Social Media

The truth beyond the communities

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IDT 510 Social Media

Throughout the semester, we have studied many different types of social media sites, varying from microblogging such as Twitter and Tumblr to picture-based networking like Pinterest and Instagram. We've even looked at all the different aspects that Facebook has to offer from the various groups you can follow to the economics of the site. After researching the many sites that are available, it is quite clear that social media plays a huge role in our everyday lives. The opportunities are endless. They offer users another platform to interact with people, play games and spread ideas and opinions. Instead of finding out days later about important news, social media has opened the doors for anyone, not just media outlets, to access the news instantaneously.

In the different types of social media, there have been common threads of thought and questions that were of key importance in each of the comparisons and discussion posts each week. I personally believe that after studying each one, there are so many questions that can be answered beyond what they all have in common and its differences. It's simple to say that all forms of social media have made progress in how we communicate with one another online, whether it's through words, images or videos. Each social media site is catered to different users in mind like when we studied Pinterest, where the site has been more designed for women than men. Or how there is a significant difference in how we have to write on Twitter with 140 characters versus Tumblr where you can write as much as you want until your heart's content.

Although social media has been a great platform for ideas, thoughts and other types of user-generated content, there are still some lingering questions: How reliable is social media, and what are its downfalls? After comparing and contrasting the various sites, I noticed that all of them, though they are all designed for interactivity, have become outlets for discrimination and false information. Since the birth of social media, there has been a growing fear that what was once an issue in the "real world" has jumped over to the "virtual world."

Some of the discussions throughout the semester have struck some interesting topics that have not only been key concerns in social media, but also are of curiosity to me. I decided to touch on three areas that have left its mark: cyberbullying, misinformation and identity. Each one of the areas brought about some insight on how social media has really changed the way we communicate and display information.

Cyberbullying: Online taunting

Before the Internet and social media became a craze and a part of our everyday lives, bullying was always a growing issue. In a face-to-face conversation, if someone says the wrong set of words you were judged, made fun of or publicly embarrassed. But this concept has come more

into the spotlight since social media has opened its doors to the public. Now, all it takes is one written word to hurt someone's feelings.

This so-called "public sphere" like we have studied in our discussion posts doesn't mean that it is this perfect world where nothing can break you. Social media is much like the real world; all your worries and troubles don't magically disappear. The reason it is called cyberbullying is self-explanatory. Like I have mentioned in a past discussion, "people can still find ways of damaging other people's reputations and images so they can make themselves look better" (Discussion post No. 4). Though each social media site offers different features catering to everyone's interests, each one is still an extension of the real world we live in. It amazes me how, since the increased fascination in social media communication, people have found it easier to target others. After finding this interesting, I did some research into why it's becoming a growing trend. According to the Enough is Enough: Making the Internet Safer for Children and Families website, the statistics explain themselves. I found some of the cyberbullying numbers from 2011 to be alarming.

- **95 percent:** Teens who use social media have witnessed cruel behavior online say they have seen others ignoring the behavior.
- **66 percent:** Teens have witnessed others joining in the bullying.
- **21 percent:** Teens say they have joined in the harassment.
- **90 percent:** Teens who have seen online cruelty say they ignored mean behavior on social media sites.
- A 2011 Consumer Reports survey said that "one million children were harassed, threatened or subjected to other forms of cyberbullying on Facebook during the last year" (http://www.internetsafety101.org/cyberbullyingstatistics.htm).

Not only do the numbers prove that cyberbullying is on the rise, it also shows that there are various associated signs. With the rise of cyberbullying, people utilizing social networking sites are susceptible to social isolation. According to ProCon.org, "social networking can exacerbate feelings of disconnect (especially for youth with disabilities), and put children at higher risk for depression, low self-esteem and eating disorders" (http://socialnetworking.procon.org). The Web article also suggested that the phrase "passive consumption," which they defined as scanning posts without making a comment, is directly related to loneliness.

I think this is one of the reasons why user-generated content has its downfalls. As much as you can express your thoughts, dreams and other ideas to your group of friends or those that follow you, it seems there are a few in the bunch that think is acceptable to embarrass or use mean behavior to get satisfaction in life. And the only way they can do that is to make everyone's lives around them miserable. It amazes me how much social media has become a platform for negativity about places, things and — of course, people. As we reviewed in discussion post No.

2 about imagined communities, I still raise the question: If we are looking for a sense of belonging in life and in social media, why are we still picking on one another and taking it to new extremes? As proof, the high risks that are mentioned previously have led to more serious problems such as suicide. For instance, one high-profile 2006 cyberbullying case involved a 13-year-old girl named Megan Meier.

Here's the backstory: A Missouri girl was in a relationship on MySpace with a 16-year-old boy who claimed to live nearby. The month-long relationship went south when she began receiving insults. The day before Megan's suicide she got a message saying the boy didn't want to see her again, which then led to more bulletins such as "Megan Meier is fat," according to the Associated Press (http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=3882520). Megan, who had a history of depression, hung herself in bedroom closet on Oct. 16, and a day later she died. Reports say that after her death, the family learned the boy never existed. The twist: A classmate's mother created the false boy's profile and sent the taunts. This case is just one example of where cyberbullying was reported; however, there are some cases where the attacks are not.

That being said, the other issue of the cyberbullying is that no one can effectively stop the action when it happens, "due to everything being performed behind a screen" (http://www.bbc.co.uk/schoolreport/22065333). In a poll from the students at The Crest Girls' Academy in London, they found that the only way to stop a bully is if they are reported and theorized that "victims may be too intimidated to do it." Though I agree with the results of this poll, there has to be other ways that cyberbullying can be diminished. After the 2006 suicide of the Missouri teen, 15 states had into anti-cyberbullying laws, and at the time, Massachusetts was considering passing a law, according to an ABC News report. However, the more I read on the subject matter, I found current reports that state there is a fine line in the laws that separate face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying. A ThinkProgress story from Oct. 15, every state except Montana has anti-bullying legislation; only 18 states specifically mention electronic harassment in their statues (http://thinkprogress.org/health/2013/10/15/2784221/states-cyberbullying-laws/). What's more disturbing news, as stated in the article, is although 44 states allow the schools to determine if students are guilty of cyberbullying, "just 12 states — including Florida — impose criminal sanctions on cyberbullies."

As much as these states are trying to stop online bullying through various laws, I think it's not enough. It is one thing to have something in legal jargon in print doesn't enforce the laws; it just leaves a paper trail. It's another thing to enforce the law, and that's the issue. Cracking down on cyberbullying is going to take more than just legislation for it to end. Words — though they can be powerful — are never bring about a solution. We've seen words spread through awareness, but we've also seen people brought down with words. A possible solution may have to include designing a system to watch every computer in the United States. If there is a sign of

cyberbullying, the authorities are alerted. That being said, one could argue that the possibility would fall into the "big brother" category. The idea would cross the privacy line and break the First Amendment rights of Internet users.

Cyberbullying is not the only issue that exists among all the various types of social media. In the 2006 cyberbullying case in Missouri, another concept popped up — false information. A mother used a fake identity to taunt a student, which led to her committing suicide. User-generated content brings about one question: What is real and what is not?

Believe or not to believe?

Over the various weeks of playing with the different types of social media sites and participating in the bi-weekly discussion posts, I made note as well as other classmates about the issue of false information. Social media raises the most important question: How believable is the information a user posts?

In a participatory culture where people are allowed to produce their own content, you run the risk of fake material sneaking in. This makes it more difficult to check sources against sources. You may go to one social media site to find one set of headlines, but go to another site where it could say something completely different. Like we talked about centralized consumable locations in Discussion Post No. 3, without having all the material in one place, the information floats around, forcing you to determine whether the information is true or not. The Web 2.0 isn't just one set of encyclopedias; it's now more than one. For example, the authors of the article "Users of the World, Unite!" mentioned as much as participatory sites such as Wikipedia are becoming main sources of information, "not everything on Wikipedia may actually be true" (62). Nonetheless, it doesn't matter how many sites I visit on a specific subject where I could get multiple answers, but who do you believe?

Media outlets are one of the best examples of entities that have to deal with this type of problems. Though social media is a great source of information and immediacy, it shouldn't be a main source. Based on my experience in a newsroom as mentioned in my second comparison write-up, the Boston Marathon bombings was one prime incident where the newsroom saw the initial tweet from Twitter, but couldn't confirm or deny whether the breaking news was correct. One source does not make it the right source; it takes multiple sources to find commonalities. After some time, the newsroom was able to confirm the story. After reading some outside sources, I discovered that 49.1 percent of people have heard false news via social media. The website ProCon.org cited several incidents where social media hindered the real facts. For instance, on Sept. 5, 2012, false rumors of fires, shootouts and gunmen in a Mexico City suburb spread through Twitter and Facebook caused panic, took over the police department with more

than 3,000 phone calls and closed schools for a short time. On the other hand, a tweeter named Shashank Tripathi, passed along false facts after Hurricane Sandy, which included writing that the New York Stock Exchange flooded and power was cut to all of Manhattan. The worst part of this story: "the bogus information was picked up by national news outlets including CNN and the Weather Channel."

Because it is easy to deceive and create misinformation, media outlets, as seen above, must independently verify everything. Newsrooms have to heed caution and must create policies that encompass news found on any social media sites. The Poynter Institute, a journalist's best friend for tips and reliable news, have created a list of guidelines to help newsrooms utilize social media as a reporting tool, to promote work, and balance personal and professional lives. Some of the policies include information found online need to confirmed offline, be accurate and actions could be misinterpreted (http://www.poynter.org/latest-news/everyday-ethics/93592/poynter-newsrooms-develop-social-networking-policies-for-journalists-on-facebook-myspace-twitter/).

The popular sites Facebook and Twitter aren't the only places where false information can be found. Out of all the social media that could display the most issues is on LinkedIn, the professional networking and resume site. Employers face challenges when they have to use social media as a hiring factor, which I believe it's the best route to go. Much like a physical resume, an online resume can still have the same false information. You can put anything down on a resume, and there could be some employers out there who are going to take it at face value. It may come down to background checks for employers to realize the person they are planning on hiring isn't the truth.

LinkedIn and Facebook aren't the only places where false information pops up and spreads like wildfire. You can't imagine the number of celebrity deaths that have turned out to be nothing more than a series of rumors online. Misinformation, if worded correctly, can be seen as breaking news to some. Take for instance the number of celebrities that have been added to a long list of celebrity death hoaxes: Avril Lavigne, Eminem, Aretha Franklin and Morgan Freeman, to name a few. Blastmedia.com calls these types of tweets "dangerous" because "most people aren't seen as a creditable source when it comes to celebrity gossip nor does a tweet like this typically insight panic" (http://www.blastmedia.com/blog/2011/09/12/twitter-terrorism-celebrity-death-hoaxes-and-you/).

Background checks may be a thing of the past. In an article from Hamilton College, two students studying reliability of social media are developing a program that will look at the spread of misinformation, where "they will produce a Facebook program that accesses people's post history, and create an algorithm to perform sentiment analysis involving three viral Facebook events" (http://www.hamilton.edu/news/story/preventing-the-spread-of-false-

information). The frequency of target words was involved in the process. The two students, utilizing this program, looked into which users redistributed false information. If this program deems successful, this could change the way information is posted to the Internet and especially social media sites. Weeding out the false facts would help move people out of the gray area of believing what is true and what is not. And it would certainly help employers with sifting through the online resumes on LinkedIn. But, that's not to say how it could affect user-generated content. Could that ultimately put a damper on what is added to Wikipedia, for example?

Programs like the Hamilton College students' concept, in the future, could lead to restrictions and regulations. According to a New York Times editorial in January, "many jurisdictions already have laws that limit freedom of speech in the real world for reasons such as incitement of violence or panic, and are grappling with how to apply those laws to online activities" (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/09/opinion/only-you-can-prevent-digital-wildfires.html?_r=2&). The editorial, however, cites that because of the new forms of communication, limiting the online anonymity and affecting the use of the Internet brings challenges such as censorship. Much like trying to enforce cyberbullying, cracking down on who is passing along misinformation doesn't offer many solutions at the moment. I believe you do cross the line into break not only privacy but giving users the right to post whatever they please on the Internet. The scenarios aren't unlimited, but in the end, controlling users and having government control over social media and even the Internet would hinder future use. What would have possibly moved past a Web 2.0 system would be backtracked, where users visit stagnate sites and could not produce their own content. However, the editorial points out what would happen if regulations were not put in place: New norms will take shape, in that "users of social media typically have less to lose than traditional media outlets from spreading information that has not been properly fact-checked, and are typically less aware of laws related to issues such as libel and defamation."

Identity crisis

With the evolution of social media, the various platforms have really changed the way we see people. In normal face-to-face conversations, we may visually see others in one direction and hop online to notice they are completely different. The people we are in person aren't the same as who we are online. It's like we have two different lives — our everyday lives and the one we would like to be a part of, or our "perfect" worlds. Before we ever came across social media, it seemed like we were always hiding behind brick walls or under the so-called blankets; however, after social media, that weight was lifted. Social media gives users the opportunity to present themselves in a different light. As I mentioned in one discussion post (No. 6), "someone who is

an introvert and has a difficult time communicating with others in the real world may be the complete opposite online."

More importantly, we should try to present ourselves equally to friends, family and other people you may meet along the way. This means the same way we act in the physical world should be in the same manner we present ourselves online. As much as you define your identity face-to-face, that rule should not be broken when you are on any social media site, whether it's Facebook, Twitter or any social game. In the journal by author Sarah Banet-Weiser, the evolution of interactive technologies allowed us to redefine relationships within ourselves and within a brand. Banet-Weiser mentioned that author David Buckingham characterized the "project of the self" as "one in which individuals 'have to create biographical 'narratives' that will explain themselves, and hence sustain a coherent and consistent identity'" (7). By having a consistent identity, you remain true to the friends you make on Facebook, the tweets you write on Twitter and, more importantly, the images and professional brand you create on Instagram and LinkedIn.

I really do believe having two completely different lives doesn't bode well for reputations and credibility. Not only is your identity broken, but also the information could be false, falling back into unreliability factors. A key factor in this topic is that we can lie about our identities in both the real world and the virtual world. Like misinformation, we believe what we want to hear and see, and without ways to fact-check, it could be the only information. Though there are signs when we meet face-to-face that alert us to lying, the signs are more difficult to find online. Creating false identities can happen on any of the social media sites from the names you pick out to even the photos. Currently, you can type in anything as your username; photos can be altered through editing software such as Photoshop.

In a 2012 CNN Tech article, they reported that 83 million Facebook accounts are fakes, which are in three categories: duplicate, misclassified and undesirable. While duplicate and misclassified accounts make up 45.8 million and 22.9 million respectively, the number of undesirable accounts is 14.3 million that "Facebook believes have been created specifically for purposes that violate the companies terms, like spamming" (http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/02/tech/social-media/facebook-fake-accounts/index.html). After false accounts are pinpointed, Facebook disables user access to all content including photos, posts and videos "for safety and security reasons." This is one prime example of how one social networking site is cracking down on users. Facebook has the right to shut down your account if it sees any questionable activity, and the twist is if you are caught, you cannot create a new one with permission from the company.

If Facebook has guidelines to filter out the fake identities on its websites, what about the other social media sites? In researching some of the policies available, some have rules written clear

as day; some have a gray area in which they don't clarify what is considered false information. Twitter and LinkedIn have clear rules on false accounts. More importantly, Twitter has the right to cancel accounts when someone files an impersonation report where you must prove the person is not who he or she really is. When Twitter receives a valid report:

> "Upon receipt of an impersonation report from the individual being impersonated or a legally authorized representative, we will investigate the reported accounts to determine if the accounts are in violation of the Twitter rules. Upon confirming the reporter's identification, accounts determined to be in violation of our impersonation policy, or not in compliance with our parody/commentary policy, will either be suspended or asked to make edits" (https://support.twitter.com/articles/20170142-reporting-impersonation-accounts).

For LinkedIn, on the other hand, has a number of policies about inaccurate information; however, they don't have a clear punishment. They instead have a list of do's and don'ts outlined on their user agreement page. The company asks that you do not add any information that could be inaccurate, let alone any type of impersonation. What is interesting is you can flag an inappropriate profile and file a formal complaint. At that point, I was to assume that LinkedIn has the right to cancel your account, but they don't really explain how they go about investigating it like Twitter does. Where it gets sort of gray is with Pinterest and Instagram. I believe because they are more image-based social media than word-based, the companies are going to have a more difficult time figuring out false identities. Though the companies ask that your information be accurate, a specific section does not go into great detail on its actions.

Conclusion

Social media, since it has come into existence, has added a new outlet for communication where we are able to connect with people with the click of the mouse or the touch of a smartphone screen. Though it's given users the chance to interact through words, videos, photos and music, the world of the real life has collided with the world of social media. People may think that it's is a place where their worries and concerns can never exist; that is not the case. Much like we deal with the problems of discrimination, identity and other issues in the real world, social media has only enhanced those problems. We no longer have to be face-to-face with others to damage their reputations. With the addition of new communication platforms, it has forced us to think about how we are to act not only in public but also online. Our behavior in public must reflect who we are on social media.