The Formation of Social Networks: A New Stage in Communication Culture

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Annotation: The article examines the stages of development of social networks from their emergence to the present day. From a socio-philosophical perspective, it highlights their impact on the formation of the digital society through technological advancements, socio-cultural changes, user identity transformation, interactivity, and algorithmic governance.

Keywords: social networks, digital society, user identity, platformization, algorithmic governance, digital communication, metanetwork, interactivity, digital economy.

Introduction. In today is digital society, social networks have become an integral part of human life. These platforms deeply influence from personal communication to business, education, politics, and cultural processes. The development of social networks is a complex process related to technological innovations, social needs, and changes in communication culture, which has formed as the main means of information exchange in modern society. This article is dedicated to the scientific-philosophical analysis of the stages of social networks development, with the aim to determine the role of social networks in the transformation of digital communication, their impact on society and future development directions.

Analysis of literature related to the topic. The phenomenon of social networks, as a socio-cultural event that fundamentally transformed the modern communication space, has been studied from various perspectives in numerous scientific researches. Notably, prominent American researchers in the fields of social networks, digital identity, and online interactions, Dana Boyd (1977) and Nicole Ellison (1968), analyze social networks as virtual spaces that strengthen interpersonal communications, paying special attention to mechanisms that reinforce user interactions – such as "friendship," "comment," and "like." This approach serves as an initial theoretical basis for the communicative function of social networks. [1]

One of the most prestigious social philosophers of the 20th and 21st centuries, postmodernist scholars like Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017), emphasize the weakening and superficial nature of interpersonal relations within sociality in digital communication society. [2] At the same time, American sociologist, psychologist, and professor of social sciences at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), Sherry Turkle (1948), in her research discusses the "communication illusion" occurring through digital tools, advancing the idea that connections formed via technological means cannot replace deep emotional bonds. [3]

Regarding the stages of social networks formation, the concept of social media evolution proposed by D. Boyd holds significant importance. It distinguishes the key differences and communicative characteristics of the initial phase (listservs and forums), transitional period (MySpace, Friendster), and the current modern phase (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) of social platforms. This approach allows a theoretical justification of the step-by-step formation of social networks. [4]

Moreover, some studies conducted in the context of Uzbekistan reveal the local impact of social networks on society, changes in youth consciousness, and the formation of digital culture based on empirical observations, thereby shedding light on the local context. [5]

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This analysis of literature shows that the coverage of social networks and digital communication is mainly limited to technological and sociological approaches, yet there is a need for a deeper illumination of their socio-philosophical essence – namely, the transformation of humanity's attitude toward communication, freedom, personality, and sociality. Therefore, this article attempts to highlight the evolution of social networks precisely in the context of the socio-philosophical transformation of communication.

Research methodology. In the scientific article, methods such as analysis, systematic approach, philosophical-logical thinking, philosophical analysis, grouping, and comparison were utilized.

Analysis and results. Although social networks have formed as the central means of communication in today's digital society, they did not reach their current form instantaneously. Their formation occurred gradually, closely connected with technological advancements, the development of information systems, and the evolving human needs. Each stage is distinguished by its unique technological, social, and cultural characteristics, which have caused the expansion of social networks' functions, the transformation of the user's role, and the complication of information flow management mechanisms. Therefore, studying the development of social networks is important not only to understand their technological evolution but also to grasp the profound changes in social relations occurring within the digital environment.

The process of social networks' development consists of several stages, each formed based on the interaction of social and technological factors. Below, these stages are analyzed consistently from a socio-philosophical perspective.

Initial Formation Stage (1990-2000) – The initial formation stage of social networks emerged in the early 1990s, directly linked to technological progress, especially the introduction of the Internet. During this stage, new forms of communication appeared, namely user-oriented, horizontal, and interactive information exchange. Social networks for the first time enabled the formation of virtual communities, which implied liberation of social relations from spatial and temporal constraints.

The earliest social communication platforms served to unite users around specific topics or interests, though most were limited to one-way or text-based communication. Launched in 1995, the platform "Classmates.com" was among the first projects recognized as social networks, allowing users to find former schoolmates and university students. This represented a new form of restoring and strengthening social connections.

This stage created a new form of human ontology – virtual existence. While in traditional societies personal identification was linked to biological, social, and cultural indicators, in the virtual space this identification became mutable and multi-layered.

Notably, the platform "SixDegrees.com" created in 1997, was the first project to embody the principles of social networks in a technological format. Users could create profiles, add friends, and send messages. Although this project played an important experimental role in creating a digital model of social relations, it closed in 2001 due to technological limitations and insufficient user base.

At this stage, social networks fundamentally transformed the form of communication. Unlike the traditional top-down communication model, horizontal communication prevailed during this period. Users began to communicate directly with each other without intermediaries. This situation is directly linked to Jürgen Habermas's theory of the "public sphere" where individuals can express their opinions on the basis of equality in a new communicative environment. Habermas stated, "The public sphere is an environment that serves the formation of social consciousness through the exchange of citizens' opinions." [6]

From a socio-philosophical perspective, this stage gave rise to the earliest forms of the concept of "digital ethics." On the one hand, it reflected the impact of technological inventions on social consciousness; on the other, it necessitated the formation of humanistic criteria for relations between humans and technology. In particular, the re-interpretation of concepts such as truth and privacy in virtual communication intensified philosophical debates.

Overall, the formation stage of 1990-2000 was a complex period that synthesized the communicative possibilities of social networks, their ideological-human influence, and technological innovations, marking an ontological turn in society's transition to the digital stage.

American writer, Internet researcher, and cultural scholar Howard Rheingold states: "Virtual communities create a new form of relationships in real life." [7]

The technological and communicative foundations established during the initial formation stage paved the way to the mass adoption stage as the digital needs of society increased. Thus, social networks evolved from narrow experimental platforms into global communication spaces encompassing a wide audience.

Mass Adoption Stage (2000-2010) – The mass adoption stage marked a qualitative leap in the development of social networks. During this period, social networks evolved not only as technological phenomena but also as socio-cultural forces, deeply entering the collective consciousness. The foundations of many modern platforms were laid in these years. Experimental or narrowly targeted services were replaced by networks encompassing a global audience.

Key platforms such as Friendster (2002), MySpace (2003), and especially Facebook (2004) began to spread worldwide. Their main innovation was the centrality of the user's identity: each individual could create a digital profile, share personal information, express themselves through photos and videos. This development both simplified and deepened users' participation in virtual space.

Henceforth, every user was not only an information consumer but also a creator and distributor. Manuel Castells conceptualizes this phenomenon as "mass self-communication": "Each person can now address a mass audience. This changes power structures in social networks and decentralizes communication." [8] Therefore, this phase can be characterized as the democratization of communication.

In this stage, social networks became more than just communication tools; they emerged as new arenas for social movements, civil society, and political activism. Notably, the 2009 protests in Iran, coordinated via Twitter, demonstrated the global political mobilization power of social networks.

Clay Shirky emphasized that "now every user can become a content creator", [10] highlighting the expanded capacity of individuals to produce and disseminate information through the Internet and social networks. This expansion led to new forms of communication and social transformation in the digital society.

During this period, the boundary between social reality and virtual existence increasingly blurred. Individuals participated in the social sphere through their digital "selves," leading to an invisible and contextual formation of identity. How a user presented themselves on a social network would influence how others perceived them.

The French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) elaborated on this phenomenon: "The boundary between reality and representation disappears; simulacra replace reality. A simulacrum is a sign that does not point to any original or truth but only to itself". [9]

Facebook's transition from a university-based network to a global social arena represented a turning point in social networks becoming universal phenomena. Simultaneously, platforms like YouTube (2005) and Twitter (2006) expanded the forms of social networks, becoming tools not only for interpersonal communication but also for mass media dissemination and rapid news distribution.

Dana Boyd and Nicole Ellison, prominent American researchers in social networks, digital identity, and online interactions, assert: "Social networks serve to reflect human connections in digital form". [11]

The mass adoption stage introduced social networks to a broad public, transforming them into instruments of personal expression, collective consciousness, and political engagement. Thus, social networks ceased to be mere information exchange environments and became new territories for the

formation of social subjectivity and consciousness. This transformation, by the 2010s, evolved into a new qualitative stage – mobile integration and digital sociality.

Mobile Integration and Digital Sociality Stage (2010-2020) marks a deepened phase in the evolution of social networks, during which not only existing platforms advanced, but also there was significant diversification in both the form and functional orientations of social networks. Previously dominated by text-based platforms primarily accessed via computers, this stage witnessed the rise of networks adapted for mobile devices, emphasizing visual content and enabling real-time communication.

Platforms such as Instagram (2010), Snapchat (2011), and TikTok (2016) constituted a new generation of social networks. Each introduced distinct communicative styles that fundamentally transformed users modes of information consumption and expression. For instance, Instagram placed visual aesthetics and image at the core of social networking, whereas Snapchat promoted direct and rapid communication through ephemeral content. TikTok, through an algorithm-driven content distribution model, attracted a new generation of audiences.

By this period, social networks consolidated their position not merely as mass media or personal expression tools but as essential existential conditions of human life. This stage may be conditionally termed the "mobile integration and digital sociality era," as social networks, integrated with mobile devices, created a state of "always-online" presence.

Whereas in previous stages the user was considered to be "logging into" the network, from this point forward, they were reinterpreted as entities constantly living within the network. The Polish social philosopher Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017) describes this transformation as follows: "Through mobile technologies, humans live in a state of constant communication, continuous surveillance, and incessant production. This permanent presence is a social consequence of modernity". [12]

Mobile technologies enable users to communicate, be monitored, and controlled via the network anytime and anywhere. This led to a deterritorialized form of communication, separated from time and space. Spanish sociologist and leading expert in communication and globalization Manuel Castells (1942) emphasizes: "Connectivity via smartphones allows each individual to engage in real-time communication. This continuity gives rise to new social structures". [13]

Mobile integration altered the functional composition of social networks. While computer-based access was the primary model in the previous stage, in this phase users became entities living within the network through constant push notifications, location-based services, real-time video broadcasts, stories, and events. This simultaneously created a condition in digital sociality where the user is a consumer, creator, and observed subject.

American social psychologist, economist, and leading theorist on the contemporary information society and digital capitalism Shoshana Zuboff (1951) comments on this level of digital surveillance: "Today's digital social environment operates on monitoring, analyzing, and predicting user behavior. This new form of capitalism is surveillance capitalism". [14]

The mobile integration phase also intensified the direct intervention of algorithms in social communication. French philosopher, historian, and social theorist Michel Foucault (1926–1984) states: "Power now operates not hierarchically but in a network form. This governs not the body but the mind, attention, and social direction". [15] Social interactions are now managed through algorithmic selection, "likes," recommendations, and filtered feeds, leading not to democratic dissemination of information but to the emergence of "information bubbles" (filter bubbles) artificially created within digital environments.

The widespread adoption of mobile devices and permanent internet connectivity ensured rapid popularization of these platforms. American media theorist, cultural scholar, and leading expert in mass communication Henry Jenkins (1958) notes: "Users actively participate in distributing content". [16] Henceforth, the user ceased to be a mere visitor to social networks but emerged as a continuous participant, content creator, distributor, and consumer. This process redefined the communicative

characteristics of social networks, positioning them at the center of personal, professional, political, and cultural interactions.

Renowned Dutch sociologist and media theorist Jan van Dijk (1928–2008), a specialist in social information technologies, digital divides, and the information society, states: "Social media is not only a means of communication but also a powerful institutional structure". [17]

The mobile integration phase intimately connected social networks to everyday life, establishing a state of "permanent online presence". However, this process initiated not only a technological approach but also the increasing algorithmic governance of user activity. Particularly, the selective presentation of content streams, the management of user attention, and information filtering are now realized through distinctive algorithmic regimes unique to each platform.

The Stage of Platformization and Algorithmic Governance (From 2020 to Present) – Since 2020, the development of social networks has witnessed a marked increase in complexity and functional scope. At this stage, social networks have transcended their initial role as mere communication spaces to become central structural components of digital life. Their contemporary form is conceptualized as a "metanetwork" a multi-layered communicative ecosystem integrating diverse services, applications, content formats, and economic activities.

In this phase, social networks have evolved from simple communication tools into universal platforms facilitating personal brand creation, economic activity, political influence, interaction with artificial intelligence, and even the construction of new realities such as the metaverse. The transition of "Meta" (formerly Facebook) from a social network to a metaverse platform serves as a global metaphor for this stage.

The post-2020 period in the evolution of social networks can be characterized by the deepening of platformization and algorithmic governance. Social networks now function not only as communication environments but also as infrastructures that shape social consciousness, information consumption, and even collective action. From a socio-philosophical perspective, this transformation necessitates a re-examination of human freedom, communicative will, and subjectivity.

Whereas in previous stages users were regarded as relatively autonomous agents of their own activities, under platformization they become agents subjected to algorithmic models, recommendation systems, filter bubbles, and the laws of attention economy. As contemporary communication scholar and social media expert Tarleton Gillespie (1973) notes, platforms are not merely technological tools but also normative and epistemic sources of power: "By calling themselves 'platforms' these companies present themselves as neutral content hosts, while in reality they exert significant control over what content is disseminated and how it circulates". [18]

During this stage, social networks have become hierarchical managers of information flows. They shape the construction of social reality by algorithmically managing users attention, filtering, and disseminating information. Algorithmic selection is not merely a technical process but a social construction and ideological filtering practice. For instance, the algorithms of Facebook, TikTok, or X (formerly Twitter) preferentially promote emotionally charged, controversial, and rapidly spreading content to maximize user engagement. This phenomenon leads to the blurring of digital truth and the intensification of post-truth effects. Contemporary historian, philosopher, and public intellectual Yuval Noah Harari emphasizes: "Whereas censorship traditionally worked by blocking information flows, in the twenty-first century it functions by overwhelming people with excessive and trivial information". [19]

The power of platforms at this level has transformed them into instruments of control. Through the collection of personal data, tracking and analyzing user behavior, and forecasting via artificial intelligence, platforms create a novel form of social governance technology. This development invites a reconsideration of Michel Foucault's concept of "biopower" in the digital context, where power is exercised less through overt violence and more through imperceptible algorithmic regulation.

British scholar and writer Nick Srnicek (1982), active in philosophy, political economy, and digital technologies, states: "Platforms have become the main pillars of the internet economy". [20]

Platformization denotes the expansion of networks services and their integration with other digital services such as commerce, finance, gaming, education, and artificial intelligence tools. For example, TikTok is no longer merely a short-video platform but also an algorithmic information distribution system, a culture-shaping trend creator, a marketing tool for brands, and a vehicle of the digital economy.

Issues related to the control of information flows, algorithmic governance, and the intensification of moral, religious, and political filtering have become increasingly pressing. Content regulation through artificial intelligence and algorithms, management of user attention, digital surveillance, and handling of personal data have brought social networks into the sphere of philosophical and ethical debate.

Leading scholars in media studies, digital labor, internet theory, and critical media analysis such as Christian Fuchs (1976) observe: "Digital labor and surveillance capitalism have become central to social media activities". [21]

During this era, distinctions among social networks have blurred as platforms increasingly replicate each other is functions. YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and others import features such as vertical videos, live streaming, stories, direct messaging, and algorithmic feeds, converging into an interoperable metanetwork. This convergence results in the unification of user experience and intensification of inter-platform competition. [22]

The formation and development of social networks must be understood as a multi-stage historical process that has profoundly transformed the information-communication dynamics of modern society. Each stage is inherently linked to technological advances, social needs, and cultural changes, generating new formats of sociability and fundamentally reshaping the culture of information consumption and distribution.

Initially, social networks served to digitize personal communication; later, they became key instruments in the functioning of identities, social groups, and institutions. During the mass adoption phase, social networks emerged as principal arenas of communication, with users evolving from passive receivers to active content creators.

In the stages of mobile integration and platformization, these networks permeated nearly all aspects of human life. They became infrastructures organizing and managing social relations, directly influencing social reality construction, social consciousness and identity formation.

Within the information society, the development of communication tools, especially social networks, has radically altered interpersonal relations, information dissemination and cultural interactions. This process marks a new phase in communication culture. Digital devices – smartphones, tablets, AI algorithms, 5G, and sensor interfaces – form the technological foundation of this transformation.

Mobile technologies enable continuous access to social networks, allowing individuals to express opinions rapidly, participate in collective discussions and form online social movements. This fosters social awareness activation and widespread social responsibility.

However, it also confines human consciousness and attention to an "online presence" mode, cultivating a culture of "constant connectivity," which leads to fragmented thinking, shortened attention spans, and diminished capacity for deep comprehension.

While traditional communication models – television, radio, newspapers –organized vertical information flows, social networks have cultivated a horizontal network culture. Every user is not only a consumer but also a content creator and distributor, promoting democratization of social structures as the boundaries among power, media, and public become blurred.

Yet this new balance increases risks of misinformation, manipulation, and algorithmic control over consciousness. Network algorithms confine each user within an "information capsule" artificially narrowing their informational environment and amplifying polarization.

As American social theorist and Harvard Business School professor emerita Shoshana Zuboff notes: "Network algorithms trap each user in an 'information capsule' artificially limiting their information space—this constitutes a significant epistemological pressure on consciousness". [23]

As a central element of the information society, social networks provide real-time, global, personalized information flows, elevating society's informational needs to a new qualitative level. Through personalized information streams, users construct and manage their own information environments.

However, this exacerbates post-truth phenomena, disinformation, and emotion-based rather than fact-based communication, rendering the information society epistemologically vulnerable. This demands a reconfiguration of communication culture as both a technological and moral-cultural institution.

American sociologist, psychologist, and technology philosophy expert Sherry Turkle (1948) highlights: "Amidst the intensification of online communication, people experience a deeper sense of loneliness in a world rich with connections—a paradox of communication culture". [24]

Today, social networks have reached the level of a metanetwork by integrating complex technological elements such as algorithmic governance, artificial intelligence, the metaverse and the digital economy. This development leads to a distinctive transformation not only in the culture of communication but also in the very nature of social reality within the digital society.

Conclusion and recommendations. Thus, by systematically analyzing the developmental stages of social networks, we gain the opportunity not only to comprehend their technological and communicative transformations but also to deeply understand the fundamental changes occurring within social relations, identity, and cultural spheres in the digital society. Today, social networks function as a broader and more complex social space than merely tools for information exchange; they occupy a central position within digital economy, political activism, cultural constructions, and emerging communicative models.

Such an analysis is relevant not only for academic research but also from the perspectives of social policy, technological advancement, and the future of civil society. This is because social networks represent not merely technological innovation but a dynamic force that creates new forms of social reality and reorganizes both individual and collective consciousness.

In the future, a more profound understanding of social networks and their rational use, alongside measures to mitigate their negative impacts while ensuring social justice, freedom, and transparency, will require comprehensive approaches.

The issues of disinformation and manipulation on social networks are becoming increasingly pronounced. Enhancing users' skills in critically analyzing information, developing effective methods for detecting false information, and ensuring transparency of information sources constitute urgent tasks.

Social networks employ complex algorithms in content distribution systems. Going forward, it is necessary to consider measures aimed at algorithmic transparency, explaining to users how information flows are managed, and democratizing the data sorting processes conducted by digital platforms.

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