

# What Is Social Software?

Social software has played a major role in changing the ways people interact online. It has led to the birth of the read/write Web, where users are both consumers and producers of online content. The term “social software” is difficult to define because it can include so many different tools. Some people argue that social software includes the tools that allow people to connect more easily to each other online, such as wireless Internet access and mobile devices. A more narrow definition may only include software that lets people have a two-way conversation, excluding technologies such as podcasting and screencasting.

Tom Coates, a blogger and Yahoo! employee, created one of the most concise definitions: “Social software can be loosely defined as software which supports, extends, or derives added value from human social behaviour—message boards, music taste-sharing, photo-sharing, instant messaging, mailing lists, social networking.”<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this book, social software is defined as a tool that must meet at least two of the three following conditions:

1. It allows people to communicate, collaborate, and build community online.
2. It can be syndicated, shared, reused, or remixed, or it facilitates syndication.
3. It lets people learn easily from and capitalize on the behavior or knowledge of others.

While some tools (including electronic mailing lists and forum software) have been around for more than two decades, the majority of social software tools have been developed within the past 10 years. These newer tools both help create and benefit from modern ideas about the read/write Web, which promotes collaboration, sharing, and community-building from the bottom up.

## Characteristics of Social Software

While social software can include a variety of tools, certain characteristics distinguish it from other technologies.

### ***Easy Content Creation and Content Sharing***

Years ago, putting content on the Web was a job for tech-savvy individuals who were familiar with HTML and Web programming languages. With today's social software, anyone can add online content, including photos, text, audio, and video. Blogging software lets anyone create a Web page easily—using the software to write whatever they want and posting it to the Web a moment later. Blogs also allow organizations to develop a Web presence without a Webmaster. Essentially, if you can type, you can produce a blog. Wikis make it easy for groups of people to add content to a single space without needing to know any HTML. Essentially, a group of people can use a wiki to build a Web site together, democratizing the process of content creation.

Photo-sharing software lets people easily upload their digital photos to the Web to share them with family and friends or with the world. Audio recording software made it easy for users to create a digital audio file, but services that can host and syndicate these audio files now make podcasting accessible to everyone. Screencasting software lets people create Flash movies without knowing anything about Flash animation. Video-editing software has become affordable and easier to use. Even people without a server of their own can create a blog or a wiki, develop podcasts and screencasts, and put content online using one of many free storage services. Online directories of blogs, photos, podcasts, and videos let others find this content more easily. In fact, social software has made it easy for everyone to express themselves online, share content with family and friends, and become active developers of the World Wide Web.

### ***Online Collaboration***

While e-mail made it easy to communicate virtually, it wasn't easy to work collaboratively online until the wiki was born. Before wikis, collaborative Web development translated to a group of people telling their Web developer what they wanted on their site. With wikis, anyone can add or edit content, letting people create a Web site together and

asynchronously. Wikis can be used collaboratively to develop guides and knowledgebases, plan conferences, and edit text. They also offer a terrific space for collecting knowledge from a diverse group of people for everyone's benefit.

### ***Conversations: Distributed and in Real Time***

Social software allows conversations to occur in many different forms. Blogs that allow comments enable conversation between the author and his or her readers. A more distributed conversation (a conversation held in more than one place), however, can occur when a blogger uses his or her own blog to comment on another person's writing. Permalinks, or permanent links to specific blog posts, let people easily refer their readers to the blog post on which they are commenting. TrackBacks and applications that follow the thread of a conversation across blogs let us know who said what about us, so we can respond to them on our own blog. People can even subscribe to "ego searches" to receive an update every time another blogger refers to them.

Conversations can take place online in real time through the use of instant messaging (IM) or Voice over IP (VoIP). With IM, two or more individuals can type messages to each other in real time, letting them have a synchronous conversation online through the use of text. Voice over IP is an Internet protocol that allows two or more people to talk with each other through their computers. Using VoIP is much the same as talking on the phone, only the signal is transmitted over the Internet rather than a phone line, usually with no cost involved.

### ***Communities Developed from the Bottom Up***

People usually think of online communities as groups that are created from above and consciously joined. This type of online community has clear boundaries—you are either a member of a community or you are not. However, many social software tools allow communities to be created from the bottom up, where people are connected in a network by their affiliations to one another, and where boundaries are more permeable and changeable. Bloggers offer an excellent example of a community developed from the bottom up. Hundreds of individuals start their own blogs and write about a certain topic. Somehow, as they link to each other

and comment on each other's blogs, a community begins to form. These bloggers begin to feel that they have become part of a community that they did not consciously join, but their connection is based only on their linking behavior and their comments.

These bottom-up online communities are similar to networks, in which people can be connected to each other by third parties, and connections can be either strong or weak. Bloggers may not all know each other, but they are connected by their connections to other bloggers. I may read a blog, and someone else may read the same blog, but we don't read each other's blogs. Yet we are still part of the same community based on our shared connection as readers. Social networking software works in a similar way. One person creates a profile about himself and adds a list of his friends with links to their profiles. He can then see his friends' friends, visualizing how they are connected to others through people he already knows. This lets people connect with friends of friends for dating, friendships, or business in an interconnected web of relationships that somehow forms a community.

Social software helps us build different types of communities. Online community doesn't require a forum, a bulletin board, or an electronic mailing list. Conversations can take place in a wiki, in the comments section of a blog, through photo-sharing software, through linking behavior, or through common tagging of materials. Communities such as this require no maintenance and no central authority. They exist only because people are using the same social tools or taking part in similar activities.

### ***Capitalizing on the Wisdom of Crowds***

Not only can we converse, collaborate, and build a community online, but we can learn a lot from the aggregate knowledge and behavior of others. Many social software tools let us learn more as more people participate. Wikis, for example, let tens, hundreds, thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of people add their knowledge to a single Web site, creating a tremendous knowledgebase about a given subject. If your library colleagues recorded everything they know about reference materials and Web sites in an internal wiki, each member of the library staff would essentially have their colleagues' knowledge with them daily at the reference desk. The more people add their knowledge to a wiki, the more useful it becomes.

The wisdom of crowds also shines through in recommendation systems. People always want to know that they are buying the best product or getting the best deal. Before the Web, we used magazines such as *Consumer Reports* or asked friends; now, we all can benefit from the knowledge of millions of other consumers. People write up their impressions of hotels, restaurants, and products and put them online for everyone to see. People can easily assign ratings to the movies they rent and the books they buy. Sites also make recommendations passively based on individuals' purchasing behavior. With this kind of people-driven system, a substandard product will not stay on the market for long.

With tagging, people can make sense of the Web. A tag is basically a keyword, and users are tagging their blog posts, their photos, and the Web sites they bookmark so that people can find them easily. People can search for a single tag and find everything others have tagged under that term. With social bookmarking, people bookmark Web pages that are meaningful to them and tag them with descriptive terms. If someone is interested in wikis, they can call up everything others have tagged with the term "wiki." Ostensibly, the documents that people tag "wiki" are going to be more relevant—and perhaps of higher quality—than those that Google indexes under that term. Tagging helps people make sense of their own resources and, by extension, makes it easier for others to discover the same things.

## ***Transparency***

The wisdom of crowds produces transparency. If the quality of a product is poor, a company does something controversial, or a congressman breaks the law, you can be certain that people will find out about it. The reputation of any organization can be ruined by a string of bad reviews online or by a group of bloggers posting negative comments. The crowd can bring a gadget, a book, or a piece of software great fame, or ensure that no one buys it just as easily. While this may be startling to corporations that are used to letting their public relations executives deal with the traditional media, this transparency also presents a unique opportunity. Social software lets organizations connect with customers in a more personal way. In addition to its flashy impersonal Web site, General Motors has a blog ([fastlane.gmblogs.com](http://fastlane.gmblogs.com)) where company executives write about what's happening behind the scenes. Rather than writing as GM, these

people write under their own names, with their own voice, and connect with their customers as human beings. Putting a human face on a large, impersonal company can be difficult, but social software can offer companies—and libraries—the chance to connect with their customers on a personal level.

### ***Personalization***

Some people read the newspaper from cover to cover, but many people only read articles on particular topics of interest. However, they still have to go through the entire paper to pick out what they want to read. What if you could tell your newspaper the topics you were interested in and have only articles on those topics delivered to your doorstep every day? RSS essentially lets you roll your own daily news online. RSS is a social software tool that allows users to syndicate content from various sites onto a single Web page or into an RSS aggregator. So if you're interested in technology news, you can subscribe to technology RSS feeds from various sources, including mainstream media like the *New York Times*, blogs, and scholarly journals. Some Web sites even let you subscribe to a search term and receive all the news or blog posts related to that term; you could subscribe to the term "wiki" to have every blog post written about wikis sent to you daily. This leaves you with an online newspaper you would enjoy reading from cover to cover.

RSS is also the technology behind podcasts, audio files that are syndicated on the Web. Many podcasts are designed much the same as radio shows, with music, commentary, and humor. You can subscribe to the podcasts you like best, download them to your MP3 player, and essentially create your own radio station that plays only what you want to hear. RSS enables people to choose what information is pushed to them. They no longer have to hunt for materials on their topics of interest or wade through irrelevant material.

### ***Portability***

To use the Internet, we used to be tied to our desks at work or at home. As access became more ubiquitous, people started to take their work with them wherever they went. Unfortunately, most traditional computer applications aren't portable: Desktop applications are installed on one computer and then can be accessed only on that computer. Even if another

computer has the same application, you have to bring all of your personal files with you on a portable storage device. Fortunately, most social software applications are Web applications. If you're sitting at an Internet café in Fiji, you can still access your blog to write about your vacation, upload photos to your photo-sharing application, and read all of your favorite blogs and news sources in your RSS aggregator. As long as you remember your username and password for each application, your social software applications can follow you wherever you find an Internet connection.

Beyond using portable Web applications, more people now access the Web through mobile devices such as PDAs and cellphones. These tools can be used to search Google, check movie times, network with friends, send e-mails, take photos or movies and upload them to the Web, and send text messages. More and more Web sites and applications are designed to be accessed by both desktops and handheld devices, making it possible for people to use their handhelds to do many of the same things on their desktop computer. SMS, or mobile text messaging, has become a particularly popular way for young people to communicate with one another, and companies are taking advantage of this by offering services that push information to users via SMS. Web applications, mobile devices, and text messaging provides access to people online 24/7, no matter where they are.

### ***Overcoming Barriers of Distance and Time***

Social software does an excellent job of overcoming the barriers of distance and time, giving people a chance to communicate and work together wherever they are. Through IM and VoIP, people can communicate with each other in real time. Libraries with IM reference services can provide the same level of service whether a patron is on the other side of the library or the other side of the world. Using wikis, people can collaborate on a project online without having to be in the same room together or work on it at the same time. These tools make in-person meetings much less necessary.

## **Why Should Librarians Care About Social Software?**

Social software is obviously an important trend, but why should librarians be concerned? First, and most importantly, our patrons are using

these tools. No matter what type of library you work in, your patrons will be using some type of social software, whether they IM, blog, or listen to podcasts. It's important to be aware of the tools your patrons use to see if you can provide services using the same tools. If the vast majority of your patrons use IM, it may make sense to offer virtual reference services via IM. If your patrons are avid blog readers, your library might want to start a blog to disseminate information about programs, services, or resources.

While social software tools can improve the ways in which libraries communicate with patrons, they can also improve internal communication and knowledge sharing. Blogs, wikis, and social bookmarking each can play a role. A library wiki knowledgebase can decrease people's dependence on their colleagues' in-person expertise. Blogs are a great way to disseminate news about broken printers or new databases. Social bookmarking can help colleagues share useful Web links. Libraries not only should examine how social software can improve services to their patrons, but they should also consider how these tools can improve internal communication and collaboration.

Finally, librarians often talk about providing outreach to their patrons. This usually means getting out of the library and providing services where patrons congregate. But what if your patrons are hanging out online? Libraries should be aware of their patrons' online social worlds, whether these are Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), social networking sites, or other online communities. Whatever your patrons' third place, consider how you can provide services there. Librarians can do market research, build presence, market services, provide reference services, and develop portals to library resources in these online worlds. If patrons spend more time online than they do at the library, it makes sense for libraries to provide outreach online.

Libraries need to look at social software applications as valuable tools for communicating with and serving their current patrons, as well as attracting new library patrons. Social software can provide libraries with a human face beyond their walls. It can provide them with ways to communicate, collaborate, educate, and market services to their patrons and other community members. Social software can also help libraries position themselves as the online hub of their communities. Technology can make libraries more relevant to people who think they can get all their information from the Web, while attracting a brand new population to the library.

## Endnote

1. Tom Coates, "An Addendum to a Definition of Social Software," plastic bag.org, January 5, 2005, [www.plasticbag.org/archives/2005/01/an\\_addendum\\_to\\_a\\_definition\\_of\\_social\\_software.shtml](http://www.plasticbag.org/archives/2005/01/an_addendum_to_a_definition_of_social_software.shtml) (accessed May 26, 2006).

