

Daily Update: A Teenager's View on Social Media and the Social Communications Map

13-16 minutes

Good morning,

As I noted last week, I will be going to Beijing the Wednesday to Friday. As of now I plan on keeping the same posting schedule, but my apologies in advance if there are any delays. In addition, my schedule isn't yet completely set, so I'm not sure if I will be able to get a meet-up together; if I did, who might be interested? It would probably be Thursday night. Please reply and let me know if you would be interested in attending, and I'll let you know if I can pull something together via email.

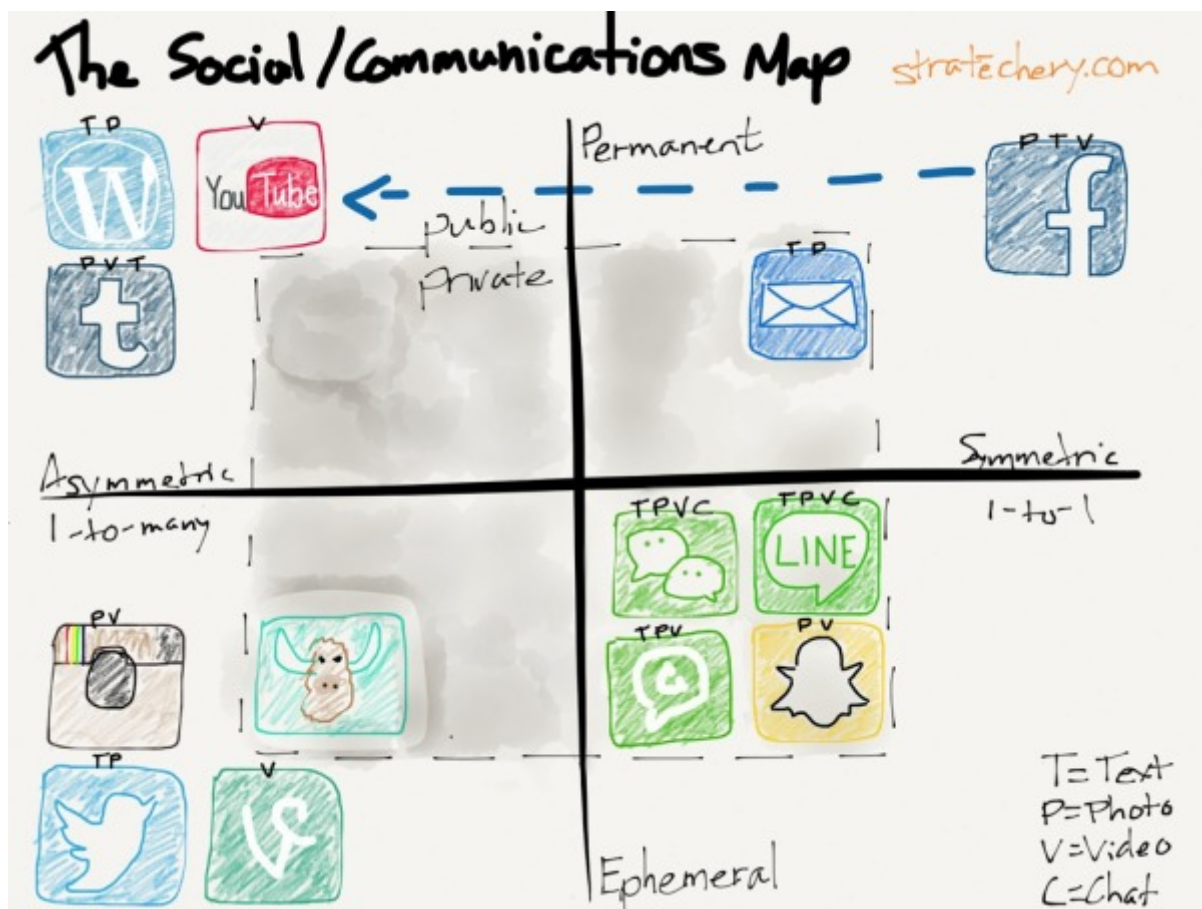
On to the update:

I'm sure most of you have by now read [A Teenager's View on Social Media](#) by Andrew Watts:

I read technology articles quite often and see plenty of authors attempt to dissect or describe the teenage audience, especially in regards to social media. However, I have yet to see a teenager contribute their voice to this discussion. This is where I would like to provide my own humble opinion.

For transparency, I am a 19-year-old male attending The University of Texas at Austin. I am extremely interested in social media's role in our society as well as how it is currently evolving. Thus, the views I provide here are my own, but do stem from observation of not only my own habits but my peers' habits as well.

It was certainly an interesting perspective, and for me anyway, gratifying: I felt Watts' views corresponded pretty nicely to the Social-Communications Map.



Today's update is all about breaking down the various services in the article, how they correspond to the map, and a couple of things I might have gotten wrong.

Facebook

Watts:

In short, many have nailed this on the head. It's dead to us.

Hey, it's conventional wisdom 101! You see this echoed in all kinds of stories and analysis. It's also 100% wrong, as Watts himself unknowingly illustrates:

It's weird and can even be annoying to have Facebook at times. That being said, if you don't have Facebook, that's even more weird and annoying... Facebook is often the jumping-off point for many people to try to find you online, simply because everyone around us has it.

Bingo. Facebook isn't dead. It's not even past. It's something different, and deeper. I wrote in [Christmas gifts for Facebook](#):

Facebook is as ubiquitous as a service can be (China excepted, of course), and it's not only indispensable – and unmovable – as the effective address book for over a billion people, but it's actually deepening its rate of engagement over time... So while the conventional wisdom may be that Facebook needs to reach teens more effectively, I think the future, for at least the medium term, is Facebook plus other services; they are all additive to Facebook.

Watts and his friends may not love Facebook, but they all use it, just like we all use email. It's essential, and for many of its users, beloved. In fact, I'll bet that if Watts is only using

one of the services in his article in ten years, it will be Facebook: it is a utility, in the best sense of the word.

More from Watts, on Groups and Messenger:

Facebook is often used by us mainly for its group functionality. I know plenty of classmates who only go on Facebook to check the groups they are part of and then quickly log off. In this part Facebook shines—groups do not have the same complicated algorithms behind them that the Newsfeed does...

Messaging on Facebook is also extremely popular among our age group, mainly because they provide the means to talk to those people who you weren't really comfortable with asking for their number but comfortable enough to send them a friend request.

Both of these functions relate to Facebook's core value proposition: the best groups app is one that everyone is already familiar with and signed up for, which leaves basically one option in many countries, including the United States (Watts does mention GroupMe at the end, but I don't think that's something that will be long-lasting). Same with Messenger. Moreover, Watts is spot on that the utility of Facebook Groups in particular is excellent, and I'm sure it's only time until Messenger is at a similar level. The public interaction between acquaintances is Facebook's bread-and-butter and I don't see any evidence that it is threatened.

Instagram

Watts:

Instagram is by far the most used social media outlet for my age group. Please note the verbiage there—it is the most used social media outlet. Meaning, although the most people are on Facebook, we actually post stuff on Instagram.

I thought the Instagram section was the most interesting in this article:

- Instagram posts get a lot more interaction, in part because...
- There's less pressure to follow-back, so you only see what you want to see (and don't have to deal with the algorithm burying stuff), which means...
- Most of the content is of very high quality

It's striking how much this sounds like Twitter's platonic ideal. The problem for Twitter is that text is simultaneously easier to produce *and* more difficult to make interesting. Or, perhaps, we all just have a better eye for what makes a good picture than we do a good idea.

Also worth noting is how important the *lack* of discoverability is to Instagram's appeal: things like tagging just disappear into the ether. It's why Instagram (and Twitter, for now anyway) are on the ephemeral side of the Social/Communication Map.

Twitter

Watts:

To be honest, a lot of us simply do not understand the point of Twitter.

You know the snarky joke is [just sitting there](#), but I'll pass.

Twitter is a place to follow/be followed by a bunch of random strangers, yet still have your identity be attached to it (this distinction will be important later on). Your tweets are also easily searchable on Twitter which is good but not good if you want to be yourself and not have it follow you around when you're trying to land a job. Thus, to others Twitter is used like Facebook—you post with the assumption that your employer will see it one day.

This was very interesting to me: it suggests that from the perspective of Watts and his friends, Twitter is actually towards the *top* of the Social/Communications map. And, critically, it's much harder to drive engagement at the top of the map because you're battling against fear. In other words, things like massively improved search may actually be hurting Twitter more than it helps.

Snapchat

Watts:

Snapchat is quickly becoming the most used social media network, especially with the advent of My Story...Snapchat is where we can really be ourselves while being attached to our social identity. Without the constant social pressure of a follower count or Facebook friends, I am not constantly having these random people shoved in front of me. Instead, Snapchat is a somewhat intimate network of friends who I don't care if they see me at a party having fun.

This is a great articulation of why I'm so bullish on SnapChat. It's not that photos are deleted, it's that there is no friction. I don't just mean no friction from a UI perspective, but from a "social pressure" perspective. On SnapChat you just don't care and that is super liberating. Watts adds:

Another quick aside about Snapchat—I only know a handful of people (myself included) that believe Snapchat does delete your photos. Everyone else I know believes that Snapchat has some secret database somewhere with all of your photos on it. While I will save that debate for another day, it is safe to say that when photos are "leaked" or when there's controversy about security on the app, we honestly do not really care.

This is the key thing to understand when thinking about social: the technical implementation doesn't really matter; at the end of the day all of these apps are kind of the same (which, I suppose, is why people think Facebook is so easily replaced). Rather, what matters is the *perception* of users and their expectations of the service: everything flows from that. And, for Snapchat, the perception is pure ephemerality, and the expectation is freedom to truly be yourself.

Tumblr

Watts:

Tumblr is a place to follow/be followed by a bunch of random strangers, yet not have your identity be attached to it. Tumblr is like a secret society that everyone is in, but no one talks about. Tumblr is where you are your true self and surround yourself (through who you follow) with people who have similar interests. It's often seen as a "judgment-free zone" where, due to the lack of identity on the site, you can really be who you want to be. The only Tumblr URLs I know of people in real life are my close friends and vice versa.

I found this part fascinating: clearly I had Tumblr completely wrong on the map (Marco Arment, who built Tumblr, [says Watts is exactly right](#)). The company isn't an easier-to-use WordPress, even though those are the types of Tumblr's that I am most familiar with. Rather the company is, well, a more accessible version of Twitter, and more ephemeral as well (again, it's the perception that matters). And, more importantly, because the friction is just a bit higher than Twitter, it's signal-to-noise ratio is better as well.

I wouldn't say a lot of "socializing" — at least in the way we've defined it in our social media society — occurs on the site, but people can really easily meet others worldwide who hold similar interests. This makes it a very alluring site to join for many teenagers, even just to make new friends.

If I'm Twitter, this focus on "interests" is very concerning. I'm not sure exactly how popular Tumblr is, but every user it keeps from Twitter is a problem.

Yik Yak

Watts:

Yik Yak is a rather new contender, however, a ton of friends in college have the application. It has gotten to be so addicting because it focuses solely on the content of your posts — there are no followers, no profiles, nothing. Whatever is funny/relevant is at the top and everything else is at the bottom, whether Kanye West is the one who is writing it or some random kid who never talks in class.

I last updated the Social Communication Map [in order to add Yik Yak](#), and I feel like I got it right:

The breakthrough idea in Yik Yak is its use of location: while many other social networks have had location as a feature, when it comes to Yik Yak location is the entire point, providing both meaning and organization to the network.

As Watts notes, that's the downside too:

A negative to Yik Yak, however, is how unused the application is whenever there is a school holiday. Yik Yak is only as good as the 10 mile radius around you, so if you are in an area with a low population of Yik Yak users, you won't really be using the application much.

Give it time. I'm bullish.

Medium (and WordPress)

Watts:

Many of my peers look for platforms to begin a writing blog that they can share with their friends and family. When I hear my friends say this, they automatically think of creating a WordPress site. For some reason, WordPress seems like the more "sophisticated" website to begin a blog. Others who have had experience with Tumblr will choose to open up a separate blog on there, one that is not connected to their "personal" blog on the platform.

Welp, that right there nails what I got wrong about Tumblr — the use I saw is a secondary one, at best. And truthfully, that makes sense: one of the best things WordPress has going for it is its name. People just assume that's where you write a blog. And, if Tumblr was just aping that, why would it be so popular?

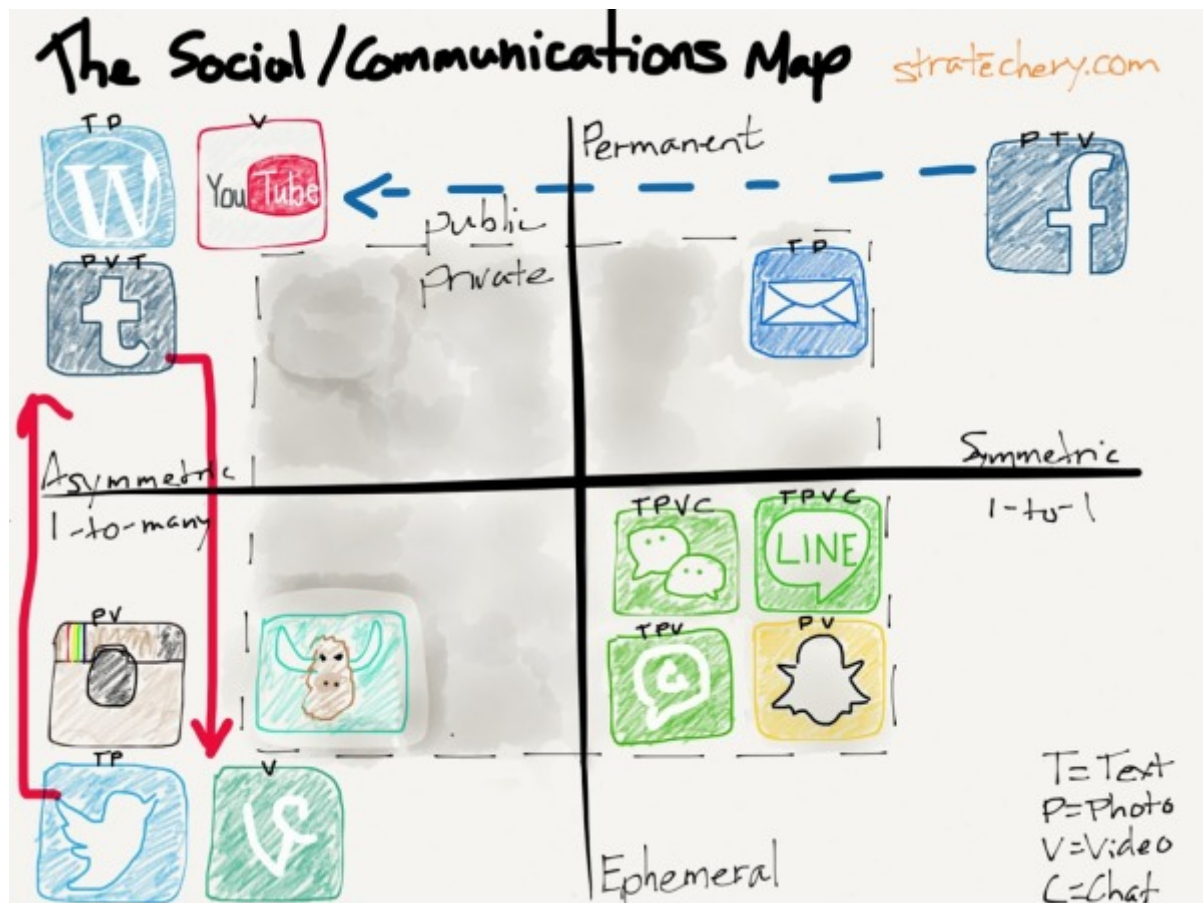
However, once I have introduced Medium to those my age, I have never seen them turn back in terms of a platform to publish a blog. What Medium does right is the “recommend” function. This is unseen on WordPress (besides the typical website sharing buttons) and is really what makes Medium a community, not just a bunch of individual sites. Having a simple “Follow” system also makes it so that you come back to Medium even if you aren’t looking to write a blog. Medium also has an emphasis on commenting right next to the text (as opposed to a lengthy comment section at the bottom).

Medium’s only challenge is becoming known to the teenage audience. The layout of the site as well as the content is all there, what is needed is just the recognition of our age group. I feel that over time as more teenagers begin to discover Medium, many of my peers will begin blogging here.

It’s a compelling argument, and Medium’s product is quite nice. The challenge, of course, is just how many people are actually serious about blogging – and dealing with all of the social pressure and fear that is involved – yet ok with not actually owning their content or website name? I rather suspect vanity, which dictates the latter, is also fuel for the former.

That said, I admit this is probably the part of social I have the weakest view on: it’s not that I don’t have experience, but rather I’m just too close to it to fully disengage and see clearly.

Clearly, it’s dangerous to read too much into one (very well-written) article. Anecdotes and all that. But I do think Watts’ experience really fits my previous thinking on the matter, and I’d go so far as update the map with what he had to say about Tumblr in particular:



In addition, Watts clearly has an American perspective on social, but it’s not so different from Asia anyways. Some of the apps are different – LINE, for example, very much falls in

the SnapChat category – but the [multitudes of social](#) are universal.

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