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Understanding the Social Media Ecologies of Employees within Higher Education Institutions: A UK-Based Case Study

Every once in a while, performing an audit of our digital lives can prove an educational experience. Like 1.11 billion other users worldwide, the chances are that you actively engage with Facebook on at least a monthly basis (Facebook, 2013). Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly unlikely that this will be the only form of social media you engage with; perhaps like 288 million others you are transfixed with tweeting (GlobalWebIndex, 2013), or just maybe you are akin to the 225 million users who proclaim their professional credentials upon LinkedIn (LinkedIn, 2013). Further reflection may even reveal something about how you prefer to manage your multifaceted digital life. Perhaps you elect to seamlessly blend the personal and professional spheres of your social world upon just a small number of sites, or could it be that you compartmentalise different facets of your life across numerous platforms; each serving its own distinct purpose?

As an umbrella term used to encapsulate the online activities of social networking, content sharing, blogging and microblogging (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010), social media adopt many guises; from the battle-hardened, consistently familiar Facebook and the staid hues of LinkedIn, to the youthful, aesthetic exuberance of Instagram and Pinterest. Though the demise of early social networking sites such as SixDegrees and Friendster (boyd and Ellison, 2007) serve as timely reminders that size of user-base is no guarantee of longevity, the ever-expanding range of social media to have blossomed around the fertile grounds of Facebook should provide impetus for social science researchers to broaden their focus out beyond the world's largest social networking site (cf. Wilson, Gosling and Graham, 2012).

As Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy and Silvestre (2011, p. 242) state, "there currently exists a rich and diverse ecology of social media sites, which vary in terms of their scope and functionality." The ecological metaphor employed here forms an important foundation upon which much of the discussion throughout the current chapter is constructed. Though Kietzmann and colleagues do not appear to explicitly attribute a definitive provenance to the term, the biological imagery appears to have much in common with media ecology theory: that is, "the study of media as environments" (Postman, 1970: 161). Whilst it is not the intention to frame the proceeding discussion specifically within the parameters of the theory, it seems meritorious to embrace the general notion that different forms of social media constitute distinctive digital environments that fit together to provide the user with a range of outlets for use within a professional context. To paraphrase McLuhan (2003: 271), social media ecologies are about interacting with the sites in ways that are complementary, rather than cancelling each other out.

A core aim of this chapter is to explore how employees within Higher Education Institutions (HEI) draw upon different elements of their social media ecologies to support their interactions with students, colleagues and professional peers. HEIs are complex organizations, quite often with equally complex missions requiring the engagement of employees from across a distinct range of roles (Whitchurch, 2006). As reflected in a wider trend of organizations 'going social' (KPMG, 2011; Brown and Vaughn, 2011), the increasing centrality of social media within the lives of the student population (Selwyn, 2009) provides a particularly compelling reason for Higher Education employees to take social media seriously, regardless of whether their role is primarily administrative or academic in focus. As the UK-based Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Information Strategy Guidelines

emphasize, information is the 'lifeblood' of Higher Education Institutions (Pollock, 2000; Orna, 2004). As a form of communication technology, social media appear to excel precisely in supporting this endeavour.

Furthermore, in a digital society where reputation is becoming an increasingly prominent feature of the digital economy (Masum, Newmark and Tovey, 2012), social media users employed within HEIs appear to be faced with an ongoing challenge of how to engage in authentic, open communication whilst attenuating the risk of reputational damage to either themselves or their employer. The following discussion draws upon the qualitative findings of a case study to explore how employees of both administrative and academic roles within an HEI address this task whilst using Facebook and other elements of their social media ecologies to interact with students, colleagues and professional peers outside of their institution.

Middleton University: A Case Study

Middleton University (MU) is a pseudonymous Higher Education Institution based in the United Kingdom. The university is attended by over thirty-thousand students, employs several thousand members of staff and consistently ranks within the top percentage of universities worldwide for its quality of research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen full-time employees at MU; ten of which were in administrative positions and four in academic roles. Of these fourteen individuals, eight had managerial responsibilities and whilst nine could be classified as being within the maintenance stage of their careers (cf. Mount, 1984) with over ten years of professional experience, two were at the establishment stage of their careers, with less than two years of experience.

Questions in the semi-structured interviews addressed four core themes: background information, including their work role at the institution; how they used social media to support their professional activity; how they perceived their own digital identity and that of others; and finally, how they managed the personal and professional aspects of their digital life. All interviews were transcribed and thematic analysis subsequently conducted upon the content, following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Interactions with students

Since its inception in 2004, Facebook has played a central role in supporting the social elements of student life; from its relationship with increased life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement and political participation (Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2009) to improved self-esteem and the construction of different forms of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe, 2007). Commenting from an institutional perspective, Roger, a senior administrator at Middleton University (MU) indicated that social media were ideally placed "as a vehicle for engaging with students to enable [MU] to recruit more and better students". In comparing his perceptions of culture within HEIs to that of other corporate environments, Roger noted,

The difference is I think we're much better placed to exploit the liberalism [of HEIs]; that freedom to actually use the benefits of social media to engage more meaningfully with students, who are part of this big learning community and, you know, to kind of test out boundaries.

The limits of these boundaries of engagement are not always easily defined, however. David is a Professor within the MU's Faculty of Social Sciences, wielding a prodigious publication record that is matched by a two thousand and nine hundred strong Twitter followership and expanding swell of international visitors to his research-focused blog. David was acutely aware that many of these followers were students and whilst acknowledging the self-promotional utility of Twitter as a way of sharing ideas relating to his research ("It's a brilliant, brilliant exercise in forcing you to write."), he was initially reluctant to engage with Facebook. Eventually, he gave in to satisfy his curiosity about the traditionally clandestine conversations he felt his students were having about his lectures online:

I joined Facebook because some students set up a group about me and the only way I could see what the little f*ckers were saying was to join. I didn't want to join in my own name so I joined under a fake identity, which was fine and allowed me to see what they'd done. It wasn't too bad. In fact, it was sort of quite nice in some ways.

Though David's initial motivation for engaging with Facebook appeared to constitute a form of strategic reputation management, his colleague Peter, an Associate Professor based within the Faculty of Arts, was wary that using the site for monitoring extracurricular student debate introduced an element of risk to the student-teacher relationship that, for him, outweighed any potential benefits:

Some misguided colleagues of mine search for their names and so forth and find discussions - sometimes very flattering, but nevertheless, discussions … The fact some of our students insist on putting drunken photos of themselves up and not using the privacy settings, prompt most of us – certainly myself – to talk explicitly to our third years about the use of Facebook and social media.

Not only does Facebook appear to present academic members of staff like David and Peter with potentially awkward social situations to negotiate with their students, but also university administrators, like Roger, are left with a fine line to traverse: litigious comments may fall neatly under the institution's existing disciplinary procedures, though viral trends such as 'Confessions' pages on Facebook (e.g. Reuters, 2013) present more complex challenges. Such pages may pose a significant threat to the institution's reputation, but equally, demanding their removal is an action accompanied with its own risks; not least the potential for it to be perceived as restricting freedom of speech throughout the student body. In this instance, 'traditional' disciplinary strategies may not only be ineffective but in fact, serve to exacerbate situations further.

Conversely, whilst numerous studies have hinted at student reticence to interact with staff upon Facebook (Hewitt and Forte, 2006; Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley, 2009), a common challenge discussed by many of the interviewees was the management of friendship requests received from students within their institution. Without exception, all interviewees emphasized the importance of maintaining professional distance between themselves and students at MU by declining such requests. For most, the decision appeared a clear one to make, though for Jess, a student liaison officer whose role had become increasingly tied to communicating with students upon social media, the situation demanded greater consideration:

The difficult thing I find is when you get requests from students. I kind of find that a little bit [pauses] I have these internal debates with myself. I've had about half a dozen, maybe even more, that have requested me as a friend on Facebook but I feel that I need to keep my personal Facebook account separate from my work life.

For Will, an early-career lecturer with the Faculty of Arts, Facebook represented a complex social space in which he communicated with non-work friends, colleagues and professional peers. As such, the inevitability of talking informally about work simply emphasised further the pastoral responsibility he felt for not including students within his Facebook network. Like David, Will was aware of the increasing number of MU students following both his Twitter profile and blog. Perhaps one of the most prominent features of social media, and in particular Twitter, is the way in which for many users, it collapses multiple audiences into a singular context (Marwick and boyd, 2010).

Offering users relatively limited nuance in how privacy settings are managed, Will, like his fellow interviewees, appeared to be less concerned with controlling access to his Twitter profile than he was with regulating the content of his tweets. In particular, Will indicated feeling "very uncomfortable" with discussing anything that might be overtly political or controversial, primarily due to his concern with "isolating particular students". He was also wary of putting himself in situations where he may be "intellectually vulnerable" to his students; contrasting his own approach to that of a fellow early-stage academic with whom he was friends and whose "frank" tweets, he felt, would inevitably be discovered by her students and subsequently "seriously diminish her authority and her ability to control a class". However, as noted by Will:

When you're trying to bear all these things in mind, you can actually end up coming across quite anodyne. One of my students joked the other day, 'oh, you just post about work all the time on your Twitter feed' and I'm like [pauses] 'yeah' [laughs] I do.

Thus, self-regulation appears to be an important aspect of interacting with the different elements of one's social media ecology, though at the other extreme, excessive restriction and self-censorship is a concern with respect to how interesting subsequent content will actually be to students. Indeed, why use social media at all if one is to disavow its support for social interaction?

Interactions with colleagues and professional peers

Frances is an Associate Professor within the Social Sciences and an active user of eight different social media platforms. The reason for engaging with such a diverse social media ecology appeared logical: "I guess at the moment there just isn't one site that does everything that I want. There's a bit of stuff on Academia.edu, there's a bit of stuff on Twitter and there's a bit on Facebook". Compartmentalising and distributing these distinct facets (Farnham and Churchill, 2011) of her digital identity throughout her social media ecology appeared to provide Frances with a practical approach to fulfilling what Binder, Howes and Sutcliffe (2009) propose is a fundamental psychological need to maintain independent social spheres. Though she discussed predominantly succeeding in doing so, Frances admitted that

with Facebook in particular, the boundary between her personal and professional life had become progressively blurred over time:

I try to keep Facebook primarily for friends and family and Twitter primarily for academics, but the split never works out like that because, especially, there's quite a lot of academics who are on Facebook. So there are a bunch of academic people who I'm also friends with and that means I have to be more cautious about what I post there.

For most of the academic employees interviewed, their Facebook networks often contained work-related connections, and in particular, known colleagues at the University and professional peers they had previously met at conferences. As indicated in studies by Skeels and Grudin (2009) and Lampinen, Tamminen and Oulasvirta (2009), the social etiquette of handling Facebook friendship requests from more senior professional peers can also present HEI employees with a dilemma. As Frances remarked,

You get a friend invitation from a very high profile academic in America and you think 'you're a great academic, but I don't think I really want to be Facebook friends with you because I don't want to see your photos skiing and laying on beaches, and you don't want to see photos of my kids'. But, you know, you sort of slightly feel as though it would be rude to say no with some of these things.

Conversely, almost all employees within administrative roles were unwilling to accept requests from current colleagues on Facebook, though were more comfortable doing so with former co-workers. For Abigail, an MU employee in a student support role, Facebook enabled her to keep in touch with former colleagues whom she had remained close friends with. However, she was vigilant to keep particularly personal aspects of her social life separate from members of her work team:

I'm gay and I'm keen to keep that to who I want to keep that to. Although I'm quite open about it, I don't necessarily want it to be picked up and talked about just through a social media network.

Roger, a senior administrator with a relatively expansive social media ecology, emphasised that HEI employees need to be perceptive of the professional consequences that can arise from publicly sharing personal matters or strongly critical professional opinions amongst an audience of professional peers. Furthermore, he indicated that this could be especially problematic for those at the beginning of their career or for administrative employees who "don't enjoy the same protection [of freedom of speech as academic staff] and I'd say you've got to be more careful." However, few interviewees in academic roles appeared to place their faith in such protection; a point illustrated by the ubiquitous use of 'my views are my own' disclaimers on their Twitter profiles, without truly believing in any legal protection that they might offer ("I don't know if it will make any blind bit of difference but I thought 'I might as well'. It's just a few words.").

In fact, for many of the interviewees, Facebook appeared to represent an element of their social media ecologies that supported relative freedom in what they felt able to share amongst friends and professional peers. For a number of academic employees in particular, the platform was referred to as providing a "safe audience"; a network that in comparison to the audiences of their Twitter profile or blog, were largely known in an offline context and

could be trusted to correctly interpret any potentially ambiguous content. Subsequently, some (e.g. Lewis, Kaufman and Christakis, 2008) have likened Facebook to the dramaturgical concept of a back stage or region; defined by Goffman (1959: 112) as "a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course".

However, in line with Hogan's (2010) critique of the analogy's application to Facebook, an interactional space that is considered to be private or "safe" is not necessarily the same as a 'backstage' area where individuals "can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude" Goffman (1959: 114). Indeed, David's self-described conformity to the adage of "don't write anything that you wouldn't want to see on the front page of the Daily Mail" indicated that he still performed for a professional audience, despite his actual Facebook audience being largely homogenous in its composition of mostly non-work friends. Thus, the perceived freedom in self-expression that Facebook appeared to provide HEI employees was merely relative to more publicly accessible elements of their social media ecologies. As noted by David, "Even if [others] have protected their stuff, people can get in. They can take screenshots. I mean, it's not that bloody safe."

Conclusions

As the case study of Middleton University hopefully illustrates, HEIs offer particularly fascinating social environments in which to explore the use of social media in a professional context. It seems likely that for as long as HEIs continue to embrace these social technologies to recruit, consult and educate students, both administrative and academic employees will need to think carefully about how they balance the needs of the organization against their own. As many of the interviewees in the case study demonstrated, when utilised effectively, the distinct elements of their social media ecologies can fit together to provide a powerful method of disseminating research, communicating with students and connecting with professional peers.

However, to achieve this, vigilance, conscientiousness and self-control appear to be crucial. The employees of MU indicated that upon Facebook, personal-professional boundaries should be maintained at all times with respect to current students. For those in administrative roles, this applied equally to current colleagues. Conversely, Twitter, LinkedIn and blogging sites offered platforms that there were perceived as more professionally appropriate for interacting with both students and professional peers. As more openly public spaces for social interaction, it was upon these sites that employees appeared to demonstrate the greatest awareness for the professional consequences of their actions; regulating their interactions with respect to the anticipated responses of imagined audiences consisting of students, professional peers and the tabloid press.

As new forms of social media continue to emerge and appeal to the student body, it seems likely that Higher Education employees will need to seek increasingly novel ways to protect and promote both their own reputation and that of their institution. Whilst Facebook remains an important site of inquiry, the experiences of employees within Middleton University indicate that we should also broaden our focus to encompass other elements of the individual's social media ecology.

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