



Social Media: Tools for User-Generated Content
*Social Drivers behind Growing Consumer Participation
in User-Led Content Generation*

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
SOCIAL MEDIA: FACTS AND FIGURES	7
DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA.....	7
<i>Key Enablers of Social Media</i>	8
Openness, Granularity, Equipotentiality, Ownership: <i>Wikipedia</i> and its Rivals	11
<i>Key Principles of Social Media</i>	11
<i>Key Implications and Challenges</i>	14
Checklist.....	14
SELECTED DATA ON SOCIAL MEDIA	16
KEY TRENDS	19
<i>Community Self-Organisation and Moderation</i>	19
<i>Building Community Skills: Spore</i>	20
<i>Slashdot: From Staff Moderation to Self-Moderation</i>	22
<i>Social Media Service Extensions</i>	26
<i>Monetisation</i>	28
CASE STUDIES	31
WORLD LEADERS	31
<i>Facebook (and Ning)</i>	31
<i>YouTube and Flickr</i>	34
<i>Wikipedia and other wikis</i>	36
NEWS AND VIEWS.....	38
<i>New Assignment and NowPublic</i>	38
<i>myHeimat</i>	41
PRODUCTS AND PLACES	44
<i>Yelp.com</i>	44
<i>Outside.in</i>	46
NETWORKING AND DATING.....	47
<i>Nerve.com and other dating sites</i>	47
<i>LinkedIn</i>	49
OTHER NOTABLE SITES	51
<i>Whirlpool.net.au – an Australian product reviews community</i>	51
<i>LoveThatPlace.com.au – aspirational Australian real estate</i>	51
<i>Bliin.com – location-based social networking</i>	52
<i>OpenStreetMap.org – worldwide citizen cartography</i>	53
<i>coComment.com – tools for tracking participation across sites</i>	53
CONCLUSION	55
FURTHER INFORMATION	57
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	58

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Executive Summary

We define social media as:

Websites which build on Web 2.0 technologies to provide space for in-depth social interaction, community formation, and the tackling of collaborative projects.

In this report we do not aim to make an argument for why social media elements should be incorporated into the online operations of non-profit and commercial organisations; while there are many benefits to working with social media communities, the decision to do so must be made on a case-by-case basis by considering the specific needs of the organisation and its online presence. It is not the aim of this report to discuss at great length the reasons *why* such choices have been made, but to offer insights into *how* the benefits of social media can be maximised. So, for organisations which do choose to incorporate social media elements into their online presence, this report provides material to inform that choice and guide the structural decisions which follow from it. We highlight the importance of understanding both the social and technological aspects of social media, and of addressing them in developing and managing social media Websites. In particular, we emphasise the following points:

1. Social media rely on collaborative activities among large user communities. This is enabled by:

- A low threshold to user participation which allows even unskilled and uncommitted users to take part.
- Highly granular participation tasks ranging from very minor to very major contributions.
- Equipotentiality: the assumption that regardless of skill level, each user can make a useful contribution.
- A sense of shared ownership in the content generated by the collaborative work of users.

2. The operators of social media sites must respect the processes of the community:

- Be as open as possible to new users, and encourage the community to sort good from bad.
- As the community defines its aims and values, work with those who emerge as leaders.
- The community and its processes will change over time. Follow and encourage this evolution.
- The community will feel a sense of pride in its achievements. Don't take it away from them.

3. Traditional commercial approaches need to be reconsidered:

- Don't try to lock users into exclusively using your site – they'll want to explore and combine various commercial and non-commercial services.
- Allow your content to travel beyond your site, even if this means losing some control. This increases brand reach and recognition.
- Be transparent about everything you do with the site, but allow users to manage the transparency of their information on a case-by-case basis.
- Allow outstanding users to become 'micro-celebrities'. This can boost take-up of your site.
- Users expect quality services for free, but are often prepared to pay for enhanced additional services.

4. Australian take-up of social media still lags behind the US and other major countries, but is catching up rapidly:

- Social media are deeply embedded in the lives of a rapidly growing number of their users as tools for managing a wide range of social activities.
- Content creation and social distribution is no longer limited to a few sites, but is becoming an everyday practice across a multitude of Websites.
- Limited broadband quality confines many Australian participants to focussing on less bandwidth-intensive practices.
- Internationally, the Internet ranks second only to television as a source of entertainment and information in the developed world.
- We also focus on a number of key concerns related to corporate engagement with social media communities, and highlight the following major points:

5. Community management should aim to gradually reduce the need for intervention by operators:

- Social media communities of sufficient size are highly effective at self-management.
- Community self-management can be supported by providing ‘social accounting’ tools for tracking and rewarding constructive user contributions.
- Participation in social media sites aimed at generating specific forms of content can be channelled by providing content creation toolkits.
- At earlier stages of community development, site operators need to kickstart and foster positive community dynamics and act as role models.

6. Social media sites must be designed to support desirable user practices:

- Communities are most cohesive if site structures enable them to separate out into smaller groups that are focussed on specific tasks and topics.
- The reach of a social media site is much expanded if it provides a number of interfaces allowing for its content to be accessed and spread.
- Conversely, the utility and versatility of a site is enhanced if users are able to embed content from elsewhere.
- In particular, interfaces must be made available to access and post to a site from mobile devices on the fly, in a local context.

7. While social media users expect the bulk of services to be provided for free, the community as a whole can be a driver of lucrative commercial activity.

The report closes by presenting a range of case studies which exemplify and expand on these points.

Social Media: Facts and Figures

Defining Social Media

There is no universally accepted definition for the term ‘social media’. It is used by some analysts as a term that is virtually interchangeable with ‘Web 2.0’, that is, as a definition focussing largely on the technological dimension – Web 2.0 describes the current generation of interactive Websites which build on databases, AJAX, and RSS to offer a highly personalised, flexible Web experience – while others emphasise the social dimension and use ‘social media’ and ‘social networking’ as near-synonyms, narrowing the definition of ‘social media’ to include only social networking sites such as the generic networks *Facebook* and *MySpace* and the purpose-specific networks *LinkedIn* (for professional networking) and *RSVP* (for personal dating).

For our present purposes, we will use a broader definition of social media as:

Websites which build on Web 2.0 technologies to provide space for in-depth social interaction, community formation, and the tackling of collaborative projects.

This definition covers social networking sites, but also includes social media sites which, beyond social networking itself, focus more strongly on specific aims and projects – from knowledge management in *Wikipedia* through media sharing in *Flickr* and *YouTube* to community advice and self-help in sites like *Yelp* or *TripAdvisor* – while excluding Websites which build on Web 2.0 technologies but do so without making specific efforts to enable user communities to form and organise themselves. Such Websites include, for example, the many travel and product review sites which offer an option to add content, but fail to leverage the knowledge of existing communities, as well as many news media Websites which provide the functionality to add comments to news articles, but offer no space for meaningful longer-term interaction amongst authors and commenters.

Two defining aspects of social media, then, are *community* and *collaboration*, and we will address these in more detail in later sections of this report. What is important to note at this stage is that addressing both these aspects effectively is key to any successful corporate approach to social media: for a social media site to function effectively, it is crucial that users feel part of an on-site community that stands apart from the corporate brand associated with the Website itself, and that they are (or feel) in control of their own collaborative projects rather than merely working towards stated or unstated corporate goals.

In other words, user communities and their collaborative projects must be allowed to develop their own rules and aims. In doing so, they engage in a process of what has been variously described as ‘commons-based peer production’¹, ‘p2p production’², or ‘produsage’³ – a form of self-organising, community-driven content creation and development that is for the most part independent from commercial objectives, but can generate significant value nonetheless.

¹ Yochai Benkler. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

² Michel Bauwens. “Peer to Peer and Human Evolution.” *Integral Visioning* 15 June 2005. 1 Mar 2007 <<http://integralvisioning.org/article.php?story=p2ptheory1>>.

³ Axel Bruns. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008.

Key Enablers of Social Media

There are a number of key factors enabling the operation of social media Websites. These must be taken into account in the design and development of social media sites.

Low Threshold to Participation

Successful social media sites create very few barriers for prospective users, enabling them to join and contribute within minutes of encountering the site. Famously, *Wikipedia*'s slogan is 'Anyone Can Edit' – here, even unregistered, anonymous users can make content contributions to its knowledge base; other sites may require registration and/or the creation of a basic user profile, but treat such requirements as mere formalities which can be completed on the fly.

This low threshold to user participation is crucial as onerous registration or accreditation requirements are likely to discourage a significant proportion of potential users, leading them either not to join the site at all or, if they do join, to be more cautious in their participation. By contrast, the 'Anyone Can Edit' approach of *Wikipedia* and other sites enables even unregistered users to dabble in editing and thus experience their first taste of participation and collaboration; this builds a sense of the site as a welcoming space open to newcomers, and can lead to greater user loyalty (expressed, importantly, in frequent return visits).

Some sites – such as the Japanese-language *Wikipedia*⁴ – further support this early sense of connection to the user community by instituting more or less formal 'welcoming committees' which contact newly registered users to introduce them to the site and mentor them during their first steps towards meaningful participation. Other sites provide similar forms of introduction by pointing to accessible step-by-step guides to effective contribution (for example in the form of Flash or *YouTube* movies).

It should be noted in this context that the need for a low threshold to participation does not necessarily translate to 'free for all'. While for an all-encompassing encyclopaedia such as *Wikipedia* the 'Anyone Can Edit' approach is appropriate, the same is not true for more specific social media sites (e.g. a professional networking or a travel reviews site). What is required here is to ensure a low threshold to participation *for users with the desired skills and knowledges*, while simultaneously setting the bar higher for other potential users. In successful social media communities, such other, potentially disruptive users are often identified and addressed mainly through community self-management practices (see "Key Principles" below).

Highly Granular Participation Tasks⁵

The introduction of new users to a site, and their gradual socialisation into the community, is further supported by most successful social media sites by making user participation tasks highly granular. In practice this means that new users are not required to immediately make significant new contributions to the site (which could be compared unfavourably to the contributions of long-established, experienced users), but are instead able to proceed through a series of smaller contribution steps that gradually build up their content creation skills and develop their understanding of what the overall

⁴ Dirk Riehle. "How and Why Wikipedia Works: An Interview with Angela Beesley, Elisabeth Bauer, and Kizu Naoko." Proceedings of WikiSym 2006, 21-23 Aug. 2006. <<http://www.riehle.org/computer-science/research/2006/wikisym-2006-interview.html>>.

⁵ Yochai Benkler. *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

user community considers to be desirable, quality content. The failure of a number of otherwise promising social media sites (such as *New Assignment*, discussed in the case studies below) is due to the fact that they neglected to include such educative steps in their user participation models.

Though not necessarily explicitly designed this way, the implicit logic of this process is comparable to that of computer games, which similarly ramp up their challenges from small tasks designed to train players in controlling on-screen characters to major obstacles requiring advanced skill sets. In much the same way, social media sites allow their users to experience participation first by making very minor contributions (e.g. adding other users as ‘friends’, rating another user’s content, adding a comment to an ongoing discussion, or uploading a photo to their personal collection), and then to move on to more challenging tasks (e.g. initiating a discussion on a citizen journalism site, setting up a new interest group on *LinkedIn*, adding a new page to *Wikipedia*, reviewing a new product on *Yelp*). Where sites assign different levels of membership, they may even choose to nominate for community leadership roles – for example as community-appointed editors, moderators, or administrators.

It is important to note in this context that not all users will necessarily advance to the highest levels of participation. As we will discuss in a later section, some users will be perfectly happy to remain at the lower levels, especially where they feel that they have little substantial value to add to a community. However, by making their participation as easy as possible, a granular task structure enables and encourages them to advance at least as far as they are comfortable to do, rather than unnecessarily resigning themselves to non-participation because the tasks ahead of them appear too daunting.

Assumption of User Equipotentiality

A further key enabler for successful social media Websites relates to the structure of user communities. Here, it is important to allow the community to establish and develop its own structure, rather than imposing a predefined, fixed role distribution. The underlying principle in this context is not that all users are *equal* – indeed, for the past thirty years studies of social media communities as well as of other online communities in Websites, mailing-lists, and newsgroups have repeatedly demonstrated that online communities tend to form elaborate and persistent community structures which clearly distinguish between a variety of roles from non-participating lurker through valued contributor to community influential leader.

However, what is important for the long-term survival of user communities in social media sites and elsewhere is that all users are assumed to have *equal potential* to become valued members of the community, and even to rise to positions of leadership. This sense of equipotentiality⁶ is particularly crucial in encouraging new users to make a long-term commitment to community membership – they are likely to invest significant energy into their contributions only if there is a clear sense that this will improve their social standing and increase their social capital. If this sense of equipotentiality is undermined – either explicitly through the imposition of fixed and insurmountable distinctions between different types of users, or implicitly by the existence of an impenetrable ‘inner circle’ of long-term community leaders – this is likely to substantially discourage participation efforts by new users (and may even lead them to switch to alternative sites). Such processes have also been observed in many long-established newsgroups and mailing-lists, where established social networks and

⁶ Michel Bauwens. “Peer to Peer and Human Evolution.” *Integral Visioning* 15 June 2005. 1 Mar 2007 <<http://integralvisioning.org/article.php?story=p2ptheory1>>.

personal connections between long-standing members often prove impossible to penetrate for new users, and can ultimately lead such communities to become stale and decline as the influx of ‘fresh blood’ stops.

The presence of permanent site staff (such as moderators and administrators) poses a particular challenge for this sense of equipotentiality, particularly also in commercially-operated social media sites where such staff are paid for their work on the site. While their presence is legitimate and unavoidable – and often necessary for legal and commercial reasons – their ability to intervene in the community in powerful ways nonetheless challenges and disrupts community self-organisation, and can (if poorly managed) generate significant community backlash. It is therefore advisable for such staff to clearly outline their role and to encourage community self-management wherever possible; they should also build strong relationships with established community leaders (and where appropriate, recruit such leaders into further administrative positions). Social media sites are most successful and sustainable if the community feels that it, rather than an appointed administrator, runs the site and addresses any problems or controversies that may arise.

Shared Content Ownership

This sense of community responsibility also translates to the content created by the community. A key aspect of social media is user-led content creation and development, and to encourage such activity it is important that users feel in control of the content they (co-) create. For many sites, this involves clear and lasting attribution of contributions to individual users, as well as the possibility to track the contributions of individual users from their personal profiles (which also introduces a competitive element as individual users may try to out-do one another in a race to be seen as the most productive community member).

It is just as important, however, that sites offer their users significant flexibility in how they go about contributing content for the site: on the one hand by offering a range of granular content creation tasks (as noted above), but on the other hand also by refraining from channelling user contributions into specific prescribed forms. *MySpace*’s use as a tool for advertising new bands and musicians, for example, emerged from user experimentation with the possibilities of the site rather than from a strategic push in this direction by the site’s operators. Prescribing how users should contribute content to a site, by contrast, gives them a sense that they are used merely as unpaid labour (following the ‘crowdsourcing’ model), and is likely to discourage them from participation unless they see the site’s goals as inherently worth supporting (as may be the case with *Wikipedia* or NASA’s *Clickworkers* crowdsourcing project⁷, for example).

For commercially-backed social media sites, this has further implications. While most users are likely to accept the need to trade off some content ownership rights in exchange for commercial support for ‘their’ social media site (e.g. accepting ads on the site, or allowing limited commercial use of the data and content they provide), they are increasingly alert to the terms of that trade-off – this has become evident for example in debates about the End-User Licence Agreements (EULAs) on sites such as *YouTube* or *Facebook*. Commercial operators must be up-front in explaining their licencing terms, and work with the community where they intend to change these terms, therefore; they must also make sure that users continue to feel that ultimately, they are in control of the content they have contributed.

⁷ See <http://clickworkers.arc.nasa.gov/top>

Openness, Granularity, Equipotentiality, Ownership: *Wikipedia* and Its Rivals

Wikipedia, its unsuccessful predecessor *Nupedia*, and rival encyclopaedia *Citizendium* provide a useful illustration of the importance of these three factors. Where *Wikipedia* enables maximum participation even by unregistered users, assumes that each user has a constructive contribution to make, and offers granular tasks from minor copyediting to high-level administrative oversight, both *Nupedia* and *Citizendium* operate(d) on different principles. *Nupedia* invited contributions only from accredited experts, and instituted a complex multi-step peer reviewing process for content contributions; as *Wikipedia* founder Jimmy Wales summed up the project, “after 18+ months and \$250,000, ... we had 12 articles.”¹ *Citizendium*, initiated by *Wikipedia* co-founder Larry Sanger after a public split from the project, distinguishes between unreviewed articles (which have received some expert oversight) and approved articles (which have been peer-reviewed), and requires would-be expert contributors to provide faxed evidence of their academic credentials; some two years into the project, *Citizendium* hosts some 9400 articles, 93 of which have been peer reviewed.² (By contrast, *Wikipedia* has some 2.7 million articles in its English-language version alone; *Citizendium* is only slightly larger in size than the Māori-language *Wikipedia* version.)

Their rejection of the crucial enabling factors openness, granularity, equipotentiality, and ownership must be seen as a key factor contributing to the relative failure of these projects. *Nupedia* and *Citizendium* fail to extend an open invitation to contribute to all potential user, thus curtailing the size and diversity of user community; they institute a predetermined workflow process, thus undermining users’ ability to ‘learn on the job’ by working their way up from smaller to larger tasks; they introduce strict and inflexible distinctions between different users, thus limiting the areas of the shared project that individual users are able to contribute to; and they prescribe strict contribution formats which remove their users’ sense of ownership and accomplishment from the material they have contributed.

¹ Daniel H. Pink. “The Book Stops Here.” *Wired* 13.3 March 2005. 26 Feb 2007
<<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/13.03/wiki.html?pg=3>>.

² See http://en.citizendium.org/wiki/Category:Approved_Articles

Key Principles of Social Media

Building on our discussion of the key enablers of social media sites, it is possible to formulate a number of guidelines for the development and operation of social media sites⁸:

Be as open as possible to new users, and encourage the community to sort good from bad.

Both as social media sites expand and develop, and once they have reached a stage of maturity, it is necessary to maintain a constant influx of fresh blood in the form of new contributors. These contributors add diversity to the existing community, and may offer new ideas and impulses for existing tasks and processes; they also replace existing users as they drop out of the community

⁸ These guidelines are closely based on the key principles of produsage outlined in Axel Bruns. *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*. New York: Peter Lang, 2008.

through natural churn. Under the right circumstances, the result is a process of continued, gradual change, and of knowledge transfer from older to newer community members.

Social media sites are stable not if their membership is static, but if influx of new and disappearance of old users are in reasonable balance – avoiding both the disappearance of substantial parts of the community without replacement, and the influx of large numbers of new users without being adequately socialised into the community. It is the community – not site operators acting either personally or through rules and guidelines – which is best placed to show new members the ropes and channel their energy towards the most productive forms of participation.

This can also be supported through the provision of social networking tools on the site (enabling users to explicitly tag one another as friends, to exchange private messages, or form interest groups) – the better embedded in the community network users become, the harder it is for them to act against community interests without a substantial loss of social standing. (For this reason, many of the comments threads on *YouTube* and on various mainstream news Websites remain unruly – in the absence of a strong and stable community of users, there are few consequences for behaving in an abusive manner.)

As the community defines its aims and values, work with those who emerge as leaders.

Functioning communities will rapidly develop social structures which can often become very elaborate. This may not happen without significant controversy, as some community members rise in social standing while others see their fortunes fade; this process also constitutes a struggle to define the aims and values of the community. Not only should this process be allowed to run its course, it should also be supported through the provision of tools which communities can use to organise themselves – ranging from the means to demonstrate personal achievement and community contribution (for example by tracking contributions made, and feedback and ratings received from other users) through the tools to facilitate community interaction and self-organisation (e.g. discussion boards for specific interest groups within the community) to systems for acknowledging individual users' status in the community (for example using a ranking system distinguishing between new, established, and leading users on the basis of seniority, peer ratings, or contributions made – some such systems make such rankings explicit through a system of titles for their users: e.g. 'newbie', 'regular', 'expert', etc.).

As community structures become more evident, it is important for site operators to engage emerging and established community leaders as partners in the continued development and operation of the site. This may be achieved by involving them as beta testers for new features, seeking their input in the day-to-day administration of the site, or even formally employing them as community moderators in a full- or part-time capacity. (It is also important to ensure that such engagement does not damage their standing in the community itself, however.)

Properly managed, such engagement enables community leaders to serve as a two-way communication conduit between site operators and community. This role is especially crucial at times when new site features are introduced or other substantial changes to the operation of the site are made; the authority of community leaders can be an important factor in ensuring a smooth transition,

but their intimate knowledge of community attitudes should also be used to influence management decisions well before such changes are introduced.⁹

The community and its processes will change over time. Follow and encourage this evolution.

While working with community leaders is important for managing relations between site operators and users, it is also important to recognise that community structures, aims, and values are never static. Due to continuing membership churn and various internal and external influences, the status of individual users may rise or fall, and new ideas and goals may come to be at the core of community activities. This is a natural, unavoidable process, and must be supported, even encouraged by the community tools provided by the site.

Properly managed, in fact, such change can be a significant source of innovation which may be of substantial benefit to the site and its operators. Social and structural innovation may attract new user groups to a site (for example, strong communities of Portuguese speakers on Google's social networking site *Orkut*, which at the time required its members to use English only, forced the relaxation of language rules and led to a further massive influx of Portuguese-speaking Brazilian users¹⁰, while *LiveJournal* is now a favourite destination for Russian users – in both cases opening new markets for these sites), while user-led technological innovation, supported by well-documented open Application Programming Interfaces (APIs), can enable further additional uses of a site (this is evident for example in the vibrant cottage industry providing plug-ins for *Facebook*).

While continued development and innovation by site operators remain of crucial importance (and are most effective if such development efforts are well coordinated with and respond to the community's own interests), ultimately it is the user community of a social media site which will determine the site's further trajectory. Crowdsourcing site development (understood here as both technological and social development) at least in part is therefore an important strategy.

The community will feel a sense of pride in its achievements. Don't take it away from them.

While in principle, social media sites do continue to be owned by their operators, in practice the user community will feel a strong sense of ownership; furthermore, this sense of ownership is closely and inextricably linked with a sense of loyalty to the site. This sense is notably absent in many troubled or dysfunctional social media sites – few *YouTube* users are likely to feel a strong sense of loyalty to the site, beyond (at best) their own space on the site, and this explains the frequently abusive comments attached to videos there. It also varies across different user groups, of course – deeply involved, frequent content contributors are likely to feel more connected than casual users.

A strong sense of ownership, loyalty, and pride in a site is an important factor protecting against disruptive and abusive behaviour. The goal for site operators, therefore, is to develop this sense in as many users as possible. This is achieved by encouraging them to contribute content and form strong

⁹ The recent controversies around *Facebook*'s News Feed of user updates, around its Beacon advertising system, and around its recently revised terms of service, provide clear counterexamples of major operational changes which were introduced without sufficient consultation with or support of community leaders. See e.g. http://news.cnet.com/8301-13577_3-9826664-36.html, and Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's public apology over the News Feed 'mess' at <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=2208562130>, as well as <http://news.cnet.com/facebook-backs-down-on-privacy-terms/?tag=mncol:txt> about the terms of service controversy.

¹⁰ Suely Fragoso. "WTF: A Crazy Brazilian Invasion." In Fay Sudweeks & Herbert Hrachovec, eds., *Proceedings of CATaC* 2006. Perth: Murdoch University, 2006. 255-274.

connections to the overall site community in order to increase a sense of *personal* ownership (as outlined above), and by building respectful consultative partnerships between site operators and user community in order to build a sense of *shared* ownership and responsibility.

On the flipside, it is important to avoid a perception of end-user licencing agreements and terms of service (TOS) provisions as exploitative and designed to maximise corporate profit, and of site operators' decision-making as aloof and disconnected from user interests. This is especially important for any site developments which directly affect the content created by users (e.g. limiting their ability to influence how it may be used, or to change, revise, and delete it). Concerns about such issues may be able to be mitigated in advance by utilising Creative Commons or similar licences (possibly with additional clauses that enable limited commercial use, as in the CC+ suite of licences¹¹).

Key Implications and Challenges

Social media as described above offers a number of specific challenges for site operators. These have been usefully outlined by industry watchdog *Trendwatching.com* (see insert); it is worth highlighting some of them in more detail in the following:

Checklist

... Here are a number of keywords and phrases defining the online world, ready to be projected on a white wall ;-)

- Sharing
- Constant, 24/7, always on
- Keeping in touch
- Cheap, fast and easy
- Snack culture
- Free
- Ongoing feedback
- Transparency
- Anonymity
- Customization, personalization, creation
- Searchability
- Easy befriending & connecting
- Instant gratification
- Collaboration
- Micro celebrity
- DIY
- Multiple personalities
- Total control (or at least the illusion of it)
- Overload
- Beta testing
- ...and so on

From <http://www.trendwatching.com/trends/offon.htm>

¹¹ See <http://wiki.creativecommons.org/CCPlus>

Snack Culture, Instant Gratification

In the presence of multiple, competing social media sites catering to just about any purpose, the sites which are likely to succeed in attracting and binding a strong community of users are those which offer users an instant return on investment (of their time and creative energies, if not of financial resources). As users ‘shop around’ and compare the various sites catering to their interests, they are likely to be attracted to the sites with not only the largest and most active, but also the most welcoming and most compatible user communities, and with the best-developed and easiest-to-use set of tools and functions for participation. Additionally, being able to connect with or embed content from their profiles in other sites (e.g. *Flickr* or *YouTube*, used for storing media content) is also a desirable aspect. (This also relates to ***Multiple Personalities, Sharing, Customisation, DIY.***)

Easy Connecting, Keeping in Touch

Such connections should also be able to be made in the opposite direction: user-created content and activities should be available to be exported from the social media site and embedded elsewhere. This enables the social and content network created through the social media site to extend well beyond the site – and while this means that site operators must give up some control over how and in what contexts the content from their site is utilised, it also serves to increase brand recognition for their site and drives new users to it. (Arguably, a significant reason for *YouTube*’s market leadership in the video sharing market is the ease with which its content can be embedded into third-party sites.) (This also relates to ***Sharing, Multiple Personalities, DIY.***)

Total Control, Anonymity, Transparency

As noted above, it is important to users to at least feel in control of their content, contributions, profiles, and personal information. This sense of control must be carefully managed by site operators, and any limitations to such control must be clearly noted and justified in order to avoid community misgivings. Closely related to this question of control are the potentially conflicting aims of anonymity and transparency: while users may desire to remain anonymous (or at least control how and to whom they release personal information), at the same time they expect site operators and fellow users to be completely transparent and honest in their dealings with them. (It should be noted in this context that users can be persuaded to trade anonymity for transparency and reliability in certain contexts; this is the case for example for a number of social networking services including *Facebook* and *LinkedIn*, though notably not for all of them.) (This also relates to ***Multiple Personalities, Personalisation.***)

Micro Celebrity, Searchability

Especially over time, an important driver of prolonged participation in user communities is also the potential to become a community leader and achieve a micro-celebrity status, perhaps even beyond the community itself. Prominent bloggers, for instance, have frequently established profiles as consultants, authors and writers outside the online space, but dependent on their reputation within social media. This phenomenon is also particularly relevant for social media sites focussed on creative content (e.g. *Flickr*, *YouTube*, and to some extent *MySpace*). In this context it will also be important to users that content is visible, searchable, and sharable from outside the social media site itself, even by non-registered users; popular viral videos on *YouTube*, for example, rise to prominence not only because they are popular with the community of *YouTube* users itself, but even more so because they are

shared via email, blogs, and other means of online communication. (At the same time, it must also be noted that the massive influx of new users which can be a result of the viral success of user-contributed content may substantially disrupt the established user community on a site, threatening its long-term sustainability. Micro-celebrity can be a double-edged sword.) (This also relates to **Sharing, Snack Culture.**)

Free, Cheap, Fast and Easy, Constant, 24/7, Always On

Perhaps the greatest challenge for the operators of social media sites is the widespread expectation by users that social media services are provided for free yet immediately responsive to user demands and desires. (Indeed, many such services *are* available for free at least during their early stages, while they clarify their business plans or wait to be bought out by major media conglomerates). Except for truly unique services, it is usually impossible to introduce strict for-pay arrangements (though some users may be prepared to pay moderate fees for enhanced ‘pro’ accounts); site operators are therefore forced to explore alternative funding opportunities (e.g. advertising, merchandise, or other models). While the exploration of such funding models is not a focus of this report, we will touch on such issues below. (This also relates to **Instant Gratification, Snack Culture, Transparency.**)

Selected Data on Social Media

Discussion of social media usage trends in Australia is hampered by the paucity of relevant up-to-date data. While some propositions can be made about the increasing popularity of social media sites, and the embedding of social media in everyday life from existing international and national data, little pertinent research has so far been conducted on usage, demographics and motivations of users in the Australian context. Our hope is that this gap can be filled to some extent by further work we are doing on this current project. So this analysis of statistics must be taken at this stage to be indicative rather than definitive.

The first point to note is that both international and Australian data discloses that social networking has been something of a minority pursuit among general Internet users. As Internet use has become widely diffused among populations globally (although a “digital divide” persists), some basic patterns have remained constant. By far the most commonly used application is email. Nielsen data from the United States current as at December 2008 shows that email sites receive the most traffic of any genre of online destination measured in page impressions¹² (with “general community” sites at 10% of traffic measured by Hitwise). The CCI *Digital Futures Report* – the Australian iteration of the World Internet Project survey – reports similar findings based on a sample of 1000 Australian households conducted in August 2007.¹³ But aggregating data from a number of sources suggests that social networking is increasingly diffusing outside its original core of “expert users” and that the largest social media sites are being more and more utilised as a hub for a range of social and commercial activities and practices – communicating with friends and family, planning and organising events, sharing content, and making and discussing consumption choices among others.

An indicative if somewhat speculative picture of Australian social media usage can be inferred from the extrapolation of US and UK trends and domestic Alexa data on site popularity, as well as a

¹² See <http://www.marketingcharts.com/interactive/top-10-site-genres-by-image-based-impressions-december-2008-7811/>

¹³ See <http://cci.edu.au/sites/default/files/pbrowne/AuDigitalFutures2008.pdf>

snapshot from Hitwise taken a year ago in February 2008. Unfortunately the *Digital Futures Report* did not include some of the questions asked by the Oxford Internet Institute in their 2008 WIP survey of the UK¹⁴ on social media usage *per se*, preferring to ask respondents about “posting messages on discussion or message boards” and use of chat rooms and other measures which reflect an earlier stage of the development of web-enabled networking and communication prior to social media. In addition, the survey was conducted when the take-up of social networking sites in Australia was in its infancy.

The UK study, based on a representative sample of 1492 respondents, found that 45% used the Internet for “social networking”. American data from the most recent Pew Institute *Internet and American Life Project*¹⁵ shows a growth rate of 400% in users having profiles on social networking sites from 2005 to 2008, reaching a penetration rate of 35% of all US Internet users by December last year. The age distribution is of interest – take-up diminishes as the age curve increases. A similar demographic profile is likely to be found in Australia, as is the growth in usage among the 25-34 and 35-44 cohorts.

However, intensity of usage has increased, with a third of adults now reporting a visit to a social network site “daily”. Social media are primarily used for entertainment and for maintaining personal social networks, with professional connections a minority interest. However, the most active users maintain several profiles and navigate privacy issues expertly in order to take advantage of the variety of uses, personae and practices facilitated by social media. Given that the Australian data also suggest that concerns often raised by the media about the eclipsing of personal contact by online interaction are unfounded, it is likely that a similar set of motivations exists in this country – the intensification of existing networks and the extensification of those networks for a variety of purposes – flirting, dating, meeting people with similar interests, sharing content and business networking.

Turning to Australian data, as noted above, the growth curve in the use of social media has been very steep since 2007. In that year, the Future Exploration Network prepared a report on the *Future of Media*¹⁶ for the industry summit of the same name, and noted the beginnings of this expansion, characterising it as both a catch up to US patterns and as limited by connection speeds. While video- and data-intensive applications may still be used less because of low broadband speeds by international standards, the speedy increase of take-up of broadband to 78% of home Internet connections measured by the ABS in the financial year 2007-2008¹⁷ will have obviated some of the previous technological barriers to the majority of social media uses. Data compiled by Hitwise in February 2008 show that social media and forums were the second most accessed category of sites in Australia, above “News and Media” and exceeded only by search engines. The access figure of 8.00% was slightly lower than that in the US (9.00% of sites) but higher than in the UK (7.69%). Significantly, Hitwise found a high level of engagement with social media sites based on average length of visit.

Much of the story of the increasing engagement with social media in Australia relates to the exponential growth in Facebook use. Use of Alexa data must always be accompanied by the *caveat*

¹⁴ Ellen J. Helsper, William Dutton, and Monica Gerber. “To Be a Network Society: A Cross-National Perspective on the Internet in Britain.” *Oxford Internet Institute Research Report 17* (Dec. 2008). 15 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/research/publications/RR17.pdf>>.

¹⁵ See <http://www.marketingcharts.com/interactive/socnet-use-quadruples-among-us-adults-35-have-profiles-7735/>

¹⁶ See http://www.rossdawsonblog.com/Future_of_Media_Report2007.pdf

¹⁷ See <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/8146.0>

that it does not provide a complete picture of traffic, but it does have the advantages of providing a constant point of comparison and of being able to be disaggregated by nation. *Facebook* is now the third most popular site in Australia as measured by Alexa¹⁸, behind only *Google Australia* and *Google International*. In the US, *Facebook*'s market share of traffic according to Hitwise doubled between February and December 2008¹⁹, and it had overtaken *MySpace* in Australia by February. The most recent evidence from February 2009²⁰ suggests this reversal may have also occurred in America. *Facebook* membership doubled in Australia between December 2007 and December 2008, and is now projected to be slightly above 4 million users.²¹

Facebook will be discussed as a case study later in this report, but it is important to emphasise two points at this stage. The first is that the concerns about a purported migration to international sites raised in the debate around social media exemplified by the *Future of Media* report a number of years ago are somewhat misleading. Global platforms are increasingly configurable around national and local networks and users share pertinent hyperlocal content on these platforms. While there is some differentiation among the leading generic social media sites, with *Bebo* enjoying popularity in the UK and *Orkut* in Brazil and India, for instance, their actual use tends to be primarily for generating and sharing content among immediate networks, as already noted. It may not be the case that an Australian generic site would be successful, but the presence of boutique sites organised around specific communities of interest in the Australian Alexa Top 100 demonstrates that the same causal factor is operating – community formation around interests or networks on a platform which best facilitates that formation.

Secondly, the trend²² towards portability of identities and networks across platforms exemplified²³ by the development of Facebook Connect, Google Friend Connect and other such protocols will enhance existing trends towards hyperpersonalised networks floating free to a greater extent from host sites or professional content sites. Of the Alexa Top 100 sites in Australia, five of the top ten are social media sites in the strict definition of the term, and the only site which could be argued to be configured mainly around the provision of professional content, *Ninemsn.com.au*, is a portal. “Social distribution” of content, both professional and user-generated, when combined with the opportunity for “dynamic privacy”²⁴ is the direction in which lead or expert users are increasingly moving, and it can be anticipated with some confidence that the demographics which potentially provide high commercial value to online business models are at the forefront of these developments.

Additionally, there are also clear distinctions in usage between different groups of users on the various sites, of course. It is likely that for each major social media site, and across these sites, it may be possible to distinguish various usage and participation trajectories (e.g. from mere *user* to casual and increasingly active contributor, and/or towards greater levels of involvement and leadership in the user community); such trajectories may divide into a number of different stages which could be influenced

¹⁸ See http://www.alexa.com/site/ds/top_sites?cc=AU&lang=none &ts_mode=country

¹⁹ See <http://www.marketingcharts.com/interactive/top-10-social-networking-websites-forums-december-2008-7644/> and <http://www.marketingcharts.com/interactive/top-10-social-networking-websites-forums-february-2008-4125/>

²⁰ See <http://www.insidefacebook.com/2009/02/05/google-trends-facebook-surpasses-myspace-in-us-search-volume-for-the-first-time/>

²¹ See <http://laurelpapworth.com/facebook-massive-growth/>

²² See <http://www.slate.com/id/2208676/pagenum/2>

²³ See <http://www.slideshare.net/charleneli/the-future-of-social-networks-presentation>

²⁴ See <http://marketingisadirtyword.com/2008/12/10/facebook-connect-what-is-it-pros-cons-and-do-we-really-need-another-online-id-system/>

by both extrinsic factors (age, education, socioeconomic status, etc.) and intrinsic aspects (length of membership in a site, level of relevance to personal interests, etc.). We will explore some such issues in Report 2.

Key Trends

Previous sections have provided a wider overview of the fundamental features of social media and their implications. In the following section, we highlight key trends in a number of specific areas which provide both challenges and opportunities to the operators of social media environments.

Community Self-Organisation and Moderation

Social media communities do not arrive fully-formed; they develop over the course of several months or years, and their social dynamics continue to shift throughout the entire lifetime of the community. Social media operators should be involved in this process, but avoid dominating it, throughout this time. Social media communities are most likely to be stable and successful if they feel in control of their own affairs, and have the means to organise their own social structure.

Forming and Training the Community

Early formational stages are crucial: the attitudes and actions of early participants tend to set an example which new arrivals follow in their own behaviours. It is advisable, therefore, for new social media sites to be introduced through limited-release, public-beta phases, possibly involving directly recruited participants identified as desirable on the basis of their existing online or offline track record, and to encourage these seed users to spread the word judiciously through their own social networks. This may also create a certain amount of viral message spread about the soon-to-be-launched new social media site. (Though not social media as such, the early phases of Google's invitation-only *GMail* roll-out may serve as an example here.)

Additionally, it is important to provide clear and accessible tools which help these and other incoming users to learn about how to use the social media site effectively, especially if the purpose of the site is to create content for wider use. Such tools may include clear on-site FAQs, instructional Flash videos, or other introductory material; they may also include user toolkits²⁵ in software form which are custom-designed to assist users in developing and uploading their content to the site (examples for this include the Uploadr tool for automatic batch image uploads to *Flickr*, or various Google and third-party tools for uploading content to *YouTube*; indeed, for the presentation sharing site *Slideshare* even PowerPoint itself can be seen as such a tool). The design of such tools can help channel user-led content creation into areas deemed especially desirable by the site operator, and widespread use helps reduce the incidence of support requests from users with non-standard software applications. Additionally, during the early lifetime of a new site, it is also important that site staff generate a certain amount of seed content to set the quality standard for subsequent, genuinely user-generated contributions.²⁶

²⁵ Cf. Eric von Hippel. *Democratizing Innovation*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.

²⁶ See Jason Wilson, Barry Saunders, and Axel Bruns. "Predators: Making Citizen Journalism Work." Presented at AMIC 2008, Brisbane. <http://www.uq.edu.au/sjc/docs/AMIC/Jason_Wilson_Barry_Saunders_Axel_Bruns.pdf>.

Building Community Skills: *Spore*

One extraordinarily successful recent example for the rapid establishment and skilling-up of a community of users comes from the games industry, in the form of the Maxis/Electronic Arts game *Spore*. *Spore* is an open-ended, multi-stage ‘evolution game’ in which players progress from controlling single-cell organisms through progressively more complex animal, tribal, and civilisation stages to a final space exploration stage; along the way, they are able to create and modify their in-game characters (determining their bodyshape, attributes, and colour scheme in an editor mixing elements of Playdoh and Mr. Potato Head) as well as in-game clothing, buildings, vehicles, and related assets. Such creations are almost automatically shared with other users through the *Sporepedia* Website, and users’ game copies will automatically download random creations from that Website to increase the virtual diversity of the universe each player encounters.

Spore was introduced over a period of two years before its launch in the northern autumn 2008 through a series of demo videos from international games industry exhibitions (some of them featuring actor Robin Williams and other celebrities), available from *YouTube* and games enthusiast Websites; during 2008, finally, a subset of the *Spore* game itself, the *Spore Creature Creator* (the editor for in-game characters), was released to the public in a limited demo version and a full-featured version available for a nominal download fee. The editor acted, therefore, as a training tool for prospective *Spore* users, enabling them to develop their skills with this crucial in-game toolkit before playing the full game; in addition, it also built their familiarity with the *Sporepedia* Website which tracks their content creation activities, showcases their creations, highlights their in-game achievements, and enables them to follow leading content creators by subscribing to their ‘Sporecasts’ (RSS feeds of asset collections).

Users were therefore well-prepared for the release of the full *Spore* game several months later; within one day of the *Spore Creature Creator* launch, its users had created over 100,000 different creatures, and by the time the game proper launched, users had already contributed in excess of 1.5 million creatures – a larger number of creatures than there are different species on the planet.¹ By the time of writing, some 70 million different assets are now available in the *Sporepedia* (including creatures, but also buildings, vehicles, and other user-created elements).

¹ See <http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/wright-spore-has-more-species-than-earth>

Managing the Community

Once a stable and sustainable community formed, its management becomes a major challenge for site operators. A key aspect of this task is addressing the influx and socialisation of new users who will be unaware of established community practices and conventions; it is these practices and conventions, however, which help the community to remain functional and prevent it from losing its focus. Even with the best intentions, in this context site operators are often poorly placed to intervene in community matters, and should aim to ‘crowdsource’ moderation (that is, devolve moderation

responsibilities to the community) as far as possible. The community is better placed to determine whose contributions and what contributors it deems desirable or disruptive, and the sometimes lengthy process of deliberation within the community which ensues in response to new challenges is in fact a crucial element in maintaining the community's sense of itself.

That said, site operators also have legitimate reason to seek to address problematic content and resolve community conflicts swiftly and definitively; such reasons may include their legal obligations to remove inflammatory, slanderous, incorrect, or otherwise unacceptable content, their need to maintain a site which is attractive both to advertisers and to prospective new users, and their need to protect their own brand. Nonetheless, it is advisable to encourage community self-moderation wherever possible: it is evident that the presence (and even the perception of presence) of a site operator-appointed staff moderator can have significant impact on community development in a social media site.

In other words, the more clearly a staff moderator is in place to manage user contributions to a site, the less likely it is that a strong, active, and vibrant community will form and participate – instead, the presence of a moderator necessarily introduces an adversarial element in which newcomers will attempt to test the boundaries of what they can say on a site before being censored (rather than pulled into line through peer pressure, as would be the case in self-moderating communities), and in which users overall feel a lack of control over their own content and participation. (Along with the absence of real user profile functions, this is one reason why the commenters on leading Australian news sites from *ABC Online* to its commercial competitors rarely exhibit any traits of a genuine community, compared with the user communities on some of the country's leading blogs and other social media sites following the news.)

Moderation Strategies

Operators of social media sites can choose between a variety of moderation strategies which can be classed into the three general categories of pre-, post-, and peer-moderation. While legal considerations tend to encourage an adoption of the former, we will discuss these options here with a view to their suitability for social media sites and processes as we have defined them.

From that perspective, the most cautious solution of pre-moderating all user-contributed content is clearly the least desirable: unless an impossibly large and costly team of moderators were employed to accompany content creation on the site on a continuous, round-the-clock basis, pre-moderation necessarily always introduces – sometimes lengthy – gaps between content creation by the user and content availability on the site. While this may be acceptable for a small number of sites (perhaps *Flickr* or *YouTube* users could be convinced to wait a few minutes until their uploaded material becomes visible, if this filters some of the undesirable content on those sites – but even this is unlikely), it is inherently unacceptable for sites which thrive on a virtually real-time exchange and collaboration between their users. Discussions in blogs or on the microblogging service *Twitter*, or content creation in *Wikipedia* or *Facebook* cannot possibly take place on a pre-moderated basis (for more on *Wikipedia* in this context, also see the *Wikipedia* insert above – *Nupedia* and *Citizendium* can effectively both be regarded as pre-moderated, contributing to their relative failure). *ABC News Online*'s practices are instructive in this regard: due to both moderation policy and staffing limitations, most of the discussion threads attached to its news and opinion articles are terminated at the end of the

work week because there are no moderation staff available during the weekend. Communities cannot be switched off in this manner without being severely undermined.

Post-moderation, where undertaken transparently and focussing simply on obvious cases of abuse, is far less problematic by comparison. Communities will be little troubled by the removal of clearly abusive content and contributors, especially if clearly documented and explained by the moderator, and a post-moderation approach can also be undertaken effectively by staff working regular hours, as long as site operators accept that overnight or during weekends unacceptable content may occasionally be visible for longer periods of time that is desirable. Two elements are key in this context, however: first, the moderator must at all times act transparently and accountably in their dealings with the community – there is a need to provide a set of clear ‘house rules’ (not simply a collection of legalistic statements in the terms of service) which the moderator will enforce, and where necessary and appropriate these house rules must be negotiated with the community, taking into account what (except for obvious legal infringements such as slander or copyright infringement) the community feels is unacceptable or abusive behaviour. A rule of thumb in this context is for the moderator to focus on addressing any infringements which are or may be legally actionable, and for the community to deal with those actions which are of a more primarily socially disruptive nature (unruly or aggressive behaviour, off-topic contributions, etc.). Second, the moderator must take care to be present in the community themselves, rather than acting as an outside ‘voice of god’ intervening unpredictably at times of their own choosing. Though not necessarily a full community member themselves, the moderator must at least be well acquainted with the community (and *vice versa*), so that they appear as a reliable partner to the community as it manages its own affairs. Such community presence may also enable the moderator to exert pressure on unruly participants to bring them in line before a need to moderate as such is triggered, for example by warning them (in concert with the wider community) that a repeat of unacceptable behaviour may see them or their content ejected from the community.

What proportion of such disruptive behaviour can be left to the community to address without recourse to the moderator (through peer pressure, social sanctions, and other means) also depends on the strength and maturity of the community itself, of course. Over the lifetime of a social media site, it is likely that (post-) moderation will play a significantly stronger role especially in the early stages of site development, as the community itself is still in the process of forming (and moderators present at this time can help shape the future direction and values of the community). Over time, however, it is also important to devolve more and more of the responsibilities for self-organisation and self-maintenance to the community’s own processes of socialisation and debate (and to resist the urge to intervene even when such debates turn heated on occasion): community self-organisation and, ultimately, self-moderation is substantially more scalable than pre- or even post-moderation by staff. As social media sites grow and their communities begin to measure in the tens or hundreds of thousands of users, it is no longer feasible for moderators and site operators to engage in close control of all user-generated content; they have no other choice than to rely to a large extent on the community to conduct its own affairs – and for that reason, it is important to involve the community early on in such activities and to gradually train it to take on ever more of that responsibility.

Slashdot: From Staff Moderation to Self-Moderation

The development of leading technology news site *Slashdot* from staff moderation to self-moderation is instructive in this context. The site's FAQ explains the lifestages of its moderation system since its launch in 1997 in some detail:

Comments and Moderation

[Return to Help & Preferences](#) | [Return to the FAQ](#) | [Previous Section](#) | [Next Section](#)

Before Moderation

In the beginning, Slashdot was small. We got dozens of posts each day, and it was good. The signal was high, the noise was low. Moderation was unnecessary because we were nobody. It was a different world then. Each day we grew, adding more and more users, and increasing the number of comments submitted. As this happened, many users discovered new and annoying ways to abuse the system. The authors had but one option: Delete annoying comments. But as the system grew, we knew that we would never be able to keep up. We were outnumbered.

Hand Picked Few

So, I picked people to help. Just a few. 25 or so at the end. They were given the simple ability to add or subtract points to comments. The primary function of these brave souls was to weed out spam and First Post and flame bait. Plus, when they found smart stuff, to bring it out.

The system worked pretty well, but as Slashdot continued to grow, it was obvious that these 25 people wouldn't be enough to keep up with the thousands of posts we were getting each day. It was obvious that we needed more.

400 Lucky Winners

So we picked more the only way we could. Using the actions of the original 25 moderators, we picked 400 more. We picked the 400 people who had posted good comments: comments that had been flagged as the cream of Slashdot. Immediately several dozen of these new moderators had their access revoked for being abusive, but they settled down.

At this time I began to experiment with ways of restricting the power of moderators to prevent abuses. 25 people are easy to keep an eye on, but 400 is another matter. I knew that someday I would have even less control since I intended to eventually give access to even more people. While moderators still added and subtracted points, the number of points they were given dropped from hundreds to dozens.

As time went on, I began working on the next phase: mass moderation. I learned a lot from having so many moderators. I learned that I needed to limit the power of each person to prevent a single rogue from spoiling it for everyone. And then we took the next step.

Today: Most Anyone

Today any regular Slashdot reader is probably eligible to become a moderator. A variety of factors weigh into it, but if you are logged in when you browse Slashdot comments, you might occasionally be granted moderator access. Don't worry about it. Just keep reading this document and learn what to do about it!

From <http://slashdot.org/faq/com-mod.shtml#cm520>

Community Self-Moderation

Finally, then, there are a variety of tools and techniques for community self-moderation (i.e. peer-moderation) available; the choice between them depends in good part on the nature and intent of the social media site and its content.²⁷ A typical approach is to allow users to rate one another's contributions (from creative content to comments in an ongoing discussion), or even one another; this can be used effectively to highlight the content and community members which are most highly regarded by their peers. In discussion threads, for example, it is possible to employ a model first developed by collaborative technology news site *Slashdot*: here, comments rated below a set threshold value are hidden from view by default; depending on their needs and interests, users can also set their own preferences for this threshold value, however, thereby revealing more or displaying even fewer other comments. Some of the international versions of *Wikipedia*, on the other hand, have introduced a peer-review system which distinguishes between standard entries (which continue to be edited by the user community) and 'approved' entries, which have been checked for accuracy by a special team of contributors – but both types of entry remain accessible to *Wikipedia* users, who thus have a choice between the most up-to-date and the most reliable versions of a given entry. (*Slashdot* goes even further by adding a layer of 'meta-moderation' as well, which allows users to review their peers' ratings – thereby weeding out users who persistently abuse the ratings system to promote irrelevant or disruptive content.)

Additionally, users may be invited to describe their peers' contributions by choosing from a set of pre-defined keywords (funny, interesting, insightful, irrelevant, etc.) or by adding their own, free-form tags. Given a sufficient level of participation by the user community, this enables automatic and on-demand content filtering according to other criteria – for example highlighting the content that the overall community found most insightful, grouping together all contributions tagged with a set of related keywords, or simply allowing individual users to file relevant content for future reference using their personal tags. The development of such folksonomies (or user-generated classification schemes) depends on involvement by a larger group of users, however; folksonomies created by small groups tend to skew towards the interests of their members (which may not be representative of the larger community) and remain open to deliberate interference by a small number of extraordinarily active users.

Finally, from such activities (as well as from more specific built-in 'friending' tools which may exist in a social media site) it is also possible to extract and display information about individual users themselves, and about their standing in the community. This may combine the ratings they have received for their content contributions into an overall community ranking or 'karma score', or display their connections with other users numerically or graphically. If generated and presented carefully, such information can substantially aid the community in identifying and recognising its leaders and most valued members, and the importance thus bestowed on these members places them in a position of greater authority to determine future community direction and ward off disruption. For site operators and moderators, this also identifies those community leaders with whom they should most aim to build a working relationship. An often welcome side-effect of such recognition (and quantification) of a user's place in the community is also that it may encourage competition amongst

²⁷ See Axel Bruns. *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

community members to ‘be good’ (to build up their own participation stats and be recognised as leading members themselves), and/or that it may discourage disruption for fear of losing valuable ‘karma points’.

At the same time, such ranking systems must also be handled with care and should not be allowed to become the core *raison d’être* for the site. Excessive respect for high karma scores could alienate new users starting at zero – to maintain their enthusiasm, such users must quickly be made aware that through constructive participation, they have a chance to rise to higher karma levels as well. Further, some poorly designed systems are open to ‘gaming’ – that is, the artificial inflation of personal participation stats by using dishonest means or exploiting loopholes in the system (one such phenomenon is the creation of ‘sock puppets’: multiple fake user accounts which continuously give the highest ratings to the contributions made through a user’s main account, thereby boosting that user’s standing – this is also often used by fraudulent *eBay* users to make themselves appear to be reliable buyers or sellers); sites where high scores in user stats are the ultimate goal encourage meaningless forms of interaction (as evident for example in some social networking sites where some users attempt to out-do one another by creating impossibly large ‘friends’ networks numbering in the thousands and tens of thousands); and sites dominated by ‘karma’ rankings often lose their diversity and forward momentum, as users with views which diverge from majority opinion refrain from voicing those views in order to protect their ‘karma’ score, thus also stifling community innovation processes which crucially depend on a diversity of inputs. While *some* competition for community recognition is desirable, therefore, *too much* of it has negative effects.

Social Accounting

Beyond such generic tools for community self-management, other means of tracking and rewarding the contributions made by individual members of the community may exist in the context of each specific social media site, depending on what its aims are and what forms of content it focusses on. *Wikipedia*’s page history functions, for example, which enable any user of the site to trace the iterative evolution of the entry they are reading, offers a wealth of information about the contribution practices of individual users, and this can be (and increasingly is) mined to extract user-specific information used to rate their standing in and value to the community; for professional social networking services such as *LinkedIn*, on the other hand, community self-management is aided by the fact that for most users, the very reason for their being a member of the site is after all to put their best and most professional face forward in pursuit of new connections and opportunities, so that unruly behaviour is relatively unlikely by default – based on this realisation, such services are able to introduce further social media elements beyond mere profile creation and network maintenance without needing to rely on overly intense moderation procedures.

It should also be noted that professional networking sites such as this, some social networking sites (but not all: *Facebook*, but not *MySpace*, for example) as well as projects like the German citizen journalism site *myHeimat* (which will be discussed in more detail in the case studies section below), have the comparative luxury of being able to encourage their users to create profiles under their real names rather than under pseudonyms. (For *myHeimat*, this is a result of the predominantly rural and regional focus of the site: the site has managed to convince its users that in localities where ‘everyone knows everyone’, operating under pseudonyms is pointless.) Where such use of real names can be achieved, it may substantially boost the quality of user contributions and discourage unruly behaviour;

this is especially true if an object of the site is to ‘make your name’ and become better known in the community, of course (as it is for sites such as *LinkedIn*, and possibly also for *myHeimat*).

Such more specific approaches to and tools for community self-organisation and self-management can be described as *social accounting* – as Howard Rheingold has defined this, social accounting tools provide the “methods and structures to measure social connectedness and establish trust among large communities of strangers, building reputation along dimensions that are appropriate to a specific context and creating a visible history of individual behavior within a community.”²⁸ Again, however, it should be noted that which social accounting tools may be developed and made available to a social media community depends at a significant extent on the purpose of the social media site itself.

Social Media Service Extensions

Social media sites do not exist in isolation, and are today increasingly embedded in their surrounding media environments. Additionally, and partly as a result of this embedding, some social media sites and communities are also increasingly internally diversified, to a point where some social media platforms serve as the basis for a number of virtually independent communities. This internal diversification may also serve to increase the cohesion of the resulting sub-communities – participants in smaller sub-communities are better able to develop a sense of their community and their place within it than members of generic, overwhelmingly large communities. We outline a number of key developments here.

Diversification and Stratification

Many major social media sites play host not simply to one overall community, but to a network of overlapping sub-communities. *Wikipedia* provides a clear example for this: while its contributors are in some sense part of the generic *Wikipedia* community, they also form part of a complex, diversified and stratified layer of sub- and sub-sub-communities. So, for example, the overall community most obviously divides into the specific communities of the various national *Wikipedias*, possibly with relatively limited overlap in participation across language boundaries. Within each such *Wikipedia*, there are further community layers containing more or less loosely defined groups of contributors to specific topics from quantum physics to Queensland’s history and beyond (with a possibly greater level of shared personnel across cognate topics), and at an even lower level we find communities of contributors to specific pages within the *Wikipedia*, which again are likely to share a substantial number of members with community groups developing pages on neighbouring topics. In all, then, there are differently-sized communities present at strata ranging from page through topical field to all-of-*Wikipedia* level, with personal networks spanning these communities and strata both horizontally and vertically.

Wikipedia is hardly alone in this – similar group and cluster formation amongst users is visible in social media spaces from *Facebook* to *Flickr*. Not all such spaces handle this diversification and stratification of user communities as effectively as *Wikipedia*, however; *Facebook*, for example, has been criticised by some commentators for providing only relatively insufficient tools for the formation of groups and sub-communities: one point of contention was the inability for users to distinguish

²⁸ Howard Rheingold. “The Cooperation Project: Objectives, Accomplishments, and Proposals.” 30 Mar. 2005. 15 Jan 2009 <http://www.rheingold.com/cooperation/CooperationProject_3_30_05.pdf>. 4.

between workmates, family, and friends in the site's in-built friendship system (any of these groups, and others, were simply classed as generic 'friends'), while many of the interest groups in *Facebook* exist more for the display of personal identity on one's personal profile page (e.g., being a member of 'Brisbane bike riders' or 'friends of the ABC') than for actual, meaningful group interaction. While *Facebook* has worked to introduce more flexible tools during the past year, such deficits have also given rise to the emergence of a number of alternative social networking sites, including the now popular *Ning*: *Ning* offers no overarching, all-inclusive *Facebook*-style community, but instead provides a platform for users to set up their own, individual social networks using a number of standardised tools and functionalities. (We discuss this development further in the case studies section.) Other social media sites – and here, especially those building on local and hyperlocal communities (see e.g. the case studies of *Outside.in* and *myHeimat* below) – integrate both approaches: they may connect their members in the first place with what local participant communities are relevant to them according to their geographical location, but also enable them to transcend such boundaries and explore and engage with activities in other geographical areas.

Open Interfaces

Especially also in the context of this diversification and proliferation of location- and interest-specific social media communities both within the major generic sites and in the form of specialist communities hosted on *Ning* and elsewhere, the interconnection between these individual communities and their platforms becomes especially important. This is true at a social as well as technological level: from a social perspective, users participating across a number of communities in different spaces are likely to want to take some of their established online profile with them as they move between communities (but equally, they will also want to leave behind irrelevant elements) – they may use *Dopplr* to track their past and future travel activities, and *Flickr* to store photos from those travels and other activities, and display that information both in their professional profile on *LinkedIn* and on their personal blog, but may choose not directly to display blog posts about their social activities on their professional profile, for example. From a technological perspective, the existence of these sites catering to diverse aspects of a user's life and activities also means that no one site needs to cater to *all* of these needs any more, provided that it is easily, reliably, and transparently possible to transfer and embed this information from one site into another. In the process, attractive services 'mash-ups' combining information from a variety of sources can be created.

What is crucial in this context is that users must be (or at least, *feel*) in control of this process. While virtually all aspects of a user's online persona may be able to be revealed by spending some time using Google or other search engines, users will still want control over what is actively displayed on or embedded into any one of their various online profiles; while social media Websites should therefore offer the required tools to cross-purpose the user's content on other sites, they should not automatically embed the user's (or anybody's) content from one site into another unless specifically instructed to do so. (Recent controversies around *Facebook*'s Beacon advertising service or Wordpress's 'related posts' function are instructive in this context.)

Ultimately, then, social media sites need to provide advanced open APIs (Application Programming Interfaces) to make their content available for embedding in other contexts, and RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds to track new material made available by the user. In doing so, such sites lose some level of control over the context in which such materials will be used, but at the same time also gain

exposure for themselves as destinations for uploading such content in the first place (*YouTube*'s vast success in the viral marketing of its services by making its videos embeddable in blogs, social media sites, emails, and virtually any other online space provides an excellent example for this point).

It is possible that in the process, we will see the location of community move beyond the space of any one social media platform – already, for example, for many social media users community interaction takes place across the spaces of *Flickr* and *YouTube* as content hosting services, *Google Maps*, *Dopplr*, and/or *Bliin* for connecting activities to specific locations, *Wikipedia* for background information, *Facebook* or *LinkedIn* for personal profile management, and *Twitter* for real-time messaging. Google's support for the OpenSocial framework, which aims to make the exchange of content and information between such individual services even faster and easier, points to a significant potential for further developments in this area.

Hyperlocal and Mobile

Of particular interest in this context is the role of location-specific information and services, and their increasing availability through mobile and wireless devices in addition to conventional wired access – not least also following the success of the iPhone. (We will discuss a number of hyperlocal social media services in the case studies section below.) A focus on local and hyperlocal communities is one approach to the diversification of larger social media communities, and (like other such approaches) may help to give the community an added sense of cohesion; in addition, the hyperlocal approach in particular may also be able to draw on new or pre-existing social connections between contributors in the same locale to further curtail unruly and antisocial behaviour (it is easier to act up online if there is little chance that one may run into other members of the community during offline activities).

For many social media sites with specific aims, it is also of substantial interest to tap into the local knowledge held by members of hyperlocal social communities, which may be unavailable to professional content creators – local participation may be harnessed to report on local events or record local histories, or to capture local insider knowledge which is available only to long-standing members of the (offline) local community. Here, particularly, there is also an important role for the use of mobile devices to capture such information on the spot and virtually in real time – such uses range from the use of *Flickr* or *Twitter* to report high-profile events such as the 2005 London bombs or the 2008 Mumbai attack through to comparatively more mundane activities such as sharing information about traffic jams, potholes, restaurants, or travel destinations. (Conversely, of course, the use of mobile devices to access information from social media services on the fly and on location is also of significant importance – and may itself lead to further content creation activities as mobile users may respond to, comment on, or correct such hyperlocal information.)

Monetisation

An in-depth consideration of possible business models is beyond the scope of the present report, which focusses on the structural, operational, and social configurations of social media environments. However, we distinguish between three major forms of monetising the social media sites we examine here (these models are also visible in the case studies below).

Advertising

Many if not most social media sites include some form of online advertising, often using the Google Adwords service. As long as such advertising remains relatively non-intrusive, users seem relatively comfortable with this, though it is likely that a percentage of them will use ad-blocking plugins for Firefox or Explorer to keep such ads from being displayed in the first place.

More directly targeted personalised advertising is more problematic, as the community outcry against *Facebook's* Beacon service has shown: where users feel that their activities are tracked or their profile is datamined beyond reasonable limits, they are likely to speak out loudly and persistently. This has the potential to sour relations between users and site operators; it is of crucial importance, therefore, that any proposed advertising services or changes are introduced to and discussed with the community in a transparent and respectful manner well in advance of being implemented.

At the same time, many users will be willing to participate in and even drive viral marketing campaigns within and beyond the social media site if they are appropriately designed and if users feel that they gain a benefit themselves from their participation. Many advertisers are in the process of exploring such campaign possibilities. A further opportunity is presented by the *myHeimat* model of generating advertising-supported offline products, delivered free to households in a local area, from online contributions made by the community. This has the potential to attract new readerships and advertising markets for both on- and offline products, and – contrary to many other free community newspapers – the established user investment in the (user-generated) content of these products makes it more likely that they will not be considered to be junk mail, and thrown out unread. (More on this in the *myHeimat* case study below.)

Premium Services

Many social media sites now offer a range of for-pay premium service options to heavy and high-end users. Such options may enable them to switch off advertising, to store greater amounts of information, or to gain access to more advanced functionality.

Especially if managed transparently and offering genuinely useful features, such premium options will be of interest to many higher-level users. The argument that heavy users should pay for what are otherwise free services has been made successfully for the image storage site *Flickr*, for example. However, it is only likely to be successful if there are no ‘free’ competitors with similar services, or if switching to such a competitor would be prohibitively work-intensive (as it is for many heavy *Flickr* users who would need to transfer gigabytes of content from one site to the other, for example).

Premium services are also likely to be received unfavourably by the user community if they are seen to exert downward pressure on the quality of non-premium service offerings. Some professional networking services, for example, allow non-premium users to create their own profiles, but prevent them from seeing key profile details of other users unless they pay for premium access – it is not surprising that the more permissive *LinkedIn* has emerged as a market leader in this field. Put differently, users will respond positively to premium options if what is on offer are genuinely valuable services adding to what is already a useful and attractive social media site – not if paying for premium access simply restores functionality which had been artificially crippled in the non-premium version of the site.

Community Shopping

A third monetisation option will be more appropriate for some social media sites than for others: here, the site itself or in partnership with allied services offers a variety of community shopping options. At its simplest, the site may include a shopping section offering products of interest to its target community – travel tracker *Dopplr* recently opened a shop selling a variety of travel guides, international WiFi plans, and other travel accessories, for example; hyperlocal services designed for mobile access might similarly offer mobiles, plans, and accessories, while photo- and videosharing sites could develop camera and imaging software stores.

Some social media sites which encourage their users to review products, events, or travel destinations frequently employ similar approaches, but in some cases also add a further cost-saving element into the mix: knowing that positive reviews of new products by trusted community members will often lead to increased sales of the product, sites such as *Yub.com* are able to offer their users discounts if a large enough number of them end up ordering that product. While allowing the community maximum freedom to write critical and reliable reviews of new products, this nonetheless places the site operator as a new intermediary in the shopping transaction process, able to extract a percentage from the turnover while still passing on some savings to customers.

Community attitude to such social recommendation services depends crucially on their transparency. Contrary to conventional advertising-supported services, it is essential that users are able to trust in product reviews and recommendations on these sites as having been written by users like themselves. Any perception of advertiser or manufacturer influence (to hide or soften negative reviews, or balance them with more positive opinions) is likely to result in a significant loss of community trust in the site and its operators. (Open and direct responses by manufacturers, addressing criticisms, are encouraged and appreciated, however – travel review site *TripAdvisor*, for example, explicitly invites hotel and travel operators to respond to critical reviews.)

Case Studies

In the following section, we present a range of brief case studies of social media Websites in a number of different areas, to demonstrate the principles outlined in the previous section. Some of these sites are universally well-known, some are leaders in their specific fields; a few of them constitute ‘interesting failures’ which provide important lessons for new ventures.

In addition to providing an overview of **World Leaders** – *Facebook*, *YouTube*, *Flickr*, and *Wikipedia* – in the social media field, we focus especially on three key areas of interest:

- **News and Views:** the idea of citizen journalism, or at least of greater user participation in journalistic endeavours, has been highlighted and explored from a number of perspectives for some years now.²⁹ Beyond ‘pure’ citizen journalism, however, which takes place entirely outside of and often in opposition to the mainstream journalism industry, a key area of development is the emergence of sustainable ‘pro-am’ models which combine user participation and content creation with professional journalistic oversight.
- **Products and Places:** even well before the emergence of Web 2.0 and social media as developments in their own right, the use of the Internet to share reviews and feedback on current consumer products and other goods and services with interested user communities was a key use of mailing-lists and Web spaces. Social media’s improved facilities for collaborative knowledge management and knowledge sharing have made such communities a potentially powerful factor in determining the success or failure of such products. Additionally, reviews related to specific geographic locations are increasingly combined with *Google Maps* and other mapping services.
- **Networking and Dating:** the functionality for users to ‘friend’ one another (to list other users overtly as members of their network) is a fundamental feature of many social media sites. Beyond generic social networking sites such as *Facebook* or *MySpace*, this model has also been translated into a number of specialist uses, including dating sites, professional networking sites, and sites which incorporate a location-based component that enables users to track where their friends are physically located at any one moment. As especially dating sites already demonstrate, such specialist uses also offer a greater potential for paid, premium services to be introduced to the community.

We close by highlighting a number of **Notable Sites** which point to further developments of interest.

World Leaders

Facebook (and Ning)

As mentioned earlier in this report when considering social media statistics, the growth of Facebook has been rapid, as has its diffusion outside the United States. Nevertheless, as Vitak suggests³⁰,

²⁹ See e.g. Axel Bruns. *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.

³⁰ Jessica Vitak. “Facebook ‘Friends’: How Online Identities Impact Offline Relationships.” Masters Thesis. Georgetown: Georgetown University: Communication, Culture & Technology, 2008. 15 Feb. 2009 <http://dspace.wrlc.org/bitstream/1961/4433/1/etd_jmv35.pdf>.

Facebook and *MySpace*, while being classifiable as “generic social networks”, both bear continuing traces of their origins and initial demographics and associations in the American college student and music communities, respectively. Such patterns of origin and historical development influence their appeal to different core demographics, and the purposes and patterning of user behaviour. For instance, while identity verification is now less rigorous on *Facebook*, and affiliation with a network based on an educational institution no longer required, strong norms continue to encourage users to create a profile around their offline identity. This is one example of the importance of the early establishment of formal and informal rules which shape community formation and which enable new users to be socialised into an already existent (though emergent) online culture. Thus, while attention has rightly been paid to some of the innovative configurational and technical features of *Facebook* (for instance its openness to the creation of “applications”), the shape and patterning of user behaviour remain key to the success and growth of *Facebook* as a social media site (and indeed social media sites in general).

Facebook’s goal, according to its founder Mark Zuckerberg³¹, is to create a “social graph” in the form of a network “with the nodes indicating individuals and the connections the friendships”. Zuckerberg’s ambition may seem somewhat hyperbolic, in the tradition of Silicon Valley cyber-utopianism, but the site’s phenomenal growth is evidence that a “network effect” has resulted from this approach – *Facebook*’s user community has grown rapidly as existing users have invited more and more offline friends into their on-site friend networks.

At the same time, much criticism, both academic and popular, has focused on the twin issues of Facebook’s approach to privacy and its elision of friendship with “weak ties”. In real life, “friendship” can mean many things, and some friends are much closer (having access to more “private” information) than others, but traditionally this has been recognised only insufficiently in *Facebook*’s friendship system; users have found it difficult to reveal certain private information (for example, their relationship status or recreational activities) only to close friends rather than to their entire community of friends (including family and workmates, for whom such information may not be intended). Privacy is in fact a relational and dynamic concept rather than an absolute one, and in response to such issues *Facebook* has only belatedly introduced a “dynamic privacy” model, giving its users the ability to adjust the visibility of their profiles and content contributions by setting up different levels of access for on-site friend networks, *Facebook* in general, and the Internet as a whole.

More broadly, for many of *Facebook*’s users, the distinction between “online” and “offline” identities and contexts is somewhat artificial.³² *Facebook*’s success rests on its ability to mirror and enhance existing social networks³³, and its utility to members derives from the features which deepen communication and the sharing of information within overlapping but bounded networks that have local, institutional, interest-based and/or affective resonances with offline communities. While common stereotypes of social networking sites in general and *Facebook* in particular suggest that

³¹ James Harkin. *Cyberburbia: The Dangerous Idea That’s Changing How We Live and Who We Are*. London: Little, Brown: 2009.

³² danah boyd (Lead Author). “Friendship.” In Mizuko Ito *et al.*, eds. *Hanging Out, Messing Around, Geeking Out: Living and Learning with New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, Forthcoming. 15 Feb. 2009 <<http://digitalyouth.ischool.berkeley.edu/book-friendship>>.

³³ danah boyd. “None of This Is Real: Identity and Participation in *Friendster*.” In Joe Karaganis, ed. *Structures of Participation in Digital Culture*. New York: Social Science Research Council, 2008. 132-157. 15 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.danah.org/papers/NoneOfThisIsReal.pdf>>.

users are motivated mainly by what Joinson³⁴ terms “social browsing” (i.e. seeking out new connections), the consensus of empirical research is that this is much rarer than “social searching” (i.e. finding out more about existing or lapsed connections). To this typology, we would add “social distribution”: the ability to utilise *Facebook* as a platform for embedding and sharing content derived from elsewhere – for example through feed aggregators that link to blog posts on external sites, through social bookmarking practices aimed at sharing interesting material found on the wider Web, or through embedding links with commentary on profiles. *Facebook* constitutes a highly effective mechanism for pushing out such material to the newsfeeds of a user’s friends, or to an even wider cross-section of the network through groups.

Posting and tagging of photos and videos, authoring and tagging of text posts, creating events, variegated news feeds, the ability to comment on feed and profile items, and the extensibility of individual content into groups and group-based events, all enable users to manage and leverage multiple interests, roles and personae. In addition to mapping and extending networks, rather than being an unbounded space where individual users interact randomly or instrumentally with others, *Facebook* can in effect become something of a “one stop shop” for individuals to create and share information and content, manage their social lives, join with others to mobilise social, cultural and political action³⁵, and interact at a range of levels of formality with a range of connections.³⁶ It is this embedding of *Facebook* in everyday life³⁷ which is both responsible for the length of site visits and the degree to which the use of *Facebook* begins to transcend the normal relations of trust and identification which make social media sites “sticky” for a community. Rather, we would argue that *Facebook* is becoming something of a term of art for a particular set of practices, much as “googling” has passed into common parlance.

Implicit in this view is that *Facebook*’s leveraging of offline social networks enables content to be shared or pushed out onto *Facebook* as an alternative to the creation of “boutique” social networks which are freestanding and which do not have the same global visibility, “network effect” potential, or ability to piggyback on the activities already embedded in many users’ everyday lives. However, as we have also pointed out, particular niches (which also correspond to existing offline communities or potential online communities around hyperlocal or interest affinity concerns) can nevertheless have value as online communities independent of *Facebook* and similar sites. As noted in the statistics section of this report, such sites can have a wide reach – as demonstrated in the national context by the inclusion of interest community sites such as *DeviantArt.com* and *Whirlpool.com.au* in the Australian Alexa Top 100 sites. (Both these sites are discussed in more detail elsewhere in this report).

Here, it is significant to note the potential for the creation of smaller, more focused networks, which offer greater functionality for their members than *Facebook* groups, and which place the group of

³⁴ Adam N. Joinson. “‘Looking at’, ‘Looking up’ or ‘Keeping up with’ People? Motives and Uses of *Facebook*.” Paper presented at CHI 2008, Florence, 5-10 Apr. 2008. 15 Feb. 2009 <http://people.bath.ac.uk/aj266/pubs_pdf/1149-joinson.pdf>.

³⁵ Matthew J. Kushin and Kelin Kitchener. “Getting Political on Social Network Sites: Exploring Online Political Discourse on *Facebook*.” Paper presented at the 2009 annual convention of the Western States Communication Association, Phoenix. 15 Feb. 2009 <<https://mysite.wsu.edu/personal/mkushin/e-portfolio/research/collections%20of%20my%20work/Getting%20Political%20on%20Social%20Network%20Sites%20-%20Exploring%20Online%20Political%20Discourse%20on%20Facebook%20-%20Kushin%20and%20Kitchener.pdf>>.

³⁶ Nicole B. Ellison, Cliff Lampe, and Charles Steinfield. “Social Network Sites and Society: Current Trends and Future Possibilities.” *interactions* (Jan./Feb. 2009). 15 Feb. 2009 <<https://www.msu.edu/~nellison/EllisonLampeSteinfeld 2009.pdf>>.

³⁷ Cliff Lampe, Nicole B. Ellison, and Charles Steinfield. “Changes in Use and Perception of *Facebook*.” Paper presented at CSCW’08, San Diego, 8-12 Nov. 2008. 15 Feb. 2009 <<https://www.msu.edu/~nellison/LampeEllisonSteinfeld 2008.pdf>>.

community project rather than the individual user at the centre of activities. *Ning.com* is an important example for this type of *Facebook* alternatives. Where on *Facebook*, users create their personal profile and then find the friends and groups to make contact with, on *Ning* a self-standing topical social network is created first, and then attracts users through word-of-mouth and other means; such users may be members of multiple *Ning* networks at the same time, but their participation in each such network is almost entirely separate from others – indeed, each network is automatically provided with its own [socialnetwork].ning.com subdomain. The platform now hosts some 740,000 social networks (with 40,000 new networks being created during the first two weeks of 2009 alone)³⁸, and had amassed over three millions unique users by December 2008.³⁹

Ning appears to be used especially by users who desire social media functionality for their community, but are wary of being subsumed into the overarching structure of *Facebook* or another mainstream social network. Groups in such mainstream sites ultimately require users to create personal profiles in order to participate (or sometimes even just to access group content), but such profiles are then also visible beyond the group and may lead to unwanted requests to become ‘friends’ or join other groups on the same site; it is virtually impossible to use *Facebook* or similar sites to *only* participate in a specific interest group. *Ning* sites, on the other hand, offer personal profile and personal messaging functionality, but do not require participation beyond the particular social network that users have specifically chosen to join.

The boundaries of *Ning* sites are highly permeable to connection with other social media services: in the form of content feeds, *Flickr* photos, *YouTube* clips, and other materials, content can be embedded into *Ning* easily, but what happens on *Ning* is also instantly visible to users on the wider Web (indeed, for users wishing to connect their *Ning* activities and their *Facebook* profile, there is also a widget for posting *Ning* activity updates to *Facebook*). A *Ning* site can therefore be just one element – a central hub, aggregator, or forum, perhaps – in a federated network of personal and collective blogs, wikis, and collaborative project sites, and there is no requirement for all members of that federation to commit to it. In this sense, *Ning* networks can replicate some of the organisational power of *Google Groups*, but with customised branding and design. Uses to date range from networks designed around families or events to the use of *Ning* for project management and content sharing, and even to the utilisation of *Ning* sites as ready-made social media platforms for specific organisations and businesses – users of *Ning* include the US college sports broadcaster *YourSports.com*, the commercially-sponsored DIY health awareness site *Orange Cross*⁴⁰, the P2P Foundation for social media research and activism⁴¹, and various fan communities for musical and other artists. Especially for smaller-scale organisations which require social networking functionality for their Web presence, setting up a *Ning* site to support their work is now often a substantially cheaper and more effective solution than investing in building and maintaining a site of their own.

YouTube and Flickr

YouTube and *Flickr* are well-established as market leaders in their respective content sharing fields (videosharing and photosharing, respectively; *Flickr* has recently also introduced functionality for

³⁸ See <http://blog.ning.com/2009/01/40000-social-networks-in-14-days.html>

³⁹ See <http://blog.ning.com/2009/01/thanks-nielsen.html>

⁴⁰ See <http://ocsupportgroup.ning.com/>

⁴¹ See <http://p2pfoundation.ning.com/>

sharing brief video clips, but this was an addition which was controversial with users and remains relatively under-utilised on the site). According to Internet traffic tracker Alexa, *YouTube* ranks on average as the third most visited site on the Internet at present, while *Flickr* is ranked just over 30. The importance of both sites is also documented in their well-publicised acquisition by leading Internet companies – *YouTube* was bought by Google in October 2006 for US\$1.65b, while *Flickr* was purchased by Yahoo! in March 2005 for a more modest sum rumoured to range between US\$15m and US\$35m.

Although very similar in their appeal in some respects (chiefly in providing an initially free platform for Web users to share their videos and images), there are also some key differences between the two sites. Common to both of them is that a significant share of their appeal to users lies in their use not primarily as social media sites in their own right, but as storage spaces whose contents can be easily embedded into other Websites. Both sites provide a number of customisable solutions for embedding their content in various formats – for *Flickr*, this ranges from embedding thumbnails or larger versions of single images to embedding Flash-based collections (so-called ‘sets’) of images as defined by *Flickr* users.

Such embedding, especially where it relies on the embedding of interactive Flash applets rather than of simple image or video files, also provides an important vehicle for the viral marketing of *YouTube* and *Flickr* and their contents: so, for example, embedded *YouTube* videos will, once the initial video clip itself has been viewed, also point to a range of ‘related videos’ (as determined by tracking usage patterns on the site) – this is an important factor in driving user traffic to the sites. (It may also be possible to include paid advertising directly in embedded content, and some competitor sites have begun experimenting with this – however, this must be handled with great care, as overly intrusive advertising is likely to drive users to switch to competitors which do not engage in such practices.

The internal tracking of user behaviour is another shared element of both sites; both use this to determine items which are frequently viewed, listed as favourites, or commented upon. On this basis, *Flickr* calculates what it calls the ‘interestingness’ of each uploaded image, and highlights some of the most ‘interesting’ images on its front page and elsewhere. Similarly, *YouTube* offers links to ‘related videos’ throughout the site, thus further increasing usage of the site. Additionally, both sites also provide user-driven systems, for the folksonomic tagging of content and for flagging specific items as favourites.

The sites depart from one another in their handling of on-site communities, however. While *YouTube* provides functions for attaching feedback in the form of text comments and video responses, and for following the work of individual users, there is little consideration for the formation of more permanent user communities. In line with our consideration of social media community dynamics in the “Facts and Figures” section above, the often unruly and banal level of discussion surrounding videos on *YouTube* itself can be traced to this fact – there is little sense of community rules and values which may guide discussions towards more productive directions. Indeed, actual ‘community’ around *YouTube* videos and contributors largely exists outside of *YouTube* itself⁴²: it takes place on the Websites, blogs, social media sites, and other spaces where *YouTube* videos are embedded.

⁴² See e.g. this interview with Henry Jenkins, author of *Convergence Culture*, and Brian Haven: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuwDnzfl98w>

Partly to address these perceived shortcomings of its on-site community, which are especially problematic for institutional and commercial content providers considering placement of their videos on the site, *YouTube* has recently moved strongly towards a diversification of uploaded content into specific content channels operated by individual content providers; further, such channels can also be themed to distinguish them to some extent from the overall *YouTube* site design. Channel operators range from individual *YouTube* users through US network CBS, the Australian ABC, the Obama White House, and even to the British monarchy. While as yet limited in their functionality, such channels may eventually provide a basis for the formation of more clearly defined, more permanent user sub-communities engaging with one another in a more organised, better-behaved manner. That said, many organisations uploading their content to *YouTube* tend to disable any commenting functionality on the site itself, and at best allow commenting where they embed such videos into their own sites.

Flickr, on the other hand, has long provided more effective community formation and interaction tools, and hosts a number of highly active communities. These range from communities exchanging self-help advice for photographers at various skill levels or focussing on specific forms of photography to groups which collaborate on various photography projects or engage in playful competitions to edit and re-upload one another's content. *Flickr* users are able to join and contribute to existing groups or start their own; groups can also set up their own image pools to collect material of interest to them, and can invite other users to contribute their content to such pools (there exists a large number of groups focussing on photographing specific cities, locations, or activities, for example).

Flickr's use of Creative Commons licences must also be noted. *Flickr* users are able to choose between a number of content licencing options as they upload their materials to the site – from standard copyright through a number of Creative Commons options to release into the public domain. This very clear outlining of user rights and responsibilities provides an important basis for a wide range of image re-use and remixing activities which *Flickr* users engage in both on- and off-site; the widespread – legitimate – use of *Flickr* images in presentations, brochures, and elsewhere (crediting the image creator and pointing to the site) also has the added side-effect of further promoting the site itself. (Various international travel guide publishers, for example, now regularly contact *Flickr* users to request permission to use their photos in the guides.)

Wikipedia and other wikis

Wikipedia is without doubt the most successful social media project of recent years; within years of its inception, it has become the leading knowledge source for Web users. We have already noted *Wikipedia's* in-built ability to distribute the participation of its community into various stratified layers (from *Wikipedia* as such through communities centred around broader topics to sub-communities focussing on specific entries within the knowledge base); this has substantially contributed to the formation of lasting community structures, norms, and values even in the face of the very open *Wikipedia* participation model which is expressed in the 'anyone can edit' slogan. Additionally, *Wikipedia* users' ability to create user profiles on the site, and the functionality to track and review the contributions of individual users by analysing the page histories of individual entries contribute to a sense of both belonging and responsibility for its users.

In the context of such community dynamics, *Wikipedia* is also especially notable for its extensive processes of developing and defining its community rules and standards. A separate section of the *Wikipedia* wiki space is used by interested members of the *Wikipedia* community to discuss and document such rules; this space contains *Wikipedia*'s cardinal rules, for example:

- Neutral point of view: “All Wikipedia articles and other encyclopedic content must be written from a neutral point of view, representing significant views fairly, proportionately, and without bias.”⁴³
- Verifiability: “Material challenged or likely to be challenged, and all quotations, must be attributed to a reliable, published source.”⁴⁴
- No original research: “Wikipedia does not publish original thought Articles may not contain any new analysis or synthesis of published material that serves to advance a position not clearly advanced by the sources.”⁴⁵

The ongoing involvement of the community in defining and interpreting such rules is documented in the extensive and continuing debates, both about how best to express these fundamental laws and about their implications for specific cases encountered in daily editing work, which are evident in the discussion pages attached to these articles. Taken very seriously especially by many *Wikipedia* contributors who contribute to the project not only because of their interest in a specific topic, but also because of its social or political impact, such discussions bear strong resemblance to debates around the interpretation of constitutional law; it is no exaggeration to say that for sites such as *Wikipedia*, these basic rules, developed by the community, act as the constitution for their online space.

In line with this observation, that such rules are not immutable, but form a living document is also evident in the fact that in response to a number of high-profile errors in *Wikipedia*, the community has recently developed a fourth cardinal rule. This became necessary when Wikipedians realised that, while it is widely accepted that some misinformation will always be temporarily present in the knowledge base, but (given the size, diversity, and level of activity of the community) will soon be addressed again in subsequent edits, such errors are particularly problematic when they affect living persons. Not only may even temporary misinformation give such persons reason to engage in legal action against *Wikipedia* and its contributors, but – depending on how long it remains uncorrected on the site – it may also form the basis of lasting unfounded rumours and myths about these persons.

For this reason, the self-governing *Wikipedia* community has introduced a fourth rule:

- Biographies of living persons: “Wikipedia articles can affect real people's lives. This gives us an ethical and legal responsibility. Biographical material must be written with the greatest care and attention to verifiability, neutrality and avoiding original research.”⁴⁶

It is notable that, although *Wikipedia* founder Jimmy Wales – who continues to command great influence and respect in the community – also argued strongly for this additional rule, it was ultimately the community itself which defined and adopted this ‘constitutional amendment’.

⁴³ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view

⁴⁴ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability>

⁴⁵ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:No_original_research

⁴⁶ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Biographies_of_living_persons

Wikipedia's success has also led to the development of a large number of other wiki spaces – some of which have adopted governing frameworks that are closely aligned to *Wikipedia*'s, while others merely use a similar wiki system but operate under different principles. Indeed, a number of commercial wiki hosting services (including *Wikia.com*, founded by Wales and other *Wikipedia* alumni) have emerged to support such projects.

On a smaller scale, many such projects exhibit community dynamics that can be compared to *Wikipedia* itself. Indeed, both failures and successes amongst such projects can often be attributed directly to how they address the role of their communities. One widely publicised failure, for example, was the *LA Times*' 2005 experiment with allowing its readers to edit the day's editorial on a wiki basis; this 'Wikitorial' experiment was abandoned three days after its inception, when it became clear that the wiki was mainly used to replace the original article with profanities and spam promoting porn sites.⁴⁷ This failure clearly documents the importance of introducing such experiments in a staged, gradual manner which enables the formation of a robust and self-correcting community; instead, the *LA Times* simply assumed that its imagined community of readers would behave in a respectful and orderly manner.

By contrast, the Canadian Greens Party's use of a wiki to develop their policies for the 2004 federal election appears to have been considerably more successful.⁴⁸ This is likely to have resulted from the fact that in its members and wider constituency, the Greens' "Living Platform" wiki could readily tap into an existing offline community of potential contributors, and was therefore much better able to generate effective community dynamics in its wiki environment.

Not all wikis are necessarily as open and self-governing as the *Wikipedia*; more closely moderated wikis have also enjoyed significant success. In 2007, for example, the New Zealand government utilised a wiki to solicit public input for a revision of the country's Policing Act⁴⁹ (the law governing the role of New Zealand's police), apparently with good success. This wiki was moderated by government staff to ensure that discussion and collaborative editing remained within acceptable limits.

News and Views

New Assignment and NowPublic

The motivation for the *New Assignment* project, which citizen journalism advocate Jay Rosen announced on his blog in July 2006⁵⁰, was multiple. Rosen had long had an interest in "public journalism"⁵¹ – a movement which sought to foster the reporting of public affairs "as if it mattered" – by eschewing coverage of personality-based political discourse and concentrating on issue-based investigations thought to be of interest to citizens. The aim was to be more responsive to putative civic concerns as discerned by opinion surveys that sought to draw out what news inspired by a citizenship model might look like. While there were some experiments in this direction with a shift in focus by local newspapers, the "fourth estate" principles Rosen wished to see realised by *New Assignment* might reasonably be assessed as arising out of largely academic debates. Rosen was concerned not just

⁴⁷ See e.g. http://news.cnet.com/L.A.-Times-shuts-reader-editorial-Web-site/2100-1023_3-5754202.html

⁴⁸ See http://www.dkosopedia.com/wiki/Green_Party_of_Canada_Living_Platform for an overview.

⁴⁹ Archived at <http://www.policeact.govt.nz/wiki/pmwiki.php>

⁵⁰ See http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/07/25/nadn_qa.html

⁵¹ Margaret Simons. *The Content Makers: Understanding the Media in Australia*. Penguin Books. Camberwell, 2007.

about the future of professional journalism in light of the growing threats to the business model which sustained its practices, but also about a range of issues which had been identified through academic critique of the performance of the press when benchmarked against an idealised public sphere. Although Rosen foresaw potential pitfalls at the outset of the project, and indeed actively incited input about weaknesses in the idea⁵², it can be argued that the unexamined conflation and confusion of a number of goals contributed greatly to the disappointing outcomes. We include *New Assignment* here, therefore, as a notable failure offering a range of lessons for other journalistic projects in the social media field.

Rosen and his collaborators, including *Wired* magazine, wanted to leverage concepts of crowdsourcing and distributed journalism to test a new model of citizen journalism. The hypothesis was that distributed knowledge found across various online social networks could be aggregated into a journalistic product. While the underlying ideas were – on the surface – relatively straightforward, the execution was complex. *New Assignment* received seed funding from *Craigslist* founder Craig Newmark, *Wired*, a software company and a number of foundations⁵³, but it was envisaged that further funding would itself be crowdsourced. It was envisaged that stories to be assigned to a citizen journalist would be selected through a process analogous to social bookmarking or the rating and promotion of a story on a news aggregator Website – preferences would be ranked by interest, measured by the willingness of users to donate funding for a particular investigation. However, the beta version of *New Assignment*, *Assignment Zero*, did not proceed in this fashion. Rather, a theme for story assignments – crowdsourcing itself – was editorially selected and volunteers were allocated the task of researching and writing feature stories and “Q&As”.

Writing in *Wired*, Jeff Howe⁵⁴ later characterised *Assignment Zero* as “an interesting failure”. Howe’s perspective is no doubt somewhat coloured by the participation of *Wired* as a partner in the project. Nevertheless, some of the factors he highlighted are salient – the lack of passion about the theme among participants being one significant issue. However, we see the tension between editorial direction and control on the one hand and the motivations for content creation on the other as a more important problem. Howe also writes of staff changes, a “sense of confusion” among participants, and a need to rescale the project’s ambitions as projected topics simply failed to be taken up. Above and beyond Howe’s narrative of “interesting failure”, it becomes clear that failings at the conceptual level underlay the disappointing trajectory of the project. It is worthwhile spelling them out in more detail by assessing *Assignment Zero* against the principles of social media we articulated in the “Facts and Figures” section of this report.

Assignment Zero failed to effectively manage the tensions between a top-down, hierarchically driven “industrial journalism” model of news content creation and the actual dynamics of “open source” citizen journalism. In effect, the project treated participants as if they were professional journalists with a full suite of skills, rather than setting appropriate thresholds for participation and utilising a granular task structure. It was impossible for would-be contributors to gradually ‘upskill’ from making minor additions to contributing fully-formed articles, and for the same reason, a sense of community structure centred around leading contributors also did not emerge. Thus, co-operation and social

⁵² See http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2006/08/11/na_mrpl.html

⁵³ See http://newassignment.net/about_newassignment_net

⁵⁴ See http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/news/2007/07/assignment_zero_final?currentPage=all

collaboration failed to occur as anticipated; they were undermined by a much too controlling editorial presence, and mismatching expectations between site owners and volunteers. The requisite sense of shared content ownership failed to eventuate, and the affinity participants had with the project was too weak to overcome the barriers to its success which were inherent in its modelling and implementation.

Just as *The Huffington Post* has been criticised⁵⁵ – with some justification – for adopting a business model which aims to replicate traditional news organisations but with unpaid labour, so too does it appear that *Assignment Zero* participants were treated more as if they were functionaries who fell short of professional expectations shaped by the work culture of print journalism than as a “crowd” creating the collaborative open source content the experiment claimed to envisage. An idealised model of citizens and press was also at play – guiding site operators’ expectations about what is “worth” covering, and assuming that users are motivated to provide content by their wish to serve a somewhat nebulous public interest. While these assumptions were based more on an academic ideology than a commercial business model, such editorial hierarchies and coverage priorities are common to both *Assignment Zero* and the mainstream media models it claimed to be transcending – but substantially at odds with what drives more successful citizen journalism experiments.

Some of the principles of social media might have been understood in a theoretical context by *Assignment Zero*’s backers, but the attempt to articulate these principles within a hierarchically structured organisational model clearly demonstrates the pitfalls facing site owners who fail to understand and make allowances for the emergent nature of online communities. Ceding some control to communities themselves, and adopting key principles derived from an observation and analysis of how social media actually grow, are crucial. Demonstrably, the project failed to provide support for the first three of the four enablers of social media participation which we outlined in the “Facts and Figures” section: a low threshold to participation, granular tasks, and an assumption of user equipotentiality. With the best of intentions, *Assignment Zero* succeeded mainly in providing an object lesson in ignoring the conclusions that can be drawn from observing actual social behaviour around the discussion and reporting of public affairs in social media environments.

If *Assignment Zero* stands out mainly for its relative failure, then a less widely trumpeted site such as *NowPublic* is worth a brief analysis as a counterpoint. *NowPublic* is a Vancouver-based Website which seeks to combine the functionality of a news aggregator with the ability to add depth and immediate context to breaking stories through distributed and hyperlocal knowledge. The site, which raised US\$10.4 million in funding in June 2007⁵⁶, aims eventually to succeed in a business context through providing enhanced content to larger news organisations – on the analogy of the solicitation of visual content uploaded to social media sites such as *Flickr* which we have already mentioned.

Rather than selecting a small number of participants to act in a quasi-professional role as citizen journalists, as *Assignment Zero* did, *NowPublic* works with the grain of emergent online behaviours and community norms instead of trying to force them into a more traditional frame. It enables a large number of users to contribute in various large and small ways, by writing their own stories or by adding information to stories sourced and aggregated from a range of news publishers, which can then be filtered and edited by the community. User profiles allow a progression and deepening of

⁵⁵ See e.g. http://kevinallman.typepad.com/kevin_allman/2008/08/write-for-free-huffington-post-chicago-d%C3%A9buts.html

⁵⁶ See <http://www.techcrunch.com/2007/07/29/nowpublic-gets-106-million-for-crowd-sourced-news/>

participation – from “rookie” to “veteran” – to be made visible through a transparent system of user ratings.⁵⁷ The profile can also be used to view the comments and stories uploaded by specific users, and enables users and their content to be favourited or recommended. More experienced users or staff can “flag” stories for more investigation or editing, or indicate a need to source additional content. In essence, the resulting items enhance the original or third-party news stories on which they are based by adding a sometimes extensive amount of further commentary and discussion, and by combining it with additional still image, audio, and video footage. Finally, as with a number of other successful sites we have highlighted, *NowPublic* enables⁵⁸ both the posting of content to its platform from tools and applications including blogs and *Twitter*, and the wider social distribution of *NowPublic* content by embedding it on other social media sites.

Explicit editorial activity is much more restricted than on *Assignment Zero*, following a pattern of facilitating and ordering community activity – for instance by adjusting the user-voted ranking of stories to compensate for spam or to reflect breaking news – rather than being prescriptive and “assigning” complex tasks to participants who are assumed to have a comprehensive skillset. *New Assignment*’s attempt to introduce intricate protocols for professionals and amateurs to work together can be contrasted with the way in which *NowPublic* leverages the configuration and functionality of a range of applications embedded on the site itself together with the community to produce a pro-am news product where collaboration emerges rather than is enforced or planned.

By bypassing unproductive discussions about whether average citizens can do the work of professional journalists, and by focussing instead on what each side of the divide can contribute to the task of covering the news, a site such as *NowPublic* can create commercial value through employing its users in crowdsourcing (and ‘crowdfiltering’) the content created around particular events. The willingness of Associated Press to enter into a partnership with the company⁵⁹ rests on the recognition that such content has great value at times of disaster and crisis – examples being the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans or, very recently, the Buffalo plane crash⁶⁰ –, but also on the realisation that harnessing user-generated content is an important strategy where there is no professional “beat”: for example in rural and regional areas, or in specialised fields of interest. Clearly, aside from commercial considerations, value is also created for the community itself, through participation and collaboration, and it is this emergent model of news content aggregation, creation, and enhancement which contrasts for its realism with the comparatively idealised and hierarchically determined notions of what is civic and what a citizen journalist should be that are exemplified by *New Assignment*.

myHeimat

Compared to many of the well-known sites in that field, the German site *myHeimat.de* takes another remarkably different and clearly very successful approach to citizen journalism. Contrary to standard citizen journalism models, its focus is more strongly on ‘softer’ community and lifestyle news than on ‘harder’ political reporting and commentary; this has also enabled it to operate effectively alongside and in cooperation with local mainstream newspapers.

⁵⁷ See <http://www.nowpublic.com/ranking>

⁵⁸ See <http://www.nowpublic.com/newsroom/tools>

⁵⁹ See http://www.ap.org/pages/about/pressreleases/pr_020907a.html

⁶⁰ For *NowPublic*’s coverage of the disaster, see <http://www.nowpublic.com/tag/Bufalo+plane+crash>

In the first place, *myHeimat* acts as a central space for its users to engage in citizen reporting; a central focus of such reports are the activities of local associations, clubs and societies, local history, and local events from building projects to suburban festivals. The project also takes a localised access approach, with users from different regions and towns in the country seeing in the first place what others in their area have contributed to the site. In other words, while providing a unified, nationwide space for citizen journalists to contribute content, the *myHeimat* site acts as a support platform for a large number of local and hyperlocal communities which are not necessarily aware of one another's existence and participation in the project.

This hyperlocal approach also enables *myHeimat* to tap very effectively into existing offline communities in the areas it covers. Participation in the site is strong especially on the outskirts of major towns and in regional and rural areas, where such communities and their attachment to their local area are comparatively better developed and more stable than in urban areas. Germany's demographic distribution, with some 30 million citizens (well over a third of the total population) living in towns of 30,000 inhabitants or less, makes such regional users a sizeable and lucrative market.⁶¹

A further notable outcome of this regional focus is the site's unwritten convention that users participate under their real names rather than adopting a pseudonym: participators are well aware that on the basis of their contributions to the site, their friends and neighbours are very likely to be able to identify them even if using pseudonyms, and for that reason use their real names on the site; this has the (in this context) beneficial effect of translating existing small-town peer pressure from the offline to the online community. As a result, site operator Gogol Medien and its regional partners rarely have to intervene as moderators to remove unacceptable content; indeed, where such moderation becomes necessary it takes place more often to keep contributors from sharing personal details with what they believe is their local community, in order to avoid such details also becoming visible to outsiders. *myHeimat*'s general focus on community affairs rather than on national politics or 'hard news' also helps the site avoid controversy and heated debate and contributes to a welcoming atmosphere overall.

What is particularly notable about the *myHeimat* project is its combination of community and commercial interests, and its mix of print and online publications. In regional areas where a critical mass of participants has been attracted, content generated by the local community is harvested in the form of (in most locations, monthly) free print lifestyle magazines, funded through advertising and published by Gogol Medien or its the commercial partners. These magazines are variously distributed through central pick-up locations, to the letterboxes of local households, or as inserts in local newspapers. (In a number of developing *myHeimat* bases, content is similarly harvested on a smaller scale for weekly or monthly community pages in local newspapers.) Such magazines have opened up a new market for hyperlocal advertising which matches their hyperlocal content, and have proven to be more effective vehicles for advertising than other free local newspapers or magazines, because the user-generated content contained within them ensures that they are read more attentively by local recipients – locals whose content is featured in these publications become loyal followers and promote the publication to their friends and neighbours.

⁶¹ *myHeimat* founder and CEO Martin Huber, interviewed by Axel Bruns. Munich, 28 Oct. 2008.

For this reason, *myHeimat* has been able to enter into a number of commercial collaboration agreements with local (print) newspapers – and its success is documented in the fact that regional newspaper group Madsack has bought a stake in Gogol Medien. These local partners help to promote and orchestrate participation by local users in *myHeimat* through their established publications, boosting the level of content in regions where the site is still developing its membership; *myHeimat*'s collaboration with Madsack in the Hannover region won a European Newspaper Award in 2008. The presence and guidance of local journalists on the site also provides some seed content that acts as an example of good practice and/or a starting-point for discussion, and helps locals hone their own reporting skills as they engage and collaborate with professional journalists on the site. This roll-out of *myHeimat* into new regions therefore provides an excellent example of best practice for the gradual, guided development of community structures that is necessary in the establishment of new social media sites and projects.

Indeed, in addition to such gradual roll-out, supported by existing and new print publications, the *myHeimat* platform has also been used to cover specific events, such as town festivals. The platform is flexible enough to enable its operators to combine user-submitted reports and photos from these events into print-ready magazine publications virtually overnight, to be handed out to festival-goers as a souvenir on the last day of a week-long event, for example. Working in partnership with event organisers, this has enabled *myHeimat* to make significant inroads into regions in which it had yet to develop strong community participation by other means. (In recognition of this fact, the *myHeimat* platform has now also been licenced to the *Gießener Zeitung*, a participatory print and online newspaper project independent of *myHeimat* itself.)

One notable apparent limitation of the *myHeimat* approach is that it has so far failed to penetrate substantially into urban areas. While some participation by urban users is evident (especially for urban areas close to the regional centres of the *myHeimat* community), the project's experience so far has been that – compared to regional and rural users with their strong connection to the local area – urban users are less strongly attached to their specific location (their suburb), and tend to write more generally about events in 'their city'. This leads to such content being relatively bland and generic when compared to the contributions of regional users. (Notably, the same is true for contributors from affluent regional satellite towns around major cities, who – as 'refugees' from the city – similarly have a less developed local attachment⁶²)

However, this absence of the hyperlocal connection that is crucial for the *myHeimat* model is not inevitable for urban users; the London-based *Urban Tapestries* experiment, for example, has been successful in encouraging its users to document the 'social knowledge' they have about their local area.⁶³ In major Australian cities, too, it is possible that the stronger attachment of many residents to 'their' suburb would make the *myHeimat* model a viable proposition.

⁶² Peter Taubald, editor of *myHeimat* affiliate *Leine-Zeitung*, interviewed by Axel Bruns. Garbsen, 23 Oct. 2008.

⁶³ See Alice Angus *et al.* "Urban Social Tapestries." *IEEE Pervasive Computing* 7.4 (2008): 44-51.

Products and Places

Yelp.com

Yelp is an excellent example for a growing number of social media sites allowing their users to share product and service reviews. Contrary to other such sites, which focus more on reviewing mass and niche market products, *Yelp* also includes a location-based component – content on the site ranges from reviews of bars and restaurants through local services and even to parks and other local sights. At present, the site is focussed on major cities in the US and Canada, and has recently begun to expand into the UK. In their reviews, users typically contribute a number of paragraphs, as well as a rating on a five-star scale that is used by the site to highlight the best products and services for specific searches.

While there is some editorial oversight over content posted to the site, it should be noted that the integrity of content in *Yelp* is managed largely by the user community itself. In addition to being able to review and rate the products and services themselves, *Yelp* users also rate one another's contributions (by choosing from a selection of attributes such as 'useful', 'funny', and 'cool'), and can pay one another compliments for their contributions (selection from a number of options such as 'you're cool', 'good writer', 'thank you', etc.). Such feedback, as well as the user's overall performance on the site, are tracked and displayed as statistics in the user's profile – which shows, *inter alia*, the number of reviews a user has submitted, how many of these were the first ever review for a specific product or service, how the user's ratings are distributed across the five-star scale, and what ratings and feedback the user has received from their peers. On this basis, a merit-based community structure emerges, and is recognised by *Yelp* by allowing such users to join the *Yelp* 'elite': a special group of particularly active and trusted reviewers who also participate in occasional offline community events. The availability of such user statistics also helps new users build the confidence to trust specific reviewers.

It is particularly noteworthy that the vast majority of reviews on the site are positive – *Yelp* statistics show some 67% of reviews to be in the 5- or 4-star range.⁶⁴ This is neither a result of in-built site design features nor of a particularly uncritical stance amongst *Yelp* users: rather, it points to a general tendency amongst the users of many such sites to flag those businesses they have been most happy with – such positive reviews are a sign of loyal, satisfied customers engaging in the viral promotion of their favourite products and services. At the same time, as noted in previous sections, especially in the early stages of *Yelp* community development the operators of the site also worked hard to instil in the community this sense of rewarding 'good' businesses by reviewing them; In keeping with this approach, the site FAQ, for example, suggests the following for users wanting to submit reviews: "the best reviews are personal and experiential, and tend to offer helpful suggestions, perhaps even an insider tip or two. The most useful reviews sometimes make mention of unique qualities that make the business special or the type of person who might also like this business."⁶⁵ The seed content contributed by early users and site operators is instrumental in setting the scene for the further development of the site – and notably, as it moves into new geographical areas, *Yelp* has at times paid

⁶⁴ See <http://www.yelp.com/business#bizFAQ>

⁶⁵ See http://www.yelp.com/faq#great_review

users to contribute such seed content for their local area,⁶⁶ and employs community managers (or ‘Yelp Mayors’) to encourage user participation in specific locales.⁶⁷

This question of balancing positive and negative reviews is a central consideration for many product reviews sites. Providing only positive reviews undermines the trustworthiness of a site, while an oversupply of critical views reduces the utility of the site to users (who, after all, are looking to find the right product or service to address their needs) – it is paramount to strike the right balance between positive and negative reviews, therefore, and *Yelp*’s 2:1 ratio may be an appropriate target in this regard. Again, however, we stress that such a ratio cannot be enforced in a formulaic manner from the top down, but must rather be achieved by careful management and encouragement of the user community: in their own reviewing activity, incoming users respond to what they see from other, established users – they will focus on contributing constructive reviews of the services they have found useful if this is what the existing community is doing, but they will be highly critical of products they have found wanting if that is the tenor of the site.

If successful, product review sites such as *Yelp* are also able to engage with the business community whose products and services their users are reviewing. In doing so, they depart from the conventional Yellow Pages model – where traditionally, businesses were led to advertise in the Yellow Pages because they represented a city’s central business directory, the emergence of Google and other search engines has irretrievably undermined that position. By contrast, businesses are now forced to engage with *Yelp* because of the sheer weight of user-created content relating to their products and services: they must follow what is being said about them, and (where necessary) respond to misperceptions and misinformation. To facilitate this, *Yelp* offers businesses an opportunity to ‘claim’ pages reviewing their products and services, which enables them to add and update location and contact information, add photos, and provide further informational material (with some such functionality available for a fee). Similar to Google sponsorship options, they are also able to have reviews of their services listed prominently as sponsored search results on the site. In order to protect the integrity of its core business, however, *Yelp* is at pains to point out that such business involvement does not give businesses any control over user reviews⁶⁸ – in a reversal of the Yellow Pages model, in other words, the site’s relationship with its users has become more important than its relationship with advertisers.

Finally, and importantly, *Yelp* also provides a mechanism for business operators to contact the users reviewing their products and services; on an individual basis, this closes the feedback loop between the two sides and enables businesses to identify and address areas of legitimate criticism. *Yelp* users also have the ability to update and revise their reviews, and such revisions are a common feature of the site; more so perhaps than ‘plain’ reviews themselves, such revised reviews provide convincing evidence that a business operator has responded to the criticisms voiced previously, and boost the positive perception of that business. This documents the impact of social media’s “transparency tyranny”⁶⁹ – the instant availability of reviews and feedback on products and services of all kinds – on businesses’ practices of managing customer relations and the public perception of their brand.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ See e.g. <http://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/05/12/why-yelp-works/?scp=1-b&sq=yelp&st=nyt>

⁶⁷ See <http://www.yelp.com/jobs#allCM>

⁶⁸ See <http://www.yelp.com/business#bizFAQ>

⁶⁹ See <http://trendwatching.com/trends/transparency.htm>

⁷⁰ See e.g. http://money.cnn.com/2008/01/23/smbusiness/manage_online_reputation.fsb/index.htm for an overview of how *Yelp* and similar reviews services are now being used for brand perception management.

Outside.in

At first glance, *Outside.in* (a US-based site, despite the .in country domain) may appear similar both to product review site *Yelp* and to the hyperlocal *myHeimat* citizen journalism site discussed above. However, where both those sites provide a central platforms for their users to create content and communicate with one another, *Outside.in* operates on a decentralised model: it tracks the content creation efforts of its users as posted on their blogs and other external sites (as well as material published on a number of other sources from online news Websites to government news releases) and notes in this context from them any mention of recognised cities, suburbs, or places ranging from restaurants and cinemas to sports venues and educational institutions. It then provides access to this aggregated information resource through the *Outside.in* site itself, using a number of alternative search and digest options (e.g. restaurants in Boston, mentions of specific venues, etc.). In other words, as its name suggests, *Outside.in* is a large-scale *aggregator* of location-specific news and reviews from other sources, rather than a site for publishing such information directly.

In the first place, users of the site are asked to nominate their own location; the site will then present the most recent content which is of relevance to them. This can be further explored by zooming in to specific map locations (using a *Google Maps* plugin), selecting a general area of interest (from ‘Arts and Culture’ to ‘Sports and Leisure’), reading the latest news for particular topics or places, or searching for specific keywords. Further, the *Outside.in* ‘Radar’ provides a newsfeed of content related to events within 1,000 feet of the user’s chosen location – and the site also offers a mobile phone application which synchronises the focus of the Radar with the user’s current location as determined by the Yahoo! FireEagle system.

At present, *Outside.in* claims to track “news, views, and conversations” in nearly 12,000 locales around the United States, and has stated plans to expand beyond US borders; its reliance on blogs, social media sites, and other newsfeeds from third-party sites means that contrary to *myHeimat*, its coverage is particularly strong in major metropolitan areas and drops off significantly in more sparsely populated, less online-active regional and rural locations. This aggregation of outside material makes *Outside.in* a prime example of a ‘mash-up’ site which relies not primarily on on-site content creation by its own users, but on the accessibility and reusability of outside content; in the process, it also acts to drive traffic to such third-party sites and to give their operators a further platform for exposure, of course. In addition to this aggregation of outside content, however, *Outside.in* also offers further on-site discussion functionality. All of the content aggregated by *Outside.in* is freely available online, meaning that its use of such third-party content should be perfectly legal (or at least no more open to challenge than Google’s *Google News* aggregation service); what remains untested, however, is whether the additional exposure which *Outside.in* provides for the sources it draws on could also mean that any negative statements in such source content may lead to legal action against *Outside.in* or the original sources themselves.

Overall, the site’s approach also means that *Outside.in* cannot be considered to be primarily a user reviews or citizen journalism Website; while reviews, news stories, and other relevant material will be included in its content, the place-based focus of the site has led it to be particularly strong at covering reports from local social events and reviews of local restaurant, entertainment, and other services. What should be noted in this context is that due to the manner in which *Outside.in* gathers its content, only a limited portion of the material it provides access to necessarily constitutes formal reports or

reviews, and the site does not incorporate a star-based or other ratings system; much of it consists instead of blog posts and other material in which users simply describe what they did the previous weekend (and in passing may mention the poor service at a restaurant, or the great DJ at a club they went to). However, it can be speculated that it is exactly the randomness and authenticity of such reports – compared with, say, formulaic five-star restaurant reviews – which makes *Outside.in* attractive and trustworthy for its users.

Notably, of course, as an aggregator of outside content the site also has far fewer problems in establishing and managing an on-site community of users. That said, although there is little evidence of this so far, there is a greater danger of being spammed by partisan users, frequently posting the same glowing review of a particular venue, for example. Such attempted manipulation may appear very obvious on the *Outside.in* site, however, and would be likely to lead to negative repercussions for the services that spammers may attempt to promote.

Overall, then, *Outside.in* is included here less as an already well-established success story than as an emerging aggregation-based model which should be followed further as it develops. As noted previously, the services mash-up approach of drawing relevant information from a variety of social media sites and presenting it in a combined, value-adding format is a growing trend within the Web 2.0 environment, and is likely to mature further in coming years. *Outside.in* itself, for example, could be further improved by building a strong on-site community to manage and organise its externally-sourced content; this would incorporate elements of *Digg* or similar social bookmarking services (which evaluate, rate, and rank material from all over the Web) into the *Outside.in* model. Alternatively, the *Outside.in* approach could be used to complement business listings in Yellow Pages-style services by adding information about what users on the Web have written about those services (this is similar to the way that business listings on *Google Maps* are closely connected to Web searches for those business names).

Networking and Dating

Nerve.com and other dating sites

Internet dating websites predate the development of social media sites *per se*. Interestingly, therefore, most sites (which tend to be built around common software applications) are both earlier instances of peer to peer interactivity and somewhat slow to incorporate Web 2.0 features. This is not necessarily because of any lack of understanding of appropriate applications and configurations by site owners and designers, but rather for a basic social and structural reason – the motivation⁷¹ (at least in theory) for most users is to exit the site after narrowing down a range of possible interactions to one successful interaction which then moves offline as the user's relationship status changes. Thus, communication tends to flow from an individual user to a range of discrete other users, rather than the embedding of an individual within a community and their consequent socialisation into a set of norms and practices which predates their participation. To some degree, there are also structural tensions within the business models of dating sites which affect the sites' capabilities for community formation. The first is the recognition that the less successful the user is in forming a lasting relationship, the more they will use the site. Conversely, though, the user may also become discouraged and leave the site. While

⁷¹ For an overview of the limited academic literature on users of Internet dating sites, see Jo Barraket and Millsom S. Henry-Waring. "Getting It On(line): Sociological Perspectives on e-Dating." *Journal of Sociology* 44.2 (June 2008).

sites typically make claims for marketing purposes including every member who has ever signed up, the reality is that there is a lot of churn in usage. The challenge, then, is for sites to harmonise the tensions indicated, and this is possible through selective appropriation of social media models and features.

The difference in user motivations and expectations explains why Internet dating has not been fully subsumed as a practice by more general social networking sites. As noted earlier, the use of *Facebook* for dating is very much a minority interest, and there are strong norms that create barriers for its use – the limitation of contact to friends and the comparative lack of anonymity, among others. So while Internet dating may be a function of several applications developed for *Facebook*, it is likely for a range of reasons that the market for dedicated dating sites will be a persistent one, particularly also as Internet dating appeals to a demographic which skews slightly older than generic social networking sites.

At the current state of development, two options for dating sites have emerged – generic and niche. In theory, almost any interest group, affinity or demographic could form the basis for a dating site’s membership – and in the United States, sites have proliferated for people of various religious and political beliefs, people with disabilities, residents of particular localities, and so on. However, there are at least two constraints – scale and the willingness of particular groups to monetise dating behaviours. In Australia and comparable countries, a lack of scale has meant that dating sites have tended to be generic, with *RSVP* as the market leader, although with the increasing ubiquity of Internet access and broadband connections noted in the statistics section of this report, the potential for niche targeting certainly exists.⁷² Generic sites have some disadvantages – including the inability of users in a particular niche (which might be one of high value from a business standpoint) to locate sufficient others with whom they feel an affinity despite the parameters available in search functions. Being alienated by excessive contact from members who are perceived as undesirable is also problematic – particularly for female users. Again, business concerns can defeat user satisfaction here – with limits on contact for popular users, frustration results for those who are trying to contact the most desirable potential interactors. The branding of generic sites can also discourage high end niche users – as can the exclusive focus on “romance”.

Some lessons can be drawn from US experience – with reference in particular to *Nerve.com*. *Nerve*, which has been established for over a decade⁷³, targets New York City residents in the 25-40 demographic working in such fields as culture and creative industries, finance and academia. *Nerve* bills itself as an online magazine rather than as a dating site, and is rich in content broadly organised around artistic erotica, dating, and social and cultural life. The site features blogs and fora as well as various methods of enabling users to create their own content – through themed photography and writing contests, vlogs, blogs, and enhanced commenting and group participation features – all of which are either scaled up or exclusive to premium members. *Nerve* also expands its demographic reach and reduces residual cultural resistance to Internet dating through syndication of its personals to sites with similar demographics but a different set of editorial themes – for instance to *Salon.com*, which concentrates on politics and culture.

⁷² There is little academic literature available to shed light on these matters. However, one of the researchers who authored this report, Mark Bahnisch, has had extensive conversations in another context with industry experts, and this section draws heavily on this knowledge base.

⁷³ See <http://www.nerve.com/the-first-ten-years/>

The model *Nerve* uses is similar to other sites which mix user and editorial content, and have prominent social media features – for instance *DeviantArt.com* for alternative art, creative writing and photography (which features in the Australian Alexa Top 100 sites) and *SuicideGirls.com* for alternative erotica – both of which provide and succeed in fostering rich community interactions around particular interests or identifications, and which enable users to scale up by participating in the organisation of the site or of particular aspects of it, as well as potentially being “promoted” to providers of editorially certified content.

These sites provide a rich experience while avoiding some of the pitfalls of the application of social media features to Internet dating sites – such as, for instance, controversial functionality on some sites which allows users to review their dates with other users. Rather, *Nerve* allows users to present a much fuller picture of their identity – beyond a relatively static profile – through personal blogs (whose focus is not limited to dating) and participation in community interaction and content creation. Thus users are able to “validate” the identity or self “brand”⁷⁴ they wish to represent via their profiles through broadening and deepening it.⁷⁵ In effect, the user “shows rather than tells”⁷⁶ their personality. The advantages for the site in terms of stickiness and user affinity beyond its instrumental purpose of dating are clear. Research findings from the social scientific literature also suggest that community and collaboration are among the features users value of successful dating Websites.⁷⁷ Other sites – *OkCupid.com* being the most notable – have incorporated features such as the ability to take personality tests for fun (which then link to a matchmaking feature) and to maintain blogs. This also gives them an attraction above and beyond the primary purpose of dating, and enables a more permanent community to develop. As suggested above, there are some structural tensions in incorporating Web 2.0 and social media features into such Websites, but our analysis suggests that successful models exist for minimising these tensions and maximising outcomes for both site owners and users.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn, launched in May 2003, is a social networking site oriented towards making, renewing and extending business- or work-based connections. It enables users to reconnect with former colleagues or associates from tertiary education or from past employment, and to extend connections outwards through accessing the networks of other users with whom they are already linked. Users are encouraged to import networks on joining the network through uploading address books from email or other applications. An important result of this approach is that (contrary to the vast majority of social media sites) virtually all *LinkedIn* users are present on the site under their real names.

LinkedIn’s social media model seeks to replicate the manner in which individuals have always sought to source contacts from existing networks, and is premised on validating such connections through the trust which is embedded in primary connections. The site’s configuration supports this culture through necessitating a direct or intermediary relationship before a contact can be made. The site allows users to utilise the reputational effect of their connections to bolster confidence in their suitability for

⁷⁴ Adam Arvidsson. “Quality Singles: Internet Dating and the Work of Fantasy.” *New Media & Society* 8 (2006): 671-690.

⁷⁵ Jennifer Yurchisin, Kittichai Watchravesringkan, and Deborah Brown McCabe. “An Exploration of Identity Re-creation in the Context of Internet Dating.” *Social Behavior and Personality* 33.8 (2005): 735-750.

⁷⁶ Shanyang Zhao, Sherri Grasmuck, and Jason Martin. “Identity Construction on *Facebook*: Digital Empowerment in Anchored Relationships.” *Computers in Human Behavior* 24.5 (Sep. 2008): 1816-1836.

⁷⁷ Ahmed Y. Mahfouz, Andreas G. Philaretou, and Antonis Theocharous. “Virtual Social Interactions: Evolutionary, Social Psychological and Technological Perspectives.” *Computers in Human Behavior* 24.6 (17 Sep. 2008): 3014.

employment, business relationships and/or consultancy work. Users can seek recommendations from connections testifying to their abilities generally, or to the quality of their work on particular projects or in individual positions they have held. Employers can list jobs and use *LinkedIn* for recruitment, while users can identify shared connections who can provide an introduction to potential employers.

A number of ancillary features enhance the basic purpose of *LinkedIn*. Groups can be established in order to facilitate networking among those with shared or comparable interests or histories, and a number of other applications can be imported to individuals' profiles to deepen information about their skills and capabilities – for example by automatically embedding their latest blog posts, or their most recent Powerpoint presentations from the popular presentation sharing site *Slideshare*.

Although obviously there are differences in emotional intensity and affect, seeking new business or work-based connections follows many of the same logics as flirting and seeking intimate connections – *LinkedIn* provides a platform for what may be described as “business dating”, and many of the same social media principles apply to both domains. The site, which now has some 35 million users worldwide⁷⁸, works on a logic of trust which is culturally identical to the network effect of *Facebook* friending, and implements features similar to those on dating sites features that enable users to engage in community formation and identity development without prior social validation of their profile. So, for example, users can ask their immediate network contacts to introduce them to more remotely connected *LinkedIn* users, in essence ‘borrowing’ their close connections’ professional status to make new connections in the network. Such functionality also means that *LinkedIn* has become an important tool both for individual jobseekers and corporate headhunters at middle and upper management levels, enabling them to bypass more conventional jobseeking Websites.

At the same time, similar limitations to those observed for generic dating sites (and generic social networks like *Facebook*) also apply for *LinkedIn*. In addition to *LinkedIn* as a generic professional networking site, there is a space for professional networking sites catering to specific industry sectors or business ideologies (e.g. environmentally sustainable businesses), and users may derive a higher level of social capital from participation in such more specialist sites than they do from their profile on a generic site like *LinkedIn*. *LinkedIn*'s own development of a growing array of interest group tools can be seen as a response to such potential external competition: the establishment of specialist and exclusive user communities within the site may be able to prevent an exodus of specialist users to such competitor sites. (However, the increasing addition of social media functionality to *LinkedIn* in turn also threatens to overshadow the site's more basic use for tracking professional networks – the large portion of users who utilise *LinkedIn* mainly as an online tool for managing their collection of business cards may well be put off by a growing flood of status updates, content posts, and other additional material produced by their network contacts.)

The dilemma for *LinkedIn* and similar sites (such as its competitor *Xing*, which is popular especially in Europe), then, is a choice between becoming more like *Facebook*, and ultimately having to justify its existence as a site separate from *Facebook*, and remaining more focussed purely on its core function of business contact management, but in the process perhaps disappointing those users who wish for more ‘social media’ functionality. At present, *LinkedIn* remains protected from competition by

⁷⁸ See <http://press.linkedin.com/about><http://press.linkedin.com/about>

Facebook to some extent by the different perception of both sites (with *LinkedIn* being seen as an acceptable professional networking tool, and *Facebook* as a more frivolous, recreational space), but this is likely to change as *Facebook* becomes increasingly accepted as an inherent part of everyday online activity.

LinkedIn may retain some advantage over *Facebook* also by embedding its functionality increasingly into mainstream office software and other productivity tools; it already offers plugins for the email tools *Outlook* and *Lotus Notes*, for example, which allow users to create, update, and search for their contacts, access profiles, and receive updates from their *LinkedIn* networks from within the software. Additionally, Users may opt in to share network information between *LinkedIn* and sites such as *Dopplr*, which enables its users to track their national and international travel – a combination between the two sites enables them to plan meetings with other members of their *LinkedIn* network who (according to their *Dopplr* information) will be in the same city at the same time.

Other Notable Sites

***Whirlpool.net.au* – an Australian product reviews community**

While relatively unsophisticated in its use of Web 2.0 technology, *Whirlpool* is nonetheless an important example of a successful, independent, and homegrown Australian social media community. Focussing on reviews and discussion of Australian broadband providers and plans, the site is built around a comparatively simple Web forum system that allows for threaded user discussions to take place. Additionally, it also provides an overview of current industry news and – most importantly – a clear overview and comparison of the various broadband access plans offered by some 225 Internet service providers (by its own figures, the site covers 8,235 different broadband plans). *Whirlpool*'s “Broadband Choice” section provides useful statistics about the preferred broadband providers used by its nearly 270,000-strong user community.⁷⁹

Similar to other product review sites, *Whirlpool* demonstrates the impact of the “transparency tyranny” of user-contributed reviews and feedback: in many of its ISP-specific discussion fora, ISP support staff are actively participating and responding to reports of poor customer service or broadband problems. In this context, it should be noted that the site profits substantially from its status as a third-party, user-led forum independent of any one service provider – this positioning increases the credibility of its advice and information, and heightens the need for ISP representatives to respond quickly and helpfully to problems highlighted by its users.

***LoveThatPlace.com.au* – aspirational Australian real estate**

LoveThatPlace is an Australian social media site focussing on real estate, but does not act as a real estate agent or advertising service in its own right: it could be described as an aspirational real estate site. The site allows prospective buyers to flag their interest in properties which are not currently on the market, and prospective sellers to dip a first toe into the water by flagging the fact that they may be interested in selling if the right offer is made – but without employing the services of a real estate agent or formally advertising a property for sale. Where both prospective buyers and sellers for a property are present on the site, this can also lead to actual property sales, of course.

⁷⁹ See <http://bc.whirlpool.net.au/>

In essence, the site provides a user-generated alternative to real estate sites, and its business model is based on offering advanced fee-paying accounts which allow users to provide more detailed information about the properties they are interested in buying or selling. The sustainability of that model remains to be seen – in particular, too, it is likely that greater prominence for the site may lead to more real estate agents advertising selected properties on the site (in much the same way that some commercial sellers have begun to advertise selected products on *eBay*, in an effort to draw customers to their main stores). This would make the site more profitable, but would also undermine its ability to distinguish its services from mainstream real estate sites.

***Bliin.com* – location-based social networking**

Another option for social networking sites, beyond the embedding of connection practices in a rich environment of user-generated and editorially created content, is the addition of geolocation functionality. This utilises the GPS positioning systems which are now integrated into mobile phones and PDAs, and combines them with real-time map-based data. One site to highlight in this context, in terms of usability and design, is Dutch-based *Bliin.com*⁸⁰: this site enables its users to report and track their own progress through various locations in real time (for example, while travelling between one destination and another or when located in a particular restaurant or bar in an urban district), and to update their status from the current location (for example by engaging in a form of live blogging, or posting photos and videos from the scene either live or at a later stage) using their mobile device. Users are also able to see the location of others who have chosen to reveal this information, and to access their status updates, photos, videos, and activity histories.

While use of *Bliin* and similar platforms for social networking is still in its infancy, where a significant critical mass of users exists in a local area, the site now employed for a range of purposes, including socialising and flirting. The availability of dynamic privacy settings similar to what is now being offered by *Facebook* is crucial for such practices, as they provide users with a sense of personal privacy which was lacking in some experimental dating sites that sought to enable their members to identify other participants' location in a bar or public place, raising the spectre of unwanted attention and harassment. By contrast, sites such as *Bliin* enable users to create their own groups and screen others from accessing their location data and status updates.

Bliin also constitutes an important further example of a mash-up site combining functionality from a number of social media platforms: it draws on the geolocation data made available by mobile phone networks and GPS systems, combines this with the geographic maps available from the *OpenStreetMap* project (discussed below), and enables its users to embed the content they have uploaded to photo- and videosharing sites such as *Flickr* and *YouTube*. *Bliin* activity updates, in turn, can be embedded into its users' personal Websites, blogs, or personal profiles on social networking sites like *Facebook* or *LinkedIn*.

In addition to *Bliin*, there are now a number of other geolocation-based social media projects. A number of these utilise Yahoo!'s FireEagle platform⁸¹, which provides a geolocation functionality layer that can be embedded into a wide range of mobile and Web applications. FireEagle does not constitute a social media site in its own right, in other words, but provides the support technology for

⁸⁰ See e.g. <http://www.smartmobs.com/2008/08/23/bliin-your-live/> and <http://mashable.com/2007/06/03/bliin/>

⁸¹ See e.g. http://www.lifehacker.com.au/tips/2008/08/13/fire_eagle_shares_your_location_across_applications-2.html

other sites – similar to the way that *Google Maps*-based applications are embedded into a wide range of Websites.

OpenStreetMap.org⁸² – worldwide citizen cartography

At first glance, *OpenStreetMap* (*OSM*) is an unlikely social media project to be successful: it positions itself as a user-created alternative to commercial geomapping solutions such as *Google Maps*. The project builds on the increasing availability of GSP-enabled mobile devices by providing mapping applets for various mobile platforms that enable their users to trace their movements through physical space, and to attach information tags flagging streets, bikeways, buildings, post offices, petrol stations, and various other elements (the tagging system is built on a folksonomic basis, allowing its users to expand the range of elements being marked on the map). *OSM* volunteers organise occasional ‘mapping parties’ to facilitate concerted mapping efforts of specific locales; amongst the first of these was a mapping party held on the Isle of Wight in May 2006. Additionally, in order to fast-track the comparatively tedious process of doing the basic geo-mapping of large spaces, *OSM* builds on public-domain geolocation databases such as the Tiger database of streets and highways in the US, and on donated commercial and state-owned databases (on that basis, for example, the entire road system of the Netherlands is now covered by *OSM*).

OpenStreetMap’s philosophy as a social media site is closely aligned with that of *Wikipedia* – billed as “The Free Wiki World Map”, it, too, incorporates a wiki-style system for the gradual updating and revising of its geolocation data to achieve increasing levels of quality and reliability (for quality assurance and copyright reasons, *OSM* allows content contributions only from registered users, however). Similarly, it incorporates strong community elements into the collaborative project of mapping physical spaces; this applies both for the mapping process itself as well as for the further development of *OSM* tools and technologies (which builds on the open source development model), and even for the rendering of map images at various zoom levels, which is distributed across an external network of computers whose processing time is donated by *OSM* participants.

In addition to the on-location mapping of physical spaces, *OSM* users also engage in the remote mapping of locales based on satellite imagery made available to the project by Yahoo!. A further result of this partnership is that Yahoo!-owned photosharing site *Flickr*, which allows its users to indicate where in the world their photos were taken, now uses *OpenStreetMap* for this geotagging – this partnership, enabled by *OSM*’s use of a Creative Commons licence for its maps, was launched in time for the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008, since *Flickr*’s standard maps had only poor quality street-level data for Beijing.⁸³

coComment.com – tools for tracking participation across sites

One central problem with the proliferation of social media sites is the development of strong, sustainable communities around such sites. The absence of such communities means that site operators must invest substantially more work into the management of their users, as self-correcting tendencies amongst users themselves will be absent or underdeveloped; community self-organisation only takes place once communities have grown beyond a certain threshold. The further diversification of social

⁸² See esp. Mordechai (Muki) Haklay and Patrick Weber. “OpenStreetMap: User-Generated Street Maps.” *IEEE Pervasive Computing* 7.4 (2008): 12-18.

⁸³ See <http://blog.flickr.net/en/2008/08/12/around-the-world-and-back-again/>

media across a growing number of spaces makes it increasingly less likely that sizeable communities will form, and creates profile management problems for users (who may be well known in one community but start again as complete outsiders as they join another).

coComment and a number of similar services are aiming to address such problems by enabling their users to draw together activities taking place across multiple sites. *coComment*, for example, provides embeddable client-side and server-side tools that notify *coComment* whenever new comments are added by participating users or to participating sites, thus enabling the site to draw together and track the content of conversations from all over the Web. Other sites focus on drawing together user profiles from various social media sites to provide comprehensive information about a user's content creation activities. Such approaches build on open service interfaces that can be combined using the mash-up approach outlined at the end of the "Facts and Figures" section. While both on a technological and a social level, many such services still remain in their infancy, they have a very real potential to enable new models that allow content providers to benefit from the presence of social media communities without creating a need for them to host such communities on their own sites. For example, they may enable an information provider to embed their information into an external social media product reviews community which can exist at arms' length from the provider's site, thereby protecting the information provider's relationship with its advertising clients.

Conclusion

This report has outlined some of the fundamental characteristics and drivers of social media, and examined how they are applied to leading social media sites. Any company's or organisation's decision to engage in or build social media Websites must necessarily be made on a case-by-case basis, with due consideration of the impact of such a decision on current business practices, the standing and reputation of the brand, and the resources required to sustain effective cooperation with social media communities. Where involvement in social media is a feasible strategy, however, our research indicates that it can substantially boost users' brand loyalty, lead to mutually beneficial synergies, and contribute substantially to product and service innovation.

There are substantial differences between conventional marketing and public relations strategies, aimed at communicating prepared messages to audiences and consumers, and involvement in social media environments which place brands and their users on an almost level footing. Even where social media spaces are provided by commercial entities, from a user perspective such companies only *share* the social media space and should not derive special rights from their ownership of the platform. Instead, social media platform providers must aim to understand and cater for the motivations of 'their' users. Our second report from the present research project will investigate such user motivations, and present an overview of why growing numbers of Internet users feel compelled to engage in practices ranging from maintaining personal profiles through covering local news to collaborating in multi-user creative or knowledge management projects. Finally, on this basis, our third report will outline specific strategies for companies and organisations as they engage with social media communities.

What is already evident at present, however, is that the time of a mainly adversarial relationship between established corporate and organisational interests and social media communities, which has been evident in the past in cases as diverse as the running battles between filesharing communities and the music industry, the rivalry between open source software developers and the mainstream software industry, the mutual disdain between professional and citizen journalists, or the struggle for authority between *Wikipedia* and *Britannica*, is coming to an end. Rear-guard actions by established industries against their emerging crowdsourced, community-driven counterparts are gradually being replaced by an exploration of areas in which both can collaborate constructively and to mutual benefit. This requires sometimes painful and difficult changes to established business models on the commercial side, as well as an often reluctant realisation on the side of communities that professional skills and approaches cannot always be replaced fully by user-led models. The emergence of a burgeoning open source software industry is only one example that clearly points to the potential for the establishment of new and sustainable business models in this area of pro-am⁸⁴ collaboration.

The embrace of such pro-am models requires a consideration of what elements of current practice are better undertaken by professional staff or community members. The transfer of responsibility from staff to users necessarily involves an element of controlled risk, and must take place on a gradual basis as relations between staff and community evolve; for example, it is neither feasible to expect emerging social media communities to effectively moderate their own interactions, nor to retain top-down pre-

⁸⁴ See Charles Leadbeater and Paul Miller. *The Pro-Am Revolution: How Enthusiasts Are Changing Our Economy and Society*. Demos 2004. 17 Feb. 2009 <<http://www.demos.co.uk/files/proamrevolutionfinal.pdf>>.

moderation practices by site staff as communities grow and mature. Perhaps most crucial in any form of cooperation between corporate and community interests, therefore, is a commitment to transparency: users must be kept informed of planned changes to the social media platform, and longer-term plans for the balance between ‘pro’ and ‘am’ involvement must be outlined to all participants. Ultimately, this is a question of governance: well beyond conventional terms of use or end-user licence agreement statements, social media operators and users must agree on the rules and responsibilities which apply to all participants in a social media site.

Overall, however, in practice a key guiding principle is simply that of common sense – social media communities operate in the main not through explicit written rule-books, but through a set of unwritten, but no less binding rules. Many recent examples (some of which we have pointed out in this report) document that communities will react harshly if they feel that their rules and interests are violated by commercial operators; at the same time, however, they will also reward with great loyalty those companies and organisations which make the effort to engage with them in a respectful manner. We hope that the principles and practices which we have outlined in this report will help prevent the former, and enable more of the latter.

Axel Bruns and Mark Bahnisch

Brisbane, March 2009

Further Information

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About the Authors



Dr Axel Bruns is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communication at the Creative Industries Faculty at Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane, Australia. He is the author of *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Producership* (2008) and *Gatewatching: Collaborative Online News Production* (2005), and the editor of *Uses of Blogs* with Joanne Jacobs (2006; all released by Peter Lang, New York). He is a Chief Investigator in the ARC Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation (<http://cci.edu.au/>), a member of the executive of the Association of Internet Researchers (<http://aoir.org/>) and a Senior Researcher in the Smart Services CRC (<http://www.smartservicescrc.com.au/>).

Bruns has coined the term *producership* to better describe the current paradigm shift towards user-led forms of collaborative content creation which are proving to have an increasing impact on media, economy, law, social practices, and democracy itself. Producership provides a new approach to conceptualising these phenomena by avoiding the traditional assumptions associated with industrial-age production models. His study of these environments builds on his work in the area of participatory or citizen journalism and blogging. In 2007, Bruns was a visiting scholar at the University of Leeds and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he further investigated the impact of producership on democracy, citizenship, and the media. For more information about the producership concept, see Producership.org.

He has also published extensively on blogging and citizen journalism, and is a Chief Investigator of an ARC Linkage project which in collaboration with SBS, Cisco Systems, and National Forum established the citizen journalism site *Youdecide2007* to accompany the 2007 Australian federal election. Bruns's Website, containing much of his work, is located at <http://snurb.info/>, and he contributes to the citizen journalism research blog Gatewatching.org with Jason Wilson and Barry Saunders.

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Mark Bahnisch is a sociologist who has recently submitted his PhD through the Humanities Program at QUT. He has been associated with the Creative Industries Faculty since 2006, lecturing in undergraduate and postgraduate subjects in Creative Industries Theory & Policy and Innovation, and working with fellow researchers on an ARC Linkage project in the area of citizen journalism. His research expertise includes concentrations in new media and contemporary social and cultural practices. He has published internationally on new media, and has been an invited and keynote speaker at several academic and industry conferences and seminars. He has also worked as a consultant to media organisations and service industry businesses in this field.

Bahnisch founded the prominent Australian blog *Larvatus Prodeo* (<http://larvatusprodeo.net/>), and writes regularly for *Crikey*, *New Matilda* and *On Line Opinion*. His commentary on social and public affairs has also appeared in national and international newspapers and journals such as *Overland* and *Griffith Review*. He has worked in an editorial capacity in new media, as well as in new media business development, and has also consulted to state and federal governments and the private and community sectors in the areas of workplace organisation and planning, equity, public policy and social attitudes research. He is a Fellow of the Centre for Policy Development.

In addition to his doctoral studies at QUT, he was educated at the University of Queensland (B.A.) and Griffith University (B.Comm. Honours I), and holds a Graduate Diploma in Business (Distinction) from QUT. He has held full-time appointments as a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Queensland and Griffith University and as an Associate Lecturer in Behavioural Studies at the University of Queensland, as well as a Senior Research Assistant at Griffith University.

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