Title	Social Networking Portals: An Overview and Evaluation
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Publication Date	2004
Publication Information	Ina O'Murchu, John Breslin, Stefan Decker "Social Networking Portals: An Overview and Evaluation", Proceedings of the 1st Workshop on Friend of a Friend, Social Networking and the (Semantic) Web (FOAF Galway), 2004.
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/460

Social Networking Portals: an Overview and Evaluation

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Abstract

Next generation communication on the Internet changes the way we interact with the complexity of the information load on the World Wide Web. Web portals act as gateways to resources and a multitude of services on the Internet. Social networking portals add a new quality to collaborative online communities, allowing users to create and maintain a network of close friends or business associates. In this paper, the different types of social networking sites are classified, and an evaluation is performed in terms of communication and collaboration features, searching and browsing capabilities. Furthermore, user perception, access statistics and privacy issues are discussed.

1. Introduction

The Internet and, in particular, the Web has enabled a communication revolution: the ability to send and retrieve information everywhere has changed the way we work and live. Web portals, as content aggregators, provide efficient access to information and services online: they are electronic gateways or entrances that provide numerous links to other sites and collate information. They provide a focal point and an information source that can be personalized. They also allow people to gather detailed information, on demand, and simplify user interaction. They play an increasingly important role amongst online communities as audiences seek out more specific information, providing valuable opportunities for both profit and non-profit communities by helping to eliminate time-consuming tasks such as administration to disseminate information. Social networking portals are a recent trend. A social networking site (SNS) connects people based on data gathered about them, stored in user profiles. These user profiles determine the way in which users present themselves to other users. The most important distinguishing factor between the various sites is the range of profile information that they store and can perform operations on. This paper presents a review of the various classifications of social networking portals: registration or connection based; user profiles for social or professional purposes; non-profit or profit-based sites. An evaluation is carried out under the headings of searching capabilities; communication and collaboration features; perception of users; privacy measures; and other issues. The paper starts with a review of portal sites in general and the motivation for the development of social networking portals in particular.

2. An Evaluation and Classification Schema for Social Networking Sites

2.1. Registration-Based vs. Connection Based

The majority of social networking sites have no restrictions as to who can join or when. These sites are registration based, where a person simply fills out a form of required details such as name, location, e-mail address and desired password. Registration for most sites is not subject to approval or moderation by another user, but usually does require some confirmation of details by clicking an activation link sent to the e-mail address entered. Once an account is activated, a user can begin adding friends to their network. Some registration forms can be complex with optional questions ranging from your previous employers to your favourite meal. Unfortunately it is not always clear what information is required or optional when registering with a site. There are some sites where an existing connection to a user on a site is required before membership to that site can be obtained. For example, to become a member of orkut, a non-member would have to contact a friend or acquaintance who is already a member of the site and ask for an invitation, or alternatively an existing member would send an invitation to a non-member to join the site. This seems to keeps down the number of inactive accounts. To establish a link with another user on a social networking site usually requires the agreement of that user. For example, on Spoke, an e-mail invitation message is sent to another user with whom you wish to establish a connection. There are a few sites where this is not the case. Word of Mouth is an example of such a site. A link is established by simply entering the e-mail address of the person with whom you wish to communicate.

2.2. User Profiles

User profiles are identification information about a user. They contain a description of user attributes, preferences and profile to define the interaction permissions with system resources. Business profiles allow professionals to interact with one another through business-orientated information, endorsements, testimonials and reputations. This allows business professionals, owners and entrepreneurs to connect together and search for contacts by location or expertise. These personal profiles contain information from relationship status to member's religion and gender, and are shared with friends

and community online. User profiles are a central property of online social networks and increase quality of recommendation services. They are of particular value to the business asset of commercial social network sites. The investigation on user profiles is a component of the full evaluation and part of the full results presentation.

Site	Profitable	Potential Revenue
Spoke	Unknown	Business Contacts, Jobs, Referrals, Requests, Subscription
Ryze	Yes	Awareness of Brand, Business Contacts, Publicity
LinkedIn	Unknown	Business Contacts, Jobs, Referrals, Requests, Subscription
Friendster	No	Advertising, Classifieds, Community Subscription, Matchmaking Service, Membership
Tribe	No	Advertising, Classifieds, Subscription to Join Tribes
orkut	No	Advertising, Dating and Matchmaking Subscription, Subscription to Communities
Meetup	Yes	Advertising, Charge for Sites to Hold Meetups, Exclusive Membership for Meetups
Ecademy	Unknown	Connectivity to Business Persons, Jobs, Referrals
Friendzy	Unknown	Advertising, Matchmaking Subscriptions
Tickle	Yes	Advertising, Matchmaking Registration

Table 1. Revenue and profitability potential of various social networking sites.

3. Evaluation

3.1. Searching and Browsing Capabilities

Social networking sites must provide some mechanism for users to search and browse for information, ranging from matching other users or communities who have shared interests, to job vacancies in a particular industry or location. Table 2 classifies a number of sites in terms of searching functionality. From top to bottom and left to right, these range from social to real world events to professional. While most sites are targeted towards either professional or social pursuits, there are a few like Tribe and Tickle that allow comprehensive searching and browsing in both areas. Social sites devoted to user relationships and dating tend to focus their searching functionality on personal information such as age, gender, and relationship status. For equality reasons, most professional networking sites ignore age and gender and instead focus on searching through users' current jobs and employers. Both social and professional sites allow searching of interests, locations and communities since these are common matching requirements.

Search = s, Browse = b, Neither = -	Friendzy	orkut	Tickle	Tribe	Friendster	Meetup	Ryze	Ecademy	Spoke	LinkedIn
User Relationships	s	s	s	s	-	-	-	-	-	-
User Gender	s	s	s	s	-	-	s	-	-	-
User Age	s	s	s	s	-	-	-	-	-	-
User Interests	s	-	s	s	s	-	-	s	s	-
User Favorites	s	-	s	-	s	-	-	-	-	-
User Associations	-	-	s	-	s	-	s	-	s	-
User Location	s	s	s	s	-	sb	s	s	-	sb
User Articles	b	-	-	-	-	-	-	sb	-	-
Community Articles	b	b	b	b	-	sb	b	sb	-	-
Community Events	-	b	b	sb	b	sb	b	sb	-	-
Community Names	sb	s	sb	s	-	sb	sb	sb	-	-
Community Descriptions	sb	s	sb	s	-	-	sb	sb	-	-
Community Categories	b	b	b	b	-	b	-	b	-	-
Classified Advertisements	b	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
User Real Name	s	s	s	s	s	b	s	s	s	s
User E-Mail	s	-	s	s	s	-	-	-	-	-
User Job Name	-	-	s	s	-	-	s	s	s	s
User Job Description	-	-	-	s	-	-	-	s	-	-
User Job Prospects	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	s
User Employer Name	-	-	s	s	-	-	s	s	s	s
User Employer Category	-	-	s	-	-	-	-	-	s	sb
Site Help	b	sb	sb	b	s	b	sb	b	sb	b

Table 2. Search and browsing functionality of various social networking sites.

4. Conclusion

This paper has given an overview of portal sites and the rationale for portals specifically dedicated to the creation of social networks. A classification of social networking portals has been provided and a comparison of the methods for establishing membership and user-to-user links on such sites was presented. An evaluation was performed on search, communication and privacy features, as well as the relative popularity of a number of prominent sites.