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Social Networks, Media and Audiences: A Literature Review

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RESUMEN: Redes sociales como Facebook, Youtube o Twitter están atrayendo la atención de medios y académicos. Su espectacular crecimiento y la atracción pública obtenida ha supuesto el desarrollo de multitud de investigaciones y estudios en países de habla inglesa. Esta revisión bibliográfica trata de destacar algunas de las áreas vinculadas a los medios sociales que mayor interés están recibiendo entre los académicos. El objetivo es identificar áreas de investigación de interés en este campo.

Palabras clave: comunicación, comunicación online, medios sociales, redes sociales, audiencias, publicidad. ABSTRACT: Social networks like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are capturing media and scholarly attention. Their spectacular growth and the public attention they command are attracting a significant amount of research and media scrutiny in English speaking countries. This literature review tries to underline some of the most salient topics in the emerging academic conversation about social media. Its goal is to identify interesting research areas in the field.

Keywords: communication, online communication, social media, social Networks, audiences, advertising The brave new world of social media has captured the attention of scholars and book writers around the world, which has led to the publication of a number of works about Twitter, Facebook YouTube and the like¹. Most of these books are practical and industry-based in nature and do not consider in-depth the social media impact in audiences and communication strategies. Nevertheless, the vitality of the editorial market underlines the research relevance than social media and social networks are acquiring.

Boyd and Ellison (2008: 210-230) have summarized recent research and social network history. The authors, Berkeley and Michigan State professors, consider social Networks as increasingly attractive for researchers, fascinated for their usefulness, audience size and market research potential. They define social networks are web-based services that allow users to build a public or semi-public within a system; articulate a user list with shared relationships; and observe the list of relationships of those persons with other people within the system" (Boyd and Ellison, 2008: 211).

Boyd and Ellison explain that SixDegrees (1997) was chronologically the first social network but disappeared in 2000. The most important current social networks were established after 2002: Fotolog (2002), LinkedIn (2003), MySpace (2003), Last.FM (2003), Hi5 (2003), Orkut (2004), Flickr (2004),

¹ In this footnote we mention fourteen recent books on the subject: COMM, Joel, Twitter Power: How to Dominate Your Market One Tweet at a Time, Wiley, Hoboken, NJ, 2009; WHIT-LOCK, Warren and MICEK, Deborah, Twitter Revolution: How Social Media and Mobile Marketing is Changing the Way We Do Business & Market Online, Xeno Press, Las Vegas, 2008; HOLZ-NER, Steve, Facebook Marketing: Leverage Social Media to Grow Your Business, Que Publishing, Indianapolis, IN, 2008; OIEDA-ZAPATA, Julio, Twitter means business: how microblogging can help or hurt your company, Happy About, Silicon Valley, CA, 2008; CLARK, Ronald, Twitter: Free Social Networking For Business-100 Success Secrets To Increase Your Profits and Sales Using Twitter Business Strategies, Emereo Pty Ltd., Brisbane, 2008; MCFEDRIES, Paul and CAS-HMORE, Pete, Twitter Tips, Tricks, and Tweets, Wiley Publishing, Indianapolis, IN, 2009; O'REILLY, Tim and MILSTEIN, Sarah, The Twitter Book, O'Reilly Media, Inc., Sebastopol, CA, 2009; SHIH, Clara, The Facebook Era: Tapping Online Social Networks to Build Better Products, Reach New Audiences, and Sell More, Prentice Hall PTR, Boston, 2009; VANDER VEER E., Facebook: The Missing Manual, Pogue Press, O'Reilly Media, Sebastopol, CA, 2008; ALBA, Jason and STAY, Jesse, I'm on Facebook--Now What?: How to Get Personal, Business, and Professional Value from Facebook, Happy About, Silicon Valley, CA, 2008; MILLER, Michael, YouTube for Business: Online Video Marketing for Any Business, Que Publishing, Indianapolis, IN, 2008; JONES, Monica and SOHO, Steve, Everything twitter - From Novice To Expert: The Unofficial Guide to Everything Twitter, CreateSpace, Soho Books, London, 2009; COLLINS, Tim (2009), The Little Book of Twitter: Get Tweetwise, Michael O'Mara Books Limited, London, 2009; MORRIS, Tee, All a Twitter: A Personal and Professional Guide to Social Networking with Twitter, Que Publishing, London, 2009.

Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), Bebo (2005), Ning (2005) y Twitter (2006). From 2003 on social networks reach the mainstream, and start producing audience figures we could consider "massive". Their audience growth has been explosive. In April 2009, Facebook had 200 million users worldwide: in March 2010 it had reached 400 million. By November 2010, Facebook's estimated audience is more than 547 million users. Only 26% of the users are in the United States: we are facing a genuinely global phenomenon. Twitter shows more modest audience figures (19 million in March 2009; 75 million in March 2010), and more than 44% of users are in the United States². Nevertheless, the figures speak by themselves and might well give Facebook and Twitter a place in the history of communications.

2. Key works on social media

Arguably, four books have been especially influential and are often quoted in professional and academic circles in this context: Tapscott and Williams' Wikinomics, Jenkins's Convergence Culture, Li and Bernoff's Groundswell, and Qualman's Socialnomics.

Tapscott and Williams (2006) consider social networks as a part of a wider trend in communication landscapes. They characterize it as "mass collaboration". In their opinion, transparency, peer collaboration, audience participation and globalization are changing markets and companies and social networks like YouTube or MySpace are crucial. A new type of market is being shaped: copyright, communication strategy and message control by hierarchical management structures is increasingly under attack. Wikipedia is described as symbol of this process that is influencing the communication of brands, fashion, markets, ideas and ideology.

Jenkins (2006) describes three concepts that shape what he calls "convergence culture": media convergence, participatory culture and collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006: 2). By media convergence, Jenkins deals with the content flow between multiple content platforms and audience's migrating behaviour: people are fundamentally looking for entertainment experiences. With the term "participatory culture", he underlines the contrast with the idea of a passive viewer in a time when producers and consumers do not show clearly different roles but interact with rules we don't seem to understand fully yet. By collective intelligence, he elaborates on a trend to turn con-

² See http://socialnomics.net/.

sumption into a collective process, sharing our knowledge to cope with the sheer volume of available information. Social media develop in this unique convergence, participation and "crowdsourcing" environment.

Charlene Li and Josh Bernoff (2008), two Forrester Research³ analysts, showed through 25 real world cases how companies increase their market knowledge, generate income, save money and mobilize their employees using "social technologies". Such firms follow a "groundswell" model, similar to a wave that sweeps markets. Li and Bernoff consider that there is definite social trend towards people using technologies to get what they need from other people, instead of relying in traditional institutions like companies. The consequences are almost revolutionary: control is weakened and reduced, when control has been the foundation of communication strategies for businesses and institutions. Li and Bernoff stress the need to understand how new relationships are created in social media: technologies have changed but the impact in personal relationships is even more profound.

Erik Qualman (2009) deals with social media in his book "Socialnomics". He describes an age of instant communication, transparency (we live in what he terms "glass-house effect"), narcissism and participation. It is a landscape where authenticity is a currency of exchange and mass communications do not work, as audiences go back to trust in close persons and traditional media decline. He also explores Obama's rise to power and explores future implications with expressions like "what happens in Vegas stays in YouTube" or "we will no longer look for the news, the news will find us".

Qualman looks at the social media phenomenon and assesses its impact on interpersonal relationships. His book shows how strategy, marketing and markets are influenced and explores how some brands feel very comfortable in such a context. In his opinion, social media are more revolution than ephemeral fashion.

3. Discussion: main research topics in the field

From 2006 on, researchers' attention turned to social networks, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world were they were born. Research has considered different aspects. Some papers have concentrated on the "management of impressions" by the audience: how users introduce themselves, and the quality of relationships that are generated in this context. Marwick (2005) has

 $^{^{3}\,}$ For rester is a company specialized in digital audiences' research.

analysed the degree of authenticity of user's profiles. Looking into their different roles Kumar, Novak & Tomkins (2006: 611-617) divide users among different groups: passive, and "connectors", that participate fully in the networks' social evolution.

Most available research suggests that the majority of social networks serve a need to reinforce existing relationships. We could say that they cater to a need: building bridges between the online and offline worlds. Ellison, Steinfeld & Lampe (2007) suggest that Facebook is used to strengthen "offline" friendships more than to meet new people (Ellison, Steinfeld y Lampe, 2007). Such relationships could be thin, but often there are previous links, like sharing college.

Another key research thread deals with issues of privacy and intimacy generated by social networks. Sometimes the need for a safe environment for children and adolescents is stressed, like in works by George (2006), or Kornblum and Marklein (2006). It might be especially valuable to study what Barnes (2006) defines as "privacy paradox". Acquisti and Gross (2006: 36-58) describe the "disconnect" between the goal of protecting users' privacy and their social network behavior (increasingly narcissistic, to say the least), also described in Stutzman's research (2006: 10-18). Dwyer, Hiltz and Passerini (2007) explain that Facebook beat MySpace, precisely for its better capacity to deal with privacy. Researchers agree that the most serious crisis faced by social networks have been related to privacy and personal data protection. MySpace's audience decrease and Friendster's decline have been related to this by scientific literature.

Social networks might also be a tool for audience and market segmentation and the analysis of specific or "niche" audiences. Different authors have studied their use by audiences defined by gender (Geidner, Flock, & Bell, 2007), ethnicity (Gajjala, 2007: 257-276), or religion (Nyland & Near, 2007). Specifically, ethnicity has often been researched in the U.S., as some of the better established social networks are used to connect ethnic minority targets. Such is the case of AsianAvenue, AsianAve today (established in 1999), BlackPlanet (1999), and MiGente (2000). Along the same lines, Fragoso (2006) studied the role of national identity to explain Orkut's⁴ spectacular success in Brazil. Some other authors study the role of social networks in different cultures, which opens up a very interesting field for research (Herring et al., 2007). It is indeed worthwhile to find out whether social networks are more successful in some cultures or countries, or the rationale for local versus global social networks.

⁴ Orkut is a social network established by Google.

The possibility of segmentation is also interesting for market researchers. They have developed new ways to obtain information from the net that are also applicable in social networks. *Netnography*, a qualitative methodology that adapts traditional ethnography research techniques to the study of online cultures (Kozinets, 2006: 281) is one of these new systems to collect information. *Netnography* can also be considered a content analysis of online communication and some authors classify this methodology between discourse analysis, content analysis, and ethnography (Beckmann, and Langer, 2005, p. 2). In this technique, the identification of online communities where users exchange relevant information is essential (Bartl, Hück and Ruppert, 2009: 7). Social networks could be the place to find this information (O´Connor et al, 2010) but also to identify web sites where the expected information can be found.

Social networks have also been considered in market research as a new tool for collecting information. In 2008 Facebook and LinkedIn began to offer the possibility of conducting market research inside their social network. LinkedIn is no longer providing this service (Anderson, 2010) and in Facebook, the application "My Questions" by Slide, downloaded 7.4 million times (Ricadela, 2007) is no longer available. However, there are many other applications that allow Facebook users to create their own surveys. It is the case of *Fun Surveys*, with more than 90.000 monthly active users in April 2010. Even the US Census Bureau have used social media to find people from 18 to 24 who are primarily renters and/or college students (unattached mobiles) hardly to find by other techniques (Lacy, 2010).

There are also a number of issues related to education. Some authors have researched students' reaction to educators' presence in Facebook (Hewitt & Forte, 2006) and how student-Faculty relationships are influenced (Mazer, Murphy, & Simonds, 2007). Students are typically ahead of Faculty in social media terms, like Kalamas, Mitchell and Lester (2009) have shown. This new landscape is a source for relevant educational challenges, like those explored by Caravella, Ekachai, Jaeger and Zahay, in their research about education in advertising (2009).

Researchers have also been looking ahead, trying to find out what will be social networks' life cycle. Along these lines, Boyd studied the rise and decline of Friendster, a social network born to compete with match.com in 2002 (Boyd, 2006). As the market in the US fell, Friendster was winning popularity in Asia (especially Philippines, Singapur, Malaysia and Indonesia), where it still was a relevant social network in 2007 (Goldberg, 2007). Friendster's case is interesting to see what the future of social networks might be, and what kind of mistakes might be lethal for their future.

In hindsight, the 2008 US Election might well be considered a turning point in social media research. Social networks were showcased, and their use

is almost universally recognized as critical in the campaign's outcome. Books by Harfoush (2009), Libert and Faulk (2009) and Plouffe⁵ (2009) has studied the campaign's communication strategy principles. Chris Hughes, one of Facebook co-founders, had a critical role in designing the web *mybaracko-bama.com* that used social media to connect. According to McGirt (2009), the results were impressive: two million personal profiles were created in the website; 200.000 events were planned and 35.000 groups established; and the campaign raised \$30 million online. The campaign has often been considered as paradigm in strategic campaigns based in social media. Political strategies are increasingly based in social media principles: dialogue and participation. A Harvard Business School case has also already been looking into this subject (Piskorski, 2009).

4. Implications and areas for future research

Research suggests some differences between social media and the rest of "online media". Social media call for a new audience relationship framework. Some rules seem to be emerging for environments shaped by such audiences: authenticity, participation, transparency and relevance. There seems to be a premium in avoiding commercial interruptions. Communications between individuals that are potentially always connected to the Internet, and often on the move, will be an area of growing interest for researchers.

Market research using social networks is an issue that will also receive more attention⁶. However, the ethical debate is already here. There are two nontrivial issues: the consideration of these forums as public or private and what constitutes "informed consent" in the net (Kozinets, 2002: 65). These concerns can be added to others related with online research in general, which have generated an important conversation (Gold, 2009). Another area with significant development is text mining in the net (Anderson, 2009; Weare and Lin, 2000: 289). The enormous amount of information generated in by internet users will require better analytics techniques, with stronger mathematical tools and tecniques (O,Connor et al, 2010:8).

Consumers are driving markets, and the Internet changes the way consumers learn, gather information and relate to each other. Advertising tries

⁵ David Plouffe was Obama's campaign manager.

⁶ "Web 2.0 tools give us a great opportunity both to analyse organically arising social networks and to create specific social networks to understand consumers", COOKE and BUCKLEY, p. 290.

to unleash consumer participation in all the brands' contact points. Social networks have become a significant research tool and a way to communicate directly with consumers. Strategic planners in advertising use them for consumer intelligence, trying to deepen users' knowledge and this is an area for further research.

In social networks, although their audience growth has been spectacular, there are still significant business model doubts. Their early life has been fostered by large bets by investors based in non-proven expectations about their potential. But this market situation will not last forever. Therefore, research about advertising effectiveness will be crucial. We have already some indications about the low level of click-through rates for banners in social media. How are going to be the most interesting advertising messages in a social media environment? What is it going to be effective? Advertising is a key source of income for social media survival but interruption-based models are unlikely to work. And the proper measures to track marketing ROI must be found (Gold, 2010).

Nevertheless, researchers will still be looking to understand better not as much the ever-changing technology, but audience relationships. Markets have become conversations and the consequences are far-reaching. It is interesting to see to what extent we go back to the beginning. From mass communication media the flow of messages goes back to person-to-person communication, as Lazarsfeld explains in his classic work "Personal Influence" (1955). When Lasswell defined mass media rules, he was indicating that a radio station or a newspaper could be compared with persons communicating messages. But now the emphasis is again in person-to-person communication and it is increasingly clear that an individual that reads something and discusses it with others can't be considered only as a social entity, analogue to a newspaper or magazine: it needs to be studied in its double capacity as communicator and contact point in the mass communication network (Lazarsfeld, 1955: 1).

The need for human contact and interaction is a constant that always finds new ways to express itself. Some could argue that the present passion for social media will give way to some scepticism. But we seem to be witnessing more than an ephemeral passion. Qualman (2009) already describes a "social media revolution". In any case, and paraphrasing Lazarsfeld, we have personto-person communication back again at the very core of media, communications strategies, and academic conversations.

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