

Highlights from Center for the Digital Globe Symposium on Social Networking – March 12, 2008

Professor Chi-Ren Shyu from the Department of Computer Science, School of Engineering, gave a PowerPoint presentation titled *Networking for MU Informatics Institute*. Professor Shyu said he is working on a community interaction infrastructure tool (social networking tool) which involves the MU Plant Science Department, MU Informatics Institute and the MU Department of Family and Community Medicine. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) provided a grant for this new project. Professor Shyu explained that this network will share medical topics, discussions, etc., from the bench on out. Professor Shyu said he would like to make this networking tool available in the future for researchers, and he believes they will find it helpful.

Professor Paul Lester from the Department of Communications at California State University, Fullerton, teleconferenced with the audience about his experiences in teaching a graphics course twice through the Second Life online networking community. He explained that each of his students created a unique virtual identity and sat in his virtual online classroom. The virtual classroom contains two screens, one for PowerPoint slides and one for class notes. He also uses Blackboard for the class. He saves the transcripts from each class and makes them available to his students on Blackboard, in case they miss a class or want to review a transcript. He also makes all film clips available on Blackboard. He concluded that Second Life is not well suited for teaching but has been a fun tool for experimentation. He said he will teach a media ethics course this summer, and although many publications are available on Second Life, some are more ethical than others.

Audience member Debra Mason, Ph.D. and Director of the MU's Center for Religion and the Professions, added that her center has a Second Life site with a library and a place to conduct events. Dr. Mason said religion is a virtual thing too, and using Second Life has also been experimental for her area.

Rebecca Phillips, Vice President of Social Networking for Beliefnet, gave a PowerPoint presentation titled *Introduction to Social Networking and the New Beliefnet Community*. Beliefnet is the largest multi-faith religion and spirituality web site, with over 3 million users. Beliefnet.com was launched in December, 1999. They have 12 million daily subscribers to their newsletters. Beliefnet Community (their new social networking community) was launched in Fall, 2007.

Rebecca explained that nearly two-thirds of North Americans visit a social network site at least once a month. The research they have conducted shows that Beliefnet users feel a little isolated and can reach out through their community and also create their own groups. Other religion sites are designed for specific religions such as Xianz.com for Christians and Schmooze.com for Jewish, but Beliefnet is multi-faith.

Beliefnet members can make friends, create content, receive content through feeds, recommend content, etc. Members can also set up profile pages. One of their most popular groups is the Stressing Less Group. Beliefnet's emphasis is on content and community, and participation is anonymous. Their research shows that the average participants are women, ages 35-54. All ages are using the internet.

Beliefnet has strict rules and monitoring for any objectionable pictures and content. Participants are not allowed to verbally attack each other. Groups are in three categories: public, open and private. Beliefnet has twenty editorial staff asking readers to comment on current events. They hold discussions about articles and blog posts. They ask members to submit certain types of content and photos related to seasons, events etc.

Rebecca shared a few research findings and future goals for Beliefnet. Beliefnet surveys show that people want access to content. Subscribers visit an average of three Beliefnet web pages per visit. Beliefnet will increase the number of web pages visits by offering more content. Advertisers will likely increase as they become more comfortable on user generated space.

Professor Wayne Wanta asked Rebecca whether politics is important on the Beliefnet web site. Rebecca said political discussion is one of their largest groups, because what is going on in the world affects everyone.

Patricia Fry, MU's Edward W. Hinton Professor of Law, gave a PowerPoint presentation titled *What Does Law Have to Do with Social Networking?* Professor Fry explained that she has not used Second Life or Beliefnet much, but these sites are *the internet cranked up another notch*. She added that in the past researchers used a smaller research space with firewalls for limited access. She said a month ago she chaired a teleconference to discuss a potential statute, using interactive classroom space on a computer. Everyone at the teleconference could see it. The teleconference lasted two hours and was successful, so they want to do this again. She said she could also hold the meeting on Second Life in a restricted area, and Second Life is becoming a new collaboration space.

Professor Fry cited a January 9th St. Louis Post Dispatch article related to federal officials in Los Angeles investigating whether someone used a false identity. She added that these same types of issues are online too, and some new issues have surfaced due to someone recently using a false identity to make negative comments online to a young person who later committed suicide. She said this was not the only suicide that may have been influenced by online content, as there were several suicides incidents in England.

Professor Fry explained that recent issues about online activity have caused MySpace to place more restrictions on their site. They now require that children's e-mail

addresses be submitted to them to prevent misusing addresses to set up fake profiles. They have a default setting for 16 and 17 year olds marked "private." They have strengthened their software to identify underage users and have added staff and resources to classify photos and discussion groups. They have created a high school section for users under 18.

Professor Fry cited other headlines related to online activity and legal issues. A Second Life law breaker let his under aged son use his profile. Second Life users must be over 18. Another Second Life user hacked in to bid on something and substituted one listing for another. He was kicked off and is now suing. A guy went into Second Life and claimed to be a bank, offering 44% interest per year on deposits. Consequently, \$750,000 U.S. dollars were lost. People were using this bank for gambling purposes, using Linden dollars (Second Life dollars). Professor Fry explained that with real money invested in virtual worlds, we must have laws to govern what goes on.

Professor Fry said this is all about real relationships and consequences (e.g., users and terms of service, IP rights, owner issues, intruders such as copybots taking assets, users vs. other users, users and third parties, criminal law, tort and other civil law, intellectual property, etc.). She added that special rules do not need to be written for virtual worlds until things are done that require special rules. The stance of the legal profession has been that electronic communications have the same consequences as non-electronic communications.

Professor Fry concluded that there are new U.S. Government concerns about the virtual world such as taxation issues (people earning money online without taxation), gambling, money laundering, fraud, pornography, terrorism, harassment, stalking, ID theft, etc. These are only a few of the issues. The legal profession does not yet know how all of this will affect us.