



## When Social Media Are the News

### *Futures*

Jordan Kraemer  
January 13, 2017

As social media become commonplace, they reorganize publics, places, and politics in ways history cannot predict.

Over a decade ago, a tectonic shift in communication technologies began remaking the media landscape in the US and elsewhere. During the 2004 presidential election, television network news lost ground to **talk-based cable news**, especially conservative Fox News. Print newspaper subscriptions were declining and online news had **yet to demonstrate profitability**. Yet Pew researchers **rejected dystopic predictions** that major tech companies like Google and Amazon would merge and destroy the credibility of print and broadcast media, in an algorithmic “bouillabaisse of citizen blog, political propaganda, corporate spin and journalism. Each consumer would get a one-of-a-kind news product each day based on his or her personal data” (2005). Following the 2016 US presidential election, two things stand out: First, this nightmare scenario was more prescient than we who resist technological determinism want to admit. Yet, second, it was not possible in 2004 to foresee the merging of news and computer networking through the rise of social media.



**Je Suis Charlie vigil at the French Consulate in Berlin, January 11, 2015, following an attack on the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris.** Bernd Schwabe/Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Ten years ago, MySpace, an early popular social network site, was in its heyday, but its reach was limited to teens and young people, especially fan communities. MySpace provoked endless scaremongering in the US and other news, questioning the safety of young people, digital stranger danger at its apogee. This was at odds with nascent ethnographic research, such as my preliminary work in Germany. Young people I met cultivated circles of friends on MySpace with shared interests in music and fashion, enacting subcultural subjectivities—that is, lifestyle as identity—through photos, profiles, and status updates. MySpace and similar sites were not yet organized around spreading viral content, and news media (online or otherwise) still occupied a separate sphere.

In the intervening years, anxiety about social media's risks to young people has declined (though not disappeared) as adults, once nervous about what children did online, are now active on social network sites themselves (65 percent of adults in the US use social media, up from 7 percent in 2005 (Pew Research Center 2016)). When anthropologist Daniel Miller in 2013 pronounced the decline of Facebook among young people in the UK, his claim triggered vehement backlash among analysts who took umbrage at the potential devaluation of a major global commodity. Moral anxieties, however, can serve as a barometer for social, economic, and technological transformation. Social media today have coalesced into a new mass medium, reconfiguring such anxieties. But their role in perpetuating deceptive news stories—and potentially exacerbating political polarization—traces to

the history of reconfiguring the broader media ecology. Future technological shifts will take forms that remain difficult to predict. What does this history tell us about the future of emerging media, networked sociality, and the crisis of liberalism?

### **When social media were social**

In their [landmark 2000 study](#) of the Internet, Daniel Miller and Don Slater noted that a key characteristic of digital media (that is, networked communication technologies) lies in naturalizing the rapid pace of technological change. But how much have services like Google or Facebook changed in the past decade? Most major platforms from the mid-2000s remain entrenched players, in the US and globally. These include Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, and Google, the “FANG” stocks that business analysts say drive current market gains. Internet technologies dubbed “Web 2.0” are now commonplace, such as blogging and photo-sharing. While new technologies often unsettle existing socio-technical arrangements, new forms ultimately stabilize and become sedimented. Ten years ago, for example, Internet scholars worried that the platform they studied would be passé before they could publish. In recent work, [Miller et al. \(2016\)](#) contend that Internet studies must move past studies of individual platforms to contend with the multiplicity of tools, services, channels, and devices, such as through Mirca Madianou and Miller’s rubric of “[polymedia](#),” to theorize such proliferation. If it once seemed inevitable that the future of online media meant an accelerating cycle of trends, what does this recent slowdown entail for networked sociality?

During my preliminary fieldwork in 2007 on young people’s media practices in Germany, festival-goers often shared their MySpace and messaging handles (nicknames), and later posted photos online. But social media were not yet integrated into daily living. When I returned in 2009, these practices had shifted substantially, especially because of Facebook and mobile networking (e.g., laptops, WiFi, sometimes smartphones). Music fans, for example, now shared photos during festivals and events, tagging each other and commenting. By 2009, it was common to read national news sites daily, like [Spiegel.de](#), a finding that surprised me as so few discussed news otherwise. Like MySpace, Facebook comprised a space for leisure interests and “social” activities, in the sense of personal connections among peers, as did Twitter. Erik in Hanover, for example, often bantered about music production, equipment, and software with friends in Berlin and elsewhere. He appreciated how Twitter’s global reach made the world feel smaller, but it was not a main source for political news.

### **Multiplicities of place**

On a recent visit in 2015, I found the social media landscape dramatically changed, again. Facebook began actively steering reading practices through changes in 2013 to the News Feed algorithm, which determines content in the site's central feature. That year, Facebook announced an effort to prioritize “**high quality content**,” defined as timely, relevant, and trustworthy—and not clickbait, memes, or other viral links. This policy, along with changing practices in sharing news content generally, meant that current events can unfold on and through social media. This shift became evident during the shooting attack at the Paris headquarters of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in January of that year.



**A man takes a photograph of the Je Suis Charlie gathering at the French Consulate in Berlin, January 11, 2015. Tim/Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)**

News of the attack reverberated through social media, ricocheting across Twitter and Facebook. Many in Berlin had close connections to Paris, while others equally followed the story with avid, shocked attention. One person quipped that the “French-speaking intertubes are up in flames” and re-posted numerous relevant memes. Mainstream news outlets were covering the event on and through Twitter, publishing updates and photos which circulated on Facebook, such as a 1980s video clip with one of the murdered cartoonists. Within hours, a new hashtag response, **#JeSuisCharlie**, was trending on Twitter. As an anthropologist studying media and placemaking, I

noted how the incipient hashtag linked together people in Berlin and Paris, and shuttled rapidly between “online” and “offline” spaces. This circulation produces new spatial arrangements that the division between online and offline inadequately portrays. Within hours, for example, an organizer promoted an assembly at the French consulate (near the iconic Brandenburg Gate). The event page circulated on Facebook alongside similar memorials across Europe. The next day, photos of these gatherings accompanied the #JeSuisCharlie hashtag on Twitter and Facebook, from Paris, Belfast, Amsterdam, London, Riga, **and more**. The hashtag was trending in Berlin as well, in one instance alongside a photo of publishing giant Axel Springer’s headquarters, with lights displaying “JE SUIS CHARLIE” atop a drab building. In another photo, staffers held up JeSuisCharlie signs in the newsroom of the popular tabloid *Bild*.

This hashtag campaign, meanwhile, intersected a prior movement on social media, **#NoPEGIDA**, and illuminated paradoxes in emerging European transnationalist sentiment. In October 2014, the anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim group PEGIDA began rallying in Dresden against (ostensible) Muslim migration from Iraq and Syria. An online campaign took up #PEGIDA, spurring critics on the left to protest through rallies and the counter-hashtag #NoPEGIDA. Despite (or perhaps because of) concerns that PEGIDA would capitalize on the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings, many who advocated #JeSuisCharlie decried #NOPEGIDA, often in the same Tweet or image. Some defended the liberty of western cartoonists mocking Islam, while refuting the racism and xenophobia of anti-Muslim nationalists, such as one popular cartoon denouncing the “sword” over the “pen.” Notably, some images on Twitter and Facebook featured the yellow stars and blue background of the European Union emblem (a symbol I rarely observed otherwise). Despite pointed criticism that the sentiment behind #JeSuisCharlie universalizes western conceptions of freedom, equality, and secularism, the two hashtags aligned in the following days. From Berlin, images tagged #NoPEGIDA included rainbow backgrounds, exhortations to tolerance, and celebratory statements of Berlin as “*Weltoffen*” (cosmopolitan). Similar images of Berlin’s worldliness were displayed during the 2009 *Mauerfall* (fall of the Wall) commemoration, but images of European unity had been conspicuously absent. A nascent shared European feeling among some, I argue, coincides with the intensified meshing of social media with the news.

### **Temporary configurations**

The #JeSuisCharlie and #NoPegida campaigns limn the further imbrication of social and news media in daily living. In retrospect, a new mass medium became established in the 2000s alongside print and broadcast. This fundamental shift requires new configurations and arrangements of institutions, practices, and expertise. **Carolyn Marvin’s (1990)** work on new media in the 19th century chronicles similar processes as electric lights and the telegraph were introduced. Before

stabilizing in durable socio-technical arrangements, she argues, new, still inchoate technologies threaten existing social orders and knowledges. This volatility, however, subsides as prior practices and understandings accommodate new technological forms: “old habits of transacting between groups are projected onto new technologies that alter, or seem to alter, critical social distances.” The print, television, and radio industries have atrophied in the past decade, owing both to technological change and to the underlying flexitization of labor and capital. As social media resolve as a socio-technical artifact, they will not be easily unseated. Any significant ruptures will likely take place elsewhere, such as through machine learning, algorithms, and ubiquitous computing (the “Internet of Things”).

Yet experiences of networked sociality continue to shift. No longer the preserve of teens and music fans, social media now span families and communities in much of the world—1.71 billion people have active Facebook accounts, according to the company. Many people live more of their lives online, where they encounter concurrently friends, family, and extended circles of acquaintances. As news events take place on and through social media, more people must navigate these (sometimes awkwardly) conjoined social worlds. These shifts can equally produce new possibilities for politics and ways of living, as suggested by radical movements for queer, racial, and environmental justice on one hand, to virulent articulations of white nationalism and class anxiety on the other. Diagnosing media’s trajectory only hints at future arrangements of power and capital that shape our worlds and engagements. But the commingling of social and news media may foment political formations that are antithetical to anthropological projects for human flourishing.

**Jordan Kraemer** is a media anthropologist in Brooklyn, where she is associate faculty at the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research and a visiting scholar at NYU. She is currently completing a book on emerging media in Berlin, forthcoming from Penn Press.

---

## Related Categories

[Featured Posts](#)

[Futures](#)

[In Focus](#)

[January](#)

[Top News](#)

## Related Tags

---

[anthropological futures](#)

Futures

News

Place

social media

Temporality

---

◀ 28

Commenting Disclaimer 

© 2017 American Anthropological Association • 2300 Clarendon Blvd, Suite 1301 • Arlington, VA • 22201 • TEL (703) 528-1902 • FAX (703) 528-3546