

## Defining Social Media

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It's hard to hold conversations when everyone who's talking has varying views on the definitions of key vocabulary. Yet our entire industry is talking about social media -- and I defy you to find two people that define social media the same way. Determined to solve this problem for the industry single-handedly... I looked up the term on Wikipedia (which, incidentally, cites itself as an example of social media). What I found was not only woefully incomplete (first time this has happened to me on Wikipedia), but there are a couple of areas where I would differ with the entry entirely. Here's the meat of it : "Social media describes the online technologies and practices that people use to share opinions, insights, experiences, perspectives and media itself.

Social media can take many different forms, including text, images, audio, and video. These sites typically use technologies such as blogs, message boards, podcasts, wikis, and vlogs to allow users to interact.

A few prominent examples of social media applications are Wikipedia (reference), MySpace (social networking), Gather.com (social networking), YouTube (video sharing), Second Life (virtual reality), Digg (news sharing), Flickr (photo sharing) and Miniclip (game sharing)."

You have to start some place. OK, first I think one of the biggest myths regarding social media is that it equals user-generated content. I think the definition of "user-generated" content might be the only thing more confused than the definition of social media (which might make them a great pairing). Second, there is nothing about social media that demands user creation. The "media" part of social media can be anything from professional content to home videos. Just because "America's Funniest Home Videos" consisted of user-generated content certainly didn't make it social media. Conversely, just because "Heroes" is professionally produced doesn't mean that it can't be social media.

The real difference between broadcast media and social media is not the media itself, but the system of discovery, distribution, consumption and conversation surrounding the media. This brings me to my point of contention with Wikipedia's definition. As "America's Funniest Home Videos" was user-generated content before the YouTubes of the world, so social media existed before MySpace. It's just that before digital technology, it took significantly more effort for media to inspire dialogue and sharing among communities of people. Sharing a VHS among friends, or gathering groups to watch a popular television show, is a lot more work than simply clicking and sharing media content.

What many of us are defining as social media today are actually just technologies specifically architected to facilitate people's natural tendencies to seek out, share and discuss media content. Think about it. How is MySpace social medium? I would certainly say that MySpace is the largest and most influential social media platform of our time, but it doesn't create media (at least not for most of it). The media one finds on MySpace is a mix of professional, semi-professional and (I hate using the term) "user-generated" content, and that media is made social by the context of its distribution and its ability to create dialogue between people. ANY TYPE OF MEDIA CAN BE SOCIAL MEDIA -- and eventually all media will be social media in the most literal definition. This will have serious implications for media companies and advertisers alike, so it is important that we are not dismissing social media as the user-generated portion of the Internet.

Recently, I had the great pleasure of being Jumpstart Automotive's guest at its first Think Digital conference. For simply facilitating the conversation surrounding social media advertising, I got to spend a couple of days at a beautiful resort in Napa Valley and meet some great people (I think I made out pretty well). One of the first things the conference's roundtable format made apparent was that everyone seems to have a very different opinion on what social media means. Once everyone had a dialogue on an

agreed definition of the term, the conversation surrounding social media advertising produced some really great insights. Maybe, as social media advertisers, we should bulk up that Wikipedia entry a little more as we continue the industry dialogue.

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