Chapter 19

An Empirical Investigation into the Key Characteristics of Socio–Technical Societies:
Social Identity, Social Exchange, and Social Vicinity

Shailja Agarwal
IMT Ghaziabad, India

ABSTRACT

The Internet has moved human interaction to a virtual dimension where users connect with each other through social networks. A social network comprises users and relations between these users (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), wherein relations connote "the collection of connections between members of a group" (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). This chapter looked to explain the reasons behind using social networking sites. Analysis of the collected data used a factor analysis to study the characteristics of the emerging socio-technical society amongst the students. The chapter identifies social identity, social exchange and social vicinity as the key characteristics of the emerging socio-technical societies. A gradual but paradigm shift from traditional societies to knowledge based societies was observed. While on one hand, a high dependency and usage of social networking websites (SNWs) was observed, on the other hand, the level of trust and dependency between the community members was found to be diminishing. The chapter reveals the emergence of a socio-technical community amongst students which is characterized by the need to create a social identity, a change in the style of social exchange and expansion of social vicinity. The findings suggest directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet has moved human interaction to a virtual dimension. The World Wide Web has helped create online communities that link to one another and form a complicated web of interactions. The year 2005 witnessed online social network sites like MySpace and Facebook becoming common destinations the youth worldwide. The young generation, cross the globe, was logging in, creating elaborate profiles,

publicly articulating their relationships with other participants, and writing extensive comments back and forth. The extensive adoption of social network sites by the youth and middle aged generation raised some important questions. Why do users flock to these sites? What are they expressing on them? How do these sites fit into their lives? What are they learning from their participation? Are these online activities like face-to-face friendships – or are they different, or complementary? The goal of this chapter is to address these questions, and explore their implications for youth identities. While particular systems may come and go, how youth engage through social network sites today provides long-lasting insights into identity formation, status negotiation, and peer-to-peer sociality.

A knowledge based society, apart from demanding technical skills and access to information technologies, also makes it necessary for people to have diversified and supportive social connections. Although resources and opportunities may be available, one may not necessarily be aware of their existence, or even have direct access to them. In those cases, knowing people from different backgrounds, grades of expertise, and social levels turns out to be essential. This is where social networking sites enter the scene and provide necessary information through online networking. Corporations that operate in these environments have begun to listen to the 'voice' of their communities and participate in their 'conversations' (Srividya, 2006). The genX is showing a strong presence in multiple aspects of socio-technical networking. They have expanded their repertoires beyond mere email by joining list servers, maintaining their own web pages and blogs, sending instant messages (IM) and becoming a part of virtual communities and online networking sites. Their online lives are as full and complete as their offline lives (Dixon, 1996). This intense usage of social network and its analysis has offered a plethora of opportunities to modern organizations. On one hand, it has given an insight into how informal organizations influence the formal ones; while on the other hand, it has established the pattern of human interactions (Steiny & Oinas-Kukkonen, 2007). In other words, this rapid development in digital technology has impregnated network awareness. This network, which has reduced the cost of communication (Yoo, Lyytinen & Boland, Jr., 2008),can be defined as "a multileveled concept that includes people's awareness of the networks around them, the strategy of becoming more aware of networks, and the processes and tools to help aid this strategy" (Steiny & Oinas-Kukkonen, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Networking can be explained as either being a technical process, the methods for successful operation of which are straightforward, or it being as a completely non-technical process, involving organizational, interpersonal and social interactions (McMurdo, 1996). A social network comprises users and relations between these users (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), wherein relations connote "the collection of connections between members of a group" (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). When a computer network connects computers via cables and electrical networks, it becomes a 'computing network', and when it connects people, it creates a 'social network' (Raghavan, 2006). Simply put, social networking is a platform for one person to meet up with other people on the Net. These people could be existing friends, acquaintances or starngers on the net. Social networking sites, created to assist in online networking, are generally communities created to support or be a part of a common theme. Given the immense communication opportunities, surpassing geographical and time constraints, social networking sites are expected to transform the world in an unprecedented manner. Social networking sites such as MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook etc. give individuals opportunities to meet new people and friends in their own and

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