Let's Connect

Fr. Jürgen Wegner, SSPX

"Bob's surgery went well. We're optimistic. Thanks to all who kept their fingers crossed for him!"
"Will the crisis come soon? The news reports are diverse." "I will just give water to my flowers and then I will go to bed. Good night to all of you!"

Whoever has experienced that someone in the middle of a conversation grabbed his cell phone to read an incoming Twitter message, knows how dominant modern ways of communication can be. One is chatting, mailing, blogging on the computer, leaves pins on sites such as Facebook or Bebo or follows the life of others on the net. A cell phone with data service makes it possible that one maintains permanent virtual contact on his way without saying a word. Virtual communication invades our lives more and more.

What thoughts can we have about the new ways of communication?

Social network services

A social network service focuses on the building of social networks or social relations among people. A social network service essentially consists of a representation of each user, his or her social links, and a variety of additional services. Most social network services are web based and provide means for users to interact over the internet, such as e-mail and instant messaging. Social networking sites allow users to share ideas, activities, events, and interests within their individual networks.

The main types of social networking services are those which contain category places (such as former school-year or classmates), means to connect with friends (usually with self-description pages) and a recommendation system linked to trust. Facebook, Bebo and Twitter, which are widely used throughout the world combine many of these methods.

History

The notion that individual computers linked electronically could form the basis of computer-

mediated social interaction and networking was suggested already some time ago. Early social networking websites started in the form of generalized online communities such as The WELL (1985), Theglobe.com (1994), Geocities (1994) and Tripod.com (1995). These early communities focused on bringing people together by interacting with one another through chat rooms, and by sharing personal information and ideas about any topic. Some communities took a different approach by simply having people linked to each other via email addresses. These sites included Classmates.com (1995), focusing on ties with former school mates, and SixDegrees.com (1997), focusing on indirect ties. User profiles could be created, messages sent to users held on a "friends list" and other members could be sought out who had similar interests in their profiles.

New social networking methods were quickly developed by the end of the 1990s, which changed the social networking models from ones that simply recommended additions to users to ones they could manage themselves. These sites included Epinions.com, using a system called 'The Web of Trust', which allowed users to build social networks based on whom they trusted. These systems began to flourish with the emergence of Friendster in 2002, causing such sites to become part of mainstream users globally. Friendster was followed by MySpace and LinkedIn a year later, and finally, Bebo. By 2005, MySpace, emerging as the biggest of them all, was reportedly getting more page views than Google. 2004 saw the emergence of Facebook, a competitor, also rapidly growing in size. In 2006, Facebook opened up to the non US college community, and by allowing externally-developed add-on applications, and some applications enabling the graphing of a user's own social network - thus linked social networks and social networking, becoming the largest and fastest growing site in the world, not limited by particular geographical followings. Since January, 2007, Facebook has had an average of 250,000 new registrations per day, resulting in an average of 3% weekly growth. Its active users are doubling every 6 months and more than half of all active users visit the site daily. In 2010, 400 million people all over the world have a profile on Facebook, 38% of the users being between 13 and 18 years of age. The fastest growing demo-

graphic is the 25 years old and older and more than half of the users are now outside of college. People spend an average of 20 minutes per day on the site.

Typical structure

In general, social networking services allow users to create a profile for themselves, and can be broken down into two broad categories: internal social networking (ISN); and external social networking (ESN) with sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter and Bebo. An ISN is a closed, private community that consists of a group of people within a company, association, or society; an ESN is open and public and available to all web users to communicate.

However, whether specialized or generic there is commonness across the general approach of social networking sites. Users can upload a picture of themselves; create their 'profile' and can often be "friends" with other users. In most social networking services, both users must confirm that they are friends before they are linked. For example, if Alice lists Bob as a friend, then Bob would have to approve Alice's friend request before they are listed as friends. Some social networking sites have a "favorites" feature that does not need approval from the other user. Social networking sites typically have a section dedicated to comments by friends. On Friendster, this section is called "Testimonials". On Facebook, this section is called "The Wall". In the beginning, this was a feature that encouraged people to write messages about the person in the profile. But over time, people started writing creative testimonials back, creating a form of conversation.

Additional features

Some social networks have additional features, such as the ability to create groups that share common interests or affiliations, upload or stream live videos, and hold discussions in forums.

Lately, mobile social networking has become popular. In most mobile communities, mobile phone users can now create their own profiles, make friends, participate in chat rooms, create chat rooms, hold private conversations, share photos and videos, and share blogs by using their mobile phone. Mobile phone users are ba-

sically open to every option that someone sitting on the computer has. One of the most popular wireless services for social networking in North America is Facebook Mobile.

Another social networking feature in a professional aspect is Linkedin.com. This social network allows professionals to exchange information, opportunities, and ideas. Professionals are able to stay informed with new knowledge about their field.

Emerging trends in social networks

As the increase in popularity of social networking is on a constant rise, new uses for the technology are constantly being observed. At the forefront of emerging trends in social networking sites is the concept of "real time" and "loca-

tion based." Real time allows users to contribute content, which is then broadcasted as it is being uploaded - the concept is similar to live television broadcasts. Twitter set the trend for "real time" services, where users can broadcast to the world what they are doing, or what is on their minds within a 140 character limit. Facebook followed suit with their "Live Feed" where users' activities are streamed as soon as it happens. While Twitter focuses on words, Clixtr, another real time service, focuses on group photo sharing where users can update their photo streams with photos while at an event.
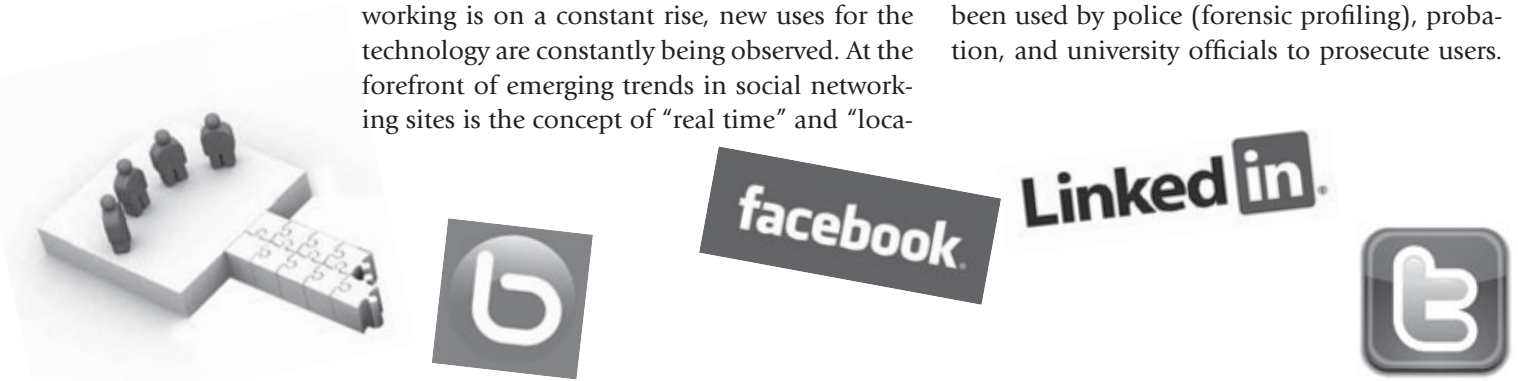
Privacy

In an interview to the German magazine "Der Spiegel", on January 15th 2007, MySpace's co-founder Christ de Wolfe explains that these sites are meant to be tools for everybody to introduce themselves on the web: "It's like a platform to quickly show the whole world who you are. That didn't exist before. It's like a snapshot, not just your picture, but everything you're interested in - the look of your site, the sound file in the background. You get a visual and acoustic

feeling of what a person is like by looking at it. This generation wants to be more expressive. It's probably a renaissance in wanting to be creative. It's pretty hard to show creativity in other ways, but it's easy on MySpace."

Over the years there have been growing concerns about a perceived privacy threat by placing too much personal information in the hands of large corporations or governmental bodies, allowing a profile to be produced on an individual's behavior on which decisions, detrimental to an individual, may be taken. Information posted on sites such as MySpace and Facebook has been used by police (forensic profiling), probation, and university officials to prosecute users.

In some situations, content posted on MySpace has been used in court. Facebook is increasingly being used by school administrations and law enforcement agencies as a source of evidence against student users. The Site allows users to create profile pages with personal details. These pages can be viewed by other registered users which often include police who have signed up for the service. One UK police force has sifted pictures from Facebook and arrested some people who had been photographed in a public place holding a weapon such as a knife (having a weapon in a public place is illegal).

Furthermore, there is an issue over the control of data - information which was altered or removed by the user could in fact be retained and/or passed to 3rd parties. In medical and scientific research, asking subjects for information about their behaviors is normally strictly scrutinized by institutional review boards. It is not clear whether the same rules apply to researchers who collect data from social networking sites. These sites often contain a great deal of data that is hard to obtain via traditional means. Privacy on Facebook is undermined by three principal factors: users disclose too much, Facebook

does not take adequate steps to protect user privacy, and third parties are actively seeking out end-user information using Facebook. Every day teens go on social networking sites and reveal their most inner thoughts for the whole world to see. Information and the Instant Messaging name are disclosed to an unknown population in cyberspace. What's more, for the Net generation, social networking sites have become the preferred forum for social interactions, from posturing and role playing to simply sounding off. Since such forums are relatively easy to access, posted content can be reviewed by anyone with an interest in the user's personal information. Privacy on the net is a rare thing and ultimately it is left to the user to be responsible and improve his or her privacy online.

Interpersonal communication

In the above mentioned interview to the

German magazine "Der Spiegel" MySpace's founders Tom Anderson and Christ de Wolfe explain how the Web site killed television and changed the world. The magazine asked Tom Anderson if he thought that we were undergoing a fundamental shift in the way people communicate with each other. Tom Anderson's answer was unambiguously: "Definitely. What's culturally significant about MySpace is that it has become so pervasive that people of all ages are now using it. Even people who didn't grow up with it are getting used to it. People just get sucked in. A 35-year old person doesn't find it strange anymore to be on MySpace. Just two years ago, we would have had no chance of attracting that person."

Mass media, cell phone, email and social network services have gradually replaced interpersonal communication. This is coupled with a distancing from the stress of face-to-face, real-life conversation, which is far more perilous. Meeting up with a person occurs in real time and requires the sensitivity to voice tone and body

language. Looking at the rise of virtual communication we have to fear that real conversation in real time may eventually give way to these sanitized and easier screen dialogues, in much the same way as killing, skinning and butchering an animal to eat has been replaced by the convenience of packages of meat on the supermarket shelf. Perhaps future generations will recoil with similar horror at the messiness, unpredictability and immediate personal involvement of a three-dimensional, real-time interaction.

Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nichols, the head of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, in August 2009, for the same reason has warned that social networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo and MySpace were "dehumanizing" community life and that relationships had been weakened by the decline in face-to-face meetings. "I think there's a concern that an excessive use or an almost exclusive use of text and emails means that as a society we're losing some of the ability to build interpersonal communication that's necessary for living to-

gether and building a community. We're losing social skills, the human interaction skills, how to read a person's mood, to read their body language, how to be patient until the moment is right to make or press a point. Too much exclusive use of electronic information dehumanizes what is a very, very important part of community life and living together."

Parents – a big problem to teens

Many social networking services, such as Facebook, provide the user with a choice of who can view their profile. This prevents unauthorized user(s) from accessing their information. Parents have become a big problem to teens who want to prevent their parents to access their MySpace or Facebook accounts. By choosing to

make their profile private, teens are able to select who can see their page and this prevents unwanted parents from lurking. Teens are constantly trying to create a structural barrier between their private life and their parents. Here is the testimony of a father: "While setting up my page in Facebook, I decided to invite my daughter to become a friend. She's a college freshman and has been using Facebook for several months. When I spoke to her on the phone about it, she said that it felt a little awkward having her father enter her Facebook space. It was something for her and her friends, and not for parents. That made sense to me. And it also reminded me of how people attach specific meanings, feelings, and purposes to their online spaces. The world of Facebook has the distinct energy and excitement of a 'college student' atmosphere. If you get a chance to enter it, you'll see what I mean."

Attention span in jeopardy

In a startling warning from Lady Greenfield, professor of synaptic pharmacology at Lincoln college, Oxford, and director of the Royal Institution, February 2009, she told the House of Lords that children's experiences on social networking sites "are devoid of cohesive narrative and long-term significance. As a consequence, the mid-21st century mind might almost be infantilized, characterized by short attention spans, sensationalism, inability to empathize and a shaky sense of identity". Arguing that social network sites are putting attention span in jeopardy, she said: "If the young brain is exposed from the outset to a world of fast action and reaction, of instant new screen images flashing up with the press of a key, such rapid interchange might accustom the brain to operate over such timescales. Perhaps when in the real world such responses are not immediately forthcoming, we will see such behaviors and call them attention-deficit disorder. It might be helpful to investigate whether the near total submersion of our culture in screen technologies over the last decade might in some way be linked to the three-fold increase over this period in prescriptions for methylphenidate, the drug prescribed for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder."

Immediacy

Lady Greenfield in the above mentioned article also warned against "a much greater and marked preference for the here-and-now, where the immediacy of an experience trumps any regard for the consequences. After all, whenever you play a computer game, you can always just play it again; everything you do is reversible. The emphasis is on the thrill of the moment, the buzz of rescuing the princess in the game. No care is given for the princess herself, for the content or for any long-term significance, because there is none. This type of activity, a disregard for consequence, can be compared with the thrill of compulsive gambling or compulsive eating."

Addictive

Ben Mezrich, author of "The Accidental Billionaires: The Founding of Facebook" stated in an interview with CNBC, the recognized world leader in business news, about Facebook: "I really think that Facebook is the next step in human evolution. The majority of people who go on it spend three or four hours on it. Students in high schools spend their whole life on it. Dating comes through it, they meet one another through it, and they live on it. This is the new form of human life."

Facebook to its audience is like a spider to its prey! Where does this fascination come from? There are manifold reasons, the most important ones are summarized by a Facebook user as follows: "The way I see it, the most loyal Facebook users are in a trance or, for better use of words, under a spell – the spell of technology: wanting to be up-to-date with the newest trends and keeping in touch with present advancements in the field of technology".

But what else does Facebook use to capture its audience?
- The Desire to Compare: Facebook nourishes our desire, or even need, to compare ourselves to others in terms of looks, travels, shopping sprees, spouses, friends, and so on.
- The Curiosity Factor: How many times did you find yourselves snooping around in your friend's albums to see what she was doing on that day when you called and she didn't pick up? Better yet, how many times did you spend half an hour or more reading your friend's wall posts to know who said what to her or him? Facebook fulfills the curiosity factor that breeds on our need-to-know need!
- The Boredom Variable: What could be more addictive than finding something to fill the

hours of boredom we suffer at least once a day? Facebook is that bridge which gaps boredom on many levels through games, applications, music and much more.

- Jealousy Disease: Are you too jealous? Maybe somewhat insecure about your relationship? Facebook is your pill to getting better! Through its ability to track conversations, events, whereabouts and so on, Facebook provides a perfect platform for solving jealousy issues through stalking options!

- The Loneliness Phenomenon: Let us be frank here and admit that many of us, at least at one point or another, feel lonely. Facebook has the power to be the cure for loneliness! (It might also cause it in certain events, but that's besides our point here). If you are feeling lonely, you can call a friend, go out with a group, or just spend hours sending messages to your friends' Facebook inbox, comment on their pictures, write something fun on their wall and so on!

- The Ache to Belong: Have you been in a situation where you were asked: "REALLY? You don't have an account on Facebook? How come?" I am sure at least someone you know has been in this situation. Facebook exploits the ache to belong through its great number of users and affiliates.

Herd mentality

The right message at the right time can start a movement that changes the world. Social media has the ability to spread that message and organize that movement in ways not possible in the recent past. Of all the psychological triggers that lead to persuasive messages that spread, one stands above the rest. In fact, this one element of influence drives the entire concept of social media. What is it? Blog posts with lots of comments get more comments, items that are heavily bookmarked get even more bookmarks; blogs that display high subscriber counts attract more subscribers faster. Users often decide to give a message a chance based on initial indicators that have nothing to do with the actual quality of the content.

People tend to follow the crowd without evaluating wrong or right. Given the vast amount of information by social network sites we naturally look for quick cues about the quality of what we come across. And we're wired to look to others for those indications of quality. Especially if the topic is new, someone will likely be influenced by the raw popularity of the piece, plus the specific comments of others who've come before.

Risks for child safety

Citizens and governments have been concerned about a misuse from children and teenagers of social network services, particularly in relation to online sexual predators. A certain number of actions have been engaged by governments to better understand the problem and find some solutions. A 2008 panel concluded that technological fixes such as age verification and scans are relatively ineffective means of apprehending online predators.

Trolling

A common misuse of social networking sites such as Facebook is that it is occasionally used to emotionally abuse individuals. Such actions are often referred to as trolling. It is not rare for confrontations in the real world to be translated online. Online bullying is a relatively common occurrence and it can often result in emotional trauma for the victim. Depending on the networking outlet, up to 39% of users admit to being "cyber-bullied". There are not many limitations as to what individuals can post when online. Inherently individuals are given the power to post offensive remarks or pictures.

Conclusion

It is hard to see how living this way on a daily basis will not result in brains, or rather minds, differing from those of previous, Christian generations. The virtual ways of communication will inevitably de-familiarize man from reality. Modern technology is intended to threaten real contact between men. Sitting behind a screen all day long, constantly pushing an internet profile and instant chat messages will result in forgetting the real person. Once the living person is annihilated, charity – the principle virtue in human existence – will be destroyed in its roots. If any man say, I love God, and hateth his brother; he is a liar. "For he that loveth not his brother, whom he seeth, how can he love God, whom he seeth not?" (1 John 4:20)

Herd mentality, trolling, all the dangers for child's safety and the loss of privacy will accelerate the destructive effects of all these modern inventions.