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Social Media

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Social media can be broadly defined as the set of interactive Internet applications that facilitate (collaborative or individual) creation, curation, and sharing of user-generated content. Examples of social media platforms are numerous and varied. They include Facebook, Friendster, Wikipedia, dating sites, Craigslist, recipe sharing sites (e.g. all-recipes.com), YouTube, and Instagram. Social media platforms all share the above-mentioned characteristics, but are unique from one another in many respects. In particular, platforms often vary in their architectures, structures, norms, and user bases.

In working to differentiate between different kinds of social media platforms, scholars distinguish and label several subsets of social media, with a particular emphasis on social network sites. boyd and Ellison (2007) explicitly differentiate social network sites from social *networking* sites. They argue that social *networking* implies meeting new people and making new connections, which contrasts with actual user practices. Specifically, social network site users tend to interact with existing—rather than new—social contacts. Examples of social network sites include Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and LiveJournal.

A second subcategory of social media consists of microblogging sites. These allow users to distribute short messages to a broad audience, often through links and images. Such sites have explicit limits on the number of characters or amount of content allowed per message. Twitter, the predominant microblogging site in the United States, and Weibo, China's suite of microblogging sites, limit each message to 140 characters. Vine, Twitter's video application, limits clips to 6 seconds.

In addition to the label of social media, the contemporary Internet—characterized by interactivity and user-generated content—is also known as “Web 2.0.” Some argue that the newest era of digital technologies, characterized by user collaboration and cooperation, can be labeled “Web 3.0.” Others, however, contend that Web 1.0, 2.0, and 3.0 are better understood as variations in user practice rather than technological capability. Of particular relevance, social media users, who can engage in participatory and collaborative activities online, also utilize social media platforms to send e-mail type messages, or engage in asynchronous discussions, both of which characterize the Web 1.0 era (Barassi & Treré, 2012).

Researchers at the Pew Internet and American Life Project show that 69% of all US Internet users participate in some form of social media (Brenner, 2012), with Facebook, the most popular brand, utilized by 66% of Internet users. Women are significantly more likely than men to participate in social media, with 75% versus 63% participation, respectively. Those who are younger (under 30) are significantly more likely to use social media than those who are older (50 and above), and those with either very

high or very low incomes have significantly higher social media participation rates than those with middle-range incomes. There are no significant racial differences in social media usage (Brenner, 2012). Internationally, social media use among adults is above 50% in Britain, Spain, and the Czech Republic. Usage rates approach these levels in Brazil, France, and Italy. In contrast, Pakistan and India have very low social media use, with less than 10% of the adult population engaging social media platforms. As in the United States, there are strong global variations in social media use by age, with the young (18–29) far more likely to use social media than their older counterparts (50+). For instance, 71% of 18–29-year-olds in Japan use social media, as compared with 8% of those 50 and older (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Because of their pervasiveness and availability through numerous devices—including home computers, work computers, tablets, and mobile phones—social media have important implications for private and public practices and processes in everyday life. In particular, social media pervade processes of identity, interpersonal relationships, and the political economy.

Identity

Social media platforms are often nonymous, meaning that they are non-anonymously attached to bodied beings. As such, much research focuses on the identity implications of social media. Early Internet research, based primarily on multi-user domains (MUDs) and MUDs object oriented, emphasized the dual nature of identity in a digital era. Interactive digital technologies were a reprieve from bodily and social constraints. More recent work, however, recognizes the integration of the digital and physical, and understands that social and physical reality are part and parcel of identity processes within social media.

In particular, identity within social media, though enacted and negotiated in new ways, is subject to the race, class, and gender relations of the larger society (Nakamura 2007). Nathan Jurgenson (2012) refers to the earlier view of a separateness between online and offline—or the assumption that social media are a less “real” form of sociality—as “digital dualism.” Many contemporary social media scholars heavily critique the digital dualist perspective on identity, and argue instead for an augmented perspective, through which users and technologies mutually constitute one another (see Cyborgology.org for an ongoing exposition of the augmented perspective).

In line with the augmented perspective, social media can be seen as a medium through which identities are “prosumed”—or simultaneously produced and consumed. Social actors come to know themselves by seeing what they do, and how others respond to them. By producing and consuming profiled content, social actors produce and consume selves and identities into being (Davis, 2012). This has significant implications for social movements, as social media become places to learn about, teach about, and come to identify with, contested identities. Similarly, social media can be a means by which people come to associate with political parties and causes, developing politicized identities through production and consumption of partisan content. Far from a separate or less “real” venue, the social media environment is one in which

users actively negotiate and constitute their very being, affecting self-perceptions, lines of action, and the evolution of identity meanings.

A key debate among scholars is the extent to which social media afford or constrain user control over identity meanings. Hogan (2010), for example, notes that social media platforms are such that actors submit artifacts to share with one another, focusing on ideal self-presentation with less need to strive for authenticity. Others, however, argue that authenticity is strongly policed within social media platforms, and that phoniness is highly reprimanded (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

This debate rests on the complex architectures and normative structures of social media platforms, which enable explicit curation of identity meanings, while making the labor of doing so highly visible and therefore always suspect. Moreover, social media platforms enable other generated content (OGC), in which an actor's network contributes—in sometimes unexpected ways—to the actor's profiled performance(s). The presence of OGC is further complicated by the collapsed nature of network walls within social media, such that previously segmented networks (e.g. parents, friends, colleagues, bosses, and drinking buddies) all come together within a shared interaction space, bringing with them different expectations about who the actor is and how s/he is supposed to be.

In this vein the affordances of social media create a tension between ideal and authentic self-presentation, with the added complexity of collapsed contexts. Social actors must manage these tensions as they prosume selves and identities into being. They do so in several ways, including complex use of privacy settings, intricate navigation of the social media architectures, presenting to the “lowest common denominator” (Hogan, 2010), or in some cases conscientiously opting out altogether (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). The challenge of opting out, however, is increasingly difficult due to the pervasiveness of social media discussed above.

Interpersonal interaction

As indicated by the label, sociality is a key component of social media. By definition, social media involve interactivity between users. This interactivity can be synchronous, asynchronous, one-to-one, one-to-many, situational, or rooted in exhibitional artifacts (Hogan, 2010). The key debate among scholars and commentators addresses the isolating versus relationship-building role/potential of social media.

On the one hand, social media can enhance interpersonal relationships by facilitating connection across geographic and temporal barriers. Especially with the prevalence of mobile devices, social media make it such that social actors rarely, if ever, have to be alone. Digital interactivity, facilitated by social media, has become part and parcel of everyday experiences. Solitary moments can now be shared with friends instantaneously, and those friends can engage with the user, inserting themselves into the now shared experience. Moreover, the vast ties facilitated by social media enable users to keep in touch with those who might otherwise fall by the wayside, decreasing the cost of interaction and making tie maintenance more easily obtainable, and, in turn, expanding network size.

Despite fears of fragmentation in contemporary society, research shows that the expansion of network size through social media can have positive effects on social capital. Specifically, social media participation, by connecting and activating potential ties, is instrumental in increasing “bridging” social capital, such that users acquire access to new perspectives and a broader range of information, resources, and support than that which is available in close-knit networks. Similarly, intense social media usage predicts “bonding” social capital, or an increased closeness with existing ties. Social capital grows along with network size, but only to a point, with positive effects leveling off, or even declining after network size exceeds 400–500. Importantly, how users utilize social media platforms affect social capital benefits, with connections to “actual” friends predicting social capital more so than connections with strangers or distant acquaintances (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Tong, Van Der Heide, Langwell, & Walther, 2008).

On the other hand, social media hold the potential to disconnect, tethering users to screens instead of to each other. Sherry Turkle (2011) makes this argument powerfully in her recent book, *Alone Together*. She claims that our connectedness to digital devices detracts from the richness of human relationships and moves us away from conversation. Similarly, Stephen Marche (2012) contends that our increased accessibility holds the unintended consequence of dissipating social cohesion.

Differentiating interactivity within social media from face-to-face interaction, Hogan (2010) refers to social media sites as “exhibition spaces.” Unlike face-to-face settings, social media are not temporally bound and actors do not—and cannot—maintain vigilant adjustments to interaction partners. Instead, they leave content, traces of themselves, which are algorithmically curated and then consumed by often large and ambiguous audiences. Importantly, however, Hogan maintains that social media are not separate from the physical world, but afford different kinds of engagement.

In a similar vein, Whitney Erin Boesel (2012) describes the devolution of friendship in light of social media, as the crux of friendship labor shifts from production to consumption. Rather than spending emotional energy as friends direct stories, jokes, questions, and anecdotes to a specified audience, members of the audience put their labor toward sorting through the masses of networked artifacts to find that which is relevant and worthy of or necessitating a response. Users quickly and easily post content about themselves—status updates, pictures, Spotify listens, and Four Square check-ins. It is up to the user’s friends to select out that data, personalize it, and engage with it in meaningful ways that sustain the relationship.

Indeed, social media change the landscape of interpersonal interaction, broadening network reach, strengthening existing ties, creating new ties, stretching ties thin, and imploding the meaning of “friendship.” This affects not only how people present themselves—both directly and indirectly—but also how people make sense of their relationships with one another. The public interactions of social media in many ways work to establish friendship meanings, solidify and make official significant relationships, and establish distance or schisms through an absence of such public connection. In all, these interactions reflect and affect face-to-face sociality, reinforcing while inextricably altering what it means to be social.

Political participation

The relationship between social media and mass media is one of integration, rather than juxtaposition. Most mainstream news outlets maintain both a mass media and social media presence, and many mainstream news stories originate with citizen reporters on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms. In this vein, social media is an integral part of the public relations repertoires for politicians and lobbyists. Similarly, much of the content people share through social media platforms comes from mass media outlets, as users curate and comment upon mass-produced discourses. Nonetheless, the presence of social media has shaped the landscape of political discourse generally, and political participation in particular. The key shift is from primarily one-to-many political communication capabilities, to a suite of communication modes including one-to-many, one-to-few, many-to-many, and one-to-one communication.

The potential for digital technologies to facilitate a “public sphere” has long been debated among Internet scholars. The notion of the Internet as public sphere draws on the potential to transcend geographic barriers, overcome traditional one-to-many media oligopolies, and engage in democratic debate. Indeed, such democratic participation is a bedrock of Western values, and in many cases a perceived moral “duty.” At the same time, social media platforms make users traceable and trackable, provide distraction, and result in a mass of content and information that can be difficult, if not impossible, to sort through effectively. Social media simultaneously give voice and bring voices together, while blurring these voices and facilitating their transience.

Some argue that social media are a new and effective avenue for grass-roots movements, cultural sharing, and the presence of multiple voices. These are spaces of revolution and exchange, spaces by and for the people. Others, however, understand social media technologies as yet another tool of the powerful who can utilize platforms to perform surveillance, enact social control, and reify (rather than deconstruct) existing power hierarchies. Still others take a more muted view, arguing that the cacophony of voices facilitates neither a public sphere nor an oppressive regime, but a benign space in which multiple voices blur into an oversaturated din.

Interestingly, research shows that social media are neither an impediment nor an impetus for political participation, but an increasingly required tool for those who do wish to engage in the political process. In other words, those who are or wish to be politically active find social media a useful and essential part of their political practice. Those who do not wish to do so largely ignore political discourse and action both online and offline (Gustafsson, 2012).

With that said, social media have certainly played a significant role in international social movements and political uprisings. Twitter and Facebook continue to be instrumental in the Arab Spring, as well as the Occupy Wall Street movements. Indeed, the role of social media in political participation is so salient that new (often value-laden) language has emerged with which to talk about the phenomenon (e.g. hacktivism, slacktivism, Twitter revolution). These platforms, however, have been utilized by both the people on the ground and those who seek to oppress them. Never was this dual purpose clearer than during recent events in an embattled Syria.

In the effort to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, Syrian rebels were engaged in bloody battle with the reigning regime. This battle took place on the ground and through digital communication technologies. With international reporters banned from the region, rebels communicated with each other and with the outside world using social media tools. The government, however, also used these tools as a means of tracking rebels and intercepting plans. Then, on November 29, 2012, with the rebels making significant inroads and the regime losing control, the government shut down all social media capabilities. The fighting continued, but the communication stopped, changing drastically the structure of the war. As the rebels adapted, using new digital tools such as Skype, so too did the regime, tapping into these new communication sources and continuing the digital battle along with the physical one.

The point here is that political participation, the spread of ideas, the inclusion and exclusion of voice, has most certainly been affected by social media, but these processes are very much rooted in an existing physical, political, and cultural reality. Moreover, while social media enable participation in some ways, they constrain it in others. Overall, what it means to participate politically now spans multiple platforms and numerous communication channels.

The future of social media studies

Social media are integrated into identity, interpersonal relationships, institutions and the political economy. Social media blur the lines between public and private, work and leisure, online and offline. Such blurring must be kept in mind as researchers continue to understand how social media affect, and are affected by, the social world. Some key areas of interest are beginning to develop.

Increasingly, researchers are looking at the ways in which social media users navigate social media platforms in agentic and active ways. Early research focused largely on the affordances of social media. This line of work emphasized the ways in which social media platforms guide users and facilitate particular kinds of interaction and self-presentation. Emerging work looks more closely at resistance—how social media users redraw lines, negotiate boundaries, and alter social media landscapes towards their own ends. This line of research also understands the evolution of digital technologies and social media usage not as a linear evolution, but as a web of interwoven practices and material conditions through which users move deftly as fits their needs (Barassi & Treré, 2012).

Another emerging area of inquiry looks at the relationship between social media and embodiment. Of particular interest is the Quantified Self movement, in which people track bioindicators using digital technologies and often share their biodata with their networks (see Quantifiedself.com). In these ways, social media users co-construct their bodies, enacting their very physicality digitally and publicly, making sense of their bodies in the collaborative social media space.

Finally, emerging work will have to focus on autosharing, or the automatic documentation of self-data through social media. Applications like social readers, running trackers, geolocators and social music programs share users' activities—both online

and offline — without any explicit effort on the part of the user. Increasingly, then, social actors will need to engage with a social media logic, acting under the assumption of visibility and sociality. This is even the case for those who “opt out” of social media, as their presence in public spaces subjects them to the documentation and sharing that is part of an augmented digital-physical landscape.

SEE ALSO: Blogging, Political; Citizen Journalism; Computer-Mediated Communication; Cultural Studies; Digital Democracy; Digital Divide; Digital Public Sphere; Internet; Interpersonal Communication; Media Democracy; Online News; Political Sociology; Popular Culture; Protest, Political; Social Networks

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