

This is a pre-print version of the David Coad webtext "Review of *Social Media: Usage and Impact*" published in *Kairos: Rhetoric, Technology, Pedagogy*, Vol 19.3, available at <http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/19.3/reviews/coad>.

Social Media: Usage and Impact

Edited by Hana S. Noor Al-Deen and John Allen Hendricks

New York: Lexington, 2012

ISBN: 978-0-7391-8009-9, 307 pp.

Introduction

[Photo of book cover]

Social Media: Usage and Impact is a primary-data-driven edited collection that reaches far into many areas of social media research. In five parts, and 16 chapters, this book explores questions related to collegiate education, ethics and legal issues, politics, and even social media marketing.

This book was edited and primarily written by faculty in communications departments, and it is clearly targeting students and faculty in communications departments. As a result, it feels very different than most books a composition studies or computers and writing scholar would normally pick up. However, that does not mean it is not very useful to those concerned with rhet-comp. As a young scholar in our field, I found this book surprisingly helpful in building an understanding of how social media is currently at work in various corners of American society. It wasn't just the section on "Social Media and Education" that I found applicable to my work; even the chapters that answered questions like, "how has social media helped shape US politics in the last 10 years?" or, "how are marketing firms using social media?" proved to help frame my thoughts about social media in my own scholarship.

From a practical standpoint, many of the chapters in this collection serve as strong research-based readings for composition classes that have a focus on digital or social media. They also serve as good models for empirical research about various aspects of social media for young scholars. For the experienced scholar, these studies give ripe data, shedding light onto areas of social media research that are not yet mainstream within composition studies.

So, get ready for a ride, because *Social Media: Usage and Impact* helps rhet-comp scholars begin to answer the important (and sometimes troubling) question: How do we shape social media, and how does it shape us rhetorically, politically, legally, economically, and ethically?

Part I: Social Media and Social Networking

[Photo: Screenshot of the UC Davis Facebook page.] *Caption:* Facebook has become increasingly important for helping undergraduates settle in and make connections in their new social environment, as chapter 1 examines.

Overview: Part I intertwines various approaches to social media as a means to connect with others. Lynne M Webb, Megan L. Wilson, Maggie Hodges, Peter A. Smith & Monica Zakeri, in chapter 1, for instance, study the ways college students use Facebook to build important relationships in their new life context [reminiscent of prominent media scholar danah boyd's (2014) work, which explores how teens use social media to access publics outside of the home environment]. John Jones, in chapter 2, shows that conference presenters who ignore the Twitter conversation about them may be overlooking an increasingly important aspect of the presentation. Douglas A. Ferguson, in chapter 3, cogently showed that many of these previously face-to-face conversations have shifted to social media, including conversations about television shows. Altogether, while social media is a place for making meaningful human connections, as in chapters 1 and 3, it is also a place for power struggles to be the most prominent voice in a conversation, as in chapter 2.

Application: Chapter 1 helps writing instructors understand students they teach and the struggles students face, which is helpful information for teachers, but also for researchers studying youth culture. Chapter 2 explores the nature of digital rhetoric in public discourse communities, and more specifically, how Twitter functions at professional conferences, both of which are useful knowledge bases for rhet-comp folks. Chapter 3's discussion on conversations about television shows moving online explores some cultural studies issues that relate to our students' lives. Chapter 3 may be an appropriate chapter for a first-year composition class with a digital bent because it suggests the importance of digital literacies for participating in everyday activities.

Part II: Social Media and Education

[Photo of a large lecture classroom] *Caption:* Large lecture classes present a formidable challenge. However, with the inclusion of creative and collaborative social media activities like the ones tested in Chapter 5, the task doesn't seem as daunting.

Overview: Part II focuses on the role social media can play at colleges and universities, both in and outside the classroom, and helps us understand college students in ways composition research usually leaves out. In chapter 4, Ronald A. Yaros reports students enjoying and collaborating in social media-enriched courses, versus less collaboration in more traditional courses that lack a social media component. C. Michael Elavsky, in chapter 5, also discusses social media's classroom uses, but specifically in the large lecture hall. Resisting the traditional notion that Twitter and similar technologies are disruptive to the classroom, he shows by example many situations in which his students benefited from using Twitter and Google Docs to collaborate and engage with class material. Chapter 6 explores using

Twitter in graduate-level courses for debates and feedback on graduate student presentations. Chapter 7 expands on social media in and outside the classroom, arguing that social media has a positive effect on students' feelings of connectedness and self-esteem within the college community.

Application: College composition instructors who lean towards digital and social media are always looking for keen new strategies for engaging students with these tools. The four chapters in part II provide just that: a kind of mini-handbook for social media pedagogy. Chapter 7 serves up strategies for graduate-level courses, a topic that is covered less often in the literature. While these chapters are less empirically driven, they provide real life examples of using social media in ways that are innovative and helpful to an instructor of any experience level.

Part III: Social Media and Strategic Communication

[Photo of Whole Foods Market's Facebook page] *Caption:* Many companies, such as Whole Foods Market, have used social media to convey strong marketing messages, while others, such as BP, have failed to keep up with the conversation about them, according to chapter 9.

Overview: Part III studies the strategies businesses use to communicate their marketing message to consumers via social media. Bobbi Kay Lewis and Cynthia Nichols, in chapter 8, examine the question: Do college students have similar or different views towards social media compared to business professionals? Mia C. Long, in chapter 9, closely studies three companies (Whole Foods Market, Southwest Airlines, and British Petroleum) in order to see how they rely on social media to engage with customers, in more than a unidirectional, business-to-consumer manner. Long juxtaposes Whole Foods Market and Southwest Airlines' success in the social media realm with BP's failure to engage in a conversation with consumers on social media, especially their failure to respond to the 2010 Gulf Oil Disaster. Miao Guo, in chapter 10, coded the websites of 100 global brands for social media usage, and found, for example, that 95% of the companies use Facebook, while only 78% use Twitter, and 6% use Wikipedia.

Application: Part III presents some business and marketing ideas in an easy-to-follow format for those who may not be in the field of strategic communication. While composition instructors sometimes have their students look at marketing campaigns as consumers, chapter 9 looks at these campaigns from the back end, and this chapter may help teachers and students of rhetoric to understand the mind behind the machine. Chapter 10 serves as a model for coding web-based information and mining it for understanding of broader phenomena, something that graduate students and emerging researchers would benefit from understanding.

Part IV: Social Media and Politics

[Campaign photo of Meg Whitman with the heading, "Meg: A New California"]

Caption: Chapter 11 is critical of Meg Whitman's inadequate use of social media in her campaign for California governor.

Overview: From social media as social capital for politically underrepresented groups, to activism and political campaigns, part IV delves into social media's political successes and failures, and begins to unveil how social media helps or hinders political movements while also opening the possibility of giving voice to underrepresented demographics. John Allen Hendricks and Jerry K. Frye, in chapter 11, point to the 2010 California gubernatorial campaign to show how social media campaigns are now overshadowing campaigns on more traditional media such as TV and print. For instance, Meg Whitman's campaign strategies were limited in that she only reported on past campaign activities, while Jerry Brown invited his followers to take action at future campaign events. Rhon Teruelle, in chapter 12, discusses activism on Facebook and Twitter and youth perspectives about social media as tools for activism. He discovered that only 32.5% of respondents participate in activism, while 95% believe that activism can enact positive change. Arguing that social media represents social and political capital for Black male youth, Travis L. Gosa, in Chapter 13, expresses excitement to see how in the 2008 election, young African-American males inundated YouTube and other content sharing sites. For Gosa, this indicates a change that is occurring in this demographic, which has been traditionally less literate in social media.

Application: All three chapters in part IV would serve well as readings and/or discussion topics for composition classrooms. Many composition teachers like to discuss the rhetoric of political campaigns to develop critical thinking skills in the classroom; chapter 11 provides a very effective way of making that conversation about digital rhetoric. Chapter 12 provides hard data that encourages young adults to become activists for various social and political causes in their societies. Black youth would find chapter 13 especially encouraging, and it also serves as a convincing piece of data-driven research for scholars interested in critical race theory to build arguments from.

[Photo of a woman speaking into a press microphone, standing in front of a poster for an advance screening for the movie *Bully*.] *Caption:* Bullying, which has become a major social issue in recent years, is an even larger problem when taken into social media spaces, according to chapter 14.

Part V: Social Media and Legal/Ethical Issues

Overview: Overview: Part V explores the push-and-pull between the value Americans ascribe to free speech and the value Americans ascribe to "civility, individual reputation, privacy, physical and emotional security, and dignity" (p. 237). Lyrisa Barnett Lidsky and Daniel C. Friedel, in Chapter 14, examine the United States' developing approach to dealing with cyberbullying, which, they argue, has been a defining issue in the news and other media (citing Tyler Clementi's suicide after being a victim of cyberbullying). Although few states have established new

laws to help mitigate these serious problems, judges are trying to find a just way of dealing with them. Jasmine E. McNealy, in chapter 15, explores how the courts have traditionally defined privacy through different rulings, and how this may or may not apply to social media in a world that defines privacy through the home/public dichotomy. It may be surprising to some to realize that courts primarily recognize social media as public spaces, not private ones. James Benjamin, in chapter 16, discusses a wide variety of issues related to ethics and social media, pointing out, for example, the danger caused by the inability of tweeters to give appropriate context to their tweets because of the 140-character limit.

Application: Part V's strength is that it sympathetically considers multiple sides of the story. Chapter 15 would likely get a good discussion started in many writing classes about whether social media spaces should be considered private or public. For an ethics-themed composition class, chapter 16 provides a clear and wide-reaching explanation of ethics as they relate to social media.

Conclusion

[Photos: logos of three social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube)]
Caption: As social media platforms proliferate, they continue to have an impact on our society that is worthy of thoughtful and in-depth research, like is demonstrated in the studies in this book.

Social Media: Usage and Impact is primarily helpful to computers and writing folks in two ways. First, it helps the researcher build a foundational understanding of social media's impact in a wide range of societal domains. Second, the chapters in this book serve as great readings for writing classes, especially those concerned with digital and social media. The book is full of ripe, research-based controversies to discuss with students (such as how we define privacy in social media spaces, both as a society and as individual users). Although I would say most chapters are aimed more at an upper-division level, a student writing a research paper in an FYC class would find this book very useful for sources also. Altogether, I would recommend this book to any faculty, graduate students, or undergraduates interested in social media as a rhetorical, political, social, ethical, or economic phenomena.

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