

◆ Social Networking: Communication Revolution or Evolution?

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Social networks and the need to communicate are universal human conditions. A general assumption is that communication technologies help to increase and strengthen social ties. The Internet provides many social networking opportunities. But how do social networking sites affect individual relationships? Do people use social networking sites to expand their personal networks, to find people who have had similar experiences, to discuss a common hobby, for the potential of offline dating? Or, do people spend time on networking sites to deepen their existing personal networks and stay connected to old friends or distant family? What is the nature of the communications that transpire on social networking sites? Is it personal, emotional, private, and important; or trivial, informal, and public? We examined the literature on social networking sites and conducted our own studies of how students on American college campuses engage in social networking. © 2008 Alcatel-Lucent.

A social network is a configuration of people connected to one another through interpersonal means, such as friendship, common interests, or ideas. "Social networking" was not created in the age of the Internet; it existed long before. Social networks exist because humans are societal and require relationships with other humans in order to survive. This need to bond emotionally with others was documented as far back as 1958, in Harlow's famous study of infant rhesus monkeys and wire mothers [4]. Social networks are critical to the psychological well-being of humans; this has been well documented throughout the years and is still interesting to researchers today [2, 5].

Networked computers allow social networks to expand and grow in ways that were previously unanticipated. *Social networking*, as the phrase is being used in industry and in pop culture today, refers to the use of a specific type of Web site focused on the creation

and growth of online social networks which allows users to interact. Most social networking sites encourage communication with others by providing directories of relevant user populations, opportunities for self-description and content uploads, and/or recommender systems.

Some researchers suggest that technology-mediated communication fosters "connected presence" and that offline social networks are affected by the technology that is used for communication [9]. One study reported that Internet users have somewhat larger social networks than nonusers, and that the Internet helps sustain an individual's social network [3]. An investigation conducted a decade ago found that an overwhelming majority of survey respondents reported they had formed personal relationships online [10]. But do these cyberspace relationships change social networks in any meaningful way?

A meta-analysis was conducted of 16 studies run between 1995 and 2003, with data from over 35,000 subjects [11]. The authors concluded there is little to no relationship between Internet use and social interaction. Their overall finding was that “the Internet has not had any broad effect on social interaction.” The authors’ explanation for the lack of relationship between Internet use and offline social connections was the difference in communication with friends versus family. They suggest the Internet may serve as a source of “friendship-reminders” to give attention to one’s friends, which is necessary for friendship to thrive, yet is not necessary for relationships with family, which are less fleeting. “Even though the Internet may have changed many habits, the effects of those changes on fundamental relationships and psychological well-being would likely be small or slow in emerging.”

While there has been little documented support that social networking sites and other Internet use are changing human relationships, we are hearing that “social computing is transforming organizations and societies” [6]. Indeed, there is no question about the existence and dominance of this infrastructure, but there are interesting issues to explore within it: Why do people engage with social networking sites and what do they do while there?

A recent study found that college students use Facebook*, a popular social networking site, to maintain their social capital [3]. They use Facebook to stay linked with people with whom they used to be more closely involved, e.g., former classmates.

A related study investigated whether college students use Facebook for “social searching” or “social browsing” [8]. Social searching occurs when a Facebook user looks up particular individuals he or she already knows or has become aware of via an offline connection in order to learn more about them. Social browsing, on the other hand, occurs when users try to find strangers online whom they would like to meet offline. Overwhelmingly, college students are using Facebook for social searching [8].

These studies explored the reasons people engage in social networking but have not necessarily examined the nature of the communication that takes place on these sites. As part of a larger study we conducted

Panel 1. Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Terms

IM—Instant messaging
IT—Information technology
SMS—Short message service

on communication behaviors and decisions [1], we collected our own data on college students’ use of networking sites. We wanted to learn more about why students engage in social networking as well as discover something about the type of communication they engage in while there.

Method

We conducted a survey and two focus groups to learn about college students’ communication habits, including social networking. We designed a questionnaire that included open-ended questions regarding situations in which someone is more likely to choose one method of communication over another, e.g., voice versus short message service (SMS) versus instant messaging (IM). We included three questions on use of social networking sites. Two questions asked for a numerical response:

1. “How many social networking accounts do you have?”
2. “On average, how many times a day do you log on to a social networking site?”

The third question asked people to describe the who, what, where, why, and when of their communication via social networking sites. We collected data from 68 undergraduates, ages 18 to 22. In order to probe for detailed information about college students’ communication habits, we also conducted two focus groups at two different universities in New Jersey, with seven and six college students, respectively.

Results

About a third of the people we surveyed (37 percent) indicated they have one social networking account, 53 percent have two accounts, and 9 percent reported having three accounts. On average, people visit their accounts about three times per day, but there is wide variability (min: 0; max: 17.5; mean: 3.3; sd: 3.3). Note that the maximum is not a whole

number because one person wrote 17.5 in answer to the question.

Verbatim replies to the open-ended question “I am more likely to use a social networking site because . . .” were evaluated independently by the two authors. Of the 68 questionnaires, two people left the question blank and another eight answered that they did not use social networking sites; thus there were 58 responses to be evaluated. After reading through all the responses, the authors identified eight general categories of responses, which are listed in **Table I**. Each author then rated each response as belonging to one or more of the categories. Responses or partial responses that could not be put into one of the eight categories were tagged as “other.” Interrater agreement after the first round of evaluations was 88 percent. The authors then discussed all responses they had not initially categorized the same and easily came to agreement on 100 percent of the responses.

The most common reason provided by the undergraduates for using social networking sites was “keeping in touch with friends.” Of those respondents who use social networking sites, 41 percent mentioned “keeping in touch” when asked why they use them. Table I shows the percentage of replies for each of the eight categories of answers.

Table I. Undergraduates’ reasons for using social networking sites.

Categories of responses	% Respondents*
To keep in touch with friends	41
It’s fun; entertaining	17
To post or look at photos	12
I use it when I’m bored	12
I use it only in response to someone contacting me on the site	10
Everyone is doing it	10
I use it when I don’t have any contact info	7
Because you can send a message to multiple people	3
Other	19

* Total is greater than 100% because respondents listed multiple reasons.

Our focus groups probed into the motivational contexts for using social networking sites. Focus group participants described Facebook as a good communication method when there is a low need for a response or when one person is not particularly close with others in the network. Generally, they said, Facebook is for a brief exchange and for trivial information. Finally, social networking sites are not often chosen for communication of emotional content. Focus group participants were asked to identify which communication method they would choose when they had to communicate something important, and social networking was never chosen. This form of communication is for chatty, social searching; it is used to post humorous comments about content on another person’s account or to “see what others are up to.” Young adult Americans are not generally communicating with unknown others who share similar interests via these social networking sites; rather, they are using them as a form of entertainment and a way to stay connected with people they already know.

Discussion

Our survey results support the findings of others that the main purpose of social networking is to keep in touch with friends. Our findings also indicate that social networking sites are used for trivial communications (i.e., unimportant message content) with friends, both close and nonclose, and that they are used to maintain friendships, but as a noncentral form of socializing. Social networking may be convenient for retaining contact when time and distance are issues, but it does not replace voice calls and face-to-face communication. Not a single respondent of the 68 people we surveyed answered that he or she used social networking sites to meet new people.

A Web survey conducted in South Korea, one of the most technologically “mature” countries in the world, found that IM is used to maintain a small communication network with other IM users, but not for communicating with people outside one’s existing social network [7]. These findings are in agreement with findings about social networking sites. People are using technology to communicate with people they already know. They are not using it to find new people.

Although technology is evolving rapidly, people as societal beings are not necessarily changing in their basic social motivations. In answer to the question posed in the title of this paper, social networking has not revolutionized communication; rather, it appears—at this time at least—that social networking is simply another form of communication that is evolving over time with the aid of technology.

While it may seem that information technology (IT)-based social communication is superficial and that social networking sites are used to retain existing networks, the ability to harness the more intimate aspects of social relationships by including voice communication, presence, and location information on sites could further change social networking and perhaps provide the “something extra” needed for a communication revolution. Perhaps the ability to game individually and then in a group will change social communication more radically. Additionally, artificial intelligence indexing “others like you” may help people find community and identity not easily available by other communication methods.

Finally, something noted in research but not always compared with other forms of communication is that social networking sites are exploding around individuals’ abilities to be creative and expressive. One can play with presentations of self and share rich content such as video and art, bridging a gap through which a phone or an IM client is too narrow a channel. It takes little skill using social networking sites to publish one’s own life. But as we posited in an earlier paper, it is unlikely that social networking sites will easily predict compatibility when meeting new people [12]. Being social is a multisensory event, and not one that technology-based communication has been able to fully simulate. Face-to-face introductions and time spent in physical company will continue to dictate change and growth for a person’s true familial and friend social networks.

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