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Social Media – Sharing, Publishing, Networking

Social media tools have an enormous power to put users in contact with thousands of other people. Social media is the umbrella term used to define the various activities that “integrate technology and social interaction... enhancing people’s capacity to communicate with other people” (Bornman 2008); emphasising “the importance of interaction, the consumer and the community” (Universal McCann 2008, p10). As previously stated, ‘Web 2.0’ is “collaborative” (Bass 2008, p30), a product of user interaction and the generation of content, rather than the simple consumption of it (Singel 2005). Social media revolves around “building a community” (Franklin 2008, p39): utilising the Internet and ‘Web 2.0’ technologies to pull the power of “collective intelligence” (Bray 2005), such that “anyone and everyone can create, shape and transmit information” (Kenton 2007). The key driver of social media is the accessibility and ease of use, for even the least technical of users is able to contribute to the Internet (Universal McCann 2008, p10), with the ability to “publish and distribute their ideas to an astonishingly broad audience” (Kenton 2007).

The social Web is the venue, “the online place where people can gather” (Volpe 2007). Key social platforms include, but are not limited to, blogs, RSS (Really Simple Syndication), widgets, chat rooms, Pod-casts, photo and video sharing websites, and online social networks (Universal McCann 2008, p11). The common defining factor is that all invite participation, communication and collaboration, and all utilise various aspects made feasible via ‘Web 2.0’ technologies. These can be categorised into three groups - Sharing, Publishing and Networking (Volpe 2007) - although most social platforms tend to include elements of each of these. With the Internet developing so rapidly, the above examples of social platforms may speedily evolve or be superseded by other innovations.

Sharing tools and websites are based around the aspect of promoting anything on the Web to everyone; “sharing your Web” (Volpe 2007). This can comprise the sharing of pictures, videos and other media, including the linking of websites. Users have been given the ability to share and discover content from anywhere on the Web. As the Internet continues to grow, sharing increases the chances to discover even “the most obscure content” (Digg 2008), which may otherwise go unnoticed. Websites such as Digg <www.digg.com>, which “provide a place where people can collectively determine the value of content” (Digg 2008), can influence consumers’ decision-making processes and the websites that they visit. Sharing sites can also appear in the form of social book-marking sites, such as StumbleUpon <www.stumbleupon.com>. Through a rating system, like-minded people are informed about content, thus taking members directly to websites matching their personal interests and preferences (StumbleUpon 2008).

The emphasis of sharing is on the users, employing “non-hierarchical editorial control” (Editor 2005). The sharing of content can easily result in the driving of “thousands of visitors to your site in a very short time” (WordPress 2007). Sharing gives “every piece of content on the Web an equal shot at being the next big thing” (Digg 2008), expanding the potential visibility of the most unique content that may otherwise remain unnoticed. Sharing amplifies the suitability and magnitude of word-of-mouth communication over the Internet (Strauss & Frost 1999, p261); as easily as forwarding an e-mail, people are forwarding whole content and websites. This emerging facet has significant implications for SMM.

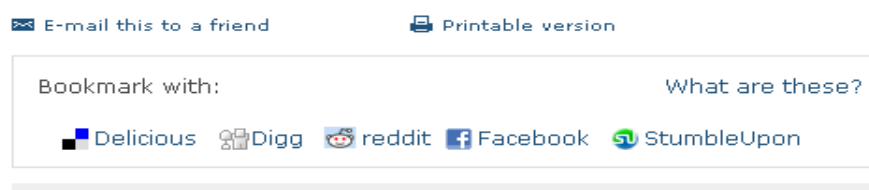


Fig. 1. An Example of Sharing Functions As Featured On A Website. (Source: www.bbc.co.uk)

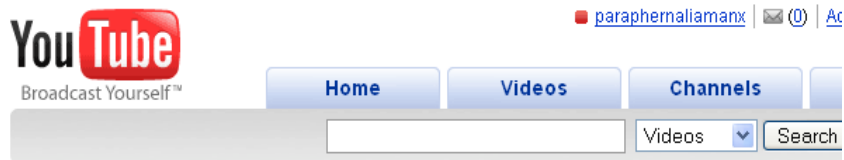
Publishing websites, also referred to as “content communities” (Mayfield 2007, p26), allow everyone to publish anything on any topic, which can be viewed by the whole community or

a pre-selected audience. Publishing websites allow their members to upload content for members or non-members to view, and to browse content others have uploaded. The most popular publishing-based website is YouTube <www.youtube.com>, which allows its members to upload a variety of videos, and to start conversations through comments on these videos. Viewers and members alike can then share published content across the Web.



Fig. 2. An Example of a Wikipedia Site. Inset: Edit This Page Function. (Source: www.wikipedia.org)

Publishing website audiences are vast, with 100 million videos viewed every day on YouTube alone (Mayfield 2007, p27) and 175,000 new blog entries added every day (Technorati 2008). For ordinary people, publishing websites provide the opportunity for them to become “citizen journalists” (Weber 2007, p3), easily able to publish and share their ideas without editorial restrictions (GlobalVoices 2008), with readers able to engage with the creator “in open conversation” (Technorati 2008). The viral nature of publishing and sharing websites is enormous, and constantly growing as ever more content is being added.



Video Upload (Step 1 of 2)

Title:

Description:

Video Category:

Tags: Tags are keywords used to help people find your video. (space separated)

(* indicates required field)

Fig. 3. A Screenshot of an Upload Page. (Source: www.youtube.com)

Social networking gives anyone the ability to connect with “everyone from anywhere on a single platform” (Volpe 2007). “Networks exist when many nodes (or people) are linked to many other nodes” (Barney 2004, p2), allowing people to “manage, maintain, and enhance [their] social connections” (Abram & Pearlman 2008, p9) via an online platform, building connections with others, whether “friends, people with similar interests, [or] potential employers” (Polanosky 2007). The larger the membership of a social network, the better quality the connections can be; though this can take time as communities ‘evolve’ as opposed to being created (Wildbit 2005, p6). Networking covers all areas of the social media landscape, bringing them all together in one venue, whilst creating a “rich customer experience-sharing platform” (Klaassen 2007).

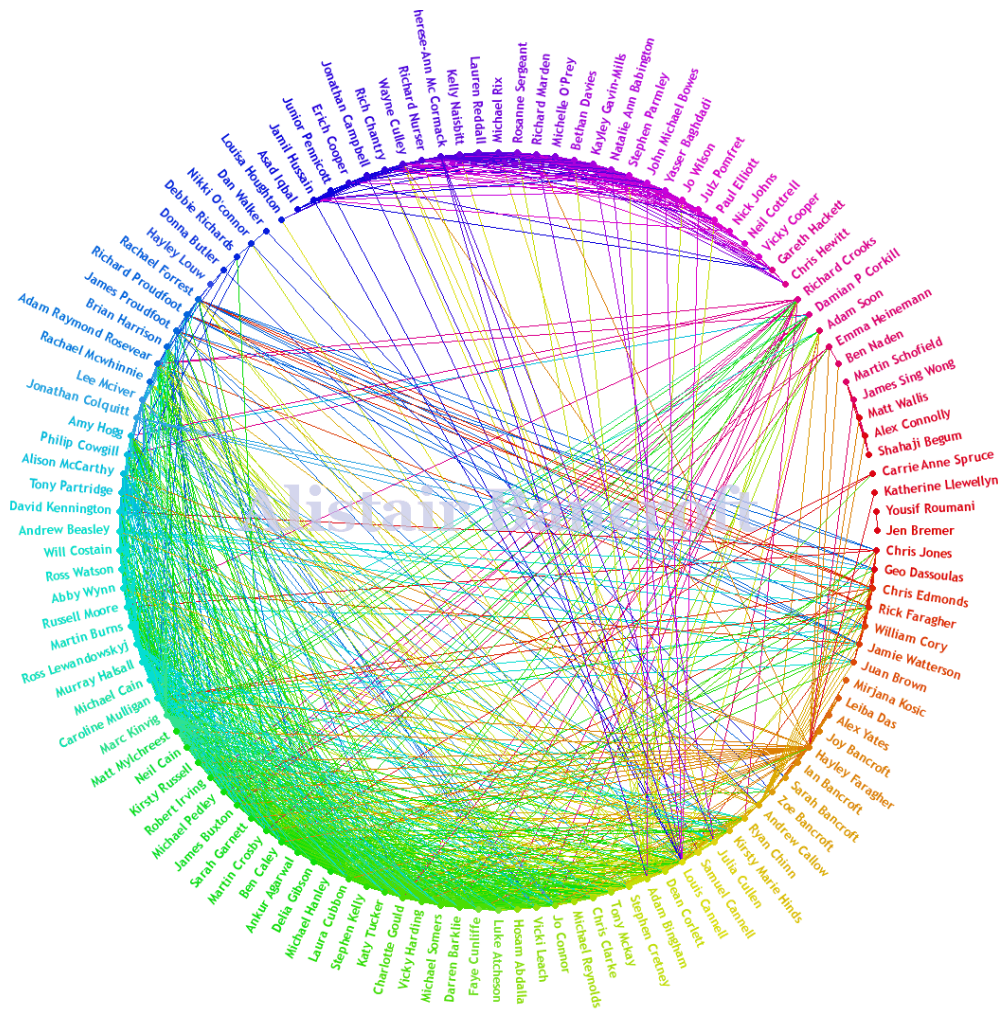


Fig. 4. Example of an OSN. 124 nodes and 1225 links. (Source: www.facebook.com)

OSNs facilitate the “real, human level connection” (Carfi & Chastaine 2007, p3) of which human beings naturally crave (Carfi & Chastaine 2007, p1). Consumers are always looking for new ways to communicate, and as social media becomes a “mainstay in Internet culture” (Nicole 2007) it proves to be more than just a passing fad (Brazeal 2007; Burns 2008). Growth in social media has exploded “regardless of wider economic, social and cultural development” (Universal McCann 2008, p5). Social media Web traffic has more than doubled from 5.3% in 2006 to 12% in 2007 (Lopez 2007), whilst in the UK in 2007, social media Websites accounted for 7.04% of all upstream online traffic (Goad 2008). OSNs make up the majority of this traffic: Worldwide in 2008, 57.5% of Internet users were members of

OSNs, more than doubling since 2006, “making it the number one platform for creating and sharing content” (Universal McCann 2008, p37).

Findings from a Forrester survey (cited by Lopez 2007) suggest that 18-21 year olds are the greatest participants in OSNs, both in terms of active creation of content and as passive spectators. An emerging pattern reveals that as age rises, activity tends to fall, with seniors aged 62 plus the least active. However, the older generation are revealed to be more competent collectors of information, as opposed to being contributors (Lopez 2007). These results can be attributable to the fact that the younger generation make up the majority users of new media technologies, being more socially adaptable and aware to communicating over these new media.

Two of the largest and most reported networks are MySpace <www.myspace.com> and Facebook <www.facebook.com>, although there are rising numbers of ‘white-label’ social networks that enable customer-tailored networks to suit “a range of purposes” (Hendrickson 2007) and niche markets (for example www.dogster.com). Facebook originally launched as an exclusive student-only website in 2004. However, due to the immense media interest and increasing activity it opened up to anyone with an e-mail address from 2006 (Arrington 2006; CrunchBase 2008).

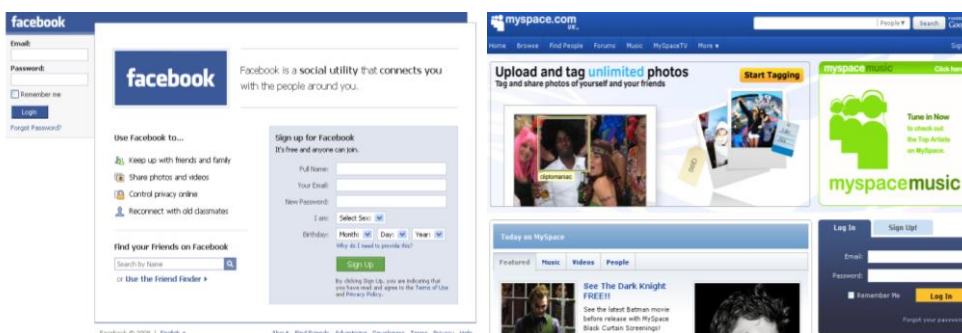


Fig. 5. Online Social Network Welcome Pages. (Source: www.facebook.com & www.myspace.com)

Since then Facebook has nearly doubled its user base from 19 million users to almost 35 million (ComScore 2008). However, the market leader MySpace has failed to maintain growth to the same level, with niche networks producing the greatest percentage change in the same period (ComScore 2007; FaberNovel 2007). This may have been a knock-on impact of MySpace struggling to extract value from its business model, mining users' information to heavily target them with advertorial content (McIntyre 2008). Furthermore, Facebook's members are 'active', with an estimated 93% logging on at least once a month, 85% at least once a week and 60% at least once a day (May & Kwong 2007, p2). Facebook is rapidly changing the face of OSNs, making other networks question their own business models. Facebook utilises a 'stripped down' design in contrast to MySpace, which looks like "Times Square at night" (O'Brien 2007). Facebook also employs 'limited profile' privacy settings that allow users to control who has access to their profile and personal information (Abram & Pearlman 2008, p57). By reducing the barriers to joining OSNs, Facebook has been able to attract a wider audience of users, making it easier and safer to use, by giving more control to the user.

The profile is the central point of the network, being "a page about you that you keep up to date with all the information you want people to know" (Abram & Pearlman 2008, p11) and displaying an online reflection of the user's "individual identity" (Carfi & Chastaine 2007, p1). The profile includes information of the interests, likes and dislikes of the user, and acts as a holding page displaying all published and shared content uploaded or linked. The profile also features a 'wall' where interaction occurs, as well a mini feed displaying the user's most recent actions. Up to 55.1% of users upload photos to their profile, whilst 21.9% upload videos (Universal McCann 2008, p38). The most common form of interaction is messaging,

with 74% of users messaging friends, whilst 30.8% of users write a blog (Universal McCann 2008, p38).



Fig. 6. Facebook Profile Page Screenshot. (Source: www.facebook.com)

A further growing trend is the installation of applications, also known as widgets (Mayfield 2007, p14), a trend encouraged by Facebook opening up its code to enable “anyone to develop applications and run them... without a charge” (Mayfield 2007, p14). Applications allow users to further personalise their profile and engage with other users in the network; as your profile grows, so does “the opportunity to find more connections” (Polanosky 2007). Applications also increase the user’s potential time spent on the site in-line with the increased activities (Wildbit 2005, p6). The scope of open source ‘widgets’ or applications opens up an entire new dimension for SMM.

The largest application that brings users together is ‘groups’. Groups can be leveraged to stimulate measurable discussion, generate community engagement and as a promotion

implement, and can be based around anything the creator likes (Groups 2008). In the recent US primary elections, Barack Obama used Facebook groups to build a “one million strong support” (Obama 2008) to generate interest in and contribute to his on-going campaign. The total number of groups is impossible to measure as new groups appear every minute on a myriad of topics; however, the growth in the number of members is substantial, with the largest of groups alone attracting communities of over two million members (Facebook Groups 2008).



Fig. 7a. Facebook Friends and Personal, Recently Joined Group Pages. (Source: www.facebook.com)
 Fig. 7b. Group “Jeremy Clarkson should be Prime Minister” Screenshot. (Source: www.facebook.com)

Bibliography available on request. info@animanx.com