

Name: _____ Class: _____

Anti-Social Networks? We're Just As Cliquey Online

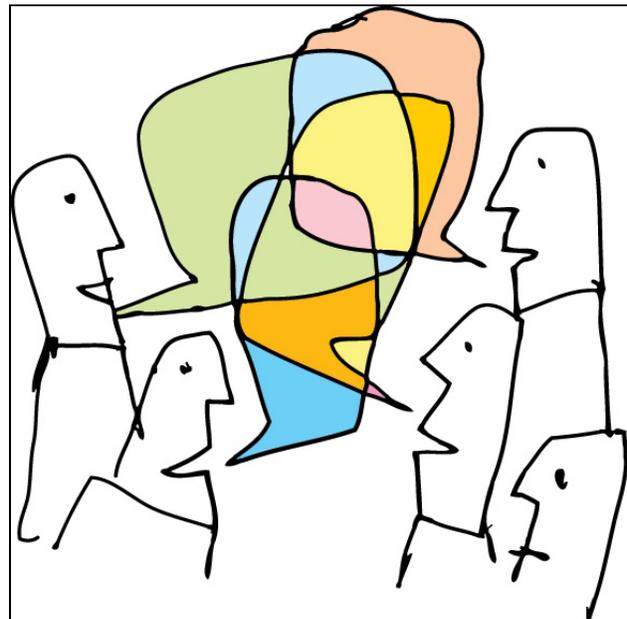
By Laura Sydell
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For some people, online social networking sites help them make new friends and keep in touch with old ones. For others, social networking sites may be reinforcing existing biases and limits new social experiences. As you read, identify the author's claims about the influence of social media.

- [1] Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter are helping people keep in touch with friends and family. But just how social are those networks? Are Internet communities simply “real-world” cliques moved online?

Dwayne Aikens uses Facebook to stay in touch with people he already knows — friends and family who, for the most part, share his political views. Aikens lives in Oakland, Calif., and runs a nonprofit that focuses on health and fitness.

“A lot of my friends are Democrats and liberals,” Aikens says — and his Facebook newsfeed reflects that. He doesn’t see many posts from conservatives, he admits.



“Social Media” by Martin Gysler is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

Facebook’s software may be reinforcing his tendency to only see links from people he agrees with. When Facebook displays your “Top News,” it’s guessing what you’re interested in seeing based on how often you have clicked on a particular friend’s entries in the past.

- [5] Most people don’t click on posts that they disagree with, explains Dean Eckles, a Stanford Ph.D. candidate studying social networks. And if you don’t interact with content — meaning you don’t click on it or comment on it — services like Facebook have no way of knowing that you are still interested in seeing it, Eckles says.

Facebook and Twitter can act as echo chambers where you interact primarily with others who have similar interests and politics. But both services can also connect you with people you don’t know — fans of the same sport, movie or TV show.

If you look at trending topics on Tuesday nights you might see hashtag — #TheGame. It's a drama on BET about the lives of African-American pro-football players. Aikens watches and tweets *The Game*. He loves the show, he explains, because it looks beyond stereotypes of African-American athletes. That the show is still on the air today is thanks in part to its fans on Twitter. Back in 2009, when the CW network canceled *The Game*, angry tweets went out from the show's loyal audience. Kyra Gaunt, a professor at the City University of New York's Baruch College, says the Twitter conversation focused on the lack of good programming about African-American life — even on BET. Gaunt says BET heard the complaints and picked the show up.

"I think there's a little bit of wishful, hopeful thinking," Gaunt explains, "that something might turn a corner with the way that BET mediates images of black people. We don't want a black version of MTV."

According to a study by Edison Research, 25 percent of Twitter's users are African-American. African-American teens and young adults are using cell phones to communicate with friends, says Craig Watkins, a communications professor at the University of Texas. Cell phones serve as the main entryway to the Internet for teens in low-income families without home computers or broadband.

[10] "That mobile device becomes a... reliable way to do the kinds of things that they want to do online," Watkins says, whether that's watching videos, updating Facebook or using Twitter.

But while many Facebook interactions remain private — visible only to friends and friends of friends — Twitter conversations are much more public. "It becomes about listening," Gaunt says, "Oh my God, I can listen in to what black people are talking about."

Gaunt, who is African-American, says having conversations about race on Twitter has been a freeing experience. People feel they can be honest, she says.

"You can really have a conversation and not worry about getting punched in the nose," Gaunt says. "There's debate, there's engagement, there's learning." Some of the friendships Gaunt has forged on Twitter have even spilled over into the "real" world. "I'm meeting strangers," she says — two in the last two weeks, in fact. "I met them and I felt like, 'This is my tribe.'"

Though Gaunt is using social networking tools to reach out to people she wouldn't normally meet, she may be the exception to the rule. Many other users interacting online are content to stay within the confines of their familiar social networks — which may not look so different from their real-world social networks.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following best describes a central idea of the text?
 - A. The majority of people actively seek out others with different or opposing views because they want to be challenged about their ideas.
 - B. Social media sites should be given more credit for the power they hold, especially in the entertainment industry.
 - C. Due to the design of many social media platforms, people are more likely to stay within their “real life” social cliques and interest circles while online.
 - D. Internet users should make a daily effort to reach out to people outside of social media and meet in person.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. “Most people don't click on posts that they disagree with, explains Dean Eckles, a Stanford Ph.D. candidate studying social networks.” (Paragraph 5)
 - B. “Facebook and Twitter can act as echo chambers where you interact primarily with others who have similar interests and politics.” (Paragraph 6)
 - C. “That the show is still on the air today is thanks in part to its fans on Twitter.” (Paragraph 7)
 - D. “‘I’m meeting strangers,’ she says — two in the last two weeks, in fact. ‘I met them and I felt like, ‘This is my tribe.’” (Paragraph 13)

3. What connection does the author draw between Facebook and one’s personal views in the article?
 - A. The author points out that Facebook allows people to explore new ideas and engage in discussions with strangers.
 - B. The author discusses how someone’s personal Facebook profile is shaped by their ability to “like” a post.
 - C. The author talks about how Facebook fails to actually grow one’s social circle because most people are “friends” with people whom they know in real life.
 - D. The author explains how Facebook caters towards a person’s interests and social circles, reinforcing their established views.

4. “Cell phones serve as the main entryway to the Internet for teens in low-income families without home computers or broadband.” How does this quote from paragraph 9 contribute to the development of ideas in the article?
 - A. Young people are more likely to communicate on their phones rather than talk to people face-to-face, which limits them from having “real world” experiences.
 - B. Mobile devices allow more people from different backgrounds, such as teens from low-income families, access to the Internet and the ability to join online discussions.
 - C. Teens from lower-income families are less likely to be spending time on the Internet and thus gain more valuable experiences with a wider range of people.
 - D. The Internet is not as accessible as we think it is and therefore should be free to everyone, regardless of income or status.

5. How does the author use the final paragraph of the text to refine her ideas?
