Living (and Dying) in the Social Media Age

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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 weekend 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 ripe 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 substitution 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 development when they increasingly communicate with us and one another through distance and technology?

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The current information environment described by Postman encompasses the television, radio, and books, and the authors of this environment are scientists and engineers who have created and developed the technologies in question. They describe the content which fills this new environment and articulate its qualities; among these qualities are immediacy, tangibility, and illogicality. This defines the context within which this new environment has evolved and was labeled “a kind of religious or philosophical bias toward the supreme authority of technification” (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.

Other technologies over the years have been added to this environment, new forms of communication created, a new environment of communication. Postman labeled this environment the “technological environment” (1979, p. 100). Today we add another layer of communication to this environment, social media, in a world of internet, mobile communication, and new technologies.

In these and other works, Postman describes an information environment that “stresses visual imagery, discontinuity, 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 technification” (1979, p. 100).

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 to continue to help our students and ourselves reimage how we might relate to one another and how our daily communications might differ if we relied less heavily on our technology.

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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


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