Posting, Tweeting, and Liking: Helping Students Navigate Social Media Beyond the Classroom

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The first U.S. case of Ebola was publicized in an unauthorized tweet at 4:52 p.m. EST on September 30, 2014.

Less than an hour later, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) made an official announcement in a press conference about a patient in Dallas, Texas, who had Ebola; but in the 40 minutes between the tweet and the press conference, nearly 240,000 additional tweets had been made about the case. Many of them contained rumors, falsehoods, and myths about the virus and became a significant narrative in several social-media channels (Luckerson, 2014).

The ways in which social media is used to deceive have become increasingly sophisticated since 2014. As a professional and technical communicator, I have conducted research about how organizations use social media to respond to crises, how groups use it to promote social justice, and how individuals use it to create alternative narratives and explanations.

In this paper, I will discuss two ways social media situations have been examined and, then, I will provide three ideas I teach my students to help deal with social media.

The two ways by which such situations have been examined are as follows:

- Antenarrative, defined by David Boje (2001) as "before the creation of a narrative;" by its nature, antenarrative is "fragmented, non-linear, incoherent, collective, unplotted, and pre-narrative speculation."
- Sprezzatura, which is hiding the use of technical skills and abilities to make a complex process appear simple

Classroom skills could help student process the information presented on social media.

Isolated cases of Ebola in the U.S. followed several months of news coverage of a widespread outbreak—15,209 confirmed cases—in Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria, Senegal, and Sierra Leone. This coverage included images of Ebola hospitals, doctors wearing protective gear, and officials from the World Health Organization asking for additional support from the international community to control the virus (Cumming-Bruce, 2014). A Washington Post poll conducted in August 2014 revealed that two-thirds of U.S. citizens were worried about an Ebola epidemic in the United States and that four in ten people were "very" or "somewhat" worried that they or a close family member might catch the virus (Harlan, 2014).

Images of Ebola's effects and Americans' fear of the virus contributed to an environment in which rumors spread quickly; the most flagrant creations were of false-news webpages including one that reported several cases of the virus at Anchorage High School. Others suggested that prominent people had contracted the disease or identified marijuana, salt water, and vitamin C as cures for it (Dewey, 2014). Such content prompted U.S. President Barack Obama to acknowledge what was occurring on social media: "We can't give in to hysteria or fear, because that only makes it harder to get people the accurate information they need . . . . If we're guided by science—the facts, not fear—then I am absolutely confident we can prevent a serious outbreak here in the United States" (Jaffe & Brittain, 2014, p. A11). Additionally, government agencies and departments used social-media tactics to calm fears and promote accurate information.

The Use of Antenarrative by the CDC

In roughly 26 million Tweets about Ebola made from September 30 to November 1, 2014, social-media users in the United States attempted to make sense of the origins of Ebola and why the virus was spreading so rapidly. In responding to such concerns, many people developed conspiracy theories. Some blamed the origin of Ebola on the U.S. government, others speculated that the virus was a failed biological weapon, and still others claimed that pharmaceutical companies had developed it to accelerate drug and vaccine sales by suggesting that the companies wanted Ebola to move into larger markets that would pay a premium for a vaccine (Bair, 2016). Such antenarratives

False information will spread six times faster on social-media networks than true statements will.

were often efforts to make sense of modern medicine's being unprepared to respond to the outbreak.

The CDC strategically shifted the social-media conversation from the initial panic to an understanding of Ebola's transmission methods and risks and of the safety recommendations people could follow.

In fact, the social-media campaigns of all U.S. Department of Health and Human Services agencies corrected misconceptions about Ebola and helped audience members understand that seasonal flu was a larger health threat to consider. The CDC, for example, shared infographics featuring the top ten myths about Ebola, including that it could spread through air, water, or brief contact with an infected individual. As the CDC generated these narratives, Twitter became replete with messages contrasting Ebola's rarity with the flu's prevalence. Following such activities by government agencies, Tweets with claims about changes in transmission went from several thousands to less than ten each day (Almendrala, 2014). The organization also Tweeted about the flu throughout October, which helped Twitter users generate similar messages in their personal feeds.

In responding to the antenarratives of the U.S. public, the CDC was able to create other arguments and information that became the dominate narrative and thus reduced fears, removed false claims, and developed new narratives. While the CDC used these tactics to communicate factual information, others have used similar strategies to promote fear and promulgate misinformation.

The Use of Sprezzatura by the CDC

In his medieval handbook, Il Libro de Cortegiano (The Book of the Courtier), Count Baldassare Castiglione uses the term sprezzatura to advise gentlemen to complete everything in life with "stylishness and panache that make …[the tasks] look easy" (D'Epiro and Pinkowish, 2001, p. i).

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Today, sprezzatura can apply to any technological process that hides its complexity from the audience.

The CDC employed sprezzatura in communicating about the potential dangers of Ebola and in shifting attention from the virus to the flu. That process demonstrated deliberate social engineering of information. While the CDC generated information for the general public that was simple and easy to remember, for the expert population, it produced messages that were far more technical and nuanced. For example, the messages the CDC generated during the 2014 U.S. Ebola outbreak used simple, straightforward language. Developing messages with common but specific verbiage to communicate complex information about the risks of Ebola is a form of sprezzatura; it made understanding technical information seem simple, especially with various social-media platforms' content-length restrictions at play. While the CDC's use of sprezzatura was successful, organizations that present complex information as part of a crisis response risk oversimplifying it and causing consumers to draw incorrect or even dangerous conclusions. Groups using sprezzatura need to acknowledge such risks and carefully plan their social-media messages in a way that prevents miscommunication.

Lessons about Social-Media

In the process of conducting research about social media and examining millions of posts, I have brought three "takeaways" to the classroom so that students can be prepared to make sense of a seemingly increasingly complicated world as they consume

> Teach our students to share good.

content via social media: critical-thinking skills, transparency, and sharing good.

Critical Thinking

Regardless of their qualifications, people can make claims about virtually any topic via social media; as others like, share, and comment about the posts, the plausibility of the original statements can seem to be enhanced. Because of this, content that might typically be considered a conspiracy theory or groundless accusation receives wider attention than it otherwise might. Requiring students to think critically in the classroom and other contexts can help prepare them to examine a claim, consider the creditability of the person or group that is making it, conduct appropriate research, and decide what they believe and how they will respond.

Research published in Science by a team from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology reports that falsehoods spread much "farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly" than the truth on social-media platforms. False information is 70 percent more likely to be shared by individuals, and false information will spread six times faster on social-media networks than true statements will. The researchers tested a number of hypothesizes as to why this is occurring, but did not develop definitive conclusions (Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral, 2018, p.1). With rumors being posted and spread on social media at such rates, consumers need to become adept at discerning fact from fiction. Many classroom skills could help student process the information presented on social media better; discussions about sources, arguments, and credibility might be a strong place to start. Encouraging students to examine competing ideas or claims and studying the arguments, determine flaws in claims, and come to conclusions about the reliability of the information

presented would help them develop the critical-thinking skills they need in a world replete with misinformation.

Transparency

The Pew Research Center has tracked social-media usage of American adults since 2005 when only 5 percent of adults were using social media; by 2018 that number had increased to 69 percent, which suggests that this form of media has changed and continues to change how businesses and organizations connect with prospective and current customers.

In preparing business students for writing for a social-media audience each semester, I am often presented with the following question: "I use social media to present the best information about myself, so when I am writing for a company, should I stretch the truth and present only positive things about it?" This question is connected to the social-media behavior "compare and despair," which occurs as users examine the posts of others and compare themselves to them—especially in areas like affluence, relationships, success, and vacations—and lament about the shortcomings they perceive in their lives. A study

conducted by the Royal Society of Public Health (2017) found among heavy consumers (those who spend more than 61 minutes on social media each day) the incidence of depression and anxiety was 25 percent higher than among peers who consumed less social media.

In helping students understand what and how organizations and individuals should post online, I explain that they might consider content that will establish goodwill between them and other users. In other words, individuals might post exciting vacation photos, but they might also post about everyday things such as thanking people for kind acts, the work associated with earning a college degree, or content that has helped them during a struggle. For organizations, the process of establishing goodwill might include activities like giving back to the community, connecting with individuals around them, and establishing themselves as honest and transparent.

Sharing Good

In a BYU Education Week address in August 2014, Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles provided an apostolic warning and invitation regarding

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social media. He warned members of the Church to be careful with how they choose to use social media, as "too much time can be wasted, too many relationships can be harmed or destroyed, and precious patterns of righteousness can be disrupted when technology is used improperly. We should not allow even good applications of social media to overrule the better and best uses of our time, energy, and resources" (Bednar, 2014).

After extending a warning regarding social media, Elder Bednar invited members of the Church to share "messages filled with righteousness and truth—messages that are authentic, edifying, and praiseworthy—and literally to sweep the earth as with a flood." Social media provides remarkable opportunities to influence and connect with others.

In a world dripping in social media, teachers can and should teach our students to share good, to think critically and to choose transparency. The research suggests this can help them. ✽

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