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Editors' Comments - Special Issue on Enterprise and Industry Applications of Social Media

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EDITORS' COMMENTS

FROM THE GUEST EDITORS

The rise in popularity in the use of social media tools in recent years is staggering. Wikipedia was founded in 2001, yet now hosts over 16 million user-generated articles in dozens of languages. Facebook has only been open to the general public for four years, yet boasts over 500 million users—enough to be considered the world's third largest country behind China and India—over half of whom use the service daily. YouTube streams over 2 billion videos per day, with 24 hours of new video content uploaded each minute. Over 190 million people currently use Twitter, sharing 65 million new “Tweets” per day. The above statistics are accurate as of this writing but will surely be obsolete on the day this paper is published.

The rapid adoption of these social media tools represents both an exciting opportunity and a genuine threat for organizations and their managers. These tools do provide environments for employees to interact more easily with one another and with customers, partners, and key stakeholders—but these tools can both help and hinder organizations. They can more easily channel positive sentiment and valuable information to reach the right people, at the right place, at the right time to be useful for decision-making. On the other hand, negative sentiment can move just as quickly while proprietary information can more easily escape careful control by the organization. These tools allow groups to form and work together quickly and easily, for purposes either aligned with or opposed to your organization's objectives.

This special issue highlights how companies are beginning to explore the use of social media tools to achieve organizational goals, and the challenges that they have faced. We hope that executives will find in these research articles key takeaways for managing the deployment of readily available organizational social media platforms as well as for managing employees who are adopting, or co-opting, social media tools.

From these four research articles, it is clear that there are many ways in which the managerial decisions surrounding social media tools are similar to the management challenges associated with previous generations of IT tools. Virtually all of the authors

note, for instance, that top management support is critical for successful implementation of social media initiatives, a success factor that will come as little surprise to veteran IT managers. IT executives will also find familiar themes in the potential for unanticipated consequences of IT adoption (e.g., the recognition that USAA's Nexus system partially alienated middle management in the article by Leidner et al.), the need to provide some training and guidance for users to effectively use the technology (e.g., the advocacy of user tools in Dell's Ideastorm in the article by DiGangi et al.), and the need to align IT tools with the organization's culture and strategic objectives (e.g., in Gallagher and Ransbotham's discussion of Starbucks) while remaining mindful of the organization's ability to effectively absorb new systems, processes, and routines (e.g. absorptive capacity in Culnan et al.).

Perhaps the most salient management theme observed in these articles that was also seen in previous generations of IT is the fact that the return on investment remains stubbornly difficult to identify and quantify. Although we can see clear anecdotal evidence for the success of these tools—whether measured by employee retention (USAA), brand awareness (Starbucks), or new ideas (Dell)—precisely how to measure the impact of social media remains elusive.

While some of the lessons learned in these articles have been observed in previous deployments of information systems, social media tools raise significant new challenges for executives. We selected the articles for this issue in part because they helped illustrate ways in which social media tools are different from previous generations of IT. One new challenge is an increased urgency for companies to develop *a consistent and integrated message* across a diverse set of very different social media tools used in different ways. Culnan et al. find that organizations often employ multiple social media platforms—such as Twitter, Facebook, and blogs—housed within different areas of the organizations. Each of these platforms are used in different ways, as when an internal social networking site for an organization is used to coordinate corporate social events, while an external blog is used to keep consumers up-to-date about corporate decisions. Each tool implies a certain time horizon; “always-on” Twitter feeds, for

example, require companies to engage more rapidly in rumor control than postings on a site checked by users on a more irregular basis. How to strategically align these different media so that a company presents a single enriched face to the customer is not simple, as illustrated by Gallaugher and Ransbotham.

A second challenge presented by the corporate use of social media is in whether and *how to manage the uncontrollability of a crowd* in a way that avoids damage to the company's reputation from negative publicity, yet harnesses the value that an uncontrolled crowd can bring in terms of brand loyalty and innovation. Managers must learn how to mobilize online communities around the social media without taking control away from the community. Among these case studies, Starbucks and Dell particularly struggled with this challenge. Attempting to impose too much control may reveal an inauthentic voice that can have a chilling effect on participation or, worse, spark a backlash from members of the community. One need to only follow the news to observe how social media communities can rebel against established organizations; as we go to press, recent news stories have shown that Comcast, Domino's, and Amazon (to name only a few) have all learned this lesson the hard way.

Each of our case studies also demonstrates that *online communities don't just happen: they need to be mobilized*. Mobilization can be fostered through injecting new ideas (like at Starbucks), through strategically placing employees or other resources throughout the organization to be ready to respond to online (as recommended for Dell), or through encouraging the community to govern themselves (such as at USAA).

Mobilization is not enough, however. As the articles in this special issue suggest, balancing the leadership versus control dynamic by setting user expectations, as well as providing guidance and advice, helps to clarify the partnership expected between the organization and customer-users. These expectations should include rules about content and behavior that are strictly forbidden – typically, rules that are similar to expectations an organization might have in off-line contexts (e.g., no cyberstalking, no pornography, no personal attacks). These expectations can also be established in subtler ways such as in the manner to which user comments are responded to. For instance, as seen in the discussion of Dell's IdeaStorm, a lack of response from Dell to customer's ideas led the community to lose enthusiasm.

There are a range of additional challenges faced by managers interested in corporate use of social media. Managers need to carefully consider tertiary beneficiaries of the social media, not just the immediate users. That is, it may not be simply those who are online who are affected by the usage of social media. At USAA, for example, some internal managers not involved in the original social media deployment plans were the ones who later turned out most concerned about the changes that the social media created to the workplace. The need to be responsive to customer and/or community input 24-by-7 requires managers to develop a rapid response capability. Automated workflow applications for processing and routing incoming unstructured information to appropriate departments is another need to be considered, as noted by Culnan et al.

Despite these challenges, we believe the dawn of social media represents an exciting time for IT and business managers. Tim Berners-Lee notes that social media is the fulfillment of what the World Wide Web was originally supposed to be. Although managers would rightly be wary of getting caught up in the hype, the so-called “.com” revolution continues in new directions. Social media brings with it many exciting possibilities and many very real threats. Nevertheless, it may no longer be possible to ignore the impact of social media tools in a context in which employees and customers use them regardless of whether managers approve or are even aware their use. It may be that just when IT tools become simple, ubiquitous, and easy to use, that the exciting management challenges really begin.

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Guest Editors

FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Please join me in extending our thanks to the three guest editors for this special issue. Their work began over a year ago as they planned the 2009 pre-ICIS SIM Academic Workshop in Phoenix where they facilitated discussions about the management challenges and lessons learned from social media innovators, such as the companies highlighted here. Be sure to check the *MISQE* website for details about the 2010 pre-ICIS workshop and special issue on New IS Leadership Roles for a Digital World.

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