthermore, the majority of LiveJournal users are teenagers. The confluence of weak community and an immature population certainly evokes the image of a squabbling populace, rippling with turmoil. If people think they are building actual friendships, when they are actually building loose affiliations, trouble is bound to result. However, the nature of user expectations is sure to be significantly affected by the way that relationships are articulated. Boyd makes a key observation on this point: "In analyzing social applications, architectural changes fundamentally alter the ways in which people connect socially" (4).

The most telling evidence for the claim that LiveJournal has altered friendship is the appearance of certain new terminology: "friending" and "defriending". These words build upon the root signifier "friend" to describe system functionality. The discourse of friendship has thus been altered in a manner owing to LiveJournal's architecture. These words also demonstrate how friendship is fundamentally altered through an implementation as a binary, public articulation. A term such as "friending" is needed to emphasize the difference between pressing a button, as in LiveJournal, and say, going out for beers every Thursday for a month, as in everyday life. The latter process implies that

people implicitly build a shared understanding of friendship as their relationship develops. The former process implies that if people want a shared understanding, they will have to work it out after the fact. Friendship in LiveJournal breaks down because people become friends instantaneously, without having even a gut feeling about what it actually means. Furthermore, no one considers the button labeled "add friend" to signify a month's worth of Thursdays. Thus, it is clear that hyperfriendship exists, and that is a part of all LiveJournal relationships.

Conclusion

I have presented an ethnographic account of friendship amongst users of LiveJournal. I identified a number of various old and new interpretations of friendship that users hold. Ultimately, I described how the diversity of meanings destabilizes friendship, and how their confluence under a shared signifier leads to the phenomenon of hyperfriendship.

By depicting these trends as a result of LiveJournal's architecture, I hope to have shown how future social applications can avoid repeating existing problems. Specifically, future services should take into account the diversity of relationships, and allow users to gracefully negotiate the space of possible interpretations. At the very least, designers should employ unique terminology to describe relationships, instead of overloading common existing signifiers.

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