

Mapping Social Networks: An Ordinary Habit^I

A comparison between 'old' and 'new' social network mapping services

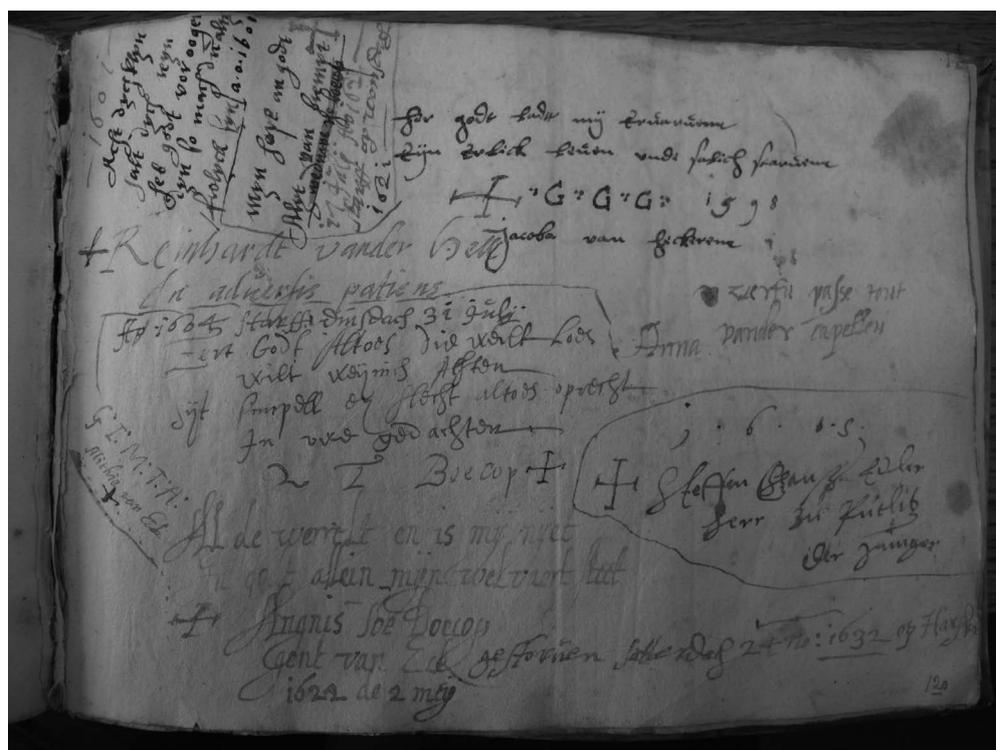
By Sophie Reinders

While we may think that social media are a modern invention, they were already in use 400 years ago in the form of so-called alba amicorum, friendship books in which people collected inscriptions by friends and family. Interestingly, like Facebook, these alba had their origin in the world of universities.

A short history of the album amicorum

It is generally accepted that the origin and history of the album amicorum is correlated with the world of the university, especially that of the Protestant University of Wittenberg. Martin Luther was a lecturer at this university and regularly received books from students – such as their Bibles and hymn collections – with the request to give an inscription. The popularity of collecting inscriptions grew rapidly. In order to create more space for inscriptions, some books included blank sheets. Somewhat later, bindings were used with only blank sheets, and these functioned as alba amicorum. These bindings did not only include contributions by professors: students were asked to write something as well. Students' alba thus became collections of signatures from professors and other students.

Alba amicorum were not just kept by men. In the 16th and early 17th century noblewomen collected songs, poems and adages from friends and family whom they met in their domestic setting in their friendship books. Women's alba tell



A typical page in a woman's album.

a different story than men's. They do not provide a recollection of the wanderings of a student or a group of continuously changing fellow students. Women travelled less often than men and usually stayed in the same location for a long time, ordinarily their family home. A woman's album therefore has a very different character and was used more as a guestbook, a personal

songbook (though printed songbooks were already in circulation) or a combination of both. It seems to have been more of a personal document that reveals a network of family, friends and acquaintances who actually visited the house of the owner at least once – in contrast with the alba of men, which were full of interesting names, of persons briefly met while travelling,

but not necessarily of close contacts and/or houseguests.

Parallels between then and now

Media archaeologists would – if they knew these sources – consider women's alba amicorum as an early form of social media to visualize (historical) relationships between young adolescents. We could consider an album amicorum as a *social network mapping service*, like Facebook.

Social network sites are application systems that offer users functionalities for *identity management* (the representation of the own person e.g. in form of a profile) and which furthermore enable them to *keep in touch* with other users (and thus the administration of their contacts).

The research on women's alba has uncovered a couple of close networks of a group of women's alba, their owners and inscribers. Many

contributors wrote in multiple alba and kept an album themselves. (Groups of) alba show us a network of friends and acquaintances with many shared connections. It is the same kind of web of connections that we see on Facebook nowadays. People are members of peer groups that map their social connections via a social network mapping service. Sociological research has shown that connections articulated on modern social network sites often begin as reflections of already existing communities in real life. This seems to be the case with women's alba as well. For example many album owners lived close to each other and share more than 60 inscribers. What other parallels exist between features and functions of Facebook and the alba amicorum?

A multimedia platform

Facebook is a multimedia platform, which means that it brings various forms of media together in one place. Users can share movies, photos, (pop)songs, hyperlinks, texts and even games with each other.

Multimediality seems a specific aspect of the Internet, but the alba had a similar character. Alba were used to share poems, lyrics, pictures, emblems, paintings and other types of inscriptions (sometimes originals, sometimes copied from e.g. songbooks). In a way they are also multimedia platforms. There seems to be a parallel between the mechanism, and apparently the need or the wish to share (cultural) inscriptions in a semi-public way – you select your network of friends that can see your wall or read your album –, between then (alba) and now (Facebook).

Be nice!

Although cyber-bullying does exist, people are supposed to (and generally do) post nice things on one another's walls. They post songs, texts, etc. that the "owner" of the profile is expected to like. Users can decorate their walls and manage their online identity. They can delete negative or unsuitable messages. Album owners expected nice content too. This appears in, for example, the third album of Joanna Bentinck, who writes in the beginning of her album:

This book belongs to Joanna Bentinck. Whoever does not want to write anything nice in it, had better stay out of it.

We find in other alba similar warnings, or rather, encouragements, to write something appropriate and nice for the album owner.

Agnes Ripperda is in a relationship with Volkhardt van Haddien

On Facebook it is very common to indicate who your partner is ("is in a relationship with...") and people flirt by sharing posts. In alba we find expressions of existing relationships, for example by



Different aspects of a lover (like melancholia and jealousy) expressed in a drawing and poem.

couples writing on the same page. In the album of Agnes Ripperda, her sister Anna and her husband Volkhardt van Haddien, write their inscription on the same page. Anna also makes it very clear that she is married to Volckaert by adding to her name: ‘genant von haddyn, frau zu knerrienhausen’ [called Von Haddyn, wife of Knerrienhausen]. We see this in many alba: contributors indicating whom they belong to and writing on the same page.

Margaretha has invited you to an event

As on Facebook, alba include reminders of parties (on Facebook often illustrated with photographs). The *Overijssels Liedboek* – a woman’s album kept by Margaretha Haghen – includes, on folio 183v, traces of the party of the night before:

In Shrovetide, on day two,
We guests wrote this for you
And could not leave for
home,
So tipsy we’d become;
Love made us so bedottled
We left nothing in the bottle.

This inscription in the album of Margaret was accompanied by many contributions, suggesting that many friends attended the party and stayed overnight.

Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose?

So there seem to be quite a few parallel practices and characteristics of sharing cultural content within friendship networks between alba amicorum and Facebook. But has nothing changed? No. Of course, a lot has changed over time. As historians we can always select material and make the present look like the past or the past look like the present. There are similarities but there are also many differences. Cultural practices never simply

adapt to new technological conditions, but always inherently change along with the technologies and the potentialities of their use.

Facebook is a digital medium while alba are an analogue medium. Its users are dependent on whether their friends use it or not; if not, they cannot connect with them. In contrast, someone could write in an album without being an album owner him- or herself. It is possible to post an “inscription” on Facebook from any place in the world with a computer and Internet access, while album owners were dependent on the people they knew and met in real life. For inscribing an album it was necessary to be physically near the album. On sites like Facebook, users can post something on someone’s wall, without asking his or her permission first. “Owners” can, however, delete a post afterwards. Album owners could only “delete” a post by ripping out the page or striking out the inscription. Facebook does more than the documentation of your social network and sharing inscriptions. Users can now directly communicate with their friends with the chat programme. In the case of the alba, users could obviously only chat with each other directly, “in real life” or through letter writing. And there are more differences, of course.

So, indeed, there are differences too, but the characteristics of sharing (music, texts: diverse contributors drawing material for their entries from a corpus of known texts) and the desire to share – and at the same time map a social network – does not seem to have changed radically. For better or worse, people judge others based on their associations: group identities form around networks and are reinforced by the collective tastes and attitudes of those who identify with the group. The groups around social network mapping services now

and then share common values that are based on, intensified and affirmed through social contact, and articulated and affirmed through the process of sharing songs and other inscriptions and making the network visible.

Teens gather around social network services for a variety of purposes, including gossip, supporting or attacking one another, jockeying for status, collaborating, sharing information, flirting, joking, and goofing around as well as to negotiate identity. Because of the alba’s heterogeneous origins, alba are a unique record of a young noblewoman’s social circle with the texts of her time.

The comparison between historic and contemporary social media tells us something about young women and men four hundred years ago, but also about ourselves. Nowadays we seem to live in a “cut and paste culture”, a culture of file sharing. Marcus Boon even states in his book *In Praise of Copying* that copying is an essential part of being human. He proclaims that the ability to copy is worthy of celebration, and states that we can neither understand the world we live in nor ourselves, without recognizing how integral copying is to being human. Women’s alba amicorum with their collection of (often copied) songs, shared poems and travelling (between alba) of images, seem to indicate that Boon has a point when he states that copying and sharing “seems to be in our DNA”.

¹ This article is a much abridged version of an article that will appear in the essay collection *Intersections*, which will be published by Brill later this year.

Marcus Boon, *In Praise of Copying*, Harvard University Press 2010.