Using StatusNet to simplify some social network problems

I'm probably not the typical user of social networks. I join them not for social reasons, i.e. interact with *friends*, but because i'm interested in the phenomena and the techniques involved. Many of my status updates are about those techniques itself and probably not very interesting reading material for my friends, i.e. the ones I normally interact with socially. I bet most of them just ignore my updates. I have at times considered splitting my (online) personality into '*ich geek*' and '*ich normal*' (cfr. Schachnovelle, Stefan Zweig) and have the people I know follow the one or the other, but to date I haven't found a good way to deal with that.

Register at them all?

Let's assume for the moment that I **am** interested in following my friends through social networks. Scribbling down a list of social networks I would have to join to be able to follow them:

1. Twitter : most people I know are on there, but many are also on there just because others are on there and not because it is **their** primary network;
2. Hyves : Big in the Netherlands only, but used by many of the people I know as their primary network;
3. Facebook : mostly my international contacts use Facebook, but increasingly more dutch users are switching from hyves to facebook;
4. Identi.ca : the largest instance of the StatusNet software. Here's where most of my geek contacts are.

Those four basically cover the usage of social networks by my friends. So, if I want to follow my (actual real life) friends I need to register myself on at least four networks. The actual act of registering isn't the problem, that's a one time thing. Checking in on a regular basis, (which is what the social part is all about no?), is the real problem. I don't want to spent time checking in at 4 different places. That's the first problem.

As a consequence of people using different networks, and therefore hindered in communication, several "*solutions*" have popped up. I quoted solutions because they are not really solutions in my view, but workarounds. All of these solutions involve some kind of mirroring updates on one network on the other, so a different

audience has access to them. This can be done by the person himself by literally posting it to different networks (semi-automatically) or having one network *watch* the other (and vice-versa perhaps) and pull in updates when available. Apart from the fact that these mirror operations are not very reliable, the bigger issue is that there's duplication without reference. The status on the one network rarely accepts the one on the other as the original and thus the update is now in fact 2 unrelated updates. Especially in an area of short notices like status updates which are very abundant it's a big problem when from the start these messages get polluted and split.

The third problem is that almost all of these social networks are owned and operated by single companies making you sign a lengthy user agreement you do not want to read nor fully comprehend if you did. This may not be a big issue for most, but it is a problem for me. It sounds unreasonable that I should surrender to unclear conditions if I am unable to avoid their service, for example by being able to choose my own provider or be one myself.

So, impracticality, polution of status and unavoidability present my main 3 problems.

Take control

Despite the fact that there are quite a few initiatives to solve at least part of those problems (StatusNet aims at an open federated microblogging platform for example) these initiatives did not bring me any closer yet. In fact, so far they have moved me further away from a solution, because I had to introduce yet another social network to the list initially.

I think there is no real solution to the problems yet. There are a couple of things I did though to make my life a bit easier.

First, I chose my *entry point* to be an open system. For me this meant building my whole setup around a StatusNet instance, controlled by me and running on my own servers (http://o.mrblog.nl). This gives me connectivity and basically flawless federation with all statusnet sites. For both twitter and facebook there are bridges which make bidirectional comminication possible (not completely for facebook yet). Because StatusNet is open source and promotes Open Standards I can adjust my local install to my needs if needed. All the data relevant to my social graph is stored locally.

Second, I've set up a bridge to Twitter. The StatusNet bridge is mostly working, it needs a kick in the butt about once a week, but other than that it happily transfers status updates back and forth. One change I made to it was to show the twitter status updates in the public timeline instead of just in the personal timeline. This makes it consistent with what StatusNet itself.

Third, the bridge to facebook does not work fully yet and to be able to get status updates to facebook, you have to create an application on Facebook to pull out your status updates. So, my friends can hear me, but I can't hear them yet. I've

worked around that by using gwibber which can merge (client side obviously) the two timelines into one.

The above brings me a bit in the direction where I want to be, but the effort I've had to put in is way too much for this to be a scaleable solution.

What's still missing

With my setup there are still quite a few annoyances:

- I can not subscribe directly to Twitter or Facebook users, I still have to visit their sites to click on 'Follow';
- There are minor annoyances in bridging my StatusNet updates (@mrb) and my Twitter updates (@mrvdb) The bridge does not translate the two usernames properly into eachother (may be a feature?)
- The facebook bridge is incomplete.
- Much better filtering, so I can filter out some notices from users based on a regular expression of some sort. For example, check-in notices from people I'm not that interested in, so a filter would be nice to at least suppress them in my stream.
- It takes time to keep the stuff running.

Bonus features

By setting it up like I have I got a couple of bonus features:

- StatusNet supports a conversation view natively, Here's an example Note that the other person is from Twitter. Try to find this view on twitter itself, i have not been able to.
- I can do away with **some** feeds, because I can subscribe to them directly using StatusNet (using OStatus). Subscribing to blogspot.com blogs is an example.