

H1 General Paper (Y6)
Technology I: Social Media Lecture [T2W5]

Introduction

Key Definitions

- Social Media refers to computer-based modern technology that facilitates **the sharing of ideas, thoughts and information** through virtual networks and communities.
- Social Media is a type of **digital technology**. Platforms are built using computer programming (software) that runs on devices (hardware) and connects people through the internet (a technological system). Types of technologies being utilised:
 - **Software engineering** to build platforms e.g. Instagram/TikTok,
 - **Servers and networks** to store data and share content across the world, and
 - **Algorithms** to recommend content and provide personalised feeds.

Lecture Structure

Social media has many **benefits** [value & importance], but its **power** also comes with great **risk** [power & influence], making the **regulation** of social media platforms necessary and essential [control & responsibility].

1. **Value & Importance** of Social Media
2. **Power & Influence** of Social Media
 - Social Media as a Political and Social Tool
 - Social Media as a Shaper of Identity, Perspectives and Behaviour
 - Social Media as a Public Court
3. Issues of **Control & Responsibility**
 - Who is being controlled by Social Media?
 - Who is responsible for the control that Social Media has over our lives?

Recent 'A' Level Questions

1. To what extent has **social media** devalued true friendship in your society? (2021)
2. Is **modern technology** a benefit or a threat to democracy? (2020)
3. Consider the view that **social media** has more influence than politicians. (2019)
4. Does violence in the **visual media** portray reality or encourage the unacceptable? (2019)
5. In an age of **rapid technological advancement**, is a single career for life realistic? (2018)
6. 'The quality of written language is being destroyed by **social media**.' What is your view? (2017)
7. 'Books serve little purpose in education as **technological developments** become more sophisticated'. How far do you agree? (2015)

Part 1: Value & Importance of Social Media

Value & Importance of Social Media			
	<i>Has value? ☺</i>	<i>Lacks value? ☹</i>	<i>Examples</i>
Hedonistic			
Practical			
Economic			
Aesthetic			
Social/ Cultural			
Health/ Safety			
Political			

Part 2: Power & Influence of social media

What gives social media **power & influence** over others?

- It shapes identity
- It shapes public opinion and behaviour patterns through algorithmic control
- It drives trends through virality
- It amplifies voices, sparks movements to bring about social change
- It impacts political outcomes

Structure of Section: 3 ways in which social media has power and influence

1. Social media as a political and social tool
 2. Social media as a shaper of identity, perspectives and behaviour
 3. Social media as a public court
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1. Social media as a political and social tool

Social media enables activism, political mobilisation, and social change. It allows individuals and political groups to organise movements, influence elections, and push for policy changes. Unlike traditional media, which is controlled by governments and corporations, social media provides an **open, decentralised platform** for activism, advocacy, and resistance.

Social media allows individuals to organise protests, demand policy changes, and challenge authority without needing mainstream media approval. However, while social media can drive positive change, it can also be used for manipulation, including misinformation campaigns and digital propaganda.

→ **Example 1: Facebook-Cambridge Analytica Data Scandal (2016)**

An example of how _____

- In 2016, Facebook became embroiled in a major data privacy scandal involving the British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica.
- Facebook allowed a third-party app to collect data from millions of users (and their Facebook friends) without their consent, which was then used to micro-target voters with personalised political ads.
- The harvested data was then shared with Cambridge Analytica, in violation of Facebook's platform policies, which used the data to build detailed psychographic profiles of American voters. These insights were used to craft highly personalised political ads and messages, often focused on emotional and divisive issues, and distributed through platforms like Facebook itself. The goal was to manipulate public opinion and influence voting behavior, particularly in favour of Donald Trump's 2016

presidential campaign, which was one of Cambridge Analytica's clients.

→ **Example 2: Political humour & digital commentary**

An example of how

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- This is a video mash-up of Trump's al-Baghdadi Speech & Obama's Bin Laden Speech (Jimmy Kimmel Live show)
 - The way political leaders present themselves and **how** those presentations are circulated and mocked on social media shapes public perception, reinforces biases, and even influences how history is remembered.
 - Obamawas portrayed as serious and collaborative, whilst Trump was presented as theatrical and self-promotional. Social media intensifies these narrative battles, reinforcing ideological divisions.
 - By placing the speeches side by side in the Jimmy Kimmel video, the video emphasises Trump's more sensational and self-congratulatory tone, contrasting it with Obama's calm and authoritative style. This stark difference made Trump appear less composed, reinforcing a common media narrative that he is less presidential than his predecessor, Obama.
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2. Social media as a Shaper of Identity, Perspectives and Behaviours

Social media plays a powerful role in shaping how people think, behave, and see themselves. Especially among young people, it has transformed the way identity is constructed and perceived.

Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and X allow individuals to curate and project **idealised versions of themselves**, choosing what to share, how to appear, and even which parts of their personalities to highlight. This act of **self-curation** creates a sense of control over one's image, offering a space for experimentation, self-expression, and validation. Moreover, the concept of **digital permanence** can be quite harmful in the long run – unlike fleeting offline interactions, content shared online can resurface years later, making it difficult for people to outgrow or move on from their past selves. This can create a kind of *digital shadow* that shapes how others view them, even if it is long after they've changed.

→ **Example 3: Paris Brown – the UK's first Youth Police and Crime Commissioner**

- An example of challenges with digital permanence: In 2013, when Paris Brown was 17 years old, she was forced to resign from her role after old tweets she had posted when she was 14-16 years old. Her resurfaced tweets contained offensive language. Even though she had changed and matured, her past digital footprint followed her into her professional life, unfortunately harming her reputation and damaging her identity.

→ **Example 4: Caring for our migrant workers in Singapore during COVID-19**

- Instagram accounts like @wakeupsingapore and @weare migrantworkers amplified stories about the poor living conditions migrant workers faced during COVID lockdowns.
- Public **empathy** increased – There were donations, fundraisers, and even pressure on the government to improve dorm conditions. Previously "invisible" workers became more central in the public's awareness as the public became more vocal about worker rights.

Social media also influences how people form opinions and react to issues. Algorithms often create echo chambers, where users are repeatedly exposed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs. This can intensify polarisation, shape moral judgments, and affect how quickly people react to news, trends, or controversies. In a sense, social media doesn't just reflect society, it actively molds it..

→ **Example 5: Martial Law in South Korea and Fake News**

- In Dec 2024, President Yoon (S.Korea) declared martial law, which lasted for 6 hours. Yoon cited the need to protect the country from "anti-state" forces aligned with North Korea, but his decision was largely driven by political challenges and growing opposition to his leadership. This led to emotionally charged content and conspiracy theories about vote fraud and martial law being amplified by algorithms, creating online echo chambers on both the pro and anti-Yoon sides.
- Unfortunately, fake news and selective narratives were circulated widely on social media, making it difficult for the public to agree on basic facts, and turning social media into a battleground for truth and influence.
 - E.g. Pro-Yoon news: Rumours and unverified stories about opposition lawmakers being North Korea *sympathisers* or planning a coup circulated widely in right-wing YouTube communities.
 - E.g. Anti-Yoon news: Doctored videos falsely showed President Yoon admitting he "ruined the country," which went viral on platforms like TikTok and Facebook before being taken down.

3. Social media as a Public Court

Social media has evolved into a modern-day public courtroom where individuals, brands, and even politicians are subject to immediate judgment. With just a few clicks, users can amplify voices, expose injustices, and demand accountability — but this power comes with significant risks. While social media can serve as a tool for justice, giving marginalised communities a platform to speak out, it can also become a vehicle for **public shaming, misinformation, and harassment**, often without the benefit of due process.

A prominent example of this dynamic is the rise of **cancel culture**. To be "cancelled" typically means facing widespread condemnation and criticism online due to perceived offensive

behavior, problematic views, or controversial actions. The intention behind cancel culture is often to hold individuals or institutions **accountable**, particularly when traditional systems fail to do so. However, it also raises important questions: Who gets to decide what's offensive? Is there room for learning and redemption? And at what point does accountability turn into online mob justice? In this environment, public opinion can shift rapidly, reputations can be destroyed overnight, and the line between justice and punishment becomes increasingly blurred.

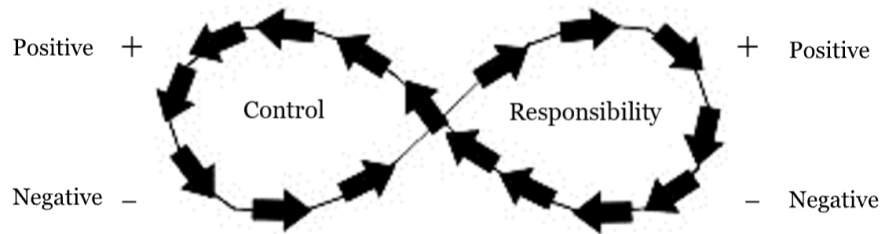
→ **Example 6: Kevin Hart *cancelled***

- Kevin Hart was "cancelled" in 2018 over past homophobic tweets and jokes, which resurfaced after he was announced as the host of the 2019 Academy Awards (Oscars). Twitter users, journalists, and activists called him out, arguing that these tweets were offensive and reflected deep-seated homophobia. Social media **played the role of a judge and jury**, deciding that Hart should be held accountable for his past remarks.

→ **Example 7: Will Smith's trial by social media**

- Social media turns disagreements into public debates, where reputation, morality, and accountability are put under scrutiny. Social media users would take sides and debate about which party is right / wrong. Both parties' reputations would be at stake.
- E.g. Will Smith/Chris Rock slapping incident (2022) – The event was judged in real-time by millions, shaping how people viewed Will Smith and Chris Rock. Both Smith & Rock faced career setbacks, showing how social media backlash affects real-world opportunities.

Part 3: Issues of Control & Responsibility



When social media gains too much control over our lives, it raises an important question: who is *truly* responsible for protecting the well-being of citizens? This section will explore the following two essential questions:

Structure of Section:

- 1) Who is being controlled by social media?
- 2) Who is responsible for the control that social media has over our lives?

1) Who is being controlled by social media?

Excessive use of social media leading to loss of control over our lives can manifest as excessive time spent online, neglecting real-life activities, experiencing anxiety/depression due to social media usage, and having addiction-like behaviours. Social media's influence can be significant, with users potentially feeling controlled by algorithms, content, and the desire for validation, leading to issues like addiction, anxiety, and a distorted view of reality.

Users most controlled by social media in terms of perspectives and behaviours:

- Children & teenagers
- Frequent consumers of news via social media
- People seeking validation online
- People who are addicted to social media
- Polarised political and ideological groups

How social media devalues friendships:

- Social media often creates a false sense of intimacy. While it helps us stay connected, especially with friends who live far away, it cannot replace real-life communication and shared experiences. True closeness is built through spending time together in person, not just through online interactions.
- In addition, in trying to present our lives as *perfect*, we miss the chance to share what is real. It is in our vulnerability, our mess and brokenness, that genuine connection is

formed. Online spaces can offer a sense of community around shared interests, but that connection can be shallow and give a false sense of security.

- Furthermore, over time, we can become self-obsessed. Social media encourages us to focus on how we appear to others, rather than nurturing meaningful relationships.

A provocative quotation: “Social media keeps us living in a vacuum. The Internet is such a solitary place.”

2) Who is responsible for the control that social media has over our lives?

With many users losing control while using social media, regulatory measures need to be put in place to protect and enhance the lives of these people.

A) _____ regulation

Social media platforms have established rules and guidelines to govern what is allowed on their sites, including bans on hate speech, harassment, misinformation, and illegal activity. These platforms rely on a combination of human and AI moderation to identify and remove harmful content. Additionally, users have access to tools that allow them to block or report problematic behavior. There are also age restrictions in place, along with parental supervision features, such as TikTok’s Family Pairing tool, to help monitor and guide younger users.

However, despite these efforts, regulation is often still insufficient. Many social media companies continue to **prioritise profit over user safety**, which can result in slow or inadequate responses to harmful content, particularly misinformation. As a result, serious safety concerns, like cyberbullying, remain persistent and unresolved issues across platforms.

B) _____ regulation

Governments are increasingly putting pressure on social media companies to protect users from harmful content such as violence, cyberbullying, and abuse. To enforce this, many have introduced compliance laws that require platforms to take more responsibility for the safety of their users. If companies fail to meet these standards, they can face serious consequences, ranging from hefty fines to being blocked entirely within a country.

→ Example 8: How governments regulate social media

Singapore:

- In 2023, a new bill was introduced in Singapore to hold social media platforms legally accountable if they fail to protect local users from online harms. The legislation empowers the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) to issue takedown orders to platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok for egregious content involving suicide, self-harm, or sexual exploitation. Non-compliance can result in severe

penalties, including fines of up to SGD 1 million or even a complete ban from operating in the country.

- In 2025, further steps have been taken with the passing of a new bill requiring app stores to block users under 18 from downloading apps rated 18+, such as Tinder. Additionally, users under 12 must be prevented from downloading social media platforms intended for ages 12 and above, like Instagram. To support these age restrictions, platforms can implement age assurance technologies such as AI-powered facial recognition or digital ID verification—tools that platforms like Instagram are already beginning to adopt.

Australia:

- In Australia, the government has approved a new bill that will ban social media use for children under the age of 16. Although the law has not yet come into effect, it marks a significant step toward shielding young users from the potentially harmful effects of algorithms, addictive features, and inappropriate content on platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and Instagram.
- While the move has been praised for prioritising child safety, some have raised concerns about its potential impact on young people's ability to form and maintain social connections in the digital age.

C) _____ regulation

Parental regulation plays a crucial role in protecting children on social media. It requires parents to take a proactive approach by actively monitoring and supervising their child's online activity. This includes setting healthy boundaries, such as time limits, and fostering open communication about what children are seeing and experiencing online. Teaching social media literacy is also essential, helping young users understand how to navigate digital spaces responsibly, recognise harmful content, and develop critical thinking skills in the face of misinformation or peer pressure.

D) _____--regulation

Self-regulation involves setting personal boundaries around phone usage, such as limiting screen time, turning on "Do Not Disturb" mode during certain hours, or even taking a complete break through a "social media detox." Some individuals go as far as deleting their accounts altogether to regain control over their time and mental well-being.

However, effective self-regulation requires a high level of self-awareness, discipline, and maturity, qualities that can be challenging to develop, especially in younger users.

Responsibility of stakeholders – A possible argument

All in all, the responsibility for ensuring user safety on social media is shared across multiple stakeholders. Social media corporations hold the greatest direct influence, as they design the platforms and have the power to protect users by providing tools, safeguards, and access to information. Governments also play a key role, particularly when corporate interests clash with public safety, as they are tasked with prioritising the well-being of citizens and enforcing regulations to hold platforms accountable. At the same time, the behaviour of individual users also significantly shapes the overall online environment, making personal responsibility just as important. Finally, parents and educational institutions are crucial in guiding younger and more vulnerable users, helping them navigate social media with awareness, caution, and resilience.

A final word

Social media has many **benefits** [value & importance], but its **power** also comes with great risk [power & influence], making **regulation** of social media platforms necessary and essential [control & responsibility].

Post-lecture reflection: *What is one thing you can change about your social media usage habits?*

Article: *Reinventing the Social in Social Media*

With the turmoil deepening around Twitter's uncertain future, pessimistic projections about Facebook's parent company Meta, and the sudden surge in popularity of alternative social media platforms such as Mastodon, this could well be an inflection point for social media platforms at large.

While we have habituated ourselves to the default settings and features of the leading social media platforms, it is timely for us to consider just what makes today's social media "social" and how these elements may be ripe for a rethink and redesign. In particular, we should reflect on the dimensions of connectedness, reciprocity, publicness and privacy.

As social creatures, humans enjoy the company of others and research shows that social connections confer health benefits as well. Hence, we are motivated to foster everything from casual connections to enduring relationships through mutual interaction. Today's dominant social media platforms serve this interaction function brilliantly. They allow us to look up possible contacts whom we can connect with, and many will suggest new contacts drawn from the extended network of our close friends and acquaintances.

Over social media, one can – through close intimates – get to know distant connections virtually, and concurrently nurture deeper relationships with online contacts that often pave the way for face-to-face interactions. Although we now take it for granted, this mutually enriching relationship between online and offline interactions is what made social media such a game changer when it first entered the scene.

Indeed, we can use social media to traverse physical boundaries and social divides to forge strong bonds while enjoying serendipitous encounters. Think of the long-lost schoolmates or relatives living overseas whom you chat with on a regular basis via WhatsApp or WeChat. Consider also the unexpected friendships you developed through joining a Facebook group or commenting on a TikTok video. These opportunities for socialising lend social media platforms tremendous appeal.

Clearly, relationships don't grow on the basis of mere connections but must be nourished through reciprocity. You reply when someone texts you and return a fun emoji or a delightful GIF. When your friend posts about the demise of his pet, you express your condolences in a comment, just as he had reacted with a heart sticker when you announced the birth of your child.

Such back and forth acts of reciprocity are the lubricant that helps drive relationships forward. Again, social media platforms provide many tools for expressing and experiencing reciprocity that mimic the nature of offline relationships. But where social media platforms depart from and distort real-world relationship dynamics is the sheer publicness of it all.

Friendship ties are now captured in neon lights, allowing all and sundry to scrutinise who is no longer friends with whom, or why X never liked Y's Instagram photo. Debates between friends and strangers on controversial issues are also played out in a very public fashion on many social media platforms, allowing random "passers-by" to spectate or even add fuel to the fire. To be sure, publicness can be a force for good that allows messages of social import to be significantly amplified.

However, the highly open and public nature of many online spaces is also what gives rise to spontaneous interactions among loose gatherings of people with no sense of shared norms or mutual accountability. In such circumstances, the strident airing of views can rapidly turn into hostile arguments, especially on controversial or divisive topics. As is often observed of Twitter or Reddit conversations, "well that escalated quickly!"

This gross degree of publicness, coupled with anonymity, is what increasingly unsettles netizens about platforms like Twitter where the trolling and harassment of celebrity and ordinary users alike has reached uncomfortable levels. Alternative platforms such as Mastodon and Discord enable users to choose the communities they want to participate in, thus giving users greater autonomy over which "publics" they want to join and how public they really want to be.

With greater customisability, users can better calibrate how visible their profiles are and whom they want to be visible to. This obviously begs the question of privacy. We have become increasingly immune to leaving digital trails everywhere we tread online, tracking the activity of others while allowing ourselves to be surveilled.

With WhatsApp's blue ticks and "last seen" status updates, Facebook Messenger's and Instagram's "read" receipts, LinkedIn's "active now", and iMessage's and WeChat's "typing" notifications, our online activity is perhaps more visible to online contacts than our physical activity is to people we live with. Although many of these features can be turned off, users either do not know how to disable them or find them convenient to retain.

Be it connectedness, reciprocity, publicness or privacy, granting users a higher degree of control is vital for raising the quality of the social media experience. The publicness of many social media platforms that allow our friendship networks and reciprocal interactions to be up for scrutiny should be determined by user preferences. The quantification of "likes" and reactions to different posts should be an option and not a mainstay. All platforms should also offer privacy by default to grant users greater agency over managing their visibility to others.

To some extent, several platforms already offer such choices to users, but these are often hidden and require concerted effort by users to discover them. How algorithms function to suggest possible friends and feeds is also cloaked in mystery. Greater public education on features that facilitate customisability and personalisation must be undertaken to raise the transparency of social media platforms.

Social media may be here to stay but the forms they assume can yet be reshaped to better accord with human needs, social norms, cultural values and community dynamics. We must seize the opportunity to disinvent and reconstruct social media as we currently know it.

AQ Exercise:

Support your answer with reference to:

- [illegible]

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