

Social Networking/Social Media

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Facebook, MySpace, Twitter come to mind but also YouTube, Picassa (photos) Flickr (pictures) Blippy (purchasing info), Delicious (articles), Digg (articles), blogs, podcasts (micro journalism), ETC.

FB now has 500 million active users, 2004 – 1 million.

72% of internet users are active on at least one social network. Facebook dominates the SNS space in this survey: 92% of users are on Facebook, 29% use MySpace, 18% use LinkedIn and 13% use Twitter.

In five years, social networking sites have gone from being novelties to being an integral part of how many people live. Facebook “friends” which used to be a running joke, are for some people as real as the friends they made at school, at work or in the gym.

However different, “superficial” or transient these relationships may be, they are real. Social scientists will have a field day analyzing this stuff.

You may have seen the latest study by the Pew Research Centre <http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Technology-and-social-networks.aspx>. It was widely reported last week.

Here are some Highlights from the Globe and Mail on the research (June 16, 2011):

- *Since 2008, the number of Americans who say they frequent social networking sites has grown significantly – from 26 per cent of those surveyed three years ago to 47 per cent in 2010 – and 79 per cent of people who said they use the Internet.*
- *At the same time, the average Facebook addict is aging: More than half of social network users are older than 35; the average age is 38, and 36 per cent are over 50.*
- *While Internet users are more trusting than the average American (46 per cent agree that “most people can be trusted” compared to 27 per cent of non-Internet users), Facebook users are even more likely to assume you wouldn’t dream of stealing their wallets, or hacking their profiles and using them to proliferate malware and lewd jokes: They’re 43 per cent more likely than other Internet users, and three times more likely than non-Internet users to agree that “most people can be trusted.”*

- *The average American surveyed has 2.16 confidants – people in whom they confide the most personal and private information. The average Internet user has 2.27 of these close friends.*
- *And Facebook users have an average of 9 per cent more than the average Internet users. What’s more, they said an increasing number of their “closest ties” are also people they count as friends on Facebook.*
- *Researchers point to this as proof that Facebook helps strengthen personal bonds by ensuring you’re aware of what they’re eating, thinking and fantasizing about at all times – without even asking them.*
- *“One of the things we hear a lot in the media is that people who use social networks are somehow experiencing less closeness or less intimacy,” Mr. Hampton says. “We asked about people’s closest social ties – who are the people in your life with whom you discuss important matters. ... Even when we control for all those demographic factors, people who use Facebook a lot have more of those close relationships.”*
- *When prodded, people who use Facebook multiple times a day say they get more support – emotional, companionship and “instrumental” aid – than the average American, and five points higher, on a 100-point scale, than other Internet users.*
- *“One of the most exciting things about Facebook to older users,” Pew Centre director Lee Rainie says, “is that when they sign on, all of a sudden their world repopulates. All of a sudden, Facebook is delivering content or delivering names to them of people who might have connections. For older folks, this is one of the enchanting things about Facebook: It brings back memories.”*

Two more telling statistics: according to Forrester Research, 95% of decision makers world wide use social networks and in 2008, 12.5% of married couples in the USA met through a social network. That is how much a part of the fabric of society they are becoming. This will only become more profound as the generations born to social networking grow up with them.

In an editorial in the February 21st Macleans, the editors were quite put out by the revelation that Prime Minister Harper and Industry Minister Clement had changed CRTC policy via Twitter. Something very ironic in that. The PM tweeted that he was “concerned about CRTC’s decision on usage based billing and its impact on consumers. I’ve asked for a review of the decision.” The Minister tweeted that “CRTC must go back to the drawing board.” The CRTC got the message. Macleans objection was that this announcement was made to 97 odd thousand twitter followers, as opposed to a speech, a press release or a statement in parliament. Should changes to the country’s regulatory framework be made in 140 characters or less?

Well, why not? If 97 thousand odd people read that, it might be a few thousand more than would be watching CSPAN.

But the editors continue: “Once upon a time governments consulted with those affected, commissioned reports and weighed opinions before making important announcements.” They see reliance on Twitter as being consistent with the Governments “tightly scripted

unmediated contact with the public.” Forty years ago, Marshall McLuhan said “the medium is the message.” They conclude “Policy by Twitter is yet more evidence of a government that has lost interest in the fundamentals of parliamentary democracy.”

According to the Economist Technology Quarterly (June 4, 2011) businesses are mining online messages to unearth consumers moods and make market predictions. Researchers have found for example that tweets get chirpier, in the US, around Thanksgiving. Google has found that peaks and troughs in the volume of Google searches for things like cars and services precede fluctuations in sales of those things. Other researchers have found searches for job related items are a good predictor of unemployment rates. Another researcher has found a formula for measuring national mood from tweets and correlating that with movements in the Dow Jones Industrial Average. The theory is that when traders feel anxious, they tend to sell.

None of this is, excuse the expression, rocket science. Mining information readily available online is much cheaper and possibly more useful than paying for a marketing survey. People buy things when they are employed and feel optimistic. They don't when they are unemployed or fearful.

As Privacy Commissioner, I don't get too worked up about aggregated data being used in this way. It is possibly distantly identifiable, but for these purposes there is little value in knowing the identity of who searched for what. But the identities are available and, in the right circumstances, you could be named the the guy shopping for high heels, the girl on the abortion info site or the person searching anarchist sites.

Here is my privacy prediction. The law cannot keep pace with either the rate of technological change nor the rate of social change as we adapt new technologies. For example, earlier privacy laws wanted consent to be obtained for collection, use and disclosure. Then just consent for inconsistent uses. Now, as in PIPA, consent is required to go beyond “reasonable” collection, use and disclosure. That does not mean we do not need laws. Laws can perform many functions including being statements of values, and privacy is a value. But it is a changing value. We have shown ourselves to be quite willing to bargain. Its like “you can have whatever info you want form me because I want the convenience, the personal service, the bargains, the community you offer. So, go ahead, take all of me. But, as Google and Facebook have found, there is a limit. It is ill-defines and it moves, but it is there. The service providers do not always get it right. Solid concept like privacy by design and privacy impact assessment can help them along. But when they do not get it right, a law and a Commissioner can be a very useful and constructive critic. A law and a Commissioner can be a critical portal for people who believe the limit has been exceeded to get redress.

The real power of these media has yet to be tapped. We know they defy borders: repressive governments in Iran, Myanmar and China are struggling to maintain control over what comes in and goes out of their countries via social networking sites. I predict that they will ultimately lose that battle. Law enforcement agencies in less repressive countries struggle with whether these sites are friends or foes. They use them to gather

intelligence, even put their own messages out, but they suspect that terrorist plots, money laundering, drug trafficking and child pornography are all facilitated by social networking sites. As a result, they want government to move and control them and they want unlimited, unbridled access to them (no warrants for internet traffic).

And there is the rub: is a social networking site like having a discussion in your living room, getting a letter, making a phone call, having a discussion in a coffee shop, or standing on a box in a square proclaiming to all those who pass by? Maybe the better question is: does anyone care?

But I think social media is evolving into something more than a means for gossipy communication. “Trolling” is the posting of wilfully inflammatory, off-topic or simply stupid remarks online. Trolling is enabled to some extent by online anonymity. Along comes Facebook. Mark Zuckerberg says that having more than one online identity is “an example of a lack of integrity.” Mr. Zuckerberg is lucky he lives in a country where he won’t be persecuted, tortured or killed for what he says online.

According to the Economist (April 2, 2011) Facebook is now offering other online firms the chance to outsource the handling of their comments. When users want to comment, they log onto Facebook, which hosts the posts. 17,000 websites now use this service. Some fear that this spells the end of online identity and with it the ability to protest, comment freely. This would have chilling consequences for example in the Middle East. Others have observed that it leads to self censorship: comments are less negative when they are attributed. By default, your friends also get to see your comments.

The Economist notes that Facebook has already accumulated a huge amount of data about its users online, but also their real world activities: messages, pictures, likes and dislikes, even shopping. Now it will have their opinions too. “The result is a giant step toward Facebook becoming, in effect, the repository for identity for much of the internet. Would any of you be outraged if your government was collecting this?

And keep in mind that Facebook will, someday have to start making money on something.

In a seminal work, written in 1999 on the Internet called The Cluetrain Manifesto, the authors waxed poetic about the potential power of the internet, and by implication, social networking sites which have now overtaken porn as the number one internet use.

- *“What if the real attraction of the Internet is not its cutting-edge bells and whistles, its jazzy interface or any of the advanced technology that underlies its pipes and wires? What if, instead, the attraction is an atavistic throwback to the prehistoric human fascination with telling tales? Five thousand years ago, the marketplace was the hub of civilization, a place to which traders returned from remote lands with exotic spices, silks, monkeys, parrots, jewels — and fabulous stories.*

- *“Though corporations insist on seeing it as one, the new marketplace is not necessarily a market at all. To its inhabitants, it is primarily a place in which all participants are audience to each other. The entertainment is not packaged; it is intrinsic.”*
- *“Because the Internet is so technically efficient, it has also been adopted by companies seeking to become more productive. They too are hungry for knowledge, for the intellectual capital that has become more valuable than bricks and mortar or any tangible asset.”*

I think social media have become the platform for the “conversation”. But does the internet still hold the potential to fundamentally change the world?

Pew surveyed internet users’ political behaviour in 2010.

“Our survey was conducted over the November 2010 elections. At that time, 10% of Americans reported that they had attended a political rally, 23% reported that they had tried to convince someone to vote for a specific candidate, and 66% reported that they had or intended to vote. Internet users in general were over twice as likely to attend a political meeting, 78% more likely to try and influence someone’s vote, and 53% more likely to have voted or intended to vote. Compared with other internet users, and users of other SNS platforms, a Facebook user who uses the site multiple times per day was an additional two and a half times more likely to attend a political rally or meeting, 57% more likely to persuade someone on their vote, and an additional 43% more likely to have said they would vote.

They measured “perspective taking”, or the ability of people to consider multiple points of view. There is no evidence that SNS users, including those who use Facebook, are any more likely than others to cocoon themselves in social networks of like-minded and similar people, as some have feared.

Moreover, regression analysis found that those who use MySpace have significantly higher levels of perspective taking. The average adult scored 64/100 on a scale of perspective taking, using regression analysis to control for demographic factors, a MySpace user who uses the site a half dozen times per month tends to score about 8 points higher on the scale.

Let’s add another technological new kid to the mix: Wikileaks. While not a social networking site per se (perhaps), Wikileaks is a revolution in the delivery of information and soon, I think, the manner in which people and public bodies communicate.

WikiLeaks Assange says he is getting rid of the intermediaries.

I am a newspaper reader. I don't get my information from Facebook, Twitter or the Daily Show, although I watch it.

I depend on others to tell me what the raw data means, to put it in context.

Admittedly, I get one story from the National Post, another from the Globe and Mail, and it gets downright scary when I see what Fox does to information.

The future looks like a tsunami of information. Will we be swept away or will we be able to ride it – even harness it – to realize the Cluetrain utopia?

"We have come to the conclusion that fomenting a worldwide movement of mass leaking is the most cost effective political intervention."

Julian Assange

Time magazine said "WikiLeaks became a revolutionary force, wresting secrets into the public domain on a scale without precedent.

Wikileaks has established itself as a competitor to news media and intelligence agencies. By posting documents in their entirety, the site "disintermediates" the market, as economists say, weakening the old prerogatives of auditors and analysts to filter information for their audiences. "This is not just a threat to those would want to keep their own secret" says a former member of the site's steering committee, who declined to be named. "WikiLeaks is a threat to those who would like to have other people's secrets, too."

The Obama Administration responded with new floodgates. "The government has recognized that WikiLeaks is not an event — it is a capability — and anybody who can get material out of a classified system can now publish it worldwide in a way that can't be redacted or removed," says Clay Shirky, a New York University Internet scholar. "The idea of a widely shared but secure secret is over."

Had the world just witnessed an act of journalism? Theft? Public service? Espionage?

I have to confess to a fondness for wikileaks. After years of begging and pleading with public bodies to not only comply with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act but to keep their promises of being open, accountable, transparent, etc etc. I find I am frustrated. Compliance is uneven. Some public bodies, some departments, play it pretty straight with the law. Others play games. A lot of media feel that they are the victims of the games and, while I do not have scientific evidence of this, I believe it is so. The Freedom of Information Act is slow, usually 30 to 90 days for a response. There are a lot of exemptions from the Act and even more exceptions to disclosure of records which come under the Act: solicitor-client and other forms of privilege, advice from officials, trade secrets, information which would pose a threat to law enforcement or security.

Along comes wikileaks and blows all that away. While I would not dismiss the fears of harm to others as a result, the threat of future wikileaks might prompt public bodies to

start communicating more fully and honestly with the public. I suppose I echo Maclean's concerns about public information being doled out in 140 character bites.

No law can make public bodies communicate fully and honestly, in the sense of a dialogue between equals. They will because they believe it to be in their interests or they will delay, spin, or intermediate information. I hold great hope for the notion of open data/ open government.

2010 Open Government Open Data Principles

Government data shall be considered open if it is made public in a way that complies with the eight principles below:

- Complete - All public data is made available. Public data is data that is not subject to valid privacy, security or privilege limitations.
- Primary - Data is as collected at the source, with the highest possible level of granularity, not in aggregate or modified forms.
- Timely - Data is made available as quickly as necessary to preserve the value of the data.
- Accessible - Data is available to the widest range of users for the widest range of purposes.
- Machine processable - Data is reasonably structured to allow automated processing.
- Non-discriminatory - Data is available to anyone, with no requirement of registration.
- Non-proprietary - Data is available in a format over which no entity has exclusive control.
- License-free - Data is not subject to any copyright, patent, trademark or trade secret regulation. Reasonable privacy, security and privilege restrictions may be allowed.
- Compliance must be reviewable.

I believe that open data/open government, if done honestly, is a form of social media. At least it should be.

To conclude I want to return to the lyrics of the Cluetrain Manifesto; to the optimism of what this technology of the internet and social media could be.

- *“These new conversations online — whether on the wild and wooly Internet or on (slightly) more sedate corporate intranets — are generating new ways of looking at problems. They are spawning new perspectives, new tools, and a new kind of intellectual bravery more comfortable with risk than with regulation. The result is not just new things learned but a vastly enhanced ability to learn things. And the pace of this learning is accelerating. In the networked marketplace it is reflected in the joy of play.”*
- *“...the Net connects people to each other, and impassions and empowers through those connections, the media dream of the Web as another acquiescent mass-consumer market is a figment and a fantasy.”*
- *“The Internet is inherently seditious. It undermines unthinking respect for centralized authority, whether that "authority" is the neatly homogenized voice of broadcast advertising or the smarmy rhetoric of the corporate annual report.”*
- *“This conversation may be irreverent of eternal verities, but it's not all jokes. Whether in the marketplace or at work, people do have genuine, serious concerns. And we have something else as well: knowledge. Not the sort of boring, abstract knowledge that "Knowledge Management" wants to manage. No. The real thing. We have knowledge of what we do and how we do it — our craft — and it drives our voices; it's what we most like to talk about.”*
- *“So what is to be done? Easy: Burn down business-as-usual. Bulldoze it. Cordon off the area. Set up barricades. Cripple the tanks. Topple the statues of heroes too long dead into the street.”*