Wh@t's your virtual footprint??

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Gone are the days of the static web, when all you could do with a webpage was to gaze at it. Whether you disliked it, disagreed with the information provided therein or had more insights of your own to add on, there was nothing much you could do to rework this waterfall of information.

With the coming of the Web 2.0, the very way in which we interact with the www has undergone a complete redefinition. Today, you can connect with your pal who sat next to you in primary school; you can recommend a news item to your friends' circle and pass on your comments along with it; you can write a page about your favorite cartoon hero and submit it to an online encyclopedia for others to read and modify; you can share a video of some really wacky tantrums of your pet cat and invite viewer comments. And what's more - you can attend a corporate meeting in one of the virtual 3D worlds. In other words, you can Orkut, Digg, Wiki, YouTube and Smeet.

Doesn't make sense? Read on :)

What is social networking?

Suddenly, socializing has become a very indoor thing! At the click of your mouse, you can meet all the people you ever knew, without having to bother about fixing a meeting place. Irrespective of geographic distances, you can stay in touch with your friends and know what they are up to. Social networking sites enable you to maintain this kind of intimacy with your friends and loved ones.

ORKUT

Social networking sites enable a registered user to have a profile page that can be customized according to his/her moods and tastes. You can personalize your page by uploading your photograph, contact details, likes and dislikes and a whole lot of other personal niceties that you are comfortable sharing. You can then search and invite your

friends and restrict the visibility of your profile pages or keep it open to strangers. Based on your tastes and preferences, you can join communities or groups that will give you a sense of belonging and also flaunt the kind of person you are, solely by indicating your association with such groups. Your joining communities like "I love fast cars" or "William Shakespeare Fan Club" speaks oodles about your persona and also gives you a chance to meet other like-minded folks. Mails, graffiti and other scribbles between profiles are also possible in such networks and you can quickly ping anyone to let them know what's on your mind. Bebo, MySpace, Orkut, Facebook, Friendster, Brjj, Bigadda and hi5 are a few of the many social networks that focus on maintaining and building friendships.

Another façade of social networking is business and career networking. The entire focus of these sites hovers around careers, jobs, organizations and recruitment specific information. So your primary school buddy from your Orkut network doubles up as the Product Manager of a reputed company in your career networking list. And you could take your pick from LinkedIn, Company Loop, Vault, Ryze, Blogtronix, JobeeHive and a lot more sites in the career networking genre to make that next leap in your career smoother and easier.

Owing to the enormous success of social networking sites, there is one in every perceivable category now. If you are an ardent bibliophile you might want to register with Goodreads; if you are stung by the love of 4-wheels, you might want to try CarGurus; if you love hip-hop there is Moob and for those who have a taste for wine and want to share some drinking experiences, there is BottleTalk! Finding a social networking site is perhaps not half as difficult as choosing from the myriad variety available in most categories.

## What is social bookmarking?

Social bookmarking sites enable you to share the info items of your interest and recommend your friends to read and opine on them. By registering to one of Digg, Delicious, Fark, StumbleUpon, Reddit etc you can save links of the news items you want to share onto a page. These links are called bookmarks. You can freely share these links and invite your friends to vote or comment on these items, thereby getting to know what they feel about it. It is a collaborative way of gleaning

and sharing information and to know what is going on. Moreover, unlike traditional news, you also get to learn the popular opinion, the *vox populi*, surrounding the hot topics. So be it the Annual Budget or Twenty20 cricket, you get to hear the news from your trusted news source as well as thoughts from people who matter to you. You can also check out what others are reading and commenting on and thus, improve your store of worldly wisdom. All the major online news sites and blogs now enable social bookmarking by placing bookmarklets at the end of each news item/entry. Look for them the next time you surf.

What else can you share?

Sharing being the buzzword of Web 2.0, there is practically no limit to what you can share. Flickr, SmugMug, Slide, Photobucket and Picasa are sites that permit uploading and sharing
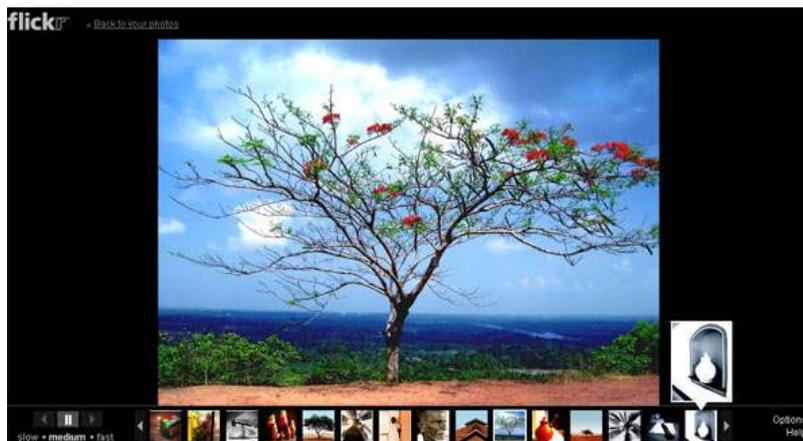
of photographs. YouTube, Google Video, Peerflix, Yahoo! Video, Veoh and Hulu are a storehouse of some really great user generated and proprietary videos. Every page you create on these sites usually has an RSS feed (denoted by this icon   )

which you can embed in your website or blog for captivating your visitors' attention. Dating ideas, Product information, Movie Reviews, Photography tips, Barbeque recipes – the list of things you can share is only limited to your imagination and inclination.

Social networking in 3D

Sites like *Second Life* and *There* add the much needed third-dimension to social networking. After registering with the site, you will be prompted to download a client software which has to be installed on your system. You can then log on to the virtual world, popularly known as the metaverse, using this software via the internet.

3D virtual reality metaverses enable users to have their own 'avatars' instead of just profile pages. An avatar is a virtual humanoid (or of any other life form, if you so choose) model in

3D, fully customizable and controllable by the user and is your alter ego in the metaverse. You can modify hairstyles, skin tones, apparels and most other physical features to make your virtual self appear as close to yourself or let your imagination dictate your virtual appearance.

Having created an avatar, you can teleport yourself to the many resident worlds of your choice – a seaside café, rave parties, rock shows or music concerts. You can arrange Smeetings, (a meeting held in Second Life) and since most virtual worlds now support voice chat, it is as good as meeting in the real world! Virtual worlds practically spell the end of spatial disparity because they influence you to believe that everything is happening in your living room.

SECOND LIFE

What makes social networking popular?

Almost anybody with a PC and an internet connection seems to have a virtual presence today. What makes it a trend with a mass following? "We spend 70 to 80 percent of our time at work with a limited group. We hardly get time to attend informal gatherings or travel to different places. So such sites are very helpful in finding 'your kind' of people regardless of geographical boundaries or cultural differences", says Manasa Kakulavarapu, a marketing professional for a leading software firm.

Suneeta Jacob, a homemaker in her mid forties, is proof that this fad is not restricted to the youngish generation. "I learnt these things from my son and I am a regular user now", she smiles. "I like the photo-sharing tools and social networks because it helps me stay in touch with family members and relatives who are scattered across India. It is much better than email because it is visually more appealing and gives a personal feel somehow", she declares.

It is small wonder then, that tech entrepreneurs are displaying boundless enthusiasm in launching innovative services in the social networking realm. Vishwas Mudagal and Sandeep Gudibanda, the founders of JobeeHive, a professional networking service, are convinced that the true potential of social networking is yet to be explored fully. "Indian corporate success story is set to continue, generating millions of jobs in the years to come. Professionals would look for platforms to connect to people, manage their professional network and build what we call as 'social capital'. JobeeHive helps them by bringing unbiased insider information about a company's work culture, salaries, hiring process and business aspects through employees themselves. It also connects employers and organizations to valuable audience, which can be used for recruitment. We call this Recruitment 2.0 and see an opportunity to create great business prospects for end users through such features", they state assertively.

With the advent of Web 2.0, most things are migrating to the virtual world. Everyday activities like reading news, talking to a friend, looking for a job or conferencing with a team all have their virtual equivalents and they are fast superseding and outmoding their real life counterparts. And it is about the right time to have ones own virtual presence and make it felt.

[1533 words]

Post Script:

1. The pic of Social Bookmarklet icons is taken from http://foliovision.com/images/2007/06/imagesaddthis-sites.gif
2. JobeeHive promoter photograph is provided by Vishwas and Sandeep
3. All other pics used in the article are screenshots of my own profiles in the respective sites viz Orkut, Flickr and Second Life