CS 8803 Social Computing: SNS Overview

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Why are we reading all these *old* papers on online social networking?

"Computer Networks as Social Networks"

- One of the early conceptuatizations of "online social networks"
  - Shift in focus from the popular HCI term "groupware" to "networked societies" that are complex, non-hierarchical, multi-faceted, fragmented, and sparse.
- Computer systems are inherently "social"
  - They allow people to communicate and connect with each other
  - Surpass geographical boundaries
  - Maintain and bridge social capital
- Very visionary: "[People's] computer-mediated communication has become part of their everyday lives, rather than being a separate set of relationships"

One of the debates Wellman mentions: "*The Internet is such a powerful force that other considerations, such as gen- der and status in an organization, are ignored.*" After 13 years, is it really true?

Wellman talks about the "digital divide" in the context of OSNs; in what ways does it affect our social computing studies today?

Wellman surveys work that raised many challenges:

- Extensive online involvement took people away from interaction with household and community members.

- Some "newbies" became more depressed, alienated, and isolated during the first 6 months of computer use

To what extent these continue to be challenges today?

Wellman poses: "*Perhaps there are differences in the kinds of communication that take place on the Internet or by telephone or face-to-face.*" In the context of today's social networks, cite some examples of how we use them for distinct purposes compared to offline means.

Wellman cites the example of "Netville" wherein Internet access was leveraged for community building—very visionary idea. Do we have tools like that today? What has prevented us from truly making this a reality?
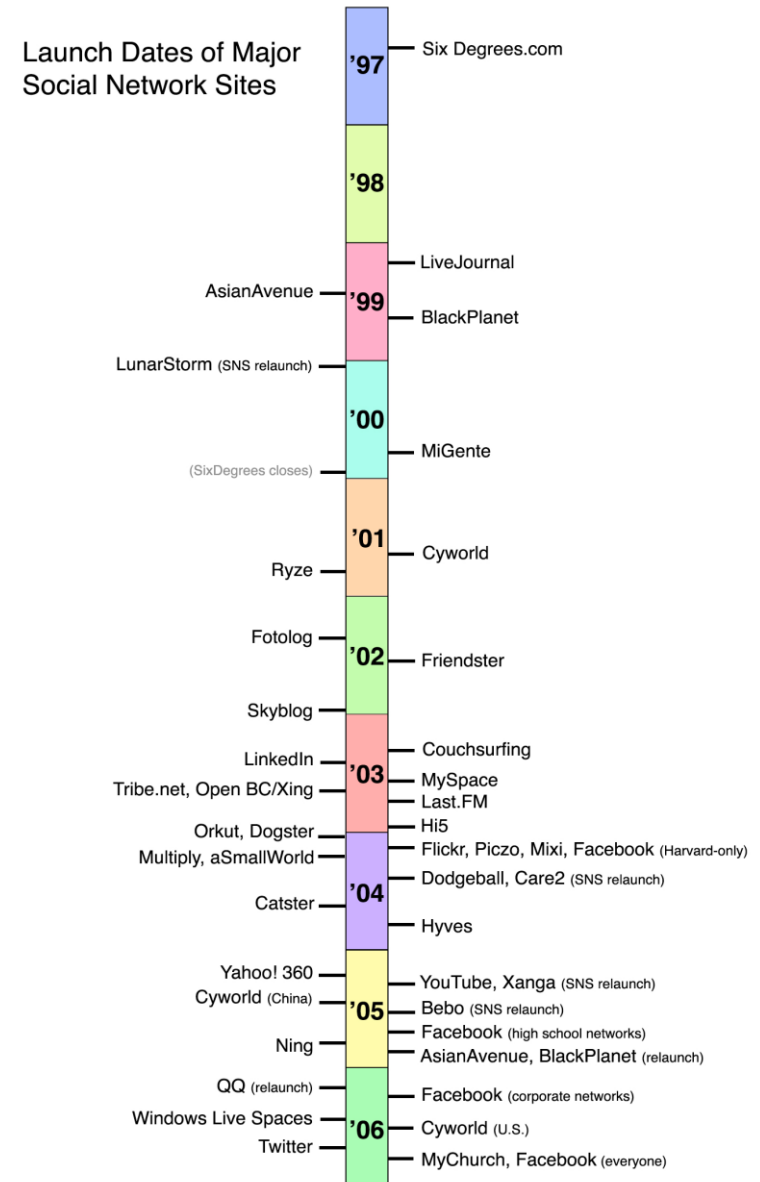
Another interesting point in the article is the challenge of identifying "who knows what" in online social networks that are distributed and sparse in large organizations. What are some of the opportunities and challenges of Q&A type social systems that are built on this principle?

In concluding remarks, Wellman points out the need to prioritize communications across "types" of contacts. Today, where do we find such capabilities as (1) defining contact "types"; and (2) set/learning prioritization of communication?

Many of you pointed out that the Wellman paper doesn't cover issues concerning privacy. Why do you think that is the case, that 13 years later, it is almost one of the most important topics concerning social computing systems?

"Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship"

- One of the early seminal work in defining SNS, authors present their perspective on the history of these sites and discuss their key challenges and developments

- Discuss the various ways in which different social networks manage profile visibility

- Discuss about the multiplicity of ties, also structure of undirected and directed ties: "friends", "followers", "fans"

- The article points to the lack of (at that time) experimental and longitudinal studies—something we have seen happen in the last five years or so

Launch Dates of Major Social Network Sites

'97 — Six Degrees.com

'98

AsianAvenue — '99 — LiveJournal
'99 — BlackPlanet

LunarStorm (SNS relaunch)

'00 — MiGente

(SixDegrees closes)

Ryze — '01 — Cyworld

Fotolog — '02 — Friendster

Skyblog

LinkedIn — '03 — Couchsurfing
Tribe.net, Open BC/Xing — MySpace
— Last.FM
Orkut, Dogster — Hi5
Multiply, aSmallWorld — Flickr, Piczo, Mixi, Facebook (Harvard-only)
— Dodgeball, Care2 (SNS relaunch)
Catster — '04 — Hyves

Yahoo! 360 — YouTube, Xanga (SNS relaunch)
Cyworld (China) — '05 — Bebo (SNS relaunch)
— Facebook (high school networks)
Ning — AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet (relaunch)

QQ (relaunch) — Facebook (corporate networks)
Windows Live Spaces — '06 — Cyworld (U.S.)
Twitter — MyChurch, Facebook (everyone)

boyd and Ellison point to an important observation: "*[SNSes] enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks*." What are some of the potential issues, from a design perspective, in making one's social network visible?

boyd and Ellison pose that one way SNSes were distinct from earlier CMC groups was that they bridged people's offline and online worlds. Then why do you think Twitter and reddit today have succeeded?

The article talks of the "privacy paradox": today we see Facebook implements a variety of complex access controls as well as user defined lists to control who sees what. What are the challenges with this type of control setting approach? Hint: Unusually large numbers of FB posts are "public", perhaps to the ignorance of the authors

"Friendster and Publicly Articulated Social Networking"

- Ethnographic study of Friendster (circa 2003)
  - *Friendster* was built on the assumption that friends-of-friends were more likely to be good dates than strangers
  - Allowed access to those only within four degrees
  - Encouraged people to join even if not interested in dating; potential bridges
- Focus on the following aspects:
  - understand how people negotiate context when presenting themselves – "context collapse"
  - determine the issues involved in articulating one's social network as compared to a behavior-driven network
  - Maintenance and bridge of old and new social connections, beyond dating
- Overall highlighted the gap between understanding of the site use by the designers and the users

boyd talks about the failure of Friendster designers in articulating nature of friendships: *friendships are binary, no consideration of the weightage of relationships*. We have come a long way, has this design feature really been incorporated in today's SNSes? If not, why not?

boyd mentions that initially Friendster restricted viewing profiles which were more than four hops away in their social networks, as a result people started adding interesting-looking strangers. Designers wanted to ensure trust in the contacts created, however it backfired. How have SNSes today dealt with this situation?

Presentation of self: an important issue with a dating focused SNS as Friendster is that people are likely to portray only their positive attributes. What could designers incorporate to deal with this challenge? Are there examples of SNSes today where these issues have been curbed to some extent?

boyd also talks about Fakesters despite some of its negative aspects: "by and large, most people love the fake characters. […] the site became less interesting once the Fakesters were removed" What in your opinion could have been a better way to deal with Fakesters?

Comparing Friendster, one of the early SNS and today's Facebook, what do you think (in terms of design considerations) has worked for Facebook in its success that didn't for Friendster? Hint: identity management, dealing with Fakesters, de-focus on dating as a way to socially connect

One new feature that many of today's SNSes enable are live feeds, which provide a way for users to learn about their networks

Next class

- Responses to "Social Media Overview".

- If you can't access the paper directly, the library proxy or logging into the GT VPN should allow you to do that

- Your response should focus on the following:

  - What is the main contribution?

  - Is it important? Why or why not?

  - What assumptions are being made?

  - What applications could arise?

  - How can it be extended?

  - What was unclear?

  - Did you find the paper interesting?

- Responses should be on Piazza by 11:59pm on Tuesday