

Social Network Sites: Indispensable or Optional Social Tools?

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Abstract

Much research has enumerated potential benefits of online social network sites. Given the pervasiveness of these sites and the numbers of people that use them daily, both research and media tend to make the assumption that social network sites have become indispensable to their users. Based on the analysis of qualitative data from users of social network sites in Russia and Kazakhstan, this paper considers under what conditions social network sites can become indispensable to their users and when these technologies remain on the periphery of life despite fulfilling useful functions. For some respondents, these sites had become indispensable tools as they were integrated into everyday routines of communicating with emotionally important and proximal contacts and were often used for coordination of offline activities. For others social network sites remained spaces where they occasionally visited with people who may have been important at some point in the past but who had little connection to the daily business of living. In these cases social network sites were seen as convenient spaces of lightweight connectivity, but by no means indispensable.

Introduction

Social connectivity and social network capabilities are increasingly integrated and extended by a range of Internet and mobile-based applications. Current research suggests that use of social network sites (SNSs) has in fact become part of daily routine for many people (Alexanyan 2009; Madden and Smith 2010). Much scholarship has considered how specific activities on SNSs might be related to a range of social outcomes such as gains in social capital (Ellison et al. 2007; Burke et al. 2011). A number of studies have investigated whether communication via SNSs has an impact on other forms of communication (Brandtzæg and Nov 2011) as well as how SNSs are used for maintaining contact with friends online (Young 2011; Ellison et al. 2011).

In a national US survey, Hampton and colleagues identified differences between those that do and do not use SNSs based on an analysis of their demographic characteristics (Hampton et al. 2011). Few studies, however, have considered how the use of SNSs might fit into the range of social practices people perform in daily life (but see boyd and Marwick 2011). Researchers have considered the frequency and breadth of SNS use and their relationship to social and psychological outcomes, often simply making the assumption that these sites had become “indispensable”. The major goal of this paper is to identify whether and how SNSs might become “indispensable” to their users and when the same technology might remain relegated to the periphery of daily life despite fulfilling useful functions. Results from this research contribute to our understanding of the role of SNSs in daily life and identify three distinct patterns of SNS use.

Background

Studies of the use of technologies in daily life usually consider technologies that have been broadly adopted by a range of different users. Indeed it is when technologies become mundane, used for a range of tasks and integrated into pragmatic routines that their role in daily life can be ascertained and they may even be construed as indispensable (Bakardjieva 2011, Hoffman et al. 2004). Social applications, most recently SNSs such as Facebook or Twitter, attract millions of users, capturing the imagination of media and the interest of scholars (boyd and Ellison 2007). SNSs have become deeply embedded in people’s daily lives (Lampe et al. 2008) in the US and in many countries around the world. For example Russian SNSs *odnoklassniki.ru* and *vkontakte.ru* consistently score in the top five most popular websites (Kiselev 2008; Alexanyan 2009).

Though there are many methodological issues in the study of SNSs, current results suggest that these communication technologies have become vitally important to people’s everyday practices. For example, in one study Austra-

lian Facebook users expressed substantial attachment to the site when asked how they might feel if their profiles ceased to exist (Young 2011). SNSs do not substitute, but augment the array of modalities that people use for daily social activities (Brantzæg and Nov 2011). These sites offer elaborate systems for perpetuating relational continuity through explicit articulations of connections and through unobtrusive and asynchronous behaviors, such as leaving comments or notes for each other (Young 2011; boyd and Marwick 2011). SNS users reap social benefits from participating in these technologies, as SNSs enable access to broader and more heterogeneous networks just a click away (Ellison et al. 2011; Burke et al. 2011).

Research Context

The study presented here is based on the data collected in Russia and Kazakhstan with a focus on how people use a range of communication technologies for maintaining relationships. With the demise of the Soviet Union resurgence of nationalism and volatile economic conditions motivated large swaths of the population to relocate, taking advantage of greater mobility afforded by the post-soviet states. What used to be stable local personal networks developed over the course of a lifetime became unstable connections to mobile and often long distant contacts (Rose 2000).

Russian-language SNSs have provided an opportunity for people in Russia to reconnect, re-establishing connections lost due to out-migration and revitalizing more local connections that have deteriorated due to economic volatility (Alexanyan 2009). SNSs not only continue to be some of the most popular sites used by the Russian-language users (Firsova 2011), but have also been credited with motivating users over 50 to start using the Internet with the promise of reconnection. Although both Russia and Kazakhstan can be construed as ‘digitally nascent’ societies (Wei and Kolko 2005), the percentage of Internet users in these countries is rapidly increasing. SNSs are wildly popular among Internet users in the region. Nearly two thirds of all users report having at least one social network site profile and this is even more prevalent among users over 50 (Skanavi 2011).

Given the prominence of SNSs in daily Internet use in Russia and Kazakhstan it is reasonable to assume that in spite of the fact that these technologies fairly recently became part of online offerings for Russians, they have become important to their users. Yet it is unclear what such importance might mean in everyday life. This study considered how people in Russia and Kazakhstan integrated SNS use into a range of their social activities and whether these sites were indeed perceived as indispensable.

Method

The data in this paper comes from a qualitative study of the role of communication technologies in relational maintenance, conducted in four cities in Russia and three cities Kazakhstan in 2009 and 2010. I conducted 62 semi-structured interviews in Russian with respondents recruited using a snowball sampling method, initially seeded with personal contacts. The sample consisted of 30 women and 32 men, ranging in age from 18 to 62 (average 36) and in education from secondary school to PhD, 28 of the participants were married. The majority of respondents were employed, eight were college students and three were retired.

All interviews began with discussions of geographically proximal and distant social ties, letting technologies used for their maintenance emerge organically, without external prompting. At the end of each interview I asked the respondents how they might react if tomorrow all social network sites suddenly disappeared. Responses to this question form the basis of the analyses reported here.

This investigation was based on the principles of grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). After each interview, I wrote extensive field notes, charting a picture of the mediated communication landscape in the lives of the people I met. I augmented each subsequent interview based on my reflections on prior interviews. Toward the end of the study I reached “theoretical saturation” as previously identified concepts and ideas were getting repeated with few new issues emerging. All presented quotes were translated by the author, who is a native Russian speaker.

Findings

Most of the respondents maintained an account on more than one SNS although the vast majority actively used only one account if they had it. Only a about a third of respondents ($n=26$) used SNSs in concert with other communication technologies to maintain current active connections as well as to keep track of connections that had become dormant. The rest used SNSs primarily to reconnect with people with whom they had lost contact over the years.

The frequency of SNS use varied from being logged onto the site constantly either from stationary computers or mobile phones to only checking them in response to email notifications of messages or other SNS activity. More than half of the respondents reported checking at least one SNS daily ($n=34$). Usually if respondents had more than one SNS profile they used one frequently and checked the others in response to notifications. While there was a general trend for respondents under 30 to be more active users of SNSs than those over 30, there were a number of exceptions to this trend in both age groups. On average, users who used SNSs daily tended to report spending between 30 minutes and an hour on their site of choice.

Importance of SNSs

At the end of every interview we asked: “if you were to wake up tomorrow and find that all SNSs suddenly disappeared, how would you react to this?” This question was deliberately constructed to ask about loss of SNSs in general for everyone rather than asking about loss of individual access to SNSs as for example in the Young (2011) study. We were interested in ascertaining the role of this technology in daily life more generally, rather than considering how individuals might feel about sudden exclusion if they were the only ones to loose access. Respondents tended to react with three broad categories of response: horror and a sense of profound loss, slight irritation at resulting inconveniences and a calm shrug indicating that it would make no difference to them. There were few simple demographics that were consistently associated with each type of response. While there was a trend for older respondents to express a kind of nonchalance toward potential loss of SNSs, younger respondents were as likely to express any of the three attitudes and there were a number of older respondents expressing other attitudes as well. Levels of income and education were not unassociated with patterns of response. We found distinct patterns of SNS use that were associated with each type of response.

SNS as an Indispensible Tool

A small proportion of respondents (n=14) reacted with expressions of profound loss:

It would be really sad, I would really miss something. I think it would be similar if tomorrow I woke up and found that refrigerators or TVs were gone! Actually, I think I could live without TV easier. – LF, 50, Russia

Such commentary illustrated that for some of the respondents loss of SNSs would mean a profound disruption to their daily activities. The comparison of the SNS to TV and refrigerator here evocatively illustrates how for this respondent SNSs had become a common utility and part of the infrastructure that supported her daily practices. In fact these practices explicitly related to interactions and relational maintenance activities with emotionally close and often physically proximal contacts. Most commonly, SNSs also offered a way to communicate that allowed circumnavigating difficult or inconvenient circumstances.

Well you can't call her at night, you know, her mother is bed-ridden and she takes care of her. So I see if she is online, I send her a message and I know she will respond when she has a minute. I'd rather not call to distract her too much. – LF, 50, Russia.

Another response of this type referred to loss of particular social contacts that had been gained specifically through the SNS and that had developed into engaging connections:

Well that would be a really serious loss, because I have a kind of community inside those, not people I know in person but people that are my network interlocutors and I wouldn't want to loose these people. – AT, 36, Russia

In this case, not only were SNSs used for maintaining offline relationships, they were also sites for making new online connections. It was these connections that represented the value of SNS connectivity and, since SNSs were the only space of their enactment they would be then irreversibly lost. These kinds of responses, full of emotional reactions to what respondents imagined would be profound losses, were what one might expect given the recent scholarship on SNSs. Yet only a small proportion of our respondents had expressed this kind of sentiment.

SNS as an Organizational Convenience

Another, somewhat more common response (n=21) could be summarized as a kind of calm description of potential inconveniences that was usually amended with considerations of potential positive outcomes:

The fact is it would be inconvenient, I would receive information much slower. Some of my habits would probably have to change. Like this I am constantly expressing ideas and I would have to change that. It would be harder to organize events – MD, 20, Russia

This kind of response did not contain the emotional reaction to a kind of profound loss expressed earlier. Here, the attitude was far more practical – a consideration of losing a useful and often frequently used tool. The loss here was merely an inconvenience, albeit one that might have substantial consequences. Some respondents even considered that these inconveniences might be imagined:

I would experience a little bit of an information vacuum or at least it might seem to me that I am in such a vacuum, but it wouldn't really change anything. – KSH, 36, Russia

While SNSs were frequently used as organizational and information resources, when asked to consider their value, many respondents referred to the time-investments necessary to make them useful, often reflecting that other tools could easily fulfill similar functions without the distraction of the social minutiae of SNS.

SNS as a Tool for Reconnection

A somewhat larger proportion of the participants (n=27), however, responded with a kind of careless shrug indicating that loss of SNSs wouldn't make much difference in their lives at least at this juncture.

Well it wouldn't be a big deal, I already did everything I wanted to, found information and I am really satiated with it. Those that are on the Internet and those that make up my [friends] I can't say that I can't

live without them, I had lived most of my life without them, at our age people leave. – SB, 50, Kazakhstan

In most cases these respondents had been using the SNS for several years and tended to primarily use them for finding connections from the past and reconnecting with them. While it is tempting to associate such sentiments with a particular age group, however, this wasn't the case:

I wouldn't be particularly broken up about it, I didn't really interact with most people on there. Those people that are really interesting to me, I have their contact information so even without [SNS] there are other ways. – NM, 28, Russia

Such nonchalance was initially startling given that many of the respondents were spending countless hours daily on their SNS of choice catching up with former classmates and exchanging fresh gossip. Yet here the loss of SNSs was not perceived as something disruptive because the contact that would have been lost was never integrated into the practice of daily living. Spending time on SNSs was a form of entertainment, disconnected from the everyday realities. Reconnected ties may have been exciting or important for reminiscence, but not imperative otherwise.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper considered what role SNSs play in how people conduct activities of daily living, identifying three broad patterns of use given three different reactions in response to the question of whether SNSs were important. These reactions were strongly associated with specific use practices that have implications for considering how to conceive of and design social applications in the future. Where all respondents engaged in reconnecting with contacts from the past, looking up each others' photographs and exchanging messages about current activities, fewer used the sites as organizational tools, ways of accessing media and entertainment or as information sources and even fewer used SNSs to actively communicate with contacts that represented strong relationships and emotional involvements. SNSs did in fact become indispensable tools for some but only when their use was integrated into the everyday routines of communicating with emotionally important or geographically proximal contacts. For many users, however, social network sites were like a box of cookies – a source of immediate gratification, whose imagined absence could easily be replaced by other activities. The ease of communication made SNS use lively and entertaining, but the use of these sites remained largely inconsequential unless it underpinned actions that traveled outside of the social network site itself.

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