

Facebook mines Census data to track its diversifying users

December 17 2009, By Mike Swift

In its earliest days, Facebook was primarily a white and Asian phenomenon. No more. In the first-ever study of the race and ethnicity of its U.S. users, Facebook said Wednesday that blacks and Latinos have joined the social networking giant at a rapid clip in the last several years.

Illustrating the growing diversity of online users as the Internet matures, a study by Facebook researchers found that about 11 percent of the social network's approximately 100 million U.S. members were African-American, about 9 percent were Latino and 6 percent were Asian, according to a blog Facebook posted Wednesday evening -- a much higher share for blacks and Latinos than four years ago.

Facebook does not ask its more than 350 million worldwide members to disclose their race. But researchers at the Palo Alto, Calif.-based social network used a Census Bureau database of the [demographic characteristics](#) of 150,000 American surnames to track the rapidly changing racial make-up of its U.S. members over the past four years.

"What we've seen over time is that as Facebook has grown in the U.S. population, we've come to represent a cross-section" of Americans who are online, said Cameron Marlow, the Facebook data scientist who led the study.

Ultimately, the [statistical analysis](#) could be a way for Facebook to dig deeper into the vast web of friendships, civic attachments and other relationships of its members. While there is controversy about the value

and limitations of sociological data gleaned from online networks, some experts believe that such studies could provide rich sociological insights, filling in the broad gaps left by existing sources of demographic data like the U.S. Census.

"I think it will be transformative," said Duncan Watts, a Yahoo research scientist who recently used Facebook to conclude that people often have inaccurate beliefs about the political convictions of their friends. "In sociology for the last 100 years, we've had the theory, but it hasn't really been possible to test it, because so much of what is important to sociology is individuals interacting to produce" families, friendships and social groups.

Social networks like Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn skew younger and more female than the general population, but the increased diversity of Facebook may be another indication of the maturation of the Internet, as minorities and other groups come on board. With well over 90 percent of young adults and the college-educated population now online, "we're reaching the saturation point in the early adopting population," said Susannah Fox of the Pew Internet and American Life Project.

The hoard of [demographic data](#) owned by Facebook -- age, gender, education and now race and ethnicity of perhaps a third of the U.S. population, along with a list of their closest friends -- is a huge potential bounty for advertisers. But Facebook said this study was not done for business purposes, but to get a sense of how closely the social network mirrors America.

"Diversity on the site is a good thing for the site, and for the users of the site," Marlow said.

"My own personal network and most people's personal networks have some amount of diversity," he added. "At the scale we're at, it's hard not

to be diverse. But at the same time, it was surprising to see how the story unfolded over time."

Following Facebook's 2004 launch among the students at elite universities such as Stanford and Harvard, the network was much less diverse than the U.S. population -- only about 3 percent were Hispanic and 7 percent were black in late 2005. Asians and, to a lesser degree whites, were overrepresented on Facebook relative to their share of Internet users and the general U.S. population.

But starting in mid-2007, the share of Facebook users who are Latino began to grow rapidly, as they gained numbers even faster than the social network's overall growth.

And in 2009, the share of African-American members in particular has grown rapidly, with both groups on Facebook now approaching estimates for their share of overall Internet users.

While Facebook is now close to the 12 percent share blacks comprise of the overall U.S. population, Facebook's Latino membership is still below their 15 percent share of the U.S. population.

The Facebook study used members names and drew from a 2000 Census database that correlates surnames and race _ for example, 89.9 percent of Americans named Washington are black, 95.1 percent of Americans named Zavala are Hispanic and 98.1 percent of people named Yoder are white, according to the Census Bureau.

The scientists then used a statistical technique to adjust their estimates based on the current set of Facebook members' names.

It's now easy to find predominantly black Facebook sites such as the "Largest African-American Facebook Group," an Atlanta-based group

trying for 5 million members, and "Black Women Are Beautiful," with more than 564,000 fans as of Wednesday.

Terri Flamer of East Palo Alto, Calif., a computer support worker at Stanford and long-time Facebook member who belongs to both of those groups, said that most of her Facebook friends were white for years, but that she noticed a huge jump in other black members in the last year.

For years, the self-described geek tried to evangelize for [Facebook](#) with her black friends. "That's one thing I think black people don't have is something that is central -- that we're able to connect like that," she said.

But last year, she began to notice an influx of black friends, such as old school friends from the all-black schools she had attended. Somebody posted a third grade class photo, tagging the names of people in the picture, which triggered another influx of people who wanted to connect with old friends.

"I think part of it was because they knew somebody who was on there," Flamer said. "And all of a sudden it made them want to be on there too."

(c) 2009, San Jose Mercury News (San Jose, Calif.).

Visit MercuryNews.com, the World Wide Web site of the Mercury News, at www.mercurynews.com

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: Facebook mines Census data to track its diversifying users (2009, December 17) retrieved 19 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2009-12-facebook-census-track-diversifying-users.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--