

SOCIAL WRITING AND SOCIAL MEDIA: AN INTRODUCTION

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Worldwide, social media use has grown substantially since the initial days of these technologies in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Early sites like Classmates.com (originating in 1995) and SixDegrees.com (originating in 1997) had membership levels in the low millions—Classmates.com had 55 million members in 2002 (Perez, 2012), for example, and SixDegrees.com had over a million members in its early years (Barker, Barker, Bormann, & Neher, 2012, p. 197). Once hugely popular, Friendster.com—which was founded in 2002 and released to the public in 2003—was copied by multiple other social media platforms hoping to capitalize on its popularity. At the time of its acquisition by MOL Global, Friendster had 115 million members (Fiegerman, 2014). In the early landscape of social media technologies, most sites served niche markets and struggled to keep users' attention. These tools had not yet been incorporated into our society as substantially as they have today.

Today, popular social media technologies measure their populations in the high millions to the low billions. Facebook, for instance, captured 1.79 billion monthly active users as of September 2016 (Facebook, 2016). Twitter has 313 million monthly active users who tweet 500 million times per day (Twitter, 2016). Even newer sites like Instagram, launched in late 2010, boast similar numbers: 500 million monthly active users, more than 95 million images and videos shared per day, and 4.2 billion likes on photos daily (Instagram, 2016). Social media technologies have become nearly ubiquitous in our culture, with the ability to tweet an online news link or send a funny picture to someone on Facebook simply a click away. Websites embed buttons to share and like information via Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Pinterest and other social media sites; trending hashtags make their way into global news. People consult Yelp for new restaurant suggestions, post pictures of their food and pets to Instagram, curate dream boards for weddings and share household tips and recipes on Pinterest. The Associated Press even circulated a short glossary of Twitter terms in 2013

and offered Twitter chats with guest experts monthly that were then archived using another social media tool, Storify. In short, social media can be found nearly everywhere.

That is, social media use is not simply a phenomenon popular among teenagers; this stereotypical view of these technologies may have been true in their early days, but today, adults are also part of the social media landscape, with usage growing among all sectors, even those aged 65 and older. The Pew Research Center (2014) has noted that 74 percent of online adults use social networking sites as of January 2014. Most of these adults visit Facebook, which social media researcher Nicole Ellison has described as “a daily practice for many people . . . the default social site” (as cited in Weise, 2015). Teenagers, who go online almost constantly thanks to the ease of access that smartphones and tablets provide, participate in social media technologies nearly as often as adults. Teens aged 13-17 use a variety of sites, like Facebook (71%), Instagram (52%), Snapchat (41%), Twitter and Google+ (both 33%), Vine (24%), and Tumblr (14%) (Lenhart, 2015). And newcomers to the social media landscape are emerging all the time, with new apps and sites arising daily.

Participants in social media technologies enact a variety of literacy practices: Writing and composing more broadly through practices like hashtagging, captioning, constructing personal profiles, and other ways of writing oneself into being comprise a large amount of users’ time in a social media site. Stacey Pigg et al. (2014) described these kinds of composing practices as reflecting the “rhetorical complexity of our social lives as they have become increasingly mediated by writing technologies” (p. 92). Through the writing activities they perform in social media technologies, students actively create literacy ecologies and thereby shape their social and personal lives (Pigg et al., 2014, p. 93). Thus we see Classmates.com and SixDegrees.com’s millions of users giving way to the widespread and pervasive use of social media among billions of users worldwide today.

STUDYING SOCIAL MEDIA

The near-ubiquity of social media on a global scale allows scholars studying the impact of these technologies a fascinating glimpse at emergent composing practices. There are a myriad of composing activities taking place in social media and a rich variety of genres, audiences, stylistic choices, and pedagogical possibilities represented. Thus in this collection, we call for increased scholarly attention to the intersections of writing and social media platforms and tools in higher education. As Andrea Lunsford (2010) compellingly argued in an op-ed piece, “Our Semi-Literate Youth? Not So Fast,” “these changes alter the very grounds of literacy as the definition, nature, and scope of writing are all shifting away

from the consumption of discourse to its production.” Because of this constantly changing landscape of social media, scholars in the field of writing studies are afforded rich sites for analysis, sites that offer us compelling questions, too, about the role of research and ethics in digital technologies such as these, the potential place of social media technologies in our pedagogy, and the future of activism and community-based efforts connected to social media.

But while recent scholarship abounds on multimodal and digital composition broadly (Ball & Kalmbach, 2010; Delagrange, 2011; Journet, Ball, & Trauman, 2012; Palmeri, 2012), scholarship on social media is still developing within the field of writing studies. In this respect, our collection, *Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, and Pedagogies*, builds on previous work articulating the role of multimodality in composition studies by extending ongoing conversations that have asked readers to expand notions of networked literacy in the twenty-first century. Our collection also offers something new to the field. It offers a more narrowly defined focus on social media and its platforms by examining the impact of social media on three writing-related themes: publics and audiences, presentation of self and groups, and pedagogy at various levels of higher education. The sixteen chapters in this collection pay attention to an undertheorized aspect of writing online—that is, the acts of composing that occur specifically in social media spaces—an aspect of writing that is both timely and compelling.

There are many ways that social media have impacted societies at a global level, but one of the more compelling moments in 2016 stands as an example of why examining social media composing is crucial moving forward. The 2016 U.S. presidential election was not the first time a presidential candidate leveraged the power of social media in his or her campaign—after all, Barack Obama was nicknamed the first “social media president” for his strategic use of social media technologies in his 2008 campaign (Schulman, 2016). However, the 2016 presidential election showcased social media’s role in political campaigns today, illustrating that candidates today can tap into the networks of Twitter, Reddit, Facebook, and other social media technologies in ways that can upset traditional approaches to understanding political campaigning. President-elect Donald Trump continued his use of social media in the days leading up to his inauguration in ways previously unseen—to attack the press, to trumpet his achievements, and to air grievances. The 2016 presidential election placed social media front and center as a key player in the ability of a political candidate to garner votes. Within this context, Lunsford’s discussion of social media’s impact on literacy as a series of changes is even more compelling:

If we look beyond the hand-wringing about young people and

literacy today . . . we will see that the changes brought about by the digital revolution are just that: changes. [They occur] across a wide range of genre and media, away from individual “authors” to participatory and collaborative partners-in-production; away from a single static standard of correctness to a situated understanding of audience and context and purpose for writing.

The 2016 U.S. presidential election was just one moment that pointed to the need to pay further attention to social media and how composing in these technologies has the power to impact our world. Whether one’s reaction to the election was shock, surprise, disgust, or joy, it is clear that social media composing—like it or not—is here to stay and has real, demonstrable influence on society in multiple and powerful ways.

ORGANIZATION OF THE COLLECTION

Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, and Pedagogies is organized around three sections: social media and public audiences, social media and presentation, and social media and pedagogy. The sixteen chapters in this collection offer exciting and productive reflections on the roles of social media in public, professional, and pedagogical arenas. Here we have included a broad range of scholars, from graduate students to full professors, who themselves interact with social media in their personal and professional lives. Our hope is that this collection will open a space for continued research on social media and literacy in the twenty-first century, and that it will have a wide range of appeal for academics in rhetoric, composition, writing studies, and communication on an international level.

PART 1: PUBLICS AND AUDIENCES

The first section, social media and public audiences, focuses on the ways that social media are being used to develop and sustain writing-related efforts. Every social media technology has the potential attention of a broad public audience. Authors who use social media tools to compose have the reach of these tools to their advantage: With the billions of active daily and monthly users in popular social media technologies like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and others, composers can address a massive group of listeners—very rapidly at that—and, if desired, attempt to rouse them to action of some kind.

Indeed, it is social media’s ability to reach broad audiences and rouse potential action that is at the heart of Section I of this collection. Since the beginning

of Western society, texts have organized and supported social activity. Too, rhetoric has been a foundational element of how citizens have discussed problems. The fact that social media and writing platforms continue that tradition, while at the same time altering it, should not come as a surprise to us (again, consider Lunsford's assertion that changes wrought by digital composing tools are just that—changes). As well, it is no surprise that as rhetoric and compositionists recommit themselves to the “public turn” (Mathieu, 2005; Sheridan, Ridolfo, & Michel, 2012) that social media platforms, the dominant form of delivery that the public uses to discuss issues of activism and public trust, should take on greater importance in terms of writing studies research. After all, the role of rhetoric in digital contexts has, for some time, been a focus of the field (Eyman, 2015; Sullivan & Porter, 1997; Warnick, 2007), with scholars attending particularly to digital technologies and tools and their impact on writing and writing pedagogy.

Public authors today frequently use digital tools to seek to address social problems. As a result, scholars attend to the ways public authors engage in and across networked social writing platforms to achieve their goals. These examinations take on new urgency as writing, technological, and social networks influence and alter larger societal discourses and meanings. The nature of that alteration is still relatively new as network writing platforms like social media become part of activists' projects. Contrary to the popular cynical dismissal of hashtag activism as “slacktivism” (Gladwell, 2010), social writing platforms have played key roles in contemporary social movements of our time such as the Occupy movement (DeLuca, Lawson, & Sun, 2012; Penney & Dadas, 2014), the #blacklivesmatter protests, #yesallwomen and other feminist projects (Dixon, 2014), and the Arab Spring of 2011 (Harlow & Johnson, 2011). Rather than dismissing this work as mere slacktivism, we counter that the composing practices that happen in social media can instead be forms of digital activism (Vie, 2014, 2015). This is but one example of how public authors and public audiences interact in social media technologies in ways that attract the interest of writing and rhetoric scholars, but as the chapters in this section illustrate, there are many other examples that are of interest.

Chapters in this section span various writing-related efforts in local, national, and global communities, from online activism to ethnographic research to fan service. Given our field's sustained interest in community-based learning and research, service learning pedagogies, and community and critical literacy efforts, this section draws from these theoretical areas to articulate methodologies, literacy practices, and other elements pertinent to rhetorical action in public social writing and activist projects. In “Hashtag Activism: The Promise and Risk of ‘Attention,’” Caroline Dadas examines the ability of social media to call attention to

challenging political issues that affect and coordinate global publics. Estee Beck combines discussions of digital literacy and surveillance studies in “Sustaining Critical Literacies in an Age of Digital Surveillance” to tackle the role of literacy in the wake of the National Security Agency and big data collection. Tabetha Adkins uses her chapter, “Social Spill: Ethnographic Data Collection When Facebook is a Site of Activism,” to examine public engagement on Facebook when corporations make the wrong rhetorical moves in engaging the public. Crystal Broch Colombini and Lindsay Hall address social writing, media attention, and collective problem-solving as forum publics responded to the housing crises and Great Recession of 2008 in “Networking Hardship: From Sharing Stress to ‘Paying Forward’ Success in LoanSafe Forum Interactions.” Cory Bullinger and Stephanie Vie’s “After a Decade of Social Media” looks broadly at the landscape of social media, examining two frequently forgotten groups: social media abstainers and ex-users. Finally, we close this section with Liza Potts writing about fan cultures’ ability to generate and maintain publics through combined uses of both strategies and tactics. These chapters demonstrate the different ways that composers in social media use strategic rhetorical communication techniques to reach out to various publics, and in turn they examine the effects of those choices. In Section II, authors move away from a focus on the relationships between public-facing authors and the public audiences for which they compose, instead concentrating on the choices both individuals and groups make in social media technologies that affect how they are perceived by others. That is, Section II attends to the performance of identity in social media, looking at how writing plays a part in how we are able to represent our selves in these tools.

PART 2: PRESENTATION OF SELF, GROUPS, AND DATA

The second section is most concerned with discussions of how individuals and groups use writing to create, maintain, and reshape their presentations in social media spaces. Authors in this section examine how people use text specifically and multimodal composition more broadly to represent themselves to various audiences and for various purposes in composing profiles, News Feed posts, “likes,” microblogs, pins, hashtags, and other writing in spaces like Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest. This section examines specific aspects of performance (such as gender, sexual identity, race and ethnicity, group affiliation, and so on) within specific online and offline rhetorical situations. Authors in this section interrogate how individuals or groups use writing in social media to create, maintain, and reshape their identities in relation to others, and how data plays a role in such performances of identity.

Performance is the focus of the second section, and these chapters are par-

ticularly interested in interrogating the relationship between the performance of identity and the discursive tools offered in social media technologies. Today, robot vacuums (@SelfAwareROOMBA) have their own Twitter accounts. Pets have their own Facebook pages. At the same time, drag performers have been removed from some social media sites because of “real name” policies that require them to use the name assigned at birth rather than the name used by the performer. Native Americans who used their native language or alphabet, such as Cherokee, for their names have been accused of using fake names (Bogado, 2015). What these stories illustrate is that identity performances in social media spaces are intrinsically linked to both the structure of the tools themselves as well as other discursive forms of performance available in the sites. When robot vacuums have their own Twitter accounts, it is the performance of identity that supersedes any static sense of self.

And so authors in this section attend to “performances” rather than identities to displace the focus on individuals’ subjectivities and instead embrace discussions of the nonhuman and the collective as well as the individual subject. That discussion begins with Bronwyn T. Williams’ conversation about presentations across multiple mobile media formats in “Having a Feel for What Works: Poly-media, Emotion, and Literacy Practices with Mobile Technologies.” In “Visualizing Boutique Data in Egocentric Networks,” Douglas M. Walls finds new ways to present rhetorical activity in social network platforms around individuals. Amber Buck examines the presentation of professionalism for graduate students in “Grad School 2.0: Performing Professionalism on Social Media” by examining the construction of audience on the part of graduate students. Les Hutchinson engages issues of collective and nonhuman performances through queer and feminist rhetorical acts of inquiry in “Writing to Have No Face: The Orientation of Anonymity in Twitter.” Kristin L. Arola asks a very different performance question in “Indigenous Interfaces” about what Facebook’s interface might look like if it were designed with American Indian epistemological understandings in mind. Finally, Kara Poe Alexander and Leslie A. Hahner use their chapter to discuss “The Intimate Screen: Rewriting Understandings of Down Syndrome through Digital Activism on Instagram” as a personal yet public way to use images and social networks to direct a certain kind of action.

PART 3: PEDAGOGY

Finally, the third section questions how social media spaces are shaping and being shaped by educational issues related to writing studies. We have selected chapters that engage pedagogy at various educational levels, ranging from first-year composition to graduate courses to writing programs more generally and

including distance education. This is the most overtly pedagogical section, but we have selected chapters that marry pedagogy and data-driven research (such as case study and survey-based approaches). Thus, this section is one that draws from educational research, classroom studies, and other theoretically based pedagogical discussions of the impact of social media on the field of writing studies.

Perhaps inevitably given rhetoric and composition's educational mandate at many institutions, much of the preliminary work in the field on social networks has focused on the impact social media discourses and technologies have had on traditional literacy education in the classroom. Early work forecasted the rise of network writing technologies. Along with the work of researchers like Gail Hawisher, Cynthia Selfe, Gunther Kress, and Charles Moran, authors like Sullivan and Porter (1997) were already asking questions such as, "Why have there been so few studies of wide-area network interaction, of cross-class interaction, or network interaction within the corporation?" (p. 57). Such education-centered questions point to the largest impact of network writing technologies on the classroom: the fact that "the classroom," as a contained writing ecosystem, soon would not be a self-contained writing ecology, if it ever was. To borrow a turn of phrase from contemporary information system discourse, extra-classroom writing technology disrupted the power dynamics, content, and traditional model of the writing classroom. Today, in the face of the ubiquitous writing technology that is social media, we must ask how writing teachers should address it. For good (we think) or for ill, social media is a part of every writing classroom, whether sanctioned or not.

Thus, this section features scholars who attend specifically to the incorporation of social media into pedagogy. The first chapter, "A Pedagogy of Distraction: The Impact of Media Use on the Writing Process," from Patricia Portanova tackles the omnipresent question of distraction in the writing classroom, asking how digital distractions impact the writing process and product. Her analysis provides compelling evidence that teachers should not shy away from incorporating digital technologies into their teaching simply for fear of distracting students or pushing them to multitask to the detriment of their writing. In Lilian W. Mina's chapter, "Social Media in the FYC Class: The New Digital Divide," readers are provided a specific focus on first-year writing through a mixed-method study of social media in this context. Arguing for the informed and critical use of social media in writing classes, Mina asserts that social media use in first-year composition is one way to fight against digital divide issues. Like Mina, Michael J. Faris also offers a data-driven study of social media, this time in an upper-division writing class. His chapter, "Contextualizing Students' Media Ideologies and Practices: An Empirical Study of Social Media Use in a Writing Class," provides an analysis of literacy practices and understandings of those practices that com-

plicates our understandings of students' uses of social media in meaningful ways. Finally, Chris M. Anson's chapter, "Intellectual, Argumentative, and Informational Affordances of Social Media: Bridging Public Forum Posts and Academic Learning," attends to the field's interest in studying students' extracurricular composing practices through a descriptive study of public forum posts in sites like YouTube and Reddit. Separating students' extracurricular composing practices from the writing occurring in the classroom may prevent us from seeing exciting opportunities for developing different dimensions of students' literacies.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

It is our hope that readers will find in this collection a series of essays that ask the kinds of critical questions needed at this juncture. That is, social media have been (for quite some time now) part of the fabric of our lives. But as with many new technologies, it often takes a while for us to be able to step back, assess the tool's impact, and consider what's next. This collection offers one of the first sets of scholarly work in our field that responds to social media's influence on both popular and extra-curricular writing as well as scholarly communication. Too frequently, social media is dismissed as non-academic, unworthy of sustained attention by researchers. The authors featured here present compelling reasons why this oft-neglected form of writing deserves—and demands—continued academic response.

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