



Social network service and social development in China



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ABSTRACT

This study systematically traces the development of SNS (social network service) in China, and divides it into 4 stages: traditional networked socializing, the budding stage of SNS, the rapid growth of real-name socializing, and the thriving stage of socialized media. At the same time, the author analyses the characteristics of Chinese SNS in different stages. The study illustrates the role SNS has played in filling a gap of the traditional media, promoting social governance and economic development, by means of case studies of the high-speed train crash in Wenzhou, the protest of Wukan villagers in Guangdong, and the selling of green onions on Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter). The study also theoretically explores how the SNS emerged and its relationship with social interaction and demonstrates that the difference between SNS and the traditional Internet is the identification of identity constructed by people-centered and social relationships. The changes in the way people use the Internet have an impact on the interaction structure of SNS and also on the evolution of social relationships on and off line, generating both positive and negative forces in the SNS development process. The SNS we expect is a rational and orderly social interaction structure which can promote continuous social progress.

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1. Introduction

The way people transfer, obtain and share information changes as information and communication technology develops. These changes in behavior affect the establishment, maintenance and growth of human relationships, as well as interaction between people, which itself also directly affects the evolution of different social relationships, thus promoting social development and progress. In recent years Internet applications, represented by SNS, have significantly changed people's social life.

China's social network has developed significantly since 2005. The Renren Network (formerly called Xiaonei) and Kaixin network soon attracted a large number of users to their real-name socializing and open platforms. These pan-medialized social networks (socialized media) quickly garnered a huge number of users in the first three years following the launch of Sina Weibo in 2009, with 424 million Weibo users and 42,300 thousand daily active users. By June 2012 the Chinese netizen population had swollen to 538 million, with an Internet penetration rate of around 40%.

At the same time, the number of hot social events triggered by social networks increased. For example, in 2009 the craze for "stealing vegetables", an online game developed by Kaixin, fueled heated debate in the media and social discussion. In 2010, a series of events were spotlighted on Weibo, including the Guo Meimei and Red Cross scandal, the fight against abduction, a high-speed train crash, the death of Xiao Yueyue, a young girl who was run over by 2 vehicles and ignored by passers-by, the emergence of independent candidates, a smiling bureau chief, etc. Information sharing on social networks not only becomes a source of conversation, but also constantly affects the trend of public opinion, or even changes the process of how social affairs develop. Social networks affect the method and structure of interaction, and also constantly change people's social life.

2. The development of SNS in China

The social network originated from networked socializing activities; that is, the way people communicate on the Internet. In the early stages, networked socializing was represented by the e-mail, BBS and instant messaging and soon became a convenient way to exchange information, hold open discussion and for online communication. Then, along with identity construction of users on the Internet and the resurgence of the Six Degrees of Separation Theory (no person is separated from anyone else on the Earth by more than six steps), the SNS, represented by Facebook, soon became a hub for

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the current Internet applications. China's social network service has developed through the following 4 main stages.¹

2.1. The stage of traditional networked socializing (1994–2001)

In September 1987, China's Internet e-mail node was officially set up at the Beijing Institute of Applied Computer Technologies. On September 20th, China sent out its first e-mail to the outside world. Enterprises, affiliated to Tsinghua University, the Institute of High Energy Physics Chinese Academy of Sciences and CRN (Chinese Research Network), then began to start their own e-mail service and a large number of scientific researchers began to exchange information and communicate by e-mail (Peng, 2005). When China's public Internet began to provide services to the general public in 1995, e-mail rapidly became an essential means of communication.

In May 1994, the "Dawn BBS" site, launched by the National Research Center for Intelligent Computing Systems, became the first BBS site in mainland China (You, 2012). In August 1995, "Smth BBS" started operating at Tsinghua University. At the end of 1995 the number of registered users was still small but it soon became one of China's most popular Internet forums. On March 16, 2005, there were more than 500 layouts in "Smth BBS", with 300,000 registered users while the number of online users reached 23,674.

With the rise of international instant communication software applications such as ICQ, Tencent Inc. launched OICQ (later renamed QQ) in February 1999 which rapidly attracted users' interest. In November 1999 the number of registered users reached 1 million, while in February 2001 the number had risen to more than 50 million with 1 million online users online simultaneously (Tencent, 2012).

The basic functions of letters, bulletin boards, telegraphs and the telephone are simulated by e-mails, Internet forums, instant messaging in the networked world, achieving the aim of conveying private information between people, discussion on public issues, and real-time communication of information. People's social activities in the real world (especially information exchange) were transferred to the network, which soon became the most popular way of socializing. So far, such applications are still the most used applications on the Internet and are profoundly affecting relationships between people.

2.2. The budding stage of SNS (1998–2004)

"China's classmates network" (the network through which classmates can contact each other) (www.5460.net) was founded on May 4, 1998, and the network through which Chinese people can find girlfriends or boyfriends (www.95333.com, later renamed Zhen'ai Net) was launched more or less at the same time, forming the prototype of China's first generation social network service.

"China's classmates network" provides the functions of small communities (BBS) such as address lists, a message leaving service, discussion, and photo and file sharing which were popular among students. In 2000, the number of registered users reached 10 million (Jin, 2011). Soon networks for alumni such as Netease alumni, Youlian alumni, Chinaren and a number of other similar networks emerged in China. Based on classmate relationships, users were bound and their social relationships stabilized by online communication, which were very similar to the current social networks. Zhen'ai Net, as a commercial network for people to find partners or friends, helped registered users who did not know each other to form a close off-line relationship, by combining online information registration and making friends offline by telephone.

These two types of Internet applications refer to specific groups and they reinforce or stabilize real life social relationships using the Internet platform. Moreover, strong relationships in real life are often reinforced.

In the wake of the success of Friendster founded in 2002, another dozen networks were born between 2003 and 2004, such as Yiyoo Net (www.yeyoo.com), Lianqu Net (www.u2unet.com), Youyou Net (www.you-you.com), Ruolin Net (www.wealink.com), Tianji net (www.tianji.com) etc. These were aimed mainly at finding friends, travel companions or as commercial recruitment agencies. Yet they also attempted to expand users' social circles thanks to the idea of finding new friends via other friends (He, 2011).

However, most of these networks did not require real-name registration and did not develop their own characteristics so they lacked long-term appeal (Gao, 2011). Users became trapped in information confusion after using them for a while and it was also difficult for them to verify facts. The novelty of these networks soon wore off, leading to their closure or to a change in the way they were managed.

2.3. The stage of rapid growth of real-name socializing (2005–2008)

In 2005, emulating Facebook, Xiaonei network (www.xiaonei.com) was founded and targeted offline college students. At the beginning, the university IP address or university e-mail were required for registration, and real-name registration and real photograph upload were encouraged to guarantee the authenticity of the users' registration and to try to offer the students the same pleasure as in real life.

In the beginning Xiaonei was mostly used as a low cost contact tool but the real-name system quickly began to make a difference. Xiaonei subsequently implemented its service for university students in Hong Kong and Macao to contact universities overseas and to meet the increasing needs of users through more platforms. By April 2008 Xiaonei had connected 2200 universities, with over 18 million university users and 8.8 million active users. At the same time, other similar domestic networks such as the Hainei network, Zhanzuo network, Yiju network and 51.com received a large amount of risk investment and became successful through real-name socializing.

In 2008, another SNS Kainxin network (www.kaixin001.com), consisting mainly of white-collar users, was founded. In addition to the real-name registration system and the provision of open platforms, Kaixin also quickly attracted a large number of users thanks to its games with social features, through which a pleasant social atmosphere was created among users. Its famous games, "To buy a car" and "Happy farm" were popular at that time and became a real talking point for people after work.

It is obvious that SNS, depending on the characteristics of real-name socializing, making friends and entertainment, has had a significant influence on Chinese netizens, and has gradually influenced the social activities in people's real life (CNNIC, 2012.3). In addition, online and real life social relationships are linked, bringing about changes in the way people communicate.

2.4. The thriving stage of socialized media (from 2009)

With the foundation and development of Twitter in 2006, some Chinese network services, imitating the same model, grew rapidly: e.g. the Fanfou network set up in May 2007 (fanfou.com), the Jiwei network (www.jiwei.com), and the Digu network (www.digu.com), which emerged in the form of friend finding and microblogging. However, users were not satisfied because mobile terminals could only post news on these websites by text message. In fact, although these websites made progress in some fields, their influence was

¹ Note: there is some overlapping in the division of the four stages.

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