

Social Media and Its Changing Uses

Lunch and Learn Series - Words Work -
November 6, 2025



Social media was created to make personal connections, but its use has evolved. Now social media is used as a platform for marketing and brand discovery, a primary source for news and information, and a tool for social and political activism, which has transformed civic engagement.





With over 5.4 billion daily users (65% of the world's population), social media has become a driving force in human society. This interaction between humans and online spaces creates opportunities for social connection, but comes with some downsides, too.



What is Social Media?

“Social media are new media technologies that facilitate the creation, sharing and aggregation of content (such as ideas, interests, and other forms of expression) amongst virtual communities and networks. Common features include:

- Online platforms enable users to create and share content and participate in social networking.
- User-generated content—such as text posts or comments, digital photos or videos, and data generated through online interactions.
- Social media helps the development of online social networks by connecting a user's profile with those of other individuals or groups.



What is Social Media?

The term *social* in the context of social media suggests that platforms enable communal activity. Social media enhances and extends human networks. Users access social media through web-based apps or custom apps on mobile devices. These interactive platforms allow individuals, communities, businesses, and organizations to share, co-create, discuss, participate in, and modify user-generated or self-curated content.



What is Social Media?

Social media is used to document memories, learn from, and form friendships. They may be used to promote people, companies, products, and ideas. Social media can be used to consume, publish, or share news." - Wikipedia



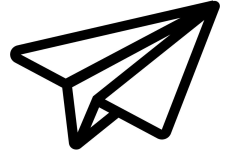
What is Social Media?

Some social media platforms encourage users to use their real name and photo, while others allow anonymous accounts. Anonymity may promote user behaviour that users wouldn't engage in in person. Some platforms have "verified user" services, so other users can know they are who they say they are.



What are the most used Social Media platforms?

- Facebook: ~3.1 billion users
- YouTube: ~2.5 billion users
- Instagram: ~2 billion users
- WhatsApp: ~2 billion users
- TikTok: ~1.6 billion users
- WeChat: ~1.3 billion users
- Telegram: ~900 million users
- Snapchat: ~800 million users (Google AI)

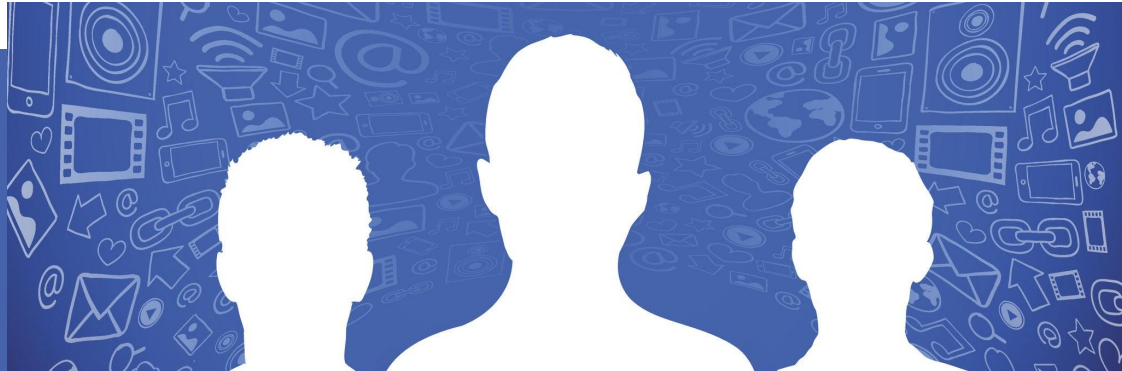


Some other commonly used apps: LinkedIn, Bluesky, Substack, Threads and Reddit.



Initial Uses

- **Early function:** Social media began as a space for friends and family to connect and share personal updates.
- **Professional use:** Platforms like LinkedIn have made professional networking, job hunting, and career development a core function.
- **Marketing and e-commerce:** Social media is now a major hub for businesses and brands to advertise, and many platforms allow direct shopping.
- **News and information:** A significant portion of people now get their news and information from social media, ranging from global news to local events. (Google AI)





Did you know that 25% of Canadians in a recent survey said that they regularly use Facebook for news?

In Canada, Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, does not allow posts from news sources. Canadian Bill C-18 required international companies to enter into agreements with Canadian news agencies to compensate them for news posted on the platform. Meta refused to bargain and instead removed the ability to post news articles.



Is it “News”?

If there is no “news” allowed, what are people considering news?

Screenshots of other platforms and “memes” are shared and used as “news” content. This user generated content is not held to the same standards of journalism as official news outlets.



New and Evolving Applications



- **Social activism:** Social media serves as a powerful tool for organizing protests, raising awareness about issues like climate change, and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities.
- **Civic engagement:** It has changed how citizens interact with government officials through online town halls and direct feedback on initiatives.
- **Community building:** Beyond personal friendships, people use social media to find and connect with affinity groups and support communities for hobbies, health, and other interests. (Google AI)





Concerns and Safety of Social Media



Data Privacy

Privacy concerns with social media include data mining, data breaches, and account hacking. These platforms collect vast amounts of personal data for targeted advertising, but also expose users to risks like identity theft, phishing scams, malware, and doxxing through both the platform's practices and user actions. Additionally, features like real-time location tracking, third-party app access, and vague privacy policies create significant privacy vulnerabilities. (Google AI)



AI Content

A lot of AI content is hard to distinguish from real content, especially for new or inexperienced users. Besides the ethical issues around using AI on social media platforms, there are safety issues when AI content is used to gather personal information or spread misinformation and disinformation.

Even trusted sources of information may use AI (I've used some in this document).



Spread of Misinformation & Disinformation



Misinformation and disinformation are often spread through social media sources. AI images and videos can be “deepfaked” with most users unable to tell that the content is not real.

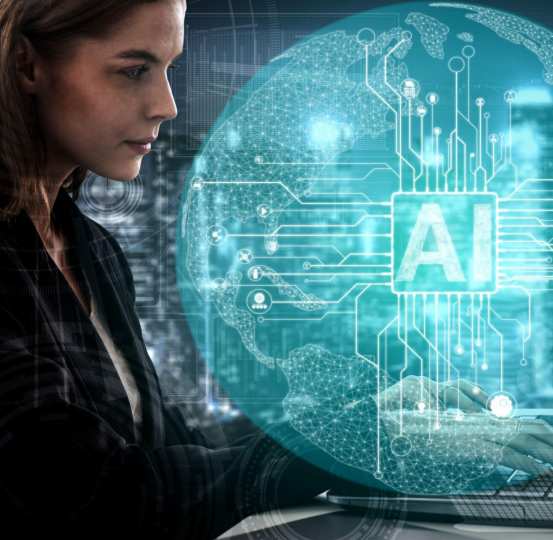
Most social media platforms do not provide fact checking, so it's up to users to learn if what they are seeing is true.



Addiction and Negative Social Outcomes

“Excessive use of social media has been linked to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, particularly among younger users. The constant exposure to curated and often unrealistic depictions of others' lives can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem.” - Forbes Online





The Future of Social Media



Less Social, More Sales



Social media will likely continue its trend of being less social. Advertising and influencers will continue to dominate your feeds. This over-commercialization is driving some users off the major platforms and onto smaller online communities.



Use Is Changing

Many people are also realizing the hazards of using social media too much and are leaving platforms to engage in real-life experiences. Social media use is dropping, especially amongst younger users. Some users don't quit their platforms entirely, but take breaks and limit their use.



Human - Digital Interface

Social media platforms will continue to evolve as humans continue to use them. Expect more AI, more commercialization and new platforms for specialized groups. Watch for the melding of humans and digital experiences through brain-computer interfaces and digital implants.





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