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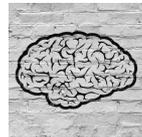


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Who Coined 'Social Media'? Web Pioneers Compete for Credit

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Coining a buzzy new term doesn't earn you any money, only bragging rights. But when the term is as buzzy and widely-circulated as "social media," the bragging rights involved are considerable — and so is the jostling to claim them.

Until now, most of the bragging has been done by Tina Sharkey, CEO of Babycenter.com and a former executive at iVillage and AOL. At a recent

conference, I asked Sharkey about an assertion in her bio (http://www.imediainconnection.com/profiles/iMedia_PC_Bio.aspx?ID=3607) that she coined "social media" during the early days of iVillage, where she was in charge of community-building. She confirmed that. "I said, 'Well, it's not like service media, and it's not quite informational media — it's social media!'" she said. "It wasn't media we were creating — it was media we were facilitating." Sharkey added that she owns the domain socialmedia.com (<http://socialmedia.com/>).

But she didn't register that URL until 1999 (<http://whois.domaintools.com/socialmedia.com>), and there's no public evidence of her using the term before then. The earliest citation in Nexis or Factiva for a use of "social media" in anything like the way it's used now is from 1997, when serial entrepreneur Ted Leonsis, then an executive at AOL, was quoted talking about the need to offer users "social media, places where they can be entertained, communicate, and participate in a social environment."

Leonsis says he is certain the phrase came out of AOL in the early 1990s, where he and company founder Steve Case were developing what would become AOL Instant Messenger. "We started to talk about 'social media,' this idea that AOL was this mashup of technology and communications and media itself," he says.

“If it really mattered, I’m sure we could find a deck somewhere [from that period] that talked about social networking and social media. But what does it matter?”

I told Leonsis that Sharkey — whose stint at AOL didn’t come until 2003 — says the term is her coinage. “I love Tina. She was a very early evangelist for social media,” Leonsis replies. “I’m sure if you were really forensic, it was someone at AOL. We were there before Tina.”

But don’t get the idea that this is a two-horse race. Darrell Berry, a self-described (<http://twitter.com/#!/darrellberry>) “photographer/writer/social media researcher & strategist/hacker,” says he began using the term sometime in late 1994 as he was developing an online media environment called Matisse while living in Tokyo. In May 1995, he wrote a paper (<http://www.ku24.com/~darrell/hybrid1.html>) on “social media spaces,” arguing that the internet had to evolve from what was then essentially a static archive of documents into a network of users engaging with each other. “I have no recollection of having seen that expression prior to that, apart from myself and a couple of friends,” he says. And since the Web had not yet evolved into the sort of place where memes could spread around the globe rapidly, he adds, there’s little chance he heard it somewhere else. “We were fairly cut off from the mainstream,” he says. “I think we developed the thought in isolation.”

Then there’s Chris Shipley, a technology strategist who is often credited with minting the term. But Shipley told me she only claims to have popularized it in 2004 while promoting the inaugural BlogOn summit. “I don’t claim first use necessarily, although I don’t recall the phrase in use prior to that time.”

Now back to Tina Sharkey. Since it’s far from clear who actually first uttered the words “social media,” does she still feel comfortable taking such public credit for them? Via email, she replied,

“ Successful memes have many mothers, and I’m happy simply to be one of them here. Of course I can’t know for sure whether or not somebody else may have used the term social media before I started using it in 1994. But at least in the Silicon Alley and Silicon Valley communities that I was a part of, I was the first that I know of to use it as applied to the newly emerging “social” forms of online media. The fact that I was able to purchase the domain retail from network solutions for \$9.95 suggests that this name was clearly not in wide use.

True enough. And ultimately it may not matter. Soon enough, all media will likely be social, in one way or another making the term “social media” obsolete. Says Berry, “It will all just be there, of a kind with everything else.”



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