



Managing the Social Media Monster

by Jennifer Carrobis and Diane Harris

As a society, we are enamored by the social media monster. The constant availability of access to and gratification of instant interactions via various media modalities can be hard to resist (Hofmann, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2012). Each day, millions of consumers are firmly entrenched in the world of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and Pinterest. The growth of social media over the past 20 years has been astronomical, with Facebook membership alone over 1.8 billion and continuously growing (Zephoria, 2017). The social media monster is here to stay.

The dramatic growth of social networking sites is attributed to two major aspects: (1) the opportunity to connect and network with one another and (2) the ability for people to instantly communicate with one another (Reddick & Norris, 2013). The lure of social media is also strong—so strong it has become addictive. In a study by Hofmann et al. (2012), when people were presented with sending a tweet or undertaking other addictive behaviors, such as consuming alcohol, study participants were less able to resist sending a 140-character message than engaging in several other addictive options. The researchers reported that “[s]elf control failure rates were highest for desires to engage in media activities, with 42% of those desires enacted even when people had attempted to resist” (p. 585). The power of social media use is evident, but what does this mean for our communities and schools? It means that social media use is vital for twenty-first-century school leaders to recognize and embrace.

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Having a social media presence as a school is a simple, cost-effective, and efficient way to engage those who are already using social media. As noted by Reddick and Norris (2013), the nature of social media platforms allows for interactional communication, a draw for so many users. It is crucial for schools to be engaged in the social networking arena, but it is equally important for them to know what their goals are for using social media. Developing a vision and purpose for social media is the start of the process. The days of traditional newsletters being sent home with students will continue, but now schools have the added advantage of incorporating social media for the purpose of immediate communication within and outside of their communities. Cox and McLeod (2014) conducted a qualitative study of school principals across the United States and parts of Canada concerning social networking in their schools. From their analysis of the data gathered, four themes emerged:

1. Social media platforms offer opportunities between principals and stakeholders.
2. Using social media improves connections with local stakeholders, other educators, and the world in general.
3. Engaging in the use of social media affords principals the ability to enhance their personal and professional growth.
4. Social media use is an expectation; it is no longer optional. (p. 12).

It is critical for schools to stay current and proactive regarding their use of social media outlets.

Advantages of Social Media

Using social media to increase the online presence of a school can generate multiple benefits for all stakeholders. Benefits include connecting with a wide audience, building transparency between the school and community, building awareness of school events and happenings, and thus creating a well-informed audience. Furthermore, social media can be used to influence the perception of community members and to monitor what people are saying about the school. As reported by Cox and McLeod (2014), “Social media tools are one method by which school principals could share with stakeholders their decision-making processes and school’s accomplishments on a regular basis using communication channels that those citizens prefer” (p. 6). The initial intended audience may be the immediate school community of students, staff, school board, families, and the local community. However, it is critical to realize that administrators have the potential to reach across the globe with instantaneous announcements and stories about their

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schools. Social media makes connections around the globe for students, teachers, administrators, and the public at large. People who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to meet have a platform to do so. Cox and McLeod (2014) interviewed one principal who shared that social media granted him access to engage in direct communication with significant members in the field of education, such as Diane Ravitch, an educational historian and former Assistant Secretary of Education (Ravitch, 2017). The principal also noted how these communications supported his professional development. Each of the benefits mentioned promotes the building of an informed and aware audience, motivates and inspires many involved, and helps to build brand recognition for schools. According to Patricia Spirou (MLS/SNHU In Session, 2016), Department Chair of Marketing at Southern New Hampshire University, building a brand is a process. In education, building that brand starts with the social media team at the school interacting with community members while linking information back to the school and its website. Spirou emphasizes the need for being proactive in design by planning and preparing strategies to help avoid potential negativity from social media users.

Calamities, Crises, and Risks

The benefits of social media have been explored, but what happens when social media is used to share news that you would prefer not be so widely promoted? How do you protect the reputation of your school? Many in the educational community, from students to parents, teachers, and more, have taken public stances using social media to generate discussion, spread gossip, draw attention to hot topic issues, create upheaval, voice opinions, and enact change.

In “The Revolution Is Here,” Strauss (2013) identified various grassroots movements, highlighting the use of social media to communicate opinions, spread awareness, and challenge current policies and procedures. From the viral video of a Texas student voicing his dissatisfaction with one of his teachers and her instructional methods, to a student movement about budget cuts in Philadelphia growing from a few students to hundreds within days, Strauss demonstrated how social media could instantaneously spread, grow, and recruit followers. In spring 2016, Campbell Brown, a former news journalist and current education advocate, came under fire regarding statistics she cited concerning 8th graders’ proficiency in mathematics based on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores in the United States (Strauss, 2016). Brown stated two-thirds of 8th graders were not grade level in mathematics. Tom Loveless, a senior fellow at the

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Brookings Institution in Washington, DC, quickly responded with clarification about the way Brown interpreted the scores and the inaccuracy in how the statistics were reported (Loveless, 2016). Loveless explained the difference between proficiency and grade level as it relates to NAEP testing, adding his voice to those already challenging Brown’s claims. A social media war

erupted around this topic with both sides firing back and forth via social media, hoping to inform and gain support for each of their positions. These three examples typify how the utilization of social media networks can quickly share information and recruit followers no matter whether the information is accurate or inaccurate. Social media can be negative and self-serving, may challenge held beliefs, may be true or false, but one way or another repeatedly demonstrates the power to influence, stimulate, and motivate.

As schools move forward with their social media plans and policies, the positives and negatives need to be acknowledged and addressed. In a recent video interview posted by Southern New Hampshire University (MLS/SNHU In Session, 2016), Marketing Chair, Pat Spirou states, “If you’re not careful in managing social media, you may want to interact immediately. The crisis management world of the field of marketing is, ‘Don’t ignore—respond,’ because the fans will take a non-reaction as guilty.” How a leader decides to respond and how quickly he or she responds can help minimize the impact of potentially harmful stories or comments (Cox & McLeod, 2014).

Necessary Decisions for Effective Social Media Plan Implementation and Utilization

School leaders recognize the potential of social media use and how it can be used to inform and engage followers in the vision of the organization (Cox & McLeod, 2014). The decision to use social media to communicate, motivate, inspire, and connect is a simple one. The way in which leaders create and implement social media policy and strategies to meet their communication objectives, however, may vary from school to school.

What decisions need to be made for a school leader to remain current and effective with the use of social media to drive the conversation? Because social media allows for the initiation and exchange of user-generated content, a leader must consider both the risks and benefits to the community (Dixon, 2012). Due to the immediacy of communication via social media, it is important to have a centralized, clear plan in place to consistently monitor social media accounts and respond accordingly. Is the risk of receiving potentially negative feedback worth the potential rewards? If, after careful consideration, the leader believes using social media is worth the risk, then the decision-making process continues. In conversations with several New England principals, some themes arose to help leaders with the decision-making process: setting the stage, setting the purpose, and how to move forward once social media is enabled for the school.

Setting the Stage

Responsibilities and Expectations. The leader must decide who will be responsible for posting and monitoring the information being exchanged over social media and approving any and all content shared. Having a designated person or team responsible for monitoring your social media outlets, including not allowing any posts until they are approved, is essential. Leaders must set clear expectations in professional but user-friendly language for anyone posting or responding to posts on pages. It is important to emphasize that while critical comments and discussions are acceptable, derogatory, abusive, or hateful language will not be tolerated. The policy must focus on positive and constructive dialogue via social media, with maintaining the safety of the

children as the priority. These expectations should be clearly communicated and easily available and accessible on the social media pages of the school website. In addition to communicating clear expectations, a plan must be created to address reporting and removing abusive user posts in a timely manner. Before opening access to the school media sites, faculty and staff should be informed of the social media policies. Then students, parents, and the local community can be notified about the school media sites. Furthermore, notification of these sites should be shared via both a paper copy newsletter, for families who do not actively access electronic resources, and on the school website.

Ease of Access. A decision must be made as to which social media sites are used, their purpose, and how media accounts not only are linked to one another but back to the school's website. To make your online presence even more accessible to those outside of your community, choose a common user name for all school media sites, one that allows users to easily find and follow the school on various social media networks. Consistency helps readers easily identify your presence and also builds name recognition. Moreover, the use of hashtags identifying the name of your school or specific topics and events linking back to your school and its website eases recognition. Linking your social media accounts to one another so news and announcements are dispersed across multiple means simultaneously further promotes your brand. Social media dashboards, such as Hootsuite or Fan Page Robot, are examples of resources currently available that allow for this simultaneous sharing of your message to a broad audience (Social Media Fuze, 2016).

Setting the Purpose

It is important to understand the changing dynamics in schools' use of social media. A change in social media implementation by school principals and leaders has already been noted by researchers. Specifically, Dixon (2012) discusses how "[t]he abundance of social technology has begun to shift the role of the school leader from site administrator to community engagement specialist" (p. 1). Dixon continues by noting that school leaders have to reconsider strategies of how to connect, not just communicate, with their communities. The transformational leadership framework of James Burns (1978), which was later built upon by Bernard and others, could benefit school leaders making decisions regarding their social media policies (Bass, 1985; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bass & Riggio, 2006). The components of transformational leadership include the four I's: individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006). Each of these areas can be addressed using the following strategies:

- ***Empowering community members.*** Empowering and identifying community members, both within and outside of the school community, is another positive way to promote your school, your students, the community, news, and events.
- ***Alerts or notifications.*** Alerts or notifications can be used in multiple ways to communicate information. From within the internal school community, alerts can be used to notify families of delays, early release from the school, or emergencies. From outside the school community, free services, such as Google Alerts or Mention, allow you to be notified when new information appears online based on the settings and parameters you provide. For example, anytime the name of your school appears online, you receive a message. In instances where the school is addressed

in a negative light, you then have the opportunity to respond instantly, explain your stance on the topic, outline your plan to address the situation, and guide the reader back to your website or other pertinent information.

Engagement and Building Trust. A principal who demonstrates idealized influence through his or her charisma motivates and inspires followers to critically think about topics, encourage creativity, and even challenge the status quo (Bass, 1985).

Communicating and making connections are the two major objectives regarding the use of social media, but engagement and real connections with others are what make social media successful. Ackerman, Donaldson, and van der Bogert (1996) report in their book *Making Sense as a School Leader: Persisting Questions, Creative Opportunities* that trusting in the community is viewed as one of two necessary principles for school leaders to hold, along with trusting in yourself (p. 139). Effective leaders do not just communicate via social media to their students, staff, families, and local communities, they engage and build trust too.

Moving Forward

It is important to acknowledge that social media is just one tool vital to managing your school's reputation. It is also critical to recognize the importance of traditional media modalities and to utilize them to inform the greater community. Local publications and news sources continue to inform community members outside the social media realm. Traditional forms of media can also be used to encourage, train, and prepare them, as well as facilitate the use of social media by users who are unfamiliar or tentative with the use of social media.

According to Cox and McLeod (2014), this constant interactive communication continues to grow and "our methods of personal and organizational communication have had to transform as well" (p. 6). Cox and McLeod continue, highlighting that the decision-making process provides increased transparency to students, parents, teachers, and the community, possibly leading to a stronger relationship with these stakeholders. Developing, incorporating, and continually assessing your media plan allows school leaders to not only manage the media monster but to tame it.

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