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Social Networking on 3 Screens: A Transition Story

Mobile services, the web, and even the living room (TV) have seen a great deal of technological development. And these developments were considered, indeed, as strictly technological in nature in the past. Today, such developments have a strong influence on how our social networks are evolving. Social circles that were in the past separate entities within the mobile community or on the web are converging towards each other. The living room was actually a barrier to the evolution of social circles: until recently, watching TV did not increase our connections to others, while current developments connect TV and the living room, too, into the social networking clouds. My paper describes these evolutionary steps and phases. We all know that social networking is a basic human behaviour.

People had already been gathering in the public square for thousands of years: they chatted, watched murderers be hanged, or simply just walked and watched others in the square. Modern social networking is very similar to these activities. The applications that are available on the web, on mobile networks, or today even on TV screens are helping to achieve the same, but in the "virtual square". Today's applications help us find friends that we have not seen for a long time, exchange quick messages with people who belong to our internal circles, or share photos. The people who do social networking on these 3 screens are often referred to as *digital natives*.

The title of this paper refers to a transition story. What transition do I speak about? Actually, today's social networking went through multiple transitions.

The First Transition

The very first transition is from physically real public spaces, streets, squares, plazas – to a digital environment. The mobile, the web, and even the TV are a kind of virtual space where we feel just as comfortable as in a physical environment when we do social networking. For some users,

the virtual backdrop of cyberspace is an even better space to network than clumsy reality. This transition is not always a beneficial one: some youngsters tend to lose connections to the real world and feel comfortable only behind a screen, regardless of what screen it is.

Based on practical examples, we can state that the more attractive the "digital square's" properties, the bigger audience it can attract. There should be a critical mass: below the critical mass, the chance that users move to and stay at another digital social square is rather high. The number one factor that defines a social application's success is its language. Most of the digital squares offer customized language setups, allowing small communities to build their circles.

The need for simplicity is clear: complex registration and login procedures cannot survive. Advertising in social networks is very rarely explicit: usually the digital natives find the best applications on their own: mouth to mouth, e-mail to email, link to link – the best applications spread.

Usually, the first encounter comes over the PC screen. It is better suited for exploration, learning via doing. As soon as the application makes its first impression and users become accustomed to its properties, other access forms (like mobile or TV) may come into use. Pure play access is more dominant now that very easy and user-friendly mobiles like the iPhone are on the market. One click to download and login to the user's favourite social application (Skype, Facebook, iWiW, etc.) makes the current one-play (only mobile) use very attractive. There are applications for mobile use that combine various social applications onto one mobile program, allowing the user to establish and to maintain parallel connections to many different systems (like Fring).

Practical studies indicate that although pure play is attractive, users as a matter of fact tend to use multiple sites and multiple access forms.

The Second Transition

Another transition occurred between mobile and PC screens, and today the living room with interactive TV enters as a third player. Social networking has been developed in a mass way on the web, with the launch of Facebook, iWiW, and LinkedIn (we could list much more here). For a long time, mobile social networking meant a solid address book on our handset, SMS messages, and calls with our friends. That was all. These two areas, the mobile and web point to the first transition, where we see not only technological developments, but real user convergence. A few examples: almost all applications that offer social networking on the web also have some kind of mobile application extension. Facebook is avail-

able with a few clicks on the mobile, photos that are taken with a mobile are earmarked with location data and are instantly uploaded on the web. Time, space, and persons have never been as mixed and brought close to each other as today. Mobile services have created a new context: *presence information*. When *presence information* is linked to our social behaviour, users can extend their access to personal metadata more than ever before: I am in a meeting, I am travelling, do not call while I am in the theatre, and I could continue listing the useful social features that link mobile and web-based social networking.

Communities Change the Game

As soon as the TV moves into the social networking arena, the "digital understanding" on the part of socially active groups like local governments, hospitals, elderly and minority support groups is much higher. Experiments show that local governments tend to support social networking initiatives much more when they can include TV in the discussion packages. This is not a surprise, since the TV has been in households for more than 50 years, while the PC and mobile are not older than 20 years in those communities. Digital villages, when looking for massive digitalization (like Boly, a small town in Hungary which has "fiberized" practically the whole community), turn to the TV as the first and most widely understood carrier of the new world. TV applications that deliver high quality video include some form of local social networking capabilities on the big screen. Apple TV, for example, includes YouTube within the standard package, offering beside VOD (video on demand), free YouTube content. IPTV applications are on the way to deliver integrated TV with practically anything that is available on the internet as a social networking toolkit.

Countries and cities that look for aggressive digitalization (with broadband connections), seek partners who bring applications that make the business case viable and more attractive. Significant funds are directed towards community application developments that will result in social networking on the TV, too.

Devices and Technology

When TV is considered as a social networking support device, there are a few usability guidelines that we need to consider. The TV set is not a personal device, it is difficult to identify who is using it and even more difficult to find out who is watching it. From this perspective, very per-

sonal social networking applications are not always suitable for the television screen.

As much as we have got used to input devices like the mouse and the keyboard, with TV the remote controller is the number one input tool. This limits our input capabilities, making it more difficult to enter data such as user names/passwords, texts, long stories. Pick and select may work better.

There is a new trend whereby high profile TV sets (exclusively with high definition) come with integrated internet connection capabilities. These sets by default contain links or direct menus to widely used social networking sites, like YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter. Although these sets are expensively priced today, there is no doubt that in a few years connection to the internet and most of the social networks will be equally easy from the living rooms' TV sets.

The social sites that work with extensive video capabilities redefine the networks we are currently using. Although most users can rely on a few hundred kilobits per second download and upload speed, the future will strongly challenge these capabilities. Since even a few ten-minute-long video uploads require fast upload speeds, the traditional copper lines will not be enough to satisfy even average users.

A New Trend

Social applications on the web or on mobile networks are opening a new array of capabilities following the success of some well positioned APIs from the digital industry. An API is the "application programming interface" that allows community developers to design, test, and later release applications on a social platform (Facebook was one of the first that released access to its community traffic). The applications that are developed by the members can have access to a range of specific community-based information. This might include: who a given member has access to, what network he or she has built up and controls, etc. The developed applications can enrich the user communities' use of the social networks. One example: members can send digital (virtual) flowers to each other, based on a given context (for example on a birthday). Others can see if a member has received a flower, and they may join the celebration. With these "add-ons" the user community is more attached to the given platform or application.

Not only fun applications appear in the digital square: sooner or later for-profit developments find their way to the large user communities. One example is the LinkedIn application, TripIT, which helps members to or-

ganize trips (to find hotels, book tickets, make travel arrangements). These applications deliver more professionalism to social network circles, hence increasing their stickiness. This is another form of transition: the not-for-profit towards for-profit shift. Of course when a system supports a large number of users, especially when this user-base is a truly global community, the very system support, the scaling and the 24-hour availability needs funding, so clearly a good business model is required.

The Third Transition

Another clear form of transition is occurring behind the corporate firewalls. For a long time, social networking had been considered as a private activity. Applications on the web and their users are mainly private databases and persons, using the "digital social cloud" to maintain or to extend their personal circles. Corporate CIOs never liked bringing those connections behind the firewalls, initially owing to security constraints, and later due to work time worries. But in the meantime, some corporations have recognized the value of this transition. Improved sales connections, mobile workers' relations and their visibility by bosses, different customer relations, all are areas where social networking behind the corporate firewalls bring extra value to our professional life. LinkedIn, a professional/business social networking hub, helps individuals get connected or find a new job or a new professional they would like to hire. Sales networks help to spread sales and corporate information to teams that do not see each other but once in a year, due to global operations. Customer feedback and connections help produce better services, and customers can be more satisfied.

Modern communications systems, like Microsoft Unified Communications or Cisco's Webex, offer a wide range of internal community building capabilities. The most basic is when users can chat with each other instead of using traditional store-and-forward e-mail techniques. Chat offers instant access to colleagues who are working on the same project (for example, programming), provides faster message turnaround time, and is more spontaneous. Communities can be formed, can share the same knowledge base quickly and very efficiently.

Shared project databases and virtual community rooms are on the next level, which are just now on the threshold of widespread acceptance in the corporate world. Ad hoc communities like project teams can share a virtual conference room regardless of where they are located, as long as they are connected via broadband to each other. The virtual project or conference room offers video and voice capabilities, but more im-

portantly, can display the same screen so as to create the experience of being in the same meeting room. After the meeting, the virtual community shares the same virtual dataroom, where everybody can have access to all data related to their joint interests or work. This technology not only improves the efficiency of working with each other, but searching for the right expertise or contacting the right person is made much simpler.

Such tools are especially useful when teams with large geographical and time differences have to act together. A few years ago, such teams could only exist when their members had a large amount of travel (and time) at their disposal. With today's postmodern (social) team applications, such cooperation is made much easier.

In some earlier studies, I indicated that mobile working or working from home was not always well-positioned within the corporate work style.[1] Colleagues could not meet each other that often and this resulted in lower team spirit, just to mention one issue that others referred to as a difficulty with working from home. Managers do complain about having less effective control over their teams and not seeing them regularly enough. Sales persons complained that less contact with their peers meant less effective experience sharing.

But today's social networking tools make remote work (working from home) more enjoyable and more effective and practical. All the abovementioned factors are improved with social networking tools, hence making home or "remote" working more advantageous for the corporate environment, too.

Conclusion

In summary, the transitions we are talking about are:

- between mobile, web, and TV
- from personal use towards corporate use ("behind the firewall")
- from private use towards professional applications

One may ask why the mobile is such a good medium for social networking. We all can agree that the mobile is a perfect sensor. It offers a rich context for place, time, personal attitude, and nowadays even for

[1] Cf. István Maradi, "Mobile Work", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Mobile Studies: Paradigms and Perspectives*, Vienna, Passagen Verlag, 2007, pp. 47–57; István Maradi, "Beyond the Two Cultures Myth", in Kristóf Nyíri (ed.), *Integration and Ubiquity: Towards a Philosophy of Telecommunications Convergence*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2008, pp. 213–219.

motion. Another reason why developers and users equally love the mobile is its ubiquity. Mobiles are available everywhere, all the time, and to everyone – the perfect tool to represent us in the middle of our social network. Social networking was launched first on the web, and without commercialization. Money was for a long time not a part of why developers put effort into development. But as soon as the user community started to grow, their physical load on the servers and applications required costly extensions, and commercialization began. This may hit the mobile arm of social networking, too. Ads and paid extra features may be an unwanted side-effect of being able to serve millions of users at the same time. In discussing a transition to the mobile, current reality should be kept in mind. Today, fewer people do social networking on a mobile than on a PC, although mobile penetration in most European countries is above 100%. Online time on a mobile is much shorter than on a PC, which is mainly due to its paid nature. And the issue of payment may influence this transition significantly.

In discussing a transition to business areas, we should ask ourselves whether social networking has a business value or not. Some of the recent social network purchases indicate that there might be business value behind it. The key questions in determining business value are:

- does the social networking application improve a specific business function? For example, higher sales, better time management, cheaper organization, etc.?
- does it foster innovation?
- does it facilitate change?

The examples where social networking in a corporate environment may be of business value include sales, human resources management, customer management, and service management. Clear examples can be drawn in each area that positions modern social networking as a viable tool to improve efficiency and deliver value. Finally, let's discuss the third screen a bit. Why do I think that TV has a place in modern social networking? For a long time TV was positioned as an antisocial networking tool. But modern interactivity, where TV itself is on the web, can bring web-based applications into the living room, hence drastically improving social networking capabilities. Village-based video storage, where inhabitants can upload videos about their lives in a given settlement, is a good example. Facebook or iWiW members can follow their relationships on television screens, hence allowing grandfathers and grandmothers to be connected while still not being forced to learn the new technologies of the web.