

What's Social About Social Media?

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Abstract

All media are social, in the sense that they establish and maintain relations between and among humans as individuals and collectives, increasingly across space and time. No medium is more social than any other medium. But each medium is social in distinctive ways. So-called social media are distinguished by their potential for many-to-many communication, drawing on and feeding into networks of one-to-one and one-to-many communication, as well.

Keywords

social media, many-to-many communication, meta-medium, civil society, public sphere

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So-called social media are distinguished by their potential for many-to-many communication, drawing on and feeding into networks of one-to-one and one-to-many communication, as well (Jensen & Helles, 2011). Like other so-called new media, their definition—as technologies of communication and as resources of social action—is still being negotiated, in theory and in practice. As technologies, social media are grounded in the programmable principles of the digital computer. The computer is a meta-medium (Kay & Goldberg, 1999/1977) that hosts a range of newly born and old, adopted media. Many more (social) media are likely to take shape on this general platform in the years and decades ahead. The digital computer, for one thing, has reopened theoretical debates on what constitutes a medium in the first place.

As institutions, for another thing, social media have reactualized scholarly as well as public debate on the social, sociality—society. Social media have been associated, not least, with classic political or normative considerations: To what extent may these media empower their users as social agents in their various private and public capacities? As so often before in the history of communication (Peters, 1999), a new form of media, thus, has stimulated both utopian and dystopian prognoses for the role of communication in shaping and, perhaps, reshaping society.

The terminology of “many-to-many” communication already begs the question of how many communicate to, or with, how many others. Take Wikipedia as an institution of knowledge. On the one hand, it provides a proof of concept

of a “wisdom of crowds” (Surowiecki, 2004): Wikipedia is organizationally different from but functionally equivalent to traditional encyclopedia. On the other hand, it illustrates the commonly cited 1-9-90 rule, which suggests that whereas 1% of users will create new content for encyclopedia and other resources and communities, and while 9% may edit this content, the 90% only read or view it. Like other media, social media are not used to the same extent, or in the same regards, by different individuals and groups in society. Regardless, along with one-to-one and one-to-many communication, many-to-many communications have begun to contribute to the ongoing constitution and structuration of society (Giddens, 1984).

Since the 18th century, modern society has been widely conceived as a three-part structure of private sphere, public sphere, and state. To one side, money makes the world go around in the sphere of private economic activity (complemented by an even more “private” or intimate sphere of personal and family life). To the other side, the agencies of the state (or, in American parlance, “government”) ensure a material infrastructure of social life, overall economic stability, law enforcement, and the regulation of conflicts by legal, coercive, and other means. Mediating between the two other spheres of market and state, the public sphere, as chronicled by Habermas (1989/1962), is the site of the main political and cultural institutions-to-think-with, including the press. In variable formulations, the public sphere has been considered

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an arena or forum in which a “civil” society articulates and communicates with itself. It is the current condition and future prospects of this civil society that are at stake in the question of what’s social about social media.

Two different conceptions of civil society, and of social media, may be identified in research and debate so far. From one perspective, prevalent in critical work, social media can be understood as a special vehicle of civil society, manifesting a third force in society, beyond state and market. In the tradition of grassroots presses and public-access broadcasting, social media provide opportunities for interests and movements that fall outside, or are opposed to, political and cultural establishments and bureaucracies to gain a voice. Here, social media could be claimed as civil media—a residual camp within a public sphere under dual siege.

From another, more ambitious, but also less predictable perspective, social media can be understood as one more general resource for constituting and reconstituting not just civil society, but all of society. The public sphere emerged as a proactive instrument wielded by a new social class to assert their political and economic rights and privileges vis-a-vis the *ancien régime* of the feudal state. Social media, like one-to-one coffee-house contestations and the one-to-many early press, are in the process of consolidating and integrating many-to-many flows of communication with other media and amidst pressures from all social spheres. Markets, states, and civil societies around the world are recruiting social media for their own, sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicted purposes.

Media are general resources for defining and contesting not only what society is but also what it could be, and, importantly, what it should be. The answer to this last question implies the answer to “what’s social about social media?” Tell me your definition of social media, and I’ll tell you what

kind of society you would like to join and constitute for the future.

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