Chapter 13
Evolving Digital Communication:
An Actor-Network Analysis of Social Networking Sites

Mohini Singh
RMIT University, Australia

Jayan Kurian
RMIT University, Vietnam

ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses elements of social networking sites to establish how a combination of heterogeneous elements of technology, media, language, users, data, and information are networked together to provide this new communication media. Social networking sites are also referred to as social media sites, which can be explained using the Actor-Network Theory. Social networking sites have clearly achieved widespread adoption as a new means of communication in a very short time around the globe. An analysis of literature on social networking sites is included in this chapter to reflect the new social networking language and style, the content shared via this media, the mode of use, and the language used for communication, which is a combination of a number of technological and social entities. This chapter explains how the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) can be used to explain social networking and includes some issues for research on this topic.

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites are fast becoming the principal communication and information sharing tool used by people of all ages, and backgrounds in all regions of the world. Social networking sites also referred to as social media sites are developed on the Web 2.0 platform, which offers an architecture for participation and allows users to control their own data and information (Kim et al., 2010). Web 2.0 is an extension of Web 1.0 on which individuals deliver content and services in the public domain creating a network effect

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-6126-4.ch013

through which others can access, update and combine content (Cummings et al., 2009). Characteristics of Web 2.0 enable formation of communities via collaboration and information sharing; novel methods of data presentation with 'mashed up' (combined) information from different sources; and with Ajax supported creative and responsive interfaces (Ankolekar, et al., 2007). Social networking applications therefore developed on the Web 2.0 platform are designed around architecture of participation and communal collaboration (Sena, 2009).

Individuals are using social networking sites for communication, collaboration, information sharing, networking, finding 'lost' friends and forming communities. Although business organisations are also resorting to social networking sites for advertising, marketing and engaging employees (Singh et al., 2010), the focus of this chapter is on 'social' user issues and characteristics of social networking for users. Web 2.0 based social networking sites are widely used by all age groups and their adoption is increasing by the day. In this chapter the aim is to establish the characteristics of social networking from the most popular sites (each with over 30 million users) and determine their 'dimensions' of networking and communication.

These are noted in Table 1.

Adoption of social networking sites by individuals is so significant that users of these sites range from 34 million on ask.fm to more than a billion on Facebook (Table 1). The growing number of users indicates the importance of social networking sites and their relevance to society. Due to social networking sites being so widely adopted in a very short period of time, and accessible on a variety of platforms such as personal computers, mobile phones, laptops and other ubiquitous technology Turban et al., (2011), it is considered essential to explore heterogeneous elements of social networking that are making them so prevalent. Although there are numerous publications on one or more aspect of social networking sites, significant earlier studies on this topic are focussed on its taxonomy (Kim et al, 2010), definition, history and scholarship (Boyd, 2007) risk, trust and privacy concerns (Fogel and Nehmad, 2009), changes in user behaviour (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010)., self-disclosure model (Posey et al., 2010); (Krasnova et al., 2010), and impact on business environment (Sena, 2009); (Singh et al., 2010). More recently, Kietzmann, et al., (2010) addressed social media applications in organisations from the perspective of how individuals in the organization use these tools.

Table 1. Social networking sites with over 30 million users - February, 2014

Social Networking Site	Date of Origin	Registered Users in 2013
Facebook	Feb 2004	1.15 Billion
Twitter	July 2006	500 million
Google+	June 2011	500 million
Linkedin	May 2003	238 million
Instagram	October 2010	130 million
Pinterest	March 2010	70 million
Meetup	June 2002	35 million
ask.fm	June 2010	34 million

Source: http://www.ebizmba.com/articles/social-networking-websites