

## **UNIT I**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Evolution of online communities - History and Evolution of Social Media- Social Media vs. traditional media - Social Media Audience and Goals for using Social Media - Understanding Social Media: Strong and weak ties – Influencers - How ideas travel – Viralness - Social theory and social media - technological determinism in popular discourse on social media technologies.

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## **EVOLUTION OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES**

### **HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

Humans have been searching for new ways to communicate since the dawn of time. Forms of communication have included grunting, cave drawings, speech, letter writing, sign language and email.

Then along came social media.

Social media platforms focus on communities and mass participation. Instead of knowing an individual's private contact information in advance, social media users can find old friends and new like-minded people. Today people can contact each other from opposite sides of the world in less than a second, share files through the cloud and watch the same video simultaneously despite being miles apart. Through these platforms, entire digital ecosystems can form.

In just a short time, social media has revolutionized the way humans communicate with each other. In 2005, just 5% of Americans used a major social platform; by 2021, this number increased to 72%, according to findings from the Pew Research Center. Globally it's estimated that 4.89 billion people are using a form of social media in 2023, according to statistics from Statista.

### **What is social media?**

There are many forms of digital communication, but not all are considered social media. Social media refers to websites or applications that support content sharing, user interaction and the exchange of messages within a collaborative framework. The emphasis here on sharable content and social interaction is key. While many platforms support uploading content, social media enables greater engagement and collaboration between users.

The context for these interactions can be broad depending on the purpose of the platform. For example, some networks may be focused on business connections and furthering professional development, such as LinkedIn. Others may target image sharing over text, such as Instagram, or cater to a specific demographic.

Increasingly, social platforms are facilitating new mediums, such as live video streams or digital retail. Many celebrities and notable professionals also use these networks to communicate directly with fans and supporters in a more intimate format than traditional media allows.

The definition of social media may evolve as the platforms themselves do, but the central component of community engagement should endure.

### **Precursors to social media**

While social media itself has only been around at scale since 2003, there were some initial platforms that paved the way for this kind of digital community. Early adopters of the internet quickly recognized the technology's capacity for communications. Bulletin board systems let people connect to software that hosted public message boards, which displayed news and bulletins to all users. Some bulletin boards offered multiplayer gaming, while others enabled direct messaging or chat rooms.

Prodigy was an individual online service that quickly amassed subscribers thanks to its vast content offering of news, weather, messaging boards, stocks and travel. While the email system was originally launched to support digital advertising and online shopping, it quickly became a peer-to-peer messaging tool.

The other two popular services of the day, America Online (AOL) and CompuServe, followed a similar trajectory and grew such large subscriber bases that they collectively became known as the "Big Three." However, despite seeing substantial popularity in the 1980s and 1990s, none of the Big Three programs could successfully compete against affordable dial-up internet and newer web browsers, with each service fading out of popular use in the late 1990s.

Internet relay chat was another precursor to modern social media. IRC is a form of text-based instant messaging that was designed for group conversations as opposed to one-to-one connection. While IRC remains in use today on servers such as Libera Chat and OFTC, it requires a client connection to an IRC server. Users began to migrate toward more user-friendly chat options. Today the top 100 IRC networks only host a combined total of 230,000 connected users at peak times.

AOL Instant Messenger was introduced to the landscape in 1997. It was spun out of America Online and eventually became a standalone messaging application. Yahoo! Messenger and MSN Messenger quickly followed in 1999.

These tools helped people stay in contact from the convenience of their living rooms -- a foreshadowing of the convenience of smartphone communication.

### **Early social networks**

After this initial wave of applications, the first true wave of social media networks emerged on the market. SixDegrees launched in 1997 and was based on the idea of the six

degrees of connection. Users could list their contacts and invite nonmembers to join, with the ability to message first, second and third-degree connections. Bulletin board functionality ensured the presence of community-wide interaction. The site shut down in 2001.

Less of a traditional social media platform, LiveJournal paved the way for the self-documenting side of social media. Launched in 1999, LiveJournal lets users create a personal blog, journal or diary and share these posts with their friends and community. Users can also list other members as "friends," but this has limited functionality and doesn't need to be reciprocated as on Facebook. It is more like following someone on Instagram or Twitter. Posts have a comment section, which encourages engagement between community members. The platform is still functioning today.

Next came Friendster in 2002, one of the sites most directly comparable to modern-day social media platforms. This site supported photo sharing and video sharing, alongside more traditional text posts and link posts, that would direct users to other locations on the internet. It was also used as a platform to discover new media and events. Users could search for each other and communicate directly or within larger networks.

Friendster was so popular that it reached 3 million members in its first few months. After failing to compete with the social media giants that came after it, Friendster was rebranded and relaunched as a social gaming platform in 2011. It eventually shut down in 2018.

In 2003, MySpace launched and quickly became a global phenomenon. MySpace was the most popular social media platform in the world between 2005 and 2008, becoming the most visited website in the U.S. in June 2006 -- as calculated by internet tracker Hitwise, now defunct. One of MySpace's most popular features was the ability to embed music and YouTube videos into a user's profile, which could also be customized using basic HTML code.

Music played a key role in the platform's success thanks to the MySpace Music feature, where artists could upload their music for greater discovery. This was a precursor to Instagram and TikTok for finding new music. Although popular for years, MySpace was ultimately just not able to keep up with its closest rival, Facebook, which finally outpaced Myspace in terms of unique monthly visitors in April 2008.

Other platforms around this time also launched to various degrees of success, including game-based social platform Habbo in 2000, Hi5 in 2003 and Bebo in 2005. However, none of these have achieved get the same cultural foothold as the following platforms, which continue to dominate the industry nearly two decades later.

## **Modern social media platforms**

Although many social networking sites shut down over the years and faded into obscurity, there are still many social media apps for modern users to choose from. No longer the domain only of the youth, some of these networks have been able to maintain a strong hold over older demographics even as they win new users. The most successful ones have become ubiquitous, with major businesses, famous individuals and everyday users maintaining accounts.

### **LinkedIn (2003)**

The only professional-focused community on this list, LinkedIn was the original business networking tool and has maintained its social position throughout the last 20 years. Both users must agree to be first connections, but anyone can "follow" another member and see their public posts. In-platform messaging tools, comment sections and an interactive job board help professionals develop their networks and follow the careers of those they know.

LinkedIn has been owned by Microsoft since 2015 and has become a popular place for people to showcase their work histories and publicize their achievements.

### **Facebook (2003)**

Perhaps the most well-known social networking app of the modern age -- with an average of 2 billion daily active users -- Facebook was created by Mark Zuckerberg in his Harvard dorm room. Originally only available to Harvard students and then those with an American college address, Facebook quickly expanded and was the third-most visited website of 2022, after Google.com and YouTube.com.

The platform lets users "friend" each other, share pictures and videos, engage with each other's posts, and create events. Small businesses and community pages are also a big draw for users, creating miniature networks within the larger Facebook network.

Facebook is free to use but has made money through ads and selling user data. It also now offers a paid verification option, which proves a user's identity. The company has faced criticism for its handling of private information and a few data breaches.

### **YouTube (2005)**

YouTube is the go-to platform for video content, counting more than 2.5 billion monthly visitors who consume as much as a billion hours of content collectively each day. It launched in February 2005 and was bought by Google a year later. YouTube is now the second-most visited website in the world, after Google Search.

While predominantly a viewing platform, YouTube's comment section, interactive livestreams and "Community" feature enable the kind of collaborative engagement that defines social media. Users can subscribe to channels, create their own and respond to each other's content. A comprehensive advertising model has also made it a popular revenue

stream for individual creators and businesses alike, with many millionaire influencers originating on the YouTube platform.

### **Reddit (2005)**

Reddit is beloved for its old-school aesthetics and simple, text-heavy aesthetic. This website encourages users to upvote or downvote other people's posts, in addition to commenting on them. These votes dictate how visible a post is on the platform. Redditors can also create "subreddits" within the community and share posts, pictures, videos and links, with a mix of administrator- and member-moderators.

There is a greater sense of being run by the community rather than other social media networks, which has made Reddit popular with niche groups that want a safe place to convene online. However, Reddit has recently come under fire for charging for access to its API.

### **Twitter (2006)**

Twitter has been the platform of choice for many writers and creatives due to its focus on microblogging; each post has a set character limit of 280, so users must be concise. Twitter also replaced the mutual friends model with the follower model, where anyone can opt in to see public posts -- or tweets -- of other users in a central newsfeed. This made it easier for people to grow a following and establish a public identity while still allowing for private messages and tweets. Images, videos and links can also be shared, but the emphasis has always been on text captions.

Billionaire Elon Musk acquired the platform in 2022, and it is currently undergoing some changes, such as replacing its legacy "blue check" verification system with a new paid subscriber system.

Learn about some Twitter alternatives [here](#).

### **Tumblr (2007)**

Tumblr is another microblogging platform, popular with younger demographics and fandoms. Users can create and follow each other's blogs, in which they share text or multimedia posts. Instead of a newsfeed, Tumblr members have dashboards that highlight recent posts from people they follow. Users can also ask questions of other blogs anonymously and not associated with their account.

### **Pinterest (2010)**

2010 saw the emergence of photo-dominant platforms, beginning with Pinterest. This site lets users bookmark, or "pin," images from the internet and collate them into different themes and boards. A digital version of a traditional pinboard, Pinterest also added a community aspect by letting users "re-pin" each other's posts and follow each other's boards. Users can upload content from elsewhere on the internet and use Pinterest as a personal catalog. They can also browse existing images that others have uploaded.

## **Instagram (2010)**

Although originally the domain of photographers and artists, Instagram quickly became popular across all ages and backgrounds. Like Twitter, following people on Instagram can be a one-way relationship, which has made it popular with celebrities and other public figures. However, users can also set their profile to private, which requires them to approve any potential followers.

On each post, followers can like, comment or save the image. The photo-heavy platform has a "Stories" function where all content only lives online for 24 hours, similar to SnapChat's temporary content. More recently, Instagram launched a dedicated short video product, Reel, to compete with other video-first networks.

The platform has been owned by Facebook -- now Meta -- since 2012.

## **Snapchat (2011)**

Snapchat's appeal is short-form content, with peer-to-peer and public "Stories" functions. This emphasis on temporary communications and inclusion of various fun filters has made it popular with a younger crowd. Snaps can be pictures or videos, and users can add text, visual effects or drawings to both. While it is possible to take a screenshot of a temporary message and therefore make it permanent, doing so will alert the sender.

Most recently, Snapchat introduced a new AI chatbot called My AI, which can respond to queries. My AI is a generative AI tool powered by OpenAI's ChatGPT.

## **Discord (2015)**

Discord is a little different from the other platforms on this list, with an emphasis on voice calls as well as written communication. Discord supports real-time instant messaging, video calls and voice calls across all the major platforms: MacOS, iOS, Windows and Android.

The site has a large gamer membership due to the voice call technology, but it has also found popularity among smaller communities who want to set up their own private servers within Discord. Each server can support up to 800,000 members, and the platform is free to use.

## **TikTok (2017)**

Despite being the newest addition to this list, TikTok quickly became one of the most popular social media networks for a younger audience since it launched in the U.S. market. Although the platform recently adjusted its settings to accommodate longer videos, the premise is short-form video content and the ability to duet with other users on the platform, increasing interaction between members. Each video post lets users like, comment, save and share. Users can also layer saved audio tracks over their videos, which helps users find related content. An AI algorithm delivers suggested content to members' "For You" page, leading to a highly curated experience.

Learn about some alternatives to TikTok here.

### **Brief fads**

Though those titans of social media all found success, other apps have struggled to find the same audience. Clubhouse was a brief addition to the market in 2019, which offered an audio chat room experience -- a sharp difference to the visual focus of competitors. Despite the growing market for podcasts and other audio content, Clubhouse never quite found its niche, and in April 2023 the company cut its staff by 50%. Vine was a short-form video platform that Twitter bought in 2012 but ultimately discontinued in 2017.

### **How does social media affect society?**

Social media has many uses, including sharing personal updates with friends, brand marketing and publicizing professional work.

Some pros include the following:

- Users can connect instantly with an audience, fostering relationships and building valuable communities.
- Brands can grow an audience and compete with larger rivals.
- Jobseekers can find new career opportunities.
- Local communities can organize around politics or social issues.
- Users can seek out like-minded people as well as connect with family and friends.

But there are also some cons to social media:

- Users can hide behind anonymous accounts and attack other members online.
- Users can spread disinformation.
- Users can exacerbate their insecurities by seeing unrealistic portrayals of their peers.
- The platforms are at risk of data breaches.

### **How has the role of social media changed?**

Initial social media platforms were targeted at the public and designed to help people connect digitally with friends. Over time, they have become spaces welcoming commercial business, brand marketing and the collection of user data. As userbases grew, small communities developed within these larger networks, making them resources for local organizing and finding new connections. The high levels of engagement also made these social networks valuable channels for public figures to share their messages with a large audience without going through traditional media.