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# What is social media?[1]

Many previous studies of social media emphasise specific platforms, including books and papers devoted to just one particular platform such as Facebook or Twitter.[2] It is clearly important to understand Twitter, for example, as a platform: the company that owns it, the way it works and the very idea of social media based on messages that must remain below 140 characters. From an anthropological perspective, however, if we ask what Twitter actually *is* it makes more sense to think of the millions of tweets, the core genres, the regional differences and its social and emotional consequences for users. It is the *content* rather than the platform that is most significant when it comes to why social media matters.

As will be described in our individual ethnographies of social media around the world, genres of content happily migrate between quite different platforms, being seen one year on Orkut and the next on Facebook, one year on BBM and the next on Twitter. Platforms such as Facebook have themselves often changed functionality, developing and introducing new features. This research project is not therefore a study of platforms: it is a study of what people post and communicate through platforms, of why we post and the consequences of those postings. We have found this content to be very different across the nine field sites in which we worked. Content manifests and transforms local relationships and issues. Our study has thus turned out to be as much about how the world changed social media as about how social media changed the world.

Clearly this is not entirely a one-way process. These technologies have changed us. They have given us potential for communication and interaction that we did not previously possess. We need first clearly to establish what those potentials are and then to examine what the world subsequently did with those possibilities. It is easier to understand what social media is if we go back to a time before it existed. So wind back

though Snapchat and Tinder, past Facebook and QQ, through MySpace and Friendster to life before all that.

Prior to all these technologies, there were two main ways in which people communicated using media. The first was public broadcast media such as television, radio and newspapers. With such media anyone at all, providing that they can gain access to it, can be the audience. The broadcaster has no direct control over who makes up their audiences, though they may try and persuade people to join them. Also available for quite some time were media that facilitated private communication between two people as one-to-one conversations, for example a telephone conversation. This is also called 'dyadic' communication. People could meet in groups face to face, but it was uncommon to create group-based interactions within media such as the telephone.

With the development of the internet, this polarisation between public and private media started to change. An email could be sent to a group. There were bulletin boards, specialised forums, chat rooms and blogging, which appealed to wider audiences, as well as other group media such as CB radio. Nevertheless most everyday communication through media remained dominated by the two prior forms, public broadcasting and the private dyadic. The initial development of social networking sites was, in effect, a scaling-down of public broadcasting to become individuals posting to groups. Usually these groups included not more than a few hundred people. In addition the people who formed those groups would interact among themselves, for example commenting upon the comments of others.

At the same time the development of text messaging and internet services such as MSM and AOL took place. These developed further with the rise of the smartphone, in particular BlackBerry Messenger (BBM), the proprietary messaging platform for Blackberry phones; its global impact has generally been considerably underestimated and it was the precursor to WhatsApp. Such services took private messaging and moved it upwards in scale by including various group functions. This trend has been consolidated over the last three years with the remarkably rapid rise of platforms such as WhatsApp and WeChat. These tend to be used to form smaller, more private groups than QQ or Facebook, often around 20 people or less. They may not be centred upon any one individual. Generally all members can post equally; these are groups rather than the networks of any one person. They are particularly important since for young people such text-based communication has largely replaced voice-based use of the phone.[3]

Clearly to define what social media is based only on those that presently exist is limiting. For our definition and approach to be sustainable we also have to bear in mind the new social media platforms that are constantly being developed, and the likelihood that some will become very successful in the future. It helps that we are starting to see a pattern in the way new forms of social media emerge. Some of these platforms have scaled down from public broadcasting, while others have scaled up from private communication. With the addition of new platforms in the future, we are likely to end up with a result that in effect creates some scales between the private and the public, along which we can locate these platforms.

We can envisage two key scales. The first is the scale from the most private to the most public. The second is the scale from the smallest group to the largest groups. At one end of both of these scales we still see private dyadic conversation and at the other end we still see fully public broadcasting. What is it that is being scaled? The core to the study of social science is the way in which people associate with each other to form social relations and societies. This is called sociality. The best way to define what is popularly called social media but also includes prior media is thus to describe the new situation as increasingly 'scalable sociality'.[4]

One of the clearest examples of how social media has created online scalable sociality emerged from the research on schoolchildren in the English village field site. Based on a survey of 2496 students, Miller


**Fig. 1.1** Scalable sociality

found that most of them were using five or six different social media from a young age (Fig. 1.2).

In an earlier work, along with Madianou, Miller had developed an approach called 'polymedia',[5] which recognises that none of these platforms can be properly understood if considered in isolation because the meaning and use of each one is relative to the others. Previously people might have assumed that cost or access explained why users chose one media or platform rather than another. Today, however, people seem increasingly free to choose between these platforms, and so may be judged on their choices. For example, children living abroad who want to tell their parents gently about something that will not please them, such as a new tattoo or a need for more money, might for that reason avoid a medium that includes a visual element or one that allows a person to respond immediately – perhaps, in such a case, in anger.

With polymedia people can also map different kinds of sociality onto the diversity of their social media platforms. In the case of these

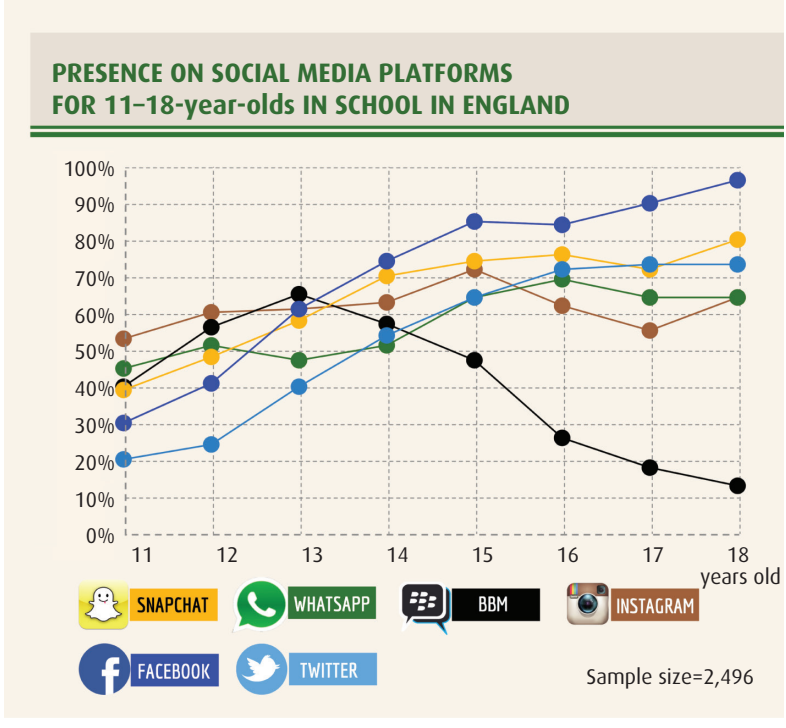


**Fig. 1.2** Presence on social media platforms for 11–18-year-olds in schools in England

school pupils we can start with the continuity of dyadic communication, as they message or phone to chat in private to someone like their *Bestie* or *BFF* (Best Friend Forever). Next comes Snapchat which, because it often includes items such as a particularly ugly photograph of one's own face, relies on trust. Indeed it may be used to establish and maintain trust within a small group. The next size up consists of groups created in WhatsApp. Typically in a school class there will be one WhatsApp group that includes all the boys where they could talk about girls (or vice versa). There may be another that includes all the class. Reaching a still larger group are Tweets that reach all those who follow an individual on Twitter. This is the main site for school banter, and may include pupils from other classes in the year. Beyond the class is Facebook, mainly used by these school pupils as their link to family, neighbours and others beyond the school. Finally we have Instagram, where each pupil's social circle is often comprised of the same school pupils. However, it is also the only site where they actually welcome strangers – because the contact shows that someone who the children do not know has appreciated the aesthetic qualities of the image they have posted on Instagram (Fig. 1.3).

The use of social media by English schoolchildren demonstrates scalable sociality in that each of these platforms corresponds to a position of greater or lesser privacy and smaller or larger groups. There are no rules behind this. Groups and platforms may overlap, but mostly we find platforms become associated with specific genres of communication

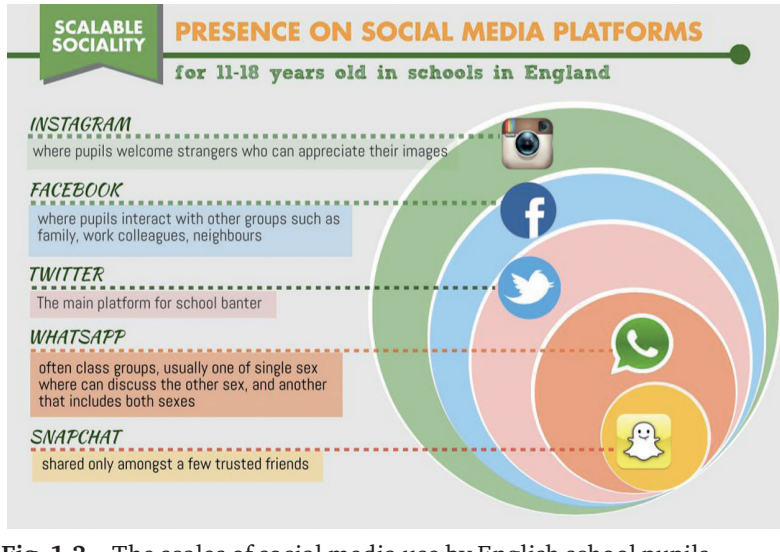


**Fig. 1.3** The scales of social media use by English school pupils

which people see as appropriate for the group engaged with that particular platform.

In the schoolchildren's case the differences between platforms were used to illustrate this principle. However, scalable sociality can exist just as well within a single platform. A person may post a comment or image on their social media which will make sense only to the people to whom they are close, who understand what it refers to. Other people may be on the same site, but they will not get the significance – and are thereby excluded despite being present on this same platform.[6]

We have started with this example of scalable sociality in order to address the question of defining social media. While definitions may be useful, however, they are not the primary aim of this project. Through our ten key questions, each of which forms a chapter of this book, we investigate the very wide range of contexts within which social media now plays an important role: from the increasing importance of visual communication as opposed to textual communication to the impact of social media on education and whether equality online impacts upon inequality offline.

Platforms remain central to our analysis since these are the primary units through which we think about and use social media. Yet we should be careful in presuming that there are properties of the platforms that are responsible for, or in some sense cause, the associations that we observe with platforms. These same schoolchildren provide evidence for why we should not infer cause simply from association. Firstly the way they use Twitter, primarily for banter between themselves, contrasts sharply with the adult use of Twitter as mainly a source of information. Is the 'true' Twitter the one used for information or the one used for banter? Furthermore this school banter used to be on BBM; it then migrated to Facebook and is now almost entirely on Twitter. This suggests that a genre of interaction may remain quite stable despite migrating between supposedly very different platforms. Such an example, if sustained by others in our studies, would suggest that the platform is surprisingly irrelevant to finding explanations for why and how people use social media. It provides the place, but not the cause nor the explanation.

When all nine field sites are considered, it becomes apparent that in each region every new social media platform quickly becomes standardised around quite specific groups of users and implicitly understood appropriate and inappropriate usage, though these will continue to change. Again differentiation of groups may occur within the same platform or by exploiting a contrast between platforms. For example in

2014–15 there was a trend in several of our field sites to differentiate the more public-facing platforms such as Facebook or QQ from the more private-facing platforms such as WhatsApp/WeChat.

How new forms of social media map onto prior social groups, or indeed create new groups, varies considerably from one field site to another. In our south Indian field site, for example, the groups that associated around social media are mainly traditional social units such as the family or the caste. By contrast in our industrial Chinese site the floating population of migrant workers have largely lost their traditional forms of sociality, and in effect create social groups adapted to a new life spent mainly moving from city to city. Their more constant social life is actually on social media rather than offline. In some cases the more private platforms have radically changed people's lives, as in our site in southeast Turkey on which young women and men can more easily chat with each other. Meanwhile in our Chilean field site most people use public posting to patrol their own local community, whose values they regard as contrasting with the more metropolitan values of the capital city. More details for of all these claims will be found within this book.

Two other points should be already clear. When the study of the internet began people commonly talked about two worlds: the virtual and the real. By now it is very evident that there is no such distinction – the online is just as real as the offline. Social media has already become such an integral part of everyday life that it makes no sense to see it as separate. In the same way no one today would regard a telephone conversation as taking place in a separate world from 'real life'. It has also become apparent that research on social media is no longer the particular purview of either media or of communication. Our research provides considerable evidence that social media should be regarded rather as a place where many of us spend part of our lives. As a result the study of social media is as much one of sociality as of communication. Much of this book is not about media, nor about scalable sociality. It is about social media as another place in which people live, alongside their office life, home life and community life.

If we have defined here the term social media, what about 'the world'? Clearly we cannot study the world or the 'global' as a whole. But we can hope to study sufficient numbers of locations to be able to make statements about diversity and generality around the world. The contents of this book are based on the research of nine anthropologists, each of whom spent 15 months looking at the use and consequence of social media in one particular location. The unique character of this

book is that it is almost entirely comparative. A brief account of the nine field sites may be found in an appendix.[7]

Finally we would couch these questions in terms of an approach developed by Miller and Sinanan called a 'theory of attainment'[8]. As we shall see in respect to the ten popular questions/topics considered in this volume, new technologies are often accompanied by a kind of moral panic, frequently fostered by journalism. These suggest that as a result of this new technology we have lost some essential element of our authentic humanity. For example, such panics incorporate the idea that face to face communication is richer or less mediated than communication employing digital technology, or that we are losing cognitive abilities such as long-term attention spans. These responses to technology have been common ever since Plato argued that the invention of writing would damage our capacity for memory. At the same time others have a utopian view that new technologies make us in some manner post-human.

Our theory of attainment argues that these technologies make no difference whatsoever to our essential humanity. The sociologist Goffman[9] showed convincingly how all communication and sociality takes place within cultural genres, including face to face. There is no such thing as unmediated, pre- or non-cultural sociality or communication. Instead we should recognise that whatever we do with new technologies must be latent in our humanity, i.e. something that as human beings we have always had the potential to do and to be. Such a capacity is now attained as a result of the new technology. This theory does not claim to adjudicate on whether any new capacity to send memes or selfies through social media, for example, is either good or bad. It just acknowledges that this has now become simply part of what human beings can do, as has driving a car.