

Facebook's "purpose"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

October 28, 2010

I agree with a lot of Cathleen Falsani's [piece](#) on *The Social Network*, in which she praises Facebook's capacity for reconnecting real-world friends and reinforcing existing community. But she loses me when she suggests this is the site's *purpose*. I think it's difficult to define this, and I'm not sure how much it matters.

If you, like I, were a recent college grad in 2003--the last year of the pre-Facebook era--there's a fair chance you have a long-dormant Friendster account. Friendster was [created](#) specifically as a dating site, but a lot of people used it exclusively to crack each other up with silly comments and fake profiles of various nonhuman entities. The guy who built the site [wasn't amused](#), but there wasn't a whole lot he could do about it.

Facebook's long since taken over Friendster's dominance ([in the States](#), anyway), and I use it for all sorts of productive things I never imagined doing via Friendster: promoting blog posts, networking with colleagues, finding e-mail addresses and name spellings for people on my wedding invitation list. Of course, all these things were theoretically possible on Friendster, too--and none of them was intended by Facebook's creators. Social media's function has at least as much to do with organic trends among users as with technological capacity or official purpose. (The best illustration of this is [Twitter](#).) I think Falsani overshoots here:

The idea of Facebook isn't to go trolling for new friends, but to reconnect with people we already have a relationship with in some way.

Rather than functioning as a hollow, mechanical replacement for genuine friendship, it is designed to augment and expand pre-existing relationships.

Actually, Facebook was designed as an online version of the facebook published by colleges to help students put names with faces (in practice, especially the most attractive faces--a point that highlights how quickly intention and usage can diverge). Trolling for new friends was the whole point, and the only pre-existing

relationship required was a shared .edu e-mail domain. (I first heard of Facebook when a friend's little brother mentioned that he went to college with my little sister--he'd noticed her in class and looked her up later on Facebook. "On what?" I asked. He explained, a bit sheepishly.)

Scoping out cute classmates is no longer Facebook's only function--again, these things change organically over time. Now the site's used to connect people, real-life friends and otherwise, in all sorts of ways. Falsani's right to highlight the irony between this general theme of connection and *The Social Network's* depiction (accurate or [not](#)) of Mark Zuckerberg as a guy who invented Facebook only to see his friend count drop from one to zero.

But Zuckerberg didn't create Facebook for anything as high-minded as kindling community among bona fide friends. The fact that this is one common use of it now only emphasizes the limited connection between what a site's built to do and what it does.

See also Adam Copeland's post about The Social Network.