

# What is Social Media?

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The term social media is currently being relentlessly tossed around that finding an answer to this question is challenging. Ask ten people what social media is and you will probably get ten different answers. None of them will be completely right or wrong.

Social media is described as online media (web or mobile based) that allows two-way communication, blending technology and social interaction. However, it is best understood as 'what it provides' rather than 'what it is'. Certain characteristics shape social media which separate it from traditional media and allow a picture to be formed of what it provides. Four of these characteristics include the following:

- **Openness**

The Internet is built on the openness concept. Social media is no different. Opinions, contributions and sharing of information (that is free to access) are the core aspects of social media.

- **Participation**

Traditional media is a linear medium that broadcasts information to an audience (i.e. television). Social media is collaborative with contributions from the audience (user generated content) allowing them to participate in a two-way conversation. This in turn blurs the line between media and the audience.

- **Community**

Groups are formed very easily to develop communities that share common interests (i.e. particular political views or hobbies). These communities can share information and engage according to their topic of interest.

- **Connectedness**

All the above factors allow people to connect not only through their conversation but also through member's resources and links to other sites. This makes people feel like they belong or have a common purpose.

There are many social media tools which provide for activities in various contexts and for different purposes. This is why pinpointing what social media is can be difficult because each tool is different. The characteristics above assist us to understand what social media does. The key element, however, to understanding social media is that it is all about conversation - a two-way dialogue, engaging and connecting. The next section will talk about the different tools that are currently being utilised.

- **Forum:** arguably one of the early forms of social media. It is an online area for discussion and conversation, often around specific topics and interests. People post messages around the specific topic and conversation forms. Messages may have to be approved by a moderator depending on the type of forum. It is hierarchical in structure and may contain subforums.
- **Blog:** is an online journal with regular entries in reverse chronological order which provide commentary on a particular event, topic or news. Readers can contribute by leaving a response to the post thereby creating a conversation.

- **Social Networks:** personal web pages which allow individuals to connect with friends for the purpose of sharing content or information, photos and so on. *Facebook* is arguably the most popular example of a social network.
- **Microblogging:** is similar to blogging, however, content is distributed in 'updates' and in small quantities (140 characters to be precise), whereas blogging posts can be short or long depending on the blogger. When people think of microblogging, they should think *twitter*.
- **Wiki:** are websites which allow people to create or edit content to the information already on the website depending on the level of access of the wiki. It is a shared website where information is constantly changing. The most known example of a wiki is *Wikipedia*, the online encyclopedia.
- **Podcast:** a digital media file including audio or video files. For example, it can be a downloaded song available by subscription, through Apple iTunes or an university lecture if a class was missed.
- **Content Communities:** are based around communities which manage and share specific type of content. For example, *Flickr*, which focuses around photos, or *YouTube* which is all about video clips.