

Case #06 — MySpace

In January 2012 Rupert Murdoch tweeted that, with MySpace, NewsCorp had “...screwed up in every way possible...” (Abell, 2012) NewsCorp had bought MySpace for ~USD580m in 2005 when, though still young and unproven, it was experiencing unprecedented growth for a site of its kind: a social network. In July 2008, 41.4 billion pages were viewed on MySpace, which, at the time, made it the site with the largest number of page views within the United States. (Angwin, 2009: 9) Three years later, in 2011, NewsCorp sold MySpace for an undisclosed sum, widely reported to be ~USD35m (Segall, 2011). At less than a tenth of what they paid for it, this represented a considerable loss and was a remarkable closing chapter in the rise and fall of what was — if neither the first nor the most successful — arguably the most significant of the social networks. While Facebook may be reigning champion in the social networking space today, there is a huge amount about our current position and trajectory that can be understood by looking at its one-time rival.

From 2003 there was increasing public and press attention given to what was seen then as the new *trend* of social networking.ⁱ There were various early attempts at social networks — Tribe, Orkut, Ryze, Tickle — the most successful being Friendster, conceived by ex-Netscape developer Jonathan Abrams, as a dating site with a difference. Instead of matching strangers on questionnaire responses, Friendster took on the rather simpler task of giving you a way to meet people through mutual friends. The thinking was that connections rooted in real-world relationships would be viewed as safer and the service would be more trusted as result. It would also introduce the key architectural trait of all social networks to this day: the ability to create a personal profile page and to selectively link it to those of others.ⁱⁱ Quickly adopted by the 20-30s dating demographic, Friendster launched in early 2003 and attracted 4 million users within its first nine months. Its users swiftly demonstrated behaviours atypical of your average dating site: some using the site to reconnect with old school friends, while others “...treated it as a giant parlour game to see who’s connected to the most people.” (Spinner, 2003) It also demonstrated social stratification, quickly generating a shadowy marketplace for access to more exclusive Friendster circles, with invitations to select groups being auctioned off on eBay. (Kahney, 2003)

Such was the site’s rapid rise in popularity that Jonathan Abrams had appeared on TV talk shows, (Rivlin, 2006) secured some USD13m in investment from venture capital firms, and turned down a USD30m offer for the firm from Google within a year of its launch (Hopkins, 2003). Perhaps even more surprising than how quickly it grew, though, is just how quickly it was eclipsed.ⁱⁱⁱ As a dating-site, the Friendster approach “...focused on fostering safety and trust.” (Rosenbush, 2005) Users were required to use their real identities and those found to be generating fake or obviously fraudulent profiles were quickly deleted. While acceptable to many, this irked a proportion of users, giving rise to the now infamous *Fakester Manifesto* (Unknown, 2003). It is testament to the pace with which users were testing the boundaries of this new networked environment that by July of 2003, with the service having only launched in March, Friendster was dealing with its first user-rights revolt. Such grumblings also didn’t go unnoticed among the wider Friendster community, with many users choosing to seek out alternatives, and by one member in particular: Tom Anderson.

Having first met while both working at XDrive, by September 2002 Tom Anderson and Chris DeWolfe had sold their fledgling start-up, ResponseBase, to eUniverse (later Intermix) for USD3.2m. eUniverse was not held in particularly high regard, responsible as it was for various “pop-up advertising, unsolicited emails, spyware and the adware behind controversial peer-to-peer file sharing network Kazaa” (Lapinski, 2006). They were a company that held a diverse portfolio of low-brow products and services, and who had a knack for knowing exactly “...which viral greetings cards with fart jokes on them were really gonna hit it big.” (Angwin, as quoted in Snyder, 2009)

By the following summer, eUniverse were struggling financially, having been kicked off the Nasdaq stock exchange following accounting irregularities, and were in need of new ideas to lift the company’s prospects. Around this time, Anderson approached DeWolfe enthusing about Friendster. Following a few days spent intensely surveilling the site, the pair had conceived a plan. They would create a functional copy, brand it, and use the marketing clout of eUniverse to make it a success. Within a matter of weeks, MySpace was up and running. They would stick with the copy-paste approach as they developed the service. Anderson would routinely ask developers to copy features found on competing websites. As a result, MySpace would end up fielding several formal complaints from companies who felt their intellectual property had been infringed, including HotOrNot.com and Xanga.com. Ironic then, that they should come to feel such heat from the creative industries regarding the uploading of copyrighted material by users.

Anderson and DeWolfe decided that they would differentiate themselves from Friendster by adopting the opposite position on membership. They would, for instance, not require member email addresses to be verified, nor would they require that users be identified by their real names, and they were completely unconcerned about the existence of fake or fictional accounts. Overwhelmingly though, MySpace’s only real innovation, the only clear moment of originality amid their shameless aping of Friendster, and perhaps the biggest factor in their success, was a mistake; a happy accident. When original developer Duc Chau departed after only a month, MySpace employed two developers to migrate the entire site from Perl to ColdFusion, bringing it in line with other eUniverse sites. In the migration, the developers failed to block the inclusion of HTML, CSS and Javascript in forms submitted to the site by its users. This was a commonplace security measure on similar social sites meaning that the site owners retained full control over the visual identity of their sites.

Rather than patching the flaw, it was allowed to persist and users responded, turning “...their profiles into an explosion of animated chaos,” (Boyd, 2007) “...a jungle of clashing colors, blasting sounds, [and] lurid images.” (Hansell, 2006) A raft of secondary sites emerged as a result, providing users with the necessary code and instructions with which they could make such modifications to the appearance of their profiles. It is from this that Boyd determines the emergence of a ‘copy/paste culture’, whereby users who are not technologically literate enough to make the changes themselves, could access mediating services that would, essentially, do it for them (Boyd, 2007). Not content just changing fonts or the background colour of their profile pages, users could now easily aggregate content from around the web, as if putting virtual posters on their virtual bedroom walls.

This kind of user-generated and user-curated content was what would give rise to the concept of 'Web 2.0', and so began the cat and mouse game of copyright infringement and take-downs that still plague sites like YouTube, and which rankle the creative industries to this day. With MySpace we were all of a sudden in a completely new era, where the technological barriers to creating a personal presence on the web had been yet further reduced, and following which there would forever cease to be clear distinctions between "...consumption and participation, authority and amateurism, play and work, data and the network, reality and virtuality." (Zimmer, 2008)

The sudden huge numbers of users publishing personal information, thoughts, likes and dislikes, also meant a new opportunity for data collection and analytics. Profiting from this user data would become the dominant business model for social start-ups. This was reflected in both the NewsCorp valuation of MySpace, and the eventual sale price that followed the haemorrhaging of users from the site. Facebook's recent IPO, which valued the company at a staggering USD100bn, is also testament to this, as is their recent USD1bn acquisition of Instagram. This valuation was certainly not arrived at because of any patents or IP held by Instagram that Facebook could exploit, rather that they had attracted huge numbers of users in a very short space of time. Had they wished to, any addition of further social features by Instagram would have placed the two firms in more direct competition. Despite the various apps, games, and the positioning of the network as an entertainment destination via the integration of streaming services such as Spotify and Netflix, Facebook is valuable because it has more users than anyone else and it harvests a huge amount of data and intelligence from them, not just as they log in and check their friends walls and status updates, but as they navigate any page on the web that chooses to include Facebook social plugins. Make no mistake: social networking is a never ending market research survey, with benefits, where the questions are disguised as opportunities to connect, engage, or share.

What is interesting about user behaviour in migrating away from the comparatively tightly controlled environment of Friendster to the near free-for-all of MySpace, is that they would eventually come full circle so soon by adopting Facebook *en masse*.^{iv} Facebook saw a return to Friendster's requirement that users register using their real identity and offered users no customisation or personalisation options whatsoever. What remains consistent throughout though — from Friendster to Facebook — is the complex of mechanisms of exchange and reward that are essentially anchored around how much you give — and frequently this equates to the divulging of personal information — to the network. Whether it's by means of number of friends, comments, likes, pokes, or retweets, popularity and influence is tied to an individual's activity. As an example, the social network for professionals, LinkedIn, aggregates the various activity of its users and provides weekly charts of 'top influencers'; the concern here is in conflating influence with authority, or allowing influence to supplant achievement. The complexity of power relations within such a diverse, expansive and active network is hard to comprehend, and is a constantly moving, shifting and evolving target of investigation.

If one were to carry out an associative exercise on the word “MySpace”, music might reasonably be expected to figure quite highly among responses. Some may then, find it curious to find that music wasn’t an intrinsic part of the MySpace plan, rather a response to the fact that it wasn’t the overnight success its creators thought it might be. When initial growth was slow, DeWolfe and Anderson again they found their answer in fashioning a feature as a relief of existing Friendster policy: bands and music. As Anderson recollected, “On Friendster, if you were a band and you made a profile, they would delete it. They didn’t want bands on their site.” (as quoted in Pace, 2006) The pair were savvy enough to realise that the record labels — growing increasingly concerned about piracy and declining sales — were signing fewer acts, for less money and giving them less time to develop. MySpace would get its numbers by giving musicians, bands and DJs a platform upon which they could promote their music. By March 2004 MySpace had some 5,000 bands and 1.2 million registered users. Bands making use of the site ranged from household names to the completely unheard of, and everywhere in between.

While its growing reputation as a music discovery site and promotional tool for bands would continue to propel its growth — attractive as it also was for non-musical users of the site, who would include artist songs on their profile pages — the real impact of the service on the music industry is tantalisingly difficult to determine. There were the failed attempts to sell music to MySpace users. First, by creating a marketplace for unsigned acts to sell their music directly to the listener (or at least slightly more directly, MySpace would take a sizeable 45% chunk of revenue from sales, albeit not quite as much as a label might extract from a traditional recording contract). Second, in attempting to position itself as a rival to the dominant iTunes service from Apple (for which it enjoyed the support of three of the four major record labels, with only EMI withholding support). What’s for certain is that there was a lot of ‘buzz’ being generated in early 2006: buzz about artists on MySpace, and buzz about MySpace that in turn seems to have generated buzz for artists on MySpace. Myth-making is a fundamental part of the history of popular music from Robert Johnson through Dylan, Bowie, Waits and beyond. It is then — given the association with popular music — quite fitting to find that there was more than just a little mythologising around MySpace and its potency for finding, supporting and breaking new talent and reviving what was widely perceived to be a flagging music industry.^v

It was frequently cited as being responsible for the signing and eventual success of a number of acts and, in a number of very high profile cases at least, this ascription was, at least partly, misplaced. British group, Arctic Monkeys, were one of those dubbed a ‘MySpace success story’ after they generated a feverish flurry of attention in the UK and US music press. When quizzed towards the end of 2005 about the role MySpace played in their rise, the band recollected how at the time of their album achieving number one status in the UK, coverage “...on the news and radio [was] about how MySpace has helped us... the perfect example of someone who doesn’t know what the **** they’re talking about. We actually had no idea what [MySpace] was.” (Park, 2005) A few months later their product manager at record label Domino commented of the episode: “...the media need to make the populace join the dots... so people think that MySpace and Arctic Monkeys makes sense, even though it’s not true.” (Webb, 2006) To overstate the importance of MySpace is to miss the more important part of the Arctic Monkeys story and that

is how their success was propelled more by their decision "...to give away their songs... on free CDs... [and] any swap or file sharing website that would have them." (Henry, 2006) Similarly, other acts, such as Lily Allen and Sandi Thom, would be revealed to have already been signed to conventional recording, publishing or management deals prior to their discovery on 'MySpace.' Somehow though, and in a manner that echoes the media frenzy around the 'Twitter Revolutions' of 2009, it was the technology — in this case, MySpace — that became the story.

It is difficult to separate out the impact of MySpace on the music buying behaviour of listeners, from that of Napster, Kazaa, BitTorrent, PirateBay et al., all of whom arose around the same time. Whatever disruptive effects MySpace's streaming music services may have had on the music industry, they were never successfully monetised and it is only now that we are seeing services emerge that satisfy both the industry and copyright holders in terms of safeguards and security, while offering users sufficient choice and at a price point that means they are being more widely adopted. While the case brought against MySpace by Universal in 2006 for hosting copyright infringing material is significant, three of the four major labels were eventually coaxed into an agreement with the service to sell music from their artists. It seems that the greatest enthusiasm was from eager artists and the music press and that, once all is considered, it may simply have been the case — as was remarked of the Sandi Thom episode — that "...the story created the story..." (Paul Scaife, MD, Record of the Day, as quoted in Gibson, 2006) and to everyone's advantage: both MySpace and those acts seeking fame or who were deemed to have owed it some substantial debt for making them a success. The area in which the industry made its most enthusiastic embrace of MySpace as a platform was as a promotional tool: another media channel that could be manipulated by street teams, just as radio phone-ins, discussion forums and message boards had been before it.^{vi}

MySpace was quickly popular with teenagers and launched without any means of verifying the stated ages of those signing up to the service. The upshot of this was that it was not long before MySpace was dealing with complaints from parents, schools were blocking access to the site (Anderson 2006) and they were facing a rising tide of media concern about child safety. An MSNBC report in April 2005 found that there were a number of child users who were lying about their age, with "...kids who say they are 16 later [stating] in their personal descriptions that they are younger." (Sullivan, 2005) There followed, some high profile cases involving under 16s and MySpace. First, a 16-year-old Michigan teenager was intercepted in Jordan after her parents reported her missing, on her way to marry a West Bank resident she had met through the site. (A.P., 2006) There was also the case of a 14-year-old Texan girl who attempted to sue the site for USD30m following a claimed sexual assault by someone she had met through the site (A.P., 2006). It already restricted the publicly viewable information of 14 and 15 year olds (minimum age for membership being 13), but MySpace had to swiftly make further amends to demonstrate that it was serious about protecting younger users, making it more difficult for those over 18 to befriend under 16s. (BBC News, 2006) The US government adopted a legislative response to the growing media clamour around MySpace, when, arguably, the reality was "...less archetypically frightening than the publicity about these crimes suggests." (Wolak et al., 2008)

The Deleting Online Predators Act was proposed by Representative Mike Fitzpatrick in May of 2006. It was widely felt that the terms as defined under Section 2C of the bill, were far too broad and prompted widespread concern regarding the possible implications for schools, libraries and others providing Internet services to young persons, in addition to possible infringement on the first amendment rights of both registered sexual offenders and minors. The bill defined social networking as any website that allowed users to “create web pages or profiles that provide information about themselves and [which] are available to other users”, and which offers “...a mechanism for communication with other users, such as a forum, chat room, email or instant messenger.” (Library of Congress, 2006) Despite widespread opposition, the bill was passed in July and stands as one in a succession of knee-jerk legislative responses — along with the 1996 Communications Decency Act and the 1998 Child Online Protection Act^{vii} — that ran roughshod over freedom of expression in an attempt to address hysteria around particular technologies and emerging media.

Social networking is now entirely ubiquitous. We are past the tipping point where beyond it is considerably more noteworthy to not have a Twitter or Facebook account. We are, as Dana Boyd has coined it, operating as individuals within “networked publics,” (Boyd, 2007) where the seemingly informal and irreverent is now anything but temporary. Our flippant transgressions are cast, if not in quite stone, then at least in some substance of indeterminable longevity: persistent, searchable, replicable, and accessible, often in ways beyond our control, to an invisible and unknowable audience. What today ends with Facebook began, in earnest, with MySpace.

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ⁱ Very difficult now to see this as a trend, so well established is social networking. The ultimate perhaps being the extension of professional networking via sites such as LinkedIn which, after a slow development that precedes the launch of MySpace, have now established themselves as key tools for career professionals.

ⁱⁱ Initially, within a limited four degrees of separation, though this was soon lifted.

ⁱⁱⁱ The company would later in 2006, successfully be awarded a significant patent related to social networking sites, but even this could not restore the competitive advantage it had by then lost to MySpace.

^{iv} Facebook overtakes MySpace in number of unique monthly visitors globally in April 2008 (ComScore as quoted by TechCrunch <http://goo.gl/Wc3zd>), and in the US in May 2009 (ComScore as quoted by TechCrunch <http://goo.gl/i4V8M>)

^v While there would be little argument about the impact on compact disc sales, studies have shown that the music industry as a whole responded to the advent of MySpace, Napster and other P2P file-sharing with overall growth:

<http://www.prsformusic.com/creators/news/research/Documents/Economic%20Insight%20%20%20web.pdf>
<http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/news/2010/04/piracy-problems-music-industry-grew-in-13-markets-in-2009.ars>

^{vi} This was also true for other content industries, most notably film, where MySpace profiles were created to promote and publicise upcoming Hollywood blockbusters, and which would frequently contain MySpace exclusives such as advance trailers, interviews, competitions and the suchlike.

^{vii} Which, though a US law, had reach beyond its borders for foreign owned sites targetted at US children.