

## 對話世界頂尖學者

回顧與展望：

社群媒體研究的挑戰與機會

### **Looking Back and Forward: The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Network Site Research**

Discussants: Dr. Nicole B. Ellison and Rebecca Ping Yu<sup>1</sup>

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Dr. Nicole B.  
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#### **Abstract**

Dr. Nicole B. Ellison has been a pioneer in research on social network sites (SNSs). Her 2007 and 2013 articles on SNSs (with Dr. danah boyd) have over 17,000 citations. In this dialogue, Dr. Ellison looks back and shares the backgrounds of her first study on SNSs. She

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then discusses whether a new definition of SNSs is needed as the platforms have changed so rapidly. She also provides insights into the challenges and opportunities for future research on SNSs.

## Introduction of Dr. Nicole B. Ellison

Dr. Nicole B. Ellison is the Karl E. Weick Collegiate Professor of Information in the School of Information at the University of Michigan. Her research addresses issues of self-presentation, relationship development, social capital, and identity in online environments such as social network sites. Her work has made foundational contributions in these areas and has been cited more than 50,000 times according to Google Scholar.

NE: Nicole B. Ellison

RY: Rebecca Ping Yu

**RY : The pioneer study on SNSs—The benefits of Facebook “friends:” Social capital and college students’ use of online social network sites?—was published in 2007. Would you talk about the background behind the study? What are some factors that drove you to study social network sites (SNSs) back then?**

NE : Back in 2005, I was a pretty new assistant professor at Michigan State University and had been talking with Charles Steinfield, one of my colleagues, about potentially conducting research on Facebook. The platform captured our attention because our undergraduate students had taken it up so intensely and so quickly. In our classes, we would see them using the site during class. Then, Cliff Lampe joined the department. Cliff had been setting up online discussion communities and also had an interest in new online platforms for communication. So the three of us started talking about doing a project and looking at Facebook seemed to be something that we were all interested in. We were really interested in understanding how this platform was different from other platforms that came before it. As suggested by our 2007 study, the platform had obviously tapped into some pretty fundamental human needs—to share information, to affiliate with others, to engage in uncertainty reduction about other people in your geographically bounded space (which was the campus at that point). It was actually

Cliff who had the idea of using a social capital lens to look at Facebook. Once he suggested that, it all made sense, because social capital is a fundamental concept that describes how individuals contribute to and receive different kinds of resources or support from their networks. Facebook was, indeed, a platform that was perfectly designed to do just that. So the original impetus was just to better understand what this platform was and why it was so compelling to our students, and social capital ended up being a framework that really made sense for answering this question.

**RY : Your another landmark work—“Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship”—has been cited more than 17,000 times. In 2013, you and Dr. danah boyd wrote another piece to offer an updated look. As the number of SNSs has rapidly increased over the past few years, has the definition of SNSs changed?**

**NE :** That’s a great question. Actually, I was teaching a doctoral seminar on social media last Fall. For the first week, we looked at definitional pieces, including this one and the Carr and Hayes one. One of the things that students asked was: “It’s about time for another definition. Will you write another one?” I said “No.”

For the first one (2007), boyd and I were motivated to stabilize the academic discussion around social network sites and to help move the field forward by addressing some of the ambiguity about terminology and concepts. At that time, for instance, people were writing papers and talking about the same thing but using very different terms like social networking, social network sites, social software, or social networking services. Also, sometimes these terms were used to talk about every technology under the sun, including things like blogs or list serves. It was very problematic to have so much ambiguity about terminology.

The first piece was driven by an attempt to say, “Hey, let’s be clear about what we’re talking about and what the terms are, so that we can be sure that we’re not using different words to describe the same platforms or using the same words to describe completely different ones.” The 2007 piece was the introduction to one of the first collections of academic work on social networks sites. We benefitted from being one of

the first pieces in that space that now has grown and blossomed over the last decade.

The 2013 piece was motivated by a couple of things. First of all, we realized that we hadn't really described communication anywhere in the definition of social network sites. Thus, we wanted to highlight the fact that communication is the engine that drives the use of these sites. Second, the platforms themselves had changed dramatically and fundamentally since the first piece. In the 2013 piece, we tried to outline some of the changes, such as the interaction of the newsfeed or the stream, which didn't exist in the same way at the time of the first piece.

However, what we would want to avoid is to constantly provide new definitions as platforms add or dismantle various features. That, to me, doesn't seem useful. What seems more productive to me today is to describe these sites with regard to their affordances—what are some higher level possible actions that various platforms enable? Once we theorize at that level, whether the sites themselves add or remove some particular features doesn't really matter because we're focusing on more enduring scholarship that is able to articulate how these social psychological processes are implicated at the affordance level.

Definitely, things have changed. A lot of these platforms are integrated into many other actions to the point where sometimes it's difficult to distinguish whether you are on a platform and performing certain online activities or not. Just as one example, in a survey we would ask users: "Are you on Facebook?" What does that even mean? If I am logging into a newspaper through my Facebook account and those two entities are tied together, am I on Facebook? Or in a survey, researchers often ask users: "Do you use the internet?" I don't know that many people understand enough about how the internet works to answer that question.

For instance, one of my colleague told me that once she interviewed someone and asked: "Do you use the internet?" The respondent said, "No," but five minutes later he talked about something he saw on Facebook. There's a lot of blurring now of various platforms and online activities but I don't think another definition would be the best

way to move the field forward at this time.

**RY : When you said that SNSs are integrated into many other actions, is it a phenomenon related to the point you mentioned in the 2013 piece—“the networked nature of SNSs interactions provides an additional layer of complexity not experienced by earlier media scholars examining the role of television or radio” (p.165)? Could you elaborate more on that?**

**NE :** Yes, it is related. Some of this argument revolves around the fact that we, for the most part, often rely on participants’ self-report of their activities. Compared to earlier forms of media or traditional broadcast, such as television and radio, where you are certain that if a user said they watched “I Love Lucy,” they saw the exact same thing that another user who also reported watching “I Love Lucy” saw.

But now every single user in a particular study will have a fundamentally different experience because of the differences in their network composition, who they’re friends with, who they follow, the newsfeed algorithm, how their preferences are set up, whether they access it on a mobile device versus a desktop, et cetera, et cetera. Because there are many different factors that influence users’ experiences, it becomes more challenging to figure out what to ask and how to ask about user practices. One potential way to address this issue is to take the advantage of server level data that captures users’ activities in a very granular or accurate ways because it measures exactly what users do. But another point we tried to make in the 2013 piece is that just relying on server level data in and of itself also has its challenges in terms of not knowing how to interpret the data and, as a field, we should also be thinking about which scholars have access to these kinds of data and what kinds of questions they might not only be able to answer but also what kinds of questions they will be comfortable asking. The platforms are not necessarily opening up their databases to every scholar who has a question to investigate. And then, of course, the platforms themselves are changing rapidly. The platforms aren’t communicating with the academic field to signal changes that they plan on making—and we wouldn’t expect them to. For any study that spans more than

one day of data collection, scholars sometimes struggle with the fact that things have changed dramatically from day one to day two in terms of these sites making changes that they need to do to innovate.

**RY : Your response reminds me that for those who rely on social media to get news may have very different experiences in terms of news exposure. As you said, many factors, such as algorithms, personal networks, and personal preferences, determine what they see on the platform.**

NE : I don't study the news angle, but I agree social media are a fundamentally different environment than when everyone was watching the 6:30 PM news with Walter Cronkite or reading the front page of the same local paper. In the US, this has certainly been a real challenge, when you're trying to have two people come together to talk about what's happening in public discourse and they may draw from a fundamentally different set of facts.

**RY : I would like to follow up on the method issue. As you mentioned, if survey data and server level data have their own challenges, would you provide some insights into how to better understand users' behaviors on SNSs with regard to methods?**

NE : I don't think I have an awesome answer to this question right now but my first thought is that we do a better job of triangulating. For example, you can marry server level data with more perceptual self-report data to get a better understanding about users' behaviors. Further, it is important to bring together scholars from different fields who have different areas of expertise and different frames for understanding this phenomena, which can be helpful in terms of getting a more cohesive understanding. The choice of methods also depends on the research question. I'm hoping that, as a field, we're moving away from pieces that just describe what's happening at this moment, but do a little bit more in terms of thinking about mechanisms, motivations, theories, and affordances—what you want to really learn from analyzing data from a particular site as opposed to what's technically possible.

**RY : One line of your work explores the potential for SNSs to help first-generation or**

**low-income students access college. It is very interesting that you also worked with other researchers to develop a Facebook app to help first-generation students locate and take advantage of their networks on Facebook. Can you talk about that experience?**

NE : What you described is the College Connect app, which was funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The app allowed users to visualize their Facebook network. What the app did was look at which of your friends were connected to which other friends, and then graphically display the connections. In this case, I was working with the app developer—Bernie Hogan—is also a social media scholar. He was able to do the technical work that was informed by theory. The exciting aspect of this project was that we were able to combine the theory of social capital with what we already knew about the information needs of first generation students to design a specific tool to help these students see who in their network could be a source of college related information. One challenge for scholars who try to develop technical tools have is that it is very difficult to get users to embrace a new technology. It is very challenging to create an online community and get actual people, not just research subjects you pay, to really use it. One of the benefits of College Connect is that it was able to capitalize on the fact that these students already had their articulated networks within Facebook and we were just able build right on top of that. It was not any extra work for students. All they had to do was to add the app. So we were able to capitalize on the platform's popularity. The flip side of the coin is that because we were dependent on Facebook for these existing connections that users already realized using the platform, Facebook could just pull the plug to shut down the access, which is what they ended up doing. A couple of years ago, in response to privacy concerns, Facebook shut down the API access to the network information. Since then the College Connect couldn't function. There is a lesson learned there. As an app developer, if you are trying to build on existing platforms, you are at their mercy in terms of what they decide to do regarding future support of your project.



**RY : As social media use has been deeply woven into the fabric of users' various aspects of lives, social media research has become increasingly interdisciplinary in nature. As someone trained in communication, what unique perspectives do you think communication scholars can bring to the study of SNSs?**

**NE :** As communication scholars, we are interested in studying and theorizing interactions between users, and have insights about the technology itself. We have studied all three areas that are central to the understanding of the phenomena: the technology, the social interaction, and the psychological understanding of the individual user. Such a combination is what makes communication folks in a particularly strong position for understanding contemporary media environments and moving the field of social network site research forward. For the doctoral seminar I was teaching last fall, I taught it before in 2014. At first, I thought, "I'll just use the same syllabus." Over the summer, when I started to read all the work that came out since 2014, I changed it so much there is hardly anything I kept in the syllabus. This is just within five years. I had to include recent books by Tarleton Gillespie, who's thinking about content moderation; Nancy Baym's book on how musicians use social media; or Lee Humphreys' book, which is a historical perspective on social media. Just look at the vast range of topics, this is a really exciting time for communication folks who have an interest in technology.

**RY : SNS use has been a global phenomenon. What are your thoughts on the global aspects of SNSs? To what extent do you think SNS research is further complicated by cross-cultural context of SNS users? Can the cross-cultural approach enrich SNS research, if so, how?**

**NE :** I think SNS scholarship benefits when research examining a wide range of cultural contexts is encouraged—this could be geographical diversity, but also diversity across samples in terms of education level, age, class, etc. Overall, I would say we know a lot about how college-aged, mostly white undergraduate students use Facebook but less about how other populations use other platforms. So, I definitely would like to see a wider range of cultural contexts studied. I have found cross-cultural comparisons

of SNS use a little tricky, because often the platform is different in addition to the participant sample, making it more difficult to ascertain whether differences are due to the people, the technology, a combination of the two, or a third factor. (This is more challenging for some kinds of research questions, obviously). I hope to see more scholarship that addresses a wider range of participants and platforms in the future and think this would be very good for our field.

**RY : What advice will you give to scholars interested in future research in social media?**

**NE :** Because the ecosystem of tools, platforms, websites, and technologies is changing so rapidly, it is often very easy to find something new and want to describe it and treat this as something completely new. It is important to resist that temptation, take a step back, and see what other work or scholarship might be relevant to understanding what is happening below the surface—at the level of what human needs this particular tool meets. Inter-disciplinary work is important. This means having a conversation with other fields and reviewing the existing work that maybe was not about that unique site but relevant nonetheless. It is often not the case that we know absolutely nothing about whatever this tool is and that we need to start from scratch. Try to place it within the broader context of what we already know about technology and how humans communicate, what our fundamental motivations are in terms of meaningful connections and shared meaning. Also, try to do enduring scholarship that's really more at the level of mechanisms than description. Finally, try to have fun. If you are not enjoying what you're doing, there are going to be very long, very painful days. That is where, for me, the collaborations have been important because it is just much more fun when you are working with people that you like and that are also excited about the things you are excited about.

## Selected Works

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