



## SCIENCE/TECHNOLOGY: Social networking begins to open

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**SUBJECT:** The compatibility of internet social networking applications.

**SIGNIFICANCE:** Rapid growth of social networking has created an archipelago of islands on the internet, each of which is defined by distinct groups of users. For example, social networks linked to websites such as Bebo, Facebook and MySpace remain unable to interconnect. For this reason, Google's Open Social initiative is likely to gain traction because of the inherent benefits of open standards for myriad groups -- social networks, advertisers, consumers and software developers.

**ANALYSIS:** Facebook's 15-billion-dollar market valuation has fuelled debates about the growth and relevance of internet-based social networking:

- A key topic of contention is whether such websites can continue to attract users (and advertisers) in their current form, as walled gardens (see [SCIENCE/TECHNOLOGY: Open content will diversify - May 8, 2006](#)).
- Despite Facebook's continuing appeal (allegedly it adds 200,000 new users each day to its membership base of 50 million), incompatibility of existing social networks clearly constrains the landscape of internet friendship.

**Opening social networks.** The Open Social initiative represents an innovative attempt to disrupt the status quo. Although at a nascent stage, it has potential to open the landscape of internet friendship to broader participation, commercial growth and more varied forms of innovation:

- The idea is to introduce a core set of standards through which social networks and associated software applications can interconnect.
- Social networks basically are portals to repositories of personalised information, and thus could be made compatible with protocols that underpin other aspects of the internet, such as the world wide web and email.
- The Open Social initiative already has the support of many leading social networks (Bebo, Linked In, My Space) and as a result, potential access to a user base in excess of 200 million.

**Opening internet friendship.** As the dominant aggregator for internet advertising, Google stands to benefit from the combined user base of Open Social participants (see [SCIENCE/TECHNOLOGY: Perceptions could threaten Google - July 3, 2007](#)). Nonetheless, the initiative also has clear benefits for operators and users of social networks, in addition to software developers and commercial advertisers:

1. **Liberating users.** Despite its growth, social networking remains at a relatively nascent stage -- a majority of internet users globally are not yet active participants. Like any other 'format war', persistence of incompatible social networks will only subdue overall demand for social networks:
  - The presence of multiple competing platforms clearly tarnishes the appeal of social networking. There are barriers to entry and conversion.
  - The time and effort required to build a profile and social network deter some users, or prevent others joining separate social networks where friends and colleagues might reside.
2. **Streamlining software development.** Social networks function as important platforms for internet-based software applications. For example, Facebook has attracted substantial activity from programmers, who have sought to produce games, networking tools and other applications. Introduction of open standards could invigorate development of such software:
  - The current paradigm is limiting to software developers, who must write separate code for each social network.
  - The Open Social initiative has potential to liberate developers from the limitations of platform incompatibilities, and expose products to a broader user base (see [SCIENCE/TECHNOLOGY: Interactive media empowers amateurs - May 4, 2005](#)).

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3. **Exposing targeted advertising.** The size of their user base, and capacity to connect advertisers with consumers, ultimately determines social networks' commercial value. By forging a common set of standards, social networks will not only attract more users, but also contribute to formation of a much larger 'digital commons', where targeted and potentially useful advertising can take root:
  - With the help of consumer relationship management software, which scans profiles of registered users, advertisers can reach the demographic segments that are most likely to be interested in their product or service -- by adopting open standards, operators of social networks thus will enhance value to advertisers.
  - The shift to open standards will also improve the accuracy and integrity of the 'social graph' -- connections between users and their friends -- by simplifying participation and interconnection across networks; this will galvanise the value of emerging 'social advertising' forms, which attach commercial messages and endorsements to specific user actions.

**Counter currents.** Yet the shift towards open standards is not inexorable or inevitable. Other trends also characterise internet friendship, which might counter progress of initiatives such as Open Social:

- **User privacy.** There are concerns about the privacy implications of open standards, and expanding social networks. Facebook's recent move to introduce social advertising drew heavy criticism from consumer rights groups, who fear technology may be used to elicit unwitting commercial endorsements from users (see [UNITED STATES: Traffic-shaping may have potential - July 19, 2006](#)). It is unclear how (or whether) user information would be protected in a world of open social networking, as identity theft is already rife in closed platforms.
- **Walled gardens' appeal.** Given privacy concerns, some users may prefer the safety and integrity of walled gardens such as Facebook. It might also be argued that demographic forces favour differentiation and separation of social networks characterised by distinct groups of users, varying by age, culture and geography. Concentration of users into particular networks might weaken the case for interconnection. Users may also prefer to transition between closed platforms over time -- for example, leaving Bebo to join Facebook.
- **Virtual worlds' growth.** As broadband adoption expands, three-dimensional internet social networks are likely to emerge, which (like Second Life) offer users a more dynamic environment in which to interact and connect with friends. As worlds in themselves, with specific norms and rules, these may be less amenable to interoperability as favoured by advocates of Open Social. For example, it is unclear whether users of nascent three-dimensional social networks such as Habbo Hotel would desire interoperability with other networks. Users tend to cluster in these closed environments for demographic and other reasons.

**Outlook.** Concerns about user privacy, and the enduring appeal (to certain users) of closed portals, will shape and constrain progress of initiatives such as Open Social. Yet myriad benefits are associated with open social networking:

- There will be considerable experimentation with social networking sites and applications, once the potential of open standards becomes clearer -- for example, there is scope for live e-mail services such as Google Mail or Yahoo Mail to be transformed into social networking hubs, where contact lists (comprising individuals from multiple social networks) can be accessed.
- As a result, the internet friendship landscape may become more accessible and expansive.

**CONCLUSION:** The internet embodies the inherent benefits of open standards. As an open platform, it has provided a home to an array of software and hardware. Over time, social networking will probably be forced to become more open because of benefits of inter-connection. A core set of open standards will eventually enable the users of different networks to connect, where to do so is useful and desirable.

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