FAME OR FUNCTION? HOW WEBCOMIC ARTISTS CHOOSE WHERE TO SHARE

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Online social networks are complex systems that can be variously construed as websites, platforms and communities but relatively rarely are they considered from the perspective of a goal-directed user. A mixed methods study consisting of questionnaires and in-depth interviews was carried out in order to examine the use of social networking within the online cartoonist community. We consider this subset of users, who rely on the use of social networking for specific work-related activities, because they form a group of motivated innovators who explore the uses and abuses of different services in terms of both feature set and community. A complex picture emerges of the strategic combination and interplay between platforms to co-optimise function and reach.

Introduction

Online social networks are complex systems that are traditionally discussed in several different ways, often revolving around either the technology and design of the platforms themselves, or the behaviour and social interactions of the communities that use them. These two areas are often studied as separate topics, but in reality how people interact online is affected and restricted by the functions of the sites they use. Social networking is becoming an important tool for both businesses and creative individuals to find audiences and customers, and it is important to understand how contrasting factors are perceived to affect each other. From a systems ergonomics perspective (Wilson, 2014), how and why people in a particular industry or with a specific goal make use of existing platforms can help to improve the functionality of future designs.

In this paper we study an online community consisting of creators and consumers to examine the use of different social media platforms and the ways in which

their interactions may be restricted or facilitated by differing platform dynamics. We chose this community because the use of social media is an integral part of the creators' business models, and social networking is very much a necessary part of their work. The majority of users of social media platforms are performing non-directed activities, browsing with no particular aim in mind, but our creators must act in a goal-directed way to maintain their communities. As such, our creators are an expert group of users and can therefore provide insights which will help other communities, as well as suggesting issues to be considered in future platform design. We now give a brief overview of this community.

Webcomics are comics that are distributed through the internet by an independent creator with no corporate sponsorship (Fenty et al., 2005). Conservative estimates for the number of titles online at any time place the number around 15 to 20 thousand (Walters, 2009) although this varies considerably. Most webcomics do not make a large income, however there are an increasing number of creators who can support themselves full-time. Internet technologies are vital to these creators as the costs of production and distribution are much lower; cheap website hosting, free blogging software, and access to large audiences make it easy for an artist to display their work and get it seen.

The importance of the relationship between comics creators and their readers has long been recognised, and with webcomics in particular, the use of technology in this relationship is vital (McCloud, 2000). Creators are able to build up meaningful relationships with readers over time and through many different avenues. The internet negates geography, which for webcomics means that they can maintain a large reader base whilst still catering to a niche audience (Guigar et al., 2011). It takes time and dedication to build up a reliable community, but in response creators often end up with a group of readers willing to spend their time and money to support the artist. Most financially successful webcomics artists cite close relationships with their readers as a major factor (e.g. Watson, 2012).

In order to cultivate relationships, many creators encourage dialogue, and include blogs with their comics. Readers can post comments, and visit forums or social media pages to engage with creators and other fans; they can be involved in every stage of comic production, with artists posting ideas, concept sketches, and works-in-progress, and livestreaming their process. They make use of many different websites for varying purposes. For example, if they wish to reach as large an audience as possible they may post predominantly on 'famous' sites such as Facebook and Tumblr, but if they are more concerned with reaching a particular audience they may focus on comic-specific sites such as Comic Fury, or particular communities such as gamers. Alternatively, creators may choose sites based on what they wish to achieve by posting work online; this leads to choosing sites based on their particular features, for example using an image-focused site such as Tumblr or Deviant Art as a form of online portfolio. It is most likely that artists will use a combination of 'fame' and 'function' to decide where to post their work, and will use several different combinations of sites to maximize their reach online.

This brief summary shows that webcomics creators are motivated to carefully consider their usage of social networking; their businesses depend on rich interactions and sharing content and so they must use these sites more often and with more consideration than other groups might. Often, part of their working day is dedicated to social media (Guigar, 2013), and they have particular mental models about how such sites work. Their entire working life is visible online, and although their business models only exist due to the power of social networks, their livelihoods may also be threatened by what is available and how they manage their internet presence. This paper highlights some of the issues and opportunities faced by these creators, which in turn may affect the more casual user and other communities.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was taken in this study, in order to build a comprehensive picture of how people within the webcomics community make use of the internet, particularly social media. A multiple-choice questionnaire was distributed online, followed by a series of semi-structured interviews with 6 full-time and 5 part-time webcomic creators (7 males and 4 females). Questionnaire participants were recruited through social media, webcomic sites, direct emails to creators, and creators sharing the study with their readers. As an online industry with a large emphasis on interaction, recruiting in this way was felt to be appropriate, particularly with the wide range of avenues utilised. All 209 questionnaire respondents were webcomics readers, with 92 also being creators. Almost half were aged between 26 and 35 (46.4%), most were male (53.6%), and American (43.1%) or British (20.1%). Creators had typically created one comic (43.5%), for up to two years (48.9%) although a substantial number had been updating their current comic for more than five years (19.6%). Comics are typically updated once a week (44.6%), and receive fewer than 5,000 unique visitors per week (84.8%); only six creators considered themselves to make a living from their webcomic work. Interviewees were recruited via email; all webcomics creators listed to attend Thought Bubble Comic Art Festival in 2013 were contacted. 19 creators indicated they would be happy to be interviewed, but due to time constraints only 11 interviews were fully completed, with 9 UK-based and 2 US-based creators. Whilst this sample was somewhat opportunistic, Thought Bubble is the largest gathering of independent creators in the UK and therefore it was the best place to gain a diverse group of artists. Questions were kept very open to allow creators to say that they wanted without constraint, and to prevent guiding opinions. Interviews lasted for between 10 and 50 minutes and creators were asked to discuss how they use social media and the internet to interact with their readers. Interviews were transcribed fully and an inductive, iterative, and grounded approach was taken to analysis in order to code for recurring themes. This included grouping comments by keyword, and coding for positive and negative comments. Quotes used in this paper were chosen as representative of the theme.

Results - *Fame*

As can be seen from Table 1, most artists maintain a dedicated site for their webcomics; the following seven most used sites are social media (indicated by *), whilst the final two of the top ten are comic-related or webcomics-hosting sites (#). This generally matched with where people read webcomics, although readers much prefer the dedicated site rather than reading elsewhere; this may be because creators often simply post links directing people to their main site on Facebook or Tumblr. Posting and accessing additional content, such as concept art and blogs, differs considerably, although the top 5 sites were also exclusively social media. Readers also appear to have a very slightly higher preference for comic-related and webcomics-hosting sites; 27 of the 46 other sites mentioned were comic-related, and were only used by one or two people. Generally speaking, the sites with the most users are also the most popular: Facebook boasts 1.32 billion users (Facebook Newsroom, 2014) and Twitter has 255 million (Digital Market Ramblings, 2014), whilst Comic Fury has nearly 45 thousand (ComicFury, 2014) and Tapastic has 1 million (Digital Market Ramblings, 2014).

Table 1 Top ten websites for webcomics content (Position in brackets)

Website	% Post Comic	% Access Comic	% Post Additional Content	% Access Additional Content
Any	100.0	100.0	83.7	75.6
Dedicated site#	84.8 (1)	96.8 (1)	48.9 (1)	67.5 (1)
Twitter*	54.3 (2)	34.8 (2)	31.5 (4)	38.8 (2)
Facebook*	52.2 (3)	22.2 (3)	33.7 (3)	22.5 (4)
Tumblr*	46.7 (4)	14.5 (4)	42.4 (2)	24.9 (3)
Reddit*	15.2 (5)	5.8 (5)	1.1	1.4 (6)
Google+*	12.0 (6)	3.4 (6)	3.3 (=6)	1.0 (=7)
Deviant Art*	9.8 (7)	1.0 (=9)	15.2 (5)	2.9 (5)
Pinterest*	5.4 (8)	0.0	0.0	0.0
Smack Jeeves#	5.4 (9)	1.0 (=9)	0.0	0.0
Comic Fury#	3.3 (10)	1.9 (8)	2.2 (=9)	0.5 (=9)
Instagram*	0.0	0.0	3.3 (=6)	0.0
Blogger	0.0	0.0	3.3 (=6)	0.0
Webcomic Underdogs#	1.1	1.0 (=9)	2.2 (=9)	1.0 (=7)
Comic Rocket#	1.1	2.4 (7)	1.1	0.5 (=9)

Interview data backs up these numbers, with all of those interviewed showing preference for Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. The most obvious reason was that they reach more people: *"I'm still small, I'm building up my career and I need as many people as I can to see my work"* (P8). Users will share content that they like with others, increasing the work's audience; this is particularly useful when introducing a new comic or seeking the viral effect: *"you need to get into their feed, you need to get into what they look at every single day"* (P8). Posting on social media can be very successful: *"there's some people that do follow me on Facebook that will buy pretty much anything that I put out"* (P1). However, large numbers of followers does not necessarily transfer into more success, either in

terms of dedicated readership or merchandise sales: *"Tumblr is more sort of, well kids really, who you know, clicking is free and they'll look at a thing but they don't, they can't reach into their pockets or anything"* (P6). In some cases it may be better to find a smaller, more appreciative audience elsewhere: P2 found most success posting to gaming communities rather than social media.

Getting lost in the crowd was also of concern to those interviewed, for example P1 and P10 felt that Tumblr could becoming confusing in terms of who created a post, whilst P8 thought it was *"flooded with lots of things like little gifs"*. P2 felt that keeping up with social media was often too time consuming. P9 in particular had some issues with large social media sites. *"Once everybody's on social media just honking their horn non-stop it's too much noise and people aren't interested. [...] As soon as every voice is heard with equal volume, nobody can possibly benefit the same as they did when it first started out."* (P9). He had more success with fewer followers, which he feels is because people follow so many people that they do not have time to read everything, or click every link. He believes the sheer volume and speed of posts also makes it harder for the artist to engage with their readers: *"I can't try and keep up with replying to comments, if you reply to everything you don't reply to anything properly."*

So whilst webcomic artists mainly post to large social networking sites, corresponding to where content is read, it appears that the opportunity to reach more people may not be the main or only reason for engaging with social media. Creators show clear preferences for particular social media sites, even if they post to all of them; additionally, outside large social media sites, where content is posted and where it is read varies a lot, implying that creators may not simply 'go where the readers are'.

Results - *Function*

This section looks at possible reasons for choosing one site over another, based on three major function-types derived from the interview themes.

News Feed

Everyone interviewed indicated that they use social media to post every time they have an update to their comic, or a piece of news to share. P2 felt that readers tend to use *"social media as a trawl to find out interesting things happening"*. Twitter and Facebook were the most preferred; creators were roughly evenly split between the two, with two artists favouring them equally.

Updates are usually in the form of links on both Twitter and Facebook, driving traffic towards the creators' own sites. Twitter was often used for automatic posting of links to new comics, although most creators also liked to post more personal, funny, or interesting tweets in between these links. The idea of using Twitter just for automatic links was not well liked: *"I like reading the little life-titbits of people I follow. [...]Under those circumstances, I may as well use an RSS feed"* (P11), and it was only used as such by one creator who had multiple

Twitter accounts. Facebook tended to be used for more extensive, less frequent news posts between comic updates. *"If someone's subscribing to you on Twitter they kind of expect that sort of junk and terrible jokes and things. If I clog up somebody's newsfeed [on Facebook] I think they're more likely to just defriend me"* (P3). Tumblr was generally not felt to be suited to this type of content: *"I do cross-post all my updates there, but I don't think my audience is primarily reading it on Tumblr"* (P5).

Interaction

Cultivating a loyal readership is a major goal for webcomics creators: *"there's a lot more value in the long-term fan"* (P5). Two-way interaction between creators and readers helps to achieve this, and is a major reason for using social media. It was felt that *"people like to know there's a person behind a webcomic"* (P8) and rather than simply driving traffic towards their sites, creators see social media as *"a way of building engagement with the audience"* (P3). This leads to increased reader loyalty, which may translate into not only more site visits and merchandise sales, but also support when things go wrong; readers often report art theft and copyright violations to creators through social media, and help them to campaign against it. Other creators do this too, and through social media artists are able to form tight-knit communities who provide each other with advice and encouragement. *"It's that kind of nice connectivity of knowing other artists and having a little gathering of artistic minds"* (P1); *"We're constantly chatting with each other, because it's nice to build those bridges. [...] it's massively useful to chat with other people doing this for a living."* (P6).

Of the eight creators who expressed a preference with regards to interaction, six of them preferred Twitter. *"I use [Twitter] to kind of help readers to get to know me [...] I vent the frustrations of my daily life in a way that I think is going to be amusing for people"* (P5). A potential reason for this preference is that Twitter provides an instant 'chat'-like element to the interaction; another is that it provides slightly more privacy. Several artists were not comfortable with readers being able to see where they lived, who their family was, and so on, and on Twitter these things are easier to hide. Facebook Pages and Groups were preferred however when creators needed a permanent base for group discussions, longer bits of news, and opinions that were not practical to post in 140 characters. *"I was very keen to sort of build a kind of fan club around the comic so that people would regularly tune in"* (P8). Other suggestions for finding this interactivity were through allowing comments on the main comic's website, or encouraging discussion in dedicated forums.

Portfolio/Art sharing

The third major theme emerging with regards to functionality is the posting of images. Many creators like to showcase their work outside the individual pages of comics that they post. Everyone interviewed preferred Tumblr or Instagram for this. *"Tumblr is mostly just the one panels, and when I do a bit of promotional art like a post card I put it on there and sometimes I ask for feedback."* (P6); *"Instagram is a good community, that is, it feels like the other*

social networks did at first. [...] The quality of work that you see on there is higher than you get on any other social network" (P9).

Facebook is used by some, but P10 felt *"it seems like not the done thing, like to put a load of, like an album of drawings on Facebook".* Twitter is also seen as rather awkward for posting images, as most of the time the user has to follow a link to see the picture properly. However, some did link to their Tumblr posts on Twitter, to reach a wider audience. Deviant Art was occasionally used, although P8 found that the *"submission process was too long winded and archaic for me to update daily"* so it wasn't really suited to a webcomic; P10 felt that this was the case for Flickr also and it was *"not really for sharing things around".* Additionally, P11 thought that Deviant Art had become an *"art harvesting platform"* and always made sure to add a watermark to her work.

A separate portfolio or art blog is also an option for this functionality. P10 in particular made use of several different art sites for different purposes. *"[M]y portfolio site, that's like the final, main things that I want to show off [...] and then Instagram is literally just anything, just work-in-progress study really [...] and then Tumblr, I can do more, cos I do like animated gifs and little drawings, and also more finished things."*

Conclusions

Webcomics creators post to a wide range of sites, but the most popular are the large social media sites, particularly Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr. These are also the sites where they can reach the most readers. However, interview data shows that creators do have concerns about using these sites, particularly getting lost in the crowd and reaching the right demographic. Often it is more important that the sites they post on have the functionality that they need; their main requirements are news posts and links, interactivity, and displaying work. All three of the preferred social media sites can be used for these purposes, but each one is optimised for a particular thing in the view of creators. It is important for platform designers to consider different types of users and their requirements. Most creators *"use the different mediums for what [they] see as their intended purposes."* (P11), and in order to make the most of what is on offer, creators most often prefer to use a combination of Facebook and Twitter, or Tumblr and Twitter. It is important for these creators to be able to appropriate the functionality they need from each site, and to use them compatibly with other sites.

Creators are generally very aware of how they can find the biggest combination of reach (fame) and convenience (function): *"it changes every year which [social media sites] are the main ones, and which are the best ones, and you just have to kind of stay on top of it"* (P10). Particularly in the case of posting their artwork, creators will choose the site that performs the best for them, and then link to it on the bigger sites to encourage readers to visit them there.

A complex picture of social media use has emerged from this study. Time and effort is needed to create a useful online network, and creators must be highly aware of how they can make the most of the tools available. It is clear that webcomic creators are experimenters, who take different parts of each platform and combine them to form a network that works for them in the way that they need it to. Whilst the structure of a platform dictates how it is used, these creators work around any issues in a sophisticated and strategic way, reaching as wide an audience as they can on some networks and directing them to content on others. It would be beneficial to look at other communities who make use of social networking for various reasons, and how the different functionalities affect interactions of different levels.

Acknowledgements

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