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IT 103, Section 001

March 1, 2011

Online Social Networking

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I. Introduction

Online social networking is a web-based service, which provides an online community for people with similar interests or activities to share information through a social profile and communicate among other users (Chapman, 2009). The latest trends in social networking include popular sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MySpace, which have changed the face of 21st century social media and transformed how individuals across the world interact and engage online. The following paper will discuss the roots of social networking technology, including innovations and breakthroughs made over the years, as well as the benefits of the technology, and potential ramifications including legal/ethical issues, security concerns, and social issues.

II. Background

Online social networking is at its peak, with over millions of active users across the world, however the popular trend didn't start with Facebook. The roots of social networking can actually date back to the 1970s, before the Internet became public, with early programs such as BBS and CompuServe. BBS, or Bulletin Board System was the primary means of online community in the 1980s and early 1990s before the Internet. This was a system, which allowed users to communicate through messages or download files on a network. The earliest technology of BBS showed a text-only interface, plus the system was mainly for local users to post subject-based bulletin boards on a particular topic (Nickson, 2009). Though BBS is now considered obsolete, it is still used in parts of the world where Internet is less prevalent. Another service that was available in the 1970s was CompuServe. This social networking site originally served as a communication site for businesses, however it gained public access in the late 1980s and offered services such as message exchange, file sharing, and access to news (Nickson, 2009). The site

became widely popular among users with the unique feature of discussion forums for different subjects. Another site known as America Online (AOL) was also unique because it allowed users to create member profiles and establish communities. This helped establish the foundation for future social networking sites. With the growth Internet users, several sites emerged which were targeted to network a certain demographic of users. Classmates.com was one of these sites, used to locate high school friends and classmates. The site is still able to retain its popularity with over 40 million current users. Demographic based social networking services emerged to appeal to the Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino communities with sites such as BlackPlanet.com, AsianAvenue.com, and MiGente.com (Nickson, 2009)

Until then, social networking had started gaining attention, but it hadn't fully developed into the booming social trend it is today. Social networking arrived at its turning point around 2002 with the launch of Friendster. This site enables member profile use with the ability to establish communities with likeminded people. LinkedIn started in 2003 to target a professional approach to networking with the linking of businesses to establish connections with different companies. This site is still widely popular today with over 30 million users (Nickson, 2009). MySpace also started in 2003 and is considered as one of the most popular social networking sites in the world. MySpace allows complete profile customization and is targeted towards the teen and young adult demographic with emphasis on music and entertainment. The social phenomenon of Facebook arrived in 2004 with original limited access to only college students. In 2006, Facebook opened its doors to the public and is now the most well known social networking site today. Facebook encompasses virtually all aspects of networking between friends, family, businesses, and entertainment artists, and offers a multitude of services including instant chat, event organizing, gaming, advertising, member profiles, and etc. Another popular

site, known as Twitter also hit the market with access to social networking from hand held devices such as smart phones. This service is aimed on keeping users up to date on people's statuses and events through posts made via computer or phone (Chapman, 2009). In today's fast paced environment, Facebook and Twitter have become worldwide sensations with its accessible networking services, easy-to-use interface, and convenient mobility.

III. Benefits

Engagement in social networking nowadays provides individuals with boundless advantages and opportunities to build better ties and expand one's social circle. At the surface level, social networking allows its users to gain a sense of community with a collective social space and the ability to stay in touch with friends, relatives, and colleagues. That being said, social networking serves as a convenient online medium to connect with people across boundaries without the hassle of long distance charges and calling rates. The building of knowledge networks through blogs or web logs also facilitates communication among subject-based communities and provides access to information for popular topics and current events. In turn, this helps knowledge exchange become more widespread and accessible to a large scale (Kimball & Rheingold, 2003). In today's society, information about an issue can spread and become viral in a matter of seconds through video and news sharing sites such as YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.

In addition to establishing social ties and meeting new people, social networking services are now seen as an online venue for employee recruitment, internship searches, and building professional relationships with corporations (Kriescher, 2009). With the rapid development in social media and networking, businesses and corporations have started to look into these sites as valuable and innovative tools for future generations. Furthermore, social networking stands as a

convenient and cost effective way to promote companies and market services to a wider scope of people through advertising and creating business profiles. Creating a social or professional profile also increases one's visibility online and therefore generates traffic to open up more opportunities for employment (Kriescher, 2009). In addition, recent studies show that students who use social networking develop useful technology and communication skills. For example, a 2008 research study at the University of Minnesota concluded that students who use online social networking sites gain more proficiency in technology systems, editing content, and stimulating online creativity ("University of Minnesota," 2008). In sum, users of Internet and social media sites have the ability to reap the many forward thinking benefits which online social networking has to offer.

IV. Legal/Ethical Issues

As with any technology that provides its users with numerous benefits, there are also a fair amount of ramifications, including legal and/or ethical issues. One of the legal issues that surround the world of social networking is defamation, or the posting of false or offensive materials online. The number of lawsuits and allegations for defamatory content has risen due from social networking, and although the site may be protected, the user who posts the defamatory comment can still be held liable (Fayle, 2007). Another legality that comes up with social networking is the issue of copyright infringement. The use of third party content, such as photos or text may come into violation of copyright law if taken without permission. Video sharing sites, such as YouTube, have been targeted in the past for copyright infringement. Again, in this case, the user still may be held accountable even if the website is protected (Fayle, 2007). In terms of ethics, a major uncertainty is whether businesses or employers have the right to make employment decisions based on content from a perspective employee's social profile. Many

employers look into social profiles before hiring, and there is always the chance of being turned down for a job or interview because of unfavorable material (Ossian & Paddock, 2010). That being said, there is also the likely potential for bias and unwarranted prejudice to occur if companies base their hiring decisions solely from the content off one's social network. The only way to minimize these legal and ethical risks is to stay cognizant of all materials, including messages, text, graphics, and photos that are posted on one's social networking profile.

V. Security Concerns

Being part of a social network not only means being able to communicate and connect with likeminded people, but also understanding the possible security risks that are at large, especially with online users. The largest hassle anyone on the Internet can face is identity fraud, which runs rampant with social networking. Almost anyone can forge a false identity on a social network and pose as someone else (Harris, 2009). Without absolute verification of someone's identity, one could befriend a complete stranger and not even know it. In addition, hackers create programs, which can retrieve your password and gain access to unauthorized information to sell online. Without the proper settings and privacy controls, there always stands a chance of someone stealing your private information or photos and make it public (Harris, 2009). There have been numerous past cases in which hackers have gained access to profile information and publicized content through mass email. The risk of spam and malicious viruses also exist on social networking sites and can pose a threat to your computer.

VI. Social Problems

Online social networking runs the risk of creating social issues at school, in the workplace, and especially among minors. Social networks, although stated as beneficial to students and businesses still pose as an easy distraction from school or work. Students who try to

log on to their social networking site during school hours may be penalized for violating school policy. Many schools have blocked students' access to such sites to prevent distraction.

Employees are also guilty of trying to access social networking on work computers, and may be subject to penalty or even termination of employment. The bigger issues with social networking lie with the concern for child safety. Minors who engage in online social networking are held vulnerable to cyber bullying—the receiving of hostile or threatening messages/materials via online communication, or cyber stalking—using the Internet to stalk or harass individuals (Chapman, 2009). Furthermore, minors, particularly females are also prone to becoming targets of sexual predators, who pose as teenagers online to gain profile access (Chapman, 2009). The aforementioned problems are all serious issues that all online users, parents, and authority figures should be aware of when using or allowing children to operate social networking sites.

VII. Further Required Research

Social networking is at an all time high right now with its global standing and will continue to evolve in the upcoming years. In fact, social media services are so widely used around the world, that they are helping to facilitate civil advocacy groups and protests. The recent revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt had been stimulated through the online circulation of news and advocacy groups by social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (“Arab Revolt,” 2011). Since then, social protests have stirred up throughout the Middle East, with youthful activists standing up to their oppressive governments through a number of ways such as organizing groups and protest events through Facebook, circulating updated information by Twitter, and broadcasting protests clips and videos on YouTube. One Internet activist stated, “The events in Tunisia and Egypt inspired the whole region, they made us realize that we don’t have to live with all the problems we’re having, and change is indeed possible” and also

“Facebook and social media are playing a major role in all changes and revolutions happening in the Arab region (“Arab Revolt,” 2011).” Protests have become so widespread that certain countries such as China and Saudi Arabia have enforced blocks and censorships on certain social media sites. In sum, people’s voices are being heard through these social networking sites, and it is vehemently inspiring hope and change on a global level.

VIII. Conclusion

Online social networking has truly come a great way, enhancing the way the world communicates. Social networking is a forward thinking phenomenon that can only continue to expand in upcoming years and generations. With the ability to maintain relationships, share information instantly, and build professional ties, one can’t afford to miss out on the immense opportunities social networking has to offer. At the same time, legal and security drawbacks are at large, and privacy precautions along with a thorough sense of judgment must be carried out to ensure the safety of each user. Furthermore, online social media and networking services have revolutionized the developments in internet technology and will continue to serve as the future for global communication.

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