Facebook’s Rise to the Top: Exploring Social Networking Registrations by Country

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ABSTRACT

In this article, the authors examine Facebook’s rise as an emerging standard for Internet-based social networking. Within the past four years Facebook has evolved from being the third or fourth most popular social networking site in many counties to the top position in much of the world. An exploration of Facebook registrations by country reveals an expected strong correlation with broadband availability, but also a relationship with Internet-capable mobile telephones in countries with limited broadband access. The analysis also reveals Facebook’s difficulty expanding in some countries including BRIC nations (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) where it faces non-Western cultural mores regarding personal privacy, state challenges to freedom of expression, and competition from well-established international and indigenous sites.

Keywords: Brazil-Russia-India-China Nations (BRIC Nations), Broadband Internet, Facebook, Mobile Telephones, Social Networking Sites (SNSs)

INTRODUCTION

Few technologies of the last hundred years match the Internet’s extraordinary impact on how we access, share, and utilize information. We turn to the Internet for the latest national or world news, to shop or complete bank transactions, and increasingly to communicate with friends, relatives, colleagues, and others. In fact, the importance of remaining connected has led some to characterize the Internet as a social technology or “third place” in our lives after the “first place” (home) and the “second place” (work). Indeed, the Internet has been described as more of a social creation than a technical one (Berners-Lee & Fischetti 1999).

Emerging over the last ten years, Internet-based social networking sites (SNSs) play a unique and increasingly important role in facilitating communication and social interaction. SNSs combine the functionality of text messaging, chat rooms, and personal web pages with an evolving array of capabilities such as photo and video sharing, web conferencing, and direct marketing. SNSs have two distinguishing features. First, they enable users to create and share a “profile” or personalized webpage with information such as educational background, work history, favorite books and movies, and personal photographs. Maintained by each user, this dynamic content encourages repeat visits

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by other users. Second, SNSs become more valuable to users as they expand in the way early telephone networks did a century ago. SNSs are designed to enable personal networks to grow using contact information discovered on the personal networks of other users. It is this focus on connectivity, rather than common interests, that sets SNSs apart from other forms of many-to-many, one-to-many, or one-to-one communication such as listservs, blogs, and chat rooms.

Even when compared to the ubiquitous mobile telephone, worldwide growth of social networking is without precedent. Measured in terms of “hits” (visits to web pages) SNSs are surpassed only by search engines such as Google.com as the most popular sites on the Internet (IDG Enterprise 2012). A 2010 Nielsen survey estimated that nearly 23 percent of all U.S. Internet activity can be attributed to SNSs (Nielsen Wire, 2010). A key factor contributing to time spent on SNSs is accessibility. SNSs are used at home but also during work hours and increasingly through mobile computing devices.

In this article we explore Facebook’s worldwide expansion. Within less than ten years Facebook has gained a presence in nearly every country as its popularity has overshadowed both international and indigenous social networking sites. As a first step we consider Facebook’s per capita use, or penetration. In examining penetration within regions and individual countries Facebook registrations are compared to broadband availability and mobile telephone subscriptions. Finally, we consider populations that have resisted Facebook’s standardization through a look at the so-called BRIC countries: Brazil, Russia, India, and China.

A Brief History of Online Social Networking

Computer networks have been used to exchange personal information since USERNET was introduced to mainframe computing in the 1970s. A decade later personal computers and telephone bulletin board systems (BBSs) enabled the exchange of electronic messages from homes and offices through private networks or subscription systems such as CompuServe and America Online (AOL). Beginning in the 1990s the Internet facilitated the sharing of personal information among friends and acquaintances through email, chat rooms, and websites. In contrast to websites and chat rooms established for connecting persons with common interests, Classmates.com was innovative through its focus on reconnecting high school friends (Peslak, Ceccucci, & Sendall, 2010). Other fledgling SNSs soon emerged. Named for psychologist Stanley Milgram’s (1967) theory of social networks, SixDegrees.com was among the first SNSs to offer capabilities for viewing information about friends of friends. Other SNSs such as Friendster.com introduced tools for viewing and exchanging photographs, videos, and music (Garrahan 2009). At the international level hundreds of international and indigenous SNSs appeared such as Maktoob.com (Arab World), hi5.com (Mongolia, Mexico, Portugal, and other countries), Habbo.com (Finland), and Wer-kennt-wen.de (Germany).

SNSs can often be distinguished by their target audiences. LinkedIn.com evolved as a tool for business networking while niche SNSs have been established to address special interests such as firefighting (e.g., firefighternation.ning.com), sports (Streetball.com), or membership in ethnic groups (Bharatstudent.com) (Mellins, 2008). SNSs can be categorized according to functionality such as microblogging (Twitter.com) or by the scale of their geographic influence. In a few cases indigenous SNSs dominate their home countries, such as Qzone.qq.com in China and Cyworld.com in South Korea (Ewers, 2006). A few larger SNSs have gained international appeal including MySpace.com, Orkut.com, and Facebook.com (Table 1).

Past Research on Social Networks

As suggested by Wellman (2001), our lives and daily routines are influenced by crisscrossing and overlapping networks involving work, family, and neighbors. Within the framework of these formal and informal groups, “social
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