



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

Volume 2 – User Engagement Strategies
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Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

This report should be read in conjunction with Report 1: *Social Media – State of the Art*¹, which preceded it. As in Report 1, 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.

Where Report 1 focussed on presenting an overview of the current state of the art in social media, Report 2 is divided into two parts: Part 1 offers background information that is crucial to the development of an understanding of how communities work and what motivates their participants to contribute, while Part 2 converts that understanding into a series of strategic recommendations for profit and non-profit organisations aiming to develop a presence within the social media environment. In combination, these two reports serve as a toolkit for organisations as they come to terms with social media spaces and develop their strategies for engagement with their communities of users and followers.

Part 1

The material presented in Part 1 emphasises the following points:

- 1. Communities are defined by the adherence of their members to a set of shared values, beliefs, norms and ideas.**
 - Such norms develop over time, and are subject to constant renegotiation in the community.
 - Evaluation against these ideals determines the place of individual members in the community.
- 2. Communities are organised around their leading users and ideals in concentric circles, from the core to the margins.**
 - The leading community members are those who best embody the community's shared ideals.
 - Members may rise in status by showing their allegiance to the community's values.
- 3. Individual communities within a wider field of interest are themselves organised in concentric circles.**
 - Communities within a given field range from smaller specialist groups to generic spaces.
 - These communities interact and engage with one another, and their membership overlaps.
- 4. Users of social media spaces may be motivated by several competing factors.**
 - These include egocentric (individual needs) and altruistic (community needs) motivations,
 - as well as intrinsic (personal satisfaction) and extrinsic (social rewards) motivations.

¹ See Axel Bruns and Mark Bahnisch. "[Social Drivers behind Growing Consumer Participation in User-Led Content Generation: Volume 1 - State of the Art](#)." Sydney: Smart Services CRC, 2009.

- 5. Various combinations of these motivations result in a range of commonly observable user types.**
 - Knowledge sharers derive personal satisfaction from sharing with the community.
 - Community facilitators aim to serve the community by safeguarding its social processes.
 - Information seekers come to the community mainly to address their personal needs.
 - Attention seekers feel a need to gain social status within the community.
- 6. Users may move through a range of stages in their social media lifecycle, but there is no one typical pathway which they follow, other than from lesser to greater sophistication of usage.**
 - The pathways followed by users are inherently dependent on the social media spaces they use.
 - Users may be at different lifecycle stages in different social media spaces.

Part 2

In Part 2, we convert this understanding of social media communities and their participants into a series of ten strategic recommendations which are designed to increase the chances of success for organisations which attempt to develop a social media presence and attract a community of participants:

- 1. Identify possible levels of engagement with different user types. Map them onto an engagement framework combining activities within third-party and (where necessary) in-house social media spaces.**
- 2. Especially in the early stages of community development, treat the role of community manager or community animator as a priority, and ensure that these staff are enthusiastic and capable. Confirm that they understand what is required of them.**
- 3. Where the anticipated influx of new members to the community makes this necessary, plan for a staged roll-out of the social media space that opens the space to new participants only gradually and privileges likely lead users during its early stages.**
- 4. Plan ahead to provide the emerging social media community with a steady stream of inputs which seed community interaction and content development. Ensure that such material is new and stimulating to the community, and in sharing it, encourage them to respond and participate.**
- 5. Carefully consider the technical infrastructure supporting the social media space, and ensure that it provides for a range of contribution tasks that increase in difficulty in evenly spaced steps. The experience of early success in contributing to the space encourages users to move towards more elaborate forms of participation, increasing their loyalty to the site.**

6. **Ensure that user identities are persistent over time and connected to the user's profiles in other online spaces, and encourage users to flesh out their online personas with additional information. Consider encouraging the use of real names where appropriate. Encourage communities to sanction disruptive behaviour without a need for moderator intervention, but address overzealous bullying of users expressing minority views.**
7. **Prepare for the inevitability of moving towards peer moderation processes as the community grows, provide appropriate tools and mechanisms for this form of social accounting, and help train the community in their use. Enable the community to develop a shared understanding of what are seen as desirable and undesirable forms of participation, and encourage it to share this understanding as a set of public guidelines for all contributors.**
8. **Track user participation in the social media space and build strong relationships with community members to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the social media community. Regularly review community activities and the social media platforms supporting it, and update the technical and social infrastructure to enhance collaborative processes. Extensively consult the community on any development activity.**
9. **Work closely with the leaders of the social media community as they emerge, and draw on their knowledge and expertise in managing the community, developing the social media space, and developing new products and services. Be transparent about your actions as you harness community leaders in this way, and ensure that they are able to maintain their trusted position in the community. Consider community leaders as potential new staff, but ensure that any such transition is managed with utmost transparency.**
10. **Understand the expectations of contributors in relation to their ownership and authorship rights, and develop mutually acceptable licencing arrangements. Transparently display such arrangements and educate new users about their rights and obligations. Maintain the community's goodwill by meticulously acknowledging the authorship of individual contributors where their ideas are utilised by the organisation.**

These recommendations cannot guarantee success in social media spaces, as this is also determined by a number of further environmental and contextual factors, but they provide organisations which implement them with the best possible chance of being successful in developing strong and sustainable relationships with their users and followers. Additionally, it is certain that any actions which go *against* these strategic recommendations will significantly limit the chances of the social media space to be successful.

Part 1 – Understanding User Motivations

Introduction

There are many reasons for commercial and non-profit organisations to engage in social media, even to the point of deploying their own social media spaces around existing and new products and services or around the organisation as such. Social media spaces which are focussed on an organisation and its products and services in this way provide an immediate and powerful way of speaking directly to the organisation's most loyal adherents, followers, and fans (as well as to its most vocal critics); this connection may be utilised to release information about upcoming events and developments for wider viral dissemination, to maintain brand relationships, and to source valuable feedback on the organisation's past and present performance as well as input into current and future developments. More broadly, too, users' social media activities around the organisation's online presence can enhance and add to that presence, in some cases creating a greater incentive for repeat visits and brand loyalty than the organisation's own offerings do by themselves.

The current media and industry hype surrounding what nonetheless are real opportunities for organisations engaging with and in social media has also created significant temptation to attempt to exploit such opportunities by blatantly harnessing social media user groups as little more than unpaid labour, especially in advertising new products and services or in generating ideas for new R&D projects. Such overt and cynical exploitation of user communities is unlikely to succeed in the long term, and liable to create a significant community backlash, information about which will itself be expressed and disseminated using the tools of social media. Many of the negative experiences with social media, and much of the industry scepticism about engaging with social media that has emerged since the advent of 'Web 2.0' as a term of interest, can ultimately be traced back to this unpreparedness of organisations to engage in social media on appropriate terms. However, such stories of failure cannot be used by organisations as a convenient excuse from continuing to develop social media initiatives – failure to engage with what clearly continues to be a significant shift in how the Internet is being used is simply not an option.

In Report 1 we provided a fundamental basis for understanding how social media work. We outlined the underlying principles of social media, offered a number of key guidelines for organisations engaging in social media, and highlighted a range of key social media sites across a variety of media industries and practices (news and views, products and places, networking and dating) in order to point out the specific social, operational, and technological factors which have made them so successful (or, in the case of a few 'interesting failures', led to their demise). In Report 2, we build on this basis and provide deeper insights into the motivations of the users populating social media spaces (in Part 1), and detailed recommendations for building, managing, and maintaining successful and sustainable social media spaces (in Part 2).

Central to this work, and an important principle to keep in mind in reading this report, is that (as we noted in Report 1) a 'build it and they will come' approach to social media is unlikely to be successful; indeed, the same applies to the attitude 'moderate it well and they will stay', which still appears to underlie many major organisations' attempts to engage with social media, especially in the media industry. By contrast, successful and sustainable social media communities draw their strength from

being shaped by the users themselves, individually and collectively. It is crucial that the organisations operating these social media spaces understand this, and that they find ways to manage the tensions between the goals of the community and the interests of the organisation itself.

The key to lasting success for organisations in engaging with social media spaces and communities is in understanding and catering to the needs of users even while ensuring that commercial or other organisational objectives are also met. To do so requires a more sophisticated picture of participants than is apparent in many corporate attempts to ‘do’ social media – a picture, not least, that guides the very development process for social media spaces and initiatives rather than one which is considered only as an afterthought to technical development and operational deployment.

Understanding Social Media Communities

A necessary first step in this discussion is to distinguish between the instrumental and social uses of social media. Some users are primarily motivated by instrumental factors, such as a desire to be informed or entertained; they are drawn to social media spaces by the bite-sized ‘media snack’ culture which the content available from many social media spaces enables, but otherwise use this content much as they use that available from more mainstream sources, and remain relatively passive, non-interactive and non-participating audience members.

Others, who may overall have moved to another stage in their personal social media lifecycle or simply happen to have a special affinity with the specific field of interest within which a particular social media community operates, engage much more actively and interactively in the social media space: they contribute to discussions, collaborate on content development or content curation, engage in maintaining and managing the social media community itself, and are otherwise active members of the social media space.

Our focus in this report is specifically on these *social* users of social media, as they will be the most active and committed participants and therefore the group of potential users that is of most interest to the operators of social media spaces. Instrumental users may generate additional page impressions on the content generated and made available through social media spaces, but provide only very limited feedback that may be harnessed to inform current organisational development processes (such as the design of new products and services), and due to their more passive use of the information they access are of only marginal use as viral marketers and brand advocates.

Indeed, it is only these social users of social media who are truly members of their online communities. Community membership in social media spaces ultimately depends crucially on a user’s visibility to other participants – and given that in an online environment there are no other clues to a user’s presence than their contributions to the space itself (in the form of comments, uploaded materials, or other contributions), merely instrumental users of these spaces remain largely invisible to their peers, appearing at best as a statistic in the anonymous counters that may track how frequently a particular piece of content – a blog post, a *YouTube* video – has been accessed on the site. The distinction between instrumental and social users of social media is one between audiences and participants, in other words – and (offline as well as online) active participation is a prerequisite for membership in any community.

Defining Community

Most accounts of the development of social media trace the emergence of this media form at least to the development of blogs – during the mid- to late 1990s – as a first technology in what is now described as ‘Web 2.0’, noting along the way several milestone events that popularised blogging as a new media practice (such as the role of bloggers in covering the 11 September 2001 attacks in the U.S. and their aftermath). In such accounts, blogging as such later became subsumed by the accelerating growth of social networking and social media sites in general; it became one social media practice amongst many.

While this view of social media history is correct in outlining the technological milestones on the way from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, it provides little insight into the development of online community as a phenomenon in its own right. Indeed, it obscures the lineage of online social and community practices within a much larger history of mediated community, and it is important to note that – in spite of the changing technological tools used to create and maintain communities of shared interest, taste, or knowledge – the fundamental aspects of community have not changed significantly for a much longer period of time.

Early research into computer-mediated communication made much of the technological differences between communication using email, mailing-lists, newsgroups, or chat tools and their offline counterparts. Such work highlighted the relative absence of non-textual conversational cues – including visible or audible cues (a nod of the head, a clearing of the throat) which would be available in face-to-face or telephone conversation. While some researchers concluded that using the comparatively impoverished communication tools of the Internet and other mainly text-based electronic media, a ‘real’ sense of communication and community would never be achievable, others quickly also began to point to the development of workarounds for otherwise unavailable conversational cues – not least the emergence of simple and relatively standard emoticons, such as :-) or ;-(– and the ability of conversants to develop a heightened perception for circumstantial cues which *could* be gleaned from between the lines of electronic messages: such cues may include elements such as the conversational tone, formal or colloquial language, breadth of vocabulary, and attention to grammar and spelling which are evident from the messages themselves. While the quality of such perception of intra-textual cues to a correspondent’s identity, attitude, and mood naturally varies across participants in online communication, it is nonetheless correct that we regularly infer a great deal more about our correspondents than is explicitly revealed in the messages we receive. Some past experiments have shown, for example, that over time many participants in online conversations with users whom they have never met offline form a picture of their counterparts which is relatively closely aligned with these correspondents’ ‘real’, offline personas – for example in terms of their assumed age, gender, educational and social backgrounds, etc.

Online communication – which today importantly and centrally includes communication using social media – can and should be understood simply as yet another form of communication (if on the basis of specific technological affordances) rather than as a special case operating according to a set of entirely different rules. This is true especially as we consider the communities of participation and interaction which form around specific online and social media communication practices. Ultimately, such communities continue to follow the same principles which have been established by the long history

of cultural and sociological research which has examined community processes and dynamics in the past: from this perspective,

Communities are defined by the adherence of their members to a set of shared values, beliefs, norms and ideas.

This applies as much to the members of offline communities (the followers of a sports club, the fans of a musical group, the members of a political party, the adherents of a religion or cult) as it does to those of online communities. In each case, the condition for membership is that each participant affirms – and ideally, publicly displays – their allegiance to the central tenets of the community, regardless of whether these tenets require a preference for one band over another, one team over another, or one political view over another. In many cases, in fact, one community's particular beliefs will be mutually exclusive with those of another: one cannot be both Muslim and Jewish, both Democrat and Republican, or both Ford and Holden supporter.

At the same time, however, certain elements of the values shared by communities are less central than others, and community membership tends not to require a full and complete submission to a set of immutable, unchangeable principles. It is possible, for example, to be part of the community of fans of a particular music style, for example, without needing to agree with all other fans on exactly which artists are the best and most central representatives of that style, for as long as there is general agreement on a working definition of the key aspects of the style itself, and on the fact that the style is superior to any other styles which exist in competition with it.

Because of the possibility for such differences on the more minor aspects of the community's shared set of values, then, communities act as spaces for the continuous negotiation of their members' shared beliefs, and – as a result – remain in a continuing state of flux. While it is rare for their fundamental, most deeply cherished beliefs to change, over time even this is within the realm of possibilities (and the long history of political and religious communities provides obvious examples for such gradual, glacial change); a reinterpretation of the more minor norms which find their basis in the community's fundamental beliefs is certainly possible at a more rapid rate.

This continuous negotiation and gradual change in the community's shared beliefs is also driven by the natural turnover in its membership, which constantly requires new members to be socialised into the existing community. Through such socialisation processes, new members are confronted with the ideas, beliefs, values, and norms of the community as they are currently established, and must find an arrangement with them that determines their placing within the community membership. Socialisation may proceed through both positive appreciation for and negative sanctioning of new members' actions within the community: actions which show an adherence to the community's norms are met with more or less explicit approval and over time increase the member's social standing amongst their peers, while actions which violate these norms are publicly criticised and their perpetrators shunned.

In online communities, such socialisation usually takes place in the context of the first contributions made by new members – contributions may receive more or less positive responses from more established participants, which in turn impacts on the new member's sense of belonging within the community and may variously encourage them to contribute more frequently in ways which were appreciated by other members, or discourage them from acting in ways that received negative

feedback. At the same time, the new member's established personal attitudes also come into play here, of course, and may lead them to choose a more marginal, oppositional, or less involved stance towards the community if they feel unable or unwilling to subscribe in full to the community's shared values, or to refrain from further participation altogether. Conversely, especially if the number of such dissidents grows, over time it is also possible for such new members to affect and shift the community's shared values altogether, of course.

The Concentric Circles of Community

What emerges from this description of community as focussed around a core of shared values and beliefs, as dynamic and changeable especially in the face of a need to socialise new members to these shared defining attitudes, is a view of communities not as simple groups with a flat membership structure (where participants either are or are not members of the group), but as more complex associations of members who adhere more or less strictly to the key tenets of their community's beliefs. This can be expressed in the form of a number of concentric circles (although it is important to point out in this context that this image itself also necessarily simplifies the structure of communities: for the most part, there are no clearly distinguished 'inner' and 'outer' circles in communities, but merely a gradual decline from core to marginal status (and to non-membership beyond)).

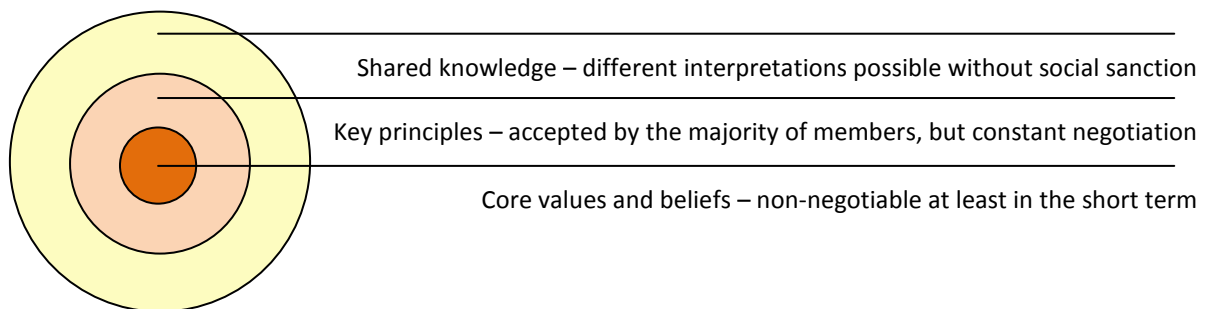


Figure 1: Concentric circles of shared beliefs, principles, and knowledge in communities

In the first place, then, the shared values and ideas of the community are themselves arranged into a hierarchical structure of more or less central principles, as show in Fig. 1. Disagreement with the core values and beliefs that form the central basis of the community is possible for members only at the risk of losing their social status within the community, while the more general shared knowledge which exists within the community remains open to discussion and reinterpretation on a daily basis; indeed, for many communities such debate provides part of their lifeblood as it enables individual members to show their command of community knowledge and establish their credentials as more insightful contributors than other peers. Interminable debates in relevant communities over 'who was the best [rock guitarist, Formula One driver, US President]...' may serve as examples for this point.

This concentric arrangement of values, beliefs, norms, and ideas within the community is mirrored by similar structures for their members themselves. Here, too, there are more or less central members of the community (and indeed, as we have noted, their centrality is measured in good part by the level of their adherence to the core ideals of the community, of course). A participant's placement within the community is determined in the first place by their track record of participation – that is, by the level of social capital which they have been able to accumulate through prolonged constructive contribution to the community's aims and ambitions. Where such contribution has been largely in line with the

community's shared values and norms, the community member will have achieved a higher social status than where they have taken a more strongly oppositional stance – however, this should not be seen as suggesting that central status in a community can be achieved only by relatively uncritical followers of the community's core beliefs, as some communities also explicitly value critical perspectives. Additionally, especially in online spaces, a user's standing in the community is also determined by their continued *active* participation, of course – particularly online where only active users appear to their peers *as* peers, members must maintain visibility in order to maintain their social status.

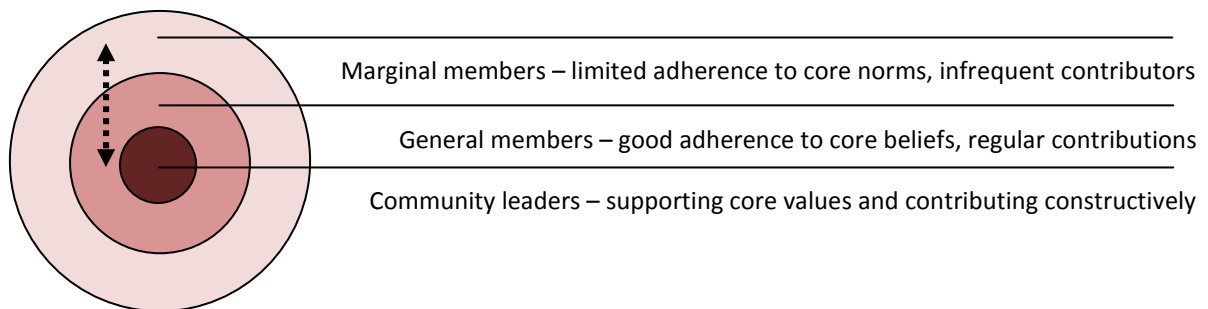


Figure 2: Concentric circles of community membership

To many participants in communities, especially to those belonging to the general (as opposed to the more marginal) membership, the visibility of the a relatively small and elite group of community leaders with substantial social status at the centre of the community – as indicated in Fig. 2 – will act as an incentive for continued conforming and constructive participation: the presence of community leaders acts as a promise of higher status which ‘regular’ participants may aspire to, and community organisers may exploit these aspirations to encourage greater levels of participation from their membership. This is the case only as long as there is also evidence of such a move between the social levels within the community, however: where the community leadership is indeed seen as a closed elite of users that is inherently separate from the rank and file and impenetrable to newcomers, the visible presence of that elite within the community may repel rather than attract aspiring general members. In any community – and perhaps especially online, where it is more likely that alternative communities may easily be found –, it is therefore crucial to ensure that the social structures of the community remain flexible rather than solidifying into a fixed ‘class’ system. More broadly, too, the overall community of members must be welcoming enough to new participants to ensure that there is a steady influx of newcomers to balance out natural attrition through shifting interests and changing lifestyles. To the casual observer, a tightly-knit community that engages well amongst itself may appear healthy and sustainable, but if it remains impenetrable to new members, it is nonetheless likely to be doomed to decline over time.

In essence, then, the membership structure in any community is likely to follow the well-known ‘long tail’ power law distribution graph: the community will consist of a small number of highly regarded leading members, a larger group of known and accepted general members, and a further contingent of more marginal, less known, and relatively low-status members (Fig. 3). The success of the community *as* community will depend on the relative size ratio between these groups, as well as on the steepness of the graph's slope, which determines the potential for social mobility as members move up from the margins of the long tail towards its more desirable high-status regions.

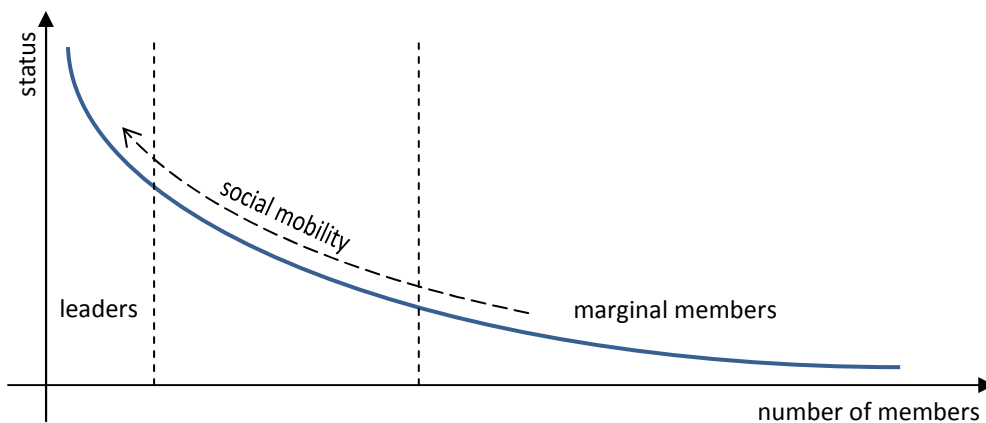


Figure 3: The long tail of membership status in communities

Finally, it should be noted that communities as such do not exist in a vacuum. Any of their members will also be a member of a variety of other, more or less contingent and compatible other communities, and implicitly as well as (on occasion) explicitly they act as connecting nodes between these otherwise separate communities – transferring ideas, information, and other influences from one to the other, making connections between individual members here and there, and thus forming a social and informational network that bridges the boundaries of individual communities.

This way, these individual communities themselves come to interact with one another; further, where they are focussed on related topics, communities as such may then be imagined as being arranged in a more or less concentric fashion, for example according to their membership reach and degree of thematic specialisation (Fig. 4). In the field of sports, for example, we might imagine a hierarchy of communities stretching from the larger and more general communities for ordinary fans of bicycle racing to more dedicated communities for active amateur racers themselves, or for fans of specific professional teams, and through to highly specialised communities for owners of high-tech road bikes or for professional racers themselves. The latter are likely to draw on a substantially narrower clientele, yet also to command much higher status amongst overall bicycle enthusiasts – and as community leaders, members of these specialist communities are also likely to have a respected presence in more general groups.

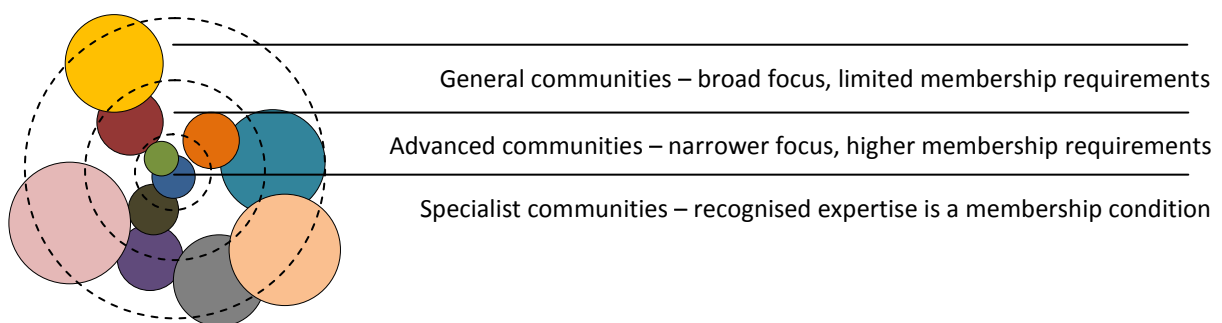


Figure 4: Concentric circles of thematic communities with varying degrees of specialisation

Such networks of communities may connect individual social media spaces (such as communities built around specific personal or group blogs), but – where the social media platforms used support this – can also exist within the same social media space. A large proportion of users especially in the

massified social media spaces of *Facebook* or *MySpace* is likely to have only a very limited attachment to the overall community of *all* of their fellow users; they may be somewhat more closely connected to self-selected communities of members who share similar interests and ideas, and may express such connection for example by joining one of the many ‘fan’ groups that exist mainly as a form of displaying personal identity and affinity, but often remain relatively inactive and inconsequential; and they will interact most closely and actively only within a few much smaller micro-communities, containing immediate family and other close friends as well as participants with strong and sustained enthusiasm for specific social and political causes, sports teams, artists, or other points of focus.

By contrast, other users, as we have noted above, will come to these large social media spaces only for instrumental reasons (in search of information or entertainment, or simply to maintain their personal connections but without using the site for direct engagement with that community in any meaningful way). Such users are necessarily destined to remain on the margins of social media spaces, due to their choice of only highly limited social engagement.

Understanding Social Media Users

So far, we have focussed our attention on the structures and social dynamics of social media *communities*, and the roles of users within them. It is equally important, however, to understand communities from the perspective of the individual *user* – to examine what motivates users to join and to participate in social media communities, to understand what influences their behaviours within and towards their fellow community members, and to observe the various stages of development and sophistication through which their engagement with social media communities may move.

Individual users interface and engage with the established and emergent community norms by finding a more or less workable arrangement between their own, personal aims and ambitions and the wider goals of the community as they perceive them. The better they manage to accommodate themselves to the community’s norms, the more they will themselves be seen as valued members of that community; this can create a virtuous cycle in which actions determined by various individual motivations (to build status in the community, to make connections with fellow users, to contribute to the greater good of the community) contribute constructively to community development – not least also by setting a positive example which others may follow.

Where such accommodation is difficult or impossible (for example if the differences between the community’s perceived values and the user’s own attitudes and ambitions remain irreconcilable), on the other hand, users will remain marginal to the community and/or may even be regarded as disrupting influences. As in any functional social structure, however, extremely disruptive, dysfunctional forms of behaviour tend to exist only at the very margins of the community space, and as we have noted above, to encourage such disruptive members to normalise their behaviours, a variety of social sanctions are brought to bear on those who offend against the shared values of the community. By contrast, what is vastly more common is that users settle on a position between the centre and the margins of a community that is compatible with their degree of adherence to the community’s rules – or that they move on to another, competing community which better accommodates their personal needs and aspirations.

A Matrix of User Motivations

A user's participation in a social media space, and in the communities which exist around the space, may be influenced by a range of motivations. Such motivations are individual and dynamic: not only do they differ from user to user, but individual users themselves will experience different motivating factors in different situational, thematic, and community contexts, and these factors are subject to change over time as users move through what we will describe below as a lifecycle of participation. Not least, user motivations are also influenced by (and influence) the continuous development of community norms, the changing status of community projects, and other external factors that change their own relationship to the communities that they belong to.

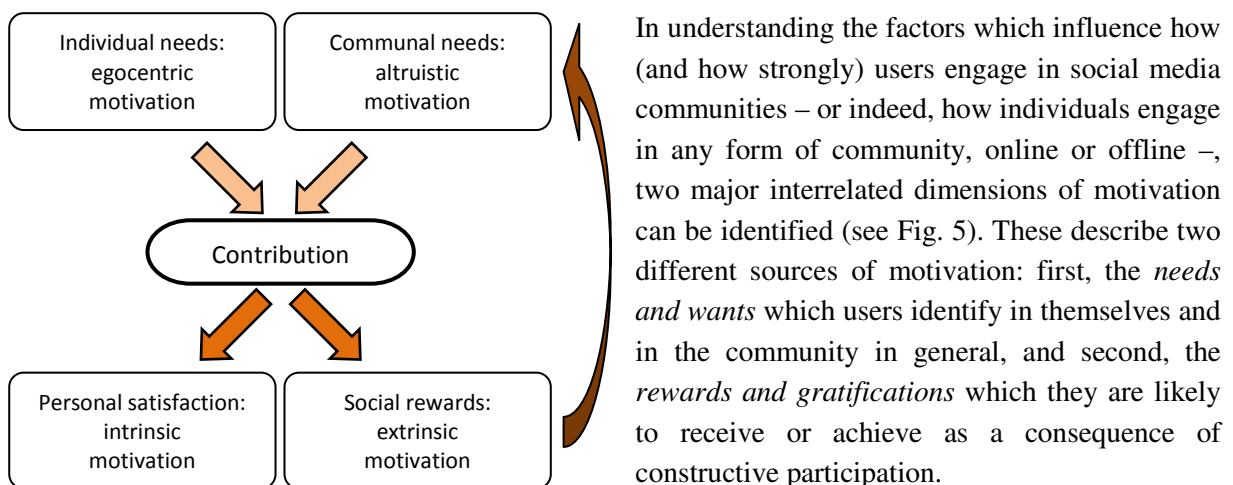


Figure 5: The Cycle of Motivations

On the one hand, then, participants may be motivated by factors ranging from egocentric to altruistic elements: by their perception of needs ranging from the individual to the communal level. On this scale, the altruistic end describes an almost selfless engagement of the user for the greater, communal good, driven by a strong belief in the importance of the community's purpose and efforts. Such highly altruistic behaviour may be found especially in communities that are focussed on the collaborative development of useful resources (such as open source software or the *Wikipedia*), but is also commonly observed in more conversational settings, especially where communities embrace a strong self-help ethos around critical social themes to motivate their contributors. The other end of this scale describes strongly egocentric approaches, where each of the user's contributions to the community is ultimately driven by individual self-interest: for example the desire to accumulate greater social or professional status, or to collaborate with others in developing a resource that addresses a specific individual need (such as developing a software tool for a problem for which no commercial solution is currently available). It is worth noting in this context that (as in the software example) even such highly egocentric motivations for participation in social media communities may result in the development of strong and active communities – even if in communities where such egocentric motivating factors dominate the *social* aspects of social media communities may be comparatively less developed than in other such spaces.

The second dimension of community motivations is concerned less with the question of whether users are motivated by perceived individual or communal needs and wants, but instead describes the return on their investment of time and effort which they expect to receive as a consequence. Here, too, we

can describe a scale of motivating factors, ranging from intrinsic to extrinsic elements: from the personal satisfaction and gratification of the users themselves to the social rewards received from their peers (or, in some cases, from the social sanctions avoided). We have already described in previous sections the processes of social rewards and sanctions which a community may meter out in response to more or less constructive contributions by individual users – the everyday visibility of such processes, and the rise and fall in the social status of individual users that results from them, acts as a strong motivating factor for constructive participation for most members of the community. On the other hand, however, the user's own perception of their contributions, independent of such social validation, also remains important – the feeling of a job well done does not necessarily lose its lustre even if few of the user's peers recognise the achievement or show their appreciation for it. At the same time, it is also possible for intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to come into conflict: some users may derive a sense of intrinsic personal satisfaction from disrupting community processes (and even from receiving the extrinsic social sanctions which result from it), while some users may require an extrinsic appreciation of their efforts by their peers before they can come to feel any intrinsic gratification as well.

These two dimensions can be described as spanning a matrix of user motivations for participation in social media spaces, as shown in Fig. 6. The matrix provides an opportunity to understand a range of possible combinations of these motivations, and to assess specific existing social media spaces by examining which types of motivation to participate they favour. This is important, since – as we have alluded to above – the public perception of a social media space and its community will be influenced by the type of user which it has managed to attract: a community populated largely by users who are driven by the aim to address individual needs and the desire to derive personal satisfaction from doing so will necessarily feel different to its members than a community built mainly around serving communal needs and receiving social rewards for doing so. It should be noted in this context, however, that neither combination is inherently more valuable and desirable; different configurations of motivational factors, and indeed an appropriate mix of egocentric and altruistic, of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, will be necessary for different communities with specific aims and goals. Further, then, the matrix outlined in Fig. 6 also provides a simple planning tool in the development and maintenance of social media communities: organisations operating such communities should consider which motivations their space may be able to address and harness, and ensure that these motivations represent an appropriate mix.

At the same time, it is important to understand that social media spaces do not simply exist at any one coordinate point in this matrix: the *Wikipedia*, for example, is not simply driven by, say, 'mainly altruistic, and more intrinsic than extrinsic' motivations. Rather, a different combination of motivations will apply for each individual community member, and indeed for each time they contribute to the social media space – they may make some contributions in order to maintain their social status (extrinsic, egocentric), and others because derive satisfaction from contributing their knowledge to the community (intrinsic, altruistic), for example. The balance of these motivations will differ over time and within different social media contexts. Where such combinations are relatively constant, however, it is possible to identify a range of typical *types* of contributors, and to develop appropriate technological supports and social structures to cater specifically to their needs.

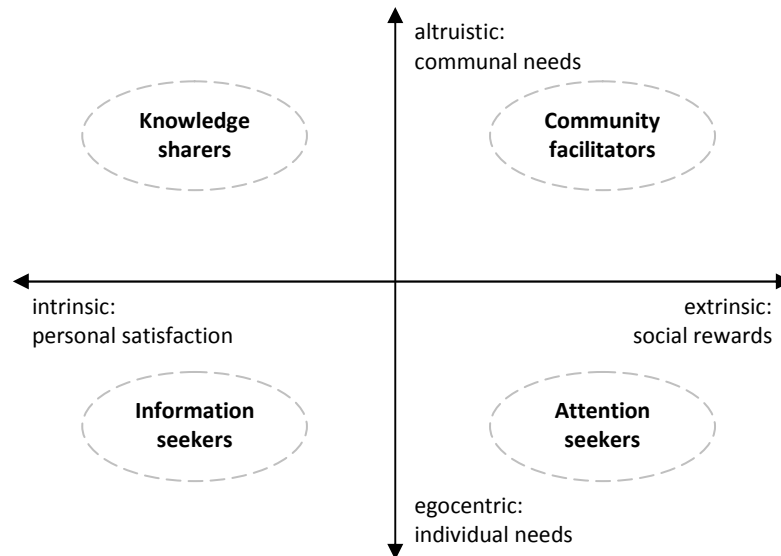


Figure 6: Matrix of user motivations

We have sketched out four such contributor types in Fig. 6 – these should be understood only as very generic types, however, and not as constituting an exhaustive list of possible contributor types. Types of users will necessarily vary with each social media space, with its specific aims and interests, and with the overall nature of its community. Nonetheless, it is likely that these general types of users will be able to be identified in a large number of social media spaces:

- **Knowledge sharers:** this type of user derives personal satisfaction from sharing their existing knowledge with the rest of the community. They do so not to generate significant social status in the community, though this may also result, but out of genuine interest in the field in which the community operates.
- **Community facilitators:** this type of user aims to serve the community by ensuring that its social processes continue without major disruption. Such users aim to be widely connected within the community, but less out of a desire to be recognised as leaders (though this may be a result) than out of the altruistic desire to see the community flourish.
- **Information seekers:** this type of user comes to the community mainly to address their personal needs. They engage in community processes mainly to maximise their chances of finding solutions to the practical problems they may have encountered, and derive personal satisfaction from doing so.
- **Attention seekers:** while the knowledge sharers or community facilitators described above may also find themselves in positions of recognised authority, this type of user specifically sets out to gain social status within the community. They seek such status explicitly because it fulfils an individual need (such personal validation, or professional achievement).

Again, however, it is also necessary at this point to note that the behaviour of individual users may match any one of these types in any one given situation, even within the same community or over the same period of time. This also underlines the fact that the different motivating factors are not mutually exclusive: egocentric motivations – which may be informed, for example, by a desire to monetise online content creation or to build personal and professional networks for individual gain – can co-

exist with altruistic motivations – for example, the aim to develop freely available resources for communal use, or the desire to strengthen the community by building better connections between its individual members. Similarly, both extrinsic and intrinsic motivations may be present at one and the same time. Ultimately, the tension that may exist between these different motivating factors in particular circumstances may also be an important driver of creativity and innovation.

A Social Media Lifecycle

The different motivational factors which we have described above will necessarily exist at different levels of intensity in different users – leading ultimately to the formation and maintenance of social structures within communities that extend from their most motivated, central members to their considerably less motivated, marginal members (and beyond to non-members who have no motivation at all to participate). These different levels of motivation are directly linked to different forms of engaging with social media communities and their content, then, which have been variously described in a number of recent models. Additionally, they also give rise to a possibility to identify a general lifecycle of social media participation which moves from the lower, more passive stages to the higher, active and more deeply involved levels.

For example, Shao (2008) distinguishes between three major levels of engagement with user-generated content:

- **Producing** (for self-expression, for self-actualisation)
- **Participating** (for social interaction, for community development)
- **Consuming** (for information, for entertainment)²

While generally useful, the applicability of such models to specific social media contexts should not be exaggerated, however. Although the overall centre-and-periphery structure of social media communities as we have described it above is present in virtually any social grouping, it would be incorrect to map this directly onto Shao's three levels of engagement in user-generated media, for example: general and even marginal users may be just as (or even more) active in generating content and participating in the community as its central, lead users; their lower social status in the community generally means that their contributions are less visible and impactful, however. Almost any user of social media spaces will at some point during the process be engaged in each of the three forms of usage that Shao has outlined, and in some social media environments, marginal users may indeed be the major contributors of content; lead users may be more engaged in maintaining the social structure of the community (described in Shao's model as 'participating') than in actual content creation.

Similarly, a 2007 report by Forrester Research provides a generally useful distinction of different social media participation practices, but on that basis describes a 'ladder of participation' which suggests that users move through these different practices in linear progression, gradually ascending towards more sophisticated forms of participation. The report describes the following practices, in order of increasing sophistication:

² G. Shao "Understanding the Appeal of User-Generated Media: A Uses and Gratification Perspective. *Internet Research*, 19.1 (2008): 7-25.

- **Inactives:** no activity
- **Spectators:** read blogs, watch peer-generated video, listen to podcasts
- **Joiners:** use social networking sites
- **Collectors:** use RSS, tag Web pages
- **Critics:** comment on blogs, post ratings and reviews
- **Creators:** publish Web page, publish or maintain a blog, upload video to sites like *YouTube*³

It should be obvious even from this simple list of identified practices that any description as a ‘ladder’ from lower to higher forms of participation is inherently misleading. On social media sites such as *Flickr* or *YouTube*, for example, contributing content by uploading photos or videos often *precedes* any form of social engagement through commenting or joining groups – and many users of such sites never progress to these social practices but instead simply utilise these sites as a storage space for their content. Similarly, for many users, the use of RSS readers or social bookmarking tools remains a substantially more advanced practice than commenting or publishing their own content. And as a further complication, users of multiple social media spaces may be at varying stages of their social media lifecycle in each of these spaces – they may be advanced users of *Flickr*, but novice participants in *Twitter*, for example.

Rather than simply arranging the rungs of Forrester’s ‘ladder of participation’ in another order, then, it is more appropriate to acknowledge that the specific steps which social media users may take to proceed from basic to more advanced forms of participation are highly dependent on the features of the social media spaces themselves. While the first few steps on the Forrester ladder are relatively unproblematic – most users will proceed from ‘inactive’ status through to being ‘spectators’ in social media environments, and will finally stake a claim by joining and thus creating a profile for themselves –, what comes next remains highly site-specific. *Wikipedia* users may begin by making small, functional edits (correcting spelling and grammar, adding minor details), for example, before proceeding to making more substantial changes to existing entries or even creating new entries themselves. *Facebook* users may connect with their closest friends and relatives, post personal updates and photos, or play with available games and applications, before engaging in or even creating new interest groups or making friends with previously unknown users who share similar interests. Users of product ratings and recommendations sites such as *Yelp* or *Yub* may immediately begin adding their own ratings to products already listed on these sites, and may gradually move to commenting on other users’ experiences, before finally posting new product reviews of their own.

Common to each of these pathways is that there *is* a gradual acclimatisation process during which users build their confidence in using these sites (supported, importantly, by the feedback received from their peers on the site) and slowly explore new functionality, but that process is specific to each site – and, given the range of user types with their differing motivations for participation which we have outlined above, it will vary even from user to user: there is no one ultimate end point to these users’

³ See http://blogs.forrester.com/groundswell/2007/04/forresters_new_.html

processes of learning and discovery, but there are instead a range of possible advanced roles within the social media community that each user may aspire to. Rather than a ladder of participation, there is a tree: starting from similar roots, users may end up on different branches in the community structure.

This is a process of self-realisation and of specialisation, then, which does not resemble the process of acquiring new knowledge and developing a particular expertise only by accident: coming to terms with and finding a space within a social media community is a process of peer-assisted learning, which needs to be aided by the organisations operating social media spaces by providing the appropriate pedagogical support. Similarly, much as in any other educational context, the learners in social media must increasingly be provided with the necessary autonomy to develop the confidence to operate unassisted – for social media communities, this means that they must increasingly be allowed to engage in (initially, at least limited) self-management processes. By and large, those social media spaces which fail (or fail to realise their full potential) do so precisely because the site operators and developers fail to extend the necessary trust in their self-management and self-policing capabilities to individual users and the overall community; they anticipate disruption and disorder and fail to provide the tools for communities in their own right to combat such disruption and to develop their own binding norms and principles to develop and maintain a sense of community.

In Part 2 of this report, we recommend a number of key principles which will help to avoid such failure. They establish the basis for the development and operation of social media spaces as environments for a mutually beneficial cooperation between the organisations operating social media spaces and the communities populating them; only social media spaces which do operate on this basis of engagement and respect between both sides stand a chance of lasting success.

Part 2 – Strategies for Engagement

Overview

While there is evident interest from corporate and non-profit organisations and institutions to engage in the social media space, for many organisations the embrace of existing social media tools and platforms, or the deployment of social media elements on their own Websites, proceeds often in a highly haphazard and poorly planned manner which often does more damage to the brand than it generates payoffs in the form of increased user connection and loyalty. Indeed, even where major public relations disasters as such are avoided, an organisation's poor performance in social media spaces can have a more subtle long-term effect of undermining its public stance as an innovator in its field, especially with its lead users who are more likely to be highly active in social media themselves. Conversely, a strong and well-orchestrated presence both in generic social media platforms (such as *Facebook* or *Twitter*) and in social media environments operated through the organisation's own Website (such as blogs or discussion fora) can substantially enhance communication with users, increase their brand loyalty, and harness the collective knowledge of users as additional input for internal decision-making processes.

In Report 1, we outlined a number of key guidelines for social media engagement by organisations:

- 1. Be as open as possible to new users, and encourage the community to sort good from bad.***
- 2. As the community defines its aims and values, work with those who emerge as leaders.***
- 3. The community and its processes will change over time. Follow and encourage this evolution.***
- 4. The community will feel a sense of pride in its achievements. Don't take it away from them.⁴***

In this section of Report 2, we suggest a number of interrelated strategies for putting these guidelines into practice. These strategies will necessarily need to be adapted to the specific contexts of their application, but in combination they help to ensure that an organisation's exploration of social media engagement for its purposes has the best possible chance of succeeding.

Implied in the list of guidelines above is also a temporal progression, from the early roll-out of an organisation's social media presence through the gradual establishment of a dedicated community of regular users around that presence to the increasing devolution of moderation and management processes to that community itself, thus relieving the organisation's own staff from the need for ongoing in-depth monitoring of community interactions. (Such monitoring would otherwise generate increasingly prohibitive staffing costs, as the resources required for community management grow in parallel with the size of the social media community itself.) In the following, we therefore present our social media engagement strategies as a roughly temporal, step-by-step pathway towards a fully fledged social media community.

⁴ See Axel Bruns and Mark Bahnisch. "[Social Drivers behind Growing Consumer Participation in User-Led Content Generation: Volume 1 - State of the Art.](#)" Sydney: Smart Services CRC, 2009.

Establishing a Social Media Presence

The first major choice which must be confronted by any organisation aiming to develop a social media presence is that of whether to engage with users within one or more of the established generic social media platforms (*Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, YouTube*, etc.), or whether to develop and deploy its own social media space. Either option presents a number of advantages and disadvantages, and many organisations will select to pursue a mixture of both options, with variable emphasis on one or the other.

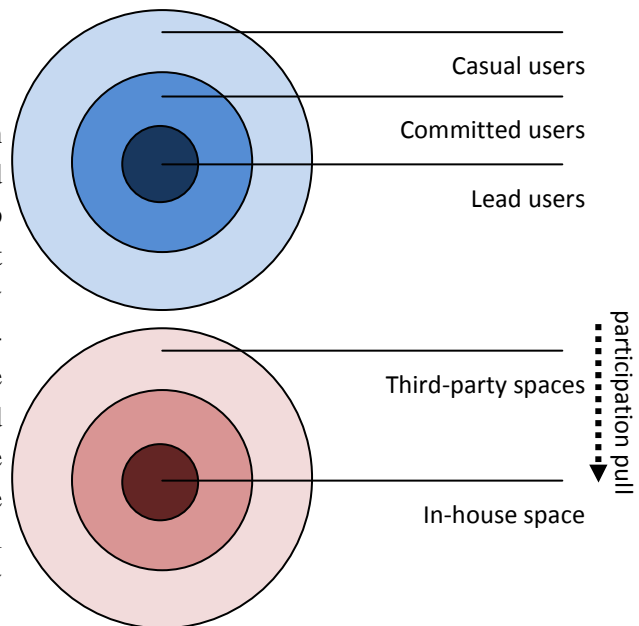
Engaging through an established third-party platform enables the organisation to more immediately reach a much larger audience of potential users, and allows it to tap into the established community of social media users on that platform as a means of viral distribution of its messages; on the other hand, however, while ‘brand community’ functionality of one form or another is likely to be available on such platforms, such specific communities remain necessarily subordinate to the broader social interaction activities which take place on the platform. On a site such as *Facebook*, for example, joining a *Facebook* group for a specific organisation generally remains an afterthought to the user’s overall social networking. By contrast, users of the organisation’s own social media platform have already self-selected to register as users, and can therefore be assumed to have a stronger level of connection to the organisation from the outset.

Developing its own social media space also enables the organisation to configure this space exactly as required for the specific forms of social interaction which are seen as desirable, and to extract more detailed information about user participation patterns than is possible from third-party sites. This is especially important if user participation is envisaged to move beyond mere communication and group discussion, for example towards the submission of user-generated content in specific formats, or if a more complex system of user membership levels and access permissions will be required. Similarly, direct control over the social media space also enables more effective systems of moderation and community policing than most third-party platforms will provide, even if (as noted) such systems are also likely to generate an increased workload for the staff engaged in such activities.

For most organisations, the preferred solution will lie in a combination of both approaches. Third-party platforms may be used for general user engagement, and as a means of providing updates on current activities and promoting the organisation’s own platform, while the most meaningful and in-depth interactions may take place in the organisation’s own social media space. A close integration between both spaces can be achieved by automatically posting key updates from the in-house social media space to third-party sites, for example, or by encouraging staff and lead users who are active in both to act as go-betweens between the two spaces. Operation across both spaces also mirrors the concentric structure of social media communities, extending from central lead users to ever more occasional and disengaged users on the margins, as we have outlined it in Part 1 of this report: from this perspective, the organisation’s own social media space caters to the more central members of its user community, while its presence in third-party social media platforms engages with its more marginal followers but also acts as a means of encouraging these marginal users to become more central (more strongly engaged) and to join the organisation’s own social media community.

Combining Different Social Media Spaces

Social media communities are organised in concentric circles of more or less active and committed membership around a small group of very central lead users, as outlined in Part 1. A combined engagement strategy operating across both in-house and third-party social media spaces helps separate committed from more casual users, and enables the organisation to address these different user groups in different ways, while also acting as encouragement for casual users to become more committed community members.



While this division of the organisation's overall community of users could be seen as a dilution of social media's strength to mobilise followers, it is also important to recognise that it is usually necessary to address different community members in different ways. Lead users will already be highly engaged and may be both important sources of new ideas and harsh critics of failed initiatives; they must be engaged with speedily and courteously, and can be trusted to act as influential supporters of the organisation, even where they are critical, for as long as they feel valued and respected. Committed users provide a wider range of alternative perspectives and have an important role to play in keeping the community going by adding volume and diversity to its interactions; they are likely to require more ongoing management but in established communities will also develop strong self-management tendencies. Casual users may follow the organisation more than engage with it directly in a meaningful way; they will pass on information on the organisation's activities to their own networks of friends, and can thus be harnessed effectively as viral marketers. For the most part, therefore, organisations may be content with focussing on their lead and committed users through their own, in-house social media spaces, and with reaching more marginal, casual users through flow-on and flow-out effects from these central spaces via third-party social media platforms to the wider World Wide Web.

- ➔ **Recommendation 1:** Identify possible levels of engagement with different user types. Map them onto an engagement framework combining activities within third-party and (where necessary) in-house social media spaces.

Modelling Desired Practices

Once the technological frameworks for a social media space are in place (whether in-house or based on third-party solutions), the next major challenge for the organisation is to initiate and guide the emerging community processes in line with the desired outcomes. In doing so, it is equally important to be consistent in modelling good practice and to enable community members to explore and establish their own practices of participation; this is a difficult balancing act which remains persistently in danger of becoming too authoritarian (and thus alienating the community if it comes to experience the site moderators as a patronising influence) as well as of taking a too laissez-faire approach (leading to the establishment of disruptive patterns of behaviour which undermine the enthusiasm of genuinely constructive community members).

This early stage of social media community formation requires a very delicate touch from the organisational staff participating in the community, therefore. They are necessarily placed in a role as quasi-lead users as the *actual* user community forms around them, and must act as such: they must show genuine enthusiasm for the objectives to be pursued by the social media community (whether this may be general discussion, the formulation of new ideas and initiatives, the collaborative development of new resources, or another aim), and they must be able to contribute insights and ideas of their own to the continuing community process. At the same time, as the community grows and begins to develop its own structures (and as its own leaders emerge within the social media space) these staff must be able to gradually step back from this leadership role in order to ensure that the community is not dependent on their presence for the longer term. This is crucial not least also as the organisational costs of having staff members permanently seconded as social media community leaders are likely to be unsustainable over time.

At this early stage, in other words, organisational staff members must assume a role as community animators: depending on the specific purpose of the organisation's social media initiative itself, they may kick off new debates, highlight new information as it comes to hand and lead the community's evaluation of such information, or guide community members through their exploration of new functions and features made available on the site.

In the process, they must create and share their own content, and must develop their own online identity within the community; this, too, is a difficult process: in order to be accepted as genuine members (and leaders) of the community, they must present a personal rather than merely corporate identity, while at the same time acknowledging their special status as paid staff rather than mere community member. Managing this balance is often achieved most successfully where staff adopt a somewhat self-deprecating persona which asserts but downplays their status as staff and declares all of the staff member's contributions to the community to reflect only their own views, and not necessarily those of the organisation, thereby managing community expectations. Successful staff acting in this role will also readily accept that on many points, the overall community may be more knowledgeable than they themselves – and most crucially, such staff members will readily and regularly interact with other community members rather than acting simply as an otherwise unresponsive source of announcements.

Staff in this position should come to understand their role as acting as a go-between in the development of a mutually acceptable arrangement between organisation and community; they must

be mindful of both sides' needs and wants, and it is especially crucial that the social media user community feels well-represented by these 'special' community members. In communities where this relationship of trust breaks down or is never established, the community's stance towards the organisation is often significantly more critical, suspicious, or even belligerent, substantially reducing their likely longevity and ability to generate mutually beneficial outcomes.

To a significant extent, then, the early influence of these leading staff members in the emerging community has a lasting effect on the prevailing atmosphere within the social media space. If they take too authoritarian and corporate an approach, the community may never fully develop, and may instead remain simply an audience for announcements from the organisation which may be accessed and disseminated, but rarely actually engaged with. Conversely, if they take too hands-off an approach, the community may come to be impervious to input from and communication with the organisation's representatives, and is thus all but lost to the organisation as a source of information and feedback and as a partner for deeper engagement.

The choice of staff for such roles is crucial, then. Staff must be genuinely enthusiastic about their place in the social media community, and be able to communicate this enthusiasm; they must be personable as well as knowledgeable about the field in which the social media community operates; and they must be prepared to approach their participation in the community as a long-term engagement rather than a short-term job. They must have strong social skills in an online environment, and should be able to act as champions for the social media space in order to attract strong take-up both from organisational staff (where desirable) and from the wider community of online users.

As frontline staff in the organisation's engagement with users through the social media space, these staff may also be frequently called upon to report on their observations of community attitudes and behaviours – both in order to inform the continuing development and configuration of the social media space itself, and to provide valuable market research information on the wants and needs expressed by the community. Whether formally trained or not, they should therefore also possess a good eye for behavioural patterns in the community and be able to extrapolate more general observations from their day-to-day interaction with community members.

➔ **Recommendation 2:** Especially in the early stages of community development, treat the role of community manager or community animator as a priority, and ensure that these staff are enthusiastic and capable. Confirm that they understand what is required of them.

Socialising Users into the Community

A first major challenge in establishing a social media community, once the technological and organisational infrastructure itself is in place, is to manage the influx of community members. As we have outlined in Part 1, a community's cohesion is defined by a sense of common values, beliefs, aims and ambitions which is shared by the majority of its members; while some differences in their interpretation will necessarily remain, this common set of attitudes is crucial as a basis for communication and collaboration between members. In most groups, this shared understanding does not exist *a priori*, however, but is established and maintained through an ongoing process of socialisation which enables the community to address and manage diverging opinions and oppositional views and allows for established community values to be passed down from older to newer members over time. Through this process, community structures – that is, the positioning of individual members as relatively central or marginal to the overall community – are maintained as members' views and ideas are continuously checked against the 'common sense' of the community as it has been established over time.

These crucial self-maintenance processes of communities are inherently exceedingly fragile in their early stages, at times when there is no long history of community engagement to look back upon and when community structures remain highly fluid and changeable. The processes which drive the establishment of shared values and their transmission from older to newer members can be disrupted especially by the sudden influx of a substantial number of new members, to the point that they swamp and sideline the existing group of users – potentially including the community manager as well – and become unresponsive to this older group's attempts to socialise them into acceptable and desired forms of behaviour.

While for established social media communities with a strong sense of shared values and a proven resilience to internal and external disruptions it is generally advisable to remain open to all newcomers and to allow the community itself to separate constructive from disruptive contributors – the core of our Guideline 1 above, "Be as open as possible to new users" – at this critical early stage of establishing a social media community it may therefore be necessary to find ways to manage a gradual opening of the community to new participants rather than to be open to all from the start.

This may often be able to be achieved simply through staggered announcements of the availability of the new social media space: inviting at first only organisational staff themselves, then undertaking a soft launch only to selected target user communities, and finally orchestrating a hard launch with full announcements and promotion in relevant mainstream and social media spaces. Where even limited announcements are likely to be disseminated widely through various social networks, however, more formal membership restrictions may need to be in place from the start.

This approach may follow the model established in the introduction of Google's *GMail* and *Google Wave* services, for example. These were made available at first on an invitation-only basis: Google staff invited a handful of prospective lead users of these services only (and provided mechanisms for others to apply to participate as well), and these lead users gradually gained the ability to invite a limited number of their friends to the service; this second generation of users were themselves able to invite more friends in turn, and this gradual growth of the membership continued until the services were opened up to the wider online population. This gradual, managed roll-out enabled Google both to

fine-tune the technical aspects of these services by providing the necessary infrastructure, responding to error reports and attending to feature requests, and to observe and guide the development of social conventions in using these services; in doing so, the company avoided the likely overload of its systems (and the subsequent negative publicity) which would have resulted from immediately making its services freely available to all users, and managed to generate a strongly positive anticipation for these services since their early users were respected and trustworthy individuals rather than (as is the case with many other free email services) irresponsible and ill-reputed spammers and hackers.

A similar approach should be recommended for any other possibly high-profile social media initiative. Where a new social media space is to be established by an organisation, it could transition naturally from internal testing to general use by in-house staff who are likely to act as community leaders once the space is publicly available; this stage would allow the staff concerned to develop their own shared values and approaches to participation in the space. As a second step, staff could invite selected potential lead users and lead user groups to begin contributing to the space; as these lead users develop a relationship with participating staff and with one another, they could also be given the power to invite a limited number of trusted friends to the site (for the organisation itself, this is also a useful form of viral marketing to a crucial and possibly previously unknown group of potential users). As this growing group of lead users and other committed participants in turn establishes its shared community values and principles, the social media site could be gradually opened up further to general

The DBCDE Blog

Late in 2008, the Australian Department of Broadband, Communication, and the Digital Economy trialled an official blog as a form of engagement with citizens. The blog, open to all commenters, aimed to generate debate about Australia's future digital economy, but was immediately swamped with comments about the proposed 'cleanfeed' Internet filter instead.¹ A staged roll-out, allowing commentary at first only from invited experts in the field and gradually extending invitations to a wider range of voices, may have been more productive in generating policy ideas.

¹ Axel Bruns and Jason Wilson. "[Citizen Consultation from Above and Below: The Australian Perspective](#)." Paper presented at EDEM 2009, Vienna, 7-8 Sep. 2009.

participation, and wider promotion of the site through various organisational and social networks could commence; at this point, it should become evident that the potentially more casual users now beginning to join the site are being socialised into desirable forms of participation in the social media space by the established community of lead users rather than requiring more heavy-handed forms of moderator intervention.

This controlled opening of the community to wider participation enables a managed roll-out of the social media space which enables staff acting as community managers to work with the emerging leaders of the community in socialising newcomers into the shared values and principles of the community. Along the way, it remains possible for staff to guide the development of community interaction patterns in the desired direction without having to take an immediately authoritarian or adversarial position; earlier, already socialised members of the community will act as their allies and do most of the heavy lifting.

➔ **Recommendation 3:** Where the anticipated influx of new members to the community makes this necessary, plan for a staged roll-out of the social media space that opens the space to new participants only gradually and privileges likely lead users during its early stages.

Seeding Content Development

We have already highlighted the importance of organisational staff as community animators and community managers in social media spaces especially during their early stages. Such staff must communicate their enthusiasm for the space and its aims and act as role models for new users as they join the community; these staff are the early leaders of the community and only gradually step back from that role as genuine community members develop in status and recognition.

An especially important aspect of this role of organisational staff during the early stages of community development is their contribution of content to the community. Depending on the aims of the social media space itself – that is, whether it is focussed mainly on continuing discussion of relevant topics, or also on the collaborative creation of content for continued use –, their activities will differ somewhat, of course: the content developed by discussion-based communities necessarily remains more ephemeral than that developed by collaboration-based communities, which becomes a permanent if continuously changeable digital object. However, the role of staff in seeding this content development is equally important in all emerging social media spaces, regardless of their mix of discussion and collaboration.

Seeding content development in discussion-based spaces is largely a matter of kickstarting conversations and ensuring that other community members feel invited to participate. Depending on the specific topical focus of the community, this may be done for example by highlighting interesting relevant news items both from within and from outside the organisation, by sharing new ideas being developed within the organisation, or by flagging certain themes which may be of interest to the community; within limits, technically off-topic themes may also be touched upon on occasion in order to boost the recognition of the community as a social space populated by participants with interests beyond the main topic of community interaction. What is particularly important in this context is that staff regularly encourage other members to add their own views, ideas, and information to discussion threads; information posted by staff must be framed as a contribution to the conversation rather than as a self-contained press release, in other words. Even simple and somewhat formulaic encouragements to respond – such as ‘What do *you* think?’ – may help to break the ice, and again it is the degree to which staff are seen as genuine community members rather than merely as representatives of the organisation which will determine their success as community animators in this context.

Where the social media space is constructed as a place for the collaborative development of more permanent content, staff will – at least during these early stages of community formation – need to make regular contributions of their own work in progress, or of other material which may help to serve as the kernel of an idea which may then be fleshed out in much greater detail by the overall community. (As we will note later, it is important in this context to consider – and to make very clear to the rest of the community – the intellectual property implications as well, to avoid disruptive misunderstandings at a later point.) The content offered to seed community development processes at this stage does not need to be perfect – and indeed, the more fully formed the material is already, the more difficult it will be for community members to make a meaningful contribution of their own –; rather, it needs to provide an interesting idea and challenge to the community which other members will feel excited to develop further.

Seeding Linux Development

comp.os.minix

Message from discussion [What would you like to see most in minix?](#)

[Linus Benedict Torvalds](#) [View profile](#) [More options](#) Aug 26 1991, 2:12 a

Hello everybody out there using minix -

I'm doing a (free) operating system (just a hobby, won't be big and professional like gnu) for 386(486) AT clones. This has been brewing since april, and is starting to get ready. I'd like any feedback on things people like/dislike in minix, as my OS resembles it somewhat (same physical layout of the file-system (due to practical reasons) among other things).

I've currently ported bash(1.08) and gcc(1.40), and things seem to work. This implies that I'll get something practical within a few months, and I'd like to know what features most people would want. Any suggestions are welcome, but I won't promise I'll implement them :-)

Linus (torva...@kruuna.helsinki.fi)

PS. Yes - it's free of any minix code, and it has a multi-threaded fs. It is NOT protable (uses 386 task switching etc), and it probably never will support anything other than AT-harddisks, as that's all I have :-).

[Reply to author](#) [Forward](#) Rate this post: ☆☆☆☆☆

Now historic 1991 post by Linus Torvalds to the *comp.os.minix* newsgroup to seek collaborators for his project to develop the open source Linux operating system. Today, some 60% of Internet servers in the world run Linux.¹

¹ http://www.pcworld.com/businesscenter/article/151568/ballmer_still_searching_for_an_answer_to_google.html

It is notable in this regard that even vastly successful spaces for user-generated content such as the *Wikipedia* draw at least in part on existing material from other sources: some of its earliest seed material, for example, was sourced from an early-20th century edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* which by the time of *Wikipedia*'s inception in 2001 had fallen into the public domain – and this material was then revised more or less quickly by *Wikipedia*'s own contributors, of course. Similarly, the standard example for seeding community-based collaborative content development is provided by open source software development, where projects typically proceed from an initial developer sharing the alpha-stage source code for a piece of software which they have tinkered with in their spare time but feel unable to take much further without the involvement of a much larger team of developers.

This need for an effective seeding of community processes requires the organisational staff acting as community animators to source a steady stream of content to feed into the community, and to do so in a manner which encourages responses and further participation. Where feasible, it will be useful if such content also provides new insight into the development of ideas, products, and services in the organisation itself – the novelty of such material acts as an added incentive to join and participate in the community, and thus increases the community connection and brand loyalty of participants. In this context it remains important, of course, not to over-promise on current developments and to declare such previews as preliminary and subject to change; at the same time, community responses will also provide valuable input into ongoing development processes.

➔ **Recommendation 4:** Plan ahead to provide the emerging social media community with a steady stream of inputs which seed community interaction and content development. Ensure that such material is new and stimulating to the community, and in sharing it, encourage them to respond and participate.

Providing Appropriate Toolkits for Content Development

Whether focussed more on ephemeral discussion or on the collaborative creation of more permanent forms of content, the content development processes kickstarted by organisational staff providing seed content which we have described above also crucially depend on the availability of appropriate infrastructure to support them. Such infrastructure is technological in part, and the specific form of these technological tools depends necessarily on the nature of the content itself – social media spaces for the collaborative development of content will require more or less sophisticated version control systems (such as the wiki system upon which *Wikipedia* is built, or the concurrent versioning systems used by open source software development communities), while discussion spaces require what at least in their basic functionality may be considerably simpler tools for posting and responding to articles.

Even when the technical infrastructure required to facilitate community interaction and collaboration is relatively basic, however, it is crucial to ensure that these toolkits are both accessible even to more casual users and powerful to meet the needs of more advanced and lead users. We will highlight a number of specific features of such systems in the following pages, but begin here especially by noting the fact that the technical configuration of the social media space is immediately intertwined with its social structure. In particular, given what we have noted above and in Part 1 about the overall structure of online communities, it is crucial that the technical features of the social media space enable the development of a fully featured community structure spreading out from lead users as central community members through to less committed and ultimately marginal members, and that such differing status within the community is able to be identified and experienced by community members and casual visitors alike.

The absence of such features is the main cause of the relatively anaemic and often predominantly anti-social levels of interaction in many of the ‘social media’ spaces attached to mainstream online news publications – for example in the comment threads attached to op-eds in the online versions of major newspapers. For the most part, the ‘communities’ which briefly form around these columns have no permanence and consist simply of an unstructured list of comments attached to the main article; this provides no opportunity for readers and participants to tell regular contributors from random commenters or for any other forms of longer-term structured engagement to emerge. The fact that such columns often attract the worst in public sentiment and thereby actively repel potentially more constructive contributors is therefore hardly surprising.

Well beyond such facile attempts at ‘doing’ social media, then, what is necessary in the development of successful and sustainable social media spaces which add value to the organisation’s Web presence as well as allow for the emergence of a sense of community that is valued and valuable to its members is to provide the means for community members to move from more casual forms of participation towards more advanced levels of membership. As we have noted in Report 1, the key element in achieving this is to make contribution tasks as granular as possible – that is, to enable casual users to begin to participate simply by offering some very simple contributions to the continuing community processes, and to provide them with an evenly spaced ladder of increasingly more complex forms of participation. Towards the higher end of participation standards, their role may also move further from that of content contributor to one of community leader, moderator, or administrator, as noted below.

Providing a Smooth Learning Curve

Report 1 highlighted the success of the German hyperlocal community news Website *myHeimat.de*. The development of the substantial community of active contributors which this site has now attracted is due in good part to the granularity of its content contribution tasks, as site founder Martin Huber notes¹:

simply to make clear, 'this is open and anyone can participate', that's something that you have to impress [on users] and for which we have to give an appropriate push. You have to set a very low threshold, so that users don't need to start with a contribution consisting of a page of text – plus ten images, ready to print with a gripping headline – but can begin simply with a snapshot, with a brief impression.

And we notice clearly that people follow a learning curve on the platform, where they do ... begin with a snapshot, with an impression, with an image, and then step by step learn to operate [the system] and gain confidence. ... And that really needs to be supported, that's nothing these people are familiar with from 30 to 40 years of media consumption. ... That's a very different approach or a very different understanding of such a product from what a traditionally educated journalist does.

¹ Axel Bruns. "[Citizen Journalism and Everyday Life: A Case Study of Germany's myHeimat.de.](#)" Paper presented at Future of Journalism, Cardiff, 9-10 Sep. 2009.

Good practice in structuring the technical and social features of social media spaces can be identified from relevant existing and successful sites in the specific field within which the organisation's envisaged social media space is set to operate; indeed, there are a variety of ready-made and highly customisable commercial and open source solutions now available which provide at least the generic support structures which enable the development of a strong sense of community as we have defined it and allow site operators to set out a granular range of contribution possibilities which enable participants to graduate from basic to more elaborate forms of engagement. Such systems will necessarily still have to be modified to cater to specific and unusual requirements, however. Again, it is also important to note in this context that some forms of participation may be able to be facilitated through third-party solutions (such as image and video sharing sites like *Flickr* and *YouTube*, or real-time communication systems like *Twitter*) and can simply be embedded into the social media space itself without a need to replicate the full functionality on-site. In such cases, however, it is also important to consider the added complications and limitations which this use of external tools may introduce, and to ensure that less adept users are not alienated by this use of third-party tools which may be difficult for them to comprehend.

In the following pages, we note a number of specific configuration choices which will have a significant impact on the sense of community which emerges in the social media space.

- ➔ **Recommendation 5:** Carefully consider the technical infrastructure supporting the social media space, and ensure that it provides for a range of contribution tasks that increase in difficulty in evenly spaced steps. The experience of early success in contributing to the space encourages users to move towards more elaborate forms of participation, increasing their loyalty to the site.

Enabling Persistent User Identities

The experience of online community which we have described in Part 1 – as a structured network of participants that incorporates lead, committed, and more casual users – crucially depends on the persistence of user identities. As we have noted, the coherence of any community (online or offline) is dependent on the continuing socialisation of new members – a process through which they encounter and negotiate the shared values, ideas, beliefs, and knowledge of the community and determine their own position within the overall membership: the degree to which a member accepts these core values ultimately determines how central to the community they are able to be.

None of this continuing, long-term process is possible unless members are readily identifiable to one another through their use of persistent identity markers – such as unique screen names or avatars. An environment which (like many of the comments threads on mainstream news sites) does not provide for the persistence of user identities and instead (at best) relies on users themselves to choose the same screen name each time they make a comment or contribution enables and even encourages abuse – it removes any possibility of significant repercussions from the contributor's peers and thus allows participants to disrupt the social media space at will and even to impersonate other participants. Such environments are inherently and irretrievably un conducive to meaningful community formation and development. The example of *Wikipedia* should be noted in this context: while that site does allow contributions – of both content and commentary – to be made by unregistered users (whose IP address stands in as a basic marker of identity), any meaningful discussion and collaboration on developing the content of the encyclopaedia takes place almost exclusively between registered users, who frequently encourage those unregistered users who participate regularly to create a user account for themselves.

The importance of such persistent user identities – usually in the form of registered, password-protected user accounts – is not necessarily an argument for the use of contributors' real names, though this is a further option for increasing accountability and encouraging meaningful participation; however, pseudonymous participation is already a substantial step forward from anonymous usage. Many social media users invest a substantial amount of energy in the development of their online persona even if that persona does not operate under their real name. The social sanctioning by the overall community which results from disruptive behaviour is felt just as strongly whether it affects the perpetrator under their given legal name or under their chosen screen name.

Established social media communities are often highly effective at sanctioning their users even without formal intervention by staff moderators: respected, leading community members will speak out against disruptive behaviour or (where this is possible in systems for collaborative content creation) roll back or delete negative contributions. Members whose disruptive behaviour has been highlighted in this way are often shunned and ostracised for some time to come, until they have redeemed themselves in the eyes of the community by apologising, engaging more constructively, or otherwise showing an improved understanding of the community's shared values and expectations. It should be noted here that this form of socialising peer pressure is widely practiced in any form of community (the same processes keep us from making socially inappropriate remarks in face-to-face conversations, or from breaking the law), but it is also important to highlight that where practiced without real provocation or unnecessarily vigorously they can turn into bullying and the persecution of supposedly 'undesirable' minorities. In the context of social media, it is here (rather than in the day-to-day policing of community interactions) that official moderators should intervene.

The threat of such social sanctioning acts as a strong disincentive against disruptions especially for well-established, longer-term users (again highlighting the importance of the continuing socialisation processes within the community). This tendency may be heightened even further in social media spaces which allow their users to add links from their identity in the space itself to their identities in other social networks (such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Flickr*, etc.), as misbehaviour in the given social media space may thus also affect the social standing in these external networks. Linking the different social identities (which is also possible using cross-platform technological solutions such as OpenID) also polices against the practice of users creating multiple accounts within the same social media space (a practice known as ‘sockpuppeting’ where it is used to create the impression that multiple users support the same controversial point of view).

Social sanctions are likely to be felt most acutely where users are participating under their own names. While it remains difficult to enforce the use of real names in social media spaces without introducing a possibly prohibitive identity authentication barrier (requiring prospective users to submit copies of their official identity card or of similar documents), it is nonetheless possible to strongly encourage the use of real names both through built-in technical features of the social media space and through established social conventions in the community. Social networking sites such as *Facebook* and the professional network *LinkedIn* are obvious examples for the former: while it is possible for users to create accounts under ‘fake’ names, this largely defeats the purpose of these sites, which are used by their participants to find and connect to existing friends, acquaintances, and colleagues for whom they search by their real names. More broadly, too, sites which have a strong connection to communities in the offline world (such as the community news network *myHeimat*) are an example of the latter: where the nature of a contributor’s online activities makes them easily identifiable to their offline acquaintances even if they were to use a pseudonym, it no longer makes any real difference whether they do so or not.

The choice of using real names or pseudonyms in the configuration of a social media site is therefore subordinate to the need to ensure that online identities are persistent and difficult to tamper with. Contributors’ personal investment in their online persona within the social media space can be further increased by providing them with the tools and the space to create a fully-fledged profile rather than merely an account – this profile should include links to their profiles elsewhere, as noted above, as well as some information about themselves and their interests. Ideally, it may also track their previous contributions to the community’s interactions and various other forms of ‘performance data’ which may be able to be extracted from the track record of interactions within the space. These data provide a shorthand means of evaluating the social status and standing of each participant within the community, and often encourage a form of friendly competition between members over who is the ‘most valued player’. (More serious competition, which could lead to a focus on quantity over quality in participation, should be avoided, however.)

➔ **Recommendation 6:** Ensure that user identities are persistent over time and connected to the user’s profiles in other online spaces, and encourage users to flesh out their online personas with additional information. Consider encouraging the use of real names where appropriate. Encourage communities to sanction disruptive behaviour without a need for moderator intervention, but address overzealous bullying of users expressing minority views.

Encouraging Community Self-Moderation

In Report 1, we have already outlined the choice between pre-, post-, and peer moderation options which the operators of social media spaces must necessarily face. As we noted, while safest from an operational and legal perspective, pre-moderation is also the least desirable as it introduces possibly lengthy delays to user-contributed material actually appearing online (especially where users are contribution after hours or on weekends) and thus fundamentally undermines the continuous and collaborative aspects of social media engagement – additionally, it clearly positions the moderator as an entity superior to the community itself, which serves to substantially limit the community’s site loyalty and sense of belonging.

Post-moderation fares significantly better from this perspective, and while maintaining a visible presence for the moderator reduces them to a kind of ‘community cleaner’ looking after the participants rather than positioning them as an unpredictable gatekeeper deciding over whether contributions become visible or not. During the early stages, it may be possible for moderators to retroactively check each user contribution for its adherence to the house rules, but especially as social media communities grow beyond their limited origins, such post-moderation practices can necessarily no longer act on all user-generated material, and must therefore instead increasingly incorporate peer moderation elements.

At the simplest level, such peer moderation may simply consist of providing the means for users to alert the moderators to questionable content which they may then act upon. Substantially more sophisticated (but also more complex) peer moderation systems may also be introduced over time, however, which may allow users to rate the contributions of other participants, for example, and thus affect their visibility and acceptance. Such ratings may in turn also implicitly or explicitly affect the social standing of the contributor, for example by conferring specific titles or awards upon them (‘valued user’, ‘expert’, etc.). In Report 1, we outlined the development history of moderation features in the major technology news community *Slashdot* as an example for the various possible approaches in moderating online discussion; where social media communities are engaged in the collaborative development of lasting resources, additional means of peer moderation and peer review of the content being created through these processes may also be available.

In the absence of unlimited resources to fund moderation activities by staff, at any rate, the deployment of some form of peer moderation is an inevitable necessity for the management and policing of any online community of substantial size. Such peer moderation is facilitated by processes of social accounting: 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.”⁵ The exact nature of such systems will depend on the specific social media space and its aims and practices, but what is important overall is that the vast majority of the community itself subscribes to a shared understanding of the necessity for such peer moderation and a common set of principles and criteria against which it measures whether individual users and their contributions are seen as constructive or disruptive.

⁵ 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.

Defining the Principles of Peer Moderation: The Case of *Wikipedia*

Wikipedia provides one of the best and most elaborate current examples for the consensual development of peer moderation systems. Virtually a blank slate when its wiki was established, the community began by defining a small number of central principles for its operation – including the now famous ‘Neutral Point of View’ doctrine. These principles were extensively clarified, refined and – in some cases – separated into multiple rules for *Wikipedia* participants, and the *Wikipedia* pages which present these principles continue to be amongst the most actively discussed and edited entries within the entire encyclopaedia. A variety of further subordinate rules and general guidelines were also added to the site, and some participants specialise exclusively in facilitating the continued maintenance of these rules and guidelines, rather than actively contributing to the ongoing development of *Wikipedia*’s content itself.

Emerging alongside this process of collaborative policy development was a more strongly diversified structure of roles within the community, which pertained not only to the specific focus of individual participants (content contributor, copyeditor, discussion facilitator, policy maintainer, vandalism cleaner, welcoming party for newly registered users, etc.) but also to their level of control over the *Wikipedia* system itself, which – beyond standard unregistered and registered users – now also recognises special ‘administrator’, ‘bureaucrat’, and ‘steward’ roles with specific additional administrative privileges (as well as a special ‘founder’ or super-user role for *Wikipedia* founder Jimmy Wales). While the implementation of these roles ultimately depended on the cooperation of the non-profit Wikimedia Foundation which operates the *Wikipedia*, their exact definition and the conferral of such privileges on individual users were ultimately determined by the *Wikipedia* community as such.

This common understanding – ideally made explicit in the form of collaboratively authored guidelines – forms part of and is born out of the shared stock of overall values, rules, beliefs, aims, and ambitions which are held by the community and which constitute it as a community rather than a mere group of users in the first place. In this context, then it is especially important that the tools and mechanisms which support peer moderation are developed and deployed in consultation with the community itself, that the community is gradually trained in their effective use, and that these tools are fine-tuned as the community itself evolves. Any community which is asked to engage in peer, that is, in self-moderation – must be provided with the tools that are appropriate to its specific needs, and must be able to modify and customise them further as required. While certain features are commonplace across a wide range of communities, some are specific only to communities with particular aims and purposes.

- ➔ **Recommendation 7:** Prepare for the inevitability of moving towards peer moderation processes as the community grows, provide appropriate tools and mechanisms for this form of social accounting, and help train the community in their use. Enable the community to develop a shared understanding of what are seen as desirable and undesirable forms of participation, and encourage it to share this understanding as a set of public guidelines for all contributors.

Tracking Community Dynamics

If these recommendations are understood as a roughly chronological guide to developing social media spaces and nurturing collaborative online communities, then over the past few pages we have gradually moved from the early emergent phase towards a more stable state that allows more of the day-to-day responsibilities of keeping the community going to be transferred to the community itself, rather than remaining the domain of organisational staff acting as community animators and moderators. As social media communities enter this stable phase, staff should find a way to step back from all too direct involvement as community leaders and lead users, and allow ‘homegrown’ talent from within the community to begin filling these roles; staff will still be needed as (post-)moderators where there are significant cases of abuse or disruption, of course, and they should continue to provide new impulses to the community by contributing relevant content that animates its discussions and/or other content creation activities, but by this stage at the very least, they need to make sure that the community is no longer dependent on their seed content for its own activities.

Knowing when to draw back from higher levels of involvement in order to let the community processes themselves take over requires organisational staff to closely monitor and track community activities and to develop a picture of the community’s areas of strength and weakness. For example, if a hypothetical *Wikipedia*-style community were seen to be strong at progressing encyclopaedia entries from rudimentary entry stubs to fully-fledged articles, but to be weak at originating new entries from scratch, then staff should concentrate their content seeding activities on the latter task and create a range of new entry stubs but let the community drive their development towards higher levels of quality; conversely, if many articles are being created but few reach maturity, staff may need to drive the development of mechanisms to highlight articles which still require work and to enlist contributors who may be able to do such work.

In other words, the role of staff here becomes one of supporting and channelling the community processes which are already taking place within the social media space. This may also require the deployment of new technological or social mechanisms to better coordinate the community’s work (or the modification of existing systems where they are seen not to address the needs of the community as they stand) – such mechanisms may provide additional tools for community members focussing on specific aspects of the shared projects to coordinate and track their efforts and manage the material being created in the process, for example. What takes place in the social media space from here on is a constant shaping and reshaping of the space and its supporting infrastructures (in their technical as well as social aspects) that requires a very delicate touch and good, continuous communication especially with the lead users who likewise have a strong sense of the community’s needs and wants, but also with the community at large.

Organisational staff members’ tracking of community dynamics can draw in part on the data and metadata generated by the social media space itself, and where at all possible staff should ensure that they have access to and regularly review such data – it may point to information on the influx rate of new community members and their loyalty to the site (measured for example as repeat visits), and thus show the level of user turnover; it may indicate periods of higher or lower participation activity, and thus point to daily, weekly, or seasonal patterns of use that may be useful in planning the timelines for new contribution initiatives; it may show activities that regularly generate a high level of participation

(or fail to do so), thus highlighting areas which are of specific interest to the community or which will have to continue to be artificially supported by staff until community take-up improves. Staff may also be able to glean information on community demographics and common interests, which will help in further promoting the site by addressing particular interest groups or engaging in viral marketing through relevant social networks.

Beyond this quantitative tracking, however, it is just as important for staff to maintain strong in-depth relationships with individual community members and thereby gain a more qualitative understanding of their attitudes towards their fellow community members and the social media space overall. Lead users are an obvious target group for such direct engagement, but it should be noted that their views may not necessarily be representative of the wider community; indeed, shaping the space too closely around lead users' wishes may end up alienating less advanced participants who could come to see the social media space as targeting 'elite' contributors only. Staff members in this role at the stable stage (in a position which is no longer that of a moderator or community animator, but may be best described as *community manager* now) should ensure that they form relationships with a wide range of community members, from marginal and infrequent participants through regular contributors to the

lead users. They may also want to organise regular meta-discussions about the social media space's purpose and activities to enable community members to air their views and – where necessary – let off steam.


It is crucial in this context that the organisation operating the social media space is responsive to the voices from the community, and that staff position themselves as a liaison between the community and the organisation – they must manage the community's expectations, but also consult it on proposed changes and additions to the space before they happen. While clearly a market leader for general social networking, it is notable that even a site like *Facebook* has frequently failed to heed this advice, resulting in considerable bad blood between its community and the organisation itself.

Facebook and Its Users

Facebook vows 'improvements' after user backlash

AFP MARCH 25, 2009

STORY PHOTOS (1)



WASHINGTON - Faced with a torrent of complaints over its latest redesign, the social networking hub Facebook has vowed a series of "improvements" to eliminate clutter and make the website more user friendly.

"Since we launched Facebook's home page design, we've received thousands of emails,

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Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, attends the Digital Life Design (DLD) conference on January 27, 2009 in Munich, Germany. DLD brings together global leaders and creators from the digital world.

Photograph by: Sean Gallup, Getty Images

Typical story about community protests following yet another *Facebook* redesign.¹

¹ <http://www.canada.com/technology/Facebook+vows+improvements+after+user+backlash/1426664/story.html>

➔ **Recommendation 8:** Track user participation in the social media space and build strong relationships with community members to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the social media community. Regularly review community activities and the social media platforms supporting it, and update the technical and social infrastructure to enhance collaborative processes. Extensively consult the community on any development activity.

Recognising Community Leaders

Throughout this report, we have highlighted the role of community leaders as key allies in establishing and developing social media communities, and in driving as well as (where necessary) policing their internal social and collaborative processes. Community leaders are the lead users of the social media space – they are likely to be amongst the most frequent and most active visitors to the space, the best connected within and beyond the community, and (as a result) command the greatest status capital within the community. As is the case in many offline communities, too, they need not necessarily be the greatest experts on the topics which are of interest to the community, however: leadership may stem from a participant's social abilities and their overall understanding of the community's interests as much as from their in-depth knowledge of any one specialist field.

For organisational staff working in and with social media communities, such leaders should be easy to recognise: they will be present in the majority of discussions within the community, and will be treated with a significant degree of respect by other users; conversely, however, they may also be a central target of attacks by disruptive users as they more than any other user embody the consensus on the community's shared values and principles (a consensus which disruptors are inherently opposed to). Just as such disruptive users are often relative newcomers to the community, these community leaders are likely to belong to the oldest generation of participants on the site.

Community leaders are key partners in managing the social media space and guiding community processes, and it is crucial to develop more or less explicit mechanisms for recognising them as such. Many standard discussion systems introduce simple contributor rankings, for example, which display a status as 'newbie', 'forum regular', 'advanced user', 'lead user' (or similar terms) next to each user's name and avatar – such rankings are frequently based on the participant's longevity on the site, their number of contributions to the community, or the accumulated positive or negative feedback received from their peers. Others may enable the community itself to collaboratively develop lists of its 'most valued players' by ranking or voting on community members, or regularly highlight particularly valuable contributions to the ongoing process or project.

Where such recognition is explicit, it can also lead to deliberate and ultimately disruptive tendencies to 'game the system' by pursuing quantity over quality or by making contributions which are in complete agreement with the prevailing community opinion and can thus hope to gain significant approval without controversy. Such 'karma whoring', as it is known in the technology news site *Slashdot* (where a contributor's social standing in the site's 700,000-strong community is measured in 'karma' points) is highly problematic and should be addressed through social and technological sanctions before it can become a widespread practice, as it conflicts with and undermines the grown social structures within the community. Instilling a sense of friendly competition in participants – to be seen as an active and constructive member of the social media space and thus move closer to the centre of the community – is useful, but this is often better promoted through implicit social mechanisms of mutual peer evaluation of each member's contributions than through explicitly awarding points measuring the value of each such contribution.

As genuine community leaders emerge, at any rate, organisational staff should make sure to build strong personal relationships with them. Such relationships build the basis for harnessing these community leaders as important sources of insight into the community's current sentiments, interests,

and ambitions, as well as as conduits for information originating from the organisation operating the social media space which is designed to be passed on to the community at large. Community leaders (and the staff who are their counterparts on the organisational site) thus sit at the very Pro-Am⁶ interface which connects organisation and community. As persons trusted by both sides of the Pro-Am equation, and thus as reliable partners for the organisation, such leaders may also be given previews of new developments within the organisation (including both new features being developed for the social media space itself, and new products and services to be introduced by the organisation to its overall audience); they may be harnessed as beta-testers for new initiatives, in other words, and will be well-placed to offer insightful feedback and advice on the current state of development. Finally, as well-connected central members of the community as well as of wider communities beyond the social media space itself they may also be harnessed as influential viral marketers for the community as well as the organisation.

The successful harnessing of community leaders in this fashion depends on their continued goodwill, however – their use as informants on community sentiment and advocates for community and organisation cannot be seen as a subordinate and exploitative relationship by the organisation, and must never be experienced as such by the community leaders involved themselves, as they may just as easily turn their considerable influence in the community and beyond against the organisations' interests. Community leaders who have built strong relationships with organisational staff only to be slighted or misled in some form are highly likely to turn against these staff, often with significantly disruptive results which may sour the relationship between organisation and community for a substantial period of time. Similarly, too, in harnessing community leaders as partners for the organisation, the community must never be led to develop the impression that their leaders have 'sold out' (perhaps literally, by accepting payment or preview copies of new products) and become mere spokespeople for the organisation itself; this would fundamentally undermine the standing of these leaders within the community.

In itself, however, this is not an argument against developing more formal relationships between organisation and community leaders, even to the point of inviting some such leaders to accept paid roles within the community. As communities grow and require a larger number of paid community managers, leaders emerging from the community itself are obvious candidates for such jobs. However, if they are to take on such roles, it is important that this transition takes place with the utmost transparency, not least on part of the community leader themselves who must clearly announce their changed positioning within the community and spell out how this may affect their continued participation in the social media space.

➔ **Recommendation 9:** Work closely with the leaders of the social media community as they emerge, and draw on their knowledge and expertise in managing the community, developing the social media space, and developing new products and services. Be transparent about your actions as you harness community leaders in this way, and ensure that they are able to maintain their trusted position in the community. Consider community leaders as potential new staff, but ensure that any such transition is managed with utmost transparency.

⁶ For more on Pro-Ams, 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>>.

Dealing with Content Authorship and Ownership

Perhaps the single most significant source of controversy between organisations and communities engaging in social media spaces are the policies which govern the content and ideas which are generated by the social media community. Most social media spaces which immediately give participants the impression that their main aim is to utilise the community as a cheap source of labour and ideas are unlikely to develop in the first place, and many others which were found to have hidden rules (enshrined for example in their Terms of Service documents) that strongly favoured the organisation's interests were substantially undermined by the debates which ensued once these conditions were discovered.

That said, many social media communities tend to exhibit a relatively sophisticated understanding of the organisational need to sustain engagement in social media spaces by generating revenue directly or indirectly. They tend not to be opposed to engagement in commercially operated spaces for as long as they are not required to entirely give up their rights to authorship and ownership as a necessary, non-negotiable condition of entry; Terms of Service which grant social media operators a non-exclusive licence to the content generated by social media communities, provide mechanisms for participants to remove their material again without lasting trace after publication, and prohibit the overt commercial exploitation of their ideas without the further consultation of individual authors are usually accepted without generating major complaints.

Central to developing a mutually agreeable arrangement between organisation and community are not the specific legal instruments used to define it, however, but the establishment and maintenance of a sense of mutual respect between both sides. Contributors must feel appreciated and not exploited; they must feel treated as equal partners in a mutually beneficial arrangement. Where their ideas are utilised beyond the confines of the community itself – where contributions lead to the improvement of existing or the development of new products and services, for example – they will expect at least to be acknowledged *as* contributors, or (in more substantial cases) to be remunerated for their efforts. Even if the Terms of Service permit the organisation's use of community ideas at will, where such acknowledgement or remuneration is not forthcoming, there is a substantial possibility of negative repercussions for the organisation from its disgruntled users.

It is useful in this context to distinguish between contributors rights of authorship and ownership. In most non-profit social media communities – such as those engaged in the development of open source software – contributors are generally more than happy to relinquish their rights of *ownership* for their contributions, by applying the relevant Creative Commons, Open Source, or GNU content licences to their work (notably, however, these licences frequently pertain only to *non-commercial* exploitation of their intellectual property; we return to this point below). Use of such licences – which allow other community members to work with and modify this material without a need to seek the original author's explicit permission – is a fundamental precondition for open source software development initiatives to operate on a reliable legal basis, in fact; without such licence schemes, such projects would be continuously exposed to the potential of legal challenges from earlier contributors who disagreed with how their material has been used and redeveloped in subsequent iterations.

While relinquishing their ownership, however, open source contributors tend to continue to assert their rights to *authorship*, that is, their right to be recognised as an author (amongst many others) at least of

some part of the complete source code for a specific software project. This right to authorship – or more specifically, the need to acknowledge all previous contributors to the project – is similarly enshrined in the requirements of standard open content licences used by such projects. It is a right which is carefully protected, as in these and other social media projects the acknowledgment of contributors *as* contributors is a major source of their social standing within the community – their reward for participation in social media, in other words, is measured in social rather than financial capital. (In some such projects, social capital can be converted more or less directly into financial capital, however: open source developers who make a name for themselves within their communities are also very well placed for careers as paid software developers or consultants.)

The picture is further complicated in social media spaces which – unlike most open source projects, community initiatives, or collaborative ventures like the *Wikipedia* – are operated by for-profit organisations: clearly, the standard ownership licencing schemes which explicitly forbid the commercial use of user-generated material cannot be used in such cases. Additional permissions must be negotiated between contributors and the organisation operating the social media space in such cases, and must be explicitly (and publicly) stated in Terms of Service agreements; indeed, to facilitate the transparent development and deployment of such licence agreements, the Creative Commons initiative has recently introduced a new ‘CCPlus’ licencing scheme that combines overall Creative Commons licencing conditions with specific additional rights granted by contributors to the commercial organisation.⁷

Given the limited understanding of social media contributors’ and organisations’ legal obligations which exists especially on the side of communities, special effort must be taken to make as explicit as possible the licencing arrangements which pertain to a specific social media space must, and to continue to educate incoming users about their ownership rights as they participate in the space. Additionally, it is important for organisations to make every effort to respect and acknowledge contributors’ authorship of their content, especially also where this material is used beyond the social media space itself; in most cases, the added cost of tracking and acknowledging authorship in appropriate fashion will significantly outweigh the potential loss of goodwill and reputation which results from the negative publicity surrounding stories of the apparent exploitation of contributors’ content by commercial operators.

Indeed, beyond boosting their social standing within the community, the recognition of contributors through explicit acknowledgment by the organisation is also likely to generate a significant loyalty dividend: users who feel appreciated by the organisation are more likely to remain active and constructive contributors, and to act as its advocates in the wider community.

➔ **Recommendation 10:** Understand the expectations of contributors in relation to their ownership and authorship rights, and develop mutually acceptable licencing arrangements. Transparently display such arrangements and educate new users about their rights and obligations. Maintain the community’s goodwill by meticulously acknowledging the authorship of individual contributors where their ideas are utilised by the organisation.

⁷ See <http://wiki.creativecommons.org/CCPlus> for an introduction.

Conclusion

This report is divided into two parts. Part 1 provided an introduction into the fundamental principles and characteristics of communities – and these principles are applicable to online as well as offline communities, but are particularly relevant for any critical or practical engagement with the communities which form around social media platforms. It is crucial to make the point that social media *are* social media only because of their communities of participants: where such communities fail to form, or where technological limitations or organisational problems prevent them from forming fully, the *social* media aspects of such platforms will fail to fully develop, and the site will remain a more conventional and often significantly less attractive online publication that may be effective at addressing its audience but cannot harness the additional benefits which may stem from the development of a loyal, committed online community around it.

We stress the importance of communities in this report because this aspect of social media remains surprisingly underdeveloped in organisational strategies and practices. While many of the profit and non-profit organisations which have worked to develop social media spaces around their online activities are by now highly adept at employing the tools of Web 2.0 to address the technological requirements of their social media platforms, the same cannot be said with any confidence about the social side: here, a treacherous ‘build it and they will come’ attitude still prevails in many cases, or – where by accident more than by design real communities *have* developed – the development of appropriate strategies for working with these communities and retaining their interest and enthusiasm for the long term is thwarted by a lack of understanding and a patronising attitude towards the communities themselves.

Where there is a genuine interest from the organisational side to develop a strong and lasting relationship with a community of users and followers, it is crucial to overcome this imbalance between the technical and the social, and to ensure that social media technology is seen as a means to an end, but that the end of developing social media communities is seen first and foremost as a question of relationship management, not as merely a technical challenge. We have noted in the report that even the apparent leaders of social media do not always manage to get the balance right: the repeated community uproar over poorly communicated design changes in *Facebook* provides one example here; the at times bitter debate over changes to the ‘retweet’ functionality in *Twitter* which erupted during the writing of this report provides another: retweeting, that is, passing on someone else’s message to one’s own group of followers in *Twitter*, emerged from the community itself as a social convention which simply required users to place the letters ‘RT’ and the author’s *Twitter* user name in front of the original message, with additional commentary added as required. *Twitter*’s proposed new feature replaces this with less flexible built-in functionality, and represents an attempt to replace user-led with in-house innovation, much to the dislike of the *Twitter* user community. It appears unlikely that *Twitter* can win this fight with its user community – at the time of writing, the company had ‘temporarily withdrawn’ the new functionality.⁸

We note such examples not so much as cautionary tales designed to make organisations think twice before engaging in and developing social media spaces as part of their overall communications

⁸ See <http://www.internetnews.com/webcontent/article.php/3848186/Retweet+Redux+Twitters+New+Feature+Hits+Snag.htm>

strategies, but rather in order to highlight the need to thoroughly consider how such engagement changes their relationship with their users and followers. Whatever their technological setup, social media spaces are fundamentally shared spaces that belong to the community at least as much as to the organisation, and they must be treated as such if they are to have any chance to survive and thrive. To give up and share ownership and responsibility in this fashion remains a difficult process, however, especially for organisations which retain a conventional mass media attitude to their audiences.

Part 2 of this report, therefore, provides a number of fundamental strategic recommendations for organisations wishing to develop a sustainable presence in the social media environment. How these recommendations are implemented in practice necessarily depends on the specific organisation, the communities it wishes to engage with, and the field of interest within which they operate, as well as the specific technological frameworks upon which the social media platform is built. However, our recommendations focus on the bigger picture beyond such specific considerations, and are able to be adapted to a wide range of contexts. Naturally, we cannot guarantee success even if these recommendations are followed to the letter – a variety of other contextual and environmental factors may still intervene: the availability of competing social media spaces whose dominance may be hard to break, current perceptions of the organisation within the community, the personalities of early lead users in the community and of the initial community animators delegated by the organisation, as well as the design and functionality of the social media platform itself may each affect and undermine the organisation's efforts to build a strong social media space. However, it is certain that any actions which go *against* the strategic recommendations we have made in Part 2 will significantly limit the chances of the social media space to be successful.

We have arranged these strategic recommendations in roughly chronological order: we begin with considerations that should be made as the social media space itself is developed and populated with initial seed content, at a stage that requires considerable support and input from the organisation and its staff; from here we outline the need to gradually devolve more and more responsibility to the community itself, to a point where the social media community becomes self-managing and self-sustaining to the furthest extent possible. Again, this loss of control over the space and the community may seem undesirable to some organisations, but as we have noted above, social media spaces require the establishment of a shared authority and responsibility between organisation and community, and the achievement of such balanced ownership inherently necessitates a ceding of some control to the community. Organisations which are unwilling to accept this fact would do best not to engage in social media at all, as their half-hearted attempts at 'doing' social media are likely to do more damage than good for their reputation – the often offensive nature of the comments threads attached to columnists' 'blogs' on mainstream news media Websites provides an obvious warning here.

In the conclusion for Report 1, we noted that a key guiding principle for organisational engagement in social media should be the application of common sense, and the same continues to hold at this point, too. Indeed, the strategic recommendations we have made here may seem to some readers to be simply commonsensical – and they ought to be. Sadly, there remain many examples for a less-than-commonsensical approach to social media in the corporate world; we hope that these reports may help to address such shortcomings and to support the success of organisational approaches to social media.

Axel Bruns

Brisbane, November 2009

Further Information

The following resources are recommended for further reading on social media and communities:

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflecting on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Baym, Nancy K. *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2000.
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About the Author



Dr Axel Bruns is an Associate Professor in Media and Communication in 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 Produsage* (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 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 *produsage* 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. Produsage 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 produsage on democracy, citizenship, and the media. For more information about the produsage concept, see Produsage.org.

From 2010, Bruns is the leading Chief Investigator of a major ARC Discovery research project to trace and map Australians' use of key social media sites. The project will provide a first comprehensive overview of Australian public communication in the online environment, and offers new insight into the shape of Australia's networked public sphere.

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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