Counting to Nowhere: Social Media Adoption and Use as an Opportunity for Public Scholarship and Engagement

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Abstract
Counting social media site users is popular yet fraught with challenges. Scholars can help illuminate public discussion of social media use. An open access journal like Social Media + Society provides a platform for scholarly public engagement. This essay highlights some of the challenges of understanding social media adoption and suggests opportunities for scholars to become part of public deliberation.

Keywords
measurement, public, scholarship

Quantification is everywhere. Of particular interest to many is the number of social media users of a particular platform. While Ev Williams, Twitter founder, does not “give a shit” that Instagram has more users than Twitter does, he seems to be in the minority. In the race to the bank, investors and tech pundits anxiously await the release of the latest number of users.

The financial implications of number of users are obvious: more eyes means more revenue. Yet when pundits, policymakers, or governments cite social media users as meaningful proxies for deeper concepts, the stakes are much higher than financial profit. When pundits or government officials speak of number of users, it is often in support of a bigger social or political goal: “84 percent of youth in Country X are on Facebook . . . Thus the democratic revolution is coming!” or “most African-American households have Internet access, so the digital divide is over.” Beyond inaccuracies on Wall Street, these claims can have substantial impact on policy. There exists an opportunity for scholarship to help increase understanding of what is meaningful—if scholars are willing. Social Media + Society can be a place for public scholarship that can help. Four suggestions for areas of understanding that are ripe for contextualization from scholars of social media are as follows:

1. The contributing factors to technology adoption are well-known but become embedded within discussions of adoption rates.

Scholarly research tells us that technologies, including social media, tend to diffuse in similar patterns. In nearly all societies, the wealthier, the better educated, the more urban, and the younger adopt new technology earlier. We also know that there are a myriad of other, non-demographic reasons for adoption. Thus, when comparing entities based on percentage of individuals who have adopted a technology or use a social media platform, analyses that do not consider these differences are misrepresenting the actual technology landscape. When the media suggest that a particular group is leaving or joining a social media site, scholars can illuminate the discussion with diffusion of innovation, context collapse, or impression management to increase understanding.

2. Counts are notoriously inaccurate.

Counting users is methodologically difficult. In lieu of a properly sampled nationally representative survey (which is not perfect either—social desirability and response biases abound), Internet penetration rates generally come from the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a United Nations agency that is responsible for information and communication technologies. But the ITU gets its data from “administrative data sources,” which are “mainly telecommunications operators, and are collected by governments at the national level (ministries or regulatory authorities).”

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Some governments have reason to inflate penetration rates, and there are few checks on this by the ITU.

Social media user data come either from press releases from the companies themselves or from third-party services like SocialBakers that determine users based on the number of potential viewers of an advertisement. Because these are for-profit entities selling analytics to marketers without transparent methodologies, they are thus unreliable.

Moreover, with social media platforms, it is very difficult to determine the true location of a user. With choices about listing location and proxy servers that can allow a user to appear to be located in a different country than he or she is actually in, accuracy is questionable.

Finally, is a user “real” is up for debate, and scholars have a lot to say about this. When Instagram purged “fake” users in December 2014, 29% of the site’s users were “fake.” Twitter admitted that 8.5%–14% of its users are “fake.”

Scholars from a variety of disciplines are creating methods for detecting fake accounts (Ratkiewicz et al., 2011) and certainly could speak to a public concern about automated deception online.

3. “Ever used” is a meaningless category.

Another issue with social media user adoption rates is that they are all-inclusive. An user includes not only the young woman with a smartphone, iPad, and a laptop who is on Facebook for all of her waking hours but also the older man who went to an Internet cafe once 4 years ago and never went back. All of these individuals are experiencing a different Internet and social media world, and potentially benefitting from their technology use differently as well.

A more useful measure, from scholarship, would be of frequency of use because daily users are different from occasional users. Even so, measuring perpetually connected people’s use is futile. Consider this, “how many hours are you online each day?” Does checking your e-mail while waiting at the dentist’s office count as 5 minutes of use? If your smartphone is constantly connected to the Internet, are you online 24 hours a day? Scholars are trying to address this question (see Blank & Groselj, 2014).

4. Activities matter.

People assume a lot about what others do with social media. The average North American may spend his or her day checking Facebook, reading news stories, texting, and e-mailing. This may not be the case for everyone, and scholarship speaks to this. A user concerned about resources, for example, may be more cautious in her use. Wyche, Schoenebeck, and Forte (2013) explain that there is a cost associated with every phase of signing up for and maintaining a Facebook account—beyond the Internet cafe (and travel costs) or mobile Internet fees (and fees associated with charging the phone’s battery), users felt compelled to scan their best photographs for profile pictures, then pay to upload them, and continue using the site. Certainly, these users are experiencing a different Facebook than my American undergraduate students do. It is important to acknowledge that people do different things with their technology and that these different activities are not only determined by access to resources, cultural norms, and personal characteristics but also have different outcomes (Pearce & Rice, 2013). News reading is enriching for some things, while a first-person-shooter game may not be. Watching videos of cats falling off tables has a different impact than taking an online course does. So when adoption rates are cited, it is entirely possible that many of those users are watching pornography, playing Farmville, or reading celebrity blogs.

Conclusion

Scholars should insert themselves into discussions of social media use. And instead of complaining about ignorant media coverage, they should work with journalists, governments, and pundits to be more critical consumers of statistics and understand the challenges associated with social media use. Social Media + Society, particularly because of its open access policy, can be a place for the public to come to understand social media better as well as a welcoming place for scholars wishing to have a broader audience for their work.

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Notes

1. See http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/12/27/quantified_self_critique_personal_data_apps_for_calories_exercise_sleep.html
2. See https://medium.com/@ev/a-mile-wide-an-inch-deep-48f36e48d4cb
3. This is not to imply that some scholars do not engage. On the contrary, many do.
4. Pew and other sources as an exception.
5. See http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2013/12/27/quantified_self_critique_personal_data_apps_for_calories_exercise_sleep.html
6. See http://www.rferl.org/content/why-technology-penetration-rates/24805097.html
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