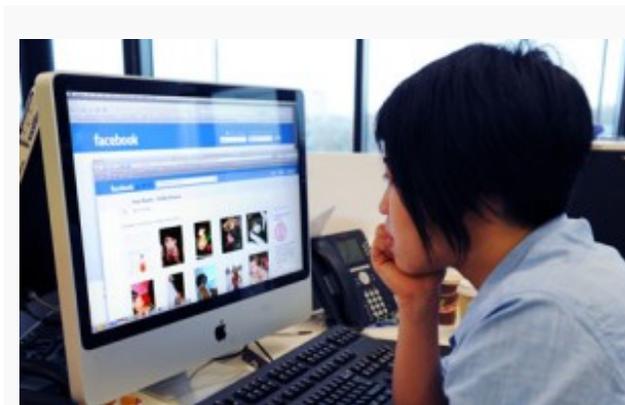# What do you see when you think of Facebook? New prize-winning research on how social media fits into our social space

blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2014/06/19/what-do-you-see-when-you-think-of-facebook-new-prize-winning-research-on-how-social-media-fits-into-our-social-space/

Andy Crosby has just won an award for his research proposal on how Facebook users think about how social media fits into their lives. What do you think of when you think of Facebook? He asks. Andy is a student on our two-year joint Global Programme degree run with our partners, USC Annenberg in Los Angeles. He won the annual Silverstone Scholarship named in honour of the founder of the LSE's Media and Communication Department. Here he describes his dissertation research project.

What do you see when you see Facebook?

Space is, and always has been, one of the essential ingredients of our social lives. Whether we are conscious of it or not, the way we communicate and relate to one another is regulated by our environment – think of the limiting power of prison bars, in contrast to the informal freedoms of the local pub; think of the abandonment of social norms within the white lines that bound a football field; and the embrace of them at the opera.

What happens, though, when we start to socialise outside physical spaces? What changes when, instead of being shaped by concrete surroundings, our interactions are moulded by digital environments?

Virtual places, such as the social networks so many of us use every day, have revolutionised the way we communicate to an extent unseen since the advent of email, or even the telephone.

Having a Facebook account and a smartphone gives you the ability to share your life with hundreds or thousands, to stay in touch with friends and family in private, at almost any time and in almost any place. It lets you interact with people through your own photos, videos, audio, text, as well as through content created by others.

From the most public things to the most private sites like Facebook, Instagram, Vine and Twitter have fundamentally changed the way an enormous proportion of our society interacts.

It's this revolutionary aspect which informs my research – the idea that we are seeing an entirely different social and media phenomenon to any that have come before, and that we therefore need to assess how it has changed the essential nature of how we relate to one another.

My research is an attempt to better our understanding of social media's role and nature as a site of social interaction, looking in particular at Facebook.

At the core of the research are interviews with a broad variety of people, within which they draw and discuss a 'map of Facebook'. This map provides a platform from which I can examine attitudes and thought-processes relating to the service. Using the information that this yields, I can in turn develop a framework for understanding just how Facebook functions, as a place where people interact.

The instructions given to my respondents are deliberately left pretty vague – the idea is that I give the interviewees

maximal scope to express how they see and think of the site. Some have used a brainstorm or mind-map format, some have just drawn their profile, and some have pretty much just filled the page with text. Each option provides me with some rich, tactile data that illustrates and gives depth to the information in the interview transcripts.

The intended impact of this is twofold. First, I hope to add to and help refine researchers' somewhat inconsistent conceptualisation of digital spaces. Second, I hope to contribute to an increasingly innovative range of research practices within the Media and Communications field. By providing a tactile, intuitive and physical means for my interviewees to express their understanding of Facebook, in combination with more traditional face-to-face interviews, I will be able to approach the debate from an entirely new angle, and thus generate new insights on the nature of digital social practice.

There is little doubt that social experience in the digital era differs greatly from that in the world that existed before. It is vital then, that we continually create and innovate in our research practices.

This article by Andy Crosby