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Does Social Media Breed Learner Laziness?

| **By Shelley Kinash and Jeffrey Brand** |

As new technologies grow in popularity, the associated cognitive and moral worries, concerns and questions intensify. The current devices of choice are smartphones, tablets and laptops. People primarily use them for texting, social media and massive multi-player online games. Parents and teachers are concerned, asking questions such as: are people losing the ability to [offline] socialise; is the current technology too addictive, in that children need to be forced to pick up a book or go play outside; is abbreviated and phonetic messaging interfering with people's spelling and grammatical skills.

These questions are a new iteration of an old phenomenon. The fears of television are well-known. There were also grave concerns alongside the introduction of the radio, telephone and fictional novel. This phenomenon, called *media determinism,* has a well-worn path in education. The process begins with the introduction of a new medium. The medium is commercialised by offering entertainment and spreads quickly with the support of compelling advertising. Application of the medium for education often seems dubious and fraught with contradictions such as play versus work, and entertainment versus learning. These contradictions serve to increase uncertainty and fear about the "effect" or "impact" of the medium on thoughts, attitudes and behaviours of people, particularly children. When it comes to providing for the future of students, educators rightly need to be sceptical of new media. Having formed more nuance and understanding about serious and educational games, teachers are now charged with interrogating the impact of social media on students' capacity to get the most out of their digital media environment. One such significant concern is the death of the book.

Consider:

- 500 million people use Twitter, 400 million tweets are sent every day. Each tweet is a maximum of 140 characters.
- 1.15 billion people use Facebook with a total of 20 billion human minutes spent on Facebook every day
- There are 12.9 billion Google searches every month
- More than 1 billion people visit YouTube to watch over 6 billion hours of video each month, with 100 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute
- Wikipedia is populated with over 4 million articles over 31 million pages.

Where did the authors of this article derive these statistics? The answer is from websites including http://expandedramblings.com, http://www.youtube.com and http://wikipedia.org. This is notable because the set of references further makes the case. Student papers, whether at school or university, have less and less book-based references and more and more websites. This raises further questions about the validity, reliability, authenticity, authorship and intellectual property of the sources and summaries.

Regardless of where a teacher works in the education system, students enter the classroom with the same orientation to social media. They look for information from social media and they write their reference lists incorporating social media sources. They are also writing their own content, albeit wide in quality and taste.

Social media scholar and author Clay Shirky, explains that the macro-social impact of so much sharing is "cognitive surplus". Shirky explains in his latest book on the topic that he and an IBM researcher have estimated that the amount of time people have spent on creating the content of Wikipedia is on the order of 100 million hours. Notably, this is much, much less time than the amount of time people spend watching television, Shirky points out. But behaviour is changing; collectively we are moving away from being only consumers or watchers of other people's content. We are now creators too and we are doing more creating and less passive consuming. Notably, not all of our collective creations deserve celebration or should be shared. However, beyond the concerns about blurring boundaries and safety, social media is creating new opportunities for sharing, collaborating and building upon one another's ideas and constructions.

Information is available to students like never before. Instead of listening to a professor's lecture on polar bears, given that the professor may have never actually seen a polar bear, students can watch the creatures via a recorded snow-cam and hear polar bear behaviour interpreted by David Attenborough, or a tourist with a mobile phone camera featuring high-definition video recording and plenty of storage. When a student of Russian literature is assigned *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky or Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as part of the senior school syllabus, the student has access to Aciman and Rensin's 'Twitterature' versions, told in a series of 140 character tweets.

The value of the social media is derived from the so-called *network effect*. Simply put, the more people who use a communication network, the more complete, robust and valuable it becomes. Telephone networks grew in value and importance as more and more people were assigned telephone numbers. Similarly, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Wikipedia are enriched and valued (commercially if not intellectually) on the basis of the number of users they connect. We understand that not all users have honourable intentions or contribute meaningfully.

However, the assumption is that more users increase the likelihood of creation, innovation and sharing of beneficial content.

The Pros Of Social Media

There are pros and cons of the current passion for social media. Starting with the pros, social media has narrowed the gap between teacher and student. It is no longer the case that the teachers are the holders of all the information and have the power to make all of the important decisions about how and when to dole it out. Publishing is no longer the exclusive realm of academics.

Social media proliferates and sparks information and ideas. Infographics make the ideas of quantum physics accessible to all. Upon reading the 'Twitterature' version of Don Quixote, the student may be inspired to read Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra's masterpiece. If not, they may simply follow #donquixote or even look up Don Quixote on YouTube.

Social media is, by its very nature, social. People are understandably concerned about teenagers with their noses in their mobile phones, but most of the activity they are engaged in is community-based rather than solitary. They are posting, commenting and sharing with one another while developing a complex literacy of traditional and modern society.

The Cons Of Social Media

There are also cons, or at least concerns, that arise from using social media in education. The first earned the priority of being this article's title: Does social media make students lazy? Many university students no longer purchase the assigned textbooks. Some have never set foot in the library. Used to browsing, surfing and skimming online, students tend to take the same approach to reading print media. Similarly, both primary and secondary students go first to Wikipedia, second to their Facebook network of 'friends', third to their library and fourth maybe their school books. Although turning to social media is not cheating, strictly speaking, teachers who want students to learn how to find qualified information and learn the difference between trustworthy sources and the rest often prohibit use of social media in assignments.

Cheating the system is not a new practice for students looking for short-cuts. Extracts and *CliffsNotes* that summarise and guide studies of fiction, history, mathematics and writing have been around since the 1950s and *Coles Notes,* a Canadian study guide publisher before that.

As movie rentals became more popular, students began watching the movie rather than reading either the assigned book or the study notes. Indeed, the emergence of digital delivery for movies has meant that students with an iTunes, Amazon or Google account can download content at a moment's notice. Even long-form films seem too much for many students. Accessing abbreviated, free, reworked versions of the film is often easier than renting and downloading the full version thanks to YouTube, Vimeo and a host of other video social networks. These student behaviours are enough to lead teachers to ask what is next – a three-photo summary of Macbeth on Instagram?

The nature of social media sends the message that short-cuts are acceptable and even preferable. Students see nothing wrong with referencing any social network. Language is informal and spelling is discounted. Scholars openly admit to reading abstracts rather than entire articles in studies of the academic workload. Have we lost rigour? Completeness? Patience for the time and effort it takes to assimilate, interpret and understand? These are worthwhile questions that test us.

Social media is overwhelming, even demanding; there are pressures to post, tweet, blog and share. The cognitive surplus seems less like surplus and more necessity. We ought to be reciprocal, posting our own brilliance, but remembering to acknowledge and contribute to the wisdom of others. Meanwhile new tools are added regularly and trends shift quickly. Sites and information must be updated, linked and contextualised. The demands for the 'digirati' are great, but what of the digital divide? Does use of social media for education alienate one class of educators from non-users? This, of course is a question of policy and approach.

Navigating Social Media, Re-imagining The Book

Marshall McLuhan once wrote that no medium ceases to oppress its predecessors until it finds new places for them. Books are worthy of note here. Almost everyone who experienced books from a young age appreciates them through life. Nevertheless, readers are flocking to social media, which provides both technical and social convergence. Doing so does not kill the book. Indeed, the media landscape is more diverse and colourful today than ever before in human history.

Rather than be run over by social media, we need at one and the same time to harness it, but also to let go, observe and understand. As teachers and professors, it is important that we do not strip books of their experiential meaning. As the child progresses through school and into university, they increasingly receive the message that social media is fun and interactive and that books and their content are stale and boring.

In fact, the undisturbed impact of books is quite the opposite. Watch toddlers. They love books. They also love tablet computers. They love language, symbols, information and communication – especially coming from trusted carers. The enduring value of books is dependent on these same trusted carers: parents and teachers. Social media is just as likely to be a tool to direct as distract, to engage as to disrupt, to educate as to dumb-down – but social media requires role models and leaders, indeed, teachers.

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Dr Jeffrey Brand *is a Professor of Communication and Creative Media at Bond University and Chair of the Higher Degree Research Committee. He is a 2013 recipient of the Australian Office for Learning and Teaching citation for Excellence in University Teaching. His research examines emerging media, audiences, educational uses of media and media regulation. He is also the father of three digital natives.*