Online Social Networking for New Research Opportunities

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INTRODUCTION

Online Social Networking Web sites are Internet sites that facilitate building of personal social networks online. Young people throughout the United States (U.S.) and around the world are flocking to these sites in droves. Venture capitalists are funding social networking companies at rates not seen since the great technology bust of the late 1990s. Anecdotal evidence suggests that social networking software is one of the next big trends in information technology. Leonard (2004) notes that, "like e-mail, like using a search engine, social networking is a part of the Internet way of life. And [sic] it's barely getting started." There are many potential opportunities for research into these virtual communities.

BACKGROUND

Traditional Social Networking

Social Networking is not a new phenomenon. Social psychologists and organizational behavior practitioners have studied and analyzed social networks for years. WordIQ.com defines social networking as, "the process of connecting individuals via friends, relatives and acquaintances—a person's 'personal network.' These networks can then branch out and allow friends to connect with people inside their accepted social circle ..." (WordIQ, 2004).

J.A. Barnes is largely accepted as the initial developer of the concept of social networks, observing in his study of a Norwegian fishing village that social relations formed into "... interpersonal links that combine to form a social network" (Barnes, 1954, p. 39). Barnes collaborated with contemporaries to develop early models for social network analysis. These models have evolved into formalized metrics for analysis (see Hanneman, 2001). Social network analysis involves mapping relationships, flows and throughput between nodes in a social network. Management consultants use these methodologies and even software tools to complete the analysis of organizations (Krebs, 2003), and social psychologists use them to analyze relationships between people in group settings.

ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING

Friendster

Although traditional social networking models are not new, online social networking is a relatively new paradigm. Friendster was the first social networking software application to hit the Web. Founded in 2002 by Jonathan Abrams, Friendster went online in March, 2003. By August, 2003, Friendster had more than 1 million users and was growing by 15% per week (Rosenheck, 2003). In early 2004, Friendster claimed to have more than 5 million registered users (Kopytoff, 2004). By December, 2004, Friendster claimed to have more than 13 million registered users (Friendster, personal communication, December 15, 2004). There may be fewer users who routinely use the service; Kopytoff (2004) cites Nielson/NetRatings indicating that Friendster had only 904,000 unique users in December, 2003. Although the number of active users is arguably significantly less than advertised, the quantity of users is nonetheless impressive.

What is Online Social Networking?

Leonard (2004) defines social networking Web services as, "online gathering places that encourage their members to build explicit, hyperlinked networks of their friends and acquaintances." He notes that as a "friend" of someone on the network, "I am connected to all of his other friends, and to all the friends of all those friends. Looking for a job or a date, or merely curious, I can point-and-click my way through the pictures, profile information and communities of the other members of my network." Leading social networking software provider Orkut bills itself as "an online community that connects people through a network of trusted friends. We are committed to providing an online meeting place where people can socialize, make new acquaintances and find others who share their interests" (Orkut, 2004).

How it Works

In practice, users join Friendster only by invitation of another user. New users enter their personal information,

pictures, location and so forth. However, nobody can see this information until another Friendster "confirms" the new user. Once the new user is confirmed, anyone within four degrees of separation can see it. Trust, or validation, of users is built through the process of testimonials, which users write about each other. Users are connected to their friend's friends and so forth in this manner, thus building their network.

GROWTH AND NEW PLAYERS

Since 2003, some 30 social networking Internet sites have sprouted in addition to Friendster. If pre-Friendster affinity group informational sites such as Classmates.com and Military.com, or the various sites addressing technical topics such as Perl, Linux and Python are included, the number of sites approaches 300. Search engine mogul Google launched Orkut in early 2004 as a direct competitor to Friendster (Olsen, 2004). Other essentially similar sites include LinkedIn, Tribe and MySpace. PeopleAggregator is an open-source social network.

Niche Markets

Some sites try to appeal to the specific desires or needs of users in affinity-type groups. For example, Monster.com has recently added a social networking area to its site, oriented to job hunters. Even America Online added a social networking aspect to its ICQ service in early 2004 (Reardon, 2004).

In March, 2004, TahitiPetey Enterprises launched its online travel club (Business Wire, 2004). In differentiation from other similar travel/dating sites, TahitiPetey is offering a network of Internet cafes, and daily first-class transportation from its Las Vegas headquarters to more than 90 sites in California, Arizona, Utah and Nevada. The company plans to have eight cafes and grills operational in California by 2005, and 500 nationwide by 2008.

Evite, launched in October, 2004, lets members "create electronic networks of friends to share recommendations about eateries, nightclubs and other hangouts" (Walker, 2004, p. 1). Walker quotes Evite's president as saying that the site has 66 million e-mail addresses from users who sent or received invitations through Evite, and that more than 1 million user profiles have been created, along with 1.5 million restaurant recommendations.

OSN with a Twist

IRL (In Real Life) launched Zirla.com in February, 2004, to combine OSN with real-life social events (PR Newswire, 2004). Zirla.com members attend dinners with small groups of other like-minded members, matched by common inter-

ests and preferences from online profiles. After each event, people they have met become part of their online network. This is said to prevent the stress of searching through profiles, sending e-mails that may not be answered and waiting for someone to respond.

Mobile Social Networking

Users of Dodgeball (www.dodgeball.com) send text messages to the Dodgeball server, which then sends them to all of the user's friends entered on the Dodgeball Web site. In an interview on National Public Radio, Dodgeball executives assert that if you were supposed to meet your friends at a certain bar, but wound up in another bar, Dodgeball would let them know where you are (Block & Siegel, 2004). A more significant function is that once you let the Dodgeball server know where you are, it looks for anyone within 10 blocks with one degree of separation from your friends. If it finds a friend of your friends, it lets you know where they are, and lets them know you are near. By November, 2004, Dodgeball claimed to have more than 13,000 registered users (Stern, 2004).

Talk to Your "Friends"

In September, 2004, Friendster teamed with Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) company Voiceglow to offer voice services between friends on its Web site (Business Wire, 2004a). Friendser intends to integrate Voiceglow's Glophone into its Web site. Called the Friendster Phone, it will allow friends to make free voice calls any time of the day. In the paradigm of social networking, this allows people to talk to new and existing friends without disclosing phone numbers or e-mail addresses. Once signed up on the Friendster Web site, users can sign up for a Friendster phone, and receive a U.S. phone number that can be used through any Internet connection worldwide. By paying for an upgraded plan, users can call anyone regardless of whether they are on the Friendster network.

Along the same lines, OSN provider SocialTree.com has teamed with communications company Userplane to offer instant message (IM) streaming audio and video to its customers. This gives users "the ability to see and hear each other by streaming both audio and video through a Flash MX-based client—creating an online social environment that enables live interaction from the comforts of home, while still protecting users' privacy through a certain degree of anonymity" (Business Wire, 2004b).

FAD OR EMERGING PARADIGM?

Some feel the trend towards online social networking may merely be a fad (Kopytoff, 2003; Spinner, 2003; Wharton,

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