A Vision of an open Platform – The Enablers Perspective

position paper, aka-aki networks GmbH, Germany

1. Who we are

aka-aki is a mobile social network based on encounters in real life. We offer our members a playful approach for discovering and connect with new people in everyday life.

aka-aki was founded in 2007 and evolved from a diploma project of the original team of founders at the University of the Arts Berlin.

One of the original ideas of aka-aki was to connect existing social networks on the internet, to enable them to leave the virtual space and bring them out to the streets. That didn't work out so far, because the existing platforms prefer to keep their communities closed and are not willing to „share" their users. So aka-aki decided to create its own community.

We developed our own J2ME client for mobile phones and launched aka-aki in April 2008.

Today aka-aki is venture funded, has 18 mobile community experts working in Berlin.

2. What we want to do

Our product is platform independent and not only able to connect our own users with each other, but also provides an API which can make users of other existing networks visible to each other wherever they are.

We believe that the mobile phone could be the device to become the holy grail of social networking, a ‚social hub'. This hub will connect the users' different online identities, merging all those walled gardens of now into one big open network. It will not be a meta-website or a huge and clunky meta-community-interface on the desktop. It will have to be there with you, all the time, just as people do not stop being social entities after they shut down their computers. Even now your mobile phone is the place to connect you with your friends whenever you want and wherever you go – and it does so not matter where your friends live or what network, hardware and software platform they use. You may be billed differently, and billing is sure an important factor in any vision concerning mobile data-usage. But no matter what: you want your phone to connect you with other people – and it just does.

So why should this be any different for the non-speech ways of social networking?

All the above requires a new way of looking at networks, platforms and service providers like aka-aki. aka-aki as an enabler could make it possible for a MySpace user to meet a Facebook user just by walking close by. To see the other user's profile-page on the phone and to discover mutual friends and interests – *without* being members of the same social network. Just like that, other enablers could ad their module, their way of social interaction to this unified approach.

We have been working on these problems since our inception. It actually was the first thing we had in mind when we founded our service. But the closed nature of the big players in the social networking field and the iron clad grip of the carriers on phones and software rendered any real attempt futile. We were practically forced to create our own social network.

The lesson learned is that open platform solutions that don't include all involved parties are bound to fail as nobody will be able to actually use them. To achieve our vision, we need to collaborate with social networks, manufacturers, carriers and providers of software architecture. And they need to listen unless they want to be bypassed in the next mobile revolution.

3. What we need

We need the other communities to offer open APIs and to open their databases to share their user data and to make interaction between each other possible. This may hurt them in the short run, but just with every other communication-centric application, interoperability is the key to success. And for that to happen we need a platform independent, common standard for sharing social networking user data and to create APIs.

We want the carriers and phone manufacturers to give up their walled gardens and to support and implement open platforms actively. We don't need new walled gardens, that just look better and feel bigger than the old ones. The old ones never really got of the ground. Why should the new ones do any better?

We don't need badly implemented or totally locked down software platforms. Right now, installing J2ME software on any phone is at least messy and takes many steps of user-interaction. And the implementations are simply not up to the task of providing a modern software environment, often being buggy and incomplete. Development and testing costs must be brought down significantly by better standards and compatibility testing on part of the manufacturers – or many devices will simply be left aside by the developers for better managed platforms like the iPhone.

Cost for mobile data traffic needs to come down. If even customers in mature markets find data-tariffs to be prohibitively high and are actually afraid to touch the ‚internet button' on their phone for fear of being robbed by the network – and we are hearing this from our users on a daily basis– then the industry is in serious trouble. Lower costs will enable millions of people (especially in the emerging markets) to connect to the internet for the first time in their live and in turn will create huge business opportunities for all involved in the mobile-social-networking space.

4. What we see today

There is obviously a need for mobile social networks as we see rapidly growing user numbers in the last six months.

Users don't want to think about technology, they just want things to work. And that on every platform possible. And this is the way technology always worked. TVs can tune into every station out there, not just one. Cars run on gas from every station there is, and phones connect you to every other phone as long as you know the number. It is not that important to users on which device they connect to their friends – as long as it gets the job done.

All technological barriers are artificial. They exist because they were deliberately put in place. In our product development, we never killed a feature because it wasn't technically feasible. But we had to postpone lots of good ideas simply because implementations were buggy or SDKs and NDAs prevented us from going ahead,

Now it's up to the industry to give their customers what they want – or be left behind.

And its up to us smaller networks and technology providers to tell them.

Bastian Pfister, Product Architect, Founder

Roman Hänsler, Head of PR, Editor-in-Chief, Founder