THE EVOLUTION OF THE

INFORMATION REVOLUTION

THE GROWING POWER OF VIRTUAL SOCIAL NETWORKS

University of St. Gallen (HSG)

Paper in the context of:
Digital Technology and Society

handed in on January 2nd 2009

to Prof. Dr. Bozena I. Mierzejewska

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Abstract

The Information Revolution has, like the Industrial Revolution, spearheaded a new era in the global society. This time around, the revolution was not based on steam power, electricity and mechanization, rather it was based on recently developed communication technologies. (Kumar, 1995)

The impact of the Information Revolution has been monumental, as it rendered organized knowledge and information socially beneficial. The development has not stood still, however, and an evolution of the Information Revolution has been in progress. Today's society has, over the past few years, taken up the technological advances which came along with the introduction and establishment of the Internet and the World Wide Web and started to integrate them into their daily lives. The ongoing growth and general acceptance of interaction on social networks, social collaboration platforms and virtually managed collective actions is likely to create a very influential and powerful movement within our society, which has the potential to become a medium through which charismatic persons can communicate and interact with the masses in ways previously unimaginable to create new social movements.

"It's about the many wresting power from the few and helping one another for nothing and how that will not only change the world, but also change the way the world changes" (Grossman, 2006)

This paper aims to portray the current state and developments of online social collaboration with the aim to provide a clearer picture on the intangible movements in the virtual world. With that in focus, the reader will be introduced to the history of the Internet and the emergence of the Web 2.0 movement, which has been an important milestone in the evolution of the virtual society by introducing user driven content to the virtual world. In the second part of this paper, a brief overview will be presented of the early days of social networks, which are the forerunners of online collaboration platform, which have merged the idea of social networking and communication with collective actions and collaborations. In the last part of this paper, insights, based on information gathered during an interview with Amazee CEO Gregory Gerhardt, on the current status of the online collaboration movement will be presented. Social collaboration platforms are on the rise and have the potential to reach the status of social networks today. With one significant difference, social collaboration platforms take a step further as they connect the virtual and real world by inducing its users to transform the virtual into real world actions adding a tangible social, political and cultural dimension.

The history of the Internet

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the first forms of networks were developed and established. These networks however, only allowed for a limited number of connections as a direct link from a computer to the network had to be established in order to allow for data transfer between the network users. Unlike today, where such a connection is achieved via the standard TV cable or telephone line, separate cables had to be installed to enable a connection to the network. As a result, network connectivity was usually limited to large institutions and corporations with the necessary funding. In order for larger networks to function, a new data transfer method was needed. At that time two computers could only exchange data through a constant connection line, meaning that only two computers could be connected at one time. True network capabilities came with the invention of packet switching.

Packet switching is a communication method in which packets, discrete blocks of data, are routed over networks. Figuratively speaking, data sent from one computer is divided into data-packages and transmitted separately over the network. These single packages, which together constitute the complete data set, are traveling independently over the network and are routed by the nodes, which coordinate the transfer of the packages on the network, to the ultimate receiver. Once the receiver gets all the packages, his computer combines the previously separated packages to form the original data set. (Rand Corporation, n.d.)

Packet switching was invented by scientists at the Rand Corporation with the aim to construct a virtually indestructible network for military purposes. The fact that packets can be sent over different interlinked networks and can reach the recipients though various streams within that network, insures the functionality of the network even in the event that an enemy attack would render parts of the network inoperable. In other words, this method of packet switching is a rapid store-and-forward design. When a node receives a packet it stores it, determines the best route to its destination, and sends it to the next node on that path. If there was a problem with a node (or if it had been destroyed) packets would simply be routed around it. (Rand Corporation, n.d.)

The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) launched a program with the aim to establish a network between Universities within the United States in April 1969. On October 22, 1969 the first link in the course of this project was established between the University of California, Los Angeles and the Stanford Research Institute. The network was named ARPANET and expanded gradually to connect an increasing number of Universities. (Hauben, 2001) ARPANET became the technical core of what would become the Internet, and a primary tool in developing the technologies used.

In the following years as the number of computer connected to different networks gradually increased, the need for standardization became evident. Until then, most physical networks were functioning with their own communication standards limiting the possibilities for interconnectivity between the networks. The invention of the common internetwork protocol, which united all the different network protocols, was the solution.

With the common internetwork protocol, which was developed by DARPA in 1973 and evolved to the TCP/IP protocol which is used until this day, most networks could be connected regardless of their characteristics. The British Post Office, Western Union International and Tymnet collaborated to create the first international packet switched network, referred to as the

International Packet Switched Service (IPSS), in 1978. By 1981 this network had grown from Europe and the US to cover Canada, Hong Kong and Australia. A worldwide network infrastructure had been erected by the early 1990's. (Wikipedia, 2008)

Important steps towards unifying all networks to create a World Wide Web were taken by late 1989 and mid 1990's with the implementation of a hypertext system, the creation of the first web pages as well as the launch of the first web server by Tim Berners-Lee and his team at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Geneva, Switzerland. (Berners-Lee, 1990)

At first the idea was to connect hypertext with personal computers, to have a single information network for supporting the CERN physicists to share all the computer-stored information at the laboratory. Hypertext would enable users to browse easily between texts on web pages using links. Mr. Berners-Lee and his team created an editor to enable the sharing and editing of information on a server with the help of common hypertext for easy navigation. (CERN, 2008) The new editor was given the name WorldWideWeb by its creators.

Info.cern.ch was the address of the world's first-ever web site and web server, running on a computer at CERN. The first web page address was http://info.cern.ch/hypertext/WWW/-TheProject.html, which contained information regarding the WWW project. Visitors could read about the concept of hypertext, learn more about technical details for creating their own web pages. The prime target of Mr. Bernier-Lee's team was to get the word out and encourage many people to start creating web pages in order to add information to the network.

In this context it is important to add that the Internet and the WWW are two separate entities, which are frequently wrongly used interchangeably by the general public. The notion of the Internet has appeared well before the WWW initiative and stands for the global internetwork, which consists of numerous smaller networks. For example, the University of St. Gallen would create a physical network, connecting all students and professors enabling them an exclusive platform to communicate and interchange data. This network, consisting of cable lines laid out throughout the campus, would only be accessible by physically connecting a computer, requiring the physical presence of the user on the campus. The whole network infrastructure would be exclusive property of the University and not accessible from anywhere else but the campus premises. Given these features, this network would not be a part of the Internet. Assuming the University would want to render this network a part of the Internet, it would have to connect their network to all the other networks by establishing a link to an Internet gateway. The connection to the gateway would lead to the ability of the University network to become accessible from anywhere in the world via the Internet. At this point, the University network would be considered a part of the Internet.

During 1991 servers appeared in other institutions in Europe and in December 1991, the first server outside the continent was installed in the United States at SLAC (Stanford Linear Accelerator Center). By November 1992, there were 26 servers in the world, and by October 1993 the figure had increased to over 200 known web servers. The true breakthrough of the World Wide Web (WWW) concept came in February 1993 with the release of the first version of Mosaic, which was to make the Web available to people using PCs and Apple Macintoshes. The Mosaic, created by the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA) at the University of Illinois, became the first widely spread web browser enabling people around the globe to access and post information on the WWW. (CERN, 2008) The mosaic web browser,

renamed in 1994 to Netscape Navigator, brought such large improvements in terms of accessibility and user friendliness that the community of Internet users grew exponentially and led to an enormous increase in available data. The introduction of the mosaic web browser combined with the announcement of the CERN that the Internet would become accessible to anyone free of charge, opened the flood gates in the WWW context. (Berners-Lee, 1993)

“CERN's decision to make the Web foundations and protocols available on a royalty free basis, and without additional impediments, was crucial to the Web's existence. Without this commitment, the enormous individual and corporate investment in Web technology simply would never have happened, and we wouldn't have the Web today."

Tim Berners-Lee, Director, WWW Consortium

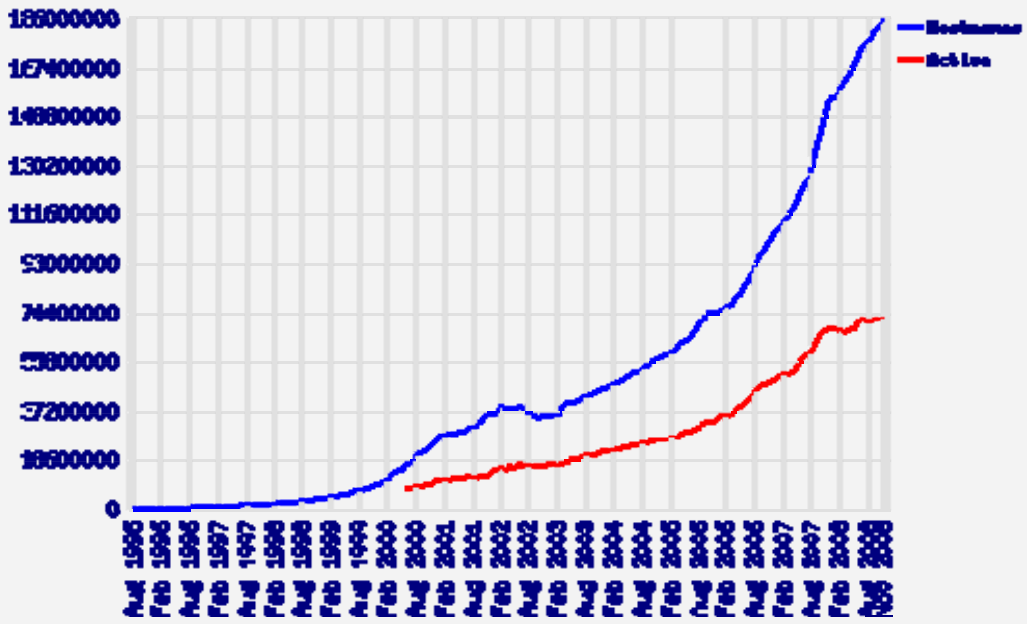
With the expansion of the WWW, Information Service Providers (ISP) have formed and started to offer services, which enabled anyone to reserve a domain name and have server space available to publish their own web page. People discovered the possibility of installing modems at their homes, which would enable, through the telephone line, to be connected to the Internet. The electronic mail (email), which already had been in use at the workplace of many, suddenly became available for personal communication from home. As the Internet user community was growing, new applications started to develop and soon many users were, usually under fake names, spending time in chat rooms, having written conversations with random people. Forums developed, where users with similar interests had the opportunity to exchange ideas and opinions by posting comments on the forum platform, enabling others to log into the forum and read the postings of other users. On top of that the Internet was increasingly used as a source of information for news searches, cooking recipes or game scores. Also companies started to see the benefits of having an Internet presence by putting up their homepages with information about their products and services as well as opening hours and contact information. Hobby programmers started to program their own personal web pages where they published large varieties of information. By 1996, the Internet had developed beyond the point of return. With the introduction of Windows 95, the third Microsoft Operating System with a Graphical User Interface, the Internet Explorer, Microsoft’s version of a web browser, came bundled with the product. Suddenly people buying new computers had a web browser included into their operating system and as a result the likelihood of them becoming Internet users was quite high.

Microsoft, even though they recognized the potential of the Internet quite late, had with their entrance into the Internet field a lasting impact. They started with their .Net initiative several programs focusing on building their web presence. Hotmail, the free email service, MSN Messenger and many more applications were all introduced to keep up with the competition which had been ahead with introductions of similar services but lacked the financial and strategically strength of Microsoft. Microsoft’s dominance in the Operating System market has given them a stirrup, which enabled the strong push into the web space. The entrance of Microsoft into the web space was quite controversial however and has led to several antitrust litigations with the claim of Microsoft’s abuse of their market dominance.

Since 1993 a small company was growing quickly in the shadow of the generally disliked software giant Microsoft. That small company, Google, developed to become one of the largest Internet players with almost unlimited resources and market presence today.

With the emergence of Google, the Internet has changed forever. With the fast growth of networks and servers connected to the Internet the amount of information available had grown exponentially. *(compare to figure 1)* The only problem was that the information lacked an order and information search had become difficult and slow. Even though previous providers had tried to bring a certain order into the system, it was not until the introduction of the Google search engine that web queries had become a simple and user friendly matter.

Figure 1: Total web sites across all domains August 1995 - November 2008



Source: http://news.netcraft.com

The development of the Web 2.0

Until 2004, Internet users were primarily content consumers. They visited web pages and consumed the displayed information. That form of the Internet, where the web page operator was the sole content provider and the consumer was reduced to merely consume the content is referred to as the Web 1.0. With the introduction of some new Internet services like Wikipedia, Napster and Flickr, suddenly the consumer was empowered and encouraged to add content and become the provider of information. Tim O'Reilly, who has popularized the term Web 2.0, explained the term in the year 2005 as a platform, which is far more than a collection of web sites. (O'Reilly, 2005) Even though there is not one clear definition of what Web 2.0 is, the early applications, which in retrospect were recognized as the beginning of the 2.0 movement, have one thing in common, they all have used power of the web to harness collective intelligence. (O'Reilly, 2005)

The objective of all Web 2.0 services is to mutually maximize the collective intelligence of the participants. The collective intelligence can be defined as the knowledge that is distributed within a group. It reflects the knowledge of all participants and continuously adapts to changes in the environment or opinion leadership. (Hoegg et al, 2006)

"The fundament of Web 2.0, which is already reflected in the definition of Web 2.0 services, is the concept of maximizing the collective intelligence. The interactive exchange of information and the continuous development and maintenance of a group opinion is described as the process of collective intelligence. The result of collective intelligence can be a commonly accepted opinion or commonly accepted content (that is not modified or criticized) but it can also occur indirectly as a presented selection of information." (Hoegg et al, 2006)

The fact that social networks provide a platform to manage collective intelligence and support the continuous development and maintenance of a group opinion, makes them very powerful in that a large group of people, located anywhere in the world, can form a community, which can collaborate on achieving common goals. Second Life, a virtual world launched in June 2003 by Linden Research, Inc, was believed to have the potential to form an e-collaboration platform. (Anthes, 2007) In Ned Kock's view, the Second Life platform was too complicated to attract an amount of users, large enough to form a critical mass. *"Past experience tells us that if a virtual community of users is created around a technology and grows beyond a critical mass, then practical e-collaboration applications will follow."* (Kock 2007, P.7) Today, Second Life is reaching maturity and new sites have appeared competing for active users. (Wager, 2008) Therefore, it is likely that Second Life will never become a widely used e-collaboration platform.

An example of a simple e-collaboration platform on a small level and with limited reach, with which all students of the University of St. Gallen should be familiar with, is the StudyNet. Although the StudyNet is mainly used as an information distribution platform, it does have functions to enable collaboration. The two functions which it offers are the community platform and the discussion platform. From the author's personal experience, these two collaboration functions are not widely used among students, however. Reasons could be the limited usability and the lacking promotion from the professors' side. In Ned Kock's words, the cost for using the StudyNet as an e-collaboration platform seem to be too high compared to its benefit.

"For a virtual world to have a practical e-collaboration appeal, meaning that actual work can be done in the virtual world, the benefits of e-collaborating through the virtual world must outweigh the costs. Possible costs are reduced communication fluency and increased communication ambiguity due to cumbersome interfaces and interaction delays."

(Knock 2007, P.7)

According to Knock's classification, platforms, which want to have a chance to become meaningful e-collaboration networks must be easy to use and must have efficient means of communication.

The influence of virtual social networks

With the launch of Friendster (www.friendster.com) in 2002, the first milestone for a virtual social networking platform was reached. Friendster allowed its users to create virtual profiles with pictures and personal information to be portrayed on the Friendster online platform. All users were able to connect through their virtual profiles and thus create a network of friends. The network enabled the users to communicate via messaging, postings or chat. This new way of communicating and being connected to friends had a strong appeal among US University and US High School students and as a result, the number of users on the network grew rapidly.

Several employees of eUniverse, an Internet marketing company, with Friendster accounts realized the potential of networks in the form of Friendster. They decided to mimic the most popular features of Friendster and added new capabilities to create their own social network called MySpace, which launched in August 2003 under www.myspace.com. eUniverse used its 20 million users and e-mail subscribers to quickly breathe life into MySpace by sending out sign-up invitations. In the following months MySpace had quickly developed to become the virtual place to be for surfers between the age of 15 and 25. The contents also started to expand to include music exchange. Small town bands started to upload their songs, which they recorded in the garage, and with a single upload reached thousands of potential listeners. Some musicians even reached US wide fame and were signed under a music label contract. The best example is Colbie Callait. She grew up close to Malibu, California and had been in touch with music and singing since her early years. With the wide spread introduction of MySpace, she uploaded her song called "Bubbly" on her MySpace profile only to find that within a few weeks, her song was listened to over 9 million times. The exposure through MySpace, helped her to sign a music label contract and start a professional music career.

While MySpace had overtaken Friendster as the most popular social network, a new rival was starting to amass users with an improved interface and new features. Facebook was launched in February 2004 from a Harvard dorm room. Within two weeks almost every student at Harvard had a Facebook account and within months Facebook spread to other US University campuses and became the most popular social site for students. With the critical mass of students in the US, an international breakthrough to Universities outside of the US was just a matter of time. The true breakthrough for Facebook came on May 24, 2007. That day, Marc Zuckerberg, the founder and CEO of Facebook, announced that the Facebook platform will allow for programmers to create social applications within Facebook. With other words, Facebook opened itself up to other programmers to create applications, which would run within the Facebook

framework. This announcement suddenly opened the opportunity for many developers to start producing applications for all Facebook users, gaining access to a large audience, which does not shy away from trying new things. Today, Facebook has established itself as the number one social networking platform and has left behind Friendster and MySpace in terms of registered users. Social networking in general has established itself as a socially acceptable tool for interacting with friends and others. An often heard line between two people that just met and want to keep in touch is: Are you on Facebook? Usually email addresses are not exchanged anymore, the name is enough to find the others profile on Facebook.

The highly innovative Internet community has not been inactive however and new platforms and applications have started to build on the basic notions of Facebook and MySpace. Ning.com for example, has introduced a social networking platform, which allows the users to set up their own networks and add their own content to create their “personal little network”. Therefore, Ning is often referred to as white-label social networking platform, since they leave the platforms content entirely to the user. Others have gone even further and have taken the basic idea of social interaction in the virtual world to the next level, by setting up platforms, which enable social collaboration and collective action. BasecampHQ.com and Huddle.net are platforms promoting social collaboration as they enable the users to manage projects online and to exchange documents and data. Change.org and Socialactions.com enable their users to try to make a difference in this world. Change.org for example is a platform on which registered users can start petitions to raise awareness and win other users to support their claims. Animal’s rights, global warming or humanitarian relief are often mentioned topics with several petitions filled in those domains. Socialactions.com makes an effort to bring all social actions of different web sites and platform together and allows the user to search for social actions within the database. A selection of the most often used search keywords include: climate change, healthcare, animals and education.

The movement of social collaboration and collective actions are rather new phenomenon. While in the USA the movement has already gained some momentum and users have started to take advantage of the online offerings in that domain, Europe and the Rest of the world are still at the very beginning of the movement.

Amazee.com, a social collaboration platform, which launched in September 2008, has set the goal to provide a global collaboration medium. Amazee is headquartered in Zurich and has an office in San Francisco, thus has the optimal global footprint to extend the social collaboration movement from the US to Europe.

Amazee and the social collaboration movement

In the course of the research for this paper, the author came across Amazee a recently launched online platform for social collaboration, a very relevant key word when looking at the growing influence of social networks. In order to get a better insight into the rather new developments in the areas of social collaboration and social action, the author set up an interview with Gregory Gerhardt, the CEO and Co-founder of Amazee.com. Gregory's profound knowledge as well as his exposure in the Silicon Valley places him at the core of the online collaboration movement. Gregory describes Amazee as following:

"Amazee is a more evolved social networking site devoted to the joy of collective action and designed to empower individuals and small groups to launch global initiatives,"

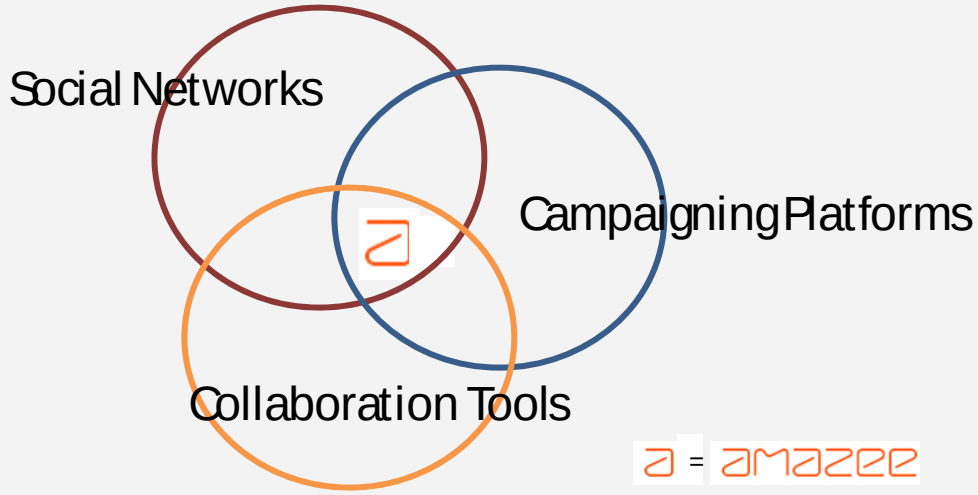
Gregory Gerhardt, CEO of Amazee

Key Features of Amazee include:

- Social Networking Tools consisting of member profiles, invitations, messaging and newsfeeds.
- Collaboration Management features including to-do list, calendar, discussion forum, write-board, voting, member right management and file sharing.
- Site Promotion is enabled by a shareable project home page accessible by anyone on the Internet without an Amazee membership, making it easy for project teams to drive new members to a site via all the tools available on the Internet, including other social networking sites, email campaigns, media outreach, and advertising.
- Project Funding is an important and unique part of Amazee, providing several built-in mechanisms for projects to raise money.

Amazee, unlike the typical social networking platforms, puts not the personal profile center stage but rather the project profile. *"The project profile is the main vantage point of our platform as people are connected not directly via their profiles but through common projects."* Gregory explains. While on Facebook the groups are usually organized around static interests like hobbies, work place or real life organizations, on Amazee the projects are of dynamic nature. Projects are usually set up with a goal in mind. Once that goal is reached, the project is completed and archived, thus projects are in general a timely limited venture. *"We position ourselves right in the middle of the three domains of social networks, campaigning platforms and collaboration tools, as we incorporate features from all three segments."* Gregory says. *(compare to figure 2)* In all three domains, there are already large established players. Nevertheless, the space in the overlap has been neglected in the past and Amazee is set to change that with the launch of their platform in September 2008.

Figure 2: The networking platforms landscape



Source: Gregory Gerhardt 2008

Among the well established and influential social networking platforms is Facebook. *"Facebook is very powerful and widely established. However, we see our chance in the fact that on the one side, the Facebook platform is currently not optimized for project management and on the other side, it has a generally accepted user mood of "having fun". With other words, Facebook is currently lacking the seriousness to be understood as a viable online collaboration platform, where people meet to reach a goal and not to set the next date for drinks out in town."* Gregory says. The social aspect, even in the field of social collaboration and online project management cannot be neglected however. *"We have come to realize, through feedbacks from our users, that a certain level of social interaction between people outside of respective projects is desired. As a result and to improve our platform, we are in the process of including a friend-function, which will enable the user to add friends, track what they are doing, interact with them on a non-project basis as well as recommend project to them or recommend them to be added to a project."* Amazee will, at least in the basic functionality, include more Facebook-like features in order to leverage their sophisticated project management tools.

"At Amazee, we position ourselves to serve the upper regions of the Maslow pyramid, where as Facebook and other plain social network platforms are aiming at the middle of the pyramid." Gregory specified. *(compare to figure 3)*

Figure 3**:** The pyramid of needs according to Abraham Maslow

Source: http://nodearth.files.wordpress.com/2007/09/maslow-pyramid.jpg

A general modularization of the people's lives can be observed. *"Many people in today's world think in terms of projects. Their work is a project, their hobby, their social engagement and so forth"* Gregory observes. *"Amazee is aimed to become the place, where people keep track of their life project portfolio and manage and share it efficiently."* It can be observed, that the private and physical "I" is increasingly often merging with the public and virtual "I". *"People tend to realize, that by portraying their true personality in the virtual world, they can increasingly leverage their influence in the real world to become an influential personality in the virtual world. As a result, they can apply their virtual influence to achieve real world projects."* Gregory explains.

The platforms, which have become the leading social networks, share one common feature: They mostly replicate existing real-world networks in the virtual world. *"Traditionally, the circle of friends that one has on Facebook mirrors the circle of friends one has in the real world. In the early days of virtual social networking, only rarely two people connected as friends without having met in person at least once in their lives."* Gregory explains. *"On Amazee, we want to encourage people to start projects and achieve goals with a team of which not every member has seen the other member in person or has known that person prior to the launch of the project."* Gregory specifies. The intention is that the project manager has the option to choose from a worldwide pool of potential team members.

A general hesitation, especially in Europe, can be observed when it comes to collaborate and communicate with people without a prior physical encounter. In America, and especially in the Silicon Valley, Internet users are much more open to accept a virtual personality as the true personality of the person behind the profile. As a result, meeting someone in person or being introduced on an online platform has become increasingly equal and consequently online collaborations are more willingly formed. *"Since online profiles and online personalities have become increasingly accepted as the mirror of one's true personality, people start to realize the*

importance of building up a virtual reputation. With other words, your actions and contributions in an online environment are becoming increasingly important for the formation of your personality, your track record and thus your reputation online" Gregory says.

As opposed to the early days of online interaction, where people usually were hiding behind user names, today people want to be recognized and accredited for what they do. Thus, in settings where people can contribute and link the contribution to their personal profile, the participation rate is much higher. Online users want to be presented with their true personality, which is increasingly reflected in their virtual profile. Back in the day, where the Internet was a rather new phenomenon, anonymous chatting and posting was prevalent. Today, people want to leave a personal imprint, which can be traced back to the creator.

As per November 17, 2008, Amazee had over 4'000 signed up users, 764 registered projects and 52 alliances. *"Even social collaboration demands active project management. Many users have the impression, that once their project is registered online, the goals will be reached by itself. That is not the case. Projects must be actively promoted, managed and communicated."* Gregory explains. In online project management a typical contributor split, which can be also observed in the real world, occurs. Typical project participants can be divided into 5% leaders, 10% contributors and the rest is split into direct followers and stalkers, which only occasionally come to see how the project is going.

Amazee sees social collaboration as the logical evolution of social networks. To achieve the largest possible exposure, Amazee has entered into agreements with media partners, which extend the reach of the virtual platform into printed media. *"Projects that have created a certain motion in the virtual world are selected and presented in the print and online media of our partners, reaching over 40'000 subscribers via the printed press or the online magazine."* Gregory explains. *"This increased exposure of the projects is likely to establish Amazee as the main platform for online collaboration and project management, while at the same time, gives the project initiators a stage to address new and potential participants. Spreading the word and getting media coverage is what empowers every single online motion. Be it a project, a petition or action, once the mass hears about it and it appeals to them, change is likely to be set in motion."* Gregory describes.

By building up a social collaboration platform, Amazee has stated in their mission to remain completely neutral. Their goal is to provide the instruments and the platform and let the users provide and decide about the content. *"We do not intend to actively influence the projects on our platform as long as they play within the guidelines of our Terms of Use."* Gregory says. With random monitoring as well as user reporting options, Amazee keeps an eye on the dealings on their platform. *"Every user has the possibility to report potentially dangerous or inappropriate projects directly from the online interface. Our administrators will promptly take actions to insure conformity with our Terms of Use."* Gregory explains. Due to the fact that Amazee is still in the starting phase, an automated and constant monitoring of the content is not yet necessary. *"We are considering adding active oversight applications to our platform framework once a critical mass is achieved"* Gregory says.

For the platform to be abused by criminal organizations or terrorist networks, the configuration is not suitable. *"In my view, criminal organizations prefer to use the traditional ways of communication as the application of online platforms always leave digital footprints, which are rather easy to trace for experts."* Gregory explains. *"Nevertheless, one of my biggest fears in terms of business risk is that the Amazee platform could be abused for criminal purposes*

thus losing credibility among the general audience and users. With active monitoring this risk can be reduced to a minimum though, therefore, at the end of the day, it does not worry me too much." Gregory illustrates.

Regarding the revenue model, which currently for most platforms is traditional advertising, Amazee is envisioning advanced forms of advertising and sponsoring. *"Our analysis has shown that companies like their logo and identity to be linked, also referred to as engaged branding, to projects and events for good causes and with clear objectives. As long as the project has a "positive feel" to it and aims at achieving a goal, companies are very likely to be willing to present themselves as sponsors of these projects."* Gregory says. The income generated by engaged branding sponsorships, combined with a Freemium user revenue model are likely to become the main sources of income for online platforms. The Freemium model is a combination of a free and a premium fee based revenue model. The premium users pay a fee for unlimited access and additional tools and options, where as the free users on the other side, have limited access and functionality but add to the critical mass in order for this model to function.

"The social collaboration movement is still at a very early stage even in the USA, which usually is 2-3 years ahead of Europe. Nonetheless, clear trends towards a growing popularity and influence of collaborative networks can be recognized." Gregory describes. *"The establishment of user habits and source credibility takes time and does not truly become established until a critical mass of followers is reached. Once that number is achieved, in my view, the new collaboration platforms and above all Amazee will become very powerful instruments for charismatic leaders, which will have the ability to project their real life status into the virtual world while reaching billions of people on a very personal level via the collaboration platforms."* Gregory envisions. In a world where numerous online platforms and applications are fighting for the attention of the users, only the best will prevail.

"I am convinced that by constantly improving our platform and by listening to our users and the general Internet public, we will in the future, combined with far reaching network of partners, establish Amazee as "THE" platform for social collaboration similar to the status of what Google is for Internet search today."

Gregory Gerhardt, CEO Amazee

Conclusion

In the authors view, the information society has the potential, with the wide spread establishment of social collaboration networks, to move away from being a system upholding the current political, social and economical environment as suggested by Kumar (1995), to become an institution, which will have the prerequisites to undermine the status quo by empowering the common user. With the collaboration technologies, social communities can form in the virtual world based on common interest rather than common geographical location and the newly formed communities can transform the placeless meeting point, the collaboration platform, to the real world through concrete actions. Even though the online collaboration movement is still in its infancy, already today a trend, especially in the Silicon Valley, can be observed heading to an increased acceptance of active online collaboration, which aims to transform virtual into real actions.

Not to be forgotten however, is the fact that access to the Internet is still quite limited throughout the world and as a result, the collaboration platforms, as a form of new technologies, may widen the gap, the digital divide, between rich and poor, powerful and powerless, educated and non educated even more.

Nevertheless, the collaborative action platforms are likely to become a very powerful medium for interest groups to form on a global level and take influence in areas of their interest. In a few years and with the benefit of hind side, the society might be referring to virtual social collaboration with real world impact, as it is forming in these days, as the Web 3.0 movement, which evolved from virtual social networks to become collaboration platforms, which connected the virtual and the real world through global, virtual social collaboration and gave rise to the empowerment of the individual user.

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