Responding to Hate Speech on Social Media:
A Class Leads a Student Movement

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ABSTRACT

In the Spring of 2012, fans of the Gonzaga University basketball team used hate speech on social media site Twitter to express their frustration at losing a game to the Brigham Young University team. In response, the students in the Hate Studies in Business course started a student-led movement to "Take the Hate Out of Hoops." The students applied their lessons in virtue ethics and leveraged the experiential structure of the course to create a positive response to a negative event. It was through the unique study of hate, the recognition that membership in a community implies responsibility for harms perpetuated by that community, and the action-oriented nature of this class that students were moved to respond to this instance of injustice. This paper describes the course, the incident of hate speech, the students' response, and the lessons learned by the four instructors of the course.

Keywords: Community, Hate Speech, Injustice, Social Media, Virtue Ethics

INTRODUCTION

With the increased popularity of social media, hate speech has proliferated on the Internet. Some recent examples include the Facebook group "Kill a Jew" Day (Lappin, 2010), Twitter threats to retaliate with rape against feminists in Britain (e.g., Topping & Quinn, 2013), and death threats on Twitter against an atheist teen who objected to prayer in her Rhode Island school (Coleman, 2012). These problems extend to college campuses. Examples include a fraternity at Florida International University that was suspended for a Facebook page in which members posted photos of topless college women and anti-gay slurs (Segal, 2013) and a Twitter account at Purdue University called "PurdueAsians" (@OrientalSwag) which contained posts that were offensive to students of Asian descent (Florman, 2012).

Perhaps it is not surprising that there are many examples of inappropriate use of social media on college campuses. As one might expect, many users of social media are college-aged. In 2012, 86 percent of Internet users ages 18-29 used Facebook, and 27 percent of Internet users ages 18-29 used Twitter (Duggan & Brenne, 2013). These social networking sites allow users to share information, pictures, videos, and other information. On both sites, users set up a profile. On Facebook, users accept "friends" who are allowed to access the user's page to varying extents. On Twitter, users accept "followers" who can read the user's posts, called "Tweets." Followers can "retweet" the Tweets they are following. Also, most Tweets are public and simple for non-followers to find. Twitter also allows users to establish hashtags that indicate the topic of the Tweet so that followers can easily find other Tweets with the same topic.

Academic research on social media use by college students has focused primarily on the impact of Facebook and Twitter use on academic performance (Junco, 2011; 2012; Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2010), student engagement (Heiberger & Harper, 2008; HERI, 2007; Junco, Heibergert, & Loken, 2010; McEwan, 2011). In addition, studies have found social media to provide avenues for college students to express and reinforce aspects of their personal identities by communicating their interests, tastes, and political views, and expressing affiliation with groups of various types (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). This research suggests that social media clearly may yield benefits to users in the form of increased social connection and social capital, which are important drivers of student integration and persistence (Thomas 2000) in the relative short run, as well as overall happiness and life satisfaction (Helliwell & Putnam 2004). However, the breadth of and manner in which information is shared, along with the informal and impersonal nature of the interactions on social media sites create conditions under which bullying, hate speech, and other negative interactions can thrive.

This paper describes one response to an incident of hate speech on a social media site on a campus. The response was made possible through a course called "Hate Studies in Business." The course was grounded in virtue ethics and sponsored by Gonzaga University's Institute for Hate Studies. The institute advances the interdisciplinary field of Hate Studies and disseminates new theories, models, and discoveries about hate. This paper will describe how, with the support of the institute, the Hate Studies in Business course spawned a student movement in response to hate messages on social media. This movement embodied the goal of active engagement through an unplanned "teachable moment."

THE COURSE

The Hate Studies in Business course was intended to give students the tools to recognize, understand, and combat hate in the workplace and society. The course had four instructors: two business ethics professors, one management professor, and one marketing professor. Each instructor led a section of the course, with the goals of generating a broad understanding of hate from a multi-disciplinary perspective and making students aware of instances of hate in a variety of contexts. By the end of the course, it was expected that students would be able to: 1) discuss hate from a philosophical or virtue perspective, 2) identify business contexts in which hate plays a role and analyze the factors that contribute to this injustice, 3) develop workable solutions to lessen or eliminate instances or situations of hate and make victims whole again, and 4) create methods and materials to educate others about hate in business to prevent its occurrence.

One of the business ethics professors spent the opening portion of the course leading

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