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Social media time management tools and tips

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 21st century, we are now for a couple of years in the social media era, where we are confronting with a lot of applications and tools, easy to use, friendlier, free to use, easy to (re)build. No matter on which kind of activities we intend to spend time, there are plenty of similar applications with similar functionalities. Accordingly, the decision which of them to use is sometimes very difficult to take and, not less importantly, time-consuming.

More than that, people in the 21st century live in a technology and media-suffused environment, marked by various characteristics, including: access to an abundance of information, rapid changes in technology tools and services. In order to be effective in the 21st century, there are plenty of almost unknown applications for the large mass of Internet users that can be useful for different types of activities and/or purposes. Accordingly, through this paper, we intend to offer some insightful help for social media users in order to be able to organize their information, activities and work, to become more productive and to avoid wasting their time. More than that, in this paper, we intend to present both positive aspects of different technologies which could be used for specific purposes or activities, without ignoring, however, some lesser-known facets and recommended, yet equally important, but they must be aware to take them into account.

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, information and communication technologies have dramatically changed our current society, no matter if we are speaking about the way we communicate and interact each other, work or participate in entertainment activities. In a Web-based environment, at any time and any place, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, we can spend our time online for different purposes and activities.

Due to the decreasing cost of buying computers (mobile phones or other type of devices) and associated equipments, as well as due to increasing the capabilities and functionalities of the hardware and associated Internet technologies, we are now almost two billion Internet users[i]. Thus, this number represents only 28,7% of the total population worldwide and taking into consideration the regions where the percent is still low, but still looking to grow, in the next years the continuous ascendant trend of global Internet users could be anticipated.

Thanks to the Web 2.0 technologies, applications and tools, which are characterized as easy to use, friendlier, most of them free to use and easy to (re)build (due to the open source code) and among them there are the most

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known wikis, blogs, social networks etc, day by day we are becoming more technological literate and more confident about our skills in using such kind of technologies and applications. Consequently, day by day more and more people become more addicted to Web 2.0 technologies and applications and the time spent online is in an ascendant curve, no matter the age. Thus, for example, if in 1999 the average number of hours spent on a weekly basis by American Internet users was seven hours, ten years later their time spend online has increased to thirteen hours[ii].

Therefore, no matter which kind of applications they are using, the Internet users worldwide are more numerous and moreover, they spend more time online and they are capable to create digital content more easily. All of that leads to an increasing content available worldwide, which means also more time spent and also increased skills in order to find and access more easily the proper content.

2. Social media, user generated content and the information overload context

As it is generally agreed, the Internet and especially the second generation of Internet provide numerous communication spaces in which people meet and can interact with each other. Moreover, the second generation of Internet based applications (i.e. Web 2.0), can directly engage consumers in the creative process by both producing and distributing information through collaborative writing, content sharing, social networking, social bookmarking, and syndication (Malita, 2010).

When we look through the web literature, in one way or another, all of those mentioned issues are related to social media. Even most of the well-known Web 2.0 gurus (like Stowe Boyd, Robert Scoble, Jay Rosen, Jeremiah Owyang, JD Lasica, Brian Solis and many more) have spent their last years defining and redefining Social Media. So, it is hard to find a definition of social media, accepted through the scientific and academic research areas. Even if there are plenty of definitions (it is the same for the Web 2.0 definition), none is widely accepted. I particularly like Ron Jones' social media definition[iii]*:"Social media essentially is a category of online media where people are talking, participating, sharing, networking, and bookmarking online",* but I sometimes refer to the Wikipedia definition[iv], which is by far much more comprehensive: "*Social media describes the online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences, and perspectives. Social media can take many different forms, including text, images, audio, and video. These sites typically use technologies such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, wikis, and vlogs to allow users to interact. A few prominent examples of social media applications are Wikipedia (reference), MySpace (social networking), Gather.com (social networking),YouTube (video sharing), Second Life (virtual reality), Digg (news sharing), Flickr (photo sharing) and Miniclip (game sharing)*".

Anyhow, no matter which definition we like more, all of them have things in common: they are referring to social media as the tools that facilitate the socialization of content. On the other hand, social media is considered an evolving phenomenon, a shift in how people discover, read, and share news and information and content. It is a fusion of sociology and technology, transforming monologue (one to many) into dialogue (many to many) (Solis, 2007). Thus, most social media services encourage collaboration, interaction and communication through discussion, feedback, voting, comments, and sharing of information from all interested parties.

Moreover, in Bradley's view (Bradley, 2010), six core principles underlie the value of social-media, and, in combination, serve as the defining characteristics that set social media apart from other forms of communication and collaboration:

- *Participation*: social media is strongly dependent on mass collaboration through user participation. Users are welcomed to develop their ideas by using technologies which are friendlier and easier to use then ever before. For example, they are attracting users to come back to continue the conversation already started by using comments, votes, links etc.
- *Collective*: there are plenty of social media sites where people collect information in order to reshape the content and to spread it to the world, by sharing. Moreover, users could sometimes use the facilities offered by the interoperability between the applications for accessing information which is already stored online, on other social media sites.
- *Transparency*: most of the content created is spread to the world by sharing, commenting, voting etc. Even though there is the possibility to have/store private online content, only a transparent flow of information and stored content will conduct to a collaborative participation of users, because without transparency, there is no

participant collaboration on content;

- *Independence*: users can participate anytime, from anywhere and whenever they like. Moreover, another characteristic of social media is related to no-censorship, most of the content flowing freely and instantly through the Internet.
- *Persistence:* like it or not, the digital content is available and persistent in time, as an emergent reputation. Because of this, even if some of us might think "nobody knows me on the Internet", there are different ways to find the "source". But, more importantly, people do not know or do not care enough about their online reputation.
- *Emergence:* most of us are in agreement that social media is a prominent part of the current digital landscape, and will be an even more prominent part of our digital lives in years to come. But, on the other hand, there is also an agreement that social media is never a completely cut-and-dried, completely predictable or completely certain affair.

Another unique aspect of social media is the idea of staying connected or linked to other sites, resources, and people. In the last years, there is an obvious trend: to be more open to other social media sites, even from the same applications' niche. More important is to keep users attracted into a social media site and to not leave, than to lose them in favour of a competitor.

Anyhow, although information technologies tools to support collaboration, interaction and communication have existed for decades before Web 2.0 was born, with the emerging social-media technologies, such as social networking, wikis and blogs, collaboration is enabled on a much grander scale and supports tapping the power of the collective in ways previously unachievable.

Taking into consideration the abovementioned common issues regarding the social media definition and its major characteristics detailed already, it is obvious that social media is a mixture of some components: Web 2.0 technologies, user participation and engagement as well as the content they have created. Thus, in 2007 a percent of 37% users spent their time online by visiting content (joining social networking sites or being inactive on any form of social media sites), as it is visible in the next picture:

Fig 1. User participation through social media sites
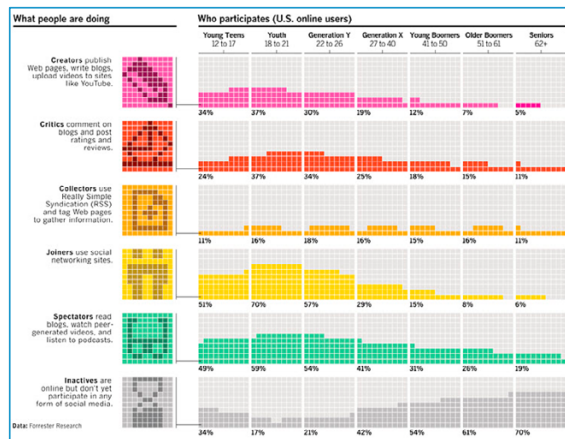
Source: http://www.outrider.com.au/blog/wp-content/uploads/2009/05/smuserparticipationchart_a1.gif

Three years later, thanks to the new facilities and functionalities of social networks sites (in order to facilitate the interoperability between applications, but even to introduce new functionalities in order to seize the users on their sites), the users have been become "producers", by producing and distributing information through collaborative writing, content sharing, social networking, social bookmarking, and syndication. Thus, having this modality of self and free expression, users start to produce content, in an explosive growth, as it is shown in the next figure (the left part), which exemplifies user-generated content in the United States. Their "engagement" as producers is demonstrated for almost each category of content shared (entertainment, computer technology, searching etc), as it is visible in the next picture (the right part).

Fig 2. User generated content, US case

US User-Generated Content Creators, by Content Type, 2008-2013 (millions)						
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
User-generated video	15.4	18.1	20.6	22.7	24.9	27.2
Social networking	71.3	79.7	87.7	94.7	100.1	105.3
Blogs	21.2	23.9	26.7	28.5	30.2	32.1
Virtual worlds	11.6	13.9	15.4	16.9	18.4	19.9
User-generated content creators	82.5	88.8	95.3	101.7	108.0	114.5

Source: eMarketer, January 2009

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Source: http://www.emarketer.com/

Fig 3. User generated content, US case

	Top 10 Sectors by Share of U.S. Internet Time			
Rank	SubCategory	Share of Time June 2010	Share of Time June 2009	% Change in Share of Time
1	Social Networks	22.7%	15.8%	43%
2	Online Games	10.2%	9.3%	10%
3	E-mail	8.3%	11.5%	-28%
4	Portals	4.4%	5.5%	-19%
5	Instant Messaging	4.0%	4.7%	-15%
6	Videos/Movies	3.9%	3.5%	12%
7	Search	3.5%	3.4%	1%
8	Software Manufacturers	3.3%	3.3%	-0%
9	Multi-category Entertainment	2.8%	3.0%	-7%
10	Classifieds/Auctions	2.7%	2.7%	-2%
	Other	34.3%	37.3%	-8%

Source: The Nielsen Company

Source: http://cdn.mashable.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/nielsen-onlineuse.jpg

Unfortunately, in time, this liberty for creating digital content provides another major problem: information overload. Worried, even Google CEO, Eric Schmidt has warned: "every two days now we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilization up until 2003"v. Consequently, we see an information overload (which has an exponential growth, see figure 4) from the access to so much information, almost instantaneously, without knowing the validity of the content and the risk of misinformation.
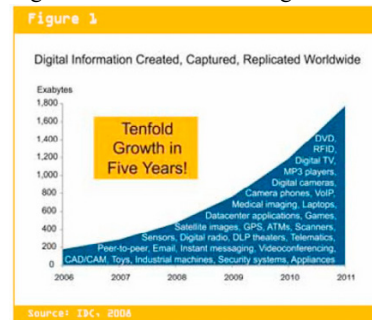
Fig 4. Information overload growth

Source: http://www.flickr.com/photos/adam_thierer/2333232442/in/photostream/

The information overload problem has emerged because information published online may not always be reliable, due to the lack of authority approval or a compulsory accuracy check before publication. In addition, according to Wikipedia[vi], the general causes of information overload include:
- A rapidly increasing rate of new information being produced
- The ease of duplication and transmission of data across the Internet
- An increase in the available channels of incoming information (e.g. telephone, e-mail, instant messaging, RSS)
- Large amounts of historical information to dig through
- Contradictions and inaccuracies in available information
- A low signal-to-noise ratio
- A lack of a method for comparing and processing different kinds of information
- The pieces of information are unrelated or do not have any overall structure to reveal their relationships

All of those lead to an unpleasant consequence: people must crosscheck what they read before using it for decision-making, which takes up more time (see figure 5).

Fig 5. Time wasted on information overload

Source: http://www.infographicsshowcase.com/how-much-time-is-wasted-on-loading-unnecessary-data-infographic/

Today, although the use of search engines helps users to find information quickly, the current filtering techniques are not advanced enough. Moreover, no matter what "information stream" we subscribe to (newsletters, RSS Feeds, newspapers, TV etc.), most of the time we will also receive a lot of irrelevant information. Even if they do contain interesting information from time to time, they also contain a lot of information you do not need to know.

3. The Twitter context

Taking into account that Twitter is one of the most trendy social media sites, and that Twitter is considered a source for user generated content shared as well as a source for wasting time, in the next section, I will try to refer to this problematic application.

Here are some interesting facts and numbers about Twitter[vii]:

- There are more that 150 million registered users;
- The maximum amount of followers are for @ladygaga, namely 6.1 million followers;
- A tweet (a message posted on Twitter) means maximum 140 characters and approximately 200 bytes;
- There are 70 million daily tweets, which means 800 tweets per second;
- There are 600 million daily search queries;
- 60% of tweets come from third party applications, 30% come from mobile devices;
- Twitter has increased with 752 percent in 2008 and with 1358% in 2009;
- On 2 august 2010, the two billionth tweet was posted, just over three years since it launched;
- Twitter has only 175 employees etc.

Regarding the user profile on Twitter, see the next figure (number 6).

Fig 6. Users' profile on Twitter

Source: http://www.infographicsshowcase.com/twitter-users-profile-infographic/4. User profile on Twitter

Thus, taking into consideration the above numbers, which also demonstrate the popularity of this social media site, we must say Twitter has also a negative badge. Among the most important argument is the fact that Twitter can

be very addictive and consequently, time consuming. Another worry comes from the fact that on Twitter most of the content is considered spam, dull or redundant.

Becoming a Twitter-addict can make us waste most of our time. With all the amazing tools Twitter has, we could easily be drawn to them in a wrong way. So for people to avoid these things from happening, we have to out-smart Twitter.

Thus, in order to avoid Twitter addiction, a first step is to use Twitter for a short period of time, several times per day, in sessions no longer than 20-30 minutes. This short period of time is anyhow enough to run through some tweets from friends for a few minutes and to check on the followers at the same time to see if they have tweeted back something interesting. Otherwise, Twitter could be really distracting; there are people who could spend daily hours doing this.

Another important thing is not to follow too many people. Too many people will create noise and will distract people from the real conversation. It is important to be on topic and not to forget from the beginning, the real reason for using Twitter. It is also important to *tweet with a purpose and a theme and somehow to use the 80/20 rule, which means 80% purpose and 20% other things. Moreover, it is important to build real relationships, by replying, retweeting, commenting etc.*

Otherwise*,* by avoiding the self-publicists, marketers and self-obsessed and following those with direct personal relevance or interest, using Twitter will be a positive experience. Also, even if we sometimes want to know things about our preferred celebrities, it is a good option to avoid them as contacts, or in case we still do, to arrange them in a separated group of contacts. Therefore, in order to not leave the task from a moment, there is also the possibility of keeping Twitter even from other social media sites or web browsers. Benefiting by usability we can still use Twitter even when we are looking at different social media sites (competitors or not).

Using Twitter productively means also to prioritize. On Twitter there are also included other functionalities, like lists (groups of people following). Depending on order of time to use Twitter, some will pay attention to certain groups alerts. Thus, too much wastage is avoided.

Moreover, in order to help manage searches on Twitter is important to use additional tools like Tweetdeck and Hootsuite and to use also hash tags to sift through the tweets and mine the data. On the other hand, apps like Twitaholic (to connect with the top 50 local users), Twapperkeeper (for saving tweets), Tweetreach (track the reach of the tweets), What the trend (for analyzing collected tweets), Tweetup (for organizing Twitter meeting), Twitalyzer (for mashup Google Analytics with Twitter visitors) and many more[viii] other widgets, the Twitter experience will be more productive and useful.

Taking into consideration the above tips and advises, which are only pieces of recommendations (also other related to security), using Twitter will be a more pleasant and fruitful experience. There is a difference between making Twitter our life and having Twitter as a part of our life and it is important to remember this.

4. Short conclusions

As some short conclusions of using social media sites, indeed, they could be wasting our time, addictive and full of misinformation. But following some basic rules for engagement and avoiding spending too much time on them, Twitter and other social media sites could be used productively and in a smart way.

As I already said, social media sites are on continuous movements, very unpredictable. Nobody knew Twitter or other social media sites three or four years ago, and nobody could anticipate their evolution and growth. There are indeed some advantages that could not be ignored (speed of spreading news, staying in touch with companies we liked, people we knew- even celebrities we liked- or meeting new people, finding answers to specific questions etc.) On the other hand, of course there are even bad parts related to Twitter and other social media technologies and applications. As we all know, nobody is perfect. But Twitter and other social media sites are here to stay for a long time ahead (Selwyn, 2010) and only by using them wisely and taking into consideration and using the productivity rules, those applications can become meaningful.

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[ii] According to The Harris Interactive poll, December, 2009

[iii] See Jones Ron (2009), Social Media Marketing 101, Part 1, http://sbinfocanada.about.com

[iv] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media

[v] See http://techcrunch.com/2010/08/04/schmidt-data/

[vi] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_overload

[vii] See http://www.slideshare.net/raffikrikorian/twitter-by-the-numbers

[viii] At the time this material was writing, there were more than 2000 Twitter applications, part of them are listed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Twitter_services_and_applications