The humanisation of media? Social media and the reformation of communication

Robert G. Picard*

Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

This article explores the extent to which social media are overcoming the limitations of mass communication and restoring the humanising elements of interpersonal communication to modern communication. It examines how the technology of social media alters the ability to communicate, the nature of what is communicated, and the extent to which social media lives up to its promise as a humanising and democratising factor. It argues that technological structures and processes of social media incorporate artificiality and lack genuine authenticity and asserts that the power arrangements and the magnitude of messages carried by social media reduce its abilities to provide quality public communications, promote elite control, and leave us vulnerable to hysteria and moral panic. Social media at best represent a slight improvement to public communication over the legacy media of the past. At worst, they are replicating legacy media as a means of social control.

Keywords: social media; interpersonal communication; technology; political economy; culture; media effects

Human beings are communal animals with innate desires to be with and interact with others of our species. We establish and maintain familial, tribal, and community bonds. We express our thoughts, our feelings, and our aspirations. We share our observations and interpretations of the world about us. We communicate in many ways – speech, gestures, art, music, performance, text, and photography. If we are unable to use one form of communication to effectively connect, we find another, because communication with others is fundamental to who and what we are as humans.

The development of communication capabilities became a natural element that promoted collective life and created capacities that made humans one of the most social species. Our abilities to cooperate, preserve, and pass on knowledge, ideas, and concerns far surpass those of other species and have given us distinct advantages in self-domestication and development (Bowles & Gintis, 2013; Relethford, 2012; Wilson, 1991).

For millennia, we gathered around fires and told the stories of our ancestors and others about us. We chanted, sang, and danced together. We fished, hunted, and farmed, passing on our knowledge of those skills to others. We sewed hides and cloth and gossiped about others. We ate together and talked of developments in our lives and how we should respond to them. Facile and informal communication with family, friends, and others in the community was the norm.

Even today, oral communication of culture and knowledge continues to be practiced in tribal settings, private life, and organisations (Ong, 2002; Vansina, 1985). The capabilities

*Email: robert.picard@politics.ox.ac.uk

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of oral communication are limited, however, because temporal and spatial factors constrain interpersonal communication. It was those constraints, combined with population scale and changes in technology, which began taking the traditional mechanisms of communication of culture and knowledge away from us.

Desires to overcome constraints of time and space led to the use technologies to express who and what we are. We began drawing on the walls of caves, carving totems, and putting characters onto stones, tablets, and parchment (Moran, 2010; Poe, 2010). Each of these means expanded our ability to communicate, but the very mediating of communication added artificiality and separated the communication from those communicating, as well as those being communicated to. It thus dehumanised our communication and altered our relationships with others.

As population increased, we became more isolated from those around us. We began living in individual dwellings, with greater distances between us, and taking part in fewer informal communal gatherings. This changed the ways in which we communicated and passed on information and knowledge. It altered the ways that we made sense of the world about us and how we made collective decisions. In response, institutions emerged and developed to serve those purposes. Large tribal gatherings, councils, religious establishments, schools, and apparatuses of nation states all became parts of our lives. And with them came formal communication processes and needs for technologies to communicate more widely to increasingly larger groups of people.

Enter mass media.

The solution for communicating more widely arose with the emergence of print, then recordings, and then broadcasting (Kovarik, 2011; Moran, 2010; Poe, 2010). By their nature, these developments introduced structures and formality into communication that limited who could speak and be heard. Not everyone could participate because communication was unidirectional. Some were denied the ability to use the systems, or be represented in them, because of elite control. Others were left out because they lacked literacy, reception and playback equipment, and electricity necessary to receive the communications required (Picard, 2010).

The creation and use of media technologies thus required social and individual wealth and capabilities that created mechanisms for elite influence and control. The knowledge and innovation needed for media development and use was fuelled by stable states, capital availability, a mix of state and commercial interests, and public education. The political economy of media created uneven global patterns of media development, access, and use that continue to this day (Garnham, 1990; Jin & Winseck, 2012; Mosco & Wasko, 1988; Picard, 2010).

Although mass media offered new and effective ways to communicate across space and time, the emergence of text and printing, photography, and broadcasting all introduced alienating forms of communications that continued separating those expressing information and ideas from those who received them. Mass media made interaction impossible between those expressing and those attending to the expression. It stole individual voices from the majority of people and gave voice to only a select few.

The operation of mass media required the creation of institutions with structures and processes. It created conditions through which individuals could be directed, manipulated, and exploited by those with a voice. It became a means of elite empowerment. It enslaved. It objectified humans, transforming them into audiences that could be commoditised and traded in markets.

Media removed capabilities for public discussion of public issues, produced communicative passivity, stultified though with popular entertainment, and became
a mechanism for social influence and control. All of these factors created artificiality and alienation, distance and separation, estrangement and detachment, and isolation and loneliness. Communication became brutalizing, debasing, and dehumanising. Media use reduced social engagement (Lazarsfeld & Merton, 1948) and alienated and pacified the public (Postman, 1985; Robinson, 1976). Its formats and presentational styles facilitated this alienation (Cappella & Jamieson, 1996; Newton, 1999).

Mass media made the dehumanisation inherent in all mediated communication worse because of its ubiquity, its commercialisation, and its growth to encompass large portions of communication behaviour and time.

**The promise of social media**

The emergence of the Internet and the development of social media are often perceived and portrayed as fundamentally altering communication, restoring voice to the public, and introducing elements that re-humanise communication.

Social media have been lauded for their abilities to support exchange of ideas and information and to create and facilitate communities. They have reintroduced multi-directional communication. They have restored informality to communications. They allow us to discuss and debate, to share information from storehouses of knowledge, and to exchange ordinary and banal information.

Observers have embraced social media and eloquently touted its benefits and potential:

*Social media is addictive precisely because it gives us something which the real world lacks: it gives us immediacy, direction, a sense of clarity and value as an individual (Amerland, 2012).*

*Social media spark a revelation that we, the people, have a voice, and through the democratization of content and ideas we can once again unite around common passions, inspire movements, and ignite change (Solis & Kucher, 2011).*

*Tweets about the mundane aspects of your life contain something that is vitally important to gaining followers and taking part in discussions: Authenticity (Lamont, 2013).*

*Teen 'addiction' to social media is a new extension of typical human engagement … Teens turn to, and are obsessed with whichever environment allows them to connect to friends. Most teens aren't addicted to social media; if anything, they're addicted to each other (Boyd, 2014).*

*By bringing together people who share interests, no matter their location or time zone, social media has the potential to transform the workplace into an environment where learning is as natural as it is powerful (Bingham, Conner, & Pick, 2010).*

There is no doubt that social media have changed who can communicate and added multi-directionality to communication. Social media have given voice to those wanting changes in society, become a font of shared information, allowed us to gossip and discuss television programmes, and given us videos of cats and people doing silly things. Social media are lauded, as well as bemoaned, as being the sum of the human experience…our highs, our lows, our accomplishments, and our foibles.
Digital and social media functionalities are thus humanising communication by displacing some of the artificiality and alienation inherent in mass communication. This is forcing change on media companies and content providers of all types, altering the ways they address and interact with their users and the types of content they provide. These changes are disquieting to elites and dominant social groups because the alterations are stripping some of the control and influence that was previously afforded to them, and because social media are diffusing their abilities to assert ideas and values, to shape culture, and to direct the course of society. The greater role of *vox populi* in public communication has significant political, economic, social, and cultural implications to mass public life.

This raises the question of what we as communication scholars should make of this humanisation, this re-endowment of media with more natural human characteristics and attributes.

**The challenge of technology**

To begin, we must understand the nature of technology and the idealized visions of progress associated with it.

No technologies are neutral and without social and cultural effects, because they were created for specific purposes and incorporate specific constraints. Although changes in technology are typically portrayed as progress, with attendant connotations of desirable development and improvement, they do not always produce fully beneficial results.

That challenge is starkly illustrated by the work of Thomas Midgley Jr., an American engineer and chemist, who was one of the greatest technological innovators of the twentieth century. He was awarded hundreds of patents, elected to the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, and received numerous industry awards. He developed the lead additive for gasoline (TEL) and chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). The use of both were later found to have created huge environmental damage to ozone layer, increased high atmospheric lead levels, and produced untold health problems. They were banned internationally by the end of the twentieth century. Midgley contracted polio later in his life and turned to nobler work, inventing a device of ropes and pulleys to help disabled people lift themselves from beds. Unfortunately, he became entangled in the ropes while using the device and strangled to death.

Technology must be viewed with some reservations.

This is especially true of the contemporary technologies of communication, which have been created for specific types of exploitation of social and commercial opportunities. Their structures produce and enforce power arrangements. Although social media have moved mass communication away from an industrial content production process, making it more people-centric than legacy mass communication, this should not be construed as removing them from the influences of power and elites (Hindman, 2009; McChesney, 2013; Picard, 2014).

Out of sheer naïveté and wishful thinking, many proponents of and commentators on social media – including many of our colleagues in communication and media studies – have portrayed the Internet and its services as an empowering force, a democratising institution, and a space free from the constraints that hobbled legacy media. These observers exhibit inadequate critical thought and analysis, venerate the technology, and tumble into the trap of technicism.

Discussion of communications advancements regularly takes on reverent tones. Deliberations on national social and economic development, education, and democratic
participation are increasingly dominated by technological modes of thought and metaphors. Many in the field of communications and media are happy to sit at the feet of prophets of technology and turn the hardware and software of digital technology into sacred objects to be revered, worshipped, and embraced.

They ignore or forget that technology is a value-laden activity from inception to use. It is a culturally based creation designed as a means to some end. It changes and transforms interactions and transactions for the benefit of some. It transforms thinking. It becomes social practice. It extracts value. It commoditises. It constrains actions. It can be co-opted to reinforce existing elites and power. It can diminish existing power arrangements, but then create new elites and power. It is anything but benign and equalising (Braman, 2006; Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014; Kingston, 2013; McGinn, 1990; Picard, 2014; Postman, 1993).

Clearly, social media are technical artefacts worthy of deep consideration for their effects on individuals and society. But we must study them with a critical perspective.

**Structure, power, and influence**

Even with the most cursory consideration, the increasing commercialisation of social media and their growing use by business interests and political elites is readily apparent. Advertisements are appearing between messages from friends and colleagues, and companies are tracking our behaviour and analysing our comments to improve marketing. Companies are ‘engaging’ with consumers on social media for commercial benefits (Scott, 2013; Solis & Kutcher, 2011). Political elites are bypassing legacy media and promoting their interests without the normative constraints of news organizations and are using social media to improve their abilities to mobilise campaigned and voters (Agranoff & Tabin, 2011; Gainous & Wagner, 2013).

Although it is true that individuals and civil society organisations are able to use this new means of communications more often, and in more ways, than they were able to use legacy mass media in the past, the structures and processes of the Internet and social media are being greatly influenced by those who control the infrastructures and systems necessary for their operation. These new institutional arrangements are based on corporate interests that determine the fundamental aspects of operations and practices, ultimately channelling and controlling content, and exploiting users for the benefit of others (Gehl, 2014; Hindman, 2009).

Measured reflection leads us to understand that social media themselves are creating powerful structures and institutions that are shifting mechanisms of influence and control from public to private spheres. This makes public oversight more challenging and reduces the ability of the public to influence social media with democratically determined policy (Picard, 2014).

The digital ecosystem seems to have a more amorphous structure than the legacy media ecosystem, because of the large number of participants and the use of hardware and telecommunications systems operated by others. However, this appearance masks the reality that a very small number of enterprises control the functionality of the digital sphere and that users are dependent upon them. The operation of the ecosystem is based on consumption of hardware, software, and services from intermediary firms that control gateways and provide essential facilitating services. This produces mechanisms for social control and influence by firms that now have more power than many nation states.

These firms are exploiting their central positions to extract value from the users of the new communication networks and limiting communication just as did legacy media who
organised their own monopolistic markets. The mechanisms for doing this come at a price. Google, Facebook, YouTube and other social media platforms determine how you use their services, direct the communications into certain forms, push content to you from which they benefit, use the content of others without appropriate compensation, and force us to give up personal information in exchange for using the services.

We are experiencing a reduction in privacy, changes in norms of communicative behaviour, and unparalleled surveillance by commercial firms and governments alike.

Uses of social media are affecting general public norms and expectations of privacy. Thoughts, emotions, and personal behaviours previously shared only among close relatives and friends are voluntarily disclosed and widely disseminated. Where people go, what they eat, what they see and do, the state of their relationships, and sexual activities are voluntarily chronicled.

Social media are clearly altering social behavioural norms. Instead of supporting social virtues such as humility, civility, restraint, and kindness, the artificiality and alienation fostered by social media tend to encourage narcissistic communication, depreciation of others, and celebration of misbehaviours.

Quiet conversations and personal communications have given way to a system in which those with whom we communicate, what we communicate, what we see and read, and what interests us are now publicly disclosed and available.

Interactions are recorded, and how often we communicate, what content we circulate and receive, and what topics interest us are logged. Similar tracking occurs when we use other digital communication systems as well.

This provides significant information about individuals that is harvested by companies and governments. The scope and scale of information available is enormous. Although digital companies criticise governmental uses of this data, they do not seem to recognize how this view conflicts with their own uses.

A central part of this challenge is that digital companies seem to believe that they own their customers and that anything they do to them is acceptable. This is why no one in the Facebook organisation raised significant concern when it decided to take part in a surreptitious experiment on users to see whether altering their moods by means of the content they received changed their behaviours (Meyer, 2014). Exploiting users is at the heart of what they do.

Digital systems are creating new mechanisms for social control and influence

It should be no surprise that every major government in the world conducts surveillance using the Internet and social media. They are not likely to stop even though revelations may lead to some constraints on their activities. Why would they? Governments have opened the post for centuries and have eavesdropped on telephone calls and tracked bank transfers for decades (Bamford, 1983; Knightly, 1980; Thomas, 2013). Although it is recognized – even within security agencies – that carrying out these activities create moral dilemmas (Olson, 2006) and pose risks to democracy (Boghosian, 2013), governments – and the public through acquiescence in pursuit of a perception of security – find them useful.

Security forces and their supporters tend to justify their actions by embracing Western philosophy, such as the Platonic view that state must prepare for war (Plato, 2008), the Machiavellian view that ordinary morality does not apply when the existence of the state is threatened (Machiavelli, 2005, 2008), and the Lockean view that democratic decision-making gives way to the prerogative power of the executive when the state is threatened.
(Locke, 1988). Consequently, they accept gathering as much information as possible on everyone to prepare for, and respond to, perceived threats.

The companies at the heart of social media are using their positions to gain advantages over their users and to find ways to sway user behaviour and susceptibility to influential messages.

Technologies that provide the abilities for some to use and control communication to exercise power over others will always be exploited.

**Popularised communications**

Giving the public a platform for greater communication creates benefits, but it also carries costs and risks.

Social media focus attention on amusements and the inconsequential details of individuals’ lives. This is not itself decadent or appalling, but the sheer magnitude and triviality of communications created through social media turn attention away from other functions and information, lowering and debasing the quality of public communications.

The mores of social media lend themselves to belligerent venting of anger and malicious public shaming. Although it is psychologically healthy to release annoyance and resentment, and public shaming can serve purposes of supporting social norms and moral behaviour, all too often social media are used as a weapon to damage or destroy others. Unfortunately, most of us allow this to occur without registering our disapproval or pointing out its unfairness.

Trolling and bullying online have become a norm and manifest themselves in far more ways than offline because of anonymity and the ability of the attacks to be spread to an individual’s social circles more rapidly. This has led to psychological problems and suicides, particularly among the young. Attempts to apply social norms or law to such behaviours are often countered by the highly libertarian and anarchistic philosophies of many in the online world.

The popularisation of communication also produces a multitude of voices that can leave us vulnerable to hysteria and moral panic. When this occurs there is little scope for debate and deliberation. The perceptions of the crowd can easily turn masses into rabble with demands for under-considered social or political action. Humans can react so rapidly with initial impressions in the digital world that they don’t fully consider other voices that may have different or moderating views.

Social media thus create a conundrum involving the values of free individual expression and desires for a noble social ethos, a nurturing culture, and the maintenance of social order.

**Is this humanising?**

This leads us to the questions of whether social media represent a reformation of media and are acting as a humanising force.

There is no doubt that social media provide more ways for individuals to express and share observations, ideas, opinions, and content that pleases or stimulates. Social media also afford opportunities to publicly assert and perform an identity and to support relationships and communities that previously were more difficult to construct and maintain through interpersonal and mass communication.

We benefit from those who use social media to record and disseminate current events, photographs, evidence of abuses of power such as police brutality, and to provide information and documentation that contradicts or moderates elite interpretations of the
world about us. At the very least, social media have reduced the power of legacy media and forced them to shake off their complacency.

Nevertheless, they still remain highly mediated communication, incorporating artificiality and lacking genuine authenticity. Social media at best represent only a slight improvement on the legacy media of the past. At worst, they are replicating legacy media as a means of social control.

Are social media humanising? They may be to the extent that they allow more individual voices to be heard, albeit with constraints, and permit multi-directional communication. However, there is no evidence that social media are moving us toward the ideals of becoming enlightened, tolerant, rational, cultured, and civilised human beings. Neither is there convincing evidence that social media are making society any more egalitarian by reducing the power or wealth of elites; rather, the evidence indicates that they are exacerbating it and have created new wealthy elites.

For the past century, each new medium introduced – motion pictures, radio, television, cable, and the Internet – has been extolled for its revolutionary capabilities to lift the human spirit, improve education, reduce conflict, and empower the public. Such worthy aspirations were trumpeted with the appearance of social media. Unfortunately, it appears that social media – like other media before them – are being co-opted by commercial and elite interests and that their use is overwhelmingly for amusement, escapism, commerce, and inconsequential chatter.

It’s a damn shame.

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Notes on contributor
Robert G. Picard, PhD, is Director of Research for the Reuters Institute in the Department of Politics and International Relations at University of Oxford, a research fellow at Green Templeton College (Oxford), a fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and an adjunct professor at University of Canberra. A specialist in political economy of media, media economics, and policy, he is the author and editor of 30 books, including Value Creation and the Future of News Organizations, The Economics and Financing of Media Companies, Media Clusters: Spatial Agglomeration and Content Capabilities, The Internet and the Mass Media, and Media Firms: Structure, Operations, and Performance. He has been editor of the Journal of Media Business Studies and the Journal of Media Economics. Picard received his PhD from the University of Missouri, Columbia, and has been a fellow at the Shorenstein Center at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

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