

***Supporting Kalyāṇamittatā Online:
New Architectures for Sustainable Social Networking***

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1. Introduction

The Internet continues to permeate people's lives as online participation becomes increasingly widespread and sophisticated. The emergence of the popular phenomenon of online social networking has had a major collective impact on connecting and reconnecting people, epitomised in *social networking sites* (SNS for short) such as Facebook. These have helped foster Dharma communities – a search for 'Theravada' on Facebook groups brings up more than 300 results; even forest monasteries are utilising such facilities to disseminate Buddhist teachings and way of life. However, the Internet's evanescent nature has witnessed the majority of online communities, including SNS, spark like fireworks that illuminate the landscape brightly for a very short period before vanishing from view.

Many initiatives have been driven by technological developments lacking a clear social vision or otherwise develop far beyond the original context. So in this paper we consider how the issue of design, according to principles of long term social well-being, might create more sustainable systems. After reviewing some of the literature in social sciences, we proceed by proposing new ways forward based on a novel approach rooted in the Pali canon.

2. Social Networking Sites and their Impact on Well-being

As SNS become a common feature in the online landscape, scholars have been evaluating their impact on society. From individuals and community leaders through to policy makers and social theorists, the question has been raised as to their significance for well-being. There is a strong need to do so given the scale of use, and the potential support offered by SNS for activities good or bad. In the social sciences the term *well-being* has been generally established as a subjective view of happiness. We highlight here distinctions noted between brief or fleeting happiness and more long term happiness:

Generally speaking, self-ratings of 'happiness' turn out to reflect relatively short-term, situation-dependent expressions of mood, whereas self-ratings of 'life satisfaction' appear to measure longer-term, more stable evaluations

(Helliwell and Putnam 2004)

A key factor, much discussed in the literature, is *social capital*, though there is no standard definition for this term. A survey by Alejandro Portes (1998) distinguishes four important sources, attributing the first systematic analysis to Pierre Bourdieu, who defined it as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu 1980). In general, Portes observes that its sense has broadened from pertaining fundamentally to the individual and family kinships – rooted in the foundational work of 19th century sociologists, particularly Durkheim – to large-scale social integration. However, as Portes illustrates, whilst such research aspires to social cohesion, many theories appear to allow equally both positive and negative networks because the definitions of social capital are vague or ambiguous.

Efforts to encourage more socially desirable foci have motivated the introduction of qualifying terms; *bonding social capital* "refers to the links between like-minded people, or the reinforcement of homogeneity. It builds strong ties, but can also result in higher walls

excluding those who do not qualify" whilst *bridging social capital* "refers to the building of connections between heterogeneous groups; these are likely to be more fragile, but more likely also to foster social inclusion" (Schuller *et al.* 2000:10). As social inclusion is generally regarded as desirable for the welfare of society as a whole, bridging social capital has merited particular attention.

So how does this translate online? As the phenomenon of SNS is relatively recent, it is useful to look initially at the broader context of *online community*, which contains technologies such as discussion fora and mailing lists that existed prior to them. One of the few long term longitudinal studies that has been carried out on the general population is the General Social Survey (GSS) which gathered nationally representative data on Americans and their networks of close confidants (McPherson *et al.* 2006). Based on a comparative analysis of census data from 1985 and 2004 respectively (including subsequent corrections), the authors have produced some strongly significant figures that indicate increased loneliness, particularly the reduction in *strong ties*, social ties in which important personal issues could be discussed freely. The findings were strongly contested, particularly by Fischer (2009), but the authors have reaffirmed that their methodology is sound (McPherson *et al.* 2009).

In any case their work has stimulated subsequent research into SNS to explore social inclusion. Ellison *et al.* (2007) carried out research involving undergraduate students at Michigan State University, where they investigated a number of relationships between their use of Facebook and three kinds of social capital – bridging capital, bonding capital and what they called *maintained social capital*, "that speaks to the ability to maintain valuable connections as one progresses through life changes." Well-being was evaluated in terms of self-assessed responses to standard questions from self esteem and slightly modified life satisfaction scales, such as "I take a positive attitude toward myself" and "I am satisfied with my life at MSU." The results on a fairly large sample of 285 present substantial evidence, albeit with a number of limitations, that shows a robust correlation between self reports of intensity of Facebook use (defined partly in simple terms such as number of 'friends' and time spent online) and the building and maintenance of social capital, especially for those with low esteem. Of particular note is that this correlation that was not found with general Internet use, revealing a marked capacity in Facebook for developing social capital. This work was reinforced by a longitudinal analysis that showed the correlation between Facebook intensity and social capital had persisted (Steinfeld *et al.* 2008).

However, whilst strongly suggestive, the results cannot be readily extrapolated from the rather rarefied context of Undergraduate students, an environment close to that in which Facebook was originally conceived. Since then it has become publicly available and over 500 million user accounts have been created. In seeking to test the same approach to general Facebook users, Burke *et al.* (2010) carried out similar research that took on board many of the questions used at MSU. They showed a positive relationship between directed communications (i.e. where a user initiates some activity) and social capital, but only after the latter had been reduced to number of friends and time spent online as metrics, a very thin characterisation of social capital. This was because the self-reports of attitudes for Facebook intensity used by Ellison *et al.* were found unreliable indicators of actual engagement metrics according to contemporary Facebook functionality. In fact the results particularly with regard to well-being also report that an increase in consumption was found to correlate with increased loneliness and reduced bridging social capital (Burke *et al.* 2010: 1911).

Overall, we can observe very mixed findings and that the design of the statistical analyses is tricky because they leave considerable room for differing interpretations, raising questions about what insights can be gained from such figures. Sentiments on SNS are widely known to vary considerably, so researchers are turning to the issue of design to belatedly address such concerns. Among them is (Kraut 201?), who avers that social science can contribute substantially to making thriving online communities and proceeds to provide a lengthy list of design criteria. However, as the analysis is very granular and often expressed

in terms of existing system concepts, it may be questioned as to whether it would help if there are fundamental issues with such systems themselves.

In order to complement the macro statistics, it is therefore useful to consider ethnographic work to gain a more vivid picture of motivations. In his Material World blog, Daniel Miller, gives some glimpses into Trinidadian culture mediated through Facebook. Whilst it was a life-saver in times of emergency (“important in galvanising the response to the recent catastrophe of fellow Caribbeans in Haiti”), it has also aggravated a less desirable side of Trinidadian culture exacerbating “a national characteristic leading to the disorder of bacchanal”(Miller 2010). We see the “affordances” referred to positively by Ellison *et al* may encourage instant gratification and lack of mindfulness. Further, such systems are commonly optimised for users who remain logged in, also prompting questions about how the time is being used; overindulgence may indicate addiction (Karaiskos *et al* 2010).

This highlights issues of long-term sustainability, most importantly regarding the *quality* of the human relationships that are created and nurtured through them. Helping the human condition in this purview requires an accompanying code of social ethics. So has there been any such code online? Those responsible for Internet-based software are generally more devoted to rapid system implementation, where ethical considerations have tended not to look beyond issues of data security and privacy. Indeed, with more personally owned or created content online, the nature of ethics has become information-oriented, a burgeoning field in the process of some consolidation (Floridi 2010). It has to a large extent displaced *netiquette*, which was prominent in early online communications. At a time when there was less online capital, netiquette guidelines were mindful of the need for special care in this limited context: “In general, rules of common courtesy for interaction with people should be in force for any situation and on the Internet it's doubly important where, for example, body language and tone of voice must be inferred” (Hambridge 1995). As has been argued in conversation by Geert Lovink, a specialist in network cultures, at the time these rules were formulated, there was still a tradition of passing on the rules between Internet users, but these connections were generally lost in the subsequent explosive growth, precipitated by the rise of anonymous file sharing services (Mejias 2008).

3. Buddhist Architectures for Sustainable Relationships Online

So we are faced with a huge deficit in personal ethics and how we relate to others on the Internet. Whilst ethics are already implicit in the social analyses of what is desirable and undesirable, a Buddhist perspective makes ethics explicit and in so doing incorporates individual motivations, cognitive perceptions and inter-relatedness. The applicability of the Buddha's teachings for sustainable community development has already been established by, among others, Mendis (1994). We argue that they can also be successfully applied to the online context.

We start with the key observation that SNS have generally persisted with deploying a single connection type, labelling it 'friend', an atomistic view that effectively dilutes relationships to a lowest common denominator, enriched only in part by privacy options. In this scenario, describing relationships is reduced merely to 'friends', 'friends of friends,' and so on, resulting in a flattened landscape. Furthermore such a connection can be made instantly, further prompting the questions about the value of such 'friendship'. A Buddhist view is not as cavalier since the right kind of friendship is seen as essential to well-being in society. The Buddha used the term *kalyāṇamittatā*, which means “association with good friends or good friendship,” and defined it thus:

"Herein, Vyagghapajja, in whatsoever village or market town a householder dwells, he associates, converses, engages in discussions with householders or householders' sons, whether young and highly cultured or old and highly cultured, full of faith (*saddha*), full of virtue (*sila*), full of charity (*caga*), full of wisdom (*pañña*). He acts in accordance with the faith of the faithful, with the virtue of the virtuous, with the charity of the

charitable, with the wisdom of the wise.” [A iv 281, Narada trans.]

It is thus a mode of wholesome activity, implying a process consisting of four basic criteria that should be actively cultivated. *Kalyāṇamittatā* is listed in the sutta as one of four *sampadā* (blessed accomplishments) that brings worldly happiness and exhibits human flourishing.

Such qualities can be usefully illustrated in a framework that elaborates on the ethical relations. Although we have no sutta where the Buddha laid down a formal code for lay people, the foundations of Buddhist social ethics are evident in a number of texts, as described in (Payutto 2007:13-47). Of these the most detailed is the Sigalovāda Sutta [D iii. 180], which has become a *de facto* code, especially for many followers in SE Asia. In this sutta the Buddha taught Sigala, a young householder, to view relationships as spanning six directions – the four cardinal points plus above and below – according to the *type* of relationship: parents [East], teachers [South], spouse and children [West], friends and associates [North], servants and employees [nadir], ascetics and brahmins [zenith]. A very visual depiction has been provided by Dattajeevo (2005:206) and is reproduced in Figure 1:

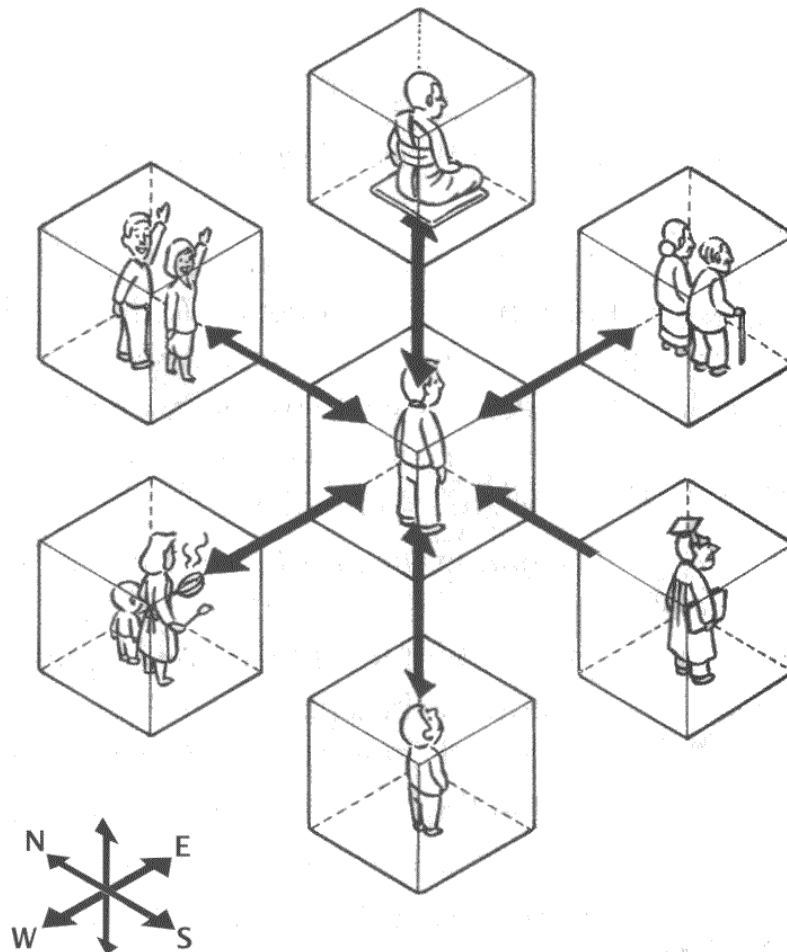


Figure 1: The Six Directions of the Sigalovāda Sutta

This is the first major insight that can enrich SNS: the separation of concerns, illustrated in this case by *orthogonality* between relationship types. This models better the diversity of human connections, augmenting the one dimensional 'friend' connection with a multidimensional lattice. The significance of the different ties can be seen in the design of the GSS, mentioned earlier, in which (McPherson *et al* 2006) produced distinct findings for

kinship and non-kinship networks. The data indicates further granularity in relationships on this matter and reveals considerable variation regarding this question. However, the Buddha goes deeper: having established the type, the Buddha instructed Sigala on the duties required to develop these relationships in a wholesome and fruitful manner. Its applicability is broad enough to aid the right view of any activity carried out in society, including endeavours in science and technology. A contemporary account and detailed explication of this sutta for lay people has been provided in (Dattajeevo 2005).

This raises the second major insight: the focus on the *mode* of interactions or exchanges carried out between people according to the relationship type. The sutta specifies that dealings with friends and associates should be conducted with liberality, courteous speech, helpfulness, impartiality, and sincerity. This highlights speech as a major component of these interaction, prompting us to watch out for deception; for instance, false friends are described as those who merely render lip-service, flatter insincerely and so on. There is a succinct synopsis of appropriate speech in the Vaca Sutta [A iii 243]: "It is spoken at the right time. It is spoken in truth. It is spoken affectionately. It is spoken beneficially. It is spoken with a mind of good-will." Such guidance could inform and transform the current vogue for online status updates that prompt the sharing of thoughts at any moment, with no guidance about truthfulness or consequences of criticisms, etc. The phrase 'good-will' is particularly significant, being a translation of *mettā*, more commonly rendered as 'loving kindness,' and is pure and refined in nature: "Metta succeeds when it loves, and it fails when it degenerates into worldly affection" (Buddharakkhita 1989). Friendship in the latter context, typical of much SNS use, is often rooted in *tanhā-pema or rāga*, a selfish love or passion, attached to sense pleasure, as distinct from the non-attached *mettā*. In addition, the Visuddhimagga describes *rāga* as the near enemy of *mettā* [Vsm. IX.98], and thus it is actually an obstacle to building social welfare.

The consideration of *mettā* leads on to the realization that friendships vary in degree. This characteristic is evident in the Mangala Sutta [Sn 258-269], which summarises very succinctly in a list of 38 blessings of life a sequence leading to the highest mental states, about which we may say such states of mind correspond with the greatest friendships. These blessings can be explored in depth from many angles. Soni provides a very detailed picture of harmony, emphasizing its universality and progressive synthesis (Soni 1978). In another modern commentary on the Mangala Sutta, seven levels of association are described extensively, with parallels for relationships with fools or the wise (Dhammakaya Foundation 2005:31-32, 44). This is related to a discourse the Buddha gave on successive degrees of engagement with his teachings, leading to full understanding [A. v.154]. We remark that simply making the connection or approach, which in current SNS would equate already to becoming 'friends', is just the very first step. There are six steps beyond that which gradually consolidate the friendship until they are one in outlook. A further aspect implicit in the teachings is that a relationship develops over time. They develop in the quality of existing interactions, for instance the generosity might grow; but they also can progress or undergo refinement in terms of their nature.

These principles are well worth pondering when considering how SNS functionality could vary according to the extent in which a relationship is developed, in terms of availability of features in a particular type of function and then the nature of the functions themselves. The very first blessing advises avoiding fools. This already highlights the need for being careful about making any connections and suggests safe-guards. Once connected, a simple example would be the sharing of photographs; when one first meets someone, perhaps at a conference, they could be just business photographs, but as the acquaintance becomes closer friendship, the photographs can relate more to personal interests. It would be a challenge to implement this in a user-friendly way, but there are artificial intelligence techniques that can help; an intelligent system would be able to distinguish different stages and provide support at the appropriate level.

Connection paradigms can then evolve from the current static objects, oriented around self, possession and acquisition (“Have x friends, consume y apps,” etc.) to dynamic process-oriented relationships whose nature keeps changing and evolving, reflecting the reality of impermanence. In thus emphasizing the quality of our relationships, our ability to build bridging social capital is enhanced and attachments in bonding social capital are reduced. Existing functionality in SNS can be folded into the new design, for instance, providing birthday gifts and seeking help from a teacher – whereas hitherto such connections have tended to be between separate systems, the new design properly implemented would accommodate all of these without allowing the wrong people to be prying.

By making explicit different kinds of relationships, the design gives more attention to supporting diverse types of bridging social capital, facilitating denser networks. Furthermore, they support infinite iterations: not just friends of friends (friend networks), but parents of parents (ancestry), teachers of teachers (expert knowledge transfer), etc., and then the various permutations parents of friends (heterogeneity across ancestry); and so on. The successive iterations can scale up to encompass the human population as a whole within a vision of social cohesion, guided by a sound global ethic.

4. Conclusions

The phenomenon of social networking sites is growing in prominence and significance, but its current manifestations appear limited in fostering a better society because of basic weaknesses in design. This paper has shown that the application of Buddhist teachings can offer new approaches that enrich the nature of these networks and support the building of true longer-term friendship, *kalyāṇamittatā*. These suggestions, rooted especially in Buddhist ethics, should at least prompt a reappraisal of the importance of architectural issues. The insights from the *Sigalovāda Sutta* and other texts may be difficult to implement directly in our contemporary society, but this should not stop the exploration of radically new alternatives. We have already a sufficient outline for the next step, which would be the creation of a prototype based on the features highlighted in the suttas, a design rooted in social ethics. In this way the orientation shifts from what we can acquire to how we may better serve each other and, by extension, the whole of humanity.

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Note that quotes from the Pali canon have been given according to the Pali Text Society edition.

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