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Definition and Classes of Social Media

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Social Media, Definition and Classes of

Social media is the term often used to refer to new forms of media that involve interactive participation. Often the development of media is divided into two different ages, the broadcast age and the interactive age. In the broadcast age, media were almost exclusively centralized where one entity—such as a radio or television station, newspaper company, or a movie production studio—distributed messages to many people. Feedback to media outlets was often indirect, delayed, and impersonal. Mediated communication between individuals typically happened on a much smaller level, usually via personal letters, telephone calls, or sometimes on a slightly larger scale through means such as photocopied family newsletters.

With the rise of digital and mobile technologies, interaction on a large scale became easier for individuals than ever before; and as such, a new media age was born where interactivity was placed at the center of new media functions. One individual could now speak to many, and instant feedback was a possibility. Where citizens and consumers used to have limited and somewhat muted voices, now they could share their opinions with many. The low cost and accessibility of new technology also allowed more options for media consumption than ever before – and so instead of only a few news outlets, individuals now have the ability to seek information from several sources and to dialogue with others via message forums about the information posted. At the core of this ongoing revolution is social media. The characteristics, common forms, and common functions of social media are explored here.

Core Characteristics

All social media involve some sort of digital platform, whether that be mobile or stationary. Not everything that is digital, however, is necessarily social media. Two common characteristics help to define social media. First, social media allow some form of participation. Social media are never completely passive, even if sometimes social networking sites such as Facebook may allow passive viewing of what others are posting. Usually, at bare minimum, a profile must be created that allows for the beginning of the potential for interaction. That quality in and of itself sets social media apart from traditional media where personal profiles are not the norm. Second, and in line with their participatory nature, social media involve interaction. This interaction can be with established friends, family, or acquaintances or with new people who share common interests or even a common acquaintance circle. Although many social media were or are initially treated or referred to as novel, as they continue to be integrated into personal and professional lives they become less noticed and more expected.

Common Forms

As this overview of common forms of social media demonstrates, some are used primarily for recreation or personal connections, others for work or professional reasons, but most allow leeway for both.

Email. Probably the most common form of social media used in everyday life, email (short for *electronic mail*) involves users logging into an account in order to send and receive messages to other users. Anyone who sends or receives an email must have an account. Many options for free email accounts are available via the World Wide Web, but many times internet service providers will also offer free email accounts with service packages or employers will offer email addresses to their employees. Most workplaces have strict rules about how email accounts can be used, although many organizations report that they have no specific email training. Those who work for public organizations (including politicians, professors at state universities, and administrators and assistants for government offices) are often subject to open records laws that will allow interested people or organizations to request any emails sent or received to a government funded email account or an email account used to conduct government business.

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Use of email actually pre-dates the internet, with some organizations having the ability to send messages electronically within a local computing network. As the Internet rose to prominence, sending messages across different servers also became a possibility. Email acts as a quick and highly reliable way to send documents or images, updates or important details at a moment's notice, or to share one piece of information with a large number of people. Many people face issues with spam, or unsolicited email that is usually from commercial sources. Many times spam is exacerbated by computer viruses that use email programs to capture all of the email addresses in a user's address book. An address book is the list of email addresses that an individual saves to quickly send an email to an individual or a group of people. People often divide an address book into different kinds of friends, colleagues, or family members to send correspondence to those who it is most relevant.

Texters. Similar to email, a texter is a two-way communication channel that allows individuals to quickly send a message to another person or a group of people. Although media portrayals often make it look as if texting is a particularly youthful behavior, people of all ages have adapted to texting. Still, younger individuals tend to text more often and usually do so at a faster speed. As texting technology has improved, it is easier to text photos or to copy and paste links into texters in order to share them with others. Texters often make use of emoticons, the use of keyboard characters to make pictures such as a smiley face (e.g., :-P), a practice that is also common with email. Texters are derived from chatters, or computer programs that make use of the internet to allow people to quickly talk back and forth via text characters. Although the use of texting is often highly convenient and allows many benefits, particular attention has been paid to two texting behaviors that has led to problems: texting while driving and sexting. It is estimated that texting while driving makes a car crash almost 23% more likely. Sexting is mostly harmful when adolescent children share pictures that are later redistributed to others by the receiver. In some cases, those forwarding pictures of people under the age of 18 have been charged with child pornography. Politicians have faced scrutiny for sharing sexual messages with others, including interns. Despite these problematic potentials, many adults report that sexting is a satisfying alternative to sexual interaction when they are away from their partners.

Blogs. The word *blog* is derived from the word *weblog*. A blog is a webpage where an individual or group can share information or ideas with a large group of people via the internet. It is not uncommon for a person to start a blog and then never update it again. Some of the most successful blogs are updated on a regular basis so the followers of the blog can know when to expect new entries. Blogs cover a wide range of topics, including political issues of all kinds. A common feature to blogs is a feedback forum where, after reading an entry, people can interact with both the blog author and others who have commented. Many traditional media outlets have adopted blog-like features online in order to entice readers to continue sticking with their news or entertainment offerings. For example, many newspaper stories end with the opportunity for readers to share their thoughts or comments about a current issue. These news stories—especially when about hot or particularly partisan political issues—can lead to serious debates. Because of the contentious nature many blogs and news outlets find, it is not uncommon for a user to be required to register in order to participate.

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Message boards. It is not uncommon for fans of television programs or other popular entertainment to frequent message boards that allow users to post messages that talk about a clearly defined subject. Message boards also prove popular with people seeking social support or advice, whether that is wounded warriors trying to make sense of life after war or someone facing breast cancer who wants to talk to someone else who has been through the experience. Advice is also offered through review sites such as Yelp that allow users to rate businesses such as restaurants.

Connection sites. Online dating is another form of social media. Users approach online dating sites—some that require paid membership and others that are free of charge—and create a profile that tells who they are and what they seek in a relationship. Some may be skeptical about how honest some are about the information displayed in an online profile, but research shows that people are generally honest. The stigma placed upon online dating sites has continued to diminish as more people continue to use them in order to meet dating partners. In addition to dating, others may use connection sites to find friends or activity partners. For example, the connection site Meet Up allows users to find activist groups, book clubs, or hobby circles. Users enter a profile, and then they can even send messages to meet up group leaders in order to learn more about the activity or see if they would make a good fit for the group.

Social networking sites. Facebook and other social networking sites are almost ubiquitous features in contemporary culture. Even those who choose not to create an online profile and participate will often hear from others information gained from such social platforms. A key distinguishing feature that makes a social networking site is the fellow list of users that one connects with, usually based upon friendship, family, work relationships, or even weak tie relationships. Initially social networking sites were great ways to meet new people, and although that is still a possibility many social networking sites now discourage people from adding connections they do not know. The public nature of information posted to social networking sites often allow a space for social or political viewpoints to be displayed, although research suggests much of this political activity reinforces pre-existing beliefs – especially because people tend to be online friends with those that are most like them.

Games and entertainment. Online games and entertainment often carry a social dimension. Puzzle games like Bejeweled or Words with Friends allow friends to challenge each

other for higher scores, send gifts that will allow for advanced game play, or even collaborate to beat a game together. Other games such as Farmville carry social dimensions where people can build a virtual farm, town, or business and fellow players can patronize or lend a helping hand to each other. Many times these games will automatically send requests to others to join in, much to the chagrin of those receiving such requests. It is becoming more common that these games will allow for some kind of chat or interaction to accompany each move.

Apps. Short for *mobile applications*, apps are not necessarily social media oriented; but many times people can connect through apps via another form of social media (typically Facebook) and many times apps in and of themselves have some kind of social dimension. One example is Grindr, an app that allows gay men to find other gay men who are within close proximity. Like many apps, Grindr uses a smartphone location tracker to determine where the user is and to determine the distance between other users.

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Common Functions

As the classes of social media make clear, social media have many different functions. First, they allow people to do identity work. When an individual puts who he or she is into a profile, it requires some kind of reflection. As individuals see reaction to their online social presence, they will consider themselves in new light and notice that online interaction allows them to feel more open about thoughts, opinions, and inquiries – both for better and for worse. Second, social media allows people to tend to their relationships in different ways. Even if popular discourse often demonizes outlets such as Facebook or Twitter as narcissistic and shallow, research shows they allow people who may not otherwise be able to connect an outlet to interact. People also report meeting some of their best friends and even spouses through computer-mediated communication platforms. Third, social media allow people to perform work functions. Sometimes the social media is their work, such as a popular blog or someone with a large social network circle being hired to promote events. Other times people interact with work colleagues via social media sites or, especially with email, take care of most of their work communication using the social media outlet.

Fourth, social media allow for people to seek information or share ideas. This information can range from political campaigns to local issues to disaster relief to where is a good place to buy plus size clothing. Fifth, and often in line with information sharing, people can also offer opinions or consider the opinions of others through social media. Finally, individuals can find entertainment through such sites.

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See Also: Blogs; Facebook; Second Life; Social media, adoption of

Further Readings

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