Presentation

In this reading lecture, Lakmal Meegahapola presented the “Families on Facebook” paper that was published in the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media in 2013 by Moira Burke, Lada A. Adamic, and Karyn Marciniak.

The paper analyzes family relationships on Facebook and how parents talk to their children, be it underage or adult children. The authors of the paper tried, among others, to answer the following research questions: (i) how common are parent-child relationships on Facebook, (ii) who friends who and at what point is the friendship initiated, (iii) how often do parents and children communicate on Facebook, and (iv) how does the communication change based on the age of the children.

The study utilized data from three months of communication between parents and children. The used features were the date the friendship was initiated between a parent and a child, the date when each participant joined Facebook, the date the relationship got confirmed, etc. The study used comments, posts, and shared links, but did not utilize any direct messages between the parents and children, because these data were substantially skewed.

After gathering all the desired data, the researchers split the data into different categories: (i) father-son, (ii) mother-daughter, etc. Some of the results include the fact that 50% of people aged 50 have their children as Facebook friends, or that daughters and mothers have more mutual friends with the children compared to the fathers and sons. Additionally, daughters tend to stay closer to their parents as they get older, compared to the sons. The researchers performed a linguistic analysis that lead to the observation that mothers’ posts are more emotional (e.g., “so sorry”, “worried”) while fathers’ prefer to discuss more about politics, or similar topics. Another interesting result of the paper, was that parents talk to their adult children as they talk to their adult friends and that Facebook communication looks similar to offline communication. Naturally, the paper has its sets of limitations, such as not including private talks, and not being aware of unreported relationships (e.g., only one party is on Facebook).

Discussion

After the presentation of the paper, Negin Safaei led the discussion. The discussion started with some personal questions, on whether we have our parents as Facebook friends. Three students out of the eleven attending the class confirmed that they did. However, only one student out of those three marked her parent as a parent on Facebook. In general, the sentiment was that almost nobody shared different content when they know that the parents will see that content. However, later in the discussion, some students mentioned that this was not the case when they were teenagers. In any case, students mentioned that they mostly used Facebook to share posts with others, but did not use Facebook to talk to their parents directly, but instead prefer to use other platforms, such as WhatsApp. Thus and as a student mentioned, Facebook might not be the right channel to evaluate this type of communication. Nevertheless, we should take note that the paper was published in 2013, so the technology landscape has substantially changed since then.

There was a discussion on the challenges of communicating over Facebook and more broadly the challenges of computer-mediated family communication. One student mentioned that the mentality of Facebook of being an open space for everybody complicates communication, since somebody might not want to mix friends with family in a discussion. Although, someone could manually configure who can see a post, this does not feel
natural (at least on Facebook). Another problem of family communication over Facebook is that it restricts face-to-face communication.

In regards to improving the technical work and results of the paper, some student mentioned a potential improvement in the linguistic analysis, by for example considering multiple words, such as “happy birthday” as a single-word. Another student mentioned that we could consider a post as a global document, utilize word frequencies, etc. The take away of this discussion was that the paper has a flavour of interpretability, in the sense that they used very simply features and techniques in order to reach easy-to-understand conclusions.

Then the discussion led us to what are the differences between having parents on Facebook, versus on Instagram. Naturally, these social platforms have different objectives and hence the communication patterns are different. One student found useful that she had subgroups of friends on Instagram for sharing stories in a restricted manner, while on Facebook she cannot do that. Additionally, she just accepts her parents on Facebook so not to upset them, but in reality she wants her privacy in order to only share with friends. Another student mentioned that they had nothing to hide, and therefore share equally much both on Facebook and on Instagram. An interesting point brought up by this discussion was that people seem more eager to hide things from their parents while they are teenagers.

After the discussant mentioned the limitations of the paper, an interesting discussion took place on what could we have done better. Some potential factors that could have been utilized in the study are the presence of siblings, as well as of the sexual orientation of the parties. Other interesting avenues for future work would have been to investigate on whether the mutual friends that parents and children have are in communication with either the parents or the children and how frequent is such an interaction. Another good point for a factor that is missing from this study is the socioeconomic status that would have played a role in the linguistic properties of the conversation. In regards to the socioeconomic status, we could have also utilized the education of the involved parties to investigate how this affect the language used between them. Finally, another factor could have been the ethnicity that we could infer by looking at the last name of a person. Naturally, as a student mentioned such an approach would lead to false positives (e.g., lived all your life in China but have an Italian last name). However, there seemed to be consensus that introducing ethnicity as a factor would be helpful. Some other limitations of the study that were mentioned by the presenter as well, were that the paper was is incomplete in some sense, since it did not consider all possible avenues of communication, such as talking to your parents over the phone. A concluding remark of this discussion topic was that we always want more data than we have.

The discussion concluded by noting that the paper contained some controversial issues regarding gender and that the used data contained some stereotypical elements. In this sense, the study reflects the time of the study (2013). Potentially, if the same study was to be performed today, it would reach different conclusions.