

Friends on the Net

So vital are social networks to our lives, a wide variety of scientists study them assiduously (http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/encyclopedia/s/so/social_network.htm). Internet social networks are a rapidly expanding sub-set. The Social Networking Services Meta List (<http://socialsoftware.weblogsinc.com/entry/9817137581524458>) provides a neat introductory inventory of the many genre available.

Friendster

Friend networking sites are wildly popular. Perhaps pre-eminent among them is Friendster (<http://www.friendster.com>). The Alexa traffic measuring service places Friendster in the top 100 most visited sites on the net (<http://www.alexa.com/data/details/?url=friendster.com>). Friendster itself claims to host over 19 million personal profiles, photos and blogs. To meet new competition from net giants Yahoo! (<http://360.yahoo.com/> Yahoo!360) and MSN (<http://spaces.msn.com/> MSN Spaces), Friendster continues to roll out new features sought by its users.

I focus on Friendster as an exemplar of the exploding participatory web which Indonesians, like most of us, now embrace. Based on my own experience there (<http://www.friendster.com/useropen.php?uid=20706882> -- you see only my partial profile if you are not in my Friendster network) since August 2005, it's impossible to measure how many Indonesians have joined Friendster. But even for a newbie like myself the hard figure provided for my third-degree friends (friends of friends of friends) already has surpassed 500,000, mostly young, as recorded in their profiles. So for practical purposes, the number of young Indonesians here is endless. And as a social hub, this site far outclasses malls, fast-food joints, and the street for conviviality and amiability.

This enormous presence is a logical extension of Indonesians' earlier wide use of the net for emailing and private (IRC) chat (http://www.tcf.or.jp/data/20010525_Mohammad_Yasin.pdf and <http://www.oeaw.ac.at/sozant/workpaper/soa005.pdf>) together with personal homepages (http://www.ji-indonesia.com/browse.php?pg_which=1&cat=57 and http://www.google.com/Top/Regional/Asia/Indonesia/Society_and_Culture/Personal_Pages). Friendster's 'circle of friends' technique has yielded a fusion of personal portal and virtual community which directly descends from, and transcends, this earlier history by eliminating a no longer needed cloak of anonymity.

New Project

I got interested in Friendster for several reasons. Many of my friends were already there. So were other people I wanted to know. Interaction with them through websites, email, lists and instant messaging posed obstacles involving privacy, etiquette, sterility, and intrusiveness. Friendster, as a mutually known place for informal interaction replete with flexible optional settings, dozens of communication tools, and a sub-culture of civility, goes a very long way toward wiping out these problems.

But what enticed me to take Friendster very seriously was a new project -- creating a place where many more Indonesian and non-Indonesian researchers (I prefer the broader term knowledge workers) could find each other easily and get acquainted to the extent they wished. I consider this a remarkably unremarked gap.

After placing some colorful 'Join Me on Friendster' buttons on my personal website and indonesian-studies (i-s) list homepage, I explained the project explicitly in a posting to that list (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/indonesian-studies/message/4831>) and soon thereafter created Simplicity, a casual Friendster blog (<http://uttersimplicity.blogs.friendster.com/simplicity>) to keep the project moving smoothly as it slowly evolves.

Making Friends

I began by inviting a small batch of i-s members to be my friends on Friendster. i-s members are currently about 40% non-Indonesian, 60% Indonesian. A majority of postings are full-text papers in English but virtually every day similar postings in Indonesian appear.

The response was overwhelming -- in acceptance, numbers and warmth. I've had everything from brief exchanges to continuing conversations to curhat (curahan hati, outpourings of the heart). I'd vowed to grow my Friendster network slowly so I could exchange such private Friendster emails with everyone. I did do that, it took lots of time, but it was well worth it. I've only slowed down the invitation rate to keep it all manageable. No one can forecast how a project like this will turn out, but I guess it will take a year to build the informal research network near the size needed.

I'd under-estimated particularly the number of young Indonesians who recognized my name or photo and wanted to know me personally. Most were in the 25-40 year old range, well-educated, and very talented. Interest among non-Indonesian researchers of any age proved less. The main reasons -- they were not already using Friendster, didn't know much about it, thought it was a dating service, or felt technically challenged.

Patterns

I've already noticed some interesting patterns in the networking of my young

Indonesian friends. Their networks are surprisingly isolated from each other. Most don't yet include many non-Indonesian researchers or older Indonesian researchers as friends. But these young friends now willingly share their research papers and reports for posting on the public i-s list which many of these presently excluded groups read. Graciously, a half-dozen so far have even sent me their dissertations, most often by email in pdf file format. Still, it will require broader awareness to bridge adequately remaining nationality and generational cleavages in the intrinsically more egalitarian Friendster setting.

A few friends use Friendster very creatively, adding members of their organizations to their networks, creating busy meeting places. Some veterans of the reformasi movement carry on here in the bulletin boards, though others faded into the job market. One tough but fair university lecturer uses his huge network to break down barriers with his students.

Most rewarding for me have been the private conversations, most in English, some in formal Indonesian, and a few in bahasa gaul, the crazy linguistic amalgam for socializing used in everyday speech which Indonesians replicate online in their blogs and emails. Beyond that, they share on Friendster loads of personal photos and create fascinating profiles presenting themselves.

Join Friendster. After you get hooked, you'll be spending more time there than you ever expected -- and enjoying it. It's a great treasure -- you meet Indonesia's future right now. It's encouraging.

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