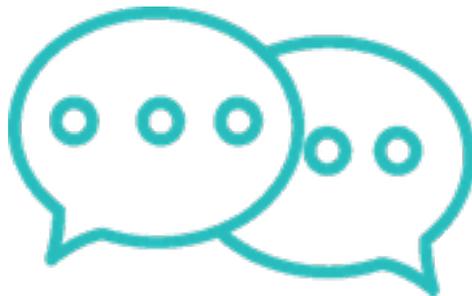


The Pros/Cons Of Social Media Use By Students

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The U.S. is a nation currently divided along social and political lines, a nation where real differences in ethical beliefs and morality exist, and where the spread of misinformation has widened the gap between social groups.



Within this context, technology and social media are increasingly being used a venue for bullying, propaganda, white supremacist, sexist and racist attacks.

Once seen as a means to build a connected future, today social media has come under attack for its potential dangers. In recent weeks, both Facebook and Twitter have attempted to address the use of their social media platforms to perpetuate hate, propaganda and misinformation.

Facebook also struggles with the unethical use of data collected on their users. Today more than ever, we must take a hard look at how social media can cause both benefit and harm in our society. If we do, I'm confident we can develop protocols and procedures to limit such damage.

While I am broadly interested in the study of social media and information and communication technologies, my current scholarly interest is in studying college

students in the U.S. and understanding how their friendships and social networks have been transformed by social media. In my most recent study, I collected data through extensive interviewing and online observation of social media sites with more than 50 participants and two different colleges. My findings were eye-opening.

I discovered that today's college students use social media to decide who to be friends with and how to build friendship networks, and they often find themselves operating within a bubble, where the information they get is shaped not only by social media provider algorithms but also by their social circle.

Students can find themselves ostracized by peers or can spend their time both online and off engaging only with those who share their views. Students told me they automatically screen potential friends for different social or political beliefs by looking at their postings. Individuals who hold different beliefs are dismissed as potential friends, resulting in friend circles with little social or political diversity.

There is no question that as the U.S. becomes increasingly divided, the need for individuals who can make connections across differences is increasingly important.

Filtering friendships is understandable as a way to protect oneself from hate, but unfortunately this filtering at times relies on flawed digital information. Like millions of other Americans, students accidentally or deliberately spread false information, and struggle to identify the difference between information and opinion. Opinions or false information that support their worldview is accepted uncritically and information that challenges their understanding of the world is treated as fake news.



We need to encourage young people to identify the critical difference between information based on science or reason, and viewpoints based on ethical positions. Misinformation not only limits our ability to talk across political and social lines, it also undercuts our ability to deal with the legitimate problem of the deliberate spread of misinformation and propaganda.

When I discuss social media use with students, I often bring up these challenges, and suggest they try to avoid relying too much on partial stories. I acknowledge the real and genuine fears that they have about developing relationships with destructive and

harmful people. Still, I suggest that they try to face their fears and to engage in face-to-face discussions over pizza with those who have different viewpoints. I encourage them to be leaders who can tell the difference between people who disagree and people who advocate hatred and harm. Most importantly, I ask students to develop strategies that help them learn to discern fact from opinion, and to think about the place of each in our society.

Companies that create social media platform also have a responsibility to control misinformation and propaganda. They should acknowledge their own culpability in creating the current social environment, and for the distribution of misinformation and propaganda. They need to do the real and difficult work of negotiating the line between creating a shared community and creating a place for hatred and propaganda to spread. To do this, they will have to develop clear guidelines that allow for genuine diversity of opinion, and invoke the spirit of civil discourse, while rejecting bullying, hate speech and propaganda, all too often hidden behind the mantle of “opinion.”

Regardless of good faith efforts on the part of social media organizations, all consumers must be critical thinkers, acknowledging diversity of thought, seeking truth, and rejecting lies and misinformation. I believe strongly that it’s important that young people expose themselves to diverse ideas, challenge hatred and bullying, identify and respect truth, and learn to debate social problems with civility and respect.

If we can reawaken the spirit of civil, reasoned debate when faced with difficult problems and controversial issues and reject the hatred and hostility that festers in the dark corners of our nation, we will be helping to build the kind of America that does seek liberty and justice for all.

Prof. Standlee specializes in teaching and research in the areas of gender, social theory, sociology of technology, social inequality. Her current scholarship examines the social and cultural implications of contemporary interpersonal communication technologies, with a specific interest on the role of socio-economic status, gender and geographic location in the formation of interpersonal relationships and complex social networks. Her publications have made contributions not only to substantive theorizing in culture, technology studies, socialization and inequality, but also to the emerging field of online research methods. At Gettysburg College, Prof. Standlee teaches courses on social theory and gender, as well as an introductory course for the major.