

REVOLUTION

a social

by Lori Brandt

If Facebook were a country, it would be the world's fourth largest," announces a popular video circulating on YouTube. Titled "Social Media Revolution," it touts statistics to showcase the growing impact of social media.

More and more people are using the vast collection of Web sites and applications to interact and share information online.

"Facebook has 400 million active users," the video continues. "YouTube is the second largest search engine in the world. Twitter members send 50 million tweets a day. Around 80 percent of companies are using LinkedIn as their primary tool to find employees. Wikipedia has over 13 million articles."

Is the social media revolution real, or just hyperbole?

UC Irvine professors from four disciplines – humanities, business,

social sciences and computer science – weigh in on this hot topic. They are (pictured from left) Carter Butts, associate professor of sociology and director of the Networks, Computation and Social Dynamics Lab; Donald Patterson, assistant professor of informatics and director of LUCI (Laboratory for Ubiquitous Computing and Interaction); Alladi Venkatesh, professor of management and associate director of CRITO (The Center for Research

on Information Technology and Organizations); and David Goldberg, professor of comparative literature and director of the UC Humanities Research Institute.

Q. Where is social media having the most impact?

Goldberg: Social media has transformed how people work, play, learn, receive news and information, and engage in politics and civics.

Butts: Social media has dramatically changed the way

people who are geographically and socially dispersed come together and mobilize in response to major events. We see it happening in areas ranging from politics to emergency response.

Venkatesh: In the business world, many companies are using social media for true customer engagement. They use it to keep current and future customers informed about their product or service and to build trust and brand loyalty. They build online consumer communities and are beginning to use recommendation systems that help customers share their knowledge and experiences with each other.

Q: What are some of the benefits of social media?

Butts: Social media has enriched the lives of many by expanding the average person's freedom



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to communicate and organize with others. It has greatly reduced the costs of social organization, allowing groups to more quickly and effectively mobilize following disasters, such as the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, and it helped local residents stay abreast of developments during recovery.

Venkatesh: Today's global marketplace requires a communication method that is fast, easy to manage, interconnected, yet private. In-person meetings and conferences are costly, so an online social network can provide an effective alternative. When created by an organization for internal use, an online social network can become an integral resource for collecting and disseminating shared knowledge.

Goldberg: In the humanities, a researcher or scholar has better access to collections in archives held in libraries or museums around the world. A medieval manuscript, for example, can be digitized and then shared and compared to materials

thousands of miles away. Researchers can engage in online discussions. Using a Wiki, they can compose a piece of work together, with four, five or 10 other people instantaneously reading, editing and sharing a common document. This quickens the tempo of output.

Q. What are some of the negative implications?

Patterson: As social networks begin to encompass all of life, they bring with them many of the same problems that we have in real, or non-digital, life. I think the assumption that everyone on your social network is a "friend" will be tested. We'll need to learn how to deal with the people who won't stop talking, stand too close, creep us out, but whom we can't just wholesale disconnect from because of social and professional obligations.

Butts: Any time a dramatic shift in socially relevant technology occurs, cultural and organizational practices are likely to lag behind the new reality. This raises issues ranging from the amusing to the serious. At the one end of the scale, questions arise such as how to politely reject an unwanted but well-meaning friend request. More serious challenges are posed by norms of disclosure. Information comfortably offered in a traditional social exchange could potentially cause issues when offered



online if and when seen by family members, prospective employers or government officials. Another challenge is the level of literacy – cultural, financial, political and technical – that is needed to be an effective decision-maker in the new media environment. There is a gap between what our educational system provides and what the average American needs in order to make well-informed choices.

Q: Do you think social media will completely replace traditional forms of communication?

Patterson: Thinking of social media as something that is going to replace other kinds of media is not the right way to think of it. Social media will be used alongside other forms of communication. It will be a place people go to for some kinds of communication, but probably not professional ones. It is too easy to miss things in the deluge of Twitter and Facebook, and professional communications are the type that must be attended to. Handwritten letters will still have a place when a personal touch is necessary, but they will be reserved for the most important and/or intimate occasions.

Goldberg: It may be that we are writing more, even if in different forms and through different media. But the instantaneity of social media makes the traditional mode of buying a card, lining up for stamps and posting the letter much less appealing. I suppose writing a letter on paper could become nostalgic and return as a fashion. I am still surprised by how colleagues at meetings come mixed with pen, paper and laptop, some doing one or the other, some switching between the two, many multi-tasking.

Venkatesh: Certainly in the younger generation, handwriting has already

become obsolete. In a recent study I conducted on undergraduate students, they rarely use e-mail for social exchanges. Text messaging is the norm.

Q: Are people at a disadvantage if they don't use social media? What about the digital divide and the generation gap?

Butts: Inequality is a basic property of all modern societies and social media does not erase that reality. However, social media greatly levels the playing field. The cost, personnel requirements and expertise of mobilizing in an online group are far lower than in an offline context, and barriers to participating at the individual level are even lower.

Goldberg: The digital divide is already taking a different form. Almost all college kids have their own computers, and anyone in the U.S. who needs access to a computer can find it in a public library. There are ethno-racial divisions between the kinds of social media preferred: Black and Latino youth tend to use MySpace; White and Asian youth prefer Facebook. The generation gap is closing some, too, as we saw the older generation engage during the past Presidential election – the Obama campaign was exemplary – but it is hardly limited to Democrats or Progressives. Tea Partiers, for example, who tend to be older, are taking courses in Twitter use.

Patterson: The younger generation has always been on social media and hasn't needed email. Once they enter the workforce, however, that will change. Cheap mobile phones will largely eliminate the have and have-not divide, and the old reasons for excluding groups will dominate, such as racism, classism, power structures, etc.



Q: What is next with social media and where do you predict it will take us?

Venkatesh: In the area of education, we are far behind. The challenge is both technical and content-related. Professors and teachers are not trained and do not have time to re-equip themselves. This does present an opportunity. As we go forward, all educational institutions should begin incorporating educational material into social media technology.

Butts: If I had to point to a gap in the current social media technologies, it's in the area of impression management. People like to present themselves based on the social context – personal or professional. The current social media status cues are tone deaf in this regard and offer no support in varying one's presentation based on the context. The next "killer app" could be a platform that lets you wear one face for family, another for your old high school friends and another for your boss.

Patterson: We will start to see broad analysis being applied to the digital breadcrumbs that are left behind from social media. Social media streams will be used as sensors for understanding what is going on in the world. Things like a decrease in tweets will be attributed to power outages, sicknesses and disasters. Social media is currently having its moment in the sun. In a few years it will be so ingrained in our lives, we won't even notice it.

