Market versus Field in Personal Communications Design: Friendster.com vs. Tribe.net

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Social networks have been studied by American sociologists to better understand the context of communication and the transmission of information between people. Some of the earliest studies were funded by grants from the department of health to analyze the transmission of the HIV virus. In order to predict the pathway of social connection and the probability of sexual contact, extensive social networking models were employed by researchers at the University of Chicago in 1992 (National Health Service Lifestyle Study). The NHSLS advanced the idea that social networks might function as a series of relatively discrete, though overlapping markets.   The use of economic logic to understand social interaction has a long history in American sociology and has come under considerable criticism as a model for communications study. An alternative to economic modeling comes from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who uses social field theory to understand communicative action. The idea of a social field challenges the idea that a single universal pattern of rationalization or "cost-benefit" analysis governs the way that people make judgements when communicating with other people.

The paper that I co-authored with a sociologist from Rutgers University, Dr. John Martin, goes into great detail about how friendship and sexuality are connected by the specific norms of sexuality that cohere as social fields. A field differs from a market, because a field generates values and 'norms' without conscious mental calculation. Communities can be seen as sharing values because of the 'fit' between the shared characteristics of the members and the values that they hold. This "fit"allows for norms to operate unconsciously, in what Bourdieu describes as the synchronization of the habitus (the lifestyle) and the field (the community).

The theoretical differences between the market and the field model have consequences for designing personal communications interface. The central question that divides the two approaches is whether the user is a "commodity" in a system of exchange or whether the user is an "agent" in a community of identity? To take an example: In the NHSLS study which used the market approach, parents and family members were modeled as "investors"who seek to influence whether friendship develops into sexual contact or not. A field based approach suggests that such a universal 'one-size-fits-all' approach to interaction (the rational action assumption) is faulty because, not only do different communities have different standards, but they apply and enforce these standards differently.

In my presentation, I will explore the differences between two popular and competing 'social network' friendship and mating websites in the USA: friendster.com and tribe.net. In many interesting ways, the differences between Friendster and Tribe are similar to the differences that characterize the market and field approaches in sociological modeling of networks.

Friendster.com is more focused on profiling and its interface implicitly assumes that social networks are already in place. The profile function – because it

is a comparatively static representation of the user (interests, hobbies, photos) – tends to present the user as a commodity to be traded on the friendship "market". Also, instead of forming new communities, Friendster's central interface design focuses on "degrees of separation" between one 'friend' and another. This feature regulates the access that users have to one another, and by following the dictates of the social network, guides users to people who know their 'friends'. There are many difficulties with this approach, which tends to generate a simulacra of a social network, a kind of ghost image of a real community where users seek to accumulate as many friends as possible to increase their access to other users. Not only are the initial "degrees of separation"based on experience outside of the website, but what develops in the website is an abstract cataloging of contacts, rather than a community with emerging (and even conflicting) interests.
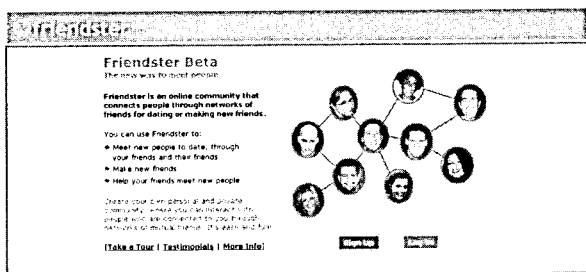
[fig.1] main page design of friendster.com

Tribe.net utilizes forum guided, conversation based interface to connect users instead of relying solely on profiling and pre-existing networks. It is interesting to note that Friendster was initially extremely successful in recruiting users, but after a short-lived "boom", has experienced a steady decline in participants since its beginning. Tribe, on the other hand, has had the opposite pattern, displaying a slow but steady increase in users. Perhaps this reflects the general internet maxim, "the barriers to entry are low, but the cost of interaction is high"meaning that it is exhilarating to wake up after registering on Friendster and finding

100 new messages from "friends" but the task of actually developing relationships with these unknown contacts from your "network" can be quite time-consuming and difficult to maintain.
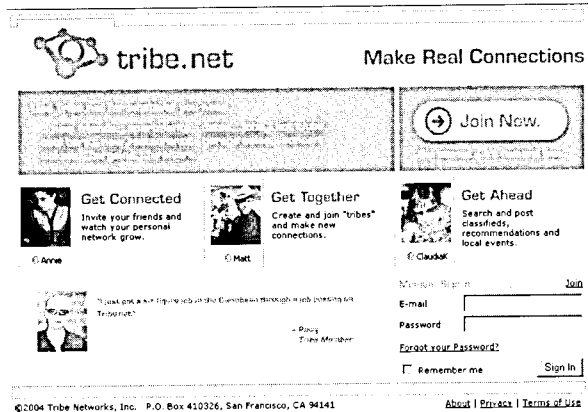
[fig.2] main page design of tribe.net

In my talk, I will follow the path and development of Tribe.net users and their interaction through various forums and formats provided through the interface of the site. I will make connections between what makes Tribe.net distinct from Friendster.com, that not only account for its success but also reflect the superiority of the field based approach to understanding social networks, compared to older market models. I will discuss possible applications for designing personal communications interface here in Korea based on the American experience of sociological modeling and social network websites

References

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357