

Part I

Changing Media, Changing PR

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Chapter 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL NETWORKS

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The meteoric rise of social network sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube changed the communications landscape forever. But social media are vastly more diverse: a connected and complex ecosystem founded on relationships, passions and a desire to be connected.

Social networks are not new. As individuals, we have always maintained social connections, be they with family, friends or professional acquaintances. We belong to groups, clubs, neighbourhoods and, of course, society. The internet and developments in technology have simply made our networks visible and easily accessible. We can now meet friends and colleagues, ask for recommendations and even build relationships with brands – in an online and often public space.

It's big, it's connected and it's here to stay

More than 70% of the internet population uses social networks in one form or another² and the numbers are growing daily. One in nine people³ on Earth have a Facebook account, and if it was a country, it would be the third largest

²ETC New Media Trend Watch, Social Media and UGC: <http://cipr.co/zvoJKI>

³This number is calculated by dividing the planet's 6.94 billion people by Facebook's 750 million users.

after China and India. Even relative newcomer Instagram has gathered 12 million members⁴ in less than a year.

And whilst the landscape continues to grow and change apace, our audiences have moved beyond the media hype and embraced new communication channels wholeheartedly. Social networking already accounts for 1 in every 6 minutes spent online.⁵

Being social online isn't restricted to 'Generation Y'. At the time of writing, the average profile age on Twitter is 35 years, and a bit older on LinkedIn, at 40. Facebook's biggest demographic is now between 35 and 54 years. Even YouTube has an even spread of users right across the 20–55 age range.

But, more significant than just the volume and demographics of participants is the change in the way people communicate, and changes in the way people are connecting, collaborating and building relationships online. A change in the way people are demanding, sharing and creating content. From user-generated content to link sharing, the frequency of participation in social networks is intense.

When it comes to sharing, the volume of content circulating through the networks is staggering. Every minute, 60 hours of video is uploaded to YouTube, 3000 images go up on Flickr and more than 700 YouTube links⁶ are Tweeted. Conversations, too, demonstrate the enthusiasm for connecting online. There are 95 million Tweets a day, 85% of bloggers post more than once a week⁷ and 57% of people talk more online than they do in real life.⁸

The rich and complex picture of social media is still evolving. As the networks grow and the conversations proliferate, people are increasingly engaged. Add mobile to the mix and you now have always-online, connected everywhere, through any device, social networkers.

⁴TechCrunch, Instagram Now Has 12 Million Users, 100K Weekly Downloads In China Alone, Alexia Tsotsis, 31 October 2011: <http://cipr.co/AyWOMj>

⁵comScore, The Network Effect: Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter and Tumblr reach new heights in May, Andrew Lipsman, 15 June 2011: <http://cipr.co/wzE8pW>

⁶YouTube Statistics, as of 8 March 2012: <http://cipr.co/x9pYW8>

⁷SlideShare, Technorati Blogging Stats Preview, Eric Schwartzman: <http://cipr.co/woDkZo>

⁸Source Alex Trimpe via Ogilvy – 21 February 2011, ThinkQuarterly, Google.

And even when the statistics in this chapter need revising (probably in a matter of weeks), it is clear that social networks are part of our lives and they are here to stay.

People connect, technology facilitates

In truth, no matter the demographic, device or even the numbers, human beings are motivated to connect and share for a multitude of reasons:⁹ researching, finding information and inspiration, participating, connecting with friends and for entertainment. Social network sites are the vehicle, not the destination.

Although 'to Facebook' appears to have entered the vernacular as a common verb, it is not social networking platforms that drive the conversation – it is people. People connect to share interests, passions and friendships, with content as the catalyst for conversations. This is demonstrated when conversations around topics are mapped online. It becomes clear that both people and conversations will move across the different social platforms. Migrating and coalescing in different online locations.

The BBC's weekly political debate programme, *Question Time*, is a good example of how interest and conversation will move across the different types of social network. In between broadcasts the programme's current topics of the week are debated in forums, on blogs and within the BBC website itself. But as the programme goes live, the conversation jumps to Twitter, with a rapid stream of 140-character opinions attached to the hashtag, #bbcqt. As the broadcast finishes, the conversation slides back to longer debates on other social networks.

The result is that connection and communities are spread across the social landscape in a fire hose of conversations. With so much chatter, it becomes difficult to find and join conversations or to network. But, it is again technology that can help people navigate the social landscape. Most social networks

⁹Jeffesposito.com, 15 interesting facts about social media in the UK, Adam Vincenzini, 16 February 2011: <http://cipr.co/w9AKZZ>

are designed with functionality to help users find connections and topics of interest within them. However, it is still a challenge to find relevant conversations and communities across the whole social landscape.

The search engines recognise that people want to source information from their trusted networks. They also understand the value of human filtering to identify valued content. Both Google and Microsoft Bing are incorporating social conversations (and social signals) into their results.

And whilst the algorithms used to rank content are still very much a secret, it seems that 'Likes' on Facebook or Google's +1 recommendation and social referrals are impacting the ranking of information. Now when people search, their own social network (called the social graph) impacts results. This is called 'social search'. It narrows the results for the searcher, making visible content created or touched by users within their social graph.

It isn't just in searching for relevant content and conversations that technology facilitates social networking. It is technology, too, that empowers our online voice. Technology provides social network platforms that are easy to use, facilitate sharing and make it simple to connect to our friends, peers and/or any company we choose.

Explaining the plethora of social network sites

Whenever social media are mentioned, it seems that Facebook and Twitter dominate the discussion. After all, it is these well-known social networks that the traditional media consistently reference. The adverts and programmes we watch entice us to like Fan Pages and use Twitter hashtags, whilst the tabloids flash us headlines on the evils of social networks (while encouraging us to 'share' the very same stories with our own social network!) They are now part of the mainstream.

Of course the social media landscape is far more complex. It is an ecosystem of differing styles and types of network: networks and platforms that range from self-publishing and content sharing, through to discussion boards and virtual worlds. What they have in common, though, are principles founded

on Web 2.0 technology.¹⁰ Principles that ensure communications are two-way, interactive and, above all, shareable.

Although they have a common foundation in technology, social networks don't fit quite so neatly into categories or types. Constantly evolving to become more useful to their users, we see new applications and services launch, such as group buying and smartphone photo sharing. Established social networks, too, absorb new functionality. You are just as likely to view a video embedded on Facebook or Tumblr as you are to see it on YouTube.

Putting the complexity of creating a detailed classification aside, there is value in identifying the main types of social media platform. Understanding the primary rationale for the different social networks is invaluable when evaluating where, how and when to communicate.

Networking sites

Networking sites should not be confused with the term 'social networks'. The latter is an umbrella phrase that encompasses all the differing types of social media, platforms and connections.

A networking site is an online service made up of individuals and is most recognisable by the user profiles. Networkers connect with links to friends, sharing common interests, passions, ideas and content. Ultimately they are designed to enable people to socialise online.

Facebook is the most recognisable site. It was originally created for students and now accounts for 58% of all visits to social sites.¹¹ But there are many more networking sites, including the relative newcomer Google+, and there is significant variation in popularity from one country to the next.

Then there are networking sites that have a specific focus. The best example is LinkedIn, which is a business-related site and is mainly used for professional networking.

Some networks are popular in certain countries. Hyves is popular in the Netherlands, StudiVZ in Germany, Tuenti in Spain, Nasza-Klasa in Poland

¹⁰O'Reilly Media, What Is Web 2.0: <http://cipr.co/wYoQza>

¹¹Data from Experian Hitwise white paper, 'Carpe Diem – Seizing the moment in social media': <http://cipr.co/yePdFC>

and Skyrock in various parts of Europe. But it is Orkut and Hi5 that lead the conversations in South America and Mixi and Cyworld in Asia.

Blogs

In February 2011 there were estimated to be more than 156 million public blogs in existence.¹² Created in a diary style format, they represent the opinions and thoughts of the writer. Technology platforms such as WordPress, Blogger and TypePad can also be used to create forums, news feeds and even websites.

Influential and connected blogs are frequently updated and have lots of comments. Subject matter and interests vary across a vast spectrum of topics. There are news blogs, like The Huffington Post; passion-led blogs, such as Maison Cupcake Blog; and leading industry blogs, such as Mashable and TechCrunch.

Microblogs

Microblogging is a short form of blogging – typically no more than 140–200 characters per post. The most recognisable platform is Twitter, although Tumblr is quickly grabbing the public's attention (it receives the second highest number of page views from any social media platform after Facebook¹³). Other platforms include FriendFeed, Posterous and the microblog for private use within organisations, Yammer.

Collaborative communities

Some social networks see users collaborate to achieve a single goal. The oldest and most recognised collaborative site is Wikipedia. But it isn't the only wiki. There are numerous wiki platforms¹⁴ and a wide variety of sites covering

¹²State of the Media: The Social Media Report Q3 2011, NMIcrite, Nielsen: <http://cipr.co/xUs9EN>

¹³Ibid. 12

¹⁴Wikipedia, Comparison of wiki software: [http://cipr.co/wwW\]gs](http://cipr.co/wwW]gs)

issues from medicine to wine tasting, and, of course, the CIPR social media wiki.¹⁵

Sites that facilitate collaborative buying (or group buying to get a better deal) also proliferate. Most well known are Groupon and LivingSocial. But it isn't just discounts that are driving collaborative purchasing. So, too, is the rise of collaborative consumption.¹⁶ Whether it's car sharing with Streetcar or hiring a room with Crashpadder, social media are facilitating the cultural shift towards sharing possessions.

Communities and forums

Communities and forums proliferate across the Web; some launching and disappearing almost overnight and others becoming as established as the mainstream media. There is no one typical approach to them. So below are a few of the most prevalent types of forum.

Discussion-based forums tend to create close-knit and trusted communities. Often based around specific interests and driven by a passionate and vocal membership, the range of conversations can be quite broad. Take a look at Mumsnet.com or Moneysavingexpert.com, where discussions focus on parenting and finances respectively. These communities can be deceptively large (Mumsnet has more than 1.5 million monthly unique users¹⁷).

Review communities have blossomed to help people identify great services and products and avoid those that have disappointed others. In fact, a recent survey shows that 42% of people have written a product review online.¹⁸ These communities focus on reviews, usually on specific topics. Probably the best known are TripAdvisor and Review Centre, but there are specialist sites such as 'White Goods Help' and the entertainment site Metacritic.

Some businesses that want to create their own networks have launched *branded communities*. Not all have been successful, but some have tapped into interests to create strong, interactive experiences for their audiences.

¹⁵CIPR Social Media Panel wiki: <http://cipr.co/ciprsm-wiki>

¹⁶Collaborative Consumption Hub: <http://cipr.co/xGrrhN>

¹⁷Statistic from Mumsnet Google Analytics: <http://cipr.co/ypFamK>

¹⁸SlideShare, The Science of Sharing: An inside look at a consumer: <http://cipr.co/wkwMgu>

Mothercare launched the successful Gurgle.com for parents (now in the US and India too); BT Tradespaces is thriving with its membership of small businesses; and some communities, such as Weightwatchers, are extensions of the brand website.

Finally, there are *DIY communities*. Here, individuals or groups create their own social network using services such as Ning or BuddyPress. Alternatively, communities are founded within established social networks such as Facebook Pages or LinkedIn Groups.

Content-sharing communities

With the profusion of social networks and subsequent conversations has come a deluge of content. From videos and pictures to links and music, it seems content can be found everywhere. And not just content published by companies, but user-generated content. Much of this content is stored and found on social networks that focus on sharing, ranking and sorting.

Photo sharing is exemplified by Flickr - a site with more than 51 million registered users.¹⁹ Here, users can publish photos, share and even sell them. Other photo-sharing networks include Zoomr and Photobucket and photo apps such as Instagram.

Video sharing is an established cornerstone of social networking, accounting for over 4% of all internet usage. YouTube is the most popular, accounting for nearly 70% of all visits to video websites.²⁰ Other platforms include Vimeo, Dailymotion, Redux and Metacafe.

The internet has revolutionised the way in which fans listen to music. But it is social networks that have allowed people to share their preferences and current listening habits, often in real time. Spotify, SoundCloud, Last.FM, Gogoyoko and Playlist are just a handful of the music-sharing platforms. Even the ubiquitous iTunes has Ping - where users can follow their favourite artists and friends to discover what music they are talking about, listening to and downloading.

¹⁹Yahoo!, About Flickr: <http://cipr.co/xggElr>

²⁰Statistic from Experian Hitwise white paper, 'Online Video: Bringing Social Media To Life': <http://cipr.co/AoHYRt>

Bookmarking is the simplest and easiest form of content sharing. Bookmarking sites such as StumbleUpon, Digg, Pinboard and Reddit, allow users to organise links, tag, add notes or comments and then share them. Some sites, such as Digg, encourage voting to rank the links; others, like Delicious, help you to organise your links into 'stacks' around content themes.

Geo-social networks

Whilst some social networks, such as Twitter and Facebook, allow user location to be added to posts using geolocation, there are also specific geo-social networks such as Gowalla and Foursquare. Geolocation allows users to tag current locations, create a comment about the place or 'check in'. Adoption of these services is still quite small. However, as more people connect to social networks via mobile, it is likely that the use of geolocation services will continue to grow.

Virtual worlds

One of the most recognised virtual worlds is Second Life, unless you are an RPG gamer, in which case you will be familiar with World of Warcraft and its 10-million-strong user base. Virtual worlds are online communities within computer-simulated environments, where users interact with one another through avatars. There is still little mass adoption of these technologies and very few demographic or usage data. But it is a network to keep on your radar for the future.

PRs need to understand the social network landscape

For today's PR practitioner, adapting public relations to this changing environment can seem daunting. Social networks present a complex, but rich, landscape of opportunities and risks.

The focus must always be on the communities, whether they are connected through interest groups, trusted friendships or driven by passions.

Tapping into the conversations that are relevant to your stakeholders allows businesses to build relationships, influence communications and ultimately inspire advocacy and trust.

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