Social Networking

What Are the Consequences of Becoming an Online Society?

CHAPTER 21

The impact of social networking is not to be confused with the impact of the internet. In the first of these essays, Alfredo Lopez argues that where the web is expansive and freeing, social networks are restrictive and limiting. There are times, however, when young people need to limit what they reveal about themselves through social networking. It can be chilling to learn how much a social networking company can know about its users and who might gain access to that information. Parents are becoming aware of the dangers that too much of a presence on social networking sites can pose for their children. College students need to be aware that graduate schools and potential employers may look at online information about an applicant in addition to what is in a résumé, as Isaac Gilman explains. Josh Moody adds that a student who has been accepted by a college can even have that acceptance rescinded because of inappropriate social media posts.

Are sites such as Facebook a place where the lonely can find a solution to their isolation, or do such sites merely make them feel that others have better lives than they do, as Jasmine Garsd suggests? Can a long list of online "friends" take the place of real-world contacts, or is it primarily those who make friends easily offline who do so online as well? In the final selection in the chapter, Gretchen McCulloch looks at generational differences in how social media are used. For many people today, social networking sites have changed the dynamics of social interaction.

Social Networking and the Death of the Internet

ALFREDO LOPEZ

Before Reading: How do the internet and social networking sites differ in purpose? Which offer the most potential benefit to humankind?

This summer, a team at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) has undertaken a remarkable project: to recreate the first Web site and the computer on which it was first seen.

It's a kind of birthday celebration. Twenty years ago, software developers at the University of Illinois released a Web browser called Mosaic in response to work being done at CERN. There, a group led by Tim Berners-Lee had developed a protocol (a set of rules governing communications between computers) that meshed two basic concepts: the ability to upload and store data files on the Internet and the ability of computers to do "hypertext," which converts specific words or groups of words into links to other files.

They called this new development the "World Wide Web."

When you read Berners-Lee's original proposal you get a feeling for the enthusiasm and optimism that drove this work, and since it's all very recent, the people who did it are still around to explain why. In interviews, Sir Tim (Berners-Lee is now a Knight) insists he could not foresee how powerful his new project would be but he knew it would make a difference. For the first time in history, people could communicate as much as they want with whomever they want wherever they want. That, as he argued in a recent article, is the reason why it's so critical to keep the Web neutral, uncontrolled, and devoid of corporate or government interference.

In our convoluted world of constantly flowing disinformation, governments tell us the Web is a "privilege" to be paid for and lost if we misbehave, corporations tell us they invented it, and most of us use it without really thinking much about its intent. Very few people view the World Wide Web as the revolutionary creation it actually is. 5

Whether its "creators" or the vast numbers of techies who continue to develop the Web think about it politically or not, there is an underlying understanding that unifies their efforts: the human race is capable of constructive exchange of information which will bring us knowledge all humans want and benefit from, and in collaborating on that knowledge we can search for the truth. There is nothing more revolutionary than that because the discovered truth is the firing pin of all revolution.

Twenty years later, it's painfully ironic that, when they hear the word "Internet," most people probably think of Social Networking programs like Facebook and Twitter. As ubiquitous and popular as Social Networking is, it represents a contradiction to the Internet that created it and to the World Wide Web on which it lives. It is the cyber version of a "laboratory controlled" microbe: it can be and frequently is productive, but if used unchecked and unconsciously, it can unleash enormous destruction, reversing the gains we've made with technology and divorcing us from its control.

Alfredo Lopez is a political activist, radical journalist, and codirector of the progressive web-hosting media service May First/People Link. This piece appeared online at *CounterPunch* magazine on May 8, 2013.

That's a harsh picture, so some explanation is called for.

You may think the World Wide Web and the Internet are the same thing. They're not. The Web is to the Internet what a city is to human existence. The first can't live without the second; the second is extended by the first. But they are not, and never can be, the same.

10 The Internet is a system of communications comprised of billions of computers that connect to each other through telecommunications lines. It allows people to interact in different ways like email, file upload, chat, and, of course, the good old Web.

The Web is a function of the Internet, a kind of subset through which data files stored on a computer (called a "server") can be accessed and viewed by people using a special piece of software called a "browser." You're reading this with a browser, and your browser is reading this as a file on a server and translating it into what you see. To do that, it uses a protocol called "Hyper Text Transfer Protocol" or "http." That is what makes the Web special because it produces "hot links" that you can click on to go to any site or page the link creator wants you to. . . . You can keep clicking and deepen your knowledge, broaden your understanding, investigate other connected ideas, and get other perspectives on those ideas.

The World Wide Web puts the knowledge and experience of the entire human race at your disposal. With the Web, the human race has finally experienced world-wide collaboration. That, essentially, is the power unleashed by the event that took place twenty years ago.

We can debate the Internet's contribution to social struggle, but there is no question that the era of the Web has seen, among other things, the democratization of the previously dictator-dominated Latin America, the democratic struggles in Northern Africa, the ascendancy of Asian countries as world powers and the resulting democratic struggles those developments feed, and, of course, the intense social struggles in the United States that have led to scores of movements, the massive Occupy movement, and a black President (probably impossible before the Web).

Compare that to the year 1968, when every continent in the world was awash with resistance and mass movements—fearing a revolutionary over-throw, the government of France actually moved its offices to Germany—and when the culture and social norms of the United States were radically shifted by left-wing activism. Because much going on in the rest of the world was hidden by our corporate-controlled media, most of us in this country didn't realize it was happening. And so we thought we were all alone, and in that perceived isolation, we were not able to envision the next steps in a struggle to create a just world.

That will never happen again because we 15
now have the Internet. We can envision the next step and we are taking it all the time. The difference is that forty-five years ago, "we" were the people of the United States (or some other individual society). In today's Web era, "we" are the entire world.

"At the heart of the original web is technology to decentralize control and make access to information freely available to all," writes the BBC's superb technology and science writer Pallab Ghosh. "It is this architecture that seems to imbue those that work with the web with a culture of free expression, a belief in universal access and a tendency toward decentralizing

information. It is the early technology's innate ability to subvert that makes re-creation of the first website especially interesting."

How does "Social Networking" jibe with that original intent? To a large extent, it doesn't.

Social Networking is a marketing term. It isn't a protocol. It uses nothing new, has added no new technological concepts. It is entirely based on the very same programming the Web has functioned on for two decades. In fact, Social Networking is nothing more than lots of people using some very large Web sites. But technology's importance isn't how it's built; it's how people use and perceive it.

People use it . . . a lot. Last year, over a billion people had Facebook accounts. Twitter routinely logs similar numbers. In short, each of these "services" draws half of all estimated Internet users. There is no question that, in terms of numbers and speed of development, Social Networking is the most successful project in Internet history.

20 Ironically, the key to Social Networking's success is a central part of the danger it poses.

Facebook—a group of linked pages on a giant Web site—is constraining and not very powerful. In order to use it, you have to use it the way they want you to, and that's not a whole lot of "using." But there is a comfort in having one's options limited, being able to use something without learning anything about it or making many choices about how you use it. That alluring convenience is a poisoned apple, however. You may not have to learn much about Facebook to use it, but the people who own Facebook sure learn a lot about you when you do.

Social Networking is, by its nature, a capture environment. The companies that offer the services, particularly Facebook, host your site and control all the information on it. When you think about what that information says about you, the control is disturbing. CNN writer Julianne Pepitone called Facebook "one of the most valuable data sets in existence: the social graph. It's a map of the connections between you and everyone you interact with."

Not only is your personal data on Facebook but the personal data of all the people you designate as "friends." In many cases, their photos are displayed (as are yours) showing their faces, the faces of those they come into contact with, and the places where the contact took place. There are also long strings of thoughts, comments, reports on what you're planning to do or what you did and who you did it with. A single Web page offers a profile of your life, your activities, and your thinking. What's more, because others "comment" on your Facebook pages in an informal gathering of like minds (or social contacts), those connections are condensed.

This amalgamation of information isn't evil in and of itself. In fact, it could be remarkably empowering. But the problem is that all of it is in the hands of one large company and that company owns it. It will use it in marketing studies and advertising profiles, and it will turn that information over to any government agency that asks for it. You have no control over that. It's in the user agreement. It's published and it's no longer yours. It belongs to Facebook and anybody Facebook wants to share it with.

If you want to try to alter what's presented 25
and how, you can't. One of the charms and strengths of the Web is your ability to design and organize your presentations on a Web site that can easily be unique—showing what you want to show and hiding what you don't,

protecting contact with others through easily created Web forms and discussion boards that let people "hide" their real identities, controlling what you share with the world. That can't happen with Facebook.

Social Networking displays information about you as an individual while restraining your ability to contribute information and thinking about the rest of the world. In fact, its structure often makes that contribution more difficult.

With Twitter, for example, you have 140 characters to make your statement. How much thinking can you communicate in 140 characters? Twitter feels like a room in which a large number of people are shouting single sentences—a lot of noise, even a few ideas, but mainly just individualized statements bereft of context, knowledge, or the need to exchange perspectives with anyone. Facebook carries so many one-sentence statements that writing anything longer seems strange and even rude.

The incremental "take-over" of the Internet by these programs has one other, even more serious, impact: it's oppressing people, particularly young people, by repressing their thinking and communication, the very benefits the Web has given us.

The World Wide Web is a classroom without walls, a library in which a library card isn't needed. Its power of access to so much information is expanded by the Web's inclusion of you, and every other human being, as a source of information. We not only learn what others think and know from the Web, we are free and even encouraged to add our own viewpoint, knowledge, and experiences to that massive mix of information. By adding the hyperlink to this system, its developers have erased national boundaries, combated cultural exclusivism, battered racism and sexism, smashed into human isolation, gone a long way toward combating ignorance, and expanded our ability to effectively write and communicate.

The seed in the struggle for freedom is the belief that you, as an individual, have value and that your life, as you live it, is of interest and importance to others. That's a message that is repressed in this oppressive society, and keeping that truth hidden is the key to continued oppression. There is nothing more liberating than realizing that your thinking and your experience can be shared with others and that others actually can benefit from it. The Web is the intellectual champion of individual human worth. 30

But that's not Facebook and it's not Twitter. There is simply no way one can share the complexity of one's thinking or the analysis of one's life in a one-paragraph Facebook message or a 140-character Tweet. For many young people, the encouraged reliance on these tools of communication, often to the exclusion of the Web's more abundant capabilities, reverses the impact the Web has had. Used alone, it makes communications shallow, a series of "references" to what the writer hopes others will understand. It is to real discussion what a wink of the eye and poke in the ribs is to honest and revealing communication.

Does Social Networking have a purpose? Absolutely. Some use it to refer to Web pages; it's an effective means of announcement. Some use it to "stay in touch" or tell others about something happening—as Arab Spring activists used it. It is unquestionably useful.

But those who profit from it push the idea that rather than a support for the rest of Internet communications, Social Networking is a

substitute for those communications. That is proving very attractive to hundreds of millions of young people, and it is increasingly damaging the potential of the World Wide Web for, among other things, real social change.

The debate over its use and impact will continue and my own opinion is certainly not the last word, but I know one thing. The people who first developed this marvel we call the World Wide Web didn't have Social Networking in mind. In fact, what they envisioned (a vision that has come to fruition) is fundamentally different from Social Networking, and people who want to change this world need to actively and vigilantly protect and preserve that difference.

#BLESSED: Is Everyone Happier than You on Social Media?

JASMINE GARSD

Before Reading: What role does social media play in your life? Does being on social media improve the quality of your life, or are there times when it causes dissatisfaction?

BuzzFeed host Tracy Clayton recently asked her Twitter followers to share a picture that they had uploaded to social media—one in which they looked great, but were actually going through a very difficult time.

The tweet went viral. An outpouring of smiling snapshots, accompanied with heart-wrenching behind-the-scenes anecdotes.

Mankaprr Conteh is one of the hundreds who responded. She remembers when the picture she shared was taken, two years ago, when she was twenty-two. She was in the Caribbean.

"My hair is in my hands. The water is shallow. And I'm smiling," Conteh says.

5 She looks stunning. Had you been browsing Instagram, you wouldn't have known that this was one of the worst times of her life. "I was initially diagnosed with depression, and then later diagnosed with bipolar 2. It's like hating waking up, like dreading the morning," Conteh says.

Distressed about her daughter, Conteh's mother took her on a vacation. Conteh says it was a challenging trip—her mother felt powerless and broke down in tears quite a bit. But there were some moments of respite, one of which was when the picture of Conteh smiling in the water was taken.

If you've spent any time on social media, you've seen this. Pictures of people having a better time than you, often accompanied by the hashtags #blessed and #grateful. Popular culture tells us that people like posting this to show off.

But it's more complicated than that, says Dr. Brian Primack, director of the Center for Research on Media, Technology and Health at the University of Pittsburgh.

"People who feel socially isolated may be reaching out on social media, on some level, to self-medicate," he says. Primack suspects that people who are depressed often post to reach out, to feel like they are participating in the fun.

Primack has co-authored several studies 10
about how social media affect mental health. He found that people who checked social media

Jasmine Garsd is a reporter for National Public Radio and a contributor to *This American Life* and *Planet Money*. Her piece was broadcast on *All Things Considered* on NPR on August 6, 2018.

the most frequently had almost three times the risk of depression, compared with people who checked less often.

But other research points to the possible benefits of social media. A recent study of brain development found that for nine- and ten-year-old children, greater social media use, such as scrolling through Instagram and texting, was associated with some positive effects, including increased physical activity, less family conflict, and fewer sleep problems. Children who had a higher use of general media, like Internet, TV and video games, were more prone to having worse sleep and more family conflict.

Primack's findings focus on adults ages 19–32. He says part of the problem is that on one level, we know these are filtered, curated photos. But on social media, "these are real people, so you feel like this is very much real life. You know it's not a Jose Cuervo ad, where the people are getting paid to put on smiles. These are people that you actually know."

In other words, it's a happiness that, albeit closely curated, feels more attainable. If your high school buddy is living it up on a yacht, then why aren't you?

So which comes first? Do you reach out more on social media because you are depressed, or do you get more depressed because you spend more time there? Primack doesn't know, but he suspects it's a cycle. "That reaching out might then only serve to increase the perception of social isolation, which then leads to more social media use, etc.," he says.

So why did Conteh post that picture of herself smiling on the beach? 15

"It was like a celebration of the not crappiness of that moment," she says. "It was almost like trying to get back into the groove of normalcy, in the midst of depression." It captured the way she wished things could actually be.

But she gets the irony of going on this platform in which "everybody seems happy. And productive. And accomplished. And beautiful," when back then, she didn't feel any of those things.

These days, Conteh is an incoming journalism graduate student. Some of her work has focused on mental health, and she says she has thought about how social media affect mental health. She talks openly about her depression—online and offline. She tells people, "Hey, this is what I'm going through, this is how I'm trying to work with it and cope with it. This is how I think it's affecting you, and this is how we're going to try to move forward with all this in mind."

Primack says we shouldn't dismiss social media as altogether bad. We simply need to understand it better. He uses the analogy of nutrition in America—and how at some point we figured out that our eating was not as healthy as possible. Scientists began researching and people began taking an interest in the topic.

The same process will happen with social media, Primack says. It's still all very new to us. 20

Online Lives, Offline Consequences: Professionalism, Information Ethics, and Professional Students

ISAAC GILMAN

Before Reading: How could what college students post online now affect their ability to get into graduate or professional school or to get a job in the future?

Introduction

The growth of the Internet over the past decade has made many tasks and personal interactions easier and faster. Students who have never experienced higher education without Google take for granted their ability to access information and entertainment at the click of a mouse and to live online lives unimpeded by anything except modem speed. For students enrolled in professional graduate programs (e.g., medicine, law, education), it is inevitable that their online experiences will shape their understanding of what is appropriate and what is ethical—which could have unanticipated professional consequences. To ensure that students' behaviors do not jeopardize their future careers, educators must understand the online activities that present ethical and professional issues and make every effort to educate students about appropriate behavior and interactions in an online environment (Gardner; Workman).

Academic Honesty and Information Ethics

For educators, perhaps the most familiar ethical issue facing students is that of academic honesty. For today's Internet-savvy students, who have become accustomed to cutting and pasting information on the fly with little attention to citations, the opportunity to use "free" online information is often too tempting to refuse. Studies over the past ten to fifteen years have confirmed that the ease of the Internet has exacerbated the misuse of others' intellectual property (Auer and Krupar; Szabo and Underwood 180). In an "open" online environment, there is no accountability for those who may inappropriately provide/use others' work. Thanks to the speed of cut-and-paste, there is also little time for students to even consider whether or not their use is ethical (Bodi 459). Even for students who do stop to consider their actions, one study found that the majority of students "would give in to Internet plagiarism under the right combination of situational and personal factors" (Szabo and Underwood 196).

As familiar (and frustrated) as educators are with the unethical use of intellectual property, students are even more familiar with faculty lectures condemning the same. Honor codes, lectures on paper mills, and the evils of plagiarism—even the use of plagiarism detection services like Turnitin.com—have largely failed to make a lasting impression on students who do not recognize the seriousness of the issue (Harris 4). For many students, like 380 undergraduates surveyed about downloading copyrighted content, the use/misuse of others' intellectual property is still seen as a "victimless crime" (Siemens and Kopp 118). Indeed, for

Isaac Gilman is dean of university libraries at Pacific University in Oregon, where he has helped graduate students and the university as a whole understand the ethics of copyright and intellectual property. This article appeared in the January–February 2009 issue of *Interface*, the electronic journal of the Berglund Center for Internet Studies at Pacific University.

undergraduate students who believe that anything accessible is free, who do not anticipate publishing a journal article, and who may never depend on a scholarly or professional reputation, it can be difficult to convey the significance of academic honesty.

However, for graduate students who may one day contribute to the professional literature, creating ethical habits for the use of others' intellectual property is of the utmost significance. Whether these students go on to become academics or practitioners, their scholarly record and actions will likely contribute to their reputation and career prospects, for better or worse. Works created as students may also persist for years if posted online (as is the case with many theses, dissertations, and other culminating projects), and it is vital that students understand from the beginning of their programs not only how to avoid plagiarism but also how to ethically—and legally—use copyrighted materials.

Social Networking and Professionalism

5 Though both educators and students are largely familiar with the issues of plagiarism and academic honesty, it is an entirely new issue that poses the greatest threat to students' professionalism—and one that has, on its face, nothing to do with students' academic performance or professional aspirations.

Over the past decade, the social/communication possibilities on the World Wide Web have grown exponentially, with one of the most notable developments being the creation of social networking sites—MySpace, Facebook, et al. As with many technologies, students were early (and fervent) adopters, with Facebook the popular choice of nearly 80–90 percent of United States college students (Educause). Profiles on social networking sites like Facebook allow students to communicate with friends, share photos and videos, and connect with people with similar interests. For students, their online profiles and communities are as personal as their offline friendships and interactions—and, often, are an extension of their offline activities, with Facebook used as a collaborative event planner and photo album.

While social networking sites and the Web connect students to one another, another connection is created that students may not anticipate (or enjoy). With student photos, blogs, comments, and affiliations publicly available online (unless privacy settings are adjusted by the student), the digital world has removed the divide between "personal and professional identities" (Thompson et al. 954). Students' (and employees') professionalism and fitness is no longer judged solely on their academic and on-the-job performance, but on their very public personal personas. Newspapers, blogs, and academic reports from the past five years are filled with stories of schools and employers who have begun accessing social networking profiles looking for any untoward information as a means of evaluation/investigation (Capriccioso; Epstein; Steinbach and Deavers; Vorster; Wilson; Read; Thomas; Bergstrom). New online services are dedicated to digging up digital dirt on prospective employees, with the promising of "automat[ing] candidate research across forty-one social networks" (Spokeo).

The blurring of the line between personal and professional identities is an important issue for any student or employee, but particularly so for those in professional fields wherein public perception of professional competence and appropriate separating from patients, clients,

or students are vital. Though there is nothing inherently unethical about the use of social networking sites, publicly sharing unprofessional content (e.g., explicit or inappropriate comments/photos) or excessive personal information may be compromising for professionals. Educators and researchers from medical, law, education, and pharmacy schools have all expressed concern that professional students may not understand the consequences of their online activities, or the risk of their personal offline activities being made public online by others (Thompson et al.; Cain; Farnan et al.; Mangan).

Research and anecdotal evidence suggest that professional students either do not share educators' concerns or are not aware that their online lives could have any bearing on their professionalism. In a recent study at the University of Florida, only 37.5 percent (n = 362) of medical students and residents had private (viewable only by designated friends) Facebook profiles. The same study found that, in a small sample of students with public profiles (n = 10), 70 percent of the students had photographs of themselves with alcohol and 30 percent had pictures or videos that showed "drunkenness, overt sexuality, foul language and patient privacy violations in non-U.S. locations" (Thompson et al. 955–56). Students in the study also belonged to Facebook groups with highly unprofessional names; e.g., "I don't need sex cause grad school f**ks me every day," "Party of Important Male Physicians (PIMP)," "Physicians look for trophy wives in training" (Ferdig et al.). There is also evidence to suggest that current undergraduates (and future professional students) share the same lack of concern and awareness. In a separate study by the same researchers at the University of Florida, researchers analyzed Facebook profiles of three hundred elementary education majors. Of the students with public profiles, 75 percent listed their sexual orientation and 73 percent had personal photo albums available (Univ. of Florida). A 2005 study by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), determined that less than 1 percent of CMU Facebook users (n = 4,450; a mix of students and faculty) had changed their default privacy settings to limit the visibility of their profiles (Gross and Acquisti). An informal online survey by the Pacific *Index*, the student newspaper at Pacific University (Oregon), found that 33 percent of respondents believed they would never get in trouble for photos posted on Facebook, while 17 percent were "not going to worry about what people think of my personal life" ("Do You Post"). Comments made in a thread started by a prospective pharmacy student on an online message board confirm all of these findings:

> mrsengle: "Pharmacists are in such high demand, employers put up with a LOT. As long as you have a license, don't have a DUI or possessions charge, have a degree and a pulse, you shouldn't worry about them checking an old myspace [sic] page" ("Grad schools/employers").

YouTube and Beyond

Unprofessional content posted on Facebook is not the only area of online concern for professional educators. Other venues for sharing personal (and/or unprofessional) material include blogs and video sharing sites such as YouTube. In one recent case, medical students posted a musical parody they had filmed on YouTube, which featured the students "dancing in the anatomy lab," "drinking 'blood' (actually chocolate) from plastic skulls," and "lying inside body bags" (Farnan et al. 518). The video was subsequently removed from

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YouTube at the request of the dean of the medical school (Farnan et al. 520).

The medical students' YouTube video illustrates an important reason for addressing online professionalism with professional students: There are notable differences between generations regarding what is/is not humorous, acceptable, and appropriate. As one educator has observed, "[w]hat looks like plagiarism, slander, copyright infringement, and embarrassing public behavior is for many students just creative and social entertainment" (Workman). While many students are beginning to understand that their personal behavior is reflective on their professional identities (Young), some still have not made the connection, or even believe that what they are doing—and posting online—has the possibility of offending anyone.

Whether or not students believe that their online activities should have any relevance to their academic and professional lives, it is growing increasingly clear that students' online personalities will be at issue for schools, employers, and other professionals. There has been a call for lawyers' bar applications to include the "cyber equivalent" of a background check (Stellato), and in an unprecedented move, applicants who wished to work in President Barack Obama's administration were required to complete a background check that included the following requests:

- "Please list [. . .] any posts or comments on blogs or other websites you have authored, individually or with others. Please list all aliases or 'handles' you have used to communicate on the Internet."
- "If you have ever sent an electronic communication, including but not limited to an email, text message or instant message, that could suggest a conflict of interest or be a possible source of embarrassment to you, your family, or the President-Elect if it were made public, please describe."
- "Please provide the URL address of any websites that feature you in either a personal or professional capacity (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, etc.)." (Obama-Biden Transition)

Conclusion

Professional students must understand the implications of their online activities and the importance of extending professionalism to their online lives. To convey this understanding, there should be comprehensive instruction provided for all professional students that addresses the issues of intellectual property, plagiarism, social networking, blogging, personal websites, email etiquette, etc. Individual workshops do already exist (Mangan), but to be the most effective, this instruction should be either integrated into program curriculum or made a required elective, and must be closely tied to the relevant professional association's code of ethics/conduct.

"E-literacy" (incorporating information ethics and online behavior standards) should be treated as a necessary competency for students to achieve, much like any other required knowledge/skills they receive in the course of their programs. Above all else, e-literacy instruction must help students realize that their online actions are not segregated from their professional lives, that their offline lives can easily end up online, and that anything posted on the Internet will persist long after it is removed. The guiding question for professional students should be, "Would it be appropriate for my mother/employer/patient/client to see what I am about to post?" (Keenan). Because if they have a computer and an Internet connection, they probably will.

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Why Colleges Look at Students' Social Media

JOSH MOODY

Before Reading: Do you think that it is appropriate for colleges to look at prospective students' social media in the course of making a decision about admission? Why, or why not?

With a single-digit acceptance rate, Harvard University in Massachusetts has been among the toughest schools to get into. But in recent years, some students who cleared that high bar for admission had their acceptance rescinded before even stepping on campus. The reason: inappropriate social media posts.

Experts say that colleges want more than just a student with good grades and impressive test scores—they want someone of high character.

"As a residential campus, when we're reviewing candidates, we're just not admitting students for the classroom; we're admitting students to be a part of this community," says Marilyn Hesser, executive director of admission at the University of Richmond in Virginia.

The University of Richmond doesn't look at an applicant's social media accounts,

Josh Moody is an education journalist covering college admissions and international education for *U.S. News and World Report*. Previously he blogged about higher education trends for *Forbes*. His article appeared on *U.S. News & World Report* on August 22, 2019.

Hesser says, unless the student sends links highlighting profiles. Another scenario is that admissions officers may look at social media if troubling information about a candidate is sent by a third party, often someone who remains anonymous.

While Hesser says applicants have been turned down "on rare occasions" for social media posts, it still happens both at Richmond and at colleges across the country.

According to a 2017 survey administered by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, 11 percent of respondents said they "denied admission based on social media content" and another 7 percent rescinded offers for the same reason.

Do Colleges Look at a Student's Social Media Accounts?

A 2018 Kaplan Test Prep survey found that about 25 percent of college admissions officers review applicants' social media profiles.

"I think it's important for kids to understand that colleges, even the really large colleges, are doing much more holistic admissions, that admissions goes way beyond the data," says Judi Robinovitz, a certified educational planner and founder and co-owner of Score At The Top Learning Centers & Schools in Florida. She adds that social media can offer another look at a student.

Hesser says that if something in a college application is unclear, admissions staff will look to social media if it offers clarity on a matter.

Admissions officers do look at social media accounts for prospective students, but the practice is declining, according to the Kaplan Test Prep survey. While 25 percent of admissions pros looked at social media in 2018, that's down from 40 percent in 2015. According to the survey, the decline is due to applicants who are more cautious about social media and increased privacy concerns.

Looking at social media may also have limited value, Hesser says: "Colleges really aren't getting that much more information."

Why Do Colleges Look at a Student's Social Media Accounts?

Typically, experts say, if admissions officers are looking at a prospective student's social media account, it's because a link to the profile was included in application materials. Linking to social media can be a good way to showcase certain skills or add more information, experts say, though the effort may not always pay off considering the sheer volume of applications colleges see.

"We have to weigh that with the fact that the admission officers who are reading thousands and thousands of applications are not going to go check everybody on social media, and probably not everybody who even sends a link," Hesser says.

And when colleges do find the time to look at social media, it's not necessarily to disqualify candidates.

"I don't think they're trying to find reasons to reject kids. I think that they're trying to find reasons to advocate for a particular student or to see how a particular student has really set herself apart," Robinovitz says.

Social Media as a Supplement to Admissions Materials

While many colleges simply don't look at social media, it can be a way to offer additional information to those schools that do.

"We want (students) to build a digital portfolio to present these noncognitive skills they can bring in, whether it's leadership, understanding of collaboration, time management, resilience. It's really designed to complement one's application or resume," says Alan Katzman, CEO and founder of Social Assurity, which trains students on how to harness the power of social media.

Katzman compares social media to a supplemental essay, which he notes many colleges no longer require. Social media, he explains, allows students to create vibrant portfolios that provide admissions officers a different view into what they have to offer.

"The beauty of social media is that you're not limited to 500 words," Katzman says.

Avoiding Red Flags on Social Media

20 Katzman boils social media down to three rules: You're never anonymous, it never disappears, and anyone can find your posts. With those three rules in mind, students should think carefully about what they post, he says.

Experts agree that students shouldn't post anything that is bigoted toward any group, sexist or seemingly threatening.

"Colleges want to assemble a safe, diverse community. If you are showing hatred for any particular people, that's a red flag. They don't want you there," Katzman says.

Hesser says the University of Richmond considers its code of conduct for enrolled students when weighing social media posts.

"The (social media) review that happens at Richmond is similar to the review that would happen if a current student did the same thing," Hesser says.

25 Robinovitz tells her students to consider how their grandmother would react: "You may want to put yourself in the position of your grandmother. Would your grandmother be upset, angry or embarrassed if she were to read some of your postings?"

Sending Positive Signals on Social Media

Katzman sees value in using social media to engage with schools and encourages students to follow colleges across various platforms.

But he discourages students from casually mentioning colleges on social media, noting those remarks are visible to schools. His preference is that students follow and thoughtfully interact with college social media accounts. To get started, they may want to consider creating social media accounts specifically for the college admissions process rather than personal use.

"We want you to create a new channel, a channel that's going to have content for people who you've never met, who are going to be making important decisions about your future," Katzman says.

Social media can also be a useful tool for demonstrating interest to colleges during the admissions process.

"My other advice to students is that 30
when they're on a college visit, and snapping pictures . . . post it on Twitter or Instagram and have something positive to say about the university," Robinovitz says. She adds that prospective students should also follow colleges on social media to get a glimpse of campus life in order to craft a more personalized application for each school.

If students plan to use social media as another way to sell themselves to colleges, they need to have a strategy.

"They have to figure out what it is they want to highlight and showcase," Katzman says.

Students can use social media platforms in different ways to emphasize skills and interests. LinkedIn, Katzman says, is an effective way to highlight school activities, projects and extracurricular activities. Similarly, Instagram can be a great digital portfolio, particularly for artistically inclined students to show off their work. Facebook, he adds, can be useful for showcasing family life and activities, such as community service or experiences abroad.

And once students are admitted to a college, they should still think carefully about what they post on social media. According to AACRAO, 52 percent of respondents who monitor social media continue to do so "once an admissions decision has been made."

Post Internet People

GRETCHEN McCULLOCH

Before Reading: Why did you choose the social media platform or platforms that you use? Do you change platforms from time to time? Are the platforms you use different from the ones used by your parents' generation? Why or why not?

When I was growing up, my family didn't have a television. This made me a trifle eccentric among my peers, but I nonetheless picked up, by cultural osmosis and glimpses at other people's houses, the essentials of TV culture: how to operate a remote control, the *Jeopardy!* theme song, and the social progression of *Sesame Street* from "the best" to "a thing for babies" to the nostalgia-fueled best again. I grew up in a post-television generation, irrespective of my own (lack of) participation in it. The Pre Internet People don't feel socially connected to the internet even when they do use it, and the Post Internet People are the inverse: socially influenced by the internet regardless of their own level of use. They don't remember the first time they used a computer or did something online, the way that earlier generations don't remember when they first watched a television or used a telephone, and they can talk about the social implications of following and liking even if they don't personally have an account on a given platform or even use social media at all. It's just part of the social landscape.

Practically speaking, the bright line question that divides Full and Post Internet People is often, did you get Facebook before or after your parents? Or in more general terms, did you arrive on the social internet after it was already ubiquitous, or were you on it when it was still a niche or young-person thing? In the survey that I did in 2017, the first social platform of the thirteen- to seventeen-year-olds was a pretty even split between either the Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Gchat cluster or the Instagram, Snapchat, iMessage, WhatsApp cluster. About a third of eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds joined them in selecting the Facebook cluster. (Another half of the eighteen- to twenty-three-year-olds selected the IM cluster and are thus grouped with the Full Internet People above.)

Digital residency tends to start around age nine to fourteen. Small children use touchscreens as media devices, for playing games and watching videos. But their use of the internet for communication is still mediated by their

Gretchen McCulloch is an internet linguist and author of the *New York Times* bestseller *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language* (2019), in which this selection appears.

caregivers, just like their offline relationships: parents coordinate a videochat with grandparents or arrange with another parent for their kids to be able to videochat just as they're in charge of playdates or going to the park. This is partly for practical reasons: internet communication still often takes knowing how to read and type, there are real concerns about age-appropriate material, and the age requirement for most social networking sites is thirteen.[1] But even for open platforms like texting, and even assuming some users lie about their ages, the switch to regularly carrying a device and using it for your own, autonomous communication happens in the tween or early teen years. This is the period when parents want to be able to coordinate logistics directly with their kids rather than through other adults, and kids start asking for phones because the social life of your peers becomes more enticing than hanging out with your parents.

Since this is the youngest cohort, it's tempting to treat them as our crystal ball, and try to divine from their social media practices what we're all going to be doing in another decade or two. But it's important to be cautious about any attempt at Divination By Teenager. We need to separate out the linguistic and social features that are characteristic of this stage in life from those that will follow them as they age.

5 A certain genre of trendy article pops up every couple months in which the writer explains how teens are using social media right now—sometimes by interviewing a teenage relative, sometimes by profiling a handful of supposedly representative teenagers, sometimes by being an older teen and reflecting on the usage of their friends. What these profiles inevitably find is that popular teenagers are texting or snapping or other-kind-of-messaging each other, for seemingly no reason, at rates completely unfathomable to the adult writer. Thousands of texts a month! Running up data bills! If they dig a step deeper, they may also find that shyer, nerdier, or more introverted teens are doing less of all this.

But none of this is unique to the internet. As the linguist and internet researcher Susan Herring points out, her generation of baby boomer teens hung out "aimlessly" in malls, at drive-in movies, at sock hops and school sports games and public parks. They created codes and wrote backwards to pass notes, the same way kids in internet generations create inventive language for texting, and they decorated their lockers or bedrooms like a younger generation takes great care with their social media profiles. Whether they're spending hours on the landline telephone, racking up a massive texting bill, or being "addicted" to Facebook or MySpace or Instagram, something that teens want to do in every generation is spend a lot of unstructured time hanging out, flirting, and jockeying for status with their peers.

Herring also points to a French sociology study from 1981, which found that sociability is highest among teenagers and young adults, and declines as people get older. "All else being equal," writes Herring, "this suggests that one should interpret observed differences in digital sociability between younger and older users as life-stage related, rather than as indicating an ongoing change in the direction of increased sociability for all digital media users." Even the

[1] The Children's Online Privacy Protection Act has various regulations for websites catering to those aged twelve or younger, and for ease of enforcement many sites simply require users to be thirteen or older.

fact that teens use all kinds of social networks at higher rates than twenty-somethings doesn't necessarily mean that they prefer to hang out online. Studies consistently show that most teens would rather hang out with their friends in person. The reasons are telling: teens prefer offline interaction because it's "more fun" and you "can understand what people mean better." But suburban isolation, the hostility of malls and other public places to groups of loitering teenagers, and schedules packed with extracurriculars make these in-person hangouts difficult, so instead teens turn to whatever social site or app contains their friends (and not their parents). As danah boyd puts it, "Most teens aren't addicted to social media; if anything, they're addicted to each other."

Just like the teens who whiled away hours in mall food courts or on landline telephones became adults who spent entirely reasonable amounts of time in malls and on phone calls, the amount of time that current teens spend on social media or their phones is not necessarily a harbinger of what they or we are all going to be doing in a decade. After all, adults have much better social options. They can go out, sans curfew, to bars, pubs, concerts, restaurants, clubs, and parties, or choose to stay in with friends, roommates, or romantic partners. Why, adults can even invite people over without parental permission *and* keep the bedroom door closed!

The true influence of Post Internet People on general internet socialization was both more subtle and more important than simply a shiny new social networking site. By joining the social internet after their parents were already there, they faced an especially dire version of "context collapse." This is danah boyd's term for when people from all your overlapping friend groups see all your shared posts from different aspects of your life. For adults who occasionally see a coworker's personal photos or political updates, context collapse is a fairly minor issue, a problem of specific individuals being indiscreet. For young people, context collapse is a collective problem: they need space to figure out who they are, where they aren't being constantly supervised by authority figures.

The Full Internet People solved this problem 10
by using social tools that their parents weren't on, jumping ship for a new one every couple years to remake their networks afresh, and leaving their cringiest moments buried on defunct platforms. Friendster gave way to MySpace gave way to Facebook. Social networking sites tried to solve this and prevent themselves from being abandoned by letting people set privacy settings and pick a specific list of people to share each post with. But switching platforms every couple years and keeping all your friends sorted into lists gets tiring. Post Internet People instead came up with a more durable strategy, organized along three principles.

First, things should disappear more, the way conversations throughout history have naturally not left records. Private messages that vanish after they're seen, live video streaming, manual deletion of old posts, and story-style posts that only stay visible for twenty-four hours all reduce the likelihood that messages will be encountered outside their intended context. Second, not all social networks need to be all things to all people. Rather than using a single dominant social platform, or maintaining an account on every single one, you pick and choose your platforms to help control your contexts, perhaps interacting with school friends on Instagram and fandom friends on Twitter, or doing more résumé-safe activities with a public account under your real name but putting more

private activities into a locked or pseudonymous account. Finally, social groups also need to be organized at levels more fluid and granular than an entire platform, including both large, open options like hashtags and public groups, and small, closed options like groupchats or secret groups.

The Post Internet People have also continued the semantic shift of "lol." We know that lowercase "lol" hasn't necessarily indicated full-on laughter since the early 2000s, but what does it mean when the Facebook- and Instagram-associated young people indicated that it has shades of meaning around softening, irony, and passive aggression? The linguist Michelle McSweeney decided to find out. She created a corpus of 45,597 text messages donated by fifteen Spanish–English bilinguals in New York City between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, and analyzed how "lol" was used in it in collaboration with the youths themselves.

The first thing McSweeney and her collaborators noticed is that "lol" only appears once per phrase: people say "feeling a bit sick lol" but they don't bracket it on both sides of a simple utterance ("lol sounds good lol") or stick it in the middle ("sounds lol good"). If there was more than one "lol" in a single message, the message would have multiple parts that could have each stood alone, each one with its own lol: "Yeah lol/ my mom was annoyed when I said it lol." The other thing she noticed is that "lol" occurs with certain types of emotions, like flirting, requesting or offering empathy, alluding to undisclosed information, repairing a previous message, or softening a confrontation, but not with others, like expressing love, exchanging information, and small talk—people say "got a lot of homework lol" or "you look good in red lol" but they don't say "i love you lol" or "good morning lol." The youth explained that you could technically say "good morning lol" as a way of ribbing someone if it was actually the afternoon (where it's alluding to undisclosed information rather than simple small talk), but you really shouldn't say "i love you lol"—you'd be making fun of someone in quite a mean way.

McSweeney reasoned that "lol" must be conveying a message about the phrase as a whole, a meaning that's compatible with flirting, softening, and empathy but not with love, directness, and checking in. The difference between flirting and saying "I love you" is plausible deniability. Likewise, using "lol" can soften what might otherwise be interpreted as a confrontation ("what are you doing out so late lol"), but would undermine a serious direct statement ("you hurt me so much in our relationship"). "Lol" can subtly request empathy ("Lol I'm writing an essay :'(") but isn't necessary when asking a direct question ("Can you tell me your schedule so I know when to text you").

Some statements are direct; others wrap their meaning in layers. Including "lol" indicates there's a second layer of meaning to be found, telling the recipient to look beyond the literal words you're saying. The exact nature of that second layer depends on the meaning of the first: it's reassuring when your statement might otherwise be perceived as rude, sarcastic, or confrontational, but "I love you" is already maximally warm and fuzzy, so if you add a second layer of meaning to it, things can only get worse. 15

In some ways, "lol" hasn't changed its meaning so very far from its roots in laughter. Sure, sometimes we laugh at a direct joke, something we can point at and say, "That's funny." But there's also nervous laughter, social laughter, and polite smiles. We laugh more at a comedy performance if we have other people to laugh with: even a

studio audience or a laugh track helps. One study of natural conversations found that only 10 to 20 percent of laughter was actually in response to humor. Flirting often involves laughing at nothing in particular, but when someone says "I love you" for the first time, you probably want it to be delivered with a straight face. On the internet, real laughter calls for a representation that hasn't become trite through overuse. In my survey of 2017, people favored the ever-increasing repetition in "hahahaha" or expanded, ad hoc phrases such as "I actually just spat water on my keyboard from laughing." But, by necessity, the way we express genuine laughter keeps changing.

Just as the older half of the third wave of people to go online have managed to participate in online social activity without becoming tech people, young internet people's social savvy is also no guarantee of technological skill. Post Internet People may know the latest cool apps and be able to derive tone of voice from an errant comma or period, but their levels of technological knowledge vary dramatically. Some enter the working world without technical skills that seem basic to digitally adept older folks, like organizing documents in folders or adding up a column of numbers in a spreadsheet, while others have coded their own apps or websites. Some have a sophisticated knowledge of internet culture and social media strategy, and have made memes or accounts seen by millions of people; some don't know how to write an informative email subject line. Some are highly skilled in one area and don't even know what they don't know in another. As with many societal divides, those kids with parents who can afford the latest devices, send them to coding camps, or advise them on professional etiquette often do better than those stuck with secondhand phones or filtered computers at schools and libraries.

This high degree of variance, both within and between Post Internet People, tends to be the hardest thing for their parents and teachers to grasp. Social and technological savvy online were virtually the same for Old Internet People and still loosely linked for Full and Semi Internet People, but they've become completely decoupled for the Post cohort. This defies predictions that digital natives would pick up technological skills as easily as speaking. Rather, "computer skills" have become as meaningless a category as "electricity skills." Like children of the offline kind of immigrants, second-generation internet kids do grow up fluent in the communication styles of their peers, but no generation anywhere has ever mastered the skills of adulthood without mentorship. The Post Internet challenge is to parse out which tech skills are acquired incidentally while socializing and which skills were incidental a decade or two ago but now aren't, and so need to be taught.

On the other side of the age divide, Posts often assume that because older people in their lives seem to be familiar with Facebook and texting, they also share certain baseline assumptions about the meanings of associated communicative signals like "lol" and punctuation marks. The dot dot dot is especially perilous. For people with experience of informal writing offline, it's a generic separation character, as we just saw. But for internet-oriented writers, the generic separator is the linebreak or new message, which has left the dot dot dot open to taking on a further meaning of something left unsaid. When dealing with the generations above them, the Posts often overinterpret: they infer emotional meaning from minor cues that are more subtle than the older folks ever dreamed of sending. This level of nuance conveyed through choices in punctuation and capitalization is so varied

and interesting that it deserves its own chapter, and we'll get to that next.

20 But in a discussion of generations and cohorts, here's the sharpest line dividing internet writers: Who is the imaginary authority in your head when you choose how to punctuate a text message? Is it the prescriptive norm of an offline authority like your former English teacher or a dictionary? Or is it the collective wisdom of your online peers, the anticipation of their emotional reaction to your typographical tone of voice? The difference between how people communicate in the internet era boils down to a fundamental question of attitude: Is your informal writing oriented towards the set of norms belonging to the online world or the offline one?

Thinking and Writing about Social Networking

1. According to Alfredo Lopez, how is social networking at odds with the original intent of the internet?
2. In what sense is the take-over of the internet by social networking sites oppressing people, especially young people?
3. Review William Wharton's social media post "'Peaceful' Act of Compassion" in Chapter 3 (p. 80). In what ways does this selection refute Lopez's claim?
4. Is your experience with Twitter, Instagram, or another social networking site consistent with what Jasmine Garsd reports? Explain.
5. What should undergraduate students—and even younger students—do now to protect themselves from the type of future problems that Isaac Gilman predicts?
6. What is your response to Gilman's statements that admissions officers and potential employers use social networking sites to make decisions about applicants?
7. How do you respond to the fact that some colleges have rescinded admission to some students because of what they posted on social media, as Josh Moody reports in his article? Make a case for whether you agree or disagree with their actions, using for support Moody's article or others in this chapter.
8. What are some of the other dangers associated with social networking?
9. Based on how Gretchen McCulloch describes "Post Internet People," do you fit the description? Explain.
10. Do you agree with McCulloch's claim that teenagers and young adults use social media differently from the ways their parents' generation does? Explain.
11. What changes in social networking do you foresee in the next five years? Support your answer with ideas from the essays in this chapter.
12. Choose one of the essays in this chapter, and explain to what extent your own experience with social networking either supports or contradicts its claim.
13. Which essay about how students' use of social media can affect their future do you find more convincing, Isaac Gilman's or Josh Moody's? Why?
14. Both Alfredo Lopez and Jasmine Garsd discuss the negative impact social media use can have on the young. How are their essays different in the way they approach the topic or argue about these negative effects?