Last time: prototyping and cold start

Prototyping social computing systems requires a different approach than usual. Use social bricolage to tie together existing social systems in order to understand the social dynamics you’re creating.

The cold start problem occurs when a system is too empty to attract initial usage, so it remains empty. Two solutions:

- Focus on a narrow group initially, and broaden out later
- Be prepared to bootstrap activity
Where we are, and where we’re going

Week 1-2: Basic ingredients — motivation, norms, and starting a community

Week 3: Groups small and large
  Designing for strong and weak ties
  Team collaboration systems
There’s more evidence Facebook can make you feel lonely

What a new study tells us about social networks

By Casey Newton | @CaseyNewton | Nov 13, 2018, 6:00am EST

The Difference Between Facebook and Twitter: Twitter Is Lonely for New Users

Twitter isn't the most welcoming place on the Internet.

By Kurt Wagner | Feb 11, 2016, 12:40pm EST

For the first time in a long time, I find myself without in Guild Wars 2 before taking a break from the game simply because no one wanted to talk. The majorly accompanied by long-standing friends and we've a group. Their time in Black Desert Online was said a collection of issues saw them leave in their dro
HCI Seminar ~one week ago
Do social computing systems make us lonely?

Internet Paradox

A Social Technology That Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being?

Robert Kraut, Michael Patterson, Vicki Lundmark, Sara Kiesler, Tridas Mukopadhyay, and William Scherlis

Carnegie Mellon University
Do social computing systems make us lonely?

No.
Well, yes.
It depends on how you use it.
Why do these feel different?
Tie Strength

[Granovetter 1973]

Not all of our relationships are the same. Some are strong ties: trusted friends and family. Others are weak ties: rough acquaintances. Today’s claim: social computing systems must design for each of these groups differently.
Today

Weak

Strong
Strong ties
What are we designing for when we design for strong ties?

Think:

- Your BFF
- Your roommate
- Your mom

Strong ties typically have thick offline context. This means that the social computing system will never see everything about the relationship.
Who are our strong ties?

Strong ties are typically in the social networks that we are already deeply embedded in. [Granovetter 1973]

Strong ties provide social and emotional support that improve mental health. [Schaefer et al. 1990]

Strong ties communicate with us through multiple channels, rather than through a single widely-available channel (e.g., email). [Haythornthwaite 2002]
Designs for strong ties

Often, the design goal is to maintain or deepen the strong tie relationship.
Designs for strong ties

Friend meetups on Animal Crossing, Nintendo

Play Chips & Guac, and other games with your friends.

Your Parent's Basement

A popular deal for many men in their 20's.

GroupMe

Other examples?
Why does this work?

Why do designs for strong ties succeed at their goal?

Why don’t other social computing systems (e.g., Twitter) seem quite so good at it?

What’s the secret?

[2min]
Honest Signals

[Donath 2007; Pentland 2010; Smith and Harper 2003]

In social situations, it’s easy and quick to throw out perfunctory signals that you care about someone.

“We should grab coffee!” [Your Flaky Friend 2021]

However, other signals are much more costly to produce, and so they are more honest.

In nature: peacocks have amazing plumage because there is no way to fake having the nutritional resources to waste on them.

In social life: spending time on something for someone matters.
Strong tie designs as honest signals

What makes designs effective at maintaining and deepening strong ties is that they operate as honest signals: that I cannot fake the attention and effort I am putting into our interactions.

I respond to the text…or I don’t.

I FaceTime you…or I don’t.

I send you silly emails…or I don’t.
Weak ties
What are we designing for when we design for weak ties?

Think:

That person you kind of remember from your freshman dorm

Someone on the team that you interned with last summer but haven’t kept in close touch with

Acquaintances you see occasionally

Weak ties typically have thin context because they interact more sparsely. It’s much more likely that WYSIWYG for the system.
Who are our weak ties?

Weak ties often represent connections to parts of the social network that we do not inhabit. [Granovetter 1973]

People with weak ties to other organizational units in a company tend to have higher performance reviews and generate more creative ideas. [Burt 2004]

Weak ties often communicate through a single commonly-available channel (e.g., email, Facebook), rather than a multiplicity of channels. [Haythornthwaite and Wellman 1998]
Designs for weak ties

Design goals with weak ties are often: Keeping tabs. Celebration. Social movements. Broadcast.
Designs for weak ties

Other examples?

(Email is trying to do both strong and weak tie communication. It’s one reason why email can stink.)
The strength of weak ties

[Granovetter 1973]

Because weak ties are connected to parts of the network that we cannot access, they are valuable sources of new perspectives and professional opportunities: people find new jobs through weak ties.

Recent work has tested this using Facebook log data, finding that…

While most people are helped through one of numerous weak ties, a single strong tie is still much more valuable at the margin.

[Gee et al. 2017]

In other words, we are much more likely to go where our strong ties are, but we have many more weak ties than strong ties.
Weak tie designs as bustling spaces

Yes, we all leverage weak ties occasionally for favors. But FOMO is not enough of a design lever for most systems to stay active.

So, many weak tie designs instead lean on creating bustling spaces

Facebook: newsfeed

Clubhouse: So Many Rooms — pointing out That One Friend who’s in it

…and weak tie systems die if they’re perceived to be ghost towns
The Weak Shall Inherit

In nearly every social system, there will be extreme inequality (≈ power law distribution) in contribution volume.

This means that most of the content you see on Facebook/Twitter/dorm lists is from a small proportion of the people who are on it.
The Weak Shall Inherit

So, chances are, most of the content you see on social computing platforms is from your weak ties.

Design challenge: how do you make content from people you barely know worthwhile?

If you are an RA, how do you make the dorm community feel connected even if only a small percentage are actively contributing?
What about no ties?

At least initially, the members of these systems may not know each other at all. Is the goal of the system to build tie strength? Or something else? [1 min]
Bond- vs. identity-based groups [Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler 2007]

Many social computing systems are formed around people who (initially) share no ties at all. These groups are often bound together by a shared identity, for example Women in CS, or Warriors fans.

In contrast, Facebook is more oriented around bonds, or ties.

Design the social computing system as relevant for the kind of group you are drawing together.
More identity-based groups

Facebook Groups

Club Penguin Rewritten

Discord (also used with strong ties)

Mothers with academic careers
Private group: 961 members
This group is for women who are trying 3 posts a week
Designing for identity-based groups

Highlighting the group’s unique identity increases commitment [Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler 2012]

How can you let people express that shared identity?

Sharing content, stories, etc.

Examples: subreddits, mailing lists, forums
Tie strength in action

How tie strength plays out dynamically in social computing systems
Tie strength isn’t static over time, and social media use changes it. Tie strength does go up on Facebook by reading and reacting to broadcast content:

Looking at photos

Reading status updates

Performing one-click actions

[Burke and Kraut 2014]
Tie strength changes
[Burke and Kraut 2014]

Tie strength isn’t static over time, and social media use changes it. However, tie strength goes up much more with one-to-one communication:

- Authoring posts to them
- Commenting on their posts
- Messaging them one-on-one
Tie strength can be predicted

[Gilbert and Karahalios 2009]

It is feasible to use observable behaviors in social networks to classify the tie strength between two people in the network.

Highly predictive features:

- How recently have you messaged?
- How long ago did you first message?
- Do you talk a lot to each other?

![Graph showing predictive features](image)
Resulting designs

News feed ranking: not just a feature of the content, but also of your predicted tie strength with the other person.

People you may know: friend suggestions.

Dynamically choosing whether to show comment boxes or quick feedback buttons based on the content and your tie strength with the person.
A note of caution

[boyd 2008]

On Friendster, the system would look for people who share a number of strong ties, but are not connected to each other:

Friendster:  ● and  ○ should totally date! Let’s recommend that they connect!

Reality:  ● and  ○ are actually exes.
Back to the original question:

Do social computing systems make us lonely?
It depends on how you use it.

[Burke and Kraut 2016]

An opt-in study of ~2000 Facebook users, connected to their internal log data, revealed:

- Viewing strong or weak ties’ status broadcasts, receiving 1-on-1 messages from weak ties, or receiving one-click feedback from strong or weak ties…

- Receiving one-on-one communications from strong ties…

No improvements in psychological well-being.

Improvements in psychological well-being.
Summary

We should not design social computing systems to treat our relationships as all the same.

Strong ties: a small number of people we know well — design for honest signals, and don’t assume all communication happens through the system.

Weak ties: a large number of acquaintances — design to support feelings of connectedness, but remember that many social systems will be dominated in volume by weak ties.

Tie strength can be modeled, but it doesn’t tell the whole story.
Assignment 2: Beyond Being There

Pick four systems: a system for weak ties, a system for strong ties, a system for identity-based groups, and a system for collaboration

Describe why two screw up by trying too hard to be there; describe why two succeed by finding creative ways to go beyond being there — to be discussed Wednesday

Redesign one of the “be there” systems to go beyond being there, try a bricolaged prototype, and report back
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