

BOOK REVIEW

Social Software and the Evolution of User Expertise: Future Trends in Knowledge Creation and Dissemination

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Social Software and the Evolution of User Expertise: Future Trends in Knowledge Creation and Dissemination

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Since its beginnings in the sixties, with Arpanet, continuing with the introduction of hypertext in the eighties, and the browser in the nineties, the Internet has drastically changed institutions, and simply the way that people do things. The way we learn, communicate, diffuse information, and disseminate knowledge, are without a doubt some of those very things, and with the emergence of the so called Social Web, or Web 2.0, the changes were even more drastic. New concepts such as Blogs, wikis, and social networks placed people in the center of the action, thus becoming the primary actors and this can

be look at in a two-folded way. On the one hand, people are primary actors in the sense that they are the source of information, and on the other hand, they are primary actors in the sense that they select the information that they consume. One implication is that traditional sources of expertise are challenged. It can be said that “social software facilitates an environment of information abundance, while complicating the traditional conceptualizations of source expertise. New forms of expertise are arising, rooted in the experience of individuals rather than based on their formal credentials.” (p. 48)

Social Software and the Evolution of User Expertise: Future Trends in Knowledge Creation and Dissemination introduces an outstanding reflection about the implications of social software, from a perspective of user expertise. The book is well-structured, and gratifying to read, presenting pertinent and up-to-date articles. The articles cover the main issues on the topic, considering both theoretical

and empirical view points, as well as presenting case studies.

The book comprises four sections, namely:

- **Section 1:** Expertise and the Changing Nature of Knowledge Creation and Dissemination in the Web 2.0 Environment
- **Section 2:** Changing Expert Environments in the University and in the Areas of Research and Scholarship
- **Section 3:** Reimagining Pedagogical Expertise
- **Section 4:** Case Studies of Collective or Decentralized Expertise

Section 1 is comprised of 4 chapters that analyze the shift from traditional expertise to collective expertise, and reflects on how collective expertise challenges the traditional forms of expertise. Taking the notion of “narbs”, the abbreviation of narrative bits, as the starting point, Ananda Mitra in chapter 1 presents an interesting reflection about the traditional versus new forms of expertise and knowledge creation. Amanda Mitra says that new forms of expertise and knowledge creation facilitated by the Social Web, more precisely the narbs produced by the users, represent new challenges for those users that must now develop new ways to analyze and select the information. In chapter 2, Christopher Sweet introduces a very popular resource known as Wikipedia. A comprehensive examination of Wikipedia was elaborated by Christopher Sweet. He starts by presenting two related concepts, namely the open source movement and crowdsourcing, continues with the presentation of a brief history of Wikipedia, its principles, and its main contentions. Next, a discussion about the credibility of Wikipedia is presented, including factors in favor and also the main critiques and it finishes with the analysis of the commonly complicated relationship of academia and Wikipedia. In chapter 3, Rebekah A. Pure, Alexander R. Markov, J. Michael Mangus, Miriam J. Metzger, Andrew J. Flanagan, and Ethan H. Hartsell discuss the implications of the shift from traditional forms of expertise to the new collective forms of

expertise, supported by the Social Web in the realm of media environments. This shift poses new challenges, namely to ascertain the credibility of the information, since the criteria that allows us to do this traditionally, are no longer valid, meaning new approaches are necessary to determine expertise. The authors introduce the concept of “apomediary”, meaning that who stands “by the consumer” instead of standing between the consumer and the information, as one of the useful ways to help to “discern expertise”. Christopher Watts, in chapter 4, presents some important concerns about the “philosophies of technology.” By analyzing the relationship between people and technology, he stresses the necessity to value people instead of technology. Besides “the traditional expert”, and “the collective” expertise models, Christopher Watts considers “the new expert: possessing an ever-branching nature coupled with the ability to step back and look at the big picture with a critical eye, guiding collective efforts to increase and disseminate knowledge in ways that continue to value people over bits.” (p. 65-66)

The six chapters in **section 2** comprise an interesting reflection about the implications of the Social Web in the academic and research environments, and each chapter focuses on different aspects of the implications in those environments. Chapter 5, written by Carlos A. Scolari, Cristóbal Cobo Romani, and Hugo Pardo Kuklinski, develops around new models of “Knowledge Production” and “Knowledge Distribution” in higher education. A thorough analysis of the possible implications of “disintermediation” is done, concluding the authors that “More than being a threat to traditional institutions, disintermediation is a great opportunity for upgrading an institution that was born almost a millennium ago.” (p. 88). Laurie Craig Phipps, Alyssa Friend Wise, and Cheryl Amundsen, in chapter 6, concentrate on the pedagogical issues in higher education. It is avowed that the Social Web poses challenges to the universities, demanding a shift in the roles of both the teachers and the students. In chapter 7, Anne Beaulieu, Karina van

Dalen-Oskam, and Joris van Zundert, present the case of eLaborate, a “virtual research environment” built for the collaborative edition of mainly historical texts. How the users’ practices and experiences are influenced by the technology was studied, and it was observed that technology does not necessarily change the users’ practices, despite if the results were promising. In chapter 8, José van Dijck focuses on Google Scholar, how it has influenced the way scholarly and scientific works are developed, and on how knowledge is disseminated. By doing a critical analysis of some important issues such as the popularity and ranking mechanisms used by Google, José van Dijck offers a very useful discussion about the role of the user’s use of Google Scholar. Lilian Landes, in chapter 9, introduces another important activity in academia, reviewing, or to be more specific, book reviewing in the humanities, and how the collaborative environments of the Social Web can influence it. A platform, *recensio.net*, which is claimed to “combine traditional and innovative reviewing”, is presented and it is stated that both traditional and innovative reviewing will coexist and “it is a plea of this chapter that this coexistence should be turned into a process of cooperation” (p. 158). Maria Cassella and Licia Calvi, in chapter 10, give attention to Academic Libraries. They conducted a survey to Dutch and Italian academic librarians, in order to be acquainted with the adoption of the Social Web in this particular environment. “The results (...) show that although the interest and the need for such an adoption are felt rather strongly, the complete conversion to a Library 2.0 is still not in sight” (p. 174).

Section 3 develops around the pedagogical challenges that the new forms of expertise, introduced and discussed in previous chapters, present to higher education institutions. In chapter 11, Megan Fitzgibbons discusses the importance of critical thinking and information evaluation skills in the field of political science, a complex environment where the necessary data is highly diffused, and how this implicates in teaching political science to undergraduate students. It can be concluded that “With the

guidance of librarians and professors, students can learn to use techniques like comparison and context-based judgments to evaluate how an information source was produced and why it may be relevant for their purposes” (p. 194). Werner Beuschel, in chapter 12, introduces a research framework focused on the application of social software in higher education. Starting by analyzing and by demystifying the controversial topic of the “Net Generation”, he proposes instead a perspective of “emergent characteristic”. In the study “some implications for the design of learning environments with social software are stated and issues for further investigation are suggested” (p. 217). Mary J. Snyder Broussard, Rebecca A. Wilson, Janet McNeil Hurlbert, and Alison S. Gregory, in chapter 13, approach the issue of using Social Web resources as tools for the development of scientific pieces of works by undergraduate students and teaching faculty, concentrating on a survey at two small liberal arts institutions. Both students and faculty use Social Web resources, and it is interesting to note that students use them with or without faculty approval, and that faculty, despite using the resources for their own research, believe that students do not have the necessary skills to select the information retrieved from those types of sources. The chapter stressed that since students are using Social Web resources anyway, faculty should shift from an approach of prohibiting the use of the resources to one of teaching students the skills to use it properly. Two refreshing approaches are proposed in chapter 14 by Abigail A. Grant and in chapter 15 by Tamara A. Grant. The first one develops on the use of text messaging to the teaching of writing, and the second one around the use of Twitter in the classroom. Both agree that a good deal of research still needs to be done, but promising results were already obtained.

The book concludes with **section 4**, which includes four interesting case studies that allow meditating in the issues of collective and decentralized expertise. In chapter 16, Frederik Truyen and Filip Buekens present the case of ICT professionals and how social web changed the way they perform their work as experts. In

chapter 17, Steven Ovadia introduces the use of forums for technical support, confronting the open source with the proprietary software forums. In chapter 18, Emily Clark presents the construction of an archive of Appalachian Music and how traditional archival expertise can be redefined. Lastly, in chapter 19, Ilias Karasavvidis introduces Project Durian and how the role of the community was fundamental for the successful conclusion of the project.

Throughout the reading of this book, I have reached the conclusion that it is an important piece of work for those who are concerned with

the way social media changes communication and knowledge dissemination in several environments. In the case of a faculty, such as myself, *Social Software and the Evolution of User Expertise: Future Trends in Knowledge Creation and Dissemination* constitutes a must read book since it allows for the establishment of a fundamental reflection about the use of the Social Web resources, both for research and pedagogical aims. In resume, the quality of both theoretical and practical frameworks included in the book's papers makes it indispensable in the field nowadays.