After a Decade of Social Media: The Landscape of Social Media in Writing Instruction Today

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This piece, modified from its delivery as one of the three keynote speeches at Computers and Writing 2016, speculates on the role of social media in writing instruction in the twenty-first century. Drawing on the author's own grant-funded studies of social media use by college writing instructors, this talk explores trends in faculty use of social media, benefits to using social media in the classroom, and challenges or drawbacks to social media used pedagogically.

The full title of the keynote talk I delivered at Computers and Writing 2016 was "After a Decade of Social Media: The Landscape of Social Media in Writing Instruction Today." The first part of this title alludes to the fact that many of the social media tools Americans rely on most heavily today first emerged a decade ago. For example, the first YouTube video was uploaded in 2005; Reddit also began in 2005. Facebook was founded in 2004, Twitter created in 2006, and Tumblr launched in 2007. During this early time, many faculty and academic institutions were not exactly sure how to respond to the increasing use of social media technologies and grappled with the implications of these new tools.

Looking back, then, what one sees in the time period from 2005 to today is a time where social media, and social networking sites more specifically, began to impact academia and filter into scholars' and teachers' lives. Many of these emergent issues remain today. Concerns about privacy, institutional hierarchies, free speech, and the boundaries of appropriate behavior in social media still resonate. And it's precisely because so many of us (both within the U.S. and internationally) participate in social media technologies these days that these conversations are so pressing. A 2016 study of online American adults by the Pew Research Center found that 79% use Facebook, for instance, while only 7% used social media *of any kind* when the Pew Research Center began systematically tracking social media usage in 2005 (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016; Perrin, 2015).

At the same time that Americans have felt the impact of these changes in our daily lives, over the past decade academics broadly and computers and writing scholars more specifically have begun to consider the possibilities afforded to us through personal, professional, and pedagogical uses of social media. Some of the scholarship on college-aged students and social networking has focused on literacy practices across multiple platforms (Buck, 2012; Vie, 2007; Williams, 2009) or broad discussions of social media's impact on aspects of daily life and communication, such as digital activism (Goodling, 2015; Vie, 2014), composing within fandom communities (Potts, 2015), or responding to disasters (Bowdon, 2014; Potts, 2013). Other research has focused on singular platforms, such as Facebook (Balzhiser et al., 2011; DePew, 2011), Twitter (Jones, 2014; Wolff, 2015), Reddit (Wasike, 2011), Pinterest (DeLuca, 2015; Leckie, 2015), or Instagram (McNely, 2015; Poe Alexander & Hahner, 2017), among others. And much of the research has examined social media's impact on classroom practices and pedagogy within writing studies (Buck, 2015; Daer & Potts, 2014; Faris, 2017; Maranto & Barton, 2010; Mina, 2017; Patrick, 2013; Portanova, 2017). What I focused on in my keynote talk were some of the research results from a grant-funded study of faculty members nationwide that showcase how the field of computers and writing is beginning to connect academic practices to everyday literacies through the incorporation of social media in the classroom. Such a study adds to the existing literature on social media in computers and writing by giving readers a glimpse at the landscape of social media in writing instruction today.

The Research Study

From 2014 to 2016, I conducted research with hundreds of writing instructors about their attitudes toward and uses of social media. The study's methods are provided in greater detail in two published pieces, "What's going on? Challenges and opportunities for social media use in the writing classroom" (Vie, 2015) and "Social media as multimodal composing: Networked rhetorics and writing in a digital

age" (Vie, forthcoming). In brief, I surveyed a total of 786 writing faculty members nationwide and conducted in-depth follow-up interviews with a selected group of thirty participants. There were 29 possible questions in the survey that asked about demographics, attitudes toward social media use in the writing classroom, specific social media tools used in the writing classroom, and benefits and challenges to using social media in writing pedagogy. I coded the survey using grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to discover emergent themes in the data (e.g., privacy, time, assessment, relevance). Some specific questions I asked within the survey and expanded on in the follow-up interviews included the following:

- How does social media play a role in your pedagogy?
- What benefits might you see in using social media in the classroom and what challenges might you face?
- How might you use social media for personal and professional reasons, and what benefits and challenges might you face there?

Through the survey results and the face-to-face conversations, I discovered that writing faculty are using social media for personal, professional, and pedagogical purposes more than ever before. The possibilities for academic networking and for classroom practice are substantial. At the same time, they face particular challenges and barriers to using social media for personal or pedagogical reasons. In the remainder of this keynote talk, I shared with listeners some of those challenges and barriers and described some actionable items that scholars in the field of computers and writing should keep in mind as we move forward in this landscape of social media.

A Majority of Faculty Use Social Media Pedagogically

First, the results of my study show that the majority of faculty members I spoke with have used social media in the classroom and state they will continue to do so, and this to me is extremely heartening. In 2006, I had conducted a similar national study of faculty members' attitudes toward and uses of social media (see Vie, 2007 and Vie, 2008 for further details about the methods and findings of this earlier study). In 2006, I found that only 10% of faculty members used social media in their classroom. But today, the majority of faculty members I surveyed responded that they do use social media in the writing classroom, either as a technological tool for students to use in composing or as content for analysis or discussion. Of the faculty members who responded to my survey in 2015, 90% indicated that they have used social media as either a composing tool or as subject matter for analysis or discussion.

This means there has been a transfer from social media use in faculty members' personal lives to social media use in their academic lives. In other words, greater use of social media in faculty members' personal lives has likely also increased acceptance of their inclusion in the classroom. To return to my earlier study of faculty members' social media use in 2006, at that time, the numbers of faculty with established social media accounts was much lower. In 2006, only 29% of the faculty I surveyed had Facebook accounts and only 34% had MySpace accounts. At that time, nearly a quarter of the respondents didn't know what Facebook was, 14% said no one they knew was a member of Facebook, and nearly half said they didn't feel like they were part of the target age group (Vie, 2007). Particularly with regard to Facebook, things have certainly changed in the past decade.

Social Media Should Be Included in the Classroom

In my current study of 786 faculty members, they frequently remarked that the ubiquity of social media should prompt greater inclusion in the classroom. A few selected comments from the survey exemplify this approach. For example, one faculty member noted that "a critical approach to social media is necessary and teaching rhetorical analysis of tweets, posts, and snaps is useful in 21st century literacies." Another said, "Social media, I think, are valuable digital writing spaces that enable students to move their writing outside of the classroom and to write for various exigencies and rhetorical situations. As a result, social media has great potential for teaching rhetoric in the 21st century." A third even remarked, "I find it fascinating that I'm doing this survey on my smart phone from a link on Facebook

that two colleagues posted. Social media also functions as a teacher and researcher network." What these results show is that overall, writing faculty are using social media technologies more frequently in their day-to-day lives, and as a result, they are seeing a corresponding increase in the possibilities for social media use in writing classrooms.

Now, of course, the goal is not to reach 100% inclusion, and there are considerable barriers and challenges to social media at a pedagogical level, but when one considers social media use both personally and professionally even just a decade earlier, it's remarkable how far we've come as a field in terms of being open to their possibilities and potentials. I think we're starting to move past the early point of suspicion and doubt where people looked at social media for academic purposes and thought that there was nothing worthwhile to be found in social media. Back in 2006 when I studied faculty members' attitudes toward social media, I received responses such as "We truly don't belong on Facebook. It is for students," and several respondents noted that they valued face-to-face communication and physical presence more than online communication. To be sure, there are still faculty members who responded to my 2015 study with extremely negative views of social media, views implying that they thought time spent paying attention to communication in social media was time not spent teaching students how to write (i.e., focus on grammar or sentence structure). But the general sentiment is shifting in that academics are much more willing today to see the possibilities for professional networking, for classroom pedagogy, and for teaching rhetorical principles and writing with social media.

Which Social Media Technologies Are Used?

What is interesting too is what specific social media technologies faculty are using. When asked which social media tools they used, respondents in the 2015 study overwhelmingly used three particular technologies: YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. As seen in Figure 1 below, 80% used YouTube, just about 66% used Facebook, and 60% used Twitter. The responses drop off significantly thereafter with the next highest response being Google Plus, with 30% of faculty members responding that they used this tool. Other niche social media technologies like Tumblr, Instagram, Reddit, and Pinterest may be growing in popularity for personal use, but they are not yet being incorporated into the writing classroom with as much frequency as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.
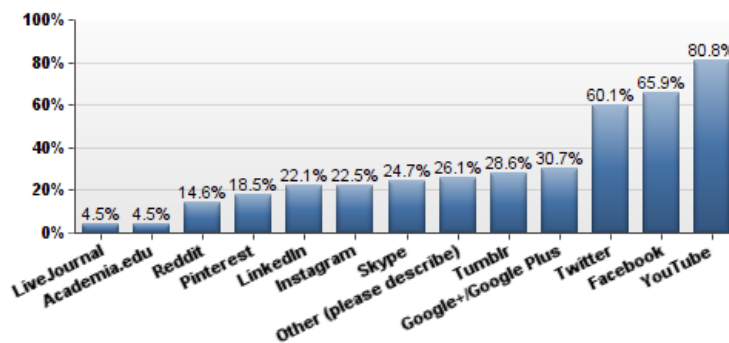

Figure 1: Which social media technologies do faculty use?

Why Do Faculty Use Social Media Pedagogically?

Why do faculty use social media in the writing classroom? Those surveyed offered a range of responses that fell into several broad categories:

- Relevance/familiarity: These tools are well-known and students like them.
- Access/connectivity: These tools are readily available and accessible; they help connect students and teachers.

- Rhetorical awareness: These tools allow for discussions of rhetorical context, professionalism, etc.
- Composing: These tools can be used to write and communicate with others in the class and beyond.

I share here a few selected quotes from respondents that align with these categories. In terms of relevance, it is clear many faculty acknowledge that students frequently use social media and anticipate that students would not be surprised to see them in the classroom. One faculty member said, "Social media are so ubiquitous that I think we have a responsibility to not only use them in class, but also talk about them so that we can understand and be critical of our everyday composing environments." In terms of access and connectivity, some faculty members do literally talk with students about issues of technological access when choosing to use social media. A faculty respondent said:

> I use social media as a platform for student writing, which I find offers the benefit of allowing traditionally aged students to write in a medium whose affordances they are already familiar with. I fold into social media writing assignments a discussion of tech access and choices to opt in and out of social media; I provide alternate options for students who prefer not to use social media and opportunities to discuss these choices to opt out and critically analyze what such options mean.

In terms of rhetorical awareness, multiple respondents reinforced how composing in social media invokes issues of audience, purpose, genre, form, and circulation. And in terms of composing, those surveyed described an expanded understanding of literacy that includes composing in social media. In these responses, faculty members frequently reinforced the importance of how to engage the medium thoughtfully and with purpose.

Follow-up Interviews

In follow-up interviews with 30 participants, I learned more about how faculty members viewed the benefits of participating in social media for personal and professional reasons. Several described how their job market experiences were positively impacted by their social media presence because they used it as a professionalization tool. Other faculty members discussed finding calls for papers through social media like Twitter or Reddit. Tapping into communities of like-minded individuals was important for multiple interviewees, who talked about bouncing ideas off of others, connecting to official and unofficial mentoring groups, and finding support through social media. For example, several participants described using hashtags like #WomeninTC to connect with mentoring opportunities in the women in technical communication Twitter, Facebook, and Slack communities. This is a crucial part of tapping into social capital, not just for academics but others as well, and I want to share a quote from one of my interviewees that ties together, for her, writing studies and social media and illustrates its generative potential:

> It's a way of not just consuming information, but helping me generate or create information. So, the kind of brainstorming that you see on Facebook where people will post a question about teaching or scholarship and get opinions. To me, it's kind of another part of the brainstorming process that we've always thought as part of writing.

Another echoed this sentiment when she said, "For me social media is a space where individuals, digital citizens, human beings, are really engaging in important and rhetorically significant literacy practices in their everyday lives." For me personally, what I've been excited to see over the past decade of social media use within composition studies is the shift in sentiment that has allowed many of us to see these kinds of potential benefits from tapping into personal and professional networks, to be able to humanize the profession in many ways by sharing our personal interests alongside our academic personas, to be able to call attention to the continued importance of digital rhetorical literacies as they play out in our everyday lives in these technologies.

Challenges to Using Social Media

However, my 2015 study also shows potential challenges to using social media at the personal, curricular, and institutional levels. Overall, the challenges revealed by participants' responses included

- Lack of teacher or student efficacy
- Lack of access to technology or support systems to sustain social media use
- Lack of student interest (whether perceived or actual)
- Time constraints or pressures to keep up with technologies
- Seeing social media as a distraction
- Concerns about intellectual property issues
- Privacy issues

See Figure 2 for a breakdown of the varied responses to the question of challenges or barriers to using social media.
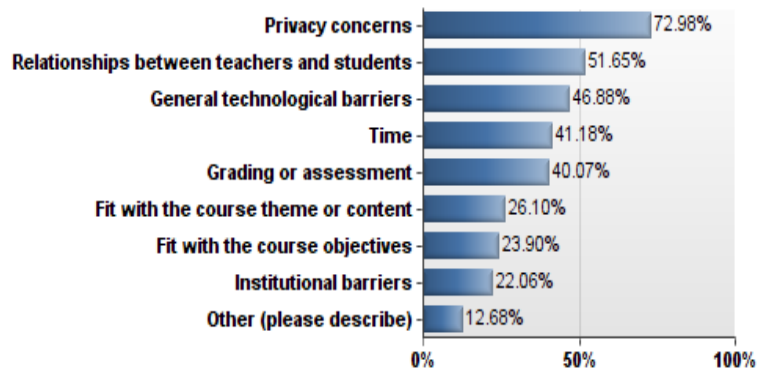

Figure 2: What challenges or barriers do you face?

Privacy

In particular, privacy remains a central concern for faculty, even those who currently teach with social media; 73% indicated privacy was a challenge. Despite more sophisticated privacy settings today, privacy and reputation management has remained a concern for users since social media's inception. When looking back at earlier discussions about privacy in social media about a decade ago, there is evidence of tensions between teachers and students, students and academic institutions, students and employers, and so on as these groups worked to figure out the place of social media in already established academic and industry hierarchies. A decade later, concerns about privacy for academics haven't gone away; instead, they've become more complex in the wake of high profile cases like Steven Salaita and Justine Sacco. Their experiences have caused some faculty members to worry about whether their Twitter or Facebook presence might become grounds for firing them if a tweet or post is taken out of context. This is coupled with the fact that the overall climate of higher education is working to erode, not defend, protections like tenure.

For both faculty and students, then, the most significant challenge for privacy is the continued blurring between public and private lives in social media. As one faculty member said, "Maintaining professionalism is difficult, especially when I use these same media to blow off steam at the end of the day." Another noted that "I worry about students putting sensitive information 'out there' that might put them in harm's way," and certainly in the wake of massive online harassment campaigns like GamerGate,

participating in various social media for particular purposes can put students as well as faculty members in danger.

Time

While time was the fourth most significant barrier to incorporating social media, it cropped up in the responses in multiple and significant ways. Time was a factor for faculty who considered incorporating social media into both their pedagogy and their professional lives. Of course, every new technological tool takes time—to learn it, to align it with course outcomes and goals, to help students figure out how to use it, to assess the writing or other product that emerges from it. But because of how quickly conversations evolve, memes circulate, and hashtags trend in social media, faculty face time-related issues that can be more complex for social media as compared to other technological tools. For some faculty members, keeping up with advances in social media became too much. And many faculty believe, whether erroneously or not, that their students pick up new technologies more quickly. One survey respondent stated, "The biggest challenge is my keeping up with their always escalating use of social media—they are in advance of me." For others, figuring out how to assess social media within the time constraints of a classroom was challenging. As discussed earlier, the blurred boundaries between public and private, or between the time we are on as teachers and when we're off duty, becomes difficult. A surveyed faculty member stated, "I feel as though it makes me 'on' all the time. I have questions come in via Twitter at all times. I also always have to think about my own personal, rhetorical choices on these spaces." Overall, these time-related issues seem wrapped up in a comment by a respondent: "The biggest challenge is time—time to compose, to assess, to discuss and live my life. The temptation is to be nearly always available—not a good idea."

Time also plays a role when one thinks about the potential longevity of their social media activities—a person's digital footprint can linger long after they made initial posts. As one respondent noted, "The Internet is already a cluttered place, so having students add their class projects to that clutter seems unnecessary sometimes. It's up to them whether they keep it up there or whether they keep it attached to their public online persona." Many of us, myself included, could do a better job talking with students about curating their social media activities with an eye toward the future:

- When will you participate in social media and how?
- What accounts will you keep open?
- Will you delete—or even be able to delete—dormant and inactive social media accounts?
- How can you ensure that your digital presence(s) will be accessible in the future?
- What would you like to happen with your social media presence after you die?

These can be uncomfortable conversations because they ask people to confront an uncertain future, but they are also important conversations.

However, given the ubiquity of social media in today's society, it was not surprising that many of the faculty members I spoke with noted that they would be open to using social media if many of these challenges could be addressed. These respondents who were not already using social media were generally willing to consider using it in the future. When asked, "Would you be interested in or willing to use social media in your teaching in the future?" 69% responded affirmatively.

Conclusion: Actionable items

Consider pedagogical use of social media when appropriate. To return to the title of this keynote talk, "after a decade of social media," it is clear that social media technologies have transformed our lives and the ways that we communicate in multiple ways. I conclude with a few suggestions for actionable items that the field might consider. First, I think it's important to continue exposing students to an expanded form of literacy for the twenty-first century through analysis and incorporation of social media as appropriate in our pedagogy. I'm not saying that *everyone* needs to teach with social media in *every* class—I don't do that, and this is my area of expertise. What I am saying is that social media can add

value to our pedagogy and when faculty see an opportunity to help students expand their rhetorical literacies through social media, they should consider bringing them into their teaching. A great deal of writing occurs in these technologies—writing that teachers often don't pay particular attention to or consider worthy of academic attention. But at the same time, students writing in online spaces frequently don't see their writing as valuable or even consider it to be *writing* at all (see Lunsford, 2010, for more on this topic). Yet meaningful work and meaningful writing in particular happen through and because of social media all the time. Thus, I argue that the literate acts that occur in social networking sites should be read as *composing practices* worthy of academic attention. As Jonathan Alexander and Jackie Rhodes (2014) argued in their discussions of new media in composition studies, "We have perhaps privileged text-based forms of writing to the extent that we rarely address the specific invention, delivery, and rhetorical possibilities of other types of composition" (p. 3). Despite their challenges, social media offer meaningful entry points into conversations about twenty-first century composition practices.

Move beyond the big three. Second, I think it's also important to broaden conversations about social media beyond those Big Three that kept recurring in the studies cited earlier in this piece: Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. It's important that we engage in research on other social media platforms, including cross-platform research, as well as longitudinal research. The scholarship we see in the field that attends to crucial issues of privacy, surveillance, data mining, race, class, and ethnicity in Facebook and Twitter is incredibly important, but I think we can find great value in extending our reach to other platforms. There are 274 million monthly unique visitors to Reddit (Reddit, 2017). There are more than 500 million people on LinkedIn, including students and recent college graduates (Awan, 2017). Over 3 billion daily Snaps are created on Snapchat (Constine, 2017). When considering how digital and rhetorical literacies shift across interfaces, within cultures, and over time, there is value in expanding scholarly research on social media beyond these Big Three. We also need more research that looks at social media abstainers along with those who join but later quit social media. While it is important to study people who use social media, whether regularly or just occasionally, we miss out if we fail to talk with those who choose not to use social media or who have stopped using these tools. Those who research social media in pedagogy need to be careful to look at more than just first-year composition (FYC), as social media has connections to a variety of classes other than FYC. And we need more research that examines social media beyond just American culture, as social media is truly a global phenomenon. Some of the most popular social media tools outside of the United States are not Facebook and Twitter, and examining social media communication within global contexts is crucial, as Kirk St. Amant (2015) has argued.

Emphasize critical literacies and social media. Finally, with an emphasis on how digital and rhetorical literacies shift across interfaces, I think it's important that we continue to reinforce, both for students and ourselves, the importance of critical digital literacies as applied to social media technologies. If faculty are going to bring social media into their pedagogy and professional lives, they should do so alongside a critical framework for thinking about communication in social media and in digital spaces more broadly. In social media, there is a level of rhetorical awareness necessary for effective use of these technologies. In other words, simple communication is possible using these technologies, but a level of rhetorical awareness and understanding is necessary in order to effectively construct one's user profile, communicate with others, understand and abide by the terms of service and user agreements, and so on.

In 2001, before this most recent influx of social media technologies, Laura Gurak described her term *cyberliteracy*, what she described as the ability to navigate the Internet with awareness. Gurak argued that most people don't operate on a conscious level that allows them to examine technologies as artifacts with backgrounds, politics, and agendas, instead preferring to view them as things that are "invented, advertised, packaged up, and sold to you … and do not, in and of themselves, make you do things" (p. 2). Users of social media can navigate these technologies on an unconscious level and communicate without intentional awareness of the choices behind their communication and of the impacts of that communication on others. However, conscientious and rhetorically aware users are keyed in to the ways that the sites themselves are constructed as rhetorical artifacts. Participants can consider how these sites have been designed and are maintained in order to elicit a particular kind of communication. So, instead

of thinking about Facebook, for example, as a thing that simply exists in the world as a valueless neutral entity, a rhetorically aware user of Facebook would think about the design and interface of the site, the creators of the site, and the values that are encoded into the site by the people who help create and maintain it.

To give an example, Facebook offers users many ways to describe themselves, including offering information about their gender and their marital status. But Facebook hasn't always had multiple gender options for users. For a long time, Facebook forced users to choose male or female or else they couldn't finish joining the site. In contrast, Google+ allowed users to keep their gender identification private and select other. Today, after many years of protest, Facebook offers over 50 different gender identification options, including an option to write in your own choice. In Facebook, for many years, the default image that was shown, even for a user who identifies as female, was clearly male. It wasn't until 2010 that a female avatar was offered. In Facebook, it took until 2011 for civil unions and domestic partnerships to be offered in the drop-down menus. The top six relationship options (single, in a relationship, engaged, married, it's complicated, and in an open relationship) were the only options available until 2011.

These examples showcase how technologies are designed by people, for people, and thus have particular values and ideologies embedded within them. Kristin Arola (2017), for instance, has written about what Facebook might look like if it were designed by and for American Indians. When Facebook offers a default white male avatar and no one else, it says something about what the default user is or should be. When the only choices to describe someone are male or female, or worse, other, that leaves out a great many people. What these examples illustrate is that social media technologies offer us opportunities to look at how we view the world—what we privilege, what we ignore, what we fail to understand. And what these examples *also* show is that through their participation, users can shape those technologies to better suit their needs. It was participants of these sites who resisted the dominant narratives about gender or relationship status and encouraged the site owners to make these changes. But in order to do this, we have to be willing to critically assess the technologies we use. To return to the term cyberliteracy, cyberliteracy means voicing an opinion about what these technologies should become and being an active, not a passive, participant.

After a decade of social media, it's been exciting to see how our communication practices have changed, our pedagogy has begun to incorporate these technologies, and our personal and professional lives have been impacted by social media. As with any new technology, some of the changes we've seen have been more positive than others. And I think it's important to remember that despite the ubiquity of social media these days, they really are fairly new. Back in March, Twitter had its 10-year anniversary. A decade really isn't that long. What will happen over the next decade? When I think ahead to what our social media landscape might look after the next decade of social media, I'm excited, and I can't wait to see how rich and varied the scholarship on social media that emerges from our field will be.

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Social Media Landscape

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