

Communications overload

February 8 2011, By Jon Swartz

Jose Huitron had just hit the digital wall. Toggling between Facebook, Google, Twitter and a handful of other online communities, he found it hard to keep up with a constant barrage of tweets, texts and instant messages.

"There are so many things coming at you," says Huitron, 29, owner of HUB 81, a social-media consultancy in Santa Maria, Calif. "I just keep a few open all the time now." He also uses a variety of third-party software to sort it all out.

A crush of popular social-media toys - [Facebook](#), Twitter, Google, Yahoo, [Yelp](#), social games, Skype, YouTube and Quora, to name a few - has opened the lines of communication between millions of people as never before.

But the glut of tools and their features - chat, messages, [instant messages](#), [texting](#) and tweets - has led to multiple conversations that can be head-spinning. That has not gone unnoticed by companies such as Facebook and Google, which are looking for ways to streamline their users' online experience with features such as Facebook Messages and Google Buzz, respectively.

People are drowning in a deluge of data. Corporate users received about 110 messages a day in 2010, says market researcher Radicati Group. There are 110 million tweets a day, Twitter says. Researcher Basex has pegged business productivity losses due to the "cost of unnecessary interruptions" at \$650 billion in 2007.

The consequences could be telling for major companies that ignore the conversation overload. Many users, like Becky Beland, a political consultant in Sacramento, have scaled back use of sites, or quit them altogether, to ease the digital-conversation overkill.

"Consumers don't have bandwidth to process so many fragmented convos online and, often, at once," says AOL executive Brad Garlinghouse. "The industry needs to address it."

For social-media companies, that means helping consumers get a handle on how they process a fire hose of information coming at them all day - in the form of IMs, texts, messages and more.

Facebook, Google, Yahoo and others have noted the communications overkill, and they are revamping their services to ease the cacophony of communications on consumers. If they don't, they risk members spending less time on their sites or straying to competitors.

The jockeying comes at a time when it has never been easier to connect via social media with childhood chums, family, co-workers, friends of friends and - sometimes - strangers. More yearn for organizational tools to keep track of their tweets, IMs and texts.

For millions of consumers, the communications overload can spill into work, with deep implications - lost productivity, mistakes, miscommunication and burnout.

The problem is "compounded in the workplace, where speed and access to the most relevant information are critically important," says Aaron Levie, CEO of Box.net, software that helps businesses share content and collaborate.

Consolidation of myriad online conversations and media is inevitable,

Levie says. Business technology such as Box.net and Yammer and consumer technology such as Facebook are helping people filter the digital noise. There's also TweetDeck, which organizes Twitter traffic, and GroupMe, which allows texts to up to 25 people at the same time and can also be used for conference calls.

Help can't come soon enough for befuddled consumers, many of whom are performing several tasks at once to keep up with work and friends - or both.

"Sometimes, it can be overwhelming," says Ben Yarmis, 19, a mechanical and aerospace engineering major at George Washington University. He juggles a quilt of services so he can talk to friends and do school work.

"It's about figuring out how people want to be communicated with," says Madge Miller, 34, a science-fiction writer in San Francisco, who uses a mix of Facebook, Yahoo IM, question-and-answer website Quora, texts and LinkedIn. "For me, Facebook is too much personal and private mixed together."

She credits Zynga's FarmVille social game with reconnecting her to a college roommate.

Then, there is Brad McCarty. As U.S. editor of tech blog The Next Web, he routinely has 10 online conversations at once: Skype, Twitter, Google, instant-messaging, e-mail, chat and texting.

"I do it out of necessity," says McCarty, 33. "When it comes to the end of the day and I can shut it all down, that's a joyous occasion for me."

Short of shutting down their PCs, smartphones and tablets, some consumers resort to shortcuts in how they communicate - in the form of

acronyms like "TMI" (too much information) and "ttyl" (talk to you later).

There is no definitive study on modern multitasking and its effect on the human brain.

A 2009 study by three Stanford University professors on cognitive control concluded that chronic media multitaskers are more susceptible to distraction. But it is hard to say if one's ability to switch tasks is helped or hindered based on age, sex, education or background, experts say.

Before there was ubiquitous technology, mothers with 10 kids were able to juggle tasks to tend to their needs, says Aaron Bornstein, a Ph.D. student in neurophysiology at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"People used to be concerned about ADHD. Now, you almost have to have that trait to cope with so much information," says Robi Ludwig, a psychotherapist in New York.

As the communications habits of consumers evolve, so do the approaches of social-media companies.

"We don't see ourselves in the e-mail business or the instant-messaging business," says AOL's Garlinghouse, borrowing a famous ad adage. "We see ourselves as in the communication business."

Despite a paucity of evidence, it could be a generational thing. Younger people use lightweight, quick conversations in the form of text messaging and chat, while older people typically rely on e-mail and phone, says psychologist Ludwig.

With that in mind, tech start-ups are being fashioned to address the

needs of voracious social-media users.

"The Web is the primary way to keep up with people, but the way (people connect on it) is archaic," says Eric Vishria, co-founder and CEO of RockMelt, a browser that helps consumers organize their profiles on multiple social-media sites.

"I cope with it as best I can," says Chris Grigson, 32, a product manager for the lighting division of Philips in Chicago. He manages four to five online conversations at once. "And I think it will increase. At some point, it has to plateau."

Some of tech's heavyweights are determined to retain, even grow, their multimillion-member audiences by simplifying communications services and interconnecting with competitors.

Billions of dollars in potential annual ad revenue are up for grabs, because marketers and advertisers base their expenditures on the size of a website's audience. Over the past several months, tech giants have taken several steps:

-Facebook: The social-networking behemoth has focused on "social design" - in which it develops products that make it easier for its 500 million users to communicate without getting "lost in a sea" of messages, says Andrew Bosworth, director of engineering.

"The simpler the product, the more users engage in it," says Bosworth,

He points to services such as Facebook Messages and Facebook Groups that streamline communications among people of similar interests. "The deeper the thing is, the more I understand how something works, the more I am likely to use it."

Facebook has produced the new features using an in-house data-science team (experts in psychology, sociology and statistics) and a user-research team. "Both give us an idea on what users want and can process," Bosworth says. "The brain has lots of specialized components for interaction."

-Google: While rumors persist of a new social network from Google, the search-engine power has taken steps to fold its various communications tools together. Its popular Gchat IM service is linked to Gmail.

Google Buzz, meanwhile, lets consumers connect their Google features with sites such as Twitter, Flickr and [YouTube](#).

Recently, Google Voice added a feature that lets users "port," or move, their own phone numbers to Google's service.

In August, it unfurled Priority Inbox, which helps Gmail users sort e-mail and order them by importance.

"There's too much e-mail - and that does not include spam," says Gmail product manager Paul McDonald. He notes Americans now consume three times the information they did in 1960.

-Yahoo: The Internet media company has deals with Facebook, Twitter and Zynga so that millions of its users can view those services from within Yahoo products.

In October, Yahoo redesigned its free e-mail service for 267 million users. One new feature connects e-mail accounts to Twitter, making it possible to see Twitter updates and to post to Twitter directly from e-mail. Yahoo already has that feature with Facebook. Additionally, Yahoo e-mail users can play videos without having to leave their inbox.

"It's about bringing the utility of Facebook to Yahoo," says Mike Kerns, Yahoo's vice president of social, personalization and games.

At Yahoo's annual analyst meeting in May, CEO Carol Bartz vowed to improve the company's engagement with social-media services.

-AOL: New AOL Mail, code-named Project Phoenix, due in March, lets some 30 million users exchange messages with [Google](#) Gmail, Microsoft Hotmail, Yahoo Mail and more than 20 other e-mail services from within their AOL inbox. AOL plans to soon add Twitter and LinkedIn to the mix.

Another feature makes it easy to send e-mail, instant messages, texts - even updates to Facebook and [Twitter](#) - from an AOL inbox.

"These are solvable problems, but the industry does a bad job of standardizing," says AOL's Garlinghouse, president of consumer applications and head of AOL's Silicon Valley operations.

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