

Social Media, Culture, and Communication

Todd L. Sandel and Bei "Jenny" Ju

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Summary and Keywords

Social media encompass web-based programs and user-generated content that allow people to communicate and collaborate via mobile phones, computers, and other communication technologies. Unlike other media linked to a particular technology, social media are a phenomenon associated with a set of tools, practices, and ideologies for connecting and collaborating. Social media blur distinctions between one-to-many and face-to-face communication. They allow individuals and groups to connect across boundaries of space and time, both synchronously and asynchronously. Afforded by changing technology, social media are ever-expanding as users develop novel uses and creative content. Scholars have studied social media across a range of topics, including such issues as message content and construction, identity formation, relationship development, community development, political activism, disinformation, and cyber threats.

Social media vary culturally. For instance, in China social media are impacted by internet censorship, including not only the kinds of apps that are used in China—WeChat and Weibo instead of Facebook and Twitter—but also forms of expression and online activities. While Chinese social media can be a site for political activism, and creative, humorous, and satirical messages, they are constructed in ways that avoid online censorship. Social media also afford the construction and maintenance of local communities and cultural identities. For instance, users with a shared interest, occupation, activity, or offline connection, such as a hometown, may communicate online using a shared language, vocabulary, or code. Hence, unlike mass media that can promote a collective, national identity, social media may facilitate the re-emergence and construction of local and diverse identities. Finally, social media can empower subaltern individuals and groups to mobilize and effect change through collective action. Yet social media, when employed by the state and/or neoliberal corporate powers, can work to suppress subaltern groups by co-opting social media as a technology that affords surveillance. They may also be used to spread misinformation or extremism by both state-sponsored and non-state actors.

Keywords: social media, culture, affordances, media richness, social presence, migrants, surveillance

Introduction

While technologies for creating and disseminating social media are an invention of the 21st century, antecedents can be found in earlier, premodern times. In the Roman era, figures such as Cicero relied on a network of friends, copyists, and community bulletin boards to keep abreast of news, and to spread messages and letters—written on papyrus—across the empire (Standage, 2013). Following Gutenberg's invention of the moveable type printing press, the German monk, Martin Luther, discovered the power of the printing press as a new communication technology. Seeking to engage in a theological debate with another monk, and in the usual manner for his time, in 1517 Luther posted a list of 95 theses—written in Latin—on the door of a cathedral. Copies quickly spread across Germany, republished by printers across the region, marking one of the first recorded instances of a post going viral. Grasping the power of this communication technology, and seeking to reach a wider audience, he wrote his next work—a short pamphlet—in simple German. Without intending to, Luther's post and subsequent writings not only split the Catholic Church, but also invented the modern German language, ended the political dominance of Rome, and facilitated the rise of nations across Europe. We can draw from these and other historical events the conclusion that communication media can and do play an important role in the shaping of empires, nations, communities, and identities that are culturally shaped.

In a well-known treatise on the origin and rise of nations, Anderson (1991) traced the origins of the idea of the nation, and showed how nations are imagined communities constructed with and through the practice of producing and consuming print media, such as daily newspapers and vernacular novels. The newspaper-reading individual imagines that others within that same nation are similarly learning about the events and affairs reported in a newspaper: readers are imagined to be linked as members of a nation that experience the same news and events. Hence, in the 21st century all inhabitable parts of the world are comprised of distinct nations, with marked physical boundaries; and all citizens of the world, with few exceptions, are constructed to be members of distinct nations.

Anderson's arguments about links between media and the construction of the nation-state can be extended when the roles of other, 20th-century communication technologies, namely radio and television, are considered. For instance, during World War II, the BBC's radio programs were an important vehicle for maintaining morale and social cohesion among the British public (Crisell, 1994). When John F. Kennedy was shot in 1963, the tragic event, broadcast on television, was experienced and felt simultaneously by viewers across the United States (Berg, 1995). And when the World Trade Center fell on September 11, 2001, most television viewers across the world felt united in the horror and tragedy of the event (Chouliaraki, 2008). These and other major events, reported on and broadcast via mass communication technologies, can serve to unite and mobilize a viewing and listening public, and create an emotional response of an affiliative bond among people, who absent a mediated connection, would be unaware of the event or of each other. Thus, as Anderson (1991) argued, a bond among imagined members of a nation can be

so strong that they go to war against members of another nation, willing to sacrifice their lives and livelihood.

A criticism, however, was that television—whether state or commercially controlled—facilitated the construction of a passive audience, addicted to entertainment (Postman, 2005/1985). Instead of fostering an engaged and informed audience, interested in addressing social problems such as crime or racial and economic injustice, television viewers passively watched the world; and the more time people spent watching television, the more afraid they became of the crime-filled world they saw portrayed on television (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1986). Thus, while television as a one-to-many communication medium was popular, pervasive, and successful in the 20th century, arguably it was flawed. A medium that could afford for a more active and engaged audience, or allow a member of the many to create and disseminate novel content—akin to how the monk Martin Luther was able to communicate novel messages in premodern Germany—could be perceived as more attractive. Thus, we see the rise of social media.

An understanding of social media must be reached through the lens of culture, which we define as “a system of socially constructed symbols and meanings, premises, and rules, pertaining to communicative conduct” (Philipsen, 1997, p. 126). That is, culture is not simply something that “other people have.” Rather, culture is what people create as a guide for how to interact in social situations. Culture is also an interpretive lens for evaluating how people perform interactional moves. For example, a wedding can be evaluated as “good”—if partners seem to the participants and/or families to be suited to each other, or a “problem”—if the partners are very different, based upon locally constructed ideas of what counts as different, and interpreted culturally (Sandel, 2011). In other words, culture is both a noun—or the “thing” that can be publicly evaluated as performed well or not—and a verb, or the sequence of actions in a given scene or event, that shapes an interactional order.

Culture as a concept can then be applied to understand what happens with social media, which “provide rich and varied environments for interactional encounters and exchanges between increasingly inter-connected networks of users” (Burger, Thornborrow, & Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 25). That is, social media provide ways of interacting that transform understandings of space and place, allowing people to cross offline boundaries and create new and sometimes unexpected contexts and means for communal interaction. Yet such new forms of interaction on social media are not without constraints. Patterns emerge, symbols are created and interpreted, rules are constructed to guide online interaction, in ways that are similar to what happens culturally in the offline environment. For example, the Chinese internet is shaped in ways that reflect a Chinese cultural understanding of community and personhood—and is shaped by political censorship—that is distinct from the non-Chinese internet (Ju, Sandel, & Fitzgerald, 2019). Furthermore, when engaged in an online exchange, students from Asian countries believed it was more important to first build the relationship, whereas Americans were more likely to first accomplish the task at hand before building the relationship (Sandel, Buttny, & Varghese, 2019). Such online behaviors can be seen as following from cultural understandings of friendship and interper-

sonal behavior in the offline world. Therefore, understandings of how culture inform social media are studied across a range of contexts.

Social Media, a Phenomenon

Social media refer to a phenomenon that emerged following the crash of the dot-com bubble at the turn of the 21st century (boyd, 2015). Unlike other types of media that are associated with an identifiable technology, such as television or radio, engineers and software developers saw in Web 2.0—an internet that readily affords the development of user-generated content (UGC) (Baym, 2015)—an opportunity to create online tools to help people “connect and collaborate, socialize and coordinate” (boyd, 2015, p. 1). Hence, social media can be understood as not just technological affordances, but a “set of tools, practices, and ideologies” (p. 1). Viewed this way, today’s social media can be understood as similar in function and purpose to the public bulletin boards used by Cicero in Roman times, and the debate items posted on a cathedral door by Martin Luther. The purpose and function of social media are to provide readily accessible tools for people to communicate and socialize, and thus break from the constraints of the limited, one-to-many affordances of mass media technologies of the 20th century. These we see evident in a variety of online tools, such as “blogs, wikis, discussion forums, and social network sites (SNSs)” (Sleeman, Lang, & Lemon, 2016, p. 392).

Social Networking Sites

The first recognized SNS was “Sixdegrees.com” (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Launched in 1997, the site allowed users to “create profiles, list their Friends and, beginning in 1998, surf the Friends lists” (p. 214). While some of these features, such as the ability to create profiles and lists of Friends, were available on other websites, Sixdegrees.com was the first to make Friends visible to others. And while it attracted millions of users, it closed by the year 2000, limited by the fact that at the time few people were online and/or had networks of friends. However, the concept of creating a social networking site did not end, and other social networking sites soon followed, including three of the most prominent: Friendster in 2002, MySpace in 2003, and Facebook in 2005 (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Each was built upon the concept of creating an online space where users could upload content that was visible to friends and others, and engage in both one-to-one (e.g., chat/messenger) and one-to-many (e.g., profile updates) communication. These SNSs did not target a specific demographic, and were open to all interested users. However, like Sixdegrees.com, both Friendster and MySpace, after initially attracting millions of users, eventually closed. (Friendster repositioned itself as a gaming company in 2011, but ceased operations in 2018. MySpace was highly successful at first, but was overtaken by Facebook in 2009, and purchased by another company in 2011.) Only Facebook was able to expand beyond its initial success and create a sustainable business model.

After 2003 a number of social networking sites were launched that targeted a particular demographic. These included such sites as LinkedIn for business professionals, Couch-

surfing for travelers in search of free accommodation, and MyChurch, a site for connecting Christian churches and their members (boyd & Ellison, 2008). In addition, sites such as Flickr and YouTube that initially focused on media sharing began to implement SNS features, such as allowing users to post and respond to comments. As social media are not linked to a particular communication technology (e.g., television, radio), but rather are a set of online tools for the purpose of helping people to connect and collaborate, social media are an ever-adapting and expanding phenomenon. For instance, facing a decrease in viewership among members of a younger generation, television stations in the United States adapted by providing content via social media (Ferguson & Greer, 2016). Netflix used Twitter and other social media platforms to promote its content (Gómez & Quevedo, 2018). And online screen entertainment platforms (e.g., Apple, Amazon, Netflix) built market share on the basis of “connected viewing,” by targeting their online customers and creating an interactive environment for product viewing (Cunningham, Craig, & Silver, 2016). Each of these innovations points to qualities and technological affordances of social media that differ from traditional media, and as perceived by users, may improve upon them. In this next section we unpack some of these qualities (cf., SOCIAL MEDIA’S AFFORDANCES, SOCIAL INFORMATION PROCESSING THEORY, SOCIAL PRESENCE THEORY).

Social Media’s Affordances

When studying the cultural and communicative aspects of social media, a fundamental concept to unpack is that of affordances. Initially developed by Gibson (1979), this concept was proposed as a way to examine how an object or environment affords possibilities for action. Consider that an environment can be horizontal or vertical. If it is horizontal, such as a flat and fertile plain, it may afford the growing of crops; if vertical, it may afford animal grazing. Yet environments are not immutable and humans may alter them to afford other actions, such as by terracing a steep slope to afford the growing of crops. Objects may also be used to afford actions. For example, a knife can afford cutting and striking. A round object can afford throwing: used as a ball for play, or as a missile for fighting. The key point is that people interact with objects and environments to afford a range of uses. And when considering the affordances of technology, we find that some may be designed by developers, such as how the telephone affords the ability to talk with others across long distances. Others may be unplanned and emerge from how persons interact with a technology. For example, until recently, people took pictures by looking through a camera lens, pointing it outward. But when smart phone developers put a camera lens on the front—initially designed for video conferencing—this afforded a different way to interact with the “camera.” Hence, designers unintentionally afforded the practice of smart phone users taking a “selfie.”

When social media are understood as a phenomenon and not a specific technology, they afford a wide and expanding range of uses. Consider that when internet-based technologies were first developed, they were primarily text-based and low in media richness (cf., MEDIA RICHNESS THEORY). They were used primarily for conveying information, but not emotion and affect. However, users developed ways to interact with the technology to

communicate emotion, such as by accenting messages with emoticons or writing in all CAPITALS (Walther, 1992). Yet as social media technologies have developed, such as by affording users the ability to insert and embed messages with pictures, gifs, audio, and video files, these afforded a range of new message types and uses. For instance, social media now afford the creation of memes, “micro-actions of media remixing and sharing” (Mina, 2014, p. 362), that can be used to communicate humor, dissent, or social resistance. That is, the affordances of social media are not limited, nor are they determined by technology, but they are open, ever-expanding, and unpredictable, just as perceptions of social media and their user-generated interactions are open and unpredictable.

Theories of Social Media and Culture

Media Richness Theory

In studies of how and why organizations process information, Daft and Lengel (1984, 1986) proposed that one important factor is the “richness of information.” They claimed that “each medium is not just a source, but represents a difference in the act of information processing” (1984, p. 198). That is, media that allow for greater and faster feedback allow for what they called higher “information richness” (p. 198). For instance, on the one hand, face-to-face communication is high in richness as it allows for immediate feedback using multiple cues, such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions. On the other hand, “quantitative reports from the computer” (p. 198), consisting of numbers, are lowest in richness, as they allow for limited feedback or personalization. Based upon these qualities, Daft and Lengel classified communication media in terms of decreasing richness: “(1) face-to-face, (2) telephone, (3) personal documents such as letters or memos, (4) impersonal written documents, and (5) numeric documents” (1986, p. 560). Media high in richness were considered better when used by managers to communicate “difficult and equivocal messages,” because they “allowed for rapid feedback and multiple cues,” whereas those lower in richness were sufficient for messages that were routine, unequivocal, and/or met “information needs” (p. 560).

Perhaps without intending to, Daft and Lengel’s writings on information processing in organizations established one of the more important theories for the internet age, media richness theory. The theory articulated a fairly easy-to-grasp proposition, that the medium that affords for communication with more clues and greater feedback is richer. And while the theory in its early formulation did not claim that one communication medium was better than another, but rather sought to “theorize which media should prove most effective in what situations” (Dennis & Valacich, 1999, p. 2), an implication was that richer was better. This can be explained in part because media richness theory was based upon social presence theory, and the “presumption that increased richness is linked to increased social presence” (p. 2). Furthermore, since text-based messages and email were the first form of computer-based communication to be developed and used by individuals and organizations in the 1980s and 1990s (see Abbate, 1999, for a history of the early internet),

and were categorized as low in media richness, an implication was that computer-mediated communication (CMC) was inferior to face-to-face (FtF) communication. This led some scholars to compare CMC with FtF.

Social Information Processing Theory

In the early 1990s, Joseph Walther and colleagues (Walther, 1992; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994; Walther & Burgoon, 1992) designed a series of studies to determine whether CMC was inferior to FtF in communicating such features as emotion, likeability, and affect. They found that while there are differences between CMC and FtF, such that it took longer for CMC users to communicate emotion than FtF, if given extended time, CMC users could communicate emotion, and that CMC was not inferior to FtF. This was articulated as social information processing (SIP) theory, which claimed that CMC users may use a range of message features afforded by the medium, including both “linguistic cues and text-based content” (Walther, 1992, p. 72). These may include the use of affiliative language, emoticons, the spatial arrangement of text, metalinguistic cues (e.g., *hmmm*), and grammatical displays (e.g., CAPITAL LETTERS). That is, even under the condition of communicating via a “thin medium” such as email or text-based messages, social presence can be communicated.

Social information processing theory, and subsequent studies of online communication (e.g., Sandel, 2014; Sandel, Buttny, et al., 2019), demonstrate that in online communication, social presence can be communicated in ways that are strongly and deeply felt. And with the development of social media that afford an increasing array of visual, auditory, and video cues, “a sense of being with another” (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003, p. 456) may be enhanced. In other words, the popularity of social media may be explained by how these media afford an enhanced sense of presence that crosses boundaries of time and space in ways not possible in FtF communication.

Social Presence Theory

Defined succinctly as “a sense of being with another,” social presence theory was first applied to mediated communication in an early work by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976). They were interested in how interaction via “teleconferencing systems and other media could be viewed, explained, and understood” (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 460). This early statement of social presence theory was influenced by symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and other theories of social psychology (e.g., Birdwhistell, 1970). From symbolic interactionism the concept of the “generalized other” was taken, meaning that a mediated social presence can be created through social interaction. Studies in nonverbal communication were drawn upon to explain both the limits (e.g., lack of visual cues in phone conversations) and affordances (e.g., tone of voice) of communication technology during moments of social interaction.

In a more recent review and discussion of social presence theory, Biocca et al. (2003) applied insights from Goffman (1963) to incorporate the concept of “copresence.” This is

the “basic sensory awareness of others,” which in a mediated environment means that “the senses of the user are extended to some degree by the technology” (p. 462). For instance, in a gaming context, copresence may be accomplished through the use of an avatar, as a representation of the other (e.g., Teng, 2017). Or, it may include a sense of “mutual awareness” that can emerge in mediated social interaction when there is a sensory awareness of both the self and other: “In this sense, two users are aware of each other in a virtual space, and that mutual awareness is the essence of social presence” (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 463). Thus, both social presence theory and media richness theory are important when understanding the affordances of social media.

We now turn our attention to describing some studies that apply these theories, with a particular focus on culture as a constructing and mediating force.

Border-Crossing Students’ Social Media Use

While there are many contexts and populations for studying social media and culture, one that has received attention in recent years is that of boundary-crossing young adult students. Developmentally, the student is at a stage in life when the demands of adulthood are relatively few, and a person is free to take on new life experiences and challenges. Thus, in a practice that harkens back to the 18th-century “grand tour” of European aristocracy, students from colleges and universities worldwide are encouraged to participate in a “study abroad” or “exchange” program (Sandel, 2014). For researchers this presents an opportunity to study not only educational outcomes, but also the stresses and impacts of cultural differences. And in recent years, with the development and use of social media, especially among well-educated youth, scholars have studied the impact of social media use on students who are exposed to and engage with different cultures. Social media can serve bridging and bonding functions, whereby bridging is associated with sociocultural tasks, such as learning how to navigate a local transportation system, and bonding associated with psychological and relational activities, such as making friends and/or identifying with a new culture. Social media can also serve to create “hybrid spaces” where communication and cultural practices from both home and host cultures can interact (Sleeman et al., 2016). Furthermore, social media have been found to have both positive and negative impacts on the sojourning students’ experience.

Affording Virtual Boundaries

One problem identified in some studies is that social media may serve to “erect virtual boundaries,” such that students from the same country (e.g., China) primarily maintain relations with others from that country (Olding, 2013; Sleeman et al., 2016). This may also negatively impact on students’ cultural adjustment to the host culture, as was observed in a study of Chinese students in Korea (Lee, Lee, & Jang, 2011). This may also be impacted by the use of a home country’s SNS, and not that of the host country. That is, in a study of Chinese students at an Australian university, while all had access to a Facebook account, only a minority were active users; instead, the students used the Chinese lan-

guage SNS called QQ for most of their online activities (Saw, Abbott, Donaghey, & McDonald, 2013).

Affording Emotional Support

Other work, however, has found social media playing a positive role. In a study of unaccompanied South Korean youth studying in the United States, Kim (2016) found that students used social media as a means for consuming transnational media, from Korea, and communicating with friends and family transnationally. More importantly, he found that such media may serve to create “transnational spaces” that can help such youth cope with the stresses of living in a foreign culture, and serve as a vehicle for receiving emotional support. Similarly, in a study of students who either came from other countries to study in the United States, or were from the United States and went “abroad” to study in other countries, Sandel (2014) found that online communication enhanced students’ experiences: such media helped them gain sociocultural skills, meet information needs, build and/or maintain relational bonds, and cope with psychological stresses and maintain a sense of well-being. Furthermore, he found that students preferred to use video streaming apps (e.g., Skype) when communicating with family and close friends, and text and picture-based apps (e.g., Facebook) for communicating with friends and acquaintances.

Findings from Sandel’s (2014) study extend media richness theory and social information processing theory by showing that the range of technological affordances available via social media can work at the relational level, with platforms that afford synchronous audio/video feeds approaching the richness of FtF communication. That is, social media allow users to actively choose a communication platform based upon the degree of richness they find appropriate for a communicative interaction and relationship. This study also points to how social media can afford social presence, as a synchronous video conversation with a family member can transcend space, and lead to the sense that both parties to an interaction are physically copresent, or as one participant remarked when seeing her mother on a video feed: “Oh, I’m here!” (p. 18).

One other way to understand the role of social media for students who cross national and cultural boundaries is to examine how students from different cultures interact and construct messages when engaged in cross-border interaction. Sandel, Buttny, et al. (2019) studied the messages constructed by students who engaged in a three-way, online interaction involving students from China (Macao), Malaysia, and the United States. Under a guided discussion of topics chosen by the instructors, students used the social media platform of their choice to interact both synchronously and asynchronously. Based upon students’ written reflection papers, it was found that interactions between Malaysian and Chinese student partners were perceived more positively than those involving U.S. and Malaysian/Chinese partners. The former partners described their talk as more informal and friendly; the latter were described as more institutional, formal, and less friendly. Further analysis of message construction demonstrated differences that supported these findings. Malaysian and Chinese students used more emoticons/emojis in their messages,

and provided greater self-disclosure than U.S. students. This study points to ways social media can serve as both a resource and context for constructing culture and a perceived understanding of cultural difference.

Migrant Populations' Social Media Uses

While most studies of how border-crossing individuals are impacted by social media involve students, there is a growing number that study other populations. These include studies of the social media use of border-crossing professionals (e.g., Ju & Sandel, 2018; Mao & Qian, 2015), marriage migrants (e.g., Constable, 2003; Sandel, 2015A; Shunnaq, 2009), labor migrants (e.g., Acedera & Yeoh, 2018; Aricat, 2015; Ju, 2018; Ju, Sandel, & Thinyane, IN PRESS; Liu, 2015), and forced migrants (Witteborn, 2014, 2018). Each study sheds light on ways that people of different cultures interact, and may use social media similarly or differently.

Professional Migrants

Mao and Qian (2015) explored how Chinese professionals living in Western countries in both Europe and North America used Facebook and other social media. From interviews they learned that Chinese used Facebook and other Western SNSs when communicating with friends in their host countries, but used Chinese SNSs, such as QQ, Renren, and WeChat, when communicating with family and friends in China. Furthermore, how they used social media reflected and communicated Chinese cultural values. For example, they were cautious in presenting too much personal information online, fearing that Facebook was not a safe place to reveal much about themselves; they also tried to avoid conflicts and “keep harmony both online and off-line” (p. 2477), by avoiding sharing personal opinions and political views. They also saw Facebook as a platform for promoting Chinese culture, such as by sharing information about their hometown and Chinese television shows. Language was also an issue, as most of their Facebook posts were written in English, whereas posts to Chinese social media were written in Chinese. Facebook was perceived as a means for learning about Western cultures, but not a vehicle for building close relationships. That is, Western social media were helpful for bridging (i.e., information seeking), but not for relational bonding.

In a study by Ju and Sandel (2018), they examined the issue of social media use and identity formation from a different perspective, by looking at the WeChat Moments posts of an American professional living in China. They thematically analyzed 135 posts by one person, collected over a three-year period. These posts demonstrated a range of self-construals and presentations of the self, including such themes as the “travel lover,” the teacher, the family member, Chinese cultural themes (e.g., Chinese food, the Chinese New Year spring festival), and American themes (e.g., American food, Easter holiday). That is, unlike Chinese professionals living in Western countries who were careful not to show too much about their personal lives (Mao & Qian, 2015), this American participant was freer and more open in sharing photos and short texts that displayed her activities while living

in China. She also openly displayed affiliations with both Chinese and American cultures; this differed from Chinese professionals who would use social media to seek out information about the West, but show the world an identity that was closely identified with China. Ju and Sandel (2018) further claim that the experiences of an American professional in China should be understood as reflecting “differential adaptation” (see De La Garza & Ono, 2015), meaning that this person’s social-cultural positioning, as someone of high status, allowed her to adapt differently from those less powerful, such as a low-skilled labor migrant.

Marriage Migrants

Another group of migrants that has received scholarly attention in recent years is those who migrate for the purpose of marriage and/or dating. In an early study, and when online communication was mainly via email or text-based messages, Constable (2003) studied a virtual community of transnational marriage-seeking couples. She found three ways internet “conversations” in a group chat room differed from FtF. First, messages were relatively “fixed,” meaning that they were viewable to most and archived; second, there could be a time delay between an initial message and its reply. The asynchronous nature of such chat was helpful to some Chinese women whose English language skills were not high, and used extra time to write their messages. Third, people were “sometimes less reserved over the Internet than they might be in a face-to-face conversation” (p. 35). Some wrote messages that seemed “aggressive, rude, or verbally abusive” (p. 35), as Constable claimed that the medium itself was interpreted by users to be a “safe” place to write messages in a style unlike FtF conversation. That is, the online medium afforded both advantages for border-crossing marriage-seeking migrants (e.g., asynchronously editing messages) and disadvantages (e.g., aggressive and/or abusive messages).

Affording Images of Marriage Partners

A second finding from Constable’s (2003) study was that social media may amplify and/or culturally construct images of the “desired” spouse. For instance, Constable documented that some Western men from countries such as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany were attracted to Asian women, believing they would be more “traditional” than Western women. Likewise, some Asian women (i.e., from China and the Philippines) were attracted to Western men, believing they would afford them a more “modern” and “free” lifestyle. Mediated images of what counts as the attractive other, however, are not limited to Western–Asian couples, but can be found in other contexts. Taiwan, for instance, is a place that has seen high rates of cross-border marriages, as men there perceived women from other countries, namely Vietnam, Indonesia, and China, as more traditional and better potential wives and mothers (Sandel, 2015A). Similarly, Vietnamese women who watched more South Korean television dramas were found to have a greater interest in seeking a South Korean male spouse (Vu & Lee, 2013). These and other studies (see Constable, 2005) point to the role that media can play in informing, shaping, and creating an image of desired relational and marriage partners, both within and across nations.

Affording Novel and Hybrid Marriages

In a study of young Jordanians, Shunnaq (2009) examined how young Jordanian women and men used social media to find spouses in other countries. Similar to what Sandel (2015A) found motivated many Southeast Asian women to marry men in Taiwan, Jordanian males viewed marriage not as primarily motivated by love and self-fulfillment, but as an opportunity to gain a better life in a wealthier country. However, Jordanian females who sought foreign spouses claimed that they were not motivated by economic reasons, but rather wanted “marital happiness and stability” (Shunnaq, 2009, p. 174). Furthermore, the anonymity of the internet and SNS afforded ways of courtship that went beyond traditional, FtF cultural practices. That is, the internet allowed women to pursue relationships in secret, out of the view of their family members. Men were able to disguise their economic intentions, and instead highlight the perception that they were good men, who were “respectful, honest, and attractive” (p. 182). That is, social media afforded ways to seek spouses in other countries and cultures that could not otherwise happen in FtF encounters and through traditional, culturally shaped practices of spouse-seeking.

Affording Traditional Marriage

Social media, however, can afford a different outcome, namely the amplification of “traditional” cultural practices. Agrawal (2015) studied how Indians, via the internet, arranged marriages. By examining matchmaking websites and traditional media, and interviewing participants, she found that the internet as a matchmaking resource was used primarily by India’s literate and upper-class segment of the population. This is a segment of India’s population that presumably would be most exposed to “nontraditional” practices, especially in light of the increased mobility of educated, professional Indian youth, who in recent decades have moved from rural to urban areas, and presumably are less likely to observe traditional, clan-based social networks when seeking suitable spouses. Yet it was found that the internet afforded the opposite practice: a preference for “conventional” arranged marriages. That is, the internet afforded geographically dispersed Indians the means to find “suitable” spouses, linked by such criteria as clan, caste, religion, and community. Furthermore, the internet afforded a greater number of family members to seek spouses. That is, the sister or brother of a spouse-seeking sibling could go online and search, a task that formerly only the father would do. This echoes a finding from an earlier study of the impacts of online communication on Muslim youth in Europe by Roy (2004), who found European-born-and-raised youth going online to seek information on how to act as “a good Muslim,” knowledge that was not learned from their African-born, Muslim parents.

Affording Dating in China

A mixed understanding of the affordances of social media to impact marriage and dating was found in a study conducted by Chan (2018). Recent years have witnessed the rise of many dating apps in China, with the most popular being MoMo (literally meaning stranger) and TanTan (meaning explorer). Based upon interviews with straight female participants, she learned that dating apps can be empowering. That is, dating apps can allow users to expand the number and type of potential male partners, in the pursuit of

sexual, romantic, or nonsexual relationships. An app can be gratifying as it can serve as “the liminal space between familiarity and strangeness” (p. 304) in a liberating way, as the app was a place to “vent,” meet strangers, and share feelings that could not be shared openly with family and close friends. Yet users also faced culturally based restrictions. As China in recent years has become increasingly paternalistic and places structural and gender-based restrictions on women, evident in the discourse that a single, unmarried woman over the age of 27 is “leftover” (see Fincher, 2014), women sometimes felt pressured by male partners, family, and friends to hide their use of dating apps. Dating apps were seen as affording females a freer lifestyle that could not be controlled by males and/or family. Furthermore, dating apps could also become vehicles for sexual harassment when meeting men whose intent was casual sex, and not what the female user was seeking. Hence, social media dating apps in China may afford a liberated space for seeking personal fulfillment, but also a space where such cultural patterns as the male gaze and structural sexism seep through.

Another kind of dating in China involves those who used SNS for online relationships (Chin, 2011). The website “Love Apartment” and the platform Renren afforded users the ability to connect with strangers of the opposite sex. They could flirt online, have private chats, and develop “*jingshen lian'ai*” (translated as Platonic relationships) with single or multiple participants. Chin found that many participants did not want these online relationships to turn into offline, FtF ones, fearing “*jian guang si*,” that once they see each other in the “real” world, the love will die. In other words, the online environment afforded the development of romantic emotional attachments, separate from the vicissitudes and realities of mundane, everyday, offline life. And while Chin did not make this connection directly, we see in her study evidence of the ways online users can bridge physical space and time by using the online tools at hand, lending support for social information processing theory (i.e., Walther, 1992). Hence, social media may afford a novel way of interacting with others that can feel free and empowering, and be attractive because of how they contrast with the constraints of offline social life.

In sum, these and other studies of marriage and dating demonstrate that while social media are impactful, such impacts are unpredictable: social media may afford a turn toward novel and hybrid practices, such as seen among Jordanian youth (Shunnaq, 2009), or toward traditional marriage-seeking practices, as found by Agrawal (2015) in India, or toward both nontraditional and traditional practices, as in China (Chan, 2018; Chin, 2011).

Subaltern Labor Migrants

We now turn our attention to highlighting studies of labor migrants, a subaltern population, and their uses of social media. Like border-crossing exchange students, people who travel long distances in the pursuit of jobs and economic opportunities also encounter cultural and linguistic differences. The widespread availability of social media for such migrants, however, affords resources that were not readily available in the pre-social-media

era. We highlight a few that serve to represent some of the affordances of social media and their impacts on migrant laborers' lives, showing both positive and negative ones.

Affording Political Activities

Aricat (2015) studied the use of social media for political purposes among Indian migrant laborers in Singapore. Unlike professional migrants to other countries, such as the United Kingdom or United States, who would hold street rallies during Indian elections, Aricat found that these Singaporean labor migrants did not participate in public political activities in Singapore. However, this did not mean they were unengaged. Instead, mobile phones and social media afforded some level of political engagement, such as mobile calling of friends and family in India to follow local politics, using social media to share political views, signing online petitions, and mobile calling to canvas for candidates. These activities were especially meaningful to some participants who were previously active in politics when living in India. Yet others felt disillusioned with politics and detached themselves from such activities. Still others were "apolitical revelers" who used social media mainly for entertainment and rarely participated in politics. Thus, social media afforded Indian labor migrants in Singapore a level of political agency and activism that transcended some limitations, such as space; but social media use was not predictive of a single use or pattern of behavior.

Affording Intimacy

In another study, Acedera and Yeoh (2018) studied how Facebook afforded Filipino/a labor migrants across Southeast Asia ways of "doing" intimacy. They studied couples involving male spouses who were "left behind" in the Philippines, and female spouses who had migrated to Singapore for work. That is, they were interested in "transnational" households connected via communication technologies, including mobile phones and computers. They found that Facebook and other social media afforded a form of "ambient copresence"; this meant that not only could they send messages to each other, and talk using audio and/or video channels, but they could also publicly post their status as "married." This was important in the context of the Philippines, where marriage is sanctioned and upheld by the state and church. Yet ambient copresence was insufficient to curtail what they identified as "intimacy limbo." Over time some partners claimed that they became used to living alone, and felt that their partner was a stranger. When wives returned to the Philippines for short vacations, they found it difficult to feel intimate with their husbands; they also felt sad during their visits, knowing that their visits were only temporary, and soon they had to leave for Singapore. Hence, one way to cope was to avoid becoming too emotionally involved during visits, or "hardening" themselves for a time of separation.

Affording Ethnic Identities

A different kind of migrant was studied by Liu (2015). He studied the Wa, a Chinese ethnic minority group with a homeland located in rural communities in southwestern China. They, like many of China's rural inhabitants, migrated to China's wealthier urban centers and manufacturing centers located in the east (Liang, 2016). Liu (2015) studied a commu-

nity of migrants living in the cities of Dongguan and Shenzhen. He observed their online messaging and blogging activities with other Wa youth and coworkers, paying attention to linguistic practices that presented an ethnic, Wa identity. In their home and interpersonal environments, these Wa spoke both an ethnic language and a dialect of Chinese spoken in Yunnan Province. Yet these ethnic forms of communication, which are mutually unintelligible both with the Cantonese spoken in Dongguan and Shenzhen and with standard Chinese (see Sandel, 2015B), were dispreferred. Using their phones, they could input Chinese characters with the “pinyin” system taught in schools, designed to be used for writing in standard Chinese, and based upon Putonghua (Mandarin). Yet as Liu (2015) found when analyzing their text messages, they often used non-standard forms of Chinese, either unintentionally when selecting the wrong character, or intentionally when using a character to represent the sound-quality of a word in spoken Yunnan dialect (e.g., writing 客 *ke* instead of 去 *qu* to represent the verb “to go”). These linguistic choices afforded the creation of written forms that among the Wa were interpreted as ways to display a regional identity and a shared sense of togetherness as “brothers” (p. 345).

Dual Migrants

Finally, we consider the experiences of “dual migrants” in China. In studies by Ju and colleagues (Ju, 2018; Ju, Sandel, & Thinyane, IN PRESS), they examined how mainland Chinese labor migrants used WeChat and other social media in their work and daily lives. Like China’s other internal labor migrants, these participants left their homes in rural areas in the mainland to work in Macao, a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, drawn to this place by its higher wages. However, due to the higher cost of living and housing in Macao, these participants rented housing in the adjacent city of Zhuhai, and crossed the border daily. WeChat and other social media that they accessed on their mobile phones were important in many ways. For instance, migrants relied upon social media apps for bridging functions when seeking news and information about such matters as transportation and government policies; they also used social media for making and receiving purchases, as some engaged in “*daigou*” (cross-border buying on behalf of others; see Xie, 2018) practices. WeChat also afforded bonding, such as by exchanging messages with distant family and friends, and sending each other “red packet” as small monetary gifts during holidays and festivals. However, dual migrants had limited social interaction with the local Macao residents with whom they worked. They avoided interacting with strangers, meaning that they primarily received emotional support and pleasure from existing relationships based in their hometowns and from those with whom they shared literacies and social status.

Affording Surveillance

One important finding from Ju’s (2018) work is that in the work environment, social media may afford surveillance activities. At participants’ workplaces in Macao, employers mandated that each worker stay in a designated area. For instance, cleaners were assigned to separate floors of a building; if they left their floor to visit and/or socialize with a worker on another floor, they would be sanctioned with punishments ranging from a warning letter, to a salary deduction, to dismissal. Regardless of a worker’s physical loca-

tion, however, they needed to be apprised of tasks, regulations, and important work-related information in a timely manner. WeChat served this function: all workers were required to join a company-managed group chat, which they used to clock in and out, and were required to take and post photos that demonstrated completed tasks. Furthermore, the company decreed that only “work-related” messages could be shared on WeChat. Hence, for this group of employees, WeChat was the panopticon through which activities and tasks were controlled by management.

Forced Migrants

The last group of migrants to be discussed include what Witteborn (2014, 2018) calls “forced migrants.” Based upon longitudinal ethnographic studies of asylum seekers in Germany, she studied their digital practices. Such persons, forced to flee distant homes and communities in many different countries, were assigned institutional accommodations while their claims of asylum were processed. They were either given or sought access to information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as computers at refugee centers, internet cafes, or smartphones. Witteborn observed that ICTs afforded access to information about their asylum claims, status in Germany, and information about events and people from their home countries. Yet ICTs also were associated with emotions and produced a range of feelings (2014). For instance, when women from such countries as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran used computers that were provided in the “computer room,” they felt bad if a man looked at them, or rumors were circulated about a woman. When men talked at or about women, and if men spoke while directly gazing at women, these women felt shame as such acts violated social norms. Others felt fear, especially when using SNS such as Facebook. They were afraid that people in their home countries may be trying to hurt them; they were also afraid that any comments they wrote could be used to hurt family members remaining in the countries they had left. They also self-censored and selectively presented themselves online, hiding their status as refugees and posting only positive messages about their lives in Germany.

Affording Emotions

Witteborn (2018), however, found that participants were not without agency, and that they could interact with social media and technologies in ways that were emotionally positive. For instance, one woman said that when she went online, it was a way of “unbecom[ing] [a] refugee and a female corseted in norms and rules imposed on her in the name of a naturalized gendered way of acting, which she did not accept” (p. 26). The technology afforded her a sense of self that differed from the offline environment, where she could become “a learner, a student of technology and connectivity, and sometimes a teacher to those who had never worked with a computer before” (p. 26). That is, social media afforded this participant a way to feel free of the constraints of social norms and a regulated behavior she felt in the offline world.

Environments for Resistance and Dissent

In this section we examine how social media afford an environment for resistance and dissent. When asked to explain what is Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg often says Facebook is for: “Making the world more open and connected” (Hoffman, Proferes, & Zimmer, 2018). By affording a space and environment for friends and family to connect, not bound by the limits of time and physical space, the world—it is claimed—will become a more open and better place.

Recent events can be cited as evidence that Facebook and other social media have had an impact across the world, and afford a more open expression of ideas and subsequent protest. These include such events and/or movements as the Arab Spring protests of 2011 (Lim, 2012; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheaffer, 2013), the Iranian “Twitter Revolution” of 2009, the Turkish and Ukrainian protests of 2013–2014 (Jost et al., 2018), and the Hong Kong “Umbrella Movement” of 2014 (Lee, Chen, & Chan, 2017). Social media can serve to promote protest or political participation for a number of reasons: they are (a) a source of news from friends and acquaintances, (b) a space or environment for expression, and (c) a forum for influencing people when they discuss and receive relevant information. And, as claimed by Lim (2012), social movements are more likely to spread and reach a larger audience when “intermodality” happens, that is, when the “networks of various media” overlap (p. 241). The case of the Arab Spring and how it unfolded in Egypt can serve as an example of the impact of social media on protest movements.

Affording Egypt’s Arab Spring

As narrated by Lim (2012), the Egyptian uprising of 2011 must be understood as resulting from the relationship between social media and political activism. The genesis of the uprising can be traced to the “Kefaya movement” of 2004 (Kefaya means “enough”), which began before Facebook and Twitter were available. In anticipation of the 2004 presidential elections, a small group of 300 Egyptian intellectuals founded Kefaya and called for President Hosni Mubarak to step down. They organized a number of protests attended by hundreds; they also “hosted online forums and coordinated activities through [their] main Website” (p. 236). The beginnings of this movement also coincided with the beginning of blogging in Egypt, with the number of bloggers expanding rapidly from 2004 to 2006. The “emerging blogosphere created a space in which the inner circle of blogger-activists could deliberate freely among themselves” (p. 237). This activity also brought together people from a range of ideologies and backgrounds who otherwise would be unconnected. However, the initial impact of bloggers was limited, as internet penetration was low during this period.

The movement, however, expanded rapidly in 2009. Two acts of political resistance became symbols of protest. One was a general strike on April 6, 2008. It was the first event promoted via Facebook and Twitter. The subsequent police response to this strike, and the arrest of one of the cofounders, Esraa Abdel Fatah, who became known as “Esraa the Facebook girl” (p. 240), served to draw in many youth who were simply curious. The

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movement was then amplified following the launch of Arabic Facebook in 2009, as the number of users increased rapidly. Then, in June 2009, 28-year-old Khaled Said was brutally beaten by the police, with online sources claiming he was killed because he possessed video footage of police brutality; images of his injuries were circulated on social media, and the Facebook page “‘We are all Khaled Said’ quickly became the most popular dissident Facebook group in Egypt” (p. 241). Lim claims his martyrdom was a “trigger” for increased collective action and protest. Then, as protests were called in Tahrir Square in 2011, calls to participate were made online via Twitter, Facebook, emails, and blogs, and offline via “flyers, pamphlets and word of mouth” (p. 243). By 2011 the movement had spread beyond the initial small number of intellectuals and activists who were strongly connected to the social movement, to include those with weak social ties; this now included cab drivers, food vendors, disaffected youth, and Cairo’s militant soccer supporters who were experienced in battles with the police and other fans. Finally, the movement reached a global audience via Twitter, Al Jazeera’s social media feeds, and the interactive websites of such news organizations as CNN and BBC. Therefore, while the eventual removal of President Mubarak from office was not caused solely by Facebook and other social media, his end was facilitated by social media, lending evidence to support the claim that “social media are not simply neutral tools” (p. 234).

Affording Gendered Resistance in China

We close with one final example that illustrates how social change may be facilitated via social media. While it is well known that China has developed an elaborate censorship regime, commonly known as the “Great Firewall of China,” in an effort to control citizen-led dissent (see Ju et al., 2019), this does not mean all forms of social, cultural, and gender-based dissent are silenced. Instead, China’s internet has been an environment and forum for novel expression (Mina, 2014) and plays an important role in social change (deLisle, Goldstein, & Yang, 2016; Yang, 2009). One example concerns the matter of gender. To illustrate, we present and analyze examples of messages circulated via WeChat’s Moments during the Chinese New Year holiday of 2019.

With a majority of China’s population now living in urban areas, the Chinese “Spring Festival” is a time when millions return to spend the festival in rural towns and communities where they have familial ties. And for many women, this physical journey can also be cultural. In urban centers, China’s young and middle-aged women may pursue careers and work opportunities, and live in small nuclear homes where they are in charge of household tasks and gender-based roles. Yet when they travel with their spouses to a rural hometown for the festival, they must take on the role of the “obedient” woman, and follow the rules and cultural norms established by their mother-in-law (see Sandel, 2004). This can include such practices as family meals and eating arrangements.

In early February 2019, just prior to the Chinese New Year, a person posted the following message link to WeChat’s Moments section.

[Translation by authors]: On New Year's Eve, [consider] that in China there are still more than 90 million women who cannot sit at the table and eat the feast!

Do you know? The Qing Dynasty ended 108 years ago, but there are still many places where women cannot sit together with men to eat! Really. Truly, and these are not just a few places. The number is more than 90 million. That is to say, in China, there are perhaps still 90 million women, when the New Year happens they have the problem that they cannot sit at the table or the main table to eat. I have selected for you a number of stories that illustrate this.

This message was then linked to a post on the SNS mobile phone app Zhihu (知乎) with stories and visual images that illustrated this claim. (Zhihu is a mobile phone app similar to Quora, with more than 100 million subscribers. Users can make posts that either ask a question, or give an answer.) For example, one person posted the following:

A female colleague's hometown is in the city of Chengdu. She found a spouse from Shandong, and the first year after her marriage went to Shandong, the town of Shuiyuan for Chinese New Year. By the time they arrived it was already night, and they were very tired. Her mother-in-law said that the next day they had to wake up early to prepare the New Year's Eve meal; this already made her [daughter-in-law] feel like she was about to explode. She was awoken at four in the morning, and worked all day in the kitchen, until the table was filled with the dishes they prepared. Then just as she sat at the table, and using her chopsticks to grasp the first bite, even before she put it in her mouth, her father-in-law said to her: "You go outside and squat over there to eat." My colleague was so enraged, that in anger she smashed the table and ruined the meal.

While it is impossible to confirm the veracity of this story, or the claim that there are more than 90 million women in China who cannot sit at the table while eating, this story does "ring true" for many Chinese women. There are many first-hand or second-hand stories of women, especially when "returning home" with their husbands for the first Chinese New Year feast, who face unexpected gender discrimination. That is, many traditional families still follow practices that are characterized as "*Da nanren zhuyi*," or "male chauvinism." Therefore, when posts are shared on social media such as this one, they tap into a well-known discourse of sexism. And sharing these posts can serve as a way to give public voice to a private problem, and demonstrate solidarity with others who face similar situations. Or, to put it into perspective, sharing stories on social media is an improvement on practices observed in the early 20th century when young, newly married Chinese women, faced with an overbearing and abusive mother-in-law, would "drink poison or throw themselves off bridges or under trains" (Wolf, 1987, p. 163).

Negative Affordances

Thus far we have mainly discussed how social media can positively afford a sense of social presence, that relationships can be built in the online, digital environment by using the tools at hand (i.e., social information processing theory), and that social media can af-

ford resistance to cultural constraints. Yet social media also have negative affordances. In this last section we highlight two examples.

Affording Misinformation

The 2016 U.S. presidential election—for many reasons—will be analyzed and discussed for years to come. One reason is how social media were used to spread misinformation, or “fake news,” defined as “intentional falsehoods spread as news stories . . . to advance political goals” (Jensen, 2018, p. 116). Traditional media employ editorial procedures to safeguard the veracity of their stories; consumers can also make judgments about news bias when they are familiar with the source (e.g., liberal or conservative). Yet when news come from social media—disseminated by for-profit technology companies such as Facebook or Google—judgments about news bias and veracity can be harder to make (Bendall & Robertson, 2018). It was in this safeguard-free context that “fake news” was created by foreign actors in Russia and other nations, widely shared, and viewed via Facebook and Twitter among users in the United States (Jensen, 2018; Schiffrin, 2017).

Fake news is problematic not simply because of “informational or epistemic deficits,” but because they work to politicize and colonize social identities, making it difficult for people in democratic systems to come “together to address common problems” (Jensen, 2018, p. 116). That is, such messages amplify preexisting social and political divisions. Based upon an analysis of Twitter messages identified as produced by the Russian Internet Research Agency (IRA), Jensen analyzed how foreign actors influenced the American electorate. First, in the early part of the campaign, they posted messages that discussed popular culture and were “aphoristic,” or general truths rather than controversial topics. They also posted “jokes and other phatic communication” as a way to build rapport (Jensen, 2018, p. 121). Then later in the campaign they pushed messages meant to discredit Hillary Clinton, promote Donald Trump, cast the two as morally equivalent, and sow doubts about the polls. That is, Twitter was initially used to build a parasocial relationship and sense of social immediacy between news producers and consumers, and then later to support the political position of Trump at the expense of Clinton. This case demonstrates how social media afforded the dissemination of misinformation, by exploiting the immediacy and emotional attachments that can be generated in an online context as a way then to mislead and influence behavior.

Affording Extremism

A second negative affordance of social media is how they afford extremism. One group that took advantage of social media to build influence, spread its message, and recruit members was the international terrorist organization ISIS (also known as the Islamic State) (Awan, 2017). This organization saw social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube—as propaganda tools for spreading its message; to this end it developed a “social media centre” to create slick videos and images under the “Billion Muslim campaign,” intending to “win the hearts and minds” of young people (p. 142). Initially the group was successful, gaining thousands of followers, and recruiting “foreign fighters” globally, including those from such Western nations as the United Kingdom and United

States. As claimed by Awan, the success of ISIS can theoretically be explained by the power of social media to generate emotional attachments and “friendships” through the use of vivid symbolic images, behaviors that formerly were the domain of offline contexts.

ISIS is not the only extremist group to use social media to extend its messages. Since 1995, white supremacist and hate groups in the United States and elsewhere have used the “dark web” to create sites for extremists “to access private message boards, email, research, and listservs and to sell merchandise” (Zhou, Reid, Qin, Chen, & Lai, 2005, p. 44). The online context has afforded such groups the ability to create a “collective identity, solidarity, and leaderless resistance” (p. 44). A more recent and publicly shared example of white supremacist extremism was the tragic attack in 2019 on worshipers at mosques in New Zealand that was live-broadcast on Facebook. Following widespread criticism for allowing the video of this attack to be live-broadcast, and for not taking it down immediately, Facebook responded by changing its live-streaming policy and creating a “one-strike” policy to temporarily restrict access for users who “break Facebook rules” (Gunia, 2019). This rule change was an acknowledgment by Facebook of the problematic power of social media to disseminate and promote extremism, when content that is uploaded by users is unfiltered and not monitored.

Conclusion

Social media, a “phenomenon” not tied to or limited to a single communication technology, in the span of decades have become ubiquitous globally, with impacts felt from the personal to the transnational. We have described some of the ways people are impacted by social media, and the affordances and uses of these media. These include studies of migration, marriage and dating, subaltern groups and individuals, political activities, interpersonal relationships, emotions, surveillance, resistance and dissent, gendered activities, and misinformation and extremism. We have also shown that social media are situated culturally, as the online environment affords the creation of novel connections across time and space; online interactions are also impacted by offline, preexisting cultural norms, patterns, and structures: the uses of social media in a Chinese context may vary from those in non-Chinese contexts. And we have outlined some theories that help us understand the features, functions, and power of social media. That is, cutting across and through most studies of social media is the understanding that they afford a heightened perception of social presence, as the boundary between online and offline worlds becomes increasingly blurred.

Future research into social media, culture, and communication will undoubtedly expand and go beyond the range of topics covered in this work, which can only be characterized as partial and incomplete. As social media technologies continue to change, users will find more uses that impact behaviors, activities, relationships, and cultures. And the future will also reveal affordances that future generations will judge both positively and negatively. Clearly there is much more to be discovered.

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Todd L. Sandel

Department of Communication, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Macau

Bei "Jenny" Ju

Faculty of Humanities and Arts, Macau University of Science and Technology