Coordinating the Ordinary: Social Information Uses of Facebook by Adults

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ABSTRACT
Social network sites (SNSs) are bundles of information and communication tools that can be used to support collaboration, among other uses. In a qualitative study of adult Facebook users (N=18), we found that some users did turn to the site for information uses that are embedded in social activities, including organizing events, establishing online groups, and seeking information. We also discuss the features of Facebook that respondents discussed as being important to these uses.

Categories and Subject Descriptors
H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces – *collaborative computing, Web-based interactions.*

General Terms
Human Factors

Keywords
Social network sites, Facebook, collaboration, home, adult users, coordination, information-seeking, social information use

1. INTRODUCTION
Social network sites (SNSs) are applications comprised of bundles of information and communication tools that allow users to accomplish multiple goals. While other research has examined SNS use in academic [2] and work settings [6, 21, 22], there is less scholarship addressing how users employ these tools to accomplish everyday goals requiring the exchange of information.

We present data from qualitative interviews with adult Facebook users, focusing on instances of social information use. We define social information use broadly as how people employ their social networks to satisfy a range of information-related goals. In other words, people exist in social systems, and the other members of those systems can be valuable sources of information. Social information uses can cover a broad spectrum of information-

related behaviors, from tasks that are tightly coupled, like co-creation of media, to more loosely coupled tasks like event coordination. Given the social nature of this type of behavior, communication is an essential component; thus, the social and technical features of SNSs such as Facebook are well-suited to support these exchanges. We discuss specific features of Facebook that respondents described as being important for social information uses. Additionally, we identify three types of social information use on Facebook: seeking information, organizing events, and creating common ground.

1.1 Social Information Use
Social information use exists in a framework of more general information-seeking behaviors. General theories of information use (i.e., those not tied to specific contexts like professional or academic environments) have often focused on how people use information to accomplish quotidian tasks. Early researchers employed a systems approach, focusing on the process by which users adapted information needs into queries they thought could be answered by "one size fits all" systems like a library or database [23]. A shift came when researchers started to examine the context in which people sought information, leading to increased user studies of information behavior and analysis of the context in which people experience information use [26]. With the adoption of widely available online tools, some researchers examined how people sought information through systems like the Web, including a focus on everyday uses of information [20]. From there, researchers have moved away from single system perspectives of information behavior to consider the multiple efforts that users make to seek information, across a variety of systems, people, and practices.

Dervin was one of the first information researchers to employ a human-centered approach to information use [5]. Her "sense making" model of information use described the iterative way in which people contextualize both their information needs and "bridges" for filling those needs in a changing environment. Nardi and O'Day [15] proposed the concept of "information ecologies," in which information use is an environmental process, with information needs interacting with multiple "species," including formalized sources like books and databases, people (both experts and social contacts), and practices around information. Pirolli adapted the Information Foraging Theory [18] to the social information foraging model [17], which adds social dimensions to how people both use and create information in decentralized information systems where interfaces are available to support different types of sociality. In this model, he described

how individual foragers improve their information-seeking performance by increasing the diversity of their cooperating contacts. All of these perspectives share the idea that people with information needs go through an iterative search process that can include multiple sources, systems, and techniques. SNSs may play an important role in this "information ecology" by allowing users to access information from members of their social networks, in order to accomplish a variety of information-related goals.

1.2 Social Network Sites and Information Use

Social network sites (SNSs) are defined as having 1) user profiles, 2) an articulated list of contacts on the system, and 3) the ability to view the contacts of other users [3]. Outside of these common characteristics, SNSs have a variety of different technical features, including status updates, media sharing, application hosting, asynchronous linking, and group formation. These features are particularly well-suited for supporting a wide range of information behaviors. Research suggests that using these sites for social information uses has become increasingly common: the Pew Internet Project has found that 72% of teens [12] and 57% of adults [11] use SNSs to make plans with friends.

Many SNSs provide multiple synchronous and asynchronous communication options that allow users to interact on both a one-to-one and one-to-many level. Private communication channels, such as instant messaging and internal email, enable interaction and coordination to occur at the individual level, while public communication channels, such as interest-related groups, enable users to find others with shared interest and lower the transaction costs associated with communicating with them [7], thus enabling information-related behaviors to occur at a larger scale. SNS features enable individuals to manage a larger network of weak ties, discover information about others, and mobilize action at a high level [7, 9] – all affordances that support various types of coordination. Additionally, specific features of these sites, such as calendar services, allow users to manage event invitations, and thus support organizing activities more concretely.

Resnick [19] discussed specific features of online tools which might lead to different types of social outcomes. Resnick's concept of "socio-technical capital" encapsulates the beneficial outcomes of making social connections through persistent online interactions and is tied to features like archives of user messages, the ability to "fan-out" messages to a large group of people at one time, and the ability to run computations on user interactions, among other technical tools. Olson and Olson [16] described the relationship between specific features of collaborative software (such as asynchronous communication and video) and collaboration conditions (like common ground and trust). Additionally, they showed how task dependencies shaped the need for different collaboration tools.

Common ground is a shared understanding between dyadic or group participants that allows for communication to occur with a shared understanding of the context [4]. Lampe et al. [9] looked at the role profile fields in Facebook played in generating common ground between participants, finding that "hard to fake" signals like location and contact information were more important in building common ground. Wellman [25] looked at online groups generally as online social networks, and concluded there were technical features of online interactions that lead to different social interaction outcomes. Ackerman [1] described a "socio-technical gap" between how collaboration systems are designed, and how social systems are able to interact within those systems. For example, collaboration systems are often incapable of handling exceptions to normal organizational processes, or allow little of the casual interaction that has been shown to be important in facilitating work processes. In the case of Facebook, the provision of multiple tools may allow people to repurpose and reuse those tools to overcome that socio-technical gap. This stream of scholarship contributes to our understanding of how SNS features may play an important role in triggering ad-hoc collaborative processes.

Researchers in a wide variety of fields have begun to consider how SNSs can improve the process of collaboration. For example, research by DiMicco and colleagues [6] has focused on organizational collaboration; studies of IBM's internal SNS Beehive found that a primary motivation for using the site was "campaigning," which includes knowledge sharing and receiving feedback on various job-related projects. Skeels and Grudin [21] interviewed workers in a corporate setting and found that SNS users often worried about context collapse (the inability to set boundaries between personal and professional networks) and hierarchy (the effects of operating in a network with bosses and employees) as reasons why collaborating through existing SNS services can be difficult in a corporate setting. Morris et al. [14] conducted a survey of adult Facebook users (all Microsoft employees) and found that more than half of their respondents reported using their status update to ask questions that covered multiple topics such as technology, philosophical inquires, and health-related queries.

In a study of college students' social uses of Facebook, Barkhuus and Tashiro [2] identified four separate meeting coordination behaviors on the site, including scheduled (e.g., organizational meetings), semi-scheduled (e.g., lunch dates), ad hoc (e.g., spur of the moment get-togethers), and special (e.g., birthday parties) events. Students in the study used a variety of Facebook's features to coordinate these events, including status updates and the Events feature. Lampe and Ellison [10] found that college student athletes sometimes used Facebook to maintain group norms and to help coordinate off-season, especially around training activities.

Little research on SNSs has looked beyond the population of college students, but adult adoption of the sites is rapidly increasing [11]. While some adults use SNSs for professional purposes, many are using them in the home to fulfill interpersonal and other needs. Many adults are using these services to connect with people from their past, to receive social support, and to connect with faraway friends and family members [13].

We were interested in what types of information-related goals everyday users had and how they employed the features of Facebook to accomplish these goals. We felt that including users outside of the college population was important because these users potentially have more diverse networks from varying phases in life. Additionally, these users were not in a specific work or school context, where task accomplishment is well-understood and frames many types of interactions. In other words, these adult users did not necessarily have the shared goals found in work and school contexts, making their coordination needs novel. Our interview protocol covered a range of Facebook-related activities, with a focus on the use of Facebook to engage in information-seeking and sharing. Consequently, our interview data enable us to better understand the ways in which they are

using Facebook to accomplish tasks related to the management, sharing, and coordination of information.

2. METHOD

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 18 adults in the United States who had an active Facebook account between November 2009 and January 2010. Participants were recruited through a series of Facebook ads shown to users between the ages of 25 and 55; the ads redirected to an online screening survey that asked participants about their basic demographic data and general use of Facebook. For those interested in participating in a 45-minute phone interview in exchange for a $15 Amazon.com gift certificate, we gave them the option to provide their email addresses. Thirteen participants were recruited through the Facebook ad and an additional five were recruited through snowball sampling. We stopped recruiting once we reached saturation in the dataset, as indicated by redundant statements by our participants.

The final sample includes a diverse range of ages (M = 43.6, $S.D.$ = 9.2), ethnicities, and network size (i.e., number of Friends; M = 196; $S.D.$ = 215). Table 1 includes full data for the 18 participants.

Table 1. Participant demographics

	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	No. of Facebook Friends
P1	45	Male	White	150
P2	41	Female	White	339
P3	48	Male	Latino	200
P4	51	Female	Black	164
P5	55	Female	White	300
P6	39	Female	White	125
P7	41	Male	White	750
P8	51	Female	White	139
P9	36	Male	White	40
P10	34	Male	White	25
P11	52	Female	White	30
P12	55	Female	White	50
P13	36	Female	White	30
P14	28	Female	Black	16
P15	27	Male	Latino	700
P16	51	Female	White	99
P17	39	Female	Other	250
P18	55	Male	White	120

The interview protocol was designed to cover all of the major uses of Facebook, with a focus on how adults are engaging with other users through the wide range of communication features. Interviews were semi-structured, enabling follow-up questions that probed instances of interesting or unique example of Facebook-enabled activities.

The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed by an undergraduate research assistant, and checked by the researchers for accuracy. The researchers then conducted textual data analysis using Atlas.ti, a qualitative content analysis software program. In analyzing the interviews, we took an exploratory approach to answer generic questions about how Facebook enabled user collaboration. The analysis was an iterative and collaborative process, whereby we went through the transcripts to identify references to how they were using Facebook, what types of Facebook features they used to carry out specific tasks, and how their activities affected their relationships with other Facebook users. Several codes were removed or expanded during this process, and when necessary, multiple codes were applied to the same unit. Units related to collaboration were coded with the "organizing" code, in addition to related codes such as "convenience," "reconnecting," and "information-seeking."

3. FEATURES OF SNSs

As our participants described their use of the site for coordination activities, patterns emerged as to the ways in which information use was facilitated by various social and technical affordances of the site. These benefits were associated with three primary features: the ability to micro-broadcast, the ability to connect with individuals already on the site, and the multiple communication channels available within the service.

3.1 Micro-Broadcasting

Our data suggest that the different affordances of Facebook enabled participants to reach both global (general) audiences as well as specific ones (e.g., sub-groups of their Friends network). Examples of one-to-one communication included Facebook Mail and Facebook Chat. Additionally, there were many mentions of the ways in which Facebook allowed participants to engage in one-to-many interactions when seeking or sharing information with their network and beyond. We term this ability to select an audience for one's message and target them, which Resnick [19] referred to as "fan-out," as *micro-broadcasting*.

Facebook enables users to choose the audience for a given message. While sometimes it may be more appropriate to broadcast a question or update to one's entire network, at other times a user may want to send the message to specific people or groups. For instance, one participant (P5), a devoted member of a regional political group, talked about how Facebook was used to find potential colleagues and send direct messages to them:

> *Right now, one of the other officers is establishing a young democrat organization as a sub-club under us to include the younger democrats into the organization and to bring them in and to groom them to be party leaders of the future, so he's using Facebook to send out messages to people and specifically invites people in our particular county.*

In contrast to this example, many participants had a clear idea of who they wanted to target with a given message. When it came to talking about specific subjects or a topic in a certain context, participants described communicating through Facebook Groups or Fan pages. One participant (P17) described Facebook as a public forum that simplified the process of sharing information, similar to when she was organizing her high school reunion:

> *Everything was announced [on Facebook], and then we put up all our pictures, which was great because everybody had access to it. That's the difference. It's not like making individual phone calls; it's like a giant bulletin board in the sky.*

This notion of Facebook as a "bulletin board in the sky" speaks to the lowering of transaction costs associated with communicating with larger groups through the site. In this case, Facebook helped separate her former classmates into a Group so that only members would be able to see the information. This simplified the process of communicating information about the reunion by allowing members to post one public message.

Similarly, a woman involved in charitable group fan sites (P12) said that she wrote on the pages of the groups she was involved in. When she was commenting to someone's post, she said that she thought of the post as a general comment to the group rather than a response directed at a particular person. Similarly, a participant (P8) who created a Group for junkyard enthusiasts said that she communicated back and forth with another Group member on the Group Wall but never became Facebook Friends—thus restricting communication with that individual to within the Group.

Users also described broadcasting to larger audiences but with a micro audience in mind. For instance, users would post a status update that could be viewed by their entire Facebook Friend network knowing that only a subset of that network would find the message relevant. This proved to be useful when participants were putting out a call that was not too personal in nature. For example, one woman (P2) said she posted a status update saying that the principal of her old high school had given her permission to hold a reunion and asked if anyone wanted to help. She said she received five or six responses on that status update; after which she followed up by sending a more directed message to her high school Friend list. This participant chose to post a general status update, although only 40 of her 300+ Facebook Friends were those from high school. Other examples included people who published their Facebook game achievements as status updates or sought Friends' help for certain Facebook games. These messages could be seen by their entire network, but were intended only for other Friends who played that particular game.

Although these activities were convenient for participants in broadcasting their message to a wide audience, they sometimes caused annoyance for those who were not interested in the events. One participant (P18) complained that most of the invitations he received were on subjects that he had absolutely no interest in:

> It's clear that the person who's done the inviting is just sending out mass emails to get as many people there as they possibly can. And if I ignore it or say no, I'm not quite sure what they see, and I don't want to alienate them or insult them. On the other hand, I have no intention of going, but I don't really want to explain to them.

This example suggests that there are certain tradeoffs for individual users to consider when distributing a message, especially when it comes to ascertaining the target audience. While many benefits may be accrued through distributing information to a wider network (as discussed in the next section), abusing these features may have negative consequences for the information distributor.

3.2 Network Benefits

On Facebook, one's Friend network constitutes a group of other users with whom one has formally connected through Friending; privacy settings can ensure that this group has access to more content than strangers. Some of our participants described accessing the larger network of all Facebook users (or a specific subset) through participation in Groups, fan pages, and applications. These local and global networks were important factors for our participants when it came to information-based activities in terms of size, diversity, and connectivity. Participants talked about how Facebook gave them access to a "pool" of Friends, which was useful for targeting content to these individuals and obtaining information from them.

Several people mentioned how some of their friends were more accessible through Facebook than through other types of communication such as email. For example, P8 spoke about how Facebook made it easier to talk to her sister, because she could see when she had logged onto the site and didn't have to worry about possibly calling her and waking her up. P13 said she has two friends who she communicates with only via Facebook because "if I send it to their email, chances are they won't get it for days." Likewise, P14 commented about how her communication usage patterns had changed due to Facebook:

> I'm actually doing less telephone calls, because I know if they won't answer their phone, or their ringer is off, I'll know they're on Facebook. I can actually go on Facebook and see who's on there, and I can send them a message, and I know that they can get the message right then and there.

For users seeking information or advice, the ability to access their network of Friends was potentially helpful in achieving their information goals. Many participants described posting questions to their network via status updates, or witnessing others who were doing so. Similar to other research on this topic [13], examples included asking for recommendations for a good restaurant or movie. One participant (P9) used comments as a voting mechanism to get advice. He had recently adopted two kittens from a shelter and he posted photos to Facebook to solicit names for the kittens and get advice on how to rear them.

Other examples reflected participants' need for actual help, in which they sent out a "distress call" to their network, hoping that someone in their network would know the answer. One participant (P6) talked about a friend who told her network she was looking for a catering job and eventually found one through someone in her network who knew a banquet hall that was hiring. Another participant (P7) said that he used his status update to ask people for help installing a Twitter application on his computer.

Facebook was used to coordinate various activities, especially if they were seeking advice that could be offered by their network:

> If our church is having some kind of an event, I've had other cousins that say [on Facebook], "oh yeah, I know this place," or if I'm trying to do an event somewhere, and I'm looking for maybe a hall or something like that, I've had people [on Facebook] say, "hey, well I know this place, call this guy," things like that. So [Facebook] has helped a lot. (P3)

For one participant, the fact that users had pre-existing relationships with those who responded to their requests differentiated question-asking on Facebook from question-asking using other crowdsourcing web services such as such as Yahoo! Answers, which he described as being variable in quality:

> Sometimes [on Yahoo!] you get a bunch of teenagers just making wisecracks, other times you get somebody who's a real expert on whatever you're asking about. But it's a real hit or miss. Whereas with Facebook, it's

more like you're out having lunch with friends and you brought something up. (P9)

As suggested by this participant, a pre-existing relationship helped ensure that answers were more credible. However, connecting with unknown users was also seen as a valuable characteristic of the site. For example, participants who were trying to put together events that would include people beyond their own Friends relied on the larger Facebook network. A few participants talked about how the widespread use of Facebook and the connections outside of one's immediate network were useful both in seeking people and being sought.

One woman (P2) said that she was organizing a high school reunion and although she did not know everyone, she was able to get a hold of everybody through mutual contacts. Similarly, a man (P3) organizing a family reunion through Facebook was able to reach relatives outside of the immediate family:

I don't think I would've been in contact with any of my distant cousins or distant friends if I didn't have Facebook. I mean, I'm sure eventually, if they were really adamantly trying to get a hold of me. I am on another site, LinkedIn, but that's rare. Facebook has made it possible, since it's more of a popular site for networking for social interaction.

3.3 Multiple Channel Benefits

Facebook contains both synchronous (e.g., Chat) and asynchronous (e.g., wall posts) communication features to aid collaboration through the site. Participants pointed out the benefits of synchronous communication through the Facebook Chat feature. One woman said she preferred Chat to sending messages because it was so much faster. Another participant (P3) echoed this statement, noting that while similar communication could be done over email, Chat sped up the communication process, especially when his Friends were online: "If you see somebody on Facebook and you need to get a message to them right away, that's a good way to do it."

Another participant (P10) said that he and his classmates "wanted to have a way to sort of share in real time what was going on." Facebook was similar to project-sharing software, but with the added benefit of chat, so that he and his friends could "yak back and forth." Likewise, P8 said she used Chat to catch up with high school friends with whom she had recently reconnected with through Facebook.

However, most coordinating on Facebook took place through asynchronous means. The fact that people could post messages at their own pace and still be involved in a larger discussion stream was pointed out as being useful in coordinating tasks.

Several participants described using comments on text posts or photos to coordinate different tasks. One participant (P8) talked about starting a group to share wedding photos with old friends.

All these kids that I graduated with, we are scattered all over the country and very few of us went to any of the other's weddings. So I decided to start a group about weddings, sharing our wedding memories. And they could get on and post pictures or make comments.

Participants also used Facebook's asynchronous messaging feature to exchange messages. Those using the message feature, however, were mainly coordinating events of smaller scale.

4. TYPES OF SOCIAL INFORMATION USE

In our analysis, we identified three types of social information uses that took place on Facebook: seeking information, organizing events, and establishing common ground.

4.1 Information-Seeking Behaviors

Our participants reported using Facebook for a wide variety of information-seeking behaviors, often noting how the site's communication features simplified the process of interacting with their network. Facebook enables users to broadcast questions and requests for information to an individual, their entire Friend network, or to an even wider network of individuals who share a common interest, such as through Groups.

Several participants noted that they chose to use Facebook to get in contact with friends because it was more reliable than sending an email or making a phone call. For example, one participant noted how he used Facebook to get help with using a software program while he was at work and couldn't use his phone:

I didn't know how to do this one type of statistical analysis. I just posted to my friends, "hey fellow psych nerds, can someone please tell me how to do this" and it was less than five minutes. A really good friend of mine posted back and said, "okay, this is what you do," and I was at work so I couldn't really use my phone or whatever, but I could Facebook and as we posted little messages back and forth, status updates, that sort of thing. He was able to explain to me step by step, "okay now do this, now do this, and now do this." So I was able to get it done. (P10)

In this case, the individual broadcast a message requesting assistance from his network with the hope that someone could provide him with the necessary assistance. His channel constraints (i.e., his inability to call a friend with this knowledge) limited the ways he could retrieve information, but Facebook allowed him to make the request to multiple people and quickly receive help from one of them. Another participant (P2) also commented about the benefits of sending a question to her entire network: "I posted Saturday night, I needed somebody to help me figure out how to hook up our wireless router…and [a friend and I] ended up posting back and forth about whether we were able to get it, and how much we paid, and what we think of it."

Following Granovetter's [8] findings regarding the role that weak ties serve in getting access to novel information, such as a new job opportunity, Facebook's features make it especially well-suited for professional networking. One participant (P6) used Facebook for both seeking advice about career moves as well as actively searching for new jobs:

If I see someone on [Facebook] that might be useful in helping me try to find another job, as far as a career, or if I need to ask someone a question about how to get into a specific field…I'll either instant message them or I'll send them an email through Facebook.

P6 also said that several friends had gotten jobs through Facebook, including one who got a job after posting a status update that she was looking for a position and another user replied with information about a company that was currently hiring. Another participant (P14) said she and her friends also used Facebook to share information about new job opportunities:

"Like sometimes if there's a job that's hiring, somebody will go, 'oh you know Wal-Mart's hiring, go up here,' or 'Do you know which job is hiring?'"

When addressing the question of why users turn to Facebook over other methods when seeking information, participants pointed to the ease with which they could access a wide range of people quickly. As P2 commented, "Surely that somebody out of the 350 people would have an answer to something I needed, or know where to direct me to find it." Likewise, it was important to some participants that the people from whom they were receiving information and advice had a pre-existing relationship with them (as opposed to relying on results of a Google search, for example). P7 said he used Facebook for a number of information-seeking purposes, and that he preferred responses from "real-life" friends, "because they may know more context of kind of where you're coming from, and so they can provide a more meaningful answer to your question."

4.2 Event Coordination

The majority of participants reported using Facebook to organize and RSVP for a wide variety of one-time events ranging from high school reunions to dinner parties, wine tastings, political fundraisers, church outings, and birthday parties. While some of these events can be organized through inbox messages or wall posts, Facebook's "Event" feature is the most structured method for organizing people and events through the site. Similar to Evite, Events allow individuals or groups to provide all necessary information for an upcoming event, including time, place, and description. Invites can be sent to other users through the site, and RSVPing requires one click. Events and the list of invitees can be made public or private depending on an individual's preferences. While many participants said they had used the Event feature (either by creating events or RSVPing to others' events), a few preferred using other communication methods, such as sending messages, posting status updates, and using Facebook chat.

Reunions and celebrations were common events that participants planned using Facebook, including birthdays and holiday parties. Many participants who organized these events were hosting the events for their own benefit. One man (P7) described how he listed his own 40th birthday party as an event on Facebook, and then invited people who were both local and remote. Several participants talked about organizing or being invited to high school reunions on Facebook. In the case of organizing large-scale events, using Facebook was cost efficient and convenient in terms of reaching out to a large group. As one woman (P2) put it, using Facebook to coordinate her high school reunion saved her hundreds of dollars on postage. Similarly, P18 said that Facebook simplified the process of organizing the reunion and made it much easier to share photos with other attendees.

Events, however, were not necessarily large-scale. One woman (P13) talked about how she organized a trip for her friend who was going to spend the New Year's holiday with her. Another women (P17) described how she used Facebook to organize a trip with two friends, one of whom was her boyfriend from college:

> My college boyfriend, I hooked up with him on Facebook and I'm going out to Seattle with one of my other girlfriends to visit our two mutual friends from college and I'm so excited! Yay! Facebook is how we've been all talking together.

Another participant (P9) talked about using Facebook to coordinate social gatherings:

> When we want to just get as many people going somewhere as we want, we used [Facebook] to say, "okay, let's meet at whatever, the Italian restaurant down the road," things like that. Right now I live in Pennsylvania, there's a huge Christmas light show drive-through thing, and we're all planning on meeting and going to that.

Many events, such as reunions, were social in nature, but there were also a few examples of commercial events. One woman (P12) talked about how she got her hair highlighted and cut with a discount that was promoted as a Facebook event by one of her daughter's friends. Likewise, another participant (P4) used Facebook to share her current Mary Kay promotions with her network. Participants also gave examples of using Facebook for political fundraisers, conference-related events, and events for professional organizations.

Even those participants who were not organizers had all been invited to an event through Facebook at one time or another. One participant (P6) said that she never organized an event but would attend culinary events, such as cooking classes or wine tastings. Another participant (P1) said that most of the event invitations he had received took place out-of-state so that he didn't attend them.

4.3 Establishing Common Ground

Another type of coordination that emerged from the interviews was using Facebook to create or participate in an online group with people who had similar interests. These groups were not designed for a specific future event but were more about establishing the identity of a group or individual, usually based on some kind of emotional affiliation with a specific subject matter. Participants mainly used Facebook Groups and Pages to seek people with similar interests and lay the ground for building potential networks.

One woman (P8) created a Facebook group for the school that she had attended as a child. She explained how members of the group posted old photographs to share with other members.

> I noticed that there was nothing there for the old elementary school that I went to. They had since torn that down and rebuilt a new building, but the old building was what everyone I had graduated with went to, so I started a group.

Other participants, however, engaged in more active participation in their groups, both online and online. One woman (P6) described how members of her high school alumni group on Facebook posted photos and shared comments. Another participant who was a graduate student (P10) had a Facebook group for other students in his department. He explained how the online component consolidated their affinity as a group:

> The Facebook group really helped us all come together. People are willing to come and share more in certain ways when you have a Facebook group, it's like okay, this is our banner, we're all gathering under it for one purpose, and everybody sort of knows why you're there. It's not like you randomly stumbled upon this thing.

Also speaking about Facebook use for academic cooperation, another participant (P15), who was a college instructor, discussed how his students used Facebook to help each other out:

If you're having problems with something and some people are just shy in person, it's a way to get to know people outside of class where they can form study groups or whatever. Likewise, it's a nice way, if you have a small frustration, have a little complaint, and have commiseration with others.

One woman (P12) whose son-in-law was in the army was a "fan" of several charitable groups, including one for American troops. She participated in the groups to provide emotional support to other members of the group. For instance, on a group for the Alzheimer's Association—which she joined because her mother has Alzheimer's—she would leave messages of encouragement or hope. In her case, her reason for participating in the group was to provide support to and receive support from people in similar situations.

Some participants reported using groups to facilitate activism. One participant (P7) said that he thought Facebook was a good place to lobby when interest in and engagement with a given topic was high. He described how he just joined a group to recruit an individual as the next football coach for Notre Dame. Along similar lines, another participant (P5) who was a devoted member of a regional political group, talked about how Facebook is effective for sending out messages and inviting people to events.

5. DISCUSSION

The current study contributes to a growing body of literature on the use of information and communication technologies to achieve various goals by documenting how Facebook supports quotidian information-based activities by U.S. adults. As SNSs become more entwined in the daily online activities of adults, they will increasingly become important tools for gathering information, both actively (in response to specific questions) and passively, through links and information posted by others.

Our analysis study shows that there are social and technical affordances that facilitate social information use. The ability to broadcast to both general and specific audiences, the ability to connect with immediate and extended networks, and the synchronous and asynchronous characteristics of various communication channels are beneficial for coordinating.

Our data suggest that users employed Facebook to perform a range of social information uses: information-seeking, organizing events, and establishing common ground. Facebook offers a tool specifically designed to help people organize events; thus, the fact that individuals used it to do so is not unexpected. However, users were also organizing events through a combination of other Facebook features, including creating Groups and posting status updates to their networks. Furthermore, some users moved beyond more traditional organizing and engaged in creative or unexpected uses of the site, such as the individual who used it to solicit and coordinate food donations for needy people in his community.

Ellison, Lampe and Steinfield [7] speculated about the role that SNSs play in organizing activities, both at the interpersonal and the group level. They suggested that the features of SNSs lower the costs associated with connecting with diverse others— including members of one's network and those outside their on-site "Friends"—who discover they have common interests through information shared on the site. This lowering of transaction costs can support new kinds of organizing activities, although lowered transaction costs may encourage individuals to post without considering the cost to others who have to read the requests. Future research should further explore the negative outcomes associated with lowered communication barriers (such as fatigue on the part of responders or the equivalent of "information overload") in more depth.

This study highlights how SNSs such as Facebook represent an intersection of several mechanisms that facilitate collaboration. The combination of connecting with a large network of people on one site, the variety of synchronous and asynchronous communication channels, and the ability to target communication to one or many enable a variety of social information uses. For example, users increase the chance of receiving a response to a question when they can post a message to their entire network through an asynchronous channel such as a status update, as opposed to limiting it to the smaller number of people they might reasonably call on the phone. Alternatively, users may want to target information to a specific individual or group of people, and the site's features enable this type of interaction as well. Furthermore, interactions and information can be shared through both public and private channels and can seamlessly move across channels, both within the site and outside of Facebook.

These findings are consistent with the work of Resnick [19], in that technical features appear to be associated with social processes. Micro-broadcasting and archiving, among other features he notes, are essential components of the phenomena described above. In contrast to Resnick's focus on how tool use could shape social practice, the findings here suggest that users are also making choices about tool use based on how they can best activate their social network. In choosing Facebook to accomplish their information tasks, respondents often mentioned how the ability to reach different portions of their network was an important consideration in why they chose to pursue these activities through the site. We also find support for Olson and Olson's [16] idea that certain types of tasks can be accomplished with relatively lightweight online tools. While these authors argue that channels with many types of information are needed for tightly coupled tasks, low-information channels are sufficient for many types of collaboration activities. The uses described above are loosely coupled, and common ground, necessary in tightly coupled tasks, can be built through the identity cues attached to personal profiles. This can be related to Social Information Processing theory [24], which shows that through persistent interactions, even small cues can build robust impressions between participants.

6. CONCLUSION

As communication technologies evolve, so do the ways in which users engage with them to accomplish everyday information-based tasks. Our preliminary study lays the foundation for future work that could confirm our observations and build upon them, using multiple methods, to develop and test theoretical models of SNS-based information sharing and seeking. For instance, our methods do not enable us to describe the kinds of relationships and network structures that are most likely to result in positive organizing and information-based activity outcomes. While weak ties are typically associated with more valuable information (e.g., [8]), it may be that these weak ties are less likely to expend the effort to respond to requests. Although our findings suggest that the lowering of barriers to communication within the site enables requests for information and organizing activities, more work is

needed to be able to create models that best explain information-sharing on the site and to design SNS toolsets that best support it.

While people have always sought a variety of sources, and used a variety of practices, to engage with information for things like coordination, information-seeking and establishing common ground, there are features of social network sites that play an important role in this "ecology." By enabling dispersed, heterogeneous networks, providing multiple channels that can be adapted to different messages, and enabling a form of lightweight broadcasting, SNSs can play a role in helping people seek and use information in new ways.

7. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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