Pushing the social media buttons

Erin Green

The tech savvy readers of this article will know that it is a deep challenge to find a website that is not peppered with little icons encouraging you to share, like, comment, dig, tweet, and so on. Though each just a few pixels square, they represent some of the most potent tools for influencing our online lives today. They affect search engine rankings, your impression of friends and strangers alike, they shape of online communities, and how web users generate and consume all forms of data. Also, of course, there are more sober issues related to political activism, human rights, and other social concerns that lean heavily on the success of these aesthetically sparse little buttons.

A cursory survey of the web (conduit Google, of course) unearths more than three hundred social media buttons. This is approximately twelve times the number of letters in the English alphabet. So take heart if you cannot parse these digital hieroglyphs. There is some order in the chaos and what follows is this author’s attempt to shed some light on this.

Social media represents a confluence of old technologies, archival functions, the desire to share and blog, identity shaping platforms, as well as the ability to individually and collectively edit web-based content. These features help compartmentalize the hundreds of social media buttons into a few key concepts that lend themselves to a more nuanced understanding of the Web 2.0 world.

An indispensible caveat at this point is that no social media button represents a service that fits neatly into one category. Further to this, there is likely no end to the subjective influences in how individuals experience these tools. Though nearly every button represents each of these aspects to some degree, they are nearly always polydirectional in intent, flowing from generator, to user, to online communities, and back – a cyber ouroboros if you will.

Vintage
Embedded in the hundreds of aforementioned social media buttons are some that early web adopters will remember with fondness and digital natives will hardly recognize. Included in this category are buttons that send something to a network printer or forward a single link from a mainstream media site to several recipients. These vintage icons are worthy of mention because they signal the genesis of social media long before the phrase had any currency. They point to an appetite for sharing content and interacting with it on a primitive level using some of the earliest communication platforms available on-line.

Sharing
Ultimately all social media tools allow for some degree of sharing. Without it such a thing would not be social. However, some services emphasize sharing as their primary function. Notable among these is Yahoo’s Flickr, which ranks as one of the top 40 most globally visited sites. Flickr boasts a collection of more than five billion photos. Despite the shock value of these statistics, the site does maintain a particularly homey feel because a majority of users post pictures of their children and new babies, vacation photos, pets, crafts, home renovations, and so on.
In keeping with the overall artistic vibe of the site, many art and craft entrepreneurs add Flickr to their repertoire of social media marketing. Serious amateur and semi-pro photographers find their home on Flickr, too. This is due to the service’s impressive functionality for creating an online portfolio and even the ability to license one’s photographs through Getty Images. In the end there is no dearth of subscribers willing to commit themselves to contributing images to groups, commenting on other people’s photographs, and cultivating as large a following as possible, which does run against the grain of Flickr’s familial atmosphere.

Archiving
A second subset of social media buttons allow individuals to trace their online life in a way that a simple browser history or collection of bookmarks cannot. Again the roots for this kind of functionality date to the earliest days of the world wide web, when Netscape reigned supreme and Geocities meant something to someone. Early incarnations of web browsers allowed users to bookmark websites at whim and sort through them later, perhaps in an alphabetized list or in the order in which they were saved.

Today, these sensibilities are found in far more sophisticated forms in social media tools like StumbleUpon. The population of this corner of the social media world is nearing thirteen million driven stumblers who help you find the best of the web (or so the StumbleUpon tagline encourages you to believe). Though an individual user is encouraged to follow friends and interact with other members, it is very much tailored by ones own unique combination of interests. From a menu of more than five hundred categories one creates an aggregate of interests ranging from industrial design, self improvement, conservative politics, Buddhism, nature, baking and so on.

As one ‘stumbles’ through the web, StumbleUpon produces page after page of content that the user gives a thumbs up (and archives) or thumbs down (and discards). These judgments then serve as a barometer to feed the user ever more interesting content. The items are then archived in an aesthetically pleasing way, complete with thumbnail pictures, sorting options, number of global page views, and further opportunities to share via social media vehicles.

Micro/blogging
An irrepressible feature of Web 1.0 life was the long-form blog. Blogs (the word itself a late 20th century neologism, which is the contraction of ‘web’ and ‘log’) rank among the senior citizens of the online world, but are also still among the most vivacious of all social media platforms. Dating back to the late 1990s, these open source, open content instruments show little by way of waning in popularity. From the first huddle of teenage girls writing endlessly about what happened hours earlier at school on LiveJournal and the launch of Blogger (now a Google product) at the same time, blogs have gripped the attention of hundreds of millions of people for more than a decade.

For those who may proclaim long-form blogs as collateral damage in the rise of a Web 2.0 world and the decline of attention spans, statistics show otherwise. According to Alexa, a web traffic ranking service, Blogger consistently ranks in the top 10 most visited websites in the world. Further to this, BlogPulse notes that over forty thousand blogs are added to their tracking systems each day, for an estimated global total reaching into the nine digits at more than one hundred fifty million.

However, Twitter, the preeminent microblogging service is no electronic slouch either. It ranks slightly lower than Blogger in global web traffic with an astonishing 9% of global web
users visiting Twitter.com. Some of its more contestable success stories include helping Barak Obama get ahead of Hillary Rodham Clinton in the 2008 presidential primaries. Another is that C-list American actor, Ashton Kutcher, remains a celebrity of sorts. Stars and plebeians alike seem captivated by this service.

A third style of blogging born out of the Web 2.0 era offers bloggers the chance to funnel any kind of web content they want into a single stream, of which Tumblr is most popular. The posts generally follow the whims of the individual and include any combination of text, photos, videos, content sourced elsewhere on the web, music, which then can be managed to any device with a browser. Among the most popular is one person’s attempt to remove all cartoon Garfield’s from his eponymous comic strip. This is done with a view to ‘[revealing] the existential angst of a certain young Mr. Jon Arbuckle.’

Identity shaping
One would be remiss not to discuss Facebook within the context of an article such as this. A social media juggernaut, Facebook clearly represents all of the categories outlined above. It is of vintage mindset in the sense that it has messaging functionality that very much echoes conventional e-mail. The platform also encourages as much sharing of life’s minutiae as possible through cross-platform functionality, news feeds and status updates, photos, and endless permutations of activities and interests.

Facebook is also archival insofar as users treat Facebook as a bank for digital photos and that one’s page hosts a record of every comment made, groups joined, all status updates, and so forth since the moment they joined Facebook. And of course, Facebook status updates are akin to a microblogging format.

So what, then, is there to speak of apart from the already named categories? Perhaps more than any other service, Facebook encourages identity shaping to an extent that others do not. This is facilitated by the depth of the platform, which includes user-defined extended information about themselves beyond the requisite hometown, education, employment, interests and activities. This author adds pet peeves, favourite phobias, and tracks her New Year’s resolutions in extended fields.

It ends up being the ultimate online expression of that which makes one person distinct from another. Our repertoire of likes, friends, photos, and status updates cultivate a picture of who we are. Though one can certainly produce a rather contrived persona, over the long run maintaining such a consistent façade would be exhausting.

Ranking
Social media tools like Digg offer its users a different kind of interaction with online content. Rather than being the progenitors of news items, blog posts, memes, and so forth, the Digg world grades pre-existing web content in real time. Of note here is that Digg rankings offer no insight into why something ascends the ranks of a given category. A web user may ‘Digg’ something because it made them laugh, or found it particularly relevant to a real life happening, or any number of near arbitrary reasons.

Digg is about volume. This is affirmed in a cursory look at the Digg homepage: Wikileaks, jazzketball, and, a homemade air-powered Star Trek door all occupy prime real estate on a website that is one of the 150 most popular in the world. Even the sturdy bastions of the print world, such as The New York Times, are somewhat parasitic on the success of this decade old social media tool insofar as a high Digg rank drives tens of thousand, if not more, visitors to their own websites via a single item on Digg.
Another social media tool in this category is the news ranking service Reddit. Though its interface is sparser than Digg and the service as a whole is less well known, Reddit offers a layer of functionality that the ranking system of Digg does not. It allows its users to generate their own content and contribute to the organizational structure of this aggregated news site.

The founding philosophy of both these services is similar: to afford a mass of essentially anonymous web users editorial power in a largely unedited world. However, there are challenges with collectives flooding an article to increase or decrease its ranking and with parties buying Diggs to drive traffic to the originating source of the item, which taints the purity of the aforementioned vision.

This kind of interactivity is on the rise on a number of websites. In a perhaps slightly anaemic way, mainstream media sites often feature some kind of ranking tool. Though this usually takes the form of a ‘most read’ or ‘most commented’ tool bar it does show an interest in extending content control to site visitors. Some sites, like the Al Gore owned Current TV, offer full Digg or Reddit styled interactivity on their website. The site greets visitors with a list of top stories that invite further ranking by registered users of Current.com.

The community is also prompted to submit stories, to comment on site content, participate in a conversation on a topic de jour, and to even read the most popular comments left by other members. Like Reddit, Current integrates user generated content with that outsourced from other websites.

Global scope
Writing as a Canadian inundated with media originating mostly from my own country and that of the one immediately to the south, the phrase ‘social media’ is synonymous with Facebook and Twitter. Full stop. However, global cyber culture extends beyond these seemingly monolithic creatures. Hopefully the proliferation of social media tools and rising digital culture in most parts of the world will lend insight into how cultural codes and contextual nuance translate to an increasingly on-line world.

Even among countries typically associated with the Western cohort, there are impressive differences in the overall popularity of social networking sites. For example, Bebo (Blog Early, Blog Often) offers users an experience much like that of Facebook, but offers users a few extra things. Of note is a handsome games app and a so-called Lifestream. The latter feature is a personalized aggregated of all your activity on any other social media service a person uses. So all at once Bebo allows a person’s internet friends to follow their Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr (and more!) without leaving the Bebo domain. Bebo is the most widely used social networking site in the United Kingdom, Ireland, and New Zealand.

Exponential technological growth in India also reveals some social media trends that are not mirrored in a Canadian or American context. For example, the most popular social networking site in India is a Google product, Orkut. In a country with almost 100 million internet users this is no small coup. It is also enormously popular in another large, international market in South America. Brazil’s online population again prefers Orkut over Facebook. Given that Orkut naturally integrates with any number of Google’s scores of other open-sourced, web-based tools, this social networking site is poised to make a serious run at the primacy of Facebook.

Finally, Eastern Europe also provides fodder for these ongoing conversations. In Russia, a country renowned for a deep history of leading edge advancements in computing technologies, it is no wonder that a Russian social networking site, Vkontakte, devastates Facebook with booming growth throughout its country of origin and in other former Soviet states like Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan. It boasts one hundred million users and is a...
cyber clone of Facebook. The aesthetic, the wall, the layout of the page, are largely indistinguishable from Facebook. This begs questions about cyber-ethics and plagiarism.

Conclusion
In the end, these categories provide a loose conceptual scheme for understanding the functionality that lies behind the hundreds of now mainstream social media buttons. Since they are inescapable in a Web 2.0 world those interested in social media should understand broader concepts beyond individual tools. If anything, laying out the origins of some principles of social media tools, their archival, sharing, identity shaping, and ranking functions enables readers of this article to go forth and investigate some of these services with a view of affirming or denying such an approach. In the meantime I shall go and unsubscribe to any number of the 17 services I subscribed to for the sake of thorough research!

Erin Green is a Doctor of Theology student working in the area of Theology and Philosophy of Science at Emmanuel College of the Toronto School of Theology. She also works as the Communications Officer for The Canadian Council of Churches. Her professional affiliations include serving as the Communications Officer for the Canadian Theological Society and on the executive of WACC North America.