

7 things you should know about...

Ning

Scenario

For his fall semester political science course, Dr. Jenkins instructs his students to build social networks on Ning about ballot issues for the November election. The Ning networks are intended to facilitate open discussion about the issue without advocating for a position. Although students can choose from municipal, county, or state issues on the ballot, no two networks may address the same issue. Dr. Jenkins requires the students in the class—all 24 of them—to join all of the social networks created for the assignment.

The students pick their issues and start combing the Internet for resources that bear on the questions to voters. For example, Conrad's network, which deals with a proposed change to municipal zoning ordinances that would allow a strip mall to be developed in a historic section of town, includes architectural drawings of the proposed mall and photos of the landmark buildings adjacent to the site where the mall would be built. Gina's network focuses on a proposed tax increase to fund new firehouses in the community. For her network, she includes an events page featuring town hall meetings where the ballot issue will be discussed, maps that show where the proposed fire stations would be built and the areas they would serve, and a news feed that pulls stories from local media about the issue. Gina invites about a dozen firefighters to join the network, and within a few weeks several dozen other firefighters and local emergency services personnel also start participating. Dozens of people in town join Gina's network, and the forum quickly becomes a popular venue for debating the pros and cons of the issue. Users of the network include links to stories about the results of similar efforts in other cities. Gina adds a polling tool to the network to gauge community support for the initiative, and by election day, Gina and the other active members of her social network have a pretty clear idea how the ballot issue will be decided, and why.

What is it?

Ning is an online service that allows users to create their own social networks and join and participate in other networks. Ning lets creators of networks determine the site's appearance and functionality, as well as whether the site is public or private. Most networks include features such as photos or videos, lists of network members and events, groups within the network, and communication tools such as forums or blogs. No technical skill is required to set up a social network, and there are no limits to the number of networks a user can join. Ning offers no-cost networks, which are supported by advertisements, or users can pay for premium services that eliminate ads and let users choose network URLs that are separate from the Ning domain.

Who's doing it?

Although Ning does not provide usage statistics or numbers of registered users, the company does highlight the number of networks on its platform. As of April 2008, Ning reported 220,000 networks, 70 percent of which were active within the past 30 days. Looking at the tag cloud and browsing the available networks, one sees that networks focus on a broad range of topics and are used for activities ranging from news, current events, and professional development to entertainment, dating, and support groups. Some networks are regional or municipal in their focus. Sizable numbers of networks are created by international users. One network bills itself as the "Christian alternative to MySpace." Some organizations use Ning to develop a social network that complements their primary website, and others have turned to Ning as the platform for the organization's only website. Some networks focus on particular commercial products, and in some of these cases, product representatives are active members of the network, which becomes a vehicle for "social advertising." Another clear trend is that many alumni groups, formal and informal, from high schools as well as colleges and universities, use Ning to develop networks where graduates can reconnect and stay in touch.

How does it work?

Registered users can create new social networks in very little time, with no technical skill required. Once a name and a URL are selected, assembling the network is a simple process of working through four screens. The user indicates whether the network is private (only invited people can view or join) or public; writes a tagline and description of the network; assigns keywords; chooses from a selection of features (such as photos or videos, a blog,

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events, groups, or gadgets) and uses drag-and-drop tools to place those features on the page; chooses a visual theme (colors, fonts, sizes) and can customize these choices; and decides what information users will be asked to provide to join the network. If membership is restricted, the creator can invite individuals to join. The creator of the network has access to other options, such as importing photos from Flickr, adding Ning features to Facebook pages, requesting access to source code to further customize a network, and including JavaScript that allows external tools to track network usage statistics. Members of the Ning social networks find functionality similar to that of more well-known stand-alone networks, such as Facebook and MySpace. Various features allow users to read news or learn about related events, join groups, read and comment on blog entries, view photos and videos, and other activities as set up by the network creator. RSS feeds let users subscribe to updates from specific parts of the social network.

Why is it significant?

Facebook and MySpace are consistently among the most popular sites on the web, demonstrating the public's interest in social networking. Other online tools are also adding social networking features, allowing users to connect and build community. Web users are constantly pushing the limits of available tools, looking for novel and interesting ways to use technology to discover connections between people and content and to find new answers to old questions. With Ning, users have the freedom to channel this creative energy into designing and building a social network that looks and behaves exactly as its creator believes it should. Moreover, to the extent that network creators have the technical ability to do so, they can create entirely new tools and features to respond to the changing needs and demands of the network members.

What are the downsides?

The flipside of the flexibility of social networks is that the norms and expectations for how such tools should work continue to evolve. Putting almost total control into the hands of users encourages experimentation and innovation, but such a dynamic landscape leaves most social networks in a near-constant state of change, with no clear model of organization and function that will best suit a particular community. Ning touts the ability for users to join many different social networks, which, despite its obvious benefits, also adds to the growing burden of managing involvement in multiple personal networks and keeping track of perhaps dozens or hundreds of "friends" across networks. The growth of separate online communities has led some to call for an independent database that would allow users to manage their relationships and identities across a wide range of services, and Ning would seem to be a good candidate for such a tool. Finally, because Ning hosts all of the content for the networks on its platform, some organizations will be reluctant to use the service for important or sensitive material.

Where is it going?

The Internet community at large has consistently demonstrated its desire for social and community-based applications. Whether through virtual worlds, rich-media tools, or always-on access through mobile devices, users increasingly turn to digital tools for a sense of connection with other people. Ning lets users experiment with online behavior and community tools, and through this process, "best practices" for social networking will emerge and rise to the top, resulting in a stronger sense of what functions technology can most appropriately serve. Successive networks build on previous ones, and users will become increasingly sophisticated and discerning in their use of social networks generally and of individual tools in particular.

What are the implications for teaching and learning?

For today's students, who spend countless hours on Facebook and MySpace, faculty participation on those networks is often seen as an intrusion into a private domain. Ning provides an avenue for instructors to take advantage of social networks in a neutral setting, offering functionality and an experience that are familiar and comfortable to students. By creating social networks around academic topics, or even about specific projects for a course, an instructor can facilitate a strong sense of community among the students, encouraging personal interactions that can lead to the creation of new knowledge and collective intelligence. Similarly, discipline-specific social networks connect researchers from around the world working on particular topics of study. Colleges and universities can also use Ning to create networks that help current or incoming students build connections with the institution. By the same token, an individual dorm or the library could have its own network to connect with campus constituents. Ning provides an opportunity for students to create their own social networks and learn how to cultivate and sustain a community of users that might resemble professional contacts and relationships. A social network on Ning is also an easy way for a cohort of students—from an entering class, for example, or those who participated in a semester-abroad program—to stay connected through the college years and beyond, even as they transfer to other institutions, graduate, or relocate.