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Anti-Social: An Ethnographic Account Social Media within a Technically Restrictive Public Sector Agency

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Abstract

Social Media Usage is now commonplace, with statistics placing its insertion well into the billions. While social media, as a tool, is designed to foster greater communication and interaction, there remains reluctance by many to incorporate this same level of communication with colleagues and their employer. This article provides an ethnographic account of an action-research practitioner's experience in social media usage within a public-sector agency that discourages and actively restricts social media usage on its ICT networks, and invokes policy against employee social media use. The agency is unique in the commercial, scientific and advisory services it provides, meaning that the sensitive nature of the work precludes the agency from being clearly identified – also a factor in its decision to restrict social media access. Nonetheless, events in similarly sized entities, such as the Royal Australian Navy, provide context for this study, and developments in other public sector agencies that offer similar services are provided to offer a frame of reference. Looking at the three main ways that employees are using social media at work, this examination discusses the implications for the future of collaborative work practices, and engagement with broader professional interests.

Keywords*:* Social media, Professional networks, Professional development

It is fair to say that Social Media now permeates not only the personal, but the professional life. Dedicated services such as Yammer (http://www.yammer.com) and LinkedIn (http://www.linkedin.com) have made it easier to develop and maintain an online professional presence in the digital world. Facebook (http://www.facebook.com) use currently stands just short of 1.3 billion (Facebook Inc., 2014) and Twitter (http://www.twitter.com) active monthly uses at over 250 million (Twitter, Inc., 2014), making the prospect of a professional colleague being on social media almost a certainty.

While there is an increase of organizations offering access to social media through their corporate systems, there are still a significant proportion of them 'blocking' access to social media (see Gartner, 2012a; Gartner, 2012b). This paper offers an ethnographic perspective, working in one of these traditionally conservative organizations and examining the attitudes and approach to social media by the agency

and the employees, while considering whether this environment has influenced individual attitudes towards social media.

Given this reluctance towards maintaining a public profile, the subject agency examined asked not to be named. For context, it can be described as a large public sector employer specializing in the delivery of a variety of commercial, scientific and advisory services. This analysis provides several examples for comparison with similarly sized public-sector entities, such as the Royal Australian Navy. Developments in other public sector agencies that offer similar services have also been provided throughout to offer a frame of reference throughout. This analysis, in itself, provides an insight into this otherwise closed-off section of industry, while at the same time providing lessons for similar organizations.

It is also important to note that this research comes from the approach of an Action-Research Practitioner. Rather than the purely quantitative methods of research, this is a personal account, driven by in-depth questioning, experience, and an autoethnographer's approach. While there are elements of 'traditional' academic practice that have been applied in this research, these have been used as 'conversation starters' in an otherwise organic approach to analysis. It is an emerging approach to scholarship, pioneered by the likes of Williams (2004), the Middlesex University Institute for Work-Based Learning (http://www.mdx.ac.uk/aboutus/Schools/iwbl/) and the University of Southern Queensland's (http://www.usq.edu.au) Professional Studies Program

The nature of the ethnographic approach means that there were already well-established professional relationships in the work environment. This has both benefits and drawbacks for research of this nature, as the need to engage and build a relationship can be 'fast-forwarded', yet analysis on how early-relationship interaction takes place on social media is still missing. In this instance, some social media connections were already in-place, and others (such as subordinate staff), had been avoided, maintaining a professional distance. This was the same for others, who had similarly connected, or not, with colleagues for varying degrees of work/life separation, discussed later in this analysis.

Context

The subject agency achieves Social Media blocking through one of a number of regulated web gateway service, in this instance, Blue Coat WebFilter (http://www.bluecoat.com), with sites blocked by category, including one for 'Social Media'. The expansive definition of 'social media' extends to any online act of sharing and contributing, including engagement with news sites or other user-generated content, though this analysis largely focused on individual connections with the main social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google, including YouTube (http://www.youtube.com) and Google Plus (http://plus.google.com).

The Blue Coat Systems' (2013) description for Social Media describes these sites as…

> "Sites that enable people to connect with others to form an online community. Typically members describe themselves in personal Web page profiles and form interactive networks, linking them with other members based on common interests or acquaintances. Instant messaging, file sharing and Web logs (blogs) are common features of Social Networking sites. (sic)"

Arguably, the professional application of social media is still in its infancy, as the motivation for blocking social websites is poorly articulated or defined. The subject agency had no evidence or recorded decision that justified the requirement for social media blocking, and most theories were anecdotal, ranging from maintaining workplace productivity, perceived legal and security risks, resource constraints and information privacy, though no evidence or case-studies supported one unique reason.

Hrdinová, Helbig and Peters' (2010) analysis of social media policies within Government provides the broadest assessment of the reasons that public sector employees use social media for their work – namely for official use, professional use and personal interests. The Hrdinová et. al. study also determined that these lines were becoming increasingly blurred, as employees would often contribute to niche social groups with their colleagues, while at the same time engaging with whole-of-Government problems using these same social media platforms. This categorization is important, as it helps to clarify where the possible areas of overlap are as more employees blur the line between their profession, their work and their personal relationships.

Consistent with this study, the agency's Social Media Policy was developed to govern, among other things, the non-work social media activities that may link an employee to the organization. The policy scope is defined as covering:

Organization-related, user-generated, content that is shared over the Internet via technologies that promote engagement, sharing and collaboration;

The agency's official social media presences;

Internet-based and mobile applications owned and operated by the organization;

All other activities conducted by staff on social media networks, where their connection to the agency is apparent or may be identified

In order to understand what unique requirements the subject agency had, it was useful to examine the use of social media under the three distinct usage categories outlined by Hrdinová et. al. observing how these approaches to social media engagement were used within the organization, how the social media policy and technical limitations affect this engagement, and workarounds used by subject employees.

Use of Social Media for Official Agency Interests

Using social media to advance official agency interests was evident through the agency's employment of a small team of social media professionals, working under the Corporate Communication group with responsibility for authoring, responding and engaging with the public via social media. In total, this team manages seven separate social media accounts, with the Blue Coat software allowing exemptions for these individuals for this purpose.

In addition to this team, the agency has a number of outsourced functions, such as recruitment, which manage separate social media accounts with only some limited branding and style requirements. Attempts to obtain statistical data to compare engagement between pages managed by the agency and those managed by an outsourced company met some

resistance from both parties, unwilling to share the data with a public forum. Initial observations showed that there was far more willingness to engage with the public via the outsourced streams of the service. This is understandable given the agency's social media policy, which requires the public-sector channel managers to receive multiple layers of approval before posting on social media. In contrast, the contracted service providers was empowered to speak on behalf of the brand and engage much more rapidly with the public, governed only by some general contract clauses.

Use of Social Media for Professional Interests

Outside of this centrally controlled, official agency social media presence, the employees of the agency are as professionally, demographically and geographically varied as any other large organization. In order to best capture the breadth and diversity of the agency, the sample groups examined consisted of four teams working in a regulatory setting – responsible for a variety of corporate compliance, quality assurance and internal audit functions from both financial and engineering functions of the agency.

Initial questioning confirmed that over 75% of employees had used social media in at least one platform, though only a third had made a connection with work-based colleagues. Comparatively, a 2012 report from Millennial Branding noted that "the typical Gen Y Facebook user is connected to about 700 friends. But only 16 of those friends, on average, are co-workers (Schawbel, 2012)", accounting for a little over 2%. Perhaps the notable difference in the statistics is Schawbel's capture of exclusively 'Generation Y' data, and with the average age of the sample group being in the mid 40s, much of this comparison requires the organization to evolve to a different demographic before social media becomes a priority tool.

Of the main social media services, Facebook was used by all of the participants that held social media accounts, with limited interest and involvement in the other three services. Despite the older, more conservative approach to social communication within the organization, the primary social media platform that targets the professional market, LinkedIn, was rarely, if ever, used. Of those who had identified themselves as engaging with social media, only a few had LinkedIn access, and none had made connections with their current colleagues. Indeed, out of those who had LinkedIn accounts, all had very few connections, generally from workplaces that they had previously worked in, or other friends that they knew outside the corporate setting.

The nature of the agency, and the more conservative work culture, and the individuals that this culture attracts, appeared likely to have contributed to social media playing a much more passive role in the overall communication apparatus. Despite the geographic disperse of the workforce, traditional communication methods such as email, telephone, and even fax, were still commonplace, and 'reigned supreme' when it came to internal communication.

All participants had admitted to participating in discussions and surveys online previously, but non-social media users did not see this as being 'active' on social media. Rather, email remained the primary communication tool throughout the organization, also regularly used as an additional method of managing workload.

Unsurprisingly, telephone calls and meetings would often conclude with a simple question: "Could you put that in an email to me?"

Likewise, engagement with professional bodies or associations was limited and rarely involved more than email newsletters and the occasional viewing of static organization websites. Employees were more likely to prefer face-to-face conferences, discussions and industry events over social media interactions, and while there was little discussion about the preference for this style of professional interaction, there was clearly an appetite to attend events that attracted additional cash travel and meal allowances.

More importantly, the email-centric approach to working undoubtedly speaks to work practice in contemporary conservative corporate environment. There was little collaboration on projects, with many examples present where documentation that required multiple input followed a path of being drafted by Person A, then emailed to Person B, who would return the document, with their changes, to Person A to incorporate. Regular moments of 'down time' and waiting for subsequent authors to contribute were rarely replaced with meaningful work, and there was significant troughs of work throughout the observation period. Modern services that allow multiple people to work on the same document simultaneously were either unsupported or actively restricted via the BlueCoat filter.

Use of Social Media for Personal Interests

During the sample period, none of the colleagues I had 'connected' with on social media made any reference to the organization or work, consistent with the social media policy. I questioned colleagues further about their use of social media, who citing their primary reason for using social media as keeping in contact with close family and friends, and a desire to keep 'work' and 'personal' lives separate – particularly on the social platform.

Notably, none of those questioned cited the employer's social media policy as a factor in their decision not to talk about their work on social media. While the organization, like many large businesses, has a significant range of policies and procedures to cover most work-related activities, it seems that engagement with the social media policy was somewhat of an afterthought, if thought of at all. Rather, it became apparent that there was an increasing reluctance to use social media in *any* connection with work. This reluctance was driven through a rapid series of highly visible workplace 'interventions' taking place in the media, spearheaded by action against employees within Government.

In the first instance, two civil servants were in the process of being dismissed for, what the Government alleged, were breaches of the Australian Public Service (APS) Code of Conduct, after one employee used Twitter to attack their own agency, and another for offensively describing an anti-pornography campaigner.

The second event was within the Royal Australian Navy, in which sanctions were laid against sailors who participated in Facebook groups that promoted race-hatred (Hall, 2014; Hall & Bachelard, 2014) and groups that sought to highlight "systematic bullying, harassment, cronyism and other wrongdoing" by Navy personnel (Towell, 2014a).

Freedom of speech is not constitutionally enshrined in Australia, which means that activities that would otherwise be protected could be used as mechanisms to dismiss these employees. Australian Human Rights Commissioner Tim Wilson supported their dismissal, noting that employment conditions were legally stronger than an 'implied' right to freedom of speech (Towell, 2014b).

These instances also offer echoes of attempting to 'civilize' the employees. While social media provides the platform for which bullying and racism can thrive, the subsequent management of these issues is less an attempt to deal with policy non-compliance, but more 'attitude adjustment'. The same style of sanction could easily be applied to employees who excessively cursed using social media, yet it is the unpalatable nature of racism, harassment and bigotry that are attempting to be addressed, rather than the vehicle through which they were expressed.

These events were not unnoticed across the public sector, and in late January, 2014, the agency published a large warning on their intranet stating:

> Whether you're Tweeting, posting, liking or sharing, on any form of social media, remember [agency] has social media guidelines to which all employees are expected to adhere. Everything you post online is permanent, made public and can be traced back to you. Watch this video to find out more about what appropriate online behaviour means for you, as a [agency] employee.
>
> Redacted Excerpt from Agency Intranet, 31 January 2014

The video went on to guide employees through a range of privacy and security controls commonly left unchecked through social media, prompting users to make the correction, in their own time on their own devices.

Observations

What all these aspects have done, in essence, is prohibit the use social media as a valid internal communication mechanism. Melcrum Ltd. (2012) note that effective engagement between employees and social media significantly advances the workforce culture that collaboration is good, and leads to better outcomes. While the entrenched 'email' culture is, and will be, prevalent for some years to come, providing reasonable access to social media could serve as the first step towards an inclusive, innovative workforce culture.

In addition to active blocking and the implementation of a social media policy, what was not evident was whether the agency employed the use of a third measure in social media compliance by engaging a monitoring service such as Socialite (http://www.actiance.com/socialite), Hearsay Social (http://www.hearsaysocial.com) or SocialVolt (http://www.socialvolt.com). Events, such as those two from the APS and the Navy, are both examples of overt social media activity - that is, participating in online activities without sufficient separation between their occupation and their actions.

The degree to which activity on social media is deemed inappropriate has been, for the most part, subjective. There were instances where colleagues I had connected with on social media were seen drinking alcohol, partying, complaining about any range of customer service-related issues related to their personal life, and other activities that you would expect to see in a social media feed any other day. For instance, in the below example, a colleague offered the following status update, apparently complaining about a 'Friend' recommendation on Facebook

The identification of the subject as a 'junky piece of trash' would be arguably inappropriate within the professional workplace environment, though the approach to not identifying any one person in particular, nor associating the post or context with the workplace, means that the appropriateness of the post is subjective and an issue only for those who find it socially, rather than professionally, offensive.

The combination of tight privacy settings and established 'real world' relationships with colleagues appeared to assist in insulating even slightly questionable behavior from a management layer that may take issue or action with the activity. This mutually-beneficial relationship between social media connections remained evident in the personal relationships in the office, with an almost seamless transition from electronic discussion to the 'real world'. Those staff that were connected via social media would discuss aspects of their personal activities openly, out of the earshot of Executive level management.

Notably, the 'real world' discussions rarely translated back to social media. Without providing commentary on the organization itself, there was a high level of discontent within the workplace because of change management activities that affected the sample group. Throughout the study period, all of these issues prompted regular, robust discussion in the workplace, but none of which carried across to social media.

The implementation of the social media policy by the organization clearly defines the expectations of employees operating on social media in order to prevent these instances becoming commonplace. However, without any active awareness or engagement with the policy, it seems to be a combination of social grace and control of one's personal branding that drove the social media tone of the sample group.

What is more troubling is the lack of interest in 'work-based' social media, as this shows potential disengagement with the profession. Accounting, Medicine and Engineering are all professions that require constant professional engagement and awareness of new standards, procedures and systems, and while current channels such as peer-reviewed journals, emails and conferences will allow, for now, some of these advancements to be discussed, the evolution of technology more generally means this audience will eventually dwindle and cease to exist.

Workarounds

I found little evidence to support the quote by Ontario Privacy Commissioner Ann Cavoukian (in Menezes, 2009) which claimed that blocking social media was "like waving the proverbial red flag in front of your staff – it's almost a challenge to

them to find a way around it." There was certainly no challenge, and people had long since 'found their way around it'. Colleagues overtly used their tablets and smart phones to access social media, and 'share' content with each other physically. This was observed multiple times, with a particular example involving a colleague handing over his tablet to show a clip he had posted to Facebook with the 'Minions' from the *Despicable Me* movie franchise. When he was asked him to forward it on, He happily emailed a link to the video (on YouTube) to an agency email via his own personal email account. The link was blocked by the BlueCoat filter, which meant that it subsequently had to be forwarded back to the recipient's personal email account, where it then could be watched via an iPhone.

The practice was far from subversive, and never spiteful. 'Sharing' content become a much more tactile and 'hands on' activity, and often involved the physical act of having to hand-over a funny joke, picture or anecdote, and wait while the recipient read and interpreted the material. These moments provided *ad hoc* respite from 'business as usual' activity, and took longer than it would have taken for the same process of viewing the content via a web browser and clicking 'Like' or 'Share' to indicate their feedback.

The use of personal smart phones and tablets was rife throughout the agency, and were regularly used in lieu of accessing social media via work laptops or desktop computers. This supports and continues the trend identified in between 2011 and 2012, in which mobile traffic to social media sites grew well over 80% (Nielsen, 2012).

Conclusions

Undertaking research in social media has an almost unavoidable component of ethnography, as simply participating in the conversation makes it part of the body of research. These observations can only be the first step in an otherwise ongoing and rapidly evolving research theme, with variables such as demographics, organizational culture and management appetite for risk all changing the way in which employees and organizations interact and use social media.

With that in mind, the recommendations that can be made are limited to agencies of the same size, culture and lack of enthusiasm for social media. While this is far from being a niche market, restrictions such as these will undoubtedly relax over time, though the path to doing so still requires patience and guidance.

This paper makes the following recommendations for these organizations:

1. Educate, rather than Prohibit. While the implementation of a social media policy is an important first-step in aligning organizational priorities with 'real world' social media practice, it still continues to be used as a punitive tool to control individual actions, rather than a way for employees to contribute to social media constructively. A social media policy should provide clear expectations for employees around what they can (or should) and cannot (or should not) do when it comes to social media, and provide the framework to a conversation about how best to use social media.

The examples by the APS and Navy do little to guide individuals on the best approach to operating on a social media platform when there is a clear and definable

link with an agency. Instead, these examples serve as a social barometer for attitudes and actions that would otherwise be hidden from plain view. While Australia does not enjoy the same liberties with speech as, say, the United States, social media has given like-minded people a forum with which to congregate.

No policy or sanction will necessarily, or arguably, should, change an attitude or belief, so educating all staff about how to appropriately separate their work and social lives, or disassociate with a particular organization with social media, would prove to be a much more effective mitigation strategy than a general prohibition. Using work resources such as computers to *promote* such an opinion, however, is a case-by-case agency-level decision.

2. Provide 'Reasonable' Access. There is no way to measure what one organization determines to be 'reasonable' access to social media over another – for some, it might be an hour a day over a lunch break, for others, a brief check of Twitter every 10 minutes might seem excessive. It is up to the individual agencies to set their own boundaries based on their work environment, demand, expectations and organizational culture, though blocking as seen in the subject agency had little to no effect, and instead drove people to find other ways to interact – either face-to-face or via social media using an alternative method. This also had the follow-on effect of separating employee interaction with their broader professions, and significantly limited sources of information about changes to standards and protocol, all of which could have a significant impact on the delivery of best-practice services to the public.

While the suggestion that face-to-face interaction may be a healthier way to engage with colleagues, it only serves to address part of the perceived inefficiencies that providing reasonable access can bring. While using social media at work continues to be blocked the same way that pornography or gambling sites are, then it will continue to fail as a useful method of professional engagement, driving people to use other means or nothing at all.

3. Embrace Collaboration. Social media offers immediate feedback, and a tremendous insight into otherwise untapped resource of informal communication. Opening up an additional avenue, and a culture of collaboration, can greatly enhance the day-to-day work and approach to business, even if it is simply moving away from the 'email culture'. To be truly collaborative, industry – both public and private – very much needs to shift from rhetoric to results, and the tools to do this are already available and being used by employees, just not for work. This has a two-fold benefit, as this makes tools immediately accessible and can be implemented straight-away without the need for costly training or additional systems. Making social media less of a shameful activity means that the organization can start to yield the colloquial juice from the 'grapevine'.

What has been learned during this examination is that corporate attitudes, particularly those of corporate conservatives, tend to try to avoid the reality of social media, less by 'sticking heads in the sand', but more 'putting a barbed-wire fence around the entire sandpit'. It is a crude analogy, but an accurate one, as technology that aims to obstruct communication is considered a crucial

component of information technology infrastructure.

When an employer makes social media a prohibited communication channel, it immediately becomes a separate entity for the employee, removing its use as a valuable professional communication tool, with the only benefit being delivered through officially designated positions with onerous restrictions on how they interact with the public.
That is not just counter-productive, it is anti-social.

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