

Digital Media and Social Relations

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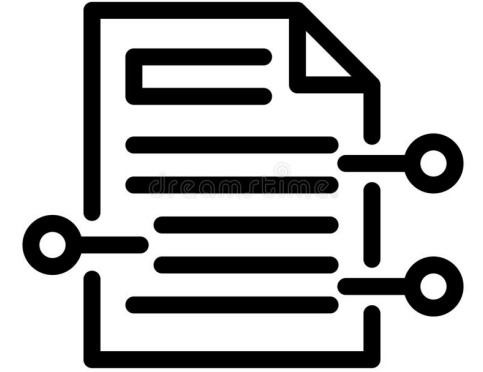
Lecture 5

DGM 711
Introduction to Digital Media

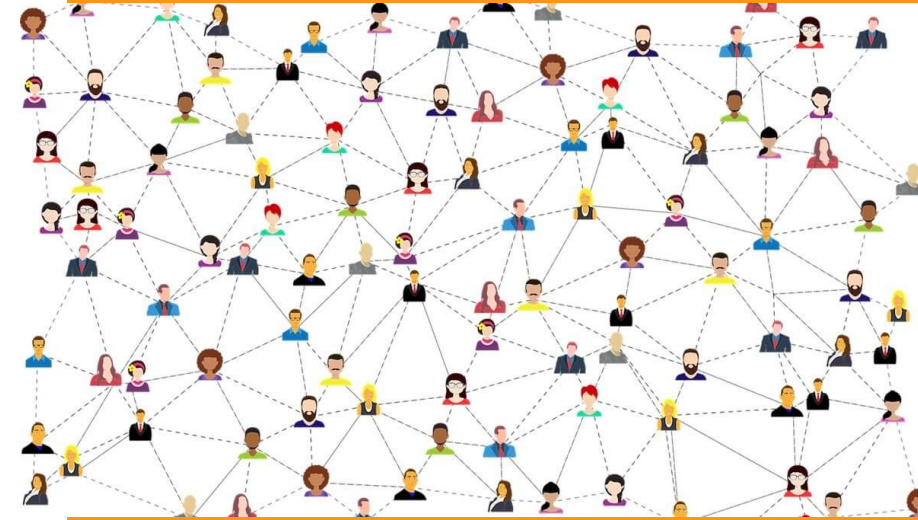


- **Technological determinism** approach understands technology as an **independent force** that can determine the development of a **society**.
- **The social construction of technology** approach suggests that the development, structure, and significance of a **technology** depends on the **strength, needs, and values** of the **social groups** that promote and design it.
- **Technologies** are **not neutral** but rather have a **“politics.”**
- Similar approaches also recognize the active role of **users** of technologies **repurpose, modify, and resist** technology.
- Scholars have also noted the existence of **“superusers”** with specific technical skills and professional positions.
- Electronic media were destined to transform humanity into a **“global village”**.

- I. Digital Sociality .
- II. Social media .
- III. Sociality Algorithms .
- VI. Conclusion.



- Activities mediated by **digital technologies** such as social media services have an impact on **people's life and identity**.
- **Digital media** foster **new forms of interaction** and enrich the **social life** of individuals.



I. Digital Sociality :

- Yet the **social relations** these technologies mediate are **not neutral**, but rather depend on uneven **power dynamics**, as well as on **cultural** and **identity** factors.
- **Digital media** can challenge, but also contribute to cementing such factors.



- **Social relations** have always been influenced by **communication technologies**.
- The **first political organizations**, such as the city-**states** of antiquity, were born in parallel with **writing**.
- Without a **means of communication** able to cross physical distances and maintain communications over time it would be very difficult to organize a complex **social system**, collect taxes, and ensure the continuity of the laws or religious customs.



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- A black and white portrait of a middle-aged man with dark hair, wearing a suit jacket, white shirt, and dark tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is dark and out of focus.



- Yet **media** are also essential for creating and maintaining **informal groups**, as well as for the construction of **individual identity**.
- The boom of **1960s youth cultures** depended to a significant degree on **technologies** such as the **portable turntable**, which allowed people to listen to **music** outside the home, **television**, which made possible the almost global and immediate spread of trends and fashions (think of the success of the **Beatles**), and the **phone**, which allowed **teenagers** to interact and communicate with peers.



- The arrival of **digital media** and mobile technologies asks for a renewed attention to the relationship between media technologies and **social relations** as part of the evolution of contemporary information societies.
- **Digital media** have had an unprecedented speed and rate of penetration, as they grew from having a few thousand to several **billion users** in just two decades.
- They have also been characterized by the **rapid succession** of new communication platforms.
- This differentiation makes it necessary to evaluate **different digital technologies** in depth, avoiding a simplistic focus on an alleged link between somewhat abstract overall effects of digital technologies and **social relations**.



Chapter 05

I. Digital Sociality :

- In the last decades of the twentieth century, **two opposing visions** seemed to dominate the debate on **digital media**:
- **on the one hand**, they were said to be **separated from the social world** of everyday “real-life” interactions.
- **On the other hand**, many maintained that they had **disruptive effects** on all forms of **sociality** .
- However, today’s **digital media** are characterized by a strong integration between **online and offline lives**, up to the point that these distinctions seem to lose meaning.



- In the **1990s**, when the **internet** was accessed via telephone modems, and when the most important platforms were web pages, mailing lists, **forums**, and Bulletin Board Systems (BBSs), one could reasonably speak of an experience of networks that was distinct from that of the real world: definitions such as “**virtual**” **world** or “**cyberspace**” described a place where it was possible to hide one’s real identity by using **alternative names or identities**.



- For example, media theorist **Lisa Nakamura** described “**identity tourism**” as a fluid process in which internet users use **avatars** to perform, swap, and even buy identity.
- Through such processes, Nakamura claimed, “our **ideas** about **race**, **ethnicity**, and **identity** continue to be **shaped** and **reshaped** every time we log on” (2002).



- According to American psychologist **Sherry Turkle**, in the **1990s** **users** could “experiment with **identity** by playing out **parallel lives**” in which they would “shift **age, gender, race, and class**” (2008).



- Today, **social media users** tend to post **content** related to **activities, emotions, and events** which belong to their daily lives.
- Mobile technologies such as **smartphones** and tablets provide access to services like Twitter, Tumblr, or Snapchat **anywhere**, in a variety of different situations – in the classroom, on the bus, in the office, or at home.
- **Mobile technologies** promote an “**always on**” **lifestyle**, that is, continuously **connected**.



- Therefore, **social relationships** seem to always be **mediated**, but that does not make them less significant.
- **Mobile technologies** have a crucial role in these processes, as they move the internet into **everyday environments** – think of carrying a smartphone – thus blending **mediated space and material space** in the experience of the user .



Chapter 05

I. Digital Sociality :

- In this sense the difference between **online and offline** tends to **disappear**:
- online activities, albeit mediated by digital technologies, are fully integrated in everyday social life and **social media profiles** have a crucial role in people's overall **identities**.
- Finally, **social media** tend to weaken the distinction between **public and private**, since users share details of their private life publicly via digital platforms.
- These details become part of **individuals' communicative strategies**, which thus take place in the context of continuous connection through ubiquitous **media** (Deuze 2012).



- As part of the increased **mediatization** of everyday social practices and relations, the services that dominate the digital media landscape are **social media** platforms.
- **Social media** are websites based on the ability to build and maintain **social ties** they provide to users.
- Many scholars studying **social media** have proposed that these technologies have assumed a central role in structuring new forms of **social relations** and contribute crucially to the construction of **personal and group identity** .



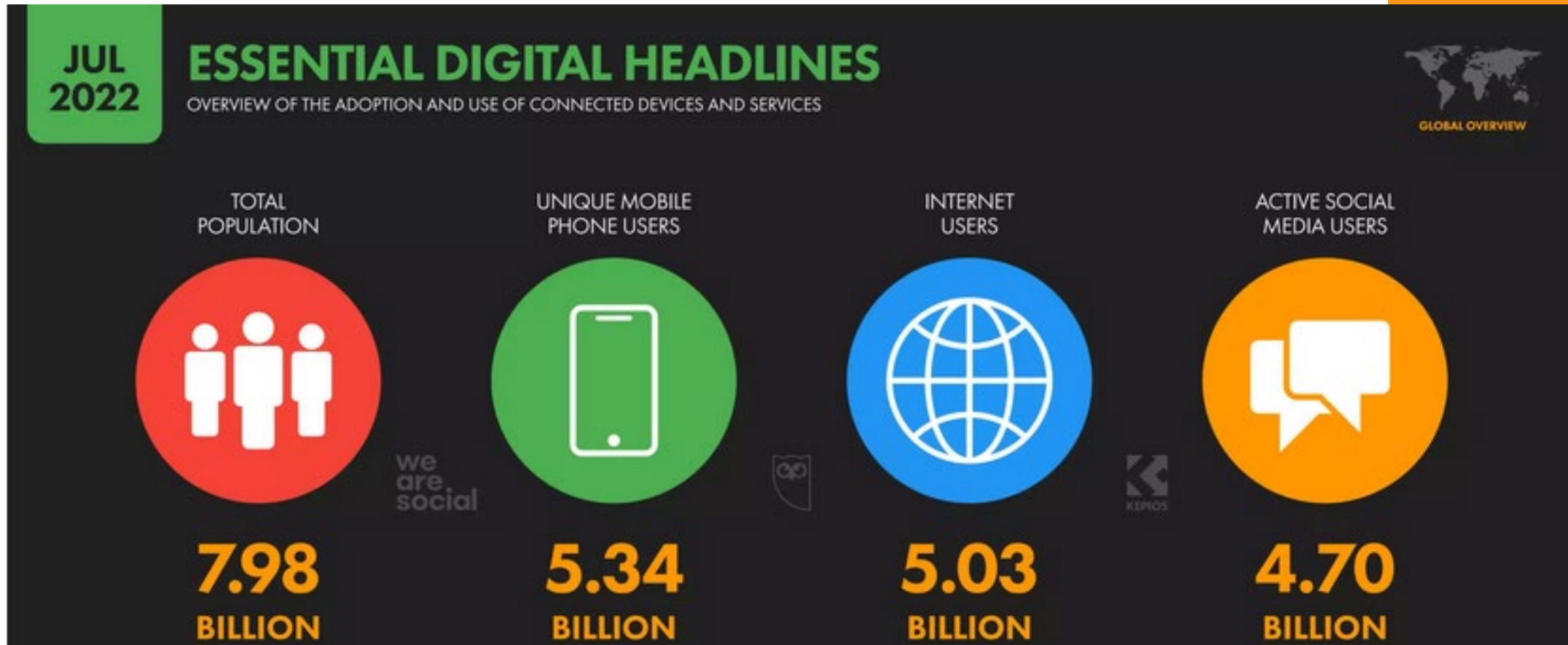
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- According to this definition, the first social network was **SixDegrees**, launched in the US in 1997, although the first service with a mass diffusion was **Friendster**, which in 2003 had 300 000 users.
- **MySpace** was launched in the same year, while the birth of **Facebook** dates to 2004, although it reached a mass level in 2006.
- Indeed, during the **2000s**, these services experienced a true commercial explosion that placed them among the most important intermediaries between individuals and digital content.



- In the last decade, **social media** have proliferated and have occupied an ever-growing position in **information societies**, both for the massive number of people they **reach**, and for their continuous and ubiquitous everyday **use** .
- It is estimated that, **Facebook** alone, which in recent years has become by far the **largest social network**, has exceeded **two billion** active users.

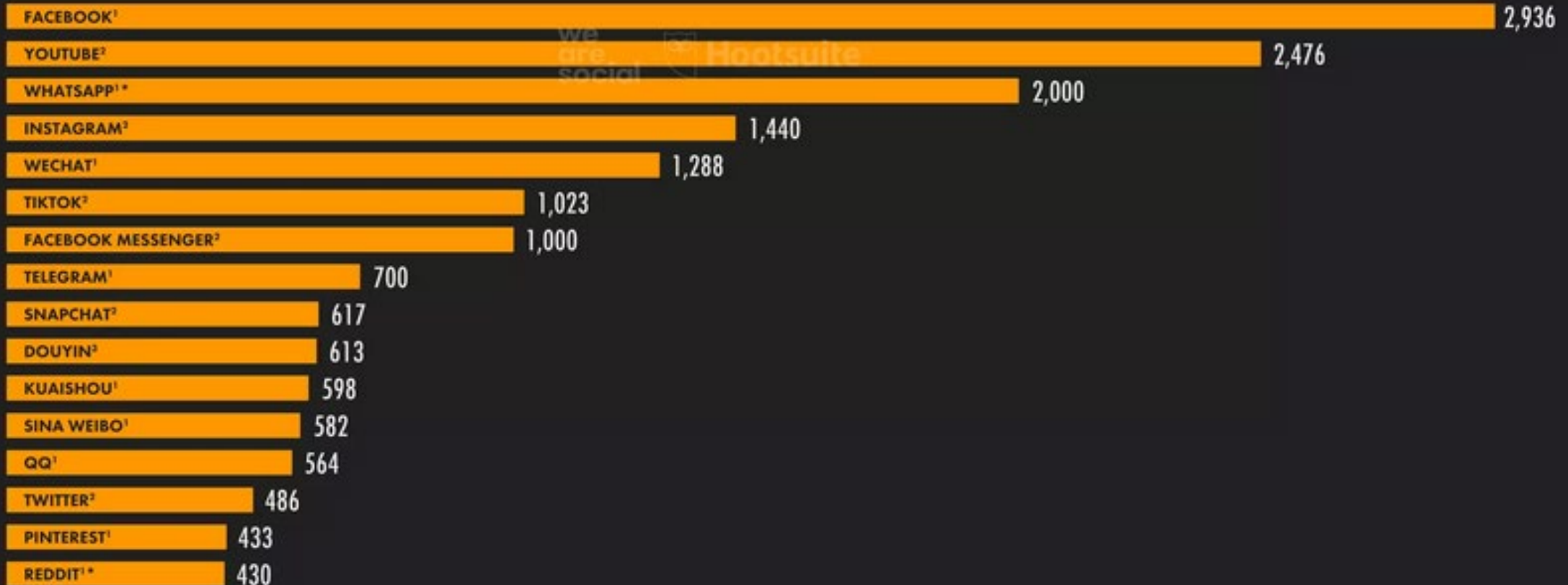




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THE WORLD'S MOST-USED SOCIAL PLATFORMS

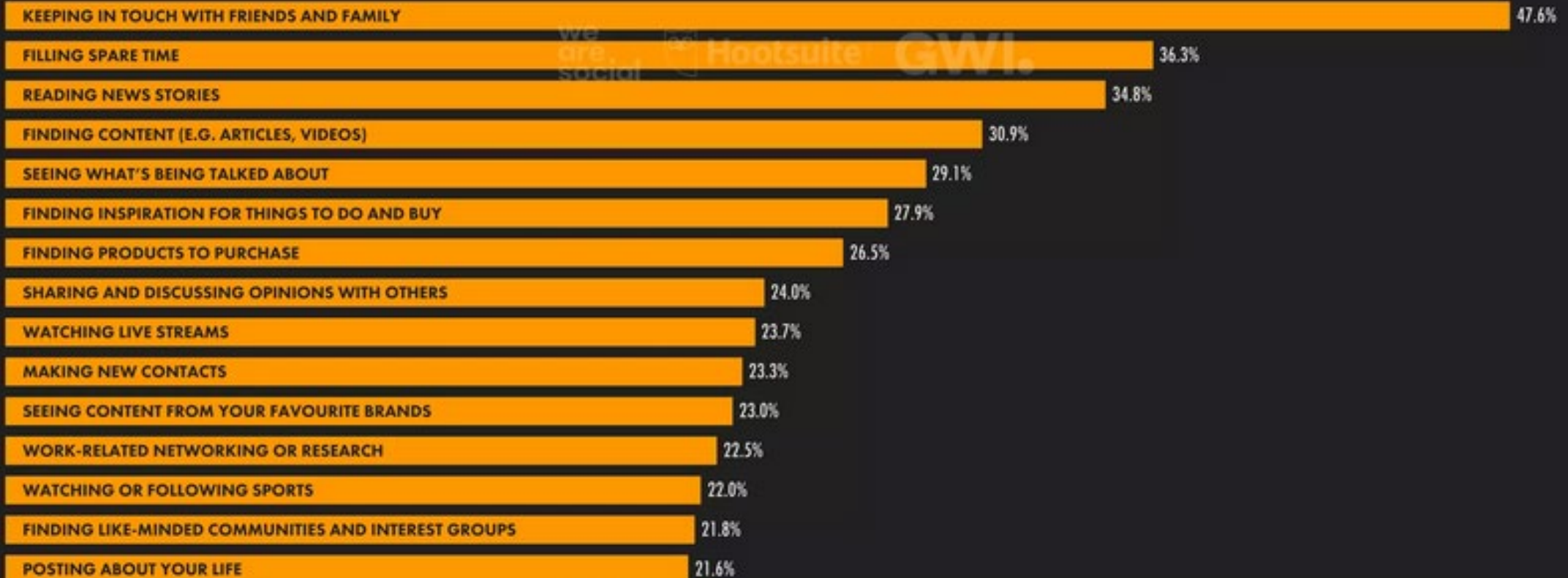
RANKING OF SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS BY GLOBAL ACTIVE USER FIGURES (IN MILLIONS)



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MAIN REASONS FOR USING SOCIAL MEDIA

PRIMARY REASONS WHY INTERNET USERS AGED 16 TO 64 USE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS



- Many of these **platforms** have been developed to facilitate the organization of **social relationships around common interests** and are at least partly the effect and not just the cause of the emergence of new forms of grassroots **sociality** .
- This follows a path that has been taken by digital services of the **past**.
- For example, the same happened with the first **BBS** networks, that in the **1980s** grew thanks to the groups of users who used them to discuss **art, or music**.

BBS
Network

- **Facebook** itself was initially developed to put in touch **students at Harvard University**, and only at a later stage did it raise the capital that turned it into a **commercial enterprise**.



- There are of course many different **platforms**, used to organize different **social groups**, for the most various **purposes** and in an array of heterogeneous modalities.
- If some **social media** are generalist, meaning they are based primarily on the sharing of a variety of content, others are dedicated to **specific purposes, media typologies**, or **demographics**.



- **LinkedIn**, for example, targets **job seekers** as well as **human resource managers**, and is used for **professional** reasons as a sort of social curriculum vitae.

LinkedIn



- **MySpace** emerged as a social media service for adolescents but has long been populated almost exclusively by musicians and bands, which use it to target an audience of **teenagers**.



- **Social media** can also be shaped by **gender**-based differences.
- For example, **Pinterest** tends to have a **female** user base as it facilitates gendered activities, such as **craft** and **fashion**.



- Some exploit **geolocalization** technologies to locate users' activities and strengthen the relation between physical space and platform interactions.
- On **Foursquare**, users receive **personalized recommendations** of shops to go to near their current location and based on their previous activities or purchases.



FOURSQUARE

- Finally, **social networks** are not necessarily global, but rather tend to be divided across **geographical** and linguistic lines.
- Even if the largest platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, are used almost everywhere, similar services provided by different actors may be more prevalent in **certain geographical areas**.



- This was the case of **Orkut**, a **Google**-owned platform that was widely spread in **Brazil** before being ousted by **Facebook**.
- Today, **Renren**, an **Asian** platform similar to Facebook, and **Sina Weibo**, the **Chinese** equivalent of Twitter, reach hundreds of millions of users.



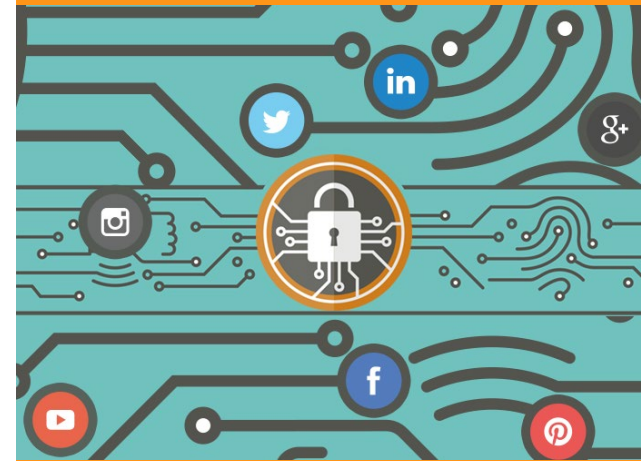
- **Social media** platforms typically integrate **services** that go beyond the **publication of content** on their boards or timelines.
- For example, many of these sites provide **chats, instant messaging, email, and telephony**, as well as **commenting** and rating systems.



- **Social media** facilitate and structure **social relations** and **interpersonal communications**, as they have the power to shape the type of actions that occur within their services.
- In fact, the **affordances** that characterize their technological features offer precise **possibilities** and at the same time set the **limits** within which they can be used.



- As media theorist **José van Dijck** put it, they do so by “**coding relationships** between people, things and ideas into **algorithms**.”
- In turn, “**sociality coded** by technology renders people’s activities formal, manageable, and manipulable, enabling platforms to **engineer the sociality** in people’s everyday routines” .



- On **social media** platforms, all activities generate **data** which are then analyzed by **algorithms** and used to shape and organize platform **sociality**.
- For example, **Facebook** is based on the creation of a “**social graph**,” that is, a **map** of all **social interactions** among individual users.
- The generation and analysis of such a **map** is key for the platform to offer a richer **online experience**.



- **Facebook** uses its **data** to **algorithmically** sort out which **content** is most likely to be interesting for a specific **user**, and thus generate **interactions**.
- This means that it **analyzes past interactions** in order to **predict future behavior** .
- **Facebook** estimates how likely it is that a **user** will **interact** with another user's post.



- For example, its **algorithms** analyze **user A's social graph** to estimate how likely it is that she will comment on or share a post by user **B** if that post has already received comments from users **C and D**.
- Platforms use this ability in order to foster and increase **user participation and sociality**, and therefore extract more **data** .



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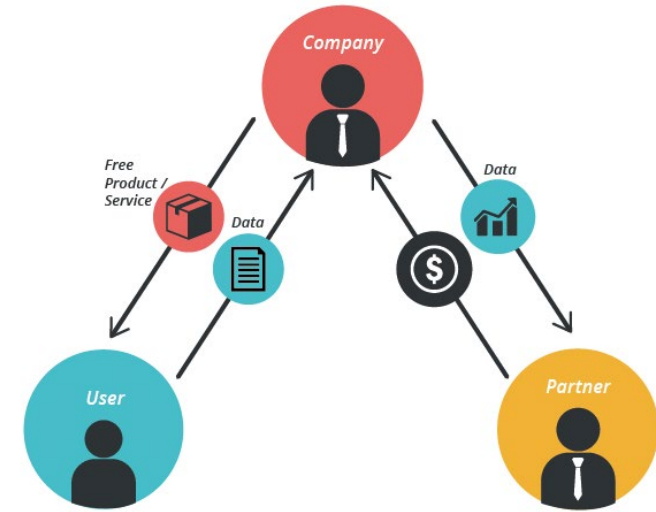
- Indeed, **social media** are overwhelmingly owned and managed by **private corporations**.
- These companies have developed **business models** that allow them to extract **profits** from the **information** they manage.



- For the **user**, most of these services are **free**, and platforms' revenues do not derive from user **fees**, but rather from their ability to capture, analyze, and valorize the **information** users provide to the site.
- **User data** is aggregated by software that creates user profiles based on their **interests** and **communications**, the **pages** they visit, and their networks of **friends** .



- The **information** collected by **social media** platforms can be **sold to third parties**, for example **marketing agencies**, or used directly on the service to provide **targeted advertising**.
- Indeed, **social media** platforms thrive on their ability to create **advertisements** that are compatible with the **interests** and lifestyles of a **user** and integrate them as natural components of the communicative environments in which one's relational life develops .



- Not all social media are for profit, but **non-profit services** have struggled to emerge.
- An example is **Diaspora**, a Facebook-like service built on **free** software and on a network of distributed servers.
- Thanks to its **decentralized** architecture, no single **user** or entity can **control the system**, which depends on many machines on which each user can store their information.



- Moreover, **Diaspora** allows for **encrypted communications** and thus seeks to protect the privacy of its users .
- This and other similar **alternative social media** tend to be **limited** by their inability to **reach** the critical mass of **users** which would make them competitive with **commercial** services.





- **Digital media** foster **new forms of interaction** and enrich the **social life** of individuals.
- Therefore, **social relationships** seem to always be **mediated**.
- Yet the **social relations** these technologies mediate are **not neutral**, but rather depend on uneven power dynamics, as well as on cultural and identity factors.
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Thank you for listening

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