

Social Media

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The term and the phenomenon

The term social media describes Internet-based services that facilitate social networking as well as the creation and sharing of content among users. The term was apparently first used in Internet business contexts in the first half of the 1990s to present ideas about future uses of Web technologies to engage and link users beyond the perceived static and then embryonic state of the online domain. It was only a decade later, however, that the term spread to wider public use. Its rise to prominence should be seen in connection with other key terms of Internet businesses: Web 2.0 and social network sites. Both these terms emerged into public discourse in the wake of the downturn in Internet technology industries around the turn of the millennium. Coined and marketed as a buzzword to renew faith and reinvigorate commercial potential, Web 2.0 connoted a new version of the Web, one that was user driven, dynamic, and user friendly. Meanwhile, social network sites became known as a label for a range of services that grew in popularity in the first years of the 2000s. US-based examples include Friendster (est. 2002), MySpace (est. 2003), LinkedIn (est. 2003), and Facebook (est. 2004)—sites that link users together as represented by connections between public or semipublic profiles (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

While social media is sometimes used interchangeably with social network sites, the former term eventually came to depict a bigger bouquet of services including Web-based audiovisual databases, image repositories, and so-called microblogs. Examples of such services include YouTube (est. 2005), Flickr (est. 2004), and Twitter (est. 2006). In this sense, social media took on a wider meaning. In some uses, the phenomenon of social media now encompassed forms of online communication that predated the first instances of the term, and even the World Wide Web, such as e-mail. Simultaneously, the phenomenon of social media became thoroughly integrated in various domains of public and private life. Public institutions from state apparatuses through to traditional mass media incorporated social media in their communication strategies and offers. So did political activists, and even cross-national terrorist groups. In the semipublic and private domains, social media seeped into applications for tracking, sharing, and networking between sports fans, athletes, or motorcycle enthusiasts, and for the monitoring of children and dating, to mention a few. Social media, then, represent tools for quite diverse forms of communication and content creation and sharing.

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Simultaneously, social media represent a massive commercial potential, primarily because of the ease of the collection of user data through these services, and the corresponding ease of analyses facilitated by current computer systems. Such data analyses form the basis for targeted marketing, either directly through the social media in question, or across other online arenas and other media. Traditional advertising-funded media have been seen as operating in a two-sided market, with the advertisers representing one side, and the audience representing the other. Social media along with similar Internet-based services can be said to illustrate a three-sided market, where the trading of information about the users represents the third side.

Academic definitions and uses

Social media is not an explanatory term, but rather a label put on a certain kind of online services. As such, academic uses have a rather pragmatic character, often employing the term to describe specific objects under study in various settings. Attempts at definitions of social media, then, tend to build on the somewhat shaky basis of industry buzzwords such as Web 2.0, to focus on certain periods in the history of the phenomenon, or to concentrate on one joint in the chain of communication, for instance the users. This pragmatic use of the term should be understood in relation to the surge of research into social media. As is often the case with media and communication research, a new media technology attracts attention as researchers try to grasp and understand new practices, and to answer expectations of being able to help explain and assess innovations.

While current research may not have tackled the thorough integration of social media into society's various domains, scholars have at least covered the manifold ways in which social media are used, from strategic communication settings, via its role for identity construction among different groups of users including youth, to the rhetorical dimensions of social media in political communication, and its effect on democratic practices of various kinds.

Methodologically, research into social media incorporates small-scale intensive study designs, as well as large-scale extensive ones. Much attention has, however, been given to the methodological potential that follows from the ease of documenting, logging, and analyzing user data of different kinds. Often associated with big data, the core of this potential is the promise of the end of sampling: While quantitative media and communication studies, in line with social sciences in general, rely on methods for sampling parts of a larger population to get to generalizable claims, big data promised to make a leap by either making it doable to study complete populations, or by eliminating sources of error through the sheer size of the data sets. Such promises are generally not met, as they depend on the research questions, and also trigger pertinent ethical dilemmas with using and linking together user-generated data.

During such a first phase of research on a phenomenon in rapid development, definitions tend to flourish, and we should neither expect nor necessarily want a singular agreed-to use of the term. Rather, conceptual discussions, where different aspects are

being highlighted, discussed, tested, and rejected, are essential for media and communication theory. In the case of social media, this is so not least because both the term and the phenomenon challenge some often taken-for-granted divisions. While media scholars have tended to focus on mass media with basically a public one-to-many form of communication, communication scholars have added an interest in public and private one-to-one modes of communication. On the one hand, with the phenomenon of social media, it became evident how Internet-based services facilitate a many-to-many mode of communication, often in a way that blurs the divisions of private and public. The term social media, on the other hand, challenged some fundamental understandings of key concepts in our field of research.

Critiques of the term and the phenomenon

A basic critique of the term has it that social media are not media, and that all traditional mass media are social. If social is taken to mean “relating to society,” all traditional mass media are clearly social. But if social is understood to mean facilitating communal activities, of being sociable, and of being associated together by companionship, then it makes sense to at least heuristically distinguish traditional mass media from Internet-based services that facilitate the creation and sharing of content between users, as well as social networking among them. In a similar vein, one might argue that social media are not media in the sense often implied in the field of media and communication studies as they are not mass media with institutionalized practices and professions for content production, distribution, and reception. Social media are, however, media in other senses of the word; they serve as sites for recording and reproducing data, and, more fundamentally, social media are intermediaries between users.

The contested nature of the term, its diverse uses, and imprecise meaning are not something that can be resolved. Rather, like many other terms dealt with in media and communication studies (including, e.g., convergence), the contestation should be taken as a given. This does not mean that the term social media can be used haphazardly, but that the term requires a sober and nuanced employment in actual analysis.

Beyond such conceptual critiques of the term itself, media and communication scholars have also duly critiqued the phenomenon. Scholars interested in democratic practices have argued that social media by and large do not significantly alter the power balance between political actors. The services open up a space for citizen participation in political debate, and also may constitute a channel for the communication of pressing issues from the periphery of society toward the societal centers of power. Still, the actual attention granted to those communicating and their content, seems to follow well-known patterns: Those with a position offline have advantages when claiming a position online. While examples of disruptive use certainly have been documented, the uses of social media for political communication seem, over time and by and large, to fall into normalized patterns.

A more concerted critique of the phenomenon of social media has come from critical political economists. Social media's place within a market economy, and their potential for new exploitations of customers for commercial purposes, as noted above, have been key points to address for critical political economy scholars. On one level, this critique follows a pattern similar to critiques of traditional mass media. On another level, though, social media's intervention in the different domains of public life, as well as in users' everyday life, has intensified the critique. In a sense, tendencies of enclosure of public spheres, along with monetization of private spheres, is perceived as more intense, and with graver consequences than before. Here, the links between social media and the wider phenomenon of the so-called sharing economy are central. In addition, critical scholars have pointed to the ways in which social media serve surveillance purposes. From this perspective, social media allow for an unprecedented access to personal information from an immense mass of users. Such access is highly problematic, whether commercial companies or state apparatuses hold it, and it invites new discussions of our understanding of privacy, as well as new discussions of how power shifts under new technological conditions. To better grasp these new challenges, there is a need for research into the technologies—their software, their algorithms, and the processes that guide them.

SEE ALSO: Convergence; Network; Network Theory and Models; Political Economy; Privacy

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