The Past, Present, and Future of Social Media

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<u>Introduction:</u>

Throughout history, society has witnessed many social media technologies come and go. Many have become technological breakthroughs, while others have been near complete failures. As humans, it is in the genetic make up to seek and desire to be in constant communication. Social media provides people with the ability to be who they are, who they want to be, or simply to stay in touch with family and friends. Each and every new technological breakthrough continues to provide a newer and more advanced way to make this possible.

The use of technology in social media can really first be attributed to the early telephone party lines. These party lines came at a time when telephone companies lacked the resources to provide dedicated phone lines to individual homes. Early telephone installations in the 40s' and 50s' used large neighborhood phone loops. Quite literally, entire neighborhood, even entire towns, shared a single phone number. When a person from the city attempted to call someone in a small town, every phone in that town would ring. When neighbors attempted to call each other, a phone operator would need to connect the call for them. Each household in the city had a special ring or ring duration. These unique rings would help determine who the call was for or who the call was from. It was not long before townsfolk quickly realized that they could all sit in on conversations. As most of the early lines were half-duplex, only one person could usually talk at a time. As technology improved, many companies capitalized on this type of party chat and created a number of social call-in party lines. In the 70s' and 80s' companies like Quest provided themed conference numbers that people could call in to join a group conversation at a modest hourly rate (Wikipedia, 2010).

Fig. 1 – Old dial-less Party-Line phone
(Reading, http://www.reading.ac.uk/)

<u>The Bulletin Board System:</u>

Although forms of social media communication existed from the early 50s through the 70s, it was not until the creation of the "Bulletin Board System" that social media began to take the form as it is known today. In 1979, an IBM technical sales specialist known as Ward Christensen, created the first working bulletin board system while stuck at home during a blizzard. This bulletin board system, known as BBS for short, created the early concept of a service provider. Using a dedicated computer and a modem, a "System Operator" would create a digital call-in center. Each computer user with a modem could then connect to this BBS by programmatically dialing the number.

Fig. 2 – Hayes 2400 Baud Modem
(Netro, http://www.netro.au/)

The BBS essentially created what would be the first digital message board, a place where computer users could dial in and post messages. A different user could then connect to the same bulletin board system and post a new message or respond to an existing one. While early bulletin board systems consisted of not much more than simple message boards and information centers, later bulletin board systems grew into a quasi-internet of sorts. Some bulletin board systems contained everything from multi-player online games, to downloadable programs (Sadofsky, 05). As technology and use of these systems grew, corporations began to sell software, both to call them, and to run them. Companies like ProComm and WWIV began releasing BBS software. The BBS remained the primary means of digital communication for computer users well into the mid nineteen nineties.

Growth of the Internet:

As the internet began to grow in popularity and availability, so did the social

media aspect of it. The change from bulletin board systems to the internet was quick, but

not altogether simple. Some of the more dominant BBS entities like Prodigy,

CompuServe and AOL, began to merge their networks with the internet once it became

publicly available. While computer users continued to connect with their modems to a

dial-up server, the back-end of the systems began to shift their services to the internet.

One of the first social media technologies to make use of the internet was IRC, also
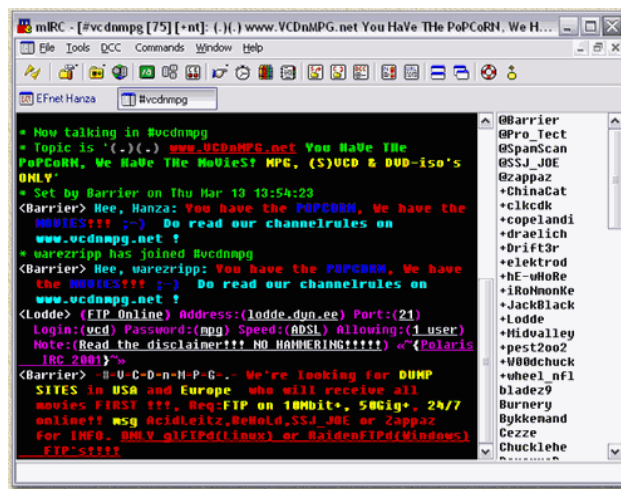
known as "Internet Relay Chat."

Fig. 3 – mIRC Relay Chat Application
(http://libertadcero.files.wordpress/2008/04/mirc.gif/)

Internet relay chat employed the use of IP communications. A company or hobbyist

would create an internet networked server that then hosted the relay chat software. A

computer user could then download an IRC application that would allow a secured

connection to it. Direct text communications were made possible because each user

connected had their own unique internet protocol address. Many servers were dedicated

to this technology for a variety of reasons and offered dozens of chat rooms on a variety

of topics. Social media began to become more personal, and the creation of ICQ and other Instant Messenger programs quickly became available. Having been built on the same basic technology as internet protocol chat, instant messenger performed similarly. Unlike IRC however, communications were maintained between distinct individuals, rather than in a large user pool. This allowed for more personal and individual conversations. As popularity grew, these new communication tools began interfacing with some of the more technologically advanced phones. Companies such as RIM / Blackberry, Motorola, Samsung and many others created devices to take advantage of this technology. This created the initial concept of online status (Oikarinen, 2007).

Fig. 4 – Early RIM iCQ/IRC Communicator
(http://www.Wired.com/)

A user's online status was the ideology of defining whether or not the user was "connected", "on-line", or simply available. A new generation of connectivity technology was created by this concept. Advanced devices such as these allowed people to stay in touch with each-other almost anywhere, at any time. These applications quickly paved the way for what would become the current boom of social media.

<u>GeoCities, MySpace, and FaceBook:</u>

While instant messenger worked well, it lacked one very important aspect. Instant messenger did not give an individual a permanent spot on the internet that they could call "home." Individual websites were for the most part, only available to individuals who possessed the skills needed to create them. Despite the programming ability required, there also existed the problem of determining how to host a site and registering a domain name. For most people, this was far too complicated a task. One of the first companies to see this market demand and capitalize on it was GeoCities. GeoCities created a free place on the internet that users could stake as their own (GeoCities, 2010). It provided a simple and easy way to upload pages and create a personalized homepage. The next time the user was engaged in a conversation in an instant messenger chat, he or she could simply send them a link to their GeoCities site. This quickly became popular, but there was still room for improvement. With GeoCities, there was no common theme to the sites, and there existed no way to integrate their pages with other emerging forms of media. This quickly changed when MySpace was introduced. MySpace, like GeoCities, provided a blank canvas for internet users to create a page. Users could customize their pages by posting pictures, music, and even blogs. What set MySpace apart from earlier self-creation sites was the aspect of "social networking." The aspect of social networking was created by the idea that an individual's page was not just a representation of them, but it became them. When a user made virtual "friends", they would be added to a list. The list could then be notified of all future updates and changes in the user's life. This became an excellent way for old friends to reconnect, as well as to meet new friends. FaceBook quickly replaced what MySpace had created and became the dominant site.

<u>The Future of Social Media:</u>

While FaceBook and MySpace many seem as cutting edge for many people, it is not difficult to see how faced-paced and rapidly growing this environment is.

What does the future hold for social media?

Because the internet is a constantly growing entity, much of what will become the future of social media is already available in one form or another. One of the more recent developments over the past few years has been the creation of 3D worlds. Multi-player 3D worlds started from a concept which was originally created for online gaming. While online gaming has itself become social media, sites such as Second Life have capitalized on this technology and show the direction that future social media could be heading towards. Second Life exists as a three dimensional platform where-by not only can the user create his or her own personal spot on the web, but quite literally their own digital existence. Users exist in these three dimension social media sites as actual characters. They can portray who they really are, or who they want to be by altering their dress, physique, and lifestyle.

Fig. 5 – Second Life characters
(http://okapi.dreamhosters.com/)

Conclusion:

        With a seemingly endless stream of new technology available, there is essentially no conceivable end in sight as to what new social networking media will be created. It remains to be seen, however, if society will continue to move further and further in the direction of positive digital social interaction, or if it will regress into a more reclusive type of fantasy.

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