

Chapter 8.5

Conceptualizing Codes of Conduct in Social Networking Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the capabilities of social networking tools and links those capabilities to recent legal and ethical controversies involving use of social networking tools such as Facebook and MySpace. A social cognitive moral framework is applied to explore and analyze the ethical issues present in these incidents. Three ethical vulnerabilities are identified in the use of social networking tools: 1) the medium provides a magnified forum for public humiliation or hazing, 2) a blurring of boundaries exists between private and public information on social networking sites, and 3) the medium merges individuals' professional and non-professional identities. Prevalent legal and social responses to these kinds of incidents are considered and implications

are suggested for encouraging responsible use. The chapter includes a description of the authors' current research with preservice students involving an intervention whereby students read and think about real cases where educators use social networking. The intervention was created to improve students' critical thinking about the ethical issues involved. Recommendations for applying institutional codes of conduct to ethical dilemmas involving online tools are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have become ubiquitous. Whereas email was the electronic communication norm in the late twentieth century, social networking is rapidly replacing email as the most favored means of networking,

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60566-729-4.ch002

connecting, and staying in touch. In fact, MySpace is the sixth most visited site on the Internet (Alexa, 2008) and Facebook is the world's largest and the fastest growing social networking site (Schonfeld, 2008). These tools are quite popular with teenagers, college-age students, and young professionals because they allow them to more easily stay connected. Using social networking sites, individuals can present themselves to others through an online identity that is tailored to their unique interests and desires, and participate in a variety of interconnected communication networks - personal, professional, creative, or informative. However, when individuals create a personal space online, they also create a digital footprint—the kind of footprint that can be permanent. And when a trail of personal information is left behind in a searchable and open format, notions of public and private information are challenged and the potential for liabilities may be high. This is of particular importance to those who wish to convey a professional image. An online profile that may have seemed innocuous and private during one stage of life may haunt an individual at the point in their life when they transition from student to professional.

For educational institutions, the widespread popularity of social networking sites as a means of communication, provide in-roads for experimenting with ways to connect with clientele. While innovative educators are quick to embrace and harness the learning potential of Web 2.0 tools, an understanding of the ethical issues in these unusual forms of social interaction has been slower to develop. Undoubtedly there are value-added features, many of which are yet to be discovered; but some institutions are refusing to innovate with this powerful technology tool due to the risks involved.

In order to design and endorse effective use of these tools, educators need socially responsible models and guidelines. What are the ethical considerations required of online social networking, and how can educational organizations capital-

ize on this innovative means of communicating while promoting responsible use? This chapter will highlight legal and ethical controversies surrounding social networking sites, identify ethical vulnerabilities associated with using the online tools through a social cognitive moral framework, and discuss implications for promoting socially responsible use of social networking tools.

BACKGROUND

Our inquiries into this topic began when one of the authors of this chapter encountered a situation involving social networking in her preservice teacher education class. What started as a class assignment turned into a moral and ethical dilemma for the instructor when a student revealed his MySpace profile as a part of a larger class assignment. Students were to create a homepage and provide three links to sites that a future teacher might use in the classroom as part of a lesson plan. Many students chose to link to their MySpace profiles as part of the assignment, but one particular link captured the attention of the instructor who was not prepared for what she saw—a MySpace profile showing a bloody machete stabbed into a hand with the caption that read, “Twist the hand that forces you to write.” Other images and words on the profile were equally disturbing. The personal icon used to identify the profile owner was an image of a cut wrist with directions on how to commit suicide. The instructor wondered why a student would turn in what seemed to be a private and personal site as part of a class assignment. Perhaps Web 2.0 and online social networking caused this student to think differently than the instructor about revealing private thoughts in such a public forum. Because technology users in the Web 2.0 environment can be both consumers and creators of information, similar scenarios are occurring often. At what point is the boundary crossed when sharing information about self and others via social networking tools? And who draws that line? The

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