

What are Social Media?

Social media refer to on-line tools used by people to connect to others electronically. Connections are made through the world wide web using social network sites (SNS) specifically created for this purpose. Popular sites include MySpace, Facebook and Friendster, which are free. The sites are supported by advertising embedded on the pages next to user-generated content, which can include text, pictures and video.

Social networks can be thought of as public or semi-public forums. They allow people to maintain or create relationships and meet on-line for conversation and collaboration. These relationships can be with one person, a few, or many people.

The first recognizable social network site, called SixDegrees, appeared in 1997. It allowed users to create a personal profile that other visitors could view, list their Friends and surf the Friends lists. These features, plus the ability to send and receive messages and pictures, are the basic attractions for users of SNSs.

Ten years ago there were hundreds of thousands of SNS users. Today, there are hundreds of *millions* of users. Facebook alone claims more than 200 hundred million users world-wide. The sites are wildly popular with young people, but according to Inside Facebook, a site which tracks Facebook growth, the biggest increase in users lately has been among women 55 and older.

Social network sites are often socially organized, seeking broad membership among people who want to create or be a part of a virtual community of friends and family. Professional SNSs like LinkedIn and Xing focus on business people. Other sites attract strangers with shared interests. Examples include: Dogster [dog lovers]; Care2 [activists]; MyChurch [Christian church-goers], and BlackPlanet [African Americans]. Some media-sharing sites have morphed into social network sites. Examples include Flickr, Last.FM and YouTube. A number of blogging tools have also incorporated SNS features.

Although interest-centric SNSs have proliferated, social network sites are structured as *personal* networks. The user is the center of his or her digital community, and this community often reflects and supports pre-existing social relations. Research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 91% of US teens who use SNSs do so to connect with friends. Other research suggests SNSs support sociability among young users in a way similar to meeting in actual public spaces.

In 2008, 35 % of adult Internet users had created a social network profile, quadruple the percentage in 2005.

75 % of Internet users aged 18-24 have a social network profile.

55 % of all online American youths ages 12-17 use online social networking sites.

About 7 % of people older than 65 have online social-networking profiles.

Pew Internet & American Life Project survey, December 2008

Examples of Social Media

Social Network	Started	Initial Users	Current Users	Number of Users
Facebook	2004	College students	General interest	200 million
MySpace	2003	Young music lovers	General interest; younger	100 million
LinkedIn	2003	Professionals	Professionals	30 million
Twitter	2006	General	Male professionals; general	13 million

Facebook and MySpace

In the US, Facebook recently overtook MySpace in popularity. Both sites offer users social media tools like profile pages and the ability to generate and share text and visual content with Friends that the user selects or approves. As with most SNSs, users tend to be younger, but the fastest growing demographic for Facebook is women 55 and older. Reasons for older people joining: keep up with family and friends, sharing photos, joining groups for discussion about causes, books or favorite hobby.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is aimed directly at professionals and others in the business community. Many business people use this SNS as a true networking tool, maintaining extensive, sophisticated contact lists.

Twitter

The original idea behind Twitter: post very short - 140 characters or less - notes about what you were doing “right now”. Twitter is like a tiny blog [microblog]. You can “follow” others’ postings and others can follow yours. The [Pew Internet & American Life Project](#) reported in a December 2008 survey that 11 percent of online adults in the U.S. had used a service like Twitter.

The trivial nature of many posts [called Tweets] irritate many critics and could account for a retention rate that may be as low as 40% among users. But Twitter is growing at a phenomenal rate – more than 2,500 percent in March 2009. Ease of use and the ability to send messages from mobile devices make “tweeting” attractive to many. Users can pose questions to solve immediate problems, send their followers links to interesting sites and keep up with breaking news by following tweets from news organizations.

Blogs

Blogs are usually created by individuals who go on-line to post commentaries, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video on a regular basis. The ability of readers to interact on the blog by leaving their comments, or posting their own visual materials, is what makes blogs social media.

As recently as 1999 only 23 blogs existed, according to marketing company MondoVox Creative Group. Although the total number of blogs may be as high as 100 million, the number of *active* blogs is probably in the 2-4 million range. Forester Research says that approximately 25% of adult Americans read a blog every month.

The Impact of Social Media on:

Traditional Media

The public media – newspapers, magazines, commercial and public radio and television broadcasters – have played an important role in sustaining our democracy. But the media landscape is moving away from top-down dissemination of information to an open, peer-to-peer [or “many-to-many”] model. The new media – especially those that are web-based – are challenging the traditional “one-to-many” schemes that have been used since the founding of the country. These older ways of getting information that many of us grew up with are already being referred to as “legacy” media – meaning, left-over, out-of-date remnants of the past. Commercial media still hold a dominant position, but as people spend less time with older media, advertisers are moving online to new platforms, including social networks. Broadcasters currently reach more people, but their slice of the media pie is getting smaller.

New business models are emerging and adjusting to evolving media habits. These new ways of interacting with media are transforming everything from retail to politics.

Led by “digital natives” – those born after 1980 – media users now:

- Actively seek out and retrieve content, instead of waiting for it to be delivered
- Create their own original content using text, audio, video and photos
- Use social network sites to share thoughts and take social or political action

In the past, none of these activities were possible using traditional media.

Politics

The new media – elements of which have been around for more than a decade – have grown in popularity to the point that they are now true Mass Media. Some have tagged them “public media 2.0” [two point ‘O’], to indicate progression to a new stage in their development.

“Multiplatform, participatory, and digital, public media 2.0 will be an essential feature of truly democratic public life from here on in. And it’ll be media both for and by the public. The grassroots mobilization around the 2008 electoral campaign is just one signal of how digital tools for making and sharing media open up new opportunities for civic engagement.”

Public Media 2.0: Dynamic, Engaged Publics
Center for Social Media [Feb. 2009]

This rosy forecast is not shared by everyone.

Large institutions—including political campaigns, businesses, universities, and foundations—are now adopting social media forms, such as blogs and user forums. The ownership of social network tools, applications and platforms is becoming more consolidated. Google now owns YouTube and

Blogger, Yahoo took over Flickr; WordPress, Facebook, and Twitter are all in the sights of large corporations. While consolidation can bring new business models, it also can create powerful stakeholders, narrow the range of options available and stifle innovation.

Some media and legal scholars worry that the technology itself may encourage a different sort of consolidation -- one that allows internet users to screen out everything they don't want to see or hear. The tools exist to tailor a completely self-selected media environment, where the user receives only those messages that conform to and reinforce his or her opinions and beliefs. In a system of highly personalized information, what happens when shared experience -- which many believe is the cornerstones of democracy -- is replaced by a customized, egocentric communications universe from which every discordant view and foreign idea is filtered out? Is this an area that should be completely governed by individual preference and free market forces, or is there a role for public policy here?

Government

Citizens and governments have embraced the internet as a way of communicating and getting things done. A recent survey by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that of those who had recently experienced a problem with of health, education, taxes, Medicare/Medicaid, employment or social security, 58% had used the internet to get help. Nearly two out of three rated their search "very successful".

Though not a true social network site -- visitors can't interact, other than via e-mail -- the www.louisiana.gov site provides a wealth of information on state governmental departments. The state legislature site provides information on the status of bills and even streaming video of some committee hearings and floor debates.

Citizens have taken the lead in employing social networks to advance their causes. In Baton Rouge, bicyclist Taylor Alexander and others created louisiana3feet.com, an on-line forum to generate ideas on how to make cycling safer in Louisiana. The group was prompted to action after a car killed fellow cyclist Collen Gautier on River Road. They decided to promote a law this legislative session requiring motorists to keep at least three feet away from bicyclists when passing.

According to Alexander, *"Most cyclists in Louisiana are members of a Yahoo group where they plan rides or promote functions, so we sent messages to those groups. We also posted frequently on Facebook and I created a cause on Facebook called 'Help Make LA 3 Feet A Law'."* She also used a site called iPetitions.com. Alexander says, *"Within five days, we had over 1,500 signatures and many of those had great comments in support of the bill."* The bill's sponsor, Representative Michael Jackson (D) Baton Rouge, told Alexander that fellow legislators have said that they've gotten more calls and e-mails about this bill than any other so far this session.

Education

In spite of the great popularity of social network site with teens – or perhaps, because of it – many educational institutions have a negative view of SNSs. More than half or all school districts specifically prohibit any use of such sites in school, according to a recent study conducted by Grunwald Associates in cooperation with the National School Boards Association [NSBA].

Joel Hilbun is the co-director of the Academy of Information Technology at Carencro High School. The Academy offers students a concentration of technology courses. Hilbun says, *“As a matter of policy our district blocks access to social networking sites.”* He says his students cannot log onto My Space or Facebook. *“That’s a shame because I think there’s a great potential in education if it’s monitored correctly and used correctly. But that’s kind of a new way of thinking I guess it’s still thought of by many people as just entertainment; just light and casual contact with people and so it’s blocked.”*

Nine-to-17-year-olds report spending about 9 hours a week using social network services, but apparently it’s not all small talk and chit chat. The NSBA study says nearly 60 percent of them talk about education topics on-line, and more than 50 percent talk specifically about school work.

While school policies show skepticism about the educational value of SNSs, nearly all schools surveyed say that at least some of their teachers are using web pages to communicate assignments and other information. Less than a third of district leaders believe that social network sites could help students improve their reading or writing. More than three out of four parents, however, say they think social networks can improve reading and writing skills.

Another reason cited by schools for barring access to SNSs is a fear of negative experiences, such as cyberbullying and unwelcome personal encounters. But the NSBA study says parents and students alike report few such incidents. Only 3 percent of students say they’ve given out their e-mail addresses, instant messaging screen names or other personal information to strangers. According to the report, *“The vast majority of students, then, seem to be living by the online safety behaviors they learn at home and at school.”*

Here are some of the ways students are using social network sites for educational purposes:

- Comparing notes on school assignments
- Collaborating with peers on class projects
- Soliciting feedback on their individual assignments

Some universities have begun exploring ways to use SNSs:

- State University of New York in Plattsville, recently created a Facebook application that allows new and current students to interact through a trivia game about the school.
- Harvard produced a Facebook application called H-Link that allows users to find students online who are taking the same courses, so they can network and form study groups.

Business

Schools are not the only social media skeptics. Thousands of employers have banned SNSs in the workplace, fearing a lowering of productivity. [A recent study by AT&T reports that 65% of respondents claimed SNSs made them *more* efficient. Most of the social networking tools cited, however, were internal company-run sites.]

But there is growing interest by businesses in using social media for marketing purposes. The Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, for instance, has set up a Facebook page; a Twitter account; YouTube for video and Flickr for image sharing.

Marketing guru Paul Chaney works for Bizzuka, a Web site design and content management service provider in Lafayette. He thinks the increased use of social network sites will lead to a post-mass marketing era – what he calls “human marketing”. He says, *“Social media engender trust ... the building of personal relationships. What you’re seeing is people are engaging with companies and brands, but it’s really the representatives – it’s the personnel that makes up those companies that they’re engaging with.”*

Some observers are concerned about the commercialization of a virtual space originally created for interpersonal communication. Not that SNSs have been commercial-free – advertising is an ever-present feature of these sites. But there have already been instances of spamming, and privacy issues – apart from identity theft – worry some users. They complain that they have little or no say in how passively transferred, seemingly innocuous information is collected, analyzed and used by companies trying to sell things to them.

Chaney sees the risks of over-commercialization, but says that marketers who violate the unwritten rules of the game will be penalized by the virtual community. *“One rule,”* he says, *“is ‘don’t connect with me if the only thing you want to do is pitch to me’.”*

Chaney’s thoughts on social media go beyond mere business transactions. He believes these new tools can have a transformational effect on American culture.

Chaney says, “I think one of the things it does it puts people on a common ground; people from different backgrounds; different socioeconomic backgrounds; different religious backgrounds; different political points of view can come together via this medium and get to know one another. And I think social media really helps to foster those things that bind us together bring us together rather than those things that keep us apart.”

Problems

The same dangers that can be encountered in surfing the internet, or even opening your e-mail, may be found in social network sites.

Some sites, notably Facebook recently, have had problems with the use of third-party software [“apps”]. These apps can be downloaded by users to customize their personal pages, but some can facilitate internet scams or harm the user’s computer through the use of “malware” – programs designed with malicious intent.

Though often highlighted in the media, research suggests that inappropriate interactions between adults and minors are rare on SNSs. Most observers agree, however, that precautions need to be taken to protect privacy as much as possible. These include avoiding the indiscriminate posting of personal information that could be used to locate an individual, or that could lead to identity theft [including social security number]. Some would include revealing one’s date of birth as a breach of personal security.

MySpace user and recent Carencro High School graduate Derrick Picard says, “The downside to any social networking site is kind of that fear of not knowing who’s on the other end. I get Friend requests all the time and my thing is, if I don’t know the person personally, I really won’t accept it.”



Tune into LPB to view *Louisiana Public Square's* “The Power of Social Networks” Wednesday, May 27th at 7 p.m. and Sunday, May 31st at 3 p.m.

You can continue the discussion in an online chat, Thursday, May 28th from 2 to 3 p.m. Have your questions answered live by Monica Ford, computer forensics examiner for the state Attorney General's Office and Alexandyr Kent, online producer for *The Shreveport Times*.

Visit www.lpb.org/publicsquare and click on the “live chat” link to join in!