

Social Media Communication Tools

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The evolution of communication tools was described in a previous article, "On-line Communication Tools—An Overview" (*Fair & Equitable*, July 2007, Vol. 5, No. 7). Early communication forms rapidly evolved from cave paintings at Lascaux, to written language, to the Gutenberg Press in 1436, to the twentieth century's mass media, such as the printed word, radio, and television. Today, the Internet and countless online applications offer new communication choices.

This article discusses the proliferation of online communication choices that fall under the broad umbrella of *social media* and the ramifications of using these tools. First, an overview of social media, including its hazards and pitfalls, benefits, the factors motivating participation, and profits, advertising, and viral marketing, is presented. Then, examples of more popular social media communications tools, such as blogs, texting, and Twitter, are discussed in greater depth because they are generating so much current interest.

Overview of Social Media

Social media encompasses multiple Web communication technologies and crosses boundaries with traditional mass media—television, radio, and print. Social media is not a pre-defined set of delivery tools; rather, it is a philosophy of how to use the online tools that are available. Almost all forms of traditional mass media have expanded to include a presence on the Internet and ties to social media outlets. The world of telephony has also expanded into social media with its portable wireless devices, iPhones, texting, and microblogging services. All these choices are competing for a slice of your communications world.

Branded social media sites such as Facebook, friendfeed, Plaxo, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and delicious, online aggregators such as Digg, and countless blog sites and texting services have blurred the lines between communication categories by expanding the tools and rules for individual and corporate expression. However, they all fall within the scope

of social media. In the broadest sense, "Social Media is online content created by people using highly accessible and scalable publishing technologies" (Wikipedia contributors, "Social media," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Social_media&oldid=300069392 [accessed July 3, 2009]).

Each social media communication tool or product struggles to distinguish itself from countless competing choices and establish a significant following. Understanding the proliferation of online communication tools presents a dizzying prospect to the uninitiated. The challenge is to prioritize these choices so that they are productive and meaningful. This prioritization process also involves balancing time and resources (both personal and business). Otherwise, a user can become lost in a sea of pointless babble, misinformation, commercial greed, and lowest-common-denominator thinking.

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Communication tools are intended to share meaningful information that provides real-life benefits to users; this is why people are so interested in having different communication options. Styles and methods of communication come and go, but the premise is that people choose to communicate in ways that best suit their purposes and needs. Does it make any difference if the method of communication is modern, trendy,

and fashionable (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and so on), rather than what's been around for a long time (the telephone, letters, fax messages)? Perhaps not. Nevertheless, there should be a basic understanding of the choices available and the implications of those choices.

Identifying *best practices* for communication tools can be difficult at best. The challenge is to first understand the purposes and needs of communication; then it is this understanding that leads to determining the best tools for the job. With the wide array of communication choices available, the inclination is to randomly try new tools in the hope that answers will present themselves along the way. Or the new communication options can be ignored in order to cling to what the user knows and is comfortable with. Moreover, people are prone to use new communication tools in the same way they have used traditional forms of communication. It can be difficult to adopt new communication paradigms unless they can be related to the traditional experience or the user is especially adept at adjusting to ever-evolving cultural innovations.

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User Beware

Online communication tools, especially high profile branded sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, have a great potential for misuse. To appreciate the benefits of social media (discussed later), it helps to first understand the hazards and pitfalls so they can be avoided and a positive social media experience can be

achieved. Understanding what not to do can make it easier to take that first step and dive into the world of social media.

Popular media are filled with reports of online fraud, identity theft, self-incrimination, and deliberate misrepresentation. A casual Google search for the words "Facebook crime" returned 43,500,000 results; this is an obvious indication of the growing awareness of online security issues. Uninitiated users may find themselves in trouble if they assume that information they post online is confidential or protected.

The following should *never* be posted on a social media site:

- Personal information, such as street address, date of birth, phone number, and e-mail address
- Dates that you will be out of town on vacation, leaving your home unattended (<http://whostwittinnow.magnify.net/video/Twitter-Crime-A-Growing-Trend>, [accessed July 3, 2009])
- A mention of the \$5,000 diamond ring purchased for that special someone
- Confidential passwords or other sensitive company information
- Photos or descriptions of embarrassing or illegal activities
- Negative comments about your workplace, spouse, boss, friends, coworkers, or anyone else you know
- Anything you wouldn't want your mother to see
- Anything you wouldn't want the rest of the world to see.

The media are full of reports of people who posted all or some of the above and paid the price, ranging from social embarrassment to jail. A few unfortunate individuals have become victims of harassment, personal injury, and even death. In February 2009, Reuters reported that MySpace had deleted or blocked approximately 90,000 accounts set up by registered sex offenders over the past two years (<http://www.reuters.com/article/technologyNews/idUSTRE51278C20090204> [accessed August 18, 2009]).

This report should shatter any misconceptions about who is out there waiting for an opportunity to take advantage of

personal information. A recent court decision in California (*Moreno v. Hanford Sentinel, Inc.* [2009], Cal.App.4th) found that posts on MySpace do not enjoy privacy rights and do not require consent to be republished elsewhere. According to the California 5th District Court of Appeal, the defendant's "affirmative act made her article available to any person with a computer and thus opened it to the public eye. Under these circumstances, no reasonable person would have had an expectation of privacy regarding the published material" (McKee 2009). The message to social media users, MySpace users in particular, is don't post information if you want to control where it might appear.



Posting to the MySpace karaoke site is an example of something you might want to think twice about (<http://ksolo.myspace.com/actions/showSongProfile.do?id=1447635&uid=8540553&sid=28897> [accessed August 6, 2009]).

In February 2009, the question of who owns the information posted on Facebook arose when the company updated its terms of use to no longer allow users to delete their data if and when they leave the service. Owner Mark Zuckerberg posted a clarifying message on the Facebook Blog saying that Facebook would *never* misuse information stored on Facebook pages. What is most interesting is that Zuckerberg does not publicly share most of his Facebook information. In July 2009, Facebook's Chief Privacy Officer, Chris Kelly, introduced stronger privacy tools

to allow users more control over their information. Facebook also continues to provide assurances that it will not misuse the personal information of Facebook users or make it accessible to advertisers.

Some interesting statistics about Facebook are as follows:

- Facebook has more than 250 million active users.
- The fastest growing age group of users is those 35 years old and older.
- More than 30 million active users currently access Facebook through their mobile devices.
- People who use Facebook on their mobile devices are almost 50 percent more active on Facebook than non-mobile users.
- More than 1 billion pieces of content (Web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photos, and the like) are shared each week.
- About 70 percent of Facebook users are outside the United States. (<http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics> [accessed August 13, 2009])

In light of these statistics, privacy and content ownership issues are likely to become more important in the online world.

Social networks are being identified as a key target for hackers, but a major concern in the working world is employee judgment. Employees who go online and do foolish things, such as making inappropriate remarks about coworkers, customers, or business practices or posting confidential passwords, have the potential to cause irreconcilable damage to their own reputations and to their workplace (<http://gigaom.com/2009/05/05/biggest-danger-on-social-networks-isn-t-hackers-its-dumb-employees/> [accessed August 11, 2009]). Some companies bar employee access to social media sites, not only because of obvious productivity issues but also because of real dangers related to usage of these sites.

The good news is that if you are careful and follow sensible guidelines, then social media tools offer many benefits, which are considered later in this article.

Another issue is the accuracy of information available from online sources. A well-publicized story on CBSNEWS announced that the files of both President Barack Obama and Senator John McCain were hacked into during last year's presidential campaign (<http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/05/29/politics/politicalhotsheet/entry5049271.shtml> [accessed August 11, 2009]). The German edition of Wikipedia was reported to have been hacked to download malware (short for malicious software) (<http://www.itwire.com/content/view/6921/52/> [accessed August 11, 2009]).

Individual users of social media would do well to imitate the practices of traditional mass media, which use more than one source to verify their information. If you find information claiming to be factual on a blog or anywhere else on the Internet, try to verify it by comparison with reports on other sites or in traditional mass media. Because unconfirmed rumors can spread across the Internet in minutes, it is easy for the same alleged news to appear in multiple places and still be untrue. Quantity does not necessarily mean quality. Seeking confirmation from more authoritative sources is a best practice that should not be ignored. The more important and/or critical the information, the more thoroughly it should be verified before conclusions are drawn or it is repeated.

The Positives

There are many benefits of social media, but they are sometimes exaggerated by service providers, which are motivated by commercial gain. Careful analysis and a healthy skepticism are required to determine the specific benefits for individual users or companies.

Critics and evangelists alike acknowledge that social media is here to stay and will eventually provide significant benefits for those who can adapt to the ever-changing landscape of choices. It is a powerful way to share ideas so they can develop quickly. Users should understand in advance what they want to accomplish using online communication tools. However, many users simply dive in and start experimenting without any idea of or expectation for the final result. A large number of social media tools are free or low cost, encouraging participation and experimentation with different communication techniques. Social media tools are increasingly accessible, through home computers, portable wireless devices, and library and school programs.

What Sites Are the Most Popular?

Table 1 lists the top 30 U.S. sites according to the Quantcast ranking, based on number of monthly visits. Table 2 lists the top 30 sites, based on the number of monthly visits, according to an Alexa Top Sites in the United States report. These

Table 1. U.S. site rankings according to a Quantcast report

1. google.com	7. microsoft.com	13. blogspot.com	19. answers.com	25. walmart.com
2. yahoo.com	8. wikipedia.org	14. ask.com	20. adobe.com	26. twitter.com
3. msn.com	9. myspace.com	15. amazon.com	21. wordpress.com	27. paypal.com
4. facebook.com	10. ebay.com	16. mapquest.com	22. windows.com	28. espn.go.com
5. live.com	11. aol.com	17. about.com	23. photobucket.com	29. att.com
6. youtube.com	12. craigslist.org	18. weather.com	24. bing.com	30. imbd.com

Source: <http://www.quantcast.com/top-sites-1>, accessed July 28, 2009

Table 2. U.S. top sites according to an Alexa report*

1. google.com	7. msn.com	13. twitter.com	19. wordpress.com	25. weather.com
2. yahoo.com	8. wikipedia.org	14. amazon.com	20. microsoft.com	26. about.com
3. facebook.com	9. craigslist.org	15. go.com	21. photobucket.com	27. nytimes.com
4. youtube.com	10. ebay.com	16. bing.com	22. imbd.com	28. linkedin.com
5. myspace.com	11. blogger.com	17. cnn.com	23. espn.go.com	29. apple.com
6. live.com	12. aol.com	18. flickr.com	24. comcast.net	30. an x-rated access site

Source: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries;1/US>, accessed July 28, 2009

*Rankings are limited to U.S. only in order to avoid listing sites that appear in other languages.

data snapshots tell an interesting story about what is important in the online world and provide fodder for endless speculation and discussion. For instance, do these rankings reflect economic, social, marketing, or other influences? Regardless of why people visit these sites, the tables clearly indicate that social media sites are a prominent part of the online communication mix.

Factors Motivating Participation in Online Communities

If common-sense precautions are observed, participation in online communities using social media tools presents a low-risk way to reach both large and potential target audiences. Because there is little financial risk, online communities tend to experiment with lots of ideas (both good and bad) and niche interest areas in the hopes of finding a responsive, interested audience. In a 2009 presentation, "Forging a New Trail with a Web 2.0 Compass," Will Fisher of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association defined social media in part as "building community through user participation and user-generated content" (Fisher 2009). This view illustrates both the strength and the weakness of social media—they are totally dependent on the level of interest and dedication of the participants. Thus, smaller communities such as nonprofit associations and government offices with limited budgets may be challenged when maintaining a presence on social media sites.

There is a danger that the *community* will be dominated by a few individuals who control and direct the information-sharing and community-building process. In order for smaller groups to find productive uses for social media, they need to understand and carefully manage the resources needed to maintain a sustainable presence. In spite of claims that online communities build themselves through volunteer efforts, it is usually a few key individuals who exert the effort to maintain a site until it reaches self-sustaining participation levels.

Time Savings. Time savings is a key motivating factor in the use of online communication tools, including social media. In the world of the Internet, a great deal can

be accomplished in a short time by using online bill paying, e-commerce, marketing, news reporting, and other information systems. If a task can be accomplished more quickly without a loss of quality and effectiveness, it has to be good—right? For better or for worse, online communication has accelerated exponentially due to increased access to the Internet and an expanded choice of tools.

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Feedback. Social media offers unprecedented opportunities to accelerate the communication process and obtain rapid feedback on any topic. This easy access to ideas and opinions is an important component of consensus building within an online community. With many ideas being shared at the same time, there is the hope that some of the better ideas will naturally float to the top.

Organization. Social media allows interest groups to explore new ways to organize. Traditional in-person meetings are constrained by physical distance, travel costs, and time. Social media tools have the potential to fill the gap and allow groups to get organized online.

One issue that social media users face is how to keep up with the ever-expanding choice of products. New social media organization tools, aggregators, and updaters are being developed on an ongoing basis. These tools specifically manage a multitude of sites by providing centralized access, single-point status updating, and the ability to organize connections such that users do not have to log on to many separate sites. Popular social media organizers are Hellotxt (<http://hellotxt.com/>), Ping.fm (<http://ping.fm/>), Sendible (<http://www.sendible.com/>),

Socialthing! (<http://socialthing.com/>), Minggl (<http://www.minggl.com/>), Digsby (<http://www.digsby.com/>), and G Zapage (<http://www.gzapage.com/#>). The list is endless and constantly changing. Many of these products are in beta versions, and users should read the terms of use before trying them.

The major social media sites have also jumped into this arena by offering aggregating tools on their sites. Now the only difficulty is selecting the organization tool most appropriate for a user's needs and purposes.

Promotion. Social media sites provide multiple avenues for promoting a brand or product. For those who have something to sell or promote, presuming people want it, social media tools allow them to maintain a pervasive presence. An example of promotion by saturation is the social media sites of U.S. President Barack Obama, who sets a political precedent with his overwhelming use of social media, as follows:

- <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/>
- <http://www.facebook.com/WhiteHouse>
- <http://twitter.com/whitehouse>
- <http://www.myspace.com/whitehouse>
- <http://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse>
- <http://www.youtube.com/whitehouse>
- <http://www.vimeo.com/whitehouse>
- <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hqblog/>.

He also has a link to the iTunes store where visitors can access his video podcasts.

Did the use of social media tools help his campaign? Who knows? Did it hurt his campaign? Doubtful. Does it provide an opportunity for increased awareness of political issues for a whole new generation of voters? Absolutely!

Flexibility. Social media in all its forms provides an incredibly flexible selection of tools that are capable of organically changing and adapting to the communication needs of users. As stated previously, social media is not a predefined set of delivery tools; rather, it is a philosophy



of how to use the online tools that are available. It is capable of changing and adapting to meet the preferences of users and making allowances for individual creative expression. If needs change, the tools can change to meet the new needs. Compared to traditional mass media, online communities are not restricted to a fixed schedule, predefined hours of operation, or a single specific delivery mechanism. This blurring of boundaries can be intimidating, but it is also liberating in the sense that participants are free to experiment with how they communicate without severe economic consequence. Twitter is a good example of a social media service that is flexible enough to adapt to how people communicate using wireless services. Twitter recognized that texting could be expanded to become essentially a broadcasting service for personal updates. Its current popularity is testimony to the power of adapting to meet specific niche needs. (See the detailed discussion of Twitter later in this article.)

Scalability. Internet World Stats estimates that 23.8 percent of the world's population and 74.4 percent of North Americans have access to the Internet (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm> [accessed July 28, 2009]). Everyone and anyone who has access to the Internet and/or wireless telephony services also has access to some form of social media communication. According to a March 2009 report by A.C. Neilson, online member communities (social networks and blogging sites) are the fourth most popular activity on the Internet, behind (1) search engines, (2) general interest portals and communities, and (3) PC software applications. Between December 2007 and December 2008, "the amount of time spent on member-community sites rose by 63 percent," indicating that "social networks and blogs are eating into the share of time held by other sectors." As interest grows in participation in online communities, they are expanding their infrastructure to accommodate the demand.

Because of their tremendous reach, social media tools cannot be ignored as a mass media outlet. These tools also have application for small work groups that do

not necessarily want to participate in mass communication but would rather focus on targeted issues with a select group. Social media allows the user to select the level of organization and size of the community within which to operate.

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Other Advantages. According to one online social media consultant, the advantages of using social media tools are "democratization of media; relationships and conversation; creativity and re-mix culture; embracing your passion and identity; community, sharing, and connecting; and increased transparency in government and organizations" (<http://compassioninpolitics.wordpress.com/2008/02/01/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-social-media/> [accessed July 28, 2009]). There are no doubt many additional benefits that could be listed, depending on the user's particular needs. Much of the hype about social media revolves around buzzwords like democratization and monetization, which can be confusing. In the end, the value of social media communities is judged by the individual or company that chooses to participate.

Profits, Advertising, and Viral Marketing
Certain factions on the Internet have come to believe that all sites related to social media should be free. Some social media evangelists and open-source coalitions contend that online communities can and will sustain themselves without intervention from commercial interests. This cultural phenomenon is well recognized by social media service providers as they attempt to find the magic formula for profitability.

The following are the facts of life:

- Internet service providers are in business to make a profit.
- Telephony providers are in business to make a profit (and succeeding).
- Major social media sites like Facebook and MySpace rely on advertising to pay their way and have a stated intent to make a profit if they have not already done so.
- Hosting services are in the business of making a profit directly from customers sponsoring sites.
- The bottom line is that social media is big business and getting bigger all the time.

Industry pundits generally acknowledge that the magic formula for *monetizing* all these services has not yet been arrived at. Also, it is generally agreed that it is only a matter of time before a solution via trial and error presents itself. Meanwhile, competition for market share of the social media pie is increasingly intense.

According to a March 2009 report on social networking by A.C. Neilson,

Messaging within advertising should come from a more authentic, candid, and humble perspective. Social media has, once again, brought word of mouth to the fore as the ultimate form of advertising at a time when traditional advertising is suffering from a major lack of trust. Nielsen's analysis of social media conversations in 2007 and again in December 2008 showed that "false" was the term most closely associated with "advertising."
(A.C. Nielsen 2009)

Apparently, sincerity means something when it comes to online advertising.

One of the buzzwords in social media is *viral marketing*. The concept of *viral*, or *word-of-mouth*, marketing is tremendously appealing, because personal testimony about products is a powerful way to build credibility for a brand or product. In some instances, particularly in the entertainment industry, it has worked exactly the way it is purported to work. Think of the excitement generated in online media for big-budget fantasy and action films like *Harry Potter and the Halfblood Prince*, *Iron Man*, and *Transformers*—this is the power of viral marketing. A few well-placed trailers have generated an enormous amount of publicity and discussion on social media sites. The record-breaking box office receipts speak for themselves.

There are similar success stories for small businesses that have hit a resonant chord with online communities. My favorite success story for viral marketing is the Blendtek “Will it Blend” series of videos on YouTube. The videos show the

high-end Blendtek grinding, chopping, and blending such items as marbles, diamonds, cell phones, lighters, and glowsticks. The videos have not only attracted attention but also improved the bottom line for the company.

That is the good news. The bad news is that viral marketing does not always work. Some topics simply don’t carry enough emotional excitement to be sustained through a viral campaign. The subject of a viral marketing campaign either has to have broad appeal and built-in fascination or needs to be approached in such an outrageous way that it attracts attention based on presentation.

Viral marketing can also be a double-edged sword when a product, brand or service is being promoting. If a marketing campaign is perceived as deceptive or dishonest, or the product is not up to expectations, the power of social media to denounce it is as powerful as the ability to promote. If viral marketing can be translated into increased sales, growth in membership, enhanced brand recognition, or some other tangible economic indicator, it can be counted as successful.

The Blogosphere

The *Blogosphere* is discussed here as a subset of social media. Blogs are not new, but in the current recessionary economy, there is renewed interest in them because they are an attractive and affordable way to extend traditional print media. Blogs can provide value-enhanced content to supplement other communications channels.

“*Blogosphere* is a collective term encompassing all blogs and their interconnections. It is the perception that blogs exist together as a connected community (or as a collection of connected communities) or as a social network” (Wikipedia contributors, “*Blogosphere*,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Blogosphere&oldid=298562800> [accessed June 25, 2009]).

“A *blog* (a contraction of the term *Web log*) is a type of Web site, usually maintained by an individual who regularly enters commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or vid-

eo. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse chronological order [i.e., the most recent entry is last]. *Blog* can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog” (Wikipedia contributors, “*Blog*,” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Blog&oldid=297295574> [accessed June 19, 2009]).

The content discussed in blogs is limited only by the imagination of the blog originator and covers anything from chicken farms to deep space exploration.

Blogs are not new—they have been around as long as the Internet. They are one of the first and most lasting forms of communication on the Internet. The content discussed in blogs is limited only by the imagination of the blog originator and covers anything from chicken farms to deep space exploration. Yes, even property taxes are discussed.

Blog hosting services are available, usually for a nominal fee. Developer-hosted platforms such as Blogger, MySpace, and Wordpress.com take “tech” out of the picture and allow the blog originator to focus on content rather than delivery (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weblog_software [accessed July 18, 2009]).

Free blog software, such as TypePad, Wordpress, or Blogger, is also available if the originator has a Web server and the technical savvy to set it up. Blog software typically provides utilities to support the authoring, editing, and publishing of blog posts and comments (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weblog_software [accessed July 18, 2009]).

The *blogosphere* is evolving into a mix of traditional text-based Web logs and a vast array of other *social media* and networking tools. As such, it is not so much a defined space as an ever-changing



“Voice of Value”



IAAO videos, produced by the Membership Department, are examples of creative and entertaining viral marketing campaigns that attract positive attention. (<http://www.iaao.org/sitePages.cfm?Page=120>)



milieu of Internet communication tools. Of the aforementioned communication tools, Twitter and similar microblogging services tend to fall within the realm of the blogosphere. Facebook, friendfeed, Plaxo, MySpace, LinkedIn, YouTube, and delicious tend to fall more into the general realm of *social media*. Individual blogs are increasingly being evaluated by Web analysis tools, such as Technorati (<http://technorati.com/> [accessed July 15, 2009]), BlogPulse, Tailrank, and Blogscope. Social media services are also being evaluated by these sites even though they tend to fall outside traditional blog boundaries. These trends continue to blur the lines even more.

Text Messaging

Another communication tool that flirts with the boundaries of social media is text messaging. It can be viewed as a form of blogging on a more personal level. It is one of today's hottest technologies and has spawned a culture of shorthand "cool-speak" that beckons like the sirens calling Ulysses.

R u w/me?
I c u r d 1 to txt w/me.
Pls.
LOL. U tlkn 2 me?
xit. gbfn :)

The rough translation into English reads:

Hello my dear friend. I have not heard from you in a while and I am wondering if you are around? I hope it is not anything I said? I would be greatly pleased if you would engage in an SMS texting session with me. It would be most pleasant and entertaining. It makes me laugh out loud when I think of the good times we have had together. I sincerely hope that we will be talking (texting) soon. It is time for me to go. Good bye for now. I will think only good thoughts for you until we next converse.

It is the ultimate in chic to be able to speak the language and be one of the texting Literati. It is also a well-documented method of communication with the younger generation. When my son gets up in the morning, he sends a text message to let me know he is awake. He is usually only 20 feet away when he does it.

Unlike the blogosphere or branded social media sites, texting is a much more personal and private form of communication. Based on text message volume, its role as a social communication tool cannot be ignored.

Text messaging, or texting, is the sending of short (160 characters or less) messages from wireless mobile devices using the Short Message Service (SMS) protocol. It is available on most digital mobile phones and personal digital assistants with on-board wireless telecommunications. The individual messages are called text messages or, more colloquially, texts or SMS. SMS is just one of the supported features on digital cellular technology networks. Other features of digital cellular technology networks are voice and data communications.



The iPhone (top) is an example of a device supporting SMS services via a touch screen. The LG phone (bottom) features a QWERTY keyboard to facilitate texting plus touch screen capabilities.

The primary use of text messaging is person-to-person communication, but many other potential applications exist. SMS can be used to monitor security system status, stock market price points, home mortgage rate thresholds, or computer server status, or for any other purpose where remote notification of current status is desired. It can also be used to *push* marketing messages to targeted audiences. Services such as jingle (<http://www.jingleblast.com/>), Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com>), and hip-cricket (<http://www.hipcricket.com>) can be used to reach both mass audiences and dedicated audiences for defined business needs. This technology can be used for brand awareness, personal and corporate PR messages, opinion polls, event promotions, product giveaways, and other marketing campaigns. Texting can also be a conduit to other information resources, such as Web sites, phone numbers, or autoresponders that provide requested information on demand.

Text messaging can be used in real estate to provide property information on demand. Real estate agents use it to post property information and photos so they are accessible to mobile device users and to collect contact information from interested customers. A taxing jurisdiction could enhance customer service by accepting text requests for information routinely provided through other channels. Information that can be made accessible through this communication medium includes Web address, contact information, directions to the office, and even appraised property values for individual properties or listings of comparable properties.

As the technology matures, new creative services are being developed on an almost daily basis. Texting is a major source of income for wireless service providers, and it has built-in mechanisms for purchasing text services and products using reverse billing. This feature provides an economic incentive for both service providers and developers of text products. Profit is a powerful motivator when it comes to the development and application of technology.

Twitter

With the escalating popularity of texting, it was inevitable that a system would be developed to expand SMS technology and reach the mass audiences of social networking. Twitter is the system, and it is also one of the most rapidly growing segments of the social media mix. Twitter has expanded beyond the boundaries of texting and propelled itself to prominence in mainstream social media.

Online communication tools are rapidly becoming an essential commodity, but the social media world is still a work in progress and models for successful implementation are still maturing.

Launched in August 2006, Twitter is the hot new social networking and microblogging SMS-based service that allows users to post real-time updates about their activities and subscribe to other users' updates, otherwise known as tweets. Tweets are text-based SMS posts of up to 140 characters. The service is currently free to end users, which distinguishes it from fee-based SMS marketing services (Twitter Inc.'s stated intention is to eventually charge for select services). Another feature that distinguishes Twitter from other SMS-based services is its ability to accept messages from the Web as well as from SMS, mobile Web, instant messaging, and other sources. This strategy has allowed Twitter to proliferate and establish a massive user base in a short time. Even other SMS-based services use Twitter to provide links to their own services (<http://twitter.com/about#about> [accessed July 15, 2009]).

In May 2009 a French hacker claims to have broken into Twitter and gained access to confidential documents that outline plans for Twitter's growth. The documents

were released to TechCrunch (<http://www.techcrunch.com/2009/07/16/twitters-internal-strategy-laid-bare-to-be-the-pulse-of-the-planet/> [accessed July 15, 2009]), which released some of the financial projections. In the documents, Twitter has projected \$400,000 in income in the third quarter of 2009 and \$4 million in the fourth quarter. The company also projects 25 million users by the end of 2009, 100 million users in 2010, and 350 million users in 2011. The accuracy of those projections is questionable, but clearly Twitter has big plans for growth and profit (<http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/15/hacker-exposes-private-twitter-documents/?ref=technology> [accessed July 15, 2009]).

A compelling feature of Twitter is that it allows users to develop a following of individuals that voluntarily sign up to read the user's tweets. In other words, a user can build an audience prequalified as wanting to read what he or she has to say. This can provide a tremendous boost to individual self-confidence if, for example, the user is Shaquille O'Neal, the famous basketball star. O'Neal has developed a cadre of more than 1 million followers who read his daily "Shaqtastic" tweets (http://twitter.com/THE_REAL_SHAQ/). It can also be somewhat deflating if there are only one or two people following a user's tweets—your mother and an unknown stalker. Twitter, like other services tied to social networking, is a window into a user's world. Be careful what you post—remember, your mother and the stalker may be reading everything you post.

Some interesting statistics about Twitter are as follows:

- The average Twitter user has about 10 followers and 10 users.
- 60 percent of Twitter's Web-based traffic comes from outside the United States.
- The top ten non-U.S. countries using Twitter on the Web, in descending order, are Japan, Spain, United Kingdom, Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, and Taiwan (<http://blog.twitter.com/search/label/stats> [accessed June 10, 2009]).

In Iran in June 2009, Twitter was used to communicate with the outside world

and within Iran itself about election results and the riots there. It speaks to the power of Twitter as a real-time communication tool (<http://industry.bnet.com/media/10002704/twitter-users-put-cnn-to-shame-on-iran-riot-coverage/> [accessed June 10, 2009]). When the world-famous singer/entertainer Michael Jackson died in June 2009, it was reported within hours on Twitter and other real-time media sources.

Unfortunately, this form of communication, like other online communication tools, is vulnerable to false reports and hoaxes and has the potential to spread misinformation at an alarming rate. The same week that Michael Jackson died, it was incorrectly reported through online media that film star Jeff Goldblum (among others) had suffered a fatal fall from a cliff while filming in New Zealand. The rumor was quashed when Mr. Goldblum appeared on the late-night Comedy Central show, "The Colbert Report."



Paul is dead and Elvis lives. It is important to check facts when accessing information on social media sites.

During the show he confirmed via tweet that he was in fact alive and well in Los Angeles. Remember the late 1960s urban myth, "Paul is dead?" Beatles hoax? And by the way—Elvis is still alive! Some things never change. Users beware—verification is still an important part of credible mainstream media.

A simple reporting tool, tweetVOLUME (<http://www.tweetvolume.com/>, produced by <http://www.wowzamade.com/> [accessed June 10, 2009]), shows how often words or phrases have appeared on Twitter since its inception in 2006.

A June 28, 2009, tweetVOLUME search showed 9,910,000 occurrences for the name Michael Jackson. In contrast, the search term *property tax* was mentioned only 4,320 times. Apparently, the property tax has a long way to go before it becomes a hot topic in social media. The International Association of Assessing Officers had five mentions—so it seems unlikely that IAAO will become a mainstream Twitter topic, although you never can tell.

Conclusion

Online communication tools are rapidly becoming an essential commodity, but the social media world is still a work in progress and models for successful implementation are still maturing.

Furthermore, as ways to measure online communication develop and mature, there will almost certainly be more sophisticated targeting of messages to audiences most likely to be receptive to them. Sometimes, the audience will be willing. Other times they may be viewed as victims of unscrupulous manipulation of modern technologies. It is hoped that tools to selectively block unwanted messages will advance at the same rate as the ability to send them.

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