

Facebook concept used by 16th century scholars, researchers discover

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Our obsession with social networking is not exclusive to the 21st century, according to researchers from Royal Holloway university.

The idea of creating networks of members and sharing information dates back to the 16th century Italian Academies, which saw young scholars create nicknames for themselves and develop emblems and mottoes to form groups with which they exchanged information.

The discovery was made during a £1,130,000 collaborative research project between Royal Holloway, the [British Library](#) and Reading University, in which a team of academics are cataloguing and investigating the works of the Italian Academies, dating from 1525 to 1700. The project provides information about the academies, their members, publications, activities and emblems.

Researchers were surprised to realise just how similar the activities of these 16th and 17th century scholars were with society today.

Professor Jane Everson, Principal-investigator, said: "Just as we create user names for our profiles on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) and create circles of friends on [Google](#) plus, these scholars created nicknames, shared – and commented on – topical ideas, the news of the day, and exchanged poems, plays and music.

"It may have taken a little longer for this to be shared without the internet, but through the creation of yearbooks and volumes of letters

and speeches, they shared the information of the day."

The scholars created satirical names for their academies such as Gelati and Intronati. Professor Everson explains: "They are jokey names, which really mean the opposite of what they say. Intronati has nothing to do with thrones; it means dazed, stunned, knocked out and so not able to think straight – but really the Intronati were engaged in serious study, debates, dramatic performances and the like from the moment they were founded in the 1520s – and they are still as active as ever in their home city of Siena. The Gelati were not going around singing 'just one cornetto'. Gelati means the frozen ones – so a pun on the fact that these academicians far from being totally inactive through being frozen cold, were busy debating, exploring ideas, challenging received opinions and changing the cultural world of their home city of Bologna, and indeed of Italy and far beyond."

Just as the names of the academies and the [nicknames](#) of the individual members were fun, so are the emblems and mottos which illustrate the name of the academy. The scholars took great delight in creating puzzling emblems with hidden meanings.

Professor Everson adds: "They do sometimes take some working out, but it is great fun when you can see the hidden meanings in the images."

More information: To find out more, visit the Italian Academies website: www.italianacademies.org or enter the world of the Italian Academies at www.bl.org/catalogues/ItalianAcademies

Provided by Royal Holloway, University of London

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