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Editorial

Social media definition and the governance challenge: An introduction to the special issue

1. Introduction

Transformative communication technologies have always called for regulatory innovation. Theodor Vail's vision of "one policy, one system, universal service" preceded more than one-hundred years of innovative regulations aimed at connecting all Americans to a single telephone network. The sinking of the Titanic, caused in part by "chaos in the spectrum" led to the Radio Act of 1912 and the creation of a command and control model designed to regulate broadcast radio (Nuechterlein & Weiser, 2013, p. 89). Safe-harbor hours were put in place after a father and son heard George Carlin's "seven dirty words" routine over the radio in their car. The fairness doctrine and the minority tax certificate program were designed to address inequalities in the broadcast television industry. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act responded to intellectual property concerns raised by a global Internet and the FCC's 700 MHz auction was the result of demand for smarter mobile phones. Now we must consider the role of regulatory innovation in response to the emergence of social media.

This special issue of *Telecommunications Policy* entitled, "The Governance of Social Media" brings together contributions from leading communication policy scholars to address a variety of regulatory challenges raised by social media. These include: social media and the public interest (Philip Napoli), social media governance by platform design and policy (Laura DeNardis and Andrea Hackl), youth and social media surveillance (Kathryn C. Montgomery), policy and virtual economies (Edward Castronova, Isaac Knowles and Travis L. Ross), social media and social justice (Amit M. Schejter and Noam Tirosh) and social media as online intermediaries (Milton Mueller).

This introductory contribution begins with a definition of social media that informs all contributions in this special issue. A section describing the governance challenge is presented next, followed by an overview of the various articles included in this special issue.

2. Social media definition

While the Internet and the World Wide Web have always been used to facilitate social interaction, the emergence and rapid diffusion of Web 2.0 functionalities during the first decade of the new millennium enabled an evolutionary leap forward in the social component of web use. This and falling costs for online data storage made it feasible for the first time to offer masses of Internet users access to an array of user-centric spaces they could populate with user-generated content, along with a correspondingly diverse set of opportunities for linking these spaces together to form virtual social networks.

Tapping latent demands, social media services quickly emerged as both business and social phenomena. Facebook, launched in 2004, has now reached 1.4 billion active monthly users worldwide (see Table 1). Twitter, started in 2006, currently has 288 million monthly active users posting 500 million tweets daily (Twitter.com, 2015).¹ Facebook and Twitter are currently the most visible of an avalanche of initiatives aimed at building new services around social media functionalities, and embedding Web 2.0 features into other web-based services. Table 1 lists several of the more popular social media services; a small fraction of the growing number of online services that enable users to express themselves, build relationships, play and share in a networked environment. The following is Statista's global listing of what they identify as the social media sites with the most active users worldwide as of March 2015.

The multitude of stand-alone and built-in social media products and services makes defining the technology a challenge (Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012). What are social media? Even the terminology remains unclear with some in the literature using the

¹ Twitter claims that as of March 2015 they had 302 million active user accounts. The 288 million figure is noted by Statista.

Table 1

Leading social media services worldwide by active user accounts, millions.

Service	Accounts
Facebook	1415
QQ	829
WhatsApp	700
QZone	629
WeChat	468
Linkedin	347
Skype	300
Google+	300
Instagram	300
Baidu Tieba	300
Twitter	288
Viber	236
Tumblr	230
Snapchat	200
LINE	181
Sina Weibo	167

Source: Statista.com as of March 2015.

term “social network” (e.g. [boyd & Ellison, 2008](#)). The former will be the term referred to herein. Upon first encountering the question, “what are social media?” one might consider the answer to be straightforward. Facebook and Twitter are social media – we seem to encounter their icons everywhere we turn, beckoning us to join the supposed online revolution. While Facebook and Twitter are perhaps two of the primary social media platforms, does social media end with these two services? Certainly not. If social media begins with Facebook and Twitter, where does it end? Are there other primary social media services? Teens appear to increasingly prefer social media services like Instagram, Snapchat and Yik Yak where their parents are not as likely to be users ([Arce, 2015](#); [Moss, 2015](#)). Does this suggest that the primary networks are moving targets? What are the secondary networks? Is YouTube social media? Wikipedia? Amazon.com? NewYorkTimes.com?

There are two distinct challenges associated with the conceptualization of social media. First, the speed at which the technology is expanding and evolving, challenges our ability to define clear-cut boundaries around the concept. Social media technologies include a wide range of PC and mobile-based platforms that continue to be developed, launched, re-launched, abandoned and ignored every day in countries throughout the world and at varying levels of public awareness. Secondly, social media services facilitate various forms of communication that are similar to those enabled by other technologies. If social media bring people together, facilitate collaboration and communication, should the telephone be considered social media? The fax machine? E-mail?

To address these definitional challenges, we synthesize definitions presented in the literature and identify the following commonalities among current social media services:

2.1. Social media services are (currently) Web 2.0 Internet-based applications

Before Web 2.0 applications became popular, the World Wide Web was primarily a medium for consumption. If you used the Internet in the late 1990s, you likely spent the majority of your time on the web reading what other individuals had written and consuming audio and video clips that were often present in commercial media. Web 2.0 applications changed the way we interact with the online world and the other users we connect with through it because Web 2.0 applications have made the Internet more interactive. The shift to Web 2.0 however, was not necessarily the result of a substantive change in technology, but rather in ideology ([Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010](#)). The shift to Web 2.0 can be characterized as a shift from user as consumer to user as participant. Some have suggested that the new role of the user is actually “prosumer,” a combination of consumer and producer ([Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010](#)). Applications are designed to enable users to create, interact, collaborate and share in the process of creating as well as consuming content. For more than a decade now, Web 2.0 has served as a platform for creating and publishing content, and also a place where content can be “continuously modified by all users in a participatory and collaborative fashion.” ([Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010](#), p. 61)

2.2. User-generated content is the lifeblood of social media

Web 2.0 is the ideology and user-generated content is the fuel. The personal information you enter into your Facebook profile or any social media profile for that matter, the network connection you create by “friending,” the video you upload to YouTube, the tweet you post on Twitter, the blog entry you just read, the comment you leave on that blog entry, the photos you add to Instagram, your high score on Candy Crush, your “Like” of someone’s Pinterest image, your upvote on Yik Yak, and an endless number of other user-generated decisions that populate social media sites across the Internet, and increasingly link us together, are all examples of the user-generated content that fuel social media sites. Without this

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