

**New Technologies Bring New Practices:  
The Necessity of Institutional Social Media Policies**

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Every new communications technology brings with it a new set of practices that are created, enabled, or at least enhanced by the technology itself. The advent of the telephone brought with it an entirely new way for corporations and customers to (theoretically) solve service issues, researchers to conduct surveys, and salespeople to find clients. Database management via the internet brought a wide realm of online marketing, purchasing, course registration, grading, and virtual services where none had existed before. The creation of social media is no exception, and may prove to be the ultimate case of how communications technologies change the very nature of communication in unforeseen ways<sup>1</sup>. Research in everything from internet health information seeking to online dating indicates that human interaction patterns online often differ from their “in person” counterparts, suggesting that the technology itself has an impact on common and even well-established practices. A simple illustration makes the point: Online dating behavior has literally thrown several well-established theories of interpersonal relationship development on their ear; unlike relationships built face-to-face, online romantic relationships are created with immediate disclosure of highly intimate information, a good deal of dishonesty, and much more elaborate use of self-presentation strategies<sup>2</sup>.

While existing policy may already cover any behavior that conflicts with community or institutional standards, it may be unlikely that social media interaction engaged by “institutional representatives” is recognized as a violation of any policy, especially when occurring within “private” contexts of personal accounts and profiles. In other words, online communication users, and most especially social media users, initially saw their posts and tweets and photo albums as being separate and distinct from their “official” forms of institutional communication, (somehow) private, and fully unrelated to their professional role or identity. The misunderstanding proved to be a poor defense when it led to complaints or litigation. However, social media’s utility continues to evolve, making what was once a personal interaction tool a commonly used way of personal *and* professional life.

Today, social media is no longer an undefined fringe communication vehicle. Social media has become deeply integrated into both personal and professional realms, blurring the clear borders of

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<sup>1</sup> Rainie, Purcell, and Smith (2011). *The Social Side of the Internet*. Pew Research Foundation. Available at <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/The-Social-Side-of-the-Internet.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> There are many studies exploring online dating; see, for example, Ellison, Heino, and Gibbs (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 11(2).

both. KRC Research found that approximately two-thirds of all non-profit institutions recognize the new role of social media in their outreach to external audiences, yet 79% of the executives of these institutions acknowledge that they are not fully clear on the value to their institutions or how to best integrate the technology in their communications plans<sup>3</sup>. It is rare to find a corporate organization that has not redirected at least a third of its communications budget to social media channels, and the growing literature on business strategies and outcomes has rapidly multiplied. The Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 68% of all Americans believe that the internet has had a major impact on the ability of groups to communicate with members, and 41% of internet-using active group members believe it has changed the way in which they organize activities for their groups<sup>4</sup>. A 2010 survey by the Pew group found that 85 percent of technical experts believed that social media improves social relations, a prediction that continues to prove true in most studies<sup>5</sup>.

Universities have also adopted, in both formal and informal approaches, social media to reach out to prospective students, increase student attendance at events, connect with alumni and donors, and create presence for individual departments or student organizations. As is typical in technology adoption, innovation is often from individuals who work with little guidance rather than through formal institutional planning. As a result, the institutional voice becomes a cacophony of individual voices, with some communicating messages that would make a Public Affairs administrator cringe.

A few examples illustrate this issue:

- A faculty member who has professional and personal followers tweets about the dreadful papers she is grading and how disappointed she is in her student's writing.
- A university English department creates a Facebook page but the administrator reposts messages from an environmental advocacy group about global warming.
- A recognized student organization creates a YouTube channel with videos showing organization activities of students without permission from the students involved. They also post the university's athletic team logo and show the campus in videos.
- Graduate students in a department create a study group on Google + and members share insights on courses, faculty expectations, and opinions on how to get a thesis through committee.
- Football players on a NCAA Division 1 team covered nationally send tweets to fellow students and fans before and after a game about the other university's team.
- A faculty member posts course slide sets that include copyrighted materials and images to his SlideShare account for easy access by students and colleagues.

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<sup>3</sup> Social Media in the Nonprofit Sector: A survey of nonprofit communications executives. Weber Shandwick Social Impact. Available at <http://impact.webershandwick.com>.

<sup>4</sup> Rainie, Purcell, and Smith (2011). The social side of the internet. Pew Internet and American Life Project. Available at <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/The-Social-Side-of-the-Internet.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> A long debate can be found in the literature about whether social media and internet use in general isolates or enhances social relationships. So far, the more convincing data seems to be that social media actually enhances in-person involvement and relationship development. See, for example, the 2009 Euro RSCG white paper entitled *Social Life and Social Media*.

Interestingly, many of the studies on social media use suggest that the technology itself creates a “cyberdisinhibition” – an increased willingness to behave online in ways that most people would not behave in person<sup>6</sup>. This, of course, has been the focus of much institutional angst and policy consideration, as students (with already limited capacity for inhibition) have employed social media for a long list of socially offensive, illegal, and institutionally embarrassing behaviors. But disinhibition goes beyond typical “coed gone wild” behaviors. That same disinhibition affects department chairs, seasoned faculty, graduate assistants, and department secretaries in making social media messages that may not be in the best interest of the institution.

But the purpose of institutional social media policy is not merely to police a set of bad or poorly planned messages and images that can (and do) get disseminated in low tech as well as high tech contexts, and for which most institutions already have adequate policy to address. The purpose of social media policy, I believe, is to enable institutions to best utilize the technologies in effective ways in the accomplishment of their educational and social missions. Rather than looking at social media policy as a long list of “Thou Shall Not” restrictions, institutions should be designing policies that guide and nurture the effective, legal, and strategic use of social media across the institution’s higher learning environment. Social media is quickly becoming a way of business for most institutions of higher education – yet without clear and sufficient forethought or guidance. The potential for bad behavior is not nearly as great as the potential for counterproductive use that will undermine its effectiveness and create a variety of problems that could be avoided.

Foundational to this argument is an understanding of policy as “a general, overall, rational canopy for specific actions, procedures, and operations”<sup>7</sup>. In other words, institutions need social media policy as a way of establishing a set of protocols and procedures as a tool to communicate (strategically) with external and internal audiences. Creating and educating the institution on these policies can also help individuals better understand distinctions between personal and professional use.

One final justification for institutional social media policy is the need to reverse prior “knee-jerk” reactions common in non-profit, federal or state-funded institutions to social media. For many of these institutions, use of social media sites have been blocked by the institution’s network, forcing individuals to engage in social media “business” on private computers and networks or to avoid use altogether. Outlawing social media has done little to curb its potential or its problems, and is more likely to deepen the misunderstanding about institutional voice. Good social media policy makes clear what role social media can and should play in the institution, and helps all members contribute to institutional values and identity through these channels.

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<sup>6</sup> This is also from the Euro RSCG study, but the finding is common across studies.

<sup>7</sup> Fincher (1999). *The Purposes and Functions of Policy: Plans, Programs, and Decisions*. University of Georgia Higher Education Institute. Available at <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED442332.pdf>

## Foundational Concepts to Policy

Institutional social media policy must acknowledge and work from an understanding of the nature of social media interaction, which is vastly different than traditional forms of communication. As a communications medium, social media is unique in three fundamental ways<sup>8</sup>:

1. Social media is INTERACTIVE. Inherent in the design of the technology is its focus on interaction between users – with the goal of collective, collaborative knowledge that is formed through dialogue rather than the broadcast of controlled messages. Many in the institution attempt to utilize social media as a worldwide billboard or broadcast vehicle; a place to send perfectly crafted messages to a willing and waiting audience. This is not the intent or structure of social media, and guidelines should reflect the use of the medium to create and sustain meaningful conversations rather than post the occasional promotion. Novice social media users should clearly understand the need to engage readers in their pages, channels, groups, or circles, and to maintain a consistent social media presence in order to fully utilize the channel. Guidelines for interactive use (what information the conversation can or cannot include) is important, as are guidelines for creating interactions that resonate with the mission of the larger institution.
2. Social media is UNRESTRICTED, despite efforts to the contrary. As recent legislative debates have demonstrated<sup>9</sup>, there is a strong desire across the industry to keep the internet (the home for all social media) free and unfettered by legal controls. Regardless of the future outcome of these debates, the current social media landscape is one of open, unrestricted access by those with the capability of entering it. In simple terms, anyone may come to or contribute to your conversation, take anything from it, change it in any way they desire, and bring it to a wide range of other forums. This open dissemination and reframing of information is exactly what social media was designed to do, so there should be no surprise when content that was carefully created for one context or audience is now used for another. Users must recognize that open conversations rarely yield total consensus (especially since there appears to be a group of social media users who find sport in message disruption, or “trolling” as it is called<sup>10</sup>), so those employing social media must have clear guidelines on content monitoring, and clear expectations about what may come of posts and uploads.
3. Social media is both TEMPORARY and PERMANENT. Given the rapid growth of populations using social media, messages from this platform are often little more than a single raindrop in a

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<sup>8</sup> A full discussion of these differences can be found in an online primer created for prevention coalitions and institutions. It is available at [www.cadca.org/somewiki](http://www.cadca.org/somewiki).

<sup>9</sup> An excellent background and discussion can be found at <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2012/01/18/whats-the-best-way-to-protect-against-online-piracy/?ref=technology>.

<sup>10</sup> [Trolling: The Today Show Explores the Dark Side of the Internet](#)", March 31, 2010.

torrent of rain, particularly at key times of the day when most people are online. A few hours off-line can, in many circumstances, mean missing thousands of messages across forums. Several social media sites have worked to help users better manage the deluge by creating circles, or wall display controls that let the user see posts from certain friends they deem most important to follow (known as Smart Lists on Facebook<sup>11</sup>), but even these controls can ensure that a message intended for an audience is received by that audience or recognized across the many other posts that surround it. Timing of posts, therefore, may be a critical consideration, as is the need for developing effective monitoring and maintenance infrastructure to manage effective reach amidst the throng of competing messages.

Paradoxically, what is posted may remain in digital form indefinitely and as always downloaded into any number of private or public memory systems. It is not unusual, particularly for photo or video content, to reappear long after the original was removed or deleted. Initial decisions for posting need firm and clear criteria, particularly when being added as part of a social media forum that represents the institution or its sub-entities.

### **Elements of Effective Policy**

The elements of effective social media policy are no different than those for any good institutional policy<sup>12</sup>. Their creation, however, may involve a different set of administrators. Social media policies often live in the institution's Public Affairs office and are connected to an institutional web management group. Placing the institutional policy in this location focuses the policy as a matter of external communication between the institution and its many external audiences. Central to the policy is a need to clarify the voice and identity goals of the institution, guiding social media use by its formal and informal representatives to reflect the mission and values of the institution.

### **Definitions**

Like all good policy, the use of clear and bright line definitions is critical. Unfortunately, social media has come to mean a broad range of things, and is often misrepresented as "all things on the internet," which is inaccurate. Social media is generally defined as "web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.<sup>13</sup>" While it is critical to define social media beyond a few popular sites (many interchange social media with Facebook incorrectly), attempting to list every one of these networks is unnecessary; while some are much more popular and likely to be used, the more important concept is the ability to identify social media from other internet tools. Several of these tools resemble but may

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<sup>11</sup> Vahl, A. (September 27, 2011). *Five Facebook changes and what you need to know*. Social Media Examiner. Available at <http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/five-facebook-changes-and-what-you-need-to-know/>

<sup>12</sup> An excellent collection of social media policies can be found at <http://socialmediagovernance.com/policies.php#axzz1kW3gJiZV>

<sup>13</sup> Boyd & Ellison (2007). Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13 (1), 210-230.

not actually fit within the category of social media. Most notable of these are blogs, which themselves are not truly social media, but which are most often linked and disseminated to networks from social media sites. Blogs, however, require a reader to “subscribe” in order to actually see the content, although anyone can view the announcement and link from a social network site. And while anyone can subscribe to the blog (and comment about the blog as long as they are a subscriber), it is less a social network than an information vehicle.

This type of mixed use has become commonplace in social media, and presents new challenges in institutional policymaking. While guidance may also be needed on blog construction and messaging (or any other Web-based information source), the decision to disseminate this information via social media is a separate and distinct choice that should follow practical guidelines as well. Approaches are addressed later in this paper, but for the purpose of definition, it may be important to distinguish the other Web-based resources and address linking and promoting to these sites in a section of the policy.

### ***Representation***

By far, the most important element of institutional social media policy surrounds representation of the institution, whether social media activity is done in a formal social media structure (i.e. a departmental Facebook page or Twitter account) or done informally in the capacity or identity of an institutional representative. In reality, many institutional identities are not easily distinguished from personal identities, but bright lines can be created around several key concepts:

1. Posting for or on behalf of the institution in social media forums. The use of social media to communicate messages on or behalf of the institution include but are not limited to messages that refer to any institutional entity, activity, policy or product. Guidelines should include content boundaries, choice of spokesperson or vehicle, and review/approval by administration. Key examples include:
  - Posting announcements of new faculty hires, new policies, or events on a department Facebook page or Twitter account.
  - Creating a profile within a social network that identifies the individual as a university representative or incorporates the university’s logo.
  - Posting a video of a university activity or group on a social network site.
2. Posting from an institutional identity (regardless of message). University faculty, personnel, and students who identify themselves in online social networks primarily by their institutional identity (Associate Professor, Dean, President of the XXU Student Government should recognize that their messages in social media networks are likely to be interpreted as representative or reflective of the institution. Care, therefore, should be used in creating messages that infer a personal standpoint from a professional capacity.
3. Use of university identity in messages, icons, and posted materials. The use of university-approved icons and other materials may not be used as part of an individual, departmental, or organizational online profile or posts without express consent by university administration.

Approved icons and other materials must be used according to institutional branding standards and unaltered.

4. Acknowledgement of personal opinion. When not officially posting for or on behalf of the university, comments should be clearly qualified as personal and not reflective of the opinions or views of the institution.

### ***Account/Network Ownership***

An interesting recent case exposed the need for institutions to outline policies surrounding the ownership of social media accounts that represent the institution<sup>14</sup>. Aspects of this policy include the clear delineation of institutional social media networks as property of the institution, but may also need to clarify approaches to ensure proper turnover of networks between institutional representatives, such as the number of required administrators to an account, the connection of the institutional account to personal accounts (a problematic issue still being worked out in the technology), and the documentation and reporting of network members for tracking and institutional knowledge.

### ***Privacy***

Another key aspect of social media policy involves privacy. Although privacy issues are covered in other policies, it may be advantageous to address them specifically to the social media context. Many privacy issues may appear somewhat differently in social media. Restrictions of information release or disclosure outlined in HIPPA or FERPA certainly apply (but may take less clear form per case) to social media. Equally important is the inclusion of private information not only on open forums but in “private” messages between parties. Several aspects of these policies are often highlighted, but are by no means exhaustive:

- Disclosure of Protected Health Information, including comments or responses that provide potential identification of a student, faculty member, university employee, or patient/client of any institutional clinic or service center.
- Disclosure of student academic performance or progress, including comments or responses that provide potential identification of a student or group of students.
- Disclosure of personnel matters, position openings or applicants, departmental plans, and/or student/faculty/staff personal information in comments posted on social media forums.
- Posting of images or videos of students, faculty or staff without express permission from the individual.

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<sup>14</sup> Biggs, J. A dispute over who owns Twitter account goes to court. *New York Times*, published December 25, 2011. Available at [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/26/technology/lawsuit-may-determine-who-owns-a-twitter-account.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/26/technology/lawsuit-may-determine-who-owns-a-twitter-account.html?_r=1).

### ***Use of Copyrighted Materials***

Also covered in other policy is the use of copyrighted materials. While evident in printed articles, reports, and teaching materials, social media users may be less aware of copyright violations in profile images, within materials posted on social media sites, and even in passing along quotations and findings from their academic field of study without appropriate attribution (a real possibility when you are limited in number of characters per tweet).

### ***Posting and Linking Institutional and Non-Institutional Materials via Social Media***

As mentioned earlier, the rapid integration of internet material distribution via social media offers an opportunity to address links, reposts and retweets of institutional and non-institutional materials on institutional social media sites. Central to the issue is the perception that the link represents institutional endorsement of all materials promoted or redistributed on its pages, sites or groups, which may present problems of equity or fair competition on one end and complete embarrassment if the linked information proves to be or poor or dubious quality. Issues to address include:

- The use of institutional logos and other content on all institutional social media pages/sites/groups.
- The restriction of links to non-institutional sites and materials on institutional social media pages/sites/groups.
- Criteria to determine the appropriateness of linked materials (institutional and non-institutional) to institutional social media pages/sites/groups.
- Restrictions or guidelines on the links to institutional materials on non-institutional social media pages/sites/groups.

### ***Civility***

While the debate continues about the institutional use of speech codes on private social media posts by members of a university community<sup>15</sup>, there is an appropriate place for establishing guidelines for the use of non-inflammatory, coarse, obscene, or libelous remarks on any institutional social media page, site, or group by any representative of the institution. However, it is worthwhile to also identify the criteria used to determine when posts that are considered uncivil are also removed from the institutional network. Publicizing these guidelines in institutional forums is critical in implementation.

### **Implementing the Policy**

Implementation of any policy involves the education of community members expected to live under its standards as well as some aspect of enforcement and adjudication so that violations are dealt

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<sup>15</sup> The best source for reviewing this debate is found at FIRE, who has taken a number of institutions to court over these issues. <http://thefire.org/>



with appropriately. Both aspects of implementation of social media policy can prove challenging to institutions. Placing the responsibility for implementation in Public Affairs makes sense, but may require both infrastructure and careful coordination with other departments.

Key considerations include:

- **Campus-wide education and training.** Beyond policy awareness, there is a high likelihood that the policy will require skills training to assist individuals in both compliance and the strategic use of social media for institutional purposes. Also valuable is providing easy access to institutional branding and messaging documentation. Several universities have created “virtual work groups” of staff most likely to take on social media maintenance across departments. Facilitated by a technical Web expert and staff from Public Affairs, the group is able to disseminate information and advice rapidly and consistently. Similar resources are available for recognized student groups, athletes, and graduate assistants<sup>16</sup>. Other campuses have created a process for establishing institutional media that both “registers” all institutional use and provides guidance for use.
- **Monitoring.** Some form of monitoring is critical to ensure compliance across campus. Monitoring is less about seeking the violator than it is about seeking opportunities to educate about the policy, offer guidance, and when necessary, enforce the policy through appropriate administrative channels. Monitoring should focus on institutional social media only.
- **Referral/Collaboration.** A system of referral may also be valuable for the occasions when inappropriate social media use goes beyond the need for guidance and represents a violation of student code of conduct, employee policy, or local/state law. As policy enforcement is rarely the traditional focus of most Public Affairs professionals, creating clear criteria for referral is helpful, and collaboration between judicial affairs, public affairs, academic affairs, and human resources personnel can yield efficient and consistent approaches to addressing social media violations that cross multiple policy thresholds.

Social media’s evolution as an interpersonal *and* institutional networking tool seems far from complete, but integration across the higher education institution is occurring and needs guidance, careful monitoring, and continued reevaluation. Like the advent of the telephone, social media is likely to continue to change the ways in which institutions communicate with external and internal constituents. Staying one step ahead with policy, guidance, and constant feedback to users can hopefully reduce the inevitable bumps along the evolutionary trail.

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the guidelines produced by the University of Maryland for their student athletes, available via a Washington Post article published October 16, 2011.  
[http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/capitalbusiness/companies-tracking-college-athletes-tweets-facebook-posts-go-after-local-universities/2011/10/10/gIQAyHZ9oL\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/capitalbusiness/companies-tracking-college-athletes-tweets-facebook-posts-go-after-local-universities/2011/10/10/gIQAyHZ9oL_story.html)