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Social software

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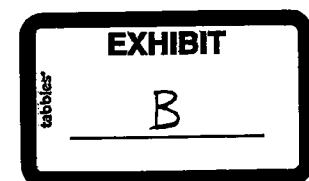From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The term **Social software** is normally applied to range of web-enabled software programs. The programs usually allow users to interact, share, and meet other users. This computer-mediated communication has become very popular with sites like MySpace and YouTube and has resulted in large user bases and billion dollar purchases of the software and their communities by large corporations (Fox purchased MySpace and google purchased YouTube).

The more specific term collaborative software applies to cooperative information sharing systems, and is usually narrowly applied to the software that enables collaborative work functions. Distinctions between usage of the terms "social" and "collaborative" are in the applications or uses, not the tools themselves, although there are some tools that are only rarely used for work collaboration.

Many advocates of using these tools believe (and actively argue or assume) that they create actual community, and have adopted the term "online communities" to describe the resulting social structures.

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Debates and design choices

Social software may be better understood as a set of debates or design choices than any particular list of tools. Broadly conceived, there are many older media such as mailing lists and Usenet fora that qualify as "social". Most users of this term, however, restrict its meaning to more recent software genres such as blogs and wikis. Others suggest that the term *social software* is best used not to refer to a single type of software, but rather to the use of two or more modes of computer-mediated communication that result in "community formation".[1] In this view, people form online communities by combining one-to-one (e.g., email and instant messaging), one-to-many (Web pages and blogs), and many-to-many (wikis) communication modes.[2] Some groups schedule real life meetings and so become physically "real" communities of people that share physical lives.

Common to most definitions of social software, is the observation that some types of software seem to facilitate a more egalitarian and meritocratic "bottom-up" community development, in which membership is voluntary, reputations are earned by winning the trust of other members, and the community's mission and governance are defined by the communities' members themselves[3]

Communities formed by "bottom-up" processes are often contrasted to the less vibrant collectivities formed by "top-down" software, in which users' roles are determined by an external authority and circumscribed by rigidly conceived software mechanisms (such as access rights). Given small differences in policies, very similar software can produce radically different social outcomes. For instance, tikiwiki supports the gACL system of detailed access control, and most services using it exploit these to divide up the visibility and editability of pages so that few people can both edit and read a randomly chosen page. By contrast, mediawiki avoids per-user controls, to keep most pages editable by most users, and puts more information about users currently editing in its recent changes pages. The result is that mediawiki is being used by community groups more often, while users who don't embrace the social paradigm and prefer tikiwiki having more content control, less social users.

Social software, by design, reflects the traits of social networks and is designed very consciously to let social network analysis work with a very compatible database. All social software systems create links between users, as persistent as the identity those users choose. Through these persistent links, a permanent community can be formed out of a formerly epistemic community. The ownership and control of these links - who is linked, and who isn't - is in the hands of the user. Thus, these links are asymmetrical - you might link to me, but I might not link to you. Also, these links are functional, not decorative - you can choose not to receive any content from people you are not connected to, for example. Wikipedia user pages are a very good example, and often contain extremely detailed information about the person who constructed them, including everything from mother tongue to their moral purchasing preferences.

Tools for online communication

The tools used in social software applications include communication tools and interactive tools. Communication tools typically handle the capturing, storing, and presentation of communication, usually written but increasingly including audio and video also. Interactive tools handle mediated interactions between a pair or group of users. They differ from communication tools in their focus on establishing and maintaining a connection among users, facilitating the mechanics of conversation and

talk. Communication tools are generally asynchronous. Interactive tools are generally synchronous, allowing users to communicate in real time (phone, Net phone, video chat) or near-synchronous (IM, text chat).

We can add to this distinction one that describes the primary user experience of each: communication involves the content of talk, speech, or writing; interaction involves the interest users establish in one another as individuals. In other words, a communication tool may want to make access and searching of text both simple and powerful. An interactive tool may want to present as much of a user's expression, performance, and presence as possible. The organization of texts, and providing access to archived contributions differs from the facilitation of interpersonal interactions between contributors enough to warrant the distinction in media.

Instant Messaging

An *instant messaging* application or client allows one to communicate with another person over a network in real time, in relative privacy. Popular clients include Gtalk, Skype, Meebo, ICQ, Yahoo! Messenger, MSN Messenger, Pidgin (formerly Gaim) and AOL Instant Messenger. One can add friends to a contact list or buddy list, by entering their email address or messenger ID. If they are online, their name will be listed as available for chat. Clicking on their name will activate a chat window with space to write to the other person, as well as read their reply.

Text chat

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and other online chat technologies allow users to join chat rooms and communicate with many people at once, publicly. Users may join a pre-existing chat room or create a chat room about any topic. Once inside, you may type messages that everyone else in the room can read, as well as respond to messages from others. Often there is a steady stream of people entering and leaving. Whether you are in another person's chat room, or one you've created yourself, you are generally free to invite others online to join you in that room. Instant messaging facilitates both one-to-one (communication) and many-to-many interaction.

Internet forums

Originally modeled after the real-world paradigm of electronic bulletin boards of the world before Internet was born, *internet forums* allow users to post a "topic" for others to review. Other users can view the topic and post their own comments in a linear fashion, one after the other. Most forums are public, allowing anybody to sign up at any time. A few are private, gated communities where new members must pay a small fee to join, like the Something Awful Forums.

Forums can contain many different categories in a hierarchy according to topics and subtopics. Other features include the ability to post images or files or the ability to quote another user's post with special formatting in one's own post. Forums often grow in popularity until they can boast several thousand members posting replies to tens of thousands of topics continuously.

There are various standards and claimants for the market leaders of each software category. Various add-ons may be available, including translation and spelling correction software, depending on the expertise of the operators of the bulletin board. In some industry areas, the bulletin board has its own commercially successful achievements: free and paid hardcopy magazines, professional and amateur

sites.

Current successful services have combined new tools with the older newsgroup and mailing list paradigm to produce hybrids like Yahoo! Groups. Also as a service catches on, it tends to adopt characteristics and tools of other services that compete. Over time, for example, wiki user pages have become social portals for individual users and may be used in place of other portal applications.

Blogs or Weblogs

Blogs, short for web logs, are like online journals for a particular person. The owner will post a message periodically, allowing others to comment. Topics often include the owner's daily life, views on politics, or a particular subject important to them.

Blogs mean many things to different people, ranging from "online journal" to "easily updated personal website". While these definitions are technically correct, they fail to capture the power of blogs as social software. Beyond being a simple homepage or an online diary, some blogs allow comments on the entries, thereby creating a discussion forum. They also have blogrolls (i.e., links to other blogs which the owner reads or admires), and indicate their social relationship to those other bloggers using the XFN social relationship standard. Pingback and trackback allow one blog to notify another blog, creating an inter-blog conversation. Blogs engage readers and can build a virtual community around a particular person or interest. Examples include Slashdot, LiveJournal, BlogSpot

Wikis

A wiki is a webpage whose content can be edited by its visitors. Examples include Wikipedia, Wiktionary, the original Portland Pattern Repository wiki, MeatballWiki, CommunityWiki, the Student Wiki (http://www.thestudentwiki.org/) and Wikisource. For more detail on commercially available wiki systems see Comparison of wiki software.

Collaborative real-time editor

Simultaneous editing of a text or media file by different participants on a network was first demonstrated on research systems as early as the 1970s but is now practical on a global network. SubEthaEdit and Google Docs & Spreadsheets are examples of this type of social software.

Prediction markets

Many prediction market tools have become available (including some free software) that made it easy to predict and bet on future events. This a more formal version of social interaction, but it nonetheless qualifies as a robust type of social software.

Social network services

Social network services allow people to come together online around shared interests, hobbies, or causes. For example, some sites provide dating services where users post personal profiles, locations, ages, gender, etc, and are able to search for a partner. Other services enable business networking (Ryze, XING, Ecademy, and LinkedIn), emotional support phone counseling (Phone Buddies), or social event meetups (Meetup).

Some large wikis effectively become social network services by encouraging user pages and portals.

Social network search engines

Social network search engines are a class of search engines that use social networks to organize, prioritize, or filter search results. There are two subclasses of social network search engines: those that use **explicit** social networks, and those that use **implicit** social networks.

Explicit social network search engines allow people to find each other according to explicitly stated social relationships such as XFN social relationships. XHTML Friends Network, for example, allows people to share their relationships on their own sites, thus forming a decentralized/distributed online social network, in contrast to centralized social network services listed in the previous section.

Implicit social network search engines allow people to filter search results based upon classes of social networks they trust, such as a shared political viewpoint. This was called an epistemic filter in a United Nations University report from 1993 which predicted that this would become the dominant means of search for most users.

Lacking trustworthy explicit information about such viewpoints, this type of social network search engine mines the web to infer the topology of online social networks. For example, the NewsTrove search engine infers social networks from content - sites, blogs, pods, and feeds - by examining, among other things, subject matter, link relationships, and grammatical features to infer social networks.

Deliberative social networks

Deliberative social networks are webs of discussion and debate for decision-making purposes. They are built for the purpose of establishing sustained relationships between individuals and their government. They rely upon informed opinion and advice that is given with a clear expectation of outcomes.

Commercial social networks

Commercial social networks are designed to support business transaction and to build a trust between an individual and a brand, which relies on opinion of product, ideas to make the product better, enabling customers to participate with the brands in promoting development, service delivery, and a better customer experience.

Social guides

A social guide recommending places to visit or contains information about places in the real world such as coffee shops, restaurants, and wifi hotspots, etc. One such application is WikiTravel.

Social bookmarking

Some sites allow users to post their list of bookmarks or favorite websites for others to search and view. These sites can also be used to meet others sharing common interests. Examples include digg, del.icio.us, StumbleUpon, reddit, Netvouz, and furl.

Social citations

Much like social bookmarking, this software is aimed towards academics, and allows the user to post a citation for an article found on the internet or a website, online database like Academic Search Premier or LexisNexis Academic University, a book found in a library catalog, and so on. These citations can be organized into predefined categories or a new category defined by the user through the use of tags. This allows academics researching or interested in similar areas to connect and share resources. Examples for those services include CiteULike, Connotea, BioInfoBank (http://buchta.lib.bioinfo.pl/), BibSonomy, and BioWizard (http://www.biowizard.com/).

Social libraries

This applications allows visitors to keep track of their collectibles, books, records, and DVDs. Users can share their collections. Recommendations can be generated based on user ratings, using statistical computation and network theory. Some sites offer a buddy system, as well as virtual "check outs" of items for borrowing among friends. Folksonomy or tagging is implemented on most of these sites. Examples include discogs.com, LibraryThing and lib.rario.us (http://lib.rario.us/).

Virtual worlds

Virtual Worlds are services where it is possible to meet and interact with other people in a virtual environment reminiscent of the real world. Thus the term virtual reality. Typically, the user manipulates an avatar through the world, interacting with others using chat or voice chat.

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs)

MMOGs are virtual worlds that add various sorts of point systems, levels, competition, and winners and losers to virtual world simulation. Commercial MMOGs (or, more accurately, massively multiplayer online role-playing games or MMORPGs,) include Everquest and World of Warcraft. The Dotsoul Cyberpark is one of the more innovative non-commercial worlds, with the look and feel of Second Life and Active Worlds, but an adamantly anti-corporate stance. Other open-source and experimental examples include Planeshift, Croquet project, VOS and Solipsis.

Non-game worlds

Another development are the worlds that are less game-like, or not games at all. Games have points, winners, and losers. Instead, some virtual worlds are more like social networking services like MySpace and Facebook, but with 3D simulation features. Examples include Second Life, ActiveWorlds, The Sims Online, and There.

Economies

Very often a real economy emerges in these worlds, extending the non-physical service economy within the world to service providers in the real world. Experts can design dresses or hairstyles for characters, go on routine missions for them, and so on, and be paid in game money to do so. This emergence has resulted in expanding social possibility and also in increased incentives to cheat. In the case of Second

Life, the in-world economy is one of the primary features of the world.

Other specialized social applications

There are many other applications with social software characteristics that facilitate human connection and collaboration in specific contexts. Project management and e-learning applications are among these.

Emerging technologies

Emerging technological capabilities to more widely distribute hosting and support much higher bandwidth in real time are bypassing central content arbiters in some cases.

Peer-to-peer social networks

A hybrid of web-based social networks, instant messaging technologies and peer-to-peer connectivity and file sharing, peer-to-peer social networks generally allow users to share blogs, files (especially photographs) and instant messages. Some examples are imeem, SpinXpress, Bouillon, Wirehog, and Soulseek. Also, Groove, WiredReach and Kerika have similar functionality, but with more of a work-based, collaboration bias.

Virtual presence

Widely viewed, *virtual presence* means being present via intermediate technologies, usually radio, telephone, television, or the internet. In addition, it can denote apparent physical appearance, such as voice, face, and body language.

More narrowly, the term virtual presence denotes presence on World Wide Web locations which identified by URLs. People who are browsing a web site are considered to be virtually present at web locations. Virtual presence is a social software in the sense that people meet on the web by chance or intentionally. The ubiquitous(in the web space) communication transfers behavior patterns from the real world and virtual worlds to the web. Research [4] has demonstrated effects [5] of online indicators

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See also

- Comparison of wiki software
- Customer engagement
- Folksonomy
- History of social software
- List of social software
- Motivations for contributing to online communities
- Online identity
- Online deliberation
- Participatory Media
- Pseudonymity
- Social bookmarking
- The WELL
- Usenet
- Wiki software
- Wikipedia's implied constitution
- Enterprise 2.0
- Web 2.0

External links

- Tracing the Evolution of Social Software
  (http://www.lifewithalacrity.com/2004/10/tracing_the_evo.html)
- Social Protocols: An Introduction (http://www.w3.org/Talks/980922-MIT6805/SocialProtocols.html)
- Tom Coates' Definition of Social Software
  (http://www.plasticbag.org/archives/2003/05/my_working_definition_of_social_software.shtml)
  and Revised / Simplified Definition of Social Software
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