



The Good, the Bad and the Ugly

By Abed A. Khooli



“Q

WERTYUIOP,” or something similar as Ray Tomlinson recalls, was the first seed of social media. That was the first email he sent to himself back in 1971. “Don’t tell anyone! This isn’t what we’re supposed to be working on,” he told his colleague. Of course, Facebook and Twitter were not around then; it was a real conversation.

Bulletin board systems and Usenet groups came out in 1978 and provided the first platforms for online information exchange while CompuServe picked Ray’s idea and provided commercial email services. Fast forward to the early 1990s when the World Wide Web became public, and web browsers started to show up to navigate new networks and online communities like America Online (AOL) and Microsoft Network (MSN). As communities and content consumption became

sizable, major companies and new entrepreneurs saw the financial light and new services were developed, including search engines, free email services and personal pages, instant messaging tools, blogging platforms and crowd-sourced references.

The first known social media platform, Friendster, was launched in 2002, followed by Myspace in 2003. The social media hatchery never stopped after that. Facebook was born in 2004, YouTube in 2005, and Twitter in 2006. Now there are more social media platforms than you can count on your fingers.

Social media platforms started as a means of communication and information sharing among relatives, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. People made new friends, exchanged ideas, interests, preferences, opinions, and simply helped each other in rather innocent ways.

As enterprises figured out the impact of social media, and due to high demand and the need for infrastructure and running expenses, social media platforms soon became prime targets for investment and business practices: marketing, commercialization, and monetization. Advertising online was already an established business, and social media was just a new channel. As Internet connectivity became more affordable and available, especially through mobile devices and smart phones, social media platforms were targeted as a means to push branding and marketing down the throats of online users.

Social media outlets evolved to become a major source of gossip and news. They are free (if you deduct your advertising value), simple to use, and available through the widely available mobile devices. At face value, this looks great, but it is also a recipe for addiction and misuse. People of all ages share personal information (voluntarily, out of ignorance, or by extortion to unlock



Social media took over 40 years to develop in its current state, yet it still has a long way to go. Despite its simplicity and popularity, major challenges and concerns raised by social media are likely to outweigh its benefits and force it into extinction. As platforms for communication and information sharing, online communities develop their own diseases and conflicts, and are not immune to catastrophes.

features) and are usually unaware of privacy implications. Many users are unable to keep up with security settings and preference updates. You may be able to select your friends, but you have no control over what personal information they can reveal about you. Your old friend, or the one you befriended in a hurry, may become your wild enemy and start to blackmail you. Someone posing as an entity you trust could end up stealing your money, exposing your private life, or affecting your perceptions, attitudes, and public opinion. Some users were even used as guinea pigs for emotional experiments, Facebook revealed recently.

Privacy is the main concern when it comes to social media usage. Large entities (commercial and security) store social media information and use it to profile, analyse, and data mine social activity. You may try to hide your

identity but that is mere deception. Your friends tag your pictures and your whereabouts; the timeline update you publish, the Tweet you send and the picture you upload reveal a lot about you — including your exact location, especially if you are using a smart device. You may volunteer some or all data in exchange for promised gifts, or a free game, or simply “better customer service” (read: surveillance). You might rationalise this by saying you have nothing to hide, but this is very simplistic. Imagine that boasting about your next vacation on Instagram could become an open invitation for a thief to break into your house while you are enjoying the beach. Your social life or your relationships could evaporate due to an insignificant conflict originating from social media that grows into something much bigger.

Social republics and kingdoms have

large online populations, and multiple citizenships are allowed. Facebook is probably the largest with over 1.2 billion. It should be pointed out, however, that many users (on every social media outlet) are inactive, unreal, duplicate (“social bacteria”), generated by bots, or posing as false identities and fake profiles. These may interact with your business to cover fraudulent activities, decreasing your visibility and forcing you to spend more on advertising, and your money could be eaten by click farms or fake accounts in a viscous circle depleting your resources. Of course, marketing agents will convince you that their targeting is precise!

Social activism has become a trend recently. It did not stop with people advancing a certain cause, working for a social campaign, defending their beliefs, or supporting a brand or sports team. Starting with the Arab Spring (or any season), social media was the backdrop of the struggle. Activists used it not only for communication and coordination, but also as an alternative to mainstream media. With people on the ground, in the streets, and in the squares, trending social media hashtags (specific keywords and phrases) were utilized to gain support and counter mainstream media. Recent examples include: Egypt over the past year; the attack on Gaza (current as of this writing); and the recent branding of ISIS (now Islamic State) in Iraq and Syria. These days, social media wars

are fought by all sides of conflicts, and social media outlets are used to spread rumours, send messages, and rally supporters using traditional tactics in digital format. The first social media world war is already waging in full swing.

To be able to get the benefits of social media while avoiding the evil, we have to look at technology from the right perspective: as a means, not an end. If you say or do something that could be embarrassing for you one day, or that could affect your chances to land a job or establish a relationship, you probably should not do it at all. There is nothing private or restricted in the social media space. Kids and teenagers require education, advice, guidance, and mentoring. If you do not know who your kids befriend, what games they play, and what groups they are active in, you may be looking at a recipe for disaster. Addiction itself is a big issue.

Social media is still evolving and becoming more anti-social. Not only did it digitize real life and increase physical isolation, but it has become a source of destruction and mischief. The perfect social media platform has yet to be developed, and popular platforms may become extinct — remember Myspace?

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