

## Chapter 8

# Functions of Social Media in Higher Education: A Case Study

**Violeta Maria Șerbu**  
*The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, Romania*

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter aims to explore some critical functions that social media is playing for the internal processes included in an alternative higher education model – The Alternative University, developed in Romania, since 2007. This case study highlights the challenges and opportunities associated with using these new communication as well as information technologies in order to generate effective learning environments. The collaborative and student-centered traits of higher education models using social media for learning activities are mainly dealt with in this study. Functions such as connecting people, sharing knowledge, collaboratively generating knowledge, community building, management platform, accumulation and construction of knowledge, knowledge assessment, raising learning motivation, personal branding, and networking are identified as important assets of social media for their use in a higher education setting.*

### INTRODUCTION

The reality augmentation with the new information and communication technologies became more obvious with the birth of Web 2.0 and the Social Media phenomenon.

*Web 2.0*, defining the second wave of evolution of the Internet, which came after the dot-com bubble (O'Reilly, 2005) is perceived as the *social* web, or as Tim O'Reilly and John Battelle explained it in 2009, “is all about harnessing collective intelligence” because involves “building

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applications that literally get better the more people use them” (O’Reilly & Battelle, 2009, p. 1).

The exponentially growth of technology also increased the social change rhythm: we are more mobile and the scale of participation has increased by orders of magnitude, thus the Web is becoming the world itself (O’Reilly & Battelle, 2009). In this perspective, Social Media is just the way people communicate in this wide connected world, this communication is now easier to carry, faster and more reachable than the traditional one (Asur & Huberman, 2010).

This communication-driven revolution, the so called *Social Media*, “touches nearly every facet of our personal and business lives” (Qualman, 2010, p. xiii). Higher education is no exception.

Higher education - perceived as a space for creating and sharing the most cutting-edge knowledge into society, is more and more influenced by this new media, either creating alternative models of higher education or transforming the old ones (Kamenetz, 2009). Social Media is blending students’ learning environments and their knowledge “in one virtual world” (Robbins-Bell, 2008).

Initially regarded with skepticism, Social Media is now more and more integrated into the academic world, fulfilling a wide range of functions – from performing citations tools to academic community building instruments or learning platforms for students and also for the teaching staff (Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Hazari, North & Moreland, 2009; Li & Pitts, 2009; Violino, 2009).

Nevertheless, the traditional academic world is still reserved about using social media with profound educational purposes (Selwyn, 2009) and underestimates its potential in transforming the higher education landscape (Hazari, North & Moreland, 2009; Ras & Rech, 2009).

By choosing to research the uses of social media in the Alternative University case, we aim to explore its potential, analyzing the advantages that it brings - ease of use, availability, individual affordability and network effect, (Alexander &

Levine, 2008) but also its characteristics, such as “persistence, multiuser, avatars, and wide area network” (Robbins-Bell, 2008) and the bigger context of “new culture of learning” (Thomas & Brown, 2011).

Last but not least, we will present a case study of a non-traditional university that developed its own way of integrating social media in the educational model it had experimentally developed. The case study will focus on the main functions of social media (educational and non-educational), the principles that influenced the integration process, the limits of its use and also on the aspects relevant for future research.

## **ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **A New Way of Communicating and the Education Revolution**

In a wider context, Social Media is regarded as *the latest trend in education*, (Violino, 2009) changing not only the way we consume information, but also the way we interact with each other and relate with information and knowledge (Kamenetz, 2009; Selwyn, 2011). New types of communication require new types of human behaviors and enact different kinds of needs.

The Internet has changed the way we think about technology and information, by “becoming a participatory medium, giving rise to an environment that is constantly being changed and reshaped by the participation itself” (Thomas & Brown, 2011, p. 42). Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown (2011) speak about “a new culture of learning”, facilitated by a “growing digital, networked infrastructure” that “is amplifying our ability to access and use nearly unlimited resources and incredible instruments while connecting with one another at the same time” (p. 18). This new type of learning is based on “potent tools” as Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube, and online games

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