

Leveraging Media Repertoires to Create New Social Ties

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ABSTRACT

We propose a system which allows users to select how and with whom they are available for contact by managing a set of personal “identities” and budding relationships. The most important of these media are public displays, which allow a low-cost barrier for finding potential friends through interaction via the display and through the attendance of displayed social events. In helping two people to both become aware of each other’s existence and to pick media which suit their preferences, we believe such a system can increase the odds of two strangers forming a strong social bond.

Author Keywords

Public Displays, Media Repertoires, Media Usage, Social Events

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.2 Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

General Terms

Design, Human Factors

INTRODUCTION

As more and more of our interactions move towards the virtual space, the importance of face to face interactions in maintaining our core social ties and its power in building healthy relationships has been increasingly ignored by the majority of those aspiring to build the next great social technology. The underlying belief that technology can solve any social problem if enough people are on a given social site or use a given communication medium ignores findings from communication theory which suggest that strong ties are unlikely to be formed and maintained without face to face interaction (e.g. [?]).

However, those who have realized the power of face to face communication must deal with two issues in promoting its use in building social ties between relative strangers. The first concerns the fact that people do not always prefer face to face interaction, particularly in situations where those already averse to social immersion are trying to extend their social spheres [?]. While persistent, one on one, face to face interaction should be a goal of any system desiring to create new social ties, it may not be the case that such an interaction is the appropriate first, or even second step for two people.

Second, and more obvious, is that a large portion of one’s time is spent doing things other than building relationships - thus, face to face communication is not always a possible mechanism for doing so. Findings from communication theory, which show that persistent mediated communication can provide some level of relation building and maintenance [?], thus suggest the need to utilize the “repertoire” of media available in the present age to continue relationship building (see [?] for further comments on media and relationships).

In this work, we propose a means for people to both find and build relationships with new, potential friends in a privacy-retaining method, allowing them to move from one communication media to the other exposing as little personal information as possible. The primary media is a public display [?, ?], a tool which provides a low-cost barrier for initiating contact with potential friends. The system then utilizes constructs from communication theory - namely, that a person’s preference for media communication varies on context, content and the alter with whom they are interested in interacting with[?] - to allow users to develop relationships across the communication media they see fit.

INTENDED APPROACH

The system we propose is based on the Instant Places [?] framework, a platform for developing social interactions via a combination of public displays, a mobile and a web application. A public display exists in a “Place” - a location associated with a specific context (e.g. a coffee shop). Users exist in the system as a singular profile which can be represented at various Places by different “Identities”, allowing the user to present themselves in the way they desire in different contexts. One way users can do so is by creating different “Signs”, which signify different interests of the user, which may then be displayed at different Places.

We adapt this base system to the proposed application in two ways. First, in addition to Signs, we allow users to post “Events” - social gatherings which others can choose to attend. In the interest of promoting trust that such events are legitimate, users also are able to comment on these events, and the live comments are shown at Places which are determined to be relevant. It is the intention that these comments, in addition to allowing display owners to remove Events from their displays, will reduce the number of “spam” Events posted and to keep the Events displayed up to date. However, these are two critical issues which currently exist as weak points in the proposed approach.

The second addition is to allow users to make contact with an Identity which is either at the same Place or which has attended the same Event. Here, we will consider the case where the two users attended the same event - the former case is analogous. When Users select a past event, they are presented with the other Identities that attended it. The user then can select an Identity they hope to form a relationship with, and interact with that Identity via a media the other Identity has enabled. Thus, interactions occur between *Identities* and not *Users* - hence Users can customize different Identities for different situations. Therefore, for instance, a user may attend a concert with a private Identity, which does not even show up on the post-event list, while in contrast might attend a bible study group with a slightly more public identity, where others are able to, for example, follow that Identity on Twitter. Thus, the system allows two users to form a bond which extends beyond a fleeting interaction at a social event. Once initial contact starts, users can then manage the media available to specific alters by adjusting media profiles according to that specific relationship.

One important point above is that it is the medium which is presented, and not the personal information- all forwarding to personally identifiable contact information (e.g. an email address) is done by the system. This is important not only for matters of privacy, but also in that certain contact information may allow interaction via multiple media. For example, a phone number provides the capability to both call and text message someone else, two media with significantly different qualitative properties in relational building [?]. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is that a person interested in contacting someone else is not presented with a choice of media which the alter may potentially find unwarranted- a choice which we feel can be quite stressful.

FUTURE WORK AND CONCLUSION

While we hope initial work focusing on personal preferences proves fruitful, the rigors of such an extensive array of settings to be manipulated suggest that users will quickly default to very simplistic privacy settings [?]. Thus, a future effort will be to combine contextual information about the place in which initial contact occurred and knowledge of user preferences to create a “modality plan” for two users, where the system makes suggestions to users about what media and contexts might be an appropriate next step for relational building. The intent is to begin interactions on a medium (such as text messaging) that both people feel comfortable interacting on and slowly moving up to more intimate ones (with the goal being eventual singular face to face interactions). By creating a modality plan across various contexts and media, we believe the system gives two people who are initially strangers the most likely chance of forming a strong social bond. Though this specific problem has not, to the best of our knowledge, been studied, similar concepts have been considered [?] from which we can draw useful theoretical constructs.

As presented, the current system suffers from questions of its ability to retain privacy, whether or not users will be interested in utilizing the array of preferences they are given, and

whether or not enough events and comments will be generated by users to keep public displays engaging and reliable. In addition, a critical question not answered here is how we will develop a base of events which can be used to fill displays at product launch - possibilities for this include pulling public and User Facebook events and pulling from community websites. However, such issues are not without precedent, and thus we have allowed ourselves to be excited by the prospect of a new system which we feel has the propensity to enhance the ability of people of varying degrees of social ability to form new and meaningful social relationships. Furthermore, given the success of such a system, opportunities for scholars to better understand how media usage plays out in relationship formation can be garnered from the resulting data.

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