

## Facebook: Organizer of Friends

### Overview

Whereas in the past our ability to make human connections was limited by geographic constraints and class or socioeconomic status, these days we traverse greater geographical areas, have access to a greater cross-section of society, and have the opportunity to meet any of the world's nearly 3 billion Internet users online.<sup>1</sup> The influx of potential connections in new contexts means that our own cultural notions of what the word "friend" means are ever more varied. To some it refers only to the very closest of friends, to others it is a broader, more casual designation, encompassing a great many of the relationships that we have in real life and in the online world. What it takes to forge a friendship has changed over time, and indeed may change for a single person between contexts.

What might constitute a friend versus a colleague in an office environment may be much more nuanced than what constitutes a friend in a social networking context such as Facebook, where a number of constraints are introduced into the ways that our relationships must be defined. The reasons for these limited definitions are numerous, but are largely attributable to differences in utility for users of the Facebook platform and the company itself. Here I'll look at the organization of friends on Facebook from both perspectives.

### What is being organized?

At first glance, it appears that Facebook allows users to organize their friends within the site, but really the site is an exercise in organizing information *about* the user, about the user's friends, and about the nature of relationships and interactions among friends. Users enter their own contact information, interests, thoughts, emotional states, education history, location, life events, familial connections, and more into the site. They can Like pages and posts to indicate further interests, create friend lists for friend classification, and chat or post with friends (an indication of familiarity) to convey stream of consciousness current thoughts and feelings.

While Facebook users are busy interacting with the site and their friends, Facebook has pulled off a greater feat: organizing information about over a billion human resources into a vast social graph comprised of user nodes, descriptions about users, edges signifying the "friendship" between users, and a great deal of information and metrics on the nature and extent of these relationships. One important type of information about users that Facebook has a great interest in organizing is that of their interest in certain products, institutions, and brands, whether these are household supplies, books, movies, sports, universities, foods, or anything else. Every Like is a vote for a product,

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<sup>1</sup> International Telecommunications Union (ITU). "The World in 2014: ICT Facts and Figures." <http://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ICTFactsFigures2014-e.pdf>

entity, or type of content, an indication of what the user is likely to respond to favorably or even purchase in the future.

### **Why is it being organized?**

Users select and organize their friends in order to facilitate the social interactions of their choosing. Facebook offers many ways for a user to interact with friends, among them chat/messaging, wall posts, Likes, photos, and group or event participation.

Facebook's reasons for organizing users are revenue driven. The more granularly compartmentalized the user information, the more accurately Facebook is able to target ads. As profiling accuracy increases, so too will advertising clicks increase, leading to more money for both the advertisers and Facebook itself. In order to accomplish a sufficiently high level of organization, Facebook has found ways to explicitly represent the sorts of interactions and relationships that we take for granted in the real world. In our daily lives we meet new people in various contexts, communicate (exchange information) with them, and even purchase things for them.

Facebook is in the business of modeling complex and often implicit real life interactions in a simplified, explicit manner. Users of their platform have a limited set of methods and encodings, making the data that users pour into the system highly structured and easier to analyze.

### **How much is it being organized?**

Many users could be thought to only organize at selection time, as they allow all "friends" access to the same level of information and interaction. However, some users elect to use the Family, Close Friends, and Restricted friend list categories that Facebook provides (essentially leaving everyone else in an uncategorized population). Some users will go further, taking the time to define a semantic implementation that is more useful to them and the interactions they'd like to get out of the site.

At face value, defining categories into which to classify our friends on Facebook might seem to be a fairly simple system, but in fact we're modeling a process that we take for granted in regular life: the automatic (often subconscious) assignment of complex relationships to categories with which we naturally behave differently. Any attempt to implement social boundaries in the digital world means unpacking what we take for granted, and addressing the faceted nature of human interaction, something that will be particularly interesting to explore, but which I suspect makes category definition difficult for most users.

Facebook friend lists are about relationships. A critical focus for every user is the determination of appropriate granularity (how much to organize Facebook friends). As mentioned in Managing Information about Data Center Resources case study, "higher granularity means that more time and money are required to organize the

information.”<sup>2</sup> For this organizing system, money isn’t a concern, but in addition to granularity being costly at the outset, it will raise maintenance and interaction-time costs significantly.

As mentioned previously, rich and highly organized user information allows Facebook to monetize through advertising, so when we look at organization from the site’s perspective, it is always highly organized to facilitate segmentation and analysis to this end. Notable are the realities that Facebook forces out of the equation to serve its own mission. For example, in the real world we may only be associated with someone because it is required of us socially, not because we desire it. Consider someone who is close with a family member or a colleague who has requested your friendship on Facebook. You might accept a friendship request to avoid an awkward social situation at home or at work, but you may not consider them to be a friend. Here Facebook has encoded an asymmetric relationship as a binary symmetric one. Viewers of your list of friends can only assume from the presence of a connection that this is a two-way friendship; you’re either directly connected to this person in the social graph or you aren’t.

### **When is it being organized?**

Simply choosing to add a “friend” on Facebook is an act of organization that carries with it different cultural categories for different people (some people will only select friends who they have spent a lot of time with in real life, some will choose to add coworkers or casual acquaintances, some will reach out to others and try to build new online friendships). It is possible that users think more about the interactions they’d like to have with the friend they are selecting for this organizing system, and less about how granular or consistent their own selection process is. After the initial connection to a friend, of course, users have the opportunity to classify or re-classify their friends into friend lists at any time, or even to delete the connection to a given friend.

Facebook itself is organizing from the outset by providing the structure, but it continues to shift the ground under users’ feet by adding new features, removing old ones, changing settings, and the like. All of these acts of organization are visible to the user, but Facebook is likely doing a great deal more behind the scenes. They might be adding resource descriptions to their databases, making connections to products or services based on inference, repackaging the data they have on you to better interface with their partners.

### **By whom is it being organized?**

The most obvious organizer of friends is the user, or Facebook account holder. However, one might also consider a user’s friends to be organizers in the context of Facebook. When a person uses the suggestion feature to connect two of their friends, they are

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpt From: Robert J. Glushko et al. “The Discipline of Organizing.” iBooks.  
<https://itunes.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewBook?id=2ED3374A7C5AF9B8293A8E7531403898>

proposing selection for another user, sketching out additional edges and nodes in a person's social graph. Indeed this occurs frequently in real life as well, with the casual introduction of a friend, or the proposal of a blind date.

Perhaps the most interesting organizer of Facebook friends is the meta-organizer, Facebook itself. Facebook has intentionally constructed the platform and all possible interactions with its own revenue interests in mind, a completely different end interaction than intended by the users of the site.

### **Other Considerations**

Organizing friends and associations in the online world is interesting because it is an implementation/encoding of a greater number and variety of relationships than was previously possible to experience at once. The Facebook platform affords a far more efficient way for users to reach and keep track of their connections, but it necessarily engenders the collision of many social sub-graphs in one portal. In the real world we physically segment our interactions more neatly into roles or categories of friends, so it is natural to experience discomfort when these social circles and the styles of interaction that we employ for each begin to overlap in a messy way online. Thinking more carefully about classification in the online world may help us to reflect on our interactions in the physical one, and vice versa.