

## **WEB CONFLICTS: SOCIAL MEDIA AS COMMUNICATION CHANNEL**

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### **Introduction**

The problem of web conflicts is developing with the rapid growth of e-economy, e-politics, e-culture and other aspects of social life moving to the cyberspace. Most people who use the Web are involved into numerous connections and interactions, which often cause conflicts of different sizes and types. We think that observation and analysis of conflicts in the Web (the sophisticated dimension of cyberspace that represents many features of the physical and social space), gives us the right to address the idea of “virtual location” of any conflict as an important characteristic feature of this conflict. That is why the problem of the web, and, its particular part, social media as a potential “place” of a web conflict, is important.

### **Social media and social software: definition problem**

There are two extremely similar terms for defining the potential virtual location of the conflict occurrence and development: “social media” and “social software”.

Social media can be defined as a group of Internet-based applications built on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content.

The term “social software” may be broadly defined as “software that supports group interaction” (Shirky, 2003, para. 2). Current social software tools not only support social interaction, feedback, conversation and networking (Boyd, 2007; Downes, 2005), but are also endowed with high level of flexibility and modularity that enables collaborative remixability – a transformative process in which the information and media organised and shared by individuals can be recombined and built on to create new forms, concepts, ideas, mashups and services.

We are going to use a term social media with some aspects of social applications. The final definition, that will be used for further research, takes the following form:

Social Media is a group of web-based applications that support interaction and communication between individuals over the internet and allow to create, share, organize and also transform the human-readable data (web content).

### **Complex communication channel**

In our research, we study the role of social media as a communication channel between the participants of a communication process. When people are using a social network or a website to share information they are acting as information sources for each other. Those who are reading or potentially receiving the shared information are recipients or, using the terminology of Shannon’s communication model, “destination”.

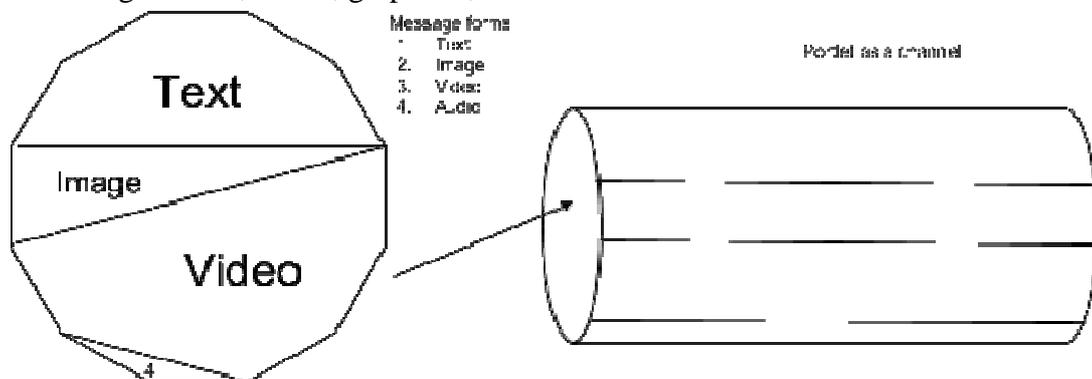
In information theory as well as in sociolinguistics the communication channel can be defined as a medium used to transmit and receive messages between the participants. But social media are very complex and differ from other communication channels. Their main peculiarity is that any social medium can be viewed as a complex channel which actually consists of a large number of quite simple channels used for transmitting diverse messages. Access to the social media data can be provided via special web-based applications called “portlets”, “widgets”, “gadgets”, which perform the role of separate communication channels for different types of messages.

Social media sites are often organized as the so-called “portals” and “mashups” which are a basic technology for Web 2.0. Most web pages available to a registered user of a social network or a website with Web 2.0 features are actually a “patchwork” or even a “collage” of data and messages from different sources, combined and displayed in the form of a web page. The sources of such messages can vary greatly and depend on the particular social media and the user’s preferences.

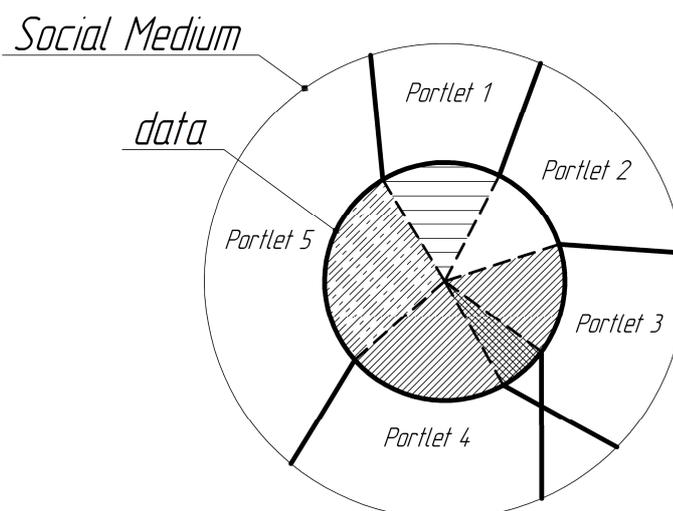
### Portlets and transclusion

An example of the technology that makes a webpage of a social network highly complex and dynamic, is usage of portlets: “web components specifically designed to be aggregated in the context of a composite page. Usually, many portlets are invoked to in the single request of a portal page. Each portlet produces a fragment of markup that is combined with the markup of other portlets, all within the portal page markup”. (JSR 168)

Each portlet can be used to convey different data. They can be designed for transmission of messages with different forms and content. The capacity of this kind of channels can be presented as an approximate proportion of all the possible forms of messages for transmitting: textual, visual, graphical, and audial.



For clarification of our concept of social media let us use a graphic scheme. We think that atom-like model can fit this purpose.



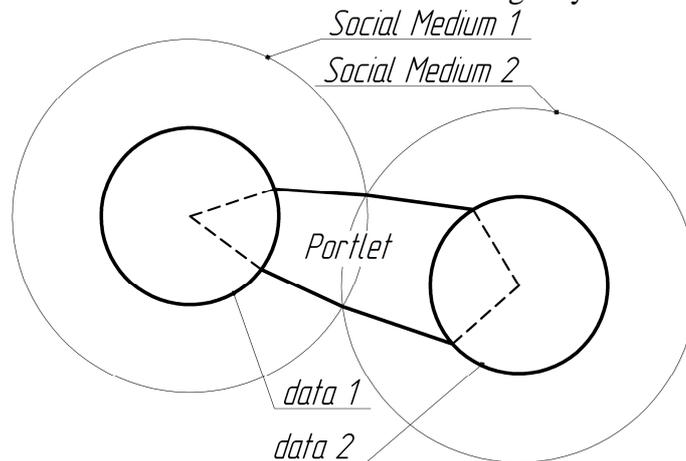
The most significant part of a portal is its database that can be viewed as a “core” in our model. The database stores all the data, most of which can be added and accessed via the portlets. The portlets form the “shell” of the portal and are mixed and represented on a web page. A user of the web site that can be either a sender or a recipient of the messages can interact only with the shell. The shell is visible and usable so the portlets provide the information flow between the core and everything outside the portal: users or other websites.

It should also be noted that every portlet has access to its own data volume. Portlets, widgets and gadgets have different functions, features, data access and transfer privileges.

The communication process on such web portals, the transmission of a message from the sender to the recipient often works according to the following pattern:

1. To send a message the sender uses a portlet (e.g., a message box). The portlet adds the message to the social media website database. During this phase the message can be transformed, filtered out or just stored waiting for requisition.
2. To get this message (not always directly) the recipient should use another portlet on his/her side of the channel. This portlet has to be able to access to the data and display the message. Of course, the portlet is not able to provide messages it is not adjusted to get. For example a youtube video can not be played in a website search box. The portlet can be designed as a web browser pop-up window or a widget.

There are also technologies, such as embedding, inline linking, framing which can transfer data from one social medium (website/blog/social network) to another to achieve the so-called “transclusion”. For example, it is easy to embed a YouTube video into a webpage or repost an interesting blog article on a social network page. Reposting (quoting an initial message, providing a hyperlink to the source or do both depending on the particular website) and embedding have become very powerful tools of message distribution throughout the Web. In our model transclusion can be illustrated in the following way:



Transclusion makes connections between different websites and creates the groups of interdependent web sources. In our analogy this resembles combination of atoms in molecular structures. In social media this phenomenon is used massively (reposts, quotes, ads, hyperlinks).

The most advanced social media use even more more sophisticated technology: mashups. Mashups can not only provide interaction between users and other data sources but also interact between themselves. Mashup is much more complex communication channel than a portal: it consists of a large amount of interwoven channels while in portals channels are parallel.

### **The role of social media in web conflicts**

In the recent decade the social media have grown to the most massive and efficient means of communication. The Web 2.0 heavily relies on the user-generated content and it is its strong side. Social media are global and ubiquitous. That means they can be reached from everywhere at any time through variety of devices even by an inexperienced user: most of such websites are very user-friendly. Although social media are very flexible and constantly changing, their advantage is that they can remain stable communication channel due to the effect of redundancy.

The fact that most social media are organized as portals and mashups means that they combine information from different sources and present it to the user in heavily mixed and fragmented way. That information is sometimes difficult for perception. And as the source of such information is another user, the messages distributed over social networks are always full of opinions, subjective points of view, and bias. This makes social media very sensitive to web conflicts inception and development.

For example, a Facebook news feed can be the source of contradictory and highly emotional messages delivered to the end user on one webpage that is constantly updating. Numerous comments to a popular YouTube video can often contain opposite opinions. “Like” and “Dislike” buttons with counters are specially designed to express the polarity of views. The very nature of social media heavily relies on expressing opinions, building very dense communicative space for discussions. That means that social media are and will be the area for conflicts. What tools are available to the conflicting parties? That depends on the particular website that serves as a virtual place for the conflict.

### **Conclusion**

As it was said, the problem of social media is extremely important because "virtual location" of the web conflict in one of its key characteristics.

The most important point is that in a web conflict social media are complex communication channels. This allows not only to explain how people communicate over the web but to show how information exchange process develops. It also makes possible to capture the moment of web conflict origination, to trace web conflict development and of course it is applicable to the research of web conflict dynamics, analysis and resolution as the final result.

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