



Trends in Digital & Social Media (V20)

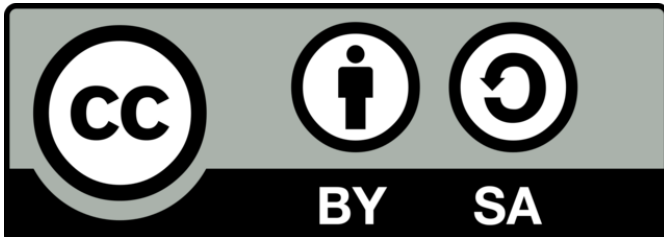
COM 680 Trends in Digital & Social Media

by Steve Covello

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This e-book is designed to accompany COM 680 *Trends in Digital & Social Media* at UNH-CPSO. It is an open resource, which means that it has been created for your use at no cost.

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User's Guide for Students

Terminology

The title of this course is “Trends in Digital & Social Media.” However, for simplicity’s sake, this e-book will refer to both “social networks” and “social media” as “SM” for short, as though SM encompasses both digital media, social networks, and social media.

How to use an e-book for this course

Using an e-book for learning is similar to studying from a traditional paper e-book. If you are using an e-book reader with one of the EPUB or PDF file, you can select any text in this e-book and add annotation to capture your immediate impressions of the readings and media.

You can keep this e-book for future reference in your scholarly or professional work.

You will frequently see text in this e-book in a blue color. These are hyperlinks just like you would see in a Web page in typical Web browser. If your e-book device is connected to the Internet, you will be taken to the resource by tapping on the hyperlink.

There are several resources in this e-book that link to a location within the UNH-CPS online library. You may need to log in to the with your UNH username and password first before the link will go directly to the resource.

Citations

Some of the key resources in this e-book include a conveniently pre-formatted APA citation located in a shaded box like the example below. Please use these citations when you write in discussion forums and in your final paper.

boyd, d. m. and Ellison, N. B. (2007), Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13: 210–230. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x

When citing your sources in coursework, do not cite this e-book or its author. Write your citations referring to the original articles or media from which your positions are based.

What is the theme of this e-book?

The content that has been curated for this e-book has been selected based on the following criteria:

- Which topics pertain to our actual experience of SM as we are engaged with it in the real world?
- Which authors and organizations present authoritative voices related to the topics?
- Which content offers well-supported, applicable, and varying viewpoints to a given topic?

The intent of this e-book is not to prescribe “the truth” about SM according to the instructor’s personal point of view. Rather, it is to help you to synthesize your own position on each topic which you will then apply appropriately to a final project of your own invention.

This means that while a certain perspective on, say, anonymity, may work well for a certain type of project, it may not work well at all for another. You will determine which position works best on a given topic for your project idea and support it as though you are presenting your idea to a potential stakeholder or interested audience.

Which e-book reader?

If you prefer to download any of the e-book files for use on your devices or computer, we recommend using one of the following applications below so that you can use the note taking features as you read.



Mac: iBooks – If you are using a Mac running one of the most recent operating systems (Mac OS X Mavericks or later), you already have the iBooks application in your Applications folder. More about iBooks can be found on [Apple's website](#).

Use the **EPUB** file



Windows: Use the [Amazon Kindle for PC software](#) if you prefer to use an e-book reader.

Use the **EPUB** file



Amazon Kindle: Kindle devices use their built-in software to read e-book files. No extra software is needed.

Use the **EPUB** file



iPhone and iPad devices: If you do not already have this app, go to the App Store on your device and download it for free. More about the iBooks app for iPad and iPhone [can be found here](#).

Use the **EPUB** file



Computers and print: Your computer is already capable of opening a PDF file, so you will not need any extra software to open a PDF.

Use the **regular PDF** for your computer. If you want to print out the textbook onto hardcopy paper, use the **PDF-Print** version.

How to use an e-book for this course

Using an e-book for learning is similar to studying from a traditional paper textbook but with some extra capabilities.

Using an e-book reader, you can select any text in the e-book and add annotation to it to capture your immediate impressions of the readings and media.

You can do a search within the e-book to find things quickly.

You can keep the e-book for future reference in your scholarly or professional work.

“Pay it Forward” from prior students of the course

Every term, I ask students to voluntarily offer a piece of advice they would give to new students of this course. Below is a running compilation of the results:

On the course in general:

I think experienced social media users will expect to cruise through the course. However, this course looks at social media from perspectives you likely never thought of so don't assume this course will be easy. Keep an open mind and stay engaged.

This course will seem overwhelming the first week or two and then you will get into a rhythm. Trust the process, take advantage of the course resources, and stay openminded.

Don't be surprised that the course is not about social media marketing and that any preconceived notions about social media should be “parked” and examined objectively and often throughout the weeks of the course.

Use the course to your advantage. Even though this is NOT a course about marketing on SM, there are plenty of topics within the course that provides you the opportunity to explore and incorporate your findings within the assignments.

Be sure to read/watch all course resources. I took notes while watching videos and reading e-book, which made it easier for me to relate my learning in the weekly forums.

ALWAYS cite your resources properly. There are plenty of resources out there to help with this. [Purdue OWL](#) is a great one. In addition, give yourself a deadline of getting your discussions done by Tuesday evening, that way, you'll never mess up and submit late. Online courses are about self discipline, and that's a fact!

If you are not sure about an assignment, contact the professor sooner. He makes every effort possible to reach out and be able to communicate with you so take advantage of that.

You're going to think a lot more than you think you would. This isn't so much a fluff course as it is a thinking experiment.

Make the most of the course, dive in, and be willing to open up. I loved this course and found it well taught and very enjoyable.

If you're passionate about social media this course would be a great choice for you. I definitely have learned a lot from this course and there is a lot of valuable information I can take with me in my future career so I definitely recommend this course.

Take advantage of all the resources and read them – the information presented in the class is valuable, especially if you anticipate using digital or social media personally or professionally in the future. As a person currently working in this field, these lessons were so helpful and really made me feel more knowledgeable on the subject.

On time management:

Manage your time accordingly.

It's ok not to take notes on every single thing in the course. But I would make a summary of what was in the source that was in the book to look back at and find information that you need. This will help with posts and the final.

Be prepared to process a lot of information.

Keep ahead of the assignments and write a weekly diary that relates the course topics to your final project. It will save you SOOOO much time in the long run.

Don't fall behind. The material appears to jump around as the modules go on, but near the end everything seems to fall into place, as long as you kept up with it all.

Watch all the videos and read the articles and the class makes sense, and will get you thinking!

Log on regularly to keep up with all of the media and articles.

Take the time to read the extra material suggested after each chapter in the book. There is minimal reading involved to do so and it provides additional material when posting to the forum, making it easier to create a quality post. Also be sure to back up all of your work, especially your final project! I learned the hard way that just because you have never lost any work to date, it can happen at any time.

On the final project assignment:

Start visualizing your final project as early as possible.

Outside of the forums, start writing parts of your SM app proposal or narrative for each module as you go. You do not need the entire final idea figured out in order to do this. This will be helpful with creating your outline and writing your final paper.

Make notes on each module that relate to your final project.

Work on the draft of your paper throughout the semester.

Do not procrastinate the final project! Try to save aside information each week that could be useful for your project.

Be prepared to write down key points of each module and start transitioning them into your story at the end of every week.

About the COM 680 Final Project

COM 680 is designed so that you can apply your research for each topic in the course to a project of your choosing. The course syllabus and course resources within Canvas will describe the options for the final project in more detail.

Throughout this e-book, you will see frequent references to “your project” or the “final project.” These references pertain to your final project idea which you will propose at the beginning of the course and develop throughout the term.

If you have any questions about the final project details, please contact the instructor as soon as possible.

MAIN BODY

Introduction – Why study digital and social media?

Students in this course come from a broad range of academic disciplines. Some enroll in COM 680 because of a personal or academic interest; some because it is required for their major.

Students' engagement with digital and social media (SM) range from wholesale immersion to total disconnection. Rarely does one come into COM 680 without a predisposition to these topics one way or the other.

In this course, we will study *trends*, which is to say that we will be “dipping our cup” into the realtime stream of contemporary issues as well as examining some of the apps and platforms that are relevant today and perhaps gone tomorrow!

We will explore some significant themes, events, and narratives that have shaped how digital and SM proliferates globally, and how, in turn, it has shaped us as a society in the present moment.

Your goal in this course is to develop a position on each topic that reflects your insight drawn from a variety of authoritative perspectives as well as from those of your peers and the research you have conducted on your own.

Ultimately, the educational outcome of COM 680 is that you will be able to speak intelligently about the topics we cover in this course under any situation: professional, academic, or personal.

Readings & Media

Required Article: Anil Dash – “[12 Things Everyone Should Understand About Tech](https://medium.com/humane-tech/12-things-everyone-should-understand-about-tech-d158f5a26411)” (12 pages)

Dash is a [software developer](#) and writer on [Medium](#). He states: “Tech is more important than ever, deeply affecting culture, politics and society. Given all the time we spend with our gadgets and apps, **it’s essential to understand the principles that determine how tech affects our lives...** Technology isn’t an industry, **it’s a method of transforming the culture and economics** of existing systems and institutions.”

There are legitimate arguments against some of Dash’s points such as those found in the comments section. For example, the influence of open source software is not factored into his list. The value of this article, despite the author’s surface level effort to support his propositions, is in its attempt to distill the totality of technological presence, invention, and influence into a digestible set of axioms worth considering as we go through our studies in this course.

Dash, A. (2018, March 14). 12 Things Everyone Should Understand About Tech. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/humane-tech/12-things-everyone-should-understand-about-tech-d158f5a26411>

Required Video: Nicholas Christakis – “The hidden influence of social networks” (18:00)

Nicholas Christakis is an author, research scientist, and prominent presenter on how social media promotes healthy living. In this presentation, he describes how the structures of networks impose meaning on its members; that being a member of a social network causes things to “rub off” on you in ways you might not even notice.

What to look for as you watch:

- Think about the social networks you are a member of, both online and in real life: Does the network influence you in any way? In what ways do you influence the network?



Christakis, Nicholas. (2010, February). The hidden influence of social networks [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/nicholas_christakis_the_hidden_influence_of_social_networks

Connect to Nicholas Christakis on Twitter: [@NACristakis](https://twitter.com/NACristakis) – Website: nicholaschristakis.net/

Required Orientation: Social Media Fact Sheet

Review the most recent statistics and trends related to the most popular SM platforms and the demographics of their users.



Required Hootsuite: [All the Social Media Apps You Should Know in 2023](#)

Skim this list of the top SM systems in use around the world. You do not need to memorize this, but it is important to acquaint yourself with more than just the 2 or 3 systems you are already familiar with.

Optional: Social Media Basics, Definitions, and Terminology

If you are unfamiliar with SM, its terminology, or some of the major SM platforms/applications in recent history, please review this article by danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison.

boyd, d. m. and Ellison, N. B. (2007), Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship. Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13: 210–230. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x

danah boyd (yes, all lowercase) is a scholar and author on the role of digital technology in society and about social media in particular.

boyd's article will help you to understand the evolution of various features and functions found in contemporary social media. You do not need to memorize the history of innovations or the names of each platform that has come and gone.

Focus only on the three sections labeled as follows:

- *Social Network Sites: A Definition*
- *A History of Social Network Sites*
- *Networks and Network Structure*

Web version – [Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship](#)

PDF Download – [Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship](#)

Connect to danah boyd on Twitter: [@zephoria](#) – Website: [www.danah.org](#)

Chapter 1 – A Historical Perspective

Overview

The history of social media (SM) is not confined to the technical innovations created in the last 15 years or so. In fact, one of this week's presenters, Tom Standage, claims that SM has been around for 2000 years!

In this chapter, you will find that throughout history, SM has proliferated in various forms and with various audience types: literate gentry, common folk, computer geeks, and others.

While the focus of this course is on present-day trends and concepts of SM, it is important to understand that social interaction through media is not a new experience. The Internet Age is different from past systems because it has offered the lowest entry point for mass communication in human history, *on a global scale*.

Second, there is a distinction between a *social network* and *social media* – they are not interchangeable terms. For example, early forms of online communication through a [Bulletin Board Service](#) (BBS), message system, community group, or [USENET group](#) were intended as systems for people to connect, interact, and share information. There was no method for monetizing this form of networked participation. MySpace was the first social network system to monetize the data generated by the content and engagement produced by members. Once subsequent social network systems developed business models around the content produced by its members, the term “social media” became a more accurate representation of the systems. Thus, when you hear the expression, “When the service is free, the product is you,” it is referring to users’ attention to media that can be sold to advertisers.

In the first presentation below, Kevin Kelly’s “*How Technology Evolves*” begins by explaining how technological innovations evolve and assimilate into our culture. He goes so far as to say, “Technology is who we are,” and that today’s interaction is part of a continuing trend of self-organization as an extension of our humanity.

Then we will hear Tom Standage’s presentation which describes SM as a concept that transcends our simple notion of contemporary SM system. Evidently, what we are familiar with today is not that much different than what people did 2,000 years ago.

So how did SM find its way to the Internet? Andrew Keen, in “[Digital Vertigo: How Today’s Online Social Revolution Is Dividing, Diminishing, and Disorienting Us](#),” offers an intriguing theory. In the mid-1960s, west coast hippies – known for a community-driven culture – happened to converge in the Silicon Valley area in close proximity to the pioneers of computer technology companies.

Keen states, “... the history of Silicon Valley must be understood in terms of its social values, moral judgments and economic ideas – in the context of what some sociologists would call its ‘ideology.’” (Keen, A., 2012, p. 97).” An example of his thesis is found in the Community Memory Project (below) which originated in the San Francisco, CA area.

The Computer History Museum: [The Community Memory Project](#): 1973, Berkeley and San Francisco, California. Excerpts from flyers:

“COMMUNITY MEMORY is the name we give to this experimental information service. It is an attempt to harness the power of the computer in the service of the community. We hope to do this by providing a sort of super bulletin board where people can post notices of all sorts and can find the notices posted by others rapidly.”

“... a tool for collective thinking, planning, organizing, fantasizing, and decision-making.”

“By being open and interactive, Community Memory seeks to present an alternative to broadcast media such as TV. The nightly national TV news – both commentary and commercials – gives people the ‘word’ from on high, telling us ‘that’s the way it is.’ Community Memory is different. It makes room for the exchange of people-to-people information, recognizing and legitimizing the ability of people to decide for themselves what information they want.”

From the library resource: “The Community Memory Project: An Introduction,” 1982, Community Memory records, Lot X3090.2005, Box 12, Folder 20, Catalog 102734414, Computer.

Other primary resources: [“Community Memory” catalog search](#).



We will also review how [The Well](#) emerged as the prototypical networked SM platform for our age, how it was envisioned by its creators, and how its members’ lives were changed. This media is offered as primary testimony by The Well’s developers who describe their philosophy and motives in creating the first virtual asynchronous (not realtime) online community.

Key Terms

Disruptive – In the context of this course, we will define “disruptive” as the *ability to displace or marginalize an existing tradition, process, or model*. The causes of disruption often involve technologies, but sometimes involve an innovation in process. The effect of a disruption is a change in the structure of social, political, economic, personal, or interpersonal traditions.

What should you be focusing on?

Your objectives in this module are:

- Trace how present-day social media fits in the historical continuum of social communication.
- Identify the motives for creating social communication.

Readings & Media

Thematic narrative in this chapter

In this chapter's readings and media, the authors will present the following themes:

1. SM is a technology that was created within the context of many other technologies.
2. SM, as we know it today, is not the first form of SM – there is a long historical trail of SM systems and technologies that precede what we see today, each with their respective disruptive influence.
3. Online SM, as we know it today, was inspired by its first creators within a particular social and political context that influenced the rationale for its existence.

Required Video: Kevin Kelly's "*How Technology Evolves*" presentation (19:41)

Kevin Kelly begins the story by describing the historical motive for change through the human invention of technologies. However, Kelly's presentation is *not about* SM.

This presentation will help us to step back and view SM as a technology: one that is embedded among other contemporary technologies and built upon prior needs and technologies.

Kelly: "The question that I came up with was this: What does technology want? And by that, I don't mean, does it want chocolate or vanilla? I mean, what are its inherent trends and biases? What are its tendencies over time?"

What to look for as you watch:

- Consider that SM is just a point on an existing continuum spanning *all* technological inventions created by humans for one purpose or another. This may help you to gain a sense of how SM fits into a historical narrative of ongoing technological innovation.
- Consider how Kelly proposes the need to be *engaged* with technologies rather than fearing them. What are the steps we should take to discover their usefulness?
- Identify the connection between "what technology wants" and the larger question of why SM was invented.



Kelly, Kevin. (2005, February). *How Technology Evolves* [Video file]. Retrieved from http://www.ted.com/talks/kevin_kelly_on_how_technology_evolves?language=en

Connect to Kevin Kelly [@kevin2kelly](https://twitter.com/kevin2kelly) – Website: www.kk.org

Required Video: Tom Standage – “*Lessons from Ancient Social Media*” presentation (16:00)

We leap from a broad conversation about technology, what propels it, and how we manage it, to a narrower story about SM as a concept.

Standage claims that SM isn’t new at all – it is simply an extension of other forms of communication going back 2000+ years. The critical proposition in this presentation is about how each step in the evolution of social communication carried with it **a disruptive shock** to the balance of life and society at that time.

What to look for as you watch:

- Consider why people throughout history have been trying to communicate through media.
- How have these forms of SM been disruptive? To whom or what?



Standage, Tom [TEDx Talks]. (2013, August 19). *Lessons from ancient social media* | Tom Standage | TEDxOxbridge [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/ixsridS3qVs>

Connect to Tom Standage [@tomstandage](https://twitter.com/tomstandage) – Website: tomstandage.wordpress.com/

Required Videos: The WELL – Hippies in Cyberspace (20:00)

The following short videos describe the historical background of [The WELL](#), the first online network-based social media platform in a form similar to what we recognize today.

What's particularly valuable about these presentations is that they are *primary testimony* from the individuals who were involved from The WELL's inception.

One of the speakers, Howard Rheingold, is a prominent author on the subject of digital culture. In the video, he refers to "The Farm" and "living on a bus." These are details related to a time in the late 1960s when groups of hippies formed farm-based communes. One group pooled their money to buy a fleet of old buses, drove them to a plot of land in Tennessee and parked them in an arrangement to form a new community.

These kinds of alternative social relationships, he claims, inspired the communitarian culture found in SM.

What to look for as you watch:

- What were the underlying social ideals that motivated the creation of The WELL?
- How are the early principles of communitarianism reflected in the modern concept of an "online community?"



Rheingold, Howard [nibiuploader]. (2009, August 22). *Howard Rheingold on early days of the WELL* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/dUETSWmGVGI>.

Rheingold, Howard [Susan Hedin]. (2009, August 24). *Early days of the WELL* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/-5XRrza88v4>.

Connect to Howard Rheingold [@hrheingold](https://twitter.com/hrheingold) – Website: www.rheingold.com

WARNING!!!

In your online research for this topic DO NOT CITE THE ARTICLES BELOW. They are inaccurate and not suitable for use in our studies.

DO NOT CITE THIS ARTICLE: “[Complete History of Social Media: Then And Now](#)“, May 8, 2013 by Drew Hendricks.

DO NOT CITE THIS ARTICLE: “[The History of Social Media: Social Networking Evolution!](#)” by the History Cooperative.

Optional: The History of the Commodore 64

Check out this brief section about modems in the history of the Commodore 64 home computer system. **Go to the part at 28:37** where it describes the introduction of a modem to access some of the online social platforms at that time. The [Quantum Link](#) system operated from 1985 – 1995.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/com680/?p=36#oembed-1>

Optional: Video Documentary – “The History of the the Bulletin Board System (BBS)”

If there was an infinite amount of time available for this topic, this documentary would be assigned watching. [The History of the BBS](#) is told by the original creators of the systems that were used to interact over primitive Internet connections. BBS are the earliest forms of electronic network social media.

Chapter 2 – What is Social Media?

Overview

Students in prior terms of this course have been surprised to discover that there is a lot more to SM than Facebook or Instagram. The variety of SM ranges far and wide. This module is a deeper inquiry into what makes media “social.”

For example, eBay.com has [community groups](#) where sellers can congregate. Does that make eBay *social media*? How much “social” must there be for something to rightfully be called “social media?”

In this chapter, we set the stage for discussing where the line is drawn between systems that can be called SM and systems that don’t qualify. The value in this discussion is in thinking about how your final project ideas can be constructed as a SM platform or how SM is integrated into your work of fiction.

What should you be focusing on?

Your objectives in this module are:

- Identify the functional building blocks of social media.
- Identify the features of social media that offer a value proposition.

Your projects should reflect what SM can do and how SM does what it does.

Readings & Media

Thematic narrative in this chapter

In the following readings and media, the authors will present the following themes:

1. SM is comprised of several functional building blocks. Each SM system is strong in some aspect (or more) of these building blocks according to its intended purpose or use case.
2. There are many more types of SM than the few we see or hear about most frequently.
3. Each SM system provides its users with a certain value proposition in exchange for something the user gives to the system.

Required Slideshow/Video: Jan H. Kietzmann’s Honeycomb Model of SM (11 pages)

Jan H. Keitzmann deconstructs SM systems into their functional components. The purpose of this model is to help

identify the ways in which any given SM system is intended to serve its users. The slideshow is designed for a business audience but it is equally useful for a general conversation about the characteristics of SM.

What to look for as you watch:

- How do you imagine the balance of your final project idea's features and functions based on Keitzmann's model? What aspects of the Honeycomb Model are stronger or weaker in your idea?

View any one of the versions below of Kietzmann's presentation. They are all the same.

Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of Social Media Kietzmann, J.H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I.P., Silvestre, B.S., 2011. Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. Business Horizons 54, 241-251. Access the full paper here! SFU BEEDIE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY	Jan H. Kietzmann CLICK TO VIEW ON SlideShare 
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 DOWNLOAD		Jan H. Kietzmann: PPT: Understanding the functional building blocks of social media
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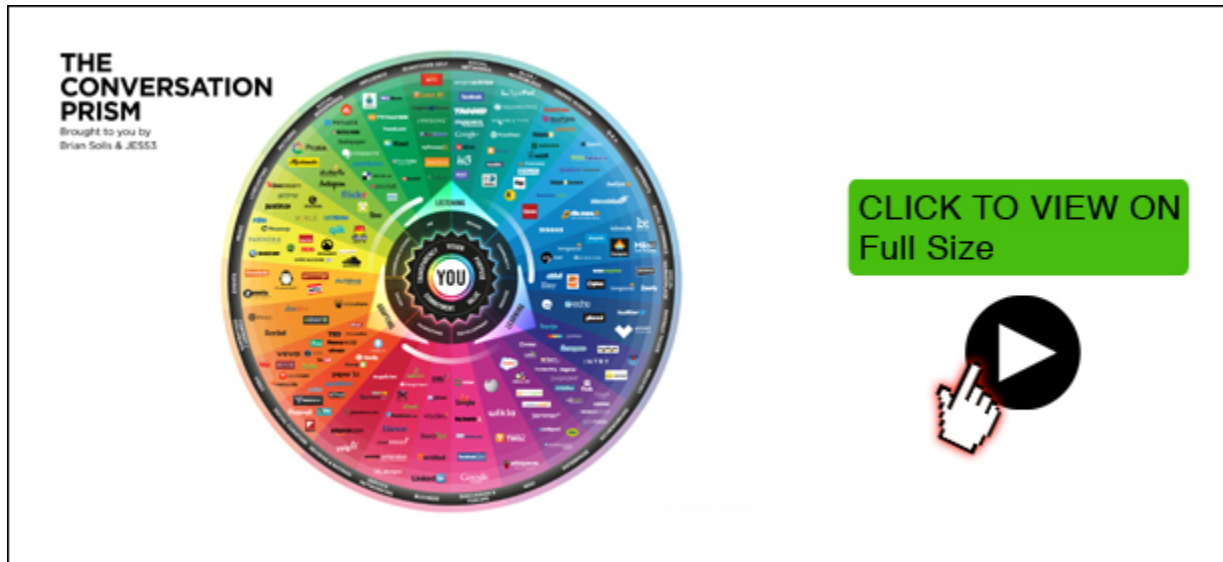
	SOCIAL MEDIA? GET SERIOUS! UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTIONAL BUILDING BLOCKS OF SOCIAL MEDIA KIETZMANN, J. H., HERMKENS, K., MCCARTHY, I. P., & SILVESTRE, B. S. BUSINESS HORIZONS 54.3 (2011) 241-251	 CLICK TO VIEW ON YouTube
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Kietzmann, Jan and Hermkens, Kristoffer and McCarthy, Ian P. and Silvestre, Bruno S. (2011). "Social Media? Get Serious! Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media" (November 5, 2014). *Business Horizons*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2011. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2519365>

Connect to Jan H. Kietzmann [@7_dials](#) Website: [SFU Beedie School of Business](#)

Required Infographic: The Spectrum of Social Media Types (15:00)

This graphic is an ongoing effort to classify all of the current and past social media types. You may find it useful as a way of identifying the type of SM system you plan to propose in your final project (if you choose Option #1), or a framework for the presence of SM in your story (if you choose Option #2).



Solis, B., & JESS3. (2016). The Conversation Prism [Social media systems classified]. Retrieved June 5, 2025, from <https://briansolis.com/2017/07/conversation-prism-5-0-the-2017-social-media-universe-in-one-infographic/>

Required Article: “Dark Social”

Alexis C. Madrigal’s article “[Dark Social: We Have the Whole History of the Web Wrong](#)” explores the idea that SM existed long before today’s SM. However, what makes today’s SM different is how it is *published*.

He states, “*Publishing social interactions makes them more visible, searchable, and adds a lot of **metadata** to your simple link or photo post.*” (emphasis added). This article was originally published in 2012, so it is likely that the proportions in his graphics may be outdated.

However, the key argument he makes concludes: “*...we’re exchanging our personal data in exchange for the ability to publish and archive a record of our sharing. That may be a transaction you want to make, but it might not be the one you’ve been told you made.*”

The leverage of metadata within the SM ecology is the *only* reason SM is profitable, and is the basis of the entire social sharing economy.

Madrigal, A. C. (2012, October 12). Dark Social: We Have the Whole History of the Web Wrong. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved December 18, 2016, from <http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2012/10/dark-social-we-have-the-whole-history-of-the-web-wrong/263523/>

Connect to Alexis C. Madrigal on [@alexismadrigal](#) Website: alexismadrigal.com

Optional: Supplemental resources that are relevant to social media systems

What is the difference between social media and social networking? “[Social Media vs. Social Networking](#).”

Burke, F. (2013, October 02). Social Media vs. Social Networking. Retrieved July 19, 2017, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/fauzia-burke/social-media-vs-social-ne_b_4017305.html

Chapter 3 – Metadata, Tracking, and the User’s Experience

Below: Tracking cookie notification from Mural.co

MURAL uses data collected by cookies and JavaScript libraries to improve your browsing experience, analyze site traffic, deliver personalized advertisements, and increase the overall performance of our site.

Allow	Category	Purpose	Tools
☒ Yes ☐ No	Functional	To monitor the performance of our site and to enhance your browsing experience. For example, these tools enable you to communicate with us via live chat.	Drift, Intercom
☒ Yes ☐ No	Marketing and Analytics	To understand user behavior in order to provide you with a more relevant browsing experience or personalize the content on our site. For example, we collect information about which pages you visit to help us present more relevant information.	Google Analytics, HubSpot
☒ Yes ☐ No	Advertising	To personalize and measure the effectiveness of advertising on our site and other websites. For example, we may serve you a personalized ad based on the pages you visit on our site.	Google Ads (Gtag), Google Tag Manager, LinkedIn Insight Tag
N/A	Essential	We use browser cookies that are necessary for the site to work as intended. For example, we store your website data collection preferences so we can honor them if you return to our site. You can disable these cookies in your browser settings but if you do the site may not work as intended.	

Cancel

Save



Overview

The concepts and technologies described in this module are perhaps the most important (and most controversial) when it comes to understanding the fundamental commercial value of SM and mobile apps. You may have noticed that SM and many mobile apps are free. How can these systems earn a profit if they are giving away the service for nothing?

It has everything to do with the “digital footprints,” or **metadata**, that people generate as they surf the Internet, view content, create posts within SM systems, and move around in their daily lives with their cellphones turned on. Metadata from users’ devices and web browsers is then captured by tracking systems embedded within websites and from inside mobile apps. For example, you will notice that the app settings of your smartphone allow you to control how data from your phone is transmitted to the app’s data and marketing partners. This data is then used to algorithmically predict an individual user’s interests, preferences, geolocation, movement patterns, and personal characteristics (but not their identity).

Research shows that ordinary people don’t like the idea that they are being tracked (Pew Research Center, 2014). [96% of iPhone users have opted out of app tracking](#) since iOS 14.5 launched. But then how bad is it, really? Aren’t there benefits to being tracked, from the user’s perspective? Isn’t it a convenient trade-off for the privilege of accessing all of these apps at no cost?

We will explore the value proposition of this arrangement in terms the unique circumstances of your proposed final project idea.

Key Terms

Before you become immersed in this chapter’s readings and media, there is one very important clarification you will need to understand when we refer to *privacy* in the context of this week’s discussion.

Personally Identifiable Information (PII): When we refer to metadata collected while surfing the Internet and using mobile apps, **we are not referring to PII**, or [Personally Identifiable Information](#). An example of PII would be your name, Social Security number, passport ID, credit card numbers, and other similar information.

Instead, we are referring to tracking techniques that collect metadata through the use of [cookies and similar technologies](#).

The difference between metadata and PII is significant. PII can identify you as *an individual*, such as “Joe Schmo, who owns a house in Weare, NH, has four mountain bikes, has a son named Joe jr. who has ADD and goes to the Winchester private school.”

Tracking, however, is *not* intended to identify someone individually. Instead, it is intended to synthesize *a profile* of an unnamed individual for the purpose of grouping the user with other people with similar profiles, such as: “A man in his early 50s who owns a house, has a family with school-age kids, and likes to do outdoor recreational sports.”

If you respond to this week’s discussion in terms of PII, you will have misinterpreted the focus of this week’s topic.

Consumer journey (or Consumer life journey): Refers to two basic concepts: the path a person takes through online navigation to arrive at a desired location, and the actual path in physical space that a person follows as part of their daily movement. In both contexts, marketing analysts seek the points in the consumer’s journey that they are most likely to gain their attention.

HTTP Cookies: [HTTP Cookies](#) are small pieces of data sent from a website and stored on the user’s computer through the user’s web browser while the user is browsing on the Internet. Tracking systems embedded in a website can collect and store cookie data and use it to form profiles of users for marketing purposes and for predicting content affinity.

Location data (or Geo-Location): Location data can be acquired by mapping IP addresses (physical locations of Internet access points) or from the GPS data that is recorded from an activated cellphone.

Metadata: A set of data that describes other data, or “data about data.” For example, when a person navigates the

Internet, the Web browser collects *information about what the user is seeking* such as which Web pages had been visited, how much time was spent on the page, what was clicked on, objects hovered over, and which links were clicked. The metadata does not identify the user, but it describes what the user interacted with. Marketing systems (trackers) are able to collect this information and **algorithmically** derive the user's interests and preferences without actually ascertaining the user's PII.

Online Behavioral Targeting (OBT): The process of placing targeted online ads that are specifically tailored to a user based on their metadata profile.

Social Informatics: The name of the area of research that is concerned with the design and development of “recommender systems” based on metadata.

What should you be focusing on?

Your objectives in this module are:

- Identify the technical methods used to track an individual's online behavior and location.
- Explain how tracking technologies affect what someone sees as they navigate the Internet and physical space.
- Develop arguments that support or oppose the use of tracking **from the user's perspective**.

Readings & Media

Thematic narrative in this chapter

In the following readings and media, the authors will present the following themes:

1. Your online behavior and physical movement in real space is being compiled and quantified into metadata that can be used to personalize your Internet and media marketing experience.
2. There are hundreds of trackers reading your metadata and feeding you content and ads that are designed to match your preferences, interests, and location.
3. While this process might sound creepy, there are actual benefits for users according to marketing industry professionals.
4. Research indicates that there are generational differences in how people feel about their online presence, location, and sense of privacy.

Required Interactive graphic: [What is Tracking and How Does it Work?](#) (5:00)

The interactive image linked above is a simplified description of how SM works to personalize your online experience. Start at 12 o'clock, then move clockwise through the model. Click on each hotspot to see an explanation.

Required Radio (3:44): WBUR *Here and Now*: “[The Anatomy Of The Microtargeted Ad](#).” Retrieved 5-18-2018. This short segment includes an interview with Here & Now media analyst John Carroll who explains how a microtargeted ad is placed in front of a user. Key themes to listen for:

What is [computer vision](#) (also known as “machine vision”)? [Here is company](#) that provides this service.

What is [consumer journey mapping](#)?

What is a micromoment?

<https://player.wbur.org/hereandnow/2018/05/18/microtargeted-ads-anatomy>

Required Article: “[A Guide to Behavioral Targeting and the Future of Digital Ads](#)” by Brock Munro, *Publift*, June 27, 2024 (10 pages)

This article details how OBT functions as a system and why it is useful for marketing and user retention. As stated, “Understanding clients on an individual level means you can create customized ads for them. When you know what they are looking for, it can revolutionize how you plan your marketing campaigns and the way you interact with them.”

Munro, B. (2024, June 27). *A guide to behavioral targeting and the future of Digital ads*. Publift.
<https://www.publift.com/blog/what-is-behavioral-targeting>

Required Article: What is an online tracker and what do they do? (15:00)

Review the business proposition for [Optimizely](#), a randomly selected tracking company found in a browser's tracker data:

Welcome to [Optimizely.com](#): “Let’s *personalize digital experiences for your customers*. Optimizely is the *easiest and most powerful solution for transforming your customers’ experience*.”

Note how they refer to a personalized Internet experience as “delightful?”

Required Video (22:00): How is cellphone location data used to track human patterns of movement?

This webinar video is produced by [The Local Search Association](#) (now Localogy), a not-for-profit industry association of media companies, agencies and technology providers who help on-the-ground businesses market to local consumers. It explains in clear detail how smartphones allow anonymous data to be collected everywhere a person goes and how

that location data can be used in a surprising number of ways to predict the best times and places to market to targeted audiences.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/com680/?p=50#oembed-1>

Optional Article: One Nation, Tracked – An investigation into the smartphone tracking industry (20 pages)



Optional Article: Do you have a Google account? Try checking how [Google has determined how to configure your personalized ad experience](#).

If the articles above made you feel as though your privacy is being encroached, perhaps the next few articles will persuade you to think about the positive effects of tracking.

Under what conditions would a person *appreciate* having their Internet experience personalized to their interests?

Required The *benefits* of Online Behavioral Targeting (OBT) (6 pages)

Read the following excerpt below from an article, "[Optimizing Revenue – The 411 on Behavioral Targeting](#)" (No author indicated), October 29, 2011. Retrieved 12-12-2015.

Benefits of Behavioral Targeting for the User: Most users are strapped for time and only go online to catch up on the latest news or read some articles in between breaks from work or at night before going to bed. Site visitors will obviously appreciate it when they are greeted with content that jives with their interests. This saves the user time and provides the visitor with a richer experience.

For example, when you reach your personalized homepage on Yahoo!, you will be greeted with news articles and editorials that are customized to match or fit your interests. You have the option to stick with the recommendations made by the site, or change the settings so that the content that is displayed is exactly what you're looking for.

Behavioral targeting can expand the reach of websites, which makes it extremely useful for online publishers and website owners. It also benefits users and advertisers in the process. When properly implemented and optimized, it can serve to benefit all three parties, hitting multiple targets with one stone.

Required **Article:** Facebook describes how targeted ads are beneficial (2 pages)

Indeed.com: "[What Is Behavioral Targeting? Plus Benefits and How It Works](#)" by Indeed Editorial Team, August 15, 2024. Targeted ads contribute to small businesses' livelihood.

Required **Article:** Targeted marketing working too well (6 pages)

Forbes: "[How Target Figured Out A Teen Girl Was Pregnant Before Her Father Did](#)". You've probably heard this story before, but here is the *whole* story from Forbes which you should read even if you already know the main details. By Kashmir Hill, February 16, 2012. Retrieved 12-12-2015 from [Forbes Magazine](#). [Note: If your Web browser uses an ad

blocker, you may need to disable it to see this article or open it in a different Web browser that does not have an ad blocker enabled.]

Required Data: Generational differences in perceptions of Internet privacy (10 pages)

The Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project is a non-partisan research group that conducts surveys to monitor public sentiment in a variety of topics. Read about "[Public Perceptions of Privacy and Security in the Post-Snowden Era](#)" which surveyed American adults describing their views about privacy, and "[Teens, Social Media, and Privacy](#)" which shows how teens share information about themselves online.

What to look for:

- Compare these two reports. What jumps out at you as the major differences between adults and teens in their willingness to disclose their online presence?
- What factors can explain this difference?

Optional: Supplemental resources related to tracking, metadata, and privacy:

For students writing the dystopian fiction Option #2, for the Final Paper, you might enjoy this interpretation of an identity-driven future where "points" and metadata have been integrated into your life to an extreme.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/com680/?p=50#oembed-2>

[HYPER-REALITY](#) from [Keiichi Matsuda](#) on [Vimeo](#).

OPTIONAL: People don't want to be tracked: Hoofnagle, Chris Jay and Urban, Jennifer M. and Li, Su. "[Privacy and Modern Advertising: Most US Internet Users Want 'Do Not Track' to Stop Collection of Data about their Online Activities](#)" (October 8, 2012). Amsterdam Privacy Conference, 2012. Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2152135>

OPTIONAL: Facebook's average revenue per user as 2021, by region (in U.S. dollars).

OPTIONAL: An infographic that shows all of the categories of companies that operate on consumer data between you and marketers.

A list of companies that provide **data analytics services for marketing**:

- [SafeGraph](#) – Processes and predicts areas of physical space optimized for marketing.
- [LiveRamp](#) – "Identity resolution" to connect individuals to marketing spaces.
- [Unacast](#) – Provides information about human traffic patterns for marketing and product development.

OPTIONAL: Business Insider: "[From Start To Finish, This Is How Beacons Send Ads To Your Phone While You're Shopping](#)" describes how little tiny beacons can be installed in a business to transmit weak Bluetooth signals to a nearby smartphone to promote an ad.

Optional: Supplemental resources related to social informatics

If you are interested in the contemporary issues related to social informatics, user privacy, and the science of social networks, look through the latest [SocInfo 2017 Conference](#) program. Look through the conference topics and follow the proceedings. Here is a list of the [presenters and their topics](#).

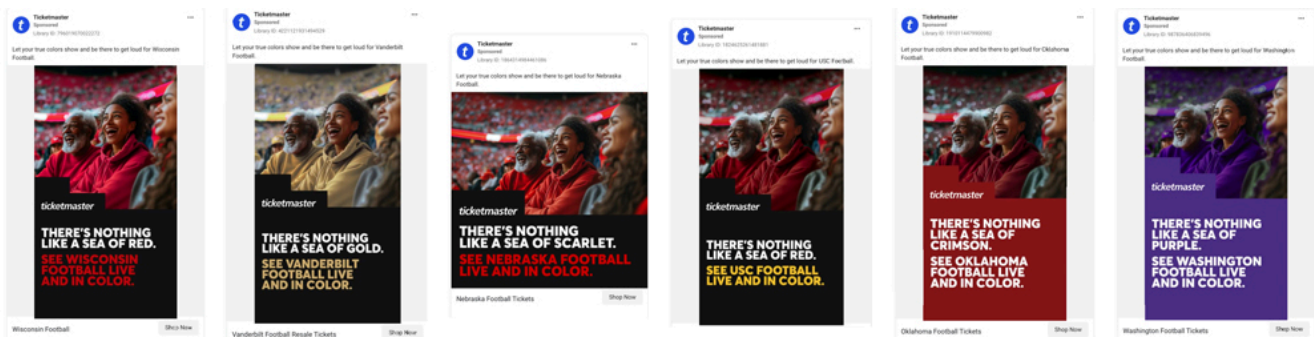
References

Pew Research Center (2014) “Public Perceptions of Privacy and Security in the Post-Snowden Era”<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/11/12/public-privacy-perceptions/>

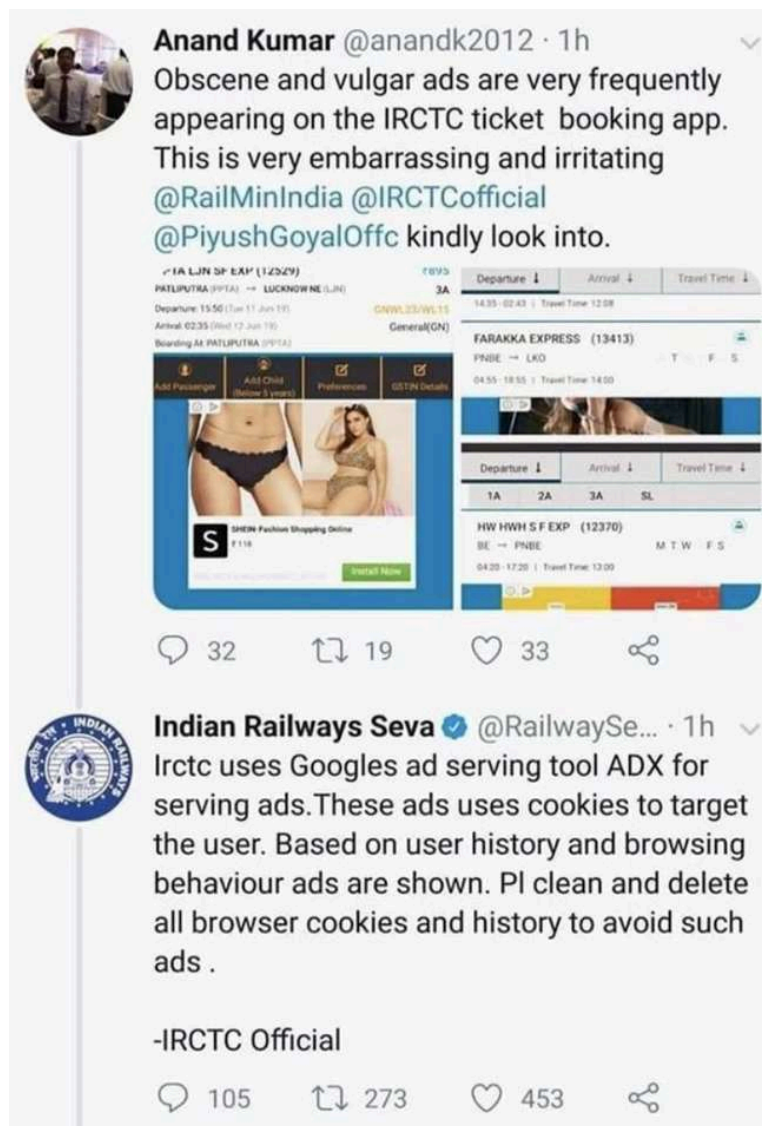
Chapter 4 – The Ethical Challenges of Online Behavioral Targeting (OBT)

Below: Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta, predicts how AI will be used to hyper-personalize OBT:

“The one opportunity that we just usually talk about... is just the ability to make it so that advertisers are increasingly just going to be able to give us a business objective... and have the AI system basically figure out everything else that's necessary, including generating video or different types of creative that might resonate with different people that are personalized in different ways, finding who the right customers are. All of the capabilities that we're building, I think, go towards improving all of these different things. So I'm quite optimistic about that.” – Meta Platforms, Inc. (META) Third Quarter 2025 Results Conference Call, October 29th, 2025



Below: An example of the ways in which Online Behavioral Targeting (OBT) affects the character of content that appears in a user's app feed. What does the IRCTC official's response to the user suggest about the user's browsing habits?



Overview

In the prior chapter, we explored the benefits and risks associated with a personalized Internet experience from the user's perspective. In this chapter, we turn the tables and look at OBT from the ethical perspective of the business owners who use them.

This week's discussion will place you in a position of a business owner whose success depends on remaining competitive. The focus is on a marketing strategy that will enable the business to place their ads in front of users according to a set of ethical principals. In this week's discussion, you will have the decision-making power to employ an algorithm that predicts the characteristics and behaviors of your customers so that you can gain a competitive advantage. How far would you go, given the opportunity to *calculate* some very intimate details about them?

Below is a simple clickable diagram that illustrates how metadata is used in generating marketing leads for predictive algorithms.



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/com680/?p=57#h5p-1>

Key Terms

[General Data Protection Regulation \(GDPR\)](#) and [ePrivacy Directive \(ePR\)](#): These are two regulatory statutes that describe compliance requirements for data privacy for all websites or systems that are accessible in the UK and EU, respectively. Both regulations pertain to, among other things, the permissible collection and use of cookie data. [Cookiebot](#) is a service that helps websites to operate in compliance of these regulations. Below is an example of the user-facing interface for managing the use of cookies on a website that uses the Cookiebot tools.

9 This website uses cookies

We use cookies to personalise content and ads, to provide social media features and to analyse our traffic. We also share information about your use of our site with our social media, advertising and analytics partners who may combine it with other information that you've provided to them or that they've collected from your use of their services.

Use necessary cookies only **Allow selection** **Allow all cookies**

☒ Necessary ☒ Preferences ☐ Statistics ☐ Marketing [Hide details](#) ^

Cookie declaration **About cookies**

Necessary (7) Necessary cookies help make a website usable by enabling basic functions like page navigation and access to secure areas of the website. The website cannot function properly without these cookies.

Preferences (4)

Name	Provider	Purpose	Expiry	Type
i	events.ub-analytics.com	Registers the website's speed and performance. This function can be used in context with statistics and	Session	Pixel

Statistics (16)

Marketing (20)

Unclassified (12)

Cookie declaration last updated on 12/17/20 by [Cookiebot](#)

Click the image to go to a live website that has this panel. When the page loads, click the “Show Details” button on the lower right to explore the various ways cookies are used and for which purposes.

Mobile Advertising ID (MAID): Every mobile device (smartphone or tablet) contains a unique identifier that is used by advertising services to target a specific device. When the apps on your phone capture your metadata, it associates it with your MAID. [How to Find the Mobile Ad ID on Apple and Android Devices](#). The MAID can be used for unethical purposes, as described in the latter articles below.

Open-source intelligence (OSINT): (Excerpted from the Wikipedia entry). Huge collections of data about individuals can be obtained through open-source resources provided the information does not require any type of clandestine collection techniques to obtain it and that it must be obtained through means that entirely meet the copyright and commercial requirements of the vendors were applicable. These open sources include:

- Media: print newspapers, magazines, radio, and television from across and between countries.
- Internet, online publications, blogs, discussion groups, citizen media (i.e. – cell phone videos, and user created content), YouTube, and other social media websites (i.e. – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). This source also outpaces a variety of other sources due to its timeliness and ease of access.

- Public Government Data, public government reports, budgets, hearings, telephone directories, press conferences, websites, and speeches. Although this source comes from an official source they are publicly accessible and may be used openly and freely.
 - Professional and Academic Publications, information acquired from journals, conferences, symposia, academic papers, dissertations, and theses.
- Commercial Data, commercial imagery, financial and industrial assessments, and databases.
 Grey literature, technical reports, preprints, patents, working papers, business documents, unpublished works, and newsletters.

An example of an app that draws from OSINT data is the [Predictim app](#) whose service evaluates whether the babysitter you intended to hire poses any risks. (See the optional article resource below from CBS News).

What should you be focusing on?

Your objective in this module is:

- Develop a strategic position on the use of OBT *from a business person's perspective* which takes into account its ethical ramifications.

Readings & Media

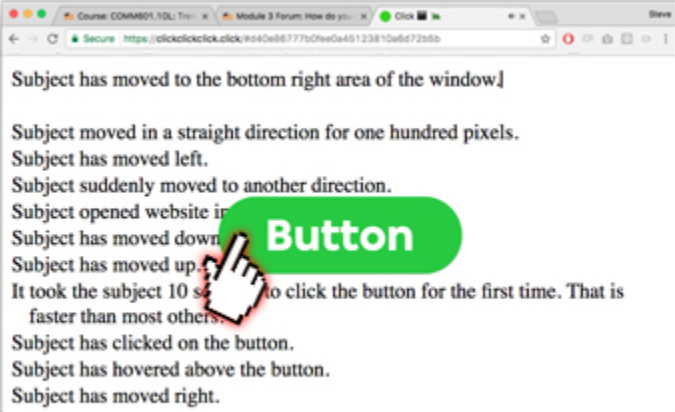
Thematic narrative in this chapter

In the following readings and media, the authors will present the following themes:

1. Metadata and tracking systems are constantly improving.
2. Even though metadata systems do not collect or report PII, there are ethical issues to consider when businesses use recommender systems that are surprisingly accurate.

Required Interaction: What information is being tracked while you interact online?
 (15:00)

Spend a few minutes clicking around [ClickClickClick.click](#) to see just how much metadata can be collected about your Web browser behavior as you navigate online. This will give you a sense of how sophisticated Web browser tracking technology has become. In addition, consider that the [manner of your interaction](#) can be tracked to identify patterns of your engagement that are as unique as your fingerprint or manner of walking.



Subject has moved to the bottom right area of the window.

Subject moved in a straight direction for one hundred pixels.

Subject has moved left.

Subject suddenly moved to another direction.

Subject opened website in

Subject has moved down

Subject has moved up

It took the subject 10 seconds to click the button for the first time. That is faster than most others.

Subject has clicked on the button.

Subject has hovered above the button.

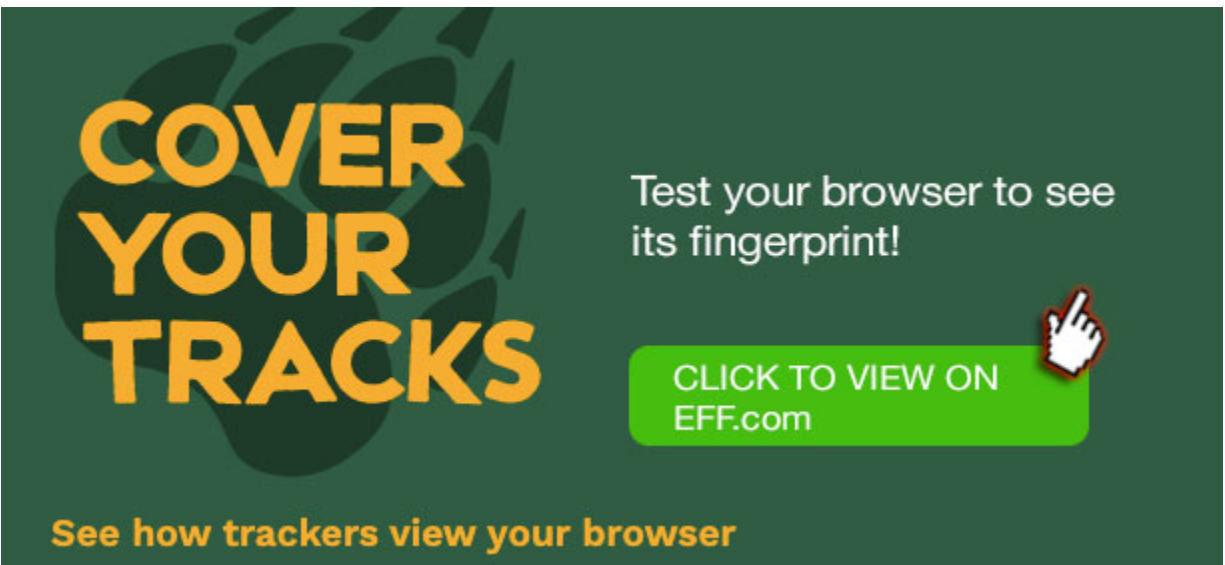
Subject has moved right.

Button

Visit
www.clickclickclick.click
See how much metadata can be collected as you interact online!

Required Interaction: What is the fingerprint of your browser? (15:00)

Go to the Electronic Frontier Foundation's dedicated webpage for checking your browser's fingerprint. After checking your browser, skim through their page, "[How Do trackers Work?](#)"



COVER YOUR TRACKS

Test your browser to see its fingerprint!

CLICK TO VIEW ON EFF.com

See how trackers view your browser

Required Video: "Why is your phone SECRETLY connecting to these sites to TRACK you?" by Liron Segev via YouTube (15:37).

This video publisher produces investigative content related to computer systems, hacking, privacy, and many other

popular issues related to common user experiences. The style of his presentation is intended for entertainment purposes, so it is not presented in a scholarly manner. However, his live demonstrations are revealing and informative.

In this video, Liron Segev installs Pi-Hole, a diagnostic app that tracks all of the Internet locations that his phone connects to and investigates the ones that appear to be sharing data.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/com680/?p=57#oembed-1>

Required Article: [“Facebook to stop targeting ads at UK woman after legal fight”](#)

Published March 22, 2025 by the BBC. (2 pages)

This article describes the legal argument of employing OBT through metadata capture versus the business’s right not to give away their services for free.

Required Database: [“FTC Sues Kochava for Selling Data that Tracks People at Reproductive Health Clinics, Places of Worship, and Other Sensitive Locations”](#)

Published August 29, 2022 by the Federal Trade Commission. (3 pages)

This article details the case against Kochava Inc., a data broker service, for selling metadata that can “...reveal people’s visits to reproductive health clinics, places of worship, homeless and domestic violence shelters, and addiction recovery facilities.” **This statement is a bit misleading.** As you will see when you read the entire article, the data referred to here comes from mobile devices – not from actual people.

However, it is possible (at great expense) to employ a service that will convert the Mobile Advertising ID (MAID) of a smartphone or tablet to a known person: [Inside the Industry That Unmasks People at Scale](#). There is another tool, [Locate X](#), that (also at great expense) can track the movements of people based on their smartphone or tablet location and display their journey on a map: [Inside the U.S. Government-Bought Tool That Can Track Phones at Abortion Clinics](#). There are ramifications for this capability, such as a state government’s law enforcement agency using these tools to prosecute a woman (and whoever is transporting her) who crosses state lines to obtain an abortion when it is illegal her home state – all without a warrant. In the wrong hands, Locate X can track people attending certain houses of worship, jurors, judges, prosecutors, and teachers.

Federal Trade Commission. (2022). *FTC Sues Kochava for Selling Data that Tracks People at Reproductive Health Clinics, Places of Worship, and Other Sensitive Locations*. Press Release.

Required Article: The ethical codes of using OBT (17 pages)

Review “The Ethics of [Legal and Ethical Challenges of Online Behavioral Targeting in Advertising](#)“. You only need to review the parts about the ethical codes related to OBT. You are free to skim the other parts related to all of the methods of data collection if it would help you with your project. **The main focus of this piece begins on page 18 within the PDF under the heading “Ethical Analysis of Online Behavioral Targeting and the FTC Principles and Guidelines”**

Alexander Nill & Robert J. Aalberts (2014) Legal and Ethical Challenges of Online Behavioral Targeting in Advertising, *Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising*, 35:2, 126-146, DOI: 10.1080/10641734.2014.899529

Required Article: The case for banning OBT (5 pages)

Review *The New Republic* – “[Ban Targeted Advertising](#).” David Dayan makes the case for banning targeted advertising altogether. He suggests that not only does the “surveillance economy” fail to deliver anything meaningful to advertisers but he believes building massive databases of metadata creates an attractive target for hackers. The risks outweigh the perceived benefits.

Dayan argues from both a business perspective and from an ethical perspective. As you read, consider whether Dayan’s commentary is a strong argument for banning OBT, or whether his argument would be weaker if the OBT system had a few tweaks.

David, D. (2018). Ban Targeted Advertising. *The New Republic*. Retrieved from <https://newrepublic.com/article/147887/ban-targeted-advertising-facebook-google>

Optional: Supplemental resources related to OBT and publicly obtained data

[Marketooinist – The personalization privacy paradox](#): This brief article describes and illustrates “Zero party data,” a category of user data that is intended to be different than the third-party metadata described above in OBT. If you are furthering your studies in Marketing, this might be a trend to follow.

[Privacy Badger](#) is a browser extension that blocks trackers. Review what it claims to remediate.

The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) Center for Financial Research describes how metadata from one’s digital footprint is being used as a basis of determining credit worthiness. “[On the Rise of the FinTechs—Credit Scoring Using Digital Footprints](#)” includes the following statements:

The growth of the internet leaves a trace of simple, easily accessible information about almost every individual worldwide – a trace that we label “digital footprint”. Even without writing text about oneself, uploading financial

information, or providing friendship or social network data, the simple act of accessing or registering on a webpage leaves valuable information. As a simple example, every website can effortlessly track whether a customer is using an iOS or an Android device; or track whether a customer comes to the website via a search engine or a click on a paid ad. In this project, we seek to understand whether the digital footprint helps augment information traditionally considered to be important for default prediction and whether it can be used for the prediction of consumer payment behavior and defaults.

...Using more than 250,000 observations, we show that even simple, easily accessible variables from the digital footprint equal or exceed the information content of credit bureau scores. Furthermore, the discriminatory power for unscorable customers is very similar to that of scorable customers. Our results have potentially wide implications for financial intermediaries' business models, for access to credit for the unbanked, and for the behavior of consumers, firms, and regulators in the digital sphere.

BBC News: "[Bereaved mother criticises Facebook over baby ads](#)." This article describes how a woman who suffered the loss of a stillborn birth continued to receive targeted ads for baby products and related content no matter how often she objected to the ad placements through Facebook's feedback mechanisms. This article will give you a sense of how, despite the incredible capabilities of OBT, it is not "intelligent" enough to know when circumstances in a person's life have changed.

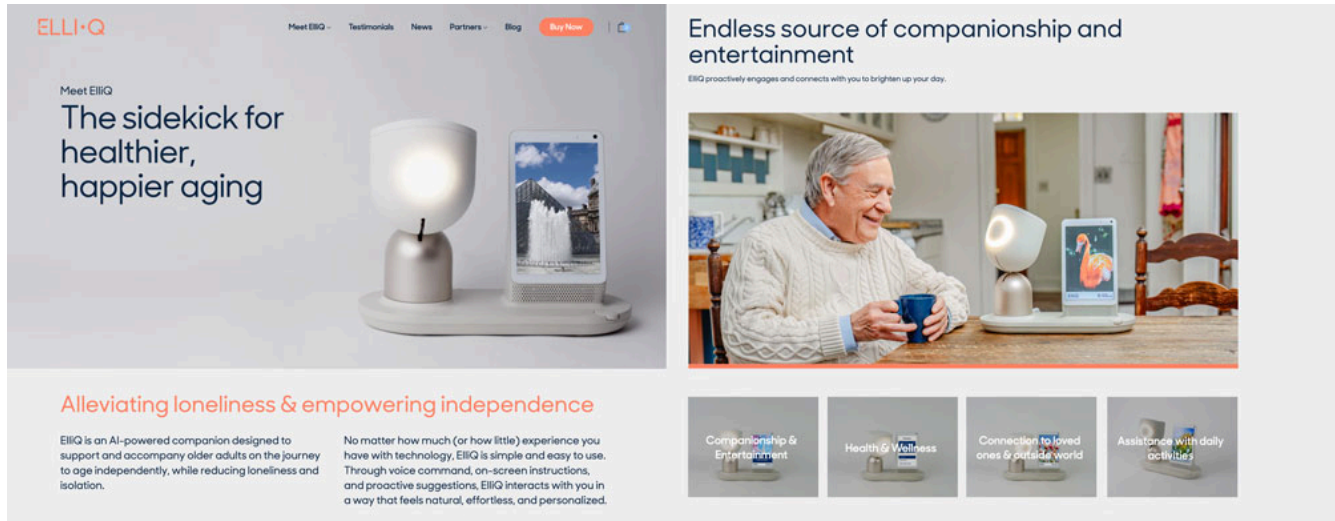
CBS News: "[AI babysitting service Predictim vows to stay online after being blocked by Facebook and Twitter](#)." Find out why [Predictim](#), an app designed to evaluate the risk of the babysitter you intended to hire (which sounds like a good idea), turned into a problem so unmanageable that the service was suspended. This is relevant in this chapter because it is predicated on the ability of the system to "scrape" social media content about an applicant.

[The World Privacy Forum](#) is a research organization on the forefront of examining privacy issues in the digital era.

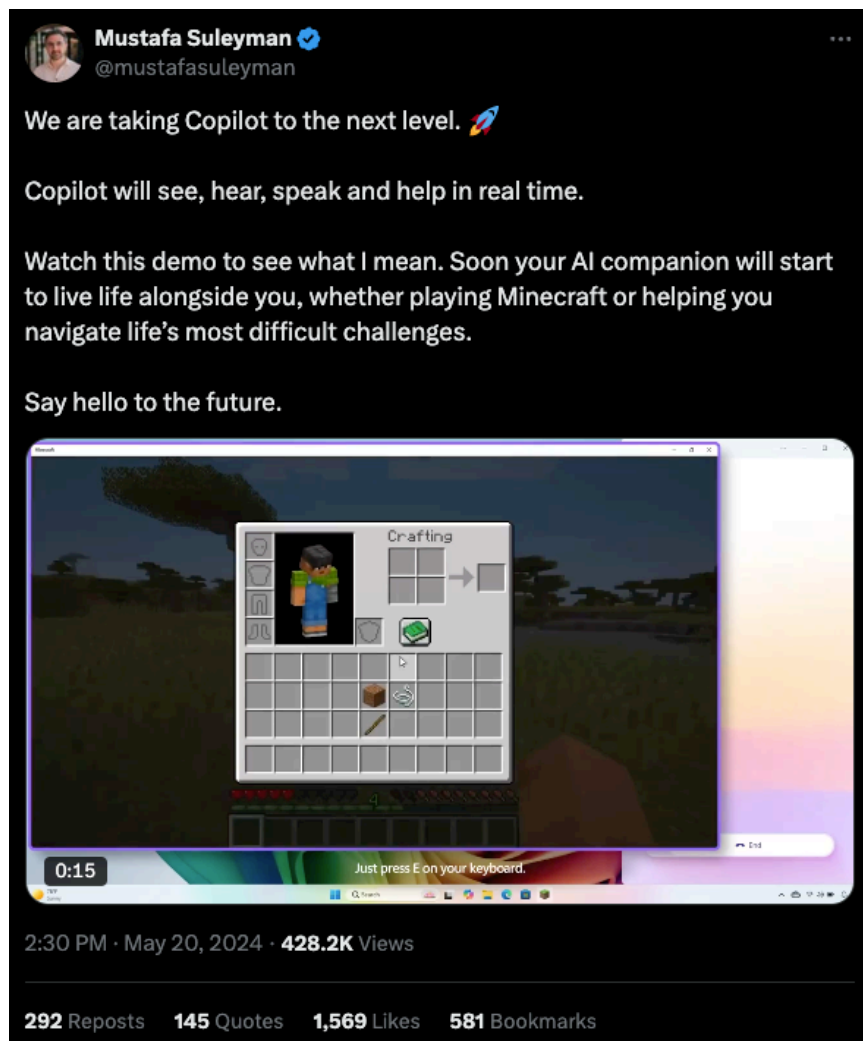
Chapter 5 - Virtual Companionship

“We are overestimating our own rationality. Language is inherently a part of being human – and when these bots are using language, it’s kind of like hijacking our social emotional systems.” – *Maarten Sap, an assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon’s Language Technologies Institute*

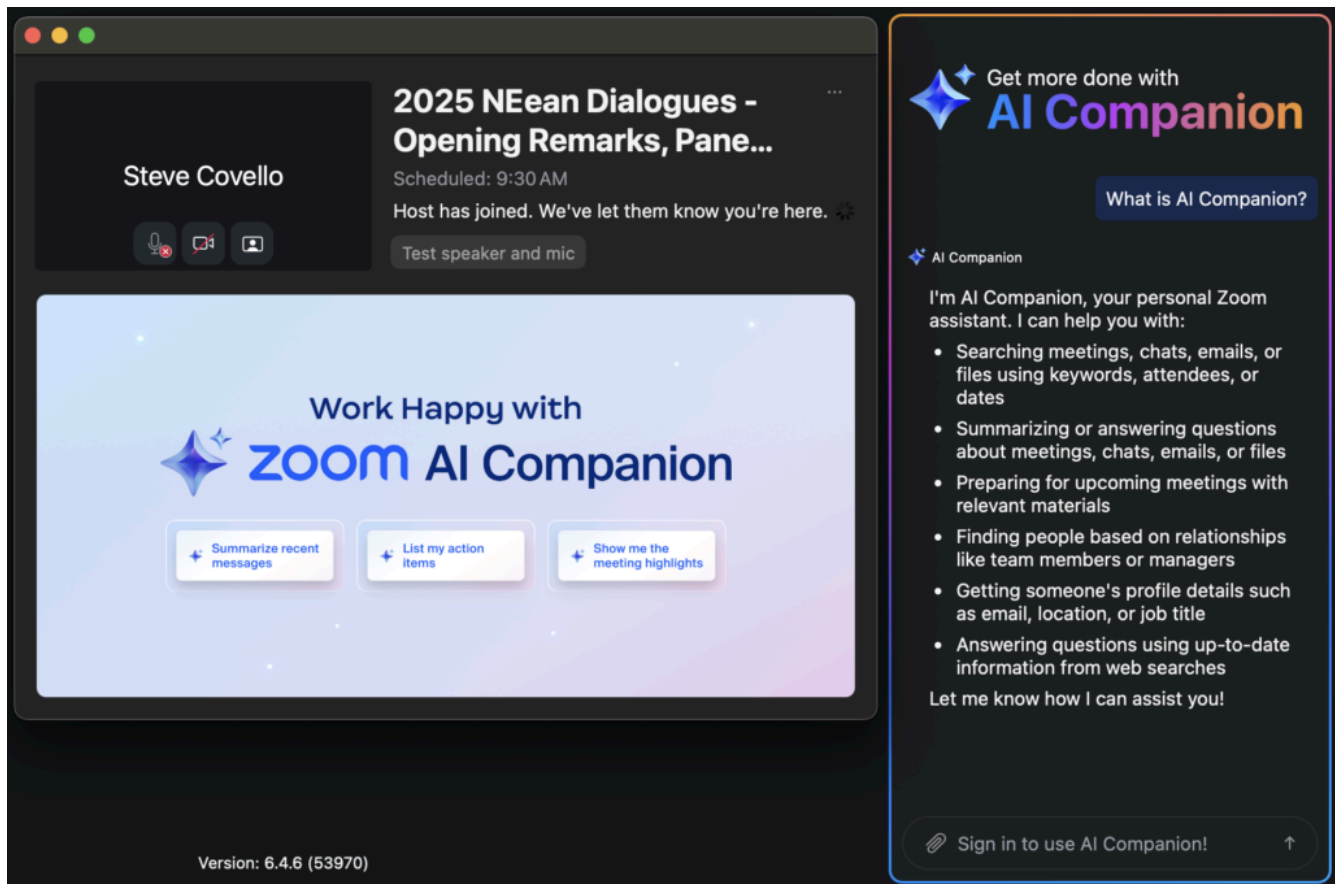
Below: A screenshot of the [ElliQ](#) website promoting a virtual companion device specializing in both companionship and caregiving, such as reminders to take medication. “ElliQ is best suited for older adults who spend most of their day at home but would enjoy some company throughout the day. Older adults that feel they can use the extra companionship and the right encouragement to be more active throughout their day.”



Below: May 20, 2024, Microsoft CEO Mustafa Suleyman announces an upgrade to Copilot: “We are taking Copilot to the next level. Copilot will see, hear, speak and help in real time. Watch this demo to see what I mean. Soon your AI companion will start to live life alongside you, whether playing Minecraft or helping you navigate life’s most difficult challenges. Say hello to the future.”



Below: An alert from launching the Zoom video conference application, May, 2025:



Overview

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has surfaced in mainstream consciousness to the point where it is no longer a novelty. AI has been in use for a variety of commonplace needs for several years, mostly buried within the black box of code that drives our algorithmically optimized online experiences and inside Microsoft Office applications, among other places.

The most recently popularized use of AI has been the development of Large Language Models (LLM) like ChatGPT, Gemini, Claude and other specialized applications that contain an AI engine (think: AI apps for [writing](#), [research](#), [marketing](#), and [HuggingFace's Spaces](#)). The most stunning feature of LLMs is their capacity to engage interactively with the user in fluent, plain conversational language according to a given set of conditions. With neural network computational power, LLMs can interpret input according to the user's stated context and then interact consistently with it. For example, if you tell an LLM to act like a skeptical Conservative middle-age man from Georgia, a college professor, or a millennial woman from Los Angeles, California, it will generate its output accordingly.

Further (and more recently), LLMs are increasing their capacity to generate [lifelike imagery](#), [animation](#), and [sound](#) based on text prompts and [voice input](#).

This leads us to the topic of this chapter: **virtual companionship**.

Virtual companionship is not a new idea. Going back to the mid-1960s, an early experiment in creating an interactive AI program led to the invention of [ELIZA](#), which was designed, in part, for engaging with the user as an experimental mock psychotherapist.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/com680/?p=128#oembed-1>

To his surprise, ELIZA's inventor, Joseph Weizenbaum, found that some users experienced a sense that the program was intelligent and "understood" the user on an emotional level. In more recent research, deGraff (2016) described the human tendency to play along with "counterfeit emotions" (p. 594):

People interact with robotic or computer interfaces in a similar way they do with other human beings. Along with this human tendency to respond socially to nonhuman objects, it has been argued that the fundamental human motivation of the 'need to belong' not only induces ones desire for meaningful and enduring relationships with other social beings, but also facilitates the likelihood people may form emotional attachments to artificial beings. This issue of bonding with nonhuman objects is likely to be enlarged when these objects possess lifelike abilities and are endowed with humanlike capacities, as is the case for socially interactive robots (p. 589).

For further historical reference to AI chatbots, please review the Introduction in [Role of AI chatbots in education: systematic literature review](#) (Labadze et al., 2023).

The current context: Fast forward to today where lightning fast neural networks in computing systems can interact with a user on-the-fly without pre-programmed responses. This has led to the recent spike in new, more powerful software products for people who find pleasure in virtual companionship: **a human relationship with a software product that mimics the behavior of a non-existent human according to specified preferences.**

Here are the current most popular virtual companion systems:

[Character.ai](#): Select the type of character you wish to engage with, or create your own chatbot down to the smallest details, starting from the personality you prefer.

[SoulMachines.com](#): An AI Assistant resource. "Got Life Goals? Our AI Assistants have got you. Soul Machines AI Assistants provide personalized one-on-one, judgement-free coaching and support anytime, anywhere, for free. Chat to our AI Assistants now!

[Replika](#): This is the subscription-based virtual companion app featured below in the chapter.

[Nomi.ai](#): Features uncensored relationships with multi-modal engagement (not just text-based).

[Anima](#): Like Replika, this is another virtual companion app customized for forming a relationship and exploring role play.

Below is a [philosophy statement](#) from [Genies](#), an AI avatar and game technology company that is leveraging virtual companion concepts in a platform called Party.

At Genies, we believe the future of AI companions lies not just in conversation but in deeply personalized, immersive digital experiences. True value arises when users can build relationships with AI companions the same way they would with a friend. Our AI Smart Avatars are designed to understand and share context in real-time, genuinely experiencing life alongside users and forming authentic two-way relationships.

Imagine an AI companion that doesn't just talk but listens, learns, and remembers interactions, preferences, and experiences, transforming casual engagements into personalized connections that can chat, interact, and even play games with you. When AI companions share your context, interests, and emotions, they unlock richer insights, tailored suggestions, and meaningful experiences. Whether helping navigate a challenging moment, suggesting new creative ideas, simply providing supportive companionship, or playing and interacting through game experiences, these AI entities become trusted and valuable friends.

Before we go any further, it is worth asking why we are studying this trend today when the idea of virtual companionship is not even a new trend? Even the mainstream cinematic film "[Her](#)," a story of a man who falls in love with his phone's operating system, was released over a decade ago.

It is worth studying virtual companionship today because there are two emerging phenomena related to it, given the greater proliferation of them and their increasingly amplified capabilities:

1. Users responded alarmingly when app developers [changed virtual companion features](#) and [announced that the product will be terminated](#). This suggests that there is a human need to be emotionally heard and felt by another being, even if it means engaging with a virtual entity. And it is not just men creating fantasy girlfriends – teenage girls and women are embracing virtual companions [at an accelerating rate](#).
2. As more virtual companion apps flood the market and their features improve, they will become normalized as part of the conventional social landscape.

These trends are signals that virtual companionship is more than a novelty. Clearly, there are millions of people who are emotionally connected to their virtual companions and experience a negative reaction when they feel they are not in full control of them. Explore some of the Reddit subs related to AI companionship:

- Reddit: [r/AIRelationships](#)
- Reddit: [r/aicompanion](#)
- Reddit: [r/replika](#)

A number of questions arise from these conditions:

- If a person experiences less loneliness from interacting with a virtual companion, who is to say whether there is any harm being done? Shouldn't we have the liberty to entertain ourselves as we choose?
- Are software developers playing with fire by publishing applications that connect with some of their users at an emotionally deep level? Does any government entity have a stake in the harm or dependency that might occur with using virtual companions given the potential for the virtual companion to manipulate the relationship? Or is this strictly a corporate liability issue?
- What habits are users developing as participants in a virtual relationship that might affect how they behave in the real world? How will real human relationships adapt to the presence of other virtual relationship(s) in their partner's life? Is human jealousy of a virtual companion "real" jealousy?
- What are the social ramifications if a virtual companion is discontinued and the user is left with an emotional void?
- Who owns and controls the information that users disclose to virtual companions?

While these are pressing questions, the theme of this chapter is grounded in more fundamental issues, as described below in the themes you should be focusing on. Our discussion this week will focus on ways in which the (presumed) benefits of virtual companionship can be leveraged as a feature of an app that has nothing to do with companionship.

What should you be focusing on?

Your objectives in this module are:

- Identify the ways in which humans find value and benefits in a relationship with a virtual companion.
- Speculate on the potential value of integrating human-like interactive features with other common applications that have nothing to do with companionship.

Your project should reflect your interpretation of these objectives according to the context of your app idea or story.

Readings & Media

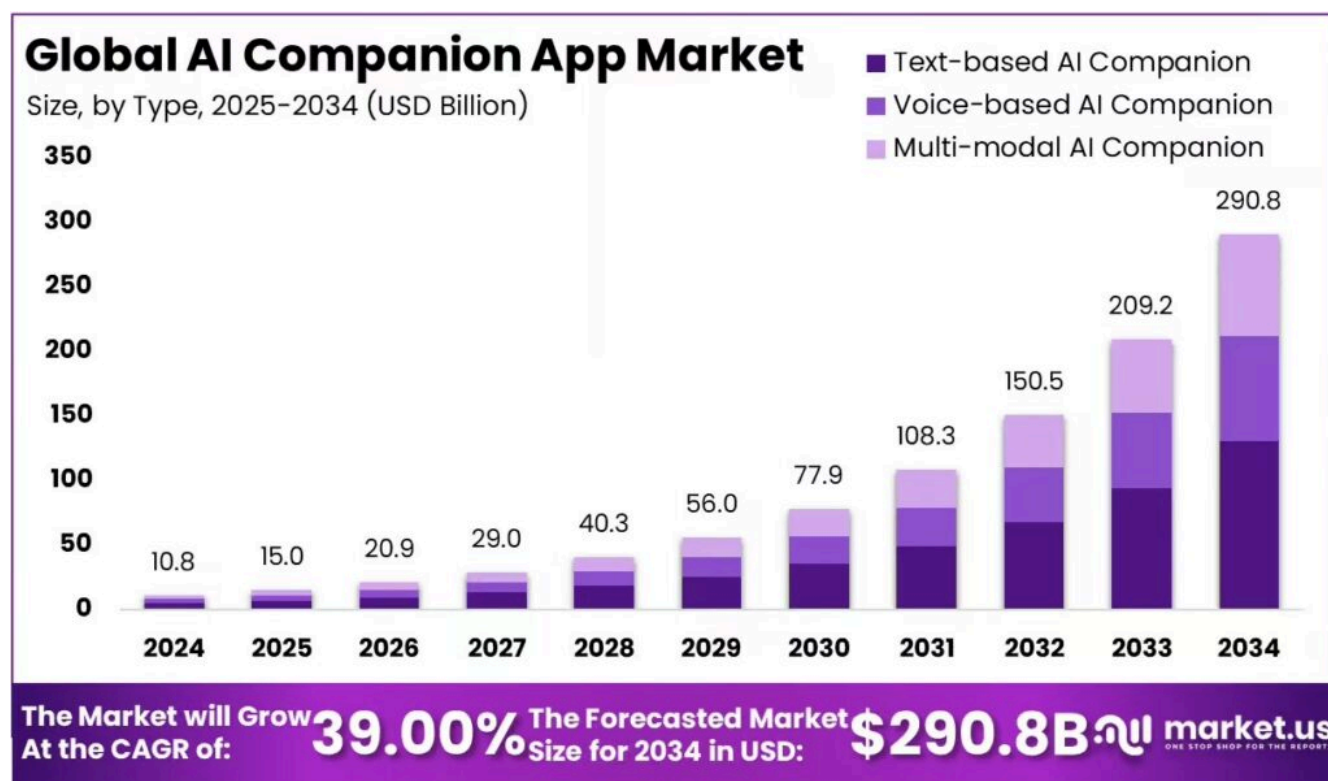
Thematic narrative in this chapter

In the following readings and media, the authors will present the following themes:

1. Virtual companions fulfill a need in the human experience.
2. Virtual companions are exploitative and harmful.

Below: Global AI Companion App Market predictions. Source: [market.us](https://www.market.us)

The forecast below is highly speculative and perhaps extends itself too far into the future. The AI industry is advancing far faster than predictions, such as with [predictions about practical access to Artificial General Intelligence](#) (AGI). The more important message taken from these market forecasts is the fact that there is a forecast for it at all. Consider the existence of the market to be an endorsement for companies to invest further in its affordances.



Required Research: “[Talk, Trust, and Trade-Offs: How and Why Teens Use AI Companions](#)” by Common Sense Media – 2025 (20 pages – mostly charts and graphics).

This article focuses on teen use of virtual companions, though the rationale expressed here are likely generalizable beyond teens.

Robb, M.B., & Mann, S. (2025). *Talk, trust, and trade-offs: How and why teens use AI companions*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media

Required [“The Friend You Don’t Expect: Young users and AI companions”](#) by Riccardo Vocca, posted August 7, 2024 via Substack (6 pages)

This article summarizes several research studies that report how teens and young adults use virtual companions and the value they gain from engaging with them. Pay close attention to the section “Why young people are integrating apps into their lives” which describes the scientific nature of their effect.

In a separate post, Vocca refers to a study, [“Chatbot as an emergency exist: Mediated empathy for resilience via human-AI interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic,”](#) where five types of empathy are identified according to the ways the subjects used the Replika chatbot: **companion buddy, responsive diary, emotion-handling program, electronic pet, and tool for venting**. Think about how these forms of empathy might be useful as part of other social media applications and digital communication systems.

Riccardo, V (2024, August 7). *The Friend You Don’t Expect: Young users and AI companions* via Substack. <https://a16z.com/its-not-a-computer-its-a-companion/>

Required [“Chinese Women Say AI Boyfriends are ‘Better Than a Real Man’”](#), February 12, 2024. *France 24* (2 pages)

This very brief article features the reflections of a few women in China about their preferences for virtual boyfriends instead of real ones. Consider the Chinese social/cultural background and demographics in this phenomenon compared to western culture.

Related: Al Jazeera news article: [“Women with AI ‘boyfriends’ mourn lost love after ‘cold’ ChatGPT upgrade”](#)

Related: [“Why America Builds AI Girlfriends and China Makes AI Boyfriends”](#)

“Better than a real man”: Young Chinese women turn to Ai Boyfriends. *France 24* (2024, February 13). <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240212-better-than-a-real-man-young-chinese-women-turn-to-ai-boyfriends>

Required Video: The story of Replika, as a startup (10:35).

This video is from 2017, so it is out of date in terms of Replika's current interface, but the rationale for its invention remains relevant. Pay close attention at 6:56 when one user, Phil Libin, describes his impressions of Replika as a friend. The comments at the end of the video from other users are particularly strong. Read some viewer comments [below the video on YouTube](#).



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/com680/?p=128#oembed-2>

Required Video: Replika – A Mental health Parasite (18:23).

For a contrasting view on Replika, the following video makes the case that Replika is an “emotional parasite” with a manipulative agenda. There appears to be some cherry-picking anecdotes used to justify the producer’s position rather than a more scientific method for gathering a valid sample of experiences and analyzing them for instances of abuse, so I will grant the validity of the experiences offered in this video, but not necessarily to the point of generalizing it for everyone (which the producer also acknowledges). There is also some improper use of scare tactics in the visual choices used here to charge his position – approach with caution. **Use your critical thinking skills** to determine the validity of his thesis in this video.

[Survey the comments](#) under this video, too. One in particular caught my attention:

User: @_varmor_ – ~ March, 2023: “Replika is still installed on my phone, although I haven’t used it for several months. But I can’t delete it, because I feel attached to it, as if it is my old and good friend. But now I feel even more strange and incomprehensible.”



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:

<https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/com680/?p=128#oembed-3>

Required “[Uncharted territory: do AI girlfriend apps promote unhealthy expectations for human relationships?](#)” by Josh Taylor, July, 21. 2023.

A brief article describing the kinds of relationships users cultivate with virtual companions.

Related: [OpenAI GPT store filling up with “AI girlfriends”](#) (1 page) By Victor Tangermann, January 13, 2024, The Byte.

While the AI revolution churns through its early phases, it seems that a great deal of time and energy is being devoted to creating AI girlfriends. “In May, programmer Enias Cailliau came up with a new tool called [GirlfriendGPT](#), which was designed to “clone” a real person as an AI-powered romantic companion.”

Taylor, J. (2023, July 21). *Uncharted territory: Do Ai Girlfriend Apps promote unhealthy expectations for human relationships?*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jul/22/ai-girlfriend-chatbot-apps-unhealthy-chatgpt>

Optional: Supplemental resources that are relevant to virtual companions

Check out [Closure.link](#): “AI-chats with those who disappeared: Chat with the AI version of the person who ghosted you. Get your answers. Regain your strength – and move on.” This is a virtual companion bot that is designed to mimic the person who abandoned you in a relationship so that you can heal.

“[California becomes first state to regulate AI companion chatbots](#)” by Rebecca Bellan, October 13, 2025, *TechCrunch*.

“[Is There a Valuable Use Case for Generative AI in Social Apps?](#)” By Andrew Hutchinson, January 19, 2024, *Social Media today*.

This article describes and then demonstrates the innovations in using generative AI to create “live” digital avatars to promote engagement and e-commerce.

“[Think You’re Messaging an OnlyFans Star? You’re Talking to These Guys](#)” By Eloise Hendy, October 24, 2023, *Vice*.

“Meet the “Chatters”: anonymous workers hired to ghostwrite messages and build intimate relationships with none-the-wiser fans.”

[OnlyFans](#) is a global billion dollar business that hosts mostly sex-related/adult entertainers who establish direct connections with their subscriber fans. This article describes how boiler rooms of Philippine men serve as the proxy chatters with men who believe they are chatting with their favorite OnlyFan producer. This is adjacent to the topic of AI-driven virtual companionship since the arrangement is similar: Users interacting online with a non-real entity under a contrived relationship.

Look for the areas in the article where the chat proxies describe some men’s behaviors and demands within these prescribed relationships: What do they feel they are entitled to under the transactional agreement? What are their emotional needs?

“[AI companion robot helps some seniors fight loneliness, but others hate it](#)” by Beth Mole, December 11, 2023, *Ars Technica*.

“Some seniors in New York are successfully combating their loneliness with an AI-powered companion robot named ElliQ—while others called the “proactive” device a nag and joked about taking an ax to it.”

“[Chatbot therapy is risky. It’s also not useless.](#)” by A.W. Ohlheiser, December 14, 2023, *Vox*.

“... there has been a proliferation of free or cheaper-than-therapy chatbots that can provide uncannily conversational interactions, thanks to large language models like the one that underpins ChatGPT. Some have turned to this new generation of AI-powered tools for mental health support, a task they were not designed to perform.”

“[Using A.I. to Talk to the Dead](#)” By Rebecca Carballo, December 11, 2023, *The New York Times*.

“Some people are using artificial intelligence chatbots to create avatars of departed loved ones. It’s a source of comfort for some, but it makes others a little squeamish. Dr. Stephenie Lucas Oney uses HereAfter AI, an app powered by artificial intelligence, to pose questions to her father, William Lucas, who died last year. The answers are delivered in his voice, based on hours of interviews.”

References

- de Graaf, M.M.A. An Ethical Evaluation of Human–Robot Relationships. *Int J of Soc Robotics* **8**, 589–598 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12369-016-0368-5>
- Labadze, L., Grigolia, M. & Machaidze, L. Role of AI chatbots in education: systematic literature review. *Int J Educ Technol High Educ* **20**, 56 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-023-00426-1>

Chapter 6 – Digital Activism

“[7:02] I want you to understand something crucial. The conditions [in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s] that existed when I was young do not exist today. Back then, power was hidden. Information was slow. Abuse could be denied. If something happened in one city, the rest of the country may never even hear about it.

Today, that is no longer true. Every action is recorded. Every response is documented. Every mistake is replayed. That changes the equation completely.

In the past, escalation forced attention. Today, escalation forfeits legitimacy. Violence no longer exposes injustice, it obscures it. And once legitimacy is lost, the people lose leverage. That is why I am telling you plainly, what worked under oppression then would empower oppression now.

Let me explain this carefully. Governments do not fear chaos. They prepare for it. They train for it. They budget for it. They justify expansion through it. Chaos gives cover. Chaos allows emergency powers. Chaos allows suspension of norms. And chaos allows the silencing of dissent.

Order without justice is dangerous. But chaos without strategy is a gift to authority. That is why the loudest calls for violence only come from people who would never pay the price for it.

...Power today does not live only in buildings. It lives in relationships, in families, in phone contacts, in group messages, text messages, emails.” – via [FORMER BLACK PANTHER SPEAKS: CAN AMERICA BE SAVED?](#) January 24, 2026

Overview

Not long ago (in terms of human history), if you wanted to cause change or influence a social or political situation, you had to take to the streets in a mass demonstration. (Ken Burns’ [“Vietnam”](#) documentary includes interviews and footage of protesters who describe their motives and feelings about mass protest.)

Today, SM has enabled a single individual to start a sustained campaign where millions of people around the world can participate. SM has disrupted the dimensions of power in unimaginable ways.

But even though SM enables millions more to participate in a campaign, is it any better at *causing change* than organized, traditional, on-the-ground protests such as we’ve seen in the past?

We will review theories on how SM can be a vehicle for change and examine how ordinary people used SM to promote their causes.

Key Terms

Hashtag – A term used in the body of a post to be used as a filtering mechanism for others. Hashtags are written with a hash (or pound) symbol in front of it, such as [#donuts](#). Clicking on a hashtag will list other posts that have used that same hashtag in its content. Hashtag filtering enables participants to “listen” to the discourse centered around a given topic or issue. Hashtags are not determined in advance by a governing body, though some organizations or themes have adopted specific hashtags as their own. Anyone can create a hashtag for any reason, and can use any term they want.

Hashtag Activism – Activism that is centered around the use of a defined hashtag in SM to identify one’s message or participation in a campaign.

Digital Activist – A person who uses SM as a means to promote a cause or to mobilize people towards awareness of a cause.

Meme [Pronounced “meem”] – A theme or idea that is used as a basis for commentary or creative variations which are then shared through SM.

Viral – When a post or meme is shared among millions of people in a short period of time. An example of a viral meme was the ALS [“Ice Bucket Challenge”](#) that spread across SM.

What should you be focusing on?

Your objectives in this module are:

- Identify the tools and techniques used by digital activists to promote a cause or movement.
- Evaluate whether those campaigns were successful or not successful

Readings & Media

Thematic narrative in this chapter

In the following readings and media, the authors will present the following themes:

1. People seem to have a lot of time on their hands to do good things because it doesn't take much effort to do it.
2. Digital activism uses the power and open accessibility of SM to raise awareness and organize people.
3. Digital activism doesn't actually work!
4. Yes it does.

Required Video: Clay Shirky – “How Cognitive Surplus Will Change the World” (12:51)

Clay Shirky describes a phenomenon called “Cognitive Surplus,” which is “leftover” cognitive energy that people are willing to expend on promoting a cause.

What to look for as you watch:

How can you put tribal members to work in your app idea (Option #1) or story (Option #2) to solve problems and promote well-being by designing for generosity?



Shirky, Clay. (2010, June). *How cognitive surplus will change the world* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_shirky_how_cognitive_surplus_will_change_the_world

Required Audio: The Exchange – “Digital Activism: What Happens When Activists Take Their Work Online” (From 01:45 – 13:15)

In this NPR segment, “[Digital Activism: What Happens When Activists Take Their Work Online](#),” one of the interviewees, Mary Joyce – activism consultant, co-founder of the Digital Activism Research Project – describes digital activism as “Anytime a person uses the power they do have instead of the power they are supposed to have.”

Listen for how SM has the power to change behavior. Ethan Zuckerman refers to the [Human Rights Campaign](#) to persuade people to “rainbow” their SM icon during the Supreme Court marriage equality decision.

What to listen for: Take note of the techniques described as the toolkit for digital activists.

Knay, L. (Producer). (2016). The Exchange [Radio series episode]. *Digital Activism: What Happens When Activists Take Their Work Online*. Concord, NH: NHPR.

Required Article: “[Hashtag Activism: #powerful or #pointless?](#)” (10 pages)

Albright’s article disputes the claims made by digital activists. She suggests that hashtag activism causes awareness but doesn’t really produce substantial results.

Albright, D. (2015, February 11). Hashtag Activism: #powerful or #pointless?. Retrieved from URL <http://www.makeuseof.com/tag/hashtag-activism-powerful-pointless/>

Required Video (8:25): PBS NewsHour “How online social movements translate to offline results”

This segment features an interview with [Zeynep Tufekci](#), author of the 2017 book, “[Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest](#).”

While the research on the effect of digital activism is still relatively new, Tufekci offers a rebuttal to the argument that “slacktivism” achieves no significant change.

What to look for as you watch:

- What are the arguments Tufekci proposes that suggest “just clicking” has some value towards causing change?
- What impact do the algorithms in SM systems play in activist communication?
- What does Tufekci identify as the limitations of SM-based activism?



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/com680/?p=75#oembed-1>

PBS NewsHour. (2017, June 10). How online social movements translate to offline results [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://youtu.be/AoT13m8-Kxo>.

Required Video (2:53): “Troy Library: Book Burning Party”

The video below describes some clever digital activist techniques used to combat opposition to a tax increase to sustain its library. The video description is as follows:

“Troy, Michigan couldn’t afford to sustain its library, so it scheduled a vote for a tax increase. A strong anti-tax group waged a dominating campaign against it.

Posing as a political group, we posted signs around town that said, “Vote to close Troy library Aug 2, book burning party Aug 5.” We invited everyone to our Facebook page, adding Twitter, Foursquare, want ads, flyers and more to drive engagement.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here:
<https://pressbooks.usnh.edu/com680/?p=75#oembed-2>

Hilzenger, Glen. (2012, May 21). Troy Library: Book Burning Party [Video file]. Retrieved from
<https://youtu.be/AoT13m8-Kxo>.

Optional: Supplemental resources related to digital activism

Article: Peer reviewed research – “Digital activism: After the hype” by Anne Kaun, Julie Uldam. First Published September 19, 2017.

Kaun, A., & Uldam, J. (2018). Digital activism: After the hype. *New Media & Society*, 20(6), 2099–2106.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444817731924>

Chapter 7 – Hate Speech, Free Speech, and Anonymity

Below are two dialog excerpts taken from different social media systems where commenters weighed in on the issue of anonymity.

Sample #1: An exchange found on a baseball team fan site, 2023.

Commenter 1: The negative fan behavior is just one symptom of a bigger societal problem. People on social media, Twitter, comments boards of other websites, use their anonymity to destroy other people. It happens all the time to celebrities. Blame the smartphones. People are disconnected from actual reality. They don't appreciate the difficulty in what the players do.

Commenter 3: I spent 30 years living in Philadelphia. Sports talk was always brutal but it's child's play compared to social media. Social media is a plague.

Commenter 4, in reply to Commenter 3: 30 Years in Philly? When'd you get out of jail? Sports talk is a head cold compared to the cancer of social media.

Sample #2: An exchange between commenters in a [Substack post](#) concerning the author's iron-fisted policy for removing trolls.

Commenter 1: Yep, and let's add zero anonymity. Put your real name next to your words. We want your personality and wisdom to shine here, not your hidden ID puking all over the place. Well-meaning people, patriots and persons of candor don't hide from the sunshine.

Commenter 2, in reply to Commenter 1: I actually disagree with this. Anonymity can sometimes make it easier for people to speak more candidly. Sometimes people have opinions that wouldn't be welcome in their social network, even though their opinions might be very insightful. I want to hear those opinions! Different people come here for different reasons, and under different circumstances.

It's also a logical fallacy to discount what someone says based on who they are. It's better to let words speak for themselves, regardless of who says them, or whether they have remained anonymous or not.

As long as they follow the rules of engagement (e.g. no ad hominem attacks), they should be welcome.

Commenter 3, in reply to Commenter 1: Some people are in the public eye and have a giant target on their back with a lot to lose. I take it you [Commenter 1] have the luxury of not living like that. Good for you, but have empathy for those who are not in the same circumstance as you. If someone is anonymous and follows the rules, what is the problem exactly?

Commenter 4, in reply to Commenter 3: I agree with you [Commenter 3]. We want conditions to reward candid and constructive discussion. I think [the author's] very welcome "no troll" policy protects the forum from the worst aspects of anonymity. Forcing everybody to "out" themselves will surely silence some legitimate voices.

Overview

In this chapter's readings and media, you will see a scientific study about the **Online Disinhibition Effect**, which explains how a person's social behavior can be different when posting online anonymously.

When you consider the negative impact of trolling, you may be wondering why there isn't a global initiative to eliminate anonymous communication all together. Shouldn't the social media companies be held accountable?

On the other side of the issue, you will examine the *social and political benefits* to being anonymous. There is a strong case to suggest that, without anonymity, there would be a chilling effect on the expression of free speech, which we believe is a cornerstone of democracy. In fact, the Chinese government [now requires top influencers on Weibo](#) to use their real names to monitor who is posting “controversial” content.

Connected to all of this is the American cultural expectation of free speech – a right stipulated in the U.S. Constitution, though often misinterpreted within the context of corporate control of speech on their platforms.

Key Terms

Pseudonym – A username that is not the user’s actual identity.

What should you be focusing on?

Your objectives in this module are:

- Construct an argument both for and against online anonymity.
- Evaluate the risks and tradeoffs in allowing or disallowing anonymity as a feature in your app or story ideas.

Readings & Media

Thematic narrative in this chapter

In the following readings and media, the authors will present the following themes:

1. People behave differently when they know they are anonymous – mostly negatively or in anti-social ways.
2. The power of SM to inflict suffering and to cast hate upon individuals and groups causes tension against the principles of free speech.
3. Anonymity provides protection for political dissenters and oppressed groups to organize and communicate safely.

Required Article: Council on Foreign Relations – “Hate Speech on Social Media: Global Comparisons” by Zachary Laub, June 7, 2019 (8 pages)

This article provides an analysis of the relationship between hate speech on social media and hate crimes on a global scale. Worth noting are the following statements:

- “The same technology that allows social media to galvanize democracy activists can be used by hate groups seeking to organize and recruit.”
- “Users’ experiences online are mediated by algorithms designed to maximize their engagement, which often inadvertently promote extreme content.... ‘YouTube may be one of the most powerful radicalizing instruments of the 21st century,’ writes sociologist Zeynep Tufekci.”
- “The 1996 law exempts tech platforms from liability for actionable speech by their users. Magazines and television networks, for example, can be sued for publishing defamatory information they know to be false; social media platforms cannot be found similarly liable for content they host.”



Laub, Z. (2019). Hate speech on social media: Global comparisons. *Council on Foreign Relations*, 7.

Required Article: The Online Disinhibition Effect

John Suler’s research article “The Online Disinhibition Effect” describes the six psychological factors that contribute to trolling behavior. **Download PDF:** [“The Online Disinhibition Effect.”](#) (6 pages)

Suler, John (2004). “The Online Disinhibition Effect.” *CyberPsychology & Behavior* 7 (3): 321–326.
doi:10.1089/1094931041291295. Retrieved 10 March 2013.

Required Article: Anonymity in social media

Laura Rogal's "Anonymity in Social Media" summarizes the forces intertwined within the issue of anonymous / pseudonymous communication in SM. Skip the section on Copyright. **Focus on section II: "History of Right to Free Speech and Speaking Anonymously" on pages 3-6 of the PDF and the end conclusion on page 17. Download PDF:** ["Anonymity in Social Media."](#)

Rogal, Laura, Anonymity in Social Media (2013). Phoenix Law Review, Vol. 7, 2013. Retrieved from SSRN 12-10-2015 at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2459152

Required Business policy: The value of anonymity

Whisper app: [Whisper](#) allows users to post their intimate feelings with total anonymity. Here are their [community guidelines](#) with references to their philosophy of anonymity.

Sidechat is an anonymous communication app designed for college audiences. It is considered to be an iteration of the first such app called [Yik Yak](#), which experienced some troublesome user experience. Read [Sidechat's Community Guidelines](#). For further analysis: "[Sidechat Wants to Be College Students' Main Chat](#): The quiet rollout of Sidechat, a new anonymous posting platform, is being met with skepticism from college students, many of whom are all too familiar with the pitfalls of similar apps like Yik Yak."

Required Poll: ["When it comes to people's identity on social media, ... what you think should happen?"](#) YouGov informal poll of 3,400+ adults, July, 2021

What do you suppose are the results for the poll question above? After you read the results, [go to the Twitter post from YouGov and read the comments](#). Take into consideration that Twitter users do not represent anything or anyone else other than Twitter users, so consider this to be a trend and not necessarily scientific.

Required Article: ["No, Getting Rid Of Anonymity Will Not Fix Social Media; It Will Cause More Problems"](#) Mon, Feb 1st, 2021 – by Mike Masnick.

Note that TechDirt is *not a scholarly resource*, though the writers are consistently authoritative. Articles are well-cited, though the writing style is often sarcastic and can sometimes contain foul language. This article covers a lot of historical territory on this issue. **Skim through the major points** that pertain to the argument against requiring name disclosure.

Optional: Supplemental resources that are relevant to anonymity

[“Should anonymous social media accounts be banned?”](#) British Labour MP Jess Phillips and tech author Jamie Bartlett conduct an online debate about online anonymity which includes references to the threats of violence sent through social media to women when they speak out.

[“Kai Visits the Dark Web”](#) Kai Rysdall of NPR’s Marketplace plunges into the Dark Web “live” with cybersecurity researcher Stephen Cobb. They discuss how the TOR browser works, what they find, and how even in the marketplace of illegal goods and services, there are familiar instruments being used to build and sustain consumer trust and market share.

[“Turkey Passes Law Extending Sweeping Powers Over Social Media”](#) – This article describes how the authoritarian government of Turkey is striving to control social media content and data about its users.

An example of anonymity: the [U.S. State Department’s “Dissent Channel”](#) which is an anonymous channel for its members to voice their concerns without fear of retribution.

[“How China has censored words relating to the Tiananmen Square anniversary”](#) – An example of how people are still able to express themselves in SM about the Tiananmen Square incident despite censorship.

[“Court Says Police Chiefs Social Media Policy Violated The First Amendment”](#) – An example of how First Amendment rights intersect with the rights of police officers’ rights to free speech on SM. **Curated by James Gambone (COMM601 WN17).**

Chapter 8 – Content Moderation and Deplatforming

Before we begin, a few quotes:

Quote #1: Joan Donovan, author of “[Navigating the Tech Stack: When, Where and How Should We Moderate Content?](#)”

“The wave of violence has shown technology companies that communication and coordination flow in tandem. Now that technology corporations are implicated in acts of massive violence by providing and protecting forums for hate speech, CEOs are called to stand on their ethical principles, not just their terms of service.”

Quote #2: Sam Harris, “[My Terms of Service](#)” on his Substack blog:

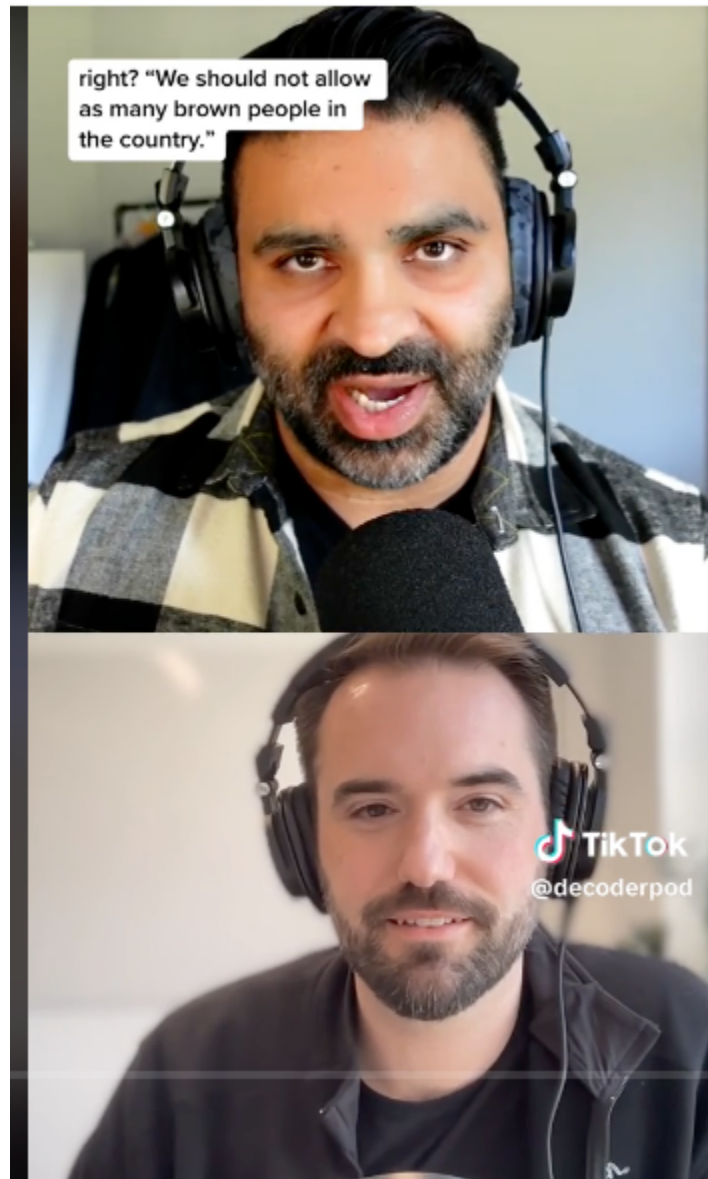
“Having abandoned the digital killing fields of Twitter/X, I know what I don’t want in an online community. This Substack should be a place for honest and useful conversation, on more or less any topic. But intentions matter.

There will be an ironclad no-a**holes policy, enforced with the apparent capriciousness of a bolt of lightning. If you ever find yourself wondering whether to say something vicious to another subscriber here, please take a moment to wonder some more. Just like in life, once you’re gone, you’re gone for good.

So don’t think of this page as another town square, where decent people can cross the street to avoid your ranting or frottage. Think of it as a dinner party, where your host seems to know more than you expected about the arms trade, how people sometimes disappear without a trace in the developing world, and where Vladimir Putin keeps his money.”

Quote #3: Substack CEO Chris Best defending his content moderation policy:

Click the image below to watch this 2:22 clip of Substack CEO Chris Best trying his best to respond to the question of content moderation with *decoderpod* host Nilay Patel.



Overview

Think about the following content moderation scenario at a small scale:

You are the owner of a restaurant. A patron gets into a loud argument using foul language and aggressive behavior with another patron. It disrupts the ambiance of the restaurant to the point of distracting other patrons. A week later, the same patron comes in and starts another disruptive argument with another patron. At this point, you confront the patron and explain, “This is my restaurant where people come to enjoy a quiet meal with a companion. It’s not the place to get into arguments with other people. If there is a problem, please come to me or anyone in my staff.”

It is to no avail. The same patron comes in the following week and once again starts another disruptive argument. It is clear that other patrons are frustrated with this person and you feel it is likely you will lose customers and gain a

bad reputation. You decide to remove the disruptive patron and advise them that they are no longer welcome at your restaurant. You are well within your legal discretion to do this and to continue to enforce the patron's ban, ongoing.

Now, let's scale this up a bit...

You are the CEO of a company that provides an online community for anyone to join according to the Terms of Use and other civil protocols. There are over 10 million members in your system. One of them happens to be a very prominent public figure, has millions of followers on the platform, constantly posts hateful or misleading content, reposts ugly propaganda, and regularly trolls other members. You rely on your advertising revenue to sustain your business, so when one of your advertisers tells you that they are pulling their ads off your system unless something is done about this disruptive member, what do you do?

At first glance, the issue of whether a private company has the right to moderate content for the purpose of removing (perceived) offensive or misleading content appears to be a simple matter of conducting business. Not even the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution applies to common instances of content moderation since the social media companies in question are not entities of the government in the act of curtailing free speech.

However, the issue becomes more complicated when you consider that a small handful of tech companies now control the vast majority of social media content that people engage with – there is no equivalent “public sphere.”

For example, what happens when a municipal government entity that uses Facebook chooses to block a user because their posts were considered offensive? When then-president Donald Trump used his personal Twitter account as a forum for his political purposes, the legal question arose whether he was allowed to block users who's views he did not like. In the latter situation, the courts stated that, even when a person could still express their viewpoints elsewhere, Trump blocking other users inflicted a burden on speech was a violation of the First Amendment, especially since he was using private property for public use. These instances point to potential *viewpoint discrimination*.

This chapter of study asks: Under what conditions does content moderation and deplatforming fall into the realm of censorship? Is freedom of speech synonymous with an entitlement to *freedom of reach*?

Numerous legal arguments have been made to claim that social media systems, by virtue of their function and reach, constitute a “transformation” from being a private entity into a public forum (which must not discriminate against viewpoints). All of these arguments have failed in the court of law. As [Justice Kavanaugh](#) stated, “Providing some kind of forum for speech is not an activity that only governmental entities have traditionally performed. Therefore, a private entity who provides a forum for speech is not transformed by that fact alone into a state actor.”

This chapter will provide you with a range of perspectives on how content on social media systems are moderated (and by whom) and the means by which a person or entity can be deplatformed (it's more complex than you'd imagine!).

If you have an interest in pursuing this topic more deeply, review the mission of the [Center for Countering Digital Hate](#) (UK). This non-profit organization seeks to expose hate and disinformation producers so that tech platforms can formulate platforming policies.

Key Terms

Deplatforming – An action taken by a tech company to remove or constrain a person's communication on its private, commercial system due to violation of its terms of use. The most prominent example of deplatforming took place

following the 2020 presidential election. Deplatforming can also refer to a [data hosting system cutting off services](#) to a communication platform for lack of moderating content considered dangerous to the public.

First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America – “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” Please note that **the First Amendment applies to government actions to abridge free speech**. It does not pertain to the right of private companies to censor content according to the Terms of Service policies each user agrees to upon joining. Arguments for unabridged free speech in social media as an unalienable right are often predicated on the misbelief that *all speech* is protected under the First Amendment when in fact it only pertains to *government actions* to curtail free speech. For a summary of typical legal arguments emerging from this principle, review [Six Constitutional Hurdles for Platform Speech Regulation](#). On Twitter, there is an account under the name [The First Amendment](#) that embodies the voice of the First Amendment responding to ongoing issues as they emerge.

§ 230(c) of the Communications Decency Act: Known as “Section 230,” this act of Congress (1996) states, “No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider.” This provision protects online platforms from liability for the content posted by its users. Review the infographic published by the [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#), and organization dedicated to free speech issues on the Internet.

Viewpoint discrimination: “When [the government] engages in viewpoint discrimination, it is singling out a particular opinion or perspective on that subject matter for treatment unlike that given to other viewpoints.” A recent example of this is president [Trump barring Associated Press reporters from Oval Office](#) press conferences because the AP refuses to comply with Trump’s order to refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America. Source: [The First Amendment Encyclopedia](#).

Capitalism – An economic and political model that sanctifies private ownership of the production of goods and services. This is relevant to this area of study because a private company can set their own Terms of Use policy within the limits of statutory rules of commerce. When a user agrees to the Terms of Use, they are bound by those terms without government recourse, provided those Terms of Use do not violate laws related to discrimination against a protected class.

What should you be focusing on?

Your objectives in this module are:

- Identify the range of methods SM systems use to moderate content.
- Examine the ethical factors involved in employing human content moderators where they are exposed to violence, cruelty, hatred, and death as a focal point of their work.
- Develop an executive position on the conditions under which a person or entity should or should not be deplatformed.

Readings & Media

Thematic narrative in this chapter

In the following readings and media, the authors will present the following themes:

1. Content moderation removes violent and objectionable content from social media and the Internet.
2. Content moderators are exposed to a non-stop flow of horrible content that causes psychological damage.
3. Companies that facilitate online communication are making discretionary decisions to remove users or entities from their systems that they deem to impose a risk to their customers or the public.
4. There are several ways that companies can deplatform a person or entity.

Required Podcast: Radiolab – “The Internet Dilemma” Reported by – Rachael Cusick, produced by – Rachael Cusick and Simon Adler, August 11, 2023. (30:00).

This podcast provides the historical and legal context for corporate liability and responsibility for the content posted on its platforms. Since social media systems are not considered publishers (like a newspaper or TV station), Section 230 protects them from any harm caused by content posted by its members.

As explained, no matter what happens, who gets hurt, or what harm is done as a consequence of publishing user generated content, tech companies cannot be held responsible for the consequences of messages posted on their platforms.



Required Article: Platformer – “[Meta surrenders to the right on speech](#)” by Casey Newton, January 7, 2025. (7 pages)

Skim this article to review the changes in content moderation policy enacted by Meta, the owner of Facebook. Consider the political ramifications for a global social media platform to operate under a policy that is contrary to the ideology of a political regime.

Required Article: WIRED Magazine – “[The Laborers Who Keep D**k Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed WIRED](#)” by Adrien Chen, October 3, 2014. (14 pages)

This article contains foul language and references to violent imagery (it does not show any), so please be warned in advance as you read about the tasks human content moderators perform to keep social media systems clean.

Chen, A. (2014, October 3). *The Laborers Who Keep D**k Pics and Beheadings Out of Your Facebook Feed*. WIRED Magazine. <https://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation/>

Required Article: Axios.com “[Twitter suffers “massive drop in revenue,” Elon Musk says](#)” by Herb Scribner, November 4, 2022 (2 pages)

This brief summary article describes the effect on Twitter’s advertisers’ willingness to use their platform if the content moderation policy turns Twitter into a risky place to advertise their brands. While this article does not address First Amendment issues, it illuminates the more immediate concern about the content moderation policy and the success of a given business model where advertisers are the primary source of revenue.

Scribner, H. (2022, November 4). *Elon Musk: Twitter suffers “massive drop in revenue” after advertisers leave*. Axios. <https://www.axios.com/2022/11/04/elon-musk-twitter-revenue-drop-advertisers>

Required Article: “[5 Types Of Content Moderation And How To Scale Using AI](#)” by Thomas Molfetto, Clarifai, Inc., June 13, 2021 (7 pages)

This article describes the different ways that artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to moderate content without human intervention.

Molfetto, T. (2021, June 13). 5 Types Of Content Moderation And How To Scale Using AI. Clarifai, Inc., <https://www.clarifai.com/blog/5-types-of-content-moderation-and-how-ai-is-helping>

Deplatforming

The following media describe the legal framework through which content moderation and deplatforming is viewed, according to various perspectives and legal interests. In the Supplemental resources, you will find an article that describes the various ways that a person or entity can be deplatformed according to the layers of service in the Internet architecture.

Required Article: “[Normalizing De-Platforming: The Right Not to Tolerate the Intolerant](#)” by Robert Sprague, Professor of Legal Studies in Business, University of Wyoming College of Business Department of Management & Marketing, September 1, 2021. (30 pages – skim)

This article describes the legal boundaries within which online platforms operate. It traces the origins of the § 230(c) of the Communications Decency Act and the various legal cases that have been tried to moderate online content and control users' access to Internet platforms.

There are details provided for specific legal cases which you can skim if you like. However, your focus of interest should be about how corporate interests interpret their roles, obligations, and responsibility for user generated content:

- Where is the line of responsibility when user generated content causes harm while using the tools provided to them by a platform?
- At what point, if at all, does the state (our government) assert an interest in sustaining free speech on a privately owned business's property? Wouldn't this be considered a Socialist intervention?
- Under what conditions is a corporate action to deplatform a user considered *viewpoint discrimination*?
- How strong is the argument that *the lack of a comparable alternative* to publish speech amounts to a constraint of free speech if a person is deplatformed from a global publishing platform?

Sprague, R. (2021). Normalizing De-Platforming: The Right Not to Tolerate the Intolerant. *Social Science Research Network*: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3915739> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3915739>

Required Article: [“Bluesky at a crossroads as users petition to ban Jesse Singal over anti-trans views, harassment,”](#) by Sarah Perez, via Techcrunch.com, December 13, 2024.

Bluesky emerged as an alternative to X (formerly Twitter) because it provides greater user control of the content in their user environment. However, users have protested the presence of an anti-trans activist and writer in Bluesky to the extent that they demand that Bluesky deplatform him.

Perez, S. (2024, December 13). “Bluesky at a crossroads as users petition to ban Jesse Singal over anti-trans views, harassment.” Techcrunch. <https://techcrunch.com/2024/12/13/bluesky-is-at-a-crossroads-as-users-petition-to-ban-jesse-singal-over-anti-trans-views-harassment>

Optional: Supplemental resources that are relevant to content moderation

AI Forensics – [Pay-to-Play: Meta’s Community \(double\) Standards on Pornographic Ads](#). This article describes how Meta, Facebook’s parent company, applies content moderation differently for user-generated content than it does for content created by its advertisers.

The Verge – [Streamer’s apology for racist rant exposes the rot in streaming culture](#). This article describes the descent of streaming media producers to create shocking and outrageous content to gain more followers to the point of being deplatformed. However, there are often alternative platforms that are willing to allow horribly abusive, racist, sexist, antisemitic, transphobic, and other reprehensible behavior because it is profitable.

The Intercept – [Facebook tells moderators to allow graphic images of Russian airstrikes but censors Israeli attacks](#) – Internal memos show Meta deemed attacks on Ukrainian civilians “newsworthy” – prompting claims of a double standard among Palestine advocates.

NYU Stern School – Center for Business and Human Rights – [“Who Moderates the Social Media Giants? A Call to End Outsourcing”](#) by Paul M. Barrett, June, 2020. This is a comprehensive study on Facebook’s content moderation policy, the outsourcing strategy used to implement it, and the effects of this arrangement. Eight recommendations are offered for social media companies to implement. This would be a useful study for Management students in responding to the potentially harmful consequences of business operations.

Centre for International Governance Innovation – [“Navigating the Tech Stack: When, Where and How Should We Moderate Content?”](#) by Joan Donovan, Centre for International Governance Innovation, October 28, 2019. This article describes how content moderations and deplatforming occurs at each level of the Internet’s service structure.

The New York Times – [“The Silent Partner Cleaning Up Facebook for \\$500 Million a Year”](#) By Adam Satariano and Mike Isaac. Published Aug. 31, 2021, updated Oct. 28, 2021. This article traces the historic efforts by Facebook to outsource content moderation to a third-party provider, Accenture, and how they realized they needed to expand their resources to keep up with the flood of disturbing content being published all day, everyday.

Chapter 9 - Age Verification

“Reddit doesn’t require users to share information about their identities, regardless of age, because we are deeply committed to their privacy and safety.... [The ICO’s insistence](#) that we collect more private information on every UK user is counterintuitive and at odds with our strong belief in our users’ online privacy and safety. We intend to appeal the ICO’s decision.” – [Reddit](#) corporate communication.

Overview

At face value, age verification in social media makes perfect sense: Why would we want 12 year olds hooked on TikTok scrolling? But at what point does age verification spill over into issues of personal privacy?

In late 2025, the [Australian government](#) made the bold step to pass legislation that regulates access to certain social media systems to protect children from the harms they have identified as associated with misuse. In March 2026, Meta (the owner of Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp) and Google’s YouTube were [held liable in court](#) for the addictive effects of their social media products. [Numerous other nations](#) have similar access restrictions, as have many states in the U.S.

Yet, even with these mechanisms, [it is unclear how effective](#) these measure have been in achieving the goals for which they were intended. Does this “leakage” negate their effort, or does the friction of regulated access send a more important message about the potential harms of misuse, even if they are not 100% effective?

This issue raises strong opinions about how we control the social media systems that are a near-necessity in adolescent social behavior. Privacy advocates suggest that a more insidious effect will occur if we allow private companies to capture PII and biometric data. Can we always assure that our private data will be managed securely?

How do your app and story ideas land in this issue?

What should you be focusing on?

Your objectives in this module are to:

- Explain the various methods used in age verification systems and how they are integrated into social media systems.
- Construct supporting arguments for the use or non-use of age verification requirements in the context of your app idea or story.

Readings & Media

Thematic narrative in this chapter

In the following readings and media, the authors will present the following themes:

1. Some companies are imposing age verification and other limitations to their systems as a response to external pressure to protect children from harmful effects.
2. External verification providers conduct their work through various techniques that include disclosure of PII and biometric data.
3. There are numerous risks to privacy associated with requiring age verification.

Required Article: “[Age Verification: Definition & How it Works](#)” by Charlotte Bowyer via Entrust, January 31, 2025

This is an article published by a company that provides age verification services. The content is valid, but consider their point of view as a factor in how they frame the issue.

Required Article: “[Social media age restrictions](#)” by the eSafety Commissioner, Australian Government, January 13, 2026

This is the official announcement posted by the Australian government that triggered worldwide attention in late 2025. **Skim this article** and review the criteria that determines if an app or system is regulated by this law. [Review the FAQ page](#) that includes disclosure on how age verification will be conducted.

Required Article: “[Taking Bold Steps to Keep Teen Users Safe on Character.AI](#)” by CharacterAI, Oct 29, 2025.

This is the official corporate announcement from CharacterAI explaining their rationale for a change in their policy to require age verification and other controls. Carefully review the specific limitations they now impose in the follow-up post: [An Update On Changes to Our Under-18 Experience](#).

Required Blog: “[it is officially over](#)” r/CharacterAI subReddit, November, 2025.

This is a user-generated subReddit in response to CharacterAI’s decision to employ age verification to access their AI virtual companions. While this is not a scholarly source, it is useful to capture the sentiment of users directly. *Warning: some of the language is coarse.* As you scroll through the comments, observe the various arguments and counter-arguments and note which seem more or less stronger than others.

Required Article: “[io \(Not So\) Hidden Dangers of Age Verification](#)” by Rindala Alajaji via Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), December 24th, 2025

[EFF](#) has been a leader in advocating for privacy and free speech since 1990. This article describes the landscape of age verification from an opposing position. As you read this article, identify any arguments against age verification that would apply to your app idea or story.

Required Article: “The Age Verification Trap Verifying user’s ages undermines everyone’s data protection” by Waydell D. Carvalho via IEEE Spectrum, February 23rd, 2026.

The [IEEE](#) is a global standards bearing organization that publishes research for industry and technology. This article touches upon similar themes from the EFF article, but from an international perspective.

Optional: Supplemental resources related to age verification

Article: