

## 33. Social Media

**Liza Potts**

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

**Michael Trice**

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

*Social media* describes a diverse, and not always cohesive, array of platforms where-in participants can interact with each other in digital spaces meant to communicate across space and time. Definitions of *social media* vary, but commonly categorize the *technology* based on technical features in combination with social purpose and multitextual possibilities (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Kimme Hea, 2014; Vie, 2008; Zittrain, 2008). One of the most often cited definitions arises from dannah boyd and Nicole B. Ellison (2007), who define social networking sites as spaces that

(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. (p. 211)

While this functional description captures apps like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram that focus on individual participant feeds, it perhaps is overly exclusionary in regards to topic-centered social sites, like Reddit, Wikipedia, and multitudes of fora across the internet. For this entry, we consider the *history* and present of both topic- and participant-centered social media. We also take cues from Amy C. Kimme Hea's focus on social media as cultural practices.

The 20th century predecessors of social media included systems used primarily by folks such as academics, technologists, the military, hobbyists, and media fans. While this group is significantly smaller than today's social media userbase, these early systems created space for the exchange of *information*, ideas, and materials that hint towards ways in which social media would eventually be deployed. Using technologies such as telenet, dial-up bulletin board systems, and USENET discussion groups, these users were able to communicate with others who shared their interests. Our field explored these earlier incarnations of social media through work on technology and writing (Bolter, 1991), technical communication (Gurak, 2001), and technology and society (Warnick, 2001). Many studies written during this era focused on the ways in which these technologies altered our writing processes. Opening up these discussions would later lead to *research* on other tools such as wikis, video, and social networks.

Before they were called social media, these technologies were referred to as social software in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This emphasis on the software

itself is illustrative of the digital skills needed to implement turn-of-the-century social tools such as blogs, wikis, and forums. Technical communicators took note, both in research (Gurak et al., 2004) and practice (Barton & Cummings, 2008; Jones, 2009; Mader, 2009). The connections between places, cultures, spaces, and peoples were illustrated through multiple histories of multimedia, hypertext, and the many digital antecedents of the social web (Ball, 2012; Haas, 2007; Manion & Self, 2012) that helped us to understand how hypertext holds meaning.

At that time, the term “platform” often referred to operating systems, such as Windows, MacOS, and Linux. Over the past several years, the term “platform” began to refer to social media spaces such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Twitch, Snapchat, and WhatsApp. In 2010, Tarleton Gillespie would challenge the *rhetorical* use of “platform,” pulling at its computational, figurative, political, and architectural meanings as a way to illustrate the tensions of corporate social media platforms striving to be also seen as civic and user-generated platforms. Gillespie highlighted the need to consider how the metaphor of “platform” served numerous rhetorical purposes in the way participants, companies, and even the government shifted meanings depending upon purpose and context. Over time, this would lead technical communication to consider the rhetoric of platforms (Edwards & Gelms, 2018; Jones, 2014) as well as the *ethics* of platforms (Cagle, 2019; Sano-Franchini, 2018).

Around the same time, the term “Web 2.0” delineated the change from static webpages to interactive websites, deploying techniques like AJAX that allowed for more advanced tool building and the beginnings of today’s social media platforms. This shift at the turn of the century opened the possibilities of participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2008), propelling us forward into online spaces where user-generated content became an area of study, application, and *pedagogy* (Balzhiser et al., 2011; Barton & Cumming, 2008), bringing about a shift in the distribution of agency, control, and content.

Early discussions around these concerns appeared in books (Spilka, 2009), articles, and blogs written by researchers and practitioners (Hart-Davidson et al., 2007; Sidler & Jones, 2008). This focus on agency and content could also be seen in concepts of delivery particularly suited to considering how messages adapt across social networks and platforms, such as Jim Ridolfo and Danielle Nicole DeVoss’ (2009) rhetorical velocity. Rhetorical velocity held that technical communicators and creatives were accountable for anticipating and theorizing the manner in which third parties might utilize content. In many ways, it applied the principle of single sourced adaptation within organization to a broader cultural and social landscape that would anticipate the rise of both memetic content and cross-platform branding and activism.

Notably, by the turn of the century, many technical communicators were already connecting the dots between technical writing and usability (Redish, 2010), encouraging us to use our skills to improve interfaces and policies beyond traditional outputs such as *documentation*. From there, works focused more on

technical communication and social media, pointing to its use in workplace settings (Katajisto, 2010), mixed spaces (Johnson-Eilola, 2004), and across cultures (Sun, 2012). Entire special issues were dedicated to understanding social media and technical communication (Dyrud, 2012; Geisler, 2011; Kimme Hea, 2014). These special issues would bring social media into long-standing discussion in technical communication about pedagogy, *knowledge* work, diversity, and rhetorical reach—while engaging with a wide variety of platforms, including Reddit, Facebook, Twitter, and Wikipedia. They might also highlight a deficit in how we were slower to sites like YouTube, image boards, and GitHub, though some progress would occur over time (Winter & Salter, 2020).

Synchronously, more scholarship addressing issues of accountability regarding racism and technology entered our conversations more visibly (Haas, 2012; Williams & Pimentel, 2014) and connected scholarship across fields (Nakamura, 2007). These trends would foreshadow the move into application accountability in technical communication that would arise in the most recent decade of work. Indeed, the ethics of social media has also become a central focus of technical communication. These examinations include how the *design* of social media platform interfaces generates political and individual discord (Muhlhauser & Schaffer, 2020; Sano-Franchini, 2018), the way surveillance is incorporated into social media (Cagle, 2019), and the impact of social media as activism and aggression (Chen & Wang, 2020; Potts et al., 2019; Reyman & Sparby, 2019). One of the central recent ethical movements has been technical communication's *social justice* turn, which has impacted social activism online via concepts of rhetorical agency (Jones & Walton, 2017) and ethics of care (Colton et al., 2017).

Increasingly, technical communication in social media has spanned across topics relating to knowledge work and content strategy, including *health communication*, disaster communication, environmental activism, and social justice. Within various strands of interests within technical communication today—*user experience*, medical, disaster, and environmental activism framed within the need for social justice and advocacy (Jones, 2016; Edenfield et al., 2019)—social media plays a role as both a conduit for communication among researchers and practitioners and a site of study for our field. It has also included an emphasis on *genre* use and context to help us better understand how digitals can empower activity (Ferro & Zachry, 2013; Trice, 2015), support emergency management (Angeli, 2018), and design for global use (Sun, 2020) and platform ideologies (Wang & Gu, 2016).

Technical communication scholars are currently exploring issues concerning the owners, moderators, designers, users, and policies that constitute social media platforms. These perspectives allow us to research the user experience architecture of these platform *structures*, the ways in which platform leaders position their organizations through their policies, and how participants on these systems are able to communicate across these networks. Our work seeks to understand how social media intersects and affects the outcomes of social movements, elections,

disasters, environmental policies, social justice, and the everyday lives of individuals across the globe.

Our classrooms demonstrate how technical communication puts these foci into praxis with emphases on using the tools available to both build community within our classrooms (Kaufer et al., 2011) and prepare students for their futures (Maggiani, 2011) as professionals and citizens. As pedagogy has long been essential in the field of technical communication, social media has smoothly entered that conversation as a means for students to demonstrate professionalism, rhetorical agency, activism, and civic leadership. When it comes to teaching, technical communication focuses upon social media as praxis and skill development (Daer & Potts, 2014) and “as cultural practices that shape and are shaped by political, social, and cultural conditions” (Kimme Hea, 2014, p. 2). Scholars like Melody Bowdon (2014) have focused on the importance of teaching ethos as a factor in online communication, while others have focused on practitioner praxis (Pigg, 2014) and service learning (Melton & Hicks, 2011).

Looking forward, perhaps one of the most important contributions technical communication researchers can make to social media is in terms of policy. Our rich backgrounds and understanding of rhetoric, design, activism, and social justice uniquely situate our work to make an impact on the ways in which platforms, governments, and organizations deploy these systems, employ design patterns, surveil users, collect personal and *public* data, and distribute or sell such data. These interfaces and the data these organizations collect are used to enforce social, political, and economic policies across the globe. The role of moderation, parameters of *accessibility*, and the rhetorical impact of knowledge-making systems upon society and specific communities are areas that technical communication has deep experience addressing. The future of social media will depend upon addressing these areas, and technical communicators must be present in those decisions.

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