

Chapter 89

Participation in Social Networks as Feral Information Systems

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ABSTRACT

Social networking systems blur the distinction between the private and working spheres, and users are known to use such systems both at home and at the work place, both professionally and with recreational goals. In fact, several traditional information systems have been modified in order to include social aspects. However, in the vast majority of cases, social networking platforms are used without corporate blessing, maintaining their status as feral systems. This chapter provides some background notions about theories of participation in social networks. In particular, it reviews the notion of social capital, which may be important both for the individuals that are able to accumulate large amounts and for organizations. Subsequently, it shows the role of social capital in the participation in online social networking activities, in the various cases of virtual organizations, virtual teams, and online networks of practice. Finally, it describes the present situation and some possible prospects where social elements are being increasingly introduced into more traditional business systems, such as CRMs and ERPs, with great promises and mixed initial results.

INTRODUCTION

The most important technological trend of the last ten years has been the rise of social networking systems to social phenomena involving hundred of millions of people all around the world, attracting

their users from any kind of group, regardless of age, gender, education, or nationality.

Social networking systems blur the distinction between the private and working spheres, and users are known to use such systems both at home and on the work place both professionally and with recreative goals. Social networking systems

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can be equally used to organize a work meeting, a dinner with the colleagues or a birthday party with friends.

Nowadays, the most popular social networking systems are the largest information systems accessible to the general public and, because of their neutrality according to both the public-private and the work-home axes, often assume the role of feral systems.

For example, the chat systems that are embedded in social networking platforms are often the most practical way to contact a colleague to ask an urgent question, especially in technologically oriented companies.

Moreover, several traditional information systems have been modified in order to include social aspects and several organizations: (i) allow external social networking platforms to be used (e.g., Facebook was available for Microsoft and Apple employees before the general public launch); (ii) have created an internal social networking platform (DiMicco & Millen, 2007); or (iii) allow other social platforms for specific purposes (Millen et al., 2006). However, in the vast majority of cases, social networking platforms are used without corporate blessing, maintaining their status as feral systems.

According to DiMicco (2008), most users that use social networking platforms for work purposes are mostly interested in accumulating social capital, either for career advancement or to gather support for their own projects inside the company. Given the close relation between professional usage of social media and social capital, in the following sections we discuss both the notion of social capital and how it affects participation in social media. Finally, we discuss how virtual teams and organizations benefit from social media.

BACKGROUND

Online social networks are a special case of the more general concept of social network, i.e.,

which is defined as a set or sets of actors and the relations defined on them (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). Social networks are typically studied using social network analysis, a discipline that focuses on the structural and topological features of the network. More recently, additional dimensions have been added to the traditional social network analytic approach (Monge and Contractor 2003; Borgatti and Foster 2003; Parkhe et al. 2006; Hoang and Antoncic 2003).

An important theoretical foundation for the analysis of participation in social networks is constituted by social capital. Social capital represents a person's benefit due to his relations with other persons, including family, colleagues, friends and generic contacts. The concept originated in studies about communities, to underline the importance of collective actions and the associated enduring relations of trust and cooperation, for the functioning of neighborhoods in large cities (Jacobs, 1961).

Social capital has been studied as a factor providing additional opportunities to some players in a competitive scenario, and, from this point of view, it has been studied in the context of firms (Backer, 1990), nations (Fukuyama, 1995) and geographic regions (Putnam, 1993, 1995). In this sense, social capital is defined as a third kind of capital that is brought in the competitive arena, along with financial capital, which includes machinery and raw materials, and human capital, which includes knowledge and skills. Moreover, the role of social capital in the development of human capital has been studied by Loury and Coleman (Loury, 1977, 1987; Coleman, 1988).

Social capital is typically studied: (i) by drawing a graph of connected people and their own resources, creating a connection between each player's resources and those of his closest contacts; or (ii) by analyzing social structures in their own right, and supposing that the network structure alone can be used to estimate some player's competitive advantage, at the social stance.

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