

Which Social Media? A Call for Contextualization

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Abstract

This essay briefly reflects upon digital social media in the mid-1990s in order to encourage: first, investigation of pre-twenty first century social media, towards the identification of lessons and resources for present-day research, practice, policy, and activism; and, second, the discursive and socio-historical contextualization of today's social media.

Keywords

contextualization, social media, Web 2.0

Surely many, if not all, human communication media could be understood in one way or another as social? If so, the very recent and near universal identification of the name “social media” with certain web applications and related practices, dating from the mid-2000s onwards, seems worthy of more reflection than has been given in new media studies up to now. There is no room here to closely interrogate the logics and consequences of the current hegemonic meaning of social media, or to provide a historical and sociological account of social media. However, I think it apposite to this inaugural issue of *Social Media + Society* to briefly reflect upon one moment in the history of digital media that has become central to the current representation of social media. This moment was around two decades ago, circa 1995, when the web was still quite new and yet had already, so the story goes, veered away from Berners-Lee's vision of a collaborative reader–writer platform and had become dominated by a rather static communicative form in which web pages were written and edited only by their “owners.” This phase of the web has been retroactively named “Web 1.0” in the process of distinguishing and defining a “Web 2.0.” Web 2.0 is identified, in contrast to Web 1.0, as supporting user creativity and collaboration through participatory “social media” applications, thus drawing us closer to Berners-Lee's vision.

What for me is so interesting here is that the story of the so-called non-participatory “Web 1.0” functions not only to help constitute “Web 2.0” and to highlight the participatory qualities of the associated applications and practices currently named social media but also to obscure a participatory computer network-based culture that was in fact thriving at the time (within a small, but rapidly growing, section of the global population). A range of participatory computer

network-based applications pre-dating the Web were still very popular throughout the 1990s. Here, I am thinking of computerized bulletin board systems (e.g., Usenet and FidoNet), synchronous online chat (e.g., Internet Relay Chat), multi-user real-time virtual worlds, and, most importantly, the humble and yet still today extremely popular e-mail list. Much of this social media was non-commercial. However, there were also commercial computer networks like CompuServe and America Online that offered subscribers consumer-friendly portals to, among other things, a multitude of member-created discussion forums. The web itself, from early on, became home to interactive spaces, and it soon began to host pre-Web participatory applications. Thus, by the mid-1990s, there existed tens of thousands of active web- and non-web-based computer-supported social media groups or virtual communities, as Howard Rheingold and other computer-network enthusiasts called them. Moreover, even “static” web pages were fairly easy to write, HTML code in many cases being simply copied and modified from existing web pages. While writing a web page was not as straightforward as would soon be the case with weblog and wiki applications, it certainly offered a significant advance in participatory media communication in terms of speed, reach, and cost. Hence, webzine culture emerged, radically extending self-publishing while anticipating blogging.

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It was the participatory communication facilitated by these 1990s social media that stimulated a range of social commentators, journalists, academics, politicians, technology developers, e-democracy proponents, and digital media activists to celebrate, investigate, promote, and lobby to protect and advance the “democratic potential” of computer networking in general and the Internet in particular. The democratizing potential here was seen as related to both extending the public spheres of formally democratic political systems as well as supporting the democratic transformation of more explicitly authoritarian ones. Talk about the extension of public spheres focused on the seemingly deliberative qualities of computer discussion forums of all types. Discussion of the role of computer networking in democratizing whole regimes was informed by the digital communicative practices of democratic activists around the world. A key reference point for this discussion was the digital communications of the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, where protestors deployed the digital social media of the time (particularly Internet Relay Chat, Usenet, and various e-mail lists) to organize, debate, strategize, fundraise, relay information, and publicize their cause to the wider world. At the same time, threats to the democratizing potential of these social media were found to come from inequalities in access and usage and also from corporate and state colonization—advertising, censorship, surveillance, and walled gardens (like CompuServe and America Online).

The point of this quick reflection is to do more than simply highlight some social media technologies and practices from yesteryear. This reflection also aims to, first, draw attention to the discursive construction of social media, and thereby encourage questioning of the meaning of social media, particularly with respect to the consequences for theory, research, practice, and policy—and hence society more generally—of defining “the social” via particular (often corporate) media technologies; and second, encourage investigation of pre-21st century social media, however defined, in

order to identify lessons and resources from past experiences for present-day research, practice, policy, and activism.

To undertake such questioning and identification, the proliferating accounts of the new social media’s technological form, affordances, and associated practices need to be accompanied by discourse theoretical and socio-historical, including political-economic, accounts. The great contribution to new media studies of Habermas’ story of the rise and fall of the Bourgeois public sphere, which was so influential upon 1990s digital democracy research and commentary, is not the particular substantive details that he gives, which have been variously questioned, but the methodological approach that he takes: considering the media technology of the time, including what could be readily considered as social media, within its discursive and socio-historical contexts, thus enabling the identification and critique of ideological and systemic dynamics. I strongly encourage social media researchers, including myself, to incorporate such contextualization more into their work so as to develop or extend critical analysis of present phenomena and thereby help determine possibilities for, and limits to, alternative and progressive futures.

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