

The Evolution of Social Media from 1969 to 2013: A Change in Competition and a Trend Toward Complementary, Niche Sites

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Abstract

How did social media begin, and where is it going? Will a new social network conquer Facebook? In order to speculate about the future, the evolution of social media from 1969 to 2013 – a topic that scholars have yet to explore – is examined. Through a textual analysis, the historical development and downfall of influential social media platforms is traced and a discussion of how media evolution theories applied along the way are provided. Results indicate early social media platforms competed with each other directly and marketed to the general population, largely supporting the functional equivalence theory of media evolution. Around the turn of the century, however, social networks experienced a theoretical shift. Sites competed less with each other and more for audience time and attention. Simultaneously, platforms started targeting niche populations – a change that may support the future of social media as an industry supporting the complementary and niche theories of media evolution.

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Two-thirds of American adult Internet consumers used social networking sites as of December 2012, according to the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project (Brenner, 2013). That number rose to 83 percent for 18-29-year-olds (Brenner, 2013). The number of people using social networking sites has nearly doubled since 2008 (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011), with Facebook clocking more than one billion active users in October 2012 (One Billion, 2012). Some scholars view the rise of the Internet as a game changer in the history of mass communication, saying the Web has transformed the way people interact and communicate (Hung & Yuen, 2010), going as far as to call the Internet revolutionary (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004).

However, some evidence suggests the popularity of Facebook may be fading. Sixty-one percent of the dominant social network's users reported voluntarily taking a break from the site for several weeks or more, and more than a quarter said they planned to spend less time on the site in the coming year (Rainie, Smith, & Duggan, 2013). What lies ahead for Facebook? Will it be overtaken by a new social media platform? Will it continue to reign while new social networks complement it? In order to speculate about the future of Facebook, it is imperative to examine the history and theoretical evolution of social media in a broader context.

In order to embark on a discussion about the evolution of social media, it is necessary to first know what is meant by the term social media. Social media is a form of computer-mediated communication. Social networking websites, like Facebook and MySpace, are the most common forms of social media and comprise a large section of the social media discussed in this paper. Social networking sites are "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211).

Social networking websites as described above – ones that are based on personal profiles – are a more modern form of social media that are "structured as personal (or "egocentric") networks, with the individual at the center of their own community" (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 219). In this discussion, the term social media is used more loosely to account for the earliest forms of online communication,

which were “structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 219) and did not necessarily require a personal profile or take place in a bounded system. Therefore, the following definition of social media for the purposes of this study was borrowed and adjusted: “Social media are Internet sites [or platforms] where people interact freely, sharing and discussing information [often] about each other and their lives, using a multimedia mix of personal words, pictures, videos and audio” (Curtis, 2013).

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how media evolution theories have applied to online communication and argue that a theoretical shift has occurred in the social media landscape. This is done by first tracing the development and downfall of some of the more influential social media platforms. Next, some background on social media is provided, along with a discussion of four theories that seek to explain the evolution of media, describing how scholars have applied each theory to various mediums, pre- and post-Internet. The growth of online communication, beginning in 1969 with arguably the first social media platform and ending in 2013 with the latest social networking sites is also examined. Finally, an argument is made that the evolution of social media began by targeting mass audiences and has since trended toward niche social networking sites that aim to complement rather than directly compete with other forms of social media.

Social Media Scholarship

Social media has been a popular topic among scholars spanning several disciplines including communication, psychology, sociology and business. The bulk of existing academic literature on social media has been published in just the last few years and has focused on the social processes of social media and its effects in areas such as marketing, politics, health communication, and education.

It is not evident that any academic scholars have published a comprehensive article on the theoretical evolution of social media. The most related piece might be Boyd and Ellison (2008), a commendable piece with a thorough history of social networking, but one that did not look at evolutionary theories of social media but rather focused on social networking sites beginning in the late 1990s.

Despite the gap in academic literature, however, popular media, trade journals, and other professionals and bloggers have written

about social media. For example, professionals have attempted to piece together timelines. The blog Webdesigner Depot published a timeline documenting the progression of social media beginning with UseNet in 1979 (Chapman, 2009). The digital media news site Mashable also published a timeline, but it marked the beginning of social media as the first email in 1971 (O'Dell, 2013). A similar timeline appears on MediaBistro, another media news site (Bennett, 2012). Dating back even further, a North Carolina mass communication professor's website includes a social media timeline that begins with CompuServe in 1969 (Curtis, 2013), while a professional marketing blogger started his social media history in the 1950s with pre-computer communication activities like phone phreaking, or hacking telephone lines (Borders, 2009).

Four theories that help explain media evolution can be applied to social media development. Because online social media is a relatively new development in the history of communication, it is important to include pre-Internet media forms in this discussion.

Theoretical Development

Displacement: Newer media replace older media

One theory that explains the evolution of media is displacement – the idea that when a new medium comes along, it competes with and ultimately replaces an older medium (Dutta-Bergman, 2004). Displacement occurs when two forms of media largely overlap one another, meaning they serve the same needs and must therefore compete (Ramirez, Dimmick, Feaster, & Lin, 2008). Researchers have published studies that arguably support the theory of media displacement. For example, in a study about telephone and email satisfaction, almost half of respondents reported using the phone less after adopting email (Dimmick, Kline, & Stafford, 2000), which potentially points to the eventual replacement of the telephone by email. Similarly, De Waal and Schönbach (2010) found that online newspapers might be starting to substitute print newspapers (van der Wurff, 2010). Further data from Stemple, Hargrove, and Bernt (2000) indicated that people who were using the Internet more were watching TV news and reading newspapers less.

The idea that new media replace the old may have some surface-level face value, but scholars have found that many forms of newer media do not in fact replace their older counterparts (Stemple et

al., 2000). Notice that the “old” media in the examples above – telephones, newspapers and television – all still exist, despite the inventions of email and online news. Hence, none have been truly replaced. The fact that existing media survive the birth of newer media fails to support displacement theory, which holds that the birth of a new medium prompts the death of an existing one. Perhaps a more accurate theory to explain the evolution of media is that of functional equivalence.

Functional equivalence: Newer media dominate older media

Functional equivalence predicts, “as new media come along that better serve a particular function, the use of the previously dominant medium that served that function declines” (Neuman, 2010, p. 12). Adding to that description, “functional equivalence of news media is defined as providing the same gratifications and gratification opportunities and as providing the same types of content” (van der Wurff, 2010, p. 140). Taken together, this theory means that a new technology that serves the same functions as an older technology, only better, will dominate. Robinson and De Haan (2006) cite a clear example in their book chapter, Information Technology and Family Time Displacement.

“When television first appeared in the United States, it was immediately clear that it affected other mass media that provided light entertainment. Thus, audiences abandoned their radio sets, movie theaters closed, and magazines that featured the type of content now prevalent on television ... ceased publication. The general explanation offered for these effects was that television content now more efficiently performed functions that were equivalent to those being abandoned” (p. 52).

The theories of displacement and functional equivalence are closely related. The key distinction for the purpose of this study is that with the former, the existing media eventually are fully replaced, whereas with the latter, the existing media only become less popular. Each example cited above that was thought to potentially provide support for displacement actually provides support for functional equivalence. Despite television becoming the dominant media, radios, movie theaters and magazines all still exist. In the previous

example for displacement, heavy Internet users were found to spend less time reading newspapers (van der Wurff, 2010), not no time at all.

According to Robinson, “The functional-equivalence argument is the most well-known and accepted framework in which to describe and understand how new technologies may affect communication and other behavior patterns” (Robinson & De Haan, 2006, p. 52). However, functional equivalence is based on competition. Some scholars argue that newer media do not always launch with the intent to compete with their predecessors. Many new forms of media complement existing mediums rather than de-popularize them.

Complementary theory: Newer media supplement older media

The idea that some new technologies complement existing media rather than compete with them directly contrasts the displacement and functional equivalence theories. Support for this idea dates to the days when telegrams were the dominant mode of communication. According to Pulitzer-prize winning author and sociologist Paul Starr, “The telephone originated in an effort to improve and extend the telegraph, not to replace it” (Starr, 2005, p. 193). Research incorporating newer media has supported this theory as well, finding that there is a complementary rather than a competitive relationship among Internet news, newspapers, and radio news (Stemple et al., 2000). Recall previously mentioned Stemple, Hargrove, and Bernt’s (2000) study. They found that people who used the Internet more watched TV news and read newspapers less, providing support for functional equivalence and potentially displacement. However, they also found that Internet users used TV and newspapers more than non-Internet users, ultimately concluding that the Internet does not replace other media, but rather supplements it (Stemple et al., 2000). Media complement each other when there is low overlap among them, meaning they serve different needs (Ramirez et al., 2008). This may lead some new media platforms to specialize in the functions they offer.

Theory of the niche: Newer media specialize

Niche is simply, yet clearly defined as “a specialized but profitable corner of the market.” A niche medium often complements an

existing medium, but that does not mean the relationship is without competition. According to Dimmick (2000), “the theory of niche explains how media compete and coexist in limited resource environments” (Ramirez et al., 2008, p. 530). In other words, niche mediums compete among each other for audience attention, but they do not directly compete to replace each other as do mediums that follow the theories of displacement or functional equivalence. Examples supporting the theory of the niche can be drawn from media both pre- and post-Internet. When the television began to overshadow the radio as the primary form of family entertainment in the home, the radio specialized by offering its services in the car – something television could not do at the time (Neuman, 2010). A modern example would be when Facebook began to outshine MySpace as the most popular social networking site, MySpace re-launched as a niche music site (Jones, 2011).

Specifically, this study tests which, if any, of the four theoretical propositions hold for the evolution of recent American social media. There is some evidence that all four can be applied, but that a shift occurred around the turn of the century from the displacement and functional equivalence frameworks to the complementary and niche models.

Argument and Method

In regard to the theoretical ways in which social media platforms have evolved, academics have yet to evaluate the issue. In order to fill this gap in the literature, the argument can be made that there has been a shift in the evolution of social media and that initial social media platforms had a “the more, the better” mentality. They sought to appeal to the general population and to directly compete with one another, supporting the functional equivalence theory of media evolution - that when mediums serve the same functions, the one that does so better will dominate. However, social media platforms transformed roughly around the turn of the century. They shifted away from direct competition and toward a coexistence where they competed among each other for audience time and attention. They began targeting specific groups rather than mass audiences. Together these changes represented a shift toward the complementary and niche theories explaining media evolution.

To support this argument, news stories from newspapers, maga-

zines, trade journals, and online media outlets were analyzed, along with data from research organizations like the Pew Research Center and from professional blogs and websites. Statistics and other information that social media sites published about themselves, such as “Facebook Statistics” or “About Us” pages were also used in the analysis, as well as scholarly articles and books.

The following pages describe the evolution of social media beginning in 1969 with arguably the first social media platform, CompuServe, and continuing through to the present. By examining the theoretical frameworks in which social media platforms have evolved, I aim to describe what the history of social media looks like as well as argue for a change in competition and a shift toward complementary, niche sites.

Findings

CompuServe: Internet service providers compete

Using dial-up Internet service and paying by the hour may not sound appealing today, but more than 40 years ago this was a novel idea and one that sparked the future of popular online communication. CompuServe Information Service was the first major U.S. Internet service provider, with no serious competitors at its beginning. It was founded in part by University of Arizona engineering graduate Jeff Wilkins in 1969, originally as a business where people paid for access to a computer housed in Wilkins’ father-in-law’s insurance company because at that time Americans did not own home computers (Banks, 2007). Despite its early innovation, CompuServe remained relatively under the radar during its first decade in existence. The company went public in 1975 and didn’t become popular until the 1980s (Curtis, 2013). Its first appearance in the New York Times was in a 1980 earnings report (Earnings reports, 1980).

Acting solely as an Internet service provider, CompuServe would not be considered a social media as defined in this paper. But CompuServe’s founders created programs and services to introduce consumers to computers and facilitate online communication. Through these efforts, CompuServe became the first social media, and it did so in a powerful, persistent effort to attract the masses. “Convinced that the personal computer would become a common household appliance, he (co-founder Jeff Wilkins) intended to develop a service that would appeal to everyone – not just hobbyists” (Banks, 2007, p. 34).

To accomplish that goal, CompuServe became the first company to bring news to people's home computers. The company worked with the Associated Press to make news reports available on home computers in what the AP president called "an experimental program with broad ramifications for the newspaper industry" (News reports, 1980). Additionally, CompuServe facilitated the first online newspaper in the U.S. in 1981 – a move that earned CompuServe its first appearance in academic literature (Laakaniemi, 1981).

Additionally, CompuServe developers created email and public bulletin board systems that were arguably the beginning of modern day social networking. Throughout the process, CompuServe promoted its services as appealing to a mass audience, and that they did. In 1985, CompuServe improved its email system by adding features including user-friendly directions and an address book that stored fifty contacts (CompuServe improves, 1985). At that point, the email service had 180,000 subscribers. CompuServe product manager for EasyPlex, the new email system, said in *Marketing News* that the new system was "designed to accommodate all levels of users, from novice to expert" (CompuServe improves, 1985). She also nicely summed up the company's success achieved from marketing to a large customer base. "In addition to the news features," she said, "the rapid growth of our subscriber base gives EasyPlex a distinct advantage over other systems because it reaches so many people" (CompuServe improves, 1985).

A year later, CompuServe merged email systems with MCI Communications Corp. and reported more than 500,000 subscribers, making it the "world's largest interconnected electronic mail network" (Reiling, 1986). The president of MCI was quoted in *Marketing News* saying the decision to merge was "a major step toward an electronic postal system and away from isolated, competing mail services" (Reiling, 1986). This move is a prime example of two technology companies that served the same function making a conscious decision to combine efforts rather than compete, which likely would have led one company to succeed, displacing the other.

CompuServe continued to market to the general population and remained the most popular online service throughout the 80s and into the 90s. Eventually, however, CompuServe was overshadowed by another company in a classic example of functional equivalence where both companies provided the same services, but one did it bet-

ter and ultimately prevailed. This model continued to explain a series of popular Internet service and email providers.

CompuServe's pay-by-the-hour business model lost to the flat monthly fee charged by its competitors, namely, America Online (Goldsborough, 2009). AOL became the most popular online service provider of the 90s, eventually buying CompuServe in 1998 (Goldsborough, 2009). America Online can be credited with mainstreaming social media services such as instant messaging, chat boards, and email (Rosenwald, 2009). At its height, AOL had more than 30 million subscribers (Holahan, 2006). At the end of 1992, it charged \$7.95 a month for two hours of time online and ten cents for every additional minute (Grimes, 1992). However, consistent with the functional equivalence model, Hotmail launched in 1996 and overcame AOL by making email available for free, accessible from any computer with an Internet connection, and without any necessary software installation (Rosenwald, 2009). By the end of the decade, Hotmail had tens of thousands of users (Craddock, 2010). Ultimately, Google won the email battle by introducing Gmail, which offers users significantly more storage space than Hotmail. But long before the turn of the century and the rise of Google and other social media platforms, other services entered the scene and set the stage for modern social networking.

UseNet: Discussion forums create online communities

CompuServe allowed people to communicate online, but UseNet created an online community. UseNet is a network that connects computers from around the world and hosts discussion groups, where users carry out live conversations. In its infancy, popular media referred to UseNet groups as electronic town halls (Markoff, 1990) and "cross-country conference table[s]" (Wade, 1985). Like the social media platforms before it, Usenet aimed to attract the general population. But it did so by creating niche groups, which were as diverse as the population itself. Groups were formed for scientists, computer enthusiasts, government officials, large corporations, activists, Grateful Dead fans, and people who wanted to discuss broad social issues (Markoff, 1990). There were also groups for "comedians, cooks, travelers, recovering alcoholics, sports fans, homosexuals, wine lovers, retirees and Go players" (Markoff, 1990). By 1998, UseNet hosted about 50,000 discussion groups and was considered the "world's larg-

est conversation on everything from biophysics to Amish cooking” (Weise, 1998).

UseNet launched in 1979, had about one thousand members in 1985 and grew to more than a million users by 1990 (Markoff, 1990), which was a significant increase considering people could not simply join a group online, but had to write a letter or call a toll-free number to request membership. UseNet may have been the world’s largest conversation, but it was not the only online discussion platform. In 1992, the New York Times reported more than 45,000 public-access electronic bulletin boards existed in the United States (Grimes, 1992). These online discussion platforms were the root of social networking as it is known today.

Early social networking sites mark period of transformation

Social networking sites are the most popular form of social media today, with hundreds connecting people online (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). According to Boyd’s definition of a social networking site – one that focuses on a personal profile and takes place in a bounded system – the first SNS launched in 1997 and was called SixDegrees.com (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). The idea of appealing to the masses was at the very heart of the site, which was built on the idea that everybody in the world can be connected through just six people. Its wide reach was highlighted in the news media. According to an article in the *Dallas Morning News*, “Six Degrees’ popularity can be measured by participation. What started last year with 150 people in New York City has blossomed into a service that adds 4,000 members every 24 hours” (Bedell, 1998, p. 2). The year after the site launched, it had attracted more than 1 million members worldwide (Bedell, 1998). In addition to employing the traditional media framework of appealing to as many people as possible, evidence clearly suggested that Six Degrees was trying to outshine its competitors through the functional equivalence theory of media evolution, which argues that new media perform the same functions as older media, but better. “If you think about the things most successful on the Internet, they are those that replicate something that already works,” Six Degrees president said. “We know networking works between people, we’re just making it more efficient” (Bedell, 1998, p. 2).

Six Degrees attracted millions of users, but ultimately it failed to become a sustainable business and shut down in 2000, three years

after its launch. The site's founder said he thought Six Degrees broke down because it was ahead of its time (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). But if the future of social networking was any indication, perhaps Six Degrees failed because the era of marketing to the masses was transforming into an era of targeting smaller, more specialized groups. "The more, the better" mentality of social media was on its way to becoming "the more specialized, the better."

The turn of the century marked both a launching point for several new social networking sites and the beginning of a tipping point toward niche sites. Ryze.com started in 2001 primarily to help connect business professionals. The site was one of the first to target an audience, but it did so cautiously by targeting a very broad audience and qualifying its invitation to professionals by ensuring that everybody was still welcome. Its website said: "Ryze helps people make connections and grow their networks. You can network to grow your business, build your career and life, find a job and make sales. Or just keep in touch with friends" (About Ryze, 2013). Although Ryze still exists, it pales in comparison to LinkedIn, which officially launched in 2003 with a much more straightforward message in regard to its target audience: "Our mission is simple: connect the world's professionals" (About Us, LinkedIn). Ten years after its launch, LinkedIn has become "the world's largest professional network with 200 million members in 200 countries and territories around the globe" (About Us, LinkedIn). That's 400 times the number of members Ryze claims. Perhaps Ryze would have been a major success had it fully committed to marketing itself as a business service solely attracting the niche audience of business professionals.

Shortly after Ryze hit the Web, the achievements and adversities of Friendster began. Friendster was considered the top social network in 2003, but it was also the dissociative identity disorder of social networking sites, identifying at various times as a general population social networking site (Tedeschi, 2004; Rivlin, 2006), a dating site competing with Match.com (Boyd & Ellison, 2008), a social complement to the business site Ryze.com (Boyd & Ellison, 2008), and ultimately a gaming site. When Friendster was thought of as a network catering to a mass audience, the *New York Times* noted that as a challenge. Unlike "the more popular dating and jobs sites like Match.com and Monster.com, ... sites like Friendster face the challenge of how to differentiate themselves" (Tedeschi, 2004; Rivlin, 2006). Friendster is remembered

as one of the biggest missed opportunities in social media – a site that could have become as popular as Facebook became (Erickson, 2012), in the U.S. at least. Friendster shifted its focus to Asia in 2011 and is now a hugely popular social gaming site (Liu, 2008). Ultimately, however, the network gave way in the U.S. to sites like MySpace and Facebook, in-part because of software problems and social collisions (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). But perhaps another factor that contributed to its downfall was the site’s indecisiveness in appealing to the masses or targeting a niche population.

MySpace and Facebook

Social media’s transition from targeting the general population to targeting specific groups represented a shift in competition. New sites are no longer competing to replace existing ones, but instead are competing for users’ time and attention among a growing number of sites. This shift in competition represents a theoretical move from functional equivalence to complementary sites in the evolution of social media. Perhaps the most transformative period in this evolutionary change was the MySpace-Facebook conflict.

MySpace was once the world’s largest social network (Nelson, 2012). The site launched in 2003 to compete with sites like Friendster, Xanga (a blog with social networking features), and Asian Avenue (a SNS targeting Asian Americans) (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). But in mid 2009, three years after media mogul Rupert Murdoch acquired the site, Facebook surpassed it in the U.S. market (Chmielweski & Sarno, 2009). In the year leading up to this, MySpace lost millions of users while Facebook, founded by Harvard students (Tabak, 2004), nearly doubled its user base (Chmielweski & Sarno, 2009). Facebook and MySpace were competitors. They primarily served the same general social networking functions at that point (MySpace did not launch as a music site (Boyd & Ellison, 2008)), and Facebook simply won. MySpace’s official defeat made national news when *The Financial Times* led an article with this sentence: “The new chief executive of MySpace has told the *Financial Times* that the company is no longer interested in competing with Facebook, effectively conceding defeat in the race to become the largest online social network” (Garrahan, 2009). Facebook’s conquer of MySpace was a prime example of functional equivalence. “Each of these [social media] services supplants the one before,” according to an article in *The Financial Times*. “It

takes the golden ring and everyone loves that, and they forget about the last one” (Chmielweski & Sarno, 2009).

Facebook’s rise over MySpace initially represented functional equivalence, but that later changed after the conflict became a token example of the shift in competition. Still with about 70 million users after Facebook surpassed it, MySpace had hardly been forgotten (Chmielweski & Sarno, 2009). Undiscovered artists and music lovers remained on the site (Nelson, 2012). In 2010, MySpace re-launched as a “social entertainment destination,” but the new site was unsuccessful for several reasons, including that the MySpace brand was too ingrained to change and that members didn’t have a compelling reason to visit the site everyday (Jones, 2011). In 2012, MySpace re-launched again as a site with “a concerted focus on music integration” and more emphasis on its mission of “connecting people to the music, celebrities, TV, movies, and games that they love” (Holpuch, 2012; About Us, MySpace). As of mid 2012, MySpace had 25 million unique U.S. visitors. MySpace stopped competing with Facebook directly, but it joined hundreds of other niche sites in competing for users’ time and attention.

Complementary and niche sites abound

When MySpace’s chief executive told the world that the site was not trying to compete with Facebook anymore, he publicly condoned what was becoming the future of competition in social media. In recent years, numerous social media sites have joined the Web not to compete directly with each other, but to compete among each other for users’ time and attention. According to one trade journal, “sites are finding success catering to smaller groups of people” (Thompson, 2012, p. 15).

This new wave of social media platforms can be explained by the complementary and niche theories of media evolution. These theories largely depict today’s social networking landscape, but there were hints of this shift dating back to some of the first social networking sites. For example, “the people behind Ryze, Tribe.net, LinkedIn, and Friendster were tightly entwined personally and professionally. They believed that they could support each other without competing” (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 215). Tribe.net, a site whose users largely included people with alternative lifestyles from the San Francisco Bay Area, attracted a passionate niche user base but also faced obstacles.

In 2008, the founder told the media, “We’ve kept Tribe going not because we believed it would turn into a phenomenal business success like Bebo or Facebook, but because I think it serves a really valuable role for the community” (Ruberg, 2008). His statement reflected the shift in competition among social media sites.

The idea that many new sites are not trying to outshine existing popular sites has caught on in the news media. “As Facebook and Twitter continue to add to their millions of users, more niche sites are emerging,” according to the trade journal Marketing Week. “Rather than seeking constantly to extend their reach among the masses, these sites have the aim of attracting smaller communities of users and advertisers that share common interests” (Barnett, 2012). This idea is supported in Europe as well. For example, Louise Mensch, a former UK politician who started a political social network, said her site Menshn — a pun on her name and the word “mention” — is not intended to be a rival to Twitter, which she still uses avidly, including to promote her own venture. Instead, her network is designed to be “a niche complement to Twitter” (Barnett, 2012).

Niche sites have taken over social media in the past decade, while targeting a mass audience has become the exception. Some of today’s niche sites include those that attract environmental activists (<http://www.care2.com>), travelers (<https://www.couchsurfing.org>), religious people (<http://www.mychurch.org>), photographers (<http://www.flickr.com>), teenagers (<https://www.habbo.com>), goal setters (<http://www.43things.com>), academics (<http://www.academia.edu>), mothers (<http://www.cafemom.com>), fashion lovers (<http://chicisimo.com>), and those seeking medical or emotional support (<http://www.dailystrength.org>).

Figure 1 reflects the tenure of success for each of the major online communication platforms discussed in this paper. The number of years of success for each platform was calculated by counting the year from the launch of each platform until the year each platform either shut down or dramatically lost its user base. This graph provides some evidence that the displacement and functional equivalence theories were working for social media outlets in the 1970s and 1980s. Starting in the late 1990s, however, social media sites started to experiment with attracting more niche audiences but were still guided by the evolutionary theories of the older media and therefore were not successful in the long term. After the turn of the century, social media

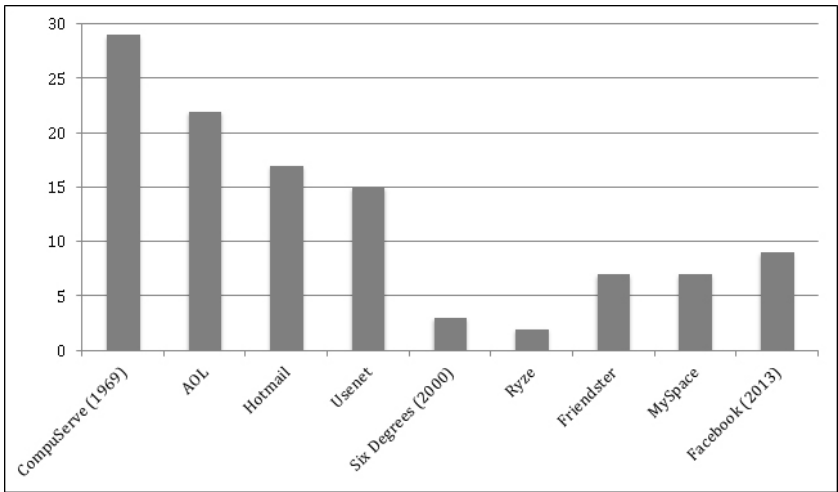


Figure 1. Number of years of success for major social media platforms

outlets fully embraced the complementary and niche media evolution frameworks and started to again see long-term success. The following graph is a nice depiction of the change in theoretical frameworks guiding the evolution of social media. However, an argument can be made that the trend represented on the graph might not continue as numerous, niche social media sites continue to launch, slowly nibbling away at Facebook's success.

Conclusion

For roughly the first 30 years of the history of social media, platforms marketed mass audiences and directly competed with each other, reflecting the functional equivalence theory of media evolution. But since around the turn of the century, social media has largely evolved into a market that is trending toward niche sites. Although signs of direct competition and functional equivalence are still present, the complementary and niche theories of media evolution overwhelmingly explain modern social networking. Not only has social media moved toward niche crowds, social networking sites have largely seen a change in competition. Rather than trying to outshine each other, sites now coexist while indirectly competing for users' resources.

This research shows that like the social media before them, social networking sites started out trying to attract the masses, but evolved

into sites that aim to attract smaller, niche markets. Facebook could be considered an exception. It has been immensely successful at appealing to the general population. Opposite of MySpace, Facebook launched as a site targeting a niche group – Harvard students at first and then other college students – and transitioned into targeting a mass audience (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Facebook has thrived partly because it has remained at the forefront of innovation, ready to compete with new sites that offer additional features. For example, when the micro-blogging site Twitter became popular, Facebook launched a “news feed” to emulate Twitter’s “staccato updates” (Chmielweski & Sarno, 2009). One social networking research specialist responded to that decision by saying, “What does Facebook do? It does Twitter ... and it does it better” (Chmielweski & Sarno, 2009). Precisely for that reason, Facebook continues to win the functional equivalence fight.

Facebook supports the functional equivalence model of media evolution and remains the most popular social networking site today with more than 1.6 billion active monthly users as of the end of 2012 (Facebook Reports). However, the site is not a complete representation of today’s social media landscape, which is largely made up of hundreds of smaller, more specialized sites that aim to target niche groups and complement existing sites. Furthermore, Facebook’s popularity might be leveling off. According to a report from the analyst firm comScore, Facebook saw a decline in unique visitors for the first time last year (Sherman, 2012). Further analysis of the data “suggests that the slowdown could be more significant and longer lasting.” Additionally, frustrated that every Facebook user looks like he has a perfect life, a social networking site recently launched that acts as an anonymous diary, allowing users to post “what they really think” as opposed to the happy-go-lucky comments they often post on Facebook. Although Facebook is still hugely popular, these signs reflect a small opposition toward the site, which brings me back to the question I posed at the beginning of this paper: What does the future hold for Facebook?

After tracing the history of social media and better understanding the trends of its evolution, I argue that it’s likely no single site will outshine Facebook because no single site is trying to. Rather, new social media forms are focusing on particular niches. “It doesn’t

look like any new social networking site is going to take Facebook down,” according to the trade journal, *EContent Magazine*. “The social networks that make it will be the ones that bring something new to the table.”

In conclusion, although multiple media evolution theories interact, the evolution of social media from 1969 to the present shifted from a functional equivalence model to a complementary and niche model, which dominates today and will likely continue into the future. If anything takes down Facebook, perhaps it will be the combination of numerous niche social networking sites that collectively steal users’ attention away from the social media giant.

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