Chapter 10
Social Media as a Learning Tool in Medical Education:
A Situation Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become one of the most dominant information phenomena of our time. As its commercial, social, activist, and informational uses multiply, questions are raised as to its efficiency as a learning tool. The authors focus this chapter on social media use in higher education, specifically in the field of medical education, and provide a modern definition of social media and its tools while elaborating on its educational uses and efficiency. Furthermore, they present a situation analysis through a review of original research published on the topic in the last five years, culminating in an identification of the gaps in literature and recommendations for future research endeavors.

INTRODUCTION

Social media is very much *en vogue*, with many academic database search engines showing hundreds and sometimes thousands of academic documents published in only the last year (2010) referring to the term "social media" (Google Scholar: 13100; EBSCO Host: 282; ProQuest ABI/INFORM GLOBAL: 1038). The excitement may be ascribed to the recently realized financial potential of the social media networks (Foreman, 2011), or equally to the smorgasbord of opportunities it allows students, businessmen, and researchers in the form of collaborative learning, distributed intelligence, online communities of practice, diverse respondent populations, and many others (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009). In

this chapter, we present an overview of recent research studies into the use of social media as a tool for enhancing learning in higher education, specifically in the field of medical education. We aim to provide an accounting of recent research (2007-2011) published in the field and present a situation analysis as a guide to further forays for researchers and academics.

BACKGROUND

Defining Social Media

The power, impact, and importance of social media is evident through its usage statistics, as shown in Table 1, provided by the Nielsen Company (2010), showing average usage times and the number of monthly unique visitors to social networking sites.

However, even though social media is such a widespread and active phenomenon, it does not have any one commonly accepted definition. We found numerous authors using a variety of semantics to define social media. Studies have taken the construct to be everything from "user generated content" (Castillo, Donato, Gionis, & Mishne, 2008, p. 1) to "media with possibilities of relationships" (Gilbert & Karahalios, 2009, p. 1) with no real semantic consensus or exact agreement upon what is and what is not considered social media. One major reason behind this definitional uncertainty is the arrival of new technologies almost every year. These new technologies not only introduce new forums and avenues of usage, but also serve to update and evolve existing traditional technologies and applications into having social media components. As an example, computer games, online news articles, online company and product sites and many other applications that were originally considered to be *traditional,* i.e. non-social online media, have in recent years been taken under the wing of social media with

Table 1. Unique visitors to social networking sites in December 2009 (in millions)

Country	Unique Audience (000)	Time per Person (hh:mm:ss)
United States	142,052	6:09:13
Japan	46,558	2:50:21
Brazil	31,345	4:33:10
United Kingdom	29,129	6:07:54
Germany	28,057	4:11:45
France	26,786	4:04:39
Spain	19,456	5:30:55
Italy	18,256	6:00:07
Australia	9,895	6:52:28
Switzer-land	2,451	3:54:34
Source: The Nielsen Company, 2010		

the addition of comment boards, online gaming communities, fan blogs and other tools opening the way for social interaction. Social scientists and researchers have reacted to this evolving technology by continuously widening their definitions of it (Social Media Defined, 2007), more recently including tools by name like wikis, blogs, social networking platforms, and others (Xiang & Gretzel, 2009). The element of connectivity is the recurring theme within most definitions, the social aspect of the communication, however, is open for interpretation.

In this chapter, we define social media as any private or public network based application that allows the exchange of information and social interaction between two or more individuals. The information may be *live* or synchronous (e.g. instant messaging), or linear time gapped or asynchronous (such as bulletin boards and wikis). The tools that qualify as social media must allow two-way communication between the initiator of the conversation and intended partners, or the author of the information and his audience. Whether the

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