

## perspectives

### Living (and Dying) in the Social Media Age

Ronald Chesbrough

A recent tragedy has drawn our collective attention once again to the impacts of social media in the higher education environment. The phrase “can’t live with it; can’t live without it” finds new, almost literal meaning in reference to the uses of social media in our current environment.

While we race to employ social media platforms in virtually everything we do in our attempts to reach students, prospective students, and even their parents, we simultaneously struggle with the many potential negative impacts of the same communications platforms in the classroom and in our residence halls.

We’ve seen the buzz created recently when Pennsylvania’s Harrisburg University of Science and Technology enacted a weeklong social media blackout. This exercise, designed to get students to think about their reliance on communications technology in their daily lives, elicited sharp responses and even cries of civil liberties violations from some corners. Imagine just a decade ago this even being an experiment worth performing, much less one rife with such controversy.

At the same time that we warn about the perils of students’ potential overreliance on social networking technologies, we strive to become masters of these technologies ourselves at an ever-increasing pace.

My own institution, like most, has installed Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter links on its website’s home page. We have begun to use these communication tools to replace everything from campus email to digital signage. And we have begun a process to shift nearly all our admission marketing strategies and tools to social media platforms. We share a little sense of guilt in doing so as we “buy into” this culture of electronic sub-

stitution for more personal contacts, but still we proceed at a quickening pace.

So how are we to balance our own thirst to connect with our students and prospective students where they live in cyberspace with our concerns about overreliance on this form of communication? How are we to continue to promote our students’ social develop-

**How are we to continue to  
promote our students’  
social development when  
they increasingly communi-  
cate with us and one another  
through distance and  
technology?**

ment when they increasingly communicate with us and one another through distance and technology? These questions ought to occupy a great deal more of our time and thinking than they presently do, and the one certain thing is that there are no clear or easy answers.

It may be helpful to return to an earlier era of technological advancement and to heed the advice of then media ecologist Neil Postman in such works as *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (1979), and *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985)—a title of particular significance in light of the recent tragedy referred to above—and *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School* (1995).

In these and other works, Postman describes an information environment that “stresses visual imagery, discontinu-

ity, immediacy, and illogicality” and describes the context within which this has occurred as “a kind of religious or philosophic bias toward the supreme authority of technicalization” (1979, p. 100).

Ironically, Postman was at the time referring to such simple examples of information technology as the telephone, television, and computer. His concerns preceded and anticipated the heightened concerns of today.

For Postman, the antidote to an overreliance on information technology was the creation of an education environment stressing narratives other than the technology narrative. He argued for narratives stressing the ascent of humanity, the American experiment, and the use of language, for instance. These might be supplemented three decades later by narratives about global interdependence, civic obligation, and human kindness.

We have gained and lost that much ground since Postman made his observations. For Postman, school could only “help conserve that which is both necessary to a humane survival and threatened by a furious and exhausting culture” (1979, p. 25) if it offered a vision different from that culture. I think we need something of that different vision more today than ever before in our learning environments.

My hope is that we would begin to experiment more with creating such narratives and alternate visions with and for our students. Harrisburg University’s experiment was a bold one, and one worth emulating.

We need, at the least, similar experiments to help our students and ourselves reimagine how we might relate to one another and how our daily communications might differ if we relied less heavily

*continued on page 2*

## *PERSPECTIVES from page 8*

on information technology.

How many of us can remember how our days began and how we conducted our normal business before the desktop, laptop, cell phone, email, and Internet, for instance? It would be useful to try. My guess is that the multiple interactions conducted there today were conducted via actual personal contact. How do we strike a new balance in today's environment, and how can we help our students do the same? Pondering this question, not Googling this topic, might be a very good use of our time.

## References

Postman, N. (1985). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Postman, N. (1995). *The end of education: Redefining the value of school*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Postman, N. (1979). *Teaching as a conserving activity*. New York: Delacorte Press.

*Ronald Chesbrough, PhD, is vice president for student affairs at Hastings College in Nebraska. As a contributing editor to Student Affairs Leader, he shares his perspectives on this page every month.*

