

What Did They Say?: Online Communities

Today's companies engage with customers more directly than ever before. There are three big reasons for this change: *new forms of interaction* and *consumer technology* that ultimately lead to *more vocal markets*. This isn't simply better communication—it's fundamentally new kinds of discourse with customers and markets spurred by what Clay Shirky calls "the power of organizing without organizations."

New Ways to Interact

Corporate communications was once a formal affair, sent on letterhead and approved by marketing. No more. Today's companies are leaky sieves through which unregulated and unapproved messages flow between customers and employees at all levels of the organization. Social media redefines what we think of as public relations, demanding new tools and new approaches.

Career marketers may be tempted to stifle such communications in order to better control their messages and the way the brands they represent are perceived. They'll fail for one simple reason: customers like to connect. Companies that engage directly with customers for marketing, support, and research get strong competitive advantages—lower costs, stronger loyalty, better conversion rates, and improved product designs.

Consumer Technology

One reason that PR is being redefined is that we're all just a click away from one another. Employees have Blackberries and iPhones that connect directly to social media. Even when they're not at work, these tools keep workers linked to their organizations. This has resulted in the creation of many informal relationships between an organization and its market. For example, Comcast's Twitter-based support program began from an employee's casual use of the microblogging tool. Search, too, makes it easy for people

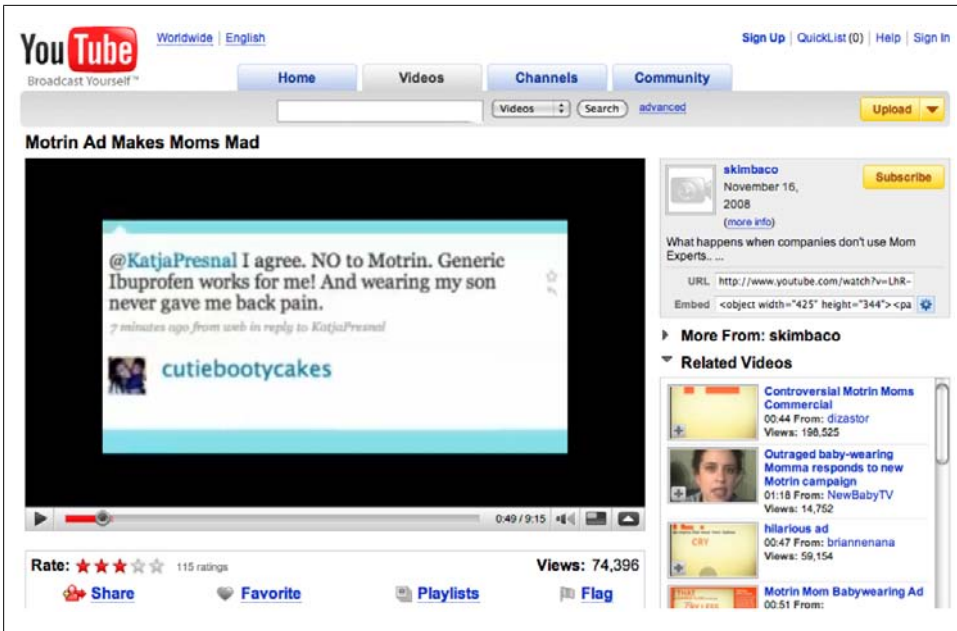


Figure 11-1. When communities strike back: the Motrin Moms viral video

to keep track of what their employers are up to, breaking down the traditional walls that kept formal marketing teams blissfully unaware of the consequences of their work.

Employees and customers can now connect on external systems, outside of the control of the company itself, often with a degree of anonymity and candor that circumvents employment agreements, leaving their employers naked and without recourse.

And they do so anytime, anywhere.

Vocal Markets

Direct engagement is born of necessity as consumers find their voice. Thirty years ago, disgruntled buyers could do little more than scratch out their righteous indignation in a letter to the local paper, throwing themselves on the mercy of the editorial court. Today, social media is the great amplifier. Consider a controversial advertising campaign for Motrin, launched in late 2008. Twitter users voiced their objection to the ads' portrayal of mothers, using microblogging and YouTube videos to get their point across (http://adage.com/digital/article?article_id=132622), as shown in Figure 11-1. Motrin killed the campaign and apologized (www.mathewingram.com/work/2008/11/16/flash-flood-mom-bloggers-and-motrin/).

In a connected world, an angry mob forms in an instant, undermining millions of dollars and thousands of hours of work. If you're not trying to engage customers directly, you

can be blind to—or blindsided by—an online movement that fundamentally changes your business.

A happy community, on the other hand, rewards you with free marketing and positive word of mouth. Businesses that understand this fundamental shift are connecting directly with their markets through communities and social media, abandoning formal messages and rigid hierarchies in favor of dynamic interactions at all levels of the organization. Marketing is a dialogue, sometimes in the extreme: Skittles went so far as to replace its website with a Twitter feed showing mentions of its candy, effectively turning its brand over to its customers.

How did we get here?

Where Communities Come from

Online communities have been around for decades, but it took recent advances in usability, widespread Internet adoption, and the proliferation of social media to make online communities and social networks something organizations could no longer afford to ignore.

Digital Interactions

The Internet on which the Web runs is a communications platform. Long before the Web, nerds with common interests found ways to talk amongst themselves. In fact, people using computers started to connect with each other during the early 1960s. Even before the Internet was introduced, military organizations and large corporations were implementing ambitious networks to share and store information.

By the 1970s, bulk email platforms kept groups in touch using *listservs*. These special-interest mailing lists are still widely used today in the form of Google Groups, Yahoo! Groups, and MSN Groups. Some community platforms also emerged in academic environments, running on university minicomputers.

Bulletin board systems (BBSs) brought computer-based communities out of academia and into the public psyche. In 1978, Ward Christensen—snowed in and bored during a storm in Chicago—decided to write the first BBS, known simply as CBBS.

Online Communities: A Historian's Perspective

Computer networks have existed through the 1950s and onward, although they vary in terms of what the computers let you do and how you can interact—the whole reason TCP/IP took off with such velocity is that it is so flexible and can shoot through other networks. But there was a whole range of networks out there long, long before the 1970s.

One of the first ones that really pushed itself as being a “community” was PLATO (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PLATO_system). But let's go back further. Home com-

puters with modems? In that case, one might want to look at the BBSs of the 1970s, like CBBS. I made a documentary on those.

Some of the BBSs out there grew quite quickly once people started hooking on. Nothing would count past 1982 for a “first online community,” although the introduction of FidoNet in 1984 would probably be a big pointer for when we had all sorts of networked folks interacting.

We’re talking probably a few thousand folks linked into pre-1982 communication.

—Jason Scott,
owner of www.textfiles.com,
Internet historian,
and director of the acclaimed *BBS Documentary*

In the world of amateur technologists, BBSs were an instant hit. Fueled by the popularity and affordability of the personal computer, thousands of hobbyists began building and operating their own. They all featured the same basic functions:

- A *message base* that allowed users to communicate with each other locally or regionally (through inter-BBS protocols such as FidoNet)
- A *file sharing system* that allowed users to upload and download files
- Turn-based and real-time “door” *games* that allowed users to compete against each other
- Real-time *chat*, allowing users to converse with one another

Early BBSs often included other functions such as voting, BBS lists, polls, and art galleries (Figure 11-2) that helped personalize them and increased visitor stickiness. BBSs became popular enough that people traveled from various countries to meet each other in person. They foreshadowed the modern Web—in fact, nearly everything that’s happened on the Web has happened before in the BBS world on a far smaller and geekier scale.

A dominant feature of BBSs was a message base like the one shown in Figure 11-3. This was a forum that allowed users to interact with one another, typically organized around a topic or special-interest group. Some of these areas were private, hidden to other users if they didn’t have the required credentials.

Some BBS communities are still strong today—the Whole Earth ’Lectronic Link (WELL) was founded in 1985, but made the transition to the Web and is still around (as part of Salon.com). Until relatively recently, however, online communities were the domain of technologists, activists, and fringe groups. Widespread adoption of computers with Internet access wasn’t enough for communities to become truly mainstream. They also had to be easy to use.



Figure 11-2. The main menu of a BBS, yesterday's equivalent of index.html

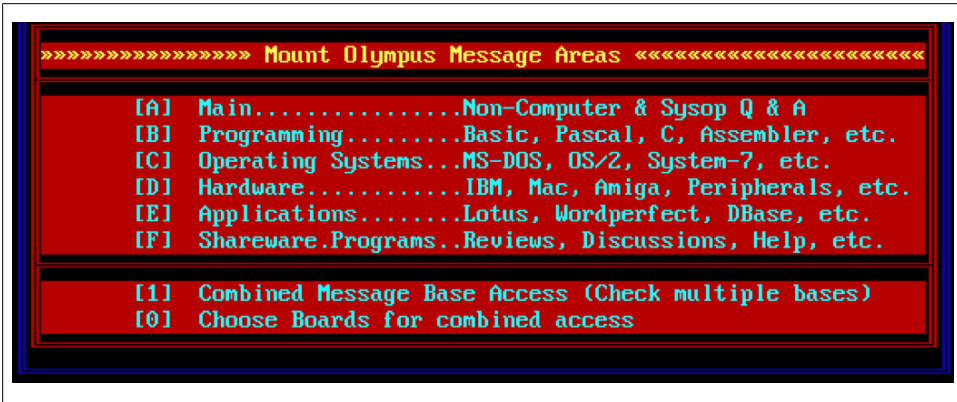


Figure 11-3. Mount Olympus BBS's Message Base

Making It Easy for Everyone

To use an early BBS, visitors had to type cryptic modem codes into terminals, often dialing for hours to try to get through to perpetually busy phone lines. Then they stared at text-only screens and slow-moving cursors. It wasn't an easy way to connect with others, and it attracted a certain kind of user.

Despite the efforts of communities in the 1980s that built client-side graphical mouse-driven interfaces, these systems were generally proprietary, platform-specific approaches that discouraged widespread adoption, for example, Hi_Res BBS, Magic BBS, and COCONET (<http://www.bbsdocumentary.com/software/IBM/DOS/COCONET/>). Accounts were also tied to the individual BBS—if you frequented 10 different BBSs, you had 10 different email messages to check, which made it hard to centralize your online identity.

Today, users don't need special hardware or lengthy codes—they just need a web browser. Online communities of many different types welcome everyone. But at their core, communities haven't changed much at all: they exist for interaction. In the end, *online communities are about the conversation.*

Online Communities on the Web

The first version of the Web wasn't about connecting people to one another; it was about connecting people to information. It was a universal system for information retrieval, where everything was interrelated by hyperlinks. It followed ideas established in text-based linked directories such as Gopher.

At that time, there were other protocols and applications for communication, from email to chat rooms to instant messaging, so the Web was more focused on information retrieval. The Web's first destinations were directories and search engines, such as AltaVista, shown in its early form in [Figure 11-4](#).

Deciding What Mattered

Directories weren't enough. Once the world had tasted the Web, and found it good, it needed tools to make it better. As the number of destinations on the Internet grew, users needed ways to find out what was interesting. Search engines based on relevance algorithms (such as Google's PageRank) provided better, more up-to-date results than static directories.

Eventually, communities emerged that could suggest good content. As we now know, groups of web users are great at figuring out which destinations are interesting, because they can quickly flag bad sites and throw the weight of their numbers behind good ones. Slashdot, Reddit, and Digg, shown in [Figure 11-5](#), are examples of dominant aggregation communities today.

Community recommendation reflected a shift in how the Internet worked. Instead of users deciding what they were interested in and “pulling” it from the Web, these sites “pushed” content toward users by telling them what their community thought they'd find interesting. This is an important change that has affected how most online applications are designed today, built around lifestreams, friendfeeds, alerts, and status updates.



Figure 11-4. The *Altavista.com* search engine of many years ago emphasizes a directory of information organized by editors

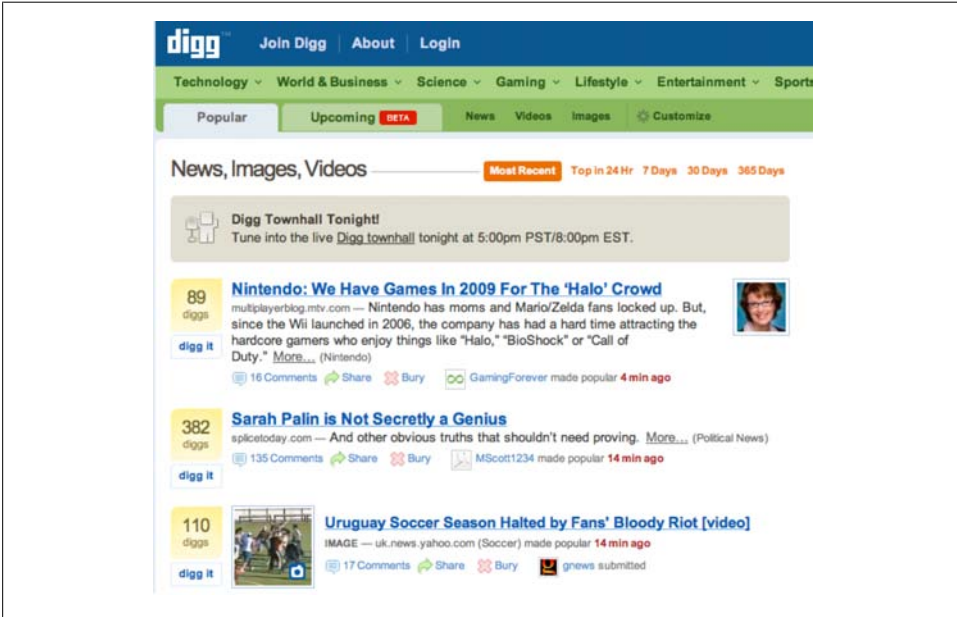


Figure 11-5. The front page of *digg.com*

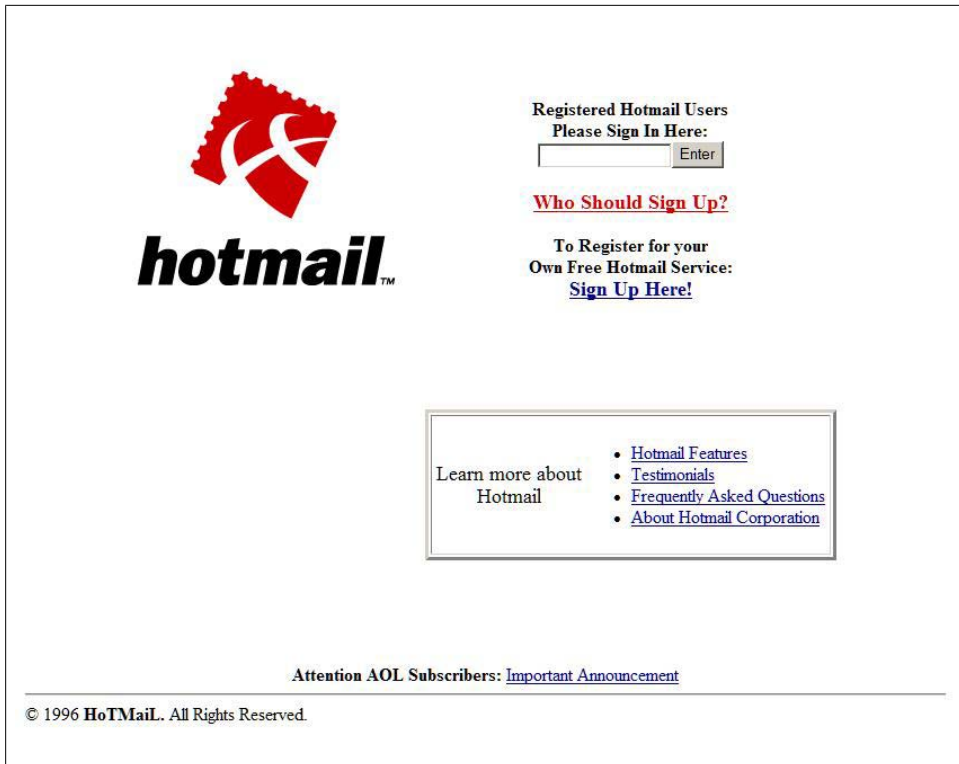


Figure 11-6. Hotmail.com in 1996, courtesy of cidfador's Flickr photostream (special thanks to @maczter for finding this for us)

Email for Everyone, Everywhere

While relevance-based search and recommendation communities were making it easier to find the right content, people began using the Web to communicate. By 1996, enough people had web browsers that Hotmail, shown in [Figure 11-6](#), was able to sign up millions of customers for its online messaging service in just a few months. No longer did users have one email address per ISP subscription; now, everyone in a household could have his or her own.

Personal email required an address book. This meant that mail service providers had a map of who each user knew, which would later become important for building out a “social graph” of their relationship to others.

Instant Gratification

Email messages were great, but only for specific kinds of interaction: relatively long, carefully constructed messages that weren't responded to immediately. Several of the large online portals added instant messaging (IM) functionality as part of their services.

IM gained immediate popularity. Email address books and IM contacts merged. Trillian, originally a client for Internet Relay Chat, was one of the first IM clients that spanned multiple IM networks, and today's IM clients, such as the one shown in Figure 11-7, are independent of a specific service provider—it's possible for a person on one network to talk to users on others.

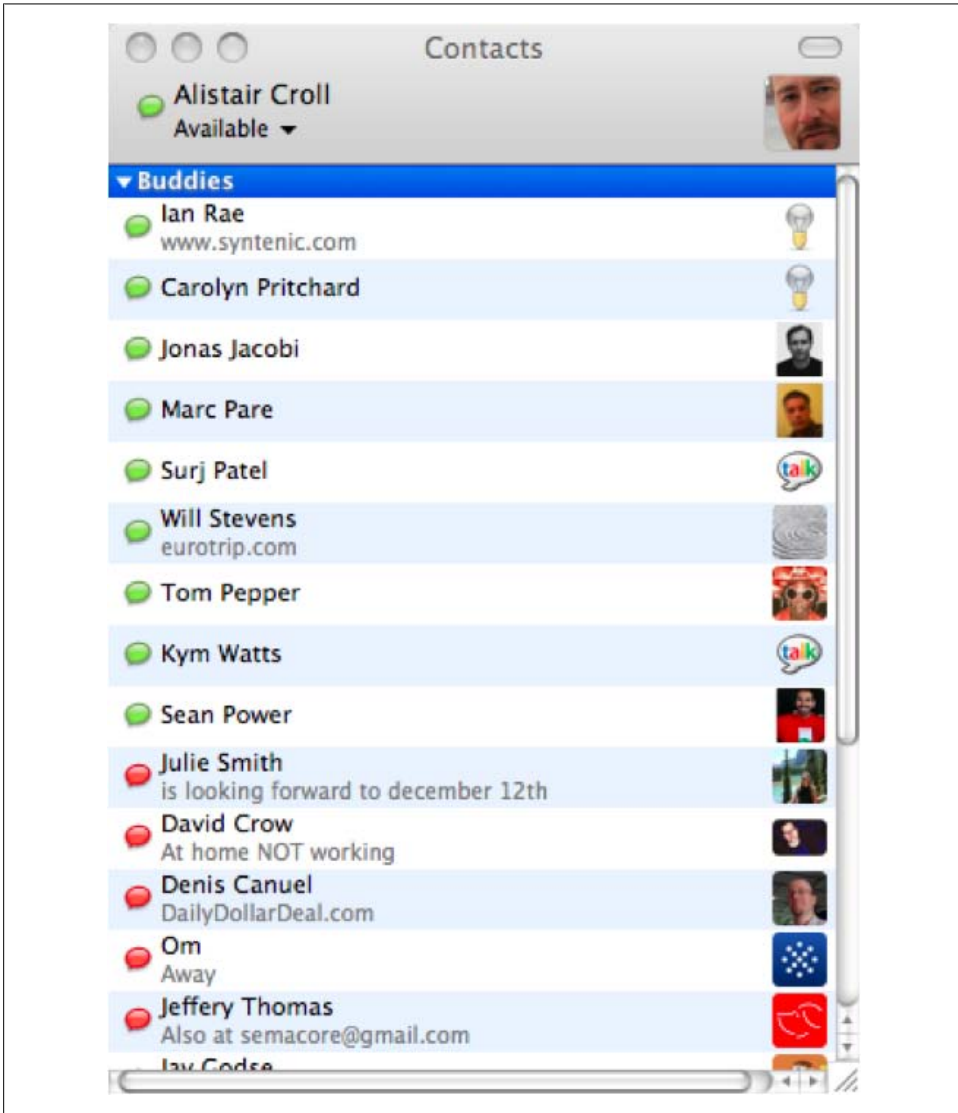


Figure 11-7. The Adium client for Mac OS X

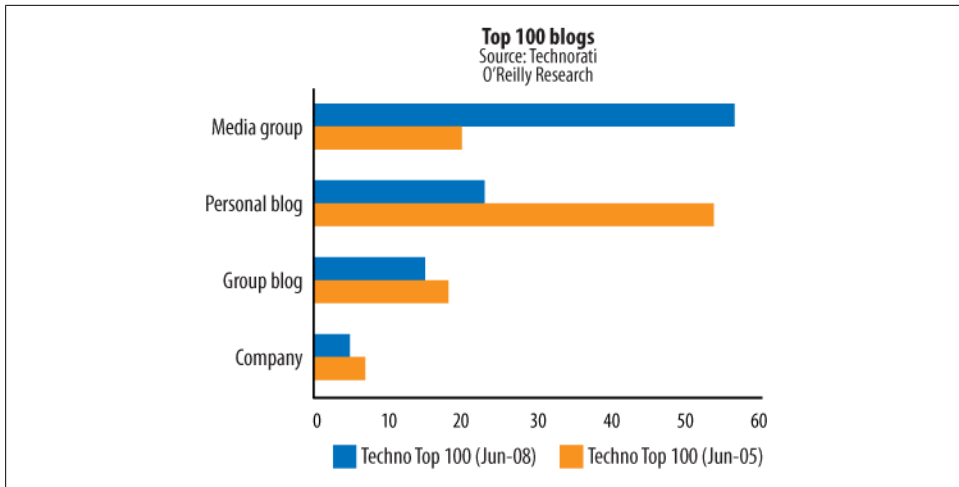


Figure 11-8. Top 100 blogs of 2008, according to Technorati

Power in Numbers

By March 2008, instant messaging platforms already accounted for very large user bases. According to Comscore (via TechCrunch), in terms of monthly users, MSN had 235 million, QZone managed 100 million, Yahoo! hosted 97.6 million, AIM accounted for 27.3 million, ICQ for 30 million, and GTalk handled 4.9 million.

Everyone's a Publisher

The Internet also made everyone a publisher. While creating and maintaining a website manually was hard work—few mainstream users had the time to hand-edit the HTML of their personal websites to keep the world apprised of their daily goings-on—blogs (first known as “weblogs”) lowered the bar for online authors, and millions of users launched personal websites.

Within a few short years, blogging became a dominant force online. Whereas in 2005 most of the top 100 bloggers were individuals, as [Figure 11-8](#) shows, today they are media organizations.

Still, blogging wasn't for everyone. Social networks were quick to provide simpler online presence. MySpace made it easy for the average web citizen to have a single page online, and appealed to a younger audience than ever. Friendster and Facebook, shown in [Figure 11-9](#), focused on the relationships between their users. Everyone invited their friends, and a few dominant players emerged as a result of the strong network effects these sites enjoyed. By filling out how we knew our friends, we were creating what we now call a “social network.” For business relationships, sites like LinkedIn and Spoke focused on referrals and employment history.

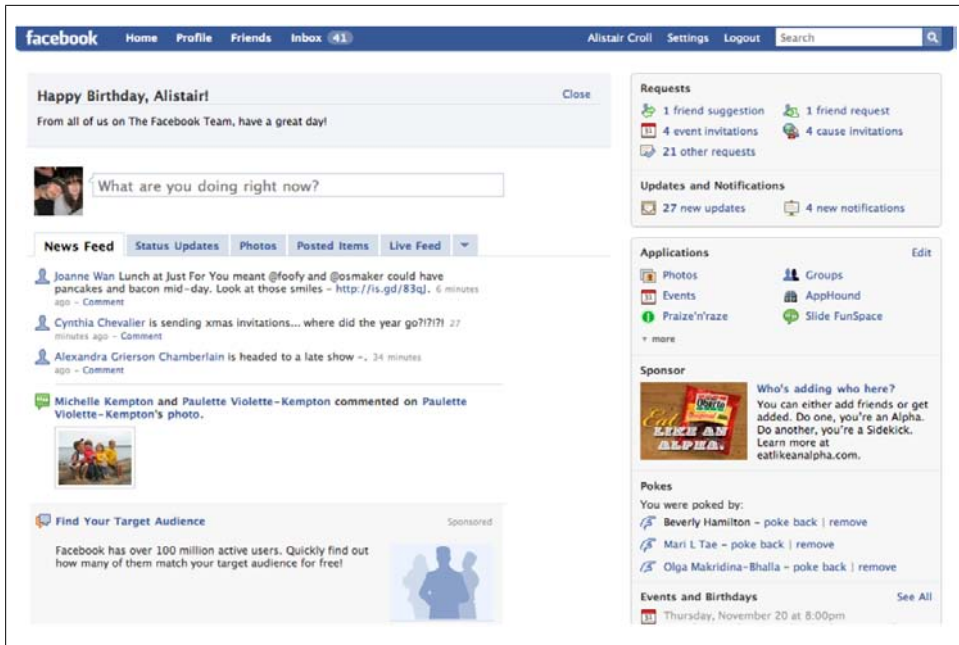


Figure 11-9. Inside [Facebook.com](http://facebook.com)



A map of a person’s social network is also sometimes called a *social graph*. The term social graph refers to graph theory, and entered the Internet vernacular when Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook used it to describe the company’s map of social interrelationships.

Another key element of these social sites was the ability to send small updates to our communities, keeping them apprised of what we were doing, and maintaining a degree of “ambient awareness” within our network. For a deeper look at ambient awareness, refer to <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07awareness-t.html>. (You may need to register to access the article, but it’s well worth the time and effort to do so.)

Microblogging Tells the World What We’re Thinking

Meanwhile, IM was changing. Most IM applications allowed users to set their status so contacts would know if they were available for a chat. But users started to repurpose the status field so their community of friends would know what they were doing in a lighter-weight version of social network sites’ status updates, as [Figure 11-10](#) shows.

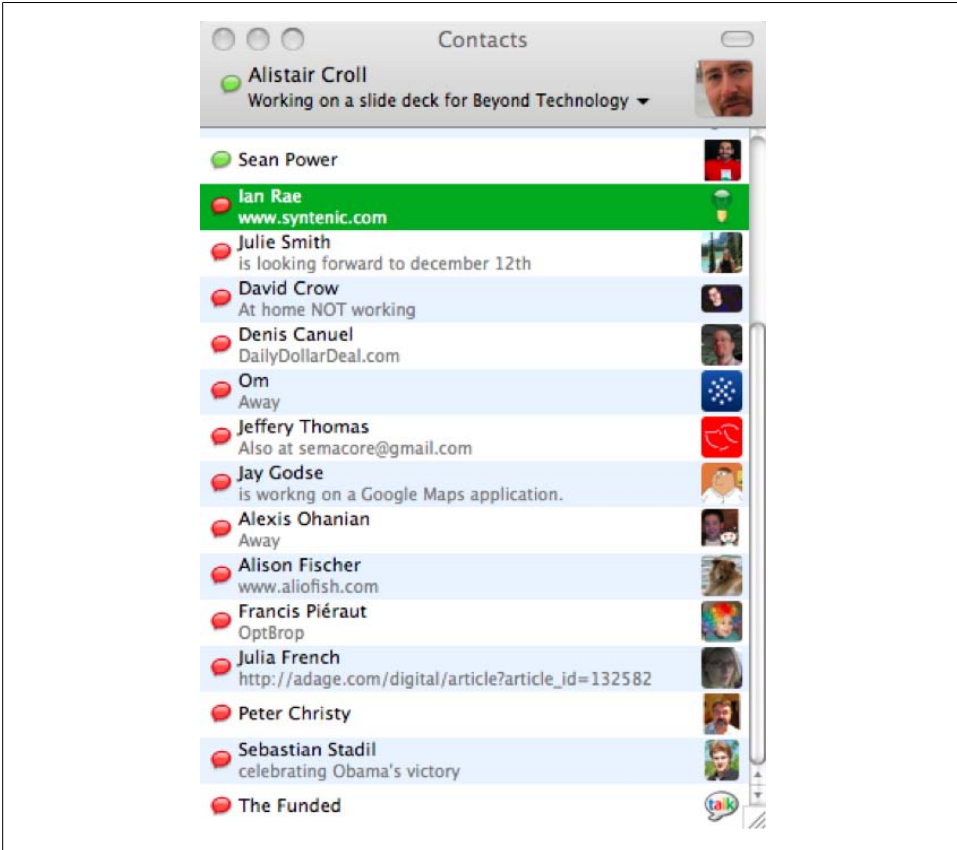


Figure 11-10. An IM client displaying many status messages

Twitter, Identi.ca, FriendFeed, and others took this repurposing of the status field to its logical conclusion in the form of microblogging, sending small updates to a community of followers. Just as with blogs, microblogging is still personal and casual, and the topics covered are often far ranging, as shown in Figure 11-11.

However personal and fleeting the bulk of its messages may be, microblogging's immediacy is hard to beat. From real-time forest fire updates that helped fire departments to manage wildfires, to eyewitness accounts of terrorist attacks, microblogging is positioned to be the protocol for real-time human interaction. It's also the best way to tap into the collective sentiment of the Web at a particular moment in time: If Google tracks what the Web knows, Twitter search tells you what its citizens are interested in right now.

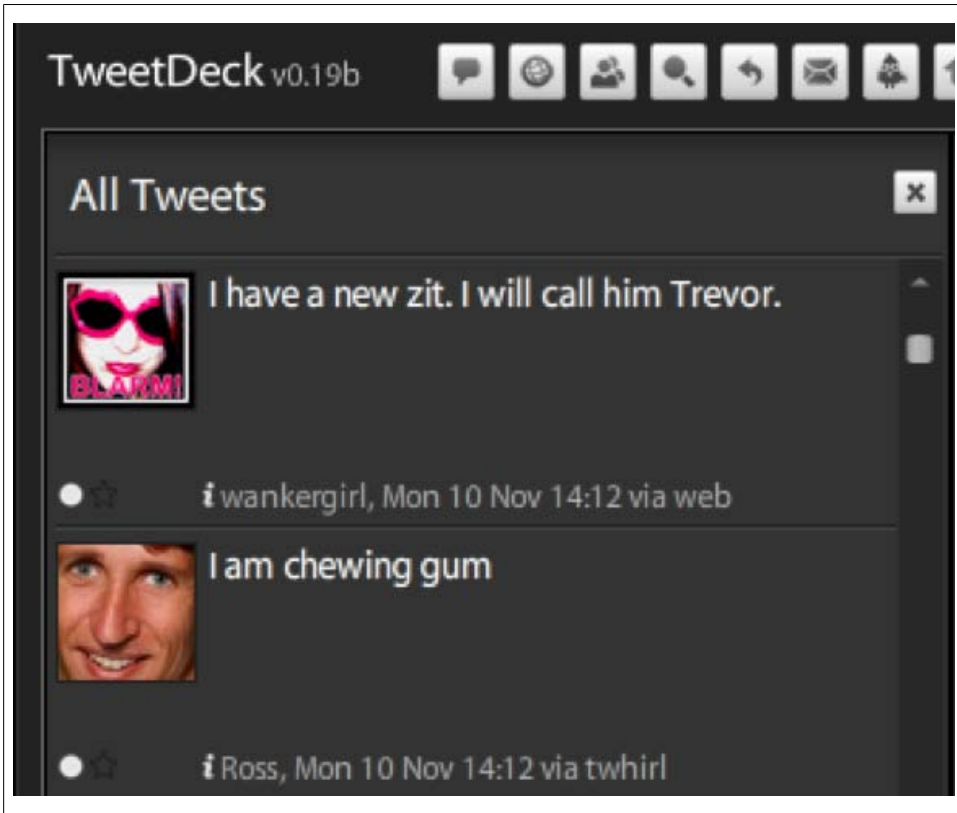


Figure 11-11. Conversations on twitter today

If you doubt the rise of microblogging, remember that blogs were in the same situation just a few years ago, as [Figure 11-12](#) shows. Personal blogs quickly gave way to influential media sources that are today supplanting traditional print publications. Microblogging may have as significant an impact on cable news stations as blogs are having on print journalism, with news desks already creating “Twitter correspondents” to track and spread breaking stories and celebrities rushing to establish a presence and follow one another.

It would be wrong to write off microblogging as just short-form blogging. Twitter differs from social sites in several ways, and one of the most important is the openness of the social network. Unlike Facebook, where others need your permission to receive your updates, on Twitter you can follow anyone without his or her approval, as [Figure 11-13](#) shows.

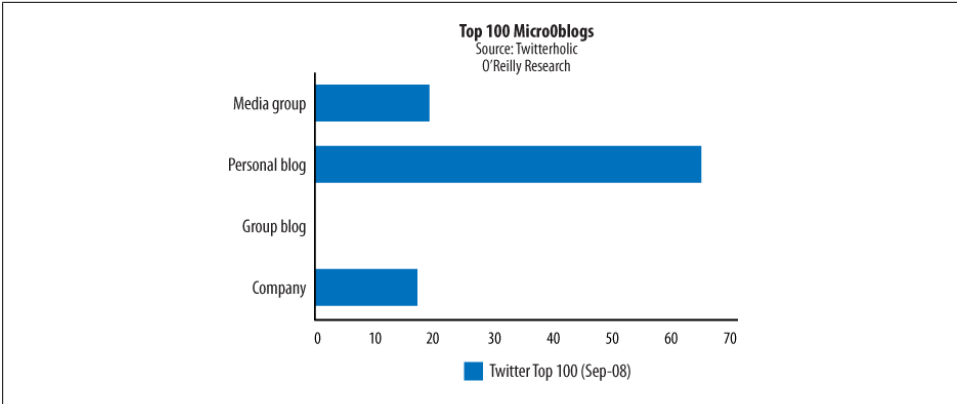


Figure 11-12. Top 100 microblogs, according to Twitterholic



Figure 11-13. A social graph on Twitter

This pattern of *asymmetric following* leads to interesting behaviors, many of which have been developed by the community itself: naming others with @name, grouping similar content with #hashtags, and reTweeting (RT) to amplify content the community feels deserves broader attention (for a brief Twitter primer, see <http://www.watchingwebsites.com/archives/twitter-survival-guide>). Microblogging is also home to short-lived bursts of information, often pointing to other content rather than being content sources themselves.

All of these community platforms—news aggregators, social networks, microblogging, blogs, and comment threads—are also shifting toward rich media and spreading out to mobile devices, creating a vast range of community places in a wide variety of forms. Ultimately, the Internet today is a spectrum of conversations, each taking place atop different platforms, as shown in Figure 11-14.

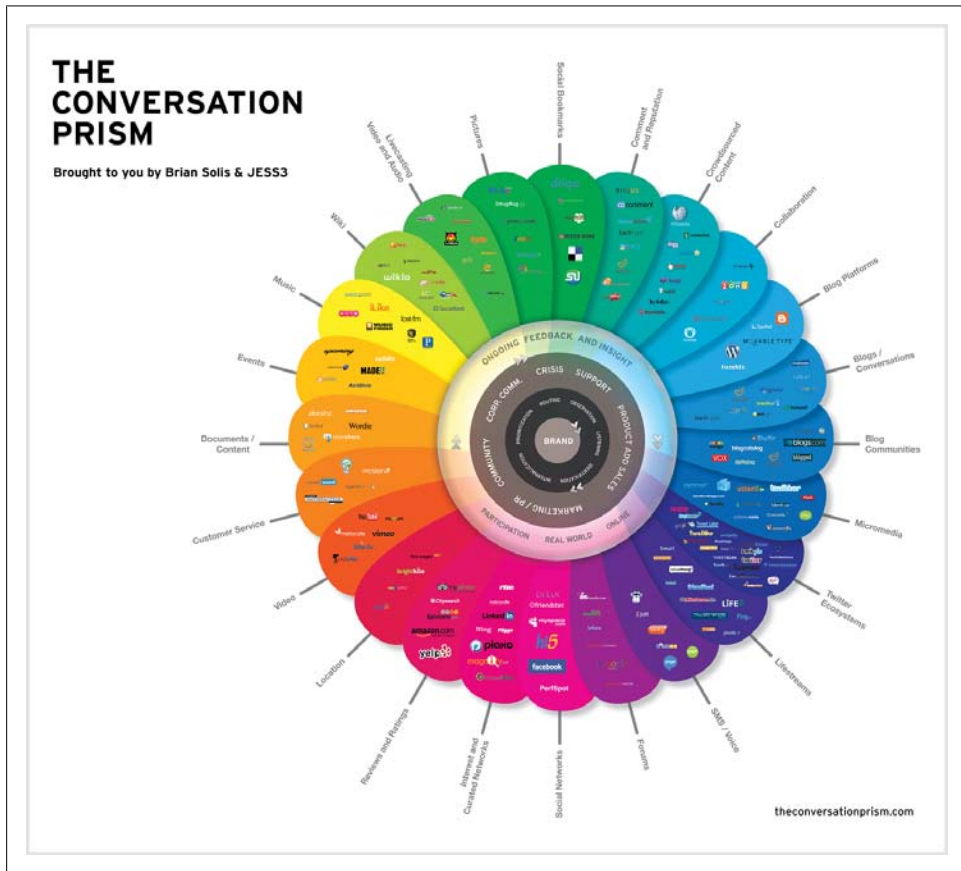


Figure 11-14. The conversation prism by Brian Solis and JESS3

Like it or not, it’s your job to care about them all.

Community monitoring is the remaining piece of a complete web monitoring strategy. In the next few chapters, we’ll show you why communities matter to you, how to figure out who’s talking about you, where they’re talking, what they’re saying, and how to track them and join the conversation.