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Encyclopedia of Social Media and Politics

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Social media are Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0—the concept of the World Wide Web used as a platform where content and applications are continuously modified by users in a participatory and collaborative manner. Social media enables the creation and exchange of user-generated content, or all forms of media content that are publicly accessible and created by end users. The social media landscape today looks significantly different from its humble beginnings; in the last few decades, it has undergone a marked evolution.

1930s

In 1935, new machines called Notificators, with “robot” message boards, were installed in the streets, stores, railroad stations, and other public places in London. These would aid persons who wished to make or cancel appointments or inform friends of their whereabouts. Individuals could leave messages for a small sum on these message boards, which appeared on a window for at least two hours so that the person for whom it was intended would have sufficient time to observe the note at the appointed place. Notificators are considered to be the first predecessor of Twitter.

1950s

The social aspect of social media was born on line, that is, on the phone. In the 1950s, technophiles and information addicts used telephone networks as rogue ways to mass communicate, and the first podcasts took place on hijacked corporate phone lines. These early social media explorers built boxes, or homemade electronic devices, that could generate tones, which allowed them to make free calls and get access to the experimental back end of the telephone system. They sniffed out telephone company test lines and conference circuits to host virtual seminars and discussions. The first blogs and podcasts were a result of hacked corporate voice mail systems called codelines, where phone phreaks would hack into unused mailboxes and set up shop until they were found and thrown out. Phone phreaking was not essentially motivated by fraud but rather a telecom monopoly that made telephone use expensive.

1970s and 1980s

Usenet is an online discussion system that was conceived by Duke University graduate students Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis in 1979 and was established in 1980. On Usenet, users read and post messages, articles, or

posts, collectively termed *news*, to one or more categories known as newsgroups. It is mostly responsible for the development of newsreader clients, which are the precursors to RSS (rich site summary or really simple syndication) feed readers used to follow blogs and news sites today. Discussions are threaded with modern news-reader software, though posts are stored on the server sequentially.

Usenet is distributed among a large, constantly changing conglomeration of servers that store and forward messages to one another in news feeds. Individual users read messages from and post messages to a local server operated by their Internet service providers, universities, or employers. Usenet has no centralized server or dedicated administrator, setting it apart from most bulletin board systems (BBS).

The first electronic bulletin board system (BBS) was developed and made accessible to the public in the late 1970s by Ward Christensen. He coined the term *bulletin board system* as a reference to the traditional cork-and-pin bulletin board where people can post messages, advertisements, or community news. The first BBSs were small servers powered by personal computers attached to a telephone modem, where one person could dial in at a time and get access.

Until the mid-1990s, most BBSs were run free of charge by the system operator, or SysOp, while other BBSs charged their users subscription fees for access or were operated by businesses as a means of supporting their customers. The functions included social discussions on message boards, community-contributed file downloads, and online games. In the 1980s, the social media scene acquired an underground flavor. A fair percentage of bulletin boards had secret, adult, or pirate software rooms, and handles, or online pseudonyms, were the norm. BBSs can be considered the first social communities connected online.

1980s and 1990s

After BBSs came online services like CompuServe and Prodigy, the first large-scale corporate attempts to bring interactive, social, online experience to the masses. These services rose to popularity along with BBSs and catered to a more corporate and mainstream, home-user client. CompuServe was the first company to incorporate a chat program, CB Simulator, into its service in 1980 but was infamous for its high charges of \$6 per hour, plus long-distance telephone fees, adding up to almost \$30 per hour. Prodigy launched nationwide in 1990, growing quickly in popularity for its color interface and lower cost.

America Online (AOL) started as an online service too and gained critical mass with aggressive compact disc (CD) promotions and direct-mail campaigns. AOL also did one of the most epic product placements of all time in the 1998 film *You've Got Mail*, bringing social online culture and romance into the Hollywood mainstream.

Although the Internet existed as a network since the late 1960s, the World Wide Web became publicly avail-

able on August 6, 1991. Tim Berners-Lee, an English computer scientist, is credited for developing this global information medium that users can access through computers connected to the Internet. The term is often mistakenly used as a synonym for the Internet itself; rather, it is a service that operates over the Internet. At the beginning of the 1990s, Internet access was available only to those with legitimate university, government, or military connections, and to hackers.

Around the mid-1990s, private Internet service providers (ISPs) started shop in most metropolitan cities in the United States. This gave millions of home users a chance to enjoy unfiltered, unlimited online experiences. Usenet became the primary center for most high-end discussions. Also, the first online social media etiquette standards, or netiquette, were proposed to stop rampant flaming—hostile and insulting interactions between Internet users—and keep the online environment civilized. By the late 1990s, Internet forums grew in popularity and began replacing Usenet and BBSs as the primary nexus for topical discussions.

In 1988, Internet relay chat (IRC) was developed by Jarkko Oikarinen. It is a protocol for real-time Internet text messaging and chat or synchronous conferencing. It is mainly designed for group communication in discussion forums called channels. It also enables one-to-one communication via private messaging and is used for data transfer including file sharing. When IRC was first made available, many people stayed logged into it constantly, using it to share links and files and keep in touch with their global networks, the same way Twitter is used today. In 1996, ICQ was developed by four Israeli technologists and was the first instant messenger (IM) system for desktop computers. ICQ was quickly purchased by AOL and became a mainstream hit. It was partly responsible for the adoption of avatars, abbreviations such as LOL and BRB, and emoticons.

Napster was a peer-to-peer (P2P) file sharing Internet service that emphasized sharing audio files, typically music, encoded in MP3 format. It was cofounded by Shawn Fanning, John Fanning, and Sean Parker and went live in June 1999. Napster transferred the power of distribution from record companies to the consumer. Music started to freely flow across the Internet, stripped of hype and payola.

Napster thrived through 1999 and 2000, until it was declared illegal and was forced to filter out all the copyrighted content. Competing P2P applications like Limewire took Napster's place until BitTorrent technology arrived and provided a robust, centralized way to share files without being blocked. BitTorrent was designed by programmer Bram Cohen. While the technology itself is perfectly legal, the legality of many of its uses is being litigated in courts worldwide.

1990s and Early 2000s

SixDegrees was launched in 1997 and was the first modern social network. It was named after the six degrees

of separation concept—the idea that everyone is on average approximately six steps away, by way of introduction, from any other person in the world. MacroView, the company that developed the site, was founded by Chief Executive Officer Andrew Weinreich. SixDegrees allowed users to list friends, family members, and acquaintances both on the site and externally; invitations were sent to external members to join the site. Users could send messages and post items on a bulletin board for people in their first, second, and third degrees, and see their connection to any other user on the site. At its height, the site had around 1 million fully registered members. In 2000, Youth-Stream Media Networks paid \$125 million to buy SixDegrees; it was around until 2001.

LiveJournal was launched in 1999 by American programmer Brad Fitzpatrick. It took a different approach to social networking from SixDegrees. While SixDegrees allowed users to create a predominantly static profile or page, LiveJournal was dynamic because it was built around constantly updated blogs sharing the most recent thoughts and acts. LiveJournal encouraged its users to follow one another, create groups, and interact. This could be considered the precursor to the live updates feature in advanced social networks.

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGS) became popular in the early 2000s and have become social networks in their own right. They are a genre of role-playing video games in which numerous players interact with one another within a virtual game world. The most famous of these is World of Warcraft (WoW). Here, players interact both in the game world and on related forums and community sites. Social interaction within the game ranges from teams set up specifically for tactical reasons to friendships and romances.

2000s

Friendster was founded by Jonathan Abrams and Rob Pazornik in 2002. It was one of the first social networking sites to attain more than 1 million members at its peak. Friendster allowed users to contact other members, maintain those contacts, and share online content and media with those contacts. It was also used for dating and discovering new events, bands, and hobbies. Users could share videos, photos, messages, and comments with other members via their profiles and their networks. Friendster was acquired by MOL Global in December 2009 for \$26.4 million. In May 2011, Friendster repositioned itself as a social gaming site, discontinuing support for existing users' social data; its new focus is on providing users with entertainment and fun.

The first mainstream social network devoted to professional networking, LinkedIn was founded in 2003. One significant purpose of the site is to allow registered users to maintain a list of contact details belonging to people with whom they have some level of relationship, called connections. LinkedIn can be used in a number of

ways. Users can upload their résumés or design their own profiles to showcase work and community experiences; it can be used to find jobs, people, and business opportunities recommended by someone in one's contact network; and employers can list jobs and search for potential candidates.

Myspace is owned by Specific Media LLC and pop star Justin Timberlake. It was founded in 2003 and by 2006 had grown to be the most popular social network in the world. It gained novelty by allowing users to completely customize the look of their profiles. Users could post music and embed videos from other sites on their profiles. Originally, Myspace allowed communication through private messages, public comments posted to a user's profile, and bulletins sent out to all friends of the user. In 2006, Myspace introduced Myspace IM, an instant messaging client that enables users to chat with their friends.

Facebook was founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg with his Harvard University roommates. The Web site's membership was initially limited to Harvard students, but it quickly expanded, and by 2006, almost everyone could join Facebook. As of June 2012, Facebook had more than 955 million active users, most of whom access it on a mobile device. In order to be a user, one has to register; then one can create a personal profile, add other users as friends, exchange messages, and receive automatic notifications. Additionally, users may join common-interest user groups and categorize friends based on degree of intimacy or place of acquaintance. By 2005, the use of Facebook had become so ubiquitous that the generic verb Facebooking was introduced to describe the process of browsing others' profiles or updating one's own.

Other Social Networking Developments

As social networking grew, niche sites were launched for specific interest groups. There are now social networks for virtually every hobby, passion, interest, industry, and group. Ning is the first widely used platform for creating niche social networks. New users can either create social networks for any niche they choose or join any of the existing networks. Ning's biggest advantage is that it is user-friendly. A number of niche social networking sites have been developed by corporations; Autonomy is one example. It is a writers' network hosted by the United Kingdom division of HarperCollins that has attracted thousands of hopeful writers from all over the globe. While some of these niche networks have active groups, many do not and end up being shut down due to lack of activity.

Sharing photos, videos, and other multimedia content is a popular social media activity. Some important sites associated with media sharing are Photobucket, Flickr, YouTube, and Revver. Photobucket was the first major photo-sharing site, launched in 2003. Flickr has groups and photo pools and allows users to create profiles, add friends, and organize images and video into photo sets or albums. It allows users to license their photos as well as retaining all copyrights. YouTube was the first major video hosting and sharing site, launched in

2005. YouTube's major social features include ratings, comments, and the option to subscribe to the channels of a user's favorite video creators. Revver took a different approach to video hosting and sharing. While other sites let users post videos for free and did not pay content creators any of the advertising revenue their videos generated, Revver shared revenue. It shut down in 2011.

The mid-2000s witnessed the advent of social news and bookmarking sites. Bookmarking is the method by which Internet users organize, store, manage, and search for bookmarks of news and resources online. Delicious, or <http://Del.icio.us>, was founded in 2003; it popularized the terms *social bookmarking* and *tagging*. Tagging enables users to organize their bookmarks in flexible ways and develop shared vocabularies. Digg was founded in 2004; its users share links to anything online, and other users can vote the content up or down (or dig or bury). The Digg Effect—when content makes it to the front page, thereby sending a huge influx of traffic to that site, overloading its servers—is a well-known phenomenon today and is often frustrating to those unprepared for sudden popularity.

Real-time Web is a set of technologies and practices that enable users to receive information in real time, as soon as it is published by its authors, rather than requiring that they or their software check a source periodically for updates. There is no knowing when, or if, a response will be received. The information transmitted is often short messages, status updates, news alerts, or links to longer documents. Some significant names associated in this category are Twitter, Posterous, and Tumblr.

With the advent of Twitter in 2006, status updates became the new norm in social networking. Twitter has developed a cult-like following and has a number of celebrity users. Twitter has also spawned a number of third-party sites and applications, turning it into more of a platform than a single service. Posterous is the newest major microblogging application, started by Y Combinator in May 2009. The content of a microblog is typically smaller in both actual and aggregate file size than a blog.

The microblogging site Twitter, founded in 2006, takes advantage of real-time Web technologies that have spread rapidly with the advent of the iPhone. The site had an estimated 500 million accounts and 200 million regular users as of 2013.



Tumblr, founded in 2007, is a cross between a lifestreaming application and a microblogging platform. There are mobile applications available for posting on Tumblr, making it ideal for lifestreaming. In fact, the iPhone can be largely credited for the rise in popularity of real-time updates. There are social networks only available

on the iPhone, such as iRovr, launched in 2007.

In the context of social media, livestreaming emphasizes the vast flows of personal information and exchange created by social network services. Lifecasting is a continual broadcast of events in a person's life through digital media. Real-time updates have led to an increase in the number of people who are now livestreaming or lifecasting virtually everything they do, while some opt to livestream by aggregating their online activities in a single place. The Web site <http://Ustream.tv>, founded in 2006, allows users to broadcast from the Web site once logged in or from a mobile device using Ustream's mobile broadcasting application. Users can watch streams live on the Web site and on the Ustream iPhone and Android applications. It allows users to interact, such as vote in polls, rate, and chat. <http://Justin.tv> is a streaming video host, founded in October 2006, that lets lifecasters and live show creators broadcast to numerous Internet users. FriendFeed, launched in 2007 and recently purchased by Facebook, allows integration of most of one's online activities—Twitter, RSS feeds, Flickr—in one place.

Conclusion

This evolutionary account shows that social media has traveled far from its humble beginnings and intersects with nearly every aspect of people's lives today. It has transformed human communication, human interaction, and the human social experience.

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- Twitter
- social media
- social networking
- Napster
- bulletin boards
- Facebook
- MySpace

See Also:

[Innovation and Technology](#)

[Instant Messengers, IRC and ICQ](#)

[Internet Forums](#)

[Microblogging](#)[Peer to Peer](#)[Social Media, Adoption of](#)[Social Media, Definitions and Classes of](#)[Social Media Sharing, P2P, Bit Torrent](#)[Social Networking Web Sites](#)[Social Worlds](#)[User-Generated Content](#)[Web 2.0](#)[World Wide Web, History of the](#)

Further Readings

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