

Researching (with) social media: ethical challenges

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Is there such a thing as Un-Social media?

Media are tools for communication which is always at least a two-way process between speaker and listener or writer and reader

Previous media forms have allowed the audience to talk back to media creators and owners

Previous periods of history have seen the creation of new publications or media channels, sometimes in order to challenge the control of vested interests or the state

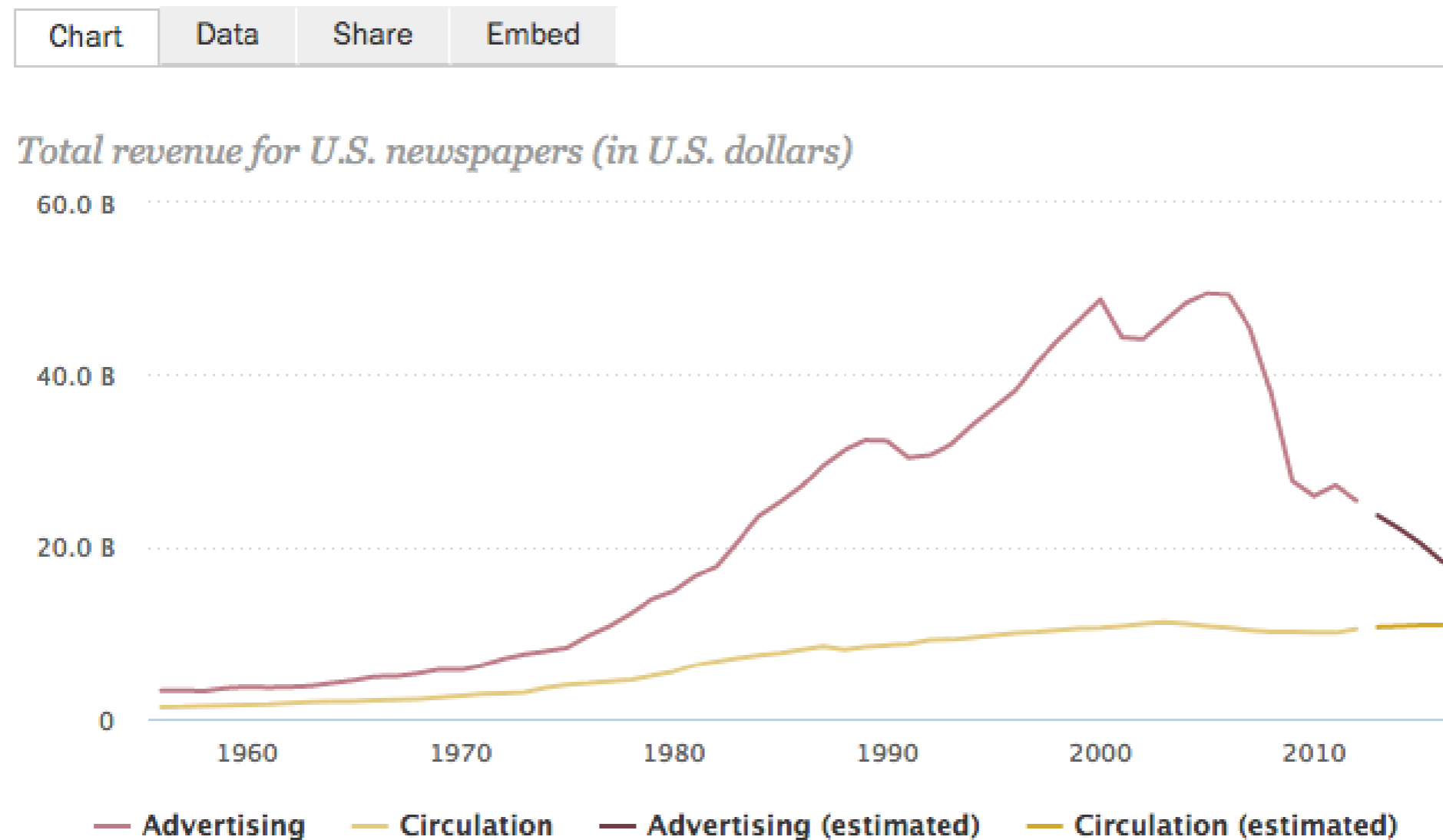
What does social media mean today?

- Creation of Web 2.0
- Emergence of social networking services
- Development of giant internet platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Google, Twitter, Sina

Impact on the news media

- Major internet platforms now affect almost every aspect of media production and consumption
- Audiences increasingly find news through social media platforms and search engines (particularly younger audiences)
- The internet giants play a key role in the online media advertising market while advertising in print publications has plummeted
- The internet giants are major investors in 'mainstream' media - Jeff Bezos of Amazon bought Washington Post and Facebook has been paying publishers to produce Live video

Newspaper industry estimated advertising and circulation revenue



Source: News Media Alliance, formerly Newspaper Association of America, (through 2012); Pew Research Center analysis of year-end SEC filings of publicly traded newspaper companies (2013-2016).

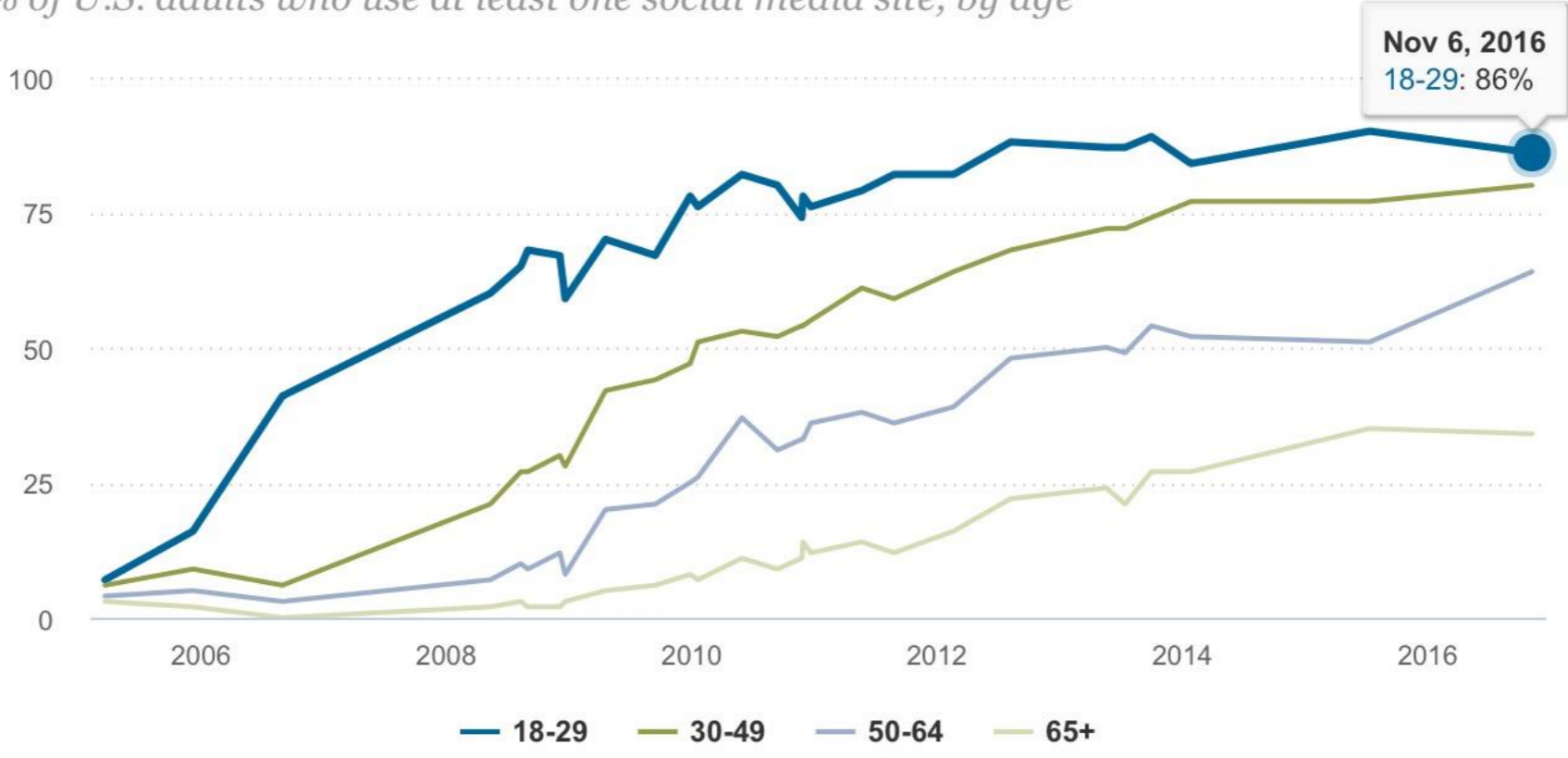
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Cited in David Uberti, 'The digital advertising doomsday clock', *Columbia Journalism Review*, 6 June 2017

Age Race Gender Income Education Community

Chart Data Share Embed

% of U.S. adults who use at least one social media site, by age



Source: Surveys conducted 2005-2016.

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“At least half of all adult global internet users are social networkers ...Across the 40 countries surveyed, a median of 76% of internet users say that they use social networks, which include Facebook and Twitter in all countries (except for Twitter in China), plus other popular country-specific social networks”

– Pew Research Center, 2016

China more socially connected than India

Adults who report using online social networking sites



Note: Percentages based on total sample.
Source: Spring 2016 Global Attitudes Survey. Q82

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Whose media?

- Ownership?
- Control?
- Editorship?



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AoIR guidelines (2012)

- The greater the vulnerability of the community / author / participant, the greater the obligation of the researcher to protect the community / author / participant.
- Because 'harm' is defined contextually, ethical principles are more likely to be understood inductively rather than applied universally.
- Because all digital information at some point involves individual persons, consideration of principles related to research on human subjects may be necessary even if it is not immediately apparent how and where persons are involved in the research data.

What is driving the 'platform economy'?

Circulation of goods including internet devices

Creation of (content) services

commodification of user data

Who are the main players?

Corporations

States

AOIR guidelines (2012)

- When making ethical decisions, researchers must balance the rights of subjects (as authors, as research participants, as people) with the social benefits of research and researchers' rights to conduct research. In different contexts the rights of subjects may outweigh the benefits of research.
- Ethical issues may arise and need to be addressed during all steps of the research process, from planning, research conduct, publication, and dissemination.
- Ethical decision-making is a deliberative process, and researchers should consult as many people and resources as possible in this process, including fellow researchers, people participating in or familiar with contexts/sites being studied, research review boards, ethics guidelines, published scholarship (within one's discipline but also in other disciplines), and, where applicable, legal precedent.

Key themes

- Be aware of power and privilege
- Balance subjects' rights against benefits of research
- Context matters
- Ethical practice runs through the entire research process
- Seek advice early and consult often

Ethical principles for data initiatives (Nuffield Council on Bioethics, 2014)

- Respect for persons
- Regard for established human rights
- Expectations about data use and re-use must be set with the participation of people with morally relevant interests
- Effective systems of governance and accountability

Key problems

- What does the "human subject" mean in an online context?
- Where does the boundary between public and private lie?
- Where is the 'field' in a networked world?
- Who owns and controls online communications?

Specific challenges of working with social media data

- Rawness
- Shortcut to participant observation
- Language
- Voyeurism and surveillance
- Plasticity of social media forms

Thanks

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