The Evolution of Online Social Networks
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Abstract— **In this article, we explore the evolution of Online Social Networks (OSNs) by providing a brief history, evaluate the benefits and disadvantages and focus its impact in our society. We also share an historical perspective view of Facebook and refer some issues related to social networking sites in general.**

Index Terms— **Social Network Sites, Media sharing, Facebook**

I. INTRODUCTION

THE possibility of being in contact with a person anywhere around the world is not a fiction today. However this was not something that came from nowhere, but rather due to some factors that favored the evolution and popularity of Online Social Networks (OSNs).

There are hundreds of OSNs created for a specific target audience but only those that were designed for diverse audiences were really succeeded in past decade – example: Facebook.

There are also social network sites focused to particular niches like LinkedIn, a business-related social networking site.

Most of these websites encourage members to create their own profiles containing some basic information like name, age, birthday, current city and hometown. Users are allowed to share their interests or activities and update their status with what they are doing at that time.

Others social network sites have extra features such as the possibility to create events and private or public groups that shares common interests and promote discussions about various topics.

A great feature provided by a large majority of these networks is a search option that allows any registered user or a simple visitor search profiles according to the name, gender, age, location, activity and interests. This clearly raises privacy concerns about what we must share in our profiles, especially in public-profiles.

To protect member's privacy, most of social network sites have privacy settings that allow users to control their own privacy by choosing who can view their profile, contact them and include them to their friend lists for example.

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II. DEFINITIONS

A. Online Social Networks

An online social network (OSN) is a web-based social structure that gathers people and organizations connected together according to their interests and activities. The main purpose of online social networks is able users to create public or private profiles and to keep a friend lists (familiars, friends or even strangers) that can interact with each other by establishing connections. Most of social network sites encourage their members to share personal information through profiles pages.

B. Forums

Online forums are the evolution of Bulletin Board Systems and have been created as a tool for people to promote discussions through messages published addressing the same topic. phpBB and SMF are two examples of forums platforms that offers social network features allowing users to create their own profiles and to keep friend lists.

C. Media sharing

Websites where people upload own media (e.g. videos) and interact with other users by commenting their media and profiles.

D. Personal Blogs

A blog is a type of website maintained by individuals who shares their reflections about life and so on. Some platforms allow users to create their own profiles and share some personal information with blog visitors.

III. A BRIEF HISTORY

The first social network site – theGlobe.com – was an online worldwide community where users could share their own content and interact with others individuals with similar interests. It was launched in 1995 by Michael Egan and Ed Cespedes. [1]

Six Degrees emerged in 1997 with 150 people and reached 1 million members at the end of 2000. [2] It was created by Andrew Weinreich and it allowed users to create profiles and interact with others by post bulletin board items or sending private messages. This was the base adopted by almost all

social network sites that appeared later such as MySpace. "When we started, I said we were going to build the largest database in the world, a place where people can build a virtual community, you ain't seen nothing yet." Andrew Weinreich says, and he was right. [3]

Many people consider Classmates or some kind of dating sites as the first online social networks, but in fact they don't allow members to maintain friend lists and most of them are paid.

Between 1997 and 2001, others social network sites have appeared in the Internet such as LiveJournal, AsianVenue, BlackPlanet, MiGente, Cyworld and Mixi, but no one has achieved popularity on a global scale. [4]

MySpace was founded in August 2003 with the main aim to compete with Friendster and take advantage of users who were unhappy with it. Between 2004 and 2008 some rock-bands and others musicians began to create their social profiles in MySpace to interact with fans and achieve more audience. Result: Many teenagers have joined to MySpace to stay close to their favorite bands and the social network registered its 100 millionth user in August 9, 2006. [5]

Facebook was launched in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. Since that it is has become the largest online social network in the world.

IV. The rise of online social networks

The rise of online social networks is clear related to the evolution of technology. Nowadays, there is Internet access everywhere, except in some remote places of the planet, and everyone want to be connected in some way that permits meet new people and establish some virtual interactions by sharing videos, notes, events, opinions and so on.

Companies are also interested in "be social" because that's where people are. The online social networks allow companies to drive traffic to their own websites while encouraging their costumers to publish posts, notes and videos about their products, spreading the word and increasing the reputation of these companies. "A brand is no longer what we tell the consumer it is – it is what consumers tell each other it is." Scott Cook says. [6]

In 2006, Hi5 was "the No. 1 ranking site online in Portugal, Ecuador, Costa Rica, El Salvador and Guatemala". [7] Despite the poor design of site, it was very popular among Portuguese teenagers and for many it is considered the first social network site connecting a large percentage of people in Portugal.

Since 2009, the Portuguese users who have joined to Hi5 began to migrate from it to Facebook, helping Facebook reach the top worldwide social network sites and the top of the most visited web sites.

V. Facebook phenomenon

Facebook is certainly one of the most well succeed social network sites. Since 2004, it grows up to more than 800 million active users. [8] Supporting more than 70 languages and accessible through mobile devices, it was the most visited site

in U.S. between January and November 2010. [9]

Initially Facebook was limited to Harvard students but months later have expanded to some universities in the U.S. and in February 2006 it began accepting students over 13 years old and quickly grew to what we see today.

Today, Facebook is more than a simple social network where users can found people according their interests and location, but a site where is possible to organize, per example, public manifestations that attract thousands of people to the streets. One of the largest manifestations all the time in Portugal happened in March 2011 and it started by a single event posted on Facebook that attracted thousands of Portuguese outraged with their poor working conditions.
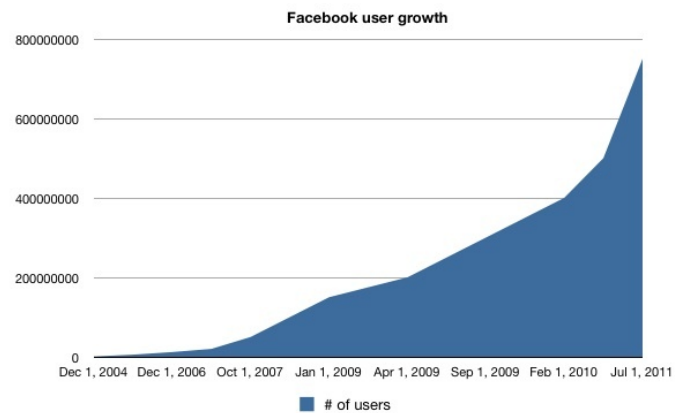

Fig.1. "Facebook user numbers according to the official statistics in the Facebook timeline" [10]

VI. Benefits and disadvantages

Are online social networks good for our society? According to the study of "The Use of Internet in Portugal in 2010", social network sites are used by 53% of Internet users. Hi5 remains the most used social network (for 43% of Internet users). But today, Facebook is probably the most accessed by Portuguese users. The most used functionalities available in social networks are communications tools – messaging (84%) and chat (48%), followed by the creation of photo albums to share with friends (46%). Almost half the users of social networks (45%) claimed to have more than 100 contacts in their friend's lists. In social networking sites, 78% of users said they know personally most people who interact with them. [11]

The online socialization is now present like never before. Probably ≈ 99,9% of worldwide Internet users had accessed to a social network at least one time. These online networks are so popular that changed habits of Internet users and common people who saw in these sites a kind of hobby.

We focus some pro and cons of social network sites above.

A. Pro

1) Allow people to make new friends and establish new relationships.
2) Bridge the gaps between family members or friends who are abroad.

3) Is a way to find jobs more easily, especially in social networks related to business (e.g. LinkedIn).

4) It is incredibly simple to use and can be utilized in creative ways.

5) In case of Facebook, everybody's are already there.

6) An easy way to spread the word.

7) Students and investigators can discuss several things without meeting in real life.

B. Cons

1) Some social network sites have little privacy.

2) A lot of people create fake accounts.

3) Some teenagers may share too much personal information.

4) Content ownership concerns.

5) Many social network sites were not created to improve people's life but to make money.

6) Makes people stay away from physical contact.

VII. CONCLUSION

Our brief research about online social networks was important because we now understand better the evolution of online social networks and all things related.

In a world becoming increasingly dependent on computers and Internet, these networks are very important to create new connections and relationships, especially for companies that see in them a business opportunity.

Social network sites are a great vehicle of information, where users share news and media which are replicated later by theirs friends and reach thousands of people in a couple hours.

Many considers Facebook success as something immediate that can be easily replaced by another social network who offers more features but Facebook has focused its strategy in innovative features – example: Facebook Video Calling that allow users to chat with their friends face to face.

The excessive use of social networks may be malicious because some people do not distinguish the virtual world from the real one, but when used moderately, combining real world and the virtual world and paying attention to the risks of the Internet, it brings benefits for users in order to improve their own lives and break natural barriers.

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