A Social Society: The Positive Effects of Communicating through Social Networking Sites

Ebony Wheeldon

Modern media practises have evolved significantly from their traditional forms, with the key concepts of this ‘new media’ being participation and interactivity (O’Reilly, 2005, p. 1) (Anderson, 2007). Society exists in a digital age, where everything in our lives is spread out across as much media as possible and this media is shaped by everyone. Much of this media exists or relates to the Internet and the ‘online world,’ as Brücks, Mehnert, Prommer and Räder (2008, p. 2) confirm in their statement that “the Internet is part of our everyday life” for the reason that “we do the same in the Internet as in real life, probably in a [...] more efficient, faster [and] cheaper [way].” As such, communication using the Internet as a channel is becoming increasingly popular. Social networking sites, such as Facebook, Twitter and MySpace are examples of communication tools available online. With proliferation of social networking online comes impact on society; a difference in what people do and how they do it. Changes in society are simultaneously useful and negative and this is the case with the impact of online social networking. This paper aims to look at the positive effect that interaction through social networking sites has on today’s society in relation to the modern media concept of greater interaction.

A social networking site is described as “a website where individuals can set up an online profile, describing his/her interests” (Hawkins, n.d.). However, as boyd and Ellison (2007) reveal, “while their key technological features are fairly consistent, the cultures that emerge around [social networking sites] are varied. Most sites support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, but others help strangers connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities.” From this, it is evident that the main use of social networking sites is interaction and communicating with others. We use them to keep up to date and in touch with existing friends and relations, or to create new relationships. The amount (and type) of additional features and services offered by different social networking sites often relates to their popularity. For instance, in a study which ranks the amount of traffic (people who use the website) of social networking sites, Facebook, MySpace and Twitter are the top three most popular sites as of April, 2010 (“Top 20,” 2010). These sites offer a diverse range of aids and methods in which to communicate online. Globalisation, interaction, participation and usability are encouraged through these sites; therefore they relate to the (growing) fundamental concepts of modern, ‘digital’ society.

The significance placed on interaction and participation within these social networking sites is evident in the numerous ways in which communication is encouraged. For example, some social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook offer users the ability to create sub-groups (or message boards) of people based on similar interests. Unlike ‘fan pages’ or ‘followers,’ which are largely one-dimensional, these groups are “analogous to clubs in the offline world” (Greenstein, 2009). These can vary from support groups, to fan groups, to community organisations or school groups. The basis behind them is to share information and communicate with others. Apart from using these groups to interact, people have the ability (depending on
privacy settings) to comment and respond to ‘status updates’ and statements or comments that others have posted, thereby initiating communication. On sites such as You Tube, people may even give a video response. By allowing such feedback, there is the prospect of conversation, of debate, of sharing information or perceiving new ideas. It is this capability of interaction that makes social networking sites multi-dimensional in communicating, unlike the one-dimensionality of earlier websites and blogs. As such, it also points to the fact that social networking sites, as Siegler (2009) suggests, are often an extension of ‘real life.’ By coexisting with life offline, communicating in the digital world is therefore no more of a threat than if a person were to join communities and interact with others in the offline world.

Other activities offered by social networking sites include such services as multiplayer online games, polls, chat rooms and messaging services, all of which endorse the idea of communicating and interacting with others. Customisation of user profiles, such as background images and page layouts also provides a way of interaction through expression (and sharing) of interests or the sharing of these graphics. Many social networking sites market on the increase in convergence technology and portability of today’s technology. As Chris Bronk (2008) of the Baker Institute clarifies, “convergence is a term tied up with digital technology.” As so much of the way we communicate has become digitised “we see more and more that your telephone is your music player and it’s also your email client or it’s your Internet browser” (Bronk, 2008). The companies that are providing us with communication services are, as Bronk (2008) further states “selling us not one service anymore [but] they’d like to [provide] a whole bunch of different [services and] so they have a converging business model,” which very often incorporates connection to some sort of social networking site. Therefore, social networking sites offer an array of ‘widgets’ and applications which allow users to easily connect to the site and to share their information on these sites with others. The website Widgetbox shows some examples of applications for social networking sites and has a wide range of ‘widgets’ to choose from. These applications are also used to connect with other websites (generally blogs), usually through “Really Simple Syndication” (RSS) feeds, which provide links and updates of information to other sites. As Jansson (n.d.) shows us, social networking sites can combat loneliness; that by overcoming ‘real life’ boundaries, such as time or distance, and establishing a continuous link to communicating with others, a feeling of participation and belonging is created.

Convergence technology, social networking sites and the applications which link the two together can also enhance freedom and mobility. They offer the ability to access information and communicate with others at any time and in any place and regardless of the physical location of other people. People can maintain a constant connection with existing friends and family who might live in different countries, or they can form new relationships with other nationalities, regardless of ‘real time’ or separate locations. As Lecky-Thompson (2009) informs, “This has recently come to light in the number of people in the armed forces using YouTube, FaceBook and Twitter to stay in touch. [Also], social networking sites can bring people together with varying backgrounds who might otherwise never have met, and then encourage them to extend that experience into real world social functions.” This is especially the case for minority groups, who might ordinarily be ostracised or overlooked in offline communities or social situations. As Bekhuis (n.d.) explains, “The virtual anonymity of online experience helps to reduce social discomfort and discrimination, or stereotyping otherwise associated with real-life perceptions of
age, disabilities, race, gender, or culture.” By communicating online, it allows people to see past physical differences and focus on a deeper connection, discovering similarities that may have been previously disregarded.

By forming groups of people with similar interests (particularly if the interest or hobby is not mainstream), social networking sites can create a sense of unity and belonging in people who might have previously felt alienated in society because of an inability to relate to local people. Particularly in areas with smaller populations, the chance of discovering others with similar interests is infrequent but by removing these location barriers through online communication, the chance of meeting people with the same interests is greatly increased. Social networking sites give the impression that it is a much smaller world. Some social networking sites, such as Neighbo even encourage social interaction on a local level, for, as Fox (2009) suggests, “with levels of social trust reported to be in decline people respond by retreating indoors” and social networking online allows an easier way to form relationships with local community members. Furthermore, existing relationships on a larger (community) level may also be aided through the use of online social networking. A trustee of a Unitarian Universalist meetinghouse presents the view that “the advantage [to local communities] of [communicating online ...] is that you can be made aware of more things… you can get involved and you can be kept up to date… you can link to a [Web] page and that [page] with its links can lead you to a lot more information on the issue. So you can become more involved [in the community]” (Kavanaugh, 2009). By encouraging online communication between local people, these relationships are therefore likely to be stronger offline, as people become more informed and involved in local events.

Social networking sites also offer the chance of communication in cases where mobility is often a hindrance to social interaction. Elderly people and those with physical disabilities who have an inability to leave their house are able to stay in touch with existing relations and friends, as well as get in touch with people who have similar issues (Lecky-Thompson, 2009). The use of social networking sites amongst deaf teens is an example of the benefits of online communication in relationship to physical disabilities. Chen-See (2009) tells us that online communication “provides a unique, convenient communication tool that does not require speaking verbally” and as such “may empower some teens with hearing loss [as it] helps to level the playing field.” This is also the case with people who have psychological disorders who may also have limited mobility. According to Lecky-Thompson (2009), “Online communication can help those with dysfunctional syndromes achieve a level of social interaction previously difficult or impossible. For some people, interaction with crowds is made easier if they do not actually feel the physical immersion. Such sites also provide those isolated by disability or environment with a rich and fulfilling social life.” Moreover, connecting with others online “can be a good addition to therapy and for many, even encourage they seek professional help” (Market Wire, 2008). The ability to incorporate blogging in social networking can also be therapeutic. “Blogging is a form of journal therapy and according to renowned therapist Kathleen Adams, “studies indicate that the release offered by writing has a direct impact on the body’s capacity to withstand stress and fight off infection and disease” (Market Wire, 2008). Many people form support groups through social networking sites to discover and communicate with others who have similar problems or health issues. People find it easier to reach out online because it can be anonymous and it allows people more control over what information they disclose. An example of the benefits of this form of online support, dubbed “Health 2.0” (McGilvray, 2009), can be seen in teenager, Tamaryn
Stevens, who was diagnosed with kidney disease when she was 10. She uses a networking site called Livewire, which was set up by the Starlight Children’s Foundation and is aimed at 10-21 year olds with serious illnesses and disabilities. “It’s hugely beneficial,” [she says.] “Especially the days that you feel [down] in real social situations like school and things like that. You go home and you go into Livewire and there’s people to talk to and it makes your day that much better” (McGilvray, 2009). With online social networking reducing difficulties with limited mobility, time and distance barriers and unacceptance due to stereotyping, people like Tamaryn therefore have more access to support and the ability to improve communication with others despite illness or disability.

Another benefit to communicating through social networking sites is the promotion of education and news. People can share information via links, reviews and applications. They may source this information from other places and share them with others or provide their own information for education, updates of news or support. Many educational institutions encourage learning via the Internet and social networking sites because it allows an easy communication channel for students to learn and share skills. As Jansson (n.d.) shows, “Students enjoy educational opportunities where lesson topics, research, creative ideas, and interactive discussions are at their fingertips.” A study at the University of Minnesota also found “that, of the students observed, […] 77 percent had a profile on a social networking site. When asked what they learn from using social networking sites, the students listed technology skills as the top lesson, followed by creativity, being open to new or diverse views and communication skills” (Educational Benefits of Social Networking Sites Uncovered, 2008). From this it is clear to see that communicating online is, in numerous ways, beneficial to educating and learning. News information may also be observed online, as many news channels also provide their information on the Internet, which users of social networking sites may peruse via ‘widget’ links and applications. These applications generally provide live feeds of current, updated news to a user’s profile page (on a social networking site), which is further evidence of the constant connection and communication provided by social networking sites and another way in which they are beneficial in society.

Businesses are also honing in on the ability to market and advertise through social networking sites. “New media shifts the balance of control for production and distribution of content between corporations and consumers” (Young, 2006) and social networking sites form part of this balance. Through online social networking, companies are better able to advertise to specific markets or discover, monitor and engage with loyal brand advocates. Conversely, they can also “discover disgruntled customers and realise their concerns” (Hunter, 2008). In addition to advertising through these sites, they can notify of products, announcements or competitions (Hunter, 2008) or research target markets and industry trends. They can socialise and network with industry peers (Hunter, 2008), build industry contacts (Jansson, n.d.) (Hunter, 2008), research industry trends and updates (Reitsma, 2010), or tag and track discussions on specific topics or events (Hunter, 2008). Communication through social networking sites can also help employment through job advertising (Jansson, n.d.) or by showcasing of talent. Many aspiring artists show off their skills through such sites as YouTube or DeviantArt.

For all the benefits of social networking sites in today’s society, it is evident that any impact they have is due to not merely the sites themselves but “the communications layer embedded within [them]” (Young, 2006). Social networking sites depend on the interaction between users
because, according to Siegler (2009), they are “simply an extension of social networking [in] the real world” and “ever since the term was born, countless people have debated the implications of taking social interactions virtual.” At different points in time, Siegler (2009) mentions “it has been said that [social networking] would be both the downfall of mankind, and the thing that would bring the planet together [but] the truth is that social networking, while great in many respects, does not fulfil a fundamental human desire: To be in the actual presence of other people.” However, as an extension of offline communication, the use of social networking sites is incredibly advantageous to society. It simply must be remembered that without the basic existence of and need for interpersonal relationships and communicating with other people, social networking sites would be extraneous and insignificant.