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# TRUE BELIEVERS AND NAYSAYERS:
## EXPLORING THE WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA

THE WORLD OF SOCIAL MEDIA BELIEVES USER-GENERATED CONTENT AND OPEN-SOURCE TECHNOLOGY WILL TRUMP COMMERCIAL PUBLISHING AND SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT. IN FACT, ORGANIZATIONS COMBINING THE BEST OF ALL WORLDS ARE THE ONES MOST LIKELY TO ACHIEVE SUCCESS.

I'm a lover of old books who also blogs. I grew up in the Silicon Valley but have become a skeptic when it comes to exaggerated claims made for the social benefits of human-computer interaction. I am fascinated by possibilities of Web 2.0 publishing, but I have shocked friends who are true believers by pointing out that not everyone knows the difference between a wiki and a blog. Let's take a look at these different worlds.

### THE EVANGELISTS

People involved in social media are almost fanatical about them, while traditional businesspeople seem to dismiss them as fad rather than seeing them as phenomena with truly transformative potential. You've no doubt read the evangelists' claims, heard the shorthand (Web 2.0, the "long tail," the "tipping point") and probably experienced the tent-meeting atmosphere of a lot of conference keynotes. Bloggers who say we should get rid of all editors and just let the people speak. Internet experts who think publishers just print books. Overexcited journalists who write, "When it comes to information, the balance of power has truly shifted to the consumer." (One assumes the writer doesn't think his own job should be done by the magazine readers, however.) Web media producers who boast they do everything online. (Surely not *everything?*)

When they paint a picture of the future as they see it – a future dominated by online interaction – social-media zealots appear to assume that teenagers (the age group most switched on to social media and the one the zealots focus on) are going to be doing exactly the same things at 40 that they're doing today. They fail to take into account the fact that teenagers have considerably more free time than 40-year-olds. People with families and careers and community activities, however tech-savvy, can't spend all their free time downloading humorous video clips and chatting in MySpace. If a renowned professor and a high school kid get into a debate on Wikipedia, the student will win. The

student has the luxury of time, which successful professional people do not. Online, fanatics often rule.

## THE SKEPTICS

Then there are the detractors. I'm thinking of the senior business development person who said, "Social what?" when I asked what her company, a major global publisher, was doing to incorporate social media into its online platform. "Oh, sure, we're doing all that," she eventually said, "but that's just icing."

In a way, she was right; users expect core content to be maintained, and when it comes to academic content and business information, stakeholders in the existing models will do everything possible to maintain the status quo. But times, and user expectations, are changing. The value added by that icing is going to be immense, and the companies that realize using social software isn't just a sop to throw to consumers but something that can genuinely improve their businesses – with greater efficiencies and far more market understanding – are going to be ahead of the game.

There are two types of detractor. Some are manifestly uninterested in the new technologies and are just hoping the revolution doesn't happen until they've retired to Santa Fe or the Berkshires. They want to use the Web to connect to peers, but they don't really want any challenges thrown their way. The others may be quite tech-savvy and active on the Internet, but they don't understand the power – and difference – of social media.

## EXPLAINING SOCIAL MEDIA

The online interfaces that make possible this brave new world are known collectively as social media. Weblogs (blogs) are an example of a social medium in which an individual addresses and receives feedback from a large audience – from the one to the many. Bulletin board systems (BBSs or forums), relationship management media (sites such as MySpace or Cyworld, or even Mappr), massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), file-

sharing systems (for music, photos and videos) and wikis (for collaborative editing of Web pages) are examples of social media in which many people interact with many other people – from the many to the many. Finally, and of particular interest to businesses, there are corporate feedback forums that let people give a company feedback on their experiences with the company's products – from the many to the one.

Interest in these media vary around the world. BBSs are, for now at least, the most important social medium in China, with an estimated 53 million people in China making use of them. They are easy to use and allow for anonymous communication, which, in a restrictive society such as China, gives people a feeling of liberation. The Chinese enjoy the social, community-oriented (as opposed to individualistic) nature of BBSs; in general Chinese people are not so eager to stand out. Blogs are extremely popular too, but unlike in the United States, they tend to be personal, generally written just for friends and family.

What it's all about is new relationships and, in fact, the webs of overlapping relationships we call community (or at least some semblance of it). This isn't for everyone, and one of the reasons for the surge in virtual community is that our world offers less in the way of actual community. Blogs, forums and relationship management sites provide some of the benefits we used to find in real-life public spaces like barber shops and even street corners. They let people:

• Stay in touch
• Discuss and debate
• Share content with friends
• Share opinions through ratings and social tagging
• Publish content in the hope others will find it useful or entertaining – and that others will recognize their expertise or talent
• Collaborate in creative writing, building directories and information sources and gaming

Some of these are one-to-many, some many-to-many, and they can be designed primarily as expert to individual (allow-

ing for questions and feedback) or as purely peer-to-peer. Even in peer-to-peer, leaders do arise, and certain people try to dominate. The online world is not without personal conflict and awkward social moments.

## HOPES AND FEARS

So what do these new social media mean, for any media company? They mean the old top-down ways won't work with many audiences. The entertainment industry is already experiencing this, but close behind are any businesses that depend on a purveyor of abstract knowledge handing down words of wisdom from on high. People these days are much more interested in hearing from someone who has lived through the experience and can describe the problem and solution from a personal perspective. That is, they're interested in hearing from school-of-hard-knocks experts rather than ivory-tower ones. Of course, the danger with experiential expertise is that the stories are anecdotal. They may not reflect overall trends, and people relying on them may miss vital information that a person with "book knowledge" but no experiential knowledge might be able to impart.

People have other fears when it comes to social media. In the United States, there is much concern about predators online. In the United Kingdom and China, there is more concern about Internet addiction. Although the evangelists of social media avert their eyes from the serious environmental impact of computing and mobile devices and from the social and economic consequences of diverting activity from local communities, corporate social responsibility may one day come to include not only improvements in remanufacturing and recycling capacity but also responsible software and site design.

Many companies are trying to capitalize on the young eyes – and associated wallets – of those who congregate at MySpace and similar sites. But perhaps they should beware. Many people don't like too much commercialization, and the MySpace crowd is likely to pick up

and move if it feels too hassled, and companies may find themselves chasing their target demographic around cyberspace.

Companies engage with social media to differing degrees. Some love to wait and see. Others proudly announce a blog and then use it to post press releases. Others decide to add every kind of whiz-bang interface they can find, without ensuring there really is a community-in-waiting. Virtual communities need some initial spark to animate them. Sometimes it's a political issue or a crisis of some kind. Often there's an offline community or many small communities ready to come

delete the well-intentioned dead ends, to rewrite the explanations that are too long and complicated and to test the final instructions. Because in a medium like this there are no final instructions.

Forums are full of good ideas and bad ones, and if it's your special subject and you don't have anything else planned for a rainy afternoon, you might want to while away the time this way. But after first creating trust, which is key to any social network, the tech forum lost me because it didn't answer my question in a way I could understand. And that is good news for publishers,

lish now, most people have absolutely no idea what a <strong> tag means and would no more edit a page in a wiki than try to drive a tractor-trailer truck. But one thing is certain. Regardless of whether or not social media will turn out to be our bread and butter, it is far more than icing on the cake.

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together in a new way. There are risks. What if your community-in-waiting is a bunch of annoyed subscribers?

An experience I had recently shows both what's wonderful about social media and what the drawbacks are.

At Berkshire Publishing, we use online project management software called Basecamp, and I wanted to post my Outlook calendar so staff, reps and our publicist could easily access it, in real time. But Basecamp is built on open source, and Outlook is from Microsoft. I clicked on Help and found myself at a forum, hosted by Basecamp, where people discussed solutions to this problem. I was fascinated. The participants sounded so knowledgeable and cooperative: "I tried your solution and it worked, except –"

The discussion went on for pages, and I felt more and more hopeful. These guys would surely solve the problem, and I would be able to impress my IT guy with having figured this out myself.

But the more I read, the less certain I felt that there was a clear solution that I would be able to execute. Because, you see, there is no editor or publisher to

because it means they will continue to have a role to play in the world of online and social media.

Part of what publishers do – and what our customers pay for – is to weed out most of the material we see. Most publishers reject 99 percent of the submissions they receive, and in general that's to the customers' benefit because it saves them time and money and gives them what they want without frustrating searches.

Perhaps the greatest challenge social media pose to corporate media companies is blurred boundaries between producer and consumer. Publishing companies may well need to be more than processors and enablers. The ones that have in-house creative and intellectual capacity and the ability to build active, ongoing relationships with creative people are most likely to take full advantage of social media.

Better technologies are also necessary if we are to have really effective but affordable interactivity. And the barriers need to be much, much lower. Although the tech-savvy think everyone can pub-

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