

THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL NETWORKING IN THE ARAB WORLD



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INTRODUCTION

The year of 2011 marks the real birthday of social networking in the Arab world. Social networking plays a crucial role in the Arab world now days not only in the area of personal communication and business but also in revolutionizing the ways Arabs are expressing their political opinions. With this steady increase in the number social networks users, comes technical challenges and privacy concerns. Social networking has been an important mean of communication in the Arab world and it is expected to grow in importance in the future in the previously mentioned areas of interest.

BACKGROUND

A social network is a website which allows its users to interact with each other's, where the connections are based on real friendship, common interests, or merely to meet new people (B, D, and F). The term was first coined by John Barres, an anthropologist, in 1954 while he was researching relationships among human beings (Churchil and Halverson). Social networks vary in the type of contents they allow to share. For instance, YouTube is for sharing videos while Twitter is for sharing very short messages that aren't longer than 140 characters. Facebook which is the most popular amongst all social networks allows many types of media including text, image, sound and video.

EARLY STAGES

THE SPARK

The first incarnation of the concept of social network is SixDegrees.com (E, D). Unfortunately, it was closed in 2000 because it couldn't define a sustainable business model for what it was offering (Boyd and Ellison). Friendster.com was the next notable social network, which is in essence a dating website that differs from classical dating websites in that it used one's friends list to suggest the friendship of friend-of-friend. It was estimated that about 300000 users were registered and many common-interest groups were active (Boyd and Ellison).

THE EXPLOSION

Until 2003, social networks were modest in technology and number of users. The introduction of MySpace.com created a huge interest, which resulted in more than 250 million registered users from the around the globe (Kim, Jeong and Lee). An explanation of this explosive growth is the spread of internet access and the specialization of social networks. For example, MySpace is for personal communication while LinkedIn is for business relationships (Kim, Jeong and Lee). In the Arab world, there are more than 60 million regular internet users with more than 17 million social network active users. Egypt is at the top of the list with respect to the number of users of internet and social networks, with more than 5 million Facebook users (Ghannam).

CURRENT STATUS

PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The main advantage of social networks is easing personal communication by reducing the time and distance challenges that are faced in other types of communication. A study that was conducted between 1995 and 2003 shows that social networks are mainly used to keep in contact with friends we know (Coyle and Vaughn). I.e. people are mainly interested in meeting their real friends on social networks, not in creating new relationships. Another study on college students using Facebook confirms this opinion (Coyle and Vaughn). It is estimated that more than 65% of teenagers in the USA have profiles on social networks (Reynolds). There are many types of personal communication that is offered by various social networks, and that includes creating profiles, connections among friends, joining groups of common-interest, direct communication with already discovered connections and sharing many types of media among those connections (Kim, Jeong and Lee).

BUSSINESS AND ADVERTISEMENT

Many organizations started using social networks to open new markets for their businesses and attract new customers. Advertising on social networks is more effective than other means of media because of the interactive nature of social networks where users are involved either by leaving comments or by “favoring” the product or the service. Also, social networks advertisement can be directed demographically which gives great flexibility in choosing the appropriate audience (Reynolds). In the Arab world there are 17 million users of social networks, while the number of sold copies of all newspapers everyday doesn’t exceed 14 million copies (Ghannam). In addition, viral marketing is an alternative to direct advertisement where the advertisement is passed by the user to his/her friends (Reynolds). For example, in a matter of weeks Susan Boyle became a superstar when “Britain’s Got Talent” submitted the video of her first song in the show on YouTube to generate millions of views (Kim, Jeong and Lee). Coca-Cola page on Facebook is “liked” by millions, and it is one of the most popular pages on Facebook (Reynolds). It also has been noticed that some employers check the profile of applicants on social networks although using the information found on those profiles is not legal in some parts of the world. There are social networks for professionals like LinkedIn which is directed toward creating connections based on the career of the user.

POLITICS AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The “Arab Spring”, revolutions, has brought the attention of millions of Arab citizens to the viable benefits of social networks as an alternative communication channel and in some cases as the only mean of communication. Social networking in general, is considered the tool of choice for promoting freedom of speech and human rights in the Arab world and in Egypt especially which is ranked fourth with respect to the number of users on Facebook (Kim, Jeong and Lee).

Tal Al-Mallouhi is a 19 years old female who was arrested at the age of 15 because of her writings on Facebook about the lack of freedom of speech and the dictatorship of Bashar Al-Asad in Syria (Ghannam). In the USA social networks has been used in more advanced ways as in the case of promoting election campaign. For example, Obama's campaign for presidency used social networks to a large extent and it has been shown to be an effective way of promotion (Kim, Jeong and Lee). The nature of social networks allows users to generate content that can spread quickly across the world, unlike traditional media where the control is not in the hand of consumers in addition to the low or no cost of generating content on these networks.

OBSTACLES

TECHNOLOGY

The number of users and potential users is enormous, to the point that managing the explosive growth requires sophisticated computing architectures. It is estimated that the number of internet users exceeds two billions (Reynolds). Facebook has the biggest share of the pie among all social networks (Reynolds). Twitter published that when it had 350000 users, the system had to process around 600 requests per second (Kim, Jeong and Lee). Now days, Twitter has around 300000000 registered users! My space uses more than 7000 powerful computers (servers) to respond to the requests of more than 300 million users (Kim, Jeong and Lee). Another issue is the connection between different social websites. For example sharing a video from YouTube on Facebook requires the architectures to cross each other to work efficiently. YouTube claims that about 24 hours of video are uploaded every minute (Ghannam). On the other hand, many users in the Arab world face the problem of slow internet connections where broadband connections are not yet common in some countries like Syria, in addition to the government control over what is allowed to be accessed(Ghannam)!

PRIVACY

Every social network user is, and should be, concerned about his/her privacy because revealing personal information on social networks might create problems in real life by people abusing those pieces of information. For instance, a study shows that 43 percent of student has been exposed to cyber-bullying, which is a kind of harassment among minors (Reynolds). Also, MySpace removed over 90000 registered users who are sexually offending other users (Kim, Jeong and Lee). Another aspect is the relationship between trust and privacy which has been shown, paradoxically, to be reciprocal. While users trust Facebook more than MySpace and use real information on their profiles, MySpace users are more willing to meet new people in reality after meeting them on the website.

The explanation is that there is less chance of being chased after a one-meeting style of real meetings because they don't use real information that helps offenders to track them back in case the relationship doesn't succeed (Dwyer, Hiltz and Passerini).

CASE STUDY: FACEBOOK

Facebook was founded by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 as a social network to exchange and share various types of contents among its users. It is estimated that 800 million users are using Facebook in 2011 where the number has jumped from about 70 million users in 2009(Reynolds, Olivarez-Giles). It is the most popular social network among all other networks on the web. There has been a concern about collecting the data of users, but Facebook claimed it has reduced the collection of data to the minimum since then. It has a great impact on the political life in the Arab world. For example, it has been used to organize protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria. Ironically, an Egyptian man named his baby "Facebook" (Trenholm)!

CONCLUSION

Social networks are becoming main-stream in the Arab world. The number of internet users is increasing, hence the number of social networks users. Social networks are used as a main or an alternative channel of communication for personal communication, business relationships or political campaigns. The issue of privacy is an important obstacle that can't be solved without real attention from users. Technological challenges are still in the way, but the advancement in architectures is alleviating these challenges. Although there are many social networks now days, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are the most popular in the Arab world. It is expected that the introduction of broadband connections in the poor parts of the Arab world, would allow more users will join social networks.

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