Social Media and Campus Community:
A Deweyan Consideration

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INTRODUCTION

For John Dewey, the challenge facing Americans in the 20th century was to continue the development of democracy and to make progress towards achieving the "Great Community."[1] The Industrial Revolution of the previous century and the changes it brought to social, political, and communal life with its new economics and ways of living had dampened optimism about democracy's future. Dewey observed that in the 20th century the conditions for participatory democracy—public life consistent with democratic ideals—had been altered because human relationships themselves had been transformed by modern life, in particular by modern technology. Dewey contended that the new technologies of the era had created "mobile and fluctuating associational forms"[2] that thwarted human associations he believed had characterized "genuine community life"[3] in America. Local and intimate in character, Dewey reasoned that pre-industrial associations produced interactions critical to democracy; that the "local town-meeting practices and ideas" that we had "inherited"[4] from earlier generations had created and enabled the kinds of "interaction and interdependence"[5] necessary for the democratic "public."[6]

The Web 2.0 technologies of the 21st century present us with concerns about democratic community perhaps not so dissimilar to those that preoccupied Dewey in the 1920s. Presently, our technologies have made communication faster, mobile, and abundant, and human association far-flung and scattered. Today, technology enables us to occupy proximal and distal disembodied social spaces. In these spaces we produce and consume knowledge actively and passively, and we nurture existing relationships and inaugurate new associations. The new virtual spaces that we inhabit allow us to gather and exchange information from

strangers, friends, family and other associations in neighboring and remote spaces. Technology brings us information that Dewey would characterize as either "genuine" or "alleged"[7] from sources known to us, but also from those whose identity is obscured, hidden, or contrived. Through online communication ever more mobile, effortless and accessible, we communicate across, through and within varied and variable social networks of familiar, unfamiliar and anonymous individuals and groups. Through millennial technology, we procure information from those known and unknown to us, from nodes on networks that extend our reach beyond our lived experience, beyond our familiarity, as well as from relations that keep us tethered to recognizable milieus. Through these technologies, information is determined by algorithmic device, and is derivative and utilitarian, but also formative and relational.

Much like the telephone, the telegraph and the printing press changed human associational forms and community life in Dewey's century, the crown jewel of Web 2.0 technologies—social media—have changed how individuals interact, how communities are developed and retreat. Since 2007, social media have become a primary means through which we interact and collaborate, and through which we advance narratives. Through social media we circulate the life events; we use social media to find employment, to join political campaigns, to stay connected with our college classmates, to contribute to charities, and to share our views on sports, entertainment, and the latest Kardashian catastrophe. We use social media to find reputable and reliable plumbers, doctors, realtors, and vacation getaways. Social media provide us with greater communicative autonomy in seemingly innumerable ways. Through these media we disseminate our experiential narratives to our various communities, and assimilate the experiential narratives of intimate and unfamiliar communities.

Social scientists now seek to understand the impact of social media on every aspect of human experience. Researchers examine how social media have affected participation in civic life and politics,[8] and how through social media, individuals form and extend social ties.[9] Social media's impact on our subjective well-being,[10] on our perceptions of racism,[11] on women's body image,[12] peer influence on behavior,[13] psychological stress,[14] and consumer

behavior[15] compose only a fraction of topics considered by research inquiry. Since the advent of social media, researchers have expanded examination of social media to include online harassment, uncivil behaviors, workplace effects, and conceptualizations of privacy.

Not surprisingly, social media are now central to the college campus experience and have a unique sociocultural position among college students. Derived from "the sociology of campus culture and the developmental psychology of student users,"[16] social media were intended as a means for information to be circulated by students who share some element of real-world association. These real-world associations could be known or unknown, distal or proximal, vetted or disqualified. On our college campuses today, students use social media to circulate their own developmental narratives and to consume other students' developmental testimonies and life chronicles. On college campuses, social media enable communication that provokes and stimulates student activism on and off campus,[17] as well as new century forms of civic engagement like the Occupy movement and Black Lives Matter.[18,19,20] Social media have transformed earlier social ecologies on campuses and now appear to influence college student growth and development, academic performance, student engagement, their sense of belonging, and racial narratives.[21,22]

What would John Dewey make of these technologies and their effects on college students today? Do these technologies contain essential elements for effective communication that could engender the interaction and interdependence for community life on campus? Would Dewey judge these technologies as capable of providing college students with experiential, interactional and communicative conditions necessary for developing shared experiences and "genuine community life?" Today, our campuses are racially diverse, but most are largely composed of white students. On these campuses, would we find that social media serve as a means to transmit and circulate narratives that can make Dewey's "genuine community life" possible?

DEWEY, COMMUNICATION, AND TECHNOLOGY

Dewey speculated about the state of the democratic public in light of 20th century technological advances. Had "the machine age" that developed the "Great Society" unintentionally altered human interaction and in doing so, foiled the development of the "Great Community"?[23] Dewey observed that the new technologies of the period had made "access to means of amusement" "easy and cheap beyond anything known in the past,"[24] and more importantly, they had forever changed how individuals interacted. He accepted that "the movie, the radio, cheap reading matter and motor car with all they stand for [had] come to stay."[25] And though these technologies were not deliberately invented to "divert [our] attention" from each other, from communicating our needs, concerns and opinions as members of a democratic public, Dewey believed that they had indisputably altered our public communication.[26]

Dewey observed early in the 20th century that "modern times" had expanded "intercommunication" with the "invention of appliances for securing acquaintance with remote parts of the heavens and bygone events of history," and that "the cheapening of devices, like printing" amplified the "recording and distributing information—genuine and alleged."[27] As he wrote, the "[t]elegraph, telephone and now radio, cheap and quick mails, the printing press" made the distribution of "news" faster, cheaper and more common. But these new forms of communication created a "mania for motion and speed" that changed our interactions from stable and moored relationships to "mobile and fluctuating associational forms."[28]

Despite these concerns, Dewey trusted that technological advances could be leveraged to advance the development of democratic communication. If technologies could expand communication by extending and freeing the range of associations and relationships, then they had the potential to become a means to achieve democratic community in modern America. Communication was the lynchpin. For Dewey, the extent to which "new" technologies could circulate the "signs and symbols" that compose shared experience would be the key to technology becoming a means to develop communal life in a democracy.

Dewey recognized that technological development could increase an individual's informational reach; that with new technologies individuals could access data about things that they had never (or would ever) experience, and from relationships ever less immediate, less experiential and firsthand. This troubled Dewey because the meaning that information acquired—whether its meaning was "genuine" or "alleged"—emerged from cooperative activity that was mediated by language and context. New technologies, he discerned, appeared to lessen the importance of individual inquiry through in-person interaction, thus limiting deliberation on meaning and the extent to which these meanings could be shared.

In effect, Dewey was concerned about the impact that technology would have on *democratic* communication. Produced more and more by interaction with text and images and not through cooperative interaction, communication in his modern era seemed less consonant with democratic ideals and thus less likely to cultivate community. What if technology reduced individual and group associations, if it supplanted the need for face-to-face interaction? What if technologies became simply information resources free of interactional activity? What if communication through technology became less and less a cooperative activity and more an exchange of symbolic activity independent of cooperation, intimacy and connection? For technology to be in the service of democracy, then—whether to induce it, to support it, or to broaden it—Dewey reckoned that technology must somehow increase the associations between individuals and between groups; that technology's contribution to democratic community lay in its ability to facilitate interaction and cooperation so that interests could be deliberately shared. To serve democratic ends, technology should provide the conditions for "social efficiency" or to "share in the give and take of experience;" technology should help us communicate our experiences and in doing so, make our experiences (information, knowledge) "more worth while to others."[29] More freely communicating our experiences with others, Dewey surmised, would enable each of us "to participate more richly in the more worthwhile experiences of others."[30] If technology could enable us to take in the experiences of others, then perhaps it could also serve to undo those

"barriers of social stratification" that Dewey reasoned made us "impervious to the interests of others."[31] If technology could do this, then technology would create the conditions for community. Technology, rightly conceived and utilized, could serve democratic ends; or more accurately, technology could serve as a means to actualize community.

Dewey alerted us to the need to ascertain the nature and effect of communication to achieve community. Community is impossible without sharing "aims, beliefs, aspirations, knowledge—a common understanding."[32] Communication enables us to "know what the other is about"[33] and to inform the other about our own commitments and experiences. Sharing experience until it is common to all is the cornerstone to community, argued Dewey. Empathy and discernment are essential dimensions of this kind of communication; communication that leads to community is not a mechanical, hearsay or a "merely verbal" exchange of information.[34] Understood this way, the communication that is necessary for community is educative and formative because the attitudes of those involved in the communicative exchange are revised, amended and adjusted.[35] Technology, then, must be a means for us to exchange the meaning made of experiences, rather than just the receiving and dispensing of information.

Consequently, the worth of technology in a democracy is the extent to which it facilitates communication understood as interpersonal dialogue, social inquiry, and the meaningful exchange of experiences. In order to unite diverse people with diverse experiences, technology must provide the capability to share meaning derived from their social contexts. Technology should enable communicative participation in which information "modifies the disposition of both parties."[36] Information that amends our understanding is data that are bound to the contexts of experience and that are instrumental in "the actions, facts, events and the relations of things."[37] In order for information transmitted through technology to be consummatory, i.e. to achieve the unity of diverse social positions through the sharing of meaning, the "dispositions"[38] of those whose experiences were shared were adjusted.

Thus, to achieve community, whether the "Great" American community or, say, the college campus community through technology, Dewey

would demand that its capabilities provide the conditions for each of us to share experiences so that our diverse experiences have the potential to be made communal. Interestingly, despite his concerns about the mobility and physical distances that characterized 20th century living, Dewey acknowledged that "living in physical proximity" was not an absolute prerequisite for community.[39] Books and letters could also "institute a more intimate association between human beings separated by thousands of miles from each other."[40] Instead, argued Dewey, communication in order to be effective had to be a creative and stimulating process that would help us overcome the differences in our experience. Like art, communication can produce mutual and collective meanings essential for community. Like art, communication should "throw [s] off the covers" that conceal our experiences.[41] Technology should enable expression, our delight and confusion, "excitement" and "turmoil" that keeps us engaged with others and enables us "to carry forward" and evolve the meanings we intend to share.[42] Technology, if it is to enable community, must allow for "the expression of self in and through the medium" and for the expression of self as "a construction in time."[43]

Nonetheless, Dewey was troubled by the effects of the increasing physical distance between individuals on democratic community. In his reasoning, physical immediacy could provoke more social closeness, while spatial distance could bring about social distance. But Dewey recognized that the technologies of his era could help individuals maintain communicative ties, or in Putnam's terms,[44] Dewey understood that telephones and telegrams could maintain "bonding" ties, and that newspapers and radio could help develop the "bridging" ties necessary for democratic communities. Dewey speculated that because these technologies were *tools* for communication, they could be employed and manipulated to mitigate the spatial distance between individuals that could thwart shared meaning making and democratic affiliation.

Like 20th century technology, social media were also intended to effectively erase the spatial distance between individuals that often thwarts communication. Physical proximity is irrelevant in social media use. Spatial closeness is no more a requirement for communication through social media than is language and

even time. Synchronous or asynchronous, communication through social media allows both spatial and temporal distance to be transcended, and does so at faster and more widespread ways than the technologies of Dewey's century. Yet despite this, communication on social media may not unequivocally stimulate social closeness according to researchers.[45] In fact, these media may produce social distance regardless of spatial proximity.

It would seem that social media's capacity to increase interaction between individuals would improve levels of association, or the possibility of association. With greater capacity for communication, it would seem that social media could help us improve the frequency and occurrence of social closeness and shared meaning. Indeed, social science research has shown us that communication through these media can strengthen social bonds and create opportunities to establish Putnam's "bridging" ties independent of time and place.[46] Nonetheless, social scientists have also pointed out and validated claims that social closeness can be negatively impacted by communication on social media, that the erasure of proximity or the perceived reduction of spatial distance does not mitigate the effects of communication that is hostile and antagonistic. For example, bullying texts, racialized aggressions, and sexually harassing images are perceived as anti-associational communication and pervert the associational and democratic potential of social media communication. On college campuses, some groups have yoked discriminatory and harassing communication on social media to advance exclusion and social detachment.[47] It appears, then, that social media communications can serve to dissociate groups on campus rather than provide the conditions for bonding and the development of shared meanings.

CAMPUS COMMUNITY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

American colleges have long struggled with building campus community especially when faced with students' experiential differences and varied social histories. Racial, class and gender social positions have contested campus insularities that precluded the full and free participation of certain individuals. Like all other social institutions, colleges are socio-political terrain in which power

relations, and symbolic and literal social hierarchies present inequitable opportunities for members.[48] Some have argued that it is our inability to effectively communicate these experiential differences in the curriculum and through other institutional means that has prevented the development of "genuine community life" on our college campuses.[49] Theoretically, social media's capacity to expand our students' range of communication should serve as one means for students to distribute and share their experiential realities, to know about the experiences of others, and to cooperatively engage in meaning-making around these experiences. Engaging in this communication could develop shared meaning and change dispositions, Dewey's criteria for genuine community life. However, recent social science research suggests something very different is occurring.

In findings from longitudinal research to assess how college students of color use social media on a predominantly white campus,[50] the nature and intent of their communication suggests that communication on social media for the purposes of sharing experiences and to engage in cooperative activity to develop shared meanings is restricted to their homophilic peers. These students have historically held outsider socio-political identities on predominantly white American campuses and did not use social media to increase their connections and interactions with racially dissimilar peers on campus—or in Dewey's terms, they did not use social media to share experience and deliberate on those experiences across various and dissimilar groups. Social media were not used to bridge to racially dissimilar peers; to share and exchange information, ideas, and opinions that would lay the foundation for building broader, more genuine community life on campus. Rather, students used social media to build bonds and circulate information with other students with similar racial identification, or status homophily.[51] Because we know that bridging enables different groups to share experiences and knowledge, social media would seem an especially powerful tool for bridging through the circulation of ideas and information. Yet these on-campus racial minority student populations did not view social media as instrumental to forming new associations with white majority students. Through social media, these students appear more likely to effect segregation than to communicate with individuals and groups with dissimilar racial identities

and social-cultural experiences. Students of color on this predominantly white campus use social media to retreat to sameness and like-minded communicative behavior, thus limiting the prospects for genuine community and democratic participation on campus. By restricting communication to defined groups or individuals, their information and ideas are rarely challenged and infrequently deposed.

But it would be a mistake to interpret the behavior exhibited by students of color as deliberately anti-communitarian. For outsider groups on campus such as students of color, this may be a communicative act designed to support and safeguard communities of color on a predominantly white campus. Though closing off the prospect of Dewey's "genuine community life," when victimized by online harassment, degradation, and racialized aggressions, students of color on campus use social media to retreat to the safety of homophily. Moreover, the anonymous nature of many assaults on social media further fuels distrust of white students, further limiting the possibility of knowing dissimilar others. Increasing distrust of white students causes students of color to detach and protect themselves from racially heterogeneous groups on campus, restricting their interconnections and interrelations further.[52].

In this example, it seems evident that some students are not using social media in ways that Dewey asserted are necessary for creating community life. In this example, students of color did not extend their range of relationships. To be in the service of genuine community, their social media use would have to have enlarged and changed their experiences beyond their proximal and homophilic relationships. To satisfy Dewey, students' social media communications would have had to have extended their range of associations and shared experiences. Despite this technology's inherent capacity for such democratic communication, students did not use social media in this Deweyan spirit. Instead, given the racial environment on campus, students of color used these technologies to build, strengthen and protect their specific racial communities, and like other communities, did so to circulate core ideas and enlist connection.[53]

CONCLUSIONS

Despite the promise that social media hold for serving as a means to develop community on the racially diverse college campus as conceived by Dewey, there's little to suggest that social media have enabled this. Social media may actually reinforce segregated communities and not foster the development of shared community life as envisioned by Dewey. But as Dewey noted, it's easy to blame the technology itself rather than "the ideas or absence of ideas" that inform technology's use.[54] That is, perhaps the problem is not social media per se but rather that we believe that this technology is beyond the reach and control of faculty and administrators; that social media are not the responsibility of *educators*. What "ideas" for social media use does the college provide students? Does the college recognize and engage social media as an educational tool for student engagement? Student formation? Civic education? For building community? Does the college leverage the educative potential of social media to foster inter-racial communication? Inter-racial shared experience? Not claiming social media as a tool for communicating ideas necessary for the formation of community on campus, or in Dewey's view the "absence of [these] ideas," is a lost opportunity for colleges. As he noted, the "thoughts and aspirations congruous"[55] for developing community with 20th century's technologies were themselves never communicated, rendering these technologies largely ineffective for developing community. He would say that the same is true of social media on the college campus today.

Though political theorist Danielle Allen[56] appeals more directly to social policy to achieve a connected society, Allen, like Dewey, reminds us that a democratic society is a connected one; that democratic communities are the result of associations large and small, of communication through associational ties. Like Dewey, Allen looks to institutions like our colleges and universities to "enable" and "nudge us"[57] toward associations so that we can access the kind of social capital ("capacities, knowledge, and skills") that will help us realize the value of associations.[58] These associations are what Dewey characterized as "full and free" associations, or those social relationships that did not restrict or prevent individuals from the "full and free" associations that engendered

individual growth, the formation of shared meanings, and the development of democratic communities.[59] These are the associations that social media could help engender on campus. To be consonant with Dewey's vision of community, then, institutions like the American college should determine how best to employ social media as a tool to "nudge" students toward such communication and associations.

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