Chapter 49
Networked Knowledge Workers on the Web:
An Examination of US Trends, 2008–2010

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ABSTRACT

With the growing popularity of online services that allow individuals to consume and contribute Web content with social groups of self-selected affiliates, the socio-technical geography of the Web has become increasingly complex. To map some of this space in a productive way for organizations and online researchers, we focus our attention on a particular segment of Web 2.0 services, publicly available online services (PAOSs) used for work purposes. After defining this segment and its relationship to other kinds of online services, we report the results of an annual survey that looks at who is using such PAOSs for work as well as the nature of that work. As our survey results indicate, how often PAOSs are used for work differs depending on the company size and office location of individuals. To frame our findings, we differentiate among the multiple PAOSs that respondents report using by classifying them as different genres of services, which we find provides a productive typology for understanding such services and their roles in organizations.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter defines a unique class of social networking technologies that are oriented toward work purposes, reports on the results of an annual survey about the uses of this class of technologies, proposes a genre-based understanding of such technologies, and analyzes trends as well as future challenges for researchers in this area.

BACKGROUND

Web-based services that allow people to collaborate and share information online have become increasingly prominent in many sectors of society. Such services, commonly referred to as Web 2.0 services, enable new kinds of interaction between small and sometimes incredibly large groups of people. With relative ease, people may now engage one another in joint, creative activities, ranging from the production of texts or multimedia works to arriving at collective understandings of a complex social problem. The appeal of such interaction has led to the adoption of Web 2.0 services in diverse social domains, including school, civic initiatives, scientific discovery, and recreation. Whole new forms of collective human endeavors have emerged with the advent of massive contributor systems (e.g., Wikipedia) and systems that facilitate crowd-sourcing (e.g., Mechanical Turk). People now have means of finding and connecting with past acquaintances or with new individuals, whether to socialize or to engage in a purposeful project facilitated by the very technologies that allow them to connect. Individuals are adopting and integrating a broad array of Internet technologies into their daily lives. These technologies, for example, often cut across the social, educational, and work arenas in a given individual's life (Skeels and Grudin, 2009). At the same time, the technologies themselves are changing, with a constant stream of new applications entering the public arena and with existing, popular technologies frequently offering new features and functions. Beyond this, many Web 2.0 services integrate with the life practices of individuals in interesting and sometimes surprisingly novel ways.

An important arena of human activity in which Web 2.0 services are changing interactions is work—an arena that has received too little scholarly attention. Only a handful of studies in the last few years have considered Web 2.0 services in the work life of individuals. Many researchers have, instead, been interested in broader questions, such as discovering who is using popular sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, and what they are using them for. Focusing on uses of the web for work, Sellen, Murphy, and Shaw (2002) studied knowledge workers' use of the Internet and identified high-level categories of web-based work activities (e.g., transacting, browsing). Their study of general web use offers insight into web use in general, but not specifically the uses of online services for work. In a study of how employees use a private, intra-company social networking site (SNS), Beehive, Dimicco and colleagues (2008; 2009) explored how such services enable people to engage in valuable work activities (e.g., sense-making, relationship building). Investigating the effects of proprietary social networking services on knowledge work in organizations, Steinfield et al. (2009) note that such services affect the nature of and opportunities for productive interpersonal relationships. The Dimicco and Steinfield studies develop useful categories for understanding how such services may be used for work, though the enterprise-proprietary nature of the technology and the lack of information about the users leave open some important questions. In a recent study of publicly available online services, Skeels and Grudin (2009) surveyed and interviewed Microsoft employees who use such services for work. They discovered that usage of such socially oriented online services by employees is rapidly evolving with an adoption trajectory that may be

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