EDUCATIONAL THEORY

HOW WE USE AND ARE USED BY SOCIAL MEDIA IN EDUCATION

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Abstract. In this article, Nicholas C. Burbules explores the effects of various social media on the ways people communicate, and the implications of these effects for the use of social media in educational contexts. Facebook, Twitter, and a host of other applications are being used in increasing numbers, especially by young people. It is where they live, share, and learn, so it is to be expected that educators would want to find ways to use these technologies to engage them. At the same time, however, these new media come with a host of issues and dangers as well as possibilities. Creative educators need to be aware of these in weighing the advantages and disadvantages of social media for educational purposes.

Activity Theory as a Way of Understanding Technology

Social media are being used widely by teachers and students in various educationally relevant ways, and are often used directly as teaching resources. As with any new technology in education, these changes come with problems as well as advantages.[1] These new media forms come with distinctive features that tend to drive their uses in particular ways. These tendencies are not determinative, however, and there are ways to work against or reframe the pathways into which many uses tend to fall. Learning more about these affordances and tendencies is one of the ways to become more critically aware of them. In this essay I explore these issues and how they raise wider questions about teaching, research, and the role of professional educators; as with other technologies, the enthusiasm of trying something "new" can interfere with thoughtful and critical reflection on when these technologies are or are not serving our educational purposes.[2]

The theoretical framework I want to use for this analysis is activity theory, which derives from the work of Lev Vygotsky.[3] It looks at the dynamic relation among technologies, discourses, and social relationships; each element seen in interaction with the others. This is much more than just Marshall McLuhan's famous observation, "the medium is the message."[4] It is certainly true that the affordances of any communications technology or medium affect the way content is communicated and understood, but it is also true that these technologies affect,

1. Nicholas C. Burbules and Thomas A. Callister Jr., *Watch IT: The Promises and Risks of Information Technologies for Education* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000).

2. Nicholas C. Burbules, "Technology, Education, and the Fetishization of the 'New,'" in *Educational Research: Discourses of Change and Changes of Discourse*, ed. Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2016), 9–16.

3. Wolff-Michael Roth and Yew-Jin Lee, "Vygotsky's Neglected Legacy: Cultural–Historical Activity Theory," *Review of Educational Research* 77, no. 2 (2007): 186–232.

4. Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium Is the Message," *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1964), 23–35 and 63–67.

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and are affected by, changing social relations and practices that in turn reshape their uses and meanings. The relation is multisided, dynamic, and — I want to emphasize — based in material considerations. In other words, the contexts and consequences of interactions among technologies, discourses, and social relations are not merely symbolic or ideational: they rely upon, and influence, structured conditions of time, speed, space (including virtual spaces), and the evolving nature of activities as actual human doings. In short, technological spaces have an architecture, and this affects how people live and work in them.

Joanne Hardman calls this framework an "activity *system*," which highlights the idea of a complex, dynamic set of relations, evolving and changing over time.[5] This is not a model of technological determinism, in which new technologies are thought to drive change (think for example of Clayton Christensen et al.'s idea of "disruptive innovations"[6]); but neither is it a completely discursively constituted process. Technologies have real and specific affordances and these are continually modified, challenged, and rethought through the processes by which they are used and socially mediated. We work with, and rework, the tools that we have; we often use them creatively against or beyond their intended uses; and we are at the same time changed by them. A common phrase in structuralist theory is "we don't speak language, language speaks us." But that is not right, I think: it is better to say, "we speak language AND language speaks us." Our expectations, plans, intentions, and ways of thinking about what we are doing and why we do it are changed. We find ourselves doing things in different ways than we might intend because of the affordances of these media and how others around us are using them. We use these technologies — and they use us. Thomas Callister and I have called this a "post-technocratic" perspective, both from the standpoint that we need to view technologies relationally, and not just as tools external to us; and because these uses cannot simply be rated as good or bad. Unintended consequences, multiple effects, and short- versus long-term considerations all complicate any simple evaluation of a new technology; typically these factors are viewed differently in hindsight (perhaps when it is too late to change) than at the time we are making decisions about their use. Hence simple evaluations of these technologies as good or bad miss the point.[7] Even what we might consider a benefit, in the short term, might be viewed differently later; what looks like a labor-saving convenience may become a dependency, for example.

5. Joanne Hardman, "Activity Theory as a Potential Framework for Technology Research in an Unequal Terrain," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 19, no. 2 (2005): 258–265 (emphasis added).

6. Clayton M. Christensen, Heiner Baumann, Rudy Ruggles, and Thomas M. Sadtler, "Disruptive Innovation for Social Change," *Harvard Business Review* 84, no. 12 (2006): 94.

7. Burbules and Callister, *Watch IT*.

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A related conceptual point here is the focus on activity. Philosophers like to distinguish a behavior from an action — a behavior is an externally perceived bodily movement, but an action is an intentional and culturally significant understanding of that movement. In certain contexts, the raising of a hand can be a request to be called upon in a classroom, a way of greeting someone, or a Nazi salute. The behaviors look quite similar, but the actions are quite different; and a major part of social life is interpreting these meanings (which can of course include possibly misinterpreting them). This process of interpretation relies on context and a certain cultural aptitude, but it is always at some level a guess. Ethnographers, especially but not only ones operating in unfamiliar cultural settings, expend a great deal of their time and effort in such guesswork.

In a similar way, an activity is a pattern of actions; a collective concept that looks across a set of instances that share certain features to see them as a common activity. Cooking, studying, playing music, and so on, each comprise a constellation of specific actions that no two people carry out in just the same way; and yet we recognize the common activities in which they are engaged. The things that unify these actions into an activity include ascriptions of purpose, intention, and overall effect. Learning about activities, and learning to participate in them in a socially recognized or approved manner, is one way to think about the educational enterprise writ large. The social element is crucial here, not only because activities are often learned through processes of observation, imitation, participation, and mentoring, but also because it is social recognition and approval that helps people learn (at least initially) what it means to engage in that activity successfully.

A number of scholars have used activity theory to examine the relation between technologies and reading and writing practices.[8] Reading and writing are socially constituted activities carried out under specific conditions and circumstances, and as such they have features common to other kinds of activities: they have a component of individual action and achievement, but they also have social and interactive aspects that shape our understanding and ways of performing them as activities (even when we are apparently doing them alone).[9] New technologies for reading and writing shape and are shaped by new activities and new kinds of social relationships.[10]

The development of the printing press didn't just create a new mechanism for producing and disseminating text, for example. Because of the particular way it

8. See, for example, Ilana Snyder, "Literacy, Learning and Technology Studies," in *The Sage Handbook of E-Learning Research*, ed. Richard Andrews and Caroline Haythornthwaite (London: Sage, 2007), 394–415; and Constance A. Steinkuehler, Rebecca W. Black, and Katherine A. Clinton, "Researching Literacy as Tool, Place, and Way of Being," *Reading Research Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2005): 95–100.

9. For more, see David Barton and Mary Hamilton, "Literacy Practices," *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*, ed. David Barton, Mary Hamilton, and Ron Ivanic (London: Routledge, 2000), 15.

10. Andrew Simmons, "Facebook Has Transformed My Students' Writing — for the Better," *Atlantic*, November 18, 2013, http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2013/11/facebook-has-transformed-my-students-writing-for-the-better/281563/.

allowed for the production and dissemination of text, and because of the particular ways it was used, it changed reading and writing practices, it changed social relations, it changed language itself, it created new occupations (and helped to kill off others), it influenced the economy, and it had a central influence on hastening the Protestant Reformation. And these concrete social (and economic and political) dimensions were inseparable from the ways in which the activities of reading and writing were changed. In this sense, all media are social, and always have been.

An Activity Theory Perspective on Social Media

When we think about new social media (the printing presses of our time, one might say), we see a scale and pace of change that is in some ways unprecedented. In all times writing and reading activities have been linked with the structure of social relations: for example, in writing letters to friends, in parents reading bedtime stories to their children, in book clubs, and so on. But because social media actually instantiate durable networks of social interaction (for example, becoming a "friend" in Facebook), the ways in which people use these social media constitute and give rise to the formation of social relationships and communities in a manner beyond just the content of the material people share with each other and cocreate with each other. They are called "social media" because they are as much about these processes of social constitution and connection as they are about the exchange of content. They are not just media for dissemination, but also a kind of creative networking:

> The fundamental mechanic of social media is the fact that it enables peer-to-peer, or "P2P" communication as well as one-way transmission. Though this was always a function of real-world social settings, most media technologies of the 20th century didn't afford this lateral behavior.… The idea of this direct connection, and the fact that it can happen in near-real time, make today's social technologies a different breed from all others. P2P is the reason social media has users.[11]

> People aren't doing anything with 21st century social media that they didn't do with media in the 20th or 18th centuries; people create, share, vet, organize, are entertained, and use social platforms to transact business, whether those platforms are built of digital switches or concrete pavement. What's "new" are the nuanced qualities of these behaviors, such as their reach (the Internet connects people located almost anywhere) and frequency (social content can be transmitted faster and more often than, say, spoken words).… Frequent use of social media isn't itself a phenomenon as much as the reality of those behaviors, such as how it changes the ways people think, buy, or vote.[12]

Although the various social media platforms have different functions and purposes, they also have a number of structural features in common: content is user-generated or reposted from elsewhere; it is shared with others within a peer-to-peer (P2P) community; and there is typically a crowdsourced process of

11. Jonathan Salem Baskin, "What's 'Social' about Social Media?," Answers.com, http://www.answers.com/article/1120379/whats-social-about-social-media.

12. Jonathan Salem Baskin, "Are Social Media New Technology or Old Behaviors?," Answers.com, http://www.answers.com/article/1127859/is-social-new-technology-or-old-behaviors.

curation, evaluation, and commentary.[13] Some are sites for sharing, evaluating, or commenting on digital creations like video (YouTube) or photos (Flickr, Instagram). Some are sites for sharing written text and links (blogs); one form of these is "microblogging," which allows only very brief posts (Twitter). Others are sites for sharing news (Digg), information (*Wikipedia*), socially curated bookmarks to favorite sites (Del.ici.ous), or answers to popular questions (Answers.com). Others are sites for sharing personal information with friends (or "friends," as in Facebook). Some are sites for professional networking (LinkedIn). This sharing culture is premised upon what David Weinberger calls an "ethos of generosity."[14]

The distinctive forms and affordances of a particular social medium influence who chooses to participate (and who does not), what kinds of things get shared, and to an extent the shape and tone of these processes of curation, evaluation, and commentary. Yik Yak, for example, is a tremendously popular application for sharing messages (a) anonymously, (b) within a small, specified radius of distance, and (c) subject to voting that promotes or votes out particular posts. But these affordances affect who uses the application, and how — sometimes in fruitful ways, sometimes dangerously (not surprisingly, students on college campuses are very heavy users). Yik Yak can be a venue for rumor and personal attacks, posted behind the protection of anonymity; but it also can be a place where people share information they are not ready to post publicly. There has been much publicity recently about students on certain college campuses using Yik Yak to harass others on the basis of gender, race, and sexuality; on the other hand, students on some campuses have used the app to discuss personal struggles with depression or questions about sexual identity, sometimes prompting community action (from sending supportive messages to individuals, to holding rallies to raise awareness about specific problems students face).[15] These affordances are not in themselves simply good or bad, but neither are they neutral. We need to go beyond pat judgments in order to understand them and to question them.

My interest in this essay is to look specifically at the dynamic ways in which social media, and their characteristics, shape certain kinds of reading and writing activities; and reciprocally, how these reading and writing activities give rise to certain kinds of social relationships formed through those social media. This question is important in many contexts, but as more and more teachers and university faculty use social media in their professional activities, in their classrooms, and in their interactions with students outside the classroom, it is

13. Danah M. Boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, "Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13, no. 1 (2008): 210–230.

14. David Weinberger, "The Digital Future," *C-SPAN* (video), December 13, 2004, https://www.c-span.org/video/?184428-1/digital-future-archiving.

15. Libby Nelson, "Colleges' Yik Yak Problem, Explained," *Vox Education*, November 13, 2015, http://www.vox.com/2015/11/13/9728368/yik-yak-colleges-missouri; and Amanda Hess, "Don't Ban Yik Yak," *Slate*, October 28, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/users/2015/10/yik_yak_is_good_for_university_students.html.

essential that they realize the affordances, the potentialities, and the limitations these media represent. As more and more students are using these media in their own lives, inside or outside the classroom, the adults responsible for them need to understand what is going on.

Sherry Turkle provides a cautionary analysis of the use and overuse of these media: how people become dependent on the particular forms of attenuated connection made possible by certain technologies — connections that allow users to control content and frequency, at a safe distance.[16] What looks like intimacy is also a kind of distancing. Actual live, real-time social interactions are unpredictable and don't come with a delete button. The illusion of "sharing" creates a feeling of connectedness and importance to our thoughts and experiences, but often without any real social interactions or effects. I was interviewing a graduate student in Buenos Aires who told me about a young girl she was interviewing, who told her that an event or experience wasn't "real" to her unless she had photographed it and posted it on Facebook. "Do you mean, sharing it with others made it more real?," I asked. "No," she replied, it doesn't matter to the girl whether anyone actually views her posts or responds to them (or "likes" them). Simply posting them online established their reality and significance for her. At some point, "sharing" as an interpersonal connection with known people scales up to a broader and more impersonal dissemination to hundreds, or thousands; or passes from direct sharing to being reposted by strangers. In this way, many users adopt social media as a mechanism for publicity and self-promotion: the number of friends, followers, or subscribers they garner creates a wider audience for their ideas. Because social media tend to have a public face, they provide ordinary people with a platform for speaking not only to people they know but potentially to many, many people they don't know. The number of followers becomes a badge of honor and a measure of popularity or potential influence — but this may be apart from the actual quality of thought going into what was posted. Retweeting or sharing links becomes a kind of distributed status network; but almost certainly the more things that get shared, and then reshared, the more likely it is (as in the game of "Telephone") that the inferred meanings and significance of what one has to say will move further and further away from any original intent. The name associated with these posts becomes no longer an actual person or originary source; it becomes, like a hashtag, a brand — a labeling shorthand to which diverse people attach a very broad range of meanings.

Not surprisingly, many private companies now use social media to create a public "brand" and to promote their products.[17] While individual people might use

16. Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

17. Richard Hanna, Andrew Rohm, and Victoria L. Crittenden, "We're All Connected: The Power of the Social Media Ecosystem," *Business Horizons* 54, no. 3 (2011): 265–273; and W. Glynn Mangold and David J. Faulds, "Social Media: The New Hybrid Element of the Promotion Mix," *Business Horizons* 52, no. 4 (2009): 357–365.

different words to describe it, they are often engaged in exactly the same process: creating a popular blog, for example, means that you want visitors to visit it, but also to come back repeatedly. The audience responds not only to the postings on the blog, but to its style and tone, the persona and voice of the "author" (which may or may not be an accurate representation of what the actual creator is like, and who may be anonymous). They ask themselves "What next?," and since a blog tends to be episodic, they want to come back for more.[18]

This self-promotional or branding motive, here as in any other context, can drive choices that sacrifice quality and substance for sensation. A knowingly outrageous or provocative posting is, in certain contexts, more likely to be picked up by others, reposted to other networks, and commented upon. Certain kinds of rhetorics (the pithiness and humor of a "meme," for example) can appeal to a broader audience with less specific knowledge or familiarity with a subject matter. More careful, nuanced postings, on the other hand, may have more substance but a smaller constituency. One question here, then, is what is the "brand" one is trying to build, and with what audience? Thinking that having more readers is better, one might argue, tends to lead to a lower common denominator.

Similarly, the constant demand for new content — and the capacity for quick posting and immediate gratification within the social media universe — tends to promote fast, impressionistic material.[19] Careful crafting, in text or other media, takes time. The very ease with which resources or links can be copied and pasted means that thorough vetting or evaluation of what one is sending is compromised. Content flows over and past the audience, with only snippets here and there really resonating or getting through.

One sort of online practice that has its own characteristic qualities is social and political activism. Here, again, the forms are diverse and there are not simply good and bad versions. But the social media context, with all the features mentioned so far, tends to encourage certain kinds of affiliation. As Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt put it, "Social media make it extraordinarily easy to join crusades, express solidarity and outrage, and shun traitors."[20] Why is this so? Because intensity and speed often overwhelm careful consideration of the issues. Because impassioned rhetoric garners attention, and earns reposting. And because the social force of social media encourages us/them constructions and the identification of easy targets and villains, strengthening a feeling of solidarity and a shared sense of moral superiority at others' expense. Jon Ronson's recent book, *So You've Been Publicly*

18. Neil Patel, "15 Types of Content That Will Drive You More Traffic," Quicksprout.com, April 14, 2014, https://www.quicksprout.com/2014/04/14/how-these-15-types-of-content-will-drive-you-more-traffic/.

19. Cyrus Shepard, "Freshness Factor: 10 Illustrations on How Fresh Content May Influence Google Rankings (Updated)," Moz Blog, June 28, 2016, https://moz.com/blog/google-fresh-factor-new.

20. Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, "The Coddling of the American Mind," *Atlantic*, September 2015, http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/.

Shamed, describes numerous cases of individuals who, because of a momentary act of bad judgment, may become the victims of a storm of online abuse, harassment, and vilification — nearly all posted by people who do not know the particulars of the original situation or act, but have heard about it only through other people's accounts and judgments. Of course, this doesn't prevent them from expressing cruel judgments about people they've never met.[21]

These kinds of judgments are made even easier when the author is anonymous, uses a pseudonym, or poses behind an avatar. These barriers to full disclosure may be a part of the appeal of some online postings: mystery, for instance, or fantasy, or the assumption that anonymous posters will reveal more truthful content than they would if they were identified. This capacity for anonymity also gives rise to that particular form of online posting, the "troll," whose identity is invested in playing the perennial adversary and critic, and whose main purpose is to provoke, to insult and, through this, to garner more attention and more responses. The purpose is not to advance an actual conversation, debate, or exchange of ideas. It is to generate more posts, even critical ones, as a sign of efficacy and influence — since even being disagreed with is a way of being taken seriously and demonstrates the power to provoke.[22]

Activity theory helps to highlight how the conditions of space, time, and controlled channels of access to information constitute structures that shape reading and writing practices in social media. For example, in an essay on virtual spaces, I used the analogy of architecture to analyze the ways that online spaces structure social movement and interaction:

1. movement/stasis,
2. interaction/isolation,
3. publicity/privacy,
4. visibility/hiddenness, and
5. enclosure/exclusion.[23]

For social media, similar processes can be seen at work:

1. how postings tend to send you to other resources, or encourage you to stay at that site;
2. how postings connect the user to other users, or invite a solo, individual response;

21. Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (New York: Riverhead, 2015).

22. Amanda Hess, Rachael Larimore, Amanda Marcotte, and Will Oremus, "Are Comment Sections Worth It?," *Slate*, May 18, 2015, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/slate_plus/2014/12/are_trolls_ruining_slate_s_comment_section.html.

23. Nicholas C. Burbules, "Rethinking the Virtual," in *The International Handbook of Virtual Learning Environments*, ed. Joel Weiss, Jason Nolan, and Peter Trifonas (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer, 2005), 3–24.

3. how information is made public, or compartmentalized only for certain users;

4. the degree of transparency and explicitness about purpose and intent; and

5. how the online space itself is structured to be welcoming, or exclusionary, to certain people or points of view.

Then there is the matter of speed, which relates to form as well as content. A microblogging medium like Twitter is perfect for authors and readers who prefer snippets and headlines to long essays. Someone can generate a large number of short postings in a brief time period (just today I was reading about a professor who had posted over 100,000 "tweets").[24] If one is Oscar Wilde or Gertrude Stein, aphorisms and brief quips can be works of genius (and sometimes humor). In lesser hands — and most of us are certainly lesser to these — it leads to the trite, the superficial, and the "clever" (not in the complimentary sense). As Plato put it, an expression of doxa and not episteme. Or, as one commentator put it, in perfect web-speak:

> Twitter is by far the worst thing ever invented. It completely makes me lose hope in humanity. I can see the slow degradation in the intelligence of our society to this so-called social network. It truly saddens me that so many people lower themselves to posting on that piece of crap.[25]

It takes only a few clicks and a bit of typing to share a video, a blog post, a link, a comment, or a "tweet" on Twitter. The mechanisms for publication and dissemination are built into the applications themselves; the potential audience is created by the already-existing network of users of that application, ready and expecting new content, and they are in turn able to promote it and share it to their own networks. These networks, and networks of networks, are also global; one's posting can reach countless people with whom one could never have direct contact. And it can all happen in a matter of minutes. For many, this is a heady, empowering experience.

This, in turn, raises questions about the rhetorics and genres of online expression. Media such as Twitter, which limit postings to 140 characters, require brief, concentrated expressions that ignore nuance, context, or qualification. Responses to other people's postings are often sarcastic, hyperjudgmental, or just plain rude.[26] As noted previously, anonymity and/or a certain distance from the original poster make it easy to be harsh without fear of consequence. The tone of much online

24. Beckie Supiano, "The Many Battles of Sara Goldrick-Rab," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 11, 2016, http://chronicle.com/article/The-Many-Battles-of-Sara/235666.

25. Kelli Marshall, "Rethinking Twitter in the Classroom," *Chronicle Vitae*, June 1, 2015, https://chroniclevitae.com/news/1021-rethinking-twitter-in-the-classroom.

26. Elizabeth Suhay, "Comment Threads Are Messy, But So Is Democracy," *Washington Post*, December 18, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2014/12/18/comment-threads-are-messy-but-so-is-democracy/.

writing, therefore, can be colorful but dismissive and rude. Various kinds of "politically incorrect" commentary, including insults to individuals or groups, sometimes crossing the line into racism, sexism, etc. — or, at another level, personal slander — are rampant, because they are without direct consequence for the poster. Furthermore, the linked issues of speed and brevity have effects as well. Susan Tardanico writes:

> Every relevant metric shows that we are interacting at breakneck speed and frequency through social media. But are we really communicating? With 93% of our communication context stripped away, we are now attempting to forge relationships and make decisions based on phrases. Abbreviations. Snippets. Emoticons. Which may or may not be accurate representations of the truth.… Rushed and stressed, people often do not take the time to consider the nuances of their writing. Conflicts explode over a tone of an e-mail, or that all-important cc: list.… Conclusions are drawn on frighteningly little information.[27]

As I will address later, these limitations make these kinds of forums problematic when being used for educational purposes.

Another dimension of many social media is the inclusion of a "Comments" section. Online broadcast media now often include an opportunity for readers to respond, question, criticize, or add their own thoughts and contributions to the subject matter. Here, too, a community, which may be a community of debate and disagreement, is created. There is something exceedingly democratic about comments: no one needs permission or authorization to add their voice. With those additions, their writing becomes part of a new text: the original creation plus all the comments responding to it. That dynamic new text, which might grow considerably over time, belongs not to the original author, but to all the authors who have cocreated it. This dynamic is very participatory and democratic. But, also like democracy, comments sections can be messy and antagonistic.[28]

Social Media and Collaboration

Social media are also often a forum for collaboration. In fact, collaboration has the same two-sided quality I attribute to social media generally: a commitment to some content or purpose, and a commitment to a networked community. People collaborate because they collectively want to accomplish something; but they also collaborate on that goal because they are committed to the community. They care about the purpose because they care about the group, and they care about the group because they care about the purpose.

The affordances of social media facilitate collaboration. First, there is the element of sharing; hyperlinks work by building connections, copying and

27. Susan Tardanico, "Is Social Media Sabotaging Real Communication?," *Forbes,* April 30, 2012, http://www.forbes.com/sites/susantardanico/2012/04/30/is-social-media-sabotaging-real-communication. See also Emily Langer, "What's Trending? Social Media and Its Effects on Organizational Communication," *University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Journal of Undergraduate Research* 17 (2014): 1–14.

28. Joseph M. Reagle, *Reading the Comments: Likers, Haters, and Manipulators at the Bottom of the Web* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

distributing links to resources, reciprocal cross-linking, and so on. While not necessarily incompatible with the motivation of self-promotion and display, the basic dynamic here is not primarily about credit or ownership, but the satisfaction of spreading ideas, creations, or resources within a growing network of influence. That is why "going viral" is the ultimate aim for many online: first, for the gratification of being seen and copied by many others; but also for having an impact beyond the sphere of people one could ever hope to reach and influence directly. In the ordinary happenstance world of social media, the number of people reached may be quite modest, but the motive is the same. Sharing what you have thought, felt, created, or discovered with as many people as you can is intrinsically satisfying. It is the opposite of what people think of as "intellectual property."

Second, the value of any particular resource or posting, in a social media context, is partly reflected in how others choose to copy, repost, and circulate it. This indirect and networked form of dissemination, which is key to "going viral," along with comments and rating systems that allow readers/viewers/listeners to rank or promote online resources — and so make them more available to others — is again the ad hoc creation of a kind of collaborative community (that is, the community that likes X — or dislikes Z). People add their endorsements because they share these likes and dislikes; but they may also come to share these likes and dislikes because they want to be affiliated with that community. Hence, these social networks instantiate those affiliations; they tend to promote certain likes and dislikes, rather than simply providing a means of expressing them. Again, we aren't just using the tools, but are changed by them.

Third, there are myriad examples of people actively cocreating works through these social networks. Fan fiction is one example. Group blogs. Mash-ups. Musical ensembles where the individuals play or sing their part and then a central member compiles them into one collective work. And so on. It is not as if such cocreations never happen in other venues, or did not occur in a pre-digital era. Collaboration is obviously not limited to online contexts. But the very impersonality and distance between participants can be part of what makes certain kinds of collaboration possible. The consequences of rejection or failure are less. Risky or controversial material can be shared or created with less personal risk. The successes of some collaborations yield encouragement and lay the foundation for others. Networked pathways, once laid out, create venues for new possibilities on a potentially massive scale. These features operate online in some distinctive ways.

Collaboration in the form of co-construction, on the other hand, creates within these networked relations the pace and focus of dynamic learning. The time it takes to make something together, the complexity of working through differences, disagreements, and accidents to build something, is itself educational in addition to the content of what is made. Elsewhere I have described this form of collaboration as a "self-educating community," one in which distinct teacher and student roles are not necessarily present; in which everyone can be a teacher and everyone can

be a student.[29] The creation of new understandings, a new artistic piece, a new way of putting ideas or resources together is the point and purpose, the occasion, and the facilitative medium that brings people together. The community is defined around the project and motivated to establish itself as a community through the project.

To summarize, social media are places for sharing, for the creation and maintenance of relationships, for projecting a particular identity, establishing a presence, promoting a reputation, and collaborating and participating in groups — all on a scale that most people could never have hoped to reach in the past.[30] This gives them a rich potential for teaching and learning. But with that potential come serious challenges.

Dilemmas in the Educational Uses of Social Media

More faculty in universities are using social media with students, both in their teaching and as a means of communication.[31] While some faculty might be "digital immigrants" rather than "digital natives" themselves,[32] they recognize the attention and time students give to applications like Facebook or Twitter, and realize that these can be a useful supplement to the formal activities and resources of the classroom to build community, improve engagement, open up discussions, share resources, encourage student–student interaction, and project a certain online presence themselves.[33] For other, newer faculty, they are likely already engaged in these resources, and they regard them less as an add-on to their teaching than as already a natural part of their activities in community building and communication. For them there is no sharp line between teaching activities in the classroom, published research, and making visible their ideas and opinions through social media. This is especially true for faculty who regard political activism and a presence as public intellectuals as part of their professional work. For them and for others, participation in social media is a mechanism for expanding one's reputation, increasing visibility and influence, and promoting one's scholarly work. Many universities now offer workshops for graduate students and faculty on how to use social media as a way of building their "brand" and advancing their career.

29. Nicholas C. Burbules, "Self-Educating Communities: Collaboration and Learning through the Internet," in *Learning in Places: The Informal Education Reader*, ed. Zvi Bekerman, Nicholas C. Burbules, and Diana Silberman-Keller (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 273–284.

30. Jan H. Kietzmann, Kristopher Hermkens, Ian P. McCarthy, and Bruno S. Silvestre, "Social Media? Get Serious! Understanding the Functional Building Blocks of Social Media," *Business Horizons* 54, no. 3 (2011): 241–251.

31. Mike Moran, Jeff Seaman, and Hester Tinti-Kane, "Teaching, Learning, and Sharing: How Today's Higher Education Faculty Use Social Media" (Boston: Pearson Learning Solutions and Babson Survey Research Group, 2011), http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535130.pdf.

32. Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (2001): 1–6.

33. Neil Selwyn, "Faceworking: Exploring Students' Education-Related Use of Facebook," *Learning, Media, and Technology* 34, no. 2 (2009): 157–174.

From what has been said so far, it should be clear that these educational uses are fraught with dangers as well as possibilities. The framework of activity theory I have tried to use here emphasizes the "material conditions" of social media (time, space, and scarce resources) that structure and shape the activities of reading and writing that take place in them. The affordances of these media promote (but do not determine) specific rhetorics, styles of writing, and affective tones on the writing or production side, and specific kinds of pacing, attention, and expectations on the reading or reception side. They create social networks, but networks of particular sorts; they foster certain kinds of roles and relationships; they tend to promote, but do not determine, certain patterns of communicative interaction. They have a flattening effect, reducing different sources and different purposes of writing or expression to a common media format; this can interfere with critically assessing the information received. To paraphrase Michel Foucault, this doesn't make social media bad, but dangerous. Social media aren't just dissemination networks: they do specific things, to and for us. Some of these things can support our purposes in higher education; some can interfere with them.

Social media encourage a lively process of sharing and adding content, as a way of participating in a community that is built around sharing; the motivation of having someone quote you, "like" you, link to you, or repost you is an affirmation of belonging and acceptance in that community. At the same time, seeking these affirmations as an end in itself can lead to all sorts of shortcuts in careful, thoughtful expression, highlighting the risks for scholars in instant notoriety. Social media are powerful tools for personal marketing, with all the good and bad that this implies. "Going viral" is a mixed blessing, to say the least.

Microblogging (for example, Twitter) has particular (though not unique) dangers in this regard because it encourages blunt, colorful, and provocative rhetoric, even though such writing can oversimplify the issues, lack context, and fall short of fair, respectful commentary. Those latter values take time, textual space, and careful attention to what is said and how it is said. The rapid turnaround and instant gratification of some social media create a powerful incentive to elevate the sensational over the serious — perhaps harmless in many contexts, but very dangerous for education. Do we want to communicate to our students that notoriety is the same as reputation? Do we want to encourage a reward system in which the best-known scholars are those most aggressive in promoting themselves, not necessarily the ones doing the best and most important work? (And, no, this isn't a problem that is unique to the current social media environment.) The tendency of "Comments" sections and other forums to encourage insulting and hypercritical postings (especially when these postings are anonymous) reinforces a more general issue in academic settings: attending to the tone and ethos of critical debate, and how to balance the values of rigorous disagreement with respect for other points of view.

As I have argued, forming strong social connections and promoting collaboration can be of tremendous value in teaching and learning contexts, creating an "ethos of generosity" and a spirit of shared discovery and cocreation. Participants

perceive their success as the success of the group. Unfortunately, this runs against our standard evaluation and reward systems in academic contexts, which tend to reward individual performance, and which will need to be reexamined if we are serious about saying that learning to collaborate is one of our primary educational goals.

Social media are largely unregulated and open to a broad range of modes and styles of self-expression, and this is to the good in an open society. But this very same freedom of expression includes snarky criticism, trolling, and harsh commentary that are dangerous to tolerate in the classroom — both because such forms of expression silence and intimidate some other voices, diminishing their educational opportunities, and because they do not exemplify the spirit of fair, respectful disagreement that is essential in order for academic discussion and debate to proceed productively.

This issue highlights a crucial dilemma confronting education, and higher education in particular, in which two fundamental principles come into conflict. The university, structurally and in its customs, derives from two traditions. One is as a crucial public space in society, one that protects the broadest possible range of free expression and free inquiry, because in many societies if universities do not protect and nurture those values, few other institutions will. The other tradition is the university as a monastic cloistered space, one that maintains a climate of safety, security, and contemplation. The very conditions that allow for free expression and free inquiry require, on the whole, a spirit of respectful (if rigorous) debate and collegial concern for one another. Individual instances might diverge from those norms, but the institution as a whole must preserve them. These two traditions, and their attendant principles, lie in fundamental tension with one another. The university must value academic freedom and free speech; and at the same time it must foster a "safe space," especially for the young people who come to the university to study and learn to become responsible adults in society. And these tensions are heightened for those areas of scholarship in which political activism and advocacy are regarded as inseparable from the pursuit of knowledge: on the one hand, such activism and advocacy more strongly claim the mantle of protected public speech; on the other, they often engage rhetorics that are more provocative and disrespectful (what Iris Marion Young calls "activist speech"[34]). This tension is exemplified in current campus debates over the merits of "civility" as a part of university culture. One danger we see in these debates, unfortunately, is a tendentious inconsistency: my/our speech needs to be protected, even when abusive, but your speech is oppressive and needs to be controlled. We see this inconsistency in certain course syllabi that attempt to ban specific words from the classroom, for example.

These tensions are exacerbated further at a time when universities are especially sensitive to the issues of diversity and inclusion, and are seeking to

34. Iris Marion Young, "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy," *Political Theory* 29, no. 5 (2001): 670–690.

foster a campus climate that is welcoming to members of groups who have been underrepresented in higher education and/or in certain fields and disciplines within higher education. How is the institution to respond when students complain, as individuals or as organized groups, that certain speech acts oppress, exclude, silence, or humiliate them? How do faculty reconcile a concern for student safety with their belief that part of the purpose of higher education is to push all students out of their comfort zones and expose them to ideas and points of view that will challenge and sometimes disturb them?

In the context of educational uses of social media, it should be clear, these conflicting values are unavoidable. The issues of quick and pithy (if superficial) analysis, anonymous attacks, trolling, shaming, the "messy democracy" of "Comments" sections, and so on, as discussed here, go directly to the question of the kind of educational spaces one wants to foster. These downsides of social media discourse need to be balanced with their potential benefits — and one way to think about this is the degree of risk one is willing to live with (or, more precisely, subject one's students to). Social media are places of public speech, of course, and they surmount the walls of the cloistered university, in both directions — bringing controversial ideas in and sending controversial ideas out. Faculty who use social media to express their opinions and to build their scholarly brands can't separate out those activities from their classroom teaching — their influence on students and others may be even greater through those media than through their formal teaching and academic writing. Sharp boundaries between professional versus personal time or public versus private discursive spaces are almost meaningless in this new media culture. Unfortunately, our academic norms and principles (for example, understandings of academic freedom and responsibility) have been slow to adapt to these new realities.

In summation, social media are powerful tools. But as with all tools, we don't just use them — they use us, they change us. Social media are not just mediums for expression through writing and reading; they shape and change the activities of reading and writing, sometimes in creative and productive ways, sometimes in ways that make us more shallow, hypercritical, and opportunistic. They help build robust networks of community, but the force and judgment of that community can be cruel. Social media help us project our identities and purposes into far-flung fields of interconnection and influence; but the farther away from us our effects are felt, the harder it is to anticipate or control what those effects might be. None of this is a reason to avoid social media or neglect their enormous potential for teaching and learning. But it is essential that we engage them knowledgeably and with a critical awareness of their limitations and dangers.

I WANT TO THANK all the members of the Educational Theory Summer Institute (2015) for their constructive advice and criticism of earlier versions of this paper. It is much, much better as a result. I want to thank especially Craig Cunningham, Amanda Fulford, and Naomi Hodgson, who gave me extensive direct feedback on this paper. Many of the ideas here grew out of conversations with my colleague Joyce Tolliver.

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