

# “Nobody has 257 Friends”

## *Strategies of Friending, Disclosure and Privacy on Facebook*

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### **Abstract**

In the present article, we discuss norms of friendship and privacy on social network sites by examining strategies of privacy among users, arguing that tacit norms of friendship are now more easily observed. The article is based on a quantitative survey among 1710 Internet users in Denmark, among them 970 Facebook users, subsequent focus group meetings with 20 respondents and finally access to their profiles for a period of twelve months. In line with the research literature on social network sites, our study shows that users’ “friends” consist of a variety of strong, weak and even latent ties and thus supports notions such as social divergence and networked publics, suggested by danah boyd. Regarding privacy issues, we distinguish between level of access to information on participants’ profiles and the way participants perform on their profiles, the level of intimacy. As to the first level most respondents seem to emphasize whom they friend, while they do not distinguish among friends once they are in; everybody is treated equally. As to the second level, our research deviates from findings suggesting that in particular young people are rather unaware of risks, as we can identify what we call a “cautious sensible” strategy in all age groups that allows users to be cautious without being too self-restrictive. Regarding the status updates, we identify a schism between saying and doing, as our respondents tend to downgrade small talk in the focus groups, whereas their profiles reveal that they in fact do engage in small talk. We understand this seeming paradox in a generic and linguistic perspective, using the notions of phatic and indexical communication, respectively, in an analysis of the status updates on the profiles.

**Keywords:** social media, social networking, friendship, identity, privacy, bonding

### **Introduction**

Facebook and other social network sites (SNS) facilitate re-articulations of friendship by urging users to create a profile and construct a list of “friends” with whom they can share regular updates and other options like joining events, groups and themes. However, the term “friend” is different from traditional notions of friends and friendship. Facebook friends most often encompass very different social relationships, ranging from what we usually have termed friendship to more or less random acquaintances – also stemming from a range of separate social contexts.

Social networks might have the consequence that the very notion of friendship is changing. boyd and Ellison (2008) and others have suggested that SNS in general and

Facebook in particular promote a type of bonding that is best understood as “friendship performance” and “impression management” generated by “the ego-centric network” – implying that what is at stake is a kind of surrogate friendship. We would not draw that conclusion, but rather adhere to the idea that Facebook is an arena of renegotiation, not only of friendship but of the whole scale of relationships, from intimate personal relations and tight social bonds to more formal and distant public connections. What is at stake is therefore also renegotiation of the borders between private and public.

In the present article, we relate the issue of changing patterns of friendship on SNS to the discussion on performance of privacy and intimacy. Privacy here encompasses two levels.<sup>1</sup> First, the level of access to information decided by users: What is disclosed to whom and how? Second, how do users perform within their circle of “friends” – the level of intimacy? The hypothesis is that on SNS friendship norms are made more explicit, through strategies of friending, privacy settings and identity performance, than in “traditional” social relationships, where they are often more implicit. Accordingly, SNS can be studied as a kind of a laboratory for studying norm changes.

We take Danish Facebook users as a case study, using a combination of a quantitative survey method, qualitative focus group interviews and profile observation. Theoretically, we discuss changing norms of friendship by using Granovetter’s (1973) notion of “strong” and “weak” (and “latent”) ties, in order to distinguish among close friends and relatives and mere acquaintances. The navigation among different kinds of relationships is explored by using Simmel’s (1955) notion of “webs of group affiliations”, the concept of “intersecting circles”, suggested by sociologists Pescosolido and Rubins (2000), and the even more recent terms of “social convergence” and “networked publics”, suggested by boyd (2008, 2011). We will further argue that the status update is of paramount importance in studying the management of privacy and self-disclosure. We analyze the status updates from the perspective of Jakobson’s linguistic theory of speech functions, in particular his notion of phatic communication, which has been elaborated further by among others Miller (2008). We will also briefly employ Simmel’s notion of social play, elaborated by Lundby (2009), and Jansson’s (2009) notion of the indexical of digital communication. In this way, we are able to examine the more informal chatter and small talk that are often ignored in formal communication analysis but nevertheless of great importance to the evolving norms we wish to study.

## **The Methods**

Our research method is based on a triangulation of quantitative survey data, qualitative focus group interviews and observations of participants’ Facebook profiles. By combining these methods, we are able to obtain and compare users’ subjective perceptions (through the survey), their negotiated attitudes (the focus groups), and their practices (the profiles).

The survey data stem from a large survey questionnaire (N=1709), which was part of a wider project on citizenship, the public sphere and new media ([www.changingborders.au.dk](http://www.changingborders.au.dk)) sponsored by the Danish National Research Council for Communication and Culture (2008-2011). The survey interviews took place between June 8 and July 8, 2009. Altogether, the survey link was sent to 4,969 persons of whom 1,709 participated and answered the full survey. The response rate is 34.4 percent, which is within the

average range for similar surveys. The survey had a special block of questions for those respondents using social media (N=970). These questions addressed usage patterns and questions on attitudes towards social media, not least issues of privacy and publicity.

The focus group participants were selected from the pool of the 970 survey respondents using social media. We identified and invited approximately 40 representative persons based on gender, age, education and location. We ended up with four focus group interviews in April and May 2010 in the major cities of Denmark: one in Copenhagen (N=9), one in Aarhus (N=5) and two in Odense (N=3 + N=3). When selecting respondents we included various age groups: the youngest participant was 23, the oldest was 72. Thus, we wished to enhance our understanding of the relevance of age for social networking, a factor that seemed to be important in the survey. The focus group meetings lasted two hours each and were only semi-structured by a few core research questions related to social network sites, as we wished to facilitate discussions and negotiations among group members. Participants were also presented with some ethical issues regarding social networking, facilitating discussions on evolving norms and perceptions of appropriate behavior on personal profiles. Contrary to the survey's general focus on social media, the focus groups thus ended up with a more specific theme, SNS defined as sites for creating and maintaining a network of "friends". Following the general picture of use of social media and social networking sites in Denmark (see below), the respondents were particularly interested in Facebook and consequently we have taken Facebook as our research case. The interviews were recorded on digital files and transcribed and coded based on the issues that were brought up. Though each group had its own dynamics and thereby different foci, the questions of "friendship" and "privacy" turned out to be central in all of them – with or without our introducing the topics. In our analysis, we have pursued a double perspective on the things said (content/thematic analysis) and the way they were said (formal/enunciation analysis).

Finally, we have observed participants' Facebook profiles for a period of twelve months, from the time of the focus group interviews and until May 2011. Through respondents' consent we managed to get access to 16 of 20 profiles. This has allowed us to compare what is said and what is actually done. The observation has been ethnographic in the sense that we have followed the activity on the profiles during a whole year and taken regular screen-dumps, but the analysis has been focused on the personal walls and updates. Together, the survey, the focus groups and the observations of the personal profiles form a picture of usage patterns, norms, attitudes and actual behavior on Facebook.

### **"Facebook Country" – Denmark as a Case Study**

There are good reasons for using Denmark as a case study of Facebook and for using Facebook as a case study of SNS. After a somehow slow start, by 2008 Denmark became one of the countries in the world with the highest Facebook penetration (Jensen, 2009). In early 2012, 2.85 million Danes had a Facebook profile, accounting for 60 percent of the population and worldwide only superseded by Iceland and Canada (Checkfacebook.com).<sup>2</sup>

There is no doubt that in Denmark Facebook is way ahead of other social network sites like Twitter and LinkedIn. Among the respondents in our survey (N=1709), 86% "know" Facebook, making it the most well-known SNS. Competing sites like MySpace and Twitter are known by 39% and 22%, respectively. The dominant position of Face-

book is confirmed in Table 1 by the fact that 52% of the respondents use or have used Facebook, whereas 57% use or have used SNS in general.

There are discrepancies between different age cohorts. The youngest respondents (18-24 years old) are the most eager users; 77% use Facebook and 90% SNS in general. These figures decline among the older age groups. Less than one-third of the eldest cohort use Facebook (or other SNS), though this is still a relatively high figure. The reverse relationship between age and use of social network sites is illustrated by gamma coefficients of 0.48 between age and social network use and 0.40 between age and Facebook use. The younger people are, the more they use SNS.

Women are slightly over-represented, as 56% of the women and 48% of the men in our survey use Facebook. The gender difference is significant, the gamma value is 0.15.

**Table 1.** *Danish Internet Users' Use of SNS in General and Facebook in Particular. Shares across age categories (Percentages)*

	Use of SNS	Use of Facebook
18-24 years	90	77
25-34 years	79	74
35-44 years	63	55
45-54 years	51	48
55-64 years	42	41
65 years and older	33	31
Total	57	52

*Note:* N=1710

Contrary to the age and gender differences, we found no significant variation in use and knowledge as a function of education or occupation. Social networks seem to be equally popular among different social groups. Having identified the field and overall patterns of use of Danish Facebook users, we move on to address the raised questions about the articulation and development of friendship and issues of privacy, respectively.

### **Identifying Attitudes: Friendship and Privacy**

As already mentioned, the survey included a section of questions, seven altogether, on participants' attitudes towards social network sites.<sup>3</sup> In order to summarize the general attitudes towards SNS, a formative index was constructed, encompassing answers to seven attitudinal questions and standardized to values from 0 to 10: high scores indicate positive attitudes towards SNS and Facebook and vice versa. The index was tested for reliability and has an acceptable Cronbach's Alpha of 0.61.

Next, index scores were tested for differences across the independent variables age, gender, income and occupation. Only the first variable, age, revealed a significant difference in index scores, as summarized in Table 2. It is evident that the younger one is, the more positive one's attitude towards Facebook and other SNS. The eldest, however, have a slightly more positive attitude than the middle-aged.

**Table 2.** *Index Scores for Attitudes towards SNS and Facebook across Age Categories*

	Average index score
18-24 years	4.78
25-34 years	4.25
35-44 years	4.03
45-54 years	3.58
55-64 years	3.60
65 years and older	3.71
Total	3.98

Note: N=878

This conclusion might not be surprising. The youngest are the most eager users and might thereby have developed a positive attitude – or their positive attitude motivates them to use the services.

In order to identify patterns of attitudes, we applied a factor analysis to the seven questions. Using that method, we tried to identify patterns in participants’ responses, identifying hidden, latent dimensions of attitudes. Five of the questions clearly formed into two factors (or dimensions), termed “social bonding” and “privacy awareness”, as illustrated in Table 3. This means, in short, that respondents give consistent answers to the questions related to these two dimensions of attitudes. These factors form the guideline for the remaining quantitative and qualitative analyses.

**Table 3.** *Factor Analysis of Attitudes towards SNS such as Facebook, Identifying Two Factors*

	Factor 1: Social bonding	Factor 2: Privacy awareness
I joined out of curiosity but got “hooked”	.756	.057
It brings me closer to friends, relatives, family	.688	.157
I might use it for finding a partner	.444	-.092
It reminds me of the town square, everything is public	.086	.701
I reflect on privacy and on who is reading and watching my profile	.050	.706

Note: Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

### **Social Bonding: Friendship and Personal Relations**

Many studies of SNS have focused on friendship, social ties and social capital, for instance Gilbert and Karahalios (2009) and Ellison, Lampe, Steinfield and Vitak (2011), or on privacy issues (Stutzman & Kramer-Duffield, 2010). A number of studies have also addressed Facebook in particular, often in the context of American college students, for instance Ellison, Lampe and Steinfield (2006, 2007a/b, 2008).

In the research literature on SNS and Facebook, the method of connecting to lists of “friends” has been addressed primarily in terms of the network. It has been documented

that users connect to people they have already met offline rather than to people they have never met or come to know online. It has also been suggested that people use such sites to consolidate rather than establish personal networks and therefore that the term social network sites should be used rather than social networking sites (boyd & Ellison 2008) as well as the corresponding term “the networked self” rather than “the networking self” (Papacharissi, 2011). However, it has also been documented that SNS are nevertheless most suited to upholding a circle of so-called weak social ties rather than nursing so-called strong ties (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield 2006). Continuing this line of thought, it has been claimed that whereas users prefer to communicate with intimate, personal relations in other media, they find SNS suitable for communication with more distant social contacts such as colleagues and co-members of leisure groups, cultural associations or political organizations (Jensen, 2009).

The theory of strong vs. weak (and latent) ties stems from Granovetter’s (1973) sociological study of different ways and types of connecting and making social bonds. His central argument is not developed to discriminate between the different prototypes but rather to maintain that they will not only typically fulfill different purposes but also tend to flow into one another: in different situations and contexts, latent ties may grow into weak ties, weak ties may grow into strong ties and vice versa. The different types can both supply and substitute each other – for instance, weak ties may be more constructive than strong ties when looking for a new job. Haythornthwaite (2002, 2005) has applied Granovetter’s types to new media and computer-mediated communication and discussed how strong and weak ties, respectively, might be strengthened or weakened, depending on the possibilities offered by a particular platform. Pescosolido and Rubins (2000), in an article on sociologist Georg Simmel, discuss his core terms “groups” and “group-affiliations” and suggest that they should be translated into “social circles” and “belonging” respectively. They claim that the idea of intersecting circles and issues of belonging more accurately address the dynamics of modern social relations and how they move in different directions, for instance either expanding into public connections or tightening around personal/intimate relations.

As mentioned, three of the survey questions empirically formed a coherent dimension, revealing social bonding as one of the issues underlying respondents’ attitudes. We claim that a fourth question, on the perceived relationship between social life online and offline, is theoretically related to social bonding and adds the offline aspect of social bonding. Table 4 shows the more detailed responses to all four questions.

**Table 4.** Attitudes towards Facebook – Social Bonding (Percentages)

	Agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Disagree	Don't know
I joined out of curiosity but got “hooked”	14	24	25	13	22	3
It brings me closer to friends, relatives, family	18	35	26	7	11	3
I might use it for finding a partner	5	8	15	9	57	7
The Internet is one thing, my other social life another	51	23	16	5	3	2

Note: N=970.

More than half of the users tend to agree that Facebook brings them closer to friends, family and relatives, thus strengthening existing physical relationships. On the other hand, only a limited number of users believe that Facebook is suited to establishing intimate relationships such as finding a partner. Although it is posed as a hypothetical question, respondents who already have a partner might have taken it literally, thus leading to the low level of agreement. Most likely, however, the numbers indicate that there are certain limits to the benefits of Facebook. This interpretation is supported by the fact that altogether 74% agree that the Internet is one thing, “physical” social life another. This answer might also further indicate that despite of the high rate of Danish Facebook users, most users have important “empty spaces” in their list of Facebook “friends” and that their Facebook circles do not correspond to the ones outside.

The focus group interviews revealed more detailed patterns of friendships and relationships. In general, the respondents did reflect on whom they friend and many list certain criteria such as having met face to face. Only one respondent was willing to friend someone she had not met face to face – if recommended by another friend. Surprisingly, almost all declared that they did not actively search for “friends” on Facebook themselves, whereas they seemed to be willing to accept friend requests as long as they adhered to their strategies and guidelines of friendship. In all focus groups and across age, gender and level of use, it was agreed upon that it is not cool to have too many friends:

*It is impossible to have 257 friends, nobody has that many!* Female, 68 years

Across focus groups, the respondents also adhered to the original purpose of Facebook as a “network between friends”, although they at the same time agreed that “friends” can be composed of very different social ties and imply very different types of bonding.

*...of course, you don't really have 300 close friends, but you have some you communicate with to a certain degree.* Female, 25 years

When asked about the balance between online and offline relationships, the respondents agreed unanimously that the Facebook concept of friendship is rather different from notions of friendship “in real life”, supporting the conclusion from the survey discussed above. When studying the Facebook profiles of our respondents, we also find that the lists of “friends” are often very heterogeneous even though they seem to display certain regularities in composition: Family, friends from “real life”, colleagues, present and former fellow students or schoolmates and for some (especially the younger) respondents, people they have met randomly. An example:

*Well, I have a big family and family-in-law, that is 100 friends, then people I know from the university, that is the next 50, then former and present work colleagues and somebody I've met randomly. It adds up.* Female, 23 years

As such, the group of friends is a mixture of strong, weak and even latent ties. However, there is a notable difference between groups of users. Especially the younger ones (below the age of 34) emphasized that they use Facebook for building and maintaining potential networks that might be useful later on, whereas the older respondents emphasized the contact with family and friends they have known for a long time (or maybe knew once). All in all, they tended to emphasize the stronger ties more than the younger

respondents did. The older respondents also maintained that they use Facebook merely for daily communication and coordination of activities within the family or in groups related to leisure activities. Thus, Facebook substitutes for the phone, e-mail and similar communication media.

In all focus groups, it was nevertheless agreed upon that one of the most beneficial features of Facebook is that it is possible to re-establish or maintain contact with social bonds that have been regrettably (almost) lost for some reason, often former school-mates, fellow students or colleagues or more distant family. However, it was also claimed in the interviews that such latent or weak ties should not be pursued if there is no actual frame of reference and thereby no potential to develop from a lower to a higher category.

There was also a general agreement that you do not friend your customers or your boss (though there were also exceptions). As to both colleagues and family, concerns were articulated as to issues such as inclusion and exclusion, delicate information and “a room of one’s own”. Again, there was a difference in particular in terms of age. Whereas the younger respondents articulated the need to have a private room from their parents, the older ones had no concerns about letting their children in. And they also claimed that they were invited to join their children’s profiles.

## **Privacy Issues and Strategies of Disclosure**

Now we will turn to the question of how “friending” and not least “non-friending” are related to privacy issues and the borderline between public and private. This relationship is discussed from a theoretical angle by Pescosolido and Rubins (2000), who identify three prototypes of socializing corresponding to three prototypes of society: in pre-modern society, social network formation is concentric: the different circles of belonging are embedded into and dependent on each other. In modern society, social network formation consists of intersecting circles: the different circles overlap, but do not collapse into each other and the individual is still embedded in each of them – creating new possibilities but also new conflicts. In late modern society, the individual connects to a range of more or less intersecting circles, but is no longer embedded in them – the individual is rather the center of (holding or tied up in) a string of ever-changing affiliations in a dynamic “spoke” structure. This idea is very well suited to a discussion of the private-public divide in terms of intersections of personal relations, social bonding and public connections.

Lampe, Ellison and Steinfeld (2006) argue that while users find SNS suitable for communication with colleagues and more distant relations, they prefer that more intimate communication with friends and family take place through other media. Such a view is supported in our survey. As Table 5 illustrates, more than half of the respondents agreed or partly agreed that social network sites remind them of the town square where everything is public, whereas only 12% disagreed or partly disagreed. In general, the respondents consider SNS as public spaces. Thus, it is no surprise that the respondents also demonstrated a high level of awareness of privacy issues. Eighty-five percent claim that they reflect on privacy issues and what to reveal on their profiles.

However, there were also demographic differences in this respect. Men seem to be more concerned than women, and older people more aware than younger. Further, higher levels of education and income are reflected in heightened concerns about privacy is-



**Table 5.** *Survey Respondents’ Attitudes towards Private and Public on Social Network Sites*

	Agree	Partly agree	Neutral	Partly disagree	Disagree	Don't know
It reminds me of the town square, everything is public	26	31	23	6	6	8
I reflect on privacy and on who is reading and watching my profile	65	20	8	2	3	2

Note: N=970

sues. However, in terms of privacy issues, there were some discrepancies between what is said and what is done, as we will show below.

Nissenbaum (2009) and boyd (2011: 52) claim that privacy is not dead, but that it is in a state of transition, implying an ongoing re-negotiation of the borders between private and public. In the following section, we will pursue such negotiations in our material. In the focus groups, the overall tendencies described above were present as well. Prior to the focus group meetings, there had been extensive debates in the Danish media on delicate cases of politicians’ and other well-known media persons’ mistakes on Facebook.<sup>4</sup> The fact that such debates were fresh in the memory of participants helped to facilitate eager discussions on privacy issues. The privacy concerns were present among all age groups, although some of the older respondents claimed that young people tend to use Facebook rather light-heartedly, whereas they themselves would be concerned with “core” communication with “true” friends. However, the subsequent interviews and the observations of the profiles showed that the older respondents also accepted and engaged in communication with more casual visitors on their profile and that the younger ones seemed quite focused on “close” friends in terms of access and contact – and also were concerned with privacy issues in terms of intimacy and disclosure:

*.... I’m not so worried about what I put (on my profile) myself because I can handle that ... (...) it’s what others do on my behalf. And with my profile... Female, 25 years*

Social network sites (especially Facebook) offer still more features that facilitate the selection of information and audiences. In principle, one’s profile is open to everyone within one’s own network, but in practice the audience for each activity can be defined and the access thereby selectively given to certain groups or individuals. Further, a good deal of communication on SNS takes place through private messages, similar to e-mails. As such, the code behind SNS itself implies various levels of privacy.

Now, the question is how respondents use the options of selective access and differentiated privacy levels? Among our respondents, 15 out of 16 had a closed Facebook profile, meaning that it was accessible to friends only. In several cases, outsiders were not given access to the generic bio information either, and in one case outsiders would not even be able to identify the respondent by using the ordinary search for person function. Further, the majority did not disclose detailed information about themselves in the bio data at all.

Despite the high level of privacy-concerns in general, none of the respondents used the advanced but obviously both technically and ethically difficult option of selective publishing in terms of discriminating among “friends” as to what to show to whom and

how. Instead, the general approach was not to publish anything that could not be said or shown in public and to tell the same things to everyone. Several respondents even made a strong point of not discriminating among their “friends” once they were in – in case of a disclosure dilemma, they would prefer to refrain from posting and then reconsider the construction of the list. Accordingly, some of them had tried to delete friends from their list and they had also experienced being deleted themselves.

Asked about what is too private to disclose on Facebook, the respondents in particular mentioned (details about) serious illness, death, sexuality and bodily functions. Whereas it was considered okay to inform about such things in a very short and direct, but at the same time discrete manner, detailed reporting and commenting on such issues were considered illegitimate, not exactly a taboo (unless in socially deviant forms) but too intimate and therefore not appropriate in the context. Non-appropriate behavior was further defined as: statements about individuals not present and thereby not able to defend themselves, negative statements about others at all and the explicit display of personal disagreements or political radicalism. Among the all-too private was also the reporting of daily affairs such as cleaning, shopping, etc. – not because it was considered too intimate, but because it was considered too trivial, without any common interest and therefore embarrassing to disclose in the (mixed) context. For the same reason, the respondents tended to claim that messages on daily settlements meant only for a few persons are better given by means of the private message function. On the other hand, more ritual greetings at birthdays and other red- letter days were welcomed.

Other cases of more private postings to a larger audience were seen among the younger segment in their 20s in terms of accepted tagging on party pictures. Some would also share a profile picture with their (in this case) relatively new boyfriend. Among the slightly older males in their 30s to 50s, however, we saw cases of very intimate exchanges with their partners on the wall, despite their statements in the focus group meetings that they in principle considered such communication inappropriate. In other words, although most participants in the survey and partly also in the interviews reported strong norms on how to behave, their actual practices revealed something else. We will return to the issue of inappropriate/appropriate talk and behavior in the next section.

To conclude on the issue of private as opposed to public conduct in terms of personal networks, it was agreed upon that there is no explicit codex to be followed on, in this case, Facebook, but it also came up that the implicit codex is felt to be strong – and that it in fact corresponds to the general rules of conduct when socializing in semi-public contexts offline, but may be even stronger because you cannot compensate by means of body language to sharpen or diminish a statement or signal, for instance, humor or irony. On the other hand, it was also claimed that other rules of conduct, known from mundane and more private socializing, are suspended – there are, for instance, no rules of “gift exchange” in terms of posting on the walls of “friends” and in this way paying respect to what within micro-sociology and ethno-methodology has been conceptualized as turn-taking, sequence and adjacent pairs. These findings may be culture specific, but as we still lack research on the particular issue of conduct, conversational rules and what to tell and what not to tell on SNS and Facebook, we will have to wait for more findings from different sites and contexts.

## What the Profiles Reveal: Small Talk and Phatic Communication

Christofides, Muise and Desmarais (2009) claimed that there are often discrepancies between, on the one hand, attitudes towards privacy and, on the other, actual behavior on SNS. One might accordingly expect that respondents’ communication on Facebook might differ from the “politically correct” statements negotiated in a (public) survey or in the social context of the focus groups. When comparing the focus group interviews with the profiles, the issue of small talk puzzled us. In the interviews, the informants seemed very eager to dismiss small talk, defined as mere reporting from everyday life things like family visits, shopping experiences, travel planning, etc., but the profiles revealed that the interviewees did in fact engage in small talk in terms of maintaining an everyday discourse. You may say that this is what the status message is all about, as it is implied in the very term “status message”: what you are doing, feeling or thinking right now. Again, many such updates were performative in the sense that they mimed the mundane, putting the very genre in focus, such as in the following update:

*Hmmm..... I wonder what I'm going to have for dinner on Saturday!* Male,  
age 43

The status update is accordingly a matter of performed intimacy in relation to a perceived audience, which is only highlighted by the fact that one of the comments on the above update was from the supposed host, who answered that he wondered, too. Nevertheless, the downgrading of small talk is shared by a range of researchers on Facebook, for instance Miller (2008), who rather puts the small talk under the heading of phatic communication, a concept originally derived from linguistics (Jakobson, 1999/1960).

According to Miller, phatic communication corresponds to the fluency of a late-modern networked sociability and communication – never too serious or too intimate, but merely enough to uphold contact and the stream of communication, simply being “on”. According to Jakobson, phatic communication is about stating that “I am here, you are here, we are here” – signaling the present state of affairs on one’s own behalf and simultaneously stating an interest in knowing that of one’s interlocutor(s). To Jakobson, phatic communication is not superfluous, but perfectly sensible in its non-sense, as it is purely social.

Interesting small talk then would be the kind of phatic communication that corresponds to the new media and tries out new types of indexical messages that appeal to the sensory experience of the audience, possibly by means of the multimodality of the media. Yet this is a new art of communication that only a very few master. You know it when it is (not) there, but you cannot fully explain it.

What the respondents could express was a sympathy for humor and irony – everybody liked it but they also agreed that conceptions of humor can be very subjective. For instance, not all “friends” may know how to comment on the above-mentioned dinner update, which could either refer to the real excitement we can share before a dinner invitation, insider knowledge for the chosen few (whereas others might feel excluded), or a satirical comment on the amount of small talk on Facebook.

One might claim that socializing has somehow always been designated by phatic communication and “smart” (ambiguous) small talk. Simmel, in his essay on “*Geselligkeit*” (1917), and other works within micro-sociology and ethno-methodology, addresses the question of the form of social conversation. Simmel’s basic argument is that, when people socialize, they tend to find a shared platform of inclusion and acknowledgement from which a com-

mon sense – that is also a sense of community – may grow and along with it a refinement of communication itself as social play, including for instance humor and irony (cf. Lundby, 2009). According to our study, this is also what Facebook is about. However, we would also like to suggest that Facebook is as much about the change in social play due to the digital context and the social “spoke structure” of late modernity as it is about the “networked self”. “Smart talk” on Facebook is indexical rather than symbolic, pointing at the often bizarre incidents of the everyday being acknowledged so as to make an extraordinary observation out of the ordinary and idiosyncratic – without relying on direct feed-back from individual others, but rather on the flux of the networked communication (cf. Jansson, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

In the present article, we have applied three different methods: quantitative survey data, focus group interviews and user profiles. This has enabled us to acquire more comprehensive knowledge about user attitudes and practices, such as friending, bonding and privacy on social network sites.

Considering friendship and social relationships, social network sites seem to contribute to reflection and negotiation on the nature of social relationships, although the basic norms of friendship seem to persist. The respondents are connected to a mixture of strong, weak and even latent ties, representing close friends and family as well as mere acquaintances. Interestingly, we have found that the younger respondents tended to connect to “weak ties” in Granovetter’s sense of the word: those who are remote but potentially useful or valuable. The older respondents tended to focus on the strong ties and the closer, daily contact with family and core friends.

Overall, the users did not distinguish between strong and weak ties regarding their notions of privacy and sharing. All Facebook “friends” were treated equally in that they were allowed access to the same informational space. The distinction between close friends and mere acquaintances seemed to be maintained through more subtle mechanisms, through other forms of media or, more often, in so-called “real life”. Even though Facebook now allows discrimination among various groups of relationships, our respondents seemed to make everything available to all friends, using the principle of the lowest common denominator: they did not publish anything that could not bear the public eye of their divergent circles. Accordingly, “social convergence” or “boundary turbulence” was handled through selection of friends rather than discriminating among friends.

We can conclude that almost all respondents, even the younger ones, might be characterized as cautious, sensible users, contrary to the media hype that in particular young people are relentlessly revealing everything online and thus might get in trouble with work, family and friends. Our interviews reveal serious concerns about privacy issues, and the current debate about etiquette in social media might have spurred the level of reflection. On the other hand, despite the high level of privacy concerns, only a few fully understood and used the new, more fine-tuned privacy possibilities, meaning that their profiles are in fact rather exposed, for instance through the walls of their friends. The solution to the privacy problem is to use the principle of the lowest common denominator: only publish things that all connections ought to see.

In general, there seems to be alignment between the attitudes and the practices of the users. Most did not post huge amounts of private information or they in fact only

disclosed their bio-info to friends. In terms of image policy, the respondents took the same cautious approach. On the other hand, some did make use of pictures, and whereas some of the younger respondents accepted being tagged on their friends’ pictures from parties etc., some of the older ones included whole albums from holidays, etc. This again is found to correspond to the different priorities of weak and strong ties, respectively, in the two age groups.

Finally, we found a paradox related to the question of small talk: especially the older users seemed to dislike the amount of small talk on Facebook, emphasizing that they preferred true, genuine interaction with real friends. However, the profiles reveal that everybody, including the older respondents, tends to use Facebook for small talk in terms of phatic communication. The general impression is that Facebook provides a sense of presence of and among one’s divergent circles of friendship by facilitating an ongoing social conversation that engenders rare glimpses of sublime social play, but mostly is just cozy and entertaining everyday discourse. The status updates and related comments resemble normal small talk among friends. However, the close circle of small talk is expanded to encompass a wider circle. Informal intimacy is expanded to a larger co-audience.

As mentioned, boyd has suggested the term “social convergence”. Although we wish to question the idea of surrogacy and egocentricity, we find the concepts of social convergence and networked publics, respectively, as well as that of “boundary turbulence”, suggested by Stutzman and Kramer-Duffield (2010), compelling because they bridge well to the issue of privacy: if the list of “friends” on social network sites such as Facebook typically consists of contacts from different social contexts and of different degrees of closeness and distance, social complexity is high in terms of more or less divergent and more or less public arenas and concerns about privacy and disclosure are accordingly supposed to be high (cf. also Baym, 2010).

## Notes

1. Thus, we define privacy from a user perspective and do not discuss, e.g., legal and copyright issues concerning the information shared on Facebook.
2. Considering these figures, one must take into account that there is a substantial number of fake profiles (for dogs, clubs etc.), that people might have several profiles, and that some may be inactive. However, there is reason to believe that more than two million Danes do have a more or less active Facebook profile, which amounts nearly half of the Internet users in total.
3. The questions were framed based on a Likert Scale where respondents could declare to which degree they agree or disagree with a number of statements: “I joined out of curiosity but got “hooked””, “It brings me closer to friends, relatives, family”, “I might use it for finding a partner”, “The Internet is one thing, my other social life another”, “I do not use it much anymore”, “It reminds me of the town square, everything is public”, “I reflect on privacy and on who is reading and watching my profile”.
4. Two cases were dominant in the Danish media prior to the focus group meetings: first a communication consultant employed by “The Liberals”, the leading Danish government party, posted updates that a named person working in the canteen of the Danish parliament was mentally ill and unbearable to listen to. Even though the updates were later apologized for publicly, the whole case spurred an intense debate on conduct when acting through social media. Obviously, other politicians did not learn a lesson here: one week later it was revealed that two members of the Socialist People’s Party were members of a hate group against their colleagues from the Danish People’s Party, portraying the leaders of the latter group as Nazis. Again, a public apology was not enough to prevent a media outcry.

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