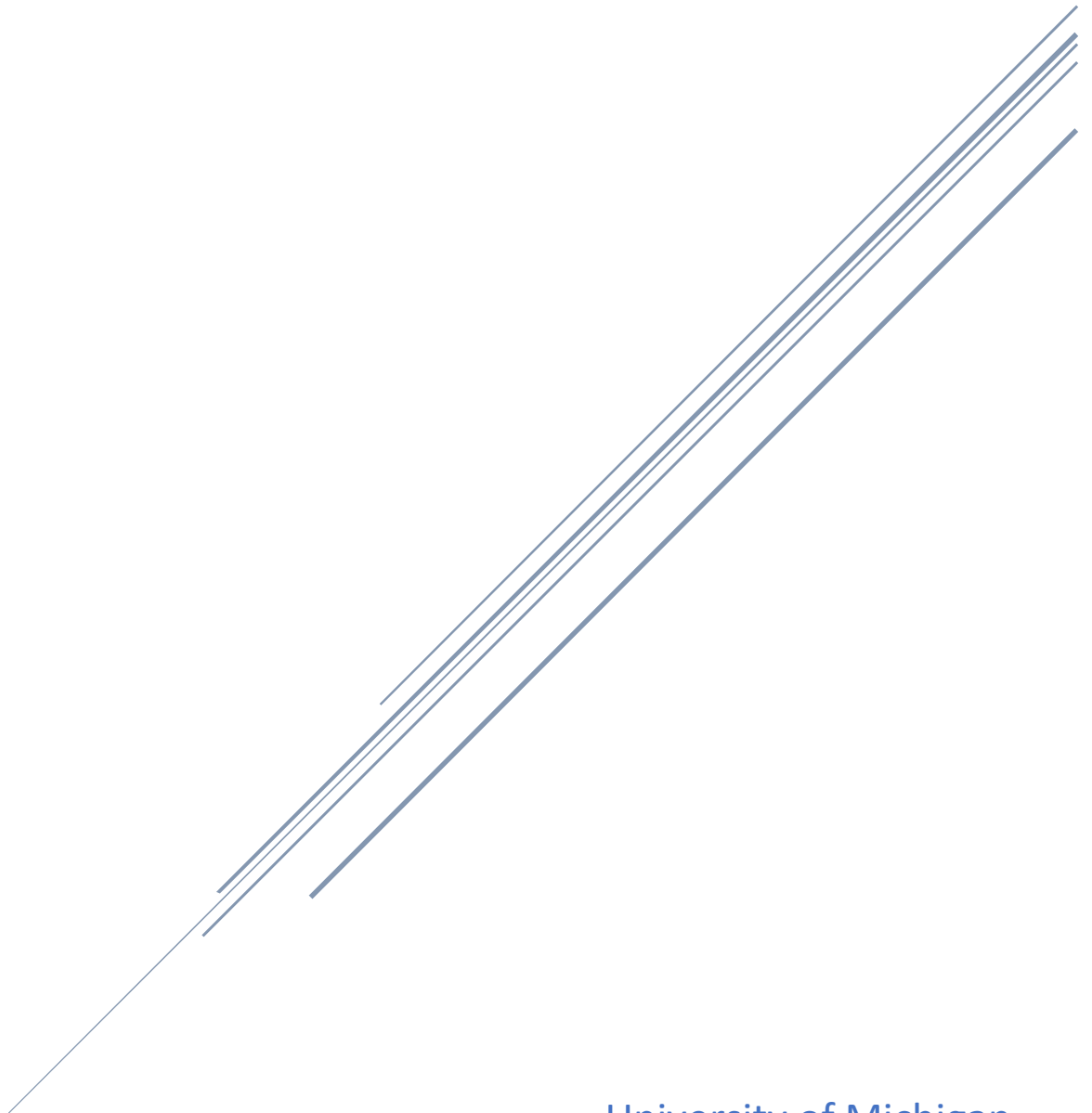


# THE CONNECTEDNESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Somya Bhagwagar



University of Michigan  
SI 110

Somya Bhagwagar

Prof. Mark Newman

SI 110

30 October 2017

Word Count: 3168

### INFOMAVEN 1: THE CONNECTEDNESS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Just as ideas are constantly evolving, so are the mediums by which they travel. Starting from oral communication when stories were passed down from generation to generation, to writings depicting messages through pictographs, to words which eventually land on paper through the printing press, and now finally landing on a screen through which one can browse files in a giant data base and collect information at the blink of an eye. This new form of communication of ideas through the internet can be known as social media. However, with each new medium of information, there has been a deeper impact in many layers of society. People appear to be spending more time online connecting with others rather than talking face to face. This brings upon the paradoxical idea that social media has brought people to a state of “isolated togetherness” which follows with the debate as to whether or not social media is connecting or alienating people. While social media may be alienating people at an individual level, it is connecting people at both a group and societal level. Throughout this paper, this concept will be emphasized as the different impacts of each layer of society will be distinguished and analyzed.

Information has always been exchanged between people, but has since changed in modern times. Though modern connectivity, even remote and rural areas around the world have heard of Facebook and Twitter, despite the existence of social media being relatively new on the grand scale of history. In 1997, the first social media site known as “Six Degrees” was made that allowed the users to create a profile and connect with other people by friending them (Figure 1: Six Degrees).



Figure 1: Six Degrees

<https://blog.bufferapp.com/history-of-social-media>

From there, social media has evolved through stages of blogging, ICQ, continuing to develop, causing social media to mainstream in a popularity surge in 2003 with MySpace, eventually leading to bigger platforms that are known today such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and

Snapchat. Today, social media consists of thousands of platforms, big and small, with slightly different purposes in order to fulfill variations of niches (“The History of...”).

#### ADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIVIDUALS:

These thousands of platforms allow people to become more connected. There are now fewer boundaries between different countries or people with various cultures and religions. On an individual scale, this allows people to have more access to information. There is efficiency in being able to quickly gain knowledge or insight on anything. Not only can they receive large quantities of information, but they can also publish large quantities of information (Newman “Is Social Media Good for You?”). Approximately one to two exabytes of information is produced every year and 3-4 zettabytes is consumed annually. Thus, the internet brings a power that people gain from being attached to their thoughts knowing that their opinions matter, and they can express them publicly. This allows one to introspect and be better connected to oneself and consider his or her individual values in order to properly take a stance on the relevant matters. With the internet and social media, individuals have additional resources to inform themselves on such current issues. Not only do they feel that they have a voice, but they can also gain confidence through a healthy level of narcissism integral to identity formation coming from selfies and status updates (Papacharissi ). There is a sense of validation of their emotions and knowing that they are not alone allows people to form an identity and discover who they are through their selfies, status updates and opinions on content. Consequently, this allows them to be more connected to themselves.

#### ADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN GROUPS:

The power of social media affects groups slightly differently. Social media allows groups to stay connected with people with whom they wouldn't naturally stay in touch. It also allows people to find others with similar unique interests. Therefore, this allows others to connect with each other on a different level, making them feel less alone. I witnessed this first hand after launching a social media account called "Students of Umich", similar to Humans of NY focusing on the journeys of students as they chase their passions and become enmeshed in the University of Michigan. Though the account started off as a pass-time which combined my hobbies of talking to people, marketing and photography, it made me realize the power of the social media platforms. Throughout the project, I have witnessed how easy it is to form connections with many different groups of people whether it is a group of people who enjoy playing ultimate frisbee or a group who likes to travel. It showed me the powerful connections people can make with each other over social media and I witnessed first-hand how social media has transformed communication so that it becomes more democratizing and involved. This account provides insight into each persons' unique struggles and character, ironically to the point where the stories become intriguingly relatable. I have received a lot of feedback about how this account showed students that they weren't alone in their struggles and that they could connect to so many people at the university.

#### ADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOCIETY:

Social media is most arguably impactful, at least visibly, from a societal perspective. The internet has rapidly increased the speed of globalization and transformed the economy. Due to e-commerce, countries can increase profits and work off comparative advantage now that they can trade. As the world globalizes, political conflicts become more apparent and are also aided and affiliated with the increase of technology and social media. The cute cat theory is a theory

created by Ethan Zuckerman concerning Internet activism. It states that Web 2.0 platforms are not just for cute cat pictures but can also be extremely powerful for social movements and resistance. Most people try and use platforms specifically meant for social movements, however as Zuckerman pointed out, these dedicated websites can be easily blocked or hacked by the government or any powerful force. Other secure channels are very difficult to set up with a small audience range. Social media and email are the best way to spread ideas and they have proved to be effective uprisings such as the 2007 Kenyan Elections and Arab Springs in Egypt and Tunisia (Zuckerman). The internet did not cause these events, but rather was used as a tool to exposed them and provided alternative information channels to facilitate organizations and uprisings, as well as publicize the events to motivate participation.

Knowledge is built off preexisting knowledge. Therefore, more ideas are culminated through the intangibly fertile grounds of social media. With this vast collection of ideas, information is available to everyone and can be more readily constructed upon prior knowledge. As previously specified, social media has allowed people to introspect and understand themselves better, connect with groups and friends with similar interests, and unity within a society to create social impact. The impact of social media extends beyond even these measures. Humans are informavores. Therefore, changes in information have had profound effects.

#### DISADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN INDIVIDUALS:

On Twitter, there is an estimated 7,000 tweets per second and on Instagram there is an estimated 729 photos per second (Newman “Too Much Information”). According to “The Benefits of Facebook “Friends:” Social Capital and College Students’ Use of Online Social Network Sites” by Nicole Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe, the average user spends

roughly 20 minutes a day on Facebook and about two-thirds of account owners log on at least once a day. Figure 2 shows the share of the population using Facebook per country.

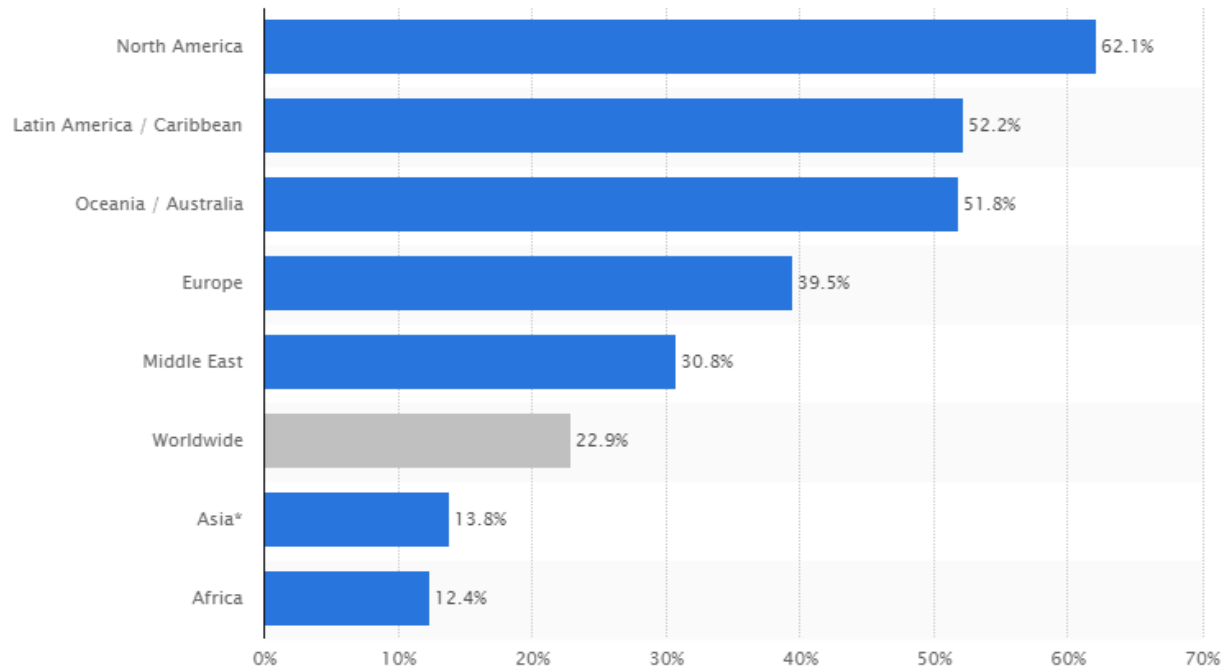


Figure 2: Share of Population Using Facebook

<http://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2017/01/05/social-media-marketing-statistics>

This affects the individual who is repetitively checking others' status updates and is affected by other people's perceived success which causes them to feel self-doubt or inferiority to their peers. Researchers have proposed a new term called "Facebook Depression" referring to the depression that is developed when young teens spend too much time on social media. The intensity of the internet is a factor that can trigger depression in adolescents due to social isolation and the constant comparisons of oneself to others (O'Keefe and Clarke-Pearson).

Changes in interactions with others affect individuals in the way people think. For example, in previous generations there is time for emotional processing after an event occurs. One has time to express emotions as they form, react, reflect, and process. However, there is less

time for the collaborative self in our modern times. When an event occurs, it is immediately shared and broadcasted through media and comments and likes are used for reassurance, validation, advice and guidance. There is a failure to develop one's own processing and coping skills (Newman "Is social Media Good for you?"). This can result in the changing of the brain in a way that deals with emotions and the collecting of thoughts in a rapid way. Due to this fast process, attention spans are starting to decrease. Humans are moving from a direct linear thought process to hyperattention where one switches focus rapidly. As generations pass, kids are exposed to greater levels of stimulation and therefore the way people think has changed.

#### DISADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN GROUPS:

In a group setting, social media can have silent effects such as filter bubbles which are limits of users' perspectives created by algorithms and personalization. In current times, there is an algorithmic allocation of attention. This means that when people use the internet, they get very personalized results. To some, this may not sound like a problem- it is an ideal solution to information overload, it can provide easy access to quick results and it is much more efficient for the user. However, a term called "corrupt personalization" shows the extent to which one's attention is drawn to interests that are not their own. This is corrupt in the sense that businesses will also only show the user what they want the user to see. It is twisted to serve business goals and make profits (Sandvig). Therefore, in filter bubbles, a user only sees very homogenized bubbles of information that is deemed appropriate for them. People are only really connected to those that think like them. This can become an echo chamber where people are only surrounded by like-minded opinions leading to divisive views on society. There is no different perspective, no challenge or exposure to learn new things, and rather than becoming a globalized society, civilians become divided and ignorant. A big example of this is through "like recycling" on



Facebook. This is when a user likes a post which eventually gets translated into liking something that was not physically liked. In other words, if a person likes a post with the words of a specific company, that would translate to them liking a post about the company, and therefore they like the company. This is not always the case and is in a sense, putting words into a user's mouth. A user does not get to choose what they see nor do they get to choose what others see about them due to the algorithms.

#### DISADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOCIETY:

Society is more affected by social media in the political realm. Social media brings about transparency which is the idea that everyone should be able to see what is going on. This can combat corruption, hypocrisy, and governmental manipulation. A big example of this is Wikileaks, a website which provided an easy way to search through the Iraq and Afghan War Diaries. This leak was released in 2013 consisting of the wartime activities in Afghanistan and Iraq including the Iraq helicopter attack, showing the United States fire power on civilians. Wikileaks has also leaked other hits such as John Podesta's emails, DNC emails, as well as some discommunication over climate change. However, many people fail to look at the opposing side. Transparency only has worth when it is applied to the powerful by the powerless. It is important to note that the social media users are not the customers, they are the product getting sold and exploited for information. Social media is built upon finance and economic capital (Dijck). Therefore, it should be emphasized that though transparency may be beneficial to the people for keeping an eye on the government, it can also be repressive as the government and businesses keep an eye on the individual. There is a topic of Radical Transparency that is discussed by Dana Boyd which states that though people think putting everything into the open will make people

more honest, it can bring a negative effect. Members of marginalized groups can be placed at risk in the form of doxing or outing.

Doxing is the act of publishing personal information about someone to harass them. It is a technique that has caused job losses and is used heavily in GamerGate. Outing when secret information is revealed about someone. This can be done with either good or bad intentions, but can still have very negative outcomes (Newman “Information, Activism, and Civil Discourse”). There are cases where several gay politicians were outed after supporting anti-gay legislation and were ostracized by several communities. Another example is the Sipple v Chronicle Case when San Francisco Chronicle published an article about Oliver Sipple, a hero who had saved President Gerald Ford’s life, indicating that he was gay (“Let’s Ace...”). Though this was meant to be an act of kindness to show that homosexuals can be heroes, but ended up hurting the personal life of Oliver Sipple. These cases go to show that it is incorrect to merit transparency without discussing power structures, social norms and prejudices while analyzing marginalized groups. It can put many people in danger and lack ethics and a proper review process which can thus lead to the spread of misinformation and false beliefs of stories.

#### CONNECTED OR ALIENATED?

Technology and social media can bring a lot of negative effects from an individual, group, and societal perspective. After analyzing both advantages and disadvantages of using social media from these perspectives, it can be shown that from a group and societal perspective, social media is good and the positive outweighs the negative outcomes. As previously mentioned, many people argue that social media is divisive as shown through the negative effects that it can bring. It brings ideals of “alone togetherness”. There is a misconception that social media ruins relationships. While it has been confirmed that there are individual risks of

using social media such as depression, cyberbullying, online harassment and lower self-esteem (O'Keefe and Clarke-Pearson), Cliff Lampe argues that social media is more beneficial for groups. There is scientific evidence that social media can be good for someone through social capital. Internet can decrease face to face time with others which can diminish the individual's social capital, but it is possible that online interactions can supplement or replace group interactions. In fact, there is an importance of social media based linkages for the formation of weak ties. Social capital is the network of relationships amongst people in a particular setting or aspect that enable society to effectively function (Ellison). Communication of all kinds builds relationships. It is important to note that when the average person makes friends, their close friends tend to share similar perspectives and points of view. It is the friends with whom one has weaker links that bring different ideals and fresh outlooks to a person's life. Therefore, weak linkages are very valuable to those who want to expand their horizons. Facebook and other social media sites allow weak linkages to form with people who do not share the same opinions as well as maintain these newfound friendships due to the easy accessibility of these technologies. Most people still interact with the people they are closest and emotionally connected to face to face. Most resources are allocated to the emotional connections, but by this logic, the internet facilitates new connections and alternative ways to discuss with people who share similar interests or opposing viewpoints.

Social media can have both negative and positive impacts just as it can make people more connected and alienated. Social media and new technologies are powerful mediums that can have strong influence on the way one thinks and the way one feels. It is important to note that this is not the first time that researchers have been concerned about the effects of new technologies on the wellbeing of the people. Both Socrates and Plato were afraid that written texts would drive

humanity apart because it is not possible to have conversations with text. There was a panic when the printing press was introduced, then electricity, telephones, rock music, and finally now, the internet. This idea that social media is alienating people is not a new phenomenon. Time and time again has shown that it is not necessarily the platform that can alienate or connect people, but rather how it is used.

#### ALIENATION OF INDIVIDUALS:

As analyzed in this paper, social media has different effects on the layers of society. Individuals become empowered because they have more access to education and a voice to state their opinions, but can also become unempowered due to increasing amounts of comparisons to others' perceived successes. This, and other risks such as cyber bullying, online and online harassment will end up increasing risks of depression. Therefore, individuals, with the current circumstances of social media often feel isolated or alone.

#### CONNECTIVITY OF GROUPS:

Groups form new friends and stay connected with old friends because relationships are not bound by distance. They can find people with similar interests or even different interests and form weak and strong ties to diversify their knowledge. Though algorithms and filter bubbles definitely exist, there are ways to avoid them by making friends with people of different views, and going a slight distance to get a new perspective. Therefore, groups are connected with other people of both similar and different interests and can broaden their horizons.

#### CONNECTIVITY OF SOCIETY:

Societies are becoming more connected through the process of globalization. There are economic benefits to bringing countries together as well as political benefits. Though social

media can bring some negative consequences such as exploitation from higher powers, as previously mentioned, these negative consequences depend on how the social media is used. The positive effects of coming together as a community and society also can outweigh these ideas of radicalism presented through exploitation and manipulation.

While social media may be alienating people at an individual level, it is connecting them at a group and societal level. As social media is everchanging and vast, the effects will vary as time goes on. With the next medium, there will still be discussion over the wellbeing of the people, but it is important to note that the users are in control of the consequences and therefore have the power to change the outcomes. The new medium is wide, boundary free, populist, unsettled, and ready to be taken on by the next generation.

Work Cited

Lister, Mary. "40 Essential Social Media Marketing Statistics for 2017." *WordStream*, 31 May 2017, [www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2017/01/05/social-media-marketing-statistics](http://www.wordstream.com/blog/ws/2017/01/05/social-media-marketing-statistics).

Dijk, José van. *The culture of connectivity: a critical history of social media*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Ellison, Nicole B, et al. "The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites." *Wiley Online Library*, 2007.

"Let's ace law school." *Case Briefs, Outlines, Lessons, and Exam Prep for Law School Students - Quimbee*, [www.quimbee.com/cases/sipple-v-chronicle-publishing-co](http://www.quimbee.com/cases/sipple-v-chronicle-publishing-co).

Newman, Mark. "SI 110: Is Social Media Good for You?", 19 September 2017, IN. Lecture.

Newman, Mark. "SI 110: Too Much Information?", 12 September 2017, IN. Lecture.

Newman, Mark. "SI 110: Information, Activism, and Civil Discourse", 28 September 2017, IN. Lecture.

O'Keefe, Gwenn Schurgin, and Kathleen Clarke-Pearson. "Clinical Report- The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families." *American Academy of Pediatrics*, 2011.

"The History of Social Media: Social Networking Evolution!" *History Cooperative*, 26 Feb. 2017, [historycooperative.org/the-history-of-social-media/](http://historycooperative.org/the-history-of-social-media/).

Papacharissi, Zizi. "A Networked Selfie ." *Medium*, Medium, 23 Apr. 2014, [medium.com/@zizip/a-networked-selfie-cb4e929af3ee](https://medium.com/@zizip/a-networked-selfie-cb4e929af3ee).

Read, Ash. "The Unabridged History of Social Media." *Social*, Buffer Social Blog, 27 Jan. 2016, [blog.bufferapp.com/history-of-social-media](http://blog.bufferapp.com/history-of-social-media).

Sandvig, Christian. "Corrupt Personalization." *Social Media Collective*, 27 June 2014, [socialmediacollective.org/2014/06/26/corrupt-personalization/](http://socialmediacollective.org/2014/06/26/corrupt-personalization/).

University of South Florida - UCM. "University Communications and Marketing." *University of South Florida*, [www.usf.edu/ucm/marketing/intro-social-media.aspx](http://www.usf.edu/ucm/marketing/intro-social-media.aspx).

Zuckerman, Ethan. "Cute Cats to the Rescue? Participatory Media and Political Expression." *Youth, New Media and Political Participation*, Apr. 2013.