

In the age of Facebook, researcher plumbs shifting online relationships

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A University of Kansas professor is researching details of relationships forged on social networking sites and determining their significance, depth and potential.

Nancy Baym, associate professor of communication studies, became interested early on in how the Internet shapes interpersonal communication and of late has focused her research on [social networking](#) sites in particular.

Sites such as [Facebook](#), [MySpace](#) and [Twitter](#) have revolutionized interpersonal relationships for the digital age, she said. Within these online communities, users share status updates, self-generated media, journal entries and other interpersonal communication with an ever-growing cadre of online friends. The purpose is to reinforce established friendships and form bonds with new friends.

"They start in the mid-late 1990s based on this idea that Stanley Milgram had that everybody's connected by six degrees of separation — and the first one was actually called 'sixdegrees.com,' " said Baym. "And they're based on the premise that you're more likely to want to get to know people who know people you already know than all-out strangers. So rather than a dating site that just has people putting up profiles and trying to randomly match, what if you could put up profiles of people that had shared friends. Wouldn't those be more likely to succeed?"

The social networking model has boomed. Baym said the fastest-growing

segment on Facebook, originally launched at Harvard for college students, now is people over age 35. The site currently claims more than 175 million active users.

Besides such impressive numbers is the enthusiasm such sites are generating, with many users frequenting social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook multiple times per day.

"Different people have different reasons for compulsive Facebook use," Baym said. "But I think it comes down to the fact that there's a continuous dribble — there's always something new — so every time you go something has changed; somebody has updated their status; someone has sent you a request; someone has posted an item. So it's a continuous link of hanging out in the halls with your friends between classes or hanging around the water cooler at the office."

Baym recently has completed research on Last.fm, a niche site that connects fans of similar music. She found that online friendships based on common taste in music tended to be more fragile, although people also used the site to maintain closer relationships.

"What I found on Last.fm was that on average these relationships are not very strong," said the KU researcher. "Other people have described them as on average being weak ties, which means that you don't discuss a wide range of topics. You don't do a variety of activities together. You tend to be kind of specialized in what topics you talk about. You interact when you run into each other but you don't seek each other out and your communication is confined to fewer media."

Indeed, across the social networking sites, online friendships range from close relationships with strong ties to looser affiliations with less connectivity — but both types of friendships are useful.

"You can ask somebody, 'Of your 300 Facebook friends how many are actually friends?' and people will say, 'Oh, 30 or 40 or 50,' " said Baym. "But what having a lot of weak-tie relationships is giving you access to are a lot of resources that you wouldn't otherwise have. Because we do tend to cluster in relationships with strong ties to people that are pretty similar to ourselves. So they don't necessarily know a whole lot that we don't know. They haven't necessarily been a lot of places that we haven't been. They can't volunteer to show us around Sydney, Australia, or give advice on a good reading on a topic. So there are all of these little bits of information and wisdom and social support that people can provide each other when they have a weak-tie [relationship](#) — and they can really open up access to resources that we wouldn't have otherwise."

Source: University of Kansas

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