News

Are Social Networking Sites Growing Up?

Greg Goth

Nicholas Christakis, a medical internist and social science researcher at Harvard University, can analyze the effects of social networking sites (SNS) with the discipline you’d expect of a career scientist. He can also distill the new data analysis opportunities these networks bring the sciences with pithy catch phrases.

“We can do things on a scale and with a level of completeness—both in terms of coverage of population and in terms of knowledge of what they are thinking and doing—that was never possible before,” Christakis says. “It’s sort of what I call ‘massive passive.’ That sort of data collection is now possible at relatively low cost.”

For social scientists, bound by experimental protocols protecting subject privacy and data integrity, the availability of social-interaction trace data is indeed a gold mine. However, opportunities also abound for commercial interests without such scholarly constraints. Christakis and colleagues at other universities who are studying social patterns among college students using Facebook are beginning to sound cautions about different generational perceptions regarding data ownership in social media. Those differences will affect application developers as well as users and perhaps the fabric of civic discourse as more information is disseminated via social media channels instead of vetted sources.

Researchers say youthful users have cavalier attitudes over who owns the information around technologies such as photo- and video-editing applications built on a social networking site. This attitude can bleed over into data containing sensitive personal information. Reconciling new mass behaviors with the data ownership rights and source credibility expected in “traditional” media is already engendering intense discussion among platform owners, researchers, and privacy advocates.

“Most people don’t understand the nature of the discussion because they don’t have any real insight into how the data is being collected and used, and how these systems work,” Sterling says. “It’s a little too complex and nuanced for them and most people are just not paying attention to it in their daily lives.”

“Hey, I bought this!”

One recent example of these issues showed up in Facebook’s launch of Beacon, an advertising application that sent registered Facebook users’ consumption data, unbidden by those users, to their Facebook friends. At launch, Facebook configured the application as an “opt-out” feature. The resulting storm of protest from privacy advocates caused Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg to issue a public apology (www.facebook.com/press/releases.php?p=11174), and the company to change Beacon to an “opt-in” application, which requires explicit permission from users to share their buying decisions.

“For the most part, my students were blissfully unaware of what goes on behind the scenes, but appreciative of the customization,” says Shyam Sundar, a Penn State University professor and the founder of the university’s Media Effects Research Lab. “You should keep in mind the majority of
Facebook clients are students, young people, often teenagers, whose main concerns are about acquiring things and showing off, among other things, and that's perfect for a venue like this. Facebook has kind of buried the privacy issue and instead has harped on the convenience aspect, so they had good thing going with their primary clientele until others jumped in with privacy concerns.”

Sundar says that when he mentioned the privacy debate to his students, they showed a new degree of concern about how their information was being used.

**Can social networks balance fluff and substance?**

The questions surrounding SNS data rights are becoming more prominent as Facebook further opens its platform. Extending a policy it began in May 2007, when it made its API available to developers, the company announced in December that it would let other social sites use the Facebook platform architecture as a model and license its methods and tags (http://developers.facebook.com/news.php?blog=1&story=60). Then in January 2008, Slide—a San Francisco-based developer of applications that let users personalize photos and videos on social networking sites—announced it had just garnered $US50 million in venture funding (www.news.com/Facebook-software-maker-Slide-gets-50-million/2100-1038_3-6226885.html).

So, there’s money to be made on SNS platforms. However, whether they can support more robust productivity applications is still an open question. Given the vast popularity of social networks among young people, the education sector might have opportunities to create applications that combine the social network platforms and an instructor’s curriculum information.

“There’s been some discussion about potential educational applications of Facebook or other social networking sites, and a lot of that is based on the fact that any time you infuse a peer-to-peer aspect or social aspect into an educational setting, students become more engaged and it tends to increase active learning,” says Nicole Ellison, a Michigan State University professor and social science researcher.

Ellison says such applications will need more heft than existing popular SNS programs.

“The knee-jerk reaction is to say, ‘Students are logged on to Facebook anyway. It will make them more engaged, let me infuse my classroom with that energy.’” But Ellison warns against jumping on the novelty factor. “That’s going to wear off,” she says. “What’s going to need a lot of work is coming up with pedagogically sound applications that are going to be beneficial to students long term, that use principles proven through time.”

Such applications, commonly called course management or learning management systems, are already being deployed. In December 2007, third-party developer Inigral received US$500,000 in funding for its Facebook-compatible LMS application (http://venturebeat.com/2007/12/03/facebook-education-app-gets-funding).

However, some academics have expressed reservations about posting instructional data to Facebook, saying its terms of use granted all rights to the material, in perpetuity, to Facebook.

“Facebook offers some generic functionality that is an improvement over traditional LMSs, but this says more about the sorry state of existing LMS solutions than about the suitability of Facebook as a replacement,” OpenAcademic project lead Bill Fitzgerald wrote in his blog entry regarding Facebook as an instructional application platform (http://openacademic.org/news/please-stop-the-madness).

**SNS as a new media primer**

The issues surrounding terms of use and other user rights on social networking sites might be part of a larger discussion. Researchers, developers, and content providers must all learn to balance cross-
generational appeal and credibility in future iterations of digital networks. In a recently published paper, "The MAIN Model: A Heuristic Approach to Understanding Technology Effects on Credibility" (www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/dmal.9780262562324.073), Sundar suggested that today’s youth are more likely to pick up on "cues embedded in—and transmitted by—the structure (rather than content) of digital technologies.”

Sundar sees a tendency among some scholars to develop "a checklist or some kind of media literacy campaign to inform young people how to evaluate the credibility of sources or information—all these classic checklist methods derived from newspaper or TV research.

"I say that is wrong because they are not paying attention to these credibility issues; they are paying attention to these surface aspects. It’s these four things in the MAIN model—modality, agency, interactivity and navigability—that can have certain cues, embedded elements in them, that can steer young users toward credible information.”

Sundar says communications researchers can tread the "next frontier” of new media, perhaps enlightening both application users and creators of their future rights and responsibilities in navigating the vast amount of information on SNS-derived technology.

"What social networking sites do, and even blogs to some extent—almost any Web 2.0 application—is tend to merge the gap, so you see no distinction between professional sources and your own network of friends, for example—and they are all part of the same network. It comes bundled together, so it’s creating that murkiness in who or what the source is.

“But that’s really very exciting territory, how to deal with the new medium which is not just for broadcasting, but for communicating with each other, which are two classically different forms of communication.”

Industry analyst Greg Sterling, of Sterling Market Intelligence, says that SNS-type collaboration technologies will expand well beyond the current industry leaders. Yet he also cautions that if users are increasingly sensitized to the amount of personal information they’re leaving online, practices such as the original Beacon “opt-out” could backfire on site operators who aren’t careful about their data rights policies. Plenty of other platforms are vying for attention.

“I think there’s a kind of social network fatigue that exists for some people,” Sterling says. "Probably two networks, maybe three, can hold their attention, and those can be different for different people. You could have a professional one and then a general one like Facebook. That’s not to say I wouldn’t add comments here and there on a news site or forum occasionally. So, I think the phenomenon of community is very widely disseminated and there’s a culture of participation that’s growing, whether or not that’s through a social network per se.”

Penn State’s Sundar says the entire paradigm of learning has changed through the social networking model. Whether that model carries on after graduation might go far in predicting how future social networking sites offer themselves. This, in turn, would affect the wider ramifications of collective versus individual ethos of interaction.

“It’s unbelievable how my students allocate tasks to each other when they are asked to do a group project,” Sundar says. "My generation would never have even thought of coming up with such efficient ways of doing it. They know how to leverage each others’ skill sets and how to strike strategic partnerships, even before they form groups.

“Now, given that kind of scenario in the background, social networks are even more important. In the olden days, the social networks we formed were all physical. Now you can be in your dorm room and belong to a number of on-campus activities by being part of the various online networks—all of which have an application.”
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