

# 'Stumblers' gather on the web

By AUBREY CLARK  
STAFF WRITER  
ARC5229@PSU.EDU

I have been a member of StumbleUpon for over a year now. The addicting community allows me to connect to web pages I would have never dreamed of seeing. To those who do not know what StumbleUpon does it may seem like I waste hours

"Stumbling" onto different sites involving my various interests. I am far from throwing away time when I use StumbleUpon, for I have become much more learned from my experience with the browser. My investigation into the search site has proved that StumbleUpon is a shared experience that connects people and introduces them to quality information/entertainment that most people never find while logged in online.

StumbleUpon.com is a community-based surfing tool that allows "Stumblers" to use a combination of human opinions and machine learning to immediately deliver relevant content, boasts the website. StumbleUpon presents only web sites that have been suggested by other like-minded Stumblers. Each time the 'Stumble' button is clicked, the user is presented with a high quality web site based on the collective opinions of other like-minded web surfers. I decided to use the site because information on the Internet changes rapidly and StumbleUpon is a dynamic approach to keep on top of this ever-evolving pool of knowledge. StumbleUpon was named by Time Magazine as one of the 50 Best Websites in 2007.

Using 15 broad interest categories, StumbleUpon narrows down each category and offers nearly 500 specific topics for Stumblers so they may choose and indicate their particular interests and preferences. Each time a user "Stumbles," the browser produces websites based on the content the user selected when he/she signed up to install the toolbar. StumbleUpon's "About Us" section says the search engine delivers increasingly relevant content as the Toolbar learns what the user has liked in the past and continues to present quality web sites in the future. A main page allows users to look at each broad category, choose one, and view the top rated pages of the day under that specific field of interest. If a certain topic is being debated, users form groups that fellow Stumblers can join to discuss a certain video, image, or issue. The participation of community members helps to maintain a database of the most up-to-date and highest quality sites possible.

When I signed up for StumbleUpon, I picked a username and filled out a "Preference Page" or my profile. It works like a social-networking site (which it is) and asked me to give a brief description of myself, where I am from, how old I am, etc. I also had the option of posting pictures of myself as well. Then, I was prompted to browse through the 500 categories and check boxes next to specific topics that interest me or I would like to learn more about. The only disappointing factor when sifting through and picking my interest based categories was that I, as well as all Stumblers, was only allowed to select 127 topics. I thought it was kind of absurd, seeing as there are 500 to choose from, but I just really narrowed down my selection to stuff that really intrigued me.

StumbleUpon was created for the soul purpose of sharing interests with others and finding the best sites to match those enthusiasms. Stumblers are held together by accepting or rejecting certain sites, administering sites to each other, and discussing how certain sites affect each Stumbler. Right after I became a Stumbler I received a brief e-mail that schooled me on how the tool bar works. Once I started to Stumble, I had the option of "liking" or "disliking" certain pages. I never really used the feature before because not only was I not concerned with connecting to other people and their profiles, but I was too lazy to hit the "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" buttons, which represent the "like" or "dislike" markers. Since I never really paid attention to rating the sites I viewed until recently, I realized I was missing out on a huge part of what the website can do for its users. As I started to "favorite" certain topics and add friends/subscribers to my list who share similar interests, I discovered that I can actually Stumble my "friends" favorite sites, directly from each persons respective home page. The Stumble button allows me to do that on thousands of pages, but I can go directly to another Stumblers page, browse their favorites, blog with them, give them ratings, and decide if our interests are similar enough to keep sharing favorites.

Being a seasoned Stumbler myself, it is safe to say that my fellow Stumblers look at the community with the utmost importance. For hours, millions of other users and I scour sites, discovering thousands of pages and "liking" most of them. The connection that is held between StumbleUpon users is so great because we depend on each other to continue Stumbling. If nobody "favorited" anything or added sites to be Stumbled, no Stumbler would be able to use the tool.

Although calling users "Stumblers" and surfing web pages "Stumbling" is as far into using jargon as we get, many websites found of StumbleUpon are filled with internet lingo

and jargon. MLIA is MyLifeIsAverage.com and I often Stumble to the site that offers a three sentence recap of a person's day which is average for them, but an extraordinary story for others. Since some of my interests include computing, I sometimes "Stumble Upon" sites that use so much jargon my head spins.

Becoming involved in discussions allows Stumblers to debate or agree with the quality of a Stumbled site. Next to the "thumbs up" and "thumbs down" buttons is the Info button, which is clicked before or after a user rates the site. If I Stumble on a lengthy article, I click on the Info icon and look at the description of the page fellows Stumblers have given the site and their feedback to the information. Users can post their opinions about the site, likes and dislikes, what the site is all about, and if they favorited the page or not. Many Stumblers post links to other sites with the same kind of information. Some heated debates form over pages involving anything from whether or not a work of art is done well to disagreeing with an article involving religious contexts. I have seen a few posts making a mockery of the subject on a page, so it makes for great entertainment. Many times, a user points to Wikipedia articles on the topic or scholarly sites that boast information about the avocation at hand.

Certain issues can also be discussed using StumbleUpon chatrooms and forums. I have been to both a few times and they are mostly used for the group discussions. Joining a group and creating a new group is easy. On the StumbleUpon homepage where I browse my profile, my friend's profile, the top rated sites of the day, is a Groups button. From there, I can browse hundreds of groups made by members. Many Stumblers post threads, pictures, and discussions into each forum. With each group, each Stumbler can unleash his or her own personality to fellow users. Football fanatics can talk about the week's games in the NFL group, NY Times subscribers can discuss day to day articles in their newspaper forum, and "foodies" can swap and rate recipes directly with other Stumblers. Any group imaginable is created on StumbleUpon and new groups are made daily.

Blogging is another tool that Stumblers can use to connect with subscribers and friends. I have seen that if two Stumblers were involved in a heated debate over a certain site or topic, one will tell his or her side of the story in the blog on his or her page. Some Stumblers blog their opinions, what they are doing, etc. It is easy to read the blogs of my friends and subscribers as well as prospective friends and subscribers. It is not often that personal Stumbler pages are private since everyone is sharing information, so it is easy to see that kind of person I am going to friend or subscribe to. Blogging is also a good way to spark debate over a topic, discuss ideals, and connect with other Stumblers who have the same feelings about a certain site.

When I first joined the community, I did not worry about "fitting in" or being "welcomed" by other Stumblers. I did receive the customary welcome e-mail and I frequently receive e-mail updates from the site which include hyperlinks from the StumbleUpon blog. I was

Photo courtesy of Stumbleupon.com



overwhelmed when I started connecting with friends and subscribers because most of them have huge followings, tons of blogs and favorites, and good reviews. It is not that I did not feel welcome, I just felt that I needed to vamp up my page, acquire new friends and subscribers, and really focus on the sharing aspect of StumbleUpon. Most Stumblers welcome new users with open arms, accepting friend and subscription requests, because who does not want new friends and followers?

One of the best StumbleUpon features involves being able to Stumble on one category continuously. As opposed to Stumbling on every subject I am interested, I am able to pick one and browse solely that subject. On the toolbar there is a button that allows me to select one of my 127 topics so when I hit the Stumble button, I am taken to websites only involving that certain subject. My favorites include news, food, and Wikipedia. The StumbleThru feature allows users to browse through Wikipedia articles and articles from the satirical newspaper, The Onion, as well as a variety of other sites. I love "Stumbling Thru" Wikipedia articles because I can read about a vast amount of pages and in doing so, I learn about a plethora of different things. I love to learn and gain knowledge about anything I can, so Stumbling Upon random Wikipedia articles or narrowed down, categories of my choosing, I can optimize my stumbling and educational experience.

My investigation into the search site, StumbleUpon, has proved that StumbleUpon is a shared experience that connects people and introduces them to quality information or entertainment that most people never find while logged in online. Not only used for entertainment, StumbleUpon allows users to gain knowledge about fields of interests anywhere from art history to science and technology. The community aspect of StumbleUpon is what keeps the browsing tool working. Without sharing websites, discussions, and discoveries, StumbleUpon would not be what it is for addicted users.