

Cell phones and iPods and Facebook, Oh my!
Electronic media and its effects on social
interactions and information distribution.

Here we will be looking at information and media distribution within the UCSC campus and its student population. Information collected from various field research projects conducted within this class is included in this analysis as well. We must note the general potential for inaccuracy within all of these studies. For one they were conducted over a fairly small time period, often only being at most one week. Most studies had a decent sampling, often of around 70 or more responses. However in many cases most information was self reported from people surveyed. This very well leads to the potential for people to be reporting their perception of how well or how much they actually use/participate the item in question. My primary focus has been with the interactions and use of Facebook.com. We conducted a self-reporting survey of peoples' usage on Facebook. The survey was conducted online and as is standard for this type of survey all results were self reported. Thus there is an unknown margin of error. All results were collected anonymously therefore I feel that surveys that were conducted online have a greater chance of being more accurate. Also there is likely to be a certain bias or subjectivity to material presented and its analysis. Given that I am a UCSC undergrad and have used Facebook for several years, I am also part of the group that I am analyzing. We must also take into account this most likely holds true for other groups' data as well.

In this study the class as a whole looked at how media and information moves around campus. Many forms of media were considered from flyers to digital social networks such as Facebook. Other aspects were considered such as various personal devices like cell phones and MP3 players, and how they effect

how people respond to exterior stimulus and interact. The distribution of media has evolved across campus rapidly in the past few years alone. More digital devices and means have developed on campus. While traditional methods such as flyering and tabling are still used electronic systems, primarily Facebook, have entered the scene. In addition to this we have the increased presence of personal electronic devices, namely the iPod and secondly the cell phone. In the context of traditional media of flyers, several groups' research indicated that while they have great visibility they do not necessarily possess the ability for people to retain the information past the time they spend reading it. In one survey most people stated that flyers mostly served as something to read while at a bus stop to pass the time. The most likely flyers to catch attention are ones that are in color or are printed on brightly colored paper. Means of contact proved to be an important factor. Many people reported that they are not likely to actually get out something to write on or copy down information on a flyer. Tear-off sheets are likely to improve a flyer's reach. The other variety of flyering is the quarter sheet, which is most commonly passed out by groups in the quarry plaza. The main advantage to this over simply tabling or a full size flyer is that they can be given to anyone as they pass by. They do not require the passing person to interact or to acknowledge the person flyering.

When tabling, acknowledgement of your table is crucial in order to deliver your information. One of the major obstacles that now has to be dealt with when attempting to deliver your information in a public space on campus is personal electronic devices. These most commonly consist of the Apple iPod as well as other portable music players, and second cell phones. One study observed people passing thru the quarry plaza who were talking on their cell phones. In this case 16 people glanced or looked at a group tabling but kept on their way, and 15 people made no signs of acknowledgement of the groups present in the plaza. Only three people actually took time to stop and interact with the groups in the plaza. From this alone we see how cell phones act as a shield allowing people to avoid interactions. This also holds true with iPods as well. In another study it was observed on a buses traveling on campus that approximately 25% of its riders were using MP3 players of some variety. All persons would be sitting often by

themselves if possible and in all instances not interacting or making eye contact with any of the other occupants. In many cases you can observe how people use a personal music device to an even greater extent of a shield against external interaction. In many cases people can act as if they cannot hear the external noise, and thus regardless if they make visual acknowledgement they can play it off as if they did not hear a person. Anyone who has been within close proximity to someone wearing headphones will often notice that you can hear their music to an extent. In any guide typically found with headphones says that your music should not be audible to persons external to you, and this is primarily to prevent hearing damage. In many cases people have their volume turned up to this level in order to drown out external noise so they don't have to interact with it.

As a result because people are shielding themselves into their own isolated world, traditional means of information communication break down. The basic method of the flyer, flyering (passing out quarter sheets), and tabling no longer work as well, if at all, given that a person can simply keep walking past as if they didn't hear. In addition word of mouth (WoM), one of the most commonly reported as an accurate source, also begins to fail. Thus as a result this forces people to begin to rely on their core group of people they interact with for their WoM information as well as increased use of electronic media sources.

Another study surveyed students as to how they got their information with respect to the category/type of news. Some of the most common information, namely local news and events as well as pop culture news people reported overwhelmingly that they received the majority of their information in those areas via word of mouth. (48% for WoM local news, and 26% for WoM popular news.) It is not uncommon for someone to overhear another conversation and retain that information. While they are not directly involved in the conversation this does count as word of mouth as the information was propagated via said means. In relation to the earlier section about iPods this method of distribution fails to work as people simply do not actually hear other people as much. One will also notice that even when two people pass each other if one is listening to a music player they are much less likely to actually do more than simply

acknowledge each other. Thus the probability of people who run into each other to stop and converse is less likely if there is an electronic barrier.

This then moves us into a digital realm that consists of online social network sites as well as start pages and news sites. We cannot exclude from this television and radio as an electronic medium. In across several studies people reported that they considered word of mouth one of their most trusted sources. Given said information often is coming from a friend people tend to consider it more accurate. However their opinion of this accuracy depends largely on the nature of the type of information. In one survey for political and sports news electronic means were considered more accurate. For political news 33% considered electronic means as their primary and 27% for TV. As for sports news it was 23% for electronic and 26% for TV, with radio tied at 23%. ("Electronic" is being defined primarily as internet sources, however it consists of anything electronic outside of TV and radio.) One reason behind this trend is a users trust in the knowledgeable of the given source. For local information, our friends (WoM sources) tend to excel as they are often going to be closest to the actual news. Versus in the larger national and global perspective we tend to trust the mass media more. However while people do report that they consider electronic media distribution for most of their information outside of the local realm, several other surveys suggest that electronic media is not trusted as much even if it is considered the primary source. In one survey of TV usage as an information source it was a fairly even 50/50 split between people considering it a reliable source versus not reliable. However what we do not know here is what category of information people were referring to when they described TV as accurate or inaccurate.

In many cases when people were actively seeking news the majority of people reported that they used an online source (29%) and the main start page for many people when browsing was Google.com (44.4%). Many reasons behind why internet sources have become increasingly popular is their easy access. Over time people begin to find their preferred and trusted sources for news. From that they can then acquire the news that most interests them in the least amount of

time. The internet information system also is simple and lightweight. As in compared to traditional print media far more information is much easier accessed thru a web browser, versus newspapers were often described as "clumsy."

However what was most interesting that in one survey conducted amongst students the majority of students reported their most frequented site on the internet was Facebook.com (34.3%) followed by MySpace.com as second most frequented (26.8%). What this leads to is that in most cases people are seeking information first off about the general social atmosphere around them, and then secondly in a larger context of the world outside of the university. As we were aware that Facebook presents itself as one of the primary internet social news sources for college students, we decided to do a survey of Facebook users of their use of the site. The survey was conducted as an online self-reporting manner. The survey was online and available for approximately 5 days. The survey received 79 responses of which 78 of them reported they had a Facebook account and where 82% of them were UCSC students. As expected the differences in responses from UCSC students versus non-UCSC students did not vary considerably. As a result we can safely state that college student use of Facebook is fairly congruent across all universities in the United States. (The result responding not having a Facebook account was thrown out.) Our survey covered many items from when, where, and how often people checked their accounts as well as what sort of information they actively sought when using the site.

As expected 52.6% reported that they check the site multiple times daily with the next largest group (33.3%) checking it daily. People reported that they most often checked Facebook "whenever they have time" which lends itself to multiple sessions in one day. From this alone we have established that much of the student campus considers Facebook a reliable source for their social news needs. What is interesting is how many users reported on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 is skimming and 5 is reading) how much they don't actually read things. 80.8% of all responses fell in the range of 3 or lower, with 35.9% of replies being at the middle (3) of a fair split between reading and skimming. This also goes along with the statistic that most people consider the news feed/homepage to be their

primary source for obtaining information on Facebook (51.3%). As the news feed works to automatically aggregate information about the people you are interested in, people have progressed to using it more and more to find out information about their friends. Previously Facebook was a browsing only system, as in it did not report much of anything to you. The original system required that you had to manually browse through friends' profiles, various groups, and events to obtain the information you wanted. However with the introduction of the news feed system this information was automatically reported directly to you in a simple time-stamped list form. At its initial introduction it was met by many people as an unwanted feature, and that it revealed too much about what they were doing. Facebook's counter argument was that there wasn't anything published that your friends couldn't have already looked up. Interestingly enough as our survey shows that many people have come to accept it and in fact use it as their primary source. "Just browsing" for information on Facebook sits at a much lower response at only 20.5% of responses. Furthermore what was extremely interesting was what people primarily look for when on Facebook. For this question users were allowed to check up to two options where their choices were: About friends, campus events, world events, gossip, notes, and other. In most other questions where multiple selections were allowed often one choice would stick out higher than others. However what was very striking was that in this section the combined choice of "about friends" and "photos" was selected the most at 32%. (Where combined selection is that respondents selected both items together. Cases where one or the other was selected were counted separately.) Not surprisingly respondents selecting only "about friends" came in second at 20.5% and following that of selecting just "photos" at only 7.7%.

We have gathered from this question alone that the majority of all Facebook traffic is to further their social life. Granted the site was based around the concept to help students better interact with each other, it still posses the ability to spread information about campus events and (to an extent) about larger news issues. Given that the majority of the time people are looking up information on their friends it is interesting how people reported where they check Facebook. Respondents were allowed to choose up to three options as to

where they checked Facebook. Overwhelmingly 70.5% reported they checked the site from home, with the second place option being "wherever there is internet" with only 11.4%. Options that were available were: home, café, in class, library, wherever there is internet, and other. This brings up an interesting conclusion: that people are spending most of their time checking up on their friends, yet they are not as willing to do it in a public viewable place. I would tie this closely to the initial stigma that was associated to the news feed when it was introduced, with many people stating that it was "stalker-like." In many ways I'd say that people's habit to check Facebook for information on their friends multiple times daily from their home is one of those things that we are most likely to not admit to. If this survey was conducted in a face-to-face interview, respondents would have most likely scaled back their responses to reflect what they would want people to believe is representative of "normal" Facebook usage.

We also asked about how well Facebook functions about distribution of information about campus events and also worldwide information. Both questions were posed as a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 being poor and 5 being excellent. Interestingly enough 37.2% reported a midway score of 3 on Facebook's ability to distribute information on campus events. The top end of the responses (4 and 5) composed only 25.4% while the lower end (1 and 2) made up 38.5% of replies. Overall students surveyed felt that Facebook did a moderate to poor job of distribution information about campus events. We also asked about worldwide information. Not surprisingly 56.4% ranked Facebook's ability at the lowest option, with the remaining responses not exceeding the middle option. However given the previous responses for what people look for on Facebook in many ways contributes to the lack of information on campus and world events. This is due to several reasons. One, Facebook is primarily user driven content. Simply put if people are not posting events they won't be available to be read. Also it is very possible that most users would easily overlook this information given most users have a specific agenda for what they are looking for on the site it. However lastly we must not neglect the Feed itself. As is explained on the Facebook blog and developer pages, the news feed aggregation system relies on a complex algorithm that analyses a users browsing patterns. From this data it is able to generate a

news feed that is most pertinent to each user. As a result the feed grew from a highly resisted feature into one that people have grown to find quite useful. As it is a "smart" system, it most often reports to us information that we actually will want to read. If we aren't looking at worldly events or campus events we won't see them in our feeds. And granted that 51% of people use the news feed to get their information it makes sense that other areas were marked down in their available information. The information is there it is just that the user base has gotten lazy and doesn't go looking for it. Regardless we have better realized the extent to which users utilize Facebook as a social network, yet we have just touched the surface of the interactions online. An interesting study would be to look at how users (such as myself) who began using the site when it first became available, versus those who came to college with it already being a staple of college life.

What is interesting which we can draw from all of this is how information exchange has shifted from real world interactions to more in the digital realm. One question that this raises is the tie in to cell phones and iPods: has our "blocking out" of exterior interactions from use of personal electronic devices forced us to rely on social networks to regain our lost word of mouth information? The progression of information across college and university campuses has changed rapidly in the past few years. Even from my first year here the nature by how people interact and meet each other has changed drastically. What would be interesting is to see how people connected in contrast four years ago when social networking sites were just a drop in the bucket, and then to look at it four years from now to see how it's changed. I think a fear of many is that we will be progressing towards more impersonal interactions where we are more recognized by our online signature of our username than we are as a real face.