Chapter XXII
Analysis and Evaluation of the Connector Website

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes a new theoretical construct for evaluating Websites that facilitate online social networks. The suggested model considers previous academic work related to social networks and online communities. This study’s main purpose is to define a new kind of social institution, called a “connector Website”, and provide a means for objectively analyzing Web-based organizations that empower users to form online social networks. Several statistical approaches are used to gauge Website-level growth, trend lines, and volatility. This project sets out to determine whether or not particular connector Websites can be mechanisms for social change, and to quantify the nature of the observed social change. The author hopes this chapter introduces new applications for Web log analysis by evaluating connector Websites and their organizations.

PREMISE

In February 2000, Malcolm Gladwell published his best-selling book The Tipping Point to much controversy as well as popular acclaim. Gladwell’s thesis, building on the work of epidemiologists and social scientists before him, stated that a social “tipping point” is characterized by: (1) the contagiousness and subsequent “stickiness” of an idea, product, or message; (2) small causes leading to big effects and social change; and (3) a resulting social change that occurs quickly and exponentially (Gladwell, 2000).

How does tipping theory work? A disease epidemic is the metaphor. According to Gladwell, social tipping happens as a viral process by which ideas, products, and messages spread and infect a population. Gladwell’s “Connector” is a key human agent in social epidemics. Connectors are important because they know a lot of people, and the people they know come from diverse social networks and subcultures. Simply put, Connectors
bring many people together who otherwise would have little chance to make an acquaintance. If these people casually interact by exchanging ideas, products, or messages (relying on the first factor of contagiousness and stickiness), interactions should exponentially increase across a defined population and lead to a social tipping point.

A classic social networking model put forth more than thirty years ago by Mark Granovetter explains one of the general processes driving tipping point theory. In an article published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, Granovetter explored how limited small-scale social interactions (he termed “weak ties”) can lead to large-scale phenomena such as diffusion of influence and information, social mobility, community and political organization, and social cohesion (Granovetter, 1973). Weak ties tend to be low maintenance in terms of time, commitment, and energy. These relationships often provide a broad range of sources that are quick references for new information and opportunities. Gladwell’s Connectors enable the weak ties between people.

**INTRODUCTION**

Today many millions of Americans are utilizing “connector Websites” to serve as a proxy for Gladwell’s Connector. The connector Website is a proposed theoretical construct and is defined in this report. This type of Website is a new kind of social institution, and its public availability coincided with the emergence of the Internet in the mid-1990s. A connector Website has the capacity and function to provide contacts and facilitate social exchanges between people, and effectively build communities of users. It boosts timely and relevant interactions between individuals while enlarging the scale of social exchange processes, by way of online social search and networking.

Social exchange applications (and technologies) collectively fortify the infrastructural backbone for connector Websites. To some degree, each Website allows for “social search” and “social networking”. It is an empirical question beyond the scope of this report to parse out to what extent a Website is used specifically for one purpose or the other. In general, connectors allow users to create self-identifying profiles, while also empowering them to search for others based on needs, interests, mutual “friends”, contacts, or other points of focus.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, the first connector Websites were those emphasizing social search, and more specifically, online dating (e.g. Match.com), online trading and classifieds (e.g. Craigslist), and online auctions (e.g. eBay). A second generation of connectors gained national media attention around 2002, offering more explicit social networking options for professional/career networking (e.g. LinkedIn, Ryze), and for making new friends through mutual friends or interests (e.g. Friendster, MySpace, Facebook). In 2004 industry-leading companies like Google, Yahoo!, MSN, and AOL started testing their own connector Websites to enhance their existing online communities.

The research on connector Websites is largely qualitative and restricted to social networks and online communities within Websites. Most researchers have focused their energies modeling the design of online communities, observing online identity formation and social interactions within one Website or a small number of Websites, and using social network analysis to measure the kinds of relationships in a community’s social networks (Adamic et al., 2003; Barnes, 2006; Boyd, 2004; Boyd & Heer, 2006; Donath & Boyd, 2004; Dwyer, 2007; Garton et al., 1997; Kollock & Smith, 1999; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003; Rheingold, 1993; Rosen et al., 2003; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Wellman & Hampton, 1999; Stutzman, 2006a; Stutzman, 2006c). In recent years, the Pew Internet & American Life Project has conducted large scale surveys offering valuable information about human behavior in online