A Review on the Ethical Issues of Online Social Networking

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ABSTRACT

Social Networking has become a global phenomenon (Nielsen, 2012) with people around the world finding ways to connect with people of different culture, getting involved with events and having to trade goods. It has been a fundamental part of the lives of people who are connected on the Internet. For most individuals,social networking sites have been a principal source of connecting to people whom they have established relationship with or to people who are interesting enough for them to establish a relationship with.

With the massive applications being used today and with the future applications envisioned, online social networks have several ethical issues attached to their development which have been nagging some scholars. Majority of the users are not aware of the dangers of the existing online social networks as they joined these sites. This paper therefore will discuss these ethical issues based on historical facts and future applications ethical impacts to the society.

The study suggests that because the Internet is Politically Neutral (Steele and Stein, 2002), we have to protect ourselves in terms of our personal and professional affiliations and so we have to constantly evaluate all our actions on our social networking accounts to avoid the ethical dangers.

Keywords: social networking, ethics, internet

INTRODUCTION

Interconnecting computers which link people, groups, and ideas, the Internet has been continually evolving with numerous developments of its applications. One widely used application isthe Online Social Networks. Alexa (2012) ranks Google as number one and Facebook number two as the top internet applications in the internet based on internet traffic. They have become a growing part of the lifestyles of people connected on the internet.

Facebook for instance has reached 1 billion active users per month and has reached 1 out of 7 persons in the planet with half of these users connected to Facebook at least once a month(Smith, Segall and Cowley; CNN MoneyTech 2012). For promotion of any kind, this type of statistics is ideal for all possible types of engagements that are intended in the society. The rapid growth of social networking sites such as Facebook creates different incremental innovations within the structure of these sites that can improve institutions of the society.

Man will be socially ‘networked’ in one way or another for as long as he exists. Man has evolved by creating networks through structured social affiliations and institutions. With the use of the internet, man has applied this social motives to the Internet asOnline social networks has cut across all these institutions primarily to provide an alternative information sharing and networking relationships medium.

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RATIONALE

Online social network provides an alternative connectivity aside from the regular face to face, or telecommunication connections to people and institutions. Online social network usage is no longer limited to individuals or organizations but it also includes major institutions of the society such as business, education, politics, religion and others. Social network sites have been integrated in the daily practices and its adoption has become a global trend (Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield; 2007).

Online users develop several motives in the use of Online social networks such as entertainment, emotional connectivity, social action, utility, communication purposes and increased profit for business through awareness, product focus, wider reach and setting up buying and selling strategies.

With the massive applications being used today and the future applications envisioned, online social networks have several ethical issues attached to its development that have been nagging some scholars. Majority of the users are not aware of the dangers of online social networks that have been existing once these users joined these sites. This paper will discuss into these ethical issues based on historical facts and future applications ethical impacts to the society.

SOCIAL NETWORKS APPLICATION

Online social network improves collaboration in the coordination and execution of any social activities within the network society despite the constraints such as distance. Multi-disciplinary and context combination communities and relationships are discovered and created. Online social network gives the freedom for people to organize themselves to create power to create and generate collective knowledge which can be evolved for innovations in fields they are grouped. They also promote any social actions.and to promote any social actions. By making all of one’s connections visible to all the others, social networking sites remove the privacy barriers that people keep between different aspects of their lives (Donath and Boyd;2004). One good example that was experienced was the Arab Spring which saw the fall of longtime governments in Egypt and Tunisia fall, regimes of Syria, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain clash with opposition, and leaders in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE offering more benefits to their populace. Social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter were so critical in the mobilization of an unprecedented protest even with the government’s attempts to block these site but it became relentless. This showed the capability of social networking sites in mobilization, empowerment, shaping opinions and influencing change in the society (Huang; 2011).

The Arab Spring was a big historical event but we can still see minor events compared to the Arab Spring that is happening regularly and locally. One incident is the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA) officer assaulted by a cigarette executive caught by a closed circuit television. A massive detestation posts were seen that created pressures for case filling against the executive. Also, The MMDA officer eventually received a lot of compensation from different compassionate sectors and was also promoted in his job.

As presented above, online social networks are not limited to individuals but to a bigger community which include institutions in the society. Religions, businesses, governments and other institutions have tapped social networking site’s wide area of members in their promotion of positions. The Internet has become an increasing ground for innovation that it created several applications such as these social networking sites. These networking sites have also evolved so that newer ideas have been realized for efficiency in social actions. Facebook credits or Facebook money are becoming a global virtual currency and eventually a virtual bank. Eventually, trading through marketplaces in the internet will be using virtual currency. Actually, there is already an exchange rate of Facebook credits to a dollar. Facebook has already strategized replacing the "Facebook credits" to its local currency (BBC News; 2012).

The liberty to build information individually and for a community allows individual voices to be heard by its connection and a common community sentiment can be voiced out. It is an opportunity for expression. This liberty is readily available in social networking sites which can influence products and services, political concerns and other sentiments critical in social actions. Posting of news, sentiments, opinions or any other form of information through the social networking sites is commonly found as one of the activities followed by members. These posts or blogs can be spread across space, time and issue boundaries (Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun and Jeong; 2007). The ability to use these social networking sites are readily available and does not have any cost involved as long as you have a device that is connected to the internet and which may lead to many such and complimentary ideas. The freedom is so overwhelming that all types of generations are interacting in an addicting fashion. This type of freedom evolved society. Herbert Spencer believes that society evolution should be toward increasing individual freedom (1857).

POWER OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

Online social networks have been eliciting mass action and digital mobilization among citizens and the populace. Bresciani&Schmeil (2012) looked at a campaign that raised public awareness and action. The campaign, which was called Kony 2012, centered around awareness about Joseph Kony, the leader of a Ugandan group called the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), who is wanted for several war crimes and using children as soldiers. Social media users from around the world shared the video of the campaign through social networks such as Facebook, YouTube, Vimeo, Instagram and Twitter at a rate that the organizers did not expect. It even reached a point where the organizer's support kits were sold out and deliveries had to be put on hold because of the outpour of support from the global community. Along with this, the campaign started with having English as the medium of communication, but in the end they had materials and kits that used around 20 different languages. Bresciani&Schmeil (2012) concluded that there is massive potential for awareness campaigns to launch. Along with this, people can now contribute and act on issues that they were previously not aware of, especially if it is for the common good.

Another example of the Internet influencing mass action and digital mobilization is the peculiar case of South Korean President, Lee Myung-Bak. Han (2012) documented how Lee was elected as Korea's 17th President. Lee won with the highest margin that was ever attained by any elected official in Korea; however, in as little as 100 days, his popularity plummeted to the worst rating a president ever received in the history of South Korea. The phenomenon observed by Han (2012) focused on how Newly Networked Information Technologies (NNIT) helped augment awareness of a certain event, which developed into a political crisis, by accelerating the speed of information transfer and quickly mobilizing a large-scale protest among the NNIT's user-base. As a result, the Internet along with NNITs can change public opinion as well as fortify civic activities.

Another such case of the Internet eliciting mass action and digital mobilization was the case of Iran's Green Movement, as noted by Diamond (2010). The Green Movement focused on Iran's online public sphere, which explored a wide range of social, cultural, religious and political issues. In the case, incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmedinejad's election victory was announced, along with claims that he won by landslide victory of 62%. This announcement outraged the citizenry, and accusations of vote fraud spread rapidly via Internet chatrooms, blogs and social networks. Through these mediums, Iranians quickly spread news and opinions, along with calls for demonstrations. Citizens rallied in downtown Tehran, with demonstrators ranging from two to three million people. The use of Twitter, text messaging, Facebook as well as Persian-language social networks such as Balatarin and Donbleh, attracted peaceful protesters and allowed for several demonstrations in the capital.

Finally, mass action and digital mobilization also came in the form of ICTs transforming emerging societies, as noticed by Soper&Demirkan (2012). They said that social media like Twitter and Facebook were once just curiosities. However, these media have now transformed the global landscape as evidenced by the Arab Spring.

One example that they highlighted was the event in Tunisia, where Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire after being harassed by a local official. News broke out through the country's ICT networks, pouring out a multitude of protesters. Hundreds of citizens gathered in the streets of SidiBouzid to demonstrate anti-government protests. Along with this, the video of Bouazizi’s final act spread through the Internet, which caused frustrations of Tunisians to reach critical mass. Soon, thousands of protesters were marching across cities in central Tunisia, which led to a full scale revolution that caused the Tunisian Government to collapse. Soper&Demirkan (2012) said that with the help of ICT’s, awareness of millions of people began the revolution. The Internet along with social networks has the power to raise awareness among those who are connected to it prompting mass action to restrictive governments as shown in the above case.

Diamond (2010) also went to cite how then President Joseph Estrada became the “First head of state in history to lose power to a smart mob”. This was achieved within four days, where more than a million digitally mobilized Filipinos assembled at a historic protest site in Manila.

ETHICAL ISSUES

The number of crimes taking place on Facebook has soared by 7,400 % in the past three years. (Skinner; 2012). Criminal activities using these online social networks are a major downfall of this Internet innovation. It is very common to hear identity theft, scams, cyber bullying that leads to robbery, murder, suicide or other fraud- based crimes. If there are any innovations in technological applications, sooner or later criminal application on technology ideas will also catch up to these innovations.

Criminal activities have increased due to the development of online social networks. In the national level, crimes that used social networking sites increased. The Central Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) said it received 25 complaints involving the use of Facebook between January 1 and June 14 this year. In comparison, the agency received 26 cases involving Facebook for the entire year of 2010 (ABS CBN News; 2011). The growth of social networking websites have left the legal world in a game of “catch up” to these online social network criminal activities (Garrie, Duffy-Lewis, Gillespie and Wong; 2010).

Other than committed crimes with the use of online social networks, there are other ethical crimes not identified and documented. Below are on-going debated ethical issues on online social networks.

Ownership of Online Social Network

The major danger of online social networking sites is the non-regulation by any international governing body. As Manuel Castells presented in his paper Network theory of power (2011), the power to program these specific networks are according to the interest and values programmers of the networks. The Online social network is a Network making power that Castells speaks off. The rules and laws on the social networks are designed and implemented by the programmers which give him or her most powerful entity of the social network system. Without regulation, the information that we have posted on these sites are at the controls of these programmers' interests and values. It will never be assured to use that the information posted will not be used in what we expect and intended it for. The programmers or owners of the online social network domain may use the information that was built there for other purposes which can be harmful to the society, its institution or its people. Michael Zucherberg, the CEO and founder of Facebook was accused of hacking the passwords of Harvard University and was also of stealing the idea of Facebook. He settled that case for 65 Million (Arthur; 2009). As powerful as the CEO of one of the largest Social networking sites with a questionable history on ethics, he may somehow use his power to control and manipulate information in Facebook against a person and or an institution as he pleases without any supervision from a recognized regulatory body.

Basically, one basic question on online social networking sites is "Who owns the data?" Protalinski (2012) stated that "Facebook owns any IP you give it, because you gave it permission to own it". Majority of the users have been ignorant with the permission given to Facebook as they join its network. One issue has been the lack of notifications provided by online networking sites; some are legal and not user- friendly as many has shunned reading its disclaimers. Protalinski (2012) continued "If there is content you don't want Facebook to own, don't upload it to Facebook" but stillunconscious posting due to psychological and emotional excitements become a common occurrence. Who ownsthe data, can rights to it be transferred, and what are the duties and responsibilities of people involved are the most common questions on ownership.

Another ethical question on ownership is "What are the duties and responsibilities of the people handling the data of online social networks?" The ethical decision should be transparency of these companies, the values of its owners and the handlers of user's data. The way our data are being handled is also an ethical decision due to the security and exposure of these data

Misinformation

As the social network may improve information dissemination, it may also be used for misinformation dissemination. Misinformation dissemination could be the use of wrong information or the spread of negative information. The validity of Information is sometimes difficult to be verified as some would post information the social networking sites and pretend that he or she has a first-hand information that no one could validate, so it would be difficult to contradict these information thus may lead others to believe that it is the truth. The results will depend on the payoff consequence (Acemoglu, Ozdaglar, and Gheibi; 2009).

Such information can be used for libellous means and some can be used to pose a hoax. Mass media nowadays such as television, especially the news programs, use polls to gather from the public perception about varied issues. Many have been using these polls as a sign to promote themselves or to push an advocacy. The problem with these polls is that they cannot be verified if they speak of the nation's or a politician's sentiments alone.

At the end of the day, due to the possible problems in the integrity of the information posted in these social networking sites, people will eventually move away fromreferencing this information posted. Distrusts on these sites will eventually lead to innovation to promote and develop information security and develop a kind of censorship. But as long as there are no governing bodies to regulate and standardize these sites, with the idea of the power of information, the dangers on these online social networks will eventually evolve too. Individual awareness, responsibility, and assistance through education will assist in abating the involuntary hijacking of private information. Users should be aware of the on-going perils associated with using social networking sites so that social networking remains enjoyable (Garrie, Duffy-Lewis,Gillespie and Wong; 2010).

Privacy

While many users of online social networking sites have no problem disclosing their personal information and activities, still unknowingly to these users that many of these information could be used for other things that may threatened their privacy. Online social networks has a participatory type of building its data called “crowd sourcing”, these data are then analyse by a sophisticated analytical software that can analyse and present information that may be behavioural, psychological and other personal information that should be kept private.

In 2009, Face.com launched a Facebook application that first asks users to identify a Facebook friend in a photo and then proceeds to search the entire social-networking site for other pictures in which that friend appears. By early 2010, the company was boasting of having scanned nine billion pictures and identified 52-million individuals. It would be alarming to know of the potential uses of these information and pictures that can be destructive personally and politically. Below are other privacy issues that may endanger a user and its networks including his family.

Stalking and Surveillance

Palmer (2010) noted that digital surveillance will receive a significant boost as face-recognition techniques improve and enter the consumer market. The trade in face-recognition technologies is so lucrative that even giants such as Google cannot resist getting into the game as they feel the growing pressure from smaller players such as Face.com, a popular tool that allows users to find and automatically annotate unique faces as these appear throughout their photo collections.

This technology could be used in law enforcement and other patrolling of national and political threats but this information could be in a border between violations of privacy. Diamond (2010) went on to discuss scenarios where undemocratic regimes used Internet filtering and surveillance.

These regimes employ more sophisticated technology as well as becoming more widespread. Diamond (2010) went on to cite that more than three dozen states filter the Internet, or deny their citizenry access completely. For a non-democracy state online social networking sites could also be used to monitor, regulate and control its citizens.

Many individuals has also been guilty of stalking people they know through these sites, many of the information gathered in this sites has been used for violations of rights of the individual. It is common just to get the affection of a person but we can hear stories of people using this information for criminal activities such as identity theft.

Identity Theft and Reputation

In the United States, many cases of stolen credit cards and social security numbers but we also hear regularly pictures and profile being stolen. In the Internet, many popular personalities have several online social networks accounts and most of them are fakes created by their fans. It took a lot of effort for these personalities to deny these fake accounts. The danger lies are the followers of these personalities and a misinformation may lead to damages to the reputation of the person which may also bring danger to the follower.

An issue also on these accounts of celebrities, it has been common news where an account has been hacked and personal photos and information has being leaked. Harm could be inflicted not only on the celebrity but also to its personal affiliation such as their kids.

Employment

As of 2008, it has been estimated by CareerBuilder.com that one in five employers search social networking sites in order to screen potential candidates (Havenstein; 2008). This could be good for a company as other information that couldn't be found on resume' and curriculum vitae could be found on social networking sites. Sites like Linkedin where professional information is stored are open to employers but for sites such as Facebook where personal information is found could violate privacy and security of the person if the information gathered are personal not professional.Another issue may be the use of this personal information as criteria to hire or not to hire a person not only on his or her credentials.

For sites such as Linkedin, there are several opportunities for an individual for career advancement. The site can show your professional value and can show potential employers. You can also participate in the discussion groups for an advancement of a profession and possibly discuss ethical aspects of a career. Opportunities for employers to get the best employees for their companies can also be an opportunity for this site. But it is common to encounter employment traps for both the employee and employers as misinformation may also be posted in this site. It is safe to require manual validation prior to the hiring or committing to an office.

Education

Many students are getting in trouble with their respective schoolsdue to posting of incriminating and inappropriate information or pictures on their social networking accounts that are violations of school regulations and conducts. Complaints and reports to these schools on student violations are investigated if these pictures or news posts are violations of school policies. Saint Theresa's College, an exclusive all-girls Catholic school managed by nuns in the central Philippine island of Cebu, sparked public outrage when it barred five high school students from joining the graduation ceremony because of photos posted on their Facebook accounts showing them wearing bikinis. This despite a ruling issued by the Cebu Regional Trial Court ordering the school to allow the students to join the graduation ceremony. The affected students and their parents complained against the lack of due process and the arbitrary imposition of harsh sanctions. The school simply claimed that the court order was deficient. (Cebu Daily News; 2013)

These information or pictures that may be private in nature once posted are considered public and all affiliation, in this case a conservative institution which was affected publicly that has to decide reactively to protect its institution which is to barred these student from graduating. They may be set as an example for other student not only on that school, to be diligent enough on their postings.

Social networking sites can be used for many collaboration activities in education such as researches and a tool for lecturing or instructing. But there are cases that social networking sites can also be used to track the behavioural history of a student by a possible employer or by a malicious entity such as a stalker.

Anonymity

Joint (2005) argues that anonymity can protect the identity of a criminal performing many different crimes such as slander, libel, fraud, racial discrimination, illegal threats such as cyber bullying, etc. Grave crimes such as high treason and instigation to rebellion have also used the Internet which could result to the collapse of a democratic society. Furthermore, The Internet particularly online social networks provides a perceived “safe space’ for some people to gather together to perpetuate their warped viewpoints, such as Holocaust deniers, paedophiles and terrorists. Diamond (2010), also adds to this discussion by stating that open access facilities can bring about hate-mongering, pornography, terrorism, digital crime, online espionage, and cyber warfare. Anonymity is no longer ensured, so people may no longer voice their opinions for fear of government retaliation.

With the standardization of web 2.0, massive user participation sites have been created. Massive data are created and stored. With minimum validation and censorship, misinformation is rampant. A simple solution is data accountability, placing persons liable to the information provided.

Commitment and accountability on the information presented has always been an issue if many have used this information as a commitment to personal or business purposes. Information should always be reliable enough or legal liability be shouldered by the person who presented this information.

Potential for Misuse

Due to the ease of use of social networking sites and the convenience to connect with families, friends and networks, Real world interaction will possibly start to diminish. And most will just communicate through these social networks. Some other social activities and social actions are being performed in Social networks. People tend to take more time on social networks which will eventually lead to addiction. Psychologist developed a diagnosis called Facebook addiction disorder or FAD and has designed an addiction scale for Facebook (Orsheim, Brunborg and Pallesen; 2012). On the other hand, Kids tend to use social networking to augment not replace their real-world relationships, helping them learn to communicate in many different ways. Social networking is becoming an increasingly important method of communicating in schools and the workplace, so it’s good for your child to be prepared to communicate through these online sites.

Security of Social Networking Sites

There is a dynamics in the operation of social networks, crowd sourcing is a term for users building their profiles and actively participating in the features and functionalities of the site while owners and developers of these sites create that space for their data. The commitments of the users are on the terms of use information provided on the initial enrolment on the social networking site. The commitment of the owners and developers are to consider the security of the information. There are basic security functions such as passwords and other authentication systems on the actual website. But on the corporate level, there are personnel handling this user information that their motive and values should be reviewed including the decision makers such as the owners and administration of these sites. They are the trustees of user information that they should secure this information. It is known the potential of these information in the future of many industries as it can be used to promote economies but the problem goes back to the lack of regulation and the regulatory bodies lagging behind the setting up of monitoring and control mechanism to these sites. These regulatory bodies should make these online social networking sites transparent and corrupt free. The technologies in the internet has been plagued with security abuses which does not exempt online social networking sites and security features should be solidify continuously, these commitment should also be enforce by these regulatory bodies. In addition, just make sure that these regulatory bodies are created in mechanisms that are credible and incorruptible.

CONCLUSION

Steele and Stein (2002) stated that the Internet by itself is politically neutral but may amplify the political affairs. Online social networks an application of the Internet itself is ethically neutral but this technology has a human component that control and powers should be managed. Online social networks, similar to other technologies have been an enabler of many ethical and unethical ideas. Whether it acts ethically or not it all depends on the entity involved which includes the developer or programmer, ownership and users.

There is a terms of use policy provided on the initial enrolment of a user but is it enough? These terms basically protects the interest of the social networking site and the other user members. I have always been a user of many of these sites but I honestly don't read the terms and conditions written. If I really wanted to join, I have no other way but to accept the terms provided, there are no compromises. I suggest that a regulatory body such as an empowered government institution look into these terms and make it more comprehensible to users. Most of the terms may be technical or too legal. It is for the users to weigh in to the potential risks and dangers before posting a picture or simply liking a post.

The owners of these sites have the power to control and program this site to whatever and however they want it. But the possibility of the users to pull out and withdrawing from the site may lead to business problem. So many of these sites try to commit more users and make them use these sites as part of their lifestyle. It is like a simple business where you have patronage but there are also monopolies. In online social networking sites we can see Facebook as a monopoly as we have seen its growth.

The values of each entities involve in these sites are always at question, as we can see in everyday interaction with different people. Technology has always been ethically neutral such as debates on handguns, "that guns don't kill but people do". It is always the same in technology similar with internet applications such as online social networks. This paper shows us how online social network can be used to "kill" if people used it unethically. The rampant usage and trends of its application has always been part of the growth of society today, the world cannot escape its growth but we have to set controls and solid regulations that would be enough to protect the society and its members.

The Internet has been around for only 20 years. It has greatly contributed to increase the speed of communication worldwide,Online social networks has been one of the reason for this. However, no one knows the long term effect that the Internet will have on ethics or whether it will be a driver of ethical practices or not. All we can do now is to make an educated guess of whether it can be a factor for greater freedom or greater control.

Finally, to protect ourselves, our personal and professional affiliations, we have to constantly evaluate all our actions on our social networking accounts to avoid the ethical dangers. Make private information private by setting up security features of the site itself. If unsure then ask for someone who understands. We have to be constantly diligent as Online Social Network will be here to stay for a long time attach with all its pleasure and perils.

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