Chapter 2
Mobile Social Web
Opportunities and Drawbacks

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ABSTRACT

As mobile Internet usage continues to grow, the phenomenon of accessing online communities through mobile devices draws researchers' attention. Statistics show that close to 60 percent of all mobile Internet traffic worldwide is related to the use of mobile social networks. In this chapter, the mobile social Web is defined, categories of mobile communities explained, and success factors and drawbacks discussed from the technical, social, and economic perspectives. Challenges, including low transmission rates, changes in usage patterns, search for new revenue sources, as well as the need for development of original mobile Web content and applications are addressed. The technical requirements for the mobile use of online communities are identified. The chapter closes with a summary of potential economic and social prospects of the emerging mobile social Web.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, the Internet was a domain restricted to stationary computers, but nowadays it can also be accessed through mobile devices equipped with web browsing capabilities. Now it is not only possible to surf the web using wireless access and mobile devices, but there is also a growing number of mobile Internet applications and services. Increasingly, mobile social networking applications have been made available to a large number of mobile phone users.

Internet users have accepted online communities and internalized the concept of the Social Web also referred to as Web 2.0 (Koesch, Magdanz, & Stadler, 2007). Private as well as business users have become familiar with various online communities (Patrzek, 2007; von Tetzchner, 2008). On the one hand, mobile social networks are becoming more widespread because of the increasing dissemination of new wireless communication technologies (Heng, 2006, p. 5). On the other hand, a large number of

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devices are designed to implement new communications technologies, for example, the Universal Mobile Telecommunications System (UMTS) in Europe (Heng, 2006, p. 1).

Studies conducted by Opera Software, an Internet software and services company, demonstrate that 40 percent of all mobile Internet traffic worldwide is related to the use of online communities. In some countries the share is as high as 60 percent: for example, in the United States, South Africa, and Indonesia (von Tetzchner, 2008). Research into the various ways of using the Social Web in a mobile context is now of paramount importance. In this chapter, *mobile social web* is defined, categories of mobile online communities and their success factors explained, and selected opportunities and drawbacks of the mobile online communities discussed from a technical, social, and economic perspectives.

BACKGROUND

The Social Web can be viewed as a concept and a platform that utilizes social software (e.g., forums, wikis, blogs, etc.) to fulfill or support some of the important human needs, such as: self-realization, acceptance, social connectedness, and safety (Maslow, 1943, p. 372-383). The purpose of the Social Web is to support human communication and facilitate social contact. The Social Web encompasses numerous Internet applications, such as social networking sites, massively multiplayer online role-playing games, photo and video sharing, online stores and auction houses, virtual worlds, and wiki collaborations. The most popular and widespread actualizations are online communities (e.g., MySpace, Facebook, StudiVZ or XING). The term "Social Web" is often used in everyday language as well as in scholarly literature as a synonym for "virtual" and "online communities" (Hummel, 2005, p. 5), although these terms do not differ greatly (Fremuth & Tasch, 2002, pp. 5-6).

In the past years many academic disciplines have dealt with the Social Web. Various attempts to provide a definition have resulted in three different approaches: technical, social, and economic. The technical approach focuses on the Internet as a medium or platform for a community. The sociological point of view stresses the forming and functioning of communities, whereas the economic perspective examines potential gains and intended profits (Hummel, 2005, p. 8-11).

These three perspectives have led to a variety of definitions of online communities with differing points of emphasis. A detailed overview of common definitions is given by Fremuth and Tasch (2002), Hummel (2005) and Markus (2002). In identifying an *online community* one perspective emphasizes that it is formed by a group of people, while another stresses its web platform. The definition used in this chapter combines both approaches, for an *online community* is seen as a social group that interacts through a web platform over an extended period of time.

An online community can be characterized by four elements (Gebert & von Rosenstiel, 1992, p. 122-123; Hamman, 2000, p. 225):

- group of people with shared objectives (e.g., interests, goals)
- interaction over an extended period of time
- closeness due to bonds and relationships
- shared space for interactions governed by certain rules (for example, role definitions).

Without shared objectives there would be no interaction and relationship and, subsequently, no community at all (Markus, 2002, p. 36). Interactions within the community are seen as topic-oriented communication as well as the execution of actions (Kim, 2000, p. 5). Both can take place independently of time and location (Winkler & Mandl, 2004, p. 14). The process of founding and maintaining such online communities usually