

An Introduction to the Social Media Landscape

Once upon a time, anyone could be a media publisher. All you needed was several million dollars, a team of editors and writers, a printing press capable of shooting out a dozen copies a second, and a distribution network that would put your publication in stores across the country.

Unless, of course, you wanted to go into radio or television. In that case, things were just a little harder.

The result was that information came down. We didn't talk among ourselves; we were talked to by writers, editors, and producers, who chose the subjects and told us what they thought. If we liked what we were reading, we kept tuning in and the company made money. If we didn't like it, we stopped buying the magazine or we switched channels. When that happened, advertisers turned away, and all of the millions of dollars required to create the publication disappeared.

Today, it's all so very different. It can cost literally nothing to create content and make it available for other people to enjoy. That low cost means that it doesn't matter if it's not read by millions. You can focus on a small market—even one interested in stamp collecting in Mozambique—and still find enough people to form a community and maybe even make a profit through advertising and product sales.

It's called the "long tail," and the Internet has made fantastic use of it.

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But the low cost of publishing online has had another effect: We aren't being talked to by professional writers and publishers any more; we're talking to each other.

Average folk like you and me—the kind of people who didn't study journalism at university, who never spent years as a cub reporter covering local court cases, and who were never even very good at Scrabble, let alone putting together articles—are writing about the topics they love and sharing their views.

And they're hearing back too. The conversation is flowing in both directions.

Anyone now can launch a Web site, write articles, or even create videos and put them live. And anyone can comment on that content, affecting both its nature and the direction of the publication.

That's social media, and it's a publishing revolution.

So What Exactly Is Social Media?

Social media can be all sorts of different things, and it can be produced in all sorts of different ways. Perhaps the best definition of social media, though, is content that has been created by its audience.

Facebook, for example, is not a publishing company. It doesn't create any of its own content. It doesn't write articles or posts, and it doesn't upload films or images for people to view and enjoy.

It allows its users to do all of that on its behalf.

It's as though Fox were to fire all its actors, producers, news anchors, and scriptwriters, throw open its doors, and tell the world that anyone is welcome to come in and shoot their own programs.

And then let them broadcast those programs on its networks for nothing too.

Of course, if that were to happen, you'd still have to tell people what channel you were on and when they could see your program. You'd still have to produce content that other people might actually enjoy. And inevitably, the people who took the most professional approach, put time and effort into what they were doing, and connected with their audiences would be the most successful.

But even that wouldn't allow viewers to take part in the program, something which forms an important part of social media.

Create a group on a site like Facebook and you won't be expected to supply all of the text and all of the images. You'll be expecting other group members to add their stories and photographs too.

Even bloggers, when they write a post, expect their readers to join the discussion by leaving comments at the bottom of the post that take the argument in new directions and add new information.

This is the "social" part of social media, and it means that publishing is now about participation.

Someone who uses social media successfully doesn't just create content; he or she creates conversations.

And those conversations create communities.

That's the real beauty of social media, and while it may or may not be the goal—depending on the site—the result of social media can always be firm connections between the people who participate.

When those connections are formed around businesses, the results can be the sort of brand loyalty and commitment that sales professionals have been dreaming about since the first days of direct marketing.

The definition of social media then is a vague thing. At its broadest, it describes a form of publishing in which stories are swapped rather than published and the exchange of content happens within a community, rather like a chat in a restaurant.

At its narrowest, it describes one way in which publishers and marketers can put their messages in front of thousands of people and encourage them to build strong connections and firm loyalty.

However it's defined though, social media has proved incredibly popular.

Facebook claims to have over 60 million active members—that's *active* members, not just people who created a profile and never used it. It's averaged 250,000 new registrations every day since the beginning of 2007, doubling the number of active users every six months. More than half of those users return every day and together they generate more than 65 *billion* page views each month.

According to their own statistics, MySpace, which went live shortly before Facebook, is even more popular, with more than 110 million people using the site at least once a month. One in four

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Americans is said to be on MySpace, and in the United Kingdom, as many people own a MySpace account as own a dog.

The site has generated around 14 billion user comments and 10 billion friend relationships and sees more than 8 million images uploaded each day.

Twitter, which was launched more than two years after MySpace—a lifetime in Internet terms—isn't quite in the same numeric league, but its growth has still been phenomenal. As a company that currently relies on venture capital, it can be pretty cagey about its membership figures, but in March 2008, it was believed to be sending more than 3 million messages a day between more than a million users, of whom 200,000 were active on a daily basis. Those users have created more than 4 million connections. By October 2008, TwitDir (www.twitdir.com), a directory of Twitter users, was reporting that it knew of 3,262,795 Twitterers.

There is another fact about Twitter that's particularly interesting, though . . .

It's massively underused.

According to the site's own blog, around half of all Twitterers follow and are followed by just 10 people. The top 10 percent of Twitterers have more than 80 followers and follow more than 70 people.

To join the top 10 percent of Twitter users, then, you just need to attract 80 followers!

To put that into perspective, as of this writing I have almost 5,000 followers and follow around 1,700 people! (I get about 25 new followers each day.) It's not difficult to do, and when you know how, it shouldn't take you much time at all.

All of these figures just scratch the surface of the popularity of social media. YouTube attracts more than 60 million unique visitors each month. They tune into the 10 hours of video footage uploaded to the site every minute.

Throw in the countless numbers of blogs (Technorati tracks more than 100 million English language blogs alone), and it becomes pretty clear that social media is a massive phenomenon that's changing the way all of us create and use content—and the way that businesses use that content and their distribution channels, too.

Social Media, So What? Why Social Media Really Is a Big Deal

So we can see that social media sites can be big. Really, really big. But so what? There are lots of people in the telephone book, and that's very big too. It doesn't make it a particularly useful marketing tool.

Social media sites don't just list people, though, and they don't just list any old people.

Each site lists a very special group of people.

At first glance, that might seem a little strange. Whether you're browsing through Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, or Twitter, you're going to see small pictures of people, small messages to and from people, and profiles in which those people say certain things about themselves, such as where they work, where they're from, and what they do in their spare time.

Look a little closer, though, and you'll start to notice a few differences. Although the sites may seem very similar, in fact, each site has its own unique feel and its own unique demographic.

Because Facebook started at Harvard, for example (it had signed up half the undergraduate population within a month of going live), and because initially it was restricted to university students, it has a high percentage of well-educated members. The site boasts that it has an 85 percent market share of four-year universities and that "more than half of Facebook users are outside of college."

Clearly, that suggests many of Facebook's users are still in college—a fantastic market for companies hoping to pick up customers, start those customers in the habit of buying from them, and stay with them as their income rises.

Facebook isn't unique in having highly educated members. Twitter's membership might currently be smaller than that of many other social media sites, but it appears to be very selective—even if it is self-selective.

Tracking Twitter's demographics isn't easy. Although some people have had fun following the frequency with which certain wealth-related terms (such as well-to-do neighborhoods) turn up (they found themselves following lots of local lawyers as a result), there's no way to easily conduct a demographic survey of the site's users.

However, Hitwise, an Internet monitoring service, did manage to produce some very interesting and some very impressive results.

Writing in *Time* magazine in August 2008, Bill Tancer, Hitwise's general manager of research and author of *Click: What Millions Do Online and Why It Matters*, noted that he had discovered that Twitter is 63 percent male and, at that time, 57 percent of its U.S. visitors (although not necessarily its members) were Californian—a statistic that likely reflects the site's large attraction to high-tech workers. Twitter itself points out that 60 percent of its Web traffic comes from outside the United States, though—in particular, Japan, Spain, and the United Kingdom. It also notes that had it looked at other ways of accessing the site, such as SMS, the international breakdown would have been very different.

More interestingly, according to Bill Tancer, Twitter's largest age demographic is now 35- to 44-year-olds. They make up just over a quarter of its users, a shift from its starting point among 18- to 24-year-olds.

Most fascinating of all, though, Tancer also says that just over 14 percent of Twitter's visitors are what he calls "Stable Career" types—a "collection of young and ethnically diverse singles living in big-city metros like Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Miami." Another 12 percent are "Young Cosmopolitans"—40-somethings *with household incomes of over \$250,000 per year*.

That means that Twitter isn't just used by young people as an alternative to SMS. The site has a large following among older, professional audiences, too, and a full quarter of Twitter's users are high-earners, a valuable piece of information that makes the site a must-use for any serious marketer.

So we can see that social media sites aren't just attracting kids looking for places to chat with their friends and find free music downloads. They're also attracting smart, educated people with money to burn.

And they're attracting experts, too.

You can see this most clearly on specialist sites like Flickr, a photo-sharing service. Although Flickr, too, isn't very forthcoming about its demographic details, spend any time at all on the site and you can't help but notice the number of professional photographers who use it.

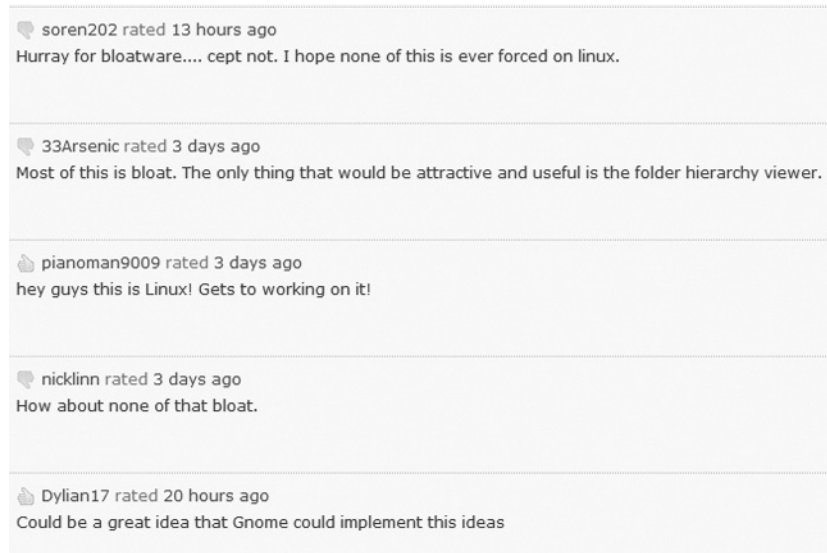


Figure 1.1 Know what these StumbleUpon users are talking about? Me neither ...

Part of the site's appeal isn't just the pictures; it's the advice enthusiasts can pick up from experts working in their field and ready to share the benefits of their experience.

Even a social bookmarking site like StumbleUpon can generate some very expert comments in the reviews of the sites submitted by users.

So we can see that social media sites attract absolutely huge numbers of people. We can see, too, that many of those people are highly educated, are paid well, and are experts in their fields.

You should be able to see very clearly then that social media offers a gigantic opportunity for any business owner to promote his or her products to exactly the sort of market he or she want to reach.

The Different Types of Social Media Sites— Content to Suit Every Market

One of the reasons that social media has proved to be so popular is that it's available in all sorts of different forms. While the

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networking sites with their tens of millions of members might be the most familiar, there are actually all sorts of different ways of creating and sharing social media content:

BLOGS

Yes, blogs are a form of social media too. They're written by people on every topic you can imagine. And only a tiny fraction of them are produced by professionals, even though all have the potential to generate revenue. Even my mother has a blog that she uses to describe her travel experiences. (You can see it at TravelsWithSheila.com—tell her I said “hi.”)

What really makes blogging part of social media is that it can cost nothing to use. Sure, if you want to have your own domain name and place the blog on your own server, you might have to pay a small fee—and when I say “small,” I mean less than \$20 per month. And there are strategies you can use to bring in readers that will cost money too.

But you don't actually need to do any of that.



Figure 1.2 My blog's home page. I write it, you read it ... and comment on it.

To become a blogger, you don't need to do any more than sign up at Blogger.com or WordPress.com or any of the other free blogging services and start writing.

Within minutes, you'll be creating content and you'll form a part of the social media world.

However, blogs do take some effort. They have to be updated regularly, and while you can put anything on a blog, from short posts to feature-length videos if you want, you'll have to work to keep your readers entertained, informed, and engaged. It's fun stuff, and it can be very profitable stuff too but it's not a sweat-free business.

Most importantly, while you can accept guest posts and hire writers, and although your comments will be a crucial element of your site's attraction, it will still be *you* guiding the content and setting the subjects.

Blogs *are* a form of social media, but it's a society with a clear ruler.

MEMBERSHIP SITES

That top-down feel that can be present in some social media channels is also present in membership sites. There are far fewer of these on the Web than there are blogs, but there's still no shortage of them, and like any social media site, they rely on the members to produce the content that's the site's attraction.

My own membership site, for example, is TopOneNetwork.com. With just under 1,000 members, it's a long way behind Facebook, but it's not intended to be a site for the masses. It's meant to be selective and targeted only toward people who are really determined to succeed at online marketing.

I use the site for coaching and to share valuable marketing information with other top marketers, but the heart of the site is the activity that takes place between its members.

I might like to believe that it's my advice and lessons that keep everyone coming back, but a quick look at what people are discussing in the groups shows that there's a lot more to it than that. My members have been swapping fantastic ideas and creating the sorts of connections that lead to valuable deals and joint ventures.

That wouldn't happen if the site was much more general. If TopOneNetwork.com wasn't carefully targeted, it would be too

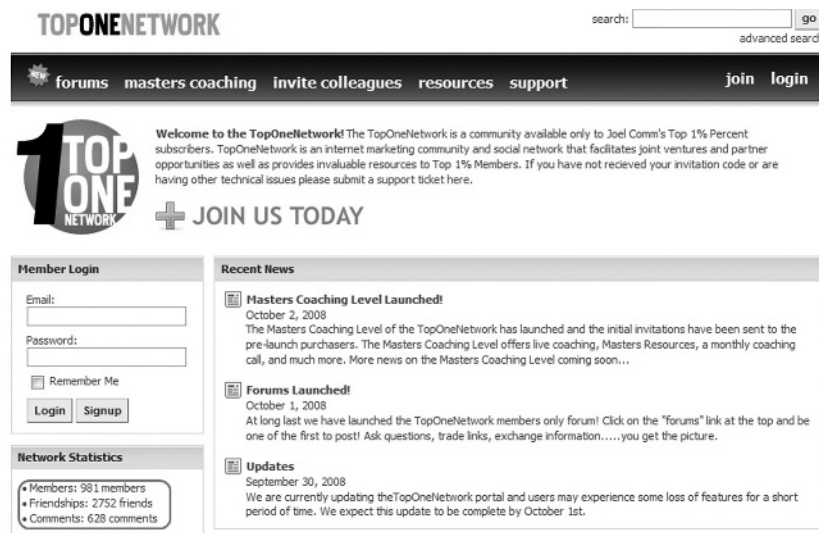


Figure 1.3 My membership site at TopOneNetwork.com functions in much the same way as a social media site. Just check out the number of friendships and comments my members generate.

difficult for marketers to find each other, network, and share the information that keeps them on the site.

But that doesn't mean membership sites can't be massive. Dating sites like Match.com are a form of social media, too. The content that people are paying to use consists of the profiles and pictures that the site's members have created and uploaded.

Match might have an online magazine, but no one is paying \$25 every month to read the magazine. They're paying that price month after month to read the descriptions and look at the photos that other people have posted, and to contact those people.

It's not the site that's the attraction of social media sites; it's the society.

SQUIDOO

Squidoo doesn't look like a social media site. You don't get to make connections or build giant piles of friends in the same way that you can on other social media sites. But what you can do is create your

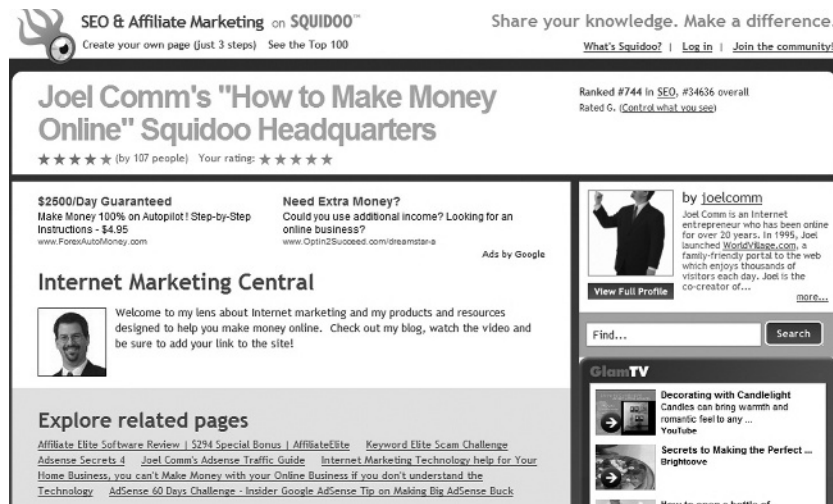


Figure 1.4 My lens on Squidoo. All my own work.

own content and act as a hub through which people looking for the information you're supplying can pass.

The site is intended to be the first stop for anyone looking for information on any topic. It's a place where experts can provide basic information and tell people where they need to go to learn more.

I've been on Squidoo for some time now, and I've found it to be a lot of fun and pretty rewarding, too. The site provides you with a free Web page—it calls them "lenses"—which you can construct using their modules, so it's very easy to use. All you have to do is place your own content in those modules. You even get a share of the advertising revenue, depending on the popularity of your lens.

And that's where the social aspect comes in again. Yes, Squidoo depends on its members to produce the content that users want, but it also depends on the community to identify which lenses are worth viewing. That makes networking vital.

While you can't add someone as a contact on Squidoo, as you promote your lens, you will inevitably end up making plenty of new friends.

PHOTO SITES

Squidoo relies mostly on links as the most important form of content on its lenses. Lensmasters are intended to help users find the knowledge they need somewhere else, rather than supply all of that information themselves. Squidoo only provides one page, after all.

But links certainly aren't the only form of content that can be shared or that require active networks to make sure that they're seen.

Ever since cameras went digital, there's been a need for a low-cost—or even free—way to share those images with anyone who wants to see them online. Both Facebook and MySpace allow their users to upload their images, but neither of them is a dedicated photography site. Images are just one form of content that users are free to share on those sites, together with videos, personal histories, group discussions, etc.

There are sites, however, that specialize in photography. They depend entirely on the photos that users upload to bring in other users.

That broad-based content sourcing already makes sites like Flickr—one of the most popular photo-sharing sites, and now

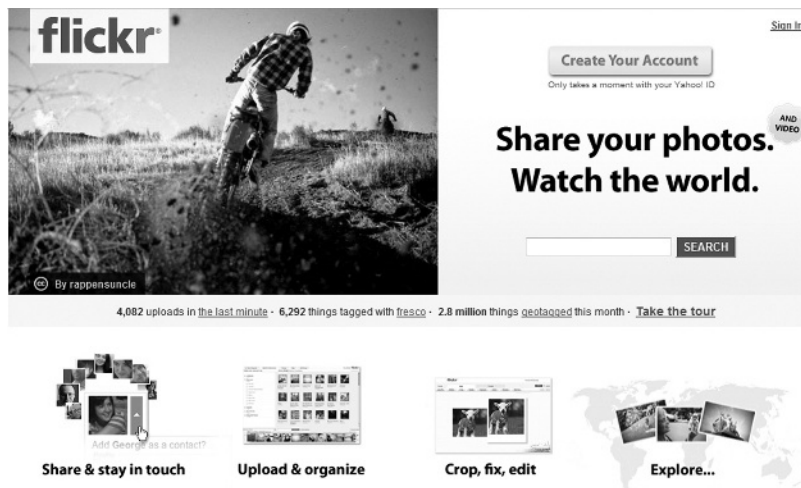


Figure 1.5 Flickr is the big daddy of photo-sharing Web sites.

owned by Yahoo!—part of the social media phenomenon, but Flickr also has the networking power of those sites.

Like Facebook and MySpace, it's possible to create long lists of friends, and you can join groups where you can submit images, enter competitions, and join discussions about the best way to light a child's portrait or which lens to use in which conditions.

Flickr also allows its members to mark images as favorites and to place comments beneath them. Both of those activities can be valuable ways of adding new friends. Pro members, who pay a subscription fee of \$24.95 per year, can even see stats that indicate how many views, faves, and comments each image has produced, and even where their visitors came from.

All of that networking is vital to success on the site, and that success can have some spectacular results. In 2006, Rebekka Gudsleifdottir, an Icelandic art student whose images and networking had brought her a huge following on Flickr, was spotted by an advertising executive on the site who hired her to shoot a series of billboard ads for the Toyota Prius. Many of the images used in Windows Vista, too, were bought from photographers commissioned after they were discovered on the site.

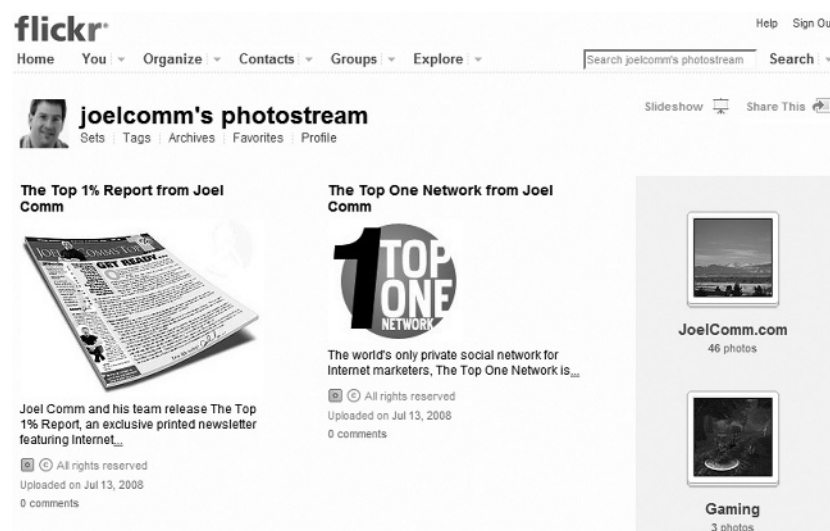


Figure 1.6 Yes, I have a Flickr stream too. You can even see my house on it.

Every day, images are licensed and prints are sold on Flickr, and it's all based on content created by the site's users and promoted through careful networking.

That's classic social media.

MICROBLOGS

And finally, we come to microblogging. This is a whole new thing in social media. In some ways, it's the exact opposite of everything we've seen so far.

Social media sites tend to want their members to contribute as much content as possible. They may restrict that content to just photographs (or, on Flickr, video now as well), or they may restrict membership to a select few (in the case of my membership site, to dedicated Internet marketers; in the case of dating sites, to dedicated singles), but on the whole, they want their members to offer as much content as possible.

Microblog sites place strict limits on the content that can be uploaded . . . and they find that those limits encourage creativity.

A Closer Look at Microblogging

Just as there are many different kinds of social media sites, so there are many different ways to microblog. One of the most popular now actually takes place within the larger, general social media sites.

When Facebook realized that many of its members loved the idea of being able to update their contacts in real time, they added their own microblogging system.

Facebook's system only works within the site, though, so unlike Twitter, which can broadcast your tweets to mobile telephones as

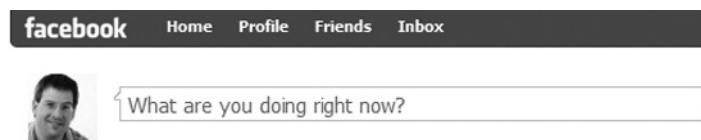


Figure 1.7 Facebook catches up with microblogging.

well, updates are only visible to friends who happen to be on the site at the time.

For Facebook users, though, it's still very powerful—and Twitter users who want their updates to reach further can use Facebook's Twitter application. This lets them send tweets from within Facebook itself. I use it and I think it's great. You can find it at www.facebook.com/apps/application.php?id=2231777543, or by searching the apps for Twitter.

Facebook isn't the only social media site to try to add microblogging to its list of features. LinkedIn, a social networking site geared towards professional connections, has integrated a system that lets people share information about what they're working on.

Just as importantly, the site also lets its users track what people are saying in those posts with a very neat application called "Company Buzz."

This is the first time that microblogging has been geared specifically to a business audience, and it's easy to understand the value this could have for a firm that wants to understand what its employees, customers, and suppliers are saying about it.

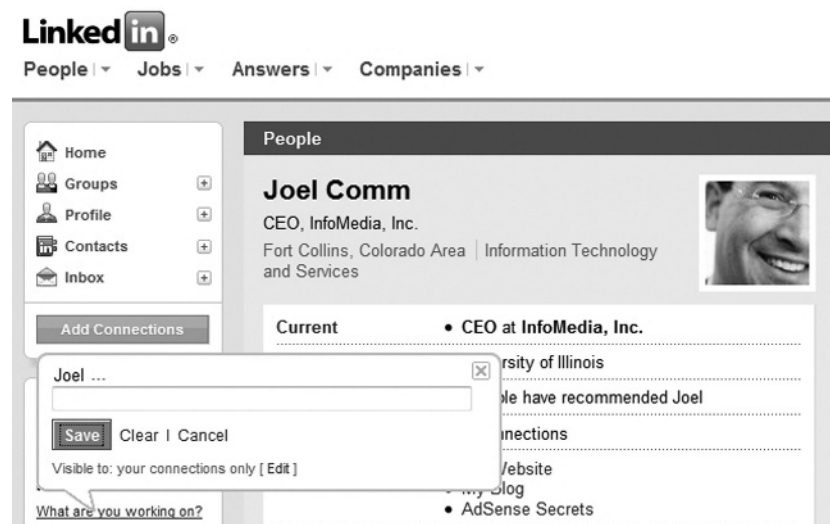


Figure 1.8 Microblogging the LinkedIn way.



Figure 1.9 Spoink is microblogging in rich media.

SPOINK

Pownc does what Twitter does and expands it by removing the restrictions and increasing the type of content that can be sent. Spoink (www.spoink.com) takes the trend even further, allowing its users to do things as complicated as posting audio content through a telephone. It also allows instant messaging across a range of different platforms, and e-mail too.

For a microblogging service, it's complicated. That certainly doesn't mean it's useless; it has a lot of different uses. But unless you have a particular challenge you need to overcome in rich media, I think it's likely to be most effective as a communication tool to join together different platforms than a main way of keeping lots of people informed.

YAMMER

Microblog services thrive most when they ask users to answer a simple question and allow anyone to see the answer. Yammer (www.yammer.com) keeps to those microblogging roots, but narrows the focus of the question—and the audience, too.

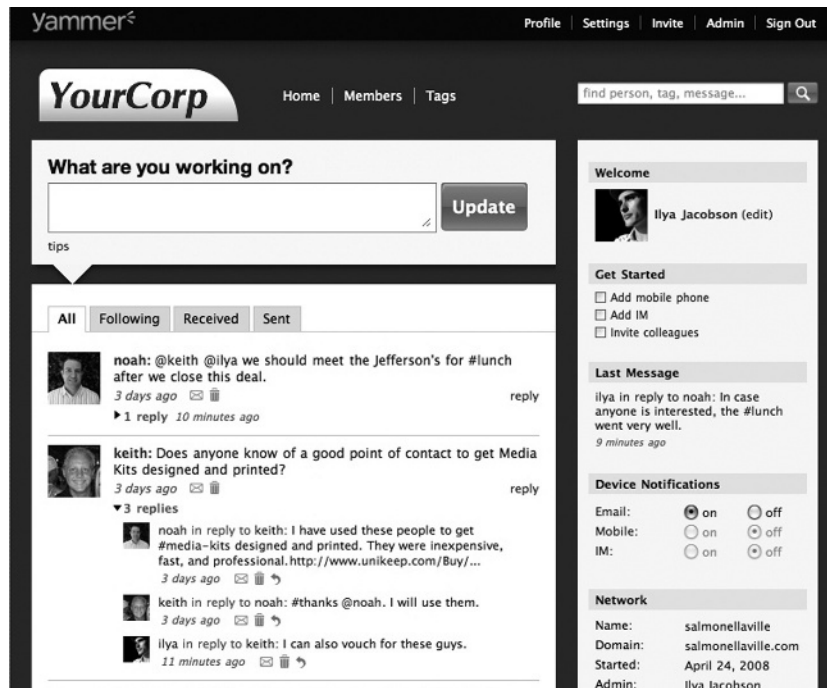


Figure 1.10 Yammer's restrictions make Twitter look like a free-for-all.

Instead of inviting people to share what they're doing (and receiving answers that might range from saving an oil-soaked bird to eating an avocado sandwich), it asks users to explain what they're working on, like LinkedIn. But it only reveals those answers to people on the network with the same corporate e-mail address.

That makes it a useful tool for communicating within a business, but it's not so handy for mass marketing.

PLURK

Plurk (www.plurk.com) might have a terrible name, but it does have some excellent ideas. You can think of it as MySpace to Twitter's Facebook. Instead of presenting posts (which Plurk naturally calls "plurks") vertically, the site displays them horizontally so that they appear as a timeline.

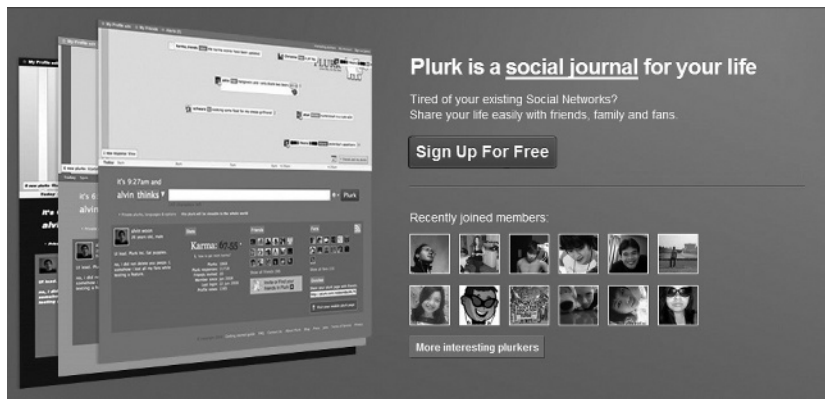


Figure 1.11 Plurk puts the blog back in microblogging.

In addition to seeing what people said, you get to see when they said it, and in the process, pick up a feel for their day.

Plurks can also come with qualifiers—colored tags such as <shares>, <asks>, or <says>—that mark out the nature of the content, and while they are limited to 140 characters, plurks can include images and videos. You can also restrict them to “cliques,” small groups of friends with something in common, like a network.

Less useful is the “Karma” feature, which unlocks features as users are more active on the site. Although it’s clearly intended to encourage people to stay active, it can also be a source of frustration for anyone who wants to get the most out of the site right away.

Plurk has only been around since May 2008, and it will be interesting to see how it develops and how many users it picks up. It’s likely that while Twitter will continue to attract well-to-do educated types who want to network professionally and mix with other experts, Plurk could become a fun microblogging forum.

Introducing ... Twitter!

And finally, we come to Twitter—the site that has really set the standard in microblogging.

The service was founded by programmers Evan Williams, Jack Dorsey, and Biz Stone in July 2006. Williams was a serial

entrepreneur who had founded a company called Pyra Labs that made project management software. A note-taking feature on that software went on to become Blogger, the free blogging service later bought by Google. According to one theory, it was Williams who first used the term “blogger” to describe people who write Web logs.

In 2004, Williams left Google to form podcasting company Odeo and, two years later, created Obvious with Biz Stone, a programmer who had joined Blogger after its acquisition by the search engine giant. The new company bought Odeo, which it later sold to a company called Sonic Mountain. It now focuses on Twitter.

The original idea for Twitter came from Dorsey, an Odeo employee. In an interview for ReadWriteTalk.com with Sean Ammirati, VP of Business Development and Product Management at mSpoke, Stone described the moment when they first discussed the idea:

“A few of us were thinking about what are some interesting ways that maybe we can merge SMS to the web,” he said. “[Dorsey] had come up with this idea where if you just look at only the status field of an instant message application like AIM, and you just look at that as a sort of really small version of what people are already doing . . . and you just make it super simple, ‘Here’s what I’m doing’ . . . [W]e kind of went off in a corner and we worked for two weeks and we created a prototype. We showed the rest of the team and everyone just sort of giggled. They all kind of loved it. It was really fun. We used it over the weekend. We found it very compelling and we decided that we would keep working on it.”

That was in March 2006; initially, Twitter was used by the company’s employees as a fun form of internal communication. (Tech companies, it seems, might have lava lamps and space hoppers, but they never seem to have water coolers!)

The service launched officially in October 2006, picked up a South by Southwest Web (SXSW) Award in March 2007, and by April was a separate entity headed by Dorsey.

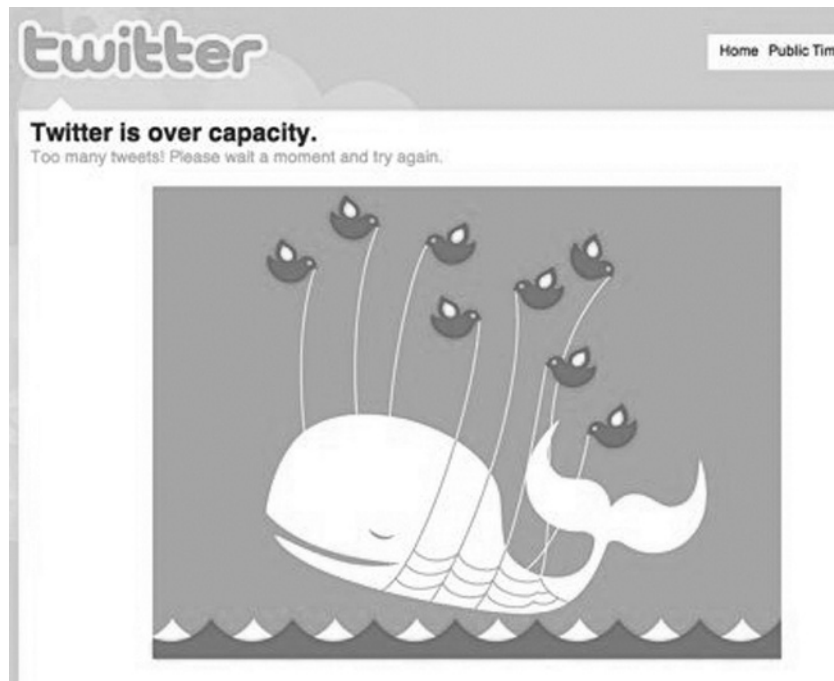


Figure 1.12 Twitter's iconic "fail whale." Designed by Yiyi Lu, the beluga whale supported by twittering birds is now a brand in its own right after its frequent appearance on an overstressed Twitter site.

Helped by the publicity generated by the SXSW award, boosted by references on Blogger (where the company had good connections, of course), and most importantly making itself attractive with an open platform that let other developers extend the service, the site started to take off.

That has led to some problems. In 2007, Twitter was reported to have had just 98 percent uptime—a loss of three whole days over the year—and tended to suffer particularly badly during major tech conferences (which says something about many of its users, too).

It has had some very impressive successes, though. Some of the world's leading personalities, corporations, and government bodies are known to use the service, including Barack Obama (twitter.com/

barackobama), Whole Foods Market (twitter.com/wholefoods) and the British Parliament (twitter.com/UKParliament). The American Red Cross (twitter.com/redcross), too, now uses Twitter as a fast way to communicate information about local disasters.

There are two things that really distinguish Twitter, though.

The first is its simplicity. Although the service now has piles of additional tools and add-ons which extend its use, at its core, Twitter remains nothing more than a way of describing what you're doing in no more than 140 characters.

That brevity and simplicity have always been key, and they're what brought Twitter its second characteristic: critical mass.

The hardest moment for any social Web service is at the beginning. In this chapter, for example, we saw how Plurk offers some promising, fun features, but people are going to be unwilling to join in until they can see who else is there and in particular, whether their friends are on the site.

It takes a special push to get a social media site snowballing to a size big enough for everyone to feel comfortable about climbing on board. For Facebook, that was its marketing at Harvard and from there to other universities.

For Twitter, it was the boost it received with its SXSW Award, which had everyone talking about the service as the next big thing.

As long it has that critical mass—and with more than three million members it certainly has that—Twitter is always going to be the microblogging service to beat. In the next chapter, I'll explain exactly why it's likely to retain that position as the leading microblogging service.