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The Oxford Social Media Convention 2009 *Assessing the evolution, impact and potential of social media*

With corporations, governments, newspapers and universities embracing blogs and Twitter feeds as key elements in their communication strategies, social media have finally come of age. Yet research shows that the landscape of social media use and impact is a complex one, quite unlike the simple depiction of ubiquitous use and democratisation of content production that was widely heralded with the advent of Blogger ten years ago. Organised by the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) in collaboration with the Centre for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, this conference will look back at the evolution of blogs and other social media to give a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which such tools have or have not made a difference at the social, political or economic level. In addition, speakers will be asked to look forwards to identify the trends and developments which will most likely shape our experience of these technologies in the near future.

Background

The Internet has always attracted devotees who believe it has great transformative potential. In keeping with this, the advent of blogs and other social or collaborative media has been received by many with the expectation that they can revolutionise popular access to and debate within the public sphere. However academic research suggests that whilst social media are undoubtedly having a significant effect, there is little evidence that they have (as yet) fulfilled their supposedly egalitarian and democratic potential.

The tension between access and use is visible at even the most basic authorship and readership figures. The number of blogs created now runs to many millions, but the number of active blogs is far smaller, suggesting that many people start but don't regularly maintain their presence online. And whilst it is true that blogging statistics may under-estimate the true picture of social media use, with many users now turning to 'micro-blogging' applications such as Twitter it remains the case that by far the largest audience share goes to professional productions such as the Huffington Post, or CNN, written by teams of writers or syndicating posts generated elsewhere.

The role of social media in providing a channel for excluded voices is even more complex. On the one hand, it is undoubtedly true that blogs continue to play a key role in releasing information under oppressive regimes; bloggers inside Burma provided vital information about the actions of the military junta during the 2007 uprisings, for example. On the other hand, a recent academic study of top political bloggers in the US revealed a demographic profile far more privileged than that of typical newspaper op-editors, and suggested that even famously whistle-blowing blogs are more dependent on traditional investigative news reporting than citizen journalism.

Blogs and other social media may not be living up to 'cyber-utopian' expectations, but we cannot ignore the fact that they do matter. The role of blogs, social networking sites and Twitter in recent and current political campaigns is challenging existing models of top-down, party-driven campaigns, whilst the traditional business models of local and regional news media are increasingly shaken by consumers' move away from print journalism. On all counts, blogs and other social media are

having an impact. Bringing together leading bloggers, media commentators, academics, and industry thought-leaders, this interactive conference will be an opportunity to assess that impact over the past ten years, and to ask what potential for change we might see in the future.

Programme

Friday, September 18th 2009 Public Conference, Saïd Business School

9.00am Registration

9:30am Welcome and Introduction (Nelson Mandela Lecture Theatre)
Colin Mayer, Peter Moores Dean, Saïd Business School
Bill Dutton, Director, Oxford Internet Institute

9:45am *From weblogs to Twitter: how did we get where we are today and what are the main impacts to date?* (NMLT)
Although the dates of the earliest 'weblog' are a matter of some debate, the majority of their growth in popularity has arisen over the past ten years. What are the most important milestones in that process of evolution, and what are the factors that have shaped the successes and limitations of social media? Why (if at all) should we expect them to have an inherently democratising or egalitarian effect? Each speaker will be asked to conclude by identifying the most significant ways in which they think that blogs and social media have had any social, political or economic impact.

Chair: Kathryn Corrick, Digital Media Consultant
Panellists: Dave Sifry, Chairman and Founder, Technorati
Bill Thompson, Technology critic, BBC News Online
Bill Dutton, Director, Oxford Internet Institute
Nigel Shadbolt, Professor of Artificial Intelligence, University of Southampton

11am Coffee

11:30am Parallel sessions

Breaking news: the changing relationship between blogs and mainstream media (Rhodes Trust Lecture Theatre)
Among the traditional media, blogs and other contributions to citizen journalism have for a long time been regarded as posing a significant threat to 'quality' news reporting, whilst the global recession has shown that the threatened failure of high quality local and regional media outlets was not a groundless fear. Whilst some of the most successful social media sites are professional media productions such as CNN's Twitter news feed and the Huffington Post, many critics of social media now fear that the collapse of traditional business models will see a real decline in the depth and quality of news reporting, particularly at the local level. On the other hand, blogs and social media are seen as potentially democratising the production of news, enabling fast, first-hand reporting often in areas where traditional media face political or practical restrictions. This panel session will consider whether social media necessarily threaten traditional news media, and what, if anything they may have to offer in return.

This session has been organised in collaboration with the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism

Chair: David Levy, Director, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism
Panellists: Richard Sambrook, Director, BBC Global News Division

John Kelly, Columnist, Washington Post
Jonathan Ford, Reuters Commentary Editor

Making science public: data-sharing, dissemination and public engagement with science (Lecture Theatre 4)

Journals and peer-reviewed publications are still the most widely used channels through which research is disseminated within the scientific community and to a broader audience. However, social media are increasingly challenging the supremacy of editors, reviewers and science communicators. Blogging about science has become a new way of engaging “the public” directly with researchers whilst researchers are increasingly using blogs within their own academic communities for peer-review purposes. Panellists will give their perspective on how social media have changed the nature of the scientific debate among scientists, and how they have impacted on engagement with the public understanding of science.

Chair: Felix Reed-Tsochas, Senior Research Fellow in Complex Systems, Saïd Business School

Panellists: Maxine Clarke, Publishing Executive Editor, Nature
Ben Goldacre, author of Bad Science blog, and Guardian Research Fellow, Nuffield College, Oxford
Cameron Neylon, author of Science in the Open blog

12:45pm: Lunch break

1:45pm: *Social media, so what? Assessing the impact of blogs and social media* (NMLT)
Theorists such as Yochai Benkler have suggested that the accessibility and inherently social nature of Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, social networking and wikis mean that we might expect them to enhance our democratic freedoms through the opening of new channels for debate and collaboration. Academic research suggests that such new opportunities have not been equally taken up, and that in many areas, new social media are simply being used by old ‘elites’. At the same time, blogs and social media are having significant effect in enhancing accountability and transparency, particularly in repressive regimes like Burma and China. This session will ask whether we should be so quick to dismiss the socially egalitarian and politically democratic potential of social media or whether there might equally be more mundane but significant social impacts which have so far been ignored.

Chair: Sandra Gonzalez-Bailon, Research Fellow, Oxford Internet Institute

Panellists: Stefan Niggemeier, Founder of BILDblog
Evgeny Morozov, Yahoo! Fellow at Georgetown University
Richard Allan, European Policy Director, Facebook
Matthew Hindman, Political Science Department, Arizona State University

3:00pm: Coffee

3:30pm Parallel Sessions

The growth of the corporate blog - ‘Letting go’ of information control or maintaining the official line? (Rhodes Trust Lecture Theatre)

Blogs, Twitter feeds and even Facebook pages are increasingly featuring in the arsenal of PR strategies employed by large corporations and public institutions. This is not an idle choice: corporate blogs at both Google and Apple have at times, been the locus of intense media attention at times when new products have been announced or controversial decisions defended. Yet the use of such modes of communication raise peculiar challenges for companies willing to embrace new media, relating to the tensions between maintaining central control of information flows and the desire to react quickly when criticism arises in online networks or discussion groups. What do companies expect to gain from maintaining

this sort of online presence and what are the implications of these trends for both the development of traditional PR strategy and business journalism?

Chair: Jonathan Silberstein-Loeb, Research Fellow, Oxford University Centre for Corporate Reputation, Saïd Business School
Panelists: Kara Swisher, Technology Correspondent, Wall Street Journal
Simon Hampton, Director of European Public Policy Government Affairs, Google
Mark Rogers, CEO, MarketSentinel

Parties, campaigns and representation: the political impact of blogs and social media
(Lecture Theatre 4)

The outcome of political careers and even campaigns is increasingly dependent on the successful mastery of new communication tools including social media. Many MPs and members of Congress are embracing the use of social networking tools to keep in touch with their constituents, whilst Facebook, YouTube and even Twitter have potentially changed the nature of election campaigns in reaching out directly to grass-roots supporters, with the recent US presidential campaign also showing how effective these tools might be in raising funds. At the same time, it is not clear whether these tools are likely to prove effective in engaging any voters except those who are already interested in politics, or whether their apparent 'democratisation' of traditional party structures is to be believed.

Chair: Helen Margetts, Professor of Society and the Internet, Oxford Internet Institute
Panellists: Iain Dale, Founder Iain Dale's Diary
Andrew Rasiej, Founder, Personal Democracy Forum
Matthew MacGregor, London Director, Blue State Digital

4:45pm: *Blogging at 20? The future and potential of social media* (NMLT)
If social media are the defining advance of Web 2.0, whereby the network-as-platform enabled users not just to download content but to create it, tag it and share it, what will the next decade hold? Many of the social media businesses whose tools we rely on have yet to make a profit, whilst concerns about privacy, security and possibly even dignity suggest that our online habits may have to change. The technology press has for some time been heralding the oncoming arrival of Web 3.0, as an era where the web gets 'smart', and research on the developing semantic web suggests that this is no idle prediction. But what will happen to social media in the interim? Will the next ten years see our fascination with blogging, wikis and social networks replaced by a re-focusing on the enhanced informational capacity of the Web or will we continue to Tweet?

Chair: Bill Dutton, Director, Oxford Internet Institute
Discussants: *to be drawn from the day's discussants*

5:30pm Reception