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# Social Media Simplified

by **Karen Christensen** (CEO, Berkshire Publishing Group, 314 Main Street, Great Barrington, MA 01230; Phone: 413-528-0206) <karen@berkshirepublishing.com> *Weblog: www.berkshirepublishing.com/blog/*

**B**logs, wikis, podcasts, and memediggers. **MySpace, Basecamp, Skype, Flickr, and Second Life.** The long tail and the ubiquitous **Web 2.0.** New technologies and concepts are coming at us faster than enemy starships in an online game. All these new terms are labels for social media — types of social networking software or interfaces that enable people to share ideas, information, and opinions in widely varied ways. All social media depend on personal interactions and on individuals' willingness to share and exchange information.

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), relationship management media (sites such as **MySpace** or **Cyworld**), massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), file-sharing systems, and wikis are examples of social media in which many people interact with many other people — from the many to the many. And then 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.

So how are publishers and librarians to make sense of this brave new world? Instead of starting with the technologies themselves, it helps to start with the experiences and activities that social media enable. So, for example, instead of talking about what wikis are and how they work, we can start with the fact that they address the need to manage knowledge and improve collaborations.

## The Tools

Today's social media tools take the form of software, but there have always been social media tools, and they played multiple purposes, just as today's social media tools do. Among the Native Americans, for example, the drum played such a role. It could be used for worship or for entertainment, to transmit information, or to gather and motivate people. It could also be a work of art. Similarly, wampum — woven belts of shell beads used by Native Americans in the northeastern North America — was used to store and convey information and to create a sense of commonality; it had a creative and aesthetic purpose as well. When we talk about the tools of social media in traditional societies, there's an added dimension: the tools are often believed to hold and convey core cultural knowledge outside of human control. This endows these objects with special ritual status and means that they must be used in carefully prescribed ways. As for today's software tools? I'd hesitate to say the same is true, but if we ask sociologists in a few years' time, they may tell us otherwise.

Consider the characteristics of today's social media tools as contrasted with the tools of the past in the four areas in which social media are put to use: knowledge management, collaboration, relationship management, and entertainment. You will notice that many of the tools are used for more than one use.

## Knowledge Management

Humans have been storing information for at least 50,000 years, for personal reuse, to share with others in their community, and to hand down to future generations. They have also found ways to acquire information and knowledge from others, through observation as well as by intentional transmission.

*Traditional Tools:* myths, folklore, oral traditions, marks on natural objects such as trees or rocks, tablets, scrolls, monumental inscriptions, books, drawings, maps, letters, diaries, reports

*Contemporary Tools:* relational databases, forums (also know as bul-

letin boards, or BBSs), blogs, wikis (shared online text editing) visual representation tools (mind maps, whiteboards), content-sharing software, directories, online maps, search functions, consensus Web filters (memediggers)

## Collaboration

Humans have always worked together, in hunting and gathering, in farming, and in industry. Collaboration requires the passing on of expert knowledge, the exchange of information acquired while work is in progress, and practical ways of dividing work to maximize productivity.

*Traditional Tools:* men's houses, initiation ceremonies, rites of passage, work teams, manuals, training programs, direct instruction, on-the-job training

*Contemporary Tools:* wikis, visual representation tools, online conferencing

## Relationship Management

Our connections with other people include intimate relationships, community ties (multiple, overlapping, and less intimate), and professional relationships. Relationship management also includes conflict resolution, mutual aid, and charitable activities. Personal display and ornament, hierarchy, and status are aspects of relationships that are also reflected online.

*Traditional Tools:* music, dance festivals, drama, letters, diplomacy, marriage, joking relationships, feuds, trade, diplomacy, war and peace making, religious rituals, telephone

*Contemporary Tools:* email, instant messaging, VOIP telephony, blogs, forums, people-connecting software and their associated spaces

(**MySpace, LinkedIn**, etc.), content-sharing software

## Entertainment

Our ancient ancestors spent a lot of time enjoying leisure-time activities; the extent to which we indulge in online entertainment and gaming might not make them bat an eyelid. The physical isolation and inactivity of online leisure activities, however, present serious drawbacks.

*Traditional Tools:* music, dance, drama, literature, poetry, art, sports, games, clubs, gambling

*Contemporary Tools:* chat rooms, MMORPGs and other online games, offline role-playing games, collaborative writing, poetry slams, crafts forums, online gambling, content-editing tools (e.g., mashups)

## The Conflict between Old and New

The catch phrases in social media, especially for businesses looking to profit from it or mitigate the risks it creates, are "user-generated content" and "creating communities," both of which represent a challenge to those who have traditionally created and mediated print content — publishers and librarians — and others as well. People in the television and film industries are trying to come to terms with user-generated content and a growing interest in "short forms" for mobile devices and the Internet. Creative control and quality are issues here, too. Filmmakers don't enjoy the idea of having their work "mashed up" (reedited by someone who's downloaded it) any more than an author would enjoy having his or her novel taken apart, rewritten, and then distributed to the purchaser's friends.

Unfortunately, the promoters of social media often underestimate the value of systems that have developed over centuries and therefore often don't even try to find ways to marry the best of the new with the things that have proven themselves. **Larry Sanger**, cofounder of **Wikipedia**, wrote recently that **Web 2.0** technologies take "content publishing out of the hands of a top-down hierarchy and make it a matter of individual initiative. Hitherto, publishing was the prerogative of printers; then (with the Web) of the technically savvy; now, it's the prerogative of everyone." It's sobering to realize that even someone as knowledgeable as **Sanger** equates publishing with printing — something like equating the work of a chef with setting the table. If one operates under that misapprehension, it's all too easy to think one can get rid of editors and intermediaries like librarians. All that's needed, they say, is to let the people speak. (Curiously, they never offer to step aside themselves; apparently "the people" still need professional journalists — and bloggers.)

In addition, the evangelists talk as if the

*continued on page 34*



media is the driver, as if human behavior and human needs are being transformed by the technologies we develop, and ignore the fact that the new technologies may have negative social consequences. In actuality, social media are allowing us to do things humans have always done, but faster and on a larger scale. The vast amount of letter writing and diary keeping done by people until recent decades has been moved to other media, so it's not so much that people are generating more content (although perhaps they are); but that they are sharing it more widely. This has positive aspects (allowing people who would otherwise feel isolated to find kindred spirits) but it has negative ones as well (and not just online stalking; hours browsing through silly videos on YouTube doesn't exactly help most people advance in their careers or become better parents).

### True Connections and Community

A desire for connection and community is one of the reasons people turn to social media. In today's torrent of information, we're all worried that we're going to miss something truly important. **Dave Pollard**, one of the best-known bloggers on social media, wrote recently that "civilization makes finding people much harder than it was for gatherer-hunter cultures where the number of people you could expect to meet and know in a lifetime was small." Well, not exactly: finding people is harder only because our expectations have grown so much, and because we're afraid of missing out on the elusive perfect partner — just as we're worried about missing out on an essential piece of information.

But practical limitations continue to operate. Some forms of social media require users to update and adjust their personal data continually — something that could easily become a full-time job! (And the database becomes an asset of the company sponsoring the medium.) As one online commentator put it, "**LinkedIn** is the digital equivalent of a chain letter. If you really want to contact a friend of a friend (of a friend), just pick up the phone or send an email. If the only way you can reach someone is through this nutty online social pyramid scheme, you don't deserve to be taken seriously. And I can guarantee that you won't be."

What surprises me is that the online world hasn't yet grasped that what's worth paying for is the elimination of things you don't want. That's why busy people go to specialist stores or have assistants to sort their mail. Part of what publishers do — and our customers pay for — is turn down the bulk of the material submitted to us for publication.

The evolution of encyclopedias shows this. Centuries ago, it was difficult to find enough information, and the miracle of encyclopedias was that they offered something about everything, a range of knowledge one could not otherwise access. But today they serve a selective purpose: a subject encyclopedia provides a limited range of high-quality information

*against the grain*  
**people profile**

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**Karen Christensen**

**BORN & LIVED:** Born in Indiana, grew up in Minnesota and California. Adult life divided between London (pop 7.5 million) and Great Barrington, Massachusetts (pop. 7.5 thousand).

**EARLY LIFE:** Books were my lifeline.

**FAMILY:** Anthropologist husband, **David Levinson**, whose expertise is homelessness, substance abuse, and spousal abuse (this took some explaining to my friends). Children: **Tom** 21 and **Rachel** 18.

**EDUCATION:** **UC Santa Barbara**, independent research, and, most important, the hundreds of scholars I work with on subjects ranging from world history to leadership.

**FIRST JOB:** Farm laborer.

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** A decade in academic and literary publishing in the U.K., at **Blackwells** and **Faber & Faber**, followed by several years as freelance journalist and author before cofounding of **Berkshire Publishing Group** in 1998. Author of a number of popular environmental books, which have been translated into French, German, Chinese, Japanese, and Thai; editor of various major reference works including the *Encyclopedia of Community* (**Sage** 2004) and *Global Perspectives on the United States* (**Berkshire** 2007). Currently a member of the board of the **Content Division of the Software and Information Industry Association**, the **Text Outline Project (Digital Universe)** advisory committee, and the **Society for New Communications Research** advisory board.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO:** Sweat.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** This winter, **Anthony Trollope's** *Palliser* and *Barchester* novels.


**PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD:** Evangelists for social media who don't appreciate good writing and the work of editors; traditional publishers who don't know what a blog is.

**PHILOSOPHY:** Walk the talk.

**MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT:** I don't know about meaningful, but it was an achievement to get the first volume of the **T.S. Eliot** *Letters* to press (1988).

**GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:** Take up aikido again.

**HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:** Far more conscious of the challenges of sustainability and the climate change crisis, and more attentive to the need for interdisciplinary scholarship and engagement between the academics and practitioners. 🐿



chosen from the vast amount available.

It's troubling that the more we talk about community, the more we lack the real thing. The fact that companies think they can "own" communities (and I've heard this said) does suggest something about the nature of community in the cyber realm. A recent study of what sociologists call social capital showed that a quarter of Americans had no one—not a family member or a friend — to whom they could turn with a serious personal problem. While we can now have a vast number of rather superficial connections with people spread across the globe, in real crises of life we may not have anyone at all to turn to.

But at their best, social networking tools expand our options and connect us with people and ideas that enrich our lives. One of the great challenges we face today is finding ways to integrate the best of new technologies with on-the-ground local community life and with the kind of deep personal relationships we can't walk away from simply by turning off the computer. Exploring the world of the Web — and especially the new ways of connecting and communicating it enables—is a rewarding pursuit for both publishers and information professionals. **Skype** me anytime (karenSchristensen)! 🐿