

Chapter 5.6

The Usability of Social Software

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ABSTRACT

Emergent Web 2.0 technologies and applications (such as blogs, wikis, podcasts, mashups, and folksonomies) present a range of opportunities and benefits and are increasingly used by people to interact with each other. Despite the growing popularity of social software, there is a lack of research on the usability of these tools. This chapter focuses on how users interact with Web 2.0 technology, discusses a conceptual framework for a usability evaluation of social software, describes the different types of social software applications, and offers guidelines for their usability evaluation. The argument advanced is that social software usability should be viewed as a set of principles and practices aimed to deliver more service-orientated Web 2.0-based applications.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Social software has emerged as a driving force of Web 2.0. The term *Web 2.0* was coined by Tim O'Reilly (2005) to describe a sea change in web services and technologies. It should be noted that Web 2.0 is not a single development but rather a heterogeneous mix of new and emergent technologies. Overall, there is an increasing presence of social software applications that allow users to communicate, collaborate, and share their personal interests. This chapter introduces a usability perspective on social software and offers guidance for evaluating the usability of social software applications.

Bryant (2007) defines *social software* as a combination of various social tools within a growing ecosystem of online data and services, all joined together (aggregated) using common protocols, micro-formats and Application Programming Interface (API) methods. It is also underpinned by

some general principles about engaging people as active participants in online social networks and communities to achieve new and exciting effects through distributed collaboration, co-production and sharing. Central to the notion of Web 2.0 is the ideas of scale, the belief that the tools become more useful as more people apply them, and changing the world through the Social Web.

According to Leadbeater (2007), the tools associated with social software transform our capacity for civic activism. Firstly, these tools allow people to participate by creating, publishing and distributing content, such as video, pictures, music and texts through the Internet. Secondly, social software allows people with similar interests to find one another and connect through social networking sites, such as MySpace, Facebook, and Bebo. People can also use search tools and systems for collaborative tagging of information and ideas. Thirdly, people can coordinate their activities and collaborate through raising petitions and funds, and planning and conducting mobile campaigns and communities programs. Fourthly, through large-scale collaborations, people can create reliable, robust, and complex products such as open source software applications such as Linux. As to Leadbeater (2007), the rubric of social software is: contribute, connect, collaborate, and create.

There are three characteristics commonly attributed to social software, namely:

- Support for conversational interaction between individuals or groups, ranging from real-time instant messaging to asynchronous collaborative teamwork spaces. This category also includes collaborative commenting on and within blog spaces.
- Support for social feedback that allows a group to rate the contributions of others, perhaps implicitly, leading to the creation of digital reputation.
- Support for social networks to explicitly create and manage a digital expression of people's personal relationships, and to

help them build new relationships (Boyd, 2003).

Owen and others (2006) suggest that social software can be also characterized by community gains, that is, many users benefit from other users acting in sociable and community-oriented ways:

- Social software delivers communication between groups
- Enables communication between many people
- Provides gathering and sharing resources
- Delivers collaborative collecting and indexing of information
- Allows syndication and assists personalization of priorities
- Has new tools for knowledge aggregation and creation of new knowledge
- Delivers to different platforms as is appropriate to the creator, recipient, and context.

In addition, social software offers great promise for education as it supports group interaction. Phipps (2007) lists the following educational benefits of social software:

- Using instant messaging to conduct tutorials at a distance with a distributed group
- Providing easier opportunities for students to collaborate and make word of mouth recommendations about sites including, or related to, course content
- Allowing students to create their own interest groups allied to their studies
- Allowing students to interact with students from different universities and countries
- Providing researchers with ways to share results faster and with opportunities for instant feedback
- Allowing the formation of *ad hoc* research groups
- Providing a way of having material peer reviewed by a broad audience before publication

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