Social Dimension of Development of Social Networks

Asst. Prof. Kire Sharlamanov  
Faculty of Communication  
International Balkan University  
Republic of Macedonia

Aleksandar Jovanoski  
Asst. Prof. Aleksandar Jovanoski  
Law Faculty – Kicevo  
University St. Kliment Ohridski – Bitola  
Republic of Macedonia

Abstract

Social networks represent a relatively new social occurrence which is more and more accepted in communication between individuals (social actors), this way penetrating in all spheres of social life of the social actors, as well as of the communities reflecting on their manner of establishment, maintenance and upgrading of social internments. For this reason social networks deserve serious research effort in the area of social sciences. This work is exactly devoted to analysis of the reasons for acceptance of social networks, their characteristics and effects on social life.

KeyWords

Social networks, Mass media, Social actors
Introduction

Social networks are relatively new, but more and more influential manner of communication between individuals. For only few years after the occurrence of Internet, social networks became a dominant activity, taking over the primate from pornography. Qualman (2010) indicates that only one of the social networks, Facebook in 2010 had more members than the number of inhabitants of any country with an exception of China and India. In other words, if Facebook was a country, it would have been the third biggest county according to the number of inhabitants. Salpeter (2011:55) informs us that 96% of the population born after the middle of 1970’s in USA uses social networks, 80% of the companies in USA use social networks for staff recruitment and every eight marriage in USA started with acquaintance through the social networks.

The prerequisite for development of social networks is the development of communication technologies and especially of the Internet. This is why the definitions of social networks insist on Internet sites which provide mediated interpersonal communication. So Harrison and Thomas (2009) conclude that social networks are a collection of interactions of individuals who have public or semipublic profile at the sites of the social networks, mediated communication with the profiles of individuals they are related with and an opportunity to observe the information published by their friends. Similar, but slightly wider and sociologically supported definition is offered by Aggarwal (2011:1) that defines social networks as a collection of internments and relations between social actors and the relations that are established between them through interactions. In a similar manner, social networks are also defined by Castells (2009 B: 20) according to who, networks represent mutual connection of nodes, whereupon nodes are collective places i.e. places where social actors gather and from where they disperse in the public space. In the urban space such nodes are pubs, bazaars, libraries, parks etc. In the virtual space such nodes are the sites of the more important informative newsletters, the informative, but also the entertainment portals where important part of social actors stop by in order to inform themselves or relax, so that later they could disperse in virtual space. The more important nodes are determined as centers that have certain influence on communication between social actors, for one thing, on determining the agenda for discussion in the interpersonal communication, but also for determination of the agenda for discussion at the social networks in general. For Castells the social networks are communication structures that include exchange of messages between social actors in time and space dimension.

Within sociology, the earliest works devoted to analysis of social networks emerged in the 1930’s and they are related to the work of authors such as Jacob Moreno, Elton Mayo, Kurt Lewin, which preceded the emergence of social network analysis) in the 1950’s. In the second generation, analysts of the social networks are Eduard Laumann and Mark Granoweter as well as the anthropologists Elizabeth Bott and John Barnes (Knox, Savage, Harvey 2006:116). The social network analysis itself is rather a mathematical concept with technical quantitative methods, which acquired more detailed observation of social interaction which was developed within microsociology. Namely, microsociology studied social interactions for a longer period, developing more theories for their analysis such as symbolic interactionism, the phenomenology of social life, ethnomethodology, conversation analysis, dramaturgical theory, social constructivism, theory of communication action etc. (Sharlamanov 2011). All these theories are based on the classical theory of social action and the social consequences of it. According to Weber (1978) social action includes acting directed towards the other social actors, while social relations include anticipation of other people’s behavior, which had influence on the motives for acting and the acting of the social actors. In his analysis of social action, Weber insisted on its typologisation whereupon he extracted
the instrumental goal-oriented social action which according to Weber was a basis of the rational modern society. For this reason the most serious critics of the rational modern capitalistic society went through critics of the instrumental rationally-oriented social action. That is why Habermas (1983) developed the theory of communicative action which was supposed to serve as a platform from which the goal-oriented action was supposed to be criticized and through it, the modern society as well. Namely, according to Habermas, unlike the instrumental goal-oriented action which is planned and manipulative in order to accomplish certain goal insisting on the causal relation between the goals and the assets for its achievement, the communicative action is spontaneous, unplanned social action that relies on sociability of people. In its criticism of instrumental action though construction of the communicative action, Habermas goes a step further pointing out that communicative action is a basis for the instrumental action, more precisely that the instrumental action parasitizes on the communicative action i.e. that the instrumental action is distorted communicative action. Regardless the very lively debate about the nature of the instrumental action which touches the foundations of social life, some authors such as Castells (2009 A) in the technological innovations in the sphere of communication technologies and the enhancement of the importance of social networks saw a development of a new type of society (Castells and Cardoso 2006). The rationally instrumental goal-oriented action and the communicative action in the contemporary network society operate through the binary logic in the time and space dimension. The basic binary dimension is the inclusion or the exclusion from the network, the social network. In the time and space dimension, the logic of inclusion/exclusion operates within the alternatives now or never and here or nowhere. When included in the network, the social actor is immediately and here available for communication, establishment of contact and relations with the remaining social actors. When that path is excluded, it is so far from us, as if it never existed anywhere. Social networks tend to reduce the space and time distance to zero, this way shortening the space and time distance to the extent that according to some authors such as Giddens (2000) they condense time and they shorten space, which on the other hand leads to entirely new experience, but also conceptualization of these basic philosophical dimensions of the human existence. It is exactly the intensity of contacts which occur in every time and in different space locations that leads to the phenomena of timeless time and priceless space, it is a feeling that everything can occur at any moment and in any place.

**Reasons for acceptance of social networks**

The popularity of social networks is based on the need of social actors for affiliation in the social environment they live in. Every individual needs affiliation, as well as to be accepted by the social environment (McClelland 1985). For this reason, social actors spend great part of time in establishment and maintaining of social relations. In the hierarchy of social needs, the need for acceptance by the group is immediately behind the needs for survival and safety. Besides having the need to be accepted by the social group, social actors also have the need of knowing something more about the individuals who constitute the group and they do this through the exchange of information in the group/the social network. According to many, that is the way of forming the human personality. So Cooley (1922) set the looking-glass self theory, according to which the individuals acquire knowledge for their own personality looking themselves in the eyes of the others and they build their own personality in accordance to the desired, projected image of themselves in the eyes of the others. Thus, social actors have a need to communicate, this communication is a type of mirror in which they see the image of themselves, but they also satisfy their own needs and in the moment when they create conditions
for promotion of the manner of communication such as in the case with social networks, they use the given opportunity. Namely, thanks to the new communication technologies, the social actors were given an opportunity to communicate in a much simpler way and more frequently, and they used this.

However, as the classical sociology teaches us, especially the dramaturgical theory of Goffman (1969), social actors during communication have the need to present themselves in as better light as possible. For this reason, Goffman determined communication as a performance in which social actors form teams and play roles in front of the eyes of the audience. It seems that because of the anonymity they provide and the limitation of the contact, social networks are an ideal field for the dramaturgical communicative action. This dramaturgical communicative action includes formation of teams of social actors within the social networks. These teams are consisted of social actors who have more intensive and closer cooperation. They perform a play in front of the rest of the social network which turns into audience. That is why Aggarwal (2011: 7) suggests that structurally related groups in the social network have to be a subject of serious sociological analysis. Each member of the social networks can simultaneously be part of one or more teams who perform a play and part of the audience who observes multitude of plays. Goffman makes a difference between the front stage where the social actors cooperate in order to impress the audience and the backstage where the actors are outside the roles they play. The backstage probably is the only place where social actors are honest. Here it is a matter of the personalities of the social actors, who Goffman himself determined as very fluid and dependant on the social roles they play, which on the other hand gave Goffman the epithet cynical Machiavelli (Lock and Strong 2010: 203; Kim 2003: 53). Regardless on this, Goffman’s analysis is very convenient for observation of communication through social networks, especially on the issue of management with impressions and techniques which the social actors use during this. Probably for this reason Quandt (2012) speaks of the importance of the dramaturgical/scene reality in the era of digitalization of information and the virtualization of the experience which more and more weakens the trust in the public communication between the social actors.

**Characteristics of social networks**

The key characteristic of communication through social networks is the symbiosis between the private and the public. The social networks on one hand provide a possibility for privacy of communication between the social actors, but at the same time they provide the social actors to publish certain contents i.e. to give publicity to certain information. Namely, social networks provide mediated interpersonal communication which could take place in the private, but also in the public space, placing interpersonal communication or part of it for an insight of the public whereupon it provides many people to be simultaneously included in the communication, which gives the social networks an element of mass communication. It is exactly the possibility to be public at the same time, but also to keep privacy of communication that initializes the question whether contemporary social networks do not represent a type of mass media.

It seems that the differences between mass communications and the mediated interpersonal communication within social networks are much larger than the similarities they show. Namely, the structure of communication provided by social networks is much more egalitarian than the structure of communication provided by the classical mass media. That is, classical media are much more in the role of senders of messages than receiving reactions. More precisely, the possibilities for reacting to the messages sent by the classical media, are limited. Also the number of mass media is limited for different reasons, which on one hand makes them target of
the centers for political and economic power which incline towards controlling them, and on the other hand this tightens the possibility of a broad circle of the citizens not only to react, but also to send messages themselves with the mediation of the media. In other words, classical mass media produce one hierarchically tight organized society in terms of the difficulties for provision of balanced communication between the interested social actors. The structure of power at social networks is much more evenly distributed. Everyone can send and receive messages, and since the number of the ones who send messages is dispersed and very expanded, the possibility for control of the ones who send messages is decreased. As a consequence, it seems that social networks impact the possibility for the social actors to have more balanced possibilities for communication which leads to one much more egalitarian society. Especially because communication as a possibility for expression of attitudes, establishment of interpersonal relations, but also imposing influence is related to the power of the interpersonal level which further on transfers in the area of the political and the economical.

Social networks rest on dichotomy, public‐privately whereupon they insist on publicity in the exchange of information. In this, a process of double mixing of the public and the private occurs. Namely, on one hand, public information and public matters are pivot around which interpersonal relations are constructed in front of the eyes of the public on the wall of social networks, and on the other hand the private becomes public through its announcement and in this manner it is returned back as a pivot of construction of the interpersonal relations. In the first case we can speak of creation of private publicity, while in the second case we can speak of creation of public privacy. Most important characteristic of the phenomenon of public privacy is the disappearance of public interest from the public. This phenomenon may be noticed at tabloids, even before the occurrence of social networks, but with social networks it started dominating in the public life.

**The effects of social networks**

With the increase of intensity, quality and importance of social interaction established with mediation of social networks, they start creating social life more and more. With the terminology of social constructivism, social interaction established in social networks constitutes the invisible rules of social life. Since the interactions are momentary and change and self‐constitute in every new moment, also the invisible rules of social life constitute and eventually change in every next moment. What gives stability to interaction is the routine i.e. the established patterns of behavior. For this reasons sociology paid so much attention to research of the establishment of the interaction, as well as its routinization and channelization. Such routinization and channelization of interactions has an important influence in all areas of life of social actors starting from economy and ending with politics.

In the sphere of economy Qualman (2010) speaks of socialnomics which according to him is a value created and shared in social networks. Observed from economic perspective, we can treat social networks as a potential market in which companies can offer their products. Considering the fast growth of users, it is one of the fastest growing markets. That is why more and more companies use social networks for advertising their own products. Advertising through social networks importantly differs from advertising in classical mass media, but also from other types of advertising through Internet. For transferring the marketing messages to companies, the structure of social networks has an important role, as well as the influential social actors within a social network (Bagherjeiran Abraham, Bhatt P. Rushi, Parekh Rajech, Caoji Vineet 2010: 656). But observed from wider perspective of public relations, for companies it important to explore and manage narrations which occur or which dominate on social networks and which affect their
working. For this reason marketing agencies, as well the agencies for public relations use the quantitative, as well as the qualitative approaches for exploration of the structure and the dynamics of the social networks. Overall, one can say that the development of social networks has influence on conceptualization, but also the management of business in the contemporary society.

In the sphere of politics, more and more important is the position of social networks in the communication strategy of the political parties and certain politicians. This especially stands for the political communication within the election campaigns. But politicians more and more frequently use social networks for regular communication with their supporters as well as the general public. As Qualman (2010) notices, it is the communication through social networks that helped Barack Obama from a relatively unfamiliar senator of the broad public in 2004, to become a president of USA only few years later. Even more, Barack Obama, through the use of social networks in the president’s campaign in 2007 managed to mobilize important part of the voters, especially the younger voters. Maybe for this reason, the contemporary analyses of the political communication pay special attention to the political communication through the social networks. In this regard Norris (2000) makes a classification of three types of election campaigns: pre-modern, which includes interpersonal communication (face to face) and newspapers, modern election campaign, which includes transfer of messages of the political parties and the candidates through the mass media such as the television and the radio and postmodern election campaigns which imply transfer of messages through Internet and within those frameworks, the social networks as well. Unlike the pre-modern campaign which is interactive face to face communication between the candidate and the voters, the post-modern campaign through social networks is more intensive and puts the personal perspective in the area of the election’s political campaign and the political communication in general. Namely, the contemporary political election campaigns do not stop at presentation and exchange of opinions for the political platforms of the candidates, but also in the political communication they insert the personal life of candidates as well as the voters, so within the frames of the political campaigns it enters from common drinking coffee through social networks, up to conversation about the favorite books and authors of the candidates.

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