

The Social Media As Echo Chamber: The Digital Impact

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ABSTRACT

The media serve as the channels used to deliver information or research data for any purpose. With media and technology combined, if today a person is sitting in one corner of the world, he or she can send knowledge and words to an unimaginable number of people without fear of being interrupted or argued with. This paper explores the impact of media technology in our lives. The advent of the “social media” is playing a role in all facets of our lives. Its overriding existence with free search engines has changed the trends in education, economics, politics, and our day-to-day routine. Here we highlight how the quest of technology in the form of “social media” has been an important aspect of getting this world expressed in terms of bytes. The social media include web-based technology that has changed communication into a more interactive dialogue. The social media have completely transformed the way we connect or reconnect with old friends and acquaintances, entertain ourselves, pursue our hobbies, shop, relax, and look for jobs. The social media are the primary communication medium today for a new generation of digitally aware consumers.

Keywords: Social Media; Information; Business; Education; Marketing

INTRODUCTION

As defined by Wikipedia, “Social media is a media for social interaction among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual networks and communities” (Rosenberg, 2013). This definition applies primarily to any form of business interactions, rather than for personal socializing. Social media search tools also help users search for conversations relevant to the topics they care about most, whether one’s favorite sport, favorite food, or celebrity, or one’s company’s brand name. Companies use the social media as a tool for direct conversation with their customers in terms of providing valuable details about their products. Usually the dialogue is not one-way, enhancing a company’s chances to give good customer service in this competitive market. In recent years, the use of social media has turned out to be the benchmark for advertising in every successful business. The social media have helped provide thousands of jobs throughout the nation, fostered a new industry where thousands more have created income opportunities online, and facilitated countless sales over the past few years. Thus, the social media have recently empowered global societies to mastermind better futures for their nations.

HISTORY

The media have existed since ancient times when gestures and paintings were the main source of communication. In the centuries since the beginning of the Renaissance, the world has witnessed a huge transformation of media from alphabetic writing to printing, and in the last few decades, from printing to electronic media and computer communication. Technology has made communication increasingly easier through history. Finally, in recent years, the social media have become a very significant tool for social networking.

The current social media did not develop overnight. The Internet that we now have - and depend upon to deliver varied information to our homes - evolved through the years, beginning with telegraph and progressing

through telephone and e-mail (electronic mail). ARPANET, BBS, CompuServe, and Geocities represent interactive sites that have managed to bring the world together. The web world grew as more and more social sites were developed for fun, entertainment, and information for digital users. The first BBS (Bulletin Board Systems) came online in the late 1970s (Chapman, 2009). Online forums have also played a vital role in the evolution of the social web.

It has been an exciting decade so far for the development of social media, but despite the growing number of services competing for the attention of the audience, only a few have established themselves over the past few years. In 2000, the social site Google developed the ability to read our minds as how we visualize the search results we want (Google.com, 2012). Further, it established a 10-language version, exploring the whole world. At present, Google Search is the most used engine on the World Wide Web.

Political Influence

In the first quarter of 2011, the Middle East witnessed many uprisings, termed social media revolutions, and it is believed that Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter played the role of catalyst role in igniting changes in the Middle East, especially in Egypt. The turmoil that ended a 30-year-old oppressive regime in Egypt resulted from the social media's uniting the youth, helping them to organize and coordinate protests against the government. Presently, Syrian videos displayed on social sites have kept people united and aware of what is happening within that country. The social media has taken us into a new era of politics with the possibility of unifying a large number of people all over the world.

Generalized Impact

Arguably, social networks are having an impact on the way the next generation will lead; we might call it the "Facebook effect" (World Economic Forum, 2011). The Internet has democratized access to information and, to some extent, relationships. Leadership relies on effective communication, and communication is what social networks are all about. Everybody, from big businesses to independent businesses, is using some form of social media marketing plan as a part of daily life. This paper looks at how the social media have penetrated our lives on a daily basis. How deep-seated have social media become in people's lives?

Social Media

Facebook, Friendster, Hi5, LinkedIn, MySpace, Orkut, and YouTube are a few common examples in a huge list of websites that comprise social networking services. Some of these have even managed to shape a whole new generation on the Web. These websites are focused on bringing people together to interact through chat rooms, and they provide easy-to-use publishing tools via inexpensive personal Web pages. The world's biggest social network is expected to seek a \$75 billion to \$100 billion valuation in its IPO, the most anticipated stock offering from Silicon Valley since Google Inc. went public in 2004 (Neil, 2012). Facebook was designed to accumulate lists of "friends" as well as bring together people with similar interests. It has added a number of features over the past few years, including messaging, chatting, posting photos and uploading videos. YouTube, the first major video hosting and sharing site, was launched in 2005. Users have the freedom to upload videos or to embed them on other websites. Now YouTube has launched a service to provide television shows and movies under license from their copyright holder (www.webgranth.com). The advent of social news and bookmarking sites in the mid-2000s brought about a whole new way of seeing what is going on in the world and discovering interesting content. News became more widely available, thanks to social media websites. Twitter, founded in 2006, gained a lot of popularity during the 2007 South by Southwest (SxSW) conference (Chapman, 2009). Twitter has also spawned a number of third-party sites and apps, turning it into more of a platform than a single service. There are Twitter clients for updating and managing followers, services that track Twitter trends, and services for posting photos and videos directly to Twitter.

Social Media – Getting Economical

If you placed an ad on page 3 in a newspaper with a circulation of 100,000 or bought some air time on a broadcast watched by 5 million, you probably didn't think about the readers who bought that paper only for the

sports news or the viewers who popped out of the room during the commercials to put a kettle on – and that’s even before we talk about circulation figures inflated by the assumption that every paper was read by 3 or 4 people (Online Journalism Blog, 2009). Online we know exactly how many people have looked at a specific page, the contents, and how many have clicked on the advertisements. You can also track which page users were coming from and which one they went to next, the search terms they were using, the location of their access, and more, depending on how much data they provided. Thus, social media has changed traditional marketing so that it is now “integrative marketing” (Carter, 2011). How businesses manage that integrative social media portfolio will determine their success or failure. Marketing is now sourced down to the end user. If you don’t meet the needs of the customer, you will hear about it. It’s a completely new way to sell products. So far, the measurement of success is done by clicks and impressions.

Reduced Cost

Web technology, which is now mobile, has reduced the cost of news-gathering, production, and distribution to almost nil (Online Journalism Blog, 2009) and new tools are being made all the time that reduce the time cost even further. When publishing is as easy as making a phone call, it causes problems for any business that has to maintain or pay debts on costly legacy production systems. Social networks are more powerful and efficient than delivery vans, and you don’t need to sell a certain amount of information to make them viable. Meanwhile, the monopoly on advertising has gone. Before, choices for advertisers might have been limited, but now they can choose from dozens of local media outlets, national directories, international outlets, search engines, or social networks – or spend money on becoming media producers themselves. This competition has driven the cost down and innovation up. Since anyone can publish, anyone can distribute, and retailers can talk to customers directly, why should they advertise in a newspaper or magazine? Audio, video, text, photography, animation – it all becomes 1 and 0 in “bytes.” The value of an organization lies not only but also within its walls but also beyond them.

The Rise of the PR Industry

News organizations have become training grounds for the PR industry. Journalists who cannot live on newspaper wages have been leaving to work in PR for some time now, which means that the costs of training and recruitment will increase. Good graduates from journalism schools are often hired by PR even before they enter the news industry, leaving the news industry in a dilemma as to how to attract the best brains. The social media empower the consumer, creating buying efficiencies. As another, interesting phenomena, the social media create better employees through the use of private networks. It also allows retirees of a company to continue to contribute via a social media platform. Thus, it is now crucial to understand social media in order to figure out the best way to use it strategically to further your business or brand. E-Marketer estimates that marketers spent \$2 billion to advertise on social network Websites worldwide in 2008 (eMarketers, 2009).

Figure 1, a prediction from before 2009, projected that worldwide ad spending would increase 17%, to \$2.35 billion. “A double-digit rise in spending is certainly good news at a time when forecasters are shrinking their worldwide online ad spending projections to the low single digits,” noted Debra Aho Williamson, eMarketer senior analyst and author of the report, “Social Networking Worldwide: Ad Spending and Usage.” “But the expected growth in social network spending in 2009 is half of what eMarketer had projected it would be in our previous forecast in December 2007.” More than 210 million people in Europe visited a social networking site during one month (Matadeen, 2009). Though there are many activities that people can engage in on social network sites – games, applications, listening to music – the key benefit is that they are an easy way to stay in touch and share information with friends and acquaintances.

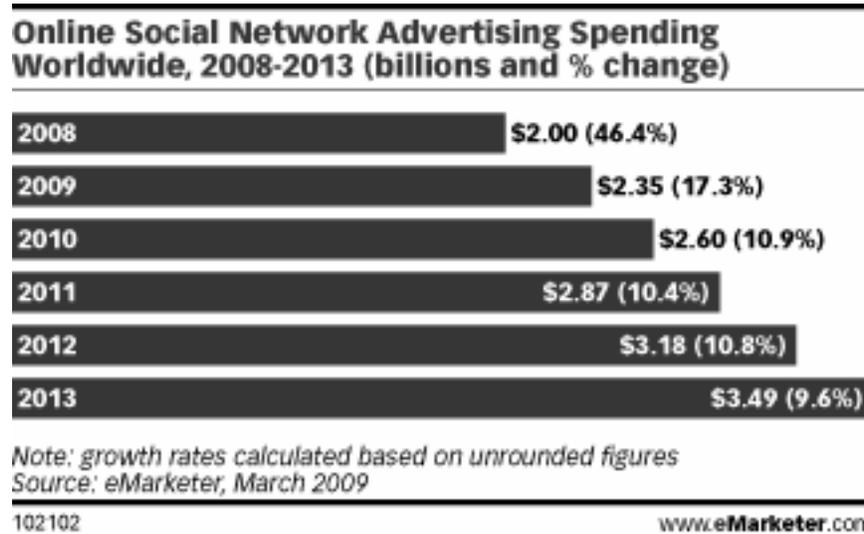


Figure 1: Online Social Network Advertising Spending Worldwide (2008-2013)

The slogan “Find your customers before they search” from Ad Tech on Facebook is sending out a message to brands that Facebook is the place for companies to advertise effectively on the Web. Facebook poses a direct challenge to Google with this new overtly commercial strategy. Facebook is clearly trying to sell the idea that on its site companies can reach out to customers before they even know what they are looking for, in opposition to using a search engine, such as Google (Barnett, 2010). Add this to the fact that people have started to shop on social network sites using shopping aggregators and it becomes clear that Facebook is certainly trying to build a web within the Web.

E-commerce, one of the biggest social networks on the planet, is going to become larger rapidly because major brands, such as Avon, have started to sell their products via the site. In its bid to attract major advertising money, Facebook is trying to pull all that’s great about the Web – messaging, shopping, photo-tagging, location sharing, question-answering – into one place.

If Facebook can get people to conduct most of their Web activities through its service, it can increase the time spent on the site by the increasing number of users – and then charge increasing amounts to brands for serving targeted adverts. Companies need to keep abreast of the huge changes and upcoming commercial opportunities on a site that is rapidly heading towards a billion users. Facebook’s best service to companies is to get people talking, which brands can do through dedicated pages and highly innovative advertising campaigns.

Social Media & Economics

Businesses are also sharpening their skills in marketing and advertising through social networking sites (Hunter, 2008). Through online social networking, companies are better able to advertise to specific markets or discover, monitor, and engage with loyal brand advocates. In addition to just advertising, they can research target markets and industry trends, notify the public about new products, release announcements, and, perhaps most important, discover disgruntled customers and address their concerns.

In every economy, there is a force that supersedes the economy, which often produces a better economic future than one might otherwise expect (Nathan, 2011). In the current economy, the social media are the driving force, not only because they have changed the whole concept of online marketing, but also because they have provided millions of job opportunities since 2009, online and offline (Socialf5 Blog, 2011). There was a time when people used social websites for chatting and personal interaction only. However, because these media are increasingly becoming a part of the corporate world, the social media have grown in status, and people have started looking at social media jobs more respectfully.

The number of jobs created by social media companies is very substantial: Facebook has 2000 employees, Twitter 300 employees, LinkedIn 900 employees, and Groupon 4500 employees. The economic impact of these thousands of newly employed workers in itself is a boost to an economy, since 2008. Social media has also tended toward a shift away from traditional employment to self-employment. People are creating businesses based on social media, than rather following instructions from their bosses. Moreover, business is now being generated through social media. This is the reason why Facebook ads contribute the bulk of Facebook's estimated \$4 billion in revenue.

The social media are considered to be the only technology that makes communication easier and creates jobs. The social media are associated with both economic output and income. In their spare time, people prefer to browse on or otherwise interact with the Web. Instead of watching soaps on TV, people have begun to blog and create other Web content, thus making them a part of labor force of the social media economy. Investors have begun to invest in such start-up and with this capital, development communities have been able to learn and create new technologies that are making it faster and easier for people to share content. Facebook alone has 5 billion posts per week. This situation creates another problem, though, because the social Web is focused on the production of content irrespective of its consumption (Vosters, 2011).

The social media are also having a destructive effect on major existing industries like traditional advertising media are becoming less and less effective as members of its audience become more networked and attentive to one another (Fischer, 2009). Manipulation is not a part of the social media landscape, but the fact that it is difficult for anyone to broadcast and be heard by large audience networks on the Web at one time means it is more difficult; and it will, in the end, be the exception rather than the norm.

In addition, it is good to note that all growth markets in the future will be niche markets. Thus, in the short term, social media's gains in economic investment may be offset by the disruptive role they have in traditional industries. In the past, technology changes led, through obvious and simple routes, to large-scale increases in productivity and demand. In the longer term, as the culture adapts to the full potential of the social media, there may be large-scale increases in productivity; but in the near term, the social media are not providing a clear path for investment. Gains in efficiency and productivity are not certain, and even the ROI for the social media as applied throughout the economy is still subjective rather than proven.

The tourist economy provides an important source of revenue to many local and state municipalities, but budget cuts and the changing use of media and technology require that many tourist bureaus strategically change the way they promote their areas (Presidio, 2011). The new media provide not only a less expensive approach to marketing for tourism bureaus during economic deficiencies but also a timely response to areas in crisis. Finally, they offer many opportunities for visitors and residents alike to engage with their hometown or the city they are visiting, instantly telling their personal stories to attract potential visitors or keeping them at bay, based on their own experiences.

Thus, with these mixed results, the social media are becoming a tough game for research companies to call (Gaffney, 2009). Several recent reports present divergent looks at ad spending projections and the potential size of key players, all pointing to the possibility that spending in this area is more spontaneous than search, display, or even traditional media. eMarketer, expects US advertisers to spend \$171.01 billion on paid media this year, up 3.6% over 2012 spending levels, according to our most recent forecast of US ad spending (eMarketers, 2013). The 3.6% growth rate will be down somewhat from last year's 4.3% increase, attributable largely to boosts from the Summer Olympics and a national election season. Spending growth for 2014 will be up, with help from the Winter Olympics, midterm elections and the FIFA World Cup, as growth rates hover between 3.1% and 4.1% for the rest of the forecast period.

Spending on social media by marketing companies is expected to increase, a sign that these efforts can be deployed quickly and inexpensively in a recession (Odell, 2009). These messages have the potential to move rapidly through word-of-mouth and can deliver measurable results. However, the data also suggest that marketing through social media remains in the experimental phase. The social media budgets to increase as a direct result of the weakened economy. These budgets, however, comprise a very small portion of overall marketing expenditures, so small in fact, that the social media have yet to gain enough footing to deserve a marketing line item.

In short, Facebook embodies a new generation of social media organizations that have significant global impact and that create economic value through enabling ecosystems of businesses to flourish (www.theecommercepro.com). Because the traditional narrow measures of economic impact are limited, it is critical to consider the broader impact of Facebook in allowing other parties to create value across the economy. Across the whole of the European Union and Switzerland, the report shows that Facebook has supported 232,000 jobs and enabled an estimated €15.3 billion of economic activity in 2011.

Social Media & Education

In the digital world, opportunities for education are available as never before. Ask anyone over the age of 50 with a PhD what it was like to get the information that they needed as graduate students, and they will generally begin to rant and discuss how young people these days have it so easy. It has been speculated that the ease in obtaining information will lead to a decline in respect for intellectuals, but that seems unlikely. Knowing how to search for something is merely the first step to real comprehension, which involves a deeper understanding and critical analysis. On the whole, intellectualism and its pursuits will always command respect. Technology is changing our world, and we have to understand the implications of its use for our children's education. The education may be affected by technology in a very real way, and the timeless goals of education should be respected.

The social media have their drawbacks, too, in terms of classroom education. Though teachers are using online tools to empower students to take part in their education, doing so may also expose students to inappropriate material, sexual predators, and bullying and harassment by their peers (www.huffingtonpost.com). Teachers who are not careful with their use of the sites can fall into inappropriate relationships with students or publicize photos and information they believed were kept private. For these reasons, critics are calling for regulation and for removing social networking from classrooms, despite the positive effects they have on students and the essential tools they provide for education in today's digital climate. Here, we look at some of the positives and negatives in the effects of the social media on education.

Positive Points

1. It's free. We still have to pay for Internet and technology in homes and school buildings, but software costs have gone down significantly (Couros, 2011). As educators continuously have to deal with budget cuts, it is important that we use tools that cost little. Safety is essential, but with a little hard work in teaching Internet safety and setting up certain sites, the software often costs nothing.
2. It cuts down on isolation. The opportunity to connect is there for those who are willing to take it.
3. It builds tolerance and understanding of cultural diversity. The social media provide a great opportunity not only to read content from different people and to hear their perspectives but also actually to talk with people. Having the opportunity to connect with people all over the world breaks down a lot of barriers and builds understanding.
4. It can amplify passion. Passion is a term that has been used a great deal in education. We now have the opportunity to not only connect with people of different cultures, but to people with similar interests and create innovation in new areas. The child who does not find anyone in the classroom with similar interests is no longer limited in searching for someone with shared interests.
5. It can open up the world of education, which is already (and needs to be yet more) open. The parents, who may not know the teacher in the next grade, can simply follow teachers' blogs to learn about some of their practices. This ability breaks down walls and helps to build relationships with families and in the community.
6. The education of a nation's youth to its full height of academic rigor and standing is a complex process that nearly always spans more than a decade, requires tens of thousands of dollars, dozens of teachers, and of course, technology (Wilhelm, 2011). Technology can be a powerful tool for learning, but it can be the same for cheating. It can be used to inform, and to distort. It can boldly open new doors, even as it flings open some that were perhaps best left closed; not every topic is appropriate for all age groups. While some involved in the world of education still want to stress cursive penmanship and hand-editing, it is hard not to admit that technology – specifically and mostly the Internet and personal computing – has transformed the

modern world. Modern students were raised with technology, for better or for worse, so we must be careful not to cheapen the impact of what might otherwise be a strong education.

Negative Points

1. Many students rely on the accessibility of information from the social media specifically and the Web in general to provide answers (Dunn, 2011). Such an approach means a reduced focus on learning and retaining information.
2. Students who attempt to multi-task in ways like checking social media sites while studying show reduced academic performance. Their ability to concentrate on the task at hand is significantly reduced by the distractions from YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter.
3. The more time students spend on social sites, the less time they spend socializing in person. Because of the lack of body signals and other nonverbal cues, social networking sites are not an adequate replacement for face-to-face communication.
4. The popularity of social media and the speed at which information is published have created a lax attitude towards proper spelling and grammar. Thus, students' ability to write effectively without relying on a computer's spell check feature has been reduced (www.guardian.com).
5. The degree to which private information is available online and the anonymity the Internet seems to provide has made students forget the need to filter the information they post. Many colleges and potential employers investigate an applicant's social networking profiles before granting an interview or offering a job. Most students don't constantly evaluate the content they're publishing online, which can bring about negative consequences months or years down the road.

What Next?

How can parents mitigate the negative aspects of social media while improving upon the positive results? Moderating their children's access to social media is one excellent method. Most of the negative aspects can be overcome by reducing the amount of time spent on social network sites. Provide ample time for face-to-face social interaction, like having some family leisure time in which you discuss their studies in a relaxed atmosphere or inviting friends and family. Paying attention to their academic progress and addressing any issues will go a long way towards keeping the negative aspects of social media from influencing their studies. So, too, will providing fun, face-to-face social interaction with loved ones.

One study, which analyzed how students performed when using Twitter, found that students who were asked to contribute to class discussions and to complete assignments using Twitter increased their engagement over a semester more than twice as much as a control group (www.huffingtonpost.com). Use of social networking not only benefits students, but also provides new opportunities for communication amongst teachers and administrators. According to a report featured in *The Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, tech savvy administrators are using blogs as a tool to keep parents, teachers, and students informed of events in their schools. Nobody would dispute that the risks of children's using social media are real and are not to be taken lightly. However, there are also dangers offline. The teachers and parents who embrace social media say the best way to keep kids safe, online or offline, is to teach them.

CONCLUSION

The social media are not just a toy; rather, they provide tools that can be used to build a business. This tool must be used with respect, as one false move and one's account could be closed down. The aspects discussed above may help us to understand the importance of social media. Personal branding is very important to Internet marketers, and social websites offer them an opportunity to do something right – or very wrong, which brings up a second point. Most people are pushing a product or business instead of offering value. However, if a business offers value, people will be interested. Adding valuable content using social media and helping people solve their problems is a great way to start building a relationship. Because of the global nature of the social media, one can establish contact with almost everyone, no matter where in the world they are. The social media content that one puts out determines one's success or failure in using social networking sites. Finally, a person or business can set up pages that people

can follow or can use to request information. This is also where people can learn about companies and products. The social media have really made the world a smaller place; they are here to stay, and people from all walks of life can profit from learning to use them to their full potential.

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