Responding to social media: Emergent policies in the academy
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Introduction

This research explores the university sector's adoption of social media, a set of web-based services used to exchange personal information. The most popular service is Facebook with over 500 million users worldwide. Facebook and other social media are increasingly weaved into institutional functions as a rapidly growing user base is volunteering information about themselves, their peers, and their social world.

The rapid uptake of mobile technology marks a creeping of surveillance into everyday life (Lyon 2001). Sites like Facebook resemble surveillance enclosures where the totality of everyday life is visible to businesses and governments (Andrejevic 2007). Facebook started as a service for students before being adopted as a tool for institutional functions. Beer and Burrows (2007) report the heightened visibility of faculty and staff online. This was an upset to universities, yet they are increasingly managing their own reputation while exploiting student visibility. This research explores how institutional policies emerge from personal usage.

Materials and methods

Fourteen semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted between February and June 2009. All respondents were employed at the same mid-sized Canadian university and used Facebook as a professional tool. Two respondents worked for campus security, four were employed by residence life, two for marketing and communications, two were tenure-track professors, two were human rights advisors, and two worked for the registrar's office. Participants were reached by way of key insiders employed by the university, including two vice-presidents. Snowball sampling was also used to locate additional respondents.

The Tavern's Photos – Cuba Tavern Party
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Added 06 November 2009
From the album:
Cuba Tavern Party by The Tavern
Share
Report this Photo

Genesis of social media as a professional tool

Instead of a mandate from above, employees themselves realized that relevant information could be retrieved on Facebook. Many employees were already Facebook users, and personal accounts were used to access information. Employees were put in charge of social media based on their knowledge and enthusiasm for these services.

I sort of do this in addition to my regular job because I have a love for it. And so, a lot of the time, most of the stuff that I do is outside of work hours because I'm on these places anyways and I like researching them, it's just a passion of mine.

Facebook offers universities an augmented visibility of social life, such that their employees struggle to make use of it. The absence of explicit guidelines from the university greatly complicates what can be done with this information.

It makes our job incredibly hard to have Facebook factor in, because the entire rules are set on seeing people do something and what they do. Now Facebook kind of blurs the timeline, right? (…) And it would make my job a lot easier if we didn't have to deal with all the problems that come off Facebook.

University reputation as concern and motivation

Respondents were concerned with the way their university was made visible through social media. The marketing and communications department was especially concerned with how the university's reputation is more difficult to manage as virtually anybody can talk about it in a public forum. These concerns are fuelled by consultants who stress the importance of managing reputations online.

Do you know [consultant name]? (…) He talks about how you basically have to go there because you're already there.

Perceived appropriateness of use

Respondents were ambivalent about using Facebook. Ethically respondents do not endorse monitoring the site, yet logistical reasons carried more weight. Respondents claim that navigating the site was incredibly time consuming. Many employees were quick to report that they took a complaints-driven approach to Facebook. If an incident were brought to their attention from a complainant, they would investigate the site. But they would not actively search for objectionable material.

We're not looking at it as an investigative tool. You've probably noticed the whole time we've been talking, that's the first time that I've ever used the term investigative. We don't investigate, we follow up.

Despite endorsing a reactive approach, respondents conceded that they would also proactively scrutinize Facebook in particular situations. Prior to an annual homecoming celebration, they search for relevant content.

When homecoming… the debate happened… yes, there were people in my office who sort of went in and sort of printed or took an inventory of the kinds of things that were being said.

It was the Dean of Student Affairs monitoring Facebook and let the police know about all these keggers that were going on. (…) And the police contacted these people beforehand and said, 'Nope, not happening. Good luck.'

Social media taskforce shaping policies

The university created a taskforce to make sense of social media in the academic sector. Led by marketing and communications, the taskforce drafted a set of guidelines for staff, faculty and students who use social media on behalf of the university. These guidelines resemble the early stages of policies for social media. A key guideline was that staff should minimize their visibility on sites like Facebook, while watching what students and others were uploading.

Monitor (…) but not attempt to control what is being posted. (Taskforce 2009)

This recommendation resonated with practices already employed by staff.

I'm monitoring Facebook. I never jump in.

Looking to the future: uncertainty and commitment

Respondents were reluctant to predict what Facebook would look like in the near future, nor were they willing to describe their response to these changes. Yet they were confident about having an ongoing presence on the site. In anticipation of student protest, an employee suggests that they have a mistaken understanding of Facebook's privacy affordances.

If my ten year old can see it at home, then I don't see any problem with me pulling it up on my computer at work.

And everybody knows this, we're creatures of judgment and we survive by making judgments and if all I have to form a judgment of you is one quick look at your Facebook page then that's going to stay with me.

Amy Lyn's Photos – 08 Barrack Bash
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In this photo: Tyler Richard, Nick
Added 18 February 2008 · Comment · Like
From the album:
08 Barrack Bash by Amy Lyn

Conclusions

Facebook and other social media have gained an unprecedented user base among university students. Universities and other institutions are aware of this and are using the site for administrative duties. This began with employees bridging personal knowledge about Facebook with institutional tasks. Yet their involvement is increasingly formal, notably with the emergence of task forces, reports, and policies. Facebook is an ever-shifting mediascape with new features added on a monthly basis. Subsequent research should focus on this growth and its consequences for institutional surveillance.

Literature cited

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Acknowledgments

Further information

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