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search engine marketing

What is social media?
An e-book from Spannerworks

Published on September 25th, 2006

Contents

'Social Computing is not a fad. Nor is it something that will pass you or your company by. Gradually, Social Computing will impact almost every role, at every kind of company, in all parts of the world.'

Forrester Research, <u>Social Computing</u> - How Networks Erode Institutional Power, And What to Do About It

Introduction

Thanks for downloading this e-book. We've written this as a short, sweet summary of the phenomenon called social media. It's an unashamedly straightforward work, intended to give you a brief overview of the story so far in social media, maybe fill in a few gaps and act as a reference guide for you.

It's intended for anyone really, but will be most useful to people working in media, marketing and communications.

This is the first edition of *What is social media?* Things move fast in this world, so we expect this e-Book to need updating every now and again. Check www.spannerworks.com/ebooks for the latest edition.

So how big a deal is social media?

Well very big indeed, if we are just going to look at the numbers. When this eBook was written (September 2006) there were:

More than 50 million blogs being tracked by Technorati, a specialist blog search engine. According to the same company, the number of blogs it tracks have doubled at least every six months for the past few years

100 million videos a day are being downloaded from video sharing website, YouTube

There are 107 million members of social network website MySpace

What is social media?

OK, let's start with a working definition and go from there.

Social media is best understood as a group of new kinds of online media which share most or all of the following characteristics:

Participation: social media encourages contributions and feedback from everyone who is interested. It blurs the line between the concept of media and audience.

Openness: most social media services are open to feedback and participation. They encourage voting, feedback, comments and sharing of information. There are rarely any barriers to accessing and making use of content – password protected content is frowned on.

Conversation: whereas traditional media is about "broadcast", content transmitted or distributed to an audience, social media is better seen as conversational, two-way.

Community: social media allows communities to form quickly and communicate effectively around common interests – be that a love of photography, a political issue or a favourite TV show.

Connectedness: Most kinds of social media thrive on their connectedness, via links and combining different kinds of media in one place.

Basic types of social media

At this time, I think that there are basically five kinds of social media. Note though that innovation and change are rife in social media.

The most common kinds of social media are <u>blogs</u>, social networks, content communities (sometimes called <u>folksonomies</u>), wikis and <u>podcasts</u>. You may have heard of many of these, and we'll go into a little more depth on these later, but here are some one line descriptions to be going on with:

Blogs: perhaps, the best known form of social media, blogs are online journals, with entries appearing with the most recent first.

Social networks: these websites allow people to build personal websites and then connect with friends to share content and communication. The best known example of a social network is MySpace, which has over 107 million members.

Content communities: communities which organise and share particular kinds of content. The most popular kinds of content communities tend to be around photos (<u>Flickr</u>), bookmarked links (<u>del.icio.us</u>) and videos (<u>YouTube</u>).

Wikis: these websites allow people to add content to or edit the information on them, acting as a communal document or database. The best-known wiki is the online encyclopedia which has over 1.3 million articles published in English alone.

Podcasts: audio and video files that are available by subscription through services like <u>Apple iTunes</u>.

Back to the future

If you think that there's something oddly familiar about descriptions of social media, it may be that you recall some of the discussions about what the web would become in the 1990s. And many of its manifestations are very close to the idealistic imaginings from that time.

Another good way to think about social media is that all of this is actually just about being human beings. Sharing ideas, cooperating and collaborating to create art, thinking and commerce, vigorous debate and discourse, finding people who might be good friends, allies and lovers – it's what our species has built several civilisations on. That's why it is spreading so quickly, not because it's great shiny, whizzy new technology, but because it lets us be ourselves, only more so…

And it is in the "more so" that the power of this revolution lies. People can find information, inspiration, like-minded people, communities and collaborators faster than ever before. New ideas, services, business models and technologies emerge and evolve at dizzying speed in social media.

The new means of production and distribution…

Media production

More useful than asking "Are blogs a fad?" or "How much of this is hype?" is to look at the fundamentals that are behind the phenomenal growth of social media.

The big thing that has changed in media is the ability of almost anyone to produce and distribute content.

It used to be that the ability to create content and distribute it to an audience was limited to individuals and organisations that owned production facilities and infrastructure to do so. In other words: the media.

If you were in the video creation and distribution business you were called a TV station and employed thousands of highly skilled individuals to write, film, edit and broadcast your content down a relatively small number of channels to the public. If you were a newspaper, similarly, you hired a team of reporters and editors, designers, typesetters, printers, delivery men and had deals with a network of newsagents for them to sell your product to your audience.

With the advent of digital technology and the internet it became a lot easier for people to create their own content, be it images, words, video or audio. But even five years ago, it was still beyond most people's technical skills to create and maintain their own website.

Today, the ever-lower costs of computers, digital cameras and high-speed internet access, combined with free or low-cost, easy to use editing software means that within minutes of deciding to do so anyone can have a live blog website up

and running, that with a little reading and fiddling they can upload video or sound to it.

Distribution

Production, obviously, is only half of the story. What good is it unless you can get your content to people? Take blogs for instance. People have a limited amount of time to check websites regularly – it's unlikely that many people at all are going to be bothered to check more than a couple of blogs every day, if that.

The innovation that has increased the reach of blogs, podcasts and has given terrific impetus to social media's evolution is a technology called RSS (which stands for Really Simple Syndication) which allows people to subscribe to a blog or website.

What RSS does is notify a "newsreader" or your personal homepage (on Google, Microsoft Live etc.) that there is new content available and sends it the text and images. You can read these in your newsreader without having to visit the website itself.

The importance of RSS, then, is that it allows blogs and other social media to build or become part of communities. They may often be small communities, but they are very focussed.

The other distribution that is sometimes neglected in any discussion of social media is search engines. Because blogs are very connected, the more established ones can become an authority on a niche topic in the eyes of Google.

If, say, you have been blogging about the cats for a good few months and your posts have attracted links from other blogs then a story about new government legislation on pet ownership on your blog may earn similar ranking for searches on that subject as the local newspaper or even national media in the eyes of search engines.

'It is difficult, indeed dangerous, to underestimate the huge changes this revolution will bring or the power of developing technologies to build and destroy - not just companies but whole countries.'

Rupert Murdoch

How social media works…

Now let's take a look at each of the main types of social media, and how they work. These explanations are very general, intentionally so, because with social media every rule seems to have an exception.

In fact, a defining characteristic of social media is the blurring of definitions, rapid innovation, reinvention and mash-ups.

Each explanation also has a section on how to try out that social media yourself, with pointers on both how to find social media that's relevant to you and how you might go about creating it. If you want to really understand how social media works there's no better way to do so than to take part in it for yourself.

Mash-ups: combining one or more pieces of content or software or websites is one the phenomena in social media that make it at once so exciting, fast-moving and sometimes bewildering. Mash-ups are possible because of the openness of social media – websites and software developers expect people to play with their services and reinvent them.

There are literally hundreds of mash-ups of the Google Earth service, where people have attached information to parts of the maps. For instance there is a UK rail service mash-up where you can track in real time where trains are on the map. Fans of the TV series 24 have mapped locations from the shows' plotlines on to a Google Earth map.

The other type of mash-up is content, usually videos and music. Popular videos on YouTube will often spawn hundreds of imitations, home pages and often comic reinterpretations.

In communities like this the number of mash-ups can often be an indicator of popularity.

Some marketers have cottoned on to the power of this and encourage people to reinterpret their content.

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Three brilliant mash-ups on YouTube

8 ½ Mile
Eminem's movie + Fellini

Love Will Freak Us
Missy Elliott + Joy Division

A Hard Day's Night of the Living Dead
The Beatles + zombie movies

How blogs work…

A blog, as we say, is basically an online journal where the entries are published with the most recent first.

There are a number of features that make a blog noteworthy and different from other websites:

Authorial voice: blogs tend to be written in a personal, conversational style. They are usually the work of identified author or group of authors.

Topic: blogs tend to define what it is they are writing about, from as specific as a blog about a book in progress to widely general topics like 'my musings on life and stuff'.

Links and trackbacks: the services people use to write blogs make it very easy for them to insert links to other websites, usually as reference to an article or blog post or to provide further information about the subject they are writing about.

Comments: each blog post has a comments section, which effectively acts as a message board for that article. On blogs with large audiences the debates in these sections can run to hundreds of comments at a time.

Subscription: blogs can be subscribed to, usually via RSS technology.

Blogs can be created quickly and easily using ant of a number of services. One of the simplest is the free Blogger service from Google. Others such as Wordpress and Typepad offer more features, the latter for a fee.

Author & topic

Links & trackbacks

Comments

Subscription
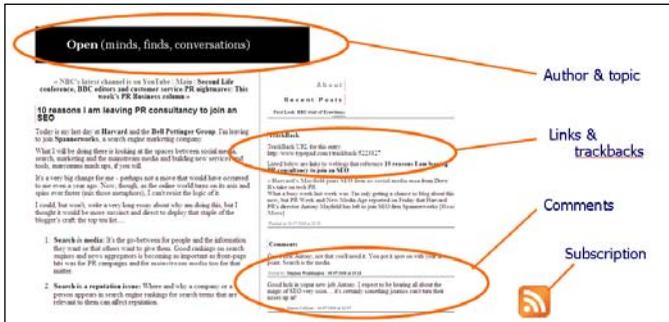
Different types of blogs

With millions of people around the world of different ages and backgrounds blogging about whatever they feel like, it is about as easy to generalise about 'bloggers' as to make sweeping statements about "human beings".

Here are some of the main kinds of blogs you will come across:

Personal blogs

Many millions of people keep blogs about their everyday lives, much like public diaries. You sometimes hear about some of these becoming very popular indeed, especially those anonymous, slightly risqué ones. You know the sort: they generally get written about in the Sunday Times and become best-selling novels.

Political blogs

Especially in the US, but increasingly in the UK also, blogs are being written about politics. Often as a response to media bias (across the political spectrum) they will mainly be commenting on the news, giving closer analysis to issues they feel have been misrepresented or glossed over by mainstream news.

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In America most if not all of the contenders for the presidency in 2008 already have bloggers on staff to advise on reaching political bloggers and their readers. We are not quite at that stage in the UK, but blogging has been playing a part in the resurgence of grass roots Conservative politics and right of centre bloggers such as [Iain Dale](#) and [Guido Fawkes](#) have been making their presence in the UK mainstream media.

Business blogs

Lots of professionals and businesses now have blogs. Broadly speaking they allow companies to communicate in a less formal style than has been traditional in newsletters, brochures and press releases. This can help to give a human face and voice to the organisation. For individuals in business a blog can become a very effective way of building a network of like minded individuals and raising their own profiles.

Almost media blogs

Some blogs are unashamedly media businesses in their own right, taking advertising and employing a blogger or a group of bloggers full-time. Effectively they are start ups that are talking advantage of the new blogging technologies and opportunities to build communities of readers in new or niche subject areas. These are generally to be found covering news and opinion in the technology and media industries.

Mainstream media blogs

Most national newspapers in the UK - not the mention the BBC, now have blogs for some of their reporters and editors. These can provide a great insight into the news gathering and reporting process but will also give vent to personal views that the journalist may have kept. It's worth noting that while many journalist blogs are hosted on newspaper sites themselves a large number are simply personal blogs with a major focus on their professional interests.

Reading blogs

The easiest way to read blogs is to subscribe to ones you find interesting using the Bloglines, Rojo or Newsgator newsreader services.

A newsreader is a website or piece of software where you can go to read a newsfeed that you are subscribed to via RSS. All blogs and most news websites have RSS feeds attached to them.

You can find blogs on topics that you're interested in by using search engines like Technorati or Google Blog Search. If you find a blog which is particularly interesting or relevant to you have a look for its *blogroll* or list of recommended blogs – it's a great way of exploring the networks of blogs.

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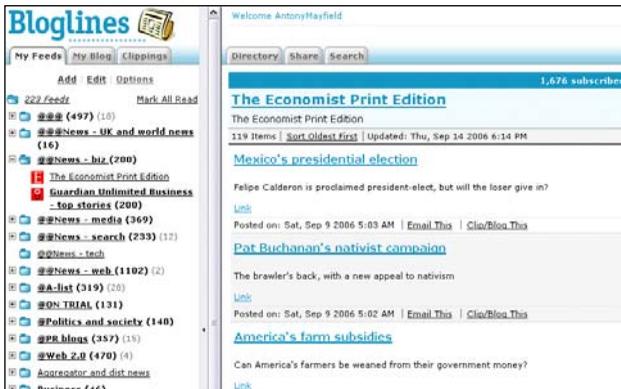
How wikis work…

Wikis are websites that allow people to contribute or edit content on them. They are great for collaborative working, for instance creating a large document or project plan with a team in several offices. They can be as private or as open as the people who create it want it to be.

Wikipedia

The most famous wiki is of course [Wikipedia](), an online encyclopedia that was started in 2001 and has over 1.3 million articles in English alone and over a million members.

In 2005 the respected scientific journal Nature conducted a study into the reliability of the scientific entries in Wikipedia and Encyclopedia Britannica. No one was surprised that Encyclopedia Britannica was the more reliable of the two. However, it was only marginally more accurate.

The Encyclopedia Britannica team issued a twenty page rebuttal of the study a few months later. Others have observed that while Encyclopedia Britannica had no entries for wiki, Wikipedia has a 2,500 word article on Encyclopedia Britannica, its history and methodology.

But Wikipedia is more than a reference source. During a major breaking news story, especially one which affects large numbers of people directly, like a natural disaster or political crisis, Wikipedia will act as a collective reporting function.

Trying out wikis…

As well as looking at Wikipedia some great examples of large Wiki projects you can take a look at and even join in on are:

Wikia
A community of wikis on different subjects

Wikihow
A practical 'how to' manual for everything from making coffee to writing business plans

WikiNews
Wikipedia's news project

You can start your own public wiki in the Wikia community, or look at the technology's possibilities for team working by trying out the services from companies like JotSpot and SocialText.

How podcasts work…

Podcasts are audio or video files that are published on the internet and can be subscribed to. Increasingly the word 'podcast' is being applied to any piece of audio or video that can be downloaded, although purists will debate the point.

And it is the subscription feature that makes a podcast so powerful as a form of social media. People have been able to upload audio content to the web for a long time, but the subscription feature means that people can build audiences, communities around their shows. It also effectively puts private individuals or brands on a level playing field with traditional media organisations when it comes to competing for people's attention with AV content.

Podcasts, like personal video recorders (PVRs), are part of a shift in media consumption patterns where people are increasingly watching or listening to content when and where it suits them. This is sometimes known as time-shifting.

When a new podcast is posted to the web, all subscribers' podcast services (like iTunes) are automatically notified and download the programme to their computer's hard drive. The podcast can then either be listened to on the computer or be downloaded onto an MP3 player, such as an iPod.

Naturally it's also meant that media brands have been able to invade one another's traditional territory. Many national newspapers in the UK have started effectively producing their own radio-style programmes and distributing them via their previously text-and-picture based websites. Channel 4 has also launched its own audio / podcasting brand, 4Radio.

The iTunes podcast section
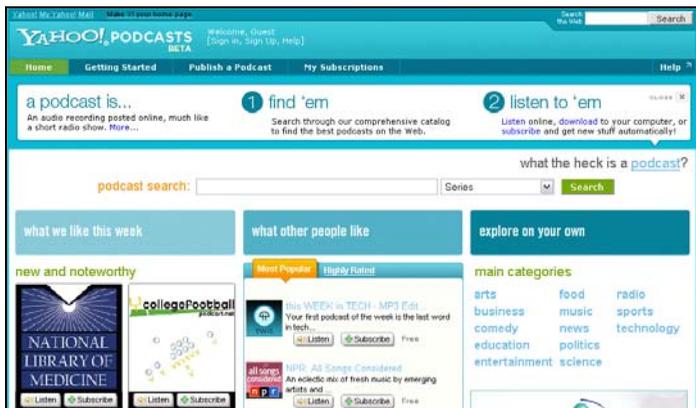
Yahoo! podcasts

Getting started with podcasts

If you already have an iPod and use iTunes you can click on the Podcast icon in the left-hand toolbar to access podcasts and subscribe to them.

Other good places to find and start listening to podcasts are Podcast Alley and Yahoo! Podcasts if you fancy trying your hand at creating your own podcast try downloading the free audio editing tool Audacious or have a look at the "how to" guide at Wikihow.

How social networks work…

Social networks on the web are like contained versions of the wider blogosphere. People joining a social network generally build a profile and are then encouraged to build a network by connecting to "friends" or "contacts" in the network or by inviting real-world contacts and friends to join the social network.

These communities retain the interest of their members by being useful to them and providing services that are entertaining or help them to expand their networks. MySpace, for instance, allows members to create vivid, chaotic home pages (they have been likened to the walls of a teenage bedroom) that they can upload images, videos and music to.

MySpace has built a lot of its popularity around its music services. There are said to over 3 million bands and

musicians registered on it, trying to attract a fan base from the 107 million registered members. According to Hitwise MySpace is the 8th largest referrer of traffic to HMV.co.uk, more even than the MSN search engine.

While MySpace is the best known social network, Bebo, which is popular among school-age children, actually has the most members, perhaps helped by the fact that it is grouped around schools and colleges.

The growth in use of social networks by young people in recent years has come at the expense of their consumption of traditional media such as TV and magazines. This switch in behaviour was one of the drivers behind the biggest deal in social media to date when Rupert Murdoch bought MySpace for US $580 million.

Marketers have also increasingly begun to experiment with trying to reach the members of MySpace and other social networks. Bebo hosts pages for many children's authors for instance, while MySpace has seen a rush of marketing efforts from Toyota to the US Army.

MySpace for older people?

More soberly, the LinkedIn network tries to be useful to its members by helping them to build their business and professional contacts into an online network. Many observers criticise it for not being open enough and for charging for too many of its services but it is probably the most successful online social network among people aged 25 and over.

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How content communities work…

Content communities look a bit like social networks - you have to register, have a home page and can make connections with friends - but they are generally focussed on sharing a particular type of content.

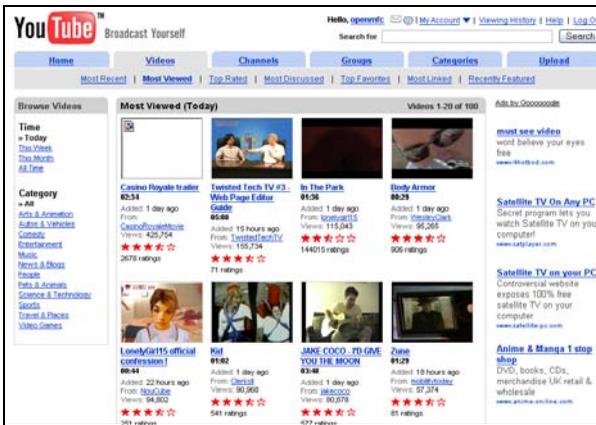The best way to illustrate this is of course to describe some of the most popular examples of content communities…

Flickr is based around sharing photography and is the most popular service if its kind in the UK. Members upload their photos to the site and choose whether to make them public or just share with family and friends in their network.

Thousands of groups on Flickr have formed around areas of common interest – as well as subjects for photography there

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are groups dedicated to particular graffiti artists, towns, sports and animals. If you work for a well-known or cult brand it is worth taking a look to see if there is a Flickr group about you – last time I looked there were groups for motorbike brands, consumer electronics brands and even the cult notebook brand Moleskine. Flickr was bought by Yahoo! for US $30 million in 2005.

YouTube is the world's largest video sharing service with over 100 million downloads every day. Members of YouTube can upload videos, make their own "channels" of favourite videos. The viral nature of YouTube videos is enhanced by a feature that makes it easy for people to cut and paste videos hosted by YouTube into their blogs.


As well as thousands of short videos from people's own video cameras, webcams and camera phones there are many clips from TV shows and movies hosted on the service while some people use the service to record video blogs.

YouTube is a small private company at the time of this e-book going to print, but rumours of its imminent purchase by a major media or internet brand abound.

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Digg is a news and content community. Members submit links to news stories and websites they think will be of interest and they are voted on by other members. Once a story has garnered about 40 votes it will be moved to the front page where it will receive wider attention from members and visitors to the site.
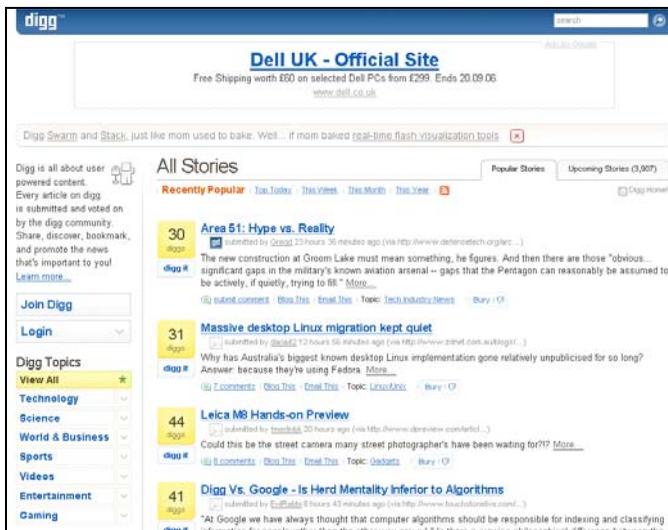
The Digg website gets about 800,000 unique visitors every day. The volume of traffic via popular links from the service is so great that it can cause smaller companies servers to crash.

Like YouTube rumours of acquisition deals and massive valuations for the service are flying around, but it remains independent and relatively small in terms of the number of employees (under 50).

Folksnonomies

Content communities are sometimes described as **folksonomies**. The term folksonomy actually refers to the way that information is organised - it is a play on the word taxonomy, a classification system.

In a folksonomy the information or content is "tagged" with one word descriptors. Anyone can add a tag to piece of content and see what other people have tagged.

For instance, <u>Del.icio.us</u> a bookmark sharing service that replaces the favourites folder on your web browser is a prime example of a folksonomy, but content communities like Flickr, YouTube and blogs generally make use of the folksonomy approach of tagging content to make it more easily found.

How Second Life works…

The latest online marvel that is capturing the imagination of the media is Second Life. Since it encourages community and social interaction some consider it to be a form of social media, although like so much in the new forms of online media it could very well be considered in a category of its own.

Second Life is a type of online computer game, but perhaps is better understood as an online virtual world. By registering and downloading the game you can enter the game world and create an "avatar" an in-game representation of yourself.

At the time of writing there are over 600,000 people registered for the game, of whom about half have been into the world in the last 60 days. In a single day in September 2006, US $417,000 was spent in the game.

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That last figure, perhaps the most surprising to those who know little about Second Life is made possible by the very real economy that exists in the virtual world, made possible by the ability to own private property within the game and by setting an exchange rate between the game's currency and the US dollar (four "Linden dollars" to the US dollar).

Marketers are beginning to experiment with the game world as well. Toyota is putting versions of its Scion xB 4x4s in the game in October, while new hotel brand Aloft is opening the first of its establishments in the game (the first real hotel will open in 2008). During its Big Weekend festival this year, BBC Radio 1 had a stage in Second Life with avatars of presenters and bands performing – anyone visiting the concert received a virtual digital radio that they could listen to Radio 1 on in the virtual world.

Doubtless a large part of the marketing benefit from these in-game presences really comes from the publicity in the non-virtual world that these generate, but these are intriguing precedents for marketers.

About Spannerworks

Spannerworks' search engine optimisation, Paid Search and social media optimisation services create positive return on investment by improving visibility in Internet search engines and brand prominence on social networks.

In plain speak that means we are good at getting websites top results in search engines, leading to more customer initiated outcomes. Our performance marketing methodology means that we only charge for results delivered, if we fail to deliver we don't charge.

We're based in Brighton, UK, and have been working hard for over a decade establishing our credentials with many of the UK's leading brands.

About the author

Antony Mayfield is Head of Content and Media at Spannerworks. Antony is a senior corporate communications professional, with ten years experience and specific expertise in online communications. He joined Spannerworks from Harvard, part of the UK's biggest PR group, where he was a director.

Antony has provided strategic counsel to clients including Reed Business Information, Vodafone, Fujitsu Services and Sony PlayStation. A Member of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR), he has over ten years experience in public relations and the media and writes about the marketing communications and social media on his blog Open (minds, finds, conversations) and is also a regular contributor to the Spannerworks SearchSense blog.

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