

USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Social media is gaining attraction day by day across all the age groups of users for variety of purposes. Even though at the onset, it seems to be the largest mode of quickly communicating with people and/or for entertainment but it has another perspective of being more meaningfully used. The present article attempts to overview the use of Social Media as one of the nascent research tool; points to be considered while doing social media research, benefits of types of social media and introducing the Social Media Research Team (SmeRT).

Keywords: Social Media, Social Networking Sites, SmeRT, Social Media Research, Social Research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social Media / Social Networks achieved a stupendous increase in their usage in the 21st Century but the world's first social network can probably be traced back to the late 1990s, to a site called 'Open Diary' (often abbreviated as "OD"), an [online diary](#) community founded on October 22, 1997. Open Diary was shut down on February 7, 2014. It allowed users to post and share diary entries with the rest of the online community. From this group came the term 'weblog' which became 'blog'. Prior to the development of Open Diary, early variants of internet services, such as usenet, allowed users to post and share public messages.

2. DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media are computer-mediated technologies that allow the creating and sharing of [information](#), ideas, career interests and other forms of expression via [virtual communities](#) and [networks](#).

Boyd & Ellison (2008) defined Social Network Sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (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. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

The Social Media Research Group quoted Kaplan and Haenlein's (2010) definition where they identified six classifications for social media platforms based on their functionality:

- Blogs and microblog sites (e.g. Twitter, Tumblr)
- Social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, MySpace)
- Content communities (e.g. YouTube, Daily Motion, Pinterest, Instagram, Flickr, Vine)
- Collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia)
- Virtual game-worlds (e.g. World of Warcraft)

- Virtual social worlds (e.g. Second Life, Farmville)

The Kaplan and Haenlein framework importantly shows that although the two phrases are often used interchangeably social media is not restricted to social networks. Wikipedia, for example, is not a social network but is a community-created resource designed to facilitate the sharing of content and information. The media (text, images, music and speech) are created, updated and maintained by its users and anyone with access to the web can become a user and make edits to the resource. As such, despite not being a social network, it can be considered a form of social media.

2.1 Most popular Social Media Services

This is a list of the leading social networks based on number of active user accounts as of September 2016.

1. [Facebook](#): 1,712,000,000 users.
2. [WhatsApp](#) 1,000,000,000 users.
3. [Facebook Messenger](#): 1,000,000,000 users.
4. [QQ](#): 899,000,000 users.
5. [WeChat](#): 806,000,000 users.
6. [QZone](#): 652,000,000 users.
7. [Tumblr](#): 555,000,000 users.
8. [Instagram](#): 500,000,000 users.
9. [Twitter](#): 313,000,000 users.
10. [Baidu Tieba](#): 300,000,000 users.
11. [Skype](#): 300,000,000 users.
12. [Sina Weibo](#): 282,000,000 users.
13. [Viber](#): 249,000,000 users.
14. [Line](#): 218,000,000 users.
15. [Snapchat](#): 200,000,000 users.

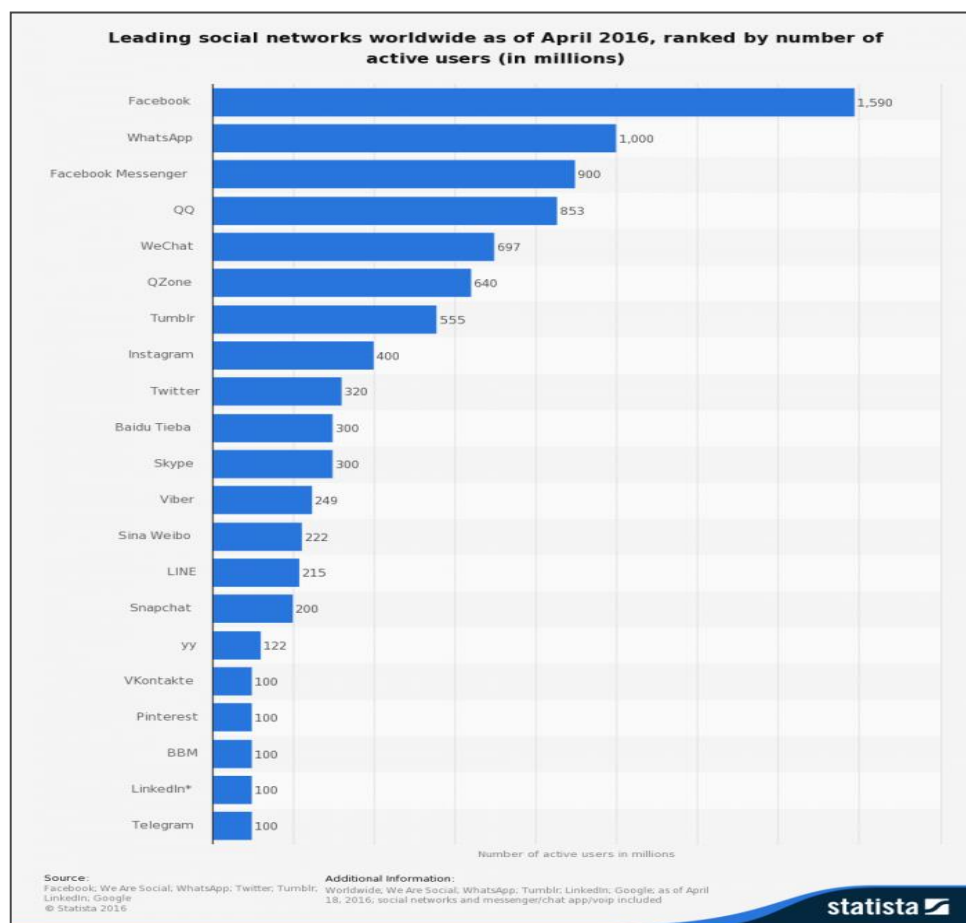


Fig.1: Leading Social Networks Usage Statistics (April 2016)

3. COMMON USES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- Make friends
- Create, Publish or distribute information in the form of texts, photos, videos, audio, texts etc.
- Ask and answer questions
- Expressing views viz. 'Like' or 'Unlike' some post.
- Creating Social Tags
- Providing Feedback

4. BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Following are the some of the ways in which Social Media can be used for research:

4.1 Facebook

There are various subject groups available in Facebook. Researchers can join an existing group of his subject and/or may create a new group wherein people of similar interests will come together for discussions, posting and sharing new information. It can prove to be an effective medium of putting your research ideas or outputs in front of the world.

4.2 Twitter

Twitter can be used to enhance communication building and critical thinking. Researchers can use

Twitter to connect with one other. A popular component and feature of Twitter is retweeting. Twitter allows other people to keep up with important events, stay connected with their peers, and can contribute in various ways throughout social media. When certain posts become popular, they start to get tweeted over and over again.

4.3 You Tube

YouTube is a frequently used social media tool. People can watch videos, answer questions, discuss content, can create videos to share with others. YouTube also helps in improving digital skills and provided opportunity for peer learning and problem solving.

5. SOCIAL MEDIA AS A RESEARCH TOOL

5.1 What is social media research?

The term social media research covers any form of research that uses data derived from social media sources. Research in this environment can be classified into two types: using social media as a research tool and research on the activity and content of social media itself.

5.2 Social media data collection

Social media data can be collected through variety of ways like Interview, Surveys, Content Analysis, Data Mining depending on the types of behavior being researched and the platforms which are used as source material. One significant difference in the collection of social media data is the development of automated technological tools that can collect, clean, store and analyze large volumes of data at high velocity. Indeed, in some instances, social media has the potential to generate population level data in near real-time.

5.3 Social media data analysis

Given the variety and potential size of social media data, the social media data can be analyzed in quantitative or qualitative manner.

5.3.1 Quantitative approaches

A wide range of insights can be gained from interrogating the frequency of discrete or categorical variables in datasets:

- a) Volume Analysis: This is the simplest way of looking at volumes of data, either associated with certain groups or with volumes of mentions of a particular keyword within a fixed timeframe.
- b) Relationship Analysis: It emphasizes on interactions between users or the number of responses to a post.
- c) Correlations: By comparing a social media dataset with another dataset across time or some other independent variable (e.g. location, age), correlations can be obtained. This forms the basis of using social media data as an indicative or predictive tool.
- d) Regression/Classification: By using correlated data, models can be constructed in order to predict categories or values which dependent

variables will have. This is particularly useful as a tool to inform interventions.

- e) Clustering: This approach is essentially a quantitative version of segmentation; it uses an algorithm to assign data to a cluster where all items in that cluster have similar characteristics. This is useful when looking at demographic characteristics of users talking about topics.
- f) Geographical Information Systems (GIS): The spatial element often provided with social media data (IP addresses from computers/GPS locations when posting from mobile devices) means that datasets can be mapped to provide a real time or historical representation of the spread of an event (e.g. a protest, illness outbreak, etc).

5.3.2 Qualitative approaches

- a) Active/Passive Ethnographic Approaches: Active or passive ethnographic approaches have historically been used, where the researcher collects data from a social media platform.
- b) Segmentation/Group Identification: Researchers can also actively engage with social media data as an additional source that complements and augments existing qualitative research.
- c) Thematic Analysis: Social media data can be coded and thematically analyzed to identify the emotive character of content or classify - hierarchical data to identify areas of significance within them.
- d) Sentiment Analysis: Pre-existing algorithms can be tailored to conduct automated sentiment analysis and identify if text constitutes a positive or negative view. This approach is still limited in its ability to gauge sentiment when processing complex subjects or ambiguous, inconsistent or culture specific material such as colloquialisms or sarcasm.
- e) Graphical Media Analysis: Image and video content is an increasingly important form of online interaction and can provide important data on areas of interest such as recreational drug use or food safety practices.

5.4 Challenges and opportunities

Data Collected from social media can sometimes not be generalized since respondents might have replied to the query without proper understanding of the importance of the research. In order to avoid challenges and opportunities arising from such situations, a very careful research design is required with clear research objectives and questions and the appropriate selection of analytical tools. If initial findings are statistically significant then they should be verified using at least one more distinct additional dataset which has been collected at a different time, using different methods, or on a different platform. If not, it may be necessary to reduce the scope of a study or reframe its central hypothesis to address a more specific aspect of human behavior on a given platform.

6. SOCIAL MEDIA IN LIS RESEARCH

More than 200 articles were retrieved by Titles and Abstracts search of peer-reviewed journal articles about "social media" from major LIS database- Library, Information Science, Technology & Technology (LISTA).

Aloia & Naughton (2016) in their research study looked at how social media can be an effective resource disseminating and finding information on grey literature. Persson & Svenningsson (2016) investigate the level of awareness of the professional use of social media among Linköping University, Sweden researchers and found that use of social media was not significant; however, a small number saw potential. Sriram (2016) through his case study of KN Raj Library of Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram explained how social media tools can be effectively put to use in libraries for marketing its resources and services. Gupta (2015) examined 733 Indian publications on social media research, as covered in Scopus database during 2004-13, and found an annual average growth rate of 168.31% and citation impact of 1.27. The paper stressed the need for the development of a national social media policy by Indian government. The scope of the research was further expanded globally and the researchers conducted scientometric assessment of 1472 global publications on "social media and libraries" covering the period 2003-14 on a series of indicators and found that the publications output averaged 62% annual growth. USA, U.K., Canada, Spain, Germany, China, Australia, India, Netherlands and Singapore were the topmost productive countries and Netherlands registered the highest share (38.89%) of international collaborative papers among the top 10 countries during 2003-14.

7. SOCIAL MEDIA RESEARCH TEAM

(SmeRT)

Formed in 2010, Social Media Research Team (SmeRT) is a collaborative venture at the University of British Columbia (UBC) comprising of two distinct but overlapping groups of librarians who had interest in using social media in libraries and its accompanying challenges in evaluation, implementation and programming. It brings together a group of student and professional academic librarians from across Canada. The group has six member librarians who are either studying librarianship or working as professional librarians in various public service and research positions in libraries and academia from coast to coast (in Vancouver, British Columbia out west to Halifax, Nova Scotia in the east). The Group believed in “To share is to learn” i.e. they believed in the power of sharing and its relationship to being social and learning online. The SMeRT librarians have begun to develop a research agenda. They have initiated a number of research projects and academic studies about using social media in their respective libraries and individual contexts.

8. CONCLUSION

The article intends to highlight the importance of social media in the lives of users and the researchers. The immense connectivity that can be achieved through social networking can prove to be highly beneficial for social research. Although, it is argued by the society at large that social media is just a way to stay in touch with family and friends, for entertainment purpose etc. but worldwide research proves that there is an increasing group of people who think in the other way. Social media with its aspects of professional interaction and information sharing is there to spread its umbrella in future to a larger extent and it will remain part of the academic librarian's toolkit and will be used to deliver traditional and innovative services in an effective and efficient manner.

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