Figuring out which platforms are for you

If you’re overwhelmed by the seemingly endless array of social media platforms and apps out there, and unsure which—if any—you should bother with, this guide aims to help you sort out your options. Whether you are looking at social media for your personal use or as a professional tool, the keys lie in figuring out what you want to share, who you want to share it with, and how comfortable you are with different online cultures.

Some of these decisions you can make in advance, others may require some trial and error, but hopefully these tips can make the process a little more painless.

Choosing where to dedicate your time and efforts can be daunting, especially if you’re new to social media.
Who are you, and who are you looking for?
Many people struggle with social media because they don’t take the time to reflect on who they are and what they want to accomplish. Start by asking yourself a few questions, depending on your reasons for turning to social media:

• What are your personal goals for yourself? These should be separate from career issues. For example, perhaps you want to learn more about other cultures, overcome social anxiety, or push yourself beyond your comfort zone. Or maybe you just want to connect with friends and family, or share photos of your favorite hobby.

• What kinds of professional goals can social media help you achieve? Think about the visibility and scope of social media. How can these features serve your career? If you are managing the social media for an organization (or club, or department), you should also be thinking about the communication objectives for that entity as you answer these questions.

• What’s the bigger picture you’re working toward? Why should others be interested in what you’re doing, and what you ultimately want to accomplish?

• Who are the people you want to communicate with, and what platforms are they using? Remember the “social” part of “social media”: the goal is to connect with others.

• Do you have any particular privacy or data ownership concerns? This may be less of an issue when working professionally with social media, but it’s always a good idea to read the terms of service for all platforms, to see who owns posted content, what rights the platform retains, and for how long. For example, some platforms may reserve the right to distribute intellectual property (photos, writings) without permission or compensation, which can be problematic for artists & professionals.

Focus on the “social” part of “social media”: the goal is to connect with others.
What’s in a platform?
Next, consider the kind(s) of content you will be sharing, and how quickly it needs to be distributed, as well as how durable you want the message or content to be. These points will also help you determine the best platforms for you.

Are you looking to share just brief text-based messages and links to other online materials? Longer written content? Or do you have an interest in putting out photos and videos? Or do you want to have the flexibility of mixing it up?

Is it important to you that people to see your content almost immediately? On a separate but related note, do you want your content to be durably archived for easy later reference? The answers to these questions will help you sort through your options.

The table below gives you some examples of current platforms. But keeping in mind the keys of content type, speed, and permanence can guide you even with new apps and sites that will come along tomorrow, next week, and next year—as long as you remember that none of these matter if the people aren’t there.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Platform</th>
<th>Type of content</th>
<th>Distribution Speed</th>
<th>Permanence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>Text-heavy multimedia</td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>Mixed, mostly low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>Photos &amp; short video</td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>Photos &amp; short video</td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>Very low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pinterest</td>
<td>Photos &amp; short video</td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>Video</td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Text-heavy multimedia</td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>High</td>
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</tbody>
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Remember, too, that you can combine channels. For example, you can post a tweet linking to a Medium post (either new content, or older but relevant to a current issue or event). This gives you the rapid distribution of Twitter combined with the longer content and permanence of a blog.
Measuring social media success

If you are just using social media for your own recreation, you probably don’t care much about assessment. But if you are communicating on behalf of an organization, or trying to promote your professional image or side business, outcomes become important.

Many people and organizations focus on counting the number of followers, fans, hits, etc.. However, these numbers alone do not measure the real effectiveness of social media, which differ from traditional media in crucial ways.

Essentially, there are five dimensions to measure:

• **Visibility**: how aware of your social media efforts are your potential or desired readers/viewers? Are you being mentioned or discussed by others?

• **Reach**: how many people are likely to see your social media efforts? This includes second- and third-tier connections (“friends of friends”).

• **Valence**: is discussion about you, your organization, or the topics of interest to you positive or negative? Do people “like” or “favorite” your content?

• **Interaction**: how engaged are your readers? Do they comment, respond, interact with you in some way? Is the dialogue or discussion taking place likely to help establish or maintain relationships?

• **Loyalty**: to what extent do people read or see your content regularly? Do they subscribe to RSS feeds, comment frequently, keep coming back to see what you have to offer?

Depending on your objectives, you may not need to measure all of these, but you should at least be thinking about what you are trying to achieve, and what kinds of information will help you determine whether you are reaching your goals.

Many platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, provide built-in analytics (although more advanced options are only available for certain types of accounts). Social media management software such as HootSuite and Buffer also offer useful data, and there are a host of third-party measurement services ranging in cost from free to thousands of dollars a month.