



TEACHING TO CONNECT WELL

Social Media as a Necessary Skill

By **Peter Levesque**, Director, Knowledge Mobilization Works

Evolution

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, a Jesuit philosopher who was also trained as a palaeontologist and geologist, proposed the idea of an Omega Point, a maximum level of complexity and consciousness towards which the universe appears to be evolving. In *The Phenomenon of Man*¹, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin developed the idea of a *noosphere*, the sphere of human thought, similar to the concepts of geosphere (for inanimate matter) and biosphere (for biological life).

The concept of the noosphere is recognized by many as the growing set of human interactions on the internet. This includes not just the web pages, books, songs, videos and other resources accessible through a URL, but also the wide set of human interactions that occur through electronic exchanges: email, chat, commentary and the many forms of interaction using social media.

Never in human history have humans been so connected to so many other humans. A friend and colleague, Dr. Raywat Deonandan, teaches health science at the University of Ottawa. He tells his eager students that on their way into class, on most days, they likely encountered more people than most humans, over the course of human history, would have encountered in their lifetime. There are more of us, meeting more often and in more ways than ever before.

The growth of our planet's population (estimated at 6.82 billion)² combined with growing access to the Internet (estimated at 1.80 billion)³ and access to social media applications, using mobile devices (estimated at 3.50 billion)⁴ means that we will continue to connect in ways that will continue to reflect the diversity of the human condition, at both its best and its worst.

The web browser Mosaic is credited with popularizing the Internet. Its launch in 1993 meant that most people with access to a computer and a phone line could connect to the Internet without having to know how to write computer code. We have to remember that this is less than 20 years ago. In less than a generation, we have seen the radical transformation of generations of human interaction. What this means for our youth and our schools is that those responsible for education is being decided by the billions of clicks of a mouse and the trillions of keystrokes, daily.

What is Social Media?

Social Media is a term used to describe the type of media that is based on conversation and interaction between people online. From the *Wikipedia*⁵ (itself a form of social media interaction using a wiki) entry for social media, there are three components to a social media interface:

1. concept (art, information or meme);
2. media (physical, electronic or verbal); and
3. a social interface (intimate direct community engagement, social viral electronic broadcast or syndication, or other physical media such as print).

In short, social media is that which allows users to not only read or view content on the Internet but to co-create the content available.

As educators, you may be thinking that the source of the above definition (*Wikipedia*) is less reliable than a more stable traditional source, such as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. However, in a study conducted by the scientific journal *Nature*, *Wikipedia* was found to have 162 errors across 50 articles, compared with 123 for the print version of *Britannica*. *Wikipedia* tends to be corrected quickly, as does the online version of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, so these online versions actually fare better over time than their print counterparts.⁶

The emphasis in social media is on the social part of the term. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*⁷, Marshall McLuhan argued that, "the medium is the message" - that a medium itself, not the content it carries, should be the focus of study. He said that a medium affects the society in which it plays a role not only by the content delivered over the medium, but also by the characteristics of the medium itself. Social media adds another layer to this theory; the medium, the content and the actor are all part of the equation. The user is no longer a passive consumer, but has become an active part of a complex process; social media websites become what they become in the process of becoming.

Social media sites such as, *YouTube*, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, blogs and wikis range in the millions.

*Facebook*⁸ alone has over 400 million registered users. Fifty per cent of users login on a given day and people spend over 500 billion minutes per month on the social networking site.

*YouTube*⁹ is the world's most popular online video community, allowing millions of people to discover, watch and share originally created videos. People are watching hundreds of millions of videos a day on *YouTube* and uploading hundreds of thousands of videos daily. In fact, every minute, 24 hours of video is uploaded to *YouTube*. Aside from its entertainment value, *YouTube* is now the world's leading source of professional development content.

The blogosphere (the global collection of blogs) is comprised of over 133 million blogs as indexed by Technorati since 2002. Over 346 million people read them. In an average 24-hour period, the average number of blog posts is 900,000.¹⁰

Something is happening, something that is affecting our children and youth. In *grown up digital*¹¹, Don Tapscott describes in detail what is happening to the generation of young people who have grown up with a reliable web browser and access to the Internet. They are becoming interdependent.

If the word to describe the baby-boom generation was independence, the other side of the coin is what describes their children. He outlines a set of norms that are rooted in the different experience of youth, especially with regard to their media diet. They have grown up being actors, initiators, creators, players and collaborators. The eight norms are freedom, customization, scrutiny, integrity, collaboration, entertainment, speed and innovation.

The difference between connecting and connecting well

When I was growing up, my parents made sure we lived in a safe neighbourhood. I went to a good school with caring teachers. I played sports, went to church on Sunday and was generally surrounded by positive influences. When bullies reared their heads (and fists), we knew who they were and the adults in my life could intervene. The world I had access to was limited by how far I could get on my bicycle, the public bus, view through books, magazines, television or hear on the radio and what my parents would show us on outings and vacations. Things worked out well overall.

All of these factors remain important, but there are many other factors to consider now; more people, more diversity, more access, more choices, more information, more of more.

When I was young, there were no Internet chat sites. Nadia Kajouji of Brampton drowned in 2008 while attending Carleton University in Ottawa. Her drowning was a suicide that was encouraged by 47-year-old William Melchert-Dinkel using an Internet chat room. She is not alone. This same Minnesota man is also charged in the suicide of a 32-year-old British man who hanged himself in Coventry, England in 2005.¹²

I was bullied as a youth, but I knew whom they were and there were ways to intervene. As reported by CBC News, David Knight's life at school had been hell. He was teased, taunted and punched for years. The final blow was the humiliation he suffered every time he logged onto the Internet. Someone had set up an abusive website about him that made life unbearable. Whoever created the website asked others to join in, posting lewd, sexual comments and smearing David's reputation. "I was accused of being a pedophile. I was accused of using the date rape drug on little boys," says David. Along with the website, there were nasty emails too.¹³

Looking for employment used to mean a good resume, good references and the right skills fitting with the right opportunity. No one ever saw a picture of me rolling out of the tent after four days without a shower. No one could read my personal diary. No one could view the video of me at a party with my friends.

As social media becomes increasingly widespread, more employers are using these sites to screen potential employees. More than half (53%) of employers reported, in a recent CareerBuilder.co.uk survey, that they use social networking sites to research job candidates. Another 12 per cent plan to start using social networking sites for screening. Among employers who conduct online background checks of job candidates: 43 per cent use search engines; 12 per cent use *Facebook*; 12 per cent use

LinkedIn; three per cent search blogs; and four per cent follow candidates on *Twitter*.

The top reasons why employers disregarded candidates after screening online were that they: lied about qualifications; showed poor communication skills; made discriminatory comments; posted content about drinking or using drugs; posted provocative or inappropriate photographs or information; bad-mouthed their previous employer, co-workers or clients; and shared confidential information from a previous employer.¹⁴

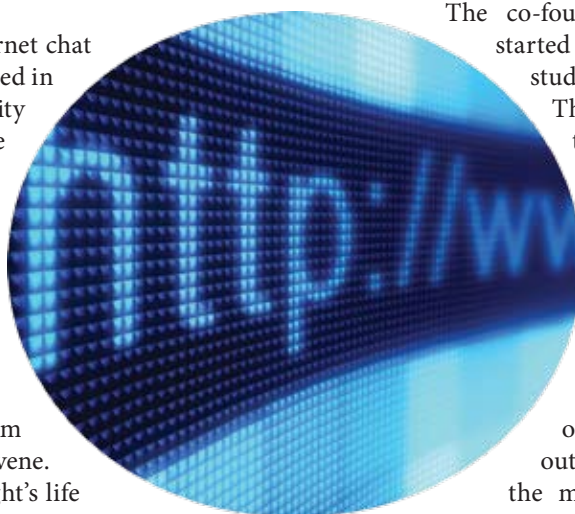
These are some of the dangers and risks of social media but the benefits are even greater.

The co-founder of *Facebook*, Mark Zuckerberg started the website as a method to connect students and faculty at Harvard University. The growth of the site has made him one of the world's youngest billionaires and created opportunities for tens of thousands of entrepreneurs who use the site to connect to people who want their products and services.¹⁵

In a 2007 report, Dr. Nora Barnes found that nearly three out of four U.S. charities used social media, especially online video, as a key component of their outreach and fundraising. Nearly half of the major charities surveyed made use of social media. In contrast, earlier Dartmouth studies suggested that only eight per cent of Fortune 500 companies had any social media involvement. She cites that there is more of a financial incentive for charities to use social media. Traditionally, they have had less money for advertising and public relations. Now they can level the playing field using social media. For the first time, even with little or no funds, they can compete with big companies.¹⁶

The United Nations' Global Alliance for Information and Communication Technology and Development (GAID) recently founded the University of the People as a not-for-profit institution that aims to offer higher education opportunities to people who generally could not afford it by leveraging social media technologies and ideas. The school is a 100 per cent online institution and utilizes open source courseware and peer-to-peer learning to deliver information to students without charging tuition. All fees are set on a sliding scale based on the student's country of origin, and never exceed \$100.¹⁷

The difference between these two sets of examples is the difference between simply connecting and connecting well. In one set, we have death, abuse and loss of potential. In the second set, we have fortune, opportunity and education. The role of our schools and



the leadership provided by educators is to harness the latter and reduce the harm of the former.

The astounding growth of the Internet has happened because people were looking for conversations and the Internet enables conversations among human beings that were simply not possible in the era of mass media.¹⁸ However, as my mother told me, “Don’t talk to strangers.” So how does someone go from being a stranger to an acquaintance to a friend? It takes time, scrutiny and knowledge. It takes an education.

Educators know that data and information are not enough. Something has to happen for raw data to become knowledge. It has to have a social life. Social media can help data and information become knowledge, but educators can teach the importance of good assessment skills that moderates the speed of connection.

The role of social media in our children and youth’s lives is unlikely to diminish in the short term (if ever). The role of educators is to teach the skills necessary to learn to connect well, with purpose, awareness and consideration of the effects of individual actions over the life course.

Before Guttenberg invented the printing press around 1440, learning to read was not a major consideration in the lives of most people on the planet. Things changed quickly after that. We are now in the Zuckerberg era of *Facebook* and social media and the changes happen literally at the speed of light. There is a literacy associated with social media that must be studied, curriculum created and pedagogy adapted.



Peter Levesque

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¹Teilhard de Chardin, Pierre. *The Phenomenon of Man*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1959.

²U.S. Census Bureau. World Population Clock. 16 May 2010. www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html

³Internet World Stats. World Internet usage and population statistics. 31 December 2009. www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm

⁴Personal communication from Tom Jenkins, Executive Chairman and Chief Strategy Officer of Open Text Corporation based in Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. www.opentext.com/2/company/company-directors.htm

⁵*Wikipedia*. Social Media. 15 May 2010. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_media

⁶Evans, Dave. *Social Media Marketing*. Indianapolis: Wiley Publishing, 2008. 32.

⁷McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: Mentor, 1964.

⁸*Facebook*. Press Room – Statistics. 15 May 2010. www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics

⁹*YouTube*. YouTube Fact Sheet. 15 May 2010. www.youtube.com/t/fact_sheet

¹⁰The Future Buzz. Social Media, Web 2.0 And Internet Stats. 15 May 2010. <http://thefuturebuzz.com/2009/01/12/social-media-web-20-internet-numbers-stats/>

¹¹Tapscott, Don. *grown up digital*. Toronto: McGraw Hill, 2009. 74.

¹²580 CFRA. Minnesota Man Charged in Suicide of Carleton Student. 23 April 2010. www.cfra.com/?cat=1&nid=72714

¹³CBC News. Cyber-bullying. 01 March 2005. www.cbc.ca/news/background/bullying/cyber_bullying.html

¹⁴WebProNews. Employers Using Social Networks To Screen Employees. 18 January 2010. www.webpronews.com/topnews/2010/01/18/employers-using-social-networks-to-screen-employees

¹⁵Forbes. Mark Zuckerberg. 15 May 2010. http://billionaires.forbes.com/topic/Mark_Zuckerberg

¹⁶PBS Mediashift. How Charities Harness Social Media to Raise Awareness, Money. 28 April 2009. www.pbs.org/mediashift/2009/04/how-charities-harness-social-media-to-raise-awareness-money118.html

¹⁷Mashable. In the Future, the Cost of Education Will Be Zero. 15 May 2010. <http://mashable.com/2009/07/24/education-social-media>

¹⁸Levine, Rick et. al. *The Cluetrain Manifesto*. New York: Perseus Publishing, 2000.