

Everything Is Social

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Part One – Introduction

In 2007 I was living in São Paulo, Brazil. My sister-in-law suggested I join Facebook. She thought it would be a good way for our family to keep in touch. I'd heard about Facebook but didn't know much about it. So, I joined. I found Facebook novel and interesting. But other than creating a profile, occasionally posting a comment or sharing a photo, I didn't use Facebook. Then I started to get friend requests from people I hadn't spoken with in years. Facebook became a way to connect with people. I connected with friends I'd lost contact with, former colleagues, and relatives I hadn't seen in years.

What amazed me about Facebook was the amount of personal information people shared. I thought if the government required us to provide the sort of information people shared on Facebook, we'd be outraged. In my mind, Facebook was turning us into exhibitionists or voyeurs, if not both. Still, I found Facebook to be a useful tool to connect and communicate with people. My experience with Facebook was positive.

Fast forward five years when posts meant to be shared privately with friends unexpectedly went viral and spread across social networks like a virus, as posts were shared and reshared by hundreds, if not thousands of people. In 2012, a Dutch teenager living in Haren, Netherlands, posted an invitation to her birthday party on Facebook. Unknown to her, her Facebook settings were set on "public," not "private". This allowed not just her friends to see her invitation but

anyone on Facebook. This generated enormous buzz on Facebook in the week preceding the party. When she realized her mistake, she canceled the party, but this did not prevent thousands of people from organizing themselves online to join the celebration. Newspapers and television started to pick up the story. On the evening of the canceled party, broadcast media started to report live from Haren, where police had barricaded the streets while visitors from all over the country poured in. The police, who were ill-prepared, could not prevent serious rioting. At least 34 people were injured, 20 people were arrested, and rioters had caused millions of dollars in damages.

This incident is an example of the viral effects of what has become known as “social media.” The advent of which has plunged us into a new reality that, in a brief period of time, has radically changed our lives.

Over the last decade, social media have penetrated our lives. It’s the latest innovation in computer-mediated communication that poses a serious challenge to existing institutions, such as mass media and government. The fast growth of social media has disrupted the mass distribution of information and news is no longer the privilege of the institutional few, governments, newspapers, broadcast, and cable news.

Social media is ubiquitous. It’s estimated three billion people, 40% of the world’s population, use social media. Every day Americans spend an average of two hours sharing, liking, tweeting, and updating their social media profiles. Users of social media are moving from the Web to mobile devices. 91% of all social media users access social media networks with their smartphones.

Companies, businesses, religious, political, and professional organizations use social media. Such organizations employ social media marketers. Someone responsible for managing, planning, creating, publishing, and monitoring the organization's social media strategies.

My niece is the director of digital marketing for Whole30. It's an impressive title, but I had no idea what it meant. So, I asked her. She told me she is the digital media thought leader, responsible for developing and delivering the strategy and roadmap for all digital marketing channels; creating and distributing content that supports Whole30's internal and external priorities via digital media channels; and growing Whole30's influential presence in digital spaces including the Web, email, and social media. Even after her explanation, I'm still not sure I know exactly what she does. But I do know that she's not alone. There are tens of thousands of people doing the same thing.

The Pandora's box of social media had been opened, and social media has been released into the world. Is that good or bad? Eric Schmidt, former executive chairman of Alphabet Inc., the parent company of Google, said that "The Internet is the first thing that humanity has built that humanity doesn't understand, the largest experiment in anarchy that we have ever had." The same thing can be said about social media.

Part Two - Definition of Social Media

What is social media? When we think of social media, we think of Facebook. This is an example of social media, but it doesn't define social media. Facebook is a social media network, but social

media is not Facebook. Social media is a fluid term, which definition is constantly evolving as new social media networks come online.

Social media can be roughly referred to as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, which allows for the creation and exchange of user-generated content. But, to understand social media, we need to take a step back to look at the evolution of the World Wide Web.

The first stage in the evolution of the World Wide Web is known as Web 1.0. Web 1.0 is characterized by static web pages and content delivery. It allowed users to search for and read information, but there was little user interaction or content contribution.

The next stage in the evolution of the World Wide Web is Web 2.0. Web 2.0 refers to websites that emphasize user-generated content, ease of use, and participatory culture. Unlike Web 1.0, which was passive; Web 2.0 is participatory. While Web 1.0 was a read-only Web; Web 2.0 is a read-write Web. The major distinguishing characteristics of Web 2.0 are relationship technologies, participatory media, and social, digital technology. Web transactions became bi-directional rather than unidirectional. Web 2.0 turned users as consumers of content into users as participants. The emergence and rapid diffusion of Web 2.0 functionalities was an evolutionary leap forward in the social component of the Web. It gave Internet users access to an array of user-centric spaces they could populate with user-generated content and the ability to form online social networks.

With this understanding of the evolution of the World Wide Web, we can define social media. Social media are interactive computer-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, and interests via virtual networks. Social media are identified by four common features social media technologies share.

1. Social media are interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications.
2. The lifeblood of social media is user-generated content, posts, tweets, comments, photos and videos, and data generated through online interactions.
3. Users of social media create specific profiles for the Website or app that are designed and maintained by social media organizations.
4. Social media facilitate the development of online social networks by connecting a user's profile with those of other users and groups.

Part Three - History of Social Media

Facebook is the most known and used social media network, but the history of social media didn't begin with Facebook. What follows is a brief history of the evolution of social media focusing on the most significant social media networks that have come into existence in the last two decades.

1. The first social media network, SixDegrees, was launched in 1997. It offered tools to help people connect online, send messages to each other, create user profiles, and lists of friends, family members, and acquaintances. It was the first site to combine these features into a single online platform. While SixDegrees attracted millions of users, it was ahead of its time. While

people were flocking to the Internet, most did not have an extended network of friends who were online.

2. Five years later, in 2002, Friendster was launched. Friendster was the first social network to attain over one million users. Publications such as Time and Vanity Fair wrote about Friendster's success. Its founder appeared on magazine covers and late-night talk shows. From its launch until mid-2004, Friendster was the top social media network.
3. In 2003, several friends with Friendster accounts decided to mimic the more popular features of Friendster and launched Myspace. When rumors emerged, that Friendster would adopt a fee-based system, Friendster users fled to alternate social networks, most notably Myspace. Myspace was the largest social networking site in the world from 2005 to 2008.
4. Also, in 2003, LinkedIn, a corporate and job-oriented social network, went online. LinkedIn has become so popular that if you're a professional you're expected to have a LinkedIn profile. If you talk to a recruiter or career coach, the second thing they ask you about, after discussing your resume, is your LinkedIn profile, which for a not-insignificant amount of money they are more than willing to help you improve.
5. In 2004, a Harvard freshman, Mark Zuckerberg, along with his roommates, created a social media network called Facebook. Facebook was an online student directory featuring photos and basic information. At first, Facebook was limited to university students in the United States and Canada. But, in 2006, Facebook opened membership to everyone. Since then,

Facebook has become the world's largest social network. In 2012, the number of Facebook users surpassed one billion, the first social media network to do so. As of the second quarter of 2019, Facebook had over 2.4 billion users. That represents 31% of the world's population. If Facebook were a country, it would be the third-largest country in the world.

6. In 2005, YouTube, a video-sharing website where users could upload, share, and view videos, was launched. As of June 2019, more than 500 hours of videos were being uploaded to YouTube every minute. It would take close to 82 years to watch all the videos uploaded to YouTube in a single hour. In 2006, Time Magazine featured YouTube as its annual "Person of the Year." The amazing thing about YouTube is the number of people who have created YouTube channels, which attached millions of subscribers, and as a result, advertising dollars. A six-year-old boy named Ryan Kaji, assisted by his parents, created a YouTube channel called Ryan's ToysReview, where Ryan reviews toys. As of November 2019, the channel had over 20 million subscribers. In 2018, he was listed as the highest-paid YouTuber, earning \$22 million.
7. In 2006, Twitter was launched as a microblogging social network on which users could post and interact with messages known as "tweets". At first, it was hard to define what Twitter was because it didn't replace anything. There was a discovery period during which users figured out what Twitter was and how it could be used. As of the first quarter of 2019, more than 350,000 tweets were posted every minute, approximately 200 billion tweets every year.

Our President is a prolific tweeter. He uses Twitter to directly communicate with his base, bypassing traditional media outlets. Since he opened his Twitter account in 2009, he has sent more than 45 thousand tweets. The President has about 51 million followers on Twitter. Not bad, but well short of the 109 million followers Barack Obama has. While President Trump has 51 million followers, he only follows 46 people, most of whom are his friends at Fox News.

8. In 2010, Instagram, a photo and video-sharing social network, was launched as a mobile app for smartphones. After its launch, Instagram rapidly gained popularity, gaining 10 million users in a year, and 1 billion users as of May 2019. Since its launch, more than 50 billion photos have been shared on Instagram.
9. In 2011, SnapChat was founded with the goal of creating an application that would allow users to send photos to friends that would quickly vanish. Users wanted to share photos with friends but didn't want them to be reposted. At about the same time, the parents of teenagers who used Facebook discovered Facebook and joined it; teenagers, in an attempt to escape their parents, fled Facebook and started to use SnapChat. As of January 2018, only 7% of people between 13 to 17 years old used Facebook.
10. While I've focused on social media in the U.S., the U.S. is not alone in the social media marketplace. Several countries have entered this space, most notably China. While China bans the use of Facebook, YouTube, and Google, there are more than 800 million people in China use social media, nearly 60% of China's population. China has dozens of social media networks, but the goliath of social media in China is WeChat, released in 2011. As of 2018,

WeChat had over 1 billion users. WeChat is described as a mix of apps, making it the equivalent of Facebook, Instagram, Skype, Uber, Amazon, and WhatsApp combined into a single app. Currently, WeChat is the fifth most-used social media app in the world.

Part Four - Impact of Social Media

Social media have impacted our lives, our society, culture, and economy. Throughout human history, new technologies of communication have had a significant impact on culture. Plato used the voice of Socrates to raise the alarm about the perils posed by the invention of writing and reading. The invention of the printing press was perceived as a threat to European culture, social order, the church, and morality. Similar concerns were raised following the ascendancy of television, which was viewed as a corrosive influence. Social media is raising similar concerns.

Like mass media, social media is revolutionizing our lives. But, unlike mass media, which was unidirectional, social media is bidirectional, transforming us from consumers of content into participants in the process of creating, consuming, and disseminating content. As a result, social media has the capacity to revolutionize our lives in more profound ways than mass media was able and with far greater consequences.

If you don't believe social media have penetrated our lives, take a walk down any street. About 70% of the people you see will be on mobile devices. For many of us, our first instinct in the morning is to reach for our smartphone to check our notifications and social media accounts.

Then at the end of the day, before going to sleep, having spent all day using social media, we reach for our smartphones once again to scan our social media network feeds. Whenever my wife and I are attending an event or traveling, she takes hundreds of photos with her iPhone, many of which she posts on Facebook. It's as if, if it's not on Facebook, it didn't really happen.

The culture of our everyday lives has become entwined with social media. Is this a good thing? Or is it a bad thing? Researchers are divided. First, I will survey some of the positive benefits of social media. This survey will be brief since if you use social media, you are familiar with its benefits. That's why you use it.

1. **Connectedness.** Social media promotes a sense of connectedness. Social media is the ultimate connection machine. Whether on questions of politics, community affairs, science, education, romance, or economic life, social media connects us with meaningful and rewarding information and relationships.
2. **Information.** Social media has democratized media by transforming us from passive receivers of information into active participants in its creation. It has given everyone an equal voice. There are no gatekeepers when you publish content on a social media platform. You can write or share anything, and everyone can read and respond to it. Social media has removed communication barriers and created decentralized communication channels, which allows us to participate in a democratic fashion.

In addition, social media have provided users with greater access to information. News content is now available much faster due to social media. The immediacy of social media allows us to learn about something happening in the world when it happens, without having to wait to hear about it via mass media. Often the front lines of information come from eyewitnesses who are reporting on events live using social media. Users of social media can read and watch eyewitness accounts, rather than having them mediated to them second-hand through mass media.

3. **Education.** Social media has benefited education. It provides access to educational opportunities previously not available. Online learning has proliferated. You can listen to and watch educational courses on your smartphone using social media apps like Coursera. You can listen to podcasts on your smartphone about any topic you're interested in, including the social and sexual adventures of young women living in New York City. You can learn how to do almost anything by watching a YouTube video, from gardening to building a tiny house to picking up women.
4. **Contentment.** Researchers believe social media leads to more contentment, helping rather than harming people's well-being because it breaks down barriers and supports users in their ambitions. People desire to educate themselves, to communicate with others, to share their experiences, and create social networks. All these are supported by social media.

Social media have many positive benefits. Yet social media networks have evolved so rapidly that little attention has been paid to its negative effects. As Heraclitus put it eloquently over two

millennia ago: “Nothing new comes into our lives without a hidden curse. The greater the marvel, the greater the unexpected consequences.” Now, I will survey some of the negative effects of social media. This survey will be longer than the list of positive benefits because we are less aware of the negative effects of social media.

1. **Commodification.** By using social media platforms, we get a lot of free tools, the ability to connect with friends, post, share photos, and videos. We think these tools are free, but they are not. In exchange for our ability to use these tools, we give social media networks our personal data. We’ve become a commodity to be monetized. Facebook has so much information about me that it knows more about me than my wife does. Social media platforms harvest our data, which they sell to advertisers because advertising dollars are their source of revenue.

I like using Google search. I’m so dependent on Google maps I can’t imagine living without it. Using paper maps has become a distant memory. But using these tools comes at a price. That price is my personal data. Yet when I’m using these tools, I forget Google and Facebook are for-profit companies, not trusted confidantes, or neutral platforms. We think we are consumers using social media tools, but we are not consumers. We are a commodity to be monetized. We have become the product, which social media networks mine to harvest our personal data. Facebook and Google are not products we use; we are products Facebook and Google use to generate revenue.

2. **Politics.** Social media data began to be used extensively during the 2012 campaign for president by Barack Obama’s staff. Since then, the usage of social media for political

targeting has grown. One of the most significant miss-uses of social media data is the case of Cambridge Analytica. Many Americans were shocked to learn that the personal information from up to 75 million Facebook users had been “mined” by the firm through third-party apps. Even more, concerning was learning the mined data was used to create “psychographic” profiles to influence voting patterns.

3. **Addiction.** Social media is often described as being more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol. Facebook’s original president, Sean Parker, said Facebook intentionally sought to addict users by “exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology.” The dopamine-driven feedback loops that result from using social media addicts us to social media. Facebook creates an addiction to gathering “likes” of posts. The more likes we get, the more dopamine hits we get, and the more addicted we become to posting content people will like.

4. **Mental Health.** Social media has the potential for promoting social ills. Researchers have coined the term “Facebook depression,” which is defined as depression that develops when individuals spend an excessive amount of time on social media sites and begin to exhibit classic symptoms of depression. The intensity of the online world, which requires constant engagement, creates a factor of self-awareness that may trigger depression. Social media have the potential to cause psychological harm.

Social media is also a source of stress. Constantly being on alert for social media messages triggers the user’s instinctive fight or flight response. It’s like being on constant alert for predators. Social media causes depression and anxiety from the stress produced from

constantly trying to project an unrealistic and unachievable perception of perfection within our social network.

5. **Cognition and Memory.** In 2008, Nicholas Carr wrote an article for The Atlantic magazine entitled "*Is Google Making Us Stupid.*" Carr points out that we have a substantial body of empirical evidence on the effects of the Internet, social media, and smartphones. And the news is not good. He notes that while there are people who benefit from the connectedness social media provides, the evidence is clear that the kind of constant, intrusive connectedness that now characterizes people's lives has harmful cognitive consequences. The research reveals a strong association, and likely a causal one, between heavy Internet and social media use and loss of analytical and problem-solving skills and memory formation.

In addition, research has revealed that students have begun to operate as if all questions should be answered online. Mobile devices make it easy to find such answers, and students often do not look elsewhere. With sites such as Wikipedia, an online encyclopedia, internal memories are no longer necessary. We only need to recall where and how to find information. Studies show that people who expect to have access to information, later, more readily forget information than those who did not.

6. **Immoral Behavior.** Social media has led to the phenomenon of cyberbullying and trolling. Cyberbullying is an aggressive act carried out repeatedly and overtime against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself. Cyberbullying is the result of social media platforms

having 24-hour access into someone's life, and can lead to negative consequences, especially younger users, as users can leave hurtful and intimidating messages on each other's profiles.

Tolling is the deliberate act by someone referred to as a troll, making random unsolicited or controversial comments on various social media forums with the intent to provoke an emotional knee jerk reaction from unsuspecting readers to engage in a fight or argument. Tolling is especially common on Twitter.

7. **Crime.** Many people have taken advantage of social media to hide their identities and commit crimes. Social media has been adopted by terrorist groups, which use social media to gather information, recruit members, raise money, and engage propaganda. In April 2013, the Syrian Electronic Army hacked the Associated Press's Twitter account and sent a tweet to millions of its followers that said two explosions occurred at the White House, and Barack Obama was injured. The news was false, but the stock market plunged within minutes. This type of cyber-terrorism can destabilize a nation's economy and security.

8. **Privacy.** Social media has rendered the idea of privacy as being redundant. Confusion arises from users' lack of understanding of how the private and public elements of social media work. Since social media networks need to collect data, they invaded our privacy, and look for other sources of information about us to create highly customized user profiles. When information is shared on social media, that information is no longer private. Invading every aspect of our lives to generate revenue is embedded in the business model of every social media company. We don't have to share, but sharing has been ingrained into society as routine and normative. For many people, Facebook and Instagram have become public

scrapbooks used to chronicle their lives, sharing things which in the past we'd only share with close friends and family members.

9. **Fake News.** Social media has led to the creation of fake news. Social media is being used to spread misinformation and false narratives. Understanding the dynamics of false narratives is important because, unlike an individual item of fake news, narratives are constructed from multiple sources and slowly emerge as a plausible reality. There are many users who will believe anything they read on social media and not look any further to find out if what they're read is true.

10. **Political Polarization.** The use of social media has resulted in an "echo chamber effect." Most Americans get at least some news from social media. Because of algorithms social media platforms use to filter and display news, such content is likely to match the users' political preferences. The impact of receiving news from social media includes increased political polarization. Selective exposure occurs when individuals favor information which supports their beliefs and avoid information which conflicts with their beliefs. Social media users are drawn to information that strengthens their preferred narratives and rejects information that undermines it. As a result, social media users end up being isolated in "thought silos," in which they only receive the information they are interested in and reaffirms their personal beliefs.

Part Five - The Future of Social Media

The proliferation of social media have caused researchers to focus on the future impact of social media. We are living in a culture in which the current generation of children and teenagers are growing up with smartphones in their hands. This generation referred to as the “iGeneration” or “Gen Z,” is a generation of children and teenagers who are growing up online with mobile technologies, who are wired to social media. To them, a smartphone is not a phone. It’s a portable device they use to tweet, access social media platforms, share, and text. It’s impossible for them to imagine life without social media and a smartphone in their hands. Researches are concerned about the effects of growing up online. It’s a test case, the results of which unfortunately will not be known until it’s too late to reverse the negative consequences of growing up online.

Some researchers are optimistic about the future of social media, while others are pessimistic. Some are focused on ways to improve the use of social media, while others have raised concerns about its governance and regulation. I will focus on the last two.

1. **Improving the Use of Social Media.** Researchers focused on improving the way social media is used, have proposed:

- (i) Social media tools should not be designed to engage people as if they were slot machines;
- (ii) Working with companies to collaborate with consumer groups to end practices that are not in the best interests of most people;
- (iii) A fundamental revisiting of the question who owns our information;
- (iv) The admission by online companies that they are not “just passive internet services;”
and

- (v) Finding ways to work with social media networks, so they accept they can make money even if they accept being called what they are. This is the greatest business, political, social, and economic challenge of our time, simply learning to call what we have created what it is and regulate it accordingly.

2. **Governance and Regulation of Social Media.** Researchers focused on the challenge of governing and regulating social media are concerned that regulators are being asked to address a broad and diverse range of challenges posed by social media. These range from privacy, speech rights, intellectual property, antitrust, government surveillance, and consumer protection. They see the risk that the policy establishment will strain to bend and stretch existing institutions to deal with problems for which they are ill-suited. They are concerned that the tendency will be to apply old policy solutions to the new challenges posed by social media. Congress and courts do not comprehend the digital technologies they are trying to regulate. Traditional regulatory structures were designed to fit services in existence at the time of their enactment. These researchers fear regulators will attempt to stuff social media into ill-fitting regulatory categories, rather than creating new regulations to address the unique features of social media. The challenge will be to clearly define what social media is and to figure out how to regulate it without impeding innovation.

Part Six – A Conclusion

Social media have transformed our lives without us realizing it. We're like the frog placed into a tank of water. The temperature is slowly increased, but the frog is unaware of the rising temperature, right up to the point at which the water boils and the frog is dead. In the same way, social media proliferated, and we slowly began to embrace it, dazzled by what it could do,

unaware of its consequences. Then social media slowly integrated itself into our lives, and before we knew it, it had become part of our daily routine.

I admit it. I'm addicted to social media. I cannot imagine living without my iPhone, which allows me to access social media wherever I am and whenever I want. This, despite knowing that the social media platforms I use, do not exist to make my life better. They exist to monetize me. I know social media networks are not products I use. I am the product social media companies use to make money. Still, I continue to use social media because I enjoy the benefits of doing so.

We enjoy the benefits of social media, regardless of the fact we know our personal data is being harvested and sold, and our privacy is being compromised. We may believe the negative effects of social media can be mitigated, but there are big players, with increasingly big pockets, that have a significant stake in using social media to generate revenue. These companies are not concerned about the potential negative consequences of social media or our privacy. They are concerned about making money. And as long as we continue to use the tools media social platforms provide, these companies will continue to harvest our personal data to sell to the highest bidder, compromising our privacy.

The only alternative to being a product social media networks exploit is to stop using social media. This is referred to as a "social media cleanse." No Facebook. No YouTube. No Twitter. No Instagram. No photos of your grandchildren, who live in another state or country, celebrating their birthdays in real-time. This is something that we all can do, but something most, if not all, of us, are unwilling to do. We want to be connected. We want to post. We want to share. And we want to be able to do so anytime and anywhere.

Social media is revolutionizing our lives, society, culture, and economy. Like Prometheus's gift of fire, social media have many positive benefits, but its potential for misuse should not be underestimated. Social media is here to stay. And even if we wanted to, we cannot put it back into the pandora's box from which it escaped.

Good night,

and good luck . . . using social media.