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Social Media and Privacy: A User's Responsibility

College is full of new experiences that I want to tell the world about. Social media seems like the only efficient way to broadcast my business, so I tweet about it and post it on Facebook, of course. Within seconds, all of my friends, family and followers know exactly what I am doing. Social media provides a forum for instant connections and open communication. The users of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter control what they post and when they post it. Whether they know it or not, users are solely responsible for the information they choose to post on social media websites. Though social media seems to dominate our lives, it is a choice for the user on whether or not he wants to participate.

There are many reasons that one might take an interest in social media; the most commonly mentioned is how convenient it makes communication and the maintenance of long-distance relationships or the reviving of old ones. These reasons and many others have made Twitter and Facebook recently popular. The ability to form and maintain relationships on Facebook is incredibly easy. All the user needs to do is search the name of a person and click a button to add them as a "friend". This allows old relationships to be rekindled, which can be especially helpful to older generations of Internet users who want to reconnect with high school acquaintances. The ease of "friending" people on Facebook also enables students and young adults to create instant networks, which can be excellent for job searching. One out of every seven people on earth is on Facebook, so one's network has the potential to be exceptionally large (Dunn).

The fact that users can see what their friends are achieving from the comfort of their own couch is another huge draw to social media. These virtual friends and instant networks begin to influence real life as we become more and more technologically involved. Events, social gatherings, popular topics and current events are shared via Twitter and Facebook, so non-users tend to get left behind. The fear of missing out has many people rushing to join sites so they can keep up with the events their friends are attending or see opinions on the latest political scandal. Facebook and Twitter allow people to bond over common interests, which is a gateway to forming new relationships.

Convenience entices the lazy people that make up the technologically literate generation of today. Connecting with others through the barrier of a screen appeals to many people. Sometimes it is quicker and easier to have a conversation through Facebook than it is to meet in person. Communicating with others using words, pictures and videos has become even easier with the Twitter and Facebook smart phone applications. Whipping out your phone to check these apps on the bus or while waiting in line has become instinctive. You can update yourself on the lives of others in just minutes. My friends at other schools can see immediately that I am having fun in Maryland. Posting photos and statuses for an audience to see is one of the main aspects of social media. While it is fun and entertaining, there are also consequences that the users should be aware of.

When creating a Twitter or Facebook account, the user makes a conscious decision to join a public forum; there is no rule forcing people to create social media accounts. People have the ability to decide whether or not they want to share information through an online forum. For example, I choose to share information with the online world by posting about my college adventures. I have to be aware that whatever I post online becomes public information and I need to accept the consequences that could trouble me later.

Although privacy settings exist, the Internet, which includes sites like Twitter and Facebook, are open to the public. Twitter and Facebook do have a responsibility to their users, which is why they protect them to a certain extent. Both sites have privacy policies that clearly outline what the company protects and what it does not. These policies are available for anyone to read, user or not. Privacy policies inform the user, as well as protect the companies from legal complications later on. Privacy policies exist because of the issues surrounding users' privacy. People are generally under the impression that information they view as personal will stay private once they post it online. That assumption is incorrect because Twitter and Facebook own the information that is posted to their websites. This misconception is known as the "privacy paradox" which occurs when teens are "not aware of the public nature of the Internet" (Boyd 222).

Even though users are sometimes unaware of the public nature with which their information is shared, companies still utilize that information. Users' information from their profiles on social media sites is sold by the companies for profit, which the companies have a right to do. The power that Twitter and Facebook have is outlined in their privacy policies, however many users choose not to read those documents. What Twitter and Facebook do not tell their readers though is to whom their information is being sold. By not disclosing the final location of the users' information the companies show a lack of social responsibility. Nevertheless, the users hold the greatest amount of responsibility. What I, a user of Twitter and Facebook, post is up to me, which is why I choose to update my friends and family on my life via tweets and Facebook posts. It is my responsibility to realize that my experiences are no longer personal once I share them online and the sites now own the rights to my information.

Teens are the major offenders when it comes to over-sharing information. Today's younger generation seems to share every detail of their lives with everyone around them. Social media sites present the ability to share with a larger audience, at a faster rate, and teens use that to their advantage. In 2012 Pew Research Center conducted a survey of 802 teens and found that 24% of them use Twitter, a 12% increase from the year before (Madden). Twitter's popularity has only increased in 2013 because it is a relatively new site and users will continue to multiply in the New Year. Getting swept up in the excitement of social media often makes teens forget that some information should stay private. With "increasing public scrutiny of online behavior," Twitter and Facebook users need to be constantly guarded about what they choose to post because it can have serious repercussions in the future (Lewis 80).

Many serious problems can be avoided if users are sensible and responsible when using social media. One of the consequences of careless social media use is the loss of potential employment. Facebook and Twitter keep records of all posts and tweets sent, so those words remain forever. One poorly thought out post could affect a user negatively later on, especially when job hunting. In a recent article, Forbes Magazine quoted research that showed 37% of employers check social media when screening job applicants (Smith). Employers look for potentially inappropriate photos and language, which deter them from hiring that user. Candidates should always be wary of what they post because 65% of employers claim to check social media sites to see whether candidates present themselves professionally or not (Smith). One's future could lie in the words of one post, which the user is responsible for.

Words are not the only information on social media sites that employers are checking though. Photos can say a lot about a person, sometimes even more than words.

Pew Research Center reports that 91% of teens in 2012 post photos of themselves online (Madden). Photos that show behavior that is not age-appropriate can definitely alter an employer's perception. It is important to keep the audience in mind when sharing words and photos on social media. Facebook is not in charge of monitoring the people who see my posts—that is my responsibility. I need to be cognizant of my virtual friends and followers and think about how their perception of me may be altered by a photo I post. I would not want my online personality to affect my true personality.

Twitter and Facebook that users need to be conscious of more than just the photos and thoughts they share. Personal information like my name, birthday and location should be protected just like my photos. Over-sharing personal information is potentially dangerous because users are never certain of who can and cannot see it. One situation that has repeatedly been reported is cyber stalking (Barnes). Any user who posts their location or contact information online risks being traced by an undesirable suitor. When I post a photo online I never use the location application because I do not want anyone who views my photo to be able to pinpoint my exact whereabouts. By revealing my location people with bad intentions can also figure out where I am not. For example, if I were to post about my friends and I taking a trip to Washington DC, everyone would know that I am not in my dorm and they could seize the opportunity to steal from my room. Revealing one's location can be more harmful than originally thought.

Another issue with personal information online is deciphering whether or not the information is reliable. Some people use social media sites to create a false persona to hide behind or create a blank slate. Too many people believe everything they read online, creating a false sense of trust in the people they meet and the information they read. Creating a social media account is the perfect time for someone to reinvent himself because

it is a new place, where no history lingers. This can be used for good, but generally people use this new forum as a way to hide their secrets. *American Business Law Journal* suggests that individuals change themselves based on the audience and by “filtering the information about themselves available to each audience” they can preserve the image they want to portray (Abril 63). Users must always exercise caution when trusting unknown individuals on the Internet. Without face-to-face interaction, a trusted “friend” on the Internet could be a total stranger in reality. Facebook and Twitter have no obligation to help a user that falls prey to another user’s false persona.

People tend to mindlessly click past the terms of service when they register for social media sites. If users actually took the time to look at the privacy policies, then they might not be in an uproar when they realize what their information is being used for. The policies are presented to them before they register as a user of the site, so the users are responsible as soon as they click “accept”. That action is acknowledging that you are responsible for the information you post and acknowledging that you are willingly registering for a public site. Twitter and Facebook are also protected by the privacy policies, so the policies are detailed and fully explain what is and is not the responsibility of the user. The policies excuse Twitter and Facebook from any liability regarding users’ posts and pins the accountability on the user. Actually reading the privacy policy might help the user gain a better understanding of the responsibilities they agree to when creating an account. When I created a Facebook account at age fourteen, I was guilty of agreeing to the privacy policy without reading it through. Now as an eighteen year old, I have gone back and read over the policy so I am aware of my liabilities. After reading the document, I revised my account and made sure I presented myself in a positive way for anyone viewing

my page to see. I am in control of my account and I am in charge of my information and my postings, so I am careful now to use social media wisely.

The first thing users need to do to start using social media sites more wisely is think before they post. An extra moment of thought has the potential to prevent so many moments of regret over an irresponsible post. Personally, I am cautious of my posts because of my future. The employer that hopefully awaits me in the journalism field may one day review my Facebook page or scan my tweets; I do not want to be penalized later for an irrational decision that could have been avoided by an extra moment of thought. I contemplate every photo I post and every word I write. Word choice and photo captions are just as important as the photos themselves, another aspect of user responsibility. Because Facebook requires mutual friend acceptance, the audience to whom you post for is your concern as well. I am conscious of who I accept as friends and followers, so I remain aware of who is able to see my posts. Keeping one's privacy settings as restrictive as possible helps monitor the audience, although it is still important to realize that Twitter and Facebook are public sites.

Public forums exist for users to share a multitude of things with other users; however, some things should not be shared. Personal matters should stay private, which requires users to keep some information hidden from the online world. In the technological age it seems that every detail of a person's life is expected to pop up on Facebook, but that is not necessarily true. Twitter and Facebook are not personal journals where humans can openly expressing all of their feelings and have them remain in one place. Social media sites invite sharing and communicating, which is the complete opposite of keeping matters private. I am aware that whatever I post on the Internet no longer belongs to me and it can remain within the web forever. I limit what I share, regarding feelings, photos and personal

information so I can keep at least some aspects of my life for myself. Be cautious before posting new information if you are not prepared to have it shared.

Teens and adolescents are among a group of new social media users who do not quite understand the repercussions of over-sharing online. Technology is a staple in almost all schools and households today, so kids grow up to be technologically literate, while the generations before were introduced to technology at an older age. With new technology however comes new responsibility. Teaching children and teens the proper uses of social media is vital to maintaining a safe online environment. Parents and pediatricians are the main influences on children, so they should take a vested interest in children's social media use. Gwenn Schurgin O'Keeffe and Kathleen Clarke-Pearson, both pediatricians, acknowledge social media's positive effects, but are also wary of the risks the sites present. Cyber bullying and harassment, sexting and Facebook depression are three of their main concerns. Bullying online can be just as hurtful and detrimental to one's self esteem as offline bullying. Sexting, defined as "sending, receiving, or forwarding sexually explicit messages, photographs, or images via cell phone, computer, or other digital devices," is a new phenomenon that teens should be educated about (O'Keeffe 802). Sharing sexually explicit photos takes sharing personal information to a new level. Adolescents that share every detail of their life tend to spend unhealthy amounts of time on social media sites, potentially putting themselves at risk for Facebook depression. This occurrence results from spending too much time on social media sites and beginning to exhibit classic symptoms of depression (O'Keeffe 802). Not only do we need to educate kids on the lasting effects of irresponsible social media use, like the loss of a potential job, but also on the long term psychological effects, like depression. Helping kids and young adults learn the consequences their online actions can have in the real world is the responsibility of those

who are aware of said consequences. It is important for social media users of all ages to understand the responsibilities associated with having a Twitter or Facebook account. At the age of twelve, one might not be thinking about a potential employer viewing their post, so older users, like parents, siblings and pediatricians should educate them. On the other hand, as a college student, one should be old enough to understand the regulations of social media and the consequences of their actions. Every online action has an effect, good or bad, and the user is liable for those effects, no matter their age. Educating young users is key to building a safer online environment for future generations.

Life was simpler before technology, when we did not have to worry about an online joke with our friends turning into the reason we get denied from a job. The instantaneous generation we live in creates a constant flow of information-- words, pictures, and videos all the time. The need to share every moment of every day consumes people, so they let their guards down. Social media users need to be more conscious of what they post, acknowledging that the responsibility of using social media sites is a large one. The Internet is a public place where personal information does not belong. There are consequences for irresponsible online behavior, like forfeiting a potential job or inviting an unwanted suitor, but these consequences can be avoided. Being conscious of appropriate language and the intended audience, as well as monitoring privacy settings, will help maintain a barrier between the real world and the virtual one. Users are the only ones in charge of what they post and they need to be mindful of that. So the next time you want to post a photo or share your thoughts in 140 characters or less, remember that your personal thoughts are now public and you are solely responsible.