

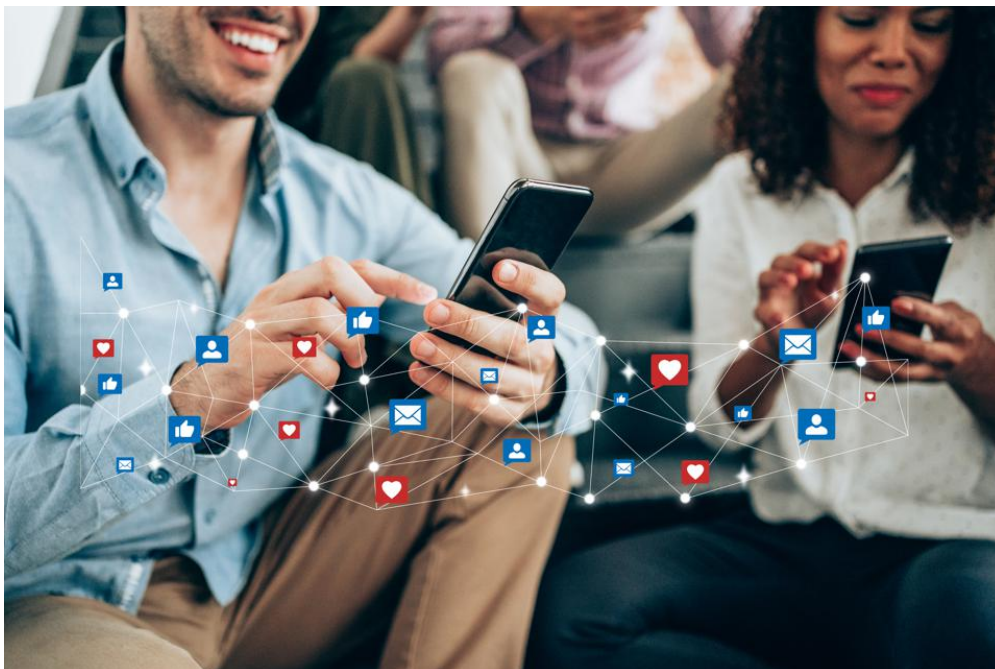
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Different Platforms, Different Purposes: The State Of Social Media Today



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No one seems to be able to agree on who coined the term “social media.” According to a Forbes [article](#), three people have attempted to claim that accolade, and although one of them insists that he used the term as early as 1994, the earliest online citation is reportedly from 1997. Social media as we know it, though, seems to have been “born” in 1997 with the [launch](#) of a site called SixDegrees.com.

Different platforms have sprung up from time to time, each with its own purpose. This year has been an unusual one (to put it mildly), and with so much of our time now spent in the virtual world with virtual connections, it’s prompted me to think about how much time I spend on each of the most popular platforms and why.

Popular Platforms: Then And Now

LinkedIn launched in May 2003 as an online service to allow professionals to network with each other and share or pursue employment opportunities. Today, LinkedIn has about [645 million users](#). Its purpose has evolved over time, and while professionals can still network with each other and job hunt or recruit, LinkedIn also now provides a

platform where businesses can grow their brand presence, increase recognition through targeted advertising and identify new prospects through the platform's tools.

Facebook launched in February 2004. Its purpose then was to provide an online platform for students at Harvard University (such as its founders/creators) to connect. It began expanding its membership to include students at other universities and eventually became available to members of the general public, age 13 or older (with almost [2.7 billion](#) monthly active users today). While Facebook still provides a place for individuals to connect, the platform's cash flow is driven by its advertising business.

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Twitter launched in July 2006, providing a social networking service where users could interact by way of tweets — messages that were then restricted to 140 characters. In 2019, there were an estimated [330 million](#) monthly active users worldwide. Tweets are sent approximately [500 million times](#) per day, and the character limit has been increased to 280. Based on my perspective, this platform has perhaps evolved the most in its use, now becoming more of a source of news than a place for people to connect.

The Hindsight Of 2020

Being in roles that include the daily use of social media can give marketing and communications professionals a unique perspective in such a strange year. With so many of our activities migrating from the real world to the virtual world, we need to compartmentalize our online activities based on whether they're personal or professional by nature, and in my personal opinion, we absolutely should. After all, there is a time and a place for everything.

The Professional

Let's start with our social media behaviors in our professional capacities. I am on my firm's LinkedIn page every day, like most, if not all, marketing and communications professionals (Facebook and Twitter to a lesser extent because LinkedIn is primarily a professional network). It's important to maintain a presence to let our followers out there know that we're still here, still doing what we do, reminding them specifically of what we're doing to help *them*. A visit to our LinkedIn page is like a virtual visit to our office: There are no personal opinions offered and no religious or political content shared because those things don't really belong in a professional setting. It's simply us showcasing what we do best.

When we switch to our personal LinkedIn pages, it's a *slightly* different story. We can still maintain an air of professional decorum in what we post, like and share, but we can allow our personalities to shine just a little bit more. (As a writer, I went through my own phase of sharing humorous grammar memes because they appealed to me and were related to what I do without verging into professionally inappropriate territory.)

The Personal

For those on a “regular” work schedule, when the clock strikes 5 p.m. (or 5:15 or 5:30, depending on the day), it’s time to switch gears. The browser windows and apps for our professional pages close, and our personal business can be conducted on our own time and our own personal accounts.

Human beings need to feel connected, and at a time when physical interactions must be minimized for the sake of health and safety (both for ourselves and others), social media has become the place many of us go to be with others. We can share opinions with those who are like-minded, and we can find those with whom we can share communal activities, albeit virtually. (Friends and I now have a standing weekly virtual movie night that began last spring with a Facebook post about a desire to watch movies with friends.)

Where The Professional And Personal Intersect

However, as nice as it is to be able to switch off our “work brains” and share candidly with our friends on Facebook and Twitter, there is one pitfall that can be hard to avoid. We can’t forget that there is a point at which our work lives intersect with our personal lives in the online world.

If you are a job seeker, employers [may visit your social media](#) pages to “screen” you as a potential candidate and get a sense of who you are as a person. If you are already employed, you represent your company, and your behavior on your own time can reflect well or poorly on it, which may lead to consequences.

It’s important to make sure that your privacy settings are up to date while remembering that nothing shared online is ever truly sacred. It can be better to err on the side of caution and keep your virtual world workplace appropriate. Keep in mind what you’re sharing, with whom and on which platforms, and you’ll be fine.

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