What is Social Media and What Questions Can Social Media Research Help Us Answer?

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What is Social Media and What Questions Can Social Media Research Help Us Answer?

Lori McCay-Peet Anabel Quan-Haase

This chapter critically engages with the plurality of meanings given to the term social media, ranging from mainstream blogging platforms to niche communication tools. A brief historical overview is first presented of how the term has evolved, showing that in academia it has only gained widespread popularity since the mid-2000s. The chapter then discusses various categorization frameworks available in the literature to examine what applications and platforms are commonly considered a part of the social media spectrum. The chapter ends with a discussion of what kinds of research questions social media scholarship can help answer. We show how social media raises novel methodological and ethical issues linked to its use as a tool for research to aid in data collection, the dissemination of online surveys, and the recruitment of participants. Further, we identify two types of research questions central to social media scholarship: a) those relating to social media use itself, and b) those that inform our understanding of social phenomena. Finally, we propose a framework of social media engagement to explore key domains of analysis and to show the significance of each for providing a holistic understanding of social media adoption, use, and social implications.

Introduction

In the past ten years, social media has become an integral part of everyday life with large economic, political, and societal implications. While the influence of traditional media dwindles, social media platforms ‘have been taken up around the globe at an unprecedented speed, revealing the extraordinary nature of the social media phenomenon. For this reason alone, it is imperative to analyze the phenomenon of social media’ (boyd, 2015: 2). Because the term social media has multiple meanings, its definition has become highly contested and it is not always clear what tools, platforms, and social phenomena count as social media, though its integration into the daily lives of many is indisputable. A 2015 report from the Pew Research Center shows 70 per cent of Facebook users logged into the site at least once a day, and as many as 45 per cent logged into the site numerous times throughout the day (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lehnhart, and Madden, 2015). The same report shows that 52 per cent of online adults adopted two or more social media sites. Because of its proliferation in society as well as its unique technological affordances, social media provides new avenues for researchers across multiple disciplines, including health sciences, sociology, and political science, to collect rich, vast, and networked data, recruit diverse groups of participants and perform complex analyses. Despite the plurality of voices on these sites, scholarly work has consistently shown that social media only provides a narrow view of our social world, as not all social groups are equally represented (Haight, Quan-Haase, and Corbett, 2014). Moreover, there continue to be segments of the population and parts of the world that are absent from the internet altogether (Girish, Williams, and Yates, 2014). Hence, it is important to realize that social media adoption, usage, and its social implications are dynamic social processes that occur within existing patterns
of inequality: some social groups are simply being left out of the social media conversation.

Often social media scholarship is associated with big data because of the 3Vs – volume, velocity, and variety – that may be culled from sites such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Kitchin, 2014). Data derived from user-generated content, such as posts, ‘likes’, and connections signalled through ‘friends’ and ‘follows’, have become central to many areas of study, including politics (Rainie et al., 2012), healthcare (Reavley and Pilkington, 2014), and business (Gopaldas, 2014). The analysis of such massive amounts of data is unprecedented and brings with it many challenges, including ethical considerations, hardware constraints, and the development of software for data collection and analysis. However, social media scholarship is not limited to big-scale analysis and examination can take place at a small scale through qualitative approaches, despite being characterized by large volume. Scholars have also called for the integration of big data analysis and small-scale approaches in mixed methods designs (Quan-Haase, Martin, and McCay-Peet, 2015; Murthy and Bowman, 2014; Zeller, Chapter 23, this volume).

In this chapter, we first examine how prior research has defined and conceptualized social media. We then propose a definition of social media and briefly discuss how various types of social media, such as social networking sites (SNSs), microblogs, and social news sites, fit within the concept. We then turn to the research relating to social media, focusing on questions about social media as well as research that uses social media data to answer social science research questions. As Jürgens wrote, ‘in recent years, social media have matured in terms of design and in terms of adoption rates – to become a platform for rich expression and exchange for a highly diverse user base, attracting intense scholarly interest’ (2012: 186). In light of this recent surge, we further explore what types of questions social media research can answer and the advantages and challenges of social media scholarship.

### What is Social Media?

Despite the proliferation of research on social media in recent years, there are relatively few formal definitions. The lack of definitions is potentially due to the difficulty in defining the term, as it is relatively nascent and still evolving (Ellison and boyd, 2013). Papacharissi goes so far as to argue that a definition of social media can only be dynamic and context specific.

Our understanding of social media is temporally, spatially, and technologically sensitive – informed but not restricted by the definitions, practices, and materialities of a single time period or locale. How we have defined social media in societies has changed, and will continue to change. (2015: 1)

The term social media is also conceptually related to other terms including SNSs and online social networks (OSNs). Several sites were launched around 2003 and included rapidly growing sites such as MySpace, Friendster, and Facebook (boyd and Ellison, 2007). As a result, the terms SNS and OSN saw a rapid growth in usage across journals, monographs, and media releases in various domains, including computer science, communication, and sociology. A search of Scholar’s Portal reveals there were almost twice as
many references in peer-reviewed papers using the term ‘social networking site (SNS)’ versus ‘social media’ between 2003 and 2008, though usage of both terms increased exponentially in the years to follow. However, between 2009 and 2014 the trend reversed with more than twice as many papers including the term ‘social media’ than ‘social networking site (SNS)’. Two reasons may explain this shift. First, social media is a broader term that includes, for example, blogging, which is not specifically geared toward building social connections, but rather toward the broadcasting of information. Second, the term social media is associated with platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat, while the term SNS is specifically associated with the use of sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and hi5. The academic literature continues to make use of both terms, but SNSs and OSNs are considered to be types of social media.

Often scholarship tends to focus on specific proprietary platforms, that is, it examines platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, or Pinterest. But what brings social media scholarship together are the many commonalities shared across platforms (e.g., features for sharing and evaluating content, means for connecting with a social network, search and save functions), making it relevant to discuss social media both in general as well as at the platform level. In particular, identifying how users engage with features that are similar across platforms seems relevant for developing theories that have applicability across platforms.

Part of the difficulty in defining the term is figuring out what makes social media distinguishable from other media (Hogan and Quan-Haase, 2010). Bruns directly compares social media with traditional media to highlight what is unique: ‘All media are social, but only a particular subset of all media are fundamentally defined by their sociality, and thus distinguished, for example, from the mainstream media of print, radio, and television’ (2015: 1, emphasis added). Certainly social media tends to support sociality, but different platforms emphasize the social to different extents. For example, Kwak et al. (2010) found that Twitter was used primarily as an information network, rather than a social network. At the same time it is also increasingly difficult to distinguish social media from digital technology in general (Creighton et al., 2013) because of the social elements that are now embedded in everything from smartphone applications to wearable technologies. Despite a lack of formal definitions, those that do exist generally agree on its key elements. Based on an analysis of a selection of definitions available in the academic literature, we identified three main themes: (a) what activities social media enables, (b) how it enables these activities, and (c) the content it contains. Table 2.1 provides an overview of key definitions and analyses of each of these themes.
Based on our analysis of a selection of definitions from the literature (see Table 2.1), we conclude that there
exists relative consensus as to the meaning of social media. While some definitions stop short of specifying the type of content available, those that do specify content all agree that it is user- or consumer-generated (Gruzd et al., 2012; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). All definitions in Table 2.1 indicate what social media does; namely, it allows individuals, communities, and organizations to interact with one another by providing a service that enables them to communicate and collaborate and to create, modify, and share content. The definitions in Table 2.1 also concur that interactions occur through computer-mediated, web-based services. Thus, it can be stated based on the definitions listed in Table 2.1 that:

Social media are web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible.

The proposed definition of social media is broad and has the potential to include numerous technologies with social elements at their core. Gruzd et al. argue that social media ‘includes a wide variety of technologies from video/teleconferencing tools such as Skype and online media repositories such as Flickr, to microblogging tools like Twitter and social networking sites like Facebook and Academia.edu’ (2012: 2341). Though much of the social media research literature makes no attempt at a formal definition, a definition is often implied by the websites or applications selected for investigation.

Frequently Facebook and Twitter are the platforms examined in social media research, though other platforms such as Pinterest, YouTube, Yelp, Weibo, and LinkedIn are similarly explored under the umbrella of social media (see the recent issues of the new journal Social Media + Society at http://sms.sagepub.com). There are two reasons why scholars have tended to give preference to Facebook and Twitter over other sites. First, Facebook is by far the most widely adopted SNS in North America and was one of the first to gather a large and loyal user base. Pew data from 2014 show that 71 per cent of Americans have adopted Facebook, while only 28 per cent use Pinterest and Instagram (Duggan et al., 2015). Second, while Twitter is not as widely used as Facebook among the general population, it has had a transformative effect on how information and news diffuse throughout society. The mainstream media, including daily newspapers, broadcasting channels, and weekly magazines, often make reference to Twitter activity in news stories; as a result, Twitter has become an important part of public discourse, despite not being widely adopted by the general population; indeed in 2014 only 23 per cent of Americans used it (Duggan et al., 2015). We feel the time is ripe for more in-depth analysis and greater attention to sites like Vine, Instagram, and Snapchat, which emphasize non-text forms of media. For example, current innovations under development provide much-needed tools to not only study images and their surrounding discourse, but also the interlink of image, text, and content producer (see e.g., Martin, Chapter 14, this volume; Rasmussen Pennington, Chapter 15, this volume; Warfield et al., 2015).

There have been several attempts to categorize social media and identify what technologies can be considered social media. Arora (2012), for example, developed a metaphor-based typology to help identify boundaries among social media spaces; she organized them into five cultural dimensions:

1. utilitarian-driven,
2. aesthetic-driven,
3. context-driven,
4. play-driven, and
5. value-driven.

More common are categorizations of social media by technology type for the purposes of marketing or research. Grahl (2013), for example, identified six types of social media applications:

1. social networking,
2. bookmarking,
3. social news,
4. media sharing,
5. microblogging, and
6. blogs and forums.

Grahl's (2013) typology serves as a means to explain to clients and users how each type may be leveraged for specific marketing purposes and goals. To examine the use of social media in the research work flow of scholars, Nicholas and Rowlands (2011) surveyed over 2,000 researchers. Based on their analysis, they identified similar types of social media as Grahl (2013), though did not explicitly identify social news as a specific type of social media, and identified three additional types of social media relevant to scholars and professionals:

1. collaborative authoring,
2. conferencing, and
3. scheduling and meeting tools.

Based on previous literature, Table 2.2 outlines ten main types of social media (Grahl, 2013; Nicholas and Rowlands, 2011) and includes examples and definitions of each.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of social media</th>
<th>Examples</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social networking</td>
<td>Facebook, LinkedIn</td>
<td>'Web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system' (boyd and Ellison, 2007: 211)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookmarking</td>
<td>Delicious, StumbleUpon</td>
<td>'Provide a mix of both direct (intentional) navigational advice as well as indirect (inferred) advice based on collective public behavior. By definition – these social bookmarking systems provide “social filtering” on resources from the web and intranet. The act of bookmarking indicates to others that one is interested in a given resource. At the same time, tags provide semantic information about the way the resource can be viewed' (Millen, Yang, Whittaker, and Feinberg, 2007: 22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Media Type</td>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microblogging</td>
<td>Twitter, Tumblr</td>
<td>‘Services that focus on short updates that are pushed out to anyone subscribed to receive the updates’ (Grahl, 2013: n.p.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogs and forums</td>
<td>LiveJournal, Wordpress</td>
<td>‘Online forums allow members to hold conversations by posting messages. Blog comments are similar except they are attached to blogs and usually the discussion centers around the topic of the blog post’ (Grahl, 2013: n.p.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media sharing</td>
<td>YouTube, Flickr, Pinterest</td>
<td>‘Services that allow you to upload and share various media such as pictures and video. Most services have additional social features such as profiles, commenting, etc.’ (Grahl, 2013: n.p.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social news</td>
<td>Digg, Reddit</td>
<td>‘Services that allow people to post various news items or links to outside articles and then allows it's users to “vote” on the items. The voting is the core social aspect as the items that get the most votes are displayed the most prominently. The community decides which news items get seen by more people’ (Grahl, 2013: n.p.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative authoring</td>
<td>Wikipedia, Google Docs</td>
<td>Web-based services that enable users to create content and allow anyone with access to modify, edit, or review that content (Archambault et al., 2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web conferencing</td>
<td>Skype, GoToMeeting, Zoho Meeting</td>
<td>‘Web conferencing may be used as an umbrella term for various types of online collaborative services including web seminars (“webinars”), webcasts, and peer-level web meetings’ (Web conferencing, n.d.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geo-location based sites</td>
<td>Foursquare, Yik-Yak, Tinder</td>
<td>Services that allow its users to connect and exchange messages based on their location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling and meeting</td>
<td>Doodle, Google Calendar, Microsoft Outlook</td>
<td>Web-based services that enable group-based event decisions (Reinecke et al., 2013)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This typology (Table 2.2) will help authors indicate what type of social media and platform they are examining and thereby help other scholars more quickly search for relevant literature as well as to identify commonalities and differences across types of social media. Through such approaches we will be able to build a more systematic body of knowledge.

**What questions can social media research answer?**

What makes the study of social media relevant to many disciplines is the availability of vast amounts of varied data. Social media produces what has been referred to as big data and is characterized by high velocity, large volume, diverse variety, exhaustivity in scope, fine-grained resolution, relational in nature, and flexibility in its approach (Kitchin, 2014). This creates new challenges for scholars, while also presenting great opportunity – this has given rise to several questions.
First, social media research has prompted questions that force researchers to look inward to grapple with its inherent challenges.

1. **Methodological questions**: Novel methodological questions emerge from the collection, analysis, and visualization of social media data. Some of these questions are platform-specific while others are applicable to all kinds of social media. To some extent social media allows easy and convenient access to large quantities of data, on the other hand, it can be costly or even impossible to obtain a specific data set. Melissa Terras (2012) for instance lamented on a blog post entitled ‘What Price a Hashtag? The cost of #digitalhumanities’, how it would cost her around US$25,000 to purchase from Gnip the historical set containing the hashtag #digitalhumanities. In other words, data is readily available if scholars can pay the price.

2. **Ethical questions**: Data collection, aggregation, and reporting of social media data has raised numerous ethical questions relating to issues such as personal privacy, accuracy, and accountability with which researchers and practitioners are only beginning to grapple. While social media data is often publicly available, there are still many ethical considerations that should give researchers reason to pause. Consent is often at the center of debates, as not all users of social media sites are comfortable with (or aware of) the use of their data for analysis (Beninger et al., 2014). Ethical considerations do not exclusively apply to scraping big data, but are also of relevance in small-scale studies relying on few cases. As Quan-Haase and McCay-Peet argue this ‘may actually be an even greater concern for small-scale qualitative researchers, where it is easier to identify single users’ (Chapter 4, this volume: 44). Hence, scholars need to address a wide range of research questions around data stewardship and what ethical guidelines need to be set up to both help scholars gain new insights, while protecting the right of users to data privacy. These kinds of discussions become increasingly relevant with new legislation being introduced in various countries. For example, the European Union has passed a new law that allows individuals to better control personal data on the web, which has been discussed under the right to be forgotten. Unfolding legal challenges open up new research questions for scholars relating to the biases of the data collected for analysis as well as the legality of storing data that users may want deleted.

3. **Questions of scale**: Scale is one of the greatest challenges to be overcome by social media scholars. Social media data allow for the examination of a different phenomenon or issue from different angles. A study can rely on either large data sets that aggregate terabytes of information or, through small-scale studies, examine the local behaviour of a few users. While both approaches are relevant and valid, they provide qualitatively different insights into a single phenomenon. So, how do we integrate findings from such disparate means of gaining knowledge? New theoretical and methodological assumptions are needed to link and integrate distinct data sets and findings.

Second, social media data provide opportunities for scholars to address new types of questions and shed light on existing research problems from a different angle.
1. **Questions relating to social media use itself**: Social media scholarship can provide answers to new questions that arise from individuals', organizations', and governments' interaction and engagement on these information and social spaces. Social media activity is the focus of research in this case (e.g., how people discuss issues relating to personal health on Facebook, topological features of Twitter networks, and social media usage patterns). For example, social media research is important from the perspective of workplaces, schools, and universities. These organizations and institutions need to understand social media in order to develop appropriate policies to support or, in some cases, control its use. Citation counts are a traditional measure of research impact which informs the academic reward system, however universities need to understand whether and how social media can be used as a new way to measure research impact (Holmberg and Thelwall, 2014). Institutions of higher education are also exploring how social media spaces for students may be integrated into college and university experiences to improve student outcomes (e.g., DeAndrea, Ellison, Larose, Steinfield, and Fiore, 2012). Research is also needed to help inform public school policy, to address, for example, social media use by American teachers whose First Amendment rights may be threatened by limits placed on what they can and cannot do on social media (Papandrea, 2012).

2. **Questions that inform our understanding of social phenomena**: A second stream of social media research is the use of social media as a tool or method for academic research, for examining research questions and understanding complex problems otherwise examined through other, more traditional, methods (Otieno and Matoke, 2014). This second type of social media research significantly broadens the base of scholars doing 'social media research', by bringing in scholars from disciplines that do not explicitly study social media, but whose research could benefit from the characteristics of social media that make it conducive to the study of a variety of phenomena: its potential as a recruitment platform, its reach into a particular demographic, and the behaviours, attitudes, and perceptions that are readily observable and extractable via social media. Social phenomena such as involvement in social movements, giving, and political participation and consuming can be examined through an analysis of social media data. Yuan et al. (2014), for example, note the value of recruitment via social media when barriers such as stigma and mistrust exist. Yuan et al. recruited 1,221 HIV-positive participants for their survey via Facebook, Twitter, and other internet resources and concluded it was a ‘feasible and efficient tool’ (2014; n.p.).

Early scholarly work from 2003 to 2008 investigating social media tended to examine a single platform, its affordances, uses, and social implications. For instance, Gross and Acquisti (2005) looked at how users were engaging on Facebook, what information they shared on the platform, and the implications for their privacy. Thus, a large body of scholarship has addressed specific questions surrounding the development of various platforms, how users engage on these platforms, and the social implications of their engagement. Despite the quick proliferation of research addressing questions linked to social media, three issues were
often insufficiently taken into account.

1. **Social media use as toolkit**: Much work tended to look at specific platforms and their affordances as if these were utilized in isolation, rather than examining how individuals employed various platforms in tandem. Quan-Haase and Young (2010) suggested that scholars think of social media use as a kind of toolkit, where different platforms fulfilled different uses and gratifications. This would help explain why users often adopt multiple social media platforms. Pew, for instance, shows that multi-platform use is becoming fairly common with 52 per cent of online American adults adopting two or more social media sites, which represents a significant increase from 2013 data, where 42 per cent of internet users adopted more than one platform (Duggan et al., 2015). Further, Quan-Haase and Young argued that more work needed to be done on comparing platforms, as this would add to our understanding of why individuals prefer one social media site over another, and why and how they integrate different platforms on the basis of the gratifications they fulfill.

2. **Online-offline gap**: Examining social media often gives the impression that it is a universe unto itself that exists in isolation from other spheres of life. This kind of perspective is myopic, however, and disregards how social media and the phenomena that emerge within it are closely interlinked to other spheres of life. Perhaps most importantly, social media usage is closely interwoven with everyday life's rhythms and patterns. In a study of digital humanities scholars (Quan-Haase, Martin and McCay-Peet, 2015), the scholars integrated their use of Twitter into their work practices, tweeting and interacting with content in between meetings and during downtime. Moreover, the social contexts in which interactions and behaviours are occurring need to be taken into account, as these help explain topological features of networks of interaction and connection. Without taking cultural, political, and historical contexts into account, important aspects of social media use and its social implications may be missed. The framework discussed below will specifically elaborate on this link between social contexts and social media engagement. This link also became evident in the analysis of social media usage during the Arab Spring, where social media played a critical role. Despite the importance of social media during the Arab Spring of Tunisia and Egypt, many analysts showed that social media was utilized as a means to organize and mobilize citizens, spread news, and engage with the political landscape, *in tandem with* and *in addition to* informal, face-to-face networks on the ground. Rather than the digital sphere being separate from the offline sphere, the two work in relation to one another (Wellman et al., 2001). Hence social media needs to be studied as an expansion of daily life, a means to amplify social phenomena, and a catalyst for social phenomena in order to understand the larger ramifications of social media in society and points of intersection.

3. **Discipline orientation**: Early social media research drew from a variety of approaches and tended to be less grounded in any one discipline. This has changed, though. Scholars within specific disciplines have come on board and are now utilizing social media data to answer
issue-specific questions, which are often closely linked to their disciplines of origins. This is an important development in three ways. First, it frames questions within a set of theoretical approaches and discourses. Second, this is allowing for methods around social media to develop and fit with the unique requirements of a set of questions. Finally, it also suggests that social media research is becoming mainstream and its data more acceptable as a viable means of gaining insight into phenomena.

To further expand on the types of questions that social media can answer, we adapt McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase’s (2016) framework of social media engagement to explore key domains of analysis. The authors identified six elements of social media engagement, which may be examined through any number of disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological perspectives and traditions: (1) presentation of self, (2) action and participation, (3) uses and gratifications, (4) positive experiences, (5) usage and activity counts, and (6) social context. We have augmented this model and added a seventh element – (7) platform characteristics (see Figure 2.1). Platform characteristics are critical for understanding how users create, share, interact with, and mobilize content as well as for understanding how community is created and maintained in different platforms. For example, Twitter allows individuals to follow a person, institution or account, without reciprocation. That is, Twitter supports one-way flows of information. By contrast, Facebook only allows linkages between users when both parties agree to the connection: two users are equally connected to one another. This difference in how features work across platforms has important implications for the flow of information, the formation of gatekeepers, and the topology of networks. Hence, understanding how features relate to social phenomena provides further insight into the affordances of these platforms for social behaviour. Each of the seven elements are briefly described below and we illustrate how they can be studied in relation to one another.

1. **Presentation of self, reputation management, and privacy:** Identity is crafted through the development of a personal profile or virtual self over time on social media. An example of a research question designed to address the presentation of self aspect of social media is: ‘Are university student Facebook users more concerned about social privacy or institutional privacy?’ (Young and Quan-Haase, 2013: 483).

2. **Action and participation:** Social media enables users to perform a variety of activities such as viewing, posting, or sharing content, collaboration, and discussion. Veletsianos, for example, posed the following research question which aims to understand the nature of scholarly participation in social media: ‘What kinds of activities do scholars engage with on the Twitter network?’ (2012: 339).

3. **Uses and gratifications:** Social media users have different motivations for adoption and use including, for example, the exchange of information and the social benefits derived from its use. To understand why people use social recommendations (e.g., ‘likes’), Kim asks, for example, ‘What are online user motives for using social recommendation systems?’ (2014: 186).

4. **Positive and negative experiences:** Aspects of social media that compel people to use it such
as positive emotions, serendipity, and flow. One research question that reflects this visceral element of social media engagement is related to deep involvement and flow: ‘What are the factors affecting users to be deeply involved in social media?’ (Chan and Ma, 2014: 17). Equally, negative experiences such as spam, fraud, and cyberbullying may lower user engagement with social media and these experiences have led to a wealth of research questions as well.

5. **Usage and activity counts**: Usage and activity counts refer to the data associated with users’ actions and participation within a particular social media site, which may be presented in real-time in raw or aggregate form to users. Research in this area may examine, for example, the impact of the counts provided by social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook on users. Westerman, Spence, and Van Der Heide asked, ‘How does the ratio of followers to follows impact perceived credibility?’ (2012: 201).

6. **Social context**: Social context refers to the social, political, economic, work, and personal phenomena or characteristics that underlie a users’ social networks within social media sites, including the size and nature of these local and global networks (e.g., a small, close-knit peer group; a large, diffuse network of social activists). Social media research may, for example, attempt to understand the implications of social context to the use of social media by asking, ‘Does (national) culture determine how we schedule events online?’ (Reinecke et al., 2013: 45). Other social media research is interested in who is using social media to help understand the social context, asking questions such as, ‘Are Twitter users a representative sample of society?’ (Mislove et al., 2011: 554). Furthermore, social movements provide a unique context from which to examine social media and how it serves as a tool for engagement, mobilization, and coordination (Castells, 2014; Poell, 2013).

7. **Platform characteristics**: Factors relating to features of specific platforms may influence engagement – for example, features that enable users to share information or communicate directly with one another. Smock et al. (2011) developed a number of research questions in their study on the uses and gratifications of Facebook, specifically relating to feature use. One of these research questions was, ‘Are the motivations that predict general Facebook use different from the motivations that predict use of specific Facebook features?’ (Smock et al., 2011: 2324).
Responses to the research questions outlined above inform our understanding of the reach of social media, how and why people engage with social media and to what effect, as well as our understanding of society. For example, Reinecke et al. (2013) examined the use of Doodle, a web-based scheduling tool, to understand cultural differences in time-perception and group decisionmaking. They found through an analysis of 1.5 million Doodle date and time polls from 211 countries that the process of scheduling is shaped by cultural norms and values. Studies such as these have the potential to not only expand our understanding of social media use, but more broadly our understanding of collectivist and individualistic societies.

In terms of the disciplines that have examined social media-related questions, we can identify marketing, communications, politics, computer science and human–computer interaction specifically, economics, health, business, and education. There are, however, many more. Often interdisciplinary research teams come together to tackle complex questions around social phenomena as they take place on social media (see Quan-Haase and McCay-Peet, Chapter 4, this volume).

**Conclusion**

This chapter presents and contrasts various definitions of social media. Based on an analysis of these definitions, we found some consensus among scholars. Drawing on key elements of existing definitions, we propose a broad definition:

Social media are web-based services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to
collaborate, connect, interact, and build a community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with user-generated content that is easily accessible.

Given the growing pervasiveness and impact of social media on a broad range of social phenomena including politics, presentation of self, social interaction, social movements, and scholarship itself, it has become both a fruitful area of research as well as a promising tool for data collection. If current efforts are any indication, there will be a growth in the development of new social media research methods and their assessment which will help integrate social media research methods and knowledge into existing frameworks (Bruns, 2015). There has already been a proliferation in social media research with niche journals emerging that either cover social media phenomena themselves or the methodological challenges associated with social media research, such as the journals Social Media + Society, Social Media and Society, and Big Data and Society. However, we would also argue that given the growth of social media scholarship more critical research is needed to understand the biases inherent in using social media methodologies and to develop best practices concerning social media research, with the aim of both supporting researchers and protecting social media users. Of particular importance is the need to determine best practices around ethical considerations. For instance, can scholars make use of social media data without the consent of authors of user-generated content? If they make use of the data, should this be done only in aggregate form? What repercussions, for example, imprisonment, stigma, ridicule, and harm to reputation can participants suffer from scholars making tweets and blog text searchable, even if anonymized? There is much work to be done not only around the social phenomena under investigation on social media platforms, but also concerning how scholars are procuring, storing, interpreting, and making use of social media data.

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Note

1Scholar’s Portal is a digital repository, which provides access to the electronic resources of 21 university libraries in Ontario, Canada, including more than ‘40 million scholarly articles drawn from journals covering every academic discipline’ (Ontario Council of University Libraries, n.p.).

References


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