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Social Networks and the Desire to Save Face: A Case From Singapore

Michael A. Netzley¹ and Akanksha Rath¹

Abstract

For 5 years, corporate communication undergraduates have maintained a wiki as a final course and community service project. Using Web 2.0 platforms to crowdsource and curate content, they learn to employ online communications for work purposes. When the course was launched in 2007, the dominant social media narrative invited educators to embrace a technological optimism with subthemes of open communication, sharing, and co-creation. By 2011, student feedback had compelled the instructor to consider the limits of technological optimism and revise the course. Specifically, Singaporean students have displayed a need to save face online, which has led to a localized teaching approach.

Keywords

social networking, Singapore, psychological safety, social media

An undergraduate course teaching online communication was launched in 2007 as part of a 4-year business degree at a Singaporean university. The course invited students to learn how social media can be used for workplace and project-based communications. Originally, the course had modest goals since social media were new phenomena (see the appendix for definitions of key social media terms). Initial learning points included the following:

Familiarity with the technology: The majority of undergraduates were minimally active on social networks in 2007 and even fewer were blogging.

Microblog networks were not discussed during the first two semesters since Twitter was launched less than a year before. Wikis for teaching and learning were virtually unheard of in Southeast Asia. Students first needed to become comfortable with technology-enabled communication.

Writing for the web: Student writing assignments were central to the course, and learners kept personal blogs.

Group-writing project: In groups of three or four, students created a short Wikipedia-style website dedicated to emerging media in various Asian markets.

Cross-cultural issues: Building on their wiki research, the course ended with a single question: How can we effectively communicate across Asia's fragmented markets and great diversity?

Just like social networking technologies and practices, the course has evolved over the past 5 academic years. While some learning points remain unchanged, such as writing for the web, many topics have evolved so rapidly that an instructor must redevelop teaching materials each semester if the course is to remain ahead of digitally savvy students. To illustrate, blogs have traditionally served as a hub for online writing, but today people are spending more time in spokes such as Facebook and Twitter. This means short-form communication is becoming more important (Stelzner, 2010). Facebook and Twitter took Asia by storm after 2008 while visual communication, such as infographics, became popular in 2010. Search engine optimization requires that writers identify and integrate keywords into their text so that their content ranks well in Google, Yahoo, and Bing search results. Today, location-based services are becoming increasingly important and some markets, such as Indonesia, are skipping the home broadband phase of national development and going directly to mobile Internet communications (i.e., the small screen). These are but a few of the challenges that demanded course updates.

Perhaps, the most significant change, however, has been to pedagogy. Singaporean students have not always responded well to using open (vs. private) social networks as part of a communication course. The key challenge has been adapting a social media course to the students' generally strong preference for privacy and saving face. When students feel concerned they might lose face by communicating openly over social networks, they lose their sense of psychological safety and often communicate in ways that are ineffective or sometimes inappropriate. Respect for the learners' need for saving face has led to a hybrid approach of using social networks that are a mix of private and public communications. This approach differs significantly from the course's original optimism about online communication assignments.

Technological optimism drove the course's original design and was derived from early books discussing social media. *The Cluetrain Manifesto* (Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2001), teaching that markets are conversations, and *Naked Conversations* (Scoble & Israel, 2006) were pivotal to the early course design and assignments. From the outset, students were invited to communicate openly online. Additional impetus for urging students to communicate online was found in communication and marketing podcasts, such as *For Immediate Release*, *Inside PR*, and *Six Pixels of Separation*,

which offered insights into the communication skills students would need after graduation. The seeds of our early technological optimism can also be found in many definitions of social media. In her book *The Social Factor*, IBM Vice President Maria Azua (2010) defines social media as, “Internet based tools—also known as social networking tools—for sharing and discussing information” (p. 101). The values guiding these online interactions typically revolve around openness, sharing, and transparency: “Our social and professional circles have expanded to include not only those whose telephone or email we have in our Blackberry, *but also to anyone in the connected world who shares our interests, aspirations, or expertise*” (p. 102). Communicators are no longer constrained by their physical presence at one location but can form rich relationships and interact in real time, which leads naturally to online communities or what has been called “tribes” (Godin, 2008).

For communication scholars, social networks might appear attractive because of the ability to bring together people from around the globe and discuss common interests. In the early years of this course, practitioner review panels gave feedback to student blogs. Students recorded audio comments and submitted them to popular podcasts around the world. Guest speakers routinely shared with the class via Skype video calls. All of this time and effort were freely shared, something that is consistent with the ethos of many social networks (e.g., Twitter’s culture of openness and sharing). And continuing today, students must build an online community of like-minded people and later turn to this community as they complete the wiki assignment and source for content.

Learning no longer needs to be constrained by the classroom’s physical walls, instructor’s knowledge, library resources, or guest speakers available locally. In this flattened world of open communications and sharing, students can network globally and interact with diverse people. The great opportunity of social media and the enthusiasm of early adopters drove the original class design, and, without question, the local preferences displayed by students would give rise to revisions in the way social networks were used in this course.

Perhaps the greatest impetus for change came from the Asian concept of saving and giving face. To illustrate how saving face emerged as a significant pedagogical concern, we will first describe the final course project and overall course design. Next, student feedback obtained through course evaluations and discussion groups will illustrate student reactions to social networks in the communication course. Finally, we will share lessons learned.

Community Service Wiki Assignment

Central to the course has been a community service project delivered via a wiki. In teams of three to four, students research and curate a Wikipedia-style website (https://wiki.smu.edu.sg/digitalmediaasia/Main_Page) offering snapshots of more than 20 different Asian countries (see Figure 1 for Indonesia). The site targets communication professionals, and the project’s theme crystallized in 2008, when a Swedish PR professional in China contacted the instructor to find out more about social media in

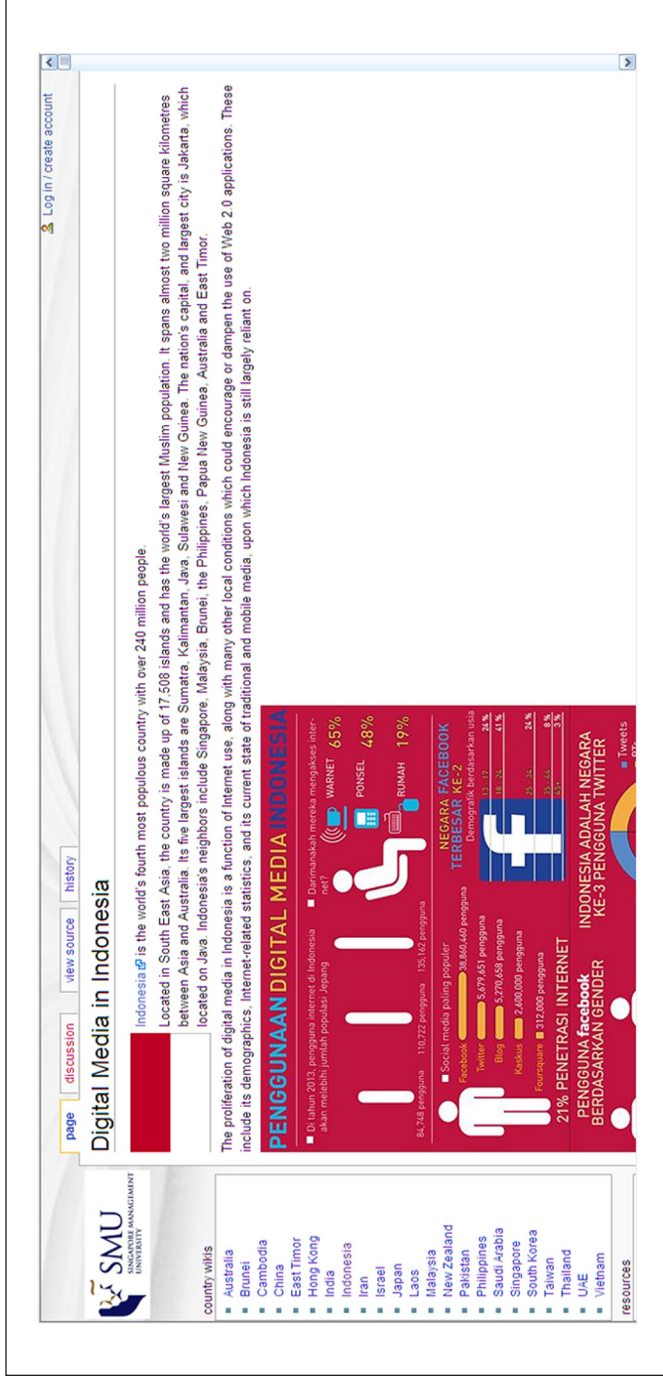


Figure 1. Example of Wiki created by students (Indonesia)
SOURCE: Digital media in Indonesia (2011).

South Korea. Since then, students have been challenged to create a wiki page that would be useful to a Swedish communication professional living in China and helping a client enter market X (the team's assigned subject). Each semester, a new student team updates an existing page, thereby ensuring that all content is revised at least once a year. Some rapidly changing markets, such as China, might be updated twice a year. Currently, the wiki averages more than 7,000 visitors per month, according to Google Analytics.

Each aspect of the wiki project has corresponding evaluation criteria. For the writing portions of this project, students are assessed for both the quality of their research and collaborative writing methods. Most wikis offer very detailed data about which students add content to a wiki page and when that information was posted online. Consequently, if students attempt to divide and conquer after being taught techniques for collaborative writing, the wiki's history page will reveal that one person is crafting an entire segment with little or no input from other team members. Analytics, in other words, can be used to craft a well-documented feedback loop for students and reinforce the collaborative writing lessons.

Similar analytics can also be obtained to create a measuring stick for each student's online communications and networking. Several tools, such as Klout or Enterprise Avenue, which measure online influence, are useful at the very start of class and again at the end to create a pre- and postassessment of a student's online activity. Another tool, Bit.ly, helps students see if their content is being shared by other people and spreading across different groups within social networks. When these free tools are combined with traditional grading of online writing (e.g., posts to a class-learning blog), instructors have more than enough information to assess online activity. Students seem to find the data a mixed blessing. While sometimes data reveal their shortcuts or lack of online activity, these same data can also reveal a student's integration into an online social network and document rising influence. When students begin to have success online, the analytics will typically document it in less than 24 hours.

Finally, the instructor and TA (teaching assistant) monitor class conversation daily, providing an opportunity for quick feedback about undesirable behaviors, such as spamming. Feedback is also an opportunity to encourage the right behaviors, such as sharing examples or capturing class learning points over Twitter.

In 2011, the course started challenging students to create more original content in the form of podcasts, infographics, and, in some cases, video narratives as well.

By the term's end, students can demonstrate their knowledge of social networking tools such as Facebook or Twitter; communicate effectively over these channels; use more advanced skills, such as hashtagging, crowdsourcing, and content curation; and employ social networks for workplace and project-based communications.

Course Design

By mid-2011, and after many revisions, the course now has four primary learning points:

Personal communication challenge: Students are introduced to social networking tools, such as Facebook, LinkedIn, or QQ Zone out of China. They also learn about blogs, microblogs, RSS feed readers, location-based social networks (e.g., Foursquare.com), and social bookmarking. After an intense 1-day immersion into Web 2.0 channels and a week to use these channels individually, students are then invited to share their successes and concerns about using social media. This typically leads to discussions about privacy, time management, filtering content, and psychological perspectives on Internet use (e.g., addiction).

Corporate communication challenge: Students next learn how businesses are using a range of social networking channels for enterprise and public communications. This segment of the course requires 6 to 7 weeks, and key topics include social network theory, Granovetter's strength of weak ties, writing for the Web, responding to critical comments, visual communications, advanced behaviors such as crowdsourcing and curating, and digital campaigns. The ideas are brought to life through Harvard-style case studies, guest speakers, and current events.

Social business challenge: This part is the course's most advanced topic: Students spend 2 weeks reflecting on how stakeholder expectations and communications are evolving and what this means for the business. For example, what are the consequences of real-time communications and how are businesses adapting to this 24/7 challenge?

Cross-cultural challenge: This theme cuts across the grain of the first three learning points and is discussed throughout the semester. Students are encouraged to think about Asia's tremendous diversity and fragmented markets, and what this means for communicating effectively. In the distance it takes to travel from New York to Miami, for example, a communicator in Asia can encounter tens if not hundreds of different languages and dialects, diverse behavioral preferences, and very different digital ecosystems. Here, when faced with such diversity, the problem with technological optimism emerges because communication practices rooted in western values of open sharing and transparency may not be well received in local contexts. Students are encouraged to think critically about the diversity challenge and what it means for communicating.

Though there have been many revisions, the community service, social networking, curated content, and diversity aspects of this course have been in place since 2007. The social business topic was added in 2010.

Literature Review

Pedagogy, like communication, needs to be localized. We often cannot borrow ideas wholesale from one context, transport them thousands of miles, and then apply them

in a new context while expecting the same results. This is especially true in Asia not only because of the great diversity, but when it comes to social networks, it is also true because of the region's many emerging markets and the comparatively late public investments in information and communication technology infrastructures. These late investments, in very practical terms, mean that many in Generation X were socialized largely in the same way as their parents. The real wave of change in many of Asia's emerging markets is Generation Y. They are frequently the first in their family to be raised with global media, digital technologies, instant gratification, and the discretionary spending power to enjoy it all. So while in more mature markets we may describe Generation X as being so different from their parents, in Asia's emerging markets, the comparable wave of change currently sits in university classrooms, and that has profound implications for how we teach communication.

These students are what Prensky (2001) calls "digital natives," who have no problems participating in multiple Web 2.0 activities simultaneously. Baird and Fisher (2006) and Prensky (2001) discuss how needs of these digital natives have evolved over time. Students from the Internet generation are used to instantaneous content, whereas many teachers might have only tweaked the instructional methods they have become proficient at over the past 10, 20, or even 30 years. While many studies have shown that technology is being increasingly used in classes, its use has been restricted to delivering content (Maloney, 2007; Parry, 2010).

One of the great changes that Web 2.0 has wrought is the user's ability to collaborate, innovate, and co-create knowledge. The challenge for educators, therefore, lies in discovering how to best harness this opportunity for better communication instruction and learning. That said, there has been much work in the past few years on how to fulfill the learning needs of digital natives. Technological advances and their ease of use have played a big part in allowing faculty to adopt new teaching methods in a bid to make the learning experience richer, with mostly encouraging results. According to Kupetz (2010), using social media in the classroom will not only help students but also enable instructors to engage with them more regularly and comprehensively.

Other researchers have evaluated the appropriateness of blogs as social networking and communication channels. A blog is an online journal used by an individual or a group of writers to record thoughts and ideas. Within a particular blog community, such as Wordpress or Tumblr, are well-developed social networking features. The interactive and networked features of blogs allow readers to provide feedback and open up a two-way learning process. As blog users reflect on their posts and the feedback they receive, they create an "environment for knowledge transfer to take place" while also becoming more fluent writers (Baird & Fisher, 2006, p. 16). Flatley (2005) concludes that blogs can be an excellent learning medium, especially given their ability to facilitate group projects, and can be further integrated into a classroom as journal assignments or as a platform for experts' collaboration and/or class administration.

Wikis in the university classroom have also been researched. A wiki is a website, essentially like a blank digital page but with advanced functionality, allowing people to collaborate, form a community of users, and to add, delete, and revise content as

needed. Kuteeva's (2011) study on the use of wikis for teaching academic writing concluded that wiki use sensitized students to the important aspects of quality writing, and they particularly valued the collaborative aspect of using a wiki. Wikibooks have also been found to potentially empower students, teachers, and classes who want to create their own learning resources (Ravid, Kalman, & Rafaeli, 2008).

A study in Hong Kong examined secondary school students using a wiki and found that the emphasis on collaborative writing was a novel yet rewarding experience (Mak & Coniam, 2008). Besides improving students' writing skills, the exercise also tapped into their creative abilities. The project was very successful, and many other schools in Hong Kong wanted to implement a similar venture in their own classes.

Much of this research highlights the benefits of using social media in the classroom and reflects the technological optimism that was a hallmark of the course in 2007. However, scholars are increasingly questioning whether or not the dominant Western concept of what social media are, and how they are best used, should be localized. In the Hong Kong study, another finding was that students contributed the least when they were asked to correct others' errors. Mak and Coniam (2008) attribute this finding to the fact that "Hong Kong students rarely comment on or 'expose' their classmates' mistakes as they do not wish them to lose face" (p. 452).

Saving Face and Psychological Safety

The notion of saving face is described in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, where Young (2010) shares his observations about technology-enabled learning after visiting universities in five different Asian markets, including the digital media class described here. In particular, he notes how nice students were in their interaction with one another. Similar to the Hong Kong study, students were reluctant to change their peers' contribution on a wiki, feeling that they would shame the other person. "It's dangerous, actually," one of the students says. "I can change everything that others have done." Many were reluctant to amend things that others had posted. "I guess out of deference. People were very careful to not want to edit their peers. Getting people out of that mindset has been a real challenge," said an American-trained assistant professor of information systems (p. A10).

Professors teaching throughout Asia can be quick to point out this cultural difference. While in the West, students may be more accustomed to vocal debates on various topics, in much of Asia there is a certain resistance or reluctance in students using social media tools in the class. The difference at times is so pronounced that instructors have been forced to choose between minimizing the importance of technology and changing the way they teach with Web 2.0 tools (Kolesnikov-Jessop, 2011).

But the news is not all bad, and there is another side to face-saving preferences. Students have also revealed that once their learning experience moves onto public platforms (e.g., Facebook or Twitter) and they post their work online for all to see, then the desire to save face can motivate many to continue monitoring and maintaining their online presence even after the course ends. In other words, it appears that a need

to save face might reduce the desire to share preliminary ideas, questions, and gather critical feedback. But once such students have time to practice and craft their online communications, the desire to save face can motivate learners to continue monitoring and contributing to a project even after deadlines have passed and grades are submitted.

One critical point, at least with the initial hesitancy to not go online, appears to be psychological safety. In this case, unbridled technological optimism unintentionally triggers concerns about losing face. The psychological safety of the learning experience is then diminished. Edmondson (1999) defines psychological safety as “a shared belief that [we are] safe for interpersonal risk taking” (p. 354). Students who value saving face are unlikely to feel safe about going online and potentially receiving critical feedback or having even small mistakes pointed out, when not making mistakes is so important to the local culture. Similarly, students may not feel safe editing another student’s writing on the wiki because once that door is open, other students may do the same and make improvements to the first student’s writing, thereby pointing out how the work could have been better in the first attempt and documenting this forever in the wiki’s history page for everyone to see. If we are going to use social technologies with Singaporean students, then our experience in teaching this course suggests that they must be given enough time and space to develop skills and confidence before appearing on the world stage via social networking technologies. Forcing this move too quickly can boomerang.

Lessons Learned

We must localize our use of social networking technologies; one size does not fit all (Netzley, 2012). The technological optimism and values of open communication, transparency, and sharing may appeal to communication instructors and practitioners, but to undergraduate communication students at a Singapore university, these same values are often perceived as potentially unsafe. We don’t want to unintentionally cause a perceived loss of face by prematurely inviting these students onto social networks. This violates their sense of psychological safety in a society where mistakes are seriously frowned on. While we can argue that making mistakes is essential to learning, cultural constraints must be respected and some degree of privacy afforded to students.

Three lessons can be taken away from the past 5 years of teaching with social networking technologies. First, private group blogs can be a great way to protect the psychological safety of the learning environment. This is especially true during the first half of the semester, when many students are still learning how to communicate over social networks. Second, only after giving students many opportunities to practice and receive feedback about their online communication should we move them to the world’s stage. Students need to be ready for their public performance, and building confidence is essential. Finally, to give better feedback and help build each student’s confidence, we should make use of the analytics available over wikis, Google

Analytics, or other resources, such as Klout or Empire Avenue. Students love to see longitudinal data that suggest they are improving.

Together, these three lessons can help us reduce the risk of unintentionally exceeding the students' lower threshold of psychological safety and leaving them feeling as though they have lost or are causing others to lose face. In this social networked age, when every student already knows that strangers can cause pain in a Wikileaks fashion just by sharing information online, we must take the time to build the students' skills and confidence if we wish to springboard them into the online world of socially networked communications.

Appendix

Definitions

Content curation. Selectively finding, categorizing, organizing and then making available to followers the most useful information about a topic. Popular curation sites include Paper.li and Storify.com.

Crowdsourcing. "The act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call" (Howe, 2006).

Hashtags. A populist practice of naming or "tagging" an Internet conversation or post so that the content is searchable. Examples include #FF or #comm215.

Infographics. A form of visual communication designed to tell a story. They are often designed for quick consumption and are easy to share by hyperlink or popular image formats, such as .jpg.

Location-based services. An information service (e.g., Google Maps) or social network (e.g., Foursquare) accessible through mobile devices and using data from global positioning systems (GPS) to find local resources or share your location with others.

Microblogging. An Internet platform for posting short messages and sharing hyperlinks or images. It is frequently described as text messaging over the Internet. Twitter is an example.

Online influence. The ability to reach and drive action from people online. Sometimes, it is described as a user's online authority.

Podcast. Often described as radio for the Internet, podcasts are audio files containing verbal and musical content. Typically, they are delivered as MP3 audio files and listened to on devices, such as the iPod or mobile phones.

RSS feed. Short for really simple syndication, it automatically produces a feed each time a webpage is updated. Users can track frequently updated websites, such as blogs, using feed aggregators such as Google Reader. Internet users enjoy the centralization and efficiency of reading Web content via RSS.

Search engine optimization. Also known as SEO, this is the process of improving the visibility of a webpage on search engine results.

Social bookmarking. A way for Internet users to store, organize, manage, and search for bookmarks of webpages. These bookmarks are stored in the cloud instead of on a personal computer.

Social business. A term capturing the impact of interactive digital technologies on business beyond the communication and marketing functions. For example, how businesses are learning to use social media for product innovation, customer service, and data mining.

Social networks. (1) The web of connections users create online when befriending people, sharing hyperlinks, and posting content to the Web. (2) Popular platforms for connecting with friendship groups and then sharing information, posting status updates, or participating in online games. Examples include Facebook and LinkedIn.

Web2.0. Web 2.0 is an overarching term for the interactive web and is frequently used as a synonym for social media.

Wiki. A website designed for maximum flexibility allowing the user to structure and use the site in many ways. They are often developed collaboratively by a group of users, allowing anyone to add or edit content on any number of webpages that can be linked to each other. Wikipedia is a popular example.

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Bios

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