

serious consequences for victims, including depression, social withdrawal, and risk of suicide. It is very challenging to address cyberbullying and cyberstalking because of the hidden nature of the online world and the difficulty of identifying the perpetrators.

Social media clearly presents many challenges, but also exciting opportunities. The following reading, by Tom Chiang Jr, outlines some of these issues, including the spread of sensationalized content and misinformation. Read the following article and consider how social media can be best studied and, potentially, changed.

## READING: SOCIAL MEDIA IN SOCIETY: A POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE FORCE?

Tom Chiang Jr.

I teach a college-level introductory sociology course where we discuss the *functional role* of mass media. Talcott Parsons' functional perspective espouses that society is comprised of interrelated parts in order to promote solidarity and stability. Therefore, the functional role of mass media is to teach and reinforce the norms, values, and belief systems of a society in order to further social solidarity. From a functional lens, social media, a type of mass media platform that facilitates the sharing of ideas, thoughts, and information between its users, which had been dismissed as a fad back in 2006, has had a functional, and arguably positive, effect on society in recent years by empowering its citizens toward solidarity through collective action. Social media is now a platform that brings social justice issues to the forefront of the American discourse, and arguably, has helped rectify persistent inequities. To this end, social media has been a place where social movements of different forms, and their messages of empowerment through collective action, are solidified.

One way that social media facilitates social movements' message of empowerment through collective action is through grassroots online fundraising. For example, as a result of a tweet tweeted during the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak, online donors donated money to people who had student-loan and past-due medical bills. Another method in which social media empowers its users toward collective activism is through the use of hashtags, which then could be retweeted on Twitter. For example, in the article *#SayHerName: a case of intersectional social media activism*, Melissa Brown and her colleagues argue that *#SayHerName*, which has been retweeted many times over, is used to raise consciousness about the deaths of Black women, especially Black transgender women. As the data from the article demonstrates, hashtags, such as *#SayHerName*, can be used to bring awareness, and, in turn, attempt to rectify systemic injustices that affect hyper marginalized groups whose lived experiences have often been neglected by mainstream media.

Despite these positive impacts of social media, a first-year student in my sociology course asked me if I believed that social media was harmful to modern society. Given the importance of this question, I wanted to dedicate some time to answering it here in detail.

### General Societal Effects of Social Media: The Pervasive Nature of Social Media

While social media was considered as a passing trend by researchers just a little less than a decade ago, social media has proliferated into mainstream society. Data from Pew Research Center show that 5% of the American adult population used social media in 2005, as compared to 72% of the public today. They also found that as social media usage increases so does the user base. In 2005, the few who used social media in America were young adults, but the user rates among older adults have also increased in recent years. In addition to the change in age among users of social media, the daily usage of social media sites, such as

Facebook and Instagram, has also increased. Data from Pew Research Center show that roughly 75% of users visit Facebook and 60% of users visit Instagram at least once per day.

People use social media for different reasons beyond keeping connections with friends and relatives who live far away. Increasingly social media will be used to complete daily tasks, especially in the field of commerce. For example, as of 2019, Facebook is developing a cryptocurrency system called Libra, which, some argue, will soon go mainstream with help from major banks. This is not surprising as social media, such as Facebook, is already changing the way we pay. Currently, Facebook users can pay other users through Facebook messenger. In addition to commerce, people use social media to keep up with the latest developments in the United States and abroad. Social media, specifically, has made information more accessible to consumers. This is evident with Twitter, which is a social media platform where individuals and organizations can share ideas, thoughts, and information with their followers.

### Negative Effects of Social Media on Society: Social Media and the Proliferation and Consumption of Sensationalized (Clickbait) Content

While social media can be a platform to empower its citizens toward collective action, *social media* has also had a negative effect on society in recent years through the proliferation and consumption of sensationalized content. In fact, in the article *The Road to Digital Unfreedom: Three Painful Truths About Social Media*, Ronald Delbert, a professor of political science at the University of Toronto, has argued that social media proliferates attention-grabbing, often emotionally-driven and divisive material, rather than multi-faceted content that present multiple viewpoints. What Delbert is describing here is often known as *clickbait*. The article *Misleading Online Content: Recognizing Clickbait as “False News”* defines clickbait as content whose main purpose is to attract readers in by producing headlines that are often sensational and scandalous.

It can be argued that social media websites proliferate clickbait because social media has become so pervasive in our society that we often turn to sites on social media to satisfy our impulsive curiosity to get more information about, and react to, shocking events that are unfolding before our eyes. In fact, a sensationalized article written about Malia Obama garnered readership from well-known celebrities and commentators, who then posted their equally provocative reactions on their social media pages for their followers to react to. Therefore, clickbait content is rampant on social media because it often exaggerates and scandalizes quotidian events, and turns these every-day events into the unspeakable, which satisfies our impulsive desire to get information about, and react to, the abominable. However, since clickbait content privileges itself on shocking content, rather than a principled approach to presenting pressing current issues, Delbert argues that the proliferation and the consumption of provocative content on social media is a breeding ground for individuals in positions of authority to create confusion and ignorance among the citizenry.

### Perspective on Power: The Intersection Between Authority and Misinformation on Social Media

Steven Lukes, political theorist and the author of *Power a Radical View*, and Charles Lindbloom, the author of *Policy Making Process*, would probably agree with Ronald Delbert's view on the societal effects of social media. If we use Steven Lukes' perspective on power, which has its framework based on Karl Marx's conflict perspective, we find that *social media facilitates misinformation*. According to Steven Lukes, individuals in positions of authority can use ideology to control the narrative by exercising considerable control over what issues people choose to care about and the degree of which they care about these issues. According to Charles Lindbloom, individuals in positions of authority can also use their power to divert attention and misinform the people about their actual circumstances. Social media is often used as a means for individuals in positions of authority to put out misinformation. Misinforming the

people, which, in turn, could lead to confusion and ignorance among its citizenry can *prove to be destructive*. This was on full display during the 2020 presidential election where Trump and his followers spread misinformation, *which, arguably, led to the insurrection on the Capitol in January*.

### Teaching the Importance of Evidence Based Research: Fighting the Negative Societal Effects of Social Media

Given the current pandemic and the recent presidential election, my student's question points to a *bigger issue on how we fight the negative societal effects of social media*. While, Trump may be voted out of office, it is likely that there will be *other individuals* in positions of authority who will *spread misinformation* on social media which will affect the fabric of American democracy and future elections. I believe that *teaching college-aged students, who, according to the Pew Research Center, are the primary users of social media, the importance of evidence-based research* is a way to *fight misinformation* on social media.

The concept of evidence-based research, which is grounded in the field of healthcare, encourages us to use sound research, rather than opinion, to make decisions. In practice, evidence-based research means that we must *rely on reputable, often peer-reviewed, studies published in scientific journals to guide our decision making* process. In fact, a recent study conducted by Gordon Pennycook on fighting misinformation found that people with an *increase* in science knowledge and an inclination for *accuracy* had a better time *weeding out* false information about Covid-19 and had an inclination *not to share misinformation* on social media.

While evidence-based research is primarily discussed in the field of healthcare, it can be *applied to other disciplines, especially in the social sciences*. In addition to teaching the college level introductory sociology course, I teach a research methods course where I have students analyze secondary data to better understand what makes information both valid and reliable. Students in my research methods course are taught to recognize signs that the information they found can be systematically verified as a trustworthy source. They are taught the importance and the signs of peer reviewed and fact-checked research. Moreover, they are taught data science methodologies, such as the process of replication and using the right instrument to ensure validity, that advances verified, and trustworthy, knowledge. I use a simple example to illustrate my point on validity: you would not measure temperature using a ruler. I often ask my students if the research can be replicated and if the same or similar results can be generated. I also teach them about the importance of sample sizes, stressing that the larger the sample size the better.

As an applied sociologist, I put theory into practice. I have students in my research methods courses generate a research paper based on a review of peer-reviewed studies and data from the General Social Survey, a nationally representative database. On the whole, my students successfully complete the assignment. They are able to synthesize and use peer-reviewed studies and data from the General Social Survey to support their arguments. By making students apply their knowledge of evidence-based research, it is my hope that they will be able to rely on evidence-based research to critically analyze the truth about the articles they may come across on social media.

### Conclusion: How Evidence-Based Research Can Make Social Media a Better Place

In sum, *what I wished I had said* in response to my student's question on social media and its negative effects *was that social media doesn't have to be harmful to modern society*. Social media can be a great place where we can show solidarity in times of need. While social media can be a place where misinformation is spread, we can teach current and future generations of college students the importance of evidence-based research practices as a means to *filter out* and *not share* misinformation on social media, which will hopefully make social media a better place.

### Reading Questions

1. How does Chiang use the “functional perspective”—what we have called structural functionalism—to understand the role of the media (and social media)? Is this a useful theoretical perspective to use in this situation? Why or why not?
2. How is social media related to the consumption of sensationalized content? What are the impacts of this for individuals and society as a whole?
3. Does the use of social media support or undermine our ability to understand the world around us? How is it related to spreading misinformation and what are the potential implications of this?
4. How can research, such as sociological research, help us to better understand the role of social media in society? Can it be used to counter some of its negative effects?

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Chiang, T., Jr. (2021, June 25). Social media in society: A positive or negative force? *Contexts: Society for the Public*. Retrieved June 12, 2023, from <https://contexts.org/blog/social-media-in-society-a-positive-or-negative-force/>

## USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION: REALITY AND THE METAVERSE

Technology companies have increasingly invested in a virtual world called “the metaverse.” But, what is the metaverse? Although there is no consistent definition, the metaverse has been generally defined as a series of virtual reality worlds that continue to function even when the user leaves. The metaverse also includes both digital and physical worlds through platforms like gaming consoles, virtual reality headsets, and phones (Ravenscraft, 2022).

Meta, formerly known as Facebook, sees the metaverse as a future site for socializing and exercise (Ghaffary, 2021). Watch this video on the metaverse and answer the following questions: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rtLTZUaMSDQ>

1. Describe the reporter’s experience in the metaverse for 24 hours. What tasks does she do that you would usually do in person?
2. How might the metaverse facilitate social connection and building relationships? What kinds of activities would you like to do in the metaverse?
3. The reporter says that moderation will be an intense challenge for the metaverse after her experience at the virtual comedy club. What does she mean?
4. How might the metaverse facilitate cyberbullying and harassment? What could companies do to prevent this?

### The Digital Divide

Internet use has increased over time. More than 90% of Americans use the Internet, a dramatic increase from the 50% who were online in 2000 (Pew Research Center, 2018). However, use of the Internet and other communication technologies is not equally distributed across all groups. The **digital divide** is the inequality between groups with regard to their access to information and communication technologies and to their use of such technologies. The divide within a country occurs between individuals, households, geographic areas, and socioeconomic levels. The divide between countries, referred to as the global digital divide, measures the gap between the digital access and use of technologies across countries.