

# THE GOOD AND BAD OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

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***Abstract:** The paper looks at social networks and their impact on the life of individuals, businesses and society at large. It examines some of the advantages and disadvantages of social networking. The opportunities that social networks present are seen both as freedoms and constraints depending on who and why uses them.*

***Key words:** social network, networking, impact, freedom, constraints, threats, safety*

## **Social Networks Today**

Facebook, MySpace, Friendster, You Tube, Twitter, Tagged, etc. (for a full list of social networks see [1]). There are few technological developments in the history of mankind which have caused as much controversy as social networks. The wide spread and clout of social networks in today's world makes it more difficult for the authorities to control the way stories are told, news are disclosed, truth is revealed, and political, social and global decisions taken. However, the focus of this paper is not on the how (they can be used) and what (for) of this invention but rather about the freedoms and constraints that it generates for its users.

For some on the surface it is mostly freedoms, while for others it is mostly constraints. It is claimed that as of June, 2010, Facebook is the prevailing social network in almost every country of the world. There are exceptions, of course, and these are mainly authoritarian countries such as Iran, China, Vietnam, and others where the dominant social networks are domestically-developed, controlled and even censored by the government. In reality, it is very difficult to completely block access to a website. But some governments order internet providers to remove Facebook's IP addresses from their DNS servers. And even though firewalling can be overcome without too much effort, using the most widely spread social networks in this case becomes pointless for a number of reasons. The significance of a social network lies in the fact that it is EASILY accessible, used by LARGE NUMBERS of people, from ALL OVER the world. If one of these factors is absent, such a social network is not a user's first choice. In autocratic states people tend to stick to the domestic social network because it is largely used by the citizens of the respective country, because it is easily accessible and because it is risk-free in the sense that the user cannot be persecuted for accessing forbidden websites.

## **Impact of Social Networks**

These days we interact differently in our personal lives because of social networks. The use of the new web tools is transforming our professional lives too. Social networking is affecting the way business gets done and the way employers recruit their employees.

On the one hand a lot has been said and written about how it gives us unlimited opportunities. On the other hand, it is also a high risk phenomenon which is raising the concerns of those who know how social networks can be misused and abused. When hundreds of millions of people use them, there is no way the outcomes can be only positive.

One of the most advantageous assets of social networks is their accessibility. It has been attracting attackers who want to get coveted information and sources more than any other target in recent years. Even to the non-specialist, the information about the threats that social networks pose to the enterprises and individual users provided by Palo Alto Networks at [2] sounds scary enough. They warn us about: **Social Networking Worms** which, among other things, can hijack accounts; about **Phishing Bait** which compromises Facebook users' accounts; about **Trojans, Data Leaks, Shortened links; Botnets; Advanced Persistent Threats (APT)** whose key element is the gathering of intelligence of persons of interest; **Cross-Site Request Forgery (CSRF)** - a technique used to spread a sophisticated social networking worm; **Impersonation** – hacking the social network accounts of outstanding people with thousands of followers; and **Trusted** links, pictures, videos, etc.

There are serious concerns about the rise in advanced targeted attacks. The big problem is how to deal with the threats that social media bring into the life of an individual, an organization, a nation and even the world. The battle has just started and will grow more intense as technology grows more sophisticated and the world becomes more vulnerable for that matter.

Social media has been around for quite some time and is no longer a novelty. What is new is the astonishing rate at which it is evolving and the growing awareness that currently it cannot be controlled adequately for purposes of personal, organizational and global safety.

The use of social media in the workplace helps to achieve a lot of the business objectives of a company or an organization. However, most of them do not possess the necessary social media security controls. There is ample evidence of the lack of efficient safety measures against malware attacks. For example, “A ton of web pages have been compromised by a huge malware attack dubbed LizaMoon” [3]. Web specialists can tell what exactly happens in cases like these but it is enough for the untrained user to know that such attacks mess up a web site's databases with all the ensuing negative consequences for individual and corporate users.

On a more positive note, social networks are a great innovation which, when used wisely and with good intentions can be a real blessing both for those in the fast lane of life and for those who prefer a more relaxed life, both for individuals and for corporate user, both for young people and for adults.

### **The Good of Social Networks**

The advantages that make people want to join in are obvious and undeniable. They have been discussed by many on the Web including at [4]. The low or no cost of social media is one extremely attractive advantage for both individual and corporate users. Businesses can target very precisely the desired audiences using unlimited options of marketing and advertising tools for a fraction of what they would normally have to pay to PR agencies. Everybody can do business, enjoy, learn, share and benefit from others provided they are connected. And the connectivity on the Web has by far surpassed even the bravest expectations from a few years ago. With individual users it hardly takes any cajoling to get on the web and start interacting. Facebook and Twitter are widely used by marketing. LinkedIn is popular with human resources. The new generation of employers and employees want to be connected 24/7 - both at home and at work, both for fun and for practical reasons.

### *Freedom*

Social networks can be seen as the phenomenon which affords freedom for billions of

people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its users find themselves free of many restraints. Among other things, social networks enable them to:

- cross geographical and other barriers;
- interact with a lot of people at the same time;
- send and receive messages, upload photos, and videos;
- access different cultures and places;
- interact when they feel like it;
- promote themselves;
- promote their business, services, or products;
- choose freely;
- engage in certain actions without control or interference;
- promote social autonomy; and
- form informal associations.

#### *Positive Impact on Language Learning/Teaching*

Social Networks can and do contribute to language learning. They provide ample incentive for acquiring foreign languages and/or improving them. Despite some of the shortcomings of the language skills developed while using social networks such as inaccurate spelling, mostly colloquial language use, accented pronunciation etc., social networks are valuable media for language learning because they:

- Motivate learners to learn;
- Provide the tools for collaborative learning;
- Allow for communication with native speakers;
- Stimulate autonomous learning;
- Provide real-life context for learning;
- Encourage sharing and hence learning from other people and from one's own mistakes;
- Facilitate the learner-teacher contact; etc.

#### *Positive Impact on Businesses*

For businesses it builds credibility to connect to partners and customers as it is believed (sometimes wrongly) that being on the web makes a company reliable and traceable. Feedback and interactivity are important assets of communication on the web. As long as a company is adequately present and active on the web without being too aggressive towards its potential customers, its integrity increases.

#### *Positive Impact on Personal Contacts*

You have friends who also have friends. You can become friends with them too. There is a lot of potential in these multiple friendships. There is a lot of give and take in this situation and invaluable socializing takes place. People, who otherwise do not mix a lot, find an easy way to communicate without the frustration of direct contact. People who want to speak their mind can do so and find enough audience. People who want to learn can learn from others. With social networks at a click away, lonely people find welcoming communities which make them feel comfortable. All these connections are valuable both at the time when they occur and in the long run as they have a long "shelf life" and can be restored when needed.

#### **The Bad of Social Networks**

While social networks free us from various restraints, they create a lot of constraints. These can relate to the individual or to society in general. In many places we are told to be

careful what we put out about ourselves on the web. We are warned that information shared freely with others on social media can create complications for us when we apply for jobs. We and our professional qualities can be judged on the basis of what we do and who we mix with in our free time. Very often employers will not discriminate between one's personal life and one's aptitude for a particular job.

It is scary to know that you cannot delete things you have put on the web for another person or other people to see and read and that a third party can have access to them. Some insurers have declared that they may raise people's home insurance premiums if they use social networks. The reason is such people become vulnerable to burglars because of the information they put out about their holidays, days out of town, parties away from home, etc. Such information is a clear indication that nobody will be at home.

#### *Negative Impact on Schooling and Employment*

Social networks are very attractive to young people. They, more often than more mature people, tend to become obsessed with sharing personal information, photos and videos with others using various web media. This gets them in trouble with university administration for lack of discretion, moral breaches, and violation of school policies or the adopted school behavior code. Job applicants, on the other hand, get turned down by potential employers because of incriminating information contained in their social network accounts that has reached them during the initial screening. People's chances of getting a job or retaining a place in a coveted university or company can be seriously diminished by inappropriate image created by data from social networks.

#### *Negative Impact on Personal Safety*

Social Networking Sites create the risk of identity theft and fraud. Personal information carelessly put out on social networks can be used by scheming people for unlawful actions. E-mail addresses, bank account numbers, names, pictures, location, etc. can be used to commit online crimes, deplete bank accounts, involve minors in sexual crimes, and facilitate burglaries, among other things. There are people who assume false online profiles with the sole aim to attract the attention of children who they can easily turn into victims. Online bullying and persecution can be a serious problem for people whose enemies decide to take their revenge. Then social networking becomes a nightmare.

The other extreme is that of becoming social network paranoid. Should we worry and how much that we can fall victims to on-line criminals or rivals, or that we are being monitored on the social networks? But aren't we monitored elsewhere? In the street, in the shops, at cash dispensers, in the office, etc. The difference is that in those places we practice caution whereas at the computer screen we have the false belief that we are vis-a-vis only with the person or people we want to communicate with. Or else that we cannot be traced back to the PC we use, that no record is left of our skype chats, messages, pictures (if we choose to delete them), i.e. that we can remain anonymous if we want. These are simply figments of some people's imagination and wishful thinking. Hence too much exhibitionism, aggressiveness, or sexual perverseness can get offenders into trouble.

#### *Negative Impact on Real-Life Communication*

Are we socializing in the true sense of the word when using social networks? Or are we simply hiding behind the keyboards and in front of the screens of our computers? Are we beginning to feel more comfortable with virtual relationships and friends than with real-life ones? If the answer to most of these questions is "Yes", then social networks are dangerously supplanting genuine human interactions.

The decline in value and volume of all traditional forms of communication and customer outreach is a major outcome of the increasingly wide spread of social networks. Radio, TV and the press are losing the battle with the Web too. Mailing letters and postcards seems to have become an outdated ritual adhered to by old-fashioned people. It is pretty obvious that direct mail is being wiped out by e-mail which in turn is being diminished by communication on Twitter and Facebook. Social media is transforming the way companies and all kinds of institutions communicate with their customers. It is still early to comprehend fully the negative effect of this trend.

Despite the craze for social networking, there are those who consider it a nuisance because they do not have the time to click around for fun or business purposes. Or else because they do not see the point of interacting in this way. Then it becomes a time-consuming diversion and more of a burden than an asset.

#### *Negative Impact on National Safety*

National and global safety can easily be jeopardized by social network users with assumed identities, terrorist intentions, extremist views, nationalistic biases, in general by people with sick minds. They can spread ideas, appeal to many for certain actions, accumulate followers in a very short time, organize activities endangering the life and safety of innocent people. This is one very important reason why social networks should and are monitored. It is important to reiterate here that communication between like-minded criminals over the internet can facilitate the logistics of massive terrorist attacks such as the ones on the Twin Towers in New York and on the London and Paris undergrounds.

#### **The Future of Social Networks**

Are social media in their infant years with an unlimited potential for development? Or are they a temporary phenomenon that will not stand the test of time and will disappear in the not too distant future?

It is hard to prophesy with any degree of certainty especially when it comes to a phenomenon whose advent is directly linked to the development of digital technology, fibreoptics and broadband, all of which are likely to develop further or into something even more sophisticated and capable. However, if individual and corporate users exercise caution when using social networks and update the software that can guarantee their safety, the benefits of social networks will by far surpass the constraints that they impose on us. The legislative and executive authorities should also target online offenders more strictly and efficiently in order to make the web a less dangerous domain for young and old.

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