Since it was launched in early 2004 by its now-infamous founders, Facebook has grown into one of the most-visited and most profitable websites on the internet. As of December 2011, Facebook reports having 845 million users actively using the site each month. Facebook was originally intended to be an exclusive social network for students at Harvard University, but is now used worldwide as a way to connect with other people.

 But is Facebook just a social network? Or has it evolved into something entirely new? The answer is yes. Facebook not only allows users to send messages to friends and post and read “statuses,” but it is also an advertising platform, a photo and video sharing service, a source of news, a form of entertainment, and even a source of information and education. Facebook is the ultimate multimedia convergence. It has or has the ability to replace newspapers, television, photo albums, video players, encyclopedias, email, radio, television, and even telephones. By combining news, communication, entertainment, information, and productivity into one, streamlined medium, Facebook has allowed people to interact not only with each other, but with the world, much more efficiently than ever before.

 Facebook is not only a social network, but a new medium that converges all these different aforementioned media. It offers what no other platform offers in this regard. It’s unique; it’s the ultimate media convergence.

 Henry Jenkins wrote in his 2004 essay “The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence” that media convergence is “more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences. (Jenkins 1). While it is true that a Playstation 3 for example, is a convergence of DVD players, gaming consoles, computers, and music players, that technological shift, in Jenkins’ words, isn’t all that is happening. There is also a cultural shift, as now it is expected that you can play games, watch movies, browse the internet, and listen to music all at the same place.

 Facebook converges media in this way. In October 2005, Facebook introduced the photo and video feature of its website. Now, it claims to be the most used photo sharing service on the internet (Facebook Newsroom). Not only has it then put serious heat on a site like Flickr, but it makes buying photo albums or ordering prints practically obsolete. And, it recently acquired Instagram, the popular photo-taking application.

Facebook introduced the News Feed a year later, as a new home page interface that shows updates on activity by a user’s friends and “pages” that they follow. In 2011, they introduced “subscriptions,” which allow a user to subscribe to any public post by anyone, especially celebrities. Those posts are shown on the user’s news feed and allow a user to see what their favorite stars have to say.

Businesses have begun utilizing the news feed as a way to get users to interact with their product or service. In an online essay titled “Facebook has changed the way businesses market their brands,” Ken Mandel of Buddy Media Asia says that “brands and marketers cannot turn a blind eye to social media as it is not bound by demographics, geography or socio-economic profiles. Especially in an end-consumer market, we see a return on investment from social engagements as brands build connections, create more value, and foster sustainable relationships with customers” (Mandel).

What this means is that companies can do much more on Facebook than they can anywhere else. They can create a fan page for customers to “like” the product and receive updates and special promotions. It also allow the customers to engage with the business by offering their feedback on posts, and with games and online contests that allow the consumer and producer to interact. Over time, this could potentially replace more expensive and less interactive radio, print, and television advertisements. For now, they are all streamlined onto this one platform.

Facebook is more than just an advertising platform for companies, though. It It is an actual medium for sharing products. Newspapers link articles to Facebook, and then they show up on users’ news feeds. Television shows use their official Facebook pages to share links to new episodes. Musical acts embed their music videos to their Facebook profiles, and even use the site to launch new material. Warner Brothers also announced last year that they would begin allowing users to rent movies on Facebook. Spotify, the popular music streaming application, and Skype, the leader in video calling, have both integrated their applications with Facebook. Games, like The Godfather and Words with Friends have used Facebook as ways to allow users to play. Even popular video games like “Madden NFL” have released Facebook versions.

And yet, there is more. Facebook messages behaves just like email, allowing users to send private, full text messages to anyone, and attach documents. You can even get a Facebook domain email address.

A study by graduate students at the University of Nevada – Las Vegas examined how police departments use Facebook to communicate with the public, releasing data and crime and weather alerts (Sakiyama et al 1). Another study examined how people, specifically disease patients, use Facebook as a tool to help them fight their disease. Facebook provides a medium for them to not only communicate with other patients for emotional support, but to solicit information and to act as a sort of research tool. This is in essence a convergence of several media, as these patients are replacing phone calls or visits to their doctors, as well as letters and encyclopedias, with Facebook (Greene et al). And, news services like CNN and USA Today give real-time updates on the new Facebook ticker that alert users who are online to breaking news updates. Recent events like the assassination of Osama bin Laden and the death of Whitney Houston were made known rapidly through people talking about it on Facebook.

If one is able to watch television shows and movies on Facebook, view pictures, play games, get the news, listen to music, do research, communicate with friends and colleagues, make video calls, and share links to other websites they find entertaining, it is possible for a user to never leave Facebook and still do everything that they would otherwise do while on the internet.

The counter argument is that being able to do so much in one place is overwhelming and will have a negative effect on productivity. A study by Paul A. Kirschner and Aryn C. Karpinski examines how the new generation is able to multitask with the rise of Facebook. They are more able than previous generations to process many things at once and multi-task. But, this study shows that that is not necessarily a good thing, as Facebook users have lower grade-point averages (Kirschner and Karpinski).

The argument against that is that students can simply log off of Facebook at any point to get back to work. Using Facebook too much is not a flaw in the system but an abuse by the users. And, Facebook can even be a tool for schoolwork. Users can send papers to peers for review, conduct surveys for research studies, and create “groups” to communicate with group members on projects or assignments.

Facebook also has advantages for college students. An essay in the Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication argues that college students are using online social networking sites, like Facebook, to connect with people they know, and not “random people.” This has allowed students to collect what the authors refer to as “social capital,” and allows them to stay connected with people who are important to them. The result is not only more well-connected students, but young people with higher self-esteem and less depression (Ellison et al).

Another counter argument is that Facebook is used for “fun” and not for legitimate communication and interaction. The term “Facebook stalking” is used colloquially to describe the act of searching a Facebook profile for someone you don’t know, but a research study in *Psychological Science* proved, by testing many subjects, that people use Facebook to actually present themselves as they really are, and not to make themselves look better or different in any way. This shows that Facebook is being used as a true communication and social tool, and that people take it seriously and use it honestly and legitimately. If people are using Facebook in such a way, they are not using it as a joke or in vain, and are then open, presumably, to use it for other uses (Back et al 372).

Knowing that users are using Facebook for real, honest communication opens the door for more serous uses of the media on the website. USA Today wouldn’t want their news being shared on “The Onion” or a parodic Tumblr page, but they want it on Facebook.

One could say that Facebook cannot be considered a media convergence because it is not a medium, and that the internet is the medium and Facebook is merely a platform, a website, and one small portion of the greater world-wide web. But it is a medium, and it is a convergence of many media. First, because most websites do not offer all these services in one location, Facebook is something new. It could be called a “super-website,” perhaps. Facebook is also more than just a website available on the internet. Facebook applications are a standard feature on most cellular phones, tablet PCs, laptop and desktop computers, and video game consoles. Facebook is even being integrated to television sets. Websites and personal blogs allow integration of Facebook. You can log in to online services with your Facebook account in one click.

The point is this: Facebook does more than any website of its kind does. There are numerous other social websites that allow users to do one thing, or maybe a couple. Hulu and Netflix stream videos. Twitter allows users post short status updates. Flickr is great for photo sharing. YouTube is great for sharing and commenting on videos. Blogger and Wordpress are great for starting conversations. Skype is a great tool for video conferencing. And Tumblr is a neat way to share that hard-to-define “internet meme” category of material.

But, without devoting too much more space to merely listing off all of the things Facebook does that other sites do not and things that other sites do well, the point is made. Facebook does *all of these things*. And then some.

The iPhone, or any similar smartphone, has applications for all of these websites, as well as many tools for research, communication, entertainment, etc. It too, converges media. But the iPhone has limits on storage and data usage and cellular minutes. Because Facebook is on the internet, storage and minutes (or text message limits) do not apply. You pay for the internet, but if you’re using wifi or a broadband connection there is typically no limit on the amount of internet you use, like there is with a cell phone. Computers, too offer this. But you must go to all these applications and all these websites. You need separate log in credentials. What Facebook offers is the ability to do it all in one place. Almost every media that the average person needs and wants is –or is in the process of being integrated – on Facebook. It’s a one-stop shop for everything media-related. And nothing else offers that kind of flexibility.

What may ultimately come of this is a Facebook phone. A phone that eliminates the need for many applications but streamlines everything to one place, one screen, much like Facebook does as a website. Wouldn’t that be interesting?

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