Chapter 41
Short History of Social Networking and Its Far-Reaching Impact

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the evolution of social networking together with its supporting technologies. Most popular social networking service providers, such as Facebook, Tencent, Twitter, and Sina Weibo are described with their market and financial data. The new business and new social relations built on social networking platforms are introduced and their impacts are discussed. The future trends of social networking are also illustrated based on the potential development of related emerging technologies. The objective of this chapter is to help readers understand the impact of technology on the functioning, evolution, and variation of socializations.

INTRODUCTION

Social networking is a platform built with information technology that supports virtual socialization (Lenhart & Madden, 2007). Although social networking has a short history compared with the long history of human socialization, it is growing fast and its impact on our life has not yet been fully realized and understood.

For thousands of years, face-to-face socialization is the major form to build social relations (Grusec & Lytton, 2012). Communities are formed locally, economy is developed locally, education, entertainment and religious activities are all performed locally. People interact with each other through physical contact and physical communications. Virtual communication appeared with the birth of mail service (Scheele, 1970). We have been using this kind of virtual communication for hundreds of years. However, virtual communities are rarely formed with surface mail, because mail correspondence usually happens between only two people, which are not enough to form a community. Recall the saying "One person is single, two persons are couple, and three persons form a society", we can say that a regular mail service between two people forms no virtual community.

Virtual communication, virtual social group, and virtual community become a reality with the advancement of information technology, especially internet-based technology. Social networking was first introduced about 40 years ago. In less than half a century, it has become an important part of our lifestyle, and moreover, it is still evolving and penetrating into every aspect of our life and our society (Papacharissi, 2010). Its future impact will be profound.

This chapter describes social networking's different perspectives. The main objective is to help readers understand the technology potential and limits of social networking, its impact and its possible future. The remaining of this chapter is organized as follows. We first describe the background knowledge, including the evolution of social networking together with its supporting technology and the latest research development in this area. Then, we analyze the major social networking services and their features. Next section describes the new business and new socialization built on top of social networking, and their impact on social relations and social dimensions. Future research directions and conclusions are presented finally.

BACKGROUND

Social networking began with the introduction of computer network (Warschauer, 2004). The early form of virtual group is the email mailing list. Email is a communication mechanism established originally on mainframe computers in 1972 (Merritt, 2012). Later, this mechanism is introduced into personal computers on the network. A simple email communication between two users might not be too much different from the traditional surface mail communication, because it only involves two users and no social groups or social relations are formed here.

However, an email mailing list service provides an unprecedented mechanism to group users together and form virtual communities. Users do not need to meet face to face and could share their feelings, information, and ideas, remotely. With the support of email attachment, pictures, documents, and links to information or data on the Internet could be shared within the group. Although mailing list is an asynchronous communication mechanism, it is better enough to shadow the traditional mail correspondence. Despite the fact that many modern social networking services have emerged in the past ten years, email mailing list is still widely used in business, education, and some organizations. One of the most famous mailing lists is Linux Kernel Mailing List that connects Linux developers and users and forms the Linux community. This virtual community was established in 1995 and had over 14 thousand members in 2008 (Chu, 2009), and it is still actively used as the main platform for Linux community members to post announcements, ask questions, and address issues.

Besides email mailing list, there are also some other asynchronous social networking services, which include newsgroup, discussion forum, and bulletin board. These mechanisms are similar to mailing list: one user's post could be published openly online or broadcasted to the group members. Newsgroup, discussion forum, and bulletin board are usually built into a web portal or a specific web service. For example, discussion forum is an important component of distance education software (Branon & Essex, 2001). Another example is Baidu Tieba, China's largest communication platform that allows users to set up, join in, and search different discussion forums. The service is provided and supported by Baidu, China's search engine.

With the advancement of hardware technology, software applications are also improved. Due to the increase of computer network speed and personal computer processing power, synchronous communications became possible in 1990s. Accordingly, synchronous social networking services emerged.

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