

Chapter 11

Preparing Your Digital Legacy: Assessing Awareness of Digital Natives

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ABSTRACT

With the increasing use of social networking tools and sites available, we must be mindful of the long-term consequences of posting information online. The combination of images, comments, and other personal data shape our online digital persona. Over time and throughout the lifetime of our many online profiles and digital identities, these representations and data become our digital legacy. When we pass away, it is this information that is left behind to represent who we are to other users, family, and friends. Additionally, all of the photos and other content remain online. In this chapter, the authors discuss the construction of one's digital legacy and focus on the need for additional education about social networking usage for the future. Additionally, they present feedback from a study of college-aged students related to this topic and their views on social network usage.

INTRODUCTION

The only constant in life is change; that same analogy can be used to describe the world of technology. With the rapid growth in new technologies coupled with the possibilities for future innovation, the opportunities for progress seem endless.

Technology has become an integral part in many facets of everyday life. We are dependent on it for productivity in the workplace, for teaching in educational settings and more recently, for social interaction and communication. A flood of social networking tools and applications have become increasingly popular over the last several years

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offering an array of services aimed at enhancing our social and personal lives (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). We are barraged with multiple forms of communication venues that can be accessed over many different types of devices, further connecting us to one another. A culture of staying connected and “plugged in” has become the norm. Perhaps the most significant force driving this phenomenon is the availability of an assortment of mobile devices that include laptop computers, smart phones, and tablets. These devices, in conjunction with social networking, have created many ways of interaction.

Social network sites (SNS) facilitate open communication and increase interactions between individuals who may not have connected otherwise. Each user constructs their identity through a profile, often containing an assortment of pictures, text, and links that can give insight to a person’s interests in real life. SNS can also be used as a forum for “pages” and “groups” that users can choose to join to connect with others who have similar interests. With a simple click of the mouse, users are kept up to date with relevant content specific to that group, which can lead to information discovery and delivery. SNS also allow for event listings that are commonly used by businesses, organizations, colleges, and universities. Event listings provide the time, location, and specific information (attire, cost etc.) associated with the event. Despite the many ways to use a SNS, as each can be distinctly different, Boyd and Ellison (2008) define a social networking site as a service that allows users to: “(1) Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). Most importantly, SNS provide a “human like” virtual presence via a profile, in which users have the ability to convey a particular image or representational artifact.

As content is added to our online spaces, specifically within SNS, comments, pictures, videos,

links and replied comments/posts by other users, are aggregated to create the “profile” of an individual. Links to other users or “friends” can also be of importance as they show relationships and connections that may also be present in real life. These pieces of information can also be thought of as “Narrative Bits” of information or *Narbs* that describe a user and their interactions over time (Mitra, 2010). “The identity of an individual is eventually constructed by the combination of narbs that are available on a social networking site where different kinds of narbs work together to produce the composite narrative of a person at any moment in time” (Mitra, 2010, p.11). Some users post content several times each day, about mundane activities and events. These posts can be used to construct timelines of events in one’s life. Examining posts on a SNS can yield past locations of users, employment history, connections, problems and many other aspects of their lives. Even greater granular detail could possibly be obtained by the use of geo-tagged pictures that are included on a SNS profile (Friedland & Sommer, 2010). Sometimes our creation of a personal narrative using these technologies is unintentional. There is a significant need for additional education and awareness regarding long-term consequences of having and maintaining a profile on a SNS.

The combination of images, comments and other personal data shape our online digital persona. Over time and throughout the lifetime of our many online profiles and digital identities, these representations and data becomes our digital legacy. When we pass away, it is this information that is left behind to represent who we are to other users, family, and friends. Although the topic of death is often a subject many wish to avoid, it is important to consider in the protection of one’s content and the preservation of the reputation (digital or otherwise) one wishes to maintain after they are deceased. In this chapter we discuss the need for educational awareness in the construction of our digital legacy in relation to social networking sites. We also present feedback from

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