Innovation in Communication:
An Actor-Network Analysis
of Social Websites

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the dimensions of social websites to establish communication innovation using the Actor Network Theory. Social websites are also referred to as social network sites and social media sites which reflect technology, users, content and linguistic issues as heterogeneous combination of entities for interaction and communication via this media. Social websites have clearly achieved widespread adoption as a new means of communication in a very short time around the globe. An extensive review of extant literature on social websites is presented in this paper to reflect their growing importance, the reasons for their adoption, the content shared, the mode of use and the language used for communication illustrating that social websites are a combination of a number of technological and social entities. This paper highlights emerging research issues on social networking sites as a future communication tool and the innovation in communication using the Actor Network Theory.

Keywords: Actor Network Theory, Dimensions of Social Networking, SNS Language, Social Networking, Social Web Sites, User Created Content

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites is fast becoming the principal communication and information sharing tool used by people of all ages, and backgrounds in all regions of the world. Social networking sites also referred to as social media sites are developed on the Web 2.0 platform, which offers an architecture for participation and allows users to control their own data and information (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010). Web 2.0 is an extension of Web 1.0 on which individuals deliver content and services in the public domain creating a network effect through which others can access, update and combine content (Cummings, Massey, & Ramesh, 2009). Characteristics of Web 2.0 enable formation of communities via collaboration and information sharing; novel and enhanced data access methods with ‘mashed up’ (combined) information from different sources; and with Ajax supported creative and responsive interfaces (Ankolekar,
Krotzsch, Tran, & Vrandecic, 2007). Social networking applications therefore developed on the Web 2.0 platform are designed around an architecture of participation and communal collaboration (Sena, 2009).

Individuals are using social websites for communication, collaboration, information sharing, networking, finding ‘lost’ friends and forming communities. Although business organizations are also resorting to social websites for advertising, marketing and engaging employees (Singh, Davison, & Wickramasinghe, 2010) the focus of this paper is on ‘social’ user issues and characteristics of social networking. Web 2.0 based social networking sites are in very widespread use with new ones emerging almost every day. It is proposed to identify the most popular sites (each with over 30 million users) and determine their ‘dimensions’ of networking and communication. These are noted in Table 1.

Adoption of social web sites by individuals is so significant that users of these sites range from 30 million on MyHeritage to 500 million on Facebook (Table 1). The growing number of users indicates the importance of social websites and their relevance to society. Due to social websites being so widely adopted in a very short period of time, and accessible on a variety of platforms including PCs, mobile phones, laptops and other ubiquitous technology (Turban, Lee, King, Liang, & Turban, 2010) it is considered essential to explore key components of social networking that are making them so prevalent. Although there are numerous publications on one or more aspect of Web 2.0 technologies, significant earlier studies on this topic are focused on its taxonomy (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010), definition, history and scholarship (Boyd, 2006) risk, trust and privacy concerns (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009), changes in user behaviour (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010), self disclosure model (Krasnova, Spiekermann, Korolevu, & Hidebrand, 2010; Posey, Lowry, Roberts, & Ellis, 2010), and impact on business environment (Sena, 2009; Singh, Davison, & Wickramasinghe, 2010). A generic consideration and understanding of why they are so widely used, what is the content shared on it, who are the users, where is it used, in which time zones they can be used and how do they support communication are not known. This paper is an attempt to highlight the reasons for such fervent use of social networking sites, the content shared on these sites, potential participants, temporal aspects of communication, as well the linguistic elements of social networking by critically reviewing the extant literature.

We structure the extant literature in the following section under purpose, content, participants, technology, time and linguistic elements to establish the components of social websites and their increased adoption around the world. This enables an understanding of the wide use of social websites as a communication and collaboration tool, the content shared, who the users of this media are, the mode of use, the linguistic elements involved and issues for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of literature on social websites is presented in the next section to explicate the purpose, content, potential participants, technology platform, time and the language used for communication using social web sites.

Purpose

As noted, social websites are based on Web 2.0 technologies, described by O’Reilly (2005) as new cost effective internet applications that support collaboration and communication amongst users. Users collaborate and communicate via social networking sites by taking advantage of Web 2.0 capabilities to author and edit content (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004), to communicate in real time (Madhaven & Goasguen, 2007) whilst being mobile (Bolter & Macintyre, 2007). The growth in social networking is so significant that not only are there web sites such as Ning and KickApps supporting their creation, but a search engine is now available for finding them (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010). The list of social web sites identified (Table 1)
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