
SOCIAL MEDIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Few people will have failed to notice the recent emergence of social media—especially much-publicized applications such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Wikipedia. Even the most casual of internet users will now be aware of the notion of social network sites and blogs, maybe even wikis and virtual worlds. Since being declared *Time Magazine's* 'Person of the Year' at the end of 2006, social media have come to dominate the ways in which digital technology is now used around the world. Of course, there are distinct geographical and cultural variations within this global adoption—whereas people in the USA may log on to Facebook and Twitter, Chinese users are more likely to access Renren and NetEase. Yet in all these guises, the general principles of social media remain the same. These are internet applications that rely on openly shared digital content that is authored, critiqued and re-configured by a mass of users. Social media applications therefore allow users to converse and interact with each other; to create, edit and share new forms of textual, visual and audio content; and to categorize, label and recommend existing forms of content. Perhaps the key characteristic of all these social media practices is that of 'mass socialization'—i.e. harnessing the power of the collective actions of online user communities rather than individual users (see Shirky, 2008).

The growth of social media over the past five years has transformed the ways in which the internet is experienced by most end users. Now the internet is no longer a one-way broadcast delivery system where the individual user downloads data, information and other resources produced by a relatively small number of content providers. Instead, the internet is now driven by (and to some extent determined through) the activities of its ordinary users—what has been described as many-to-many rather than one-to-many connectivity. The social web is therefore seen to be arranged along substantially different lines than the cyberspace-era internet of the 1990s and 2000s. This sense of internet use now being a participatory and collective activity is reflected in the language used to describe social media applications. Social media use is often described in terms of collaboration, conviviality and creativity. Social media applications are seen to be open rather than closed, bottom-up rather than top-down. Social media users go online to share and rate, mash-up and remix, friend and trend. The ways in which the internet is imagined in 2012 is certainly very different to that of 10 years earlier—hence the coining of the label web 2.0.

Amidst these technological developments, many higher education institutions (and educators) now find themselves expected to catch up with this world of social media applications and social media users. Of course, accusations of a technological lag between higher education and the rest of society can be traced back to the introduction of film and radio during the first decades of the 20th century. Indeed, as with most of these previous waves of new technology, social media remain an area of considerable expectation, exaggeration and hyperbole. It is essential, therefore, that the higher educators are able to approach social media in a

considered and objective manner. The issues addressed in the rest of this chapter are necessarily straightforward. What are the key features of social media and just what is their significance to contemporary higher education? How are social media applications currently being used in higher education settings? What changes does higher education need to make in order to remain relevant in the apparently fast-changing digital age?

UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

As computer scientists are quick to point out, most of the apparently new characteristics of social media existed long before the advent of Facebook. Since the early 1970s, internet applications have allowed users to exchange messages with each other, maintain personal profiles, curate lists of ‘friends’ and write blog-like journal entries. It is therefore important to remember from the outset that ‘the web has always been social’ (Halpin and Tuffield, 2010). Yet while the technical necessity of re-branding and re-versioning the web ‘2.0’ may be challenged, the current generation of social media applications are undeniably distinct from the earlier internet in terms of scale of use. Unlike the web tools of even 10 years ago, contemporary social media are used by hundreds of millions of users (in the case of Facebook a figure that surpasses 500m.). As such, the social media of the 2010s now boast a sufficient critical mass of users *and* applications to be of genuine collective benefit and social significance. As Christakis and Fowler (2009: 30) conclude, ‘as part of a social network, we transcend ourselves for good or ill, and become a part of something much larger’.

So what, then, is the social significance of social media in terms of higher education? Despite most discussions of social media tending to focus either on the very prosaic *or* the very profound (e.g. the role of social media in perpetrating individual narcissism *or* supporting popular revolts in Iran and Egypt), growing numbers of educationalists are beginning to consider the possible significance and likely implications of social media for education practice and provision—especially in terms of higher education. These issues can be described along at least three different lines.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEW TYPES OF LEARNERS?

Social media constitute an increasingly important context wherein individuals live their everyday lives. Indeed, some commentators talk of the ‘networked self’—acknowledging the importance of social media as a key site of sociality and identity performance in many people’s lives (Papacharissi, 2010). As such, the most immediate significance of social media for higher education is the apparently changing nature of the students who are entering university. In a practical sense, the highly connected, collective and creative qualities of social media applications are seen to reflect (and to some extent drive) more flexible, fluid and accelerated ways of being. Social media are therefore associated with an increased tendency for young people to multitask, to rely on a ‘digital juggling’ of daily activities and commitments (Subrahmanyam and Šmahel, 2011). More subtly, these technologies are also associated with an enhanced social autonomy—with young people now used to having increased control over the nature and form of what they do, as well as where, when and how they do it. Indeed, social media users are described as having an enhanced capacity to self-organize and provide for themselves. As Tapscott and Williams (2007: 52) continue, these young people ‘are not content to be passive consumers, and increasingly satisfy their desire for choice, convenience, customization, and control by designing, producing, and distributing products themselves’.

While these descriptions could be said to apply to users of all ages, often the changes associated with social media are seen in distinct generational terms. Commentators point to incoming cohorts of students who know nothing other than a life with the internet, having been ‘born into a world woven from cabled, wired or wireless connectivity’ (Bauman, 2010: 7). For many educators, therefore, the increased presence of social media in higher education settings is essential if universities are to (re)connect with these students. For

example, social networking sites are now being used by universities as alternative spaces wherein students can adapt to the university lifestyle through interacting online with peers and faculty (Yu et al., 2010). Indeed, many universities now maintain profiles and groups on social networking sites such as Facebook, where students and faculty can interact, share resources and express 'learner voice'. As Mason and Rennie (2007: 199) reason, 'shared community spaces and inter-group communications are a massive part of what excites young people and therefore should contribute to [their] persistence and motivation to learn'.

Of course, it could be argued that the top-down, mass institution of 'the university' is poorly placed to be a meaningful part of students' hyper-individualized social media use. Some critics point towards an ever-growing digital disconnect between students and their education institutions. Here it is argued that even the best-intentioned universities are able only to offer their students an artificially regulated and constrained engagement with social media. Thus, alongside other institutions such as schools, libraries and museums, universities are seen to face distrust and a growing loss of faith amongst younger generations (Downes, 2010). This clash is particularly evident in terms of the linear and hierarchical ways in which universities set out to structure communication, learning and access to knowledge. As Ulbrich et al. (2011) contend:

'Members of the net generation use the web differently, they network differently, and they learn differently. When they start at university, traditional values on how to develop knowledge collide with their values. Many of the teaching techniques that have worked for decades do not work anymore because new students learn differently too. The net generation is used to networking; its members work collaboratively, they execute several tasks simultaneously, and they use the web to acquire knowledge.'

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEW TYPES OF LEARNING?

As this last quotation implies, a major educational implication of social media is the apparently changing nature of learners' relationships with information and knowledge. Indeed, it could be argued that social media support forms of knowledge consumption and knowledge construction that are very different to the epistemological principles of formal education and individualized instruction. These changes are encapsulated in Douglas Thomas and John Seely-Brown's (2011) description of a technology-enhanced 'new culture of learning'—i.e. learning that is based around principles of collective exploration, play and innovation rather than individualized instruction. As well as chiming with currently fashionable constructivist and socio-cultural learning theories, some educationalists have been led to completely reassess the nature of learning in light of changing relationships that social media users seemingly have with information. These ideas are reflected most explicitly in the notion of connectivism—the idea that learning in a social media age now rests upon the ability to access and use distributed information on a 'just-in-time' basis. From this perspective, learning can be seen as an individual's ability to connect to specialized information nodes and sources as and when required. Thus being knowledgeable can be seen as the ability to nurture and maintain these connections (see Chatti et al., 2010). As George Siemens (2004) puts it, learning can therefore be conceived in terms of the 'capacity to know more' via social media rather than a reliance on the individual accumulation of prior knowledge in terms of 'what is currently known'.

Of course, these arguments are by no means new. Samuel Johnson was arguing in the 1700s that 'knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it'. However, descriptions such as connectivism reflect a growing belief amongst educationalists that the fundamental skills of learning in an age infused with social media are changing. As such, the emphasis placed by higher education institutions on supporting learners to passively retain information is perhaps less important than supporting the skills to access and actively augment information stored elsewhere when required. In this respect current forms of higher education are seen to be at odds with notions such as technology-based collective or fluid intelligence and the 'produsage' (production/use) of knowledge—i.e. 'where knowledge remains always in the

process of development, and where information remains always unfinished, extensible, and evolving' (Bruns, 2008: 6).

This is not to say that higher education is unable to adapt to and benefit from these changes. Indeed, many educationalists believe that universities are in a good position to utilize social media practices to support the collective creation of knowledge amongst students and the wider community (Moskaliuk et al., 2009). Many universities are now striving to develop ways of using social media to support these new forms of learning (see Conole and Alevizou, 2010). Yet whereas these changes can be seen in a wholly beneficial light, some commentators remain sceptical—especially in terms of potential diminishment of students' intellectual abilities and scholarship. Well-publicized concerns continue to be raised over an intellectual dumbing-down and de-skilling associated with using social media to access information and knowledge. Nicolas Carr, for example, contends that social media users 'are evolving from cultivators of personal knowledge into hunters and gatherers in the electronic data forest. In the process, we seem fated to sacrifice much of what makes our minds so interesting' (Carr, 2010). Similar issues have been raised by critics such as Andrew Keen (2007: 23), bemoaning the 'younger generation of intellectual kleptomaniacs'. Although rarely based on robust research evidence, such arguments have proved to be remarkably popular—even amongst students themselves.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEW FORMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROVISION

For better or worse, then, it is clear that social media tools and applications present a challenge to the concept of the formal educational establishment as it currently exists. In this sense, social media are also significant in terms of their implications for the nature and form of higher education provision. Social media in any form sit uncomfortably with some of the central tenets of the formal provision of education. The use of social media implies, for example, that learners should be 'active co-producers' of knowledge rather than 'passive consumers' of content, and that learning should be a 'participatory, social process' supporting personal life goals and needs (Lee and McLoughlin, 2010). In this sense, tensions remain between those who believe that social media can be used to strengthen and improve the higher education institution in its current form, and those who believe that social media exist to disrupt (and ultimately replace) the university altogether.

From the former perspective, many educators maintain that social media can be used successfully to support the provision of what Goodyear and Ellis (2008) term 'serious student-centred learning'. Of course, even the most structured implementation of social media in university settings implies a degree of 'user-driven' education—that is, allowing learners to take more active roles in what they learn as well as how and when they learn it. Nevertheless, many higher educators believe that universities are capable of accommodating (and benefiting from) these shifts in emphases. Some commentators have therefore begun to talk of the need to develop a 'pedagogy 2.0'—i.e. 'innovative pedagogies that leverage these affordances to support learner choice and autonomy' (Lee and McLoughlin, 2010: 1).

Yet for others, the very essence of social media is seen to negate the need for institutionally provided learning altogether. At present, some of the more significant trends in social-media supported learning are positioned outside—as opposed to within—the formal higher education system. Much has been made, for example, of the growth of social media platforms from which universities can distribute learning content and courseware such as YouTube EDU, iTunes U and Academic Earth. At present, many of these spaces are, at best, analogous to more formal modes of higher education provision. A further instance of these open, communal approaches to higher education provision can be found in the International University of the People—a not-for-profit volunteer 'university' that offers online courses, largely free of charge and that have been designed deliberately around altruistic, social networking principles. Here, groups of students participate in weekly discussion forums in which they can access lecture transcripts and associated reading material prepared by volunteer professors (often moonlighting from their official, paid university positions elsewhere). Students are expected to contribute to discussions and comment on their peers' ideas, with community-wide forums of all the university's teaching faculty and students supporting broader discussions and further learning.

Examples such as Academic Earth, YouTube EDU and the International University of the People therefore pose a serious challenge to the very concept of the traditional university institution. Perhaps then—as some critics are arguing—the campus university is nothing more than an anachronistic relic of the industrial age that is now rendered obsolete by contemporary digital technology (Suoranta and Vadén, 2010).

MAKING BETTER SENSE OF THE REALITIES OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The continued growth of social media presents a set of clear challenges to the future nature of higher education provision and practice. Yet as with many previous new technologies, academic discussion and debate remains largely speculative rather than well-informed and certain. Of course, there is an emerging literature of small-scale, 'empirical' studies that confidently reports all manner of specific learning gains and benefits from social media. We have been recently told, for example, about the positive effect of Twitter use on college student engagement and grades (Junco et al., 2011), and the ability of social networking sites to engender 'favourable feelings regarding learning experiences' (Hung and Yuen, 2010: 703). Yet, rather than being a wholly good (or wholly bad) thing for higher education, social media are perhaps best understood in more ambiguous terms. This is especially the case when one considers the complex and often compromised realities of students' *actual* uses of social media within educational contexts and in their wider everyday lives.

Indeed, when examined in more detail, there are a number of contradictions in the actual nature of social media use that raise some significant limitations to the exaggerated claims and counter-claims discussed previously. First and foremost, discussions of social media assume a level of ubiquity of internet access and use that simply does not exist in many people's lives. According to survey data across the world, people's engagement with social media tools (as well as computers and the internet in general) has remained significantly differentiated over time—even in high-tech regions such as North America and Europe. These digital inequalities are especially pronounced in terms of socio-economic status, social class, race, gender, geography, age and educational background—divisions that hold as true for younger generations of university students as they do for older generations of university staff (Jones and Fox, 2009; Helsper and Eynon, 2009). While no longer a popular term, the spectre of the digital divide looms large over any discussion of the potential benefits of social media in higher education.

There is also growing evidence that social media use is not the equitable and democratic activity that it is often portrayed to be. Even when able to access the technology, the types of social media tools that an individual uses, the ways in which they are used and the outcomes that accrue are all compromised by a set of second-order digital divides. For instance, recent studies suggest that students' preferences for particular social media applications over others follow class-based patterns of taste and distinction. In terms of social networking, for example, Hargittai (2008) reports that US college students' preferences for an application such as Facebook as opposed to MySpace appear to be patterned consistently along lines of social class and educational background. Clear socio-economic differences also exist in individuals' predilection to produce (rather than consume) online content, be it posting to blogs, sharing resources or creating profiles (see Schradie, 2009). Other US college studies report that social media environments are no more socially integrated than offline contexts. For example, race has been found to remain the overriding predictor of whether college students are Facebook 'friends' or not (Mayer and Puller, 2008). Similarly, social media do not necessarily overcome issues of offline disabilities but instead often exacerbate the boundaries of disability (Lewthwaite, 2011). All in all, it is unhelpfully idealistic to imagine social media as providing a level playing field for all.

Many of the current discussions and debates over social media are also (deliberately) unclear as to what aspects of social media use actually relate to education, learning and knowledge. One study of United Kingdom students' use of Facebook suggested that the vast majority (around 95%) of students' interactions were completely unrelated to their university studies (Selwyn, 2009). Thus while social media may well have the

potential to support communal learning and knowledge generation, this is by no means guaranteed. In this sense, Hosein et al. (2010) make the useful distinction between living technologies (i.e. technologies that students choose for their everyday social lives and for leisure purposes) and learning technologies (i.e. technologies that students use primarily for study purposes). As this distinction suggests, while there may be some overlap between the two, we should not mistakenly presume all of the everyday life aspects of social media use to be of educational significance.

Indeed, the majority of social media uses are perhaps most accurately described as constituting ‘the ordinary stuff of life’ (Shirky, 2008: 86), rather than avowedly creative, communal and convivial activities. There is currently little evidence that social media applications are being used by the majority of users in especially innovative, participatory, interactive or even sociable ways (see Jones et al., 2009). Recent empirical studies of student social media use highlight a lack of what could be considered authentic or even useful participative learning activity. Indeed, a number of recent studies report a surprising lack of sophisticated or advanced use of social media applications amongst university students (Waycott et al., 2010; Lee and McLoughlin, 2010; Nicholas et al., 2009). At best, many students’ engagement can be said to lead to what Crook (2008) terms a ‘low bandwidth exchange’ of information and knowledge.

These findings certainly challenge the vision of a ‘produsage generation’ of students learning through creating and sharing their own knowledge. Instead, it would seem that social media applications—despite their undoubted potential for communal activity—are most often appropriated for the one-way passive consumption of content. This is readily apparent in the ways in which the majority of users of social media applications such as YouTube and Wikipedia prefer to passively take pre-existing content rather than actively make their own. Wikipedia continues to depend heavily on a small core of a few thousand highly active participants who write and edit the entries that are then consumed by an audience of millions of users (Leadbeater, 2008). At best, most social media users are responsible merely for the creation and sharing of their profiles and other personal ephemeralia. In terms of any more substantive creation of content, it would appear that the open philosophy that lies at the heart of the social media ethos encourages most people to choose to free-ride on the efforts of a minority—a situation that economists term the ‘logic of collective action’.

Finally, it may also be a mistake to presume that students are necessarily enthused and motivated by the use of social media. For example, Hargittai’s (2008) study of US college students found that a significant proportion made little use of social media applications, with students as likely to be dabblers or outright dissenters as they were to be social media omnivores (see also Hargittai and Hsieh, 2010). In this sense, it is unwise to assume that the interest, motivation or affinity of all students will be enhanced by the inclusion of social media technologies in any educational context. Indeed, a number of commentators warn against attempts to motivate and engage students simply through the introduction of consciously trendy forms of social media technology use into educational processes and practices. As Tapscott and Williams (2007: 54) conclude with regard to the (mis)application of social media tools in the workplace, young people’s ‘appetite for authenticity means that they are resistant to ill-considered attempts by older generations to “speak their lingo”’.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND HIGHER EDUCATION—WHERE NEXT?

That there are clear disparities between the educational rhetoric and educational realities of social media use should come as little surprise. There has been a long-standing tendency in education for digital technologies to eventually fall short of the exaggerated expectations that initially surrounded them—what can be described as a cycle of ‘hype, hope and disappointment’ (Gouseti, 2010). In this sense, perhaps the most pressing challenge for the higher education community at present is to engage in considered and realistic debates over how best to utilize social media in appropriate ways that hopefully reduce this eventual disappointment.

Of course, clear lines need to be drawn between the immediate practical tasks of developing forms of social media use that better fit within the current 'grammar' of formal higher education systems, and addressing the rather more difficult longer-term issues of system-wide reform and redesign. In terms of this latter point, there is a clear need to thoroughly consider and discuss what higher education is, and what forms it should take in a 21st-century digital age. Indeed, many of the controversies and tensions concerning the use of social media in higher education have little to do with the technology itself. Instead, these are issues that are driven by personal belief and opinion about 'the essentially ethical question [of] what counts' as worthwhile learning and worthwhile education (Standish, 2008: 351). In this sense, social media are socially disruptive technologies that prompt a range of deeply ideological (rather than purely technical) questions about the nature of institutionalized education.

Yet these wider debates notwithstanding, higher educators also face the immediate task of integrating social media into their current provision and practice. As such, universities clearly need to continue to consider, for example, the practical challenges of how to assess students' collaboratively authored work or how best to design blended curricula (see Gray et al., 2010; Buckley et al., 2010). Further thought certainly needs to be given to how best to support staff and students alike in making sustained and meaningful use of these internet technologies. In these ways, universities need to play an important role in supporting students' supposedly self-directed activities—providing students with a good core and governance in 'arranging the furniture' of technology-based learning (Crook, 2008).

All these issues will certainly become clearer as the 2010s progress, and as society's expectations and general understanding of social media become less exaggerated and more realistic and objective. Indeed, many technological commentators have now moved on to enthuse about the next set of 'next big things' within the world of digital technology—such as the semantic web, cloud computing and the internet of things. In this sense, there is now room for the higher education community itself to assume a greater role in shaping the development of social media on the ground in higher education settings. After all, social media technology is something that is supposed to be created by its users—higher education institutions and educators included.

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