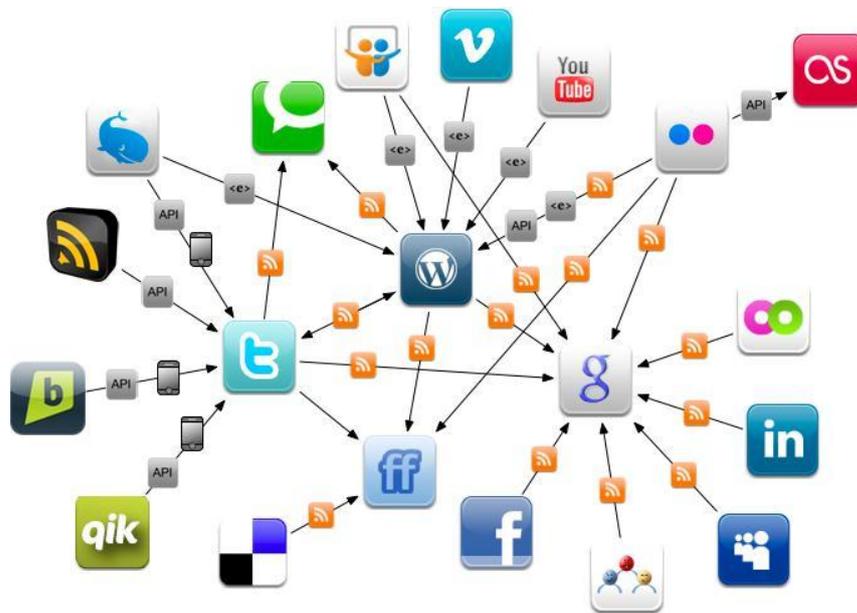




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How Social Media Is Changing the World?



Anne Helmond, May 2009

Author: Zhang Zhi Ee

Matriculation Number: S770585

Master Mechanical Engineering - Engineering Design and Renewable Energies

zhangzhi85@yahoo.co.uk

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1 Introduction

If the online social networking application Facebook is a nation, it would be the the 3rd largest nation in the world after China and India. 750 million users have signed up for Facebook since it was opened to public in 2004 (FACEBOOK, 2011). A survey by Pew Research Center in August 2011 showed that the percentage of all adult internet users who use social networking sites has increased from 11% in 2005 to a staggering 65% in 2011 (PURCELL, 2011). At the same time, 48 hours of video are uploaded to the video sharing platform YouTube every minute (YOUTUBE, 2011). Meanwhile, on the online encyclopedia Wikipedia 16.3 million articles in 282 different languages have been written collaboratively by volunteers since it was launched in 2001 (ZACHTE, 2011).

These mind-boggling statistics showed that “Social Media”, represented here by Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia can no longer be ignored. Erik Qualman, an author on Social Media, has even compared social media to the Industrial Revolution (QUALMAN, 2010). But is social media really a revolution like the Industrial Revolution which was a major turning point in human history? Or it is just a brief phenomenon that will slowly die down?

This essay will look at the definition of social media. A chronology of its development will also be presented. Its impacts on society will be gauged in four aspects; namely, in communications, knowledge transfer, creativity output and activism.

1.1 Definition of Social Media

The term “social media” is a relatively new term and only being widely used since 2004, it is not clear to many what it exactly means and what websites and

applications should be included under this term. With the terms “Web 2.0” and “User Generated Content (UGC)” interchangeably used with the term “social media”, it is imperative to draw a distinction between the terms.

(KAPLAN & HAENLEIN, 2010) makes such a distinction in their article by describing Web 2.0 as “a new way in which software developers and end-users started to utilize the World Wide Web; that is, as a platform whereby content and applications are no longer created and published by individuals, but instead are continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion”. As for UGC, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in their 2007 report defines it as: “i) content made publicly available over the Internet, ii) which reflects a certain amount of creative effort, and iii) which is created outside of professional routines and practices” by (OECD, 2007)”.

Combining these two clarifications of Web 2.0 and UGC, KAPLAN & HAENLEIN defines social media as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (KAPLAN & HAENLEIN, 2010)”.

Social media comes in a few forms. Classifying them according to their characteristics KAPLAN & HAENLEIN categorized them in six forms; namely, collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds.

On collaborative projects, contents are jointly created and managed by many Internet users. One exemplary website in this category is Wikipedia, the largest and most popular online encyclopedia (ZACHTE, 2011). Blogs are websites that allow users to publish date-stamped entries in reverse chronological order (OECD, 2007). Contents posted on blogs vary from personal diaries to

summaries of information on a specific topic and are usually text-based. Blogs are typically managed by one person or a small group of persons. Readers of blogs can interact with blog writers (also known as *bloggers*) and other readers by adding comments to the entries. Content communities, on the other hand, deal with media contents such as videos, photos and presentations. Exemplary websites include YouTube for video, Flickr for photos and Slideshare for presentations. Social networking sites are the most comprehensive social media applications. They not only connect users by enabling them to create personal information profiles and sending messages between each other, they also provide a unified platform for users to share their videos, photos and blogs, thus combining the functions of blogs, content communities and emails. Examples of social networking sites are Facebook, MySpace and LinkedIn.

Virtual worlds are platforms that enable users to appear digitally in the form of avatars in a three-dimensional environment and interact with other users as they would in real world. Virtual worlds come in two forms. The first, virtual social worlds, allows inhabitants effectively live a virtual life similar to their real life (with the exception of physical laws such as gravity). The second form, virtual game worlds, restricts the behaviors of users according to rules set for massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG).

1.2 Chronology of Social Media

- | | |
|------------|---|
| late 1970s | Usenet and Bulletin Board System (BBS). Precursors for social media which offered Internet users a platform to post public messages and interact with one another (CHAPMAN, 2009). |
| 1994 | GeoCities. One of the earliest social media in the form that we know today which offered users a platform to build their own websites which were equivalents to today's blogs (SIMON, 2009). |

- 1996 **ICQ.** One of the first instant messaging services which allowed users to create lists of friends and interact with each other instantly. (ICQ)
- 1997 **SixDegrees.** The first modern social network which allowed users to create a public profile and to become friends with other users (CHAPMAN, 2009).
- 1999 **LiveJournal.** The first community blogging platform where users can publish blog entries and connect with each other. (CHAPMAN, 2009)
- 2001 **Wikipedia,** an open source web-based online encyclopedia was launched
- 2002 **Friendster.** One of the first modern social networking websites. Had more than 115 million users in 2008 (WIKIPEDIA, 2011).
- 2003 **MySpace** and **LinkedIn.** Both modern social networking sites, MySpace were popular among teenagers and musicians while LinkedIn was one of the first mainstream social networks dedicated to business (CHAPMAN, 2009).
- 2004 **Facebook** launched as a Harvard-only social network. Opened to public in 2006 and since 2008, has been the most popular social networking site (CHAPMAN, 2009).
World of Warcraft, the world's most-subscribed massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) was launched (WIKIPEDIA, 2011).
- 2005 **YouTube,** the first major video hosting and sharing site was launched (CHAPMAN, 2009).
- 2006 **Twitter,** a microblogging service that allows users to send and read text-based posts of up to 140 characters (CHAPMAN, 2009).
- 2007 **iPhone** was launched. It marked the start of mobile social media era, allowing users to publish contents from virtually anytime and from anywhere.

2 Impacts of Social Media

In its relative short existence of about 15 years, social media has gained a foothold in our society. In the following sections, the impacts of social media will be looked at in the areas of communication, transfer in knowledge, creativity output and activism.

2.1 Communication

Throughout the history, communications technologies in the form of carrier pigeons, smoke signals, telephones and snail-mails have been inconvenient and labor-intensive. With the emergence of social media, the nature of communication has changed.

Social media enables people to keep in touch with each other with a level of regularity and intimacy like never before. Time and geographical constraints used to separate friends and family from each other. Social media overcomes these constraints by providing a cheap communication channel for all parties as long as they are connected to the Internet. Communication now can be made even on mobile devices with Internet connection, thus making keeping in touch easier. Social media has also enriched the forms and contents of communication. Besides the traditional forms of text and voice, videos and photos are now used to communicate on personal level. Videos and photos can be uploaded to YouTube or Flickr and be shared with friends online. Playing increasingly a more important role in social media era is a new kind of content; namely, information about personal preferences. Personal preferences are freely shared, for example through sharing personal reviews of restaurants on Qype or any online contents that one finds interesting on StumbleUpon. In

short, word of mouth communication has been given a new facelift — travelling faster and reaching a much larger audience.

The uses of Instant Messaging services and microblogging Website like Twitter have also dramatically diminished the response time. Communication has become shorter, instantaneous and frequent. The use of social media has also cut down the cost of communication. What one needs is a compatible device such as a computer or a smartphone and an Internet connection. The use of social media is mostly free of charge, independent on how frequent it is used or how big the audience is. This also empowers any layman to create content and publish it to a mass audience, which used to be solely reachable through industrial media like televisions, radios and newspapers.

The communication of information on current events, also known as news, is also going through an evolution process thanks to social media. The roles of journalists and readers/audiences have turned vague. For example, the first photo from 2009's emergency landing of a US Airways flight into the Hudson River was first seen on microblogging site Twitter. Traditional media outlets only picked up the news 30 minutes later (DEARDS, 2009). Amateur videos and personal blog entries from the disaster site from the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan were used extensively by traditional media outlets in their reporting.

Social media as a communication tool is a double-edged sword. A critic says social media risk “infantilizing the human mind”. Susan Greenfield, a professor of synaptic pharmacology says in a report by (WINTOUR, 2009), social media users risk “putting attention span in jeopardy” as they get use to instant responses using social media and computers. This shift of response time might accustom the brain to operate at such a timescales as well. Excessive use of social media also makes users inept to face-to-face, real-life conversation, where voice tone and body language come in play. She illustrates this situation

“as killing, skinning and butchering an animal to eat has been replaced by the convenience of packages of meat on the supermarket shelf”.

Another growing concern about social media’s role in communication is privacy issues and identity theft. There has never been a time where one shares so much personal information with each other in the history of mankind, thus also exposing one to its greatest privacy risk in the history. Personal information has great marketing values, making it very attractive for hackers and identity theft. Facebook have been criticized for its weak privacy protection and accused of selling its user data to third parties (WIKIPEDIA, 2011). One must be vigilant in this social media age on what and how much personal information one is willing to share and how much of this information is publicly accessible.

2.2 Knowledge Transfer

Exemplary social media applications for knowledge transfer are the free online Encyclopedia Wikipedia, the question-and-answer site Yahoo! Answers and Internet forums. All these applications belong to “collaborative projects” under the definition of (KAPLAN & HAENLEIN, 2010). The main idea behind these projects is that a collaborative effort of many leads to a better result that one individual could achieve.

Collaborative projects have democratized information and knowledge. Books and schools are not the exclusive source of knowledge any longer. Knowledge could be achieved and distributed through social media. Anyone who has a computer and an Internet connection could access the information. Social media also brought together people with expertise to share their knowledge and experience. Internet forums, for example, gather people of same interest and provide a platform where accounts, photos, videos, softwares etc. could be exchanged. A bicycle enthusiast could perhaps spare a trip to a bicycle repair

shop and repair his own bicycle if he invests some time in reading the numerous tutorials and videos available in forums about bicycle.

These collaborative projects are not without critics. One of the biggest critics is plagiarism. The advancement of social media has made copy-and-paste easier than before. This has leads to a huge increase of plagiarism. Ideas or texts on websites, reports and blogs are conveniently copied and used as own works without any proper citing or credit. Detecting plagiarism is still a difficult task, as plagiarism is not mere copying word-for-word of text but also stealing another's ideas as one's own, without using the exact same words (WIKIPEDIA, 2011).

2.3 Creativity Output

The introductions of content communities like Youtube for videos, Flickr for photos and MySpace for music and blogs for mainly text-based contents have provide content producers a way to bypass industrial media such as television, radio or newspaper and to reach the intended audience directly. Reduced cost and readily available multimedia equipment such as video recorders, digital cameras and editing software have played a fundamental role together with social media in giving everyone a chance to show his creativity to an audience. Justin Bieber, now one of the world's biggest superstars, was discovered in 2008 by his manager Scooter Braun, when he came across Bieber's performance videos on YouTube (KONJICANIN, 2010). Matt Harding, a video game designer became famous for his three videos in 2005, 2006 and 2008 of him dancing in front of landmarks in various international locations. His third video has been watched over 38,620,000 times on YouTube (WIKIPEDIA, 2011)

Social media websites also provide a platform for creative contents providers to interact and collaborate with each other. Flickr, an image hosting website and

online community, currently hosts more than 6 billion images (KREMERSKOTHEN, 2011). It is also serving as a hub for photography enthusiasts, where photography techniques, tips and quality photos are shared. A worldwide documentary film project “Life in a Day” was launched by YouTube in July 2010. Users sent in videos filmed by them on July 24, 2010 and submitted to YouTube. Ridley Scott, an established film director and producer produced the film and edited the videos into a film with footage from some of the contributors. The produced film is “94 minutes 57 seconds long and includes scenes from 4,500 hours of footage in 80,000 submissions from 140 nations” (WIKIPEDIA, 2011).

2.4 Activism

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines activism as “a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue”. With its widespread influence and cost-saving characteristics, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for activism.

Barack Obama, the 44th President of the United States won his presidency in 2008 partly thanks to his effective Internet campaigns. Using Internet forums and social media websites such as Facebook, Obama developed relationships with his supporters and would-be supporters. A smart user of social media, he managed to create a personable image while giving a sense of security and trust to his supporters, which motivated them to rally others in their local community. His Internet campaign was a monumental and historical success in the way it courted and mobilized grassroots activists, voters and donations (WIKIPEDIA, 2011).

The Arab Spring is a revolutionary wave of demonstrations and protests happening in the Arab world since 18 December 2010 which brought revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and major protests in eight other Arabic countries. Social media was used at length in these protests, mainly to organize, communicate and raise awareness. Twitter and Facebook were used to organize and spread the word about the demonstrations that were going to take place. These tools enable demonstrations to be organized in a short time notice and allowed the supporters to see how many people were planning to go for the protests. Without the ability to gauge how many people would be on the streets, fewer people might have shown up as they feared they were the only ones sticking their neck out (BOYD, 2011). During the protests, tweets (entries on Twitter) were sent out to let the world know what was happening. Videos were also made during the protests and uploaded to YouTube, thus bypassing any government censorship on press and media. It is important to point out here that without social media, these revolts would still take place. Social media simply made it come faster and in a more powerful and effective form. The real driving force behind these revolts was human — the people who have sacrificed and fought. Thus, it is unfair to coin these revolutions “Twitter Revolution” or “Facebook Revolution” (MEIJIAS, 2011).

3 Future Development

Social media that we know now is not the end product. Instead, it is still evolving. For one, economic value of social media is not yet fully evaluated and tapped. Secondly, the interactivity offered by social media is still in an infant stage. More new technologies will emerge, enabling new experiences and interactions that one now could not imagine.

(NOFF, 2011) predicts Facebook, Twitter and other social networks will become what Fred Wilson coins “Social Dashboards”. Companies will increasingly invest

and develop their business in these social networks. With their vast numbers of users, social networks are markets far larger than many nations. Companies will surely tap into these enormous markets sooner or later. Social networks will then become the major channel of future online shopping.

(NOFF, 2011) further predicts that personal information we share on the Internet and in social media will lead us to the age of Web 3.0 — information will find us based on information shared online about our personal preferences, interests and habits. Privacy and identity theft issues will continue to play an important role in constraining social media on how it can manipulate its users' data.

Another potential development is mobile social media technology will become more dominant. Location-based information sent out from mobile devices will make its way into mainstream and be manipulated by marketers to make shopping and going to events more interactive than it is now (FUTURE FOUNDATION, 2011).

4 Conclusion

This essay begins with the question of whether social media is revolution like the Industrial Revolution or it is just a fad?

To answer this question, the term of social media must be first defined. Social media is a group of Internet-based applications with emphasis on interactivity among the users and on creation of User Generated Content. There are six categories of social media; namely, collaborative projects, blogs, content communities, social networking sites, virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. More famous examples of social media websites are Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr and Wikipedia.

In a relatively short 15 years span, social media has evolved so much. From its precursors of Usenet and BBS, social media technologies have become more user-friendly and human-oriented. The emerging of economical computers, digital accessories and the availability of high-speed Internet in the late 1990s have given social media a timely push for it to reach today's scale.

Social media's impacts on communications, knowledge transfer, creativity output and activism have been distinct. The nature of communication has changed because of social media. Communication is now shorter, more frequent and instantaneous. The ease of creating contents and various possibilities of sharing them with other people have never been so convenient and cost-effective. Knowledge has never been so readily and abundantly available to everyone that wants it.

The evidences have showed that social media is not a fad. It could in fact be a revolution like the Industrial Revolution, judging by its impacts that lead to changes of society's structures and behaviors. However, it is still too early to crown social media with the title of "revolution" yet. It is the belief of this author that social media will continue to evolve and will bring more profound impacts on our life and society. Only then is "revolution" a deserved description for social media.

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