Love it or hate it, social media is here to stay. Reynol Junco and Arthur Chickering provide recommendations to help students use technology in ways that maximize their development and success.

By Reynol Junco and Arthur W. Chickering

Civil Discourse in the Age of Social Media

FOR CENTURIES, issues of civil discourse only arose concerning written and oral communication. But now, new technologies for communication and social interaction, particularly social media, have dramatically expanded the potential for human interaction. They generate significant challenges for institutional policies and practices to encourage and sustain civil discourse for the critical social and personal issues we and our students face. To address this challenge, we review emerging trends in social media, discuss problems that arise with their use, and provide recommendations for helping students use social media in civil and productive ways.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

SOCIAL MEDIA are a collection of Web sites, services, and activities that engage users through collaboration, sharing, and democratization of roles and responsibilities. They encompass a major shift in focus from the first iteration of the Web because they allow for increased participation, connection, and interactivity. Communication technologies have come a long way since e-mail was developed and popularized in the early 1970s. Yearly figures from Pew Internet and American Life Project's surveys show that, at least since early 2000, just over 90 percent of Internet users used e-mail, with between 50 and 60 percent using e-mail daily. Online communication and socializing took a giant leap forward when Mark Zuckerberg invented Facebook for Harvard University students in late 2003. Since then, Facebook has amassed over 350 million active users, and multiple studies show that it is used by between 69 and 99 percent of college students. In 2003, Facebook marked the launch of a whole new category of communication technologies, referred to as "social networking" (and more recently called social media), that are used to stay in touch and interact with friends. As of this writing, Facebook's own statistics show that its 400 million active users spend over 500 billion minutes interacting with

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the site each month. Other social networking sites followed—LinkedIn in 2003, MySpace in 2004, and Bebo in 2005. Cell phones are also widely used by college students, and a recent Pew study found that 43 percent of cell phone owners send or receive text messages in a typical day.

One of the more significant shifts in social media was the creation of Twitter in 2006. Twitter is categorized as both a microblogging service and a social networking Web site. Twitter's main focus is the tweet, a relatively ubiquitous artifact of our new digital lives. These 140-character phenomenological fragments have been bouncing around our society in large numbers over the last two years. They experienced explosive growth between 2007 and 2009 and have grown exponentially since then. Data provided by Compete.com show that in the year ending in September 2009, while Facebook had a 202 percent increase in unique monthly visitors, Twitter saw an increase of 660 percent.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA IN RESPONSIBLE AND EDUCATIONALLY RELEVANT WAYS

ACADEMICS AND OTHERS have studied both the positive and negative effects of these technologies. For instance, there is no doubt that using online technology at high rates and in certain ways is

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related to poor academic and psychosocial outcomes, as presented by Shelia Cotten in a 2008 issue of *New Directions for Student Services* devoted to the topic of emerging technologies. However, researchers have also found that some uses of technology, such as for educationally relevant purposes, are related to positive academic and psychosocial outcomes. Given the double-edged potential of communication technologies, it is important for higher education professionals to familiarize themselves with how such technologies can influence students in order to support usage that leads to positive outcomes and also to intervene to help students whose technology use has caused or may cause negative outcomes.

There are a number of issues that higher education professionals must understand in order to help students use social media in responsible and useful ways. Communicating online can benefit both learning and psychosocial development but can also cause negative psychosocial and interpersonal effects. Online privacy has both conceptual and technological difficulties. Information shared through social media can be detrimental to a job search and a career; cyberbullying and online harassment occur. A socioeconomic digital divide exists in access and use of social media.

Regardless of these ongoing concerns, social media technologies do serve important educational purposes. Research by both Greg Heiberger and the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) found a positive relationship between social networking Web-site use and college-student engagement. For instance, a higher percentage of frequent users of social networking Web sites participated in and spent more time in campus organizations than less frequent users. More of the frequent users interacted face-to-face daily with close friends and felt strong connections to them. In a controlled study, Rey Junco, Greg Heiberger, and Eric Loken found that using Twitter in educationally relevant ways in a first-year seminar course increased student engagement and improved grades.

On the other hand, there can be insidious effects of both shortening our communications substantially and conducting many of them online. Some time ago, Justin Kruger and his colleagues discovered that

it was nearly impossible for receivers of e-mail messages to correctly identify the intended tone, even though both the receivers and the senders were confident they could. In a related study, Nicholas Epley and Kruger found that "expectancies influence impressions formed over e-mail more than those formed over the telephone" and as a result, racial stereotypes are strengthened when interacting over e-mail (p. 417). From these experiments, we understand that it's much easier for receivers of an electronic communication to project their own stereotypes and expectations on the other person because of the ambiguity of the medium.

In real-world interactions, most people are able to pick up subtle cues in communication that frame a conversation. Past research has shown that 85 percent of face-to-face communication is nonverbal, and when verbal and nonverbal conflict, we believe the nonverbal. On both conscious and unconscious levels, we are aware of body language, vocal tone, volume, eye contact, and gestures. Some of the assessments we make about the tone of a conversation in the real world happen outside of consciousness. Malcolm Gladwell refers to this process as "thin slicing," whereby we make quick (and generally accurate) decisions about things, people, and situations. Thin slicing manifests as an intuitive sense that something may not be right in an interpersonal interaction. Some people have referred to "feeling the tension in the room" at a meeting, even though no particularly negative words are being exchanged. As blocks of communication get shorter, and there are fewer contextual clues, the ability to correctly perceive tone diminishes. This can make it easier for disagreements to spiral into serious confrontations. If student affairs professionals working in residence life, housing, and judicial affairs are aware of the potential for misinterpretation, they can create programming that helps students effectively avoid or solve online disputes.

There are also significant social issues that arise with online interactions. For example, privacy of online communications is often erroneously assumed by college students. In fact, many students believe that the information and images they post on social networking Web sites are "private" and that only their friends have access to this information. Of course, this is not true. When one posts images on Facebook, for instance, those images are available for download by the user's friends and for rebroadcasting through a variety of outlets. Sites like Facebook reserve the right to use images and communication in ways that are congruent with their Terms of Service. Furthermore, information posted online can be available years and decades later, possibly to be reviewed by a potential employer. As people are joining social networking sites at younger ages, it is important to educate them regarding these privacy issues.

Not knowing about the conceptual and technical issues surrounding online privacy can have real-world implications for students. For instance, students have only recently started to become aware of the fact that potential employers check their social networking Web sites, in addition to conducting Google searches. CareerBuilder.com has found that 45 percent of employers check social media profiles during the hiring process. In the new age of social media, job applicants may never know that a potential employer found their political view to be unpalatable and therefore passed them up for a candidate with a cleaner "net record." When one adds the public nature of status updates, the fact that online communications are less censored by the user, that tone is difficult to discern online, and that employers are checking these statements, you have a recipe for a difficult job search, especially when hiring is competitive because of slow economic growth.

Another common negative consequence of online communication for youth is cyberbullying. A Pew Internet and American Life survey conducted by Amanda Lenhart found that 32 percent of online teenagers have been the target of behaviors that can be categorized as bullying. Many higher education professionals, especially those working in residence life and judicial affairs, are well aware of examples where disagreements, gossip, and slander have either begun or been escalated through online communication and then have led to real-world conduct issues. If these professionals are aware of the potential for misinterpretations, they can create programming that helps students effectively avoid or solve

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online disputes. Teens report that it's very easy to join a group harassing another person when that harassment is taking place online, presumably because they can be anonymous, or because it is less threatening than doing so face-to-face. This kind of behavior calls for explicit policies and practices that curtail such activity and help students work through online disputes and misunderstandings. It also helps to create an institutional culture that minimizes these disputes in the first place.

There are substantial differences in how people use communication strategies based on socioeconomic levels, race, and gender. There are numerous studies, including two recent ones by Eszter Hargittai, that show that those who are more affluent, have higher levels of formal education, and are Caucasian are more likely to use the Internet and related technologies. Junco, Dan Merson, and Daniel Salter recently found that female, white, and more affluent students were more than twice as likely as men and African Americans to own a cell phone. At the same time, being African American, female, and more affluent were all positively predictive of the number of text messages sent weekly. This, too, is something that higher education professionals and staff should recognize.

SUPPORTING STUDENT DEVELOPMENT, LEARNING, AND SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

GENERALLY, in the same way we educators have taught students to think critically about traditional media and the information it offers, we should also help students think critically about the use of the Internet and the information found there. Educators who teach students from what I and Jeanna Mastrodicasa have dubbed the Net.Generation realize how heavily they rely on the Internet as a primary source of information. But do students know if the information is accurate or reliable?

Andrew Keen's *Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet Is Killing Our Culture* offers some penetrating perspectives concerning our culture and democracy. His central argument is that the so-called "democratization" of the Internet is actually undermining reliable information and high-quality entertainment by replac-

ing it with user-generated content that is unreliable, sometimes inane, and often corrupt. What's more, he points out that it is not improving community; it is not developing rich conversations; and it is not building collaboration. The Internet reflects some of our best qualities: irreverence, vitality, excitement, and youthfulness, for instance. But Keen suggests that it also reflects many of the worst developments in modern cultural life—in particular, what he calls digital narcissism, the embrace of the self. *Time* magazine's Person of the Year for last year was "You," and Keen thinks that "You" is not a good person. He does not believe that the key to citizenship is personal self-expression. For him, the key to citizenship means listening and reading and consuming high-quality information and entertainment. In Keen's view, the most corrosive element of today's Internet is the anonymity that creates an uncivil world. We don't behave properly and we have uncivil conversations and other unpleasantness because we don't reveal who we are.

In order to help mitigate these dynamics, higher education professionals need to support student learning and development and civil engagement. The Internet, while having potential for great good, also supports an interactive no-holds-barred culture. Interacting in this type of culture calls for high levels of intellectual and emotional competence anchored in solid information and well-thought-out perspectives.

PROMOTING ONLINE CIVIL DISCOURSE

HIGHER EDUCATION institutions and professionals need to think about, and have dialogue about, how these new communication technologies can be used to strengthen our communities and to foster the key cognitive and affective behaviors we value. We share recommendations for the institution, for faculty, and for student affairs professionals that may enrich this dialogue.

The institution needs to create policy statements that frame online interactions as a civil space and provide support for teaching critical evaluation of online material. The Ford Foundation's request for grant proposals on a topic it called *Difficult Dialogues: Promoting*

Pluralism and Academic Freedom on Campus frames these recommendations. The *Difficult Dialogues* program was initiated to promote academic freedom and religious, cultural, and political pluralism on college campuses, with the goal of helping students constructively engage in dialogue around difficult topics. What troubled the 16 college presidents who signed the "Letter to Higher Education Leaders" were three concerns:

1. The need for a recommitment on the part of campus leaders to "sustain informed political, religious, and civil discourse," during a time in our nation's history when "the tone of academic debate has become increasingly polarized, and, in some cases, we see attempts to silence individuals, faculty, and students who have controversial views."

2. With "the recent rise in anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-Arab incidents, threats to academic freedom proliferate on our nation's campuses," and the key is to promote "open and honest dialogue . . . in an atmosphere of mutual respect, in which diversity is examined and seen in the context of a broader set of common values."

3. "Promoting new scholarship and teaching about cultural differences and a variety of pluralisms, while supporting academic freedom, requires a significant commitment at every level of the academic community. . . . It is no longer adequate for student affairs staff, or the professoriate, to bear, largely alone, the responsibility for sponsoring and overseeing difficult dialogues." All constituencies on college campuses, including students, will need to know how to engage one another "in constructive dialogue around different religious, political, racial/ethnic, and cultural issues."

In our judgment, formulating institutional policy statements about social media use is the first crucial step to tackling these challenges. The full range of institutional stakeholders—students, staff, student affairs professionals, faculty members, administrators, and trustees—needs to be involved. How best to do this? It is a process that will take plenty of time and require broad-based participation. The initial efforts will include tackling both the conceptual and technological issues, with plenty of opportunity for input at various stages. Ideally the drafts of the policy statements need to be widely circulated in various forms, including online. This inclusive process would help raise the level of technological sophistication across the community so that the resulting guidelines rest on broad-based knowledge about their rationale. The final product should be jargon-free, readable, and as brief as possible, given the mission and the particular complexities that characterize the institution.

The resultant policy statements will probably share some basic elements. They will:

1. Make a formal institutional commitment to supporting institutional pluralism;

2. Recognize the educational value of open sharing and examination of diverse views;

3. Recognize that online forms of expression are as important to student development as traditional oral and written expressions;

4. Emphasize the importance of respect and civility;

5. Emphasize the critical need for valid information, solid evidence, and explicit information about sources;

6. Spell out expected positive behaviors and sanctions for negative actions;

7. Require that personal identification be part of all communications and interactions; and

8. Designate a clear locus of responsibility for monitoring online communications and interactions, and for strengthening the educational uses of these emerging communication and interaction technologies.

This process will require that the institution be clear about its mission and desired outcomes for students. Gaps between espoused values and values in use, between rhetoric and reality, will surface. It will

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require solid leadership and committed faculty, student affairs professionals, staff, and students to own up to those gaps honestly, and address them explicitly. Having done so, they will have laid the cornerstone for using current and future technologies to enhance personal development, provide learning that lasts, and address the diversity issues we all face.

The fundamental reason for creating policy statements, and for working through the intellectual and emotional challenges involved, is to encourage a civil institutional culture that values and respects differences and learns from them. The institution can then be a counterforce responding to the larger cultural dynamics that threaten our democracy and cheapen our multi-racial, multicultural, and spiritually diverse nation. Its graduates will become more responsible and effective citizens as they encounter the varied uses of these new technologies throughout their lives.

Faculty and staff professional development is an essential part of implementing new policies with a focus on educationally relevant uses of technology. Because of documented differences in technology skills and knowledge among (and within) members of different generations and between those who are "wired" and those who aren't, development activities should be fashioned to help bring as many members of the academic community as possible to a reasonable level of knowledge and capability. Professional development can be accomplished efficiently by recruiting faculty and staff with the requisite knowledge as "tech ambassadors" and leaders of professional development activities. Additionally, the same group that facilitates the creation of the institutional policy statement can also compile a list of online resources that faculty can use to learn more about educationally relevant uses of newer technologies.

Faculty must help students think critically about information they find online. Today's college students are very good at searching for information online; however, they are not as good at thinking critically

about the information they find. Before college, students were rewarded for their search skills—their ability to find information online; however, they were not rewarded for their ability to sift through their findings and differentiate legitimate sources from bogus ones. Just as faculty have taught students to question information they've obtained through traditional media, it is important for faculty to teach how to question information obtained through new media. Our society is becoming highly dependent on online information. We must prepare tomorrow's leaders to address online information with critical rigor.

It is also important to help students think about the unintended consequences of what they post online. Students are generally not aware of privacy issues at the same level as faculty and show a lack of understanding in both the technical and conceptual aspects of online privacy. Students, like the rest of us, need to understand the technology for using settings to keep online information private. Students may not fully grasp the fact that while their Facebook profile is set to "private," their information may be rebroadcast by either Facebook or anyone that is allowed to see that information. Deficits in a conceptual understanding of privacy impede students' understanding that once they have posted something online, they have voluntarily given up their control of the item to an entity that may not have their best interests in mind. Certainly, there is a great divide between trusting your bank to keep your financial information secure and trusting Facebook and your friends to keep your information private. For example, we, and they, may not be familiar with the new privacy controls Facebook recently established in 2010.

Faculty need to discuss and model online civility, discuss online privacy issues, and weave this information and conversation into their courses. It only takes a few minutes to reinforce online privacy issues while supporting civil discourse in the classroom and establishing ground rules for class participation.

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Student affairs professionals have contact with students in numerous important settings and activities. Housing and residence life staff members are much more involved with students' day-to-day living and relationship-building experiences than faculty. Therefore, it is important for student affairs professionals to provide programming that helps students think critically about online information, engage in civil discourse, and focus on privacy issues. By doing so they will reinforce this learning throughout the students' college experiences.

CONCLUSION

WITH THE POPULARITY of newer, faster, and easier methods of online communication, difficulties in interpersonal communications have surfaced. It is incumbent upon higher education institutions, their faculty, and student affairs staff to help students navigate the world of online communication. It is important to remember that while the use of technology can have negative effects on student psychosocial development, we can help students use technology in ways that maximize their development and success. If we, as higher education professionals, keep that notion in mind, we can go far in helping our students achieve greater and healthier levels of development.

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