

# Social Media Development, Usage, Challenges, and Opportunities



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## INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years more social media platforms have emerged on the web. With their rise they changed the way of communication as well as the media landscape itself. The user is empowered by obtaining a new role as an active, producing and participating entity within the World Wide Web. This dynamic power and the possibility to reach out people in their daily life and routines have been discovered by companies as well as by politicians. Different application scenarios have evolved within the social media. Social media news, for instance, are only one field of application. Especially through the microblogging-service Twitter, news is presented from ordinary users to the whole world. Recent years have shown how social media was used for distributing news in real time.

Exact this fact has not only had an impact on the news consumption of people, moreover, it has changed the whole news reporting process: it is not anymore the professional journalist who filters and chooses the worthy news for the ordinary users, everyone who has access to the web get the power to publish news. This article aims to give an overview about the development of social media as a media genre as well as to present different platforms which have aroused in the last years. Moreover, various application fields are introduced to demonstrate opportunities that social media provides. However, one crucial objective of the article is also to look at the risks and challenges and to develop awareness on a correct handling of social media platforms.

## BACKGROUND

One early application that made it possible to publish messages publicly was the so called Usenet. It was developed by Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis in 1979. One of the frequent users of the Usenet, Jorn Barger, is seen as the creator of the first weblog when he started his first blog in 1997 (Kaplan& Haenlein, 2010). Since this time, a huge blogosphere developed in the Internet; also other forms of social media aroused. In the last ten years over five hundred different platforms were pushed into the web. The platforms have different core usage scenarios, however, they are grouped together as social media.

Literature provides various definitions on social media. "Social Media is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological foundation of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan& Haenlein, 2010, p. 61).

Boyd and Ellison define social network sites as follows:

*...web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bound 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. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.*

The authors use the term "social network sites" in order to describe the phenomenon itself and make a distinction between the terms "social network sites" and "social networking sites." Even both terms are used interchangeable in public discourse, according

to the authors the term “networking” refers more to the beginning of a relationship, especially between strangers. However, the scope of these sites is not networking and therefore, the term “social network sites” is applied in order to define the phenomenon of this new media form (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

In addition to the terms “social network sites” and “social networking sites” other terms such as Web 2.0 and User Generated Content are often used interchangeably with social media. Web 2.0 was first introduced by Tim O’Reilly, who has organized the Web 2.0 conference in October 2004 and after publishing an essay about web 2.0, the term gained more importance. The add-on 2.0 is usually used for software upgrades and had been added in order to give the feeling of change after the new economy years (Schmidt, 2009). However, some authors do not agree with this opinion, since they do not consider the Web 2.0 as a technical update of the World Wide Web (Schmidt, 2009). Also Tim Berner-Lee who is often considered as the father of the World Wide Web, criticizes this position. In an interview with IBM in 2006 he explained:

*Web 1.0 was all about connecting people. IT was an interactive space, and I think Web 2.0 is of course a piece of jargon, nobody even knows what IT means. If Web 2.0 for you is blogs and wikis, then that is people to people. But that was what the Web was supposed to be all along. (Tim Berner-Lee, 2006)*

Kaplan and Haenlein consider the Web 2.0 “as the platform for the evolution of social media” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p.61). The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2007) has defined three requirements regarding User Generated Content (UGC): publication requirement, creative effort, creation outside of professional routines and practices.

Regarding the technological development the OECD explains: “Technological change empowers individuals to ‘tell their stories’, to produce cultural goods such as music and video and to transform the information and media content environment surrounding them.” (Wunsch-Vincent, 2007, p.64).

In regard of the phenomena that users tell their stories the OECD consider it as *citizen journalism* or *participatory journalism* (Wunsch-Vincent, 2007, p.61).

*Participatory journalism [is] [t]he act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that democracy requires. (Bowman & Willis, 2003, p. 8).*

The user gets a new role in the news process: Literature defined the term “produser” (Bruns, 2005) or formulation such as “the people formerly known as the audience” (Deuze, 2008, p.254) in order to describe the new role of the user.

## DEVELOPMENT AND APPLICATIONS

According to Boyd and Ellison’s definition SixDegrees.com is the first recognizable social network site. It was founded in 1997 and gave its users the possibility to create profiles, have a friends list and later on to search in the friends list. However, these features were supported by different websites such as dating sites or community sites, before. Nevertheless, SixDegrees.com was the first website that provided all these features in one application. Though, the website had to be closed in 2000 (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Between 1997 and 2001 also other services were launched such as MiGente, AsianAvenue or BlackPlanet. Applications started after 2001 marked a second wave of social network sites since their scope switched towards business networks. During this wave services such as Ryze, Tribe.net, LinkedIN or Friendster were founded. Within these services Friendster takes a special role since it became “one of the biggest disappointments in Internet history” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 215). It was launched in 2002 and gained steadily more popularity. However, from a technical view they were not able to deal with the growing number of users and consequently, users started to leave the service. Nevertheless, Friendster gained large popularity in some Asian countries such as the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia (Boyd & Ellison, 2008).

After 2003 many applications and services were launched. Each of them had different scopes: LinkedIn, Visible Path or Xing were designed to attract professionals; Dogster supported connections based on interests, Couchsurfing helped travelers. In addi-

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