How do people display social networks in everyday life (that is, not online)? Give 2 concrete, specific examples. Why do they do this? Looking at this display as a signal, what is the quality it is inferring? What are the costs of making this signal? The benefits? Is there a cost to the receiver if it is not honest?

There are many ways that people convey their social networks to others in everyday life, outside of using the Internet. One very common way to do so is through clothing. For example, a woman may wear a t-shirt from her alma mater to show that she is affiliated with that particular school. Another way in which people display their social networks in everyday life is by attending a particular event, or frequenting a particular establishment. A man who regularly goes to a gay bar might be showing that he is part of the local gay community.

One reason people do this is to form connections with other individuals who may be part of the same network. A guy wearing a Brown University sweatshirt might attract the attention of someone else who attended Brown University. Brown University thus serves as the focus that links these two individuals together. The man who frequents the gay bar is presumably trying to meet other gay men as potential mates.

Pride is another reason for the public display of social networks; people like to take pride in who or what they are affiliated with. For example, the guy in the Brown University sweatshirt might be very proud of having attended school there; in wearing the sweatshirt, he is not necessarily trying to attract the attention of other Brown alums, but simply showing off his affiliation with the school.

If a person wearing a Brown University sweatshirt is indeed giving off a signal, the receivers can infer from this signal that the wearer of the sweatshirt is affiliated with Brown in some way. Perhaps he went to school there, but if not, then maybe he has a sibling or a cousin who went there, or a parent who teaches at the university. In going to the gay bar, the man is giving off the signal that he is most likely gay himself. He may also be signaling that he is looking to meet someone gay, for a date or a relationship.

The costs of making this signal in the first example include the cost of the sweatshirt itself. A sweatshirt with a university insignia is likely to be higher-priced than a plain sweatshirt with no insignia. If an individual wears a Brown University sweatshirt to a Brown sporting event at a rival school, another cost might be dealing with the jeers and heckling of people from the rival school. In the case of the gay man, he must pay the cost of the cover charge for the gay bar, if any. There also may be costs associated with being gay, and possibly being discriminated against by homophobic individuals.

A possible benefit gained from signaling by wearing the Brown sweatshirt is something mentioned above – the possibility of attracting other people associated with Brown, and thus establishing a connection. A possible benefit gained by the man at the gay bar is finding a gay partner, thus also establishing a connection.

If the wearer of the Brown sweatshirt is, in fact, not affiliated with Brown University, the costs to the receiver of interpreting the signal as such are not very high. The receiver may lose a little time in asking the sweatshirt-wearer if he attended Brown,
but not much more than that. In the second example of the gay man at the bar, the costs to the receiver may be a little higher if the signal is not honest. For example, if a man is at a gay bar, a receiver of the signal may show interest in the man. If the receiver learns that this man is not actually gay, he may feel embarrassed, hurt or misled.

Identity in the real world is faceted: different aspects of our personality are expressed in different circumstances and around different people. For some of us, these differences are relatively minor, and bringing together people from different areas of our lives is not a problem. For others of us, these different facets are incompatible, and bringing them together is undesirable. How is this addressed in the design of today's SNSs? How might future designs address this?

The different facets of people’s lives are not really addressed very well in the design of today’s social networking sites. The Donath and Boyd paper gives the example of the San Francisco schoolteacher who feels uncomfortable revealing her crazy friends and social activities to her students. Sites such as Friendster do not do anything to facilitate the separation of professional life and social life. Some sites are strictly geared toward one facet of life in particular, such as LinkedIn, which is specifically for making business and job contacts. Thus, LinkedIn effectively separates out other facets of life and hones in only on professional life. But Friendster, which can be used for finding social, dating, and networking contacts, should address the problem of how to separate these so that they do not become potentially embarrassingly intertwined.

A possible future re-design of Friendster, and other similar social networking sites, should create separate contact lists for professional contacts, casual social contacts, close/intimate contacts, and whatever other categories seem fitting. The user should be able to control which category each contact falls under, and whether the various groups of contacts should be made visible to each other, enabling the contacts to see the context in which they each know the user. Such a design would eliminate the embarrassing situation that the San Francisco schoolteacher faced. It would also allow the user to keep the different facets of his/her life as separate or as mixed together as s/he chooses.

Describe or sketch part of a social network known to you (e.g. your friends, family, acquaintances in classes, etc. - feel free to use pseudonyms or describe a network from your past, such as high school, for privacy). Networking sites use unnuanced and symmetrical links - in your description, what more nuanced description of these links would you include? For instance, there are different types of relationships - parent-child, friend-friend - and different strengths, and different flows of support and information. What of these more nuanced descriptions could be used in a publicly articulated space, and which could not?

In high school, I was part of a group of friends that included two friends in particular, Shannon and Jennie. All three of us were good friends, and we spent a lot of time together, both inside and outside of school. However, Shannon and I both found some of Jennie’s mannerisms rather irritating, and we would frequently talk about her
behind her back, complaining to each other about the latest exasperating thing that Jennie had done. Thus, although on the surface it appeared that I was equally close with Shannon and Jennie, I actually felt closer and more connected with Shannon, because we had this understanding between us that both of us often found Jennie annoying. On the contrary, Jennie and I rarely talked about Shannon behind her back, and when we did, we rarely had anything negative to say.

If I were to assign strengths to my friendships with both Shannon and Jennie, I would consider my friendship to Shannon to be stronger, because we had more in common, including our distaste for many of Jennie’s actions. However, Jennie believed that all three of us were equally close, and she would have been hurt to learn that Shannon and I talked about her behind her back, and often found her annoying. Thus, in a publicly articulated space, I could not assign a greater strength to my friendship with Shannon than to my friendship with Jennie, because Jennie would be able to see this and would be hurt by it. I would have to assign equal strengths to both these friendships in any place that they were made publicly visible. One way to label them equally would be to refer to them simply as “high school friends”, which would be both accurate and not hurtful to anybody.

However, there are other, more nuanced descriptions that I could give to differentiate between my friendships with Jennie and Shannon in a non-hurtful way. For example, I had initially met Jennie in math class in ninth grade, and I met Shannon in French class in tenth grade. Thus, I could label my friendship with Jennie as dating back to “ninth grade”, and my friendship with Shannon as dating back to “tenth grade”. This would avoid hurting anyone’s feelings or revealing which friend I felt closest to, but would still differentiate subtly between the two. Perhaps describing how or when you met each friend provides a more publicly acceptable way of describing the relationship, rather than assigning a particular strength to each friendship for all to see.

Feld proposes that people have particular interests, common friends and pursuits, etc. that function as "foci" - and that connections are made when people with common foci are brought together. Some foci are highly constraining (such as being in the same family or research group) while others are lightly constraining (sharing a neighborhood or a popular taste). Re-examine the social network you described. Can you apply this model to explain some of the groupings?

In the case of Shannon, Jennie and me, the focus that connected all of us was our attendance at the same high school. However, this focus was only lightly constraining because over 1000 people attended my high school, and I did not have connections with all of them. A more highly constraining focus was the fact that we were in many of the same classes together – thus we would see each other nearly everyday and we got to know each other initially through class. But even more constraining than this was the fact that we had common interests, such as similar musical tastes, as well as common friends. These foci brought us together to form close connections outside of class.

The combination of being in the same classes, and having similar interests were the most highly constraining foci. Merely being in the same class was not that constraining – I had classes with many people whom I never got to know outside of school. Also, merely having similar interests was not that constraining either – there
were probably many people at my school with similar interests, but I did not get to know
them because I never had classes with them, and thus never even had the opportunity to
meet them. So in order for the connections to become stronger, the presence of both foci
was necessary.

**What are the benefits of making it more costly to add links in a social networking site?**

A benefit of making it more costly to add links in a social networking site is that it
forces the user to very carefully consider each link he adds. If the costs are high, users
are less likely to carelessly and frivolously add links to people they don’t know, or that
they know only marginally, in order to appear more popular. Thus, the user’s list of links
is probably more reliable, in that the user probably has real and personal connections to
each listed contact. The user is more likely to know most of his contacts offline, and will
be less liable to add new contacts that he has only met online, and about whom he can not
verify much information. Because of this, it is also more likely that the information that
the user presents about himself is mostly honest. If the user’s list of contacts tends to be
more reliable, these contacts will keep the user honest about himself, because the contacts
will know whether the user is lying. In order to protect his reputation as an honest
individual, it is necessary for the user to be truthful on his profile, or his contacts will call
him out on his dishonesty.