

## **The Spatial Production of Friendship**

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An inherent expectation of the social web is the production and performance of friendship. Users of social web technologies are mandated to situate their activities in the midst of a cohort, where the technology mediates the mode, premise and content of social connection. Regulatory structures, both implicit and explicit, provide boundaries for the exchanges between actants, evidencing a new, negotiated space of social connection and control.

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Today I wish to draw attention to friendship, which provides the locus for experience on the social web, as well as the countervailing sets of control situations enacted on the social web as social expectations or technical structures. The social web is a produced space, and our conceptions of the space draw on previous experience and interactions with control mechanisms written into being by the space's architects.

Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space* (1991), establishes a conceptualization of space. Space is constructed of spatial practice, representations of space, and representational spaces. Spatial practice can be thought of as our reading of space, as Lefebvre describes, “a dialectical interaction.” (Lefebvre, 38) Representations of space, on the other hand, consist of dominant discourses, which “identify what is lived and what is perceived and what is conceived.” (ibid, 38)

Spatial representations are where everyday life is enacted, where the discourse of space is consumed, and where end-users situate their experience within the space.

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Understanding the space of the social web requires examining friendship as a contextual production. Friendship online has multiple understandings; in social network websites, we explicitly and publicly articulate friendships, an explicit demonstration of sociality (boyd and Ellison, 2007). On the broader social web, friendship may be between nearest-neighbors, those with which we co-consume or co-declare affinity for the material or object focus of the site. Examples of nearest-neighbor sociality include the site del.icio.us, in which users orient sociality around a shared knowledge object.

Therefore, friendship is produced along a continuum on the social web; we can think of this continuum as axes where various aspects of production: identity, knowledge, exclusivity, ego, etc., provide a weighting for aspects of social relations. Through this discourse friendship is valued and realized. As Lefebvre states, “Social relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space.” (Lefebvre, 404) Relations are constructed within and between spaces on the social web; our production of friendship is contextually driven.

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Leveraging Lefebvre, we can see that the production of friendship, enacted as a spatial representation, is a wholly discursive process. The discourse occurs between individuals, the

systems, and modes of production. In order to understand the process we must explore the mechanisms of friendship on the social web and friendship's centrality to the experience of the site. This initial step may be thought of as the mapping of spatial practice, Lefebvre's first conceptualization of space. Friendship-as-network-participation can be a key experiential factor on the social web. One example is the social network site Friendster, in which one's ability to see and participate in the network was related directly to the size of the user's contact network. Applications that leverage ego, such as social network sites, tend to extract and award value based on the production of a friendship network.

Friendship on the social web can be thought of as cyclical relations, in which producers articulate networks to be consumed, leveraged or capitalized by site architects. In the public articulation of friendship, producers rarely conceptualize of these involuntary aspects of consumption, focusing on the affordances granted as reward for articulation. Architects specifically set up social relations as gatekeepers, allowing the user who produces these relations access to greater levels of interactivity, action and experience, thereby enticing ever greater production. This production, in turn, also increases the system value.

Considering representations of space, Lefebvre's second conceptualization, the discursive boundaries of the space are established through the mechanisms of system production. That is, coders, product managers and security architects enacted as the spatial architects deploy a set of rules and strategies for the control of discourse. These regulations are enacted in code, described

by Lessig. “The regulator is code – or more generally, the “built environment” of social life, its architecture.” (Lessig, 86) Our conception of the space is consequently funneled through a series of regulations, which exert structure over our expected activities. Generally, these regulations do not exert low-level controls (such as individual speech), but they heavily structure the mode and expectations of interaction notwithstanding.

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Representational spaces, Lefebvre’s final conceptualization of space, exist in the discourse between users and the spatial architects of the social web. In these contexts, understanding of friendship may be mapped from a productive/consumptive to a co-productive collaboration in opposition to the spatial architects. The incident that most clearly illustrates this situation was the response to Facebook’s creation of the News Feeds (Stutzman, 2006). Introduced without privacy controls, News Feeds remapped the conception of friendship, the expectations of the productive/consumptive cycle, and expectations of architectural boundaries.

News Feeds involved projecting recent friend activity onto one’s Facebook dashboard. Identity production, a core friendship activity, was thereby restructured, forcing a reconceptualization of the spatial understanding of friendship. Friendship was no longer purely the addition of a fellow network participant, but rather an invitation for friends to view all of the mundane daily activities of the individual. This marked a sharp redefinition of the space, in which the concrete abstractions of social relations were redefined. Lefebvre’s notion of a concrete abstraction is best explained as the materialization of a spatial entity through discursive

processes. The processes that produced the original conception of friendship did not include the constant observation implicit in News Feeds.

The shock of News Feeds migrated quickly through the articulated networks of Facebook. Though News Feed was intended as a tool of surveillance and control, it became a space for antagonism and demonstration. Users joined protest groups; their activities, consequently reported to fellow friend through News Feed fueled a viral protest. Within a few days, hundreds of thousands of users had joined protest groups, forcing Facebook to acknowledge and address the protest. Users and the site's architects renegotiated the discursive boundaries of News Feed and Facebook itself. Producers continue to leverage News Feed as a place for protest or promotion. Several other groups, often political in nature, have drawn hundreds of thousands of members.

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In the series of constantly negotiated relations between producers and architects, space is produced and redefined. Friendship provides the critical aspect for this continuous redefinition, as it is the comparative standard of assessment on the social web. That is, the producer's series of relations with other producers and architects defines both the norms and the boundaries of the interaction. Production of and with friends involves a negotiation of the spatial presence and the representations of space, the artifacts and discursive boundaries of sociality.

It is natural, I would argue, to examine the motivations for production of friendship on the social web, as it is a freshly defined artifact (one whose concrete is still drying). Looking at the social web, we see many different spaces, through which friendship is produced directly or indirectly. At the most basic level, we find social network sites, where the ego is prominent and friendship articulation serves as a verification signal (Donath and boyd, 2004). Widening our lens, we can find media sharing sites, through which the ego's products act as boundary objects for friendship. Finally, we engage with the crowd, in spaces like link- or news-sharing sites, where ego fades and one's object for production serves largely to answer the needs of the crowd. In these contexts, friendship may range from the real to the purely strategic, ultimately mapping a unique space.

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Motivations for production of friendship are defined largely within the spatial realities of each site, where the producer is challenged to ascertain the space and operationalize a definition of friendship based on spatial practice. A consistent expectation of friendship between sites can or should not be expected, nor should real-world mappings be forced. Friendship, of course, is purely a rhetorical device in context, inciting production for contacts or nearest-neighbors under the imagined concept of friendship. This is not to devalue all friendships on the social web, but rather to acknowledge their unique spatial roles, and to acknowledge the role to which they serve the productive goals of site architects.

A critical conception of friendship depends upon our reading and negotiation of spaces of production. On the social web, modes of production are strictly controlled by architects; while

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we seek new discursive opportunities by developing new representational spaces, friendship serves a productive role that is beneficial to the spatial architects. In reconsidering friendship and our conceptions of space, we are able to understand our relations to the architects, and reconsider our motivations for production.

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