Social media use and its importance in institutional communication strategy

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Abstract
Social media continues to develop and has increased in type and categories. It use has increased tremendously and this has been assisted by the availability of affordable communication devices like smart phones. Institutions that want to engage the public cannot ignore social media in their communication strategy. The write-up discusses the types of social media, their characteristics that has made it possible for their increased adoption and use. It outlines their advantages and disadvantages and indicates how institutions should safely use it. It recommends that Ghanaian tertiary institutions should develop appropriate social media use policies and also institute training schemes for persons who will want to engage the public on institution's behalf.

Key words: Social media, Policy, Institution, Higher Education, Communication Strategy

Introduction

Kaplan and Haelien (2011) define social media as a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0 and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. Social media are software and interfaces that allow communication between individuals. It originated as a personal tool that allowed interaction between with friends and family. Social media has made it possible for individuals share information about their lives such as biographical data, professional information, personal photos and up-to-the-minute thoughts and activities/events. With the increase and improvement in access to the internet, social media is gradually becoming a preferred means of communication for many (van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Types of social media

Social media has developed and increased in types/categories. Knowing the purpose of each type of social media helps to choose the best suitable social media platform. Sims (2016) basically grouped social media loosely into the following categories:

Social Networks; These are media platforms that allow you to connect with other people of similar interests and background. They allow the setting up of groups as a way of interacting with other users Users have the opportunity of profiling themselves and they can include other media such as audio recordings, videos, pictures etc. Examples of these social networks are Facebook, MySpace and Friendster. There are also professional networks which enables business professionals and researchers to recommend and share information about industry related issues. Examples are LinkedIn and ResearchGate (social networking site for scientists and researchers to share papers, ask and answer questions, and find collaborators)

Bookmarking Sites; These are services that allow you to save, organize, share and manage links to various websites and resources around the internet. These sites have features that makes it easy to search, link and share information and resources around the internet. Examples are are Del.ici.ous, Diigo and StumbleUpon.

Social News; These services that allow the posting of news items or links to articles. It also provide the opportunity for users to rate the news items /articles. The items with the highest rating are displayed most prominently. In this case, the community decides which news items get seen by more people. Examples are Digg, PopURLs and Reddit. Other platforms in this category allow you to measure the quality of the submitted content. Examples are Technorati and BlogPulse

Media Sharing; These services allow you to upload and share various media such as pictures and video. They have additional social features such as profiles, commenting, liking, sharing etc. The most popular video sharing platforms are YouTube and Vimeo. Photo sharing platforms include Instagram, PhotoBucket and Flickr. Slideshare is an example of slide sharing platforms.

Blog (comments and forums); These sites let users engage in dialogue by posting and responding to messages. The comments are usually centered around the specific subject. Free blogging platforms include WordPress.com and TypePad. There are a number of blogging sites, particularly because many of them are niche-based. e.g. LiveJournal, BlogHer. There are also Blog Networks; These are large collection of blogs which normally provide exclusive content and require approval for bloggers to join. Examples are Gawker, b5Media and 9Rules.

Micro blogging;– These sites that allow the users to submit short written entries, which can include links to product and service sites, and also links to other social media sites. The most commonly used micro blogging website is Twitter. Google developed Google Buzz a**s** a social networking, microblogging and messaging tool that is integrated into their web-based email program. Users can share links, photos and videos. In some quarters, this is categorised as *social email*.

Content-driven communities; An example of content-driven platform is Wiki. A Wiki is a website on which users collaboratively modify content and structure directly from the web browser A wiki is content management system without any defined owner or leader. There are dozens of different wiki engines in use, both standalone and part of other software, Some wiki engines are open source, whereas others are proprietary. Some permit control over different functions (levels of access); for example, editing rights may permit changing, adding or removing material. Others may permit access without enforcing access control. Other rules may be imposed to organize content. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki)

Characteristics of Social media
Unlike traditional media, Social media has the following characteristics:
- Encourages openness and participation; It encourages contributions and feedback from interested persons. Interested persons can participate by liking, voting, commenting on and the sharing of information.
- Conversation; it adopts conversational or two way approach to communication
- Community; it is very easy to form communities of persons with common interest and share information at a rapid rate
- Connectedness: social media thrive on their connectedness and making use of links to other sites, resources and people.

Due to its characteristics, social media has the following advantages:
- It is useful tool for publicity. This can translate into money for institutions by way of reaching interested people and reducing cost of traditional advertisement
- Inexpensive to set up
- Online participation where face to face interaction is not possible

- Transcend borders hence promoting cross border collaboration. With social networking sites, geographical and cultural differences are not really a barrier and they facilitate soliciting of information on any subjects from anywhere in the world.
- There is constant flow of information from updates and real time communication.
- Institutions can obtain information from their demographics.
- Has educational uses:-publishing and sharing content.- collaborating with others.
- Provides added context and value to knowledge.
- Job sourcing; Sites such as LinkedIn are a major resource that job recruiters take advantage of when looking to hire potential employees

Some disadvantages of social media include the following:
- The risk of identity theft and fraud is very high on social networking sites. This is because users naively share large amounts of personal data (full name, email address, phone, birthday city of residence, own pictures etc.)
- There is real and virtual stalking by potential stalkers
- Impersonation is very high (through strategies of re-identification)
- Unauthorised use of personal information by third party applications
- It is not easy to gauge participation and commitment
- It is not as effective as a face-to-face conversation.
- User drop-out can be very high
- Hits do not necessarily indicate attitude change
- False information can spread very fast
- It can become very addictive and have been found to reduce student performance in some cases. The ability of students to concentrate on task at hand is reduced by distractions that are brought about by social media (Abdulahi, Samadi & Gharleghi (2014)).
- Spamming can be very high
- For Institutions, risks include reputation, brand damage, brand identity theft, leakage of confidential business information

Social media logic
Social media has created a new type of communication logic referred to as Social media logic. Social media logic refers to the processes, principles and practices through which social networking platforms process information, news, and communication, and more generally how they channel social traffic. This is centred on Programmability, Popularity, Connectivity and Datafication (van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Programmability; This refers to the ability of social media platforms to stimulate the communicative contributions of users like 'liking', 'sharing', 'commenting' and 'friending'. Users influence the flow of communication and information activated by such platforms. It provides direct communication with audiences with the information without the information being filtered. Institutions own the messages they communicate and are in control of it. The advantage here for institutions is that, they are less dependent on traditional media in their communication with citizenry. There is heavy dependence on user engagement and communicative contributions.

Popularity; Institutions need followers to be able to communicate effectively. To get enough followers, it is important to attract the citizenry. One very good way is to make employees more visible on a personal level and modify their tone to be more informal and humorous, but being cautious of the kind of information to release to the public. It is important to front popular items (issues) and people. Lovering (2017) is of the view that, in this era of engagement, institutions must strive for employees to assert their personalities online. Persons communicating on social media have to be popular to attract followers and 'likes'. The flip side of this freedom is that individuals with inside knowledge of institutional issues might blurt out confidential information that

might be damaging. In addition, a well meaning post about an institutions perceived objectives can be damaging.

Connectivity; This refers to the ability of social media platforms to connect likeminded people, preferred items or individualized taste. Communication depends on user's ability to interact with specific followers. It however has the flip side of being very intrusive into privacy and susceptible to commercial exploitation of user information.

Datafication; This refers to the ability of the networked platforms to render into data many aspects of the world that have never been quantified before (Mayer-Schoenberger & Cukier, 2013). Each type of content, be it music, books, videos and relationships (e.g. friends, likes, trends) can be treated as data. Datafication endowed social media platforms with the potential to develop techniques for predictive and real-time analytics. The principles of datafication can be used to predict user taste and thereby send targeted information. It is important to note that Programmability, Popularity and Connectivity are actually grounded in the condition of datafication. (van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

In a study by Olsson and Erickson (2016) that explored government agencies' use of social media, they summarized the characteristics, practices and challenges of social media logic in the table below.

Table 1. Social media logic

	Characteristics	Changed practices	Challenges
The logic of connectivity	• Agencies' communication is no longer mass-communication but is rather directed towards individuals who are already interested in the agencies' work.	• Agencies spend resources on channels engaging few people, and also only those who are already familiar with or interested in the agencies' work • The audience is no longer citizens at large but rather specified segments of citizens	• A lack of followers in everyday social media limits the possibility to achieve viral spread in crisis situations • Followers tend to be people who already are well disposed toward and interested in the agency
The logic of popularity	• Popularity is a precondition for getting widespread traction for messages.	• Expand work with watchwords such as image building, visibility, and personification. • Change from traditional bureaucratic attitude and tone to one with more 'friendliness'	• Potential impact on citizens' expectations regarding their possibility to influence and personalize agencies' actions and decisions. • Change bureaucrats into people who have to serve as a public face of the agency without having any other control over their exposure.
The logic of programmability	• Agencies' communication discourse depends on both users' content contributions and the algorithms of social media platforms.	• Message risk being re-tweeted and distributed to an audience previously unknown and unforeseen. • Government agencies increase their communicative influence, and become less dependent on traditional media	• Requires organizational resources, flexibility, and speed; organizational structures need to be adjusted accordingly. • Balance between staying neutral or promoting the agency's issue and/or sectorial matters.

Source: Olsson and Erickson (2016)

Social Media Use by institutions

Social media use has increased tremendously over the years. Governments, institutions and businesses are increasingly developing ways of incorporating social media in their daily activities to take advantage of the benefits of this popular new communication method to reach out to customers as a public relations tool and also in marketing their goods and services in order to boost their income. It has become one of the fastest way of

spreading information or advertising. According to Ruggiero and Vos (2014), social media is an important tool that can be used in monitoring the conversation of citizenry to gather information on crucial themes, trend and problems. It has the possibility of promoting citizenry participation and inclusion. Olsson and Eriksson, 2016 recommends that social media should be considered as valuable tool in Strategic Communication. Olsson and Eriksson, 2016 further postulate that ability to cope with digitalization and social media in particular is today's most significant strategic communication opportunity and challenge. Social media offers the ease and speed in the communication process. In some organizations, social media activities have become a crucial part of everyday work and has become extensively integrated into daily activities. It presents itself as a useful tool in linking and sharing information, activating social networks, reducing uncertainty and supporting communities/groups (Macias, Hilyard and Freimuth, 2009). Commerical organizations have developed useful ways of using social media to promote advertisement of the products they sell and to boost sales through "sharing".

A search on the home pages of the website of 30 randomly selected higher educational institutions revealed the use of selected social media as shown in the figure 1 below. The most commonly used social media applications were Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.
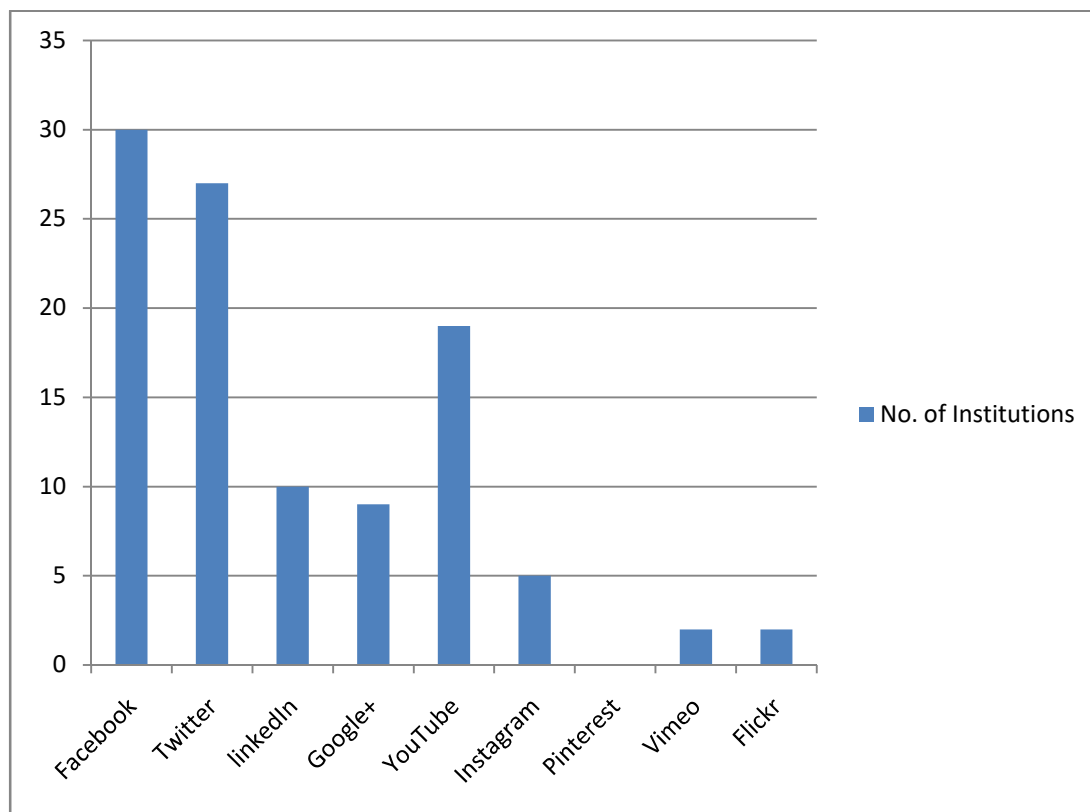

Figure 1: Social media platforms used by some Universities in Ghana
(Source: information collated by visiting the homepages of 30 randomly selected Ghanaian Universities on September 25, 2017)

UEW on Social Media
A cursory search on the internet reveal that the following groups are on various platforms are on the internet. Though this list is not likely to be exhaustive, they are the ones that were easy to locate online just by inputting University of Education, Winneba and Facebook and YouTube as the search words in Google search engine. Some pages had links or connections to others. The likes and share were not that encouraging. There is very low traction for UEW messages.

Facebook

Office/Department/group	Likes
UEW "Official page"	55,297
UEW Students page	7,974
UEW Mampong campus	6,045
UEW Kumasi campus	5,808
UEW Ajumako campus	1,649
UEW Library	1,380
GRASSAG, UEW	2,503
The Chaplaincy Board - UEW, Winneba Campus	393
Childhood Care Education Students Association of Ghana (CCESAG) UEW	204

YouTube

There are more than 1,500 video clips of various durations on YouTube. These have been posted by several people from different walks of life. Majority seem to have been posted by students who are probably eager to stage their presence online. Majority of these videos have little views.

Social Media Use in Education

Social networking systems were not designed specifically to build and manage learning experiences. They can however provide support to the current collective orientation of educational processes since they meet the connectivity requirements of today's digital natives (Rojas-Kramer, Esquivel-Gámez & García-Santillán, 2015). It is thus important to adapt to students' socialization habits motivated by their use of the internet for educational purposes.

Universities and other education providers have responded to the increased use of social media by engaging in social media marketing to showcase their courses and attract student (BBC Active, 2017). There are social media apps that offer social media in the educational context. A variety of software tools and free web applications that enhance learning, communication and engagement and collaborative study are now available for use. In many parts of the World, social media use in higher education is on the rise. Compared with traditional learning methods, learning platforms based on social media place the control of learning into the hands of learners themselves (Raut and Patil, 2016). In the 2014 Annual Report of the University of Education, Winneba, it was reported that the Department of ICT of the College of Technology Education was researching into the possibility of using Facebook in teaching and learning in tertiary institutions. It was also reported that student interns of the Department of Ewe Education mostly discussed their long essay issues via the Facebook, chats and e-mail messages with their respective supervisors and on other relevant academic issues.

With 7 out of 10 people now owning a smartphone, and social media usage accounting for over 30% of online smartphone activity, this communication channel should not be ignored or overlooked especially by distance learning providers (BBC Active, 2017). It has become possible for integration of social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn into learning management systems like Moodle and Blackboard.
Rojas-Kramer et al (2015) in a review of the educational use of Facebook intimated that students use social media for various purposes such as:
- finding friends' answers to assignments
- sharing information and ideas about projects
- inform teachers on the issues they would like to cover in a course
- submit questions that could not be asked in the classroom for various reasons

Rojas-Kramer et al (2015) further list the following as some educational applications of social media. The list is based on their study of Facebook:

- as a collaborative environment; since it promotes participatory attitude of students
- means of communication; a way of recovering communications as those expressed orally are easily forgotten
- organizing language learning; persons learning other languages could establish platforms for the languages they are learning
- as a virtual learning platform for mentoring and advice
- for running debates
- tutoring and counseling

They however advised that social media should not necessarily replace traditional communication which underpins academic performance, i.e. email, face to face interaction and the institutional virtual platform.

Dealing with the disadvantages of social media
Protective measures

Due to the risks associated with social media use, it is important to inculcate responsible social media use in persons who are to use it especially if it is on behalf on an institution. Users must understand the security issues associated with using it. Users must be aware that being on social media is like being on any other broadcast media and it would be in their own interest to observe all rules regarding public broadcast. It is important to note that what a user publishes can have telling effects on his life since it can be seen by anyone. Publication of unprofessional comments and content has serious potential implications and should be avoided. On a personal level, Rojas-Kramer et al (2015) advices that, users should always be conscious of the privacy settings and should stay abreast with updates all the time. It is important to go through all the privacy setting available so that what people can have access to can be controlled.

Issues to be included in institutional social media policy

With the increase in the use of social media, several institutions have developed social media policies to regulate its use (Henry & Webb (2014) Pomerantz, Hank & Sugimoto (2015)). Quite a number of them have arisen as a result of challenges encountered as a result of its use as detailed under the disadvantages of social media. Institutional social media policies covers a broad range of issues/themes including the following:

- appropriateness of post (content and tone)/ online behavioral standards/code of conduct
- authenticity of post
- respect for copyright and fair use laws/ intellectual property rights
- privacy rights
- use of logos (branding and issues related to public image)
- official and personal uses/accounts
- specific social media applications
- representation of institution/office/department/unit
- official authorization for social media pages/ accounts
- relationship/contacts with other organizations
- ensuring that posts comply with law

Recommendations

- Higher educational institutions in Ghana should come out with a clear policy on the use of social media
- There should be training on responsible use of social media for all persons who want to engage the public through social media
- Higher educational institutions in Ghana should constitute a social media advisory group/ social media governance committee that would be responsible for administering, coordinating and promoting the presence of the institution through social media

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