

People Sensemaking with Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

Social networking websites are evolving into tools for *people sensemaking* by supporting the process a user goes through to understand who someone is and to determine how and why that user should interact with someone.

Author Keywords

Sensemaking, social networking.

INTRODUCTION

Sensemaking is a general term for the process an individual or group goes through to create a model of a system, based on diverse information sources, with the intention of taking an action on the interpretation [4]. In addition to making sense of *information*, this term can also be used to describe the process of understanding who an individual is and determining how best to approach or communicate with an individual. We refer to this as *people sensemaking*, the process a person goes through to gain a general understanding, or gist, of who someone is. For example, by understanding what someone's role is within an organization, what they are working on, how approachable they are, and how knowledgeable they are on different topics, you can create a mental model of this person that informs how or when you will communicate or interact with that person.

Information sources for people sensemaking can be wildly diverse: factual biographical information such as found in a directory, reputation information provided by word-of-mouth, cultural stereotypes from our ingrained assumptions, or information provided directly by the individual. We incorporate all of these information sources, or signals, into a coherent picture of who that person is, and there are many issues involving accuracy, trust and reputation that influence our interpretations [2].

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The popularity and ubiquity of social networking web sites means that increasingly these sites are the default location to collect information about individuals. And the profiles on these sites, as they become more publicly visible and extensive in their profile details, are often the primary source for finding information about someone you are interested in learning about, prior to contacting online.

The premise of this workshop position paper is that social networking websites are used today for people sensemaking, both as the information source and as the tool for interpreting and synthesizing information on individuals. The environment of social networking sites is still evolving, and the social norms for providing personal information are still being formed and re-formed, to meet the needs of the users. Further, while we see evidence of people sensemaking occurring on these sites, the tools for interpreting multiple and complex profiles are in their infancy.

FACEBOOK

Lampe, et al, have shown that the type of content provided on Facebook.com profiles has correlations with the number and type of Facebook friends someone has [3]. We believe this is evidence of people sensemaking: the information provided by individuals in their profiles is having an impact on who interacts with them on the site, indicating that people are using profile information to decide who to connect with.

In our own analysis of Facebook profiles, we looked at how IBM employees present themselves on the site, to determine if people were managing their self-presentation. To do this, we looked at 68 Facebook profiles of users within our company's network and examined their profile information to understand how these users balance the presentation of themselves as professionals versus non-professionals.

The profiles clustered into three distinct groups, which we labeled "*Reliving the College Days*," "*Dressed to Impress*," and "*Living in the Business World*." (More details can be found in [1].) These three groups managed their presentation of themselves differently and from different perspectives. The members of the *College Days* group appear to be carrying over the identity they crafted during the early use of Facebook on university campuses. The *Dressed to Impress* group is more conservative and

professional in their use of Facebook, limiting the visibility of portions of their profile and presenting more professional than personal information. What most distinguishes *Business World* group from the others is that many of these users are members of their company's Facebook network and no others. This may indicate they joined Facebook to investigate and be part of an online community with their co-workers. They are characterized by their few numbers of friends, their membership in only the company's network, not any school networks, and the lack of profile information provided. We see these users as the future, professional community of Facebook users.

Within the structure of our three population segments, we believe the *College Days* individuals are not managing their personal identity for a corporate environment, while the *Dressed to Impress* and *Living in the Business World* users are managing their self-presentation to some extent, indicating they are aware that the viewers of their profiles are both professional colleagues and social friends.

In terms of people sensemaking, as the user composition of Facebook becomes more diverse, as our survey found, there are different populations sharing different amounts and types of information in their profiles. While Facebook may be a site for gathering information about someone, to perform people sensemaking, the complexities of different communities and different choices on what to share on the site make the usefulness of Facebook for people sensemaking a complicated question.

BEEHIVE

To further study the issues surrounding people sensemaking, in particular within the enterprise setting, we have been studying the adoption and use of an IBM-internal social networking site called Beehive. We launched a beta trial of Beehive at the end of May 2007 and have logged three months of user data and interviewed some key users. In this data, we have observed that users are crafting detailed personal profiles for others to learn about them. People are also spending time looking at and commenting on the profiles of users they already know, as well as with users they do not know, that they would like to initiate professional contact with. It is this second activity that we are interested in understanding more, to develop a better understanding of how people sensemaking occurs on social networking sites.

We have a salient example from our user interviews that highlights a scenario of people sensemaking:

Ricardo¹

Ricardo is a self-described "community builder" within the company. When speaking with him, he described that part of his job is to reach out to different groups in the company and evangelize to them about different technologies. He is a

very active user on Beehive, visiting the site many times a day and following the site's activity through the ATOM feeds we provide for tracking one's network's activity and for keeping up with the new people, photos and lists. When a new person joins Beehive, Ricardo often goes to look at their profile to see if he remembers having met them. If he knows the person directly or if he knows someone in common with the person, he will comment on their profile and connect to them, adding them to his list of Beehive connections.

When asked if there was someone on the site that he did not know that was particularly memorable to him, Ricardo offered this story:

"Gosh, let me think about names. One that comes to mind is [Pierre]. He seems like he works in corporate communications and I have a good network in corporate communications and I didn't know him."

The impression he got of him:

"Probably that he is French. And that he works in Japan. And I thought that was quite interesting because he works in one of the cities I wouldn't mind going to at some point, at some time, which is Tokyo. What is a French guy working in corporate communications doing in Tokyo, Japan? [I get the impression] that he travels a lot."

What information he learned that the corporate directory could not have told him:

"In this particular case, it is funny because when I ran into his profile, I actually saw that he makes connections with people in corporate communications both in Europe and in the States and not in Asia. So I wouldn't have known about those connections. In fact, he made a connection to a very good friend of mine in Paris that I've known for years and I didn't know he was a connection to him."

Ricardo subsequently added Pierre as a connection and left this comment on his profile:

"Bonjour, Pierre! And welcome to Beehive! I am glad to see you have started to make use of the hive and started buzzing around! By the way, how does a French? man get to end up working for IBM Japan? Way cool!"

Within a day of Ricardo's comment, Pierre added content to his Beehive profile that answered Ricardo's question more generally:

"So, like, why did you leave IBM CP?"

The CP headquarters were moving from Montreal to Calgary, and I didn't want to be that far from home. So I moved to Japan.

¹ Names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Isn't Japan further from Montreal than Calgary?

I was misinformed."

Ricardo's story and the evidence of Ricardo and Pierre's communication on the site illustrate how one user of Beehive has been able to discover new people, form impressions of them, and connect and communicate with them. An interesting aspect of this story is that Pierre responded to Ricardo's question by editing his permanent profile information, so now, future visitors to his profile will benefit from this exchange and get a more accurate picture of who he is. This evolving self-presentation is an interesting area of people sensemaking to consider.

Quantitative Data

As our interview with Ricardo highlights, people on Beehive are looking at profiles of people they do not know and they are coming to conclusions about those people. To determine if this process of people sensemaking is happening across the site, we analyzed Beehive's access logs, looking at how users find others and how frequently they look at content of people they have not connected to as friends on the site.

To analyze the page views on content pages, we divided the hits done by a user into the hits the user makes on his/her friend's content, versus the hits the user makes on content owned by non-friends. We found two interesting things. First, users spend the most time (i.e. generate the most page hits) looking at the content of their friends (68% of page hits on content pages). This indicates that users are focusing their time on the site learning about their social network. The second thing we discovered is that when examining the number of *different people* users look at (i.e. the unique hits on content page), users look at more people they don't know than they do know (54% non-friends, 46% friends). This indicates that, while users look with great depth at their social network, they explore new people with greater breadth.

This is evidence that people are using the site to gather information about a broad set of people, and perhaps they are also synthesizing their understanding of these people through the process of browsing their content and profile pages. There is a lot of research left to do in this area, and we see this data finding about site exploration patterns as an indication that users naturally use social networking sites to both connect with those they know and to perform people

sensemaking, by performing broad searches on people they do not know.

CONCLUSION

With the proliferation of social networking websites available on the internet for maintaining friends and colleagues, there is a new default location for the process of people sensemaking. The most popular of these sites include Friendster, MySpace, Facebook and LinkedIn. These sites allow for users to generate lists of individuals they know and use the sites to share messages, photos, and other media with each other. But most importantly, users can create custom profile pages that are personally crafted presentations representing an individual's chosen face to the community. These profiles serve as the information source for people sensemaking.

We believe one of the main strengths of social networking websites is that they *can* support this act of people sensemaking, facilitating finding people with particular skills or interests. Organization-based social network sites can also help employees establish common ground and this can improve interpersonal communication with the organization. But the process by which users synthesize profiles into meaningful models and filter the models down to a select set of people they wish to contact is currently not explicitly supported on these sites. We hope to explore this issue through further study of these environments and stimulate discussion on how social networking sites can better support the process of interpreting user profiles and communicating in effective ways with the selected individuals.

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