

## **Social Networking Sites: will they survive?**

By Jim Kent

Social Networking Sites (SNS) have achieved phenomenal success since the launch of sixdegrees.com in 1997. Original sites such as Friendster, Lunarstorm and MiGente, are now all dwarfed by the phenomenally successful Myspace<sup>1</sup>, and Facebook<sup>2</sup>. A useful historical record of the development of Social Networking sites was made by Boyd and Ellison in 2007<sup>3</sup>, although more work is needed to understand the gratifications delivered, how users derive a sense of identity and the cross cultural implications to users. The goal of this short paper is to weave digitization, identity and community into an analysis that is both historically rigorous and conscious of contemporary innovations.

### **Do Social Network sites mark a legitimate paradigm shift or a mere extension of previous technologies?**

Email and the tools to share digital data had been widely available in many communities for decades prior to the success of social networking sites. Chat fora, for example, also had the capacity to create friends lists and thus a micro on-line community. The imperative driving popular applications on SNS such as photo sharing was already available on sites such as Flickr and video sharing on Youtube. These sites are highly rated in their sectors, but neither was able to create a Social Network based around content. Users preferred to build a social network of friends and then distribute content. Fourteen million photographs are uploaded daily on the Facebook platform (2008), more than the combined total of the next 3 sites<sup>4</sup>. Often additional digital content is stored on other sites such as Youtube but distributed on SNS, thus reducing previous successful sites to mere data storage servers. Newsgroups had been heralded as networks of individuals focussed on a discussion or topic however SNS more accurately mirrors physical relational networks, because; "the world is composed of networks, not groups<sup>5</sup>" (Wellman, 1988, p. 37).

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1 47 million unique US visitors each month (QuantCast, 2007b).

2 15 million unique US visitors a month (QuantCast, 2007a). 6<sup>th</sup> most engaging site, worldwide (Comscore world metrix April 2007). 64 million active users worldwide. [www.Facebook.com](http://www.Facebook.com)

3 Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship.

<sup>4</sup> [www.comscore.com](http://www.comscore.com)

<sup>5</sup> Wellman, B. (1988).p. 37 Structural analysis: From method and metaphor to theory and substance.

The availability to users of extensive email address lists is one key reason as to the success of SNS launched since 2005, in contrast to their predecessors. Indeed, the email forwarding culture on the “bored office worker network<sup>6</sup>” (Peretti, 2007, p.158) had already been present prior to SNS. However SNS both capitalised on and encourages members of the BOWN to create or copy, content, often humorous, and distribute around a users network, using single click mass publishing. Therefore SNS success has not been based on new applications, with the exception of making it user friendly for users to automatically *one click* publish within their network, digital data, thus creating dynamic new content for users and facilitating vast amounts of information sharing.

SNS sites are a recognised part of the innovations delivered by Web 2.0. The evolution of user generated content replacing professionally edited work is encapsulated by SNS, as is the ability of the owners to make money whilst providing a platform rather than original content. Andrew Keen’s controversial and influential demolition of Web 2.0 in *The Cult of the Amateur*, concludes that the risks from sexual predators within sites such as My Space make them a key, free web speech battle ground, between the ACLU/Silicon Valley versus concerned parents and responsible legislators

This argument could be developed to answer the question if the SNS platform was ever needed, or has the creation of the platform spawned a generation of users communicating about nothing.

“We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate”<sup>7</sup> (Thoreau 1980 p.52)

### **What gratifications are driving growth in Online Social Networks? In what ways are these limited?**

#### **(i) Maintaining friendships**

It has been documented that the majority of users did not join Social Networks in order to make new contacts but to manage, maintain and re-contact with extended physical networks. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) suggest that Facebook is used to maintain existing offline relationships or solidify offline connections, as opposed to meeting new people. In

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6 Jonah Peretti in Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. P158

<sup>7</sup>Thoreau, H. D. (1980). *Walden, or, life in the woods; and, on the duty of civil disobedience*. New York: Penguin.

addition, Lenhart and Madden (2007) reported that 91% of U.S. teens who use SNS do so to connect with friends. This in itself is not surprising but remains useful evidence to distinguish SNS from previous sites which are focused on making new contacts.

Although Facebook has allowed external users to develop more than 25,000 applications as of May 2008, and as claimed by the sites developers, all of its 64 million active users choosing to install at least one<sup>8</sup>, questions remain as to whether the gratifications delivered by such functionality will be enough to prevent mass desertion by users over time. Since users after relishing initial contact with old friends discover that similar limitations to cyber relations apply as to their physical contacts. Friendster demonstrates the inverse relationship between the scale of social networks and the quality of the relations within them—a relationship rooted in the limits of human time and attention.<sup>9</sup> (Peretti 2007, p.155)

### **Identity by means of network**

A feature of SNS profiles is the possibility for users to see the number and identity of other user's contacts. Conflicting psychologies motivate some users to maximise the number of contacts published as "friends" in contrast to other users who value a minimal number of contacts, giving the impression of selectivity. Either option can be interpreted as an attempt to shape the public persona and thus identity of the user. "Public displays of connection" serve as important identity signals that help people navigate the networked social world, in that an extended network may serve to validate identity information presented in profiles<sup>10</sup> (Donath and Boyd 2004, P.71-82). This sense of context and online identity can be of particular importance for individuals who perceive themselves as lacking such in the real world.

Evidence suggests that individual users respond favourably to the concept of logging on to become part of a community<sup>11</sup> (Nishikant Kapoor, Joseph A. Konstan, Loren G. Terveen 2007 p.4). The same study also highlighted the importance of having pictures of the users on their own profile and the ability to search by picture, other users. Facebook maximises opportunities to publish the pictures of a users friends on users own profiles, reinforcing the sense of identity "by who we know" as referred to previously.

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<sup>8</sup> [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

<sup>9</sup> P155 Notes on Contagious Media. Structures of Participation in Digital Culture.

<sup>10</sup> Donath and Boyd (2004) as referred to in Boyd D.M. & Ellison, N.B. (2007).

<sup>11</sup> Nishikant Kapoor, Joseph A. Konstan, Loren G. Terveen 2007

### **Identity by means of personal data broadcast and photo publishing**

Many SNS obligated all users to create an online profile of themselves, collating and then publishing personal preferences of favourite movies and books and other personal data. This data was then protected from public access, with many sites requiring *friends* to give mutual permission for connection to each other's profiles. This permits users to consciously shape their public persona and permit online friends to gather far more data in less time than in real world relationships. In addition the ability to publish photographs as often as is wished by the user, allows users to communicate "this is who I am by what I do."

A likely consequence of any system where users are obligated to create a profile of personal data will be some users shaping their public perception by incorporating false data, as evidenced on the Friendster network with the rise of Fakesters. (Mieszkowski, K. 2003). Myspace was a target of accusations by mainstream media, of permitting adults to misrepresent themselves in order to gain access to children. (Consumer Affairs, 2006) However, the actual threat of paedophiles grooming potential victims and consequently meeting them was over represented in main stream media (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2006). They also report that although one out of seven teenagers received unwanted sexual solicitations online, only 9% came from people over the age of 25. Research suggests that popular narratives around sexual predators on SNSs are misleading—cases of unsuspecting teens being lured by sexual predators are rare (Finkelhor, Ybarra, Lenhart, Boyd, & Lordan, 2007). Furthermore, only .08% of students surveyed by the National School Boards Association (2007) met someone in person from an online encounter without permission from a parent.

### **The issue of trust**

Some SNS have succeeded in convincing the vast majority of their users to trust both the data found on individuals' profiles and the wisdom of publishing data about themselves. Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini (2007) demonstrated that Facebook users expressed greater trust in Facebook than MySpace users did in MySpace and thus were more willing to share information on the site. Despite mainstream media stories of online evidence being used against users in job interviews or Beauty Pageants<sup>12</sup>, the gratification of publishing personal data remains so strong that users continue to publish personal data that could be costly in the

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<sup>12</sup> Miss New Jersey was blackmailed over photos published on Facebook in April 2007, as reported on CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, ABC.

long term. This suggests that users' desire for identity is worth the calculated risk, despite the fact that for some users, their online network has not been reinforced by physical contact. Secondary levels of protection are offered by some sites in the form of privacy controls, allowing some data to be invisible to some "friends". Nevertheless, many users publish enough information to be victims of prejudice<sup>13</sup>.

### **Personality and the cultural norms of users.**

The personality profile of users can be broken down into distinct groups often referred to as; inviters or distributors, responders and the silent majority. SNS have given "inviters" the opportunity to easily spread digital data, whilst providing responders and the silent majority with frequently changing dynamic content pertinent to their own social network. Inviters receive enough positive feedback from responders to continue to invest time and energy into creating new content for all other users, at no cost to the SNS. More work is needed to investigate if SNS have created a new generation of inviters and distributors, or these individuals would have operated as such even without SNS. In addition for this cycle of distribution to continue in the long term, the issue of whether *inviters* will need to be remunerated and recipients to pay for content will need to be addressed.

Social rules and regulations governing the content of first conversations are created over time by communities. These rules had already been redefined online by existing electronic communication, especially chat, which had created the potential for millions of users to have their first contact with other previously unknown users. The web's global reach creates the potential for one SNS to become a Global network. Existing evidence of SNS being designed for one cultural group and yet ultimately being dominated by other groups is common. The Google-based network Orkut, for example, was launched in the United States with an English-only interface, but Portuguese-speaking Brazilians quickly became the dominant user group (Kopytoff, 2004).

Asian and Anglo Saxon differences are a specific challenge, by means of language and social protocols. Social Networks based around regional Korean relationship protocols were analyzed by Kyung-Hee Kim and Haejin Yun. Their work on how Cyworld.com supported both interpersonal relations and self-relation for Korean users traces the subtle ways in which

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<sup>13</sup> Facebook requires users to publish political and religious affiliations.

deeply engrained cultural beliefs and activities are integrated into online communication and behaviours. Asian SNS typically receive less global media exposure making their own developments harder to trace yet both Japanese and Chinese web usage should not be underestimated, with Japanese Bloggers being the most prolific in 2007, with 37% of all global postings<sup>14</sup>.

Differing cultural expectations over relational management and mutually agreed frequency of contact is yet to be satisfactorily addressed by an SNS, since in real life, we become closer or more distant depending on key environmental and emotional variables, “Networks must be supplemented in order to represent change over time.” (Warren Sack 2007)

SNS are clearly delivering significant short term gratifications, and the attraction to join remains strong amongst new users<sup>15</sup>. Their longer term success is unclear at this time, as users grapple with the physical realities of relational management. The likelihood of a successful global network and the cross cultural implications will quickly grow after one group of cultural communication norms are adopted by all. Whether those norms are to be Anglo Saxon, Japanese or Chinese is still unknown. Continued convergence of other web technologies within SNS is likely, (live on line chat within Facebook was added on April 6<sup>th</sup> 2008) as they compete for members. Ultimately the fate of any SNS, including Myspace and Facebook will be dependent on their longer term successful commercialisation and profitability which remains in significant doubt<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> State of the Blogosphere, April 2007, <http://www.sifry.com/alerts/archives/000493.html>

<sup>15</sup> As of January 1, 2008 200,000 New Users join Facebook each day. [www.facebook.com](http://www.facebook.com)

<sup>16</sup> Schonfeld, Eric, Tech Crunch. Jan 31 2008. *Facebook Finances Leaked*.

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