

A Brief History of Social Media



Social Networks

The Birth of Social Media

Friendster and MySpace

Youtube, Facebook, and Beyond

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This reading comprehension exercise focuses on a written passage about the history of social media. It's followed by a list of key vocabulary relating to social networks and technology you can use to review what you've learned.

Do the names Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter ring a bell? They probably do because they are some of the most popular sites on the internet today. They're called social networking sites because they allow people to interact by sharing news and personal information, photos, videos, as well as communicate through chatting or messaging one another.

There are hundreds, if not thousands of social networking sites on the internet. Facebook is the most popular, with about a billion people using it every day. Twitter, a microblogging site that limits "tweets" (short text posts) to 280 characters, is also very popular (President Donald Trump is especially fond of Twitter and tweets multiple times daily). Other popular sites include Instagram, where people share photos and videos they've taken; Snapchat, a mobile-only messaging app; Pinterest, which is like a giant online scrapbook; and YouTube, the mega-video site.

The common thread between all of these social networks is that they provide a place for people to interact, share content and ideas, and stay in touch with one another.

The first social networking site, Six Degrees, launched in May 1997. Like Facebook today, users could create profiles and connect with friends. But in an era of dial-up internet connections and limited bandwidth, Six Degrees had only limited impact online. In the late '90s, most people didn't use the web to interact with other people. They just browse the sites and took advantage of the information or resources provided.

Of course, some people did create their own sites to share personal information or show off their skills. However, creating a site was difficult; you needed to know basic HTML coding. It certainly wasn't something most people wanted to do as it could take hours to get a basic page just right. That began to change with the emergence of LiveJournal and Blogger in 1999. Sites like these, first called "weblogs" (later shortened to blogs), allowed people to create and share journals online.

In 2002 a site named Friendster took the internet by storm. It was the first true social networking site, where people could post personal information, create profiles, connect with friends, and find others with similar interests. It even became a popular dating site for many users. The following year, MySpace debuted. It incorporated many of the same features as Facebook and was especially popular with bands and musicians, who could share their music with others for free. Adele and Skrillex are just two musicians who owe their fame to MySpace.

Soon everyone was trying to develop a social networking site. The sites didn't provide prepackaged content to people, the way a news or entertainment site might. Instead, these social media sites helped people create, communicate and share what they loved including music, images, and videos. The key to the success of these sites is that they provide a platform on which users create their own content.

As internet connections became faster and computers more powerful, social media became more popular. Facebook was launched in 2004, first as a social networking site for college students. YouTube launched the following year, allowing people to post videos they made or found online. Twitter launched in 2006. The appeal wasn't just being able to connect and share with others; there was also a chance you could become famous. (Justin Bieber, who began posting videos of his performances in 2007 when he was 12, was one of YouTube's first stars).

The debut of Apple's iPhone in 2007 ushered in the era of the smartphone. Now, people could take their social networking with them wherever they went, accessing their favorite sites at the tap of an app. Over the next decade, a whole new generation of social networking sites designed to take advantage of the smartphone's multimedia capabilities emerged. Instagram and Pinterest began in 2010, Snapchat and WeChat in 2011, Telegram in 2013. All of these companies rely on the desire of users to communicate with each other, thereby creating the content that others want to consume.