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Towards the Integration of Social Media with Traditional Information Systems

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Abstract. This paper was inspired by the authors' personal experience of using social media systems over the last two years. During that time both authors have used a range of public, private and hosted social media systems for their professional activities and well as for personal use. They and other colleagues are convinced that a unified approach to social media systems can benefit the communications processes within their institution and its interaction with their important existing and potential clients, the students and alumni. After discussing the existing ad hoc use of social media the authors propose an action plan to achieve a cohesive approach to the more effective exploitation of social media.

Keywords: social media systems, blogs, wikis, social bookmarking, social networking

1. Introduction

Traditional information systems deployed within enterprises have matured to a point where the basic information needs are met. The information flows amongst staff and customers for the major business functions are largely understood. Chief information officers, while planning continuous improvement, can choose from a wide variety of off-the-shelf systems or a similar set of hosted services.

Information systems within an enterprise are mostly introspective. Their primary focus is to manage islands of operational data to support introspective business and service functions. The main web site is outward facing, and is balanced by intranet sites that face inward. These internal systems share major characteristics: a dedicated small group of staff has access to each system; the groups are disjointed; each system is an island of data; special training is needed for proficiency in each system, with little overlap in the training skills.

The explosive growth of the web has continued, and the nature of interaction with the web has seen a dramatic change. Instead of static pages tracked by search engines, the *read/write web* is progressing rapidly. Many thousands of interactive web sites have become information systems in their own right—web applications. A web page in a browser has become the universal user interface quickly learned by any

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individual. A single user belongs to many communities and authentication mechanisms alone determine user populations.

This new information universe is called *Web 2.0*. This paper refers to the new read/write web sites as social media systems to emphasise the sense of user community and overlap of purpose. By belonging to numerous communities an individual can participate in many enterprises or organisations, even though the communities are virtual ones. New and exciting types of participation and fulfilment are possible. Examples are described in detail below.

It has become clear that physical enterprises can benefit from deploying social media systems. The enterprise brand can be strengthened and made more visible with social media systems deployed in concert with existing information systems. Later sections outline the largely ad hoc growth of social media systems at Bond University and suggest some early steps towards a unified branding.

2. Emergent Social Information Systems

The explosive growth of web services is changing the way web users interact giving them a new power to create, publish and promote their own content. Cass [1] summarises social media as making 'it easy to find people with the same interests by providing links to groups and communities or enable people to catalog content through tagging'. He states that the strategy of social media allows people to contribute content, describe content, find content, build community, start and continue conversations.

At Bond University, the ICT strategic framework [2] refers to blogs and wikis as desirable collaborative/learning tools. Strategic priority 3 on collaborative learning environments states:

'New learning tools and learning spaces are needed to bring together people with common interests and to foster collaboration between students, between instructors, as well as among students, instructors and other learning partners. …Instructors do not have the tools to foster collaborative learning outside of class. Student expectations are shaped by sophisticated social networking environments to which they are accustomed'.

Two specific goals are to 'create an enterprise-level collaborative learning environment that supports multilevel collaborations between students, instructors and other academic partners' and 'Track, assess, integrate and support emerging collaborative and sharing technologies to enhance the collaborative learning environment.' Currently a number of ad hoc initiatives are scattered on the web, and are described in the boxes below each type of social media system.

2.1 Blogs and Podcasts

From the first blogs, started many years ago, the blogosphere has expanded with the availability of free, click-to-publish tools. Blogs range from personal, anonymous diaries, through reflective journals, professional journals, political commentary and news services to slick corporate promotional sites. The simple technologies behind blogs have resulted in creative adaptations including databases of recipes and online

dictionaries. A range of blogs allow users to publish from their mobile phones, from within MS Word documents, via email, and directly from their web browser. Never has it been so easy for an individual to share a message with potentially huge audiences.

Blogs typically comprise text-based content, but images, audio and video are often incorporated. In addition to a web site presence, blog content is also output in RSS feeds enabling the syndication of podcasts and video productions.

L Files. The L Files blog [3] was launched in May 2006 to disseminate news about Library services, along with tips for using its resources. Several librarians contribute to the blog using guidelines that encourage an informal, yet informative, news service to its community. Blogging complements email announcements, signage (print & digital) and presentations in the Library's marketing methods.

A goal of the L files is to foster a sense of community around the Library. Although it is difficult to measure how successful this has been, the blog has generated comments on a few articles. Headlines are syndicated to the Library's homepage, keeping the homepage updated with new content without requiring intervention from web development staff.

e-publications@Bond News and Views [4]. Focussed on Bond's research repository this second Library blog provides a communication channel for a project establishing the repository, e-publications@ Bond. Although readership on campus appears be small, it is also an archive of news recording project milestones. As blogs are well-indexed by search engines, using a blog to document such a project also generates traffic back to the main site.

Teaching and Learning Journals [5]. This resource identifies journals relevant to teaching and learning in the business discipline for publishing or research purposes. It has been implemented on the website in a series of html pages, although using a Wordpress blog was mooted as a possible solution. The proposal would have made use of the database that underlies Wordpress blogs, along with plugins to generate an A-Z index, to sort entries by title instead of date and to provide a search box. It would provide an easy to use, customisable database without requiring intensive application development.

Law Blog. In 2007 Joel Butler, Teaching Fellow in the Law Faculty prepared a discussion paper for the faculty exploring the possibility of a blawg (law blog). Butler reported the proposal did not gain traction. At the time there was little understanding of the potential value and concerns there would be excessive work involved in content creation - also an expectation that content should be of highly academic quality. It was envisaged that the blawg would be hosted on a free, external blog service if it were to go ahead.

Marketing. In 2006, some exploratory discussions between Marketing, the Library and Teaching & Learning Services ensued about a blog server. Marketing envisaged the use of blogs for students to write about their experience at Bond to attract prospective students. Forums were used instead, as the only blog server available on campus was designated as a trial for teaching and learning purposes only.

Personal Blogs by Bond Staff and Students. There are a number of student and staff blogs on various platforms and hosted by a variety of services. These range from professional to personal and differ widely in content and purpose.

Wordpress Blog Server. One of the authors, Michael Rees, began using blogs as partial subject assessment during 2005. Five Masters students chose a voluntary blogging assignment to maintain a blog using a public service of their choice about their studies and life experiences. Three of these students continued blogging for an additional 12 months or more.

Next, an in-house Wordpress blogging engine was used for all students in two subjects.

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They were set to write one blog entry per week on an aspect of the subject and were free to choose their own topic for another entry each week. 5% of the marks for subject were allocated to this blogging activity. Rees continued to refine his blogging assessments over 2007 making use of public blogging services, primarily Edublogs [6]. The preliminary results of this further work are reported in a blog entry at Impressions Scholarcast [7].

Blackboard Plugin. CampusPack, a product of Learning Objects, is a plugin for Blackboard that provides blogs and wikis within the locked-down environment of a learning management system. Blogs within this environment are not accessible beyond the university community, and are mostly used for subject-based content and student learning purposes.

SharePoint Blogs. The Teams Server (see below) runs the SharePoint content management system which supports blog sites with basic features. Provided the SharePoint blog site is given anonymous access it can be read with standard RSS reader software. SharePoint blogs are particularly well supported by Windows Live Writer, a blog entry editor.

2.2 Wikis and other collaborative spaces

Kajewski [8] describes wikis thus, 'A wiki, originating from the Hawaiian term for quick, is an open shared space for collaborative content contribution and editing. Contribution to a wiki requires no HTML or programming knowledge. Unlike protected web pages, any information added to a wiki can be changed or deleted by "anyone". From a web browser anyone can insert new pages, edit existing pages, or delete existing information. Previous versions of pages are saved for easy recovery from errors.'

Google Docs & Spreadsheets describes itself as 'a free web-based word processing and spreadsheet program that keeps documents current and lets the people you choose update files from their own computers. You can, for example, coordinate your student group's homework assignments, access your family to-do list from work or home, or collaborate with remote colleagues on a new business plan,' [9]. Users only need a web browser to collaborate on word processing and spreadsheet files. In August 2007, the Chronicle of Higher Education, Wired Campus [10], reported that a number of American universities had recently signed up for Google Apps for Education. The service offers email, word-processing and spreadsheets applications. The 'portability' of the applications and life-long email address were cited as attractive features. Microsoft offers a similar service with WindowsLive@Edu.

Peanut Butter Wiki. Pbwiki [11] was used by the Library, Technology Services and Teaching & Learning Services to discuss blog requirements in 2006.

Wetpaint. This wiki [12] was used by a Library team to explore and learn about wikis while planning a staff development activity. This has since moved to a SharePoint server (see below). Wetpaint is used by Charles Sturt University Library [13] to provide a collaborative space where students and staff can contribute content alongside librarians.

SharePoint Wikis. The School of IT has set up the Teams Server [14] to run the Microsoft Office SharePoint Server (MOSS). This server builds upon Windows SharePoint Services (WSS) which provides the base content management facilities for document libraries, announcements, forums, lists of links, tasks and appointments, surveys, web pages and complete web sites. One type of WSS document library is the wiki page library. This paper

was originally prepared by the authors as a series of wiki pages on Teams.

2.3 Social Bookmarking and Social Citations

Bryant [15] (2007, p.12) describes social bookmarking as 'an extremely easy and effective way of sharing and filtering interesting links based on social networks'. Users can subscribe to bookmarks of others in their network or group, or to a keyword assigned to bookmarks by others. Assigning keywords to bookmarks (and other information entities) has become known as 'tagging' and provides an alternative way to categorise information based on an emerging taxonomy created by the members of the online community. This is referred to as a folksonomy.

Bookmarking sites range from the popular del.icio.us [16] to the scholarly Connotea [17]. With del.icio.us, users have a free, always-on place to store their favourite web sites or online articles. Connotea is a scholarly bookmarking site offered by Nature Publishing which provides a free, hosted site and is freely available for local installations. Connotea includes the ability to import and export bookmarks for reference managers such as Endnote, and provides full bibliographical data. It also caters for digital object identifiers, integration with some databases such as PubMed for quick capture of bookmarks, and offers the user a quick link to institutional subscription databases. Connotea could be described more accurately as a social citation service.

Del.icio.us. One of the authors, Michael Rees, adopted del.icio.us as his central link database in January 2005 and the collection has grown to about 950 links. Del.icio.us automatically records the page title with each link but it soon became apparent that entering a short descriptive text with each link was also very useful to act as the link summary and aid in searching.

Rees exploited del.icio.us to store and distribute links as educational materials by tagging with course codes. For example, the links for Advanced Web Site Development were tagged with INFT232. A permanent link for this list can be posted on the course site. Subsequently new links can be added, existing links modified, and older links deleted, yet the URL remains constant as del.icio.us displays the most recent bookmarks.

Connotea. One of the authors, Peta Hopkins, uses Connotea to track professional reading, and to collaborate with colleagues at other institutions in building a set of useful readings on library and information science topics. A group has been established which aggregates the members' individual libraries. A tag is used by the group to share readings in their individual collections of links that are of interest to the group.

Connotea provides some competition for EndNote. While it does not integrate with word processing applications, it stores citations in a similar way and they can be accessed from anywhere with Internet access, unlike the Endnote desktop application. Endnote Web offers a web version, but the author's experience is that the sharing capability is a long way behind the collaborative features of Connotea. Connotea provides import and export functionality for Endnote users. The author's favourite feature of Connotea is the ability to define an institutional openURL resolver for easy access to full text articles.

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2.4 Social Networks

MySpace [19] and Facebook [20] are the dominant social network sites (SNS). Account holders share personal information on profile pages, identify their 'friends' or contacts and share photographs and video they make or like. Such sites typically offer other features such as special interest groups, discussion forums and messaging.

Specialised SNS emerge around a common interest. Librarything, for example, supports book collections for users. In a short time it amassed a huge quantity of book data and leverages that data to provide recommendations based on the number of people who have books in common, and on tags used to describe those books.

Other sites leveraging the social data they collect include Ratemyprofessors.com and Stumbleupon.com, the first to enable students to rate their lecturers, and Stumbleupon to 'Connect with friends and share your discoveries, meet people that have similar interests, and check out what other people are discovering'.

> **Facebook** Users choose to join one or more networks based on regions, place of employment, or educational institution. In the Bond network, there is a growing membership of over 4000, mostly students. Members have established common interest groups including 'Bond Main Library 4th floor lovers', 'Bond Main Library the Social Cafe' and 'Dons Tavern'. The Don's Tavern group was reported in Bond Briefs [21] to have 'boosted enthusiasm' for the tavern.
>
> A 'corporate' use of Facebook is demonstrated in the establishment of a group for 'Campus life at Bond – 073'. This group is administered by a staff member in Student Services and is described as 'Everything you need to know about Campus Life at Bond University'. A recent query received by the Library asked if the Library had a business profile in Facebook that the enquirer could join as a fan, demonstrating the willingness of the community to engage in this medium.

2.5 Instant Messaging and Chat

Instant messaging (IM) and chat were around long before Web 2.0 was born. But, they are now emerging as important business communication methods and have been revolutionized by web services. Embedded IM/chat interfaces on web pages for guest users, and the advent of multi-platform web services like Meebo [22] have freed the user from desktop applications. Meebo offers a single sign-on to manage multiple IM services including MSN, Yahoo, Google Talk and Jabber accessed from any Internet-enabled computer. Chat rooms are easily managed for group conversations while room administrators can integrate media and web links for all to view.

The synchronous nature of chat offers benefits over email when there is a need for quick responses and the formality of business email can be dropped. It is very useful to be able to transmit active hyperlinks. Cheaper than long-distance telephone calls, chat provides an affordable method for quick, real-time interactions.

> **IM and Chat**. Information Services at Bond currently offers an AskALibrarian chat service employing Meebo widgets. Chat boxes are embedded in the Library website and blog and in the Blackboard learning management system.

2.6 User-Generated Content

Wikis are semi-structured repositories of content that appear as collections of inter-connected web pages. Content management systems (CMS) are a less flexible but tightly structured approach to storing content. Like a wiki a CMS can allow most users to generate and contribute content but more usually document submission involves a defined workflow with approval processes. The CMS will index the contents of each document and allow intelligent searching by content. In addition most CMS allow the direct creation of content within the system using editing techniques similar to wikis.

> **Drupal**. The School of IT is deploying a content management system based on the open source Drupal [23] software package. The site will act as a specialised web site for the School. All members of the School teaching staff are populating the CMS with information such as detailed degree programme and subject data, event, biography, research interests and project overviews.

Services focussing on individual's content, but employing SNS features to expand the audience, include Flickr [24] for images and YouTube [25] for video. Tagging images allows users to explore other members' content via keywords. Both sites cater for groups with a common interest. Users can comment on the content, share with friends and usage statistics show the popularity of content items.

2.7 Virtual social environments

According to the Horizon Project's *Virtual World's Impact on Education* [26] 'Every university should have a campus in Second Life'. Virtual worlds offer a range of benefits including cheap, low-risk options for conducting experiments, carrying out medical operations and simulations of other dangerous procedures, and gathering groups of geographically remote participants in one 'place'. The best investment in virtual worlds may not be to reproduce an institution in a virtual world, but to contribute resources to new places, services and events in the virtual world that are of most benefit to the institution's community. Virtual worlds offer new opportunities and challenges for educators.

In virtual worlds such as Second Life [27] and Active Worlds [28] users determine their activities and roles in the world. They are not tied to the structure of a game–the chief objective is to interact with the society and contribute to the culture within the world.

> **Second Life**. The Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences has indicated that a small number of staff have started investigating Second Life as an education tool.

2.8 Common features of emergent social media systems

There are a number of features that characterise social media systems:
- Tagging – user-generated metadata for organising and navigating content

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- RSS and other XML output for syndication and re-use of content
- High level of interactivity for commenting, rating, voting, tagging and contributing
- Ease of use
- Low cost
- Multimedia content
- Mashups of two or more data sources to create a remix of content

It is important to remember that social media systems support a conversation between content creators and consumers, or between collaborators. This interactivity fosters an online community. The low cost and ease of use opens up the creative aspects of the web to a large audience.

3. The Case for Social Media in the Enterprise

The authors have been using social media systems, both public and internal, for the last two years or so, and have discovered colleagues doing so too. It seems natural therefore to coordinate social media systems use within the enterprise for productive purposes.

A recently published Melcrum report [29] provides detailed analysis from surveys to which more than 2,100 corporate communicators responded, and provides detailed figures on social media trends within organisations. It is a rich source of case studies of named companies some of which are of direct relevance to academic institutions. The Melcrum report showed the top three benefits were:

- Improved employee engagement (71% of respondents)
- Improved internal collaboration (59%)
- Aid to internal communities' development (51%)

Close behind these came the ability to create a two-way dialogue with senior executives.

In another significant recent document, Cook & Hopkins [30] remind us of a quote from *The Cluetrain Manifesto* [31]:

Markets are conversations. Markets consist of human beings, not demographic sectors. Conversations among human beings sound human. They are conducted in a human voice. The Internet is enabling conversations among human beings that were simply not possible in the era of mass media.

Going further Cook and Hopkins make reference to social media technology:

The traditional means of communicating with audiences — such as employees, customers, investment communities — have relied heavily on print-based documents, email or static internet websites. Today, these methods are rapidly giving way to a new generation of internet-based tools that allow for far greater levels of two-way interaction, discussion and conversation.

More significantly Cook and Hopkins go on to say:

Communicating [with social media] can become seamlessly integrated with your 'regular' workload. Everyone can communicate–not just the corporate communications team!

This theme is developed below into an action plan for an organisation.

3.1 Advice for Corporate Social Media Adoption

When asked in the Melcrum report [29] if they knew how to use social media as part of an integrated communication strategy only 28% of companies agreed, while 41% disagreed and 31% were not sure.

From the feedback of those corporate communicators who had introduced social media Manchester [29] formulated the following main issues to be addressed when adopting a social media strategy:

1. Assess your organisation's cultural readiness
2. Focus on people, not the technology
3. Think about the business purpose of the tools
4. Make sure the difference between traditional and social media is understood
5. Prepare to relinquish control and share the process
6. Be experimental and involve employees
7. Clarify what employees can and can't do
8. Don't push staff too hard to adopt social media tools
9. Integrate social media tools into existing systems
10. Don't obsess about the numbers of participants and usage

Since not all organisations are democratic but rather have rigid command-and-control, top-down management the first issue is important. The authors like to feel that Bond, while having a defined structure, allows a degree of flexibility in operational management and in delivery of service to students, especially amongst the academic staff. From the evidence above some staff are already adopting social media tools for some tasks giving the impression that Bond is 'culturally ready' in this respect.

Similarly the advice to focus on people rather technology is important but again the beginnings of adoption at Bond already outlined suggest that staff have overcome the technology fixation and have self-selected a range of social media tools. This trend to self-select can only continue in the absence of a coordinated option. The risk of doing nothing is university output being fragmented and scattered, with little integration.

While individuals who are already using social media tools have obviously considered their purpose for service provision at an individual level there are only limited examples of the purpose being defined for larger groups and other organisational units. At this level the authors believe it is necessary for the institution as a whole to begin the thought process, and identify potential social media use for selected business purposes.

Issues 4 and 5 again require consideration at the top level as they go to the heart of understanding of the new power and influence of social media and its effects on the enterprise. These last issues lead on to issue 7 where the organisation encapsulates its attitude to social media in a set of guidelines and policies that describe the limits of employee activity in the social media space. Making the policies clear without stifling communication flexibility is regarded as difficult and needs to be approached with a light hand and significant employee input.

Issues 6, 8, 9 and 10 speak to a way forward via an action plan and the authors put forward suggestions in the following sections.

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3.2 Action Plan

The authors contend that there is little doubt that their institution can benefit from the adoption of social media for both internal and external communications needs. It is only the extent and timescale that must be decided, and the shape of the context and operational rules must be formulated. Social media tools can be used to establish an integrated communication environment in which staff and students participate. External customers, student clients and the public should perceive this environment as an integrated whole meshing with existing legacy information systems.

To achieve an integrated communication environment the authors put forward this action plan that defines a sequence of plan stages. The ideas are based on a mixture of suggestions from the literature and the personal experiences of the authors to date. It is also assumed that a small Social Media Working Party (SMWP) be constituted to carry out the tasks outlined.

Stage 0: Survey of Existing Social Media Use

In earlier sections the authors identified uses of social media known to them amongst colleagues and students. It is suggested that a survey of all staff and the student council be conducted to ascertain the full extent of social media use currently within our institution. The results of the survey will enable the ranking of the different social media systems in terms of actual use and identify individuals and groups that might participate in pilot projects and the work those pilots will undertake.

This survey will address issues 1, 2 and 3 in the advice list. The desired outputs of this stage are:

- An online survey of existing social media use
- Consolidated survey results highlighting common patterns of social media use and their place in the enterprise

Estimated timescale: 3 weeks

Stage 1: Survey Analysis and Pilot Project Formulation - Start Small and Evolve

It is likely the survey will discover more use of blogging, wikis and specialised CRM web sites. The vast majority of staff and students will be using freely available social media web sites and the tools available within the sites.

An early question that will arise concerns the information systems infrastructure that will be needed to bring the use of social media under the auspices of the single integrated communication environment. Also, for some staff already using social media there needs to be a migration path to bring the content created to date from the public into the central integrated communication environment. Fortunately there is a wide choice of open source social media software from which to choose and a number of options in terms of the physical hardware and support staffing required. Indeed the software and hardware selection may not be straightforward.

At present there are three options for an integrated communication environment social media infrastructure:

- social media software hosted on a dedicated or shared server machine at a third party data centre
- customised zero cost or low cost public sites already used by some staff

- dedicated server hardware located in-house using existing technical support services

The authors favour the first option, at least for the pilot stage, as the provision of hardware and its support are the responsibility of the hoster, the software choice is with the institution, and very few institution staff need be involved in software customisation. In fact considerable customisation is possible from the IP address to use of official sites images and colour schemes. A downside is the annual cost estimated to be close to $1,000.

Successful use of social media web sites also relies on a careful choice of effective reading and editing tools. In parallel with the choice of social media server software the SMWG must choose:

- an RSS feed aggregator and reading tool
- a blog entry editor (while blogging platforms do provide their own editor, using a specialised application can streamline the blogging process)

The factors that must be taken into account include:

- An Outlook plugin that may promote take-up and use of RSS feeds for blogs, news items and events
- Network or web-based tools would provide better access for those using multiple workstations (especially students)
- On-campus/off-campus access to the RSS aggregator and access to feeds requiring authentication.

For example, some e-resources in library subscriptions are starting to offer RSS feeds, but there are implications for web-based and unauthenticated access to such feeds. The institution may also want to provide feeds that should only be accessible to locally authenticated users. A mechanism to allow the creation and distribution of collections of RSS feeds both personal and feeds sanctioned by the institution, should be provided.

A list of pilot projects will need to be drawn up taking into account issue 4 which highlights the differences between traditional and social media. Projects must dovetail with the existing and planned uses of internal and external media communications. These projects are likely to consist of inward-facing and outward-facing blogs, and possibly a corporate wiki with defined content areas and focus. Once projects are agreed it will be necessary for existing information publishers to acknowledge that the publishing model has changed as the users of the blogs and wikis contribute to the information output of the institution as postulated in issue 5. Possibly there will be up to 5 or 6 pilots that should take into account:

- Cross-organisational unit blogging such as staff/student blogging for teaching and learning, and outreach blogs for the alumni, community, and recruitment
- Synergies with Intranet use and publishing
- Organisational wikis for knowledge management in research projects general project management and working groups
- Interaction with student communities: Facebook, MySpace
- The need to experiment as highlighted by issue 6

The next step will be to draft the early versions of a social media systems usage policy that clearly expresses the desired corporate outcomes and starts to draw a boundary around acceptable behaviour as regards the generation of social media content. Advice from the corporate communicators in the Manchester [27] report will

be invaluable in the policy drafting process. In regard to issue 7 a diverse cross-section of staff should be involved in the drafting process. In terms of the policy it will be important to allow a maximum of flexibility for individual staff and student contributors while at the same time being cognisant of corporate goals so as not to stifle social media use.

The desired outputs of this stage are:

- Chosen social media software hosted by a third party with appropriate internal/external network access
- Recommended blog editing and reading software tools
- A draft Bond Social Media Usage Policy
- A list of up to 6 diverse pilot projects with participants identified and success factors outlined
- An information seminar outlining the pilot projects and their aims

Estimated timescale: 6 weeks

Stage 2: Pilot Project Operation

Each pilot project will need to incorporate some simple success measures so that the outcome of each pilot may be judged. Examples of measures might be:

- Chosen pilot group members average or exceed a nominated number of interactions per week
- The amount of user-generated content within a project deemed to cover relevant topics
- Simple survey results of pilot group users at the end of the pilot period

Most social software systems keep internal logs of usage and information flow. Simple measures of interaction frequency and rate of content generation can be extracted automatically from these logs

Estimated timescale: 1 semester

Stage 3: Pilot Project Evaluation

The SMWP will need some time to collate and analyse the data collected from the pilot projects. It is expected some preliminary analysis can be undertaken by the members of the projects themselves, with the SMWP collecting the information into a consistent format for a final report. There is considerable scope to make use of the social media tools themselves in presenting the final outcomes.

For example some projects will have maintained blogs as part of the project. Another reporting blog should be kept by the SMWP itself during the pilot period. It is expected that at least one pilot project will involve the use of a wiki which can be offered up in evidence. Again the final 'report' can take the form of a wiki with all results available in electronic form for subsequent further analysis.

Estimated timescale: 6 weeks

Thus the social media systems pilot is expected to take about 25-30 weeks or two semesters in total.

3.3 Integrating social media at Bond

Although the action plan has not yet been adopted, there are existing projects that are incorporating aspects of social media into the existing ICT environment of the University.

A major project the University is undertaking in 2008 is to implement a content management system to underpin the University's web environment. The system will be used to manage the corporate website and the intranet to provide a more dynamic and engaging web environment for students, prospective students and staff. Introducing social media into this environment is seen as one way to achieve a more engaging experience for users. The request for proposal included sections on blog and wiki functionality either as built in components of the content management system or as integration opportunities with third party products. Additionally, commenting capabilities were also included for scenarios where feedback from users is desirable. These included gathering feedback during policy development, gathering staff feedback on intranet content, reporting errors on pages and inviting public comment when appropriate.

The importance of content syndication via RSS, a key enabler of social media, was also identified by the project team for attention. It is envisaged that the Bond web environment will output content in RSS for users to consume in their choice of interface, be that feed readers, social networking sites or portlet services such as iGoogle. The request for proposal also specifies that the system must facilitate the use of external RSS content for display on the website. The new web environment will be equipped for the development and integration of social media features and services.

In February 2008, the Bond Alumni network was launched to provide a communication point where alumni can develop a profile and communicate with each other, university staff and potential employers. Some ad hoc 'Bond' networks had already been identified in Facebook and LinkedIn, and this project can be seen as a way to strengthen the ties between the university and past students by drawing on the benefits of social networking and leveraging the local alumni data not accessible in environments like MySpace, LinkedIn and Facebook.

Since the launch, 1051 member accounts have been created and 581 new email addresses have been added to the alumni database. 128 'webcards' (online business cards) and resumes have been enabled and 122 members have registered their interest in an alumni/student mentoring program. The social network has also seen considerable activity around messaging, friend connections and photo albums. The university's total body of alumni is in the vicinity of 25000 individuals, but only half of that group has active records within the alumni database. The network is seen as a tool to grow the database of alumni contacts through the 'Missing Bondies' lists and a feature for members to send pages to a friend.

4. Conclusions

Many organisations are adopting social media systems and expect to gain improved employee engagement, internal communications and the formation of internal and external communities for more effective business. A small academic institution can

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also benefit in these ways. Moreover several effective ad hoc uses of social media systems within most organisations are already underway and the staff involved are already experiencing the benefits.

Social media systems are inexpensive and can be deployed quickly in an externally hosted environment without technical staff involvement, and can run alongside existing information systems, at least during initial pilot periods.

A recommended social media systems pilot has been outlined with an expected duration of 25 to 30 weeks. The authors urge most institutions to consider initiating a social media systems pilot in the near future.

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