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## Introduction

### STUDYING THE FIRST DECADE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

From 2004 until 2016, social network platforms grew from niche spaces online where individuals of similar interests would gather to massive platforms that connect billions of users. Under development through a variety of forms and incarnations throughout the early 2000s, with influences from sites like SixDegrees, Asian Avenue, BlackPlanet, and MiGente (boyd & Ellison, 2007), the impact of these websites on American society and culture became extraordinarily visible in 2010, which can be considered the year the social network site became part of mainstream American culture. While early sites Myspace and Friendster were on the decline, the most popular social network site, Facebook, gained 500,000,000 followers in July of 2010. Twitter, a newer social network site especially popular with journalists and celebrities, had an average of 65,000 tweets per week, culminating in record traffic to the site during the 2010 World Cup. Much of the attention paid to social network sites, aside from the focus on Twitter connected to political movements, emphasized Facebook. In April, David Kirkpatrick published *The Facebook Effect*, a thorough history of the company. Aaron Sorkin's film *The Social Network*, also about the founding of Facebook based primarily on Ben Mezrich's 2009 book, *The Accidental Billionaires*, was nominated for eight Academy Awards and won three for Best Original Screenplay, Best Editing, and Best Original Score. *Time* also named Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg as 2010 Person of the Year, "for connecting more than half a billion people and mapping the social relations among them, for creating a new system of exchanging information and for changing how we live our lives" (Grossman, 2010).

Not all of this attention was positive, however. A backlash to changes in the way privacy settings were configured in December 2009 grew to a breaking point in the spring of 2010. This situation was caused by Facebook's announcement of its new Connect feature on April 21, 2010, that allowed a single sign-on for Facebook and sites across the web,

which drew not only media criticism and public panic, but also separate complaints filed by Senator Charles Schumer and the Electronic Privacy Information Center to the Federal Trade Commission. In addition, Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman's documentary *Catfish*, released shortly before Sorkin's film, also commented on anxiety over the nature of identity representation and authenticity on Facebook and similar sites. Jaron Lanier published his book, *You Are Not a Gadget*, in resistance to what he saw as an increased reliance on social network sites for communication, and Nicholas Carr wrote *The Shallows*, a larger look at the impact of the internet on cognitive ability and attention.

If 2010 was the year that brought social network sites into the American national consciousness in a sustained way, 2016 demonstrated the long-term social and political consequences of those platforms. Invigorated by the #GamerGate controversy,<sup>1</sup> far-right extremists partnered with Russian-backed hackers, fake-news creators, and Twitter bots to bombard American social media users with disinformation about the 2016 presidential election campaign and its candidates. In February 2018, Special Counsel Robert Mueller indicted 13 Russian nationals and three companies for interfering with the 2016 presidential election, primarily by impersonating Americans and American organizations on social media platforms in order to sow discord and support the candidacy of Donald Trump.

News from a whistleblower of the political data company Cambridge Analytica in early 2018 also brought fresh scrutiny to Facebook's data privacy practices before, during, and after 2016, leading to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's testimony in April of 2018 in front of the Senate Commerce and Judiciary committees. The impact of the Cambridge Analytica revelations and Facebook's data policies with their company partners continue to be felt throughout the industry. Facebook's role in Rohingya refugee crisis, political violence in the Philippines, and its public relations response to ongoing crises draw almost constant criticism as of this writing. Former Facebook data scientist and whistleblower Frances Haugen also brought up many similar concerns through both confidential documents and congressional testimony in 2021.

Along with the presidential election, prominent feminist writers and public figures faced increased harassment on social network sites, including Twitter, leading to a sustained harassment campaign of actress Leslie Jones by right-wing blogger and provocateur Milo Yiannopolos. Lindy West, a prominent feminist blogger and writer, also publicly left Twitter because it was "unusable for anyone but trolls, robots, and

dictators” (West, 2017). The publicly traded social network site Twitter celebrated its 10th birthday amid business problems over stagnated usage numbers and a public rumor that Disney had backed out of a purchase offer over Twitter’s inability to reduce harassment on the site (Sherman & Frier, 2016).

These incidents and ongoing revelations about the impact of increased surveillance and the use of user data on social media platforms like Facebook have led to increased popular press speculation about social media’s future. Despite concerns about misinformation and harassment on social network platforms, however, they also continued to grow. The Pew Internet and American Life project found that in 2016, 79% of all online adults used Facebook, while Twitter reached 24% of all online American adults, with similar numbers for Pinterest (31%), Instagram (32%), and LinkedIn (29%) (Greenwood et al., 2016). Facebook reported 1,150,000,000 active mobile users in December of 2016 (Zephoria, 2016), and Snap, the parent company of Snapchat, continued to expand in preparation for its first public offering, with active daily users of Snapchat exceeding Twitter for the first time. The year 2016 demonstrated that the long-term implications of social network sites could be impactful on public and private lives, yet the sites themselves continued to be integrated into more and more aspects of American life, moving from spaces for identity representation and communication to platforms with influence on politics and civic discourse.

The ways that social media has entered into the public consciousness and established itself within the larger media landscape throughout this time period demonstrate the importance of studying social media platforms and their influence on communication, individual literacy and identity practices, and even civic life. From 2006 to 2016, individuals collectively grappled with living lives at least partially online, where personal relationships and civic discourse play out on social platforms. Living a “literate life in the information age” (Selfe & Hawisher, 2004) increasingly means learning to present oneself and one’s ideas to a multitude of audiences as well as navigating complex issues of privacy and the management of one’s online data. Internet users take advantage of easier ways to share content: engaging in short textual interactions with friends through social media, uploading video to YouTube or images to Instagram, and managing a variety of social events and groups through different kinds of social software. Not only do these literate activities take place on networked computers but they occur on social media platforms stored on commercial websites; content is syndicated in 100 different places, blurring boundaries between work and leisure, friends

and strangers, public and private, and online and offline. And these online activities are, in fact, writing. As Regina Duthely (2018) argues in her article about hip hop and digital writing, “As we curate our Twitter timelines, try to get the best shot for our Instagram photos, and try to capture funny moments for Snapchat, we are composing” (p. 359).

José van Dijck (2013) has argued that social media platforms and the activities in which individuals participated on these services evolved together. While many social media sites began as general places to communicate with friends and contacts and share creative content, through their development, these services perpetuated and reinforced certain habits and ways of being among their users. “Friending,” “following,” and “liking” are now specific rhetorical acts, recorded within social media platforms. As van Dijck described, checking in on friends, sharing vacation photos, and scribbling notes used to be private, ephemeral acts. Through social media, though, these activities are now “formalized inscriptions” (p. 7), tracked and traced, logged in databases for posterity and sometimes shared in more public ways to wider online audiences. The endless parade of popular press stories reporting the latest individual fired for online transgressions and the public service announcements warning teens to think before uploading pictures demonstrate that the new boundaries are not yet settled. Our definitions of authorship, audience, and participation change with these communication practices, creating crucial questions for language, literacy, rhetoric, and education.

### PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK

The advent and growth of social network sites has also meant a growth in academic research on social media in a variety of fields. Writing researchers, for example, have noted the prominence of writing in digital environments in the work they do outside of the classroom. Andrea Lunsford et al. (2013) followed undergraduate students for 4 years of college through the Stanford Study of Writing. They found that not only are students writing more, but they are also effective in crafting and communicating specific messages to specific audiences. As Lunsford and her colleagues found in their study, 38% of the writing that the student participants completed happened outside of the classroom, and most of this writing happened online. Similarly, a study by Jeff Grabill, Bill Hart-Davidson, and their colleagues in the Writing in Digital Environments research group found that first-year college students engage in digital writing most frequently, primarily on mobile

phones, social network sites, and email. The study found that this type of writing is ubiquitous, noting the centrality of digital media in students' writing outside of the classroom (Grabill, 2010). At the end of the first decade of social media, Stephanie Vie (2018) reported that social media platforms had "changed writing," giving writers more choices "thanks to the broadened reach, greater rhetorical velocity, and wider and more varied audiences prevalent in social media" (p. 122), and that writing had changed university classrooms as well.

Indeed, the changes in the way information is presented and accessed on the internet in the past decade have altered the nature of writing, participation, and learning in online spaces. A study from Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project in 2010 found young adults (ages 18–29) to be the most active in managing their identities and data online; the report claimed that reputation management had "become a defining feature of online life for many internet users, especially the young" (Madden & Smith, 2010). As those young adults continued to grow alongside social media platforms, their role in the personal and professional lives of individuals of all ages expanded. While social media integrated itself into individuals' daily lives, the events I mentioned above from 2016 demonstrated that they also had a great deal of impact in social and political events. From the Iranian protests in 2009 and the Arab Spring to the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri that expanded the #BlackLivesMatter movement, social media platforms have also been used to influence public discourse. The use of social media for protest and organizing, for spreading disinformation, and for weaponized harassment campaigns have also impacted world events. What information an individual shares online, with whom, as well as what information is deemed credible and accurate are some of the most important questions for writing, rhetoric, and citizenry.

*Writing on the Social Network* takes a historical look at what I am labeling as the first decade of social media, roughly from 2006 to 2016. I argue that the events discussed above provide an opportunity to look back on the first decade of social media use in order to consider user experiences and digital literacy practices that developed on these sites. Studies of user practices on social media have inevitably focused on short periods of time, a few days or weeks, and have provided excellent snapshots of use within that time period (DeLuca, 2015; Ellison et al. 2014; Marwick, 2008; Marwick & boyd, 2011, 2014; Walls, 2017). These studies have been crucial to considering the ways individuals negotiate specific aspects of different social media sites, yet Facebook in 2007 was not the same site as Facebook in 2018.

To that end, *Writing on the Social Network* uses a longitudinal approach for studying digital literacy practices on social network sites. This project reports on qualitative case studies I conducted between 2010 and 2016, both pivotal years in social media history, through which I examined the literate activity that individuals engaged in on social media. Through this research, I explore how the literate activity I observed on social network sites coalesced around three areas crucial for writing in digital environments: (a) a heightened awareness of audience and an ability to tailor messages to specific audiences; (b) an understanding of how personal data is collected and circulated in online spaces as well as ways to subvert that data collection; and (c) a means through which to utilize the first two skills for self-promotion and self-presentation in both personal and professional settings.

I contend that social media platforms represent important locations where the different influences on writing discussed by literacy scholars become visible, laying bare the influence of social, economic, and structural forces that shape literacy practices. A close study of the rich literate practices that individuals have engaged in on social network sites over the first decade of their use allows us to better understand the roles these sites play in shaping current digital literacy practices over time. This introduction defines some key terms used throughout this book, provides an overview of social media in its first decade, and outlines the remaining chapters.

## DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

As social media research has developed, the terms used for social media sites have also changed. “Social media” can be seen as an umbrella term that refers to internet-based sites and services that have characteristics Tim O’Reilly (2005) called “Web 2.0”: services with many-to-many communication configurations where individuals can share content they create and connect with other users on the site. José van Dijck (2013) divided social media sites into four categories: *social network sites* (SNSs) that emphasize interpersonal content, including Facebook and Twitter; *user-generated content* (UGC) services like YouTube and Flickr; *trading and marketing sites* (TMSs) such as eBay and Groupon; and finally, *play and game sites* (PGS), including social games like FarmVille (p. 8).

danah boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007) used the term “social network sites,” which they defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection,

and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (para. 4). boyd and Ellison updated their definition in 2013 to include the increased importance of the news feed feature of social network sites:

A social network site is a *networked communication platform* in which participants (1) have *uniquely identifiable profiles* that consist of user-supplied content, content provided by other users, and/or system-provided data; (2) can *publicly articulate connections* that can be viewed and traversed by others; and (3) can consume, produce, and/or interact with *streams of user-generated content* provided by their connections on the site. (p. 151)

The key features of what boyd and Ellison describe as “social network sites” allow individual users to create profiles, connect with other users through friending and following, and view and explore content uploaded by other users, usually in an aggregated stream like a news feed or timeline. While the term “social media” can apply to a large amount of web content and online communities, from blogging platforms like WordPress, web forums like Reddit, and fan fiction services like Archive of Our Own, social network sites have a narrower focus, but still include a range of sites, from popular services like Facebook and Twitter to sites focused on video content like YouTube, and more niche social network sites like Goodreads, where users share and review book they’ve read, and Ravelry, a social network site for knitters. boyd and Ellison’s definition includes sites that van Dijck (2013) categorized under UGC; while the primary goal of these sites is to share content, they do have social network site elements as well, including profile pages and ways to follow other users’ content. The boundaries between them blur a great deal.

In recent years, the term “platform studies” has emerged through which to study social media as well. José van Dijck’s (2013) book provided a consideration of social media sites at the level of policy and financial considerations and used the term “platform” to study the impact of these internet companies and services at multiple levels. José van Dijck and Tomas Poell (2016) defined platforms as “online sites that facilitate and organize data streams, economic interactions, and social exchanges between users” (2). Similarly, Dustin Edwards and Bridget Gelms (2018) described platform studies as “the infrastructural layer of computing, a meeting point of hardware, software, and culture.” For Edwards and Gelms, platforms are “moving assemblages” of technologies, financial systems, and social and cultural systems.

Writing in 2021, I find the current, and arguably most precise, term for these services is “social media platform.” The word “platform” acknowledges the combined assemblage of technologies, companies,



policies, and users, and it also understands the fact that many users access these services not from a web page, but from a mobile app or similar device. Yet at the time I conducted this research, boyd and Ellison's 2007, and later their updated 2013, definition of "social network site" was the most precise term to describe the sites I was studying and the services my research participants were using, sites that included a profile, the ability to friend or follow others, and, in most cases, a news feed of updates. I therefore use the term "social media platform" when discussing the social media sites and companies as entities in their current configuration, but I also use the term "social network site" in the context of specific literacy practices of the people I describe here in this book. I use "social *network* sites" rather than the other popular term, "social *networking* sites." boyd and Ellison argue that these services are primarily used to maintain already established relationships, rather than relationship initiation. Hence, "social network site" is a more appropriate term than "social networking site." The literacy practices I emphasize here are primarily from social network sites that fall under van Dijk's more narrow definition, but I also examined practices on sites that fall within van Dijk's category of UGC sites, like YouTube and Flickr, yet meet the qualifications for boyd and Ellison's "social network site" definition.

### THE FIRST DECADE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

For this project, I define the first decade of social media as roughly spanning from 2006 to 2016. danah boyd and Nicole Ellison (2007) identify online communities like SixDegrees.com, LiveJournal, BlackPlanet,<sup>2</sup> and MiGente as precursors to social network sites, as online communities centered around specific identities that allowed users to create profiles and connect with friends. Friendster, launched in 2002, is considered by many to be the first social network site, and Myspace was founded in 2003, with Facebook following in 2004 (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Twitter was launched in 2006, which was also the year Facebook introduced its news feed feature, which substantially changed user experience on the site; in September of 2006, Facebook also opened its service beyond users with a .edu email address to anyone over the age of 13. See figure 0.1 for a brief timeline of this first decade of social media.

Alice Marwick (2013) traced the history of social media platforms, and Web 2.0 as a whole, to the technolibertarian ethos of Northern California and Silicon Valley in a way that blended counterculture activism with business culture. Social media can be traced to a number of different influences from this specific time and place, from zines, e-zines,

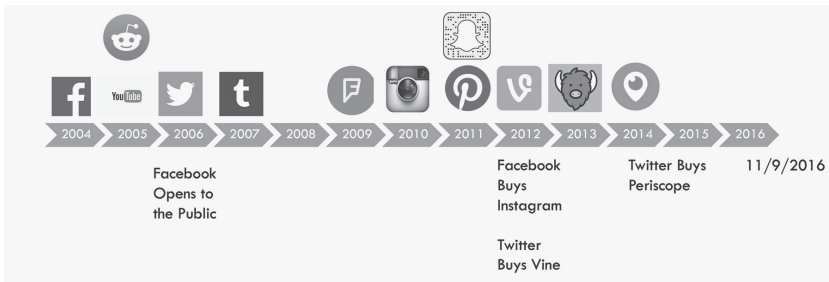


Figure 0.1. The First Decade of Social Media.

and hacker culture to Usenet groups, personal homepages, and finally, blogs. Marwick pointed to Tim O'Reilly's "Web 2.0" conference in 2004 as instrumental in coining the term and branding these new internet companies as different from those that drove the first .com boom and bust of 1997 to 2000, emphasizing "collective intelligence" and "the web as platform" approaches (pp. 63–64). Indeed, many of the first social media sites were launched in that post-bust era, including Friendster in 2002, Myspace and LinkedIn in 2003, and Flickr and Digg in 2004. José van Dijck (2013) notes that Web 2.0 turned websites and online platforms from "offering channels for networked communication to becoming interactive, two-way vehicles for networked sociality" (p. 5). The crowd-sourced orientation of Web 2.0 services was embraced both by the technology industry and the popular press. *Time* named "you" its Person of the Year for 2006, described by journalist Lev Grossman as a gesture to the popularity of social media platforms, and the crowdsourcing and user-generated content practices of Web 2.0. The year 2006, then, represents the year that social network services became a genre unto themselves that had wide adoption within the mainstream United States.

By 2010, Marwick noted, early enthusiasm over the idea of social media startups and the power of crowdsourcing had faded as the term "Web 2.0" gave way to the broader, catchall term "social media," as well as the dominance of more established companies like Facebook. As noted in the introduction of this chapter, Mark Zuckerberg replaced "you" as *Time*'s Person of the Year in 2010, an acknowledgment of the maturation and establishment of social media and its consolidation into an ever-smaller number of established platforms with large user bases. This consolidation continued over the next several years, as many smaller social media platforms folded, and others were bought out by larger services, such as Facebook's purchase of Instagram in 2012 and of WhatsApp in 2014.

Scholars and technology critics have always touted social media's potential for collective organization and social change, from crowdsourcing (Shirky, 2008) to protest through the Arab Spring (Tufekci, 2017). By 2014, two events in the United States demonstrated its impact on social movements and public discourse. First, the protests against police brutality in Ferguson, Missouri, that grew into the #BlackLivesMatter movement were organized, expanded, and discussed on platforms like Twitter, which was central for documenting events in Ferguson and raising awareness about police brutality (Freelon et al., 2016; Tynes, et al., 2016). Also in 2014, the online harassment campaign #GamerGate demonstrated how coordinated efforts across platforms could also fuel online harassment (Trice & Potts, 2018). Both events took social media platforms from tools for personal identity representation to tools for mobilization that impacted American civic and public life.

I mark the end of the first decade of social media on November 9, 2016. The day after the 2016 presidential election in the United States represents a change in the way that the mainstream press covered and considered social media platforms. While internet scholars, digital rhetoricians, privacy advocates, and other experts have long raised concerns about the impact of social media platforms on society and culture, this event demonstrated in a large way how online activities can impact offline global and political events. The impact of political polarization, data modeling, surveillance, and disinformation and misinformation campaigns, as noted in the introduction of this chapter, grew throughout the decade and have forced many social media users, as well as elected representatives, to question social media's role in our lives. While it is currently unclear if social media companies will face greater regulation, there is no other date than November 9, 2016, that represents a more definitive shift in mainstream public attitudes about social media platforms. While many of the innovations and changes that social media platforms have taken up since 2016 had been building before this point, the year 2016 represents a tipping point for many of these changes as well.

## STUDYING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Scholarship on social media expanded during the first decade of social media from studies of individual user practices to a more global view of the impact of social network sites, considering their impact on politics and civic discourse, activism, relationships, and media industries. As van Dijck (2013) has described, social media platforms are assemblages,

“both techno-cultural constructs and socioeconomic structures” (p. 28). There are six distinct elements that make up these platforms, van Dijck suggested: the technology itself, users, content, business models, governance, and ownership. These six elements cover the software design, the individuals who use the platforms and upload content, as well as what van Dijck terms to be the socioeconomic structures involved as a system of production: who owns the platforms, who manages their use, and how the platforms generate revenue as businesses.

Rhetoric and composition, and the subfield of computers and writing specifically, has a long history of investigating technologies for writing and writing instruction, not only at the level of user experience, but also of policy and infrastructure. From Cynthia L. Selfe’s landmark 1999 text *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention* to Adam Banks’s 2005 groundbreaking book *Race, Rhetoric, and Technology: Searching for Higher Ground*, and Heidi McKee’s 2011 *Computers and Composition* article on surveillance and data collection policies of internet companies, writing researchers have studied the technologies, technology policy, and individual user practices that have influenced literacy practices. Within rhetoric and composition, I argue that it is most productive to consider social network sites as an assemblage of three different elements: technology, policy, and users. By assemblage, I mean a unified entity that contains people, texts, and technologies. Jodie Nicotra (2016) describes “assemblage thinking” as a perspective that shows nonhumans, material objects, and individuals within a mutually constitutive system: “All actions come not as products of deliberate human decisions, but from a heterogeneous, distributed agency of many actants, both human and nonhuman” (p. 187). André Brock (2020) argues that in studying technologies, scholars need to consider an assemblage that includes: (a) the artifact itself; (b) the cultural practices surrounding it; and (c) the “technocultural beliefs about the artifact as evinced by its users” (p. 8). Viewing social media platforms from this perspective allows us as scholars to acknowledge the distinct elements that collectively create social media platforms. Here I briefly describe approaches to social media research in writing studies that examine technologies and policies before turning to user practices.

### *Technologies*

The first way that writing studies and internet scholars study social media platforms is through the perspective of technological design and infrastructure. Each social media platform is, of course, based in

computer code that represents the very materiality of the social network site. Kristin Arola (2010, 2017) and Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2008) have analyzed the design and interface of social media platforms and profiles, demonstrating how the design itself allows for and restricts identity representation and expression in different ways. The element of social media platforms that have received some of the greatest attention is the algorithmically organized news feed. Rather than presenting updates in a chronological fashion, most social network platforms weigh certain updates over others, governed by proprietary algorithms that take into account user behavior, preferences, and time spent on the site. As Jessica Reyman (2017) and Estee Beck (2015, 2017) have argued, these algorithms are not value-neutral and they present the social media users with information designed to keep them on the site. Algorithms are increasingly “mediators of online communication and information” (Reyman, 2017, p. 114) that along with the design of the platforms themselves have a great deal of impact on how writers use social media platforms, how they represent themselves, and how they connect with others through these services. While not solely focused on social media platforms, Safiya Noble (2018) and Ruha Benjamin (2019) have also demonstrated the means through which algorithms and other technologies on digital platforms also reinforce racism and white supremacy.

### *Policies*

Social network site technologies and interfaces do not just determine specific responses from users. Social media scholarship from writing and rhetoric scholars also considers the role of platform policies in shaping activity and user experiences. Along with content and moderation policies, these sites’ terms of service also dictate what they can and cannot do with user data, an issue of recent concern in the Cambridge Analytica case. The policy issue that has received the most attention in academia involves privacy concerns. McKee (2011) drew attention to web companies’ data collection policies, and Estee Beck (2015) also noted the importance of considering internet surveillance for writing and rhetoric scholars, as online advertising companies have built what she described as an “invisible digital identity.” Jessica Reyman (2013) argued that the metadata users generate on social media platforms falls into a gray area; while connected to the content that users write and upload on social media platforms, it is “treated as unclaimed property free for the taking” (p. 513) by social media companies. Estee Beck and Les Hutchinson (2020) also take up these questions in their edited collection *Privacy*

*Matters*, arguing that expanding digital surveillance systems represent an important area of study for writing researchers and instructors. Edwards and Gelms's (2018) special issue of *Present Tense* on the rhetoric of platforms also does crucial work in considering social media platforms both at the level of technology and policy in order to examine the influence of different platforms, including Grindr (Faris, 2018), Twitter (Trice & Potts, 2018), and YikYak (West & Pope, 2018). By studying social media at the level of policy, scholars are able to examine the role these platforms' policies—including data collection, privacy settings, and content moderation—have on users' experiences.

### *User Practices*

While it is crucial for writing studies' scholars to study both social network site technologies as well as the companies' policies, these two elements do not wholly control what happens on social media platforms. User practices themselves are also crucial and represent the focus of this book. Social network sites are often critiqued for providing too much structure over communication and creative expression online (Arola, 2010, 2017). It is important, however, to avoid viewing social network sites through a technologically determinist lens. Social network site users write, connect with others, and express their identities and opinions on services that provide restrictive constraints at times, from categories on a profile page to 140-character tweets. These individuals also use creative practices in order to work against the constraints of these sites in order to suit their own aims. As van Dijck (2013) has argued, many practices on social media platforms have evolved alongside changes to the platforms themselves, not as a result of those changes. Much more research is needed on specific user practices in order to understand how individual users work within and against these constraints in order to communicate and connect with others on social media platforms.

While research on user practices in social media is growing within rhetoric and composition, most research comes from other fields, namely communication, media studies, and what might broadly be considered internet studies. danah boyd's (2014) book *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* is the most visible of these studies, in which she interviewed youth on their use of Myspace, theorizing the concept of "networked publics" in which these young adults operate. Along with an interface analysis of Twitter, André Brock (2012, 2020) also described the user practices of African American Twitter users that constitute the cultural space known as Black Twitter. Alice Marwick (2013) detailed the

user practices of individuals she described as “microcelebrities,” and a great deal of research on teens using digital platforms (Debatin et al., 2009; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Livingstone, 2008). Recent work has also focused on more specific topics, including how user practices on social media intersect and interact with activism (Tufekci, 2017) and visual culture (Rettberg, 2014; Tiidenberg, 2018). Catherine Knight Steele (2016, 2018) has studied Black blogging and internet communities, and Jenny Korn (2016) has examined racial identity representation in Facebook Groups.

Among writing researchers, Bronwyn Williams’s (2009) book *Shimmering Literacies* provided an early look at the ways that students used social network sites and reported on research gathered from interviews with 18-to-19-year-old college students on their use of popular culture material in their online writing activities, including social network sites. Studies of hashtags on Twitter are common in order to examine the popular and contemporary conversations around a particular topic. LaToya Sawyer (2017) examined a number of different social media spaces, including closed Facebook groups and YouTube vlogs, to examine Black women’s discourse and literacy practices on social media in ways that allowed them to assert rhetorical agency. Caroline Dadas (2017) analyzed conversations around #yesallwomen and #bringbackourgirls to examine how hashtag activism connects to other activist rhetorical practices, Bill Wolff (2015) studied Bruce Springsteen fans’ tweets, and Liza Potts (2013) considered social media for disaster response. While these studies sometimes focus on the practice of tweeting itself, some also consider the online discussion around a particular topic instead. Other larger studies of user practices include Stephanie Vie’s (2008) early *Computers and Composition* article that surveyed writing students and instructors on their attitudes toward social network sites in the writing classroom. Her work has continued to survey these two groups on their perceptions of privacy and surveillance on social network sites (Vie, 2015), as well as following up on that initial research to discuss university faculty’s continued and changing experiences on social media (Vie, 2018). Discrete studies of individual users’ practices on social media are also a common area of investigation for writing studies scholars, including work by Bronwyn Williams (2017), Brian McNely (2015), and Douglas Walls (2017). Elaine Richardson and Alice Ragland (2018) have examined memes and hashtags of the #BlackLivesMatter movement that cross social media platforms into offline spaces. As Pamela Takayoshi (2018) has argued, however, writing studies as a field needs a great deal more close studies of composition processes, including digital writing processes.



A significant portion of scholarship within the field of rhetoric and composition on social media considers the use of social media platforms for pedagogical purposes. Erin Frost (2011) provided an account of her students' use of Facebook for a class project; Elizabeth Buck (2015) also discussed the ways that composition instructors can capitalize on the rhetorical knowledge students already have about social network sites. Ryan Shepherd (2015, 2016) studied the use of Facebook in first-year writing classrooms and gender differences in the Facebook profiles of first-year writing students. Similarly, Lilian Mina (2017) and Michael Faris (2017) have provided close studies of social media use in different writing classrooms. Louis Maraj (2020) also analyzes hashtagging as "digital counter/public commonplaces" (p. 46) and employing hashtag-composing practices in the classroom can decenter "hegemonic ways of reading/writing" (p. 47). David Coad (2017) also focused on the issue of graduate student professionalization and social media in his study of graduate students using Twitter at academic conferences. While considering the impact and potential role of social media practices for the teaching of writing is important, it is crucial to first understand how social media users integrate these sites within their daily literacy practices outside of the classroom.

Along with the need for more close studies of situated literacy practices that Takayoshi notes, there is also a need for writing studies researchers to consider social media on longer time scales. While close and discrete studies of social media use can help us better understand how individual writers use networked, digital tools for connection and self-expression, it is important to consider that these practices are integrated within specific digital platforms that have changed greatly over time. Features change, news feed algorithms are adjusted by developers, and social conventions for appropriate social media use shift with different platforms and practices. Yet there are very few longitudinal studies of social media use. Cory Bullinger and Stephanie Vie (2017) note the need to not only balance pedagogical accounts of social media with those that consider more self-sponsored writing practices, but also to step back and consider that use over time. Bullinger and Vie interviewed ex-social media users and non-users in order to consider why individuals have abstained or stepped back from social media platforms. Stacey Pigg (2016) also examined a Twitter user's navigation of changes on the platform over a 2-year period, noting how literacy practices on social media platforms are always in flux.

In addition, it's important to consider users' experiences on social media across different platforms. Many studies within writing studies as



well as in internet studies writ large focus on one platform. According to the Pew Internet and American Life project, the average adult has profiles on more than one social network site, and many users synchronize certain kinds of content across different sites, from Twitter to Facebook, for example, or they use a site like Tumblr to contain media from a number of the different sites on which they participate (Lenhart et al., 2010). To trace literate activity, then, writing researchers need to follow users across a number of different social media platforms to consider how their practices change across sites as well as over time.

To that end, *Writing on the Social Network* extends this inquiry by examining digital literacy practices on social network sites over a 6-year period. Using case studies of users' social media practices, I identify several challenges these writers encountered in managing audiences and sharing content, and I consider the strategies these writers developed in responding to these challenges as literacy practices. This research began with a core group of seven research participants in 2010–2011, four of whom I interviewed again in 2016. In order to expand the project in terms of individual experiences and represented demographics, I conducted additional interviews with eight research participants in 2014 and 2016. Despite these additional participants, as a project based in case studies, I must note that the results of this research are limited to these participants and not generalizable beyond this group. Each writer profiled in this project found different ways to direct content to different audience groups, manage data shared on the platform, and represent themselves for professional audiences. Yet these individuals' experiences exist as "telling cases," (Sheridan et al., 2000), and the experiences detailed in this book are reflective of many others during the first decade of social media. I argue in this project that looking back on the first decade of social network sites through these specific stories and experiences can provide us with insight and perspective in considering literacy skills necessary for social media's second decade.

#### OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

This introduction provided an overview of the first decade of social media, as well as an overview of the study of social media platforms within the field of rhetoric and composition. Chapter 1 describes this study's approach to studying literacy practices on social media platforms. This study takes a sociomaterial approach to literacy practices, considering the ways that users integrate social media platforms within their daily literate activity, and how they work with and against the technologies of

social media platforms to share information and represent their identities. This chapter outlines three different areas of concern for social media users during its first decade (audience, data, and professional identities), the topics that will constitute most of the organization of this book. Finally, chapter 1 provides a summary of the strategies the writers in this study developed to manage their own social media use.

In chapter 2, I examine methodological considerations for studying digital literacy practices on social media, and I propose an ethnographic and longitudinal case study methodology for studying social media platforms that combines methods of data collection from different sources. Using social media as a site for writing research brings up unique ethical challenges in the collection and representation of data from these sources. In this chapter, I describe specific ethical concerns I faced through this research as well as more general questions that other social media researchers might confront in conducting social media, considering the data of research participants, and representing that data.

Chapter 3 introduces one of the three primary challenges that the writers profiled in this book encountered when using social media platforms: managing multiple audience groups. Social network sites flatten different audiences into one friend or followers list, a phenomenon Alice Marwick and danah boyd (2011) call “context collapse.” Along with managing messages shared with general and specific audiences, social media users also had to consider how that content might circulate outside of its intended audience. This chapter details how the research participants in this study managed multiple audiences within and across different social network platforms and shaped content for those specific audiences.

In chapter 4, I detail the second issue social media users encountered: managing their own data with different groups and with the social network sites themselves. This chapter illustrates the ways that individuals navigate social media platforms as assemblages, managing site infrastructure, different hardware and software tools, privacy settings, and data in order to share information and restrict it to specific audiences. Each individual combined different technologies and tools in order to fit these specific social media platforms within their own daily literacy practices. While some research participants self-censored what they posted, other individuals utilized omissions and even false information to protect their privacy and personal data. The participants’ experiences discussed in this chapter describe the literacy practices used by my research participants in managing technologies, data, and policies.

Chapter 5 considers the third category of literacy practices and challenges I examine in this book: self-presentation and self-promotion. I

detail trajectories of my research participants' social media use over time, and how that role shifted as these individuals moved from positions as students in undergraduate and graduate programs to professionals in their chosen fields. I combine this work with descriptions of pedagogical interventions from my teaching that asked students to consider their professional digital identities and to build digital portfolios that presented these identities for professional audiences beyond the university. Using social media professionally brings challenges for individuals at all levels and can also create what Alice Marwick (2013) has described as "safe for work" selves. Yet there are opportunities for self-expression, self-promotion, and connection. This topic is one area, I argue, where teachers of digital and professional writing can intervene in teaching students to be strategic and savvy communicators.

In the final chapter, I summarize this longitudinal case study research and discuss its implications for our understanding of literate activity connected to social media platforms and the representation of identity on these sites. Through the literacy practices I identify and discuss in this book, we can reflect on the first decade of social media platforms and look ahead to social media's second decade. Examining the social, technological, and structural factors that influence digital literacy practices in online environments is crucial in understanding the impact of these sites on writing practices and literate activity going forward. This chapter also considers concerns for writing researchers and scholars in social media's second decade. The growth of social media platforms over the past decade, their professionalization and monetization, as well as their impact on global sociopolitical events, have implications for the ways that individuals use social media and the ways that writing researchers study these platforms as well.