

DESIGNER SOCIAL NETWORKS: OPTIMIZING SOCIABILITY



Very few of us consider our social relationships as information systems, but digitized sociality is encouraging us to do this. As we increase the variety of things we do online and the number of sites we do them on, we create expanded personal digital footprints. Couple these with online social networking, location-aware data, and web analytics, and we get new ways to measure and understand our own “social graph”—and by extension, ourselves and our roles within those networks. We are beginning to design and cultivate our relationships to create desired outcomes—to treat our social networks as programmable systems.

NEW FORMS OF VALUE FROM SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

Get ready to know more about the people you connect with online. We are in the early stages of using personal networking tools (from Facebook to LinkedIn to FriendFeed), which allow us to collect, quantify, and analyze data about the interactions and knowledge flowing across networks. Today we can see how many people have read a blog post or visited a Web site, and where they are in the world. Next will be new levels of analysis and visualization—like being able to see exactly which companies’ employees are generating the most relevant knowledge within an industry, the real-time geographic viral effect of individual speakers at an event, or the socioeconomic stratification of the people in someone’s network.

FRIENDING OTHERS FOR POSITIVE CONTAGION

Scientific research on social networks (such as that reported in Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler’s *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How they Shape Our Lives*) suggests that individual behaviors, moods, and activities have a measurable impact, for good or ill, on people who are separated by two or even three degrees within a real-world (not online) network. Given that, we will be much more vigilant about who is in our network. Not only will we be able to plot and track our own changing social graph, we will also want to know what’s going on with our friends’ friends and what impact this has on us.

OPTIMIZED PERSONAL MEDIA PRODUCTION

As the value of online social networks increases, there will be more services like uSocial, an advertising firm providing online social connections for cash. For individuals, it will become easier to assess the financial and social value of our personal online activities. We’ll know precisely whom we influence and which people provide us with the most valuable knowledge in turn. By seeing ourselves as inputs into other people’s information systems, we will begin to reshape what we do so as to provide optimum value to the people we hope will pay attention to us—whether potential employers or new friends.



Personas, an MIT initiative to demonstrate what our digital traces are



ENABLING TECHNOLOGIES



Deep Web:
Semantic engineering
of linked data

Sensory Data Interfaces:
Re-routing perception

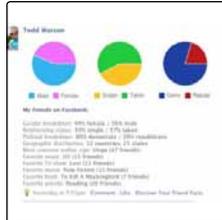
Pervasive Wireless:
Continuous connection

Location-based Computing:
Everything knows where it is

Cloud Computing:
Supercomputing on demand

Signals:

FRIEND STATISTICS ON FACEBOOK (NEW FORMS OF VALUE FROM SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS)



Facebook, Orkut, and other social networking sites are ground zero for introducing programmable relationships to the general public. Along with apps that tell you what 1970s B-movie most represents you, a growing number of programs analyze your Facebook friends. Mostly used for fun, these apps are popularizing the idea that you gain insight into your own identity and status by understanding more about who and what you are linked to.

Source: <http://turbottodd.wordpress.com/2009/10/01/social-network-analysis-getting-to-know-you/>

TWITTER TIMES (FRIENDING OTHERS FOR POSITIVE CONTAGION)



Twitter Times is a free Web service that uses your social graph (that is, your entire Twitter network of people you follow and those who follow you) to create a personalized newsfeed in a newspaper format. The links that are being shared by the most people within your network are presented as news items and updated on an hourly basis. Tools like Twitter Times will drive new network designs as people add and subtract friends to see how this changes the kinds of news they get.

Source: <http://www.twittertim.es/>

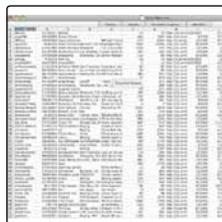
USOCIAL (OPTIMIZED PERSONAL MEDIA PRODUCTION)



uSocial, an advertising firm, is in the business of selling Twitter followers and Facebook friends, as well as getting people's information on the front page of social bookmarking sites such as Digg and Yahoo!Buzz. For a mere \$147 the company promises to add 2500 new Twitter followers to your account, and less than \$200 will procure 1000 Facebook fans.

Source: <http://usocial.net/>

FRIENDORFOLLOW.COM (OPTIMIZED PERSONAL MEDIA PRODUCTION)



FriendorFollow.com visualizes the different levels of reciprocity within a Twitter network. Input your Twitter user name and the site divides your network into three parts: (1) Following—people you are following but who do not follow you; (2) Fans—those who are following you but who you are not following; and (3) Friends—those who you follow and who also follow you. In essence, it gives a view of the way attention is distributed throughout your network. It also delivers an Excel spreadsheet of each of the three groups, complete with screen name and user name, location, number of followers, length of time on Twitter, and more.

Source: Excel spreadsheet, LynJ's "Fans" <http://friendorfollow.com>



What difference does this make?

We are learning to see ourselves through the lens of social networks, each with its own distinct and quantifiable characteristics. Some power users are already beginning to use available tools to analyze the state of their friends and followers on a regular basis.

MAKING INVISIBLE CONNECTIONS VISIBLE

The ability to measure our social relationships in new ways will change our perception of what we give and receive from others. We will learn that different people in our networks do different things for us, some of which we never noticed before. People we do not even know could turn out to be more important than we thought for our professional or personal development, while others will be reevaluated.

GROWTH OF TOOLS FOR STRUCTURING PERSONAL NETWORKS

In search of health, happiness, and competitive advantage, people will want help designing networks for particular effects—both in real life and online. There will be increased demand for ways to track, analyze, and visualize the changing status of their networks. There will also be an explosion of services and tools that make matches between people based on proprietary algorithms and evolving network science.

INCREASED SOCIAL ISOLATION OF THOSE PERCEIVED AS “BAD” NETWORK MEMBERS

As social network effects become more well known, unhealthy or unhappy people may find themselves with fewer social connections, both online and offline. Some of the people they know will worry about “catching” their behavior or passing it on throughout their entire network. Increased social isolation, in turn, has been shown to worsen disease.

NETWORKS AS MIRRORS OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR ACTIONS

Real-time network feedback will let us see that a particular kind of comment causes us to lose the attention of people we value. Some will begin to modify their actions, tailoring them to the perceived needs of the network. As Michael Silverton, a Silicon Valley engineer who is deeply engaged in collaborative life-streaming, recently reminded himself, “It’s going to be persistently important in the short to mid term to not [mess] around too much or risk losing access to minds that dramatically enhance one’s own extended cognition.”¹



What to do differently?

Businesses can learn to engage consumers through social networks in ways that provide value. They can also harness public employee data streams for use internally.

REFERENCE

1. Cognition-Hacking the Grid: Full Twitter Reboot Inevitable, <http://michael.silverton.palo-alto.ca.us/sweet-cron/items/search/GCG>

SUBSCRIBE AND TAP INTO CONSUMER IDENTITIES ON PRE-EXISTING SOCIAL NETWORKS

Despite the rapid advances in our ability to create value from digital sociality, we are quickly approaching mass social network fatigue. In the next few years we will see people pull back from their participation in fragmented networks and try to get more control over just one or two. To engage consumers, join the crowd rather than ask people to join a stand-alone network associated with a single business or brand.

CAPTURE PUBLIC EMPLOYEE DATA STREAMS

Many employees are sharing their best ideas in public domain networks like Twitter, LinkedIn, or FriendFeed. As long as they don't share anything proprietary, they create social capital for themselves and for the organization. Companies have much to gain from simultaneously capturing public employee data streams (ideally with the full knowledge of employees), adding analysis and visualization, and making use of them internally.

MAKE YOURSELF VALUABLE TO THE PEOPLE WHOSE DATA YOU ALREADY ANALYZE

People are increasingly aware that businesses are analyzing their personal data. If a business can actually provide something that an individual wants—tracking purchases, for instance, or discovering patterns in online searches—the business has an opportunity to become a valuable, even trusted, node that is programmed into that person's network rather than a nosy corporation to be avoided.



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