The Voice of Social Media, 1997–2018

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INTRODUCTION

Today's social media constitutes communication portals where anyone can sign up and freely "post" messages to self-selected groups of individuals. It includes three key elements: (1) a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) the ability to view and traverse their list of connections and those made by other users in the system[1]. (Che & Ip, 2017)

Social media can be seen as ground-level communication as opposed to the alternative - mass communication. Within some ill-defined limits, individuals can post anything they want on Social Media, while communication on mass media is heavily edited by gatekeepers – those who create, develop and edit public communication. As early as 1975 Janowitz (1975) presented the gatekeeper role in journalism as a method for reporting information with scientific method for objective and valid results. In the same article, however, he compared the journalist's gatekeeper role with that of being an advocate. Surprisingly, this contrast was to reappear decades years later in communication via social media.

While most individuals haven't sought to be journalists, freedom of expression naturally accompanies the desire for individuals to publish their own ideas. Thus, when social media arrived, many individuals joined the social media movement.

Social Media as Mass Communication by Individuals

The concept of "mass communication" has traditionally represented a one-way flow from source to recipient. Early writings in communication theory also featured feedback and context, but mass communication remained a broadcast to the masses (Schramm, 1954). Before examining its properties, one might consider the state of communication late in the 20th century.

In the last decade of the century, Berger (1995, p. 7-9) distinguished between individualism and communication to large population groups. At that time, individuals could hope to communicate with persons outside their acquaintance, but it was difficult to "reach the masses". At mid-decade the new Internet had developed from small networks to the extent that it was seen as a mass medium of communication (Morris & Ogan, 1996). However, even with the Internet, the individual's ability to access the web to reach the public was limited by cost and technology.

Throughout these formative years, the main concept in mass communication was to broadcast news and entertainment into homes from a central place. News editors served as gatekeepers, automatically limiting news content. Their news stories were received in homes and, as long as the number of networks was limited, viewers, readers and listeners could discuss the shows with friends and family the next day.

When the Internet arrived, unpublished writers hoped to gain access there. In reality, it was difficult and expensive to start a website that would ever attract a large public audience like that of radio and television

broadcasting. And, quite naturally, those websites with many visitors simply basked in their monopoly status and continued limiting access to the Internet in the same way radio and television always had.

In retrospect, the main question must have been– who was permitted to originate news content? The average person could never hope to be "on the show". In fact, it was clear that only the media managers, producers, and directors could decide. If they said your news wasn't important, it wasn't important. While many people had a desire to be "on the air" to share their ideas, this was impossible for almost everyone. Access for the average person was denied.

Background

Individuals were able to publish their own content starting in the 1980's with the public Bulletin Board Services (BBS). The BBS was sort of a hobby medium on the early Internet service. (Kayingo & Hass, 2017) Here an individual could locate a "bulletin board" covering a specific area of interest and communicate with other individuals who had made the same choice.

The first Bulletin Board System (BBS) was created by two hobbyists in Chicago who wanted a way to inform friends about meetings, post announcements, and share interesting information. (Langmia, Tyree, O'Brien, & Sturgis,, 2013).

As such, today's social media model did not emerge until 1997 with the advent of the first social site sixdegrees.com. (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Some web users started first "weblogs" in the same year (Oxford English Dictionary, 2015) and the word "social media" first appeared (Bercovici, 2010). Another service, ChinaRen Alumni was created in 1999, as China's first network community that matched the social network model.

How did writers gain access? In 1999 a new trend for access emerged with a small website called Author-me.com. Its purpose, according to the Internet Archive, was as follows:

We nurture new writers who pursue a dream of publishing their work. We offer a chance to protect each manuscript, web-publish it, and receive private comments on it via your e-mail address. Here's a bit of encouragement during the tough process of refining your writing skills and submitting manuscripts for publication.

As social platforms became established and were adopted by many users, services such as LinkedIn (started in May 2003) began to transition from a 'web of things' to a 'web of people'.

It was not until the launch of MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2006) that social networks gained widespread popularity. (Schoop, 2017). Soon these same websites converted to a new concept. Free Internet participation was available to anyone, and the social media bubble burst. This radical development began with very little fanfare.

Facebook was established by Mark Zuckerberg at Harvard University. At first, the website simply offered commercial database services on about.com. At about the same time, alternative social media websites MySpace (founded by Chris DeWolfe and Tom Anderson) gave access, along with Twitter. By 2006 Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Evan Williams and Biz Stone were discussing the idea of using text messaging to share "statuses", etc., which form the basis of today's postings. (Furlong, 2013).

As social media developed, for commercial reasons, it became important to "track" the number and location of viewers of specific pages. (Xiang& Fesenmaier, 2016). Further, users could publish "profiles" showing their background and interests. (Eastin, 2010).

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