

Social Media in the Free Society

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Freedom of information is the cornerstone of our democratic republic. In order for the free society to function, it must rely on an educated public. The founding fathers believed that a free flow of information was necessary for the citizenry to make informed decisions. In today's world information has never been more widely available. The internet has given our society new ways of exchanging social and cultural information through a phenomenon called social networking. While advocates maintain that instant communication from sites such as Twitter™, MySpace™ and Facebook® is crucial for a more open and informed society, new communications do not necessarily create or maintain a trustworthy and enlightened public. Although people are able to stay connected with family, friends and acquaintances through media that broadcasts personal information, internet communications can actually deprive us of accurate, important and diverse content, while jeopardizing privacy, and reducing our capacity for independent thought.

Neil Postman in Amusing Ourselves to Death, reminded us that while George Orwell's vision was directed at totalitarian societies, Aldous Huxley's ominous warning pointed out the dangers and ethical issues faced by democratic societies and the unlimited technologies which those societies could potentially consume. "Orwell warns that we will be overcome by an externally imposed oppression. But in Huxley's vision, no big brother is required to deprive people of their autonomy, maturity and history. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information, Huxley feared those who would give so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism (Postman)." Today as we witness the differences in the use of information between totalitarian and democratic societies, the contrast between Orwell's prophecy, and Huxley's

vision is clearer.

In June of 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran, a country known for its religious authoritarianism, held elections with the two leading candidates; the head of state Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the independent reformist Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Iran's elections ended with a landslide victory for Ahmadinejad. Protests and riots ensued as people took to the streets to protest what they believed was a fraudulent election. Meanwhile in the West, attention gravitated toward the social networking site Twitter™, where young Iranians bypassed government censorship and posted their thoughts on the instant updating website. Iranians deemed Twitter™ to be the last hope for a free Iran, as it was one of the few places where there could be freedom of speech. It empowered many to join the protests against the decades' old oppressive regime (Nasr).

Coincidentally, the protests in Iran coincided with the death of Michael Jackson on June 25, which congested the online world with communications about the pop star. The inundation of streaming messages about Jackson's death caused Twitter™ to crash, preventing Iranians from communicating. The West's obsession with celebrity took center stage, as accounts of Iran's struggle were hoisted off of the mass media's spotlight as it peered in on Jackson's death (Rawlinson, Hunt). America's flow of information regarding an important world event was easily surpassed by trivial tidbits where "protests in Tehran" could be found in between "I ate frosted flakes this morning" and "Michael Jackson RIP." While instant messaging sites such as Twitter™ have become tools in places where freedom of information is constricted, they have also contributed to menial distractions where information is not.

Aaron Sorkin, the screenplay writer of the 2010 movie "The Social Network" once said; "socializing on the internet is to socializing, what reality TV is to reality." The MySpace™

website, originally developed to promote music, has had a major influence on popular reality television. Tila Tequila, the star of the reality show “A Shot at Love with Tila Tequila,” was made famous by MySpace™ and the “friends” she made on the site. Since she was able to acquire over a million followers on MySpace™, MTV gave her a reality show. The show featured contestants (both male and female), who were to perform “tasks” to see if they could get Tila to fall in love with them (Schrock). In essence, Tila had moved from one form of exhibitionism to another.

Tila Tequila, along with millions of others, uses social networking to share and compare personal information. Social networking makes people feel more individualistic because as they see it, it’s a place they “own” dedicated to them. Ironically, the idea that the social network allows for individualism in fact encourages a sort of collectivism, where people “friend” others based on comparable passions and ideas. It discourages other opinions and ways of thinking, which limits the ability to receive diverse thought. Psychologists call it group polarization when an individual conforms to the homogeneity of any particular group (Myers). If a moderate in a given ideology joins a group that espouses a more radical viewpoint; that individual will in turn become more radical. Over time the particular group and all of its individuals will become more radicalized. The opposite is also true if a radical enters a moderate group; the radical becomes increasingly moderate. Social psychologists call it in-group bias when individuals are more likely to join groups with similar opinions and give preferential treatment to those they see as having similar interests (Myers).

In social networking, group polarization and in-group bias are evident. The user gives more attention and “likes” to those who fit his or her way of life. For example, those who make groups online based on similar political and religious interests, often times shield themselves

from other ideas and points of view. “Friends” are made based on perceptions of likeness, often with people the social networker has never met. It is the illusion of friendship that gives others a distorted and false sense of camaraderie and belonging. In face to face interactions, we can tell a lot about what others are thinking and feeling by body language, facial expressions and other cues. Social media precludes the personal interactions and contexts which help us to determine the intention of others. In online communications people can present themselves anyway they wish. In the case of intentional deception, this can distort reality rather than enhancing it. It can impede the development of true friendships, while lead the infliction of personal harms.

Social networking has another troubling side; those who put their information out on sites such as Facebook® make it easily accessible to others. In 2007 Facebook® launched an advertising system called Beacon (Perez). Beacon tracked the activities of Facebook® users’ from third-party websites and had those activities broadcasted onto personal pages, where many others could see. It was not until a lawsuit in 2009 that Facebook® decided to shut the program down completely (Perez). The plaintiff was a man who had intended to surprise his wife with a diamond ring bought on an online store, only to have it seen by hundreds of people on Facebook®, including his wife. It is important to note that Facebook® began as a website that disregarded consent. A 2003 article in the Harvard student newspaper (Kaplan) details a young Mark Zuckerberg’s controversial internet creation Facemash, the predecessor to Facebook®. Zuckerberg hacked into the school computer, took identification photos of female students and had those photographs posted on his website, without their permission. Zuckerberg, from there went on to make an application allowing users to vote on which girl was “hotter.” Accused of plagiarism by the administrative board for copying the MIT site “Am I Hot or Not,?” (Kaplan) along with stealing school ID photos, Zuckerberg took the site down. Zuckerberg’s legacy has

continued with Facebook's "the wall;" an application that allows users to post information about others, without their approval. One can type in a statement about another person, have it posted on their "wall," and the message is subsequently stored in the company databases (Dwyer et.al.). As Zuckerberg once said "the goal wasn't to make a huge community site, it was to make something where you could type in someone's name and find out a bunch of information about them."

The accessibility of private information presents another major ethical issue involving social networking; its constitutional impact on the American justice system. Maxi Sopo, a man wanted for bank fraud, was having such a good time in Mexico that he decided to post his adventures on Facebook®. As it turned out, a federal prosecutor in Seattle was looking at his page and discovered his whereabouts through the various messages and photos he had posted. The evidence Sopo posted about himself was enough to get him arrested (NYDailyNews.com).

The fourth amendment in the constitution states; "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized."(U.S. Const.) The fourth amendment is incompatible when applied to internet media and social networking because the information on the superhighway once placed there is considered to be public domain. Personal information can be taken off the networks and be permissible in a court of law without court order. Officials can and do gather messages, photographs and video clips. They can check on alibis and potential partners in crime. Despite attempts by civil liberties groups such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation to limit warrantless data gathering on social networks, very little has been done in court to determine the constitutionality of law

enforcement usage of these sites (NYDailyNews.com). Big Brother needs no warrantless wiretapping to seize personal information, for the individual freely provides it for him, gleefully.

What will the future bring with social networking and its effect on society? If we continue in the direction we are going and continue to place our information out for public viewing, then we will become a self-monitoring society, where we will not be monitored by a Big Brother, but by ourselves. Although the government will continue to gather information using social networking, the majority of the watching will be done by our choosing. Already more of our lives are being broadcast online. In late 2010, JC Penny™ became the first major clothing retailer to put a store on Facebook. In the near future, we will be able to purchase products from any major company and have our purchases posted on our Facebook® page for all of our “friends” to see (Evangelista). Our purchases, along with our credit card numbers, will be cataloged in the Facebook® databases. The databases created by the same man who once stole identity photos for entertainment and social commentary without any consent from the individuals whose photos were posted.

In conclusion, the issues of triviality and privacy will continue to plague the online community, in both the virtual world and the real. It will be interesting to see in the next decade how the youth of this day and age will deal with the consequences of their eager revealing of personal data they post on the internet today. Reading a multitude of both mainstream and independent news sources is the best way of gathering important, non-trivial information. The only way to protect private information on social sites is not to put it on there in the first place. It is up to the individual to determine for themselves what information they espouse on the internet and which they omit. Internet communications are here to stay; so it is important to use them wisely.

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