UNIT 1 ROLE & FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Structure

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

From a simple networking website, social media has transformed into a global communication ecosystem. People of all ages, from teenagers to senior citizens, are online. These platforms, which were initially begun as spaces for online connection, have now evolved into a vast digital ecosystem reshaping how people communicate, create and maintain relationships, access information, and participate in society. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, X (Twitter), and others serve as powerful tools in shaping public discourse. The key characteristics of these platforms are speed, interactivity, immediacy, and user-generated content. Users are prosumers - they not only consume content but also produce, share, and influence it in real time. By using algorithm-driven feeds, these platforms curate highly personalised feeds to enhance the engagement, making users addicted. This leads to concerns about digital addiction, fake news, misinformation, polarisation, data privacy, etc. Thus, in the contemporary media world, it is crucial to understand the functions, implications and responsibilities associated with social media.

This Unit will help you understand the role and functions of social media. You will learn about the historical dimensions, functionalities, and its influence and impacts across various platforms.

1.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- Learn the historical background of social media evolution;
- Know various types of social media;
- Understand the impact of social media on global connectivity; and
- Describe the way our daily lives have changed with social media.

1.2 HISTORICAL CONTEXT: EXAMINING THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

All of you must use Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, or another mobile app. Though they started as a source of entertainment for teenagers, they have now become an amalgamation of our work, social, and public lives. They have made their place in every walk of our lives. Social media is one of the platforms used to facilitate any kind of communication. Be it personal, professional or public communication, we use it to communicate with people around the world. The term social media has evolved from exchanging information electronically to virtual meeting places to marketing tools. The availability of cheap smartphones and low-cost internet data has made us hook up to these platforms to communicate and get our daily dose of entertainment. Social media has changed the entire information-creation, distribution, and consumption landscape. It helps individuals create their own content, use it as needed, and share it with others.

According to www.statista.com, over 5 billion people worldwide used social media in 2024, a number projected to increase to over 6 billion in 2028. More than 90 per cent of people using the Internet use social media in some way. It is a fact that social media nowadays is not restricted to only networking. However, its audience expanded to microblogs, podcasts, chat groups, internet forums, wikis, video and photo-sharing sites, and many others. The perception of the world towards information creation, consumption, and distribution has changed significantly. Social media users feel more comfortable nowadays expressing and sharing their thoughts and opinions with others. They are more expressive and have a platform to raise their voices, which shifts power to the masses.

Evolution of Social Media

The evolution of social media has undoubtedly changed the global communication scenario. The evolution of social media was fuelled mainly by the urge to connect personally at a mass scale and the development of digital technology. The invention of the Internet during the 1950s is a milestone in the evolution of social media.

Early Phase of Bulletin Boards to Online Commercial Services

The development of the electronic Bulletin Board System (BBS) in 1979 by Ward Christensen paved the way for the public message system. The bulletin boards were attached to a modem and powered by computers. In these bulletin boards, users can log in, read and post messages to one or more categories on the local servers. However, one person at a time could dial and get access. These BBS were considered as the precursor to the present form of internet forums. The BBS reached various audiences, but it had certain constraints. These boards were considered as a precursor to the World Wide Web.

EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Year	Event
1960s	Invention of the Internet, laying the foundation for digital communication.
1979	Development of the Electronic Bulletin Board System (BBS) by Ward Christensen.
1979	Introduction of Usenet by Jim Ellis and Tom Truscott, allowing distributed communication.
1979	Launch of Commercial Online Services like CompuServe, Prodigy, and The Source in the USA.
1983	America Online (AOL) launched, providing an online community experience.
1983	Jarkko Oikarinen develops Internet Relay Chat (IRC), enabling real-time messaging.
1990s	Growth of the Internet due to private ISPs, increasing accessibility for users.
1997	SixDegrees.com launched, allowing users to create profiles and connect with friends.
1999	Napster introduces Peer-to-Peer (P2P) file sharing, revolutionizing digital content distribution.
2002	Friendster launched, providing a rich online community experience.
2003	Launch of LinkedIn, MySpace, and Facebook, marking the rise of modern social networking.
2004	Web 2.0 concept gains traction, emphasizing user-generated content and interactivity.
2005	YouTube launched, revolutionizing video sharing and consumption.
2006	Twitter introduced, popularizing microblogging and real-time updates.
2010	Instagram launched, focusing on photo sharing and visual storytelling.
2011	Snapchat introduced, offering ephemeral messaging and multimedia sharing.
2012	Facebook acquires Instagram, expanding its dominance in social media.
2016	Rise of TikTok, redefining short-form video content.
2024	Over five billion people using social media worldwide, expected to reach six billion by 2028.
Future	Continued integration of immersive and AI-driven social media experiences.

Commercial Online Services were started by technology giants in the USA to provide hassle-free services. Commercial Online Services is an online service where members pay a fee to access various services, such as news articles, chat rooms, and email. CompuServe, Prodigy, and The Source offered commercial online services in the USA in 1979. Later, other companies came forward to provide online chat system services to the masses. America Online (AOL) in 1983 allowed its customers to build an online community. However, bulletin boards lost popularity as the internet became widespread during the late 1990s.

Phase of Instant Messaging System

The invention of the World Wide Web (WWW) has changed the global landscape of communication. Tim Berner Lee's WWW opened the path for multiple developments in the electronic communication system. The growth of the Internet has enabled people to engage in digital communication. Content innovations helped the Internet grow and reach the general public, making it a platform for public communication. With the emergence of private Internet Service Providers (ISPs), computer users have enjoyed unlimited online services. The most important development in the online community segment is the 'Usenet'. Jim Ellis and Tom Truscott developed Usenet in 1979 and established it in 1980. On Usenet, users communicate via a distributed network of local servers. Social media technology saw Serious transformations during the 1980s and 1990s.

The Instant Messaging system was the next development in the evolution of social media. Jarkko Oikarinen developed the Internet Relay Chat in 1983. This chat system was instantly popular among the masses. Online users use

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) to share files and photos and start networking with people worldwide. People have also begun sharing real-time updates. The use of hashtags (#), @, and others began at this point. At the same time, AOL bought instant messaging (IM) technology from four Israeli technologists. The IM technology has helped to develop emotional icons (Emoticons), which are now a rage among social media users. Later, other technology giants such as Yahoo, MSN and Google incorporated this IM technology to extend real-time chat features to their clients.

In 1999, Napster developed a peer-to-peer (P2P) file-sharing application for the first time, allowing users to download music files. This application has gained popularity, with around 25 million users during peak times. This has been considered another milestone in the media-sharing segment. It was a step closer to making social media social for users.

Phase of Social Networking Sites

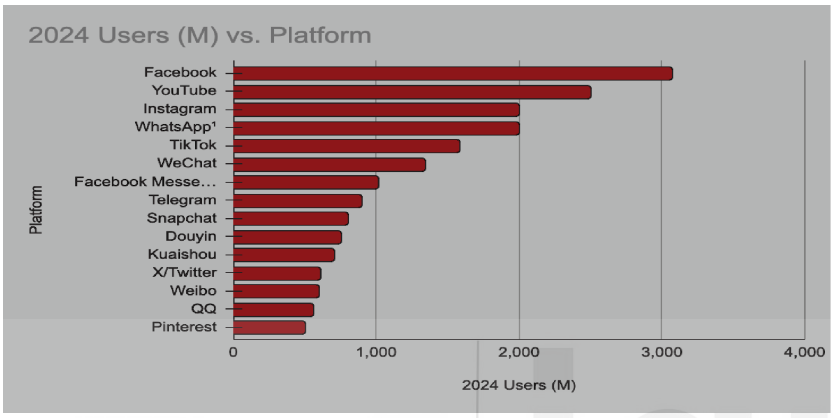
Though content-sharing applications are used to share files, they are not used for virtual communication. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) was expanding during the late 90s. The Internet enabled websites for social interaction, which were developed in the early 21st century. Developers started developing internet-based content, user-friendly interfaces and tools during the late 1990s. However, the demographic profile of internet users has changed as more people go online. Though the dotcom crash was a setback in the history of social media, we have emerged from the losses with technological advancements. Major developments that happened in the social media segment can be traced back to Web 2.0. The fundamental concept of personalised content is closely associated with Web 2.0. The emergence of user-generated content in those days has added value to the businesses. The direct exchange of information via electronic devices and virtual discussion forums has fuelled the need for the development of various social media platforms.

Online users have already started using various platforms to network, share content with other online friends, and upload or download any kind of file. News websites have started publishing real-time news stories throughout the globe. Using Web 2.0 technologies, social networking sites have enabled users to stand virtually at the centre of their networks and control their online space. During the early 21st century, some social networking sites tried to connect people who were known to each other. Later, other players on social network sites followed the trend. The first website that helped users create their own profiles, make friends, and form groups was SixDegrees.com in 1997. Classmate.com is another social networking site launched in the US to connect with school friends virtually and organise reunions. Though Six Degrees did not last long, it paved the way for other players to enter the networking segment. Friendster, another social networking website, launched in 2002 and became very popular. This website has also provided users with a vibrant online community experience. Other social networking sites, such as LinkedIn, MySpace, and Facebook, were launched in 2003.

Blogging (Web Log) is another major development that needs to be considered in terms of social media history. Though blogs started as static websites, later, with technological advancements, blog writers have incorporated dynamic features to attract more readers. It is considered a powerful medium to spread your voice among the masses. Social bookmarking is another method for

searching, organising, storing, and managing online resources. Many social bookmarking sites are helping online users stay aware of new bookmarks.

With changing times and technological advancements, social media platforms have integrated visual and location-based services. Platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat have redefined how users interact with and consume content. The smartphone revolution has altered the boundaries of online interaction, too. Smartphones have freed social media users from desktops.



(Biggest Social Media Platforms by User Base, 2024 - Source: www.statista.com)

1.3 FORMS AND TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media came into existence only to help online users connect virtually. But now, the social media landscape is changing so fast. It has come a long way from sending and receiving messages to the large digital, virtual networked world. It has revolutionised the entire communication scenario. As far as the forms of social media are concerned, various types connect individuals of varying interests. Different types of social media platforms cater to different needs. Some platforms have more active users, while others have fewer, and the publish content based on their users' requirements.

Social Networking Platforms

Social networking sites are the platforms that allow users to create content, connect, share, like, and comment in the online space. Users must create their own profiles; in return, these platforms provide rich content to engage the users. These sites provide more personalised content through text, photos, video, and audio formats. Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn and several other platforms function in this segment. All the social networking websites are free to use, which extends a push to the user base. The following paragraphs discuss a few popular social media networking sites.

Facebook was founded in 2004 as a social networking site to connect college students in the USA. Later, it was opened to the general public in 2006. It allowed individuals to create their own profiles, add friends, and join communities of different interests. It also asks users to upload their own content on various topics of interest. It is free for all social media users. You can upload, share and edit your photos, videos, music, opinions and thoughts. It has allowed the common person to raise, publish, and share his/her feelings, emotions, and voice. Now, people are starting to do business on Facebook. As per reports, India leads with 314.6 million Facebook users, followed by the US, Indonesia, Brazil, and

Mexico in 2024. It has integrated Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology at the backend to provide new features to social media users.

LinkedIn was designed and developed to connect professionals working in various service fields. It was started in 2003 in the USA. LinkedIn connects professionals, job seekers, employers, and companies worldwide by providing opportunities to network within and outside the industry and create business opportunities. More than 1 billion users worldwide use LinkedIn. LinkedIn claims on its website that it has more than 1 billion registered users from 200 countries and regions worldwide.

Social Messaging Platforms

You must use WhatsApp on your phone to chat with friends and family. The social media messaging applications have revolutionised how we communicate with our near and dear ones. Social messaging platforms provide users with a real-time messaging experience through application-based services. They allow users to send and receive messages containing text, video, audio, and multimedia files using their smartphones and mobile data. These platforms offer options for creating private and public groups for real-time discussions. The messaging app contains social media features and components to make it popular among the masses. These are considered powerful ways by online marketers to engage users and reach a mass target audience in the present day. Let us discuss a few popular online messaging applications that we use.

WhatsApp is considered the most popular messaging application used around the globe. According to statista.com, in 2021, WhatsApp's user base in India totalled approximately 493.31 million users. The number of WhatsApp users in India is projected to reach 795.67 million by 2025. Around 3 billion users worldwide the this application on their mobile devices. This is the cheapest option for us to connect with anyone anywhere in the world. The popularity of WhatsApp grew multi-fold after the introduction of voice and video calling services through the Internet. It began operations in 2009, but was acquired by Facebook in 2014. It has also integrated artificial intelligence into its applications, providing users with enhanced features and new experiences.

Messenger is a free messaging service from Facebook that provides voice and video calls. Though Facebook Chat was launched in 2008, it was revamped in 2010 and relaunched as a messaging platform in 2011. You can share text, photos, and videos on Messenger and facilitate group chats. Like WhatsApp, Messenger can also send the user's location to other users.

Snapchat is another popular American messaging application. It is also free and allows users to send text, photos, and video messages. Users can create multimedia messages using short videos or pictures, known as snaps, and send them to their friends and family. Younger smartphone users mainly use this application. It has also integrated security features to protect the privacy of the users and their data.

Image-Sharing Platforms

In the age of the selfie craze, we are all interested in publishing our photos online. After taking photos with your smartphone, you post them online within a few minutes on various photo-sharing sites. Multiple photo-sharing platforms are available to help us edit, upload, and manage our images. We narrate our stories, connect with our friends and share our emotions with the help of photos.

Instagram is a popular photo-sharing platform that started in 2010 in the USA. It allows users to upload their photos and videos to share with their connections. Users can edit their pictures and use hashtags to organise their visual content. It has also integrated a messaging system, providing a chat feature for its users. Instagram is now also used by small and big businesses to expand their business. Marketing professionals and influencers use Instagram to capture users' attention through high-quality visuals. More than 230 million Indians use Instagram, making it the No. 1 user country in the world. Instagram launched Reels in 2022, allowing users to create and post short-form videos. As of April 2024, almost 32 per cent of global Instagram users were aged 18-24, and 30.6 per cent were aged 25-34. Overall, 16% of users were in the 35- to 44-year age group (www.statista.com).

Google Photos was started in 2015 as a photo-sharing platform service by Google. It allows users to store, share, organise and edit photos and videos online. After integrating AI (Artificial Intelligence) tools into Google Photos, the Magic Editor and Magic Eraser features enhance the visual appeal of photos and videos. It also offers privacy features for your photos and automatic backup options. Google gives users 15 GB of storage space for storing photos and videos. Users can access their visuals from any device at any time.

Flickr was started in 2004 during the much-hyped Web 2.0 developments. It is an image-sharing website that offers free registration. Users need to register to open a Flickr account. During its launch, it had a chat room option called FlickrLive, where users could exchange real-time photos.

Apart from these popular photo-sharing platforms, social media users also highly demand Facebook and Pinterest to share their photographs, infographics, memes, and other visual content.

Video (Long & Short) Sharing Platforms

Nowadays, YouTube is considered synonymous with videos. You all must have a YouTube account to watch films, songs, podcasts, etc. YouTube is nothing but a video-sharing platform. Other video-sharing platforms provide visually rich content to entertain us. Through their appealing video content, they are attracting millions of users to their sites. These platforms allow independent filmmakers, content creators, and audiences to upload video content. Some video content is streaming live for the users on these platforms. Videos are the most popular form of social media content because there is no need to scroll or read; users only need to watch. With changing audience viewing habits, these platforms are integrating new features such as an easy-to-use user interface, secure hosting, social media sharing, and the ability to leave comments while viewing. Short-form videos get the attention of users. Audiences are hooked on short-form videos for their brevity and powerful content.

YouTube, the most popular video-sharing platform across the globe, is owned by Google. The First YouTube video was uploaded in 2005, and it was an 18-second film about a zoo in the USA. The video got over 200 million views, and YouTube was a hit then. It is the daily source of entertainment for all of you. People are now using YouTube to earn income by uploading interesting video content. YouTube Live was launched in 2011 to broadcast football matches, concerts, royal weddings and other sports events. India is the largest market for YouTube across the globe. Around 476 million Indian users are getting their

daily dose of entertainment from YouTube. To tap the short-form video market, Google launched YouTube Shorts. The Shorts comprise 60-second visuals on product demos, reviews, music, dance, travel videos, etc.

The reel was started in 2020 by Instagram, though it was launched as a photo-sharing platform. It is a short-format video that users can create, edit and share on Instagram. The duration of the video is between 15 and 90 seconds. Companies, users, and influencers use reels to reach their target audiences, friends, and clients and to provide engaging, entertaining content. After the ban of TikTok in June 2020, most social media users are consuming Instagram Reels. With a smartphone, you can make reels and edit them with the Speed function. As Instagram has a library of licensed music, it is easier for the reel makers to integrate music with the video. As per reports, Instagram Reels will have around 2 billion monthly active users in 2024 (www.deamndsage.com).

Blogging/Micro-blogging Platforms

This type of social media allows users to publish their ideas and thoughts on specific topics, write articles, etc. Blogging is a way for the user to publish their personal account to a wider audience on any topic of interest. Blog writers can post text, photos, videos, multimedia files, infographics, and more on their personal pages. It can be used for personal or professional purposes. It allows users to engage readers with interesting content. Websites like WordPress make it easy to create webpages where you can publish any type of content. To earn money from blogging, bloggers now use interlinking features to connect with other bloggers. Businesses are now using blogging to reach their target audiences.

X (formerly Twitter) is a microblogging website that allows users to post short updates on the personal pages they create. X enables users to read and post 140-character-long messages. These short messages were known as tweets. As digital technology evolves alongside the Internet, blogs are also evolving from static web pages to dynamic ones.

Check Your Progress: 1

Note: 1) Use the space provided below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. What are the different types of social media platforms? Explain with examples.

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2. How do you define social media? Briefly describe its evolution.

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1.4 COMMUNICATION SHIFTS

Since the invention of social media, everyone has witnessed a shift in the sphere of communication. Social media is now considered an indispensable part of the entire communication process. Everyone has a chance to raise their voice and be heard. The way humans communicate and interact has changed.

Traditional Communication Scenario

Traditional communication models are based on the principles of sending messages from the sender to the receiver. It believes in sending a message from one medium to many readers/ listeners/audiences. Newspapers and magazines provide a one-way form of communication, though readers can send feedback through letters to the editor in rare cases. In the case of radio and television broadcasting, the same thing happens. Listeners of radio programmes had no scope to send their feedback to the radio stations. Unless the radio station, in special cases, collects listeners' feedback. Television viewers have no or little scope to send feedback to the channels broadcasting various programmes. The feedback system was delayed or sometimes limited. After integrating digital technologies, these traditional media houses went online and, in a few cases, began collecting instant feedback. The media houses controlled earlier messages, and there was no scope for individual voices to be published or heard. Only professional journalists have the scope to write for various news media outlets. Media houses had limited coverage areas. They were restricted to operating within a limited geographical area. Real-time communication was not possible with traditional media.

Transformative Role of Social Media

Social media has transformed the communication scenario throughout the world. The most important role of social media in altering the traditional communication model is the power of user-generated content. In the present scenario, a person simultaneously plays the role of message sender and receiver. Content creators create and use content that is impossible in traditional communication models. Social media allows consumers to raise their voices and be heard publicly. Here, the feedback system is instant. Two-way communication is found in the social media domain. Users can participate in various discussion forums provided by social media networks. With Internet-enabled technology, messages are reaching global audiences within a fraction of a second. Even traditional media houses use various emerging technologies to reach the global masses. Communication is happening in a more democratic way than traditional media. Different features of social media, such as speed, real-time accessibility, instant feedback, cheaper mobile data, etc., are impacting the way traditional media were used to work.

From citizen journalists to the common person, they can share news and information with acquaintances and non-acquaintances. The entire communication process has seen a transformation with hyper-local content and interactive experiences. Consumers of information now decide what, how, when and where to get and share. Even journalists now depend on social media to get daily news. Social media has transformed traditional communication models into more energetic, decentralised, collaborative systems.

1.5 IMPACT ON TRADITIONAL MEDIA

Disruptive technology is one type of technology that disrupts existing and established businesses or industries through a new process or system. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, disruptive technology is a new technology that completely changes how things are done. A disruptive technology overturns a traditional business model, which makes it much harder for an established firm to embrace it. It was in the early 90s that Clayton Christensen, a Harvard

Professor, coined the term 'disruptive innovation' and developed the Disruptive Innovation Theory. By disruptive innovation, he meant the new entrant that disrupts the already established businesses. Social media is a disruptive technology that has altered every business in this era. Social media has created new business and revenue models that are impactful and tap into areas that others have not reached. Social media has restructured the way traditional industries do their business. Starting from interacting with customers, the product and service delivery system has been entirely changed. Let us discuss how social media has disrupted various traditional industries in our time.

Traditional media houses, both print and electronic, have entirely revamped their operations since the advent of social media. Social media has changed how news is written and distributed to readers, listeners, and audiences. Users get real-time updates through social media platforms like X, LinkedIn and Facebook. The concept of citizen journalism has brought a voice to the voiceless. Now, any news consumer can be a producer and distributor of news through social media. It has given space to broadcast and publish those voices that were not heard. Unlike traditional media houses, it has given the common masses the power to influence the media on how they want it to react and cover news stories. In this digital era, almost all media outlets are on the most popular social media platforms. Film lovers prefer to watch movies on OTT platforms rather than in movie halls. The entertainment industry, too, has been impacted by social media innovation. Social media empowers users to produce and consume various forms of entertainment content. YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat are our daily sources of entertainment.

Check Your Progress: 2

Note: 1) Use the space provided below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. Briefly explain how social media contributes to global connectivity.

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2. With suitable examples, describe ways in which social media has impacted traditional media industries.

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1.6 LET US SUM UP

This unit has discussed the evolution of social media and its various types and forms. Initially, we understand the historical evolution of social media platforms, the transformation from simple online spaces to complex digital ecosystems. We also learnt about how social media has changed the traditional communication model. The shift in communication enabled by social media enables two-way communication and empowers users/consumers to create, share, and publish content online, enhancing civic participation. We further explored the role of social media in global connectivity, its advantages and associated risks and challenges.

1.7 FURTHER READINGS

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1.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress: 1

1. See 1.3
2. See 1.2 and 1.2.1

Check Your Progress: 2

1. See 1.5
2. See 1.4

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