Scholars Are Falling Into Line to Maneuver Through New Territory: Online Socializing as Academic Discipline

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First to Facebook were the teens. Then came the money, the market researchers and the media. And now come . . . the academics.

In the last six months, Rochester Institute of Technology scored $150,000 from the National Science Foundation to develop courses in computer-based social networking, Cornell got $2 million for research, and the University of Michigan added a "social computing" concentration to its School of Information. You can now major in MySpace, sort of.

The Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication dedicates its current issue to social networking sites, and contains articles with titles such as "Crying for Me, Crying for Us: Relational Dialectics in a Korean Social Network Site" (referring to Cyworld, the Facebook of Korea).

The race is on -- to an extremely obscure wing of the ivory tower. Who will own the study of the social networking sites? Is it computer science or behavioral science? Is it neuropsychology or artificial intelligence? PhDs around the country are trying to figure out, in their esoteric and socially awkward way, how to get in while the getting's good.

Let the theorizing begin.

Spend enough time talking Facebook with eager professors, and eventually you will reach the end of their expertise. And then they will say, in voices tinged with resignation, "Have you considered talking to danah boyd?"

Ah, danah boyd, such an early adopter of the no-shift-key lifestyle that she uncapped herself. She is a celebrademic, the high priestess of social networking. Still a grad student, she receives 40 to 50 interview requests per week, she says. A bureau handles her speaking engagements. She once employed an admin to sort her e-mail. She's done consulting for Yahoo and Google.

Her ascent began in 2002 when at 24 she started blogging about the newly launched Friendster. She had an undergrad degree from Brown and a master's from MIT's Media Lab when Berkeley came calling; boyd enrolled in the communications PhD program. Her late adviser, she says, "told me, 'I don't understand what you're doing, but I think it's really important.' "

Whenever anyone needed an expert on social networking, he was sent to danah boyd because danah boyd was pretty much it.

Which led, not surprisingly, to the most academic of emotions: seething resentment.

"Danah has really benefited in terms of being one of the first people on this," says a professor who asked to speak
anonymously, citing professorial cliques and cattiness. "But not all of her work is through peer-reviewed outlets," the standard by which academics vet research. Now, the professor says, it's more like: boyd posts blog entry; blog entry becomes "scholarship."

"I get some really nasty e-mails from tenured professors who think the way I'm doing my research is irresponsible," boyd says. She says she received death threats after she blogged about class differences between MySpace and Facebook users. One person analyzed published photographs of boyd to inform her that she "looked like a cutter." (Her look is riot grrrl/boho, with arm warmers and funky glasses.) She doesn't name names.

The culture of academia is like a land rush: professors poised around the edges of each new intellectual territory, waving flags emblazoned with theoretical frameworks, making frenzied dashes to stake claim on new topics, ready to shoot trespassers.

The sooner who get there first become "calcified," says Nicole Ellison, a Michigan State professor who, with boyd, recently edited the special issue of JCMC. "There's a definite early-mover advantage," says Ellison. "Because then your piece becomes the requisite for when people need to cite something."

It's what William Clark, author of "Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University," calls "the establishment of insiders." When small groups of people begin to cross-reference each other, he says, "they make the small group collectively more important."

And so the bibliography of Hugo Liu's "Social Network Profiles as Taste Performances" (published in the JCMC special issue) cites the work of Judith Donath, who also has an article in the issue. Donath cites Nicole Ellison, whose article precedes her own. Ellison, in turn, cites Hugo Liu.

Every author of every paper cites danah boyd.

It's the myopia of academia in any discipline, but especially so in a nascent one where a body of work (a canon!) is still TBD, where plum jobs and tenure tracks can be determined by early elbow rubbing. Nancy Baym, a University of Kansas professor who founded the Association of Internet Researchers, estimates that currently fewer than 50 people have researched social networking sites -- but she sees the numbers rise every month. Not just from departments of communication, but from psych, and soc, and computer science, and the straggling English professor or two.

And what of that emerging canon? What are these young -- because most of them are young -- ingenue types writing so feverishly about?

An excerpt from Liu's paper:

"One of the newest stages for online textual performance of self is the Social Network Profile. The virtual materials of this performance are cultural signs . . . composed together into a 'taste statement' that is 'performed' through the profile."

In other words: People on MySpace. List their favorite movies. To show their friends what they enjoy.

In "Signals in Social Supernets," Donath writes that social network sites "locate people in the context of their acquaintances . . . and allow for the public display of interpersonal commentary."

Which means: When you write "Duuuude, last night was crazy," on someone's Facebook wall, everyone can see.

The lingo makes you want to give everyone with a PhD an atomic wedgie, but the ideas are compelling enough: Liu, for example, explores how Facebook embodies the virtual pursuit of cool, with users claiming to like the things they think they should like, agonizing over whether "Borat" or "Wedding Crashers" is a more appropriate favorite film.

Eszter Hargittai, a professor at Northwestern, studies the way the digital divide pervades Facebook -- originally meant for college kids -- and MySpace, which was open-access from its beginning.

Hargittai thinks that the research will be valuable, if it holds: "You can't compare things over time unless you ask the same questions, but you can't keep asking the same questions in a field where everything's changing." In two years -- a reasonable period of time for a peer-reviewed journal to be produced -- "we may not even call these things social networks."
Ellison adds, "I certainly couldn't dust off the same syllabus every semester."

In the end, that's the biggest difficulty of all with this new discipline. Not whether there are enough table scraps to go around after super-scholars like danah boyd have their fill, but whether it even makes sense to study something so ephemeral, something hot today, gone tomorrow.

"Frankly," sighs Liu, pondering the future of his studies, "the stage we're in is really a rough draft."