



22/11/07

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Is the web the ultimate social network?

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Is the web the ultimate social network?

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Jeff Patmore, BT's head of strategic university research discusses a recent international collaborative research project on the impact of social networking.

Networking has always been important to academics, senior business people and friends. It is how we keep in touch and test ideas. However, virtually overnight vast numbers of people are 'networking' not just in their own physical communities but globally. A trend that started among university students has spread to hundreds of millions of people in all walks of life. Online social networking has arrived.

Working with researchers in the UK, US, Malaysia and Australia, BT has been looking at this phenomenon. Already some interesting facts are emerging. For example, communication on these networks is far more like texting and less like e-mail, time can be shifted - people over distance can communicate in exchanges lasting days and there is no perceived pressure to respond. Our research has also shown that people are often more adventurous in these environments, generally feeling safer behind their screens.

Community members can visit the lives of others, wonder at their personal details and understand the motivations and connections in actions and relationships. "Status updates" allow users to write a quick sketch-like description of what they are feeling or doing and broadcast this to those in the network or community, so keeping information fresh and alive.

Together, these facilities allow the participants to feel part of a community and when the facilities are well managed, enable them to interact at a level they are comfortable with.

Mixing friends and family

Our research has also found that users of online social networks display quite distinct views on how they manage their groups of 'friends'. Some are completely comfortable with mixing work friends with non-work friends and family in their networks. Others tend to be ill at ease with this and keep the two communities completely separate. This mirrors, in many cases, how we manage our lives.

The self-disclosure required by social networking sites requires trust. Our research has found that users do not generally know who may be sent information, how the information will be judged and how long the information will exist for. Younger people, according to our research, are less concerned about this trend and will post information more freely.

We have also looked at how these networks impact on businesses. In the 'real world', people who should be communicating with each other because their interests intersect and their business would benefit, often do not because they are based either in different parts of the world, different departments, or even on different floors of a building. However many businesses have removed their blocks on web based social networks in the belief that on balance there will be a positive outcome even though some time may be lost. BT's research is showing that this is indeed the case, especially in knowledge based industries. People are using online social networks to quickly communicate, and share knowledge and information with friends and colleagues across the planet.

More recently many social networking sites have made it easy for users to link to other services such as video hosting sites. Some even enable users to build video into their messages and pages, so building on other networks and interests and increasing the potential linkages.

The World Wide Web now has well over a billion users, a figure which has been growing at a good pace for many years. However the top ten social networking sites have total registrations in excess of 500 million, although many people register for more than one site the number and its phenomenal growth is still quite amazing. Our investigations have also shown that one site with more than 70 million users has half of its user base visiting every day! With these levels of membership and interaction there is enormous potential. At the end of the day, humans are social animals who enjoy communication and interaction. Social networking applications tap into this, and we will have a richer experience if we can harness these applications to enhance both our social and business lives.

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