Digital Platforms and the Transformations in New Media: Research, Industry Initiatives, and Challenges of Training

المنصات الرقمية والتحولات في الإعلام الجديد: البحوث، والمبادرات الصناعية، وتحديات التدريب

Hesham Mesbah *

hmesbah@rollins.edu

Abstract

From language, to writing, to the printing press, to electromagnetic waves, and to digitization, human communication changed, developed, diversified, transcended unimagined boundaries, and reshaped the limitations of time and space. However, the introduction of social networking services (SNS) was more than just another milestone in the path of human communication; it opened a new chapter in the history of human communication and shaped its future in an unprecedented way.

Thanks to SNS, humans are no longer consumers of media messages but are also producers of such messages. The term "prosumers" was coined to reflect this dual function of producing and consuming media messages that is being conducted in the era of SNS.

Keywords: Digitization, Social Media, Human Communication, Networking services.

* **Professor of Communication at Cairo University & Rollins College.**

ملخص:

من اللغة، إلى الكتابة، إلى الصحافة، إلى الموجات الكهرومغناطيسية، إلى الرقمنة، تغيرت الاتصالات البشرية وتطورت وتنوعت وتجاوزت الحدود التي لا يمكن تصورها، وأعادت تشكيل حدود الزمان والمكان. ومع ذلك، كان إدخال خدمات الشبكات الاجتماعية (SNS) أكثر من مجرد علامة فارقة أخرى في طريق التواصل البشري؛ لقد فتحت فصلاً جديداً في تاريخ التواصل البشري وشكلت مستقبله بطريقة غير مسبوقة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التواصل في وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي؛ الوسائل الرقمية؛ الجمهور كصانع للمحتوى.

From language, to writing, to the printing press, to electromagnetic waves, and to digitization, human communication changed, developed, diversified, transcended unimagined boundaries, and reshaped the limitations of time and space. However, the introduction of social networking services (SNS) was more than just another milestone in the path of human communication; it opened a new chapter in the history of human communication and shaped its future in an unprecedented way.

Thanks to SNS, humans are no longer consumers of media messages but are also producers of such messages. The term "prosumers" was coined to reflect this dual function of producing and consuming media messages that is being conducted in the era of SNS. The idea of user-generated content resonates with the Western ideal of getting consumers to practice self-service, which resonates with the concept of McDonaldization (nature of service in fast-food restaurants) proposed by sociologist George Ritzer in his seminal book *The McDonaldization of Society* (1996). Humans became empowered to communicate profusely and almost incessantly through different types of messages and digital platforms with acquaintances and strangers across the globe.

In this short paper, I seek to illustrate and reflect on the specific and significant implications of using SNS for communication. Researchers from several disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, political science, mass communication, and communication, produced thousands of peer-reviewed studies and book chapters to describe, analyze, and explain such implications and/or consequences. Such consequences could be spotted and analyzed either among users, institutions, corporations, or society at large.

Social media affordances:

The genius of human communication modified the original purposes and uses of each SNS. The richness of the tools and functions of SNS enabled them to "afford a wide and expanding range of uses" (Sandel & Ju, 2021) that were not intended by their founders. For instance, the creators of YouTube were PayPal employees. They originally designed the platform for users to upload videos and provide additional content for eBay (Jarret, 2008). YouTube users "hijacked"

the site by posting their content and linking their content to other social networking activities (Cloud, 2006).

Sixdegrees.com, the first SNS, was launched in 1997 as a text-based platform to enable users to share information and create profiles. After the closure of this service in 2000, three other networks were introduced to facilitate information sharing: Friendster in 2002, MySpace in 2003, and Facebook in 2005. However, users developed innovative ways to share emotions and introduce paralanguage by employing emoticons and ALL CAPS. According to Sandel and Ju (2021), "the affordances of social media are not limited, nor are they determined by technology, but they are open, ever-expanding, and unpredictable." For instance, users turned SNS into platforms for political activism, imagined communities, the preservation of national identity (especially in the diaspora), and even starting and running their own businesses. Negative affordances of SNS were also present, such as spreading fake news and the word of supremacists, hate groups, and extremist groups.

Echo chambers:

The high levels of selectivity and interactivity offered by SNS come with a price. Users are enabled to sort through the information and opinions shared on SNS and practice their own strategies of selective perception and selective exposure, leading users of the same social, cultural, or political tendencies to flock together digitally. The theory of group polarization posits that an echo chamber is one mechanism to reinforce an existing opinion, leading to more extreme positions (Sunstein, 2002).

The algorithms of SNS respond to users' preferences and patterns of online navigation by providing similar content, which reinforces the existence and sustenance of echo chambers. In their study about the effect of echo chambers on social media, Cinelli et al. (2021) reported that users of either Facebook or Twitter "are much more likely to be reached by information propagated by users with similar leanings." Grömping's analysis of Facebook pages during elections in Thailand supported the echo chamber effect. The study showed that mind-alike users share opinions and like content on one side, while their communication with users on the opposite political side was negligible (Grömping, 2014). Schmid, Treib, and Eckardt

(2022) visualized the implication of online echo chambers as the virus of opinion polarization in Germany during COVID-19.

User empowerment

Not only did SNS provide a voice for the voiceless, but they also empowered minorities and disconnected masses to mobilize and attract even global attention to their own communities and causes. Several political mobilizations and civil resistance movements were not possible without SNS, such as the Iranian green Movement (2009), the Arab spring (2010), and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (2014). Empirically, research shows a significant relationship between active use of SNS during civil mobilizations and the inclination to participate in civil protests and sit-ins (Khomko, 2015).

More contemporary social movements were even started on SNS. #BlackLivesMatter and #Me Too are two examples that stand out as two activist movements that were organized to advocate for the rights of oppressed women and African American communities in the U.S. Link, Holland, and Hendrickson (2023) found a significant effect of hard-right online activism on the increase in political unrest and mobilization offline. In China, a social movement online gained momentum to change the social status of newlywed young Chinese women. Many of these women started to share stories on Chinese SNS, such as WeChat and QQ, about being mistreated by their in-laws.

The empowering effect of SNS is also evidently detected during crises and natural disasters, where humans are sometimes isolated, anxious, and desperate for guidance and safety. Research shows that SNS users change their communication mode during disasters by sharing more factual content (Toriumi et al. 2013). In the aftermath of the Boston Marathon tragedy in 2013, Lee, Agrawal, and Rao (2015) found that the number of followers, reaction time, and hash tagging significantly changed, affecting the diffusion of information. Similarly, Ling et al. (2015) concluded that social media empowered residents psychologically during the 2011 Thailand flooding to collaborate and assist each other.

Migrants and overseas students also found a sanctuary in SNS to form their imagined communities and maintain connections with their culture and motherland. Kim (2016) found that Korean students in the U.S. use social media to create "transitional spaces" in the diaspora and

cope with psychological stress by receiving emotional support from their families and peers.

On the other side of this coin of empowerment, governments and corporations gained access to a wealth of information about users' preferences, attitudes, and even whereabouts. Corporations have the right to monitor employees' posts on social media and take any disciplinary action accordingly. Even in a democracy like the U.S., social media has become a significant source of information for U.S. law enforcement and intelligence agencies (Waldman et al., 2022).

Mate search:

SNS have also revolutionized matchmaking and the ways of starting and managing social relations. In 2017, around 39% of heterosexual couples in the U.S. reported that they met their partners online, which has replaced meeting the significant other through friends, family, work, and study places. Other research in the U.S. reported a link between the rise in the use of dating apps and the rise in divorce rates (Noor, Djaba, & Enomoto, 2016). In China, the popularity of specific online services, such as MoMo (Chinese for stranger) and TanTan (explorer) has skyrocketed recently.

Some users opted to maintain their relationships strictly online to avoid any potential offline frustrations. The website "Love Apartment" affords users to flirt online, have private chats, and develop "platonic relationships" that do not lead to any physical offline interaction. According to Chin (2011), many users refrain from turning their online relationships offline because "once they see each other in the real world, the love will die."

Self-awareness and relationships:

SNS have become embedded in all users' social relationships. Pictures of graduations, weddings, vacations, personal achievements, and loved ones are shared daily by millions. Some users make sure to announce their love and marital status, share words of love or appreciation with significant others, and sometimes raise indirect reproach towards them on social media. This daily SNS-based documentation of personal and social matters intuitively increases an individual's self-awareness of physical flaws and ups and downs in

social relations. It sounds like SNS have become an essential tool for humans to adjust their self-satisfaction and manage social relationships.

When users develop excessive self-awareness on social media, they tend to compare themselves to others, which gets into how they perceive their self-esteem. In Pakistan, Jan, Soomro, and Ahmad (2017) found that the more college students use social media, the lower they feel about their self-esteem. Kross et al. (2013) reported that Facebook users seek to overcome their loneliness but, in this process, turn out to be less satisfied with their lives. Such dissatisfaction might be attributed to this tendency to compare between self with others on social media. For instance, Chou and Edge (2012) suggested that frequent users of Facebook are more likely to get depressed because they tend to believe that other users lead healthier lives. Using an experimental design, Vogel et al. (2015) showed that college students with higher social comparison orientations on SNS had poorer self-perceptions and lower self-esteem.

Research showed a discrepant impact of SNS on social relations. These social networks enable respondents to have better communication with their families and peers Gurusamy, 2015; Manjunatha, 2013; Sumaiya & Mahmood, 2022), but lonely users or those with lower incomes are more likely to be dissatisfied with their social relationships (Denti et al., 2012; Whiteside et al., 2018). On the negative side, a body of research suggests that excessive use Facebook, predicts negative relationship outcomes, especially if such relationships are relatively new (Clayton, Nagurney, & Smith, 2013). Another study by Russell and Clayton (2014) suggested that active Twitter use is associated with failing relationship outcomes, such as infidelity and breakup.

Overview

Even though research on the consequences of using SNS on human communication has proliferated over the past two decades, this area of study is still in its infancy. What we know so far is that human communication has been enhanced, modified, amplified, reshaped, and redefined with the advent of SNS. More interestingly, the lines between interpersonal and mass communication became blurrier, and the borders are now more adjacent. A new genre, termed "mass-personal communication," has emerged where individuals can communicate with the masses directly and personally. It is not uncommon to maintain that the followers of celebrities or blogger influences might exceed the daily audience of the *Los Angeles Times* or *Fox* network. Traditional mass communication, where the sender is an organization and the receiver are discrete, unknown, and anonymous to each other, has been made obsolete and irrelevant on SNS. With mass-personal communication, the sender could be either an individual, organization, or even a robot, and the receivers, or rather "prosumers", can be identified, located, and introduced to each other directly and/or indirectly. The audience of mass communication consumes the content without being able to reap any financial gains, whereas those prosumers are enabled to monetize the content they produce. At an academic level, instead of studying "channels" of mass communication, researchers are now studying platforms, pages, and sites where the content is produced and consumed by the audience, while the founders of those platforms and sites are technologically facilitating and monitoring communication. Consequently, communication research took a technological turn to figure out more sophisticated tools to retrieve social media posts and analytics and analyze big data. To make a long reflection short, SNS made human communication more ambiguous and less predictable on the one hand and easier to access and examine on the other.

References

- Chin, Y.-L. (2011). "Platonic Relationships" in China's Online Social Milieu: A Lubricant for Banal Everyday Life. Chinese Journal of Communication, 4(4), 400–416.
- Chou, H.-T. G., & Edge, N. (2012). "They Are Happier and Having Better Lives Than I am:" The Impact of using Facebook on Perceptions of Others' Lives. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 15, 117–121.
- Cinelli, Matteo, Gianmarco De Francisci Morales, Alessandro Galeazzi, Walter Quattrociocchi, & Michele Starnini (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 118. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118

- Clayton, R. B., Nagurney, A., & Smith, J. R. (2013). Cheating, Breakup, and Divorce: Is Facebook Use to Blame? Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 16 (10), 717-720. DOI: 10.1089/cyber.2012.0424
- Cloud, J. (2006). The gurus of YouTube. Time International, 168, 34-40.
- Denti, E., Barbopoulos, I., Nilsson, I., Holmberg, L., Thulin, M., Wendeblad, M., & Davidsson, E. (2012). Sweden's largest Facebook Study. Retrieved on May 25, 2023, from http://hdl.handle.net/2077/28893
- Grömping, M. (2014). Echo Chambers' Partisan Facebook Groups During the 2014 Thai Election. Asia Pacific Media Educator, 24 (1), 39–59. doi:10.1177/1326365X14539185
- Jan, M., Soomro, A. S., & Ahmad, N. (2017). Impact of Social Media on Self-esteem. European Scientific Journal, 13(23), 329-341. doi: 10.19044/esj.2017.v13n23p329
- Jarrett, K. (2008). Beyond Broadcast Yourself™: The future of YouTube. Media International Australia, 126,132-144.
- Karell, D., Linke, A., Holland, E., & Hendrickson, E. (2023). "Born for a Storm": Hard-Right Social Media and Civil Unrest. American Sociological Review, 88(2), 322–349. https://doi.org/10.1177/00031224231156190

- Khomko, M. M. (2015). Fueling the Revolution: Social Media's Effect on Societal Revolutions. A Master thesis, Business School, Lisbon University. Retrieved on May 24, 2023, from https://repositorio.iscte-iul.pt/bitstream/10071/11198/1/Dissertation%20pdf.pdf

- Kim, T. S. (2016). Transnational Communication Practices of Unaccompanied Young Korean Students in the United States. Asian and Pacific Migration Journal, 25(2), 148–167.

- Kross, E., Verduyn, P., Demiralp, E., Park, J., Seungjae Lee, D., Lin, N, & Ybarra, O. (2013). Facebook Use Predicts Declines in Subjective Well-being in Young Adults. PLoS One, 8, e69841.

- Lee, J., Agrawal, M., & Rao, H. R. (2015). Message diffusion through social network service: The case of rumor and non-rumor related tweets during Boston bombing 2013. Information Systems Front, 17, 997–1005.

- Ling, C., Pan, S., Ractham, P., & Kaewkitipong, L. (2015). ICT-Enabled Community Empowerment in Crisis Response: Social Media in Thailand Flooding 2011. Journal of the Association of Information Systems, 16(13), 174-212.

- Manjunatha S. (2013). A Sociological Study on the Influence of Social Networking Sites on the Interpersonal Relationships of College Students in Bangalore and Mysore Cities of India. International Research Journal of Social Sciences, 2(6), 12-19 .

- Noor, S. A., Djaba, T. & Enomoto, C. E. (2016). The Role of Social Networking Websites: Do They Connect People Through Marriage or Are They Responsible for Divorce? Journal of International Social Issues, 4(1), 40-49.

- Ritzer, George. (1996). The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Pine Forge Press.

- Russell B. Clayton, M. A. (2014). The Third Wheel: The Impact of Twitter Use on Relationship Infidelity and Divorce. Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 17 (7), 425-430. DOI: 10.1089/cyber.2013.0570

- Sandel, T. L., & Ju, B. (2021). Social Media, Culture, and Communication. In Nussbaum, J. (Ed.), Oxford Research

Encyclopedia of Communication. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.758

- Schmid, f., Treib, O., and Eckardt, F. (2022). The Virus of Polarization: Online Debates about COVID-19 in Germany. Political Research Exchange, 5(1), 1-20. DOI: 10.1080/2474736X.2022.2150087

- Sumaiya, M. & Mahmood, S. (2022). Influence of Social Media on Social Relationships and Academic Achievement. The Online Journal of Distance Education and e-Learning, 10(3), 376-384 .

- Sunstein, C. R. (2002). The law of group polarization. Journal of Political Philosophy, 10, 175–195.

- Toriumi, F., T. Sakaki, K. Shinoda, K. Kazama, S. Kurihara, & I. Noda. (2013). Information Sharing on Twitter During the 2011 Catastrophic Earthquake, In: Proceedings of the 22nd international conference on World Wide Web companion, 1025-1028.

- Vogel, E. A., Rose, J. P., Okdie, B. M., Eckles, K., & Franz, B. (2015). Who compares and despairs? The efect of social comparison orientation on social media use and its outcomes. Personality and Individual Differences, 86, 249–256. doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2015.06.026

- Waldman, R., Panduranga, H., & Patel, F. (2022). Social Media Surveillance by the U.S. Government. Brennan Center for Justice. Retrieved on May 24, 2023, from https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/social-media-surveillance-us-government

- Whiteside, N., Aleti, T., Pallant, J., & Zeleznikow, J. (2018). Helpful or Harmful? Exploring the Impact of Social Media Usage on Intimate Relationships. Australasian Journal of Information Systems, 22, 1-23.