

Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube: Friend and Foe

Mike Bowers

Winner of the 2008 SCCPA Graduate Student Writing Award

Graduated from Clemson University, May 2008

Presbyterian College

mdbowers@presby.edu

Web sites like Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube are similar to many things popular among college students: they can be good resources, but they can easily be abused. Professionals in higher education tend to focus on the negatives associated with these sites. Doing this is a great disservice to everyone involved, as these resources can be harnessed to enhance community among students.

Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube reach a significant percentage of the online population. Facebook's online membership is currently at 64 million users, many of whom are college students (Facebook, 2008). MySpace claims even more members, registering more than 106 million people as of September 2006. More than 230,000 new people register each day (MySpace, 2008). YouTube also boasts a great number of members, as it hosts over 72 million videos and five million channels as of 2008 (YouTube, 2008). The amount of traffic these sites experience is just as amazing. MySpace experienced almost 68 million unique visitors during September 2007. YouTube registered almost 50 million visitors during that same month, while Facebook experienced 30 million unique visitors (Sebestyen, 2007).

One can say with a great deal of certainty that these sites reach more college students than any other site on the Internet. A simple search on YouTube will generate videos of college students acting rowdy in the residence halls or a video from a collegiate sporting event. Searching MySpace will generate millions of profiles of both current, former, and future college students. Facebook was originally developed exclusively for college students, so it is a safe assumption that the majority of its users are college students.

Since these sites reach the most college students, this means it can be the best way to communicate with them. One of the more popular features on Facebook is the ability to create groups. These groups can be formed around any common interest. Examples of possible groups include members of a student organization, people who live in the same residential community or students who watch the same television shows. Groups like these can allow students to connect with new people. They can also facilitate good discussions on various issues.

These networking sites also provide other features for building a stronger community. Students can search for other users through various search strings, whether they are looking for someone with the same activities and hobbies or a member of the same organization. Connecting with these students can help build friendships that may have never materialized otherwise. For students who are struggling to fit in at their institution, connections like these may be the difference between staying in school or withdrawing.

However, these Web sites also have their drawbacks, and many of these drawbacks are in the same areas. Some students use Facebook and MySpace to show their disdain for other people. A simple search for the derogatory term “douchebag” on Facebook, for example, generates over 600 results. Many of these groups are referring to a fellow student, and a percentage of these are serious groups. While Facebook and MySpace make their best efforts to remove these negative groups, a student finding out he or she is the subject of an attack group can lead to a very uncomfortable experience.

Another way these sites can be detrimental to community is one of the bigger issues facing institutions of higher education today: students posting information or media that can be damaging to themselves and to others. Examples of this include posting YouTube videos of students binge drinking, posting personal information on a profile, or writing a negative blog entry about a peer. In talking with many students in past years, one of the most common statements I’ve heard is, “It’s my personal profile. I can post whatever I want.” Many people don’t grasp the concept that anything they post on the Internet is not necessarily protected. The posting of these damaging materials can lead to conflict within the campus community, whether it is with students, with faculty, with staff, or with multiple populations.

When attempting to educate students on how the Internet can damage a campus community, I always refer to a personal experience. As a sophomore in college, a person who used to be a close friend posted a blog that included many personal attacks towards me. Upon seeing this, I contacted the person and told her she should have come to me if she had these issues. This received no personal response, but it did generate another blog the next day. This blog also attacked me, mentioned our conversation, and then made the statement that it was her personal blog and she would post whatever she wanted to post. Our relationship never recovered after that, so I have used this experience to make sure the same thing does not happen to other students.

I have also personally used the positive aspects of Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube in building better communities. As a resident assistant, I used to start groups for the students on my halls. These groups would be used as a way to get to know each other before the semester starts, and it also serves as an easy way to keep people informed of various things happening on campus and in our building. More recently, our orientation program here at Clemson has used these various sites as a good way to build networks. A Facebook group has been established for current and former orientation ambassadors. This is a great idea, as it connects people with a common interest. It also facilitates discussion when people talk about their orientation experiences and what things were like when they were students. Orientation has also used YouTube to promote ambassador recruitment, a marketing tool that has also been used by other departments and student organizations. Methods like these are great and innovative ways to build better communities. They also show faculty, staff, and parents that not everything associated with these Web sites is bad.

Popular Web sites like Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube are frequently the focus of negativity among professionals in higher education. As students continue to use these sites for personal attacks and the posting of inappropriate information, it can be a real detriment to the concept of campus community. However, students will continue using these sites for the

immediate future. We need to recognize this fact, identify the ways these sites can be used to our advantage, and use them in more positive ways. Some institutions have already done this, so now it is just a matter of getting more to do the same.

Works Cited

- Facebook (2008). *Wikipedia, The free encyclopedia*. Retrieved February 19, 2008, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook>.
- MySpace (2008). *Wikipedia, The free encyclopedia*. Retrieved February 19, 2008, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MySpace>.
- Sebestyen, A. (2007). YouTube growing further: 47.5 million Unique Visitors in US. *VideoVoo*. Retrieved February 19, 2008, from <http://videovoo.com/2007/10/12/YouTube-growing-further-475-million-unique-visitors>.
- YouTube (2008). *Wikipedia, The free encyclopedia*. Retrieved February 19, 2008, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/YouTube>.