Social Interaction Design

Case Study: MySpace

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Summary

MySpace is a social software service that offers communication and interaction tools with which members profile themselves, find friends, contact other members, post and obtain images, files, and more. The site ranks 13th on the web for traffic, and is hugely popular as an online meeting place. What makes it so successful? What kinds of insights into social interaction design can we obtain from it?

The name alone suggests that MySpace is a kind of "presencing" system: personal presence within a social context. Members present themselves on it through their profiles, and engage in a form of online socializing that works by creating local scenes around members rather than places, events, or discussions. People are the site's content, each member's profile standing in for him or her 24/7.

MySpace has a proactive "always on" posture towards virtual presence. While members don't have to meet in real-time as they do, for example, in online games, lines are always open and the dial tone is constant. And MySpace occupies a strange zone between public and private—as the online world is a public space not in the present tense, but in the archived tense. Similarly, one's presence online is not real in the physical present, but becomes real and valid as it attracts attention and participation. If there is such a thing as social capital, then it is earned and spent as social currency at MySpace, and one's presence has the value that accrues to those who can demonstrate social competence (read: flirtation).

MySpace is also a talk system, which all social software applications are to some degree or another, and it's the perfect example of a unique form of what sociologist Erving Goffman called "civil inattention." Civil inattention is that non-committal recognition we provide strangers in public places: "I see you, you exist, and though I can't say that I want to talk, I'm not ignoring you, either." Members on MySpace receive postings to their profile page that are short, often pithy testimonials and greetings—but which make no call on the member to respond there in kind. Profile page thus attract comments, these comments becoming a roster of one's social circle and network of friends. And because the comments are there for others to see, they have social content and intent: they're written as a

reflection on the friend and friendship as much as they are for anything else. So MySpace facilitates a kind of low-intensity social mirroring: hellos and compliments produce a kind of flirtation. Not civil inattention, but undemanding attention.

What's remarkable about this kind of service, as simple and undemanding as it is, comes with its scale. Philosopher and sociologist Niklas Luhmann described mass media as a second order narrative about society, a reflection of society upon itself, constructed as such and for the purpose of guiding a society's members and institutions to selecting signal from noise. MySpace is big enough that it is, in itself, a mass media institution. It's like a participatory "American Idol." (That would be an interesting comparison in fact, as the challenge of auditioning on AI is highly social, increasingly nasty, and incredibly hard not to watch all the same.) A popularity contest, profiling/personals/talk show system that has the population big enough to break a new band and produce trends of its own. And that is interesting. MySpace is proof that a talk system can give big media—its high production values, celebrities, focus-grouped taste-making and ad-funded messaging notwithstanding—a run for its money. Ironically, most social software users will complain that MySpace is the ugliest of the bunch (Tribe.net, Friendster, Orkut, Yahoo 360). Which is all the more reason to investigate the power of social technologies to create meaningful user experiences.

MySpace: A Social System at work

- Participation involves the demonstration of the member's social competence in self-presentation and social interaction online
- Social interactions on mySpace tend to be unstructured, loose, and fast—youthfully social in their content, in other words
- Direct communication between members, and association with popular members, attracts crowds, provides a scene in which users can see themselves being seen, and focuses the social scene on popular members
- Social interactions are open and ongoing
- A high degree of face is wagered and given on the site, again preserving a focus on member-produced content over media consumables and mass-media participation
- The service represents a kind of grassroots mass medium, bypassing commercial marketing speech for testimony (authentic or strategic) passed among friends.

Summary of the Components of Social Interaction at MySpace
Society and Culture

Interaction is not limited to the interface of user and application—it unfolds among participants. User experience and usability issues thus encounter a social interface, and as interaction designers we have to ask: What do the site's architecture, navigation

scheme, and features contribute to interactions between users? But first, an overview of online social interactions at mySpace.

- The power of mySpace as a marketplace, and as a market maker, is not lost on mainstream media. Not only does it offer a fast ride through popular culture, it is ground up rather than top down. But most importantly, the popularity contest that is mySpace comes straight from the horse's mouth, so to speak. It's marketing by word of mouth and not by word of sponsor. This gives it "truthiness" and power.

- The community is self-reflexive: members watch each other as they watch themselves. Talk is captured and preserved over time, producing a social artifact that gathers character and produces the identity of life on MySpace.

- Social systems are said to have norms, codes of behavior and conduct, unwritten and tacit rules by which people negotiate their interactions with each other without having to be personal every time. Flirtation is one such type of behavior, for it solicits friendly and open-ended comments and yet is understood as a common type of interaction. One would be misguided to take comments too seriously in a highly social environment: it's understood that social interactions can be painful, even harsh, and therein lies the challenge.

- Testing one's personality and perhaps mettle, toughening ones skin in the presence of peers as well as anonymous members, is a type of social practice that has its benefits in the acculturation of youth to the adult world. The fact is that many youths excel at social interaction online, and its sites like MySpace that permit them the experience of building and playing themselves in front of others.

Self Presentation

Self presentation is normally handled in the context of a social situation. Only now that we have the media and means to create online profiles, to state explicitly what she might otherwise communicate with subtlety, and to show fearlessly what would draw gasps and force hands to cover mouths, has it become possible for us to maintain ourselves virtually. Self presentation starts with a profile and builds, through discussions, testimonials, comments, chats, and other kinds of communications and interactions. One's presentation can be manipulated, falsified, or truthified. Members of online communities generally get out what they put in, and get back what they give: while most of the "social" rules of self presentation operate online as they do in the real world, what changes here is the way that social feedback and guidance work. Members can more easily choose to ignore bad behavior—their own or of others—and the mediating screen and interface is to an extent a protection from embarrassment.

- MySpace isn't about creating a vast knowledge base or online reference kit—that would be Wiki. So when it comes to emphasizing contributors or contributions, on MySpace a member's contributions stand in for him/her. This is common in a dating

or highly social service, where communication is addressed to getting attention and soliciting an interested response.

- A person's actual life is perhaps not as important is his or her presentation of themselves. In this sense, competence again is demonstrated by members' skill in self promotion and presentation, that biographic exercise becoming a mode of self-presentation unto itself. MySpace, among other ssns, represents a new kind of sociality, or culture.

- One of the primary social events on MySpace is a member or group's rising stardom, or celebrity. Popularity can be measured by feedback members obtain from their presence online. Generally speaking, members know what this is, and how to do it.

Participation and User Practices

Social situations demand social competence from their participants. In fact a social encounter is an opportunity for its members to succeed—not only by demonstrating their own competency, but caretaking others' also. Embarrassment of one is embarrassment of all.

- MySpace is a highly-social social software service, and as such attracts users whose online social competence is high. Though it may seem as if very little is said, content-wise, there's a lot being said in the rituals of interaction: in fact the smallest greeting can have immense ritual value.

- The focus is on people. Members are the content. Their profiles are designed and presented in order to attract attention of others, and to solicit responses of a particular kind.

- Personality, and the personal (in contrast with the professional), inform self-presentation on mySpace.

- The service's openness to the use of html in customization of profile pages encourages creativity, and invests web skills with social capital. Social competence combines with web competence in a hybrid of social and technical practice.

MySpace Social Interaction Design

"And just as system constraints will always condition how talk is managed, so, too, will ritual ones. Observe that unlike grammatical constraints, system and ritual ones open up the possibility of corrective action as part of these very constraints. Grammars do not have rules for managing what happens when rules are broken."
Erving Goffman

Desired user behaviors

The social interaction designer's job is to anticipate the kinds of social interaction a system will require if it is to sustain itself once launched. Interaction designers think in terms of user behaviors. Social interaction design adds social and interpersonal attributes to the existing technical and device interactions. Users must have social competencies with the community's theme (what it's about, e.g. dating, jobs, etc.) and have a grasp of web navigation, links, use of form pages, search, and so on.

Interaction designers also tend to think in terms of user needs and goals. Social software, while it does often satisfy specific goals (finding people, getting dates or jobs, collaborating, buying and selling, window shopping and so on) also provides experiences we can't strictly group under the heading of user objectives. Just as a bar doesn't just sell drinks, or a convention simply provide information and new product demos. The social dimensions of life online, while thinner than in real life, belong to the user experience.

Social behaviors

- High participation levels: frequent and regular use

- High level of social and technical competence with the genre of social software and unstructured social interaction, self-presentation, and communication

- Familiarity with the conversational style of light and quick interactions, gestures, greetings, and so on: think personals and personal notes

- Friendliness and sporty social competition: be nice now, karma is real

- Trend awareness and participation ("cooliness"?)

- Participate or precipitate out, or: you get out what you put in

- WYSIWYG social interaction and competence: members who enjoy the publicity and exposure of social participation

From user practice to social practices

Social software is characterized by social practices. We think of these not as distinct user practices, but as aggregated and second order social practices. To see how design informs the practices that emerge on a social software service—and they must be allowed to emerge and grow organically, for attempts to legislate or force them will backfire—one has to observe social phenomena. The social interaction designer must borrow hats from the sociologist and the psychologist!

Consider some of the social practices supported in a service like mySpace. The following are an undisciplined combination of psychological, communication, and sociological terms. (I'm pursuing these with more precision in a separate project.)

- **Mirroring**: mirroring others' behaviors can help members fit into a new group or community.

- **Word of mouth**: passing news or views along to other members is a simple and effective way to participate in a community.

- **Flirtation**: this socially acceptable type of interaction is reasonably low risk and well known, and it shows that a member is friendly communicative.

- **Collaboration**: while not as structured as formal teamwork, collaboration occurs all the time in social networks in which members contribute to a community—even discussion is a type of collaboration (note that dating services emphasize individual, not social participation).

- **Opinionating**: members can invite communication and commentary with statements, rants, complaints, shout outs… Short and to the point, the statements are easily recognizable for what kind of response they solicit.

- **Self-Promotion**: members promote themselves on MySpace to create presence for themselves, and to get feedback and responses from others. Self promotions (e.g. profiles, announcements) are usually tailored to an audience and reflect the community's soft norms and codes of conduct. At MySpace, promotional activities include out and out marketing (of bands and dj's especially).

- **Extending trust**: trust only comes to those who give it, and the extension of trust to others is a daily practice in online communities. Members can tell how far a member has gone with an offering of trust, and generally know how much they're returning if or when they do so.

- **Peer selection**: we are who we are with, and this counts for more on a site like Myspace than in most. One's peer identities and peer group membership provides others second opinion, and is an important validation of one's identity online (where so much can be misrepresented).

- **Public journaling**: the practice of journaling in public is relatively new, and MySpace is home to a great many "private" journal entries, confessions, frustrations,

and longings. There's a self-revealing act at work in communities like this, one that combines a need for acknowledgement and a sensitivity to rejection. Public journaling can serve as a round-about way to connect and communicate with others. MySpace is meant to be a safe place in which to make the personal public, and the private, communal.

- **Stylistic displays** (vernaculars, idioms, and other linguistic and cultural competencies): signs of style are an important way of establishing one's identity in online communities, style here being both personal and social.

- **Web competence**: the technical competence demonstrated by many MySpace members tells us that a generation of computer users, raised during the internet age, include web skills among their bag of tricks and personality resources.

Relations

The feature of social software discussed most frequently is the social network: a relational map of one's relationships (friends, colleagues). First degree relations are people we know directly. Second degree relations are people known by people we know in the first degree. Third degree is people those people know… and so on. It's been said that we are all six degrees apart. True or not, that's not the critical feature of social networks when it comes to social software. Rather, it's what sociologist Mark Granovetter calls the strength of the weak tie, or the second-degree relation. For it's there only that trust might be transferable (from the person we know to the persons s/he knows). And because some level of trust, better termed confidence as it's not strictly interpersonal trust (since we don't have it with a person in the second degree), can be assumed of second degree relations, those people can become cultural resources to us. And we have all found a tailor, mechanic, home contractor or significant other through a friend.

Social networks codify relations among members so that members determine who they know, and thus how they might meet others. The criteria for relations—what makes a relationship—varies from service to service, according to its theme and users. Members may be fairly loose in choosing and inviting friends in a highly-social service; or strict and protective in a job-networking service. Ironically, the liberal use of social networking online to increase one's friend networks has actually devalued social networks: all friends are not equal, and new online friends (once called friendsters) cannot be trusted in the same way that people known in real life can. (And note that you can trust an enemy: to be mean, ruthless, conniving…).

While these social networks are still used to classify members at these sites, old forms of collaborative filtering—such as tagging—are making a return. Members declare their interests (share bookmarks) and the resulting tag culture reflects aggregated bookmarks arranged by topics (tags). Blogs come together as audiences of blog readers and feed subscribers link to one another. In short, there are other networks emerging besides those based on friendship.

- On mySpace, relations are used to make introductions and to serve as a filter on membership and content.

- Relations can provide some level of confidence in strangers when browsing people (a friend of a friend is not likely to wield an axe in the night-time).

- Relations serve as a kind of substitute for social hierarchy. This is diluted somewhat when members combine real friends and online friends, and some services invite members to make those distinctions. But on mySpace, relations are still often the means by which members find and participate in a social scene.

Group dynamics and communication

Interpersonal and social relations are dynamic by their very nature, tending to be organized by the activities a community fosters. At mySpace, members take an interest in each other, that is, in their personality and presentation. Relations are a means by which members declare an association with others, show their membership in a scene, and their interest in one another. MySpace thus takes a relatively proactive position towards relationship forming.

It's worth noting that the distinctions between direct and indirect relations, and between dyads (pairs), triads, and groups, audiences, and so on become much less clear in online communities than in co-present situations. Meaning that the constraints on interaction and communication that come with physical co-presence on speaking, listening, conversational turn-taking, attention-giving and much more have real parameters. One can only interact with another person in physical co-presence as long as the conditions are right: one has to be able to see and to hear (un-amplified) expressions and gestures. Constraints are different in the online world. A "conversation" between two members of a discussion group can be picked up months later by somebody who "wasn't there" at the time. And there are more examples too numerous to cite here. Still, some rough observations of the dynamics of social interaction within networks would include the following:

- Direct communication occurs when members through interaction and messaging tools that provide a private channel.

- Indirect communication occurs through posting and reading messages not directly addressed to oneself, such as when members comment on blog posts. Even testimonials, which are written about and for a member, have a social function (as a reflection on their author).

- Anonymous communication can also occur, such as when members rank others (MySpace invites members to rank others anonymously; other sites invite personal ratings).

- Triangulating can occur through introductions made by members. However, social scenes on mySpace seem strong enough to provide ways for members to encounter one another without introductions. That kind of relationship brokering seems to be more common in less public social networks.

- When members become a scene unto themselves, their presence on the system as a social scene attracts attention. Soon the activity is self-reinforcing, and becomes a defacto mySpace activity. As online communities scale in size, new members often seek to fit in by engaging in the activities others seem to there for. We must know what's going on, in other words, before we know how to proceed (Goffman's general observation about the organization of participation social situations)

- Information-based content presented without social context, and not produced by members, will appear less important on a social network like mySpace than member-produced content, for it's missing the presence of others that marks a social scene. The success some musicians, dj's, and bands on mySpace have had launching themselves is a testament to the site's social organization. Conventional marketing techniques aren't needed when people can show their approval and interest in a rising star within a social scene. In fact these home-grown markets stand to give marketers a run for their money: there's an authenticity to local and sub cultures that money can't buy. And that's regardless of how cheap, or self-serving, the reader thinks mySpace's "society" might be.

Communication and interaction tools

We distinguish communication and interaction tools. Communication is the stored form of talk; interaction the interpersonal and "performative" form of talk. Where the former focuses on preserving expression, the latter focuses on facilitating and mediating the dynamics of interaction.

Communication by and large occurs in text form, though audio and video are increasingly common on social software services. Because text can be stored, tagged, browsed and searched, and linked to, communication loosely combines publishing and speaking, writing and talking.

Talk

Talk is a particular kind of activity. It is social, and expressive. Most of all it is a linguistic exchange between people that has content (which is understood, or not) and interaction (such as agreement or rejection). One can understand a statement and not agree with the person who claims it.

A talk system, which social software like mySpace is, thus galvanizes linguistically-mediated interaction. Users don't just click buttons and links, driving towards meeting preconceived user needs. Interaction occurs between people as well as between the user and the website. Thus user interaction cannot be described in terms of discreet user goals and needs, but must be grasped as the social practice of private and public talk.

The social interaction designer must be aware of how these two dynamics—one at the user interface and the other at a social interface—condition and inform the user experience.

We can call this kind of talk and "open state of talk," that is, conversation never really ends. In contrast to bracketed talk, which has an opening, a middle, and a closing, open talk fades, is picked back up, and comes into and goes out of focus over time as members maintain the exchange. A feature of open talk is that participants sustain interest in each other over time, rather than engaging in and then completing a transaction.

Talk systems involve the use of communication and interaction tools. In some cases, social features like rankings, votes, polls, and other anonymous tools produce social activity without supporting authorship

The social comment, as opposed to the private message, reaches its highest highs and lowest lows on mySpace, where wit, html, font and typography, design, animation and icons all combine in a new language of expression. Pith has never been so visible!

Communication tools

- Blogs
- Commenting
- Forums
- Communication enabled profile pages
- A standing tagline that acts as name tag and identity marker
- Testimonials (as comments on a member's profile)
- Messaging (direct communication between members)

Interaction tools
- Chats (group discussion tool)
- Instant messaging (direct interaction between members)

"Thus, as Adam Smith argued in his *Theory of the Moral Sentiments*, the individual must phrase his own concerns and feelings and interests in such a way as to make these maximally usable by the others as a source of appropriate involvement; and this major obligation of the individual *qua* interactant is balanced by his right to expect that other present will make some effort to stir up their sympathies and place them at his command. These two tendencies, that of the speaker to scale down his expressions and that of the listeners to scale up their interests, each in the light of the other's capacities and demands, form the bridge that people build to one another, allowing them to meet for a moment of talk in a communion of reciprocally sustained involvement. It is this spark, not the more obvious kinds of love, that lights up the world." Erving Goffman Interaction Ritual 116
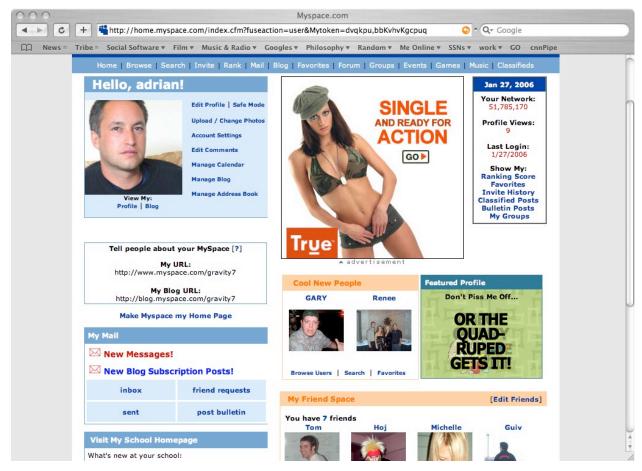
A look at the UI

The user interface (UI) is the screen with which users interact with a site (or other application). In the case of social software, the UI provides only part of the interaction. Users interact in another way with one another. They do this through the UI, but strictly speaking, their interaction doesn't stop with the UI. Social interaction designers need to think through the UI to the interactions occurring between users, and to the social practices emerging in the system. If the UI is a window, it is a structured window, providing only those views on people and events that can be captured and presented by the application, and its web front end.
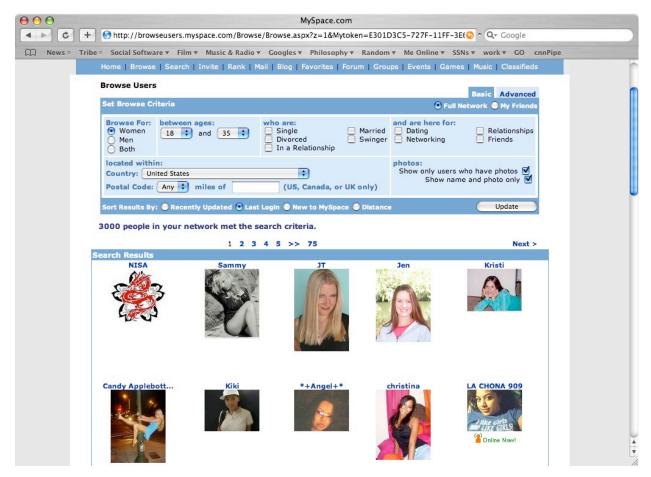

- The value proposition on MySpace
- Note the importance of uploading one's picture: this tells the new user what the site's about, and is a testament to its being a self-presencing system
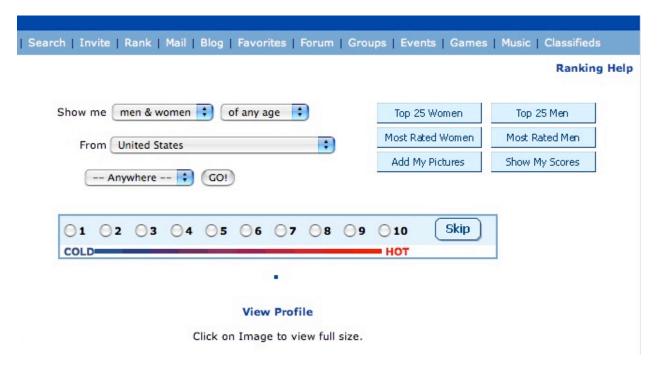
- A member's page shows that member's friends, but also new and unrelated members
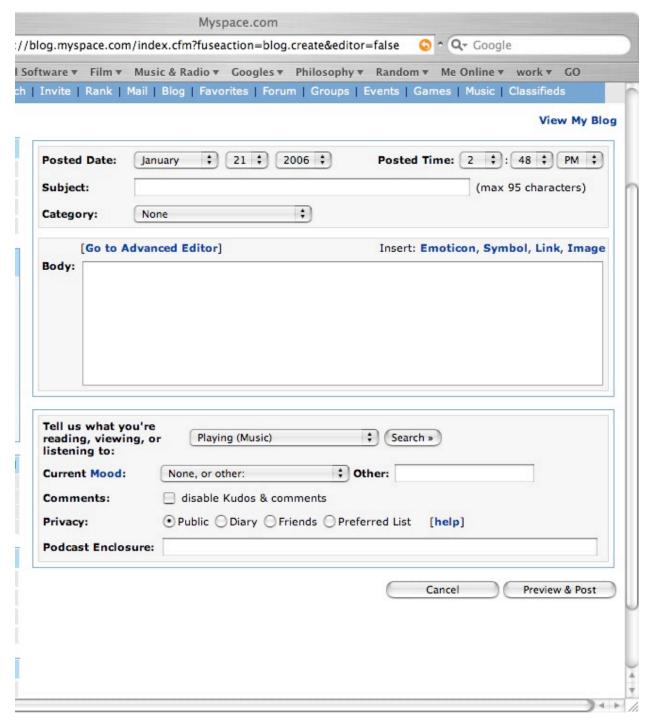- Communication (blog) and interaction (messaging) tools promote participation

- Pictures for poses

- Pictures for posturing

- Pictures are pretty

- Pictures produce voyeurism

- Picture-driven presentation of members engages the eye; here, looks beat text, and personality is shown not told

| Search | Invite | Rank | Mail | Blog | Favorites | Forum | Groups | Events | Games | Music | Classifieds

Ranking Help

Show me [men & women] [of any age]

From [United States]

[-- Anywhere --] (GO!)

Top 25 Women   Top 25 Men
Most Rated Women   Most Rated Men
Add My Pictures   Show My Scores

○1 ○2 ○3 ○4 ○5 ○6 ○7 ○8 ○9 ○10   (Skip)
COLD ▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬▬ HOT

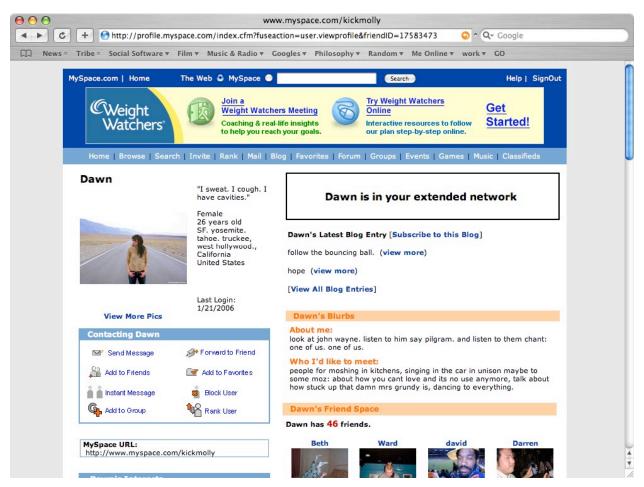**View Profile**

Click on Image to view full size.

- Who's hot and who's not started it all at the turn of the millennium.

- MySpace members can throw themselves into the site's own sexy competition

- If you look good and you can handle the attention, it just might be to your advantage!

- Anonymous votes are not for the faint of heart; the culture here says: "No Fear!"

- Moods added to blog posts are a gestural nod

- The blog editor permits embedded pictures and even music

- Creativity is encouraged, and a format is born that is part scrapbook, part broadcast, and part podcast...

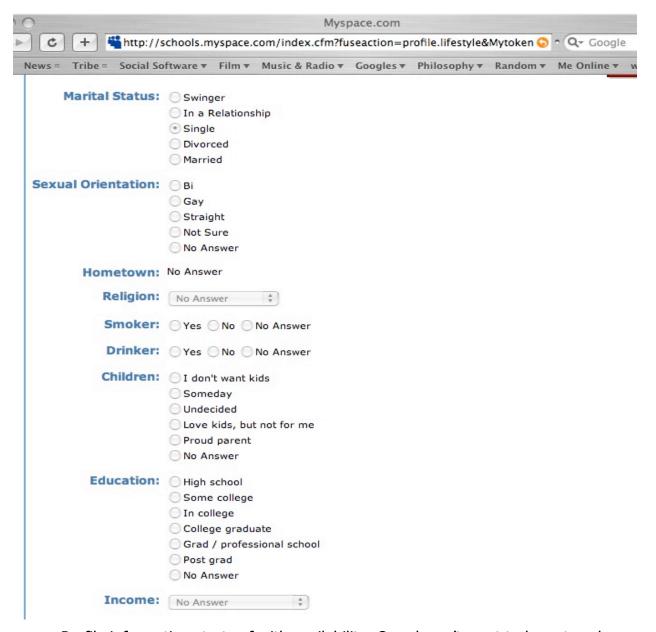- Whose audience is filtered, if the author wants, by his or her mySpace network

- A friend's page has interaction and communication tools on it to encourage participation.
    - Here, Dawn won't have to invite me to subscribe to her blog; I can do it myself
    - Dawn's profile content is fairly quick and to the point, but this is a default profile
    - Still, the default setting invites us to see more, and let's us know what Dawn would like. Hey, that's an icebreaker!
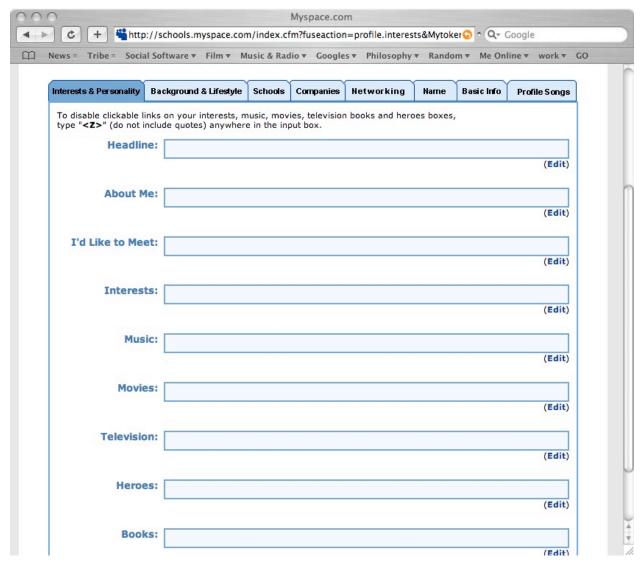
- Here's a modified profile: tools are still there, but the user's added events to the top of the page.

- Many profiles take on a scrapbook look: pictures of home, friends, pets, and activities, personal and racy but within legal limits. Of course that which we don't see only entices us to see more

- Style comes through in color and layout as well, some users showing little competence and "aesthetic," others bordering on professional

- Of course with as many users on mySpace as there are (30+ million), there could be a lot to gain from getting featured!

- Celebrity achieves value for its contribution to members
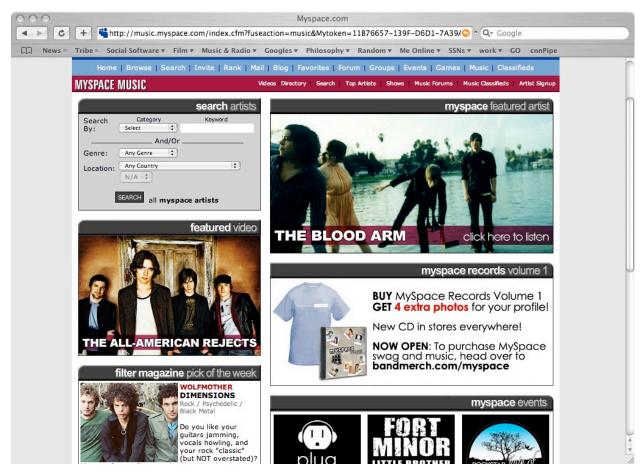
- Members invest personality in their own pages

- Profile information starts of with availability. One doesn't want to have to ask, on mySpace. The culture is not shy, and who's got the time to beat about the bush?

- Straight is only one of five options. And who would've thought a radio button is all it takes to get out of a straightjacket?

- "Normalized" data capture like this, meaning into a defined data set, facilitates search and matching

- Text fields laid out like this ask members to put it into their own words

- And suggest to users that they keep it short

- Brevity will help users get through the population faster; it keeps members "on the message," and it invites phrasing common among classifieds and personals ads

- A music section on MySpace leverages the community's interest in music
- Marketing on MySpace can be incredibly effective, for it builds on grassroots interests and promotional activities.