Organizational Social Networking:
From the Enterprise to the Farm

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ABSTRACT
Participation in Social Network Sites (SNS) is becoming an increasingly prevalent online activity, both in general and in organizational settings. However, more questions remain than have been answered about the role of SNS in organizations. This abstract describes some of the work we've done on using SNS in organizations, ranging from studies of use in technology firms to supporting rural youth groups. We define a set of questions we believe need to be answered about SNS use in organizations, and map out a research agenda that attempts to address those questions.

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Social Network Sites, CSCW, Groupware, Social Capital.

ACM Classification Keywords
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION
Research on Social Networking Sites (SNS) is maturing, as these sites become more prevalent and their integration in practice moves from academic or entertainment uses into the enterprise.

Much of the previous work on SNS has focused on informal uses of such sites [1] or use of SNSs among college undergraduates, as this population has been quickest to adopt this online tool [2, 4, 5]

Our own work in the past has looked primarily at Facebook, and its use among college students. We have found that Facebook use is associated with higher levels of perceived bridging social capital [2], that the completion of specific profile fields can lead to different outcomes for users [8] and that perceptions of audience and satisfaction with Facebook change over time [7].

Thinking about the specific technical and social affordances of SNSs, we believe that these sites can support valuable interactions among users, especially those in distributed or very large organizations. For instance, the identity information available in SNS profiles enables individuals to share non-professional aspects of the self with colleagues and peers. The kinds of interactions that result from these revelations (such as unusual hobbies or mundane details about family life) can serve to lower barriers to interaction, thus potentially lubricating professional exchanges and facilitating knowledge-sharing opportunities. When individuals are co-located, communication initiation is easier and more likely to result in conversation, and communication itself is more frequent and opportunistic [6]. We believe that the kinds and amount of identity information encouraged by SNS tools may serve as a kind of proxy for proximity, thus enabling collaborations and other activities beneficial to professional and social organizations.

Increasingly questions of how SNS can be used for populations outside of college students and purposes beyond extending loose affiliation networks arise for SNS researchers. Our own work on this subject has focused on two research contexts that enable us to explore these issues. First, we consider questions of SNS use in for-profit organizations and how those connections can change the experiences of those employees. Next, we discuss the possible role of SNS in community level interactions.

SNS Use may Facilitate Connections in For-Profit Organizations.
Recently, we have worked with a corporate research group to conduct studies of users of an internal Social Network Site designed specifically for company employees.

Our results suggest that even with limited use of the site, over a relatively short amount of time (less than 6 months in most cases), there are associations between types of usage and these different types of social capital. When

someone is using the site for meeting new contacts, they report a greater interest in making these types of contacts at the company in general. When someone is using the site for keeping up with known colleagues, both in their workgroup and in their extended network of loose ties, they report having closer ties with their immediate network (bonding social capital), a higher sense of citizenship (willingness to help the greater good of the company), and greater access to both new people and expertise within the company. And finally, the more intensely someone uses the site (meaning more frequent visits and stronger associations with the community on the site) the higher they report their social capital is, across all measures. They have closer bonds to their network, they have a greater willingness to contribute to the company, they have a greater interest in connecting globally, have greater access to new people, and a greater ability to access expertise.

This preliminary research may be extended in several ways. For instance, server-level data may provide insight into activities associated with outcomes of interest, such as bridging social capital. Longitudinal data would enable us to draw more definitive conclusions about the time order of relationships among variables we've identified. Finally, survey and server-level data may enable us to make recommendations about social behavior and technical design characteristics which are more likely to encourage positive outcomes of use.

SNS Use in Rural Communities

Use of SNS may also be transformative for non-profit organizations, ranging in level from groups to communities who are interested in connecting their members though technology.

One example of work we're doing in this area is to try and connect high school students in three rural communities in Michigan to businesses and volunteer organizations in their local areas. Students in specially designed classes create local social network sites that allow students and local businesses and nonprofits to create profiles and connect with one another. Using surveys of large groups of students and community members, we take pre/post measurements of social capital and try to determine if this type of solution can have a community-level effect. We are currently working in three rural areas of Michigan, and in the first iteration of the study included approximately 60 high school students in the activities. Currently, a similar number are participating currently in a second round of the work. Early work has shown that being engaged in the project does make the students more committed and favorable to their own communities.

In a similar but largely unrelated project, we've been working with 4H participants in a rural area in Michigan. 4H is a youth organization with a focus on skills development, in particular raising livestock animals. Participants have a high level of local connectedness, but low levels of connection between clubs and regions.

Consequently, in coordination with those students, we have developed the Cloverlink site (shown in Figure 1) which is designed to create those connections over time. After promoting the site over the Summer 2008 County Fair season, we have conducted pre-surveys of club members for measures of connection to 4H, their communities, and more.
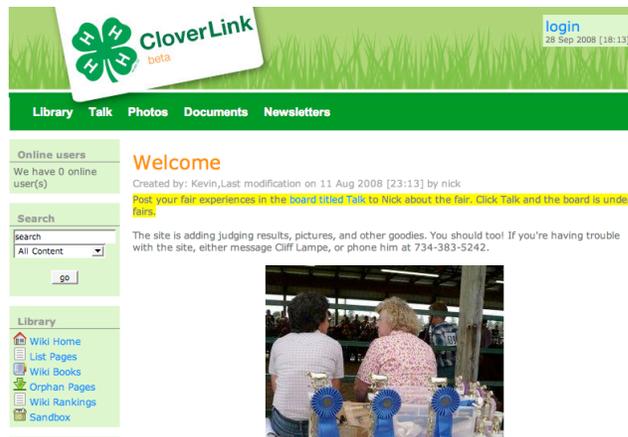

Figure 1: A social network site for use by 4H students in Michigan.

This project continues to evolve, as an alpha version of the site has been used by 4H participants and feedback from those participants is being used to develop new tools for a larger outreach effort.

SNS USE IN ORGANIZATIONS

This mixed agenda of SNS use in both for-profit and non-profit organizations has illuminated many research questions, but in considering each type of organization separately, but also in comparing the two.

How does scale affect SNS use and effect? Most SNS research has focused on large sites with tens of thousands to hundreds of millions of users. Now groups that operate at smaller scales (like nonprofit organizations) are interested in receiving the benefits of SNS without depending on the global sites. How small can a group be and still receive beneficial effects from SNS? Conversely, is there a curvilinear relationships between size of userbase and utility, such that massively large SNSs become too unwieldy for users to navigate?

Secondly, how does the diversity of membership in SNS affect usage? In our work in rural Michigan, we have found that Internet access is a primary difference between users that can affect experiences in the system. Others have found that ethnicity and socio-economic background can affect use [3, 4]. What are the effects of diverse populations on how organizational SNS unfolds?

CONCLUSION

We see many opportunities for research in the interstices between Social Network Sites and organizations of different types. SNS may have a range of effects on organizational communication and the flow of information.

An agenda of research that highlights different populations and uses in the context of organizational settings may illustrate a range of new socio-technical effects.

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