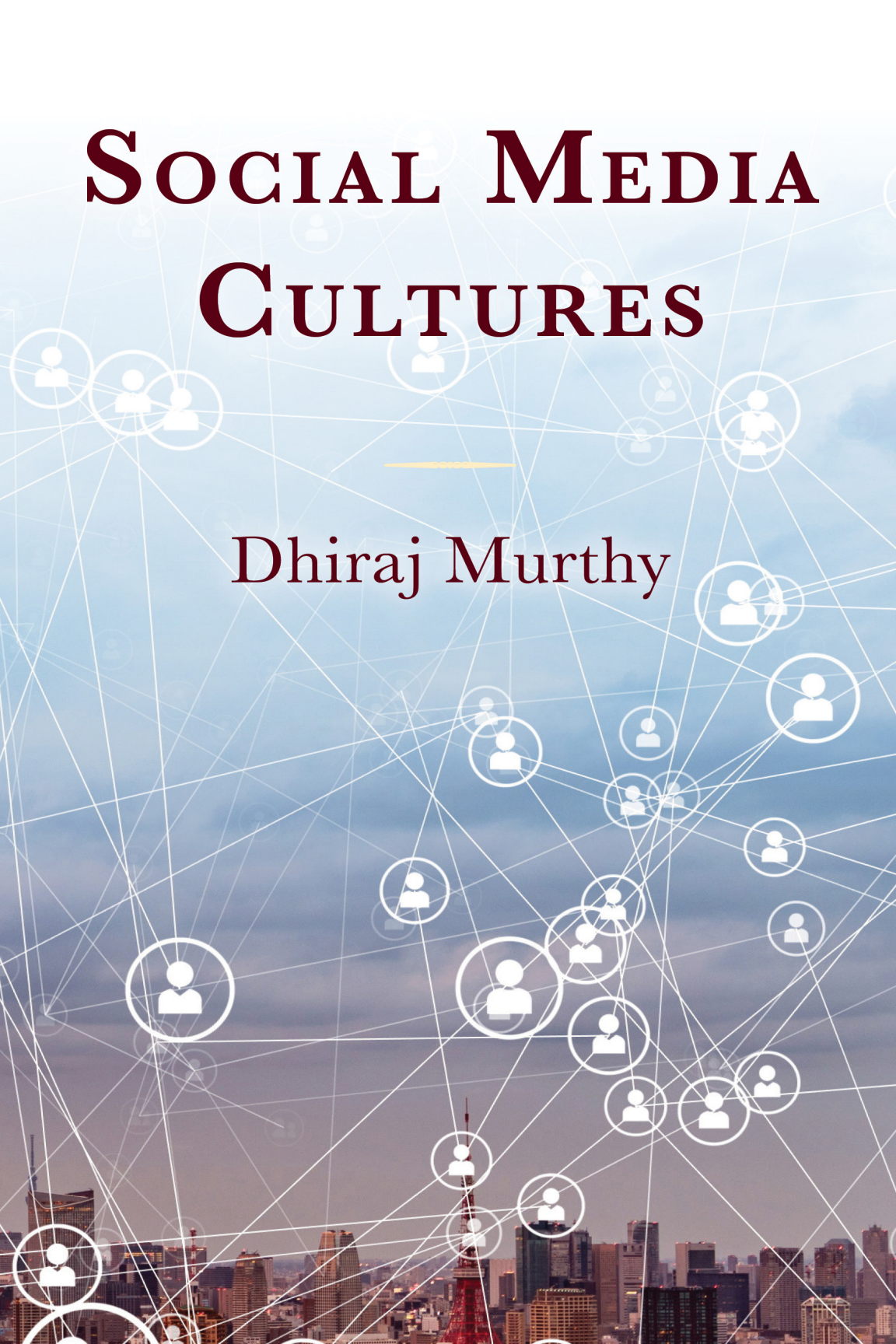
Social Media Cultures

Dhiraj Murthy



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For Kalpana, Deya Anjali, and Akash
Dedicated to Padma and Srinivasa Murthy

Contents

Chapter 1

What Are Social Media Cultures?

The content people post via social media and the cultures that have developed around our posting are part of larger and complex sociological processes. I call these "social media cultures." Social media platforms, such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (now "X"), are home to puppy videos, photos of children, creative recipes, and do-it-yourself (DIY) dance routines while also being used as organizing tools for global social movements, disaster relief, and hate groups. People are social on social media. That complex and nuanced sociality has given rise to activist movements centered around witness cultures, which occur when bystanders and onlookers witness something they feel is unjust and update their social networks to raise awareness. Because many of these social interactions are public, what people post can be exposed (both intentionally and unintentionally) to wide networks of people. "Cancel culture," a behavior where individuals, groups, or even a society permanently reject (i.e., "cancels") someone who has said or done something perceived as offensive, is an outgrowth of such motives.

The prevalence of social media cultures is partially attributable to the rise of smartphones and the proliferation of social apps. The International Telecommunication Union (2021) declared that the "mobile phone is becoming ubiquitous." For example, in the United States, ~96 percent of adults aged 18–49 own a smartphone and between 81 and 84 percent of them use social media; for seniors over 65, smartphone ownership has surged to 61 percent and social media use to 45 percent (Faverio, 2022). In high-income countries, smartphone ownership is ~80 percent, and approximately half of the world's population owns a smartphone (Mawston, 2021). This pervasiveness has led to an increase in social media content from both celebrities and non-celebrities alike. For example, someone who posts their dance routine on TikTok is likely doing so to engage with trends (e.g., popular dances), get views

(e.g., with a goal to go viral), and/or join this kind of popular social media culture (which can connect them with peers locally, nationally, and globally). Similarly, a celebrity on vacation on an exclusive tropical island takes a selfie video and posts it on Instagram to update their followers (purposefully providing a space where fans interact).

Historically, the former was part of a DIY trend that social media platforms engendered, while the latter was used to maintain a brand and celebrity identity. However, this distinction is not as relevant now; "average" people can try to promote their brand and achieve "influencer" status, gain followers, and potentially monetize their content as their platform grows. Though the celebrity is getting paid to do this (particularly if they tag their location/hotel/brand of whatever they are eating or drinking, etc.), average users may be doing the same as part of an aspiration toward influencer status. Ultimately, the responses and engagement with posts speak to a strong sense of community that has often developed on social media platforms.

Though individuals often use their social media platforms to gain followers and status, or to promote their individual brands, the communities these platforms can create have also supported social movements, political causes, and humanitarian efforts. At a more micro-social level, communities on social media platforms have supported marginalized individuals globally (e.g., LGBTQ+ people in countries that do not have support systems or guaranteed affirming care). However, the same community and trust systems have given rise to extreme speech. *Social Media Cultures* uses case studies from TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Parler to specifically explore these arguments in more detail.

Updating people with this frequency and content seems new in many ways, but "update" in the sense of keeping people informed has historically been a use of communication technologies. The telephone, telegrams, magazines, newspapers, and letters not only updated people but also, for example, conveyed fashion trends which some people kept "up-to-date" with. Social updating via communication media historically encouraged some to change their behavior to fit new social expectations or rules. For example, individuals using citizens band (CB) and ham radio in the twentieth century quickly realized these media were more public than private, making them more into a "performer," which pushed their communication and behavior more toward entertainment or communicating general information (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1983, p. 272). The same type of observation of performativity and social media is made today (Curlew, 2019; Taylor, 2022). Therefore, modern social media trends and norms connect to long-standing processes of negotiating norms. Indeed, there is rarely a clear demarcation of what is "civil" on social media. Though scholars have argued that "incivility contrasts with civil speech, which is reasonable and respectful" (Kim & Masullo Chen, 2021, p. 458), such definitions

can be relative based on which group you ask. The sometimes-siloed content that people see influences what they believe and how they act (again, to fit the norms of the group people believe themselves to be a part of).

Ultimately, the content on platforms is constantly changing, and part of the difference between social media cultures and older forms of communication media (e.g., letters) is the half-life of social media content. The time lag between letters was often weeks or months but is daily for many YouTube vloggers/Twitch streamers, and much less for Instagram, TikTok, X (a.k.a. Twitter), and Snapchat. Status updates on social media are 24/7, much like the news cycle. Every minute: 2,430,000 snaps are shared on Snapchat, 1,700,000 pieces of content are shared on Facebook, 1,100,000 swipes occur on Tinder, 347,000 tweets are shared on Twitter, 66,000 photos are shared on Instagram, and 500 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube (Domo Inc., 2023). Though an average user spends 145 minutes on social media daily (B. Wong, 2023), it is obviously impossible to keep up with all the content that is being posted. However, the "fear of missing out" is very much a part of social media cultures (Tandon et al., 2021).

Moreover, complex, black-boxed algorithms powered by artificial intelligence can also nudge us to consume more personalized content, which encourages users to spend more time daily time on social media platforms. These algorithms are also often designed to push users toward consuming and producing certain types of content. This book introduces and explains social media cultures through sociological and communication theory, by uncovering historical connections, and by unpacking contemporary examples such as cancel cultures, extreme speech, misinformation, and bystander witnessing.

UPDATING IS NOT NEW

Thomas Sheridan's (1789) eighteenth-century dictionary of the English language does not contain the word "update," nor does the standard-bearer, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Only in 1910 does the OED first reference the adjectival form with a quote from T. Hardy: "Your up-dated modern page." The most recent edition of that dictionary notes that it wasn't until the 1940s that we get "update" without the hyphen. My own archival work through searching Google Books and other digital archives finds nothing earlier. Though updating is nothing new, the notion of being up-to-date is certainly modern, as the Hardy quote explicitly indicates. Humans have always "shared" (a word in Sheridan's dictionary). "Up-date" became a common word in the 1940s in the context of communication technologies such as the telegram, mass-produced Bakelite-housed "combined" telephones with handset and receiver, and postal systems backed by cars, trains, and ships.

Though telephones particularly democratized real-time updating, scholars at the time noted they use "only one sensory channel, and this limits the amount and quality of information transmitted" (Cathcart & Gumpert, 1983, p. 271). However, the use of computer-mediated technologies has not only added sensory channels but also reduced the cost of updating (i.e., monthly data plan/credits in comparison to the high cost of individual long-distance telephone calls). Besides the high-definition audio and video quality of social platforms, we interact synchronously using gestures, chat boxes, and emojis. Moreover, virtually every social media platform has an option for users to "go live" at any given moment (e.g., Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook). Though technological divides continue to persist with Internet and smartphone access (particularly between the Global North and Global South (Mammen et al., 2023)), the reach, accessibility, affordability, and immersion of these technologies are far more extensive than the communication technologies of the past.

The progression from historical communication media to contemporary forms of social updating involves a history of processes that now has people becoming more comfortable with sharing their personal thoughts in written form—a process that began with diary writing, but now forms a core aspect of social media. One way to explore the bigger picture is to think of a shift from private diaries to contemporary public social media. Diaries were not meant to keep peers or other people up-to-date—they were often a means of documenting events and reflecting on them that was very personal, and their contents were not viewed by outside eyes until the writers had died. On the other hand, social media updates are part of everyday life and keep us continuously up-to-date. Indeed, diary writers had no idea if anyone would even read their diary, given posthumous publication practices. For many today, it is upsetting if no one comments or engages with their online thoughts and posts. Though social media posts are very public in terms of access, they can be quite private and intimate, much like diaries or letters. This is evident in tweets about one's health, for example, which resemble the intimacy of updating one's diary. What emerges is that although social media are ostensibly public, user-generated content often remains personal and even quite intimate.

SOCIAL MEDIA CULTURES CAN BE UNDERSTOOD THROUGH SOCIAL THEORY

Social Media Cultures argues that social media and the forms of updating they facilitate have not emerged in a vacuum, but, rather, have developed from historical processes. Indeed, the title's inclusion of cultures explicitly draws from the Frankfurt School. In the 1940s, Theodor Adorno (2005)

observed that "aristocratic values" cede to "egalitarian terms and the jargon of unlimited communication." His comment is just as prescient today as traditional, elite broadcast and print media industries with time and space limitations have given way to the egalitarian, less regulated, and unlimited communication afforded by social media. The difference between updating someone via a once-a-month letter of several pages and seemingly "unlimited" streams of snaps, tweets, and Facebook status updates is a case in point. Adorno and his Frankfurt School colleague, Max Horkheimer (1972, p. 121), argued that "technology acquires power over society" and what we feel as a technological "need" is governed by large flows of international (economic, social, and political) capital. Technology can constitute a form of coercive manipulation that is guided by sometimes intangible forms of capital. Though Adorno's and Horkheimer's work is pre-Internet, their point applies to social media as our behaviors, norms, and practices on social media are affected by multibillion-dollar industries around the world as well as the political agendas tied to these companies. Ultimately, though it may feel like social media cultures are highly individualistic and we make our own decisions regarding social media use, Adorno and Horkheimer's argument is that larger structural forces are at play behind technology and society.

Social Media Cultures argues that part of the egalitarian turn picked up by Adorno and Horkheimer can be connected to some of the types of democratization seen in public service broadcasting via television and radio that became ubiquitous in the twentieth century. Specifically, in the words of Paddy Scannell (a central figure in the founding of media studies), "broadcasting, appears as ordinary, mundane, accessible, knowable, familiar, recognizable, intelligible, shareable, and communicable for whole populations" (Scannell, 1989, p. 152). It is talkable by everyone. Scannell's point is that part of broadcasting's power is its ubiquity, banality, and accessibility. Moreover, unlike diaries and letters, broadcasts by radio and television were public and shared. For example, the radio and television were used to broadcast live and engender a collective shared experience of the amazing/awe-inspiring (the 1969 Apollo 11 lunar landing) and horrific events (J. F. Kennedy's assassination). This distinct change has fostered technologically mediated cultures over decades where the "ordinary, mundane, accessible" aspects of our everyday lives are documented in media. Uniquely, social media provides networked, interactive formats for sharing and experiencing everyday life collectively. Though some radio and television have active two-way communication (i.e., broadcaster to audience and audience to broadcaster) through call-ins and letters, for example, social media often employs hugely multidirectional forms of communication (i.e., broadcaster/producer to audience, audience to broadcaster/producer, audience to audience, etc.).

Moreover, it has become normal in many societies to update anything (and sometimes everything) on social media—what one is reading, eating, hating, liking, smelling, hearing, or seeing. Interestingly, some of those updates may be completely banal to the updater but may be profound to recipients. For example, friends and family who are far away may consume updates about a communicator's daily life as an easy way of being privy to the life of the updater. This takes on an especially unique role in diasporic populations who have turned to social media platforms to maintain the vitality of familial networks. This theoretically rich framework allows *Social Media Cultures* to explore the motivations for everyday or every-hour updating and asks whether these cultures of updating have transformed society. This book similarly investigates whether new forms of collective social engagement via social media updating are part of a response to larger structural forces that tend to atomize and individualize us. If so, our everyday updating is potentially contributing to a collective reshaping of the social.

SOCIAL MEDIA CULTURES AND A CHANGE OF NORMS

Social media can be seen as the public square (and sometimes public house) of the twenty-first century. Soapbox comments at Speakers' Corner in London's Hyde Park or in a public house can be considered the eighteenth-century version of some social media posts. Like the park or the public house, people post content today for sometimes unknown audiences. However, these dispatches, though public, were geographically constrained to those only in the immediate vicinity of the communicator. Social media platforms, on the other hand, make what would have likely been more private communication public, and these updates are globally disseminated and immediately accessible, often to amorphous audiences.

People also publicly update more of what Erving Goffman (1978) calls the "back" stage (i.e., life usually not seen, which takes place behind the scenes). Part of this is attributable to the fact that never before has it been so easy to share. However, that is not the whole story. The social norms of what individuals consider acceptable to share with global publics on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have shifted dramatically since just the turn of the century. Moreover, "behind the scenes" posts, on TikTok for example, provide a "relatable look" (Su et al., 2020, p. 441). "Get ready with me" ("GRWM") videos (e.g., get ready with me in the morning, get dressed with me, a day in the life) originated on YouTube in the noughties, and GRWM images became a trend on Instagram and morphed into short, highly popular videos on TikTok (Sweeney-Romero, 2022). GRWM posts are very common

ways users perform the "back" stage to their audiences, which are designed to cultivate a perceived "authentic" connection (e.g., audiences think they are friends with or "know' the poster, humanize a brand, and get more reach). *Social Media Cultures* draws out these types of important changes in the politics of everyday life and in the increased blurring of the private and the public.

Social "oversharing" (i.e., "too much information" (TMI)) has led to moral concerns around contemporary social media cultures. For example, Gu (2022, p. 350) argues that TMI reduces "people's capacity of judgement [. . . and has] a deleterious effect on the quality of information circulating." Oversharing by others may also lead people to regulate their own behavior in public. For example, people might be more careful partying, drinking, or doing drugs as photo or video evidence could end up on social media permanently as part of a digital footprint. Photos of politicians doing blackface in their youth (e.g., Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau) that resurface decades later (Dobrowolsky & Leal-Iyoupe, 2022) highlight this permanence and may be shaping some people's contemporary social media practices and behaviors.

This is not the first time such anxiety has surfaced regarding personal media use. When Polaroid photography reached a critical mass in the United States, there were similar worries that everything would be photographed at the time it happened and the instant photo could interrupt the social setting, whether you were having an intimate family dinner or immersed in conversation with a visiting friend, as people would want to see that photo. As with a Polaroid, a selfie can be pro-social, but can also be "antisocial." There is a potential tension that instantaneous, hyper-globalized media takes individuals out of the moment as they document/consume it. On the other hand, this has led to a democratization of content creation (e.g., amateur videographers, cinematographers, photographers, directors, and producers).

Similar debates around sociability and television were rife in the twentieth century. Though the high price of a television limited availability and, in its inception, often meant that families/households would gather to listen/watch scheduled programming together, by the 1980s in the United States, some family members may drift by and watch TV "en route [. . .] while moving about" (Leichter et al., 1985) and, sometimes, deciding what to watch on television or whether it should be on led to tension in the family (Rosenblatt & Cunningham, 1976). Though access to watching programming individually is much easier today through multiple devices and streams of content to consume, it is worth noting that families still watch Netflix en route, often with a phone/tablet, and deciding what to watch remains a source of contention. Moreover, watching content on social media can be pro-social (e.g., while having a "cuddle") or individualistic (with all family members watching

different things on their devices together or someone needing "alone time") (Derix & Leong, 2020).

Social communication in the twenty-first century has involved higher levels of disclosure, often with indeterminate audiences. It also means that people's lives are more searchable and knowable. It is increasingly challenging to be obscure or private in everyday social communication. For many around the world, the Internet has become essential to many aspects of daily life (from government services to paying bills). Even if one opts out of creating accounts on social media platforms, it is still likely in many countries that one will still consume content on/from social media (e.g., how-to videos on YouTube, news stories including posts from social media, and content forwarded/linked through WhatsApp messages). Getting "off the grid" from social media is nearly impossible in most countries (Vertesi, 2022).

An interesting trend in social media is the desire to combine communication with large, global publics, while retaining certain levels of privacy. This has led to anonymous publics at the local level (through mainstream and niche platforms and apps such as YikYak, Whisper, and 4chan). So-called "ephemeral" social media like Snapchat follow this trend as well. Moreover, some platforms, particularly those focused on meet-ups and dating, constrain who one connects with based on geographical proximity, as calculated by bounded boxes of nearby GPS coordinates. Some platforms allow one to opt into/out of location sharing, and on some, users actively change their location (manually or via VPNs) to connect with people in another country or even continent. *Social Media Cultures* examines whether this might be a response to the ubiquitous media globalization Hjarvard, Tufte, and others studied in the "Global Media Cultures" project at the turn of this century (Hjarvard, 2003).

SOCIAL MEDIA CULTURES AND SOCIABILITY

This book argues that social media pervasiveness is not emblematic of anti-sociability, but rather that the "social" plays a key role in social media. However, the ways in which the social are branded and marketed, and also regularly mediated by large group interactions, have fundamentally changed everyday life for many around the world. And social judgment or encouragement—rather than being exclusive to geographically proximate small groups—is increasingly determined by likes and comments made by these same large, amorphous audiences to which social media platforms help to connect people.

For many, this highlights major shifts in social communication and sociability to more public mediation (of course, some people have and will desire

obscurity). The "lifestreaming" Alice Marwick (2013) refers to is not just about self-promotion, but is more about needing to participate in these new forms of sociability. If something is not "liked" by followers, a content creator may even feel the update never really occurred at all and might elect to take down the post or story, so it does not appear on their page. There are many cultures that have always valued the opinions of strangers. Sometimes, people value the opinions of strangers because strangers are thought to be more objective than close ties (i.e., family members or a social circle). Social media uniquely quantifies and allows commenting as well, processes that are hardly unproblematic as forms of approval become more material. Some platforms are attempting to counteract this quantification. For example, Instagram's "Hide Like Count" feature enables users to opt-in to hide like counts.

People are exposed to the words and images of close and more distant connections (e.g., friends of friends, random Snapchat followers, and forwarded Instagram stories). Sociability itself now involves the production and consumption of increasingly large volumes of updates on social media and messaging platforms. Messaging technologies such as Apple's iMessage, Facebook's Messenger/WhatsApp, WeChat, and Line (in Japan) have added emojis, images, gifs, and other content to the once text-only "text message." Even payment platforms such as the U.S.-based Venmo encourage payers and payees to provide updates to their public transaction feed (though Venmo offers a "private" option for those who wish to share details of their transactions only with those involved).

SOCIAL MEDIA CULTURES AND SOCIAL FORMATIONS

Social Media Cultures also uniquely explores micro-social formations that impact sharing, while also addressing larger structural processes in the economy, polity, and society that encourage social updating. Sociologically grounded discourses of inclusion and exclusion also highlight the formation of group-level norms. As society has become more atomized and individualized, many feel the need to be seen and be part of a social group. They may also feel comfortable disclosing more as disclosure tends to solicit responses from others and can support bonding and community formation. Because diasporic groups are often away from family members flung across the globe, many aspects of their lives may be posted on social media platforms to maintain familial and other ties. Social media platforms are often integral to diasporic ethnic/racial identities (what communication scholar Nick Couldry (2012) terms "ethnic need").

Therefore, *Social Media Cultures* uniquely examines how we negotiate social sharing and the often complex nature of this. For example, in 2015 during Women's History Month, Rupi Kaur posted photographs on Instagram of herself fully clothed, but with some period blood showing. Instagram removed the photos, citing community norms, but Kaur launched a campaign to get the photos reinstated. Kaur subsequently received death and rape threats (Ulatowski, 2023). She reposted the photograph in 2023 to highlight patriarchal notions that it is still widely considered unacceptable to discuss menstruation and periods publicly on social media.[1] As Kaur's images highlight, forms of control, etiquette, race, and norms around social updating are very much in play. This case and others in *Social Media Cultures* highlight that boundary crossing, pushing, and redefining remain prominent, and we negotiate what we post about—from the every day (periods) to extreme views (hate speech). In the context of communication studies, this perspective, termed "meso," "centers around the routines and activities that link various organizational units" (Ballard & Seibold, 2003, p. 382). This negotiation is fundamental but is generally overshadowed in favor of macro- or micro-social constructs rather than some integration between the two.

Social Media Cultures ultimately argues that rather than just individuals or groups with broadband connections posting content into the void, contemporary social media cultures have the potential for community building, activism, and political engagement. The sociologist Norbert Elias (2000) terms these as "civilizing" forces (i.e., toward the building of civil society). However, social media cultures can push people toward homogeneity that closes down certain voices or thoughts. There can be pressure for users to fit a norm to get views, likes, and comments. For example, some high school and college students post their study notes, spaces, etc., on Instagram with #studygram, a hashtag started with over 18 million posts.[2] Others follow #studygram users. Many #studygram profiles have a similar aesthetic (generally beautifully crafted notes, which can include calligraphy, colorful doodles, and meticulous highlights). Though partly this is a user decision to increase views, brands (e.g., stationary products) insist on only giving affiliate deals to influencers who match the expected #studygram aesthetic (Arango Montoya, 2020). *Social Media Cultures* synthesizes these diverse strands and makes a larger, unique argument toward the existence of cultures operating not only the local and global simultaneously but the hyperlocal and hyperglobal may be updating simultaneously too. For example, a #studygram post on Instagram may have users from around the world interacting with each other through comments.

This book begins by mapping out historical antecedents and relevant theoretical frameworks. The reader will be reminded of the connections of modern updating to early media forms such as the diary, local print, and message

boards. Most importantly, *Social Media Cultures* leverages comparisons between these historical popular media forms in order to make clear (1) the fact that contemporary update cultures are not all that "new" in many of the ways in which they organize our social lives and (2) to give the reader a concrete base. *Social Media Cultures* takes this question as its starting point: Has the proliferation of social media posting really changed society? If so, how?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

The chapter outline below is divided into two parts and introduces readers to social media cultures, including challenges and risks. Part I presents an introduction to social media cultures, including definitions, manifestations, networked and mobile contexts, power structures, and explanations of how social media cultures have evolved from historical technologies rather than out of thin air. Part II largely focuses on applied case studies in areas including celebrities, self-expression, cancel cultures, and extreme speech. It also explains the methodological innovations I use to study social media cultures empirically (including mixed and computational methods such as social network analysis, machine learning, large-scale data analysis, and qualitative work).

Part I: Social and Technological Context in Which Updating Happens

Chapter 2. A Historical and Theoretical Understanding of Social Media Cultures

We have always had social updating as a part of our lives. This chapter investigates what is the same now and what is different. For example, letters—an analog update technology—provide a potential bridge to understand differences between modes and eras of updating. Modern social media are not only often double-edged and valuable in their dissemination of social information but also potentially divisive and inaccurate with rumor mills or downright misinformation. New and older forms of mediated cultures can be conceptualized via cultural studies. This chapter, therefore, uses media studies from the Frankfurt School to understand how the reception of technological mediation to media production and consumption in the 1940s and 1950s has many parallels to relevant debates today. Though historical forms of social communication were far more limited than social media, critical theorists of the time like Adorno and Horkheimer saw media as part of a "uniform" system, and their arguments on how capitalism organizes media were prescient. Though

social media is different from analog communication media, the reception of the telegraph and telephone, for example, and how they were consumed has many parallels to today.

Chapter 3. Networks and Social Media Cultures

Social Media Cultures also have similarities to historical social networks. For example, historical, physical rumor mills spread gossip and misinformation. Additionally, historical social cultures leveraged weak tie networks to disseminate social, political, and economic updates to more distant networks. Simultaneously, these social networks updated each other locally to maintain strong ties (e.g., friends and relatives updating each other regularly about their lives). However, contemporary social media networks generally involve far more network ties with much messier intersections. Specifically, the messy overlapping of different networks makes updating fast, furious, and sometimes unpredictable in terms of propagation and virality. Moreover, the ability to be social with strangers, friends, family members, and work colleagues, sometimes on the same platform, leads to context collapse, where audiences and the content people see become increasingly blurred. Many post on social media because they think someone will be listening. And if no one is listening, updates can act like diaries, providing a reflective space. Therefore, social media cultures do not inherently privilege the value of receiving a response.

Chapter 4. "Witness Cultures" on Social Media

Part of social media cultures involves "witness cultures," the posting, recording, or livestreaming on social media of what one witnesses. Sometimes what is witnessed is significant (even world-changing) and other times it disappears in people's feeds. Regardless, this collective updating can create new forms of awareness of social, political, and economic issues. New ideas and knowledge can come from what has been witnessed, and a critical mass of updating can create new social movements.

Witness cultures can involve documenting everyday racism, sexism, homophobia, and physical violence. This type of updating involves revising, critiquing, rethinking, and/or rejecting dominant social norms and tropes through the witnessing and telling of individual stories. For example, the global feminist #MeToo movement and #BlackInTheIvory (a movement exposing racism in academia) both leverage social media cultures that encourage people to record, upload, and share sexist and racist incidents that they personally or otherwise witness. This can bring attention to marginal incidents, issues, and activities. Ultimately, updates are both banal and profound, but our need to update can build and maintain political consciousness

and ultimately potentially lead to social movements. Multiple posts, streams, and videos on a racist incident can lead to a social movement tackling institutional racism. For example, social media posts during the 2024 Pro-Palestinian U.S. College Protests have included videos of racialized police attacks, and this has raised awareness of particular incidents and trends. In cases like this, posting as part of witness cultures could even be politicizing average people.

Chapter 5. Mobile Social Media Cultures

The process of social updating has been fundamentally shaped by ubiquitous mobile technologies. Being able to make a call, post, or stream from anywhere to anyone has shaped many aspects of social media cultures. Adding high-speed mobile Internet and high-quality smartphone cameras has shaped the synchronicity and richness of mobile updating. As Keep (2014) argues, the transformation is from "the Kodak moment" to the "mobile moment." There is a very profound difference in having powerful ubiquitous technology in one's hands to update. Social media has become more live because of mobile technologies. Even still photographs can have "live" features that embed several animated frames into the still that can be reviewed or turned into a short video.

This results in a compression of time and space that allows those near and far to synchronously interact within virtual space. Often, multiple media are simultaneously employed (primarily textual social media, SMS, and visual social media platforms), providing a certain level of telepresence. Mobile social media cultures also encourage new ways of visual updating that leverage the high-end cameras on smartphones. Apple has emphasized this in many of their iPhone campaigns that feature striking, high-definition photos taken by users, plastered on subway platforms around the world. Average people in their everyday lives share on social media about everything—from cancer diagnoses to an undercooked sandwich. Mobile social media apps have also directly influenced citizen journalism, quantified self, disaster updating, and citizen science (topics discussed in part II). The fact that mobile apps have become normalized in many people's everyday lives around the world encourages them to "instinctually" update their social media.

Mobile social media also marks significant shifts in terms of corporate branding and marketing. Specifically, people post from mobile devices when they consume branded products—clothes, food, media, etc.—and organize those photos on platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and Instagram through hashtags, topics, and stories. As a result, corporate entities have unprecedented consumption metadata and data from people's daily lives. Very little distinction is made between the public and private, and this chapter therefore also comments on privacy concerns.

Part II: How Update Cultures Transform/Change Media, Economy, and Society

Chapter 6. Celebrity and Influencer Social Media Cultures

Social media has moved people away from the one-directional aspects of traditional, off-limits celebrity cultures, historically facilitated by broadcast television. Reality television first marked a break with this by providing viewers with a perceived special access pass to celebrity lives. Some who post about or to celebrities via social media platforms may feel like they can be a celebrity by being visible in public conversations. People also update celebrities on platforms like Instagram with what they think is fashionable. For example, Nigerian Instagrammer Rita Dominic (@RitaDominic; 7.4 million followers) regularly receives such updates to her frequent posts. Social media updates are sometimes even broadcast on television (a photo, video, or text). Many now want to update celebrities and micro-celebrities (i.e., well-known YouTubers, TikTokkers, or Instagrammers) regardless of whether their update is replied to by anyone. Some users can feel part of a collective of celebrity followers. Ultimately, celebrities and micro-celebrities do single out or reply to some updates from average people, and this often sustains or encourages the masses of updaters.

This chapter examines how social media has reshaped some of the one-directional aspects of traditional broadcast media. Many people around the world are increasingly updating celebrities without a second thought, and this chapter explicitly situates these changes by connecting earlier media scholarship of what actions television often elicited (e.g., seminal studies of *Dallas* (Ang, 1991)) and contemporary forms of explicit elicitation via social media. The chapter notes that this bears similarities to shout-outs on the radio and requests in that people still want to be recognized on air with 15 seconds of fame. However, there are also many differences with this type of social updating as posts become part of a public stream. TikTok, as a platform, has been particularly effective in eliciting everyday individuals to post short video clips on topics that matter to them. These have tended to be lifestyle and fashion-oriented. Some TikTok users have seen a meteoric rise of followers after developing a particular fashion style or hair-styling method.

Chapter 7. Self-Expression, Connectedness, and Community within Social Media Cultures

Short clips of video and music have been important to DIY update platforms such as Vine and TikTok. Influencers and non-influencers alike see these platforms as a venue for self-expression. Short, looped videos can be inviting and enticing for many viewers (like animated gifs) and can encourage them

to like and reply to these posts. Moreover, because platforms such as TikTok have a norm of videos of a minute or under (Ceci, 2023), consumers of such content know that they are not going to be investing a lot. Attributes such as video length are important and remain understudied.

DIY video is important to social media cultures. Specifically, platforms such as TikTok have been particularly effective in eliciting average individuals to post short video clips on, for example, fashion and lifestyle-related topics. Using digital ethnography, I explain how I found that non-celebrity users are not generally posting in ways to try to become micro-celebrities. Rather, this type of posting style is rare and quotidian posting is more banal, with an average user more likely to want to show off their style to friends, followers, and the platform more broadly. This is likely part of their own self-identity and important to their own self-presentation and style. Fashion-related topics are prevalent on TikTok and Instagram and many of the posts and hashtags I studied show non-influencers hashtagging products (including brands) as well as, for example, displaying a wardrobe they put together and they think looks good.

Chapter 8. Extremist Content, Politics, and Community

Social media cultures involve a range of political communication, content, spaces, and actors. This can involve social movements, as discussed in chapter 4, or more extreme forms. This chapter focuses on the latter: extreme, radical political updates through a case study of the right-wing update platform Parler, which was shut down in January 2021. The predominantly U.S.-focused platform had a much smaller user base than Twitter and Facebook, for example. As of January 2021, it had 12 million users (Q. Wong, 2021). Though small in comparison, these millions of users had a profound impact on right-wing discourses in the United States, with the platform being attributed heavily to the January 6 United States Capitol attack in 2021.

As there has been extensive work around the specific event of the January 6 United States Capitol attack, this chapter seeks to understand extreme updates within social media cultures using a data set I have collected that includes metadata from over 1 million Parler videos and qualitative work on 250 Parler videos sampled from ~20K Parler videos I collected and have GPS data for. I labeled attributes around the content of videos as well as the race/ethnicity, sex, and language of the updater if it was easily identifiable. I labeled demographic attributes of updaters as there has been a recurrent framing of the ultra-right in the United States as being white male-dominated. However, given election results which showed increased support among minorities of Donald Trump (Nagesh, 2020a), I hypothesized that some of these shifts might be reflected among those who were posting updates and this chapter highlights that this was indeed the case. To answer questions about race/

ethnicity, location, political topics, and how divisiveness operates in social media cultures, this chapter explores where Parler users are posting from, what they are posting about, and who they are. A unique finding from this chapter is that Parler users posted updates about their kids, pets, and weekend sojourns, building community and trust, an intimacy which enabled users to feel comfortable posting extreme, hateful content.

Chapter 9. Cancel Cultures

"Cancel cultures" are behaviors in social media cultures where individuals, groups, or even a society permanently reject (i.e., "cancels") someone, something, or a group who has said, done, or represents something perceived as offensive. Cancel cultures are defined as "the withdrawal of any kind of support (viewership, social media follows, purchases of products endorsed by the person, etc.) for those who are assessed to have said or done something unacceptable or highly problematic, generally from a social justice perspective especially alert to sexism, heterosexism, homophobia, racism, bullying, and related issues" (Ng, 2020, p. 623). Cancel cultures have both positive and problematic aspects, though we tend to hear more about the latter. In the case of racist behavior, for example, cancel cultures can play "some kind of a role in publicly criticizing racism," but social media feeds can also lose sight "of the actual issue of social justice" (Bouvier, 2020, p. 10).

Cancel cultures are somewhat tied to the temporality and ephemerality of social media (Bouvier, 2020). Specifically, it is highly event-driven, and once the event passes and the public or social media public have sufficiently castigated and canceled their intended target, social media platforms move on until the next cancellation occurs. Cancel culture also tends to thrive on platforms such as Twitter, where short communication enables high levels of information awareness but potentially low levels of nuanced in-depth understanding. Platforms such as Twitter and WhatsApp are very good at making information known about someone who is being canceled so that others can retweet, reply, make image macros, and so on. However, there is often a dearth of in-depth, reasoned debate over potential "cancelees." Similarly, "critically nuanced interactions" can get glossed over, and what is more venomous and hateful is often what is spotlighted (Ng, 2020, p. 624). This chapter seeks to understand cancel cultures sociologically by exploring how and why short-lived call-outs have such an appeal to local, national, and international publics. Using case studies from around the world, this chapter investigates individual as well as broader societal dynamics that undergird cancel cultures. I take a balanced approach in terms of understanding cancel cultures, weighing some of the positive aspects (e.g., documenting smaller-scale and larger-scale injustices and mobilizing support for

those victimized) as well as negative aspects (e.g., polarization, extreme ad hominem against the perpetrator(s), and often a lack of impact on larger social issues).

Chapter 10. The Implications of Social Media Cultures

Social Media Cultures concludes with the argument that contemporary social updating needs to be situated within larger understandings of media, communication, and information technology. Though people may feel they are increasingly obsessed with updating friends, family, or the world, there are clear historical throwbacks to a desire to share and be social. One difference is the speed of social media and the new ways that people can post high-definition updates from just about anywhere, using smartphones. The telepresence afforded by these media encourages many people to update even more. On the other hand, social media cultures may be encouraging cultures of peer pressure (e.g., social media crazes). Ultimately, people across the world are shaping social media cultures in ways that are unprecedented in terms of their potential role in larger public and macro-social conversations. Social media cultures are also shaped by networked publics, where people respond to world events on social media from smartphones, tablets, and other devices in real time. These publics can potentially represent new sociopolitical formations. However, this chapter argues that these changes and shifts should be critically considered within existing theoretical frames which have been successfully used to study older media forms.

CONCLUSION

Social media cultures can and must be examined within the context of larger societal impacts. One lens that is used recurrently throughout this book is race and ethnicity. Some of these insights are premised on my previous quantitative work. For example, my work with approximately 26 million tweets geo-located within the continental United States found that cities that had populations with a higher percentage of people of color tended to update via Twitter more than whiter cities (Murthy et al., 2021). This potentially signals new ethnic and racial configurations emerging within social media cultures, where traditionally marginalized groups are leveraging social media technologies.

In part I of this book, historical antecedents and digital throwbacks are traced, while providing a theoretically grounded framework that is historically rooted. Part II uses empirical cases to draw out unique ways in which social media cultures, due to technological affordances, are supporting new forms of sociality. This has led to social media shaping many aspects of the

economic, social, and political spheres. In the context of activism and social movements, social media proliferation has meant that when an injustice has occurred, other activists or even the public at large can be updated in real time. For example, Black people in Western countries, who have been subject to much higher levels of police surveillance and brutality (exemplified by George Floyd's murder in 2020), have installed apps such as Legal Equalizer and the iPhone Siri shortcut "I'm being pulled over." The latter automatically dims a smartphone's screen brightness, records a video clip, and sends location information and the recorded clip to a specified contact (Lee, 2020). Such tools can, at the click of a button or a preset voice command, update emergency contacts and their social networks during an arrest.

Bystander videos and feeds posted have also been invaluable in documenting excessive police force, particularly against racial and ethnic minorities in countries that allow the recording of the police. This is part of what Oscar Gandy (1993) theorizes as an inversion of the panopticon from surveillance to "sousveillance," enabling those who were previously surveilled to be able to update in real time and provide a form of checks and balances on police surveillance. Social media cultures, therefore, have real impacts on society and traditional power relations. In the context of social movements, organizers can reach members of their movements and update members of their movements with critical information, progress, protests, and other events, and so on. This temporality of social media becomes crucially important and marks a significant change to historical forms of updating. Ultimately, *Social Media Cultures* seeks to unpack some of the motives for updating and the behaviors that have become ubiquitous as well as the norm.

NOTES

1. https://www.instagram.com/p/Cpd-aUYJ0Uc/
2. https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/studygram/