

Using social media safely and appropriately in higher education: A reflection on the last 10 years

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Using social media safely and appropriately in higher education: A reflection on the last 10 years

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Abstract

The ubiquitous use of mobile technology and easy access to social media apps, and more recently video conferencing software such as Zoom, provide multiple ways for individuals to interact. These technologies have been adopted by both educators and students and provide many useful ways to communicate and collaborate within and beyond the classroom. The acceleration of digital communication tools and widespread use of digital technology in our daily lives' present tensions as the collection of personal data increasingly gives rise to privacy concerns. Furthermore, inappropriate online communications have resulted in serious situations and significant repercussions for those involved. It is therefore timely to revisit the guidance on appropriate online behaviour in the use of social media, and how we use technology safely, along with being clear about the potential implications if advice is not heeded. In our session we will share the open access resources we have developed at Sheffield Hallam University with suggestions on how these could be used with students. These include "How to use social media responsibly", "Managing your digital footprint", "Using social media for learning", and "Using social media to enhance your employability". This reflection paper considers the collaborative process undertaken to produce social media guidance for an institution.

Keywords

Social media, institutional support, technology enhanced learning.

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Introduction

At Sheffield Hallam University we have a long history of using social media for learning in higher education. We have developed open-source guidance, a community-owned conference, and we have published our own collaborative international research (Purvis, Rodger and Beckingham, 2020). We reflect upon the way in which we have taken this combined approach to engagement with social media for learning and share what we have learned over the last 10 years.

Development of Guidance

Social media has been available in an identifiable format since the late 1990s (Edosomwan et al., 2011). By 2013 we began to receive requests from academic staff who were concerned about student online behaviours in social media spaces. Most of these requests for help were from staff on professional courses (i.e., Nursing, Social Work, etc.) with concerns particularly relating to potentially unprofessional behaviours. In response to these requests, we began to develop guidance that was student-facing, and that staff could also access to guide their advice to students. Our highest priority was placed on student guidance for responsibility and safety, followed by broad-brush guidance in social media in learning and teaching, and case studies for teaching staff along with forums for discussing practice and feeding into guidance.

We developed tri-fold leaflets in 4 areas:

- Using social media for learning,
- Managing your digital footprint,
- How to use social media responsibly, and
- Using social media to enhance your employability.

All guides were available as PDF files for download and content was licensed under a Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.



Figure 1. The original tri-fold leaflets produced in 2013.

We developed the guidance through a cross institutional group in 2013 and an updated group has been reconvened in 2023 to refresh the guidance and re-publish with a further Creative Commons licence. With colleagues in different roles, we can share approaches that are specific to the different business needs of the university, so reducing duplication, encouraging openness and with an appreciation of the diversity of how we can use the guidance.

We are now publishing the latest version of the guidance which will reflect the most recent changes in how we use the internet to communicate and share online. We have noticed many differences through our journey from 2013 and we discuss those changes below (see the section ‘What has changed?’)

Development of Community

Alongside the development of written guidance, we also noticed the upsurge in academic scholarly activity and discourse about the use of social media in learning and teaching in higher education. Enthusiasts for social media in learning and researchers in technology enhanced learning lobbied University teaching and learning leaders and in December 2015 we held a conference in social media for learning; “#SocMedHE15” had the overarching theme of using social media for learning in Higher Education and was designed to create a forum for academics, their students, developers, and strategic managers to consider the opportunities, challenges and the disruptive influence of social media for learning (SocMedHE, 2015).

We held the SocMedHE conference at Sheffield Hallam University in 2015, 2016 and 2017. In 2018 the conference moved into being led and owned by a cross institutional social media for learning steering group. Over the last 6 years it has moved from UK higher education institution (HEI) to HEI and was held online in 2020 and 2021. For 2024 we plan to return the conference to Sheffield Hallam University for its celebratory 10th year. The strength of the community surrounding the conference is supported both by interactions using social media, and meeting through in person events. Furthermore, this journal has provided an outlet to publish case studies and research articles in Special Conference Editions.

Development of Understanding

Throughout this period, we were researching various aspects of technology enhanced learning, including the use of social media for learning. In 2020 we published an in-depth study on the experiences and perspectives of social media in learning and teaching in higher education. The study explored some of the challenges that academics have in engaging with social media for learning. We discovered that there were three main perspectives: that of the individual, the pedagogical approach to the use of social media, and the foundational institutional support for using social media. The research demonstrated the critical nature of clarity of institutional position, and we put forward a set of recommendations for institutional support for social media for learning:

“We recommend that institutions should provide:

1. A clear statement about the support and expectations for the use of social media within the university community
2. Support and specific guidance for the use of professional networks which develop staff and student professional identities.
3. Principles for consideration in using social media for learning and teaching.
4. A protocol for guiding how social media accounts are best administered for groups and peer learning.

5. Guidance for dealing with online behaviours and encouraging positive and professional online interactions.
6. Sharing of examples of pedagogic uses of social media in practice.
7. Supporting appropriate risk-taking in exploration of emergent social media technologies.”

(Purvis, Rodger & Beckingham, 2020)

The positioning of our social media guidance and the visible leadership through the support of the conference, are key aspects of this institutional support.

What has changed?

Despite social media being in place in a recognisably social format since the late 1990s (Edosomwan et al., 2011), for example Six Degrees, it did not have a shared understanding until the beginning of the 21st century when the likes of Friendster, Myspace, LinkedIn, YouTube, WordPress, Facebook, and Twitter appeared in the first decade. Indeed, social media is always changing with new technologies and applications shifting the nature of what is ‘social’ and what is ‘media’. Several tools for digital communication could be defined as social media and yet would not be universally recognised as such. Dron and Anderson (2014) use the terms social media and social software interchangeably and include email in their collection of tools. They define social software as media that socially supports interaction one-to-one, one-to-many or many-to-many.

A useful definition that we endorse is that of Nau, Quan-Haase and McCay-Peet (2022: 15): “Social media are web-based and mobile services that allow individuals, communities, and organizations to collaborate, connect, interact, and build community by enabling them to create, co-create, modify, share, and engage with content (user- or bot-generated)”

Our research published in 2020 (Purvis, Rodger & Beckingham, 2020) demonstrated how the ethical considerations relating to using tools was becoming more common. Since that publication ethics and values of the people and companies behind the tools, is increasingly to the forefront of academic decision making (McCarthy et al., 2022).

Alternative and emerging spaces (i.e., Threads, Discord, Snapchat, Signal, TikTok, Mastodon, Zoom, MSTEams), new terminology (moblog, livestreaming, webcasting, vlogging, FOMO, splog, astroturfing – please see glossary below for definitions), and the rebranding of established spaces (Twitter becoming ‘X’) demonstrate the changing nature of social media and digital communication.

Global adoption of social media has risen from 1.8 billion users in 2011 to 4.9 billion in 2023. Threads reached 100 million active users within a week of launching. However, whilst adoption rates in northern and eastern Europe equate to 83% of the population, social media engagement isn’t evenly distributed around the world and women are underrepresented in many parts of Africa (Kemp, 2023). We therefore have a responsibility to support our social media savvy students who are used to using these spaces in a social context as well as our international students who may have little or no experience of social media prior to coming to university.

With misinformation and ‘fake news’, the perpetuation of false information is often difficult to distinguish from well evidenced information and it is becoming more confusing and concerning for users of social media. Artificial Intelligence and bot-generated content has become the latest ‘hot-topic’ in almost every academic learning and teaching conversation in 2023. In this context the university community are still seeking guidance and reassurance in an ever-changing digital environment.

What has not changed

Social media policy and guidance in higher education continues to be variable. In 2012 McNeill's study of 14 universities policies identified that ten were under the responsibility of either HR or marketing (McNeill, 2012). The focus of nine of the policies were on reputation management of the university. Pomerantz et al (2015) conducted a study in the US and found out of 4635 institutions listed in the Carnegie Classification Data File less than one quarter had an accessible social media policy, although some institutions integrated social media policy into other policy documents such as a student code of conduct. These early studies highlighted a need to look beyond corporate communication and reputation, and to consider the implications when used by students in relation to learning and teaching, as well as peer communication in a social context.

A more recent study by Lees in 2018 analysed UK university social media policies for readability and reiterated the lack of attention paid to the use of social media in learning and teaching. A content analysis identified that the documents focussed on how to use social at work but provided almost no guidance on how to use social for work within a university (Lees, 2018:480).

It therefore seems timely to revisit both social media policy and guidance for our students and academics. In this networked world we need to help them become confident and professional users of technology that help them communicate and collaborate, build professional identities and networks, and the ability to take forward these skills to the workplace when they graduate.

Next steps

The guidance we originally produced in 2013 has been updated several times and is being republished in 2023 as we write this paper. We have moved away from the tri-fold leaflet format and have focused on attractive and accessible webpages with animations, images, and downloadable PDFs under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial (CC BY-NC 2.0) license (Sheffield Hallam University, 2023).



Figure 2. The updated guidance documents produced in 2023.

We will continue to update, develop, and challenge our thinking with our approach to social media guidance and our support for its use in learning and teaching.

Glossary

Term	Description
Astroturfing	Deceptive campaigning which falsely presents materials or propaganda as if they were genuine from real customers/clients/participants.
FOMO	Fear of missing out
Lifestreaming	Documenting and sharing daily experiences online
Moblog	Mobile blogging
Splog	A fake blog which promotes spam content
Vlogging	Shortened form of video blogging, blogging in video format
Webcasting	Live video stream of an event such as a conference

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.