

Chapter 7

Social Network Sites: The Science of Building and Maintaining Online Communities, a Perspective from Actor–Network Theory

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of actors in a Social Network Sites and also the triggers and challenges they represent to social networking between today's communities and businesses. A Social Network Sites is the product of the evolution of social liaisons and the emergence of online communities of people who are interested in exploring the concerns and activities of others. A social network is the assembly of direct or indirect contacts; a network is the product of interactions with the actors (individuals, families, enterprises, etc.) enabled by means of the structural design of web 2.0. Social Network Sites bring people together to interact through chat rooms, and share personal information and ideas around any topics via personal homepage publishing tools. This article is intended to be a trigger to deeply and more intensely explore potential roles of actor-network theory in the Social Network Sites context, in today's and tomorrow's world.

INTRODUCTION

This research, as part of my thesis on Information and Communication Science, deals with the role of the actors in a Social Network Sites and also the triggers and challenges they represent to social networking between today's communities and businesses. The methodology is a qualitative

study based on observation, as well as in-depth analysis of a group of members and their operation. Moreover, I ran some testing to examine the interactions between these members, their courses of action, and their performance; verifying the convenience of some relative theories.

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ers. This evolution is forever changing societies, organizations, technologies and our imagination. This article looks at the following: can we apply Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in the context of social networking? What are the limits?

The first interest in the quest to find answers to the above-stated questions is to highlight some of the principal characteristics of the Social Network Sites, the evolution of the notion of Network, and hence explore the controversial actor-network theory that insists on the agency of non-humans, where the “*actants*” in a network take the shape that they do by virtue of their relations with one another, suggesting that there is no difference in the ability of technology, humans, animals, or other non-humans to act. As Callon states “we are entertained by showing the false controversies, indignating and dividing colleges” (Dosse, 1995, p.30)

A social network is the assembly of direct or indirect contacts; a network is the product of interactions with the actors (individuals, families, enterprises etc). The networks have revolutionized our relation with space/time. They have allowed a magnificent development of social networks and the expanding of real communities, tearing down barriers.

Social Network Sites (SNS) bring people together to interact with each other through chat rooms, and share personal information and ideas around any topics via personal homepage publishing tools. They are based on the notion that individual computers linked electronically could form the basis of computer mediated social interaction and networking. User profiles could be created (thanks to fonts and graphics), messages sent to users held on a “friends list” and other members could be sought out who had similar interests in their profiles. Research shows that the more extensive the network is, the higher is the potential of diversification. Hence Social Network Sites provide many criteria for category division: family relationships, business fields,

markets, lobbies, interest groups etc. Therefore this study is qualitative rather than quantitative, as it does not rely on figures to prove a fact or to highlight a finding in regards to the evolution of communication means.

We define the notion of Social Networks more strictly as: a social network is brought about by a mediator founded on IT communication medium, dedicated to constitute or reconstitute social connections, managing and mobilizing them for personal or professional purposes. In this context, we exclude the secondary services. Therefore we do not assimilate platforms and the internet, because a technical platform does not characterize in any case a social network. According to Haythornthwaite (2008), « social networks enable users to gear and bring to site their own social network, hence, creating new relationships or maintaining « latent relationships », i.e. offline relationships.

Also, a social network can pre-exist on a technical platform that supports it or serves as a base for it, or which the network uses and hence for further development, enabling the characterization of a trend or a certain process of evolution.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Etymologically, a network is a net; a tissue or an interlacement of threads. The word’s genealogical illustrations show that this original reference persisted till this very day, but it is “what you can do with the network threads is what has changed with time; corps-cosmos, nature and planet, society and organization” (Musso, 2003). From the beginning to the end of the 17th century the term “Network” was used within the context of the language of medicine. At that time the word “Network” did not refer in any case to communication.

The big advance to the new network concept was its “exiting” out of the human body at the turn of the 18th century: the term network was no longer used exclusively for human flesh; it was

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