

Boomers are taking over the world's biggest social networking site out of an age-old need to touch base with friends and family

By Shelley Fralic, Vancouver Sun, June 26, 2010

For the estimated 500 million users who call Facebook their cyberspace home -- making it one of the most populated "countries" on the planet -- their daily FB time means catching up with friends and family, updating personal goings-on, sharing photographs and gossip, and keeping up with one's favourite cause, be that grandchildren or global warming.

Nothing new about that, for history has proven that we are social animals who crave connection with others, and go out of our way to find it, no matter the century.

So when Facebook, the social networking site developed as a chat room among co-founder Mark Zuckerberg and his Harvard chums, hit the Internet in 2004, it not only became a global sensation but today is a \$20-billion-plus private empire rivaling Google in its usage and influence.

Like all new inventions, Facebook has had its share of growing pains, mostly over privacy, which 26-year-old Zuckerberg says is an Internet pipe dream, but the dominance of Facebook, which has left MySpace, Twitter and other social media sites in its dust, shows no sign of weakening.

Facebook is, at once, an online community centre and cultural touchstone, a clearing house for social and political discourse, a global Amber Alert for disaster relief, missing children and stolen tigers. It pushes products, raises money for charities and, like much of the wild west that is the infobahn, provides a platform for unfettered public debate.

It is, in a word, a technological marvel. It's also, like all great inventions, based on a very simple concept.

For many of us caught smack dab in the aging bulge of the population, especially those physically distant from family and friends and even the workplace, and those who like rifling through the medicine cabinets and scrapbooks of others, Facebook is the new age water cooler.

If its intangibility doesn't exactly evoke the nostalgic image of retired farmers jawing 'round the pickle barrel down at the general store, kvetching about the kids and the price of pork bellies, Facebook is nonetheless the biggest coffee klatsch in the universe. Which may account for an interesting shift in its usage these past six years.

Once considered the domain of the young, especially teenagers, recent studies indicate that more and more Facebook users are over the age of 25, and the fastest-growing segment is over the age of 55. And female.

Not so surprising, when you think about it. We live in times of busy isolation, often alone, on streets where we don't know our neighbours, in towns where our relatives no longer live, in societies where our lives are

lived behind closed doors. As the global village grows, our personal worlds seem to shrink, by circumstance and choice.

And so we look to our computers for connection.

We log on to catch up, comforted by the news that an old friend who lives across the city is still growing glorious dahlias, that another is celebrating the arrival of a new family member, while other friends and their roving kids are posting updates from Australia, Sweden, Ireland and New York, their real-time travelogues and picture galleries more captivating than any travel agent's brochure.

Author David Kirkpatrick, a former technology writer for Fortune magazine, is on tour publicizing The Facebook Effect, his just-published history of the company, and says there's no question that usage of the Internet giant is evolving.

"Facebook definitely does serve as an electronicized alternative to the coffee shop," Kirkpatrick said this week from San Francisco.

And while it has stayed true to its mandate -- allowing people in the real world to share data and information in the cyber world -- its demographic is definitely shifting: "The fastest-growing age group on Facebook is not kids any more," Kirkpatrick said. "It's women 35 to 50, and people over 55."

In Canada alone, close to 16 million of us have Facebook accounts, nearly half the population, and one million of those are over the age of 55.

I started a Facebook page several years back, for a column about what was then the new kid on the tech block. Today, I have about 50 friends (the average is 130). About a dozen are active contributors, and many are my age, which is to say closer to retirement than prom night. My postings are minimal, a comment here, an occasional photo attachment or link there.

But I look at my bookmarked Facebook page faithfully every day, it being one of those half dozen laptop hot buttons I rely on to remain plugged into my little world.

Facebook is my coffee shop, my grapevine, and while it may be a complicated high-tech marvel invented by a bright young thing, its universal appeal is simply an age-old need to touch base.

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