

Review of *Humans r social media*

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iVoices Media Lab, & Daly, D. (2021). *Humans r social media*. University of Arizona.

<https://opentextbooks.library.arizona.edu/hrsm/>

Humans R Social Media is an essential textbook for any instructor interested in the diverse and expansive realm of contemporary digital communication. Incorporating undergraduate student voices through the University of Arizona’s iVoices Media Lab with Daly’s insightful and accessible writing style, this textbook interweaves prominent theoretical conversations of the field with critical self-reflection. Bringing a human-focused view to social media in the digital age, Daly argues “the development of social media culture, including norms and technological affordances, is wrapped up in you, and me, and other humans. And we are also wrapped up in that culture; as we shape it, it shapes us” (Ch. 10, para. 7). Human action, agency, and behavior are central to the book. Regularly featuring undergraduate student voices, this text elicits a collaborative and interactive tone. While the digital environment of the text is marked by an ever-changing impermanence, the use of both theory and practice, as well as the integration of contemporary discourses in the field with critical self-reflection make this text a strong choice.

The interactivity of the text prompts engagement and illustrates student agency through a rich utilization of projects created by iVoices students. The University of Arizona’s iVoices Media Lab “channels knowledge shared through students’ stories into new media, curricula, and scholarship” (2022). As implemented throughout, *Humans R Social Media* places importance on individual and shared experiences of using social media as technology rapidly develops. Located

in orange boxes labeled “Student Content” are thematic narrative-driven pieces created by iVoices students discussing their experiences using social media. These projects include short essays, audio recordings, and videos, both individual and collaborative. Social media is “grounded in how people talk and behave, not in rules set by any authorities” (Introduction, para. 8). It is only fitting in discussing social media, many different voices and types of participation are included. Notions of agency and participation are prominent throughout the text. As the reader scrolls, each chapter located on the same webpage, they are prompted with hyperlinks, embedded videos, and relevant external conversations allowing for interactive engagement with the ideas of the text and beyond. “Almost any standards at work in social media can be changed by users if enough of us start pushing against those standards. We create social media” (Introduction, para. 8). In addition to student voices, readers can offer terms or ideas which may be missing from the textbook in a Google form at the end of Chapter 10 and other authors can participate through contributing a chapter in the second half of the book. The affordances of its digitality allow for a robust interactive and collaborative text which invokes feelings of familiarity.

The digital nature of the text allows for a multimodality only possible in this kind of space, showing the expansiveness of digital pedagogical tools. Each chapter incorporates audio, images, embedded videos, and hyper-links to illuminate the networked underpinnings of online spaces. The digital design allows for hands-on learning by incorporating multiple means of accessing definitions of bolded terms, interactive quizzes that test knowledge of each chapter’s main points, and a related content section with dozens of links to external sources to broaden the chapter conversations. Although its multimodal functions are engaging, some are subject to change because of their external nature. Thus, the textbook will have to be updated in order to

remain relevant and to have accessible accurate links. Daly highlights this complication in a note on impermanence in the beginning of the text, commenting on the complexity of networked interactions. “All informational content today, and particularly online content, is comprised of structures built on shifting foundations ... First we will lose the hyperlinks, as one, then a few, then many links lead to disappeared pages ... Second, the platform on which this book is published could be compromised” (Preface, para. 4). In this way, the book models the digital landscape of contemporary social media in its malleability.

Each chapter incorporates socio-political and ethical implications of digital communication. This includes notions of private and public, identity formation, attention, algorithms and bias, online activism, and post-truth discourses. In Chapter 6, titled “Activism,” Daly draws on examples from the Zapatistas, the Arab Spring, and #BlackLivesMatter to present both the strategies used and the tensions that arise from utilizing social media as a digital tool for issue awareness and activist organizing. Daly highlights five strategies used in social media activism, which are: speed, visuals, performances, inclusiveness, and “masked leadership” (Ch. 6, para. 21). She then troubles the use of social media in social movements with Evgeny Morozov’s term “slacktivism” wherein users experience an illusion of significant participation “at zero risk to themselves” (Ch. 6, para. 30). Additionally, at the end of every chapter, there are short descriptions, hyperlinks, and visual aids depicting a variety of different contemporary issues and how they might be analyzed through the framework of the chapter. For example, after Chapter 8 titled “Information,” Daly points to COVID-19 during spring 2020 as an emergent site for critical conversations surrounding information, trust, and accuracy. This critical engagement with current events is woven throughout the book.

Many of these events are current to the decade, however, there are some places where material already needs updating. For example, in chapter 8, titled “Information,” are “Dr. Daly’s Steps to ‘Reading’ Social Media News Stories in 2020.” After articulating the important differences between “disinformation,” “misinformation,” and “bullshit,” Daly crafts steps for critical reading, giving students tools to engage with and unpack the different kinds of information they encounter on a daily basis through social media. While these tools remain useful, urging students to investigate sources and consider reliable fact-checking sites, the landscape of news media has already changed widely, especially considering the ongoing pandemic. In the following COVID-19 example after the chapter, Daly states, “Yes the bad information machine is still chugging, but the virus has also bridged countless divides” (Chapter 8, para. 54). While this sentiment may have been widely regarded as true nearing the beginning of the pandemic, ongoing political strife has shown a nation widely divided which, as of February 2022, can be charted along party lines with vaccine decision-making and rates of infection (Leonhardt, 2022). Though Daly highlights the impermanence and complexity of the digital landscape, the lack of updating may already leave some chapters incomplete. Instructors using this text in their classes may consider implementing updated examples to reinvigorate the contemporary settings of the chapters.

As an open-sourced text, this book is both accessible and easy to use. By taking away some of the monetary burden for students attending college, instructors are able to use this text as much or as little as they need in their classrooms. Though the book in its entirety is valuable and illustrative of the diverse array of approaches to studying human interaction on social media, because of the ease of accessibility, instructors can implement any section of the text into their pedagogy. This unique ability of an open-sourced textbook may help mediate the problem of

impermanence. As a book designed in and for an online medium, it is best read online. Having downloaded the book to multiple different formats, including pdf, the easiest, most accessible, and most interactive way to engage with the textbook is by locating it online. Similar to the impermanence of its digital modality, some downloadable formats leave absent embedded videos and hyperlinks which impair the overall functionality of the text; however, this should not deter instructors from utilizing this open-sourced textbook in their courses.

Humans R Social Media is a valuable text for anyone teaching undergraduate courses pertaining to human interaction in digital spaces, ethical considerations of social media, foundational conversations in digital communication, and current socio-political issues circulating in social media spaces. Although this text appears geared toward an undergraduate audience, as a graduate student, I found it to be useful, engaging, easy to navigate, and helpful for grounding foundational terminology. As an open-sourced textbook, *Humans R Social Media* can and should be implemented as a multimodal, interactive, student-centered pedagogical tool for educators.

References

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