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A Uniquely Jesuit Approach to Engagement Through Social Media

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A Uniquely Jesuit Approach to Engagement through Social Media

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Abstract

Social media is a relevant and powerful instrument of communication in higher education, especially in the college age population. The use of social media in and out of the classroom on the college campus allows faculty to meet students where they are. Content shared by faculty on social media is a means to continue to educate our students and alumni outside of the classroom and build relationships regardless of geographic boundaries. Through the use of social media platforms, we can also continue to relay and demonstrate our Jesuit ideals. This engagement can help build a relationship between faculty and students that can grow into a mutually beneficial connection. This paper describes why campus social media engagement is important and how it can be useful within the scope of Ignatian pedagogy to extend compassion and education to students, alumni and interested followers and an example of how we have integrated social media into our department.

Introduction

Social media is a popular and relevant means of communication. This is especially true for younger audiences, including students in higher education and recent alumni who are more reliant on the internet and technology for communication.¹ Social media in higher education is unique in that it can build relationships through a shared affinity for an institution or department, break down communication barriers (e.g., geographic, economic, language), and help establish trust between students, alumni, and faculty.

Paper and ink mailing, conventional media, and billboard signage play a role in communication between an institution and its future, current, and former students. These modes, however, rely on one-way communication that is based on the sender's perception of the target audience's preferences. Print technology encourages individual interpretation and abstraction of the message. This literary means of communication changes conversational discourse, increases the distance between the sender and recipient, and weakens the exchange of ideas between the author and intended audience.

The use of social media in communication, on the other hand, can be recognized as a return to a type of oral-based culture or a "secondary orality" as described by Walter Ong, S.J.² Social media can be employed as a mechanism for two-way communication and can respond in an immediate and individualized conversational manner. Ong proposes that the era of "secondary orality" reduces the distance between the author and audience and creates a "participatory mystique, fostering a communal sense, concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas."³ This new technology has helped to generate a sense of global community and a sort of "re-tribalization" of the world.⁴ The current generation of social media users are savvy to traditional and forced marketing techniques and seek an organic sense of belonging. The effective use of social media can help to break down barriers of traditional literary and formal communication methods. Interactions in social media may be written but are more conversational in tone than traditional print communications. Social media "followers" expect and require interaction and a sense of community from those accounts they choose to engage with.

Social media use by higher educational academic departments allows them to meet students, alumni, and the members of the greater community “where they are.” It provides an avenue of two-way interaction between academia and its various constituents. Social media is useful to establish and maintain meaningful relationships with students both in the classroom and once their time in brick-and-mortar institutions is over. These relationships are important, as alumni are typically the most loyal supporters of an institution and its academic departments. Well-connected alumni can perform many roles for an institution (e.g., committee work, supplying data for the assessment of outcomes, participation in campus events, mentoring and hiring of current students, and providing financial support for the institution). In fact, alumni relations are a direct path to donor relations and university advancement.⁵ Social media also provides a means to share the stories of our students and alumni with the global digital community. This may include parents, friends, employers, and future potential applicants to an institution.

The Definition and Use of Social Media

Social media, a subcategory of “Web 2.0” technologies, includes freely available and rapidly evolving internet-based applications designed to allow users to create, edit, and share content with others.⁶ Typically an open-use browser-based tool with a simple user interface, such technologies allow people to contribute and share large amounts of information. Although social media depends on literary communication for its existence, it is a hybrid of oral and literate cultures as its platforms allow a user to share text narratives of varying length, digital photos, videos, or personal data regarding life experiences and preferences. These platforms give people an opportunity to publish their own content, link to existing content, tag other users, and comment on—and rate—others’ content.⁷ They also facilitate the development of virtual networks by connecting a user with other individuals and/or groups who share similar interests.⁸ This method of “microblogging” is truly a return to a secondary orality as it allows for real-time, quick communication with a large community that resembles an era of oral storytelling.⁹

The creation of Facebook in 2004 may be the unofficial genesis of our widespread social media culture. Facebook used higher education as a social media primer and originally required users to register for an account with an email address from a college or university. After Facebook extended membership to anyone with an email address in 2006, this social media platform quickly expanded worldwide to host more than 2.4 billion monthly users in 2019.¹⁰ In 2019, 72% of people in the United States, or 240 million individuals, reported using at least one social media platform,¹¹ up sharply from just 5% in 2005. This exponential adoption of social media has changed the way information is both gathered and shared. Recent reports indicate that, of the people residing in the 28 European Union nations, 65% of internet users participate in social media use.¹² Social media use is common even among emerging economies in the world.¹³ For US adult users, the most popular social media platforms are YouTube (73%), Facebook (68%), Instagram (37%) and Twitter (28%).¹⁴ The use of these platforms transcends age, gender, race, geography, and educational achievement, although particular platforms may be favored by one demographic over another. For example, even though only 25% of US adults report using LinkedIn, college graduates use it at a much higher rate (50%) compared to those with a high school diploma or less (9%).¹⁵ The average adult in the United States uses three different social media platforms¹⁶ and up to 74% of US adults report daily use of social media.¹⁷

Social media use in higher education has become a popular method for connecting with potential and current students and for retaining connections with alumni. When Facebook required members to have a higher education email address, the stage was set for social media to self-propagate through colleges and universities. Social media use within higher education has traditionally been used in teaching and learning.¹⁸ It has become widely used in classrooms for discussion, peer assessment, and content development. Students in fact prefer to be involved in active discussions as opposed to passive lectures in the teaching and learning process.¹⁹

Extending from this origin in the classroom, social media has become a powerful marketing tool for

institutions. Social media platforms allow institutions to reach beyond traditional geographic boundaries. It allows for connections to potential and current students, donors, alumni, and employers. On the college campus, athletic departments have fully grasped the utility of social media beyond the classroom and provide examples for other departments and programs to follow.²⁰ Individual schools, departments, programs, and faculty may utilize various social media accounts to provide information across their digital communities on campus. This means that for a large college campus there may be hundreds of social media accounts linked to that institution alone.

Social media accounts in higher education may be managed in a number of ways. The administration of social media accounts may be centralized (e.g., one manager for all accounts) or decentralized (e.g., managed by committee or by multiple managers for multiple accounts). Various campuses may even institute rules and regulations for the operation of accounts linked to an institution or program. A department or program may choose to direct social media interactions by committee. In this instance a department committee can be set up to schedule and determine what information will be released, on what platform, and when. Alternatively, management of social media may be left up to individual faculty members or graduate assistants with an established digital footprint and experience in the use of these platforms.

Digital social networks are hosted on servers that are external to the institution and viewed as a low-cost way to communicate with a large target audience. Although social media as a communication tool is considered cost-effective, it is not entirely cost-free. Initially costs can be kept low, even though management software and access levels on some social media platforms are associated with a potential out-of-pocket cost. There is also a time cost for account administrators to actively engage and respond through the various accounts an institution or department may have. As acting and interacting on social media is a hallmark of effective usage,²¹ the most successful social media communities are those that practice two-way interaction with followers. This can include the use of contests,

multimedia content, photo shares, polls, and discussion forums to actively engage followers.

Social media is a tool that can be used to increase contact with our students outside of the classroom and continue a relationship with them following graduation. Even though email and postal mail addresses can change frequently after one leaves an institution and enters the workforce, an individual's social media account address is relatively stable. Additionally, once a student has opted-in to follow an account, the majority are highly unlikely to unfollow.²² This allows universities to produce and forward materials about the institution, its programs, employment opportunities, and to generate a stream of continuing education materials that follow graduates into the future regardless of their physical location.

Jesuit Identity, Values and Social Media

How would the story of Iñigo de Loyola—struck by a cannonball, bedridden, and recovering from multiple surgeries—be different had he been granted access to the social media platforms of today? If he were not confined to his room with only books about the life of Jesus and the Saints, we might not have St. Ignatius or this discussion. Instead, Iñigo might have spent his rehabilitation exploring tales of the celebrities of the day, tweeting about who was attending the latest kingdom feasts or posting filtered selfies eagerly watching for the mounting “likes” to appear. Thankfully, armed with only ancient texts, his lengthy recovery resulted in the formation of his distinctly Ignatian views and groundwork for the founding of the Society of Jesus. Several pillars of Ignatian spirituality and pedagogy can be related to the use of social media. These include the principle of finding God in all things, *cura personalis* or care for the whole person, *magis*, and within tenets of the Spiritual Exercises and the Examen. We can use social media platforms to both instruct and model to students how to embrace and utilize our common Ignatian values.

Ignatian spirituality continually “invites each person to search for and find God in every circumstance of life, not just explicitly religious situations or activities.”²³ For all the ills attributed to social media as a media microblog or news

distribution system, we are challenged by our Ignatian roots to “find God in all things.” This includes the presence, use, and applicability of social media. When posting and responding on social media, the Ignatian ideal of *presupposition* can be a powerful tool. Presupposition, another of the ground rules in Ignatian spirituality, encourages us to give others the benefit of the doubt. This is especially true when reading and responding to communications on social media. St. Ignatius encourages us to be “ready to put a good interpretation on another’s statement than to condemn it as false.” We should presuppose that an individual’s post or comment comes from a good place and speaks more about themselves than the recipient.²⁴ Simply speaking, we can demonstrate how to practice the ideal of presupposition when we post or respond with compassion to others on our social media accounts. This is not to say that we shouldn’t correct errors, but that we should do so with kindness. We can demonstrate to our students that social media can be used without impulse and reactivity, but with grace and understanding for each other. For example, when a social media connection makes a statement or post that can be interpreted as potentially derogatory or biased, we can reflect and respond compassionately and use this opportunity to educate and engage in discussion. This allows both the conversation participants and those watching “from the sidelines” to experience presupposition in action.

In this fashion, social media platforms can be an extension of your institution’s compassion, provide peer and alumni support, and stimulate social and civic benefits.²⁵ Issues of social justice can be addressed and shared through social media. Social movements important to your department, institution, or Jesuit principles can be established, nurtured, and propagated to students and alumni. For example, social media provides an avenue to express how your campus or program is attempting to address current issues of racial justice, LGBTQ rights, migration, and environmental concerns. This provides an open avenue for conversation on these topics that extends beyond the classroom and an opportunity for you to again model presupposition in both posts and comments.

The Jesuit ideal of *cura personalis* is grounded in care for the whole person and the uniqueness of each individual’s mind, body, and soul. *Cura personalis* can be extended to care for others in the context of social interactions. Social media can be used to demonstrate this ideal by establishing out-of-classroom relationships and continuing to connect, serve, and educate our students both pre- and post-graduation. Ignatian pedagogy challenges us to ensure that faculty are personally engaged with students; that students are actively engaged in learning, discovery, and personal creativity; and that authentic relations between faculty and students are personal and sustainable.²⁶ Students at a Jesuit institution have reported that the majority of faculty attempt to get to know each of their students personally, including through the use of social media.²⁷ Social media connections can enhance the student-faculty interaction by allowing both parties to reach each other via these platforms rather than through traditional office hour appointments or emails alone. Thanks to the secondary orality of these connections, the social distance between faculty and students is reduced and has become warmer and friendlier.

This relationship will then naturally extend to life outside of the class and into post-graduation years. “It makes a huge difference when an alumnus knows their school is watching their progress in life.”²⁸ The natural extension of *cura personalis* to social media can include spotlights of student and alumni accomplishments that include academic and athletic success, career advancement and achievements, and general updates on their whereabouts. Our connections have provided us the opportunity to invite alumni back into the classroom to engage current students in discussions related to their major, future professional opportunities, as well as on current issues affecting the field. Social media can be a hub to distribute the most up-to-date and late-breaking field-specific information to keep former students engaged in continued education and learning over time. Social media connections provide an opportunity for faculty to recommend new books, papers, or opinions that update or lend a new voice to topics students may have covered in class.

Magis, a Latin adverb, is typically understood as “more,” “to a greater degree,” or more recently as

a “desire for excellence grounded in gratitude.”²⁹ This excellence in gratitude extends to our student and alumni network as an institution’s appreciation for what they gave and continue to give to the department and institution even following graduation. Social media can be a tool of *magis*, used to engage the academic community in the areas of social justice, and provide an opportunity to laud and share the stories of students, alumni, faculty, and staff. The global reach of our communications through social media can be an instrument used to drive social change among followers. It provides the opportunity for a Jesuit institution or program to truly do “more” with the collective reach it has through its social media platforms.

Even though social media can be useful in communicating and engaging followers, we must remember to use it judiciously and with balanced priorities. In the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius reminds us to utilize the tools around us in so much as they provide an avenue for consolation. A useful practice to consider when posting to social media—and to reinforce with students—is to utilize three questions that St. Ignatius asks us to reflect on as a filter: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What shall I do for Christ? We can modify these guiding questions as they relate to social media activity and to help us develop posts and responses to avoid acting with reactivity and compulsiveness. In our connections, we must balance the promotion of institutional philanthropy with benefits we can provide to students and alumni. This balance can be established by posting newsworthy and discipline-specific information, network opportunities, communication of alumni and university achievements, alumni involvement opportunities around the department or campus, and alumni research efforts. We should be mindful not to alienate alumni who have recently graduated or are financially constrained by refraining from using our social media presence solely to solicit donations.

Homan and Biro propose that the Examen prayer can be a useful tool to evaluate activity and engagement with social media.³⁰ They offer that you should reflect closely on the way you read, respond, and engage in social media discussions to offer some guidance. An Examen on social media

use can help faculty and students work towards growing closer to others, being more authentic, and moving more towards God. Led by this type of Examen, we can identify virtual interactions we are grateful for, review our social media interactions for areas of authenticity or growth, or interactions we could have directed differently. The Examen then includes an opportunity to reflect on how we can move forward with love and understanding in our future social media interactions. As members of a Jesuit institution, we are uniquely positioned to positively guide social media use in our students and the greater community. We can both model and instruct followers on how St. Ignatius’ three questions and the Examen prayer can guide us to further develop compassion and kindness in social media.

Social Media Use in Practice

Getting students to opt-in and follow your social media account is the first hurdle to cross in developing a social media presence and strategy. We use a multi-pronged approach to gain our students’ attention. Several times during the semester, individual courses remind students to follow the department-related social media accounts. Links to accounts can be embedded in a learning management system and reinforced by individual course instructors. Additionally, an email is sent to all program majors at the start of the semester reminding them of their academic department’s presence on social media. Once a student follows our account, we reciprocate and follow them back. The interconnectedness of social media platforms also allows a follow from a prospective or current student on a single platform to engage them with us across platforms with ease. Social media announcements can be used to advertise upcoming campus events, campus news, and departmental information. We follow many student-led organizations on campus including student government, campus ministry, and athletic teams. These connections allow us to identify accomplishments and events involving our students and professional-oriented extracurricular programming. We then repost, tag, and share any awards, achievements, and happenings featuring our students. This results in generating connections and additional followers including the student that we spotlight, their peers, friends, and family. Alternatively, social media

accounts can be used passively for “social listening” to get a pulse on your student and alumni followers and be useful for departmental and institutional assessments.³¹

Once connected, the key is to continue the engagement throughout a student’s academic career and beyond. Social media is useful for the hybridization of field expertise using input from a variety of previously unattainable sources in the classroom, including interactions with past students, content experts, and professionals external to the institution.³² Teaching and learning studies about social media use offer mostly positive or mixed results from its use in student support, course interactivity, content development, discussion and peer learning, and assessments.³³ Results are less evident for course content delivery and resource sharing. Social media use in an academic program can help to develop student proficiency in technology and digital competency for future critical use.³⁴ We use our platforms to post course-related information, utilizing hashtag identifiers that connect specific courses to relevant material (e.g., #KIN235, #HED337). We also use our social media presence to reinforce the Jesuit mission and identity, both in explicit discussions on Ignatian value and implicitly through our digital activity. Occasionally, bonus questions on exams relate to the material posted on the social media accounts and act as a catalyst to increase student engagement.

Following graduation, we hope to maintain our virtual contact with students. Social media allows us to acknowledge the personal and professional achievements of alumni and engage them through virtual recognition. Outside of the traditional role of institutional advancement, students’ connections to their academic programs and the faculty within their major are important factors in developing post-graduate relationships with an institution. Virtual relationships with our alumni are built by offering congratulations on life events such as additional degrees, marriages, and births of children, and on professional events such as new jobs, promotions, honors, and awards. By offering a short comment of congratulations or even a simple “like” of a former student’s post, we can demonstrate the continuing importance of alumni even after they leave our hallways. If a

student, alum, or college employee posts an alum’s accomplishment, it is an opportunity for engagement. Be sure to share this with your own followers and tag the alum in your post. “Show alumni that you still care. Retweet. It’s that easy.”³⁵

We continue to build a relationship by placing a spotlight on individual alumni achievements. We use a posting strategy that features a new alumnus each day, week, or month. It may be helpful to organize a spotlight “blitz” on your accounts. During this “blitz,” you determine a set period of time (e.g., two weeks, one month) during which a new alumni spotlight will be released each day. With additional social media management tools (e.g. Tweetdeck, Hootsuite) these spotlights can be front-loaded and scheduled for release at a later time. It may be helpful to consider linking your spotlights to predetermined recognition weeks or months (e.g., International Women’s Day, Heart Health Week, Super Bowl Week) and highlight students and alumni linked to that focus. Use a special hashtag dedicated to that focus in your posts. This allows you to connect with a larger audience outside of your student/alumni base who may be following the larger cause and end up connecting with you or your program.

Additional points of contact through your social media accounts include local, regional, and national employers who hire your graduates. Be sure to follow accounts for organizations that employ graduates and take interns within your field. Social media avenues can be used to disseminate internship and career resources including the opportunity to network with alums of your program who have an established affinity for your institution.

Once your social media account is connected to others, it is important to remember to act and interact. There are numerous ways to engage your followers. Social media provides a unique opportunity for two-way communication with parties interested in your field, program, or department. If a follower asks a question, be sure to offer an answer. Use your accounts to poll your followers on field, institutional, and popular culture topics. By responding to your followers, you can create a “sticky” account to which engaged users continue to return.³⁶ Identify sources of information for consistent content and

keep your posts easy for your audience to understand. Program or department faculty social media buy-in is important for providing shareable information. The faculty are close to the students and therefore close to the information that is relevant and worth communicating. Once your social media community is established, allow your audience to act as reporters for you. The professionals tied to your program can provide significant amounts of relevant and shareable information. You immediately increase the connection between your account and the account serving as an information source. Use caution, however, when you share a link, as it should direct your followers to a freely available source (i.e., no pay walls) and be void of any potential pop-up spam. Summarize the content yourself and include an image and appropriate hashtags to increase your presence on field-related and pop culture topics. Emoji use is another opportunity to catch a follower's eye and create a pause as they scroll through social media. Many people do not read their entire timeline so keep overnight and weekend posts to a minimum as these have a high likelihood of being missed.³⁷


The use of social media to develop and maintain relationships is not without limitations. As previously mentioned, the time investment in social media must be considered when a department plan is developed. Understand that you can spend up to 10 hours per week to develop your digital presence.³⁸ "Time equals success. Static [accounts] are not popular [accounts], just like boring parties do not last all night."³⁹ Although it is helpful to have a designated individual to manage the accounts, understand that this "service" may become time intensive with little reward in academia's typical annual review system. To lighten this load on department faculty, we use graduate assistants to collect information on student and alumni achievements, field-related news, and assist in the management of our accounts. It may be helpful for the individual responsible for your account to "dose" the amount of social media use in daily life by setting fixed times to log-in and post.⁴⁰ The volume of content you create and share should not be a burden to those managing or following your account. It is important to focus on the relevance and quality of your posts rather than overall quantity.⁴¹ Be sure to collect data to justify

the time investment in social media. Documenting interactions such as total engagement, impressions, shares, "likes," comments, and clicks can demonstrate the extent of your digital reach. Alumni donations tied to your accounts and student enrollment driven by your social media interactions are golden opportunities to justify and then enhance your social media presence.

Social media connections also require that your students and alumni have access to—and proficiency with—these tools. Older alumni might be left out with the fast-paced changes in social media that students and recent graduates are quick to grasp. Social media relays information with great speed and unpredictability, and you must be ready to respond to potentially misunderstood or erroneous posts from your account. Once a post is made, retraction may not be possible, and even if possible, the digital record of an errant post may continue to exist. This expediency and potential for misinterpretation makes the use and instruction of the Ignatian ideal of presupposition and the Examen prayer in social media so critically important.

Conclusion

Student and alumni engagement requires that you build trust, establish relationships, and provide value to the social media follower. Through our social media platforms, we can continue to relay and demonstrate our Jesuit values. Social media is a communication tool that can be used to reduce the social distance across your community, create personal and sustainable relationships between faculty and students, and deliver a continued sense of *cura personalis* to your students and alumni. Ultimately this can serve to lift them up and give public recognition for their development as men and women for and with others. Content shared on social media and the tone of these digital conversations are a means to continue to educate our students and alumni outside of the classroom. Student and alumni spotlights are useful to demonstrate continued care for others in a physically disconnected environment. Through the judicious use of social media and the appropriate reflection on our actions, we have the opportunity and means to set a positive example and virtually engage our followers. They include past, current, and future students to care for each other both on

and off social media, and to go forth and set the world on fire.⁴² 

Notes

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⁴⁰ Cheplygina et al., "Ten Simple Rules," 1-9.

⁴¹ Hipke and Hachtmann, "Game Changer," 516-532.

⁴² Follow our accounts at: Twitter: @CanisiusHW_SPEX and @DrShawnO; Instagram: @Canisius_hewe_spex and @canisiusmsa; LinkedIn: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/karl-kozlowski-b878868/> and <https://www.linkedin.com/in/dr-shawn-o-rourke-a022a8a/>