

# Are friends electric?

Websites such as Twitter and Facebook have mushroomed in Ireland, moving social networking on from the nerdy types, says Kathy Foley

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**W**anted: One Body, a play that earlier this month finished a four-night run at the Teachers' Club on Parnell Square, is as good an indicator as any that Dublin's amateur dramatic scene still flourishes. The three-act murder mystery was put on by the No Drama group, formed in mid-2008 by like-minded actors and writers who had been looking for a relaxed drama group in Dublin city centre. When they didn't find one, they started their own.

Wanted: One Body is also a product of online social networking. The founders held their initial discussions and continue to run their group on Boards.ie, Ireland's largest online forum. No Drama's very existence gives the lie to the dismissive canard that online social contact is somehow antisocial, that those who engage in it are pasty-faced oddballs who spend hours hunched over keyboards, never venturing out in the real world.

There are more than 1m Facebook users in Ireland and more than 500,000 log in every day. It's part of daily life now, as are Twitter and, depending on your interests, other social networking sites such as Flickr (photography), Last.fm (music), LibraryThing (reading) and TripAdvisor (travel). Users tend to be social. A report published last November by the respected Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project showed the more people used the internet and social networking, the more likely they were to have diverse social contacts in real life.

"It's just another way of talking to people," says Darragh Doyle, the community manager of Boards.ie, which has 262,000 members and receives 1.7m unique visitors monthly. "If you are using YouTube, Boards.ie or Facebook, you are social networking,

even if it is only with six people." Yet social networking websites don't replace real-life socialising, even though they are changing how we socialise. Pix.ie is an Irish photography site with 20,000 members who upload photos and chat about photography. They also organise "photo walks", where they get together at an agreed venue, go for a stroll and take pictures.

"If this was an offline club," says Marcus Mac Innes, the founder and chief executive



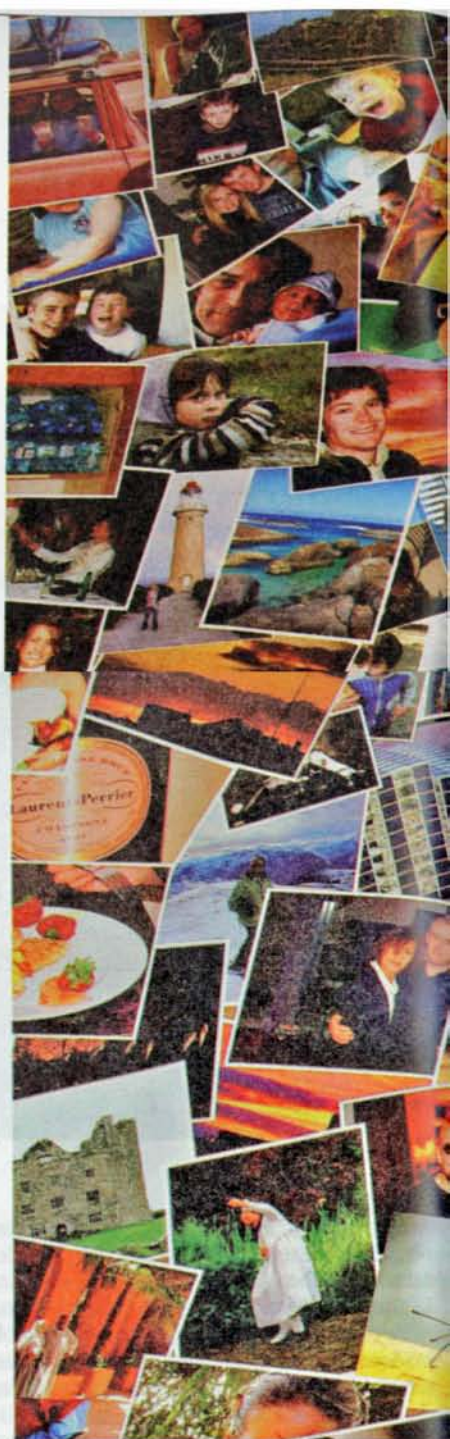
of Pix.ie, "you would not get to see everyone else's pictures. Because people are aggregating all the pictures that were taken on that particular day, you see what the group saw rather than what an individual saw. You see completely different takes on the same object, see how people took the pictures and how they processed them afterwards. It's really entertaining and insightful to see the variation."

Conor Lynch runs a sideline business called Connector.ie, which organises social networking social events, in other words, getting people from online networks to real-life events. Among his events have been some organised around the concept of tribes, as popularised by the web guru Seth Godin.

"Tribes are communities of people that connect online and offline," says Lynch. "They are groups of people interested in the arts, fashion, music, green issues, technology and so on. They are very informal. You don't get a membership card and there isn't a secret handshake."

Among the tribes at Lynch's events has been the one behind the pop culture site Culch.ie and representatives of the Dartmouth Square Facebook group, which has more than 1,000 members and organises local, non-commercial events in the Ranelagh square. Social networking is also leading to a flattening of social hierarchies, particularly on Twitter. "People want to connect and there are no boundaries online," says Krishna De, a social media expert. "You can connect with influencers, authors, celebrities, reporters, friends and family, right across the world. And it is easier to do. You no longer have to be a techie."

Twitter is helping the Irish arts sector to shed its elitist reputation, too. Arts and culture organisations use it to advertise, but also to chat to audiences and potential audiences. Among those tweeting are the National Gallery (@NGIreland), the National Library (@NLIreland), the Irish Museums Association (@IrishMuseums), the Temple Bar Cultural Trust (@tbct) and small independent shops such as Road Records (@RoadRecords), Raven Books (@RavenBooks) and the Gutter Bookshop (@gutterbookshop).



(For the uninitiated, each Twitter user has a handle that starts with @... — @Glinner, for example, is Father Ted co-creator Graham Linehan, the most celebrated Irish tweeter. See all his tweets at [twitter.com/glinner](http://twitter.com/glinner).)

The Abbey Theatre is particularly dedicated to social media: it encourages audience members to leave reviews and comments on its own website, but also has a Facebook page, a Twitter account (@AbbeyTheatre) and a YouTube channel with short films showing scenes from plays, and cast and crew interviews. The theatre's director, Fiach MacConghail (@fmacconghail), is also tweeting. "If you were an ordinary person interested in the theatre," says Doyle, "how would you have got a meeting with Fiach MacConghail before if you were not high up in the arts world? This is a leveller."

Admittedly, social networking is not for everyone. There can be a lot of noise, irrelevant comments and banal navel-gazing, and the deluge of information on sites such as Twitter deters many users. "Places like Twitter can sound like the inside of a noisy pub



A significant movement away from traditional conversation zones like coffee breaks has started in Ireland, and companies know this

filled with aggressive narcissists and that would be off-putting for a lot of people," says Bernie Goldbach, a blogger and lecturer in creative multimedia at Tipperary Institute. "Even so, Twitter's minimalism has caught the imagination of thousands of Irish who think in short text form. They grew up with 160-character exchanges."

The evidence suggests that this isn't a fad of which the world will tire. "I don't think these online social networks are just phases in our culture," says Goldbach. "A significant movement from traditional conversation zones — like office chats, coffee breaks and listening with friends to mainstream radio — has started in Ireland. [Companies] know this, and that's why you see Twitter nicknames and Facebook fan clubs springing up all over the place."

What's next for social networking? Expect more niche sites — smaller networks grouped around single interests or professions. "Niche social networks offer the online equivalent of a club," says Mac Innes. "People join because they have similar interests.

It works because it's a way to meet people who like doing the same thing you do."

Jason Walsh, a journalist, has just set up a private social network for Irish journalists and media professionals at [forth.ie/medi-aireland](http://forth.ie/medi-aireland). "There was no way to talk to other Irish journalists *en masse*, to discuss [freelance] rates, for example," says Walsh. "I wanted something like this, and it was cheap and easy to do. I was enabled by the technology." Next up: location-based social networking. "By 2013, the mobile phone will overtake the PC as the main point of access for the internet," says Lynch. "Social networking has moved from the nerdy guy in his bedroom onto the street. The lines are blurring between online and offline."

Mobile social networking is moving towards augmented reality, which sounds like something out of a science-fiction film, but refers to sites that merge online and offline. The best-known is Foursquare, which allows users to "check-in" or say where they are in the physical world. They can see where other users are, find out what cafés, bars,

**Join the club:** Marcus Mac Innes, above, has become an evangelist for social networking in Ireland; left, the website he founded, Pixie

shops, cinemas, galleries and other amenities are in the area, and add reviews of those places. While Foursquare is hardly used yet in Ireland, it is rapidly gaining in popularity in American and British cities. "Ireland has always lagged 18 months to two years behind the US," says Mac Innes. "But in 12 months, Ireland will have free WiFi everywhere."

Still unconvinced about the value and solid future of online social networking? Bear in mind the enormous popularity of children's social networking sites such as Club Penguin. Today's kids are growing up in a world where the distinctions between online and offline don't really matter. For social networking to truly work, Mac Innes says, people need to take part: "It's all about community. If people participate and give, they get so much back. If nothing is given, then there is nothing to get back." □