

# **Challenges and Opportunities in Using Facebook to build a Community for Students at a UK university.**

## **ABSTRACT**

Facebook offers a low cost scalable platform for interacting with a huge audience. For universities this audience can encompass potential, current and past students, Facebook has emerged as a key space for informal and formal communication amongst students and between students and universities. This chapter will provide a case study of a formal presence for Durham University Foundation Centre which was launched three years ago. This page has grown in this time to just under 400 fans and it has been possible to establish which of these fans are current, past or prospective students, and how the fan profile has changed as different cohorts have passed through the centre. This experience will form the basis of a more general discussion of the challenges and opportunities which Facebook presents.

## **Introduction**

Facebook offers a low cost scalable platform for interacting with a huge audience. For universities this audience can encompass potential, current and past students, Facebook has emerged as a key space for informal and formal communication amongst students and between students and universities. This chapter will provide a case study of a formal presence which was launched three years ago. This experience will form the basis of a more general discussion of the challenges and opportunities which Facebook presents.

It is a social network in that it allows individuals to construct a profile and create a network of their connections and view the connections of their contacts (boyd & Ellison, 2007). It is similar to other networks that pre- and post-date it such as Friends Reunited, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn, but the key distinctive features of Facebook are that it has rapidly grown to a dominant position, especially within universities and the range of uses is constantly changing and expanding such as social gaming, chat and the 'like' feature.

Facebook has no immediate competitors that pose a threat to its dominant position as one of the most used online services globally. It has nearly 1 billion monthly users as of June 2012, with more than 500 million active daily (Allen, 2012). Facebook has evolved from being a social network to a 'social service' that encompasses a range of new and emerging features. Facebook allows for content to be integrated from other websites, resulting in the user accessing third party information through Facebook rather than visiting an alternative website; a user may watch a YouTube video, view an Instagram photo or read a tweet without leaving their Facebook newsfeed.

It is perhaps more useful to think of Facebook as a social medium echoing earlier discourses around Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2006; Wilkes & Pearce, 2011). These discourses emphasise the peer-led co-creation of shareable content and thinking of Facebook in this way enables us to foreground the malleable nature of the site, and how it facilitates the co-creation of shareable content, and the social sharing of external material. This reading would focus on the fact that individual students are free to create their own pages and groups for their classes, cohorts or alumni groups. This leads to an informality about the Facebook space which is popular with

students, but which complicates a university's use of it, especially for learning (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Selwyn, 2009).

One of the newer features to emerge from Facebook is the ability to create pages for companies and organizations in 2010. These pages enable individuals to publicly 'like' a brand, artist or organization. This enables the creators of such pages to use the feature to keep people informed about their latest developments, but also it creates an online space for the fans of the page to share information, photos, videos etc. It is now common for companies and media organizations to use Facebook pages to interact with their customers and audiences.

A review of 24 leading British research intensive university's presence on Facebook found that as of August 2012 they all had official Facebook pages, with the number of fans ranging from 3,000 to 600,000 and the group as a whole having over a million total likes (Kelly, 2012). The number of likes is an easily gathered metric for these pages but is not, of itself, a definitive measure of user engagement. This chapter will present a case study of the creation of a Facebook page for the Foundation Centre at Durham University over three years to inform a discussion of some of the issues which arise from creating an official presence on the site. In particular a case study of this scale enables a discussion of particular groups of students, which would not be feasible with a larger scale, and would no longer be possible with data restrictions from Facebook, outlined below.

The Foundation Centre provides a 'year zero' preparation for international and domestic mature students who go on to take the full range of degree programmes at Durham University. They therefore represent a particularly diverse group. The centre has been operating since 1995 and in the year 2012-13 had 196 students, from 33 countries. This provides a manageable community of present and past students which could be targeted through a Facebook page, as well as providing a potential tool for presenting the centre to prospective students (for more on the rationale for setting up the page, see Pearce, 2010). As this study is over the course of three years it is possible to observe when students engage with the page and whether they continue to engage past their time with the centre.

## Methodology

From its outset Facebook has been at the centre of debates about privacy (e.g. Albrechtslund, 2008; Grimmelmann, 2009). These debates focus around the extent to which individuals participate in an exchange whereby they agree to give up some of their privacy in order to benefit from the information shared by others in their network. For Albrechtslund this is a new form of participatory surveillance which has positive benefits as "a way to voluntarily engage with other people and construct identities" (Albrechtslund, 2008). Whether or not this is the case for all individuals on Facebook is open to debate, but the key concern for this chapter is the recognition that individuals knowingly share some of their personal information in order to participate in the social network. From a methodological point of view the question becomes to what extent is this information, or a subset of it, a legitimate source of data?

A substantial project which produced a longitudinal dataset of Facebook profile and network information of an entire university course, over a four year period, ignited considerable debate over the ethics of research into this area (see Parry, 2011; Zimmer, 2010). This research used student researchers who made their networks available to researchers, who could then trace the interconnections of a class. This issue initiated a debate about how the privacy of the members of those networks, who had not explicitly consented to taking part in the study, and whose anonymity could not be ensured. The analysis carried out in this case

study is with the information shared with the page, rather than another individual, and all of the information taken from Facebook is publicly viewable, and therefore does not violate the individual's privacy as such although no students or staff are mentioned by name in this paper (Parry, 2011).

One feature of working with social media is the relative ease with which large amounts of data can be gathered, this face this has spawned a new sub-discipline of webometrics (Thelwall, 2008). Once a Facebook page has been set up the administrators for that page have access to a reasonable amount of anonymised demographic data about the users and quantitative historic information about the interactions such as the number of likes, wall postings or photo views. This data can be exported as a spread sheet and this has been used as the basis for some of the analysis in the next section. This provides a useful starting point for an analysis, but the data was analysed further in a number of ways to provide more relevant data for this case study.

One key question that this chapter seeks to address is to what extent the page has been successful in engaging with future, current and past students. In order to classify which community our fans belonged to the fan list was extracted from the page and cross referenced against an internal student database in order to identify current and past students. I also identified members of staff and other pages that had 'liked' our page (such as the University's International Office). I made an assumption that the remaining fans would be prospective students. This is likely to be an overestimate and some of these may have liked the page for other reasons, but it seems unlikely that they would have been many who would have liked the page for alternative reasons. At some point in the recent past Facebook has stopped making it possible to download a full list of fans for a page, and this has made a comparison across all three years impossible.

### **Case study: Foundation Centre on Facebook**

My initial proposal for establishing the page suggested that it could create an online community and emphasised three key audiences: prospective students, current students and alumni. This focus on community and range of potential uses, allied with the relative ease in setting up and monitoring the page, led to a laissez-faire attitude when the page was set up in October 2010. The rest of this section will outline who has liked the page.

Before the Facebook page was established there had been an effort to establish an online community for current students, through setting up a space in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), based on Blackboard, called 'Foundation Family' to share photos from social events and comments. This had struggled to gain momentum and had been abandoned by the time the Facebook page had been set up. There are a number of issues with attempting to create a community within a VLE which this highlights. Firstly the VLE is only generally accessed by students for specific academic related uses such as downloading PowerPoint slides and is not generally visited on a regular basis. This also means that the environment is closely associated with work, which makes it a difficult location to foster a more informal community. In addition to this only current students of the university have accounts for the VLE making it impossible to interact with prospective students and difficult to interact with past students once they have graduated.

Another rationale for establishing the Facebook page was that there was little stopping a third party creating their own page or group for the centre over which the staff would have no control. Creating an official page would enable an element of control over its content and direction. Shortly after the page was set up a group of students established a Facebook group

to facilitate organizing social events. This group was clearly targeted at a particular cohort and ran alongside our own page with mutual links between the two.

Figure 1 below shows the cumulative total likes which the page has recorded to date. This information is only available to download in 6 monthly chunks, something which has not been consistently done throughout the lifetime of the page, hence the lack of data points in the middle section. The data points shown are for the start of each month where there is data.

As you can see there was quite a rapid start, followed by steady growth. The page was initially promoted in an email to all students and staff, and since then has been promoted through a link in the web page (our most common referrer) as well as being found through Google (our second most common referrer). Obviously given the social nature of Facebook it would be expected that this would be a source of new ‘likes’ as photos have been uploaded and tagged or as items have appeared in the news feeds of non-fans.

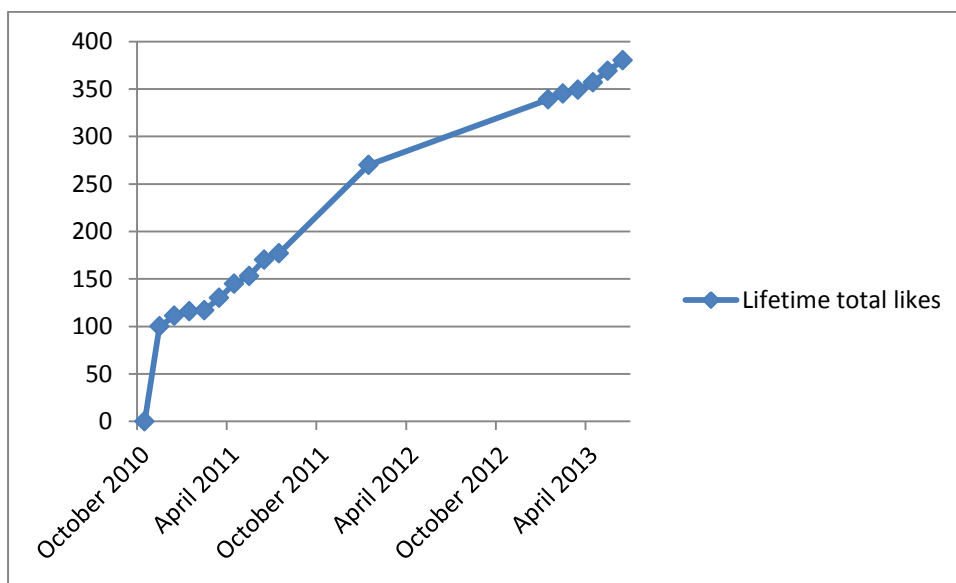
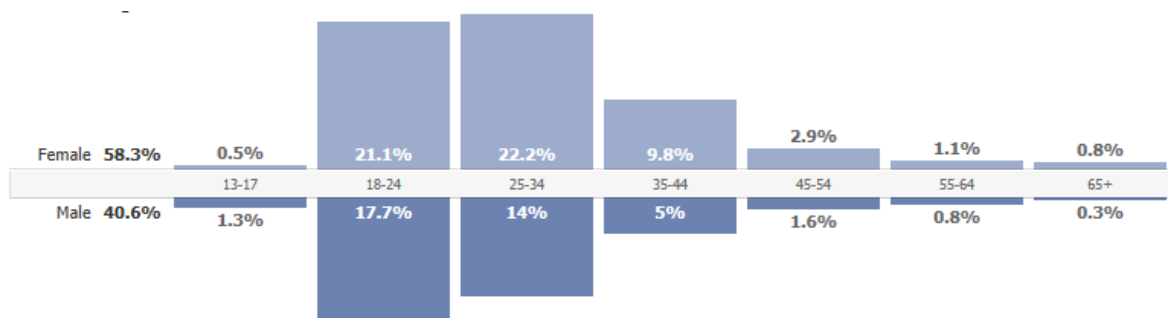


Figure 1: Lifetime total likes

Having outlined some general information about the level of use the next question is who is using the site (figure 2). One consistent feature from the outset of the Facebook page has been a majority (58%) of female users, this has been fairly consistent over the lifetime of the page, the figure was 61% a year previously. An analysis of the student database suggests that 53% of students since 1997 have been female but if we take the last 4 years only 42% have been female, so that female participation with the Facebook page is more than would be expected given the known properties of the current and past student cohorts.



**Figure 2: Demographic Data**

Also the age demographic is more evenly spread that you might expect for a student group, but this would reflect not only the more diverse student body at the foundation centre, but also the inclusion of alumni from previous cohorts.

It would have been interesting to explore the nationality of the page fans but whilst Facebook provides information on the nationality this is based on the Facebook settings which the individual sets and are clearly vulnerable to international students setting up their accounts upon arrival in the UK and appearing as UK based. This effect would be particularly pronounced for students from countries where Facebook and other social media sites are banned (such as China at the present time) where creating an account prior to arrival is very difficult, if not impossible.

Table 1 and figure 3 show different audiences who have liked the page. Over this period the number of students studying with us has been fairly stable (2010-1 169, 2011-2 182). We can see that for each year the largest group of fans is neither current students nor alumni, those we have assumed are prospective students. In fact the proportion of fans who fall into this category has risen, which is surprising, as you might expect it to remain fairly constant.

	Jul-11		Aug-12	
	Count	%	Count	%
Prospective Student	56	32	119	44
Current Student	50	28	31	11
Alumni	49	28	45	17
Class of 2010-1	-	-	43	16
Staff	19	11	20	7
Other Pages	3	2	12	4
Totals	177	100	270	100

**Table 1 Categories of 'likes' over time**

The number of fans from the current cohort is less for the second year, and has reduced in proportional terms from 30% to 17%. This may be partly due to the count being taken later in the year (the academic year ends in July). We can see that a large number (86%) of the students from 2010-11 remained fans of the page the following year, and it is unfortunate that

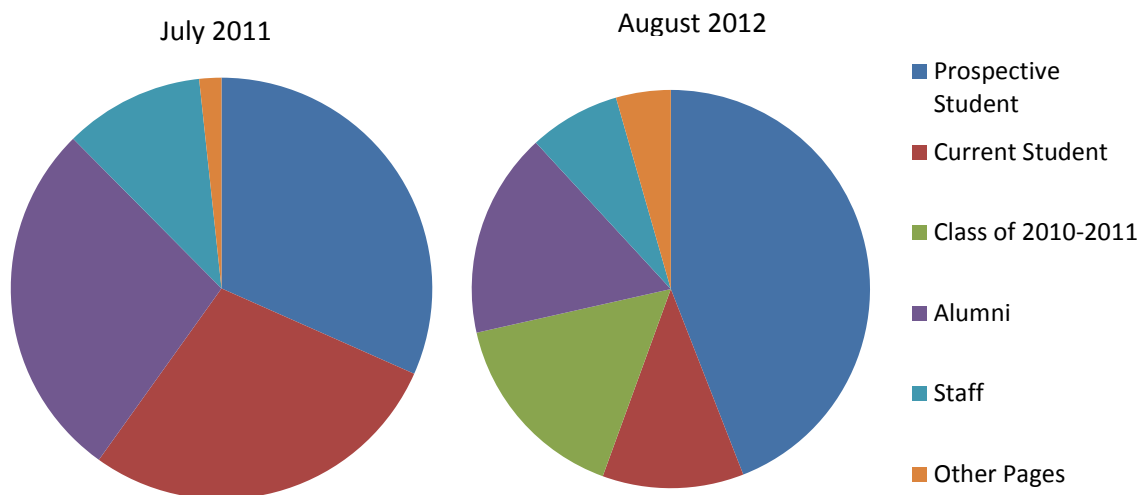


Figure 3 Pie chart of 'likes' over time

there is not the data to see how many remained fans the following year, as well as how many of the following cohort stayed.

In summary the page has proven popular, attracting a good number of fans, with female fans overrepresented. The three targeted groups have all liked the pages in broadly even numbers, although there does seem to be scope for increasing the number of likes from current students. Once students like the page they seem happy to remain connected, whilst this may be inertia we do frequently get interactions on the page from alumni.

### Reflections: Challenges and Opportunities

From the start an early concern amongst staff was about privacy and the blurring of professional boundaries with students. These are two slightly different issues. The first relates to unease that staff had about the potential for sharing their private profiles with students, and also about appearing to invade the private space of students, the second is the related but separate issue of how Facebook has established itself as a private, informal space and a worry that students would either resist the Foundation Centre encroaching on this, or that the page might be seen to erode the professional standing of staff.

By liking the Facebook page the individual is not sharing their private information with the page administrators or other fans apart from their username and profile picture. Similarly when those staff members who have been designated as administrators interact with the page they do so as the page itself, rather than as their individual profiles, and therefore they do not share their personal information (including their username or profile picture) with the rest of the page community. Whilst the administrator can change whether they are interacting with the page in a personal capacity or not, many forget to do this or are unaware and this can lead to some personal comments posted as if through the page profile.

As for the Facebook page encroaching on the individual's privacy the experience to date appears to be the opposite. Clearly users who felt that liking the Facebook page would share their personal information with it, and who had an issue with this, would not like the page in the first place, and so the success of the page in gaining fans suggests that this has not been the case. In fact an issue that has arisen recently has been prospective students posting enquiries onto the wall about their particular applications which has started conversations which centre staff have felt would be better continued in private. It seems that for some prospective students at least they are too keen to share details of their applications, and that rather than worry about the page encroaching on their privacy, the page is worried about their lack of privacy. So far the centre has responded to this on an ad hoc basis but it is clear that there is a need for a clear privacy policy which establishes which conversations are best had



in private and which are best had in public and takes into account any legal issues (Grimmelmann, 2009; JISC, 2011).

It is important to recognise that Facebook is a business and this consequently has practical implications. Facebook generates income through placing targeted adverts, and as the Foundation Centre page is recognised as an educational page, frequented by students, the adverts can be from competing providers. A further practical consideration is that the business model for Facebook can change at any time and that if the Foundation Centre is committed to maintaining a presence this may incur additional costs in the future (e.g. if pages became a freemium feature, subject to charges for additional functionality).

Another challenge to creating and maintaining an effective presence on any social media is the time commitment required to post and respond to content. To date this has been managed through staff time, but this is not ideal and as the page continues to expand, and as the centre looks to expand its presence onto other media (e.g. Twitter) this is not sustainable. We have decided to employ a student as a social media intern on a part time contract to assist with this. This is a strategy that I know is being used by colleagues across the UK and the US and provides for an excellent job opportunity for the student as well as providing an enthusiastic source of content for the page.

A final challenge is to realise that despite the apparent dominance of Facebook its coverage is not total. An increasing number of users have rejected or are rejecting the space and other social spaces exist where students create their own communities (Rainie, Smith, & Duggan, 2013). In the foundation centre context one such space has been created by our students on the [website The Student Room](http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?t=2328693) (<http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?t=2328693>). Similarly access to Facebook is restricted in some countries, which is especially important for a centre which is attempting to recruit international students from places like China and Vietnam.

## Conclusion

This case study has been able to provide a snapshot of the way that prospective, current and alumni students connect with the page for a one year programme over a three year period. Future studies will include a content analysis of the ways in which these groups interact with one another and the page. At the moment there is a good deal of interaction, particularly around photos.

It is clear that Facebook is a useful medium for many students, and for our centre to promote itself, although it is important to remember those who are not on Facebook, and not rely exclusively on this, or any other social media, to interact with these groups. Facebook is a low cost and attractive platform for interacting with students, but it should not be relied on as the only platform for any community building strategy.

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