

SOCIAL THEORY
COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES

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SOCIAL THEORY COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA STUDIES

The book series “Social Theory, Communication and Media Studies”, edited by Michele Infante, is a collection of works and researches on Media Culture and Communication’s Social Effects on Economy, Arts, Law and Policy. The purpose is to analyze the most recent innovations in media studies from a sociological point of view. The book series describes and studies in depth the main theories of international sociologists, linguists and thinkers, publishing high-scientific and academic texts, papers, collected essays, case studies, debates, etc. In this way, the series gives an important contribution to the most advanced debates, through the analysis and interpretation of the evolution of Media and Social Theory. Every reader, from academics ones, to policy makers, artists, video makers, professionals and any other social actor, will find detailed analysis of this dynamic research field. The book series collects the most relevant researches dealing with new media technologies, social theory and media practices. The different authors use a multidisciplinary approach to media studies: from philosophy to anthropology, from cybernetics to semiotics, from history of media to systemic science, from structuralism to social constructivism. In this sense, the series is also a collection of different methods and approaches to the study of media. The final goal of this book series is to collect the studies of several scholars in order to build a systematic and rigorous social theory for the contemporary cultural forms, linking different point of views; this social theory of media will tend to be an important mean to deeply understand current society. Finally, the book series is also a way to create a link between several scholars, belonging to different academic and professional fields and contexts, composing an International Network of Scholars dealing with Social Theory, Communication and Media Studies. The book series is bilingual Italian and English.

The book series adopts an anonymous peer review process, also called blind re-view. This process is a system of prepublication peer review of scientific articles or papers for journals or academic conferences by reviewers who are known to the journal editor or conference organizer but whose names are not given to the article’s author. The reviewers do not know the author’s identity, as any identifying information is stripped from the document before review. The system is intended to reduce or eliminate bias. Peer review helps maintain and enhance quality both directly by detecting weaknesses and errors in specific works and performance and indirectly by providing a basis for making decisions about rewards and punishment that can provide a powerful incentive to achieve excellence.

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Social Media Implications for the University

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*To our parents
Giuseppina and Domenico Iannacito
and Margaret and Stefan Vizmuller*

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Introduction

Social Media and the University

ROBERTA IANNACITO–PROVENZANO, JANA VIZMULLER–ZOCCO*

Social Media, the platforms that allow for multimedia computer-mediated communication, have become ubiquitous. Their aim is above all to connect people, enabling them to express and share their emotions and thoughts, and receive other people's reactions to all types of events. As such, they are an intrinsic part of Web 2.0. Some concrete examples of social media include Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Flickr, Pinterest, Messenger, Google+, Reddit, YouTube, blogs, Wikis and the ever-so-popular photo-sharing application now owned by Facebook, Instagram. According to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), social media are defined as «a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content» (61).

Van Dijck (2013) cogently describes how these platforms and applications have become a part of everyday life:

Talking to friends, exchanging gossip, showing holiday pictures, scribbling notes, checking on a friend's well-being, or watching a neighbour's home video used to be casual, evanescent (speech) acts, commonly shared only with selected individual. A major change is that through social media, these casual speech acts have turned into formalized inscriptions, which, once embedded in the larger economy of wider publics, take on a different value. Social media platforms have unquestionably altered the nature of private and public communication. (7)

Scientific and academic research which deals with social media focuses on various traits that touch upon both the social and the media aspects of this mode of communication. As far as the social side is concerned, identity

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formation, ethnic presentation of self, harassment, language use, semiotic features, imagined communities, and privacy concerns are just some of the topics of book-length studies and journal issues published in the past 7–8 years (see Ellison *et al.*, 2007; Keen 2007; Buckingham, 2008; Carr 2010; boyd 2014). As van Dijck (2013) points out,

social media are inevitably automated systems that engineer and manipulate connections. In order to be able to recognize what people want and like, Facebook and other platforms track desires by coding relationships between people, things, and ideas into algorithms. The meaning of “social” hence seems to encompass both (human) connectedness and (automated) connectivity. (12)

Publications analysing the media aspects deal with the general reception of this type of communication and the consequences of its use, such as platform design and management, differences in cognition, literacy/literacies, reading, writing, and other linguistic concerns, etc. (see Carr 2010; van der Weel 2011; Mele 2013; van Dijck 2013). Our own work in the field examines the presentation of ethnicity as well as the use of code switching and other aspects of language on Facebook (Iannacito–Provenzano and Vizmuller–Zocco 2011, 2012; Vizmuller–Zocco 2009, 2011a, 2011b).

The academic connection, however, between social media and the workings of the university in general, have not been scrutinized sufficiently, especially in Canada¹. It is not to say that research has not touched upon single areas of research, teaching, and administration.

Publications about research and social media at the university concentrate on the social, rather than the research, side of scholarly activities. Portals and networking services such as *academia.edu*, and blogs (see Grey 2011; Karnad 2013) extol the usefulness of social media for the faculty with which academics can achieve self-promotion, and showcase and disseminate their research findings. Furthermore, social media make it possible to enhance global networking for the purposes of accessing unpublished works, exchange ideas on specific topics, besides offering safe spaces for shy and otherwise lonely scholars. Social media as a source for research data have been used by independent companies to track large data analytics, but these do not deal specifically with the quality of the material as regards academic research.

Studies which analyse and critique the pedagogical use of social media can be found in professional publications such as *Academic Matters* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Specifically, in May 2012, *Academic Matters: The Journal of Higher Education* dedicated an entire issue, both print and

1. For the USA and the UK, for example, comprehensive studies are presented in three volumes edited by Charles Wankel (2011a), Charles and Laura Wankel (2011b), Charles Wankel *et al.* (2011c).

online, titled *Professor 2.0*, to the use of technology in education. Articles included topics such as “The Massive Open Online Professor” (Carson and Schmidt), “Upgrade Anxiety and the Aging Expert” (Klassen), “Becoming Professor 2.0” (Fullick), “The Professor as Mass Communicator” (Miah) and “Challenges, Opportunities and New Expectations” (Matrix). *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, under the rubric “Wired Campus” offers similar articles online and from, for example, 2012 to the time of this volume, has published on selected topics such as “Why This Professor is Encouraging Facebook Use in His Classroom” (Wolfman–Arent) and “In Classroom Experiment, All Discussion Happened via Twitter” (no author listed). It is quickly evident that “technology” here includes, or is synonymous with, in many cases, social media and social networks. Today’s students are connected: one needs only walk into a lecture hall or seminar room in any Canadian university, not to mention university libraries and other common student spaces including on-campus cafés, to find these digital natives checking email, sending texts on their smartphones or tablets or simply surfing the Internet and sending a tweet, uploading photos on the very popular Instagram, and, less likely these days especially for the 18–25 demographic, updating their profile on Facebook. Matrix’s article in *Academic Matters* outlines her experience in a lecture class of 700 students which she teaches at Queen’s University in the Department of Media and Film. The author states that «what’s undeniable is that even though digital divides exist, today’s students expect to see some technology used in their classes. It follows that we can expect increased engagement and higher student satisfaction when profs power-up» (4). However, while she does mention that the existing research «demonstrates the costs and benefits of using social, mobile, and digital technology enhancements to teach» (4), she too is not convinced as to whether this usage «results in higher student outcomes» (4). To the chagrin of some and the elatedness of others, she informs the reader that the «digitalization of the professoriate is well underway» (4). Matrix, of course, is a proponent of the use of technological gadgets, online and blended formats and social media for «next generation teaching and learning, scholarly publishing and knowledge mobilization» (6) (she teaches digital media courses: these require the use of social media if only to acquire knowledge of their usefulness to digital communication), but she also does recognize that «issues around tech-fuelled, Web-enabled productive disruptions inspire and provoke debates» (4).

In general, the issues and concerns which beg further research and answers revolve around but are not limited to individual characteristics of pedagogy as they are understood traditionally and their constant need to be modified, in this case by social media, for example:

- a) the qualitative differences between face-to-face interactions (both in teaching and learning) and on-line communication (even in situations where the quantity of tweets, let's say, is great, who decides how the quality of these is to be judged?);
- b) the qualitative differences between tweets and chat interactions;
- c) the definition of teaching and learning;
- d) the definition of community of learners;
- e) the distractive aspects of social media.

The critical aspects of social media use at the university level focus on the interactive problems with Web 2.0: if teaching/learning is a dialogical process, some social media platforms are not well-suited for in-depth discourse interactions: the elaboration of ideas in 140 characters, for example, poses challenges. Furthermore, it seems that Facebook, specifically, tends to allow for a quick exchange regarding the administrative, “housekeeping” aspects of academic courses, rather than the content of academic disciplines. However, in the recently published volume, *An Education in Facebook: Higher Education and the World's Largest Social Network* (2014), Kent and Leaver bring together 22 essays that deal with topics related to actual Facebook use as an integral part of the teaching and learning process. The contributions provide insight on the how-to of using Facebook to enhance teaching, to build community for students and also on the challenges of using this SNS in an educational environment. In his contribution to the volume *What's on Your Mind: Facebook as a Forum for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* Kent focuses on «the affordances of using this social network as an *official* (italics ours) space for learning and teaching» (53) and discusses its use in fully online and blended courses. While he outlines the potential challenges with using Facebook in university courses, i.e. it «blurs boundaries between formal and informal education and the professional and social lives of both students and staff» (57); issues surrounding privacy and copyright (57–8) and the final caution against higher education becoming complicit in commodification because of the way Facebook generates revenue through advertising (58), Kent acknowledges that it is still a “valuable addition” (59) as Facebook «allows the existing familiarity that the majority of students and staff have with the network to be leveraged for a higher level of engagement with learning material and encourages students to extend and shape that content online» (59). According to Kent it is precisely the question “What's on your mind?” regarding one's status (on a Facebook profile page) that is essential to opening discussions and conversations about any given topic in a course (59). Although the suggestion that the status question on Facebook is pivotal for entering into the realm of critical thinking, in-depth analyses and participatory action makes sense and is a good starting point for

teaching and learning, the editors of this volume would also agree with Losh who, in her recently published *The War on Learning: Gaining Ground in the Digital University* (2014), discusses not only tools such as online videos, course management systems, and educational video games but also «the rhetoric to online learning that requires knowledge of technical specifics as well as pedagogical application» (8). In other words, educators' awareness of the software and hardware behind SNSs such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. is crucial in order to understand more clearly the implications to pedagogy but also to the students' learning process.

Universities and colleges across Canada have websites that provide information regarding academic programs, life on campus, faculties, financial aid, international opportunities, etc. This seems to be standard practice. In addition, they have a social media presence that can range from Facebook, Twitter or Instagram accounts for the University in general to accounts set up for individual faculties, departments, and many professors, deans and University presidents (see Powers 2011; Riddell 2013; Hendry 2014) have separate accounts often managed by a social media or strategic communications team. One of the areas with the most rapidly growing social media presence is aimed at the recruitment of future students, both domestic and international. In fact, many universities have hired new staff or re-trained and re-deployed existing staff to deal precisely with social media marketing and recruitment efforts. While hard-copy university promotional materials such as brochures, pamphlets, viewbooks, are still produced, we are witnessing a reduction of this and a preference for recruiting online as much as possible or at least in tandem with social media marketing and recruitment. Regarding the use of Twitter in higher administration, John Hussey states, «Twitter — and social media in general — is not a panacea. However, coupled with high quality traditional marketing or student/alumni relations, it can help build relationships with your audience, break down barriers between administration and students or alumni, and develop trust» (253). At York University, for example, the website has a specific section for Future Students with links to official SNSs monitored by university staff. One recent posting (from January 7, 2015) on York University's official Facebook page is aimed at high school students as they prepare for exams. "Future Lions" ("Lions" refers to York's athletics) are provided study secrets through a link to a blog on the same topic. In another post from January 5, 2015 the University targets those prospective students who are still undecided about which school to attend in the fall and reminds them of upcoming deadlines once again through a link to a #yublog. What's more important is that SNS administrators are able to see how many people actually viewed the posts and, if anyone has left a comment, staff can personally answer the query. As Natalia Rekhter demonstrates in *Using Social Network Sites for Higher*

Education Marketing and Recruitment (2012) the immediacy of responses, the low costs involved, the sustainability of campuses through their go-green efforts, the personalization of recruitment efforts and the trackability of student interest are all pros that outweigh any possible cons (i.e. user privacy issues, staff know how, lack of control vis-à-vis content) when social networking sites are used in higher education marketing (26). Rekhter does concede, however, that although the statistics regarding inbound marketing (i.e. SNSs) (vs. outbound marketing such as university/college fairs and print materials) are encouraging, «this type of recruitment could be viewed upon more as complement[ary] than a substitute of traditional methods and strategies. Indeed while “wired generation” are (sic) the major target of recruitment efforts, the decision making power still largely belongs to parents; and they are consumers of the variety of other, more traditional — “outbound” — forms of recruitment and enrollment» (27). This, however, does not deter the university from promoting its programs and the institution as a whole via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. It often also recruits current students, acting as university ambassadors, to participate in the initiative. For example, Marc Parry, in *Social-Networking Experiment at Ohio State Hands Students Control of the Recruitment Message* explains how Ohio State University set out to connect, through YouTube, IM, blogs, etc. (but also via traditional email, telephone) 100,000 prospective students with «a current student who does not work for the admissions office» (“Wired Campus”) in order to give them a feel for what “the real OSU” is like. While the university lets go, essentially, of control over the conversations current and prospective students are engaging in (as the discussions are private), as Parry asserts, it «receives anonymous data on what kinds of stuff students are asking about, such as scholarships or dorms (which could be useful for future marketing)» (“Wired Campus”). It’s almost as if the university is using a “middleman” (“Wired Campus”) that is more relevant to the future student (i.e. usually closer in age, may have similar interests, not paid by the university as an admissions officer is, therefore this ambassador may be perceived as being more frank about the place, etc.).

The search for answers to some of the most pressing questions surrounding university research, teaching, and administration was the motivating factor that led to the organisation of the first annual international conference titled *Social Media: Implications for the University*, held at York University in May 2013. The 2013 conference brought together over 30 researchers whose interests in digital culture are situated at the intersection of social media and the engaged university. The overall goal of the conference was to analyze, discuss, explore, advance and exchange knowledge on the role that social media are increasingly playing in the university environment. The editors of this volume, also the organizers of the conference, saw a great need to

open the discussion at the university about social media as they relate to and are used in the classroom, professors' research and by various administrative offices in higher education especially for recruitment and retention purposes.

This volume offers a wealth of general and specific ideas that relate social media to the workings of the university. The chapters shed light on the role social media play in all aspects of the engaged university. The peer-reviewed contributions submitted for this volume are re-worked and re-elaborated versions of scholarly papers presented at the conference in May 2013.

Using both established methodologies of scientific research and novel approaches, the contributions to this volume critique the ways in which social media are applied in a university environment and also offer suggestions for their specific use in research, teaching, and administration.

While university and social media intersections have received some, albeit fragmented attention from the scholarly community, this volume proposes a more comprehensive and nuanced view of the possible advantages and pitfalls of using social media for research, teaching, and administration.

The volume is divided in three parts: Part I deals with Critical and Theoretical Perspectives; Part II presents Social Media and Innovative Pedagogy; and Part III indicates some suggestions for Social Media and Community Building. The tripartite division of the book reflects the three basic elements of the inner workings of the university. While the contributions are a part of a specific division, many of them address interconnections among the three elements.

In Part I, David Toews (*The University Tradition and Our Social Media Practices*) argues that since social media have become by now part and parcel of a person's social consciousness, neither instructors nor students can shut off this awareness in other social contexts. The problem lies in the fact that our typical notions of research and teaching remain unchallenged. He points out that all university workers as well as students engage in the production of communication of knowledge by adopting social media in a rather wild manner. His contribution urges instructors to become aware of the influence of social media using their identities as critical thinkers. In this vein, Toews takes a closer look at social media in the production of knowledge, focusing on the notion of modernization. He offers his definition of social media as «an extension of our human curiosity and creativity», and therefore social media are not separate from what university professors do.

Bob Hanke (*The Public University after Social Media*) offers an elaborate critical view of social media, starting with the myth of interactivity, which alludes to the paradoxical idea that social media seem to afford user-generated contributions without appearing to prohibit replies. Using a phenomeno-

logical perspective of relational pedagogy, Fischer's "atmosphere", and other philosophical concepts, Hanke calls for a redefinition of courses, and best students, especially from the perspective of a closer look at "attention economy". Among other suggestions, he calls on faculty to consider alternative platforms built by and for educators.

Opening Part II, Roger B. Ulrich (*Social Media, Higher Education, and the Flickrverse*) provides a critical discussion of the naysayers' view of social media at the university, basing his theoretical analysis and practical illustrations on his work with students using Flickr. His comments and suggestions cover courses which use visual material for teaching purposes, and Flickr seems to be a most useful and powerful tool for these aims. Ulrich's thoughtful analysis of the administration's attitudes to SNS (their use is detrimental to scholarly reputation) goes hand-in-hand with his support of pooling of effort where one's research is translated into teaching materials open to wide-ranging use. Well-organized and thought-out projects on Flickr support international collaboration of students in various universities, and this in turn creates new, dynamic and social use of online images. Ulrich's contribution evaluates the challenges of SNSs and the Academy with regards to: 1) SNSs role in the re-definition of evaluation and assessment of academic work (of students and researchers alike); 2) The role of non-professionals (do they weaken authority?); 3) Re-definition of publication; 4) Re-definition of the subjective side of marking; 5) New definition of multiple-authored intellectual property; 6) Shelf-life of on-line resources.

Aleksandar Lukac (*Move.(me).Ant – Marat/Sade Occupied: Teaching Theatre through Social Media*) analyses the innovative manner in which social media became the defining feature of a theatrical performance. U-stream, Twitter and Facebook were used not only in teaching but especially during the performance of a politically-rich, socially-engaged play, made more relevant by the addition of material pertaining to the Occupy Movement. The performance was opened up to audiences beyond the theatre walls through live streaming. Spectators everywhere were invited to participate by making comments and sending tweets. The possibility of verbalization of the global audience's impressions/desires/emotional and cognitive reactions which the actors were made aware of and reacted to resulted in a new dynamic which greatly changed the nature of traditional theatre.

Amy Thurlow and Brent King (*A Classroom Case Study of Social Media in Professional Education*) write about the benefits, potential, ethical issues, and challenges of using social media in professional and communication studies. Using a constructivist perspective, aware of platform design flaws and opportunities, they developed a series of assignments for a writing course for public relations students. One assignment in particular forms the backbone of their study: an online, interactive version of the print media