
What are Distributed Social Networks?

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3 October 2010

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About this Script

Intended Audience

The people reading the comic are non-technical Facebook/Twitter/MySpace users who have heard about distributed social networks like Diaspora and want to know what makes them different from the sites they are using now.

Script Notation

Panel numbers are in the form *page.panel*, so 3.4 would be page three, panel number four. The abbreviation “CU” stands for “close-up,” as in a movie script. I’ve tried to do the pagination so that pages end with a teaser that will make the readers want to turn to the next page. I’m no layout expert, so the pagination is not set in stone. Fitting text and graphics comfortably on the page may well take precedence.

The Characters

Roberta is the person who knows all about distributed social networks. She is the explainer.

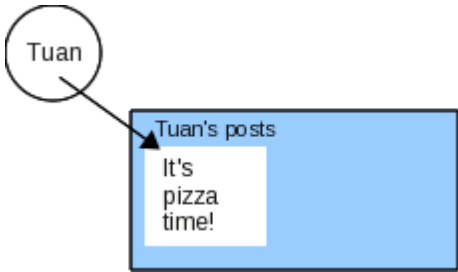
Frank is her co-worker. Frank is the one asking all the questions.

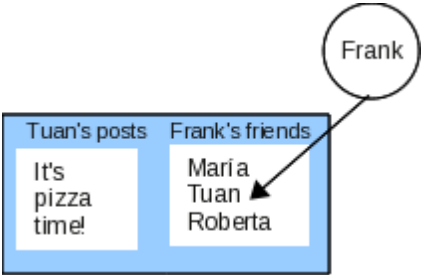
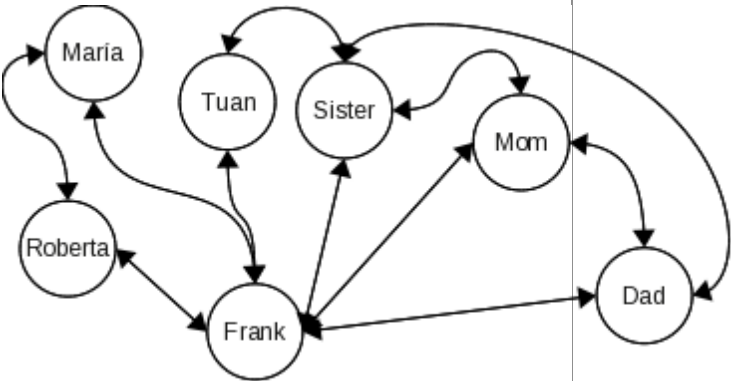
Both of them are in the early to late 20s. They are in their office, in business casual clothing. They are drawn as normal comic characters. Roberta is *not* a “sex bomb,” and Frank is not The Mighty Thor. Under no circumstances is either character to be drawn as a nerd/geek archetype. No glasses for either of them. These are humans, not techies.

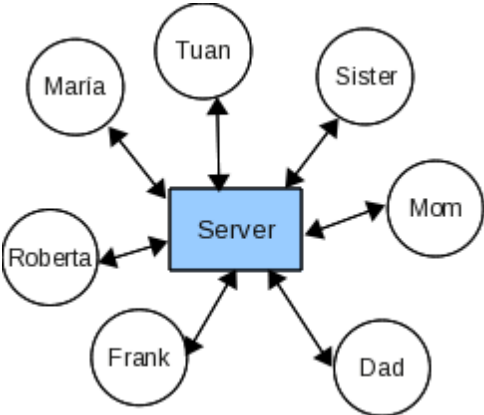

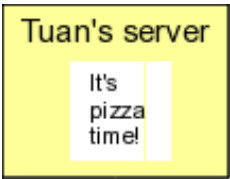
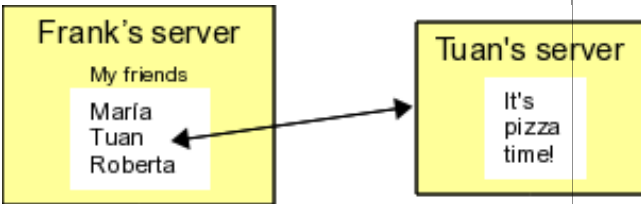
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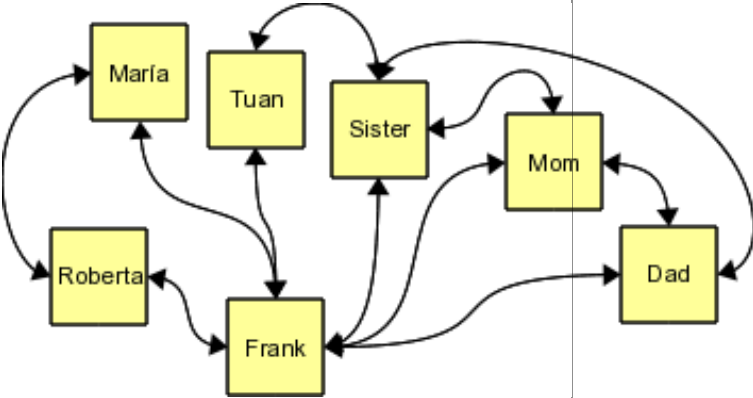
Panel	Description	Dialogue
1.1	Roberta and Frank, at their computers	Frank: Hey, Roberta, I keep seeing articles popping up all over about this thing. Roberta: What thing, Frank?

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Panel	Description	Dialogue
1.2	Frank, leaning in to his screen	Frank: Something called “distributed social networks.” I know what social networks are...
1.3	Icons for facebook, twitter, myspace	Caption: Those are sites like Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace.
1.4	Frank, CU.	Frank: But what’s the big deal about “distributed”? I have online friends from all over the place.
1.5	Roberta, turning to Frank	Roberta: The "distributed" refers to where your data lives, and the big deal is that distributed networks put <i>you</i> in control.
1.6	Frank, totally confused. Jaw open, "hypnosis eyes," question marks above head	Frank: Care to explain that in English?
2.1	Roberta and Frank, CU. Frank is thinking	Roberta: Well, here’s how a typical social web site works. Let’s call it... Frank: Hmm, how about...
2.2	Frank, index finger raised, triumphant look on face	Frank: FriendCenter!
2.3	Roberta, with bland look.	Roberta: Not very creative, but it’ll do.
2.4	Tuan (representative Vietnamese male) at a computer; words "It's Pizza Time!" are on his screen.	Caption: Let’s say your friend Tuan makes a post to FriendCenter.
2.5	Diagram showing message going to FriendCenter’s server (See Figure 1) Figure 1. Tuan Posting to Central Server 	Caption: His post goes to FriendCenter’s server.
2.6	Frank, holding up hands in a warding gesture.	Frank: Whoa! Don’t get all technical on me. What exactly is a server?
3.1	Roberta, pointing at her computer.	Roberta: Just a huge computer (or bunch of computers) that hold humongous amounts of data. It’s called a “server” because...
3.2	Frank, as a waiter in a fancy restaurant, carrying a pizza	Caption: ...when you ask the server for information, it goes into its “data kitchen” and serves up the data to you.

Panel	Description	Dialogue
3.3	Frank in foreground; Tuan and message going to server in background	Frank: OK, got it. So Tuan makes a post and it goes to FriendCenter's server.
3.4	Roberta CU	Caption: Now when <i>you</i> sign on to FriendCenter...
3.5	Diagram showing Frank signing on (Figure 2) Figure 2. Frank Signing on to Central Server 	Caption: The server sees that Tuan is in your list of friends
3.6	Frank looking at Tuan's message on terminal; thought balloon has a slice of pizza. Frank is drooling.	Caption: and serves Tuan's message to you.
4.1	Roberta, pointing at Figure 3, showing a graph of all the people and their connections. Figure 3. Illusion of Network Connections 	Roberta: The illusion is that you are directly connected to Tuan and all your other friends.
4.2	Figure 4 (all users connected to a central server)	Caption: In reality, the central server manages all of your interactions.

Panel	Description	Dialogue
	<p>Figure 4. Central Server Mediating Connections</p> 	
4.3	Frank and Roberta	<p>Frank: So, how are these distributed social networks different?</p> <p>Roberta: With a distributed network, there's no illusion.</p>
4.4	<p>Figure 5 (Tuan & Frank with their own servers)</p> <p>Figure 5. Tuan and Frank's Servers</p> 	<p>Caption: Both you and Tuan have your own servers.</p>
4.5	<p>Figure 6 (Tuan posts to his server)</p> <p>Figure 6. Tuan Posts to His Server</p> 	<p>Caption: Tuan makes his post, and it goes to <i>his</i> server rather than a central server.</p>
5.1	<p>Figure 7 (link between Frank's and Tuan's machine)</p> <p>Figure 7. Frank's Server Connects to Tuan's Server</p> 	<p>Caption: Your servers communicate directly with each other.</p>

Panel	Description	Dialogue
5.2	Frank looking at Tuan's message on terminal; thought balloon has a slice of pizza. Frank is drooling.	Caption: So that when you access your server, you see Tuan's post.
5.3	Frank & Roberta	Frank: What if I'm at my cousin George's house? How do I get to my information? Roberta: You access your server from the web, so you can do it anywhere you have an Internet connection.
5.4	Roberta, pointing to Figure 8 (entire network) Figure 8. Distributed Network of Friends 	Roberta: Your data isn't centralized—it's distributed among all the users and their servers.
5.5	Frank, with light bulb going on	Frank: Which is why they call it a distributed social network
6.1	Roberta, pointing to Figure 8 (entire network), nodding sagaciously.	Roberta: That's right! In a distributed network, all the data would not be stored in one company's server. There's no single company in control.
6.2	Frank, medium CU.	Frank: What else makes it better?
6.3	Roberta medium CU, pointing to whiteboard with words "Everyone/Friends of Friends/Friends only"	Roberta: First, there's privacy. A centralized social network may give you only a few levels of privacy.
6.4	Additional words "Immediate Family/co-workers/Bowling team" shown on whiteboard, crossed out	Roberta: If you want to set up your own groups of friends, you're out of luck.
6.5	Roberta, medium CU	Roberta: Also, FriendCenter may choose to change its privacy policies at any time...
7.1	Hand pulling back shower curtain to reveal Frank (from chest up) with shampoo in hair, shocked expression on face	Caption: ...revealing information that you might not want others to see!
7.2	Frank, leaning back in chair	Frank: Yeah, I remember back in May 2010, one of the big social networks loosened up its privacy settings.

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Panel	Description	Dialogue
7.3	Mob of angry peasants bearing pitchforks and torches	Caption: People weren't very happy about that.
7.4	Roberta at whiteboard; no group names crossed out.	Roberta: But with a distributed network, because it's <i>your</i> server, you get to set up your own groups, and your privacy policy changes only when you want it to.
7.5	Roberta draws line on whiteboard between co-workers & bowling team.	Roberta: So that means the people on your bowling team don't have to get messages about things going on at the office.
7.6	Roberta and Frank in frame; Frank is slightly puzzled	Roberta: You also keep control of your data; it stays on your server. Frank: Oh, I already keep copies of all my pictures on my hard disk.
8.1	Roberta, medium CU	Roberta: You'd be surprised how many people don't. In any case, when you upload a photo to a centralized network, it goes to their server.
8.2	Roberta, holding a document filled with fine print	Roberta: And that means your data is subject to their terms of service. Take a look at this:
8.3	Closeup of document text (this is from Facebook's terms of service)	Caption: You grant us a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any IP content that you post on or in connection with FriendCenter.
8.4	Frank, with jaw agape	Frank: Wow. I never knew that. Gives whole new meaning to "What's mine is yours."
8.5	Roberta, medium CU	Roberta: With distributed social networks, "what's yours is yours."
9.1	[These next panels may be "too much information."; I have put them on a page by themselves.] Frank, looking slightly panicked.	Frank: Wait a moment. This article says that most of these distributed networks are "open source." Does that mean that all my data is open to the public?
9.2	Roberta, with placating look.	Roberta: "Open Source" just means that the software that runs the server is openly available for you to look at.
9.3	In the background is a typical geek working at a computer. This person really does have to look like a techie type.	Caption: So you can see how the software was written and how it works.
9.4	Frank, looking relieved	Frank: Well, since I'm no programmer, there's no danger of me messing with that!

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Panel	Description	Dialogue
9.5	Roberta	Roberta: Because your pictures and posts aren't part of the software, your data is still all yours.
10.1	Frank, thinking out loud	Frank: So distributed social networks have privacy and data ownership covered. What about security, now that I don't have a middleman handling it for me?
10.2	Two computers; both their screens say "It's pizza time!"; a wire in between them has nonsense characters like GH&c^n@%72h\$ in it	Caption: The software encrypts all the traffic among the servers.
10.3	Typical comic book robber opening a safe. Frank, in a policeman's uniform, is coming out of the top of the safe like a jack-in-the-box with a huge mallet in his hand.	Caption: That keeps the bad guys from getting your data.
10.4	Frank, still skeptical	Frank: What about the social networks I use now? I can't live without Farm Wars And Mafiaville And...
10.5	Roberta, putting her hand over Frank's mouth	Roberta: I got it. You don't have to give up your current social networks. Since services like Facebook and Twitter allow programs to read data,...
11.1	Graphic showing Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace icons surrounding distributed network icon. Arrows lead out from distributed network to the services	Caption: ...your server will be able to access your data on your current social networks.
11.2	Same graphic; arrows pointing inward to distributed network	Caption: And they will also be able to integrate your server's data.
11.3	Frank in police uniform, holding hand out in "stop" gesture; a traffic barricade is in the background.	Caption: But, of course, only if you permit them to.
11.4	Frank, enthusiastic	Frank: This sounds great. But how come I haven't heard of it before?
11.5	Two guys working at a computer	Caption: Most of the projects so far have been pretty small...
11.6	Roberta, CU	Roberta: But in summer of 2010, one project named Diaspora caught everyone's imagination.
11.7	Background showing lots of overlapping web pages	Caption: That's why you're seeing all those articles now.
12.1	Frank & Roberta	Frank: So, are these distributed networks ready to use right now?
12.2	Blueprint, with workers looking at it.	Caption: Some projects are still in the planning stages.
12.3	House being built	Caption: Others are being built even as we speak.
12.4	Roberta and Frank; cozy house in background	Roberta: And some are ready to move into.

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Panel	Description	Dialogue
		Frank: So I can't just go to a website and - presto - my computer becomes a server?
12.5	Roberta, plugging in a small computer	Roberta: No. It's preferable to set up a second computer to be your server.
12.6	Pioneers with covered wagon in background. They are noble beyond belief, gazing afar into the great frontier, and holding computers. (Yes, I really want a visual cliché here.)	Caption: That takes a bit of doing, but it's a reasonable option for people who have that pioneer spirit.
13.1	Fuse blowing as Frank touches the computer	Frank: Well, I'm no technical wizard! What choice do I have, then?
13.2	Roberta, holding a power supply-sized brick	Roberta: Some projects are under way to create a computer the size of a wall plug....
13.3	Plug is in the wall, with LCD letters reading "READY"	Caption: ...that already has the software installed to make it act as a server for distributed social networks.
13.4	Roberta, at screen, with URLs http://wiki.debian.org/FreedomBox and http://foocorp.net/projects/fooplug/	Roberta: For example, the Freedom Box and FooPlug.
13.5	Frank, grimacing	Frank: FooPlug? Must have been some tech guy who came up with that name!
13.6	Frank, thoughtful	Frank: But it does sound interesting, and I'll definitely keep an eye out for it. Just one more thing...
13.7	Frank and Roberta; Frank with "puppy-dog eyes", Roberta laughing.	Frank: Roberta, when you start using a distributed social networks--will you give me a friend request? Roberta: It's a deal, Frank.