MULTIPLE WAYS OF PERCEIVING AND UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

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1. INTRODUCTION

The characteristics of online communities may vary based on the quality or depth of their social relationship that members form with other individuals within the digital environment, mutual goals, and shared interests (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002). It is clearly recognized that community members who are active in and passionate about sharing their views on topics, products, and companies are the driving force behind the online community's value (Cothrel, 2000). Williams and Cothrel (2000) have noted that fostering personal connections among members and encouraging communication and a supportive environment as good practices in online communities. Similarly, Ridings and Gefen (2004) found information exchange and social support to be the two most popular reasons for joining an online community.

In another study, Preece (2001) proposed the sociability and usability framework to identify characteristics and measures that describe the success of online communities. Sociability determinants include purpose, people, and policies. Dialogue and social interaction support, information design, navigation and access are dimensions that constitute Preece's usability framework. The fundamental role of online communities includes factors such as convenience, time savings, and usefulness of information. Hedonic benefits include enjoyment, friendship, and personal relationship aspects (Kim, Park & Jin, 2007).

Technological mediation shapes ways of habiting and perceiving the world virtually. There is heavy presence of text and screens, profiles, search features, avatars, and hyperlinks. The Internet allows us to be many selves. All of which are just as real as the selves we are in the real physical world. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Second Life, and Blog are several networking sites that afford an individual to manage his identity, information and relationship with others.

2. FACEBOOK

Facebook homepage, as shown in Figure 1, features a login form on the top right for existing users and a registration form directly underneath for new visitors. The website is free to users. Users can create profiles including photos and lists of personal interests, exchange private or public messages, and join groups of friends. Facebook users may choose to join one or more networks which are organized by city, workplace, school, and region. These networks help users connect with members of the same network. Users can also connect with friends, giving them access to their friends' profiles. By default, the viewing of detailed profile data is restricted to users from the same network.



Figure 1: Facebook Homepage

Facebook generates its revenue from advertisements. Microsoft is Facebook's exclusive partner for serving banner advertising, and as such Facebook only serves advertisements that exist in Microsoft's advertisement inventory. It has a number of features with which users may interact. They include the Wall, a plain text space on every user's profile page that allows friends to post messages for the user to see; Poke, a virtual poke which allows users to send a notification to each other; Photos, where users can upload albums and photos; Status Update, which allows users to inform their friends of their whereabouts and actions; News Feed, which appears on every user's homepage and highlights information including profile changes, upcoming events, and birthdays related to the user's friends; Gifts, which allows users to send virtual gifts to their friends that appear on the recipient's profile (see Figure 2).

With appropriate customizable privacy features, users are able to control the types of information are shared and updates about different types of activities, including profile changes, Wall posts, and newly added friends. Privacy settings can also be set for individual albums, limiting the groups of users that can see an album. For example, the privacy of an album can be set so that only the user's friends can see the album, while the privacy of another album can be set so that all Facebook users can see it. Tag is used to label users in a photo. For instance, if a photo contains a user's friend, then the user can tag the friend in the photo. This sends a notification to the friend that they have been tagged, and provides them a link to see the photo.



Figure 2: The Author's Facebook

3. WAYN



Figure 3: WAYN Homepage

WAYN is an acronym for **Where Are You Now?** It is a social networking website with a goal to unite travellers from around the world. WAYN enables its users to create a profile and upload photos. Users can then search for others, and link them to their profiles as friends. It is possible to send and receive messages using email, discussion forums, eCards, SMS and WAYN instant messaging.

A user can locate visually where each of their contacts is situated around the world. The service is thus intended to be used for its members to keep friends informed of where they are whilst travelling but also for people to find out who is coming to visit their location from elsewhere. Members can find out more about a destination they wish to visit, finding another member online from that destination and getting a firsthand summary of what to do, what to see and what to consider when visiting, and they can also find out which friends have already visited a certain destination so they can get quick tips when planning a new trip. Figure 4 shows a toolbar with the various functionalities, and a message from a traveller.



Figure 4: A WAYN Message Page

4. MYSPACE

MySpace is a social networking website with an interactive, usersubmitted network of friends, personal profiles, blogs, groups, photos, music, and videos for teenagers and adults. The site lets you browse profiles, blogs, email and join groups. Music artists can add friends, stream singles, and sell music. MySpace has led to extremely viral success for a number of artists. Figure 5 shows a quick tour of MySpace.



Figure 5: MySpace Quick Tour

5. TWITTER



Figure 6: Twitter Login Page

Figure 6 show a login page of Twitter. Twitter is a social networking and micro-blogging service that allows its users to send and read other users' updates which are known as tweets. Twitter is a service for friends, family, and co-workers to communicate and stay connected through the exchange of quick, frequent answers to one simple question: **What are you doing?** Answers must be under 140 characters in length and can be sent via sms, instant message, or the web. Most often users do not expect a response when they send a message to Twitter.

Twitter's core technology is a device agnostic message routing system with rudimentary social networking features. By accepting messages from sms, web, mobile web, instant message, or from third party application programming interface (API) projects, Twitter makes it easy for folks to stay connected. A user is only expected to pay as much or as little attention to them as the user sees fit. This means that the user can step in and out of the flow of information as it suits him and it never queues up with increasing demand of his attention. Users are very much in control of whose updates they receive, when they receive them, and on what device. They can switch off Twitter updates at any point or follow the sources most relevant to them and access information such as breaking world news via Twitter as it happens. Twitter is very much guided by a philosophy of keeping things simple and intuitive. Twitter is what a user makes of it; either receives a lot of information about his friends, or just a little. It's up to him. Figure 7 shows a Twitter of The USA President, Barack Obama before he took office.



Figure 7: Barack Obama's Twitter

A word of caution, Twitter collects personally identifiable information about its users and shares it with third parties. Twitter considers that information an asset, and reserves the right to sell it if the company changes hands.

6. SECOND LIFE

Second Life (SL) is a Virtual World in cyberspace. A free client program called the Second Life Viewer enables its users, called Residents, to interact with each other through avatars. Residents can explore, meet other residents, socialize, participate in individual and group activities, and create and trade virtual property and services with one another, or travel throughout the world, which residents refer to as the grid. Second Life caters for users aged over eighteen, while its sister site Teen Second Life is restricted to users aged between thirteen and eighteen.

Built into the software is a three dimensional modeling tool based around simple geometric shapes that allows a resident to build virtual objects. This can be used in combination with a scripting language that can be used to add functionality to objects. More complex three dimensional Sculpted prims (colloquially known as sculpties), textures for clothing or other objects, and animations and gestures can be created using external software. The Second Life Terms of Service ensure that users retain copyright for any content they create, and the server and client provide simple digital rights management functions. Figure 8 and Figure 9 show screen prints of International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) in Second Life.



Figure 8: ISTE Second Life in Wiki



Figure 9. ISTE Second Life Headquarter and Discussion List

7. BLOG

A blog is a website, usually maintained by an individual with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse chronological order. There are many different types of blogs, differing not only in the type of content, but also in the way that content is delivered or written.

The personal blog is the most common and traditional. It is an ongoing diary or commentary by an individual. Personal bloggers usually take pride in their blog posts, even if their blog is never read by anyone. Blogs often become more than a way to just communicate; they become a way to reflect on life or works of art. Blogging can have a sentimental quality and some are extremely detailed as it seeks to capture a moment in time.

Corporate blogs can either be private or it can be for business purposes. These blogs are either used internally to enhance the communication and culture in a corporation or externally for marketing, branding or public relations purposes.

Question blogging is a type of blog that answers questions. Questions can be submitted in the form of a submittal form, or through email or other means such as telephone or VOIP. Qlogs can be used to display shownotes from podcasts or the means of conveying information through the Internet. Many question logs use syndication such as Really Simple Syndication (RSS) as a means of conveying answers to questions. A blog comprising videos is called a vlog; one comprising links is called a linklog; a site containing a portfolio of sketches is called a sketchblog or one comprising photos is called a photoblog. Blogs with shorter posts and mixed media types are called tumbleblogs.

Some blogs focus on a particular subject, such as political blogs, travel blogs, house blogs, fashion blogs, project blogs, education blogs, niche blogs, classical music blogs, quizzing blogs and legal blogs (often referred to as a blawgs) or dreamlogs. While not a legitimate type of blog, one used for the sole purpose of spamming is known as a Splog. Figure 10 shows a personal blog.



Figure 10: A Sample Personal Blog

The collective community of all blogs is known as the blogosphere. Since all blogs are on the Internet by definition, they may be seen as interconnected and socially networked, through blogrolls, comments, linkback (refbacks, trackbacks or pingbacks) and backlinks. Discussions in the blogosphere have been used by the media as a gauge of public opinion on various issues. It is common for blogs to feature advertisements either to financially benefit the blogger or to promote the blogger's favourite causes. The popularity of blogs has also given rise to fake blogs in which a company will create a fictional blog as a marketing tool to promote a product.

There are essentially two measures for the dynamics of how blogs become popular: popularity through citations, and popularity through affiliation (i.e. blogroll). While it takes time for a blog to become popular through blogrolls, permalinks can boost popularity more quickly, and are perhaps more indicative of popularity and authority than blogrolls, since they denote that people are actually reading the blog's content and deem it valuable or noteworthy in specific cases.

8. PERSPECTIVES

All the above mentioned sites have become incredibly popular precisely because of their social factor: they help the user stay in touch with friends or business contacts, and make new ones as well. These services require the user to execute some identity management. Sites typically ask for some personal information at two points: registration and profile development. These sites typically require some or all of the following information from the user to set up an account: Name, email address, birth date, and gender.

After registering, a user would probably want to add information to his profile to get the most out of the site. After all, isn't this "private profile" supposed to represent him? Many people often add a slew of other identifying bits after registration to flesh themselves out. Common additions like school and work locations, contact information, friends, groups, and networks joined. Personal interests and activities are all there to give the profile some form of personality. This may be true to an extent but it is giving the profile some publicity, too.

Some information management helps the user to choose what information to provide online. It is important to understand the information that is being shared with the site; what information the site will share by default and with whom; and how the company providing the site will use the information themselves. When the user looks across all the information he has shared, it is clear that any stranger with bad intentions and with access to the information will have a head start in knowing who and where the user is. This may result in the user being a high potential target for identity theft. They know how to contact the user and what information they might use to lure the user into slipping them some of the facts that open the door to the user's financial life and personal security.

Facebook's information philosophy and default setting is to share almost everything that the user has included in his Facebook account. By default, everyone can find the user's profile listing in a public search. This includes users on Facebook, and potentially people searching on Google, Yahoo, and MSN. That means if the user has never changed his privacy settings, his Facebook profile is shared with not only all his friends and groups, but also with everyone in every network he joins. However, Facebook gives the user options to limit the profile broadcasting by providing an arsenal of privacy control and settings. Upon signing into the Facebook profile, a user can click on the "Privacy" link next to the "Logout" link, which is situated at the upper right-hand corner of the page.

In this page, a user has control over: information he shares in his profile; information people see when they search for him; information on actions he takes with other people; information available to others when he contacts them; and privacy controls for applications he has added to his account. The user can just uncheck the box "Allow anyone to see my public search listing". The user has the option of either displaying his contact information to only his friends, or to everyone. This makes it less likely that the user will unknowingly share information that he does not want to provide to strangers.

As for Myspace, people can see when the user is online by default together with his profile and photo. MySpace's privacy options are very limited, but changing three key settings can provide the user with some important privacy protection: Online Now: By un-checking this box, other users won't know when the user is actively on his account; Profile Viewable By: By selecting "My Friends Only," the user limits the ability for strangers to find his personal information; Photos: By un-checking this box, the user prevents his photos from being emailed and shared by other users.

MySpace does not have individual privacy controls for each section of information the user provides. Whenever the user decides to add information to his MySpace profile, the user should take extra care in deciding what he divulges.

9. UNDERSTANDING THEIR PRIVACY POLICY

An important part in being proactive about a user's personal information is to examine a website's privacy policy. That policy document explains how the website's parent company plans to share (or commits *not* to share) the information the user provides with other large populations of strangers — namely its employees, its parent company, subsidiaries, advertisers, and the like.

There are three things to consider when reading a privacy policy:Is the privacy policy easy to read and understand? Will they share or sell your information? How recently was it updated?

Will they sell the user's information? Sites that share and sell the user's information expose the user to greater privacy risks. It is logical to assume that the more people with access to the user's information the more opportunities for identity theft. Both Facebook and MySpace do not state that they will not sell the user's personal information. It is safe to assume that they are reserving the right to do so. Sites should be updating their policies whenever new services and features are introduced which affect the privacy of the user's personal information. If the user sees that the social networking sites are frequently adding new features, he should expect to see that their privacy policies are reviewed and updated regularly.

These social networking sites offer real benefits to their users, as shown through their popularity. But they also come with considerable risks to a user's privacy and identity. A user should protect his "virtual self" with the same common sense that he applies in the real world. Here are some pointers to information management:

- 1. A user should never share phone numbers, physical addresses, or social security number information on public websites.
- 2. A user should take the time to understand how the information he does choose to provide will be shared. There are three key questions to answer *before* a user opens account and completes "profiles": What is shown to friends/contacts? What is shared with strangers on the site? What is shown publicly on search engines?
- 3. A user also needs to be proactive in finding and using the controls these sites provide to protect his personal information and reduce his exposure to identity theft.

4. A user should understand how the companies that provide these sites will use his information. Key questions to answer: Will they share or sell your information? How up-to-date is their Privacy Policy?

It would be ideal if every social networking site has a philosophy that places a user's privacy to be paramount. Every user should be anonymous when they are at a site, and that the user's information is his to impart. Such a philosophy would drive the following practice:

Absolute minimum amount of information is required necessary in order to provide a great and useful service. To sign up for a site, the user will only need to provide: An Email address of the user choice which does not include his name; an area code; and a password. The site must be able to inform the user about the strength of the user's password. The site will not sell or rent a user's personal information to anyone, for any reason, at any time. Not even for marketing purposes or to "enhance" a user's experience on site.

10. CONCLUSION

Six social networking sites were expounded in this paper. These online community sites facilitate efficient information search and understanding among members. They are designed in a simple and user-friendly manner along with search tools which do not require extensive search efforts to find information. They exist for a purpose of connecting members in participating or being involved in an activity of common interest. Members in these communities have knowledge or experience with respect to the discussion topics. The self-selected members may already have higher levels of computer knowledge that allows them to incorporate the social networking sites into their everyday activities which helps explain the popularity of these sites. These online members not only need to manage their identity but also to manage information and relationship among "friends".

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Journal of Media And Information Warfare