Innovation in Communication:  
An Actor-Network Analysis  
of Social Websites

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the dimensions of social websites to establish communication innovation using the Actor Network Theory. Social websites are also referred to as social network sites and social media sites which reflect technology, users, content and linguistic issues as heterogeneous combination of entities for interaction and communication via this media. Social websites have clearly achieved widespread adoption as a new means of communication in a very short time around the globe. An extensive review of extant literature on social websites is presented in this paper to reflect their growing importance, the reasons for their adoption, the content shared, the mode of use and the language used for communication illustrating that social websites are a combination of a number of technological and social entities. This paper highlights emerging research issues on social networking sites as a future communication tool and the innovation in communication using the Actor Network Theory.

Keywords:  Actor Network Theory, Dimensions of Social Networking, SNS Language, Social Networking, Social Web Sites, User Created Content

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites is fast becoming the principal communication and information sharing tool used by people of all ages, and backgrounds in all regions of the world. Social networking sites also referred to as social media sites are developed on the Web 2.0 platform, which offers an architecture for participation and allows users to control their own data and information (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010). Web 2.0 is an extension of Web 1.0 on which individuals deliver content and services in the public domain creating a network effect through which others can access, update and combine content (Cummings, Massey, & Ramesh, 2009). Characteristics of Web 2.0 enable formation of communities via collaboration and information sharing; novel and enhanced data access methods with ‘mashed up’ (combined) information from different sources; and with Ajax supported creative and responsive interfaces (Ankolekar,
Krotzsch, Tran, & Vrandecic, 2007). Social networking applications therefore developed on the Web 2.0 platform are designed around an architecture of participation and communal collaboration (Sena, 2009).

Individuals are using social websites for communication, collaboration, information sharing, networking, finding ‘lost’ friends and forming communities. Although business organisations are also resorting to social websites for advertising, marketing and engaging employees (Singh, Davison, & Wickramasinghe, 2010) the focus of this paper is on ‘social’ user issues and characteristics of social networking. Web 2.0 based social networking sites are in very widespread use with new ones emerging almost every day. It is proposed to identify the most popular sites (each with over 30 million users) and determine their ‘dimensions’ of networking and communication. These are noted in Table 1.

Adoption of social websites by individuals is so significant that users of these sites range from 30 million on MyHeritage to 500 million on Facebook (Table 1). The growing number of users indicates the importance of social websites and their relevance to society. Due to social websites being so widely adopted in a very short period of time, and accessible on a variety of platforms including PCs, mobile phones, laptops and other ubiquitous technology (Turban, Lee, King, Liang, & Turban, 2010) it is considered essential to explore key components of social networking that are making them so prevalent. Although there are numerous publications on one or more aspect of Web 2.0 technologies, significant earlier studies on this topic are focused on its taxonomy (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010), definition, history and scholarship (Boyd, 2006) risk, trust and privacy concerns (Fogel & Nehmad, 2009), changes in user behaviour (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010), self disclosure model (Krasnova, Spiekermann, Korolevu, & Hidebrand, 2010; Posey, Lowry, Roberts, & Ellis, 2010), and impact on business environment (Sena, 2009; Singh, Davison, & Wickramasinghe, 2010). A generic consideration and understanding of why they are so widely used, what is the content shared on it, who are the users, where is it used, in which time zones they can be used and how do they support communication are not known. This paper is an attempt to highlight the reasons for such fervent use of social networking sites, the content shared on these sites, potential participants, temporal aspects of communication, as well the linguistic elements of social networking by critically reviewing the extant literature.

We structure the extant literature in the following section under purpose, content, participants, technology, time and linguistic elements to establish the components of social websites and their increased adoption around the world. This enables an understanding of the wide use of social websites as a communication and collaboration tool, the content shared, who the users of this media are, the mode of use, the linguistics elements involved and issues for future research.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

A review of literature on social websites is presented in the next section to explicate the purpose, content, potential participants, technology platform, time and the language used for communication using social web sites.

**Purpose**

As noted, social websites are based on Web 2.0 technologies, described by O’Reilly (2005) as new cost effective internet applications that support collaboration and communication amongst users. Users collaborate and communicate via social networking sites by taking advantage of Web 2.0 capabilities to author and edit content (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004), to communicate in real time (Madhaven & Goasguen, 2007) whilst being mobile (Bolter & Macintyre, 2007). The growth in social networking is so significant that not only are there web sites such as Ning and KickApps supporting their creation, but a search engine is now available for finding them (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010). The list of social web sites identified (Table 1)
Table 1. Social websites with over 30 million users (Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites, January, 2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (SNS)</th>
<th>Description/Focus</th>
<th>Date of origin</th>
<th>Registered Users</th>
<th>Registration (Age)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Feb 2004</td>
<td>500,000,001</td>
<td>&gt; 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qzone</td>
<td>General (In Chinese)</td>
<td></td>
<td>200,000,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>General (Micro-blogging, RSS updates)</td>
<td>July 2006</td>
<td>175,000,000</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habbo</td>
<td>General for teens. Over 31 communities worldwide.</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>162,000,000</td>
<td>&gt; 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebo</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>July 2005</td>
<td>117,000,000</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vkontakte</td>
<td>General (Russian-speaking world including former Soviet republics)</td>
<td>Sept, 2006</td>
<td>110,578,500</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myspace</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>Aug 2003</td>
<td>100,000,000</td>
<td>&gt; 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tagged</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>100,000,000</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendster</td>
<td>General (Southeast Asia)</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>90,000,000</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hi5</td>
<td>General (India, Mongolia, Thailand, Romania, Jamaica, Central Africa, Portugal and Latin America)</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>80,000,000</td>
<td>&gt; 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LinkedIn</td>
<td>Business and professional</td>
<td>May 2003</td>
<td>80,000,000</td>
<td>&gt; 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netlog (Facebook/ Bing-box)</td>
<td>General (Europe, Turkey, the Arab World and Québec Canada)</td>
<td>July 2003</td>
<td>70,000,000</td>
<td>&gt; 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flixster</td>
<td>Movies</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>63,000,000</td>
<td>&gt; 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MyLife (Reunion.com)</td>
<td>Locating friends and family</td>
<td></td>
<td>51,000,000</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classmates.com</td>
<td>School, college, work and military</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>50,000,000</td>
<td>&gt; 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>douban</td>
<td>Chinese Web 2.0 site for review and recommendation services on movies, books, and music.</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>46,850,000</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odnoklassniki</td>
<td>Connect with old classmates. (Russia and former Soviet republics)</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>45,000,000</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flickr</td>
<td>Photo sharing, commenting, photography related networking, worldwide</td>
<td>Feb 2004</td>
<td>32,000,000</td>
<td>Open to &gt; 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Last.fm</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>30,000,000</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MyHeritage</td>
<td>family-oriented social network</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>30,000,000</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viadeo</td>
<td>Global and Campus Networking (English, French, German, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese)</td>
<td>May 2004</td>
<td>30,000,000</td>
<td>Open</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
clearly demonstrates that some sites are more popular in particular regions of the world, they support a variety of languages, and serve as open as well as closed applications for specific and generic use. Although many are general sites supporting users from 13 years and above, some have been created for specific groups, age and communities.

Social web sites in this paper are based on Kim et al. (2010) description comprising of both social network sites and social media sites. Social network sites connect people to other people in online communities such as MySpace, Facebook, Windows Live Spaces, and other similar sites. The communities can range from a network of offline friends connected via social network sites to online acquaintances which may include one or more interest groups such as school attended, hobby, support, profession, ethnicity, gender, etc. These are further described as general or vertical, both of which are either open or closed (Conry-Murray, 2009). Open sites are open to general users, vertical sites connect people with a common trait such as schools attended, ethnicity or a common interest such as arts, whereas closed sites are for members of particular groups only. Social media sites such as YouTube, Flickr, Digg, Metacafe, and others support user created content made up of photos, videos, book marks of web pages, user profiles, user activities and text. They are used as a new asynchronous means of communication between a user and the user's online community to broadcast messages or any other user created content (UCC) to a large number of people, and to view and respond at any time to messages posted by other people (Kim et al., 2010). These sites allow for different avenues of communication such as instant messaging, blogs, multimedia, inclusion of video clips, tagging, tasks and calendars, scrapbooking, hobbies, interests and photographs (Madhaven & Goasguen, 2007). The main reason why people use social networking sites are for communication, to connect with existing members, stay in contact with others and sometimes to kill time (Fitzsimmons & Rubin, 2008). Other researchers identified the reasons for social website use to be for enjoyment (Rosen & Shermon, 2006), self-presentation (Boyd, 2007), to maintain social ties (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007) crowd sourcing and political campaigns.

Content

The content shared online according to Kim et al. (2010) include user created content (UCC) of personal profiles, opinions, features to connect users and to keep them coming back to the site. Although the content on each social web site can vary, common types of user created content shared on these sites include basic information such as name, photo, birthday, gender, relationship status, type of relationship desired, email address, phone numbers, address, school attended, education and work, current employer, and friends. In addition, it may include member’s interests, hobbies, favourite movies and shows, favourite music and books, quotations, travel experience, photos of destinations visited, opinions and a diary. Content shared via social networking sites according to Turban et al. (2010) may include a photo album, film repository, information collection, news collection, or downloaded TV and film. Through file sharing applications data such as personal photographs (Van House, 2009) music video (Cohen, 2009) and film and photographs (Naim, 2007) are transferred, downloaded or posted online for access by a wider audience. Users can share personal information, gossip as well as promote a self-inflated profile on social websites (Solove, 2007). Self-disclosure of personal and private information by users on social websites has been explained by Krasnova et al. (2010) to be based on social exchange theory (Homans, 1958) which is founded on a subjective evaluation of benefits and costs. Benefits of personal information posted on social websites include trust building, empathy and reciprocation which generally outweigh costs associated with vulnerability (Johnson & Paine, 2007).

All users can post new UCCs on social websites and view at any time UCCs created by users’ friends and network. Although many
of the UCCs are irrelevant to a user, some can be helpful and a new source of knowledge (Kim et al., 2010). Some social web site users are celebrities who use this medium for self-promotion or for communicating with their fan bases (Metcalfe, 2009; Wortham, 2009). Although a few of the celebrities might communicate directly with their fans via their social website, many have other people to ghost write their UCCs (Cohen, 2009).

Patchin and Hinduja (2010) suggest that in addition to the types of information given, some irresponsible information such as photos in different costumes, swear words, evidence of alcohol, tobacco and drug use and other personal information is also shared on social websites. Problematic material including pornography, politically sensitive material that is prohibited in some countries, and comments that are defamatory or violation of privacy have also been identified on social websites. Posey et al. (2010) describe the content shared on social websites to be social in nature, open and self-disclosing. Disclosing and sharing information on social websites foster relationships (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006) and Web 2.0 authoring tools enable users to collaboratively create, share and recreate knowledge from multiple sources for collective intelligence.

Types of data presented on these sites centre around member registrations, videos and photos posted by members, member activities, members’ friends data, and other related information. The member registration function reads member email address, checks for duplication against the member registration data, reads password, saves this detail to create an index entry for member ID for subsequent access (Kim et al., 2010). Social networking sites carry data and information that are viewable by the public or restricted to approved friends.

Content presented on social websites can also prove to be harmful if targeted by spammers, phishing and malware attacks (Kim et al., 2010). Irresponsible data on social websites has led to some legal implications resulting in court actions, and the issue of truthfulness on social websites such as fake names, ages, schools attended, qualifications achieved, etc which is becoming an issue for debate and the need for regulations and standards in the use of social websites. Misuse of social websites to present false and other undesirable information can also result in damage to self or damage to others. Self damage caused by social website use include denied admission to universities, lost employment opportunities, arrest of criminals, lost court cases (Hoover, 2007; Rauber & Kogler, 2001). Some users engage in spreading false rumours, participate in cyber bullying and cyber stalking (Krasnova, Spiekermann, Korolevu, & Hidebrand, 2010) and some have become less productive due to the excessive time they spend on social web sites (Kim et al., 2010).

**User Profiles**

Although social websites are also gaining importance in government and business organisations, the focus in this paper is on individual users. The millions of social website users range from teenagers (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010) to older people (Furuta & Marshall, 1996) who are either individual users, members of networks or community groups, professionals, special interest groups, classmates, ethnic diasporas (Table 1), and other groups with similar attributes. Fogel and Nehmad (2009) reveal that there are approximately equal percentages of men and women users and most users spend an average of one hour a day of their time on social websites. The online community for a user of social websites may include offline friends who are members of the same site, as well as new online friends and acquaintances (Randerson, 2007). Fogel and Nehmad (2009) suggest that users of social networking sites have a greater risk taking attitude since in spite of knowing the possible risks of their information being seen by others they are comfortable placing personal information on these sites. This is supported by Acquisti and Gross (2006) reported that users of social network sites were freely providing their home phone numbers on their sites and even a larger number were sharing their cell phone numbers. The type of information presented...
on social network sites generally portray user behaviour which is largely being scrutinised by prospective employers, teachers, counsellors, and law enforcement agencies to determine the character of these users (Fitzsimmons, & Rubin, 2008; Schweitzer, 2005).

Although most users take advantage of social network sites privacy settings to control who may access parts of their profiles, many users are not concerned about the ‘digital print’ they leave on social web sites (Stone, 2008; Stross, 2009). Dwyer et al. (2006) refer to trust and trust in other social website members to be factors that supersede privacy concerns of social website users.

**Web 2.0 Based Technology**

Web 2.0 is a technology platform that brings about collaboration and communication (Li & Bernoff, 2008) and enables users to create their own content on social network sites (Korica, Maurer, & Schinagl, 2006). Most of the social web sites are IT entrepreneurial outcomes started by one or small groups of engineers similar to the development of eBay, Fastflowers.com, and Hotmail (Singh & Waddell, 2006). Web 2.0 being an extension of Web 1.0 includes all the features of Internet access, web servers, firewalls, http protocols and traffic manager, accessible on PCs as well as tablet PCs, lap tops and other portable technologies such as iPads and mobile phones (Turban, Lee, King, Liang, & Turban, 2010). **Filesharing** (Oberholzer-Gee & Strumpf, 2007) distributes and provides access to digitally stored information, such as computer programs, multi-media (audio, video), documents, or electronic books (Wikipedia, n. d.) by enabling content sharing.

Most social networking sites have similar features although new features are created or added continuously to these sites to make them more dynamic, attractive to users, combat security issues, and to increase participation. These features within a site facilitate interaction amongst a population that is constantly engaged in multiple tasks (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Some social websites were developed with the main purpose of supporting information sharing (Crowston & Williams, 2000) such as Wikipedia. **Mashups** make available combined information such as travel information together with Google maps (Singh, Davison, & Wickramasinghe, 2010).

**Anywhere, Anytime Communication**

Social websites are accessible by members on different platforms, regions of the world and in all time zones. These channels are internet and mobile based technologies (Furuta & Marshall, 1996) that allow sharing of user created content across time and space. Communication on social networking sites can be synchronous allowing users to respond and comment concurrently, simultaneously or all together at once. However, the broad application of social websites is based on asynchronous responses, that is, not requiring real time responses giving users the freedom to respond at their convenience (Kim, Jeong, & Lee, 2010). Originally, the World Wide Web (WWW) was intended to be used to share ideas and promote discussion within a scientific community. Web 2.0 heralds a return to these original uses, and prompts significant changes in the ways the World Wide Web is being used extending collaboration and communication to users from any part of this world, on any platform and in any language. How widely a social web site is adopted is easily established by the traffic on the site.

**Language**

Communication via social media has created a new type of language (English slang) due to the amount of space the website allows (Williams, 2008) young users concealing content form adults (Woollaston, 2008) the language is considered ‘cool’ and innovative (Zimmer, 2009), or adding an element of style to the communication (Williams, 2008). Examples identified in Woollaston’s research on Bebo included the use of ‘Getting MWI’ – to be **Getting Mad With It** meaning getting drunk; ‘Legal’ – suggests person posting is 16 and
legally allowed to have sex; and ‘taken’ or ‘Ownageeee’ conveying being in a relationship. A Twitter allows 140 character space in which the message is referred to as ‘tweets’; people signed up to get them are ‘followers or tweeples’; the sphere in which it operates is ‘Twittersphere or Twitterverse’. A ‘twoosh’ is a message that fits the maximum of 140 characters exactly, without editing (Zachry, 2009). Williams (2008) is concerned about language on blogs using words such as ‘folks’ or ‘dude’ instead of people. The good part of this trend is that it is collective language, inclusive of all e.g., our friends and colleagues, however, the adverse effect of it is that the audience for whom the message is intended, may not always know it is for them. This can result in a hanging message with no one reading it. Zimmer explains a ‘LiveJournal’ to be a virtual community of bloggers and diary-keepers, ‘friending’ is marking something as a favourite, getting ‘tagged’ in a photo on Facebook is getting your name associated with that photo, and ‘untagging’ is to avoid anyone coming across the evidence of a particularly embarrassing moment. Another common thread in social media communication is the language that originated from chat rooms and text messaging. Although there is a long list on the URL http://www.netlingo.com/acronyms.php some common ones include ‘411’ meaning information; ‘@TEOTD’ meaning at the end of the day; ‘459’ meaning ‘I love you’; ‘B4YKI’ meaning ‘before you know it’; and ‘LLT’ meaning ‘looks like trouble’.

Finally, Woollaston (2008) also believes that recognition has a very important role within young people’s identity construction and social networking pages provide the opportunity to gain both positive and negative recognition. She argues that young people are responding to the technological age they are living in thus becoming very creative in their use of language. However, Woollaston (2008) also emphasises that social media slang is unprofessional and detrimental to ones professional etiquette.

The above literature discussion on social websites clearly indicates that although different social networking sites are more popular in different regions of the world, they are an innovation in communication made possible by a combination of entities. Important entities of social websites and networking identified from literature are discussed in the next section. These include:

**Technology**

Web 2.0, an extension of Web 1.0 led to the development of social websites offering a new medium of communication, networking and collaboration to users of all ages, in different languages and in all regions of the world. It enables delivery of content that is either user created or presentation of existing information in new ways by combining different forms of data and allowing others to access, respond and comment on the subject matter. Technology capabilities have been ingeniously combined on this platform to deliver new experiences to users leading to a very wide participation and collaboration among myriads of user groups. Web 2.0 capabilities of file sharing, mashed up data from different sources, multimedia enriched information, multi-platform access and easy to use, promote interaction, mobility and a very wide user participation.

**Communication Media**

The wide adoption of social websites reveals its exponential growth as an important communication media in the last few years resulting in hundreds of millions of users around the world. This new media also comes with easy to create content and a search engine for finding a relevant application for users. Different social websites are popular in different parts of the world connecting communities that are either open to all or closed to particular groups. Social websites made up of social network sites and social media sites are general as well as vertical based on a common trait of users. Access to social websites are achieved from a variety of platforms with richness added to information including photos, video clips, calendar, scrapbook and book marks leading to creative, useful and interesting content. Social
websites are fast replacing other communication tools such as emails and phone calls for a large number of people.

**Standards for User Created Content**

Social websites are user friendly with high level authoring tools allowing users to create content without the need for technical knowledge. User created content on social websites are multimedia enriched data, blogs, opinions and comments on others opinions. Social websites carry user information that ranges from personal data, experiences, professional achievements, hobbies, interests, quotations, to political opinions and some undesirable information that can have problematic implications. Although some users are careful with the type of information they present on social websites, many are not concerned about the ‘digital print’ they leave on this new media. Problematic content generally entail false identities and a digital print that can be detrimental or defamatory. Therefore standards are required for UCC to provide guidance to users to share information and further promote social web sites as an innovative present day communication tool.

**The Digital Identity**

The millions of social website users are people from different age groups, ethnic backgrounds, speakers of different languages, both male and female or community groups. Self disclosure of information by individuals on social websites is influenced by trust building, empathy and reciprocation although sometimes this leaves the user vulnerable to those seeking information on them. All information on social websites is cached or copied somewhere else. Types of information shared via social networking sites include personal information, a diary of activities and network, opinions and achievements. Although all user created content is not of interest to all users, some are knowledge enhancing and generate collective intelligence. By placing information on social websites one leaves a digital identity that can be used to determines the character of users especially sought by employers, law enforcement units, counsellors, teachers and others.

**Linguistic Elements**

Communication via social websites has resulted in a new networking/web language that is either an acronym for an English phrase, words to reflect a position or state, or extending a human situation to technology. Social website terminology is made up of a combination of characters that are numeric, alphanumeric and include symbols. Some believe this to be a response to this new technological era, while others consider it detrimental to professional etiquette. How will this shape future communication trends is yet to be determined.

The above entities are multidimensional involving a heterogeneous amalgamation of textual, conceptual, social and technical actors. Therefore innovation in communication via social websites is analysed in the following section using the Actor Network Theory.

**ACTOR NETWORK THEORY**

According to the Actor Network Theory (ANT) entities are hybrid, made up of dissimilar elements including people, objects and organisations (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1986; Tatnall & Guilding, 1999). These dissimilar elements are a combination of both technical and social entities that are inseparable and equally important in the network. Social websites discussed above are a heterogenous combination of textual, conceptual, social and technical actors. Therefore Actor Network Theory was considered an opposite analytical framework to establish how social websites are socially constructed and to identify global research issues for this innovative and advanced communication and knowledge sharing tool.

ANT is based on agnosticism promoting analytical impartiality towards all actors (technical and non-technical); general symmetry explaining the conflicting viewpoints of different actors in the same terms with neutral
vocabulary for human and non-human actors; and free association meaning elimination of priori distinctions between technical and social (Callon, 1986). ANT is an approach to structuring and explaining the links between society and technology. It has the ability to illustrate how technology becomes acceptable and is taken up by groups in society. ANT has been used to explain casemix systems in hospitals (Bloomfield, Coombs, Cooper, & Rea, 1992), EDI networks and standards (Monteiro & Hanseth, 1996), B2B SME portal (Tatnall & Guilding, 1999), communication network (McBride, 2011). The primary focus of ANT is on stakeholders (actors) and how they are involved in shaping the social websites. With social networking sites the actors are both human and non-human who pursue interests which may encourage or constrain technology (Monteiro & Hanseth, 1996). These actors include Web 2.0 based technology and social networking sites, user created content, communication, a digital identity, SNS linguistic elements, media and a set of participants. These actors make up a network of interests that become stable as they are aligned to the technology (McBride, 2011). Alignment is achieved via translation of interests and enrolment of actors into the network. Translation indicates how an actor’s interests become aligned, and alignment is established in inscriptions such as communication due to technological developments, peer pressure to use technology, partnership demands, community networks, innovation, to pass time and knowledge sharing. These social website entities support communication traits that are irreversible. Therefore communication innovation, Web 2.0, the communities and people, and the social websites form an actor-network.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

As discussed, Web 2.0 based social websites are technical as well as human combination of entities. Without UCC (created by people/humans) it is non-functional, at the same time without the support of technology (Internet) it is non-functional. Social websites entail technological support required for such a development, user profiles, user generated content, linguistic elements of communication on this new media, and user networking requirements. Although research issues for this topic are wide and numerous, an important question derived from the literature analysis above and the information in Table 1 is: ‘are the above actors and innovation in communication the same for all social websites, and how do they shape social networking in different regions of the world?’ To establish this, the following is suggested.

Identify the Actors. A list of social networking actors that enable communication via social networking sites is to be identified for all the sites listed in Table 1, from all regions of the world.

Investigate the Actors. By joining the social networking site, via content analysis each actor in the network is to be investigated for technology, reasons for use, linguistic elements of communication, types of data in user created content, use of multimedia, frequency of use, digital identities created, and profiles of users.

Build Actor Network Model. The identification of links between the actors will develop the actor network model for communication via social networking sites. This will enable the establishment of the alignment of actors by establishing the strength of the connections.

Establish Irreversibility. This will help understand the importance and role of each of the actors, how fixed are these and what can or cannot be changed. This will require an understanding of the types of communication that takes place and types of information shared via this media.

Identify factors that support communication via social websites and those that deter the adoption of this media for communication.

Identify communication innovation. The ANT analysis will establish a list of social networking features, communication etiquette, technological requirements, training and orientation needs for users, global and cultural
dimensions and further acceptance of social networking sites as a communication tool.

Other issues that will be established from the above will include technological developments, security of data, universal/international standards for UCC, digital divide, linguistic issues and implications for future communication and community development. The need for universal standards for UCC to avoid personal harm, bullying, plagiarism, professionalism and impact on personal and professional opportunities is anticipated to be an important outcome. Although there are so many aspects to consider on the language used for SNS communication, the important considerations are the need for a computer application to convert this new language into proper English and other languages. Our paper clearly highlights the importance of social networking as the new communication and collaboration tool and the application of Actor Network Theory to analyse the acceptance of social networking sites as a future communication media.

REFERENCES


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