The Failure of Defining Failure in Social Networking Sites

Erika Pearson
Department of Media, Film and Communication
University of Otago

A.C.M. Moskal
Higher Education Development Centre (Educational Technology)
University of Otago

Despite the widespread use of the terms 'failure' and 'success' within social networking site (SNS) literature, determining benchmarks of either is a complex undertaking. Success and failure both are often identified according to the presence or absence of context-specific 'markers'. 'Snapshot' metrics such as network growth or activity are pointed to as indicators of a network's overall success. However, such reductive approaches oversimplify the underlying social processes. This paper presents a review of current literature, and argues for the conceptualisation of failure at the macro-level as the constraint of network actors, regarding 'success' and 'failure' as recurrent processes in the lifecycle of a social networking site rather than outcomes. It is hoped that theorising failure independent of specific 'markers' will provide the basis for future development of predictive and analytical models to identify instances of failure in SNS case studies.

Keywords: social networks, failure

Preamble

That social networking sites (SNSs) are successful phenomena in the connected world is now an uncontentious claim. Entire journals (boyd & Ellison, 2007) have been dedicated to studying their reach, affordances, and impact across a wide range of both mediated and interpersonal social encounters (see Junco, 2012; DiMicco et al., 2008).

A number of definitions of what characterises a 'successful' SNS exist in the literature: "a large or rapidly growing user population" (Weaver & Morrison, 2008, p. 98); "a virtuous cycle of content creation and content consumption" (Pagani, Hofacker & Goldsmith, 2011, p. 443); or the generation of economic (Goh, Heng & Lin, 2013) or social capital (Valenzuela, Park & Kee, 2009). Understanding the drivers for success of these sites has also been the focus of a number of studies (e.g., Lin & Lu, 2011; Brandtzæg & Heim, 2009; Hart et al., 2008).

Relatively little research, however, has examined the precursors to 'failure' of SNSs. This raises a number of intriguing questions: what is failure? Is failure merely the absence of 'success' markers, or is it more complicated? Can it be universally identified and measured or is failure context-specific?

This paper is part of a series examining the way failure in social networking is defined, measured and discussed. By addressing the ambiguities and inconsistencies in the literature, it is hoped that a more universal understanding of the concepts of 'success' and 'failure' can be fostered. If failure can be more categorically understood, the drivers for failure in social networks will be more recognisable. Understanding these drivers will be valuable for mitigating future failures in social networks, as well as providing greater context for determining the underlying drivers for success.

Success and failure

Outlining success and failure as general outcomes is relatively easy; determining specific benchmarks of either is considerably more difficult. Success, as Desmond (1988) notes:

> …entails not only the energy of pursuit, the excitement of search itself; it also points to the satisfaction of purpose attained. Our activity comes to something, some consequence, and the prior pursuit is not vain or inane. (Desmond, 1988, p. 290)

In this vein, failure is understood as simply in contrast to success; the absence or frustration of obtaining 'satisfaction of purpose'. Desmond does provide a caveat that, "[i]t is wrong to restrict the sense of success to

[particular] conditions. Conditions being different, success might mean many different things." (Desmond, 1988, p. 290). It is this concept of *conditional success* that provides the definitional flexibility for the range of applications of ideas of success (and, by inference, of failure).

In much abstract discussion, success and failure are inseparable, often understood as phenomenological goals situated firmly within the subjective needs and experiences of those pursuing success or experiencing failure. Yet, when discussing online social networking as a structural artefact, 'success' becomes a much broader, more nebulous concept. It is readily identified in specific cases. However, once identified, it is then quantified and qualified by various 'markers' that are often incomplete, context-specific, and which oversimplify the explanation as to what is actually driving the 'success'. These markers vary across different examples, sometimes conflicting with one another; collating them into an overarching framework would be impossible. Failure, when it is discussed at all, is understood mainly as a 'lack of success,' and carries with it the same subjective, context-specific markers for evaluation.

It is worth exploring more nuanced ways of thinking about success's less-explored shadow—failure—and how failure can be better understood at the macro-level in social networking sites. In doing so, we seek to remove the benchmarks for evaluating failure from the subject, context-specific frameworks that have dominated SNS research in this area, and try to reframe markers of failure to become more generalisable across multiple sites and experiences.

Social networking success and failure

Failure as a term is ill-defined and broadly applied within social networking literature. Examples of failure tend to speak either to 'decline-as-failure', or as failure to fully realise subjective, context-specific pre-set operational parameters (market share, usage patterns, etc). When failure is contextualised in this way, failure is reduced to being the absence of (continuous) success.

A good example is Friendster, one of the early social networking sites that shaped the look and feel of many of its successors. Friendster is routinely held up in the literature as both an example of 'success' (e.g., boyd, 2005) and 'failure' (e.g. Garcia, Mavrodiev & Schweitzer, 2013; Howard, 2008). These terms are applied freely; however, unpicking the reasons for either categorisation proves a complex exercise.

Markers often used to justify both success and failure in Friendster case studies are network population and network growth. As Weaver and Morrison succinctly phrase it: "A large or rapidly growing user population characterizes a successful social network." (Weaver & Morrison, 2008, p. 98). A closer look at these metrics, though, illustrates the problems with this kind of reductive approach. Originally, Friendster boasted user uptake in the millions. However, users eventually moved away from the site due to technical issues and mismanagement. As a result, the site went through a period of user and activity degradation that ended with the functional end of Friendster as a major social network actor.

Here is an example of failure as the counterpart of success – Friendster's large user base characterised its success; the absence of this user base characterised its failure. However, such attribution oversimplifies the situation greatly. A large yet silent population in a virtual space is invisible and, in some sense, meaningless. The implication in statements like Weaver and Morrison's (2008) is not only that there is growth, but that there is activity. Sheer numbers does not a successful social media site make. Similarly, the decline of Friendster can be thought of as an expected part of a social networking 'lifecycle' (the concept of a lifecycle for online communities is put forth by several authors, e.g., Iriberri and Leroy, 2009; Venkatesh, 2003), and does not constitute failure in the strictest sense.

'Activity' provides a more refined, though still subjective, measure of success. Social networking sites rely on social activity to generate content, and therefore a reason for other users to return to and invest in the site. Established social sites that have achieved a 'critical mass' of users become self-sustaining in this respect. However, fostering this cycle of content creation and consumption in the early stages of a site can become a 'chicken-and-egg' problem. Consumers need an existing stream of content to entice them to invest time in the site; creators need an established user base to create for (Pagani, Hofacker & Goldsmith, 2011). Activity is presupposed by growth, and in itself presupposes the investment of capital (whether it be financial, temporal, or social). The existence of this capital is itself often used as a more abstract marker of success (Cox, 1995). Growth and subsequent activity are seen as part of the expected and desired result of SNSs, and their absence, thus, a marker of failure.

Yet, even this conceptualisation of activity becomes a 'snapshot' approach to evaluating success and failure online—commitment and investment over time are in flux as peripheral users leave and return to the site based on the activities and outputs of the key core user group. Also, activity does not necessarily indicate any sort of meaningful engagement of the community, such as in the cases of antisocial online behaviour (e.g., 'ranters', 'flamers' or 'trolls'; Golder & Donath, 2004). Equally, the absence of activity does not necessarily suggest the failure of a network, such as in the case of support networks which may outwardly exhibit low activity (characterised by 'lurking' behaviour), but remain active and available for when required (Walther & Boyd, 2002).

Such measures of failure (and success) situate failure within specific moments of a social network's operational life span (typically either the start or end of the network's lifecycle). However, research on social networking *dynamics* show that SNSs go through multiple stages of development and change (e.g., Kumar, Novak & Tomkins, 2010; Palla, Barabási & Vicsek, 2007), and it is arguable that each of these stages has its own potential for failure to occur. Similarly, absence of 'success' markers at one point in time does not doom a site to macro-level failure. The argument then becomes what are the generalised characteristics of failure that account for the specific dangers at each of these stages, or does the potentiality of failure reflect the specific needs and agency at play at each of these stages? Can we theorise failure at a more general level, or is failure too deeply embedded in contextual aspects of social networking spaces?

Rethinking failure

The existing literature on failure in social networks and social media sites is, at the moment, overgeneralising the concept of failure to the point of uselessness. Everything from the natural decline of old sites to the decay of abandoned sites is given the same weighting and presence of failure in the existing literature. As it stands, failure is currently being pinned on the presence or absence of particular markers (population, activity, etc) at particular moments. These snapshots obscure the underlying, long-term issues driving failure on these sites.

Alternatively, to better understand failure, research needs to be situated in relation to some key assumptions. Firstly, that social networking sites as functional social spaces are emergent phenomena, so failure needs to be understood in relation to underlying constraints — whether they be structural, interpersonal or other— on actors to innovate. Secondly, conditions of failure or success are not terminus conditions, but rather can be articulated as a change of underlying constraints: a 'successful' network may become a 'failed' network, and vice versa. For example, following its demise as an SNS, Friendster was reborn as a gaming site, and, again, posted large user numbers. As mentioned before, tying 'success' or 'failure' to markers such as growth rates makes such rates meaningless as snapshot measures when studied longitudinally. But, considered at the deeper level of constraints on actors, Friendster's changing fortunes can be understood as *periods of success or failure* based upon which different actor constraints are active at any given time.

It is this relationship between actors which gives real insight into the concept of failure in social networks. Rather than thinking of failure as presence or absence of markers, those markers are merely the outcomes of the extent to which actors can move as desired within complex and evolving networks of relationships. More useful would be to think about successes and failures as ongoing processes during the SNS lifecycle (drawing on and developing concepts raised in marketing literature around 'outcome failures' versus 'process failures'; c.f. Smith, Bolton & Wagner, 1999). Growth, activity and stage development are by-products of the stability of these complex and emergent relationships.

Taking this approach to understanding failure, many different and separated cases of failure within SNS literature can be regarded as cases of actors (such as site infrastructure, management, and so on) constraining emergent social activity and tie formation as desired by the users-as-actors in the network. If, for example, the site restricts users from communicating and exchanging content in a way that feels 'natural', intuitive or useful to them, then they are constrained. Consequently, population growth may stagnate, activity may drop, and the development of content or sharing behaviours may wither. A traditional approach to failure would stop at the stagnation. The approach put forth in this paper goes deeper to highlight the constraint of actors as triggering and driving that change, and ultimately the failure of the site itself as long as the constraint remains active.

To return to the Friendster example, rather than identifying decline in activity as 'failure', it might be more illuminating to think of Friendster as undergoing a number of shifting stages. In the growth stage, actors, though not completely unconstrained, are able to move freely enough to achieve their communicative and social desires (though sometimes the technological constraints mean they have to use workarounds to fully realise those goals, such as the creation of fake accounts; see boyd & Ellison, 2007). So while there are clear markers of success

like increasing growth and activity, underlying them are conditions that make early successes qualified. At the peak of these growth markers, these workarounds become normalised as part of the social media experience. But, in doing so, they attract the attention of other actors on the site (the management and technical staff). These actors then, for their own reasons and desires, change conditions on the site to constrain certain behaviour. In doing so, they cut off the workarounds that supported the early successes. This constraint, one too many, triggers a failure event on the social network site. Diminishing growth and activity on the site then tips a previously successful site into a period of failure. This failure continues until new relationships— i.e., the social ties between gamers— trigger a new period of (conditional) success for Friendster.

This notion of an SNS lifecycle of periodic successes and failures attempts to move the literature away from specific case studies of 'markers' (e.g., Garcia, Mavrodiev & Schweitzer, 2013; Leimeister, Sidiras, & Krcmar, 2004). Rather, it is hoped the ideas explored here might suggest ways in which a theoretical model might be developed for analysing failure at a macro-level, enabling basic predictions to be made about how and when sites may succeed or fail, or even how to turn failures into successes. This conceptualisation of failure is not context specific, but could be mapped across different types of networks, enabling comparisons across context-specific examples (such as culturally- or application-specific networks).

Conclusion

More attention needs to be paid to failure in social networking sites, not just as the dark sibling of success, but as an important phenomenon in its own right. Research on these deeper aspects of failure exists in other disciplines (as diverse as sociology and marketing); a more coherent and critical evaluation of these constraints is needed in the SNS literature to fully understand how failure works over time. Furthermore, exploration of failure must move beyond context-specific markers or 'slice' approaches to sites, such as snapshot analysis or the study of growth or activity patterns. Instead, failure study should take an approach which drills down to the network of actors at play in any social networking site, and explore the way actors are enabled or constrained as influences of both failure and success. By regarding SNSs as continuums of failures and successes, future research can concentrate on developing predictive and analytical models of failure which can be applied to future case studies within the field of social network analysis.

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Contact author: A.C.M. Moskal, adon.moskal@otago.ac.nz

Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.