

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. Advertisers turned away, and all of the millions of dollars the publication took to create 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.

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

But the low cost of publishing online has had another effect: We aren't being talked to by professional writers and publishers anymore; 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 now claims to have more than 250 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, roughly doubling the number of active users every six months. Almost half of those users return every day, and together they share more than 1 *billion* pieces of content, including blog posts, notes, photos, and news stories each week.

MySpace, which went live shortly before Facebook, is a little cagier with its figures but is believed to be at least as popular. One in four Americans is said to be on MySpace, and in the United Kingdom, as many people own a MySpace account as own a dog.

At one stage, the site was generating around 14 billion user comments, 10 billion friend relationships and saw 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 relies on venture capital, it can also be pretty secretive about its membership figures, but in March 2008 it was believed to be sending more than 3 million messages a day between over a million users, of whom 200,000 were active on a daily basis. Those users had 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.

Since then, those numbers have boomed. Helped by the appearance on the site of celebrities like Britney Spears, Ashton Kutcher, and Oprah Winfrey (who made her first tweet on her show, assisted by Twitter co-founder Evan Williams), Twitter's growth chart has changed from a gentle climb into a hockey stick. In April and March 2009 alone, Twitter quadrupled its number of visitors, and by the summer of 2009, it was believed to have more than 17 million users.

There is another fact about Twitter that's particularly interesting, though: It's massively underused.

Back in February 2008, the site's own blog was reporting that around half of all Twitterers follow and are followed by just 10 people. The top 10 percent of Twitterers had more than 80 followers and were following more than 70 people.

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

To put that into perspective, I had almost 5,000 followers at that time and was following around 1,700 people!

You'd think that with Twitter's incredible growth those figures would have changed. They did. By the summer of 2009, the number of my followers had increased by a factor of 14. Other leading Twitterers have also seen the number of their followers reach incredible

levels, with several members now boasting more than a million readers and a few celebrities tweeting to several million followers.

But while there are a small number of people with huge readerships, most people on the site are still just getting their feet wet. According to research conducted by Sysomos, a social media analytics company, 76 percent of Twitter's members have no more than 18 followers, and 99 percent have fewer than 700. About half of the profiles on Twitter have attracted no more than seven followers, says Sysomos.

Much of that is likely to down to Twitter's high bounce rate. In one particularly controversial study, Nielsen found that 60 percent of Twitter users fail to return to the site after their first month. When Twitter's users pointed out that many people quickly migrate to third-party clients like TweetDeck and HootSuite to post and read, Nielsen ran its survey again and found the same results.

But that still means that of the users who joined during Twitter's boom months, when the company was never out of the news, 40 percent have stuck around. And while only a small number of them may be posting regularly, that just means that there's plenty of opportunity for a dedicated user to stand out, and a huge potential audience to attract.

Twitter's growth has turned it into a massive marketing opportunity.

All of these figures just scratch the surface of the popularity of social media though. 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 over 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

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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 and start those customers in the habit of buying from them so they 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 older social media sites, but even with its sudden growth 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. Hitwise, an Internet monitoring service, did however 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 was 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 hi-tech workers. Twitter itself pointed out that 60 percent of its Web traffic was coming 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 interesting, according to Bill Tancer, Twitter’s largest age demographic in the summer of 2008 was 35- to 44-year-olds. They made 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 more than \$250,000 per year*.

The publicity that surrounded Twitter in 2009 has changed some of those figures slightly. Sysomos was reporting in June 2009 that just over half (53 percent) of users were women. New York had the most Twitter users, followed by Los Angeles, Toronto, San Francisco, and Boston. And some 65 percent of Twitter’s users were under the age of 25, it argued, although the research company also pointed out that only around 0.7 percent of Twitterers actually revealed their age and that those who did so were likely to be young.


While a number of 20-somethings might have joined Twitter out of curiosity, it is pretty clear that the site isn’t just used by young people as an alternative to SMS. Twitter has a large following among older, professional audiences, 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 out where to load up on free music downloads. They’re also attracting smart, educated people with money to burn.


And they’re attracting experts, too.


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 soren202 rated 13 hours ago
Hurray for bloatware.... cept not. I hope none of this is ever forced on linux.

 33Arsenic rated 3 days ago
Most of this is bloat. The only thing that would be attractive and useful is the folder hierarchy viewer.

 pianoman9009 rated 3 days ago
hey guys this is Linux! Gets to working on it!

 nicklinn rated 3 days ago
How about none of that bloat.

 Dylia17 rated 20 hours ago
Could be a great idea that Gnome could implement this ideas

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

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 you can't help but notice the number of professional photographers who use it.

Part of the site's appeal isn't just the pictures; enthusiasts also can pick up advice 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 users submit. (See Figure 1.1.)

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, well paid, and 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 their products to exactly the sort of market they want to reach.



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

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 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. (See Figure 1.2.) 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, which 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—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.

To become a blogger, you don’t need to do any more than sign up at Blogger.com or WordPress.com 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.

Blogs though 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 important, 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 members that number in the thousands rather than the millions, 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 towards people who are really determined to succeed at online marketing. (See Figure 1.3.)

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 them.

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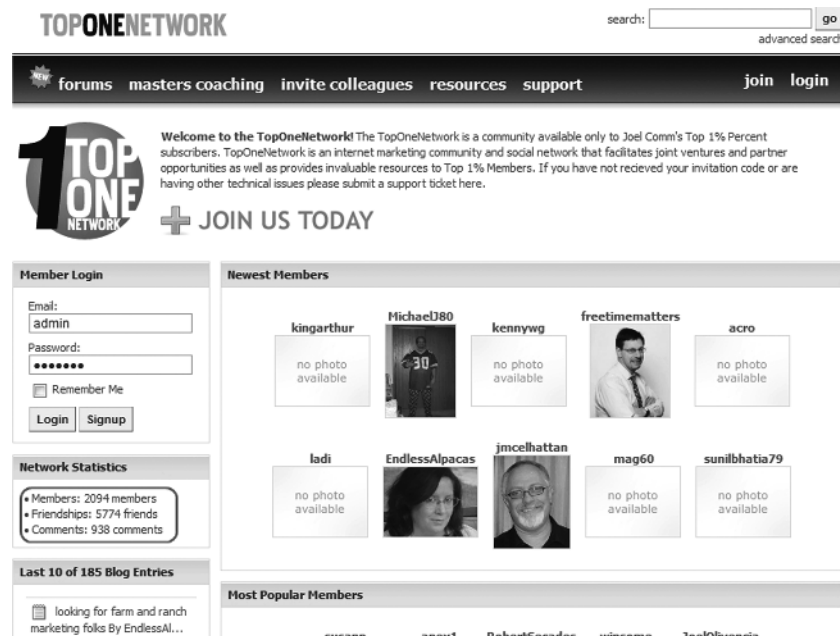


Figure 1.3 My membership site functions in much the same way as a social media site. Just check out the number of friendships and comments my members generate.

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 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 are the profiles and pictures that the site's members have created and uploaded.

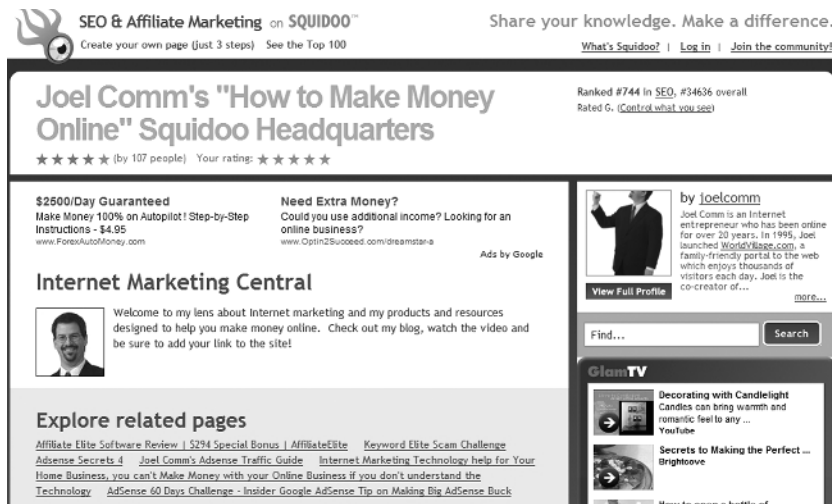


Figure 1.4 My lens on Squidoo. All my own work.

Match might have an online magazine, but no one is paying around \$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 own content and act as a hub through which people looking for the information you're supplying can pass. (See Figure 1.4.)

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 the 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 a lot of fun and pretty rewarding, too. The site provides you with a free Web page—it calls them “lenses”—that 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 which require active networks to make sure that they're seen.

Ever since cameras went digital, there's been a need for a low-cost—and 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, and so on.

There are sites, however, that specialize in photography. They depend entirely on the photos that users upload in order to bring in other users. (See Figure 1.5.)

That broad-based content sourcing already makes sites like Flickr—one of the most popular photo-sharing sites, and now 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 join groups, where you can submit images, enter

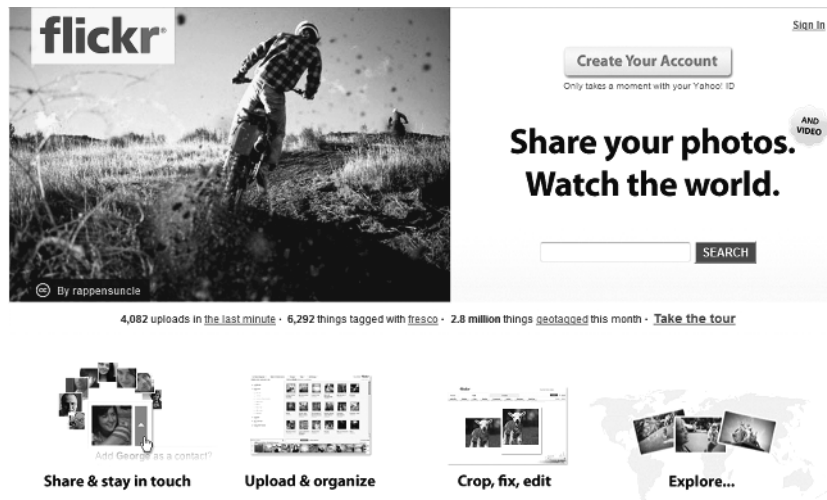


Figure 1.5 Flickr is the big daddy of photo-sharing web sites.

competitions, and join discussions about the best way to light a child's portrait or which lens to use in which conditions. (See Figure 1.6.)

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.

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

That's classic social media.

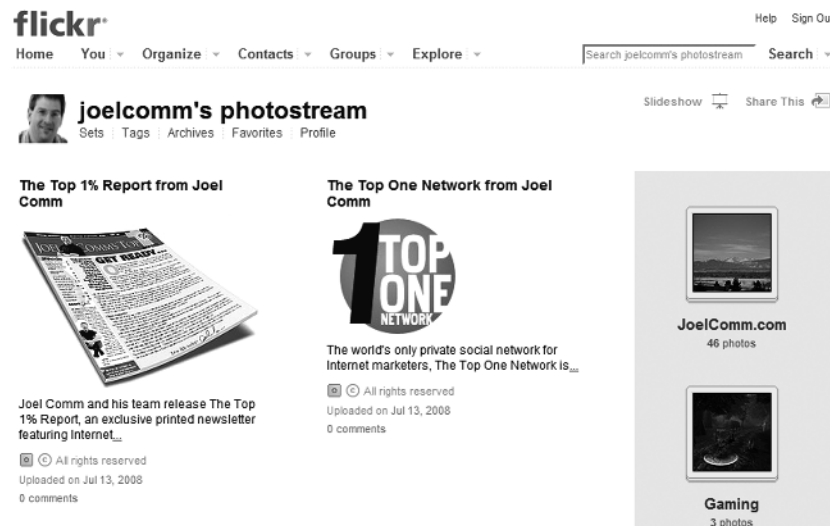


Figure 1.6 Yes, I have a Flickr stream too. You can even see my house on it.

MICRO BLOGS

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) and 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 social media sites.



Figure 1.7 Facebook catches up with microblogging.

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. (See Figure 1.7.)

Facebook's system only works within the site though, so unlike Twitter, which can broadcast your tweets to mobile telephones as 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 though. LinkedIn, a social networking site geared towards professional connections, has integrated a system that lets people share information about what they're working on. (See Figure 1.8.)

Just as important, 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 to a firm that wants to understand what its employees, customers, and suppliers are saying about it.

SPOINK

While Twitter's strong point is its simplicity, Spoink (www.spoink.com) allows its users to do things as complicated as posting audio content through a telephone, and it provides instant messaging across a range of different platforms and email, too. (See Figure 1.9.)

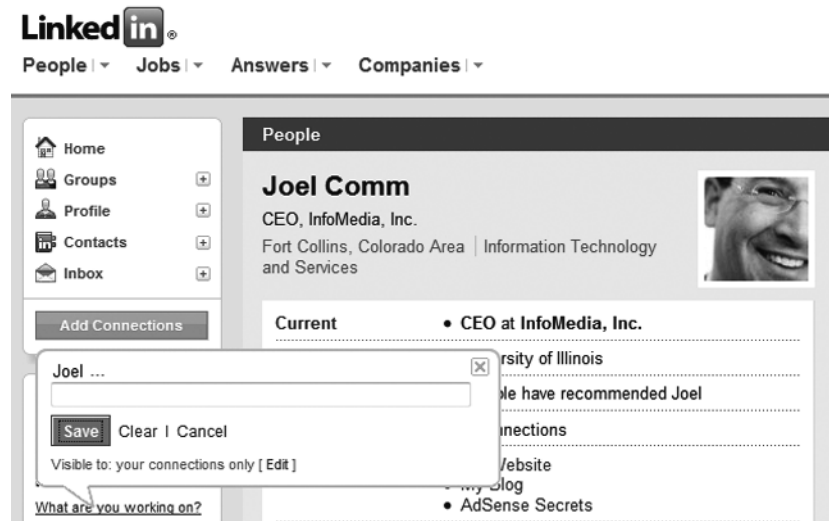


Figure 1.8 Microblogging the LinkedIn way.

For a microblogging service, it's complicated. That certainly doesn't mean it's useless though; 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

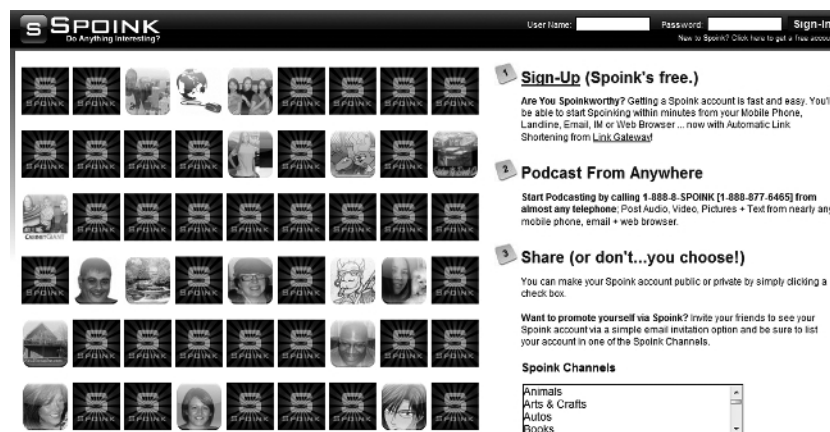


Figure 1.9 Spokin is microblogging in rich media.

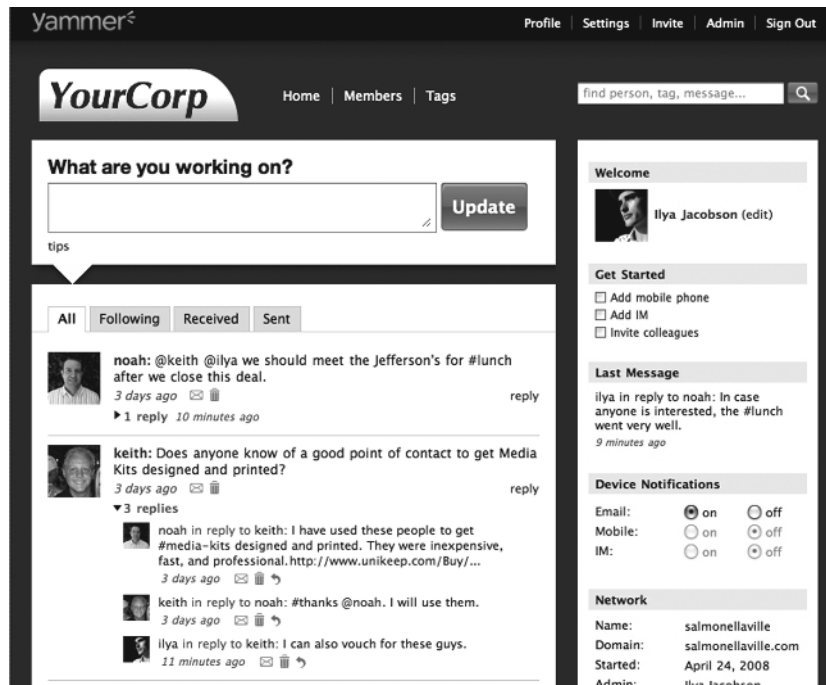


Figure 1.10 Yammer's restrictions make Twitter look like a free-for-all.

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. (See Figure 1.10.)

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), like LinkedIn, it asks users to explain what they're working on.

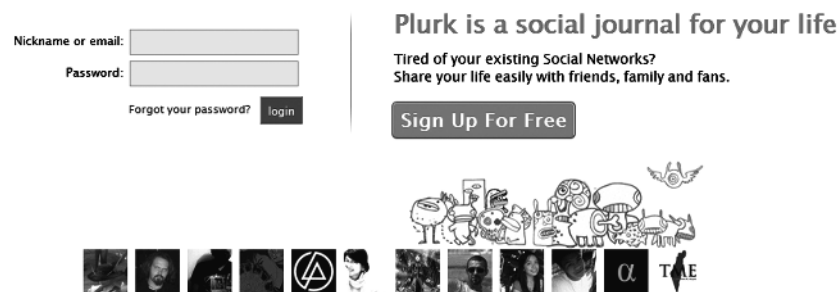


Figure 1.11 Plurk puts the blog back in microblogging.

But it only reveals those answers to people on the network with the same corporate email 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 (what Plurk naturally calls "plurks") vertically, the site displays them horizontally so that they appear as a timeline. (See Figure 1.11.)

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.

Blogger Chris Thomson created a side-by-side comparison of Plurk and Twitter and noted a couple of important differences between the two services. Plurk, for example, allows users to edit posts once they've been uploaded; perhaps most interesting of all,

Plurk, he says, demands your full attention. It's more conversational than Twitter, a bit like instant messaging, which means you can't always just post and run.

You might also have to deal with the responses and take part in the conversation.

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.

That could give the site its very own marketing power.

After comparing the two services, Chris Thomson's conclusion was that he'd use both. It's possible that other potential microbloggers will choose to do the same, using one service for pleasure and the other for professional networking.

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 weblogs.

In 2004, Williams left Google to form podcasting company Odeo, and two years later, he 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, vice president 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, and 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 watercoolers!)

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.

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

That 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). (See Figure 1.12.)

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 (@barackobama), Whole Foods Market (@wholefoods), and the British Parliament (@UKParliament).

The American Red Cross (@redcross), too, uses Twitter as a fast way to communicate information about local disasters.

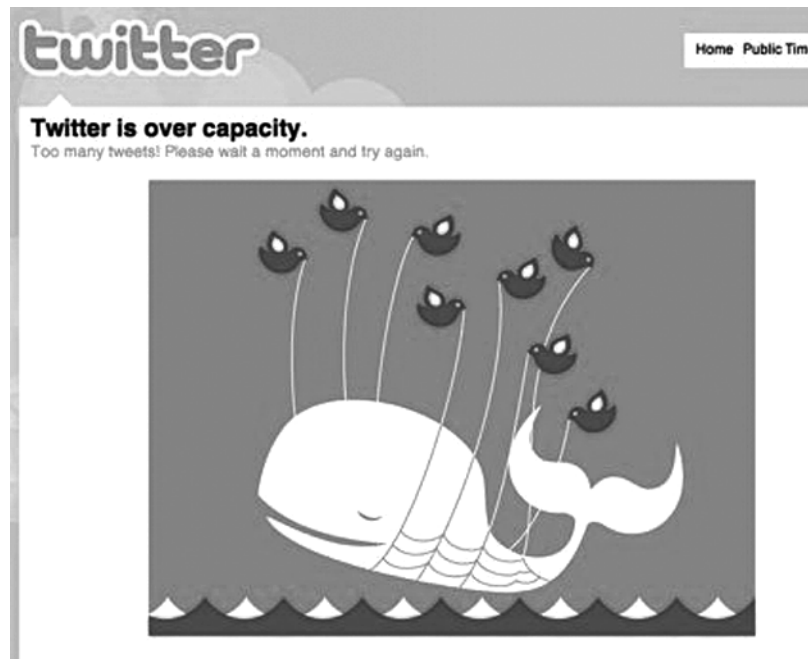


Figure 1.12 Twitter's iconic "fail whale." Designed by Yiyang Lu, the beluga whale supported by twittering birds is now a brand in its own right after its frequent appearance on an overstressed Twitter site.

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 ten 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.