Best Practices in Social Media Governance

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Chapter 1: What is social media?

WIKIPEDIA DEFINED social media in 2007 as “the online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives with each other”.¹ Heidi Cohen defined it as “the platforms that enable the interactive web by engaging users to participate in, comment on and create content as means of communicating with their social graph, other users and the public.”²

Both quotations identify the nub of social media as being conversation – or interaction and conversation, if you prefer. Instead of an organisation telling the world what it wants the world to know, social media invites people to talk about that organisation and invites the organisation itself to get involved – or not, in its own choosing. These quotations contain 21st century ‘feeling’ words such as ‘sharing’, ‘insights’, ‘experiences’, ‘participating’ and ‘engaging’.

Many organisations are using social media as more than just a way to communicate: it can be a tool for research, consultation, information dissemination, networking and uncovering business insights.³

Once we begin to consider what social media is not, the very notion of ‘traditional media’ becomes problematic. Social media is not particularly new, and what might once have been considered traditional media – a newspaper, for example – is now more ‘social’ than ever. A sensible way to draw this distinction is to describe traditional media as ‘one-to-many’ media, rather than the ‘many-to-many’ functionality of social media.

Table 1 overleaf shows recent statistics regarding the use of social media worldwide and its growth from early 2010 to early 2011.

Just how big is social media?

There are clearly demographic differences in the usage of social media across countries, continents and, indeed, across the world. Although there is not always up to date information available on each of these, the following factors are just some of the issues that are likely to influence social media usage:

- Age;
- Region – rural versus urban behaviour patterns, as well as the practical issue of broadband speed and availability;
- Socio-economics;
- Stage of education and whether currently in full time education; and
- Consumer versus business usage.

Thinking about the second point above on a global scale, the UK is falling considerably behind other regions, in particular the Far East, in terms of speed of broadband. Citizens and businesses there are able to do things that those in the UK are not, and it constitutes an element of commercial advantage. Though it may not be an attractive proposition, there are plans to install faster broadband cables across the country which is likely to cause disruption on the roads. The ‘Digital Britain’ report of
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2009\textsuperscript{5} includes some useful information on government plans and policy in this area.

The use of various social media on mobile devices has increased over the past year; the number of mobile applications seems to be increasing dramatically in line with the growing number of users.

**Key social media**

Facebook and Twitter are now extremely well known, but both commercial and personal blogging are also popular forms of social media. In some organisations, senior staff use a blog either internally or externally; it may even be part of the organisation’s framework to do so. YouTube and Flickr have changed in recent years: YouTube started out as simply a way to post a video, and the early YouTube did not receive a lot of comments. Now, the format tends to be a way to start up a conversation based on a video. All these technologies have become easier and easier to set up, particularly with the advent of easy-to-use video on smartphones. These social media are also useful in the commercial and public sector environments.

Hyper-local forums for villages and towns, which allow residents to talk about very localised issues, are also of interest to public sector organisations and regional businesses. Providers of such sites can introduce communities of practice, communities of purpose and so on for their sites’ users.

It is common for some social media forums to be wildly successful when they first start out, but for their popularity to wane over time. However, it is useful to know about them — not least because some of the ideas contained therein might be applied elsewhere. Two interesting examples are Starbucks’ ‘My Starbucks’, which was extremely popular just a short time ago, and Blue Shirt Nation, which has recently ended.

Starbucks is not a company to miss out on the going commercial ideas, whatever they may be. It set up a social medium on which anybody could post their ideas about what Starbucks should be like and what it should be doing. Customers posted opinions such as, ‘Make coffee ice cubes’ or ‘Wear name badges so I can call you by name when I come in each morning’. Although such suggestions are granular, when Starbucks put enough effort into monitoring them and picking out ideas and trends, they constituted tremendous customer research overall.

Blue Shirt Nation was a secure and private online network for employees of Best Buy. It aimed to give all of its employees, wherever they were, the opportunity to talk about what was going well in their outfit, and what they wanted Best Buy to be doing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social media</th>
<th>Early 2010</th>
<th>Early 2011</th>
<th>Percentage increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twitter user accounts</td>
<td>75 million</td>
<td>175 million</td>
<td>133%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweets per day</td>
<td>27 million</td>
<td>95 million</td>
<td>250%</td>
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<tr>
<td>LinkedIn members</td>
<td>50 million</td>
<td>100 million</td>
<td>100%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Facebook active users</td>
<td>350 million</td>
<td>640 million</td>
<td>83%</td>
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<td>Facebook on mobile</td>
<td>65 million</td>
<td>200 million</td>
<td>207%</td>
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<td>Flickr images</td>
<td>4 billion</td>
<td>5 billion</td>
<td>25%</td>
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<td>Wikipedia articles</td>
<td>14 million</td>
<td>17 million</td>
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<td>Wikipedia contributors</td>
<td>85 thousand</td>
<td>91 thousand</td>
<td>7%</td>
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</tbody>
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Table 1: Worldwide social media usage

\textsuperscript{5} 2009 includes some useful information on government plans and policy in this area.
References


3. Ibid.
