

# Facebook Grows Up

Site fills an important need on campus, but it's no substitute for friendship

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I joined Facebook in September 2005, when I was a senior in high school. Until that month, Facebook was the exclusive playground of American college students, but all of a sudden, my high school email address could win me acceptance to their club. My classmates and I thought we were So. Cool. It was all so cutting-edge!

I say this not to make myself sound ancient (though I know it does), but to illustrate how much Facebook has changed in just the last few years. A Facebook profile has become a rite of passage for teenagers, as well as a networking hub for professionals of all ages. Some 300 million people are users, and 70% of them are outside the U.S. The fastest growing group of users is those over 35. In only five years, Facebook has completely changed the way we interact with our peers and communities.

of my personality and sense of humor in my list of favorite TV shows. ("Will and Grace" was too cliché, "Boy Meets World" too immature; maybe "The Daily Show" said all you needed to know.) And I pored over my future classmates' profiles, looking for hints that we could be soulmates. I arrived at college feeling very sure of who my friends would be.

Invariably, I was completely wrong. It turns out that liking Maroon 5 is not a particularly good indicator of personality. Who knew?

But I continued to use Facebook throughout my freshman year to keep track of people I had met, check up on potential friends and blind dates, and keep up with friends from high school. Even now, whenever I meet someone new or want to know what an old friend is up to, Facebook is my first

we need some way of staying connected, knowing that we won't run into each other on Main Street every week.

Yet Facebook also makes our ties more casual and superficial. I noticed on my News Feed, for instance, that my friend Kaitlin is studying for her chemistry exam tomorrow. That may make me feel like I know what's going on in her life, but it tells me nothing about how she's doing, what she cares about right now, or how her life has changed since I last talked to her. For me and many people my age, Facebook has replaced calling and emailing to stay in touch—in many ways, a trade-off of convenience for meaningful friendship.

## IT'S OUT THERE

Even more problematic, though, is the slowly dawning realization that Facebook isn't just for kids anymore. When I first signed up, I had to show my mother my profile to convince her that I wasn't part of some mysterious, nefarious scheme. Now my mother has her own profile. She and I are friends; she and my sister are not. This has been no small source of tension in our house: my sister, understandably, is reluctant to let her mother into the social world that she shares with her friends.

For me, though, Facebook may have once been that world, but it is not any longer. The older I get, the more I have to assume that anything I post to the site will be viewed by future bosses, college deans, professors, distant acquaintances and even the local paper, if I should ever give them reason to care. My Facebook friends include my aunt and uncle, my professors, my state representative and the editor of this column. When I post a picture of myself at a party, I have to remind myself that all of them will see it.

Does this make the site less fun? Maybe. Some of the excitement that surrounded it when it was truly an online playground for young people seems to have faded, although that may have more to do with getting older than anything else. But at the same time, Facebook is much more useful than it was in 2005. The more it grows, the more purposes it can serve, the more it will integrate itself even more into our daily lives. And with a little care, Facebook can still be an invaluable home for our online selves.

Now, if you'll excuse me, I have some photos to tag.

## Tips for Staying Safe on Facebook

Never accept a friend request from someone you don't know. The whole premise of the site is that you're sharing information only with people you trust.

Don't post contact information, such as your physical address or phone number, on the site, so that if someone you don't know does gain access to your profile, your physical safety won't be at risk.

Never post pictures or make comments about anything you wouldn't want your boss, your parents or your principal to see. Odds are they will.

Pay attention to what others post about you. The "Untag photo" button can be your friend.

Have fun! Don't take anything on the site too seriously. Facebook is meant to be a light-hearted space for connecting to the people who are important to you—embrace it!



## A MAROON-5-TYPE PERSON

A case in point: Long before I met any of my college classmates face to face, some of them were my Facebook friends. Before we even arrived on campus, we set about "friending" people with similar interests, presuming that we would one day become real-life amigos. I remember sweating over every word of my profile, trying to capture the essence

stop. Although I haven't updated my own profile in months, I still assume that a Facebook page is a tiny, portable window into a person's soul.

The site fills a crucial need: an online home for our real-life relationships. Now that friends from the various stages of our lives—high school, camp, college, work—are more scattered than ever before,