Chapter 8.5
Conceptualizing Codes of Conduct in Social Networking Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the capabilities of social networking tools and links those capabilities to recent legal and ethical controversies involving use of social networking tools such as Facebook and MySpace. A social cognitive moral framework is applied to explore and analyze the ethical issues present in these incidents. Three ethical vulnerabilities are identified in the use of social networking tools: 1) the medium provides a magnified forum for public humiliation or hazing, 2) a blurring of boundaries exists between private and public information on social networking sites, and 3) the medium merges individuals’ professional and non-professional identities. Prevalent legal and social responses to these kinds of incidents are considered and implications are suggested for encouraging responsible use. The chapter includes a description of the authors’ current research with preservice students involving an intervention whereby students read and think about real cases where educators use social networking. The intervention was created to improve students’ critical thinking about the ethical issues involved. Recommendations for applying institutional codes of conduct to ethical dilemmas involving online tools are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace have become ubiquitous. Whereas email was the electronic communication norm in the late twentieth century, social networking is rapidly replacing email as the most favored means of networking,
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connecting, and staying in touch. In fact, MySpace is the sixth most visited site on the Internet (Alexa, 2008) and Facebook is the world’s largest and the fastest growing social networking site (Schonfeld, 2008). These tools are quite popular with teenagers, college-age students, and young professionals because they allow them to more easily stay connected. Using social networking sites, individuals can present themselves to others through an online identity that is tailored to their unique interests and desires, and participate in a variety of interconnected communication networks - personal, professional, creative, or informative. However, when individuals create a personal space online, they also create a digital footprint—the kind of footprint that can be permanent. And when a trail of personal information is left behind in a searchable and open format, notions of public and private information are challenged and the potential for liabilities may be high. This is of particular importance to those who wish to convey a professional image. An online profile that may have seemed innocuous and private during one stage of life may haunt an individual at the point in their life when they transition from student to professional.

For educational institutions, the widespread popularity of social networking sites as a means of communication, provide in-roads for experimenting with ways to connect with clientele. While innovative educators are quick to embrace and harness the learning potential of Web 2.0 tools, an understanding of the ethical issues in these unusual forms of social interaction has been slower to develop. Undoubtedly there are value-added features, many of which are yet to be discovered; but some institutions are refusing to innovate with this powerful technology tool due to the risks involved.

In order to design and endorse effective use of these tools, educators need socially responsible models and guidelines. What are the ethical considerations required of online social networking, and how can educational organizations capitalize on this innovative means of communicating while promoting responsible use? This chapter will highlight legal and ethical controversies surrounding social networking sites, identify ethical vulnerabilities associated with using the online tools through a social cognitive moral framework, and discuss implications for promoting socially responsible use of social networking tools.

BACKGROUND

Our inquiries into this topic began when one of the authors of this chapter encountered a situation involving social networking in her preservice teacher education class. What started as a class assignment turned into a moral and ethical dilemma for the instructor when a student revealed his MySpace profile as a part of a larger class assignment. Students were to create a homepage and provide three links to sites that a future teacher might use in the classroom as part of a lesson plan. Many students chose to link to their MySpace profiles as part of the assignment, but one particular link captured the attention of the instructor who was not prepared for what she saw—a MySpace profile showing a bloody machete stabbed into a hand with the caption that read, “Twist the hand that forces you to write.” Other images and words on the profile were equally disturbing. The personal icon used to identify the profile owner was an image of a cut wrist with directions on how to commit suicide. The instructor wondered why a student would turn in what seemed to be a private and personal site as part of a class assignment. Perhaps Web 2.0 and online social networking caused this student to think differently than the instructor about revealing private thoughts in such a public forum. Because technology users in the Web 2.0 environment can be both consumers and creators of information, similar scenarios are occurring often. At what point is the boundary crossed when sharing information about self and others via social networking tools? And who draws that line? The
ability to communicate personal, informational, or editorial information en masse—at the click of a mouse—poses new and different ethical dilemmas not as prevalent in the pre-Web 2.0 world. And this issue is compounded by the fact that as users share authored information with others, they invite countless people into their personal space. Social networking creates a window into users’ lives that is much more immediate, permanent, and impactful than ever before.

**Social Networking Tools and Their Capabilities**

Social networking sites are Websites designed to bring together groups of people in order to communicate around shared interests or activities (Wikipedia, 2008). Because meeting places are virtual, the idea that any two people can be connected through several intermediaries, commonly known as “six degrees of separation,” is magnified and expanded (Leskovec & Horvitz, 2007). This kind of interconnectivity among individuals would be impossible without the Web. The online manifestation of social networking typically refers to a minimum of three networking capacities, first popularized by Friendster in 2002. This includes publicly displayed profiles, publicly accessible lists of friends, and virtual walls for comments or testimonials (boyd, 2008). In any of the myriad social networking sites created since Friendster, individuals can join a Web service, and then design a profile to showcase and highlight personal information, hobbies, employment and any other topics they wish to be shared. Upon becoming a member of an online social network, the user can communicate with other members or groups, link their profile to others, and even invite those outside the social networking site to join the system and link to their profile. Thus, a network continually expands.

Revisiting the story of the student with the disturbing MySpace profile highlights the differences between in-person and online social networks. Prior to viewing the profile, the instructor had only the day-to-day interactions in the classroom to form an opinion of the student. The informal social network of this student was not revealed to the instructor prior to viewing the MySpace profile. However, it was the student’s choice to share the public profile with the instructor, and when that happened the cloak over a previously invisible network was removed and a facet of this student’s life that was markedly different than his in-class persona was revealed. The instructor had more information from which to form an opinion of the student, and could not help but think differently about the student from that day forth. However, the student was naively unaware of impact that his online profile had on interactions with the instructor.

More importantly though, with the lasting vision of a bloody hand, the instructor was in turmoil about the ethics behind what was brought to light. Unlike an incident in the classroom where a course of action would be clear, the most appropriate response to the personal information revealed through the online profile was not obvious to the instructor. Where did the instructor’s authority end and the student’s personal life begin? Was the instructor responsible for reporting the actions that took place outside of her classroom? Was the online information within or outside the classroom? How would this student interact with children during his field placement and in his future classroom? Was the profile indicative of a troubled individual or was it simply a manifestation of creative, albeit dark, expression? For these reasons, the instructor grappled with whether to report the student to campus authorities for the disturbing images and ideas relayed on his profile.

**Legal Actions and Campus-Based Incidents**

Professional or formal relationships may become tainted when people either purposefully or inadvertently share information about themselves.
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via online social networking services, and some users fail to think about the consequences that may arise as a result. Furthermore, appropriate responses to online personal information by those in authority, such as instructors and supervisors, may not be clear.

In recent years, many campus-based incidents involving perceived student misuse of social networking sites have occurred in both K-12 and postsecondary institutions. For example, Elon University in North Carolina took disciplinary action against members of the baseball team after photos of players involved in hazing activities found their way onto a student’s MySpace profile (Lindenberger, 2006). An academic institution’s in loco parentis responsibilities are often interpreted by campus administrators as encompassing the cyberworld. Some universities including Penn State University and the University of California-Davis utilize information contained in social networking sites to investigate campus incidents of harassment, code of conduct violations, and criminal activity (Lipka, 2008).

Slightly different problems exist for younger students. K-12 students have been suspended or expelled for creating false and potentially libelous profiles of faculty or administrators. These suspensions have been met with an interesting reaction from parents; in some cases, parents have filed suit against the educational institution for impeding a student’s right to free expression by nature of the discipline imposed for creating the profile (see Layshock v. Hermitage School District, 2007; Requa v. Kent School District, 2007; J.S. v. Blue Mountain School District, 2007; A. B. v. State of Indiana, 2008). These claims of free speech violations have largely been unfounded by the courts. However, in some cases decisions have held a student’s right to free expression in the form of an Internet parody if no significant disruption to the educational institution has occurred. Faculty have also filed suit or pressed criminal charges against students for harassing, defaming, or intimidating speech online (see Wisniewski vs. Board of Education, Weedsport Central School District, 2007; WSBTV.com, 2006).

And faculty sanctions for perceived misuse of social networking are becoming commonplace as well. Regulation of faculty conduct outside of professional duties is embedded in institutional codes and social norms, and many cases exist where faculty have claimed that sanctions or dismissals are unconstitutional (Fulmer, 2002). However, with the advent of online social networking, traditional tests of rights vs. duty may not apply. In a conventional sense, educational institutions realize the boundaries of faculty behavior to be regulated. But the transparency of online social networking has somewhat eroded those boundaries. For example, do faculty have the right to free expression online even if it conflicts with the values of the institution? Or do institutions have the duty to ensure that the values of the institution are upheld online as they are in the physical world?

One particularly striking example of this dilemma is the Tamara Hoover case. Hoover, a high school art teacher in the Austin (Texas) Independent School District, was fired when nude photographs were discovered on her MySpace profile and on her photo-sharing website, Flickr (May, 2006). Hoover was fired based on “conduct unbecoming a teacher,” even though the photographs displayed could be interpreted as artistic and professional. Hoover agreed to a cash settlement from the school district, and now uses her MySpace profile to promote teachers’ free speech rights (Hoover, 2007). The case has attracted national media attention.

The Hoover case is not an isolated incident. Many other cases of faculty sanctions over social networking have occurred in recent years (Crawford, 2007; Phillips, 2007; Vivanco, 2007). Do education administrators have the right to screen potential employees by “Googling” them, or to monitor employees’ electronic communications without evidence of inappropriate contact with students (Wheeler, 2007)? These and other ques-
tions concerning ethical conduct within social networking sites have been met with a variety of responses from teacher preparation programs, school districts, and universities. Some have warned faculty not to use the sites at all (e-School News, 2007) and others have taken an educational approach, encouraging users to critically think about what they post online (The Pennsylvania State University, 2007). Given the ubiquity of online social networking communities among youth (boyd, 2008) as well as the potential of these powerful tools to provide communications that would not otherwise be possible, barring their use strikes the authors of this chapter as an educational disservice. To best calculate the risks that could be incurred in leveraging the power of these innovative tools, we believe a careful analysis of the potential ethical issues involved in interactions in online social networks is necessary.

**APPLYING A MORAL FRAMEWORK**

The events described above begin to illustrate the confusing social and ethical landscape of communications in this changing time, especially for educators who are obligated by their professional standards to serve as role models. To add to the complexity, the multiple players, including faculty, students, administrators, and parents, appear to have vastly different points of view about what is appropriate and inappropriate conduct. This is partly due to the multiple and often competing social and moral concerns present in these types of incidents. To both investigate the ethical points of view involved in judging these incidents and to uncover the ethical vulnerabilities inherent in this new medium, we have applied a socio-moral framework with a legacy of describing moral and non-moral features of complex social interactions. Specifically, social cognitive domain theory (Turiel, 1983; Turiel, 2002) is an appropriate starting point for understanding the complexities in online social networking.

First, the theory provides an analytical framework that differentiates moral from non-moral concerns in social interactions. Prior research applying this framework has demonstrated that people consistently think about moral (such as notions of harm, fairness, and rights), conventional (such as social roles, institutional organization, and matters of social efficiency), and personal matters (such as tastes and choices) in different ways (see Smetana, 2006 for a review). From early childhood, individuals actively distinguish between these domains and make judgments specific to domains about these distinct categories of social interaction. These insights are critical because many real-world social interactions are multi-faceted in the sense that multiple social domains are involved. Judgments and actions based on social interactions often involve weighing and coordinating various moral and non-moral concerns. For example, a judgment about whether a teacher should be disciplined for approaching parents with alarming information acquired from a student’s online profile involves the consideration of multiple issues. There are concerns for the student’s welfare (moral), the limits of teacher authority (conventional), and the student’s right to privacy (moral) when choosing to post information in a public forum (personal).

Second, the framework allows for analytical investigation rather than a prescribed approach to how one should behave in ambiguous situations. There are conflicting perspectives about whether a teacher should be disciplined in such a situation; the authors of this chapter do not pretend to be certain about the right or ethical course of action in complicated, multi-faceted events. Our purpose is not to prescribe a set of moral actions that fit under a wide variation of circumstances, but instead to better understand the issues involved and also discover the ways people weigh those various issues in their thinking as online social networks continue to grow. To this end we conducted an investigation into student ethical decision-making in online social networking communities. This
study has implications for how instructors might develop ways to allow students to ponder their ethical reasoning while engaging in the use of these tools.

Research within this framework can provide insights and useful points of comparison for our topic because of multiple studies of reasoning about two relevant social issues: developing concepts of role-related authority (Laupa, 1991; Laupa & Turiel, 1993; Laupa, 1995) and thinking about rights and privacy issues with the use of modern technologies (Friedman et al., 2006; Friedman, 1997). For example, when asked about the limits of educators' authority and responsibility over students, older students are more likely than younger students to limit their influences to the concrete boundaries of the school context (Laupa & Turiel, 1993). As classroom and school boundaries become progressively virtual, limits on educators' responsibilities and authority are unclear for students and staff alike. While reasoning about moral issues in technology, one study demonstrated that many students who believe in property and privacy rights in non-technological arenas condone piracy and hacking activities on computers (Friedman, 1997). Interviews with these students revealed that this apparent contradiction had to do with fundamental aspects of technology: the perceived distance between the actor and potential victims, the indirect nature of the harmful consequences, the invisibility of the act, and the lack of established consequences for such behavior online. Therefore, social cognitive domain theory is a useful framework to guide an analysis of the kinds of issues that can arise in the use of social networking tools. It allows us to do so in a way that respects the complexity of these kinds of interactions. Finally, it enables us to connect directly with a body of research that informs investigations of the ways in which online social interaction might cultivate its own set of ethical vulnerabilities. For example, the studies highlighted above suggest at least three such vulnerabilities:

1. A magnified forum for public humiliation and hazing--Students might be more likely to engage in public humiliation through social networking tools because harmful consequences are not directly observed, in contrast to acts in physical public spaces such as the cafeteria or locker room. Furthermore, when hazing or humiliation is conducted online there is greater distance (and sometimes even anonymity) between the actor and the victim.

2. Privacy issues in public spaces--Online social networking has the power to re-frame the way we consider and apply traditional rights to privacy.

3. The merging of professional and non-professional identities--The classroom walls and school premises no longer frame the jurisdiction of the educational institution. How does this shift impact higher education? How can social networking tools be appropriately used by university programs, administrators, instructors, and students?

Using the social cognitive moral framework as a lens for analysis, these ethical vulnerabilities are described in detail in the following section.

**ETHICAL VULNERABILITIES OF SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS REVEALED**

**A Magnified Forum for Public Humiliation and Hazing**

It is not uncommon to see academic units represented on MySpace or Facebook, as they attempt to find ways to provide services and assistance to students who are familiar with online tools (Hermes, 2008). Additionally, academic units can use these spaces as an outreach tool for marketing (Berg, Berquam & Christoph, 2007; O’Hanlon, 2007). With this level of transparency it would
be easy to witness students engaging in the kinds of online activities that could be characterized as public humiliation and hazing. Most university codes of conduct prohibit this sort of behavior. However, when the behavior is discovered online, questions may arise about whether academic officials should access online profiles at all. While conducting research recently on the feasibility of creating a presence for a university academic library in Facebook, one of the authors came across a student group called “Have you seen the homeless guy in the library?” The description of the group was, “He’s always on the computers. He stinks really bad. And he has like 1,000’s of plastic bags...” Updated in the recent news section of the page was a description of where he was sitting in the library that day as well as a Web site that he had viewed. There were seventeen students in this group (no doubt with various levels of engagement), creating and sustaining a public community with the sole purpose of ridiculing one specific human being.

Public humiliation is not a new phenomenon; but the power of the collective sentiment conveyed by this online “community” would be hard to fathom offline, as a group with a purpose such as this would take considerably more time and effort to create. But by accident this particular group became visible, and when the activity was reported to the library administration, the university student affairs department was alerted. The student affairs officer explained to the library representative that student issues involving online public humiliation and hazing are not uncommon, and that the department frequently engages in mediation to resolve disputes—student to student, student to instructor, and around potentially disturbing group behavior. The officer explained that she would talk to the students who had joined the Facebook group, and use the incident as a “teachable moment” to address ethical use of the social networking tool among the students.

More and more educational administrations are grappling with issues between and among students that have extended into online social networking. As these online forums become ubiquitous to the masses, they have developed into a natural extension of students’ social and personal lives. In a recent survey the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that fifty-five percent of online teens (ages 12-17) have created a profile at a social networking site such as MySpace or Facebook (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). University students in particular frequent social networking sites. In fact, a recent survey of all first-year English students at the University of Illinois-Chicago (Hargittai, 2007), reported that 88% use social networking sites.

Incidents involving public humiliation or hazing such as the one that took place in the university library as described above, have become commonplace in both K-12 and institutions of higher learning. Through “cyberbullying,” defined as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text,” (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006, p.152) students and faculty can either become the targets or perpetrators of incidents that would be unacceptable in offline situations. Electronic humiliation and hazing of this nature can have lasting physical and psychological effects on the victims such as depression, insomnia, and anxiety disorders (Griffiths, 2002). In the interest of student and faculty welfare, educational institutions have responded to these incidents in a variety of ways. Some situations are minor and can easily be solved through mediation by administrators or student affairs professionals (Lipka, 2008) while others have warranted more serious disciplinary or even criminal action.

It is because of the sheer reach of electronic communication that the Internet and social networking have become a magnified forum for public humiliation and hazing. This activity occurs within all sectors of the educational spectrum. Almost one-third of teens who use the Internet say that they have been a victim of annoying or potentially threatening activities online, including others “outing” personal information via email,
text messaging, or postings on social networking sites. Those who share personal identities and thoughts are more likely to be the targets of such activities (Lenhart, 2007). Additionally, in a recent survey conducted by the Teacher Support Network of Great Britain, 17% of K-12 teachers indicated that they had been a target of online humiliation or harassment (Woolcock, 2008). College-age students and faculty are not immune from online defamation of character. In a survey conducted at the University of New Hampshire 17% of students reported experiencing threatening online behavior, yet only 7% of those experiencing victimization reported it to campus authorities (Finn, 2004). Sites such as JuicyCampus.com and TheDirty.com, perhaps the most notorious Web sites aimed at college students, allow anyone to post humiliating or threatening messages and photos, some of which have cost students job opportunities and internships (O’Neil, 2008). Female law school students have reported sexual harassment and defamation on AutoAdmit.com, a message board about law school admissions (Nakashima, 2007). And Web sites like RateMyProfessors.com and RateMyTeachers.com allow students to be anonymous as they air their opinions about faculty, including rating an instructor’s easiness and “hotness”.

Such activity on social networking sites has led to several court cases over perceived defamation. For example, Drews vs. Joint School District (2006) described a situation where Casey Drews, a high school student, was the subject of rumors and gossip at school after a snapshot her mother took of Drews kissing a female friend was circulated on the Internet. Drews sued the school district for deliberately ignoring the harassment. Cases illustrating faculty harassment and defamation are evident as well. A Georgia teacher brought criminal charges against a high school student who created a fake MySpace profile about the teacher, claiming that the teacher “wrestled midgets and alligators” and stating that he liked “having a gay old time” (WSBTV.com, 2006). And a federal circuit court found that a student’s distribution of a text message icon depicting a gun firing at a picture of his English teacher and the words “Kill Mr. Van der Molen” was threatening speech not protected by the First Amendment (Wisniewski vs. Board of Education, Weedsport Central School District, 2007).

Steve Dillon, director of student services at Carmel Clay Schools, states, “Kids look at the Internet as today’s restroom wall. They need to learn that some things are not acceptable anywhere” (Carvin, 2006). If the Internet is a restroom wall, then it is a giant, unisex restroom open to all citizens. But unlike a restroom wall that can be painted over, the Internet can be a permanent archive of electronic communication. Localized or place-bound codes of conduct are clearly no longer adequate in a Web 2.0 environment. How do educational organizations come to terms that the school’s four walls have been virtually obliterated, and craft appropriate responses in codes of conduct that protect the privacy and welfare of its students and faculty, while simultaneously honoring First Amendment rights?

Privacy Issues in Public Spaces

A number of recent controversies highlight our collective lack of clarity about how we can and should use personal information that is publicly available on the Web. English Education candidate Stacy Snyder of Millersville (Pennsylvania) University was denied her teaching certificate and given an English degree rather than an education degree after campus administrators discovered photos where she portrayed herself as a “drunken pirate” on her MySpace profile, even though she was of legal drinking age. The 27-year old filed a lawsuit against the university, and is asking for $75,000 in damages (Steiner, 2007). In another example (one which we have used to explore reasoning in our own research), a teacher revealed to students that she had a MySpace profile. The student consequently “friended” the teacher, giv-
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ing the teacher access to the student’s profile. In the process of exploring the student’s profile, the teacher discovered information about activities such as underage drinking in which the student was engaged. Concerned about what she saw online about the student, the teacher contacted the parents. The parents contacted the school, outraged that the teacher was snooping into the student’s personal life, and demanded that the teacher be disciplined. Scenarios such as these suggest that both producers and consumers of online information are unclear as to exactly what is public and exactly what is private.

Are producers aware of the extent to which their online disclosures are publicly accessible? Are consumers clear about producers’ rights to privacy in this online community? Studies reveal that teens and adults alike underestimate who accesses their online submissions and how that information is used (Viégas, 2005). The nature of online social interaction allows for such vulnerabilities to protecting privacy. Palen and Dourish (2003) suggest that this illusion is perpetuated, at least in part, because of our reliance on non-virtual strategies for monitoring privacy, and that online interactions call for implications for better controlling privacy violations and for different ways of thinking about privacy rights in online environments.

According to this view, our mechanisms for managing privacy have traditionally been spatial and sensory: we know who our audience is (and can control it) because we can see, hear, and read traditional forms of communication. Online, these cues are distorted. Our audience is frequently unknown and underestimated (Viégas, 2005) and the boundaries between personal and professional domains are often easily crossed. Lastly, information shared online is often available for access at future times and for future audiences. Not only do these attributes impact our abilities to regulate our intended audience, they also weaken our control over how that information is interpreted and used. In an attempt to understand and improve privacy management in information technology, computer scientists have engaged in analysis of the concept of privacy and an examination of privacy online (Palen & Dourish, 2003). Conceiving privacy as a boundary regulation process (Altman, 1977), Palen & Dourish identify three boundary negotiation processes as essential to the management of privacy in a networked world: disclosure, identity, and temporality.

Issues involving disclosure dominate recent social networking controversies, including the two scenarios above. Some would argue that both teacher and student should have known better than to reveal personal information in a public forum -- both should simply have avoided disclosing information. But Palen & Dourish argue that this view undermines the true social interactive nature online. Disclosure is essential to online interaction. Effectively negotiating private and public spaces involves selective decisions about what to disclose and what kind of persona to display. Problems arise, they argue, in how we control who is targeted by this public display and consequently how the display is interpreted.

There is also an inherent tension in our attempts to control how others see us online. When creating and publishing our virtual identities we choose to affiliate with certain groups, networks, each with their own set of identity markers, language conventions and patterns of interaction (Yates & Orlikowski, 1992). Likewise, we modify our ways of interacting based on our perceptions of the identities and affiliations of our audience. Online, these various identities can appear quite fragmented and disconnected, such that viewing one facet of an online persona out of context (such as the “drunken pirate”) can lead to distortions and errors in judgments of the person’s character and personality, largely outside of the individual’s control. Assessments can be made and then applied to the hiring and firing decisions within a variety of professions. Central to protecting privacy is “the ability to discern who might be able to see one’s action” (Palen & Dourish, 2003, p.4).
Lastly, our attempts to control the information we share have a temporal quality. That is, in any moment of information sharing, we typically respond to the results of past attempts at information sharing and anticipate future consequences of information sharing. Moments of information sharing are connected historically and logically. However, online these moments can be viewed out of sequence, preserved for future use, and even reorganized into alternative sequences. The photos, stories, and conversations uploaded during college may return to contribute a completely different image of responsibility than the one conveyed by the professional resumé uploaded ten years later.

This analysis has implications for both education and ethics. First, these lenses offer useful entry points for developing awareness and understanding of the vulnerabilities to privacy online for both those sharing and those interpreting information shared online. Second, the review suggests a way of thinking about privacy rights online. In contrast to those who believe that privacy rights are surrendered when information is made public, this review suggests that rights to privacy might still be negotiated after information is publicly accessible. For example, individuals sharing the information might deserve the right to have that information understood in context or within its original logical sequence; that is, understood in a way which maintains the integrity of the sharer’s initial intentions. There is some limited empirical evidence suggesting that people already do uphold privacy rights in public spaces (Friedman et al., 2006). In one study, when college students were asked to judge whether an installed video camera capturing video of them in a public place was an invasion of their privacy, the majority of students judged that it was. Furthermore, in this study, students’ responses illustrated a complex construal of privacy issues in public. Judgments of privacy were mediated by a variety of factors such as the location of the camera, the perceived purpose of the video camera (safety vs. voyeurism), the audience viewing the footage, and the extent of disclosure about the video camera (from posted signs to informed consent). As new technologies continue to alter the nature of our social interactions in online communities, more studies are needed both to highlight the privacy vulnerabilities inherent in these types of social interaction and to capture the adaptive reasoning about privacy rights that are constructed through those experiences.

The Merging of Professional and Non-Professional Identities

Social networking tools can serve as both a rich resource and a potential liability. As with any powerful tool, there are far-reaching risks and potential disaster if use of the tool is not thoroughly calculated—but there are beneficial uses as well. Some online social networking tools go beyond a function of socialization to include professional communication functions. For example, Zinch.com helps students connect with the colleges and universities they are interested in attending. After students register with Zinch, they complete a personal profile and prepare an online digital portfolio illustrating their talents. Profiles are automatically private to those other than approved admissions officers. Recruiters across the nation use the network to connect with students whose profiles are of interest to their institutions. A similar site, Cappex.com, has the added feature of a calculator that estimates students’ chances for admission to their desired institution. These tools take admissions criteria beyond testing, basic academics, and letters of recommendation, to allow those in non-local areas to connect with learning institutions, and provide a convenient opportunity for individual students and admissions officers to connect.

Once schooling is out of the way and the job hunt begins or a promotion is imminent, students in some professions face the news that a background check, also known as a consumer report, is
required. Background checks can be conveniently conducted during the hiring process through third party investigation services to verify any level of candidate qualifications from education records to drug tests and credit records. The Fair Credit Reporting Act mandates that a consumer report should be conducted within compliance of the law to prevent discriminatory actions (Federal Trade Commission, 2004). To assure their compliance, most often employers conduct screenings by contracting with consumer reporting agencies that have access to specialized information sources. But consumer reports can also reveal information about a candidate that is irrelevant, taken out of context, or even inaccurate. This leaves room for concern for some applicants who have not paid attention or were unaware of how their prior behavior could be interpreted by employment agencies.

An online search of a person’s name could also be conducted to obtain as much information as possible about a candidate’s level of qualification. An Internet search can reveal a candidate’s Web site or portfolio, professional accomplishments and awards, and other pertinent information. But use of an Internet search during the hiring process could also pull up a candidate’s social networking profile or other Internet-based information outside a normal background check. Voluntarily-disclosed information on profiles that are public may reveal an applicant’s sexual orientation, political affiliation, age, and marital status, and an employer who allows consideration to these factors could be acting in violation of workplace-discrimination statutes. But, it appears that use of information from social networking sites such as “drunken, racy, or provocative photographs” in order to make a judgment about the candidate’s suitability is perfectly legal (Byrnside, 2008).

These scenarios play out over and over during the hiring process. For example, a Boston marketing recruiter was screening applications and noted one of particular interest. A member of the interview team asked the recruiter if she had seen the applicant’s MySpace page, which included pictures of the recent college graduate “Jell-o wrestling.” Based on more relevant factors the applicant was not interviewed, but the MySpace page remained in the recruiter’s memory (Aucoin, 2007). Here again, misimpressions about privacy could pose life-changing implications if conscious actions were not promoted. How many emerging professionals have lost jobs or been denied opportunities because of the blurred boundaries between professional life and private life? The liabilities associated with social networking are potentially staggering, for both employers and employees.

Also consider the fact that individuals can experience a sort of identity theft through social networking sites. Cicero (Illinois) Town President, Larry Dominick, had two MySpace profiles. City officials found the sites, which were “replete with photos and questionable comments about his sexuality and ethics.” But both sites were created by imposters (Noel, 2008). Imposter profiles are so prevalent that MySpace now has protocol and a division within the company to address cyber-bullying, underage users, and imposter profiles (MySpace, 2008). Cicero attorneys are asking MySpace to identify the anonymous users who created the profiles, and Dominick is planning on suing.

When social networking sites are made public, everyone in the world, including colleagues, has the capability to view the content. No doubt, we make judgments about a person’s character based on what we see. The merging of professional and non-professional identities has implications for those who choose to create and display personal profiles.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING TOOLS**

Given the prevalence of incidents surrounding social networking within educational institutions,
there is a need to embed socially responsible usage principles in academic programs rich in technological innovation. We have begun to implement and study such interventions. As instructors in a teacher education program we (Foulger, Ewbank, Kay, Osborn Popp, & Carter, 2008) investigated the use of case-based coursework (Kim et al., 2006; Kolodner, 1993) for encouraging change in preservice teachers’ reasoning about ethical issues in Web 2.0 tools. As we have grappled with ethical dilemmas around social networking at our own institution, we were curious about the ways in which new technologies might alter traditional forms of social interaction. These circumstances gave rise to the following questions that drove our research: a) What are preservice teachers’ perspectives regarding a social networking scenario that involves multiple ethical dilemmas? And b) In what ways does case-based coursework change preservice teachers’ reasoning about social networking? In this study we assessed the effectiveness of a case-based intervention with a group university freshman-level education class. They participated in a homework assignment that was developed to help them better understand the features of social networking tools. It also helped them clarify their ethical positions about recent legal sanctions pertaining to the use of social networking tools by students and teachers.

Based on a review of the literature about case-based reasoning, we expected coursework that included case-based teaching about controversial social networking issues to (a) increase students’ recognition and integration of multiple perspectives or viewpoints about the benefits and harms of teachers’ use of social networking tools and (b) develop students’ appreciation for the range of ethical vulnerabilities inherent in social networking media. Fifty students participated in a three-part assignment. First, they were asked to respond to online selections about the technological nature of social networking. Students then commented on cases where teachers used social networking tools for pedagogical purposes. Finally students responded to cases where teachers were disciplined or dismissed for inappropriate conduct as defined by educational institutions. Comparisons of perceptions before and after the assignment were examined to analyze the preservice teachers’ reasoning about controversial social networking incidents. Some significant changes in student perceptions did occur, indicating that case-based coursework increases awareness of the ethical complexities embedded in social networking tools.

Several trends emerged from the analysis. The homework helped students develop more complex ethical reasoning to the scenarios posed and revealed a significant increase among students in the call for some form of teacher discipline. Additionally, the homework developed students’ recognition of the complexities of social networking sites and the need to develop clearer protocols around their educational use. Finally, the assignment had an impact on students’ understanding of the ethical vulnerabilities of social networking tools. A deeper exploration of one common set of responses revealed that the study participants grappled with the line between a teacher honoring a student’s right to privacy and a teacher’s responsibility of caring for the students’ well-being.

It was apparent that the case-based coursework encouraged students to contemplate rights to privacy in a public online forum. This level of thought is important because of the unknown norms of social networking. Even though many students are immersed in technology every day, there is still room for education about social networking and professional ethics.

Future studies should include investigations about educator conduct and rights to privacy in online spaces. Those who are engaged in supporting future professionals should consider ways in which they can assist the development of thinking about these kinds of ethical dilemmas so that new professionals can anticipate and prevent potential problems, develop well-reasoned responses to ethical decisions, and participate in the construc-
tion of protocols that continue to harness the educational potential of social networking tools. Developing such awareness and protocols are initial steps toward encouraging responsible use of these tools.

THE FUTURE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING IN EDUCATION

News stories continue to surface about questionable social behaviors that occur online. Although some behave as though the faceless world of online communities is lawless territory and continue to test the waters, no firm legal precedents have been established to guide online codes of conduct.

Educational organizations have taken a variety of positions on this issue, some in response to real problems they have encountered, and some prompted by attempts to be proactive in light of the news events they hear. Lamar County School Board has taken a conservative position. Although no incidents led to the decision, the attorney of the southern Mississippi district recommended adoption of a policy to lessen liabilities. Now communications between teachers and students through social networking sites or through texting are prohibited (Associated Press, 2008).

But Tomás Gonzales, Senior Assistant Dean at Syracuse University School of Law and a nationally recognized speaker in the legal issues concerning on-line communities, believes that educational organizations should embrace collaborative technologies and explore appropriate uses even in the midst of much negative press about the drawbacks of social networking (2008). He also claims that current codes of conduct about appropriate face-to-face behavior are probably sufficient for providing online guidance for students and administrators.

Codes of conduct in educational institutions should be examined to determine whether protocols for online behavior are embedded within existing policies. At a minimum, institutions should consider how their existing codes of conduct would be applied in the event of a dilemma involving social networking tools. Additionally, education programs that result in awareness of both proactive behaviors as well as potential situations to be avoided in social networking would benefit students and faculty alike.

CONCLUSION

We must recognize the limitations of our own experience and expertise. This applies to the use of many Web 2.0 tools, including online social networking. With the use of social networking tools, as with any powerful tool, come many vulnerabilities. As society becomes more technologically advanced, it has become the responsibility of educational institutions to support the use of the kinds of technologies that might prove to strengthen and support the learning process. However, it is also the responsibility of policymakers to assure participation in a safe learning environment. Ironically, news broadcasts have been mostly negative press about the pitfalls of social networking tools, and have not showcased innovative and pedagogical uses of Web 2.0 features. In order for any beneficial uses of such tools to be realized and refined, and then incorporated into learning environments, the fear and apprehension surrounding them must be set aside long enough for real innovation to occur.

We encourage institutions to first create a safe place for ideas to percolate by revisiting existing codes of conduct to assure their policy and procedures embrace the idea of virtual connectivity, and to publish guidelines for acceptable and appropriate uses of technology. By providing guidance to their members, institutions can encourage them to utilize online tools in a socially responsible manner, without squelching innovative uses of technology. Just as institutions use codes of conduct to ensure the safety and rights of each member on campus, they can utilize those same codes in
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the online extension. By conceptualizing online spaces as an integral part of institutions’ physical and temporal community, codes of conduct can be applied in a manner that respects privacy and individual rights, while allowing innovation and security for all participants.

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