

Student use of social media: when should the university intervene?

John Rowe*

Curtin University, Perth, Australia

The phenomenal growth in the use of social media in the past 10 years has dramatically and irreversibly changed the way individuals communicate and interact with one another. While there are undoubtedly many positives arising out of the use of social media, irresponsible or inappropriate use can have significant negative consequences. In the university setting, comments posted on widely accessible forums such as Facebook, and seen by other students or staff, can damage reputations, create personal distress and compromise academic integrity. So how should universities deal with this problem? This article describes the findings of a research project undertaken in 2011 to address this question. Given that many students would regard their Facebook pages and Facebook groups as their own private space, one of the key goals of the project was to establish appropriate limits for university interference in these matters. Another was to develop a categorisation model for dealing with inappropriate or irresponsible comments that have been detected or reported.

Keywords: cyber-bullying; Facebook; online bullying; reputational damage; responsible use of social media; social media; social networking; student misconduct

Introduction

Many university administrations are concerned about student use of social media to post offensive, insulting and ridiculing comments about staff and other students. All universities have been struggling to balance freedom of speech and the right to express an opinion, with reasonable expectations of responsible and respectful behaviour by students, as well as the protection of staff and student well-being. Surveys of Australian university students and staff conducted in 2011 have enabled the development of a categorisation model and guidelines for handling such matters.

Background: the rise of social networking and changes in communication style

The evolution of the Internet from essentially a passive information source to a fully interactive medium has been transformational, particularly for younger generations. The ability to ‘self-publish’ via blogs and online public forums has allowed self-promotion and attention-seeking behaviour to explode in modes of communication and representation – described as ‘ego casting’ (Rosen, 2005; Vilhena da Cunha, 2007).

Sonia Livingstone (2008) commented on initial broader community feelings towards Gen Y and social networking sites as follows:

The explosion in social networking sites such as MySpace, Facebook, Bebo and Friendster is widely regarded as an exciting opportunity, especially for youth. Yet the public response

*Email: john.rowe@curtin.edu.au

tends to be one of puzzled dismay regarding a generation that, supposedly, has many friends but little sense of privacy and a narcissistic fascination with self-display.

The growth of Facebook in particular has been phenomenal. By November 2011, there were over 10.6 million Facebook accounts in Australia. Over 60 per cent of these users are in the up to 34 age group, generally regarded as Generation Y and Generation Z.

Generation Y has grown up with 'self-esteem parenting' (Tulgan, 2009), and common characteristics are high degrees of self-confidence and less regard for authority. Achieving and maintaining status with peers is of fundamental importance to Generation Y, more so than achieving status with authority figures (Tulgan, 2009). The importance of peer acceptance and gaining kudos in one's own social groups is a possible explanation for some of the attention seeking, and at times irresponsible, postings and behaviour seen on sites such as Facebook. Social networking sites allow individuals to adopt an online persona that is more outward and confident than they may be comfortable displaying in normal face-to-face situations. This bravado is no doubt a contributing factor in encouraging rash and perhaps unthinking use of such sites hidden behind the perceived anonymity of the web. The instantaneous nature of publication on social networking sites is also highly attractive. Generation Y and Generation Z are insatiable consumers of information and can multi-task with ease, moving rapidly from activity to activity. Tulgan (2009) sums this up as follows: 'Generation Y is like Generation X on fast-forward with self-esteem on steroids'. (Generation X is generally defined as those born between 1965 and the early 1980s.)

How does this affect university communities?

There are many benefits of the use of social media in a university setting (Collin, Rahilly, Richardson, & Third, 2011). Group work (particularly popular in large classes) is facilitated enormously by the capabilities provided through social networking (Chelliah & Clarke, 2011; Wheeldon, 2010), and communication generally between staff, students and their peers can be enhanced by appropriate use of social media.

However, social media's ease of use has its negatives as well. Sites such as Facebook, which are primarily geared towards social interaction and 'fun' (Graham, Faix, & Hartman, 2009), almost certainly encourage less considered and potentially risky comments compared to those posted on the more conservative, structured formats made available to students to provide evaluation and feedback. Comments posted on sites such as Facebook are often 'stream of consciousness' thoughts, expressed with little regard to their potential impact. It has been shown that many young people set different boundaries between private and public domains and are willing to not only divulge personal information about themselves, but also make 'private' comments about others in a public space. Of course, this means that the comment can be seen by more than the intended audience and attributed to them, sometimes with unexpected consequences.

The changed nature of student comments

For earlier generations, making critical comments about teachers and ridiculing their mannerisms or appearance was commonplace. But the comments were spoken, not written, or passed between students via handwritten notes in class or scratched into wooden desktops or the back of toilet doors. The likelihood of the subject of the comment, actually seeing it was small and even if it was seen or brought to that person's

attention, the likelihood of linking the comment with a particular student was extremely slim. Furthermore, schools or universities would often immediately remove the offending comment. In essence, the comments were ephemeral, with a very limited distribution and a very limited life.

The Internet has changed all this. Although there is extensive use of anonymity and aliases on social networking sites, many younger people seem quite prepared to post potentially questionable comments under their own name, perhaps not realising that their posts are not going to be confined to just their friends. This alacrity can come back to bite these students. Comments, once posted, may not be able to be withdrawn. Even where the original posting might be able to be deleted, it may already have been copied or further distributed. There is no control over subsequent redistribution and re-posting, and a comment can take on a life of its own, appearing on many other sites and persisting in the public domain even if removed from the original source. As Ardia (2010) commented, 'Even if an embarrassing video has been removed from YouTube or a defamatory statement has resulted in a finding of liability, the injurious information often lives on in social networks, blogs, and vast online data repositories easily accessed with a search engine'.

From this, it might be construed that comments and criticisms posted in social networking forums, because of their wider reach and persistence, are of more concern than the old style 'scratched in a wooden desktop' comment. This may well be the case, but it also needs to be recognised that due to the sheer volume of comments posted and the speed with which comments disappear off the screen as a consequence of subsequent posts, many comments that are not re-posted or specifically referenced in subsequent posts actually have a very short latency. They are often quickly forgotten and replaced with the next 'interesting post'.

The growth of university-related student-run social media sites

Many universities run their own social networking sites. At Curtin University in Perth, Australia, there is an official Curtin University Facebook group that is used to distribute information and handle queries from existing or prospective students. This is managed and moderated by university staff, and the university clearly takes responsibility for controlling posts and other content on this site. In addition to the official university Facebook group, a number of other Curtin University-related (but not sanctioned) Facebook groups have been created by students and are run by students. Examples are 'Overheard at Curtin', Controversial Curtin and Curtin Memes. An 'Overheard' site exists at many universities across the world. The purpose of these sites is essentially fun – the sharing of amusing stories and commentary amongst students – but they are also fertile ground for offensive and inappropriate comments. The Overheard at Curtin group has almost 11,000 members and therefore has significant reach. However, not all the members are current students at Curtin University. Membership is open and many members are former students, students of other universities and friends of students.

If offensive or inappropriate posts are made on these student-run sites, for example, posts that could negatively impact on the well-being of staff and other students, what is the university's responsibility and how does the university respond?

Common issues faced when dealing with inappropriate or offensive posts

Using an alias or nickname is very common on Facebook and other social networking sites. Even if an identifiable name is used, many students do not protect their

Facebook passwords as rigorously as they might protect a bank password or student account password. If an offensive or inappropriate post is detected, can it actually be attributed to the person who appears to have posted it? There have been cases where responsibility for offensive or inappropriate posts on websites has been denied on the basis that 'a friend did it as a joke' or 'someone else must have got hold of my password'. It can be difficult to prove that this is not the case as such situations clearly do arise from time to time. Threads are a common occurrence on Facebook and other social networking sites. A particularly interesting or controversial initial post by a student can generate large numbers of follow up comments. This raises a number of issues. Does 'liking' an offensive or inappropriate comment make the second student also guilty of the original offensive comment? If the original comment is posted anonymously but the second student is identifiable, is it appropriate, and is it fair, to take action against the second student who 'liked' the comment, when the original perpetrator is beyond threat of action due to their anonymity? These issues must be tackled when dealing with inappropriate posts and can result in time consuming and costly investigation.

Development of a proposed categorisation model

Two surveys conducted in 2011 gauged university student and staff attitudes towards a number of issues around student use of social media to post negative or inappropriate comments. In particular, the surveys attempted to establish:

- Whether there was consensus on the extent to which universities should concern themselves about derogatory and insulting posts
- Whether there was a common view across groups on the types of posts that might warrant intervention of some form or other
- What students and staff felt about the idea of universities monitoring university-related but non-official (student created and managed) social networking sites for inappropriate comments
- Whether students would welcome universities contacting them regarding critical comments they had posted on student-run sites in an effort to make improvements in services or teaching quality
- The level of sensitivity to comments by different groups (whether teaching staff were more sensitive to comments than students expected them to be or were more sensitive than non-teaching staff)
- The extent to which staff thought their employer had an obligation to protect them by taking action against students who post inappropriate comments.

In addition to specific questions on these issues, the surveys included two sets of 10 'posts'. One set contained 10 categorised (described) posts, the other set contained 10 sample posts of varying degrees of offensiveness. Respondents were asked to rate these according to a 4-point scale as shown in [Table 1](#).

Based on experience as a senior university administrator, the author proposed this model as likely to offer a useful and practical method of categorising and rating various types of posts on a scale of increasing seriousness. Feedback on its usefulness was sought in the surveys.

Table 1. Rating scale.

Level	Category	Action to be taken	Description
1	Trivial	Take no action	These are relatively trivial comments that should <i>not</i> be reacted to by universities. In fact, intervening in these cases is likely to be counterproductive.
2	Minor	Optional – possibly contact student to discuss comment	These are comments that are not particularly offensive but display a lack of respect or judgement. There is no imperative to contact the student regarding the comment; however, a university could choose to do so, for example, to suggest a more appropriate or constructive way of making that comment or criticism. The comment is of such a nature that it would not be appropriate to issue a warning or admonishment.
3	Moderate	Issue a warning	These types of comments warrant contact being made with the student. Comments in this category will generally display a distinct lack of respect and judgement and should be addressed via provision of advice and information and usually a warning regarding appropriate behaviour. These types of comments are not considered sufficiently serious that more severe penalties would be contemplated.
4	Serious	Consider more formal disciplinary action	These types of comments warrant immediate contact being made with the student. Comments in this category would generally be those that break a law (physical threats, racial vilification, sexist or other discriminatory comments), constitute bullying, or are admissions/offers to engage in inappropriate behaviour in respect of academic matters (e.g., cheating, plagiarism, collusion). Generally a warning would not be considered sufficient in these cases and formal disciplinary action against the student would normally be considered. A formal admonishment would generally be the minimum action and even more severe penalties such as exclusion or expulsion might be considered warranted.

Student and staff surveys

An initial trial survey of a mix of teaching and non-teaching staff was conducted in July 2011. This was followed up with a hard copy survey of senior student administration practitioners from a wide range of Australian and New Zealand universities in September 2011. These were staff that, in the main, had direct involvement in student discipline matters as part of their job. In October 2011, a more comprehensive online survey of both students and staff at Curtin University was conducted. The survey was constructed using Qualtrics survey software. Response rates to the surveys and the average ratings of the categorised posts by each of the survey groups are shown in [Table 2](#).

The 10 sample posts each contained specific attributes. Average ratings of these sample posts by each of the survey groups are shown in [Table 3](#). Posts have been produced verbatim.

Table 2. Average ratings¹ of categorised posts.

Post no.	Categorised post description (ratings given on described type of post)	Senior student administration practitioners ²	Teaching staff	Non-teaching staff	Students
	Survey group (<i>n</i> = 765)	68	118	119	460
1	Strongly worded criticism of particular University facilities or services (e.g., computer services, parking).	1.00	1.27	1.31	1.38
2	Strongly worded criticism of the teaching ability of a member of staff at the University.	1.55	1.96	2.01	1.90
3	A mocking or ridiculing comment about the appearance of another student at the University (e.g., choice of clothes or hairstyle).	1.96	2.26	2.28	2.07
4	A mocking or ridiculing comment about the behaviour or personal characteristics of another student at the University (e.g., mannerisms, style of speech).	1.93	2.29	2.30	2.13
5	A mocking or ridiculing comment about the appearance of a member of staff at the University (e.g., choice of clothes or hairstyle).	1.89	2.31	2.31	2.21
6	A mocking or ridiculing comment about the behaviour or personal characteristics of a member of staff at the University (e.g., mannerisms, style of speech).	1.89	2.32	2.30	2.23
7	A derogatory or personally insulting comment about another student at the University.	2.07	2.49	2.50	2.25
8	A derogatory or personally insulting comment about a member of staff at the University.	2.28	2.55	2.56	2.45
9	A racist or sexist comment about another student at the University.	2.55	2.67	2.73	2.48
10	A racist or sexist comment about a member of staff at the University.	2.53	2.78	2.80	2.66

¹Four-point rating scale, as per Table 1.²Australian and New Zealand universities; all other responses Curtin University.

Survey findings

There was wide consensus amongst both staff and students that the most serious categories of comments are threats of violence, racist, sexist and homophobic comments, and admissions of implication in academic misconduct (cheating and plagiarism). This reflects a high degree of awareness of what constitutes illegal behaviour and also the high value placed on academic integrity in a university community.

The ratings provided by respondents to the 10 categorised and 10 sample posts show a significant degree of uniformity of opinion, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. For all survey groups, the most serious categories of post were racist or sexist comments about staff and students. With the exception of senior student administration practitioners, these sorts of

Table 3. Average ratings of sample posts (names used are fictitious).

Post no.	Sample post	Senior student administration practitioners	Teaching staff	Non-teaching staff	Students
1	'Why do we keep getting these crappy Powerpoints on Blackboard? I wish they'd do a decent job on them for once' (about a unit, not identifiable from the comment).	1.10	1.27	1.20	1.19
2	'I hate this unit. It sucks. No one should do it unless u want to feel like sticking needles in your eye the hole semesta!' (about a unit, not identifiable from the comment, but the student making the comment is identifiable).	1.40	1.54	1.40	1.37
3	'yeah, she is a pain in the a***, never shuts up she must luv the sound of her own voice' (about a female lecturer, clearly identifiable from previous comments).	1.25	1.68	1.59	1.61
4	'Yeah, do u notice she always has time for the boys? he he he!' (about a female lecturer, clearly identifiable from previous comments).	1.70	2.12	1.91	1.82
5	'I didn't get a supp. Brendan is a f***ing a***hole!' (about a male unit coordinator, clearly identifiable from the name of the student making the comment and his enrolment).	1.95	2.46	2.44	2.33
6	'I wish he'd get to the point. He just talks and talks and I can't even understand him half the time. He needs to learn f***ing English' (about a male lecturer, clearly identifiable from previous comments).	1.95	2.36	2.29	2.09
7	'That Chinese chick in our group is so lame. She is just freeloading on us cos she can't speak English. Stupid b****. aaaaargh!!! Go back to China!' (about another student, difficult to identify from the comment, but the student making the comment is identifiable).	2.85	3.15	2.86	2.55
8	'Accounting 100 lecture on Tuesday, two guys – Guy 1: Just had the biggest mind f*** just then... You know those pictures where if you look at them hard enough you notice something you didn't notice before, and it scares the s*** out of you...? Guy 2: ...Yeah	2.50	2.84	2.54	2.21

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Post no.	Sample post	Senior student administration practitioners	Teaching staff	Non-teaching staff	Students
	Guy 1: Well if you stare at the front of the lecture theatre long and hard enough you'll eventually notice there's a little Indian guy trying to teach us something in English...' (about a male lecturer, easily identifiable from the name of the student making the comment and his enrolment).				
9	'I wish Gina would die!! aaaargh! I think I might kill her tomorrow! Stick a knife rihht in her! LOL.' (about a female teaching staff member, clearly identifiable from the comment). Category: Could be construed as a threat to a staff member.	3.10	3.23	3.18	2.86
10	'Hey! Did u c that toby did the assignment already? He said he'd do mine as well if i want! Score!' (about another student, difficult to identify from the comment, but the student making the comment is identifiable).	2.35	2.63	2.28	2.38

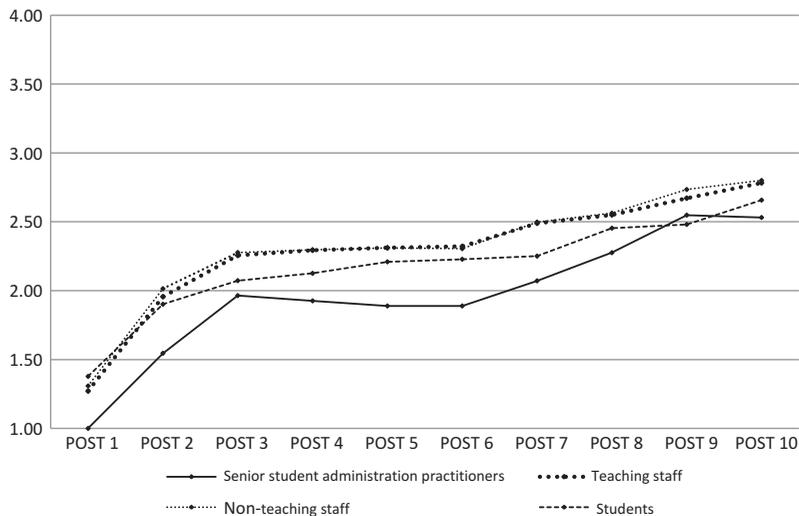


Figure 1. Average ratings of categorised posts.

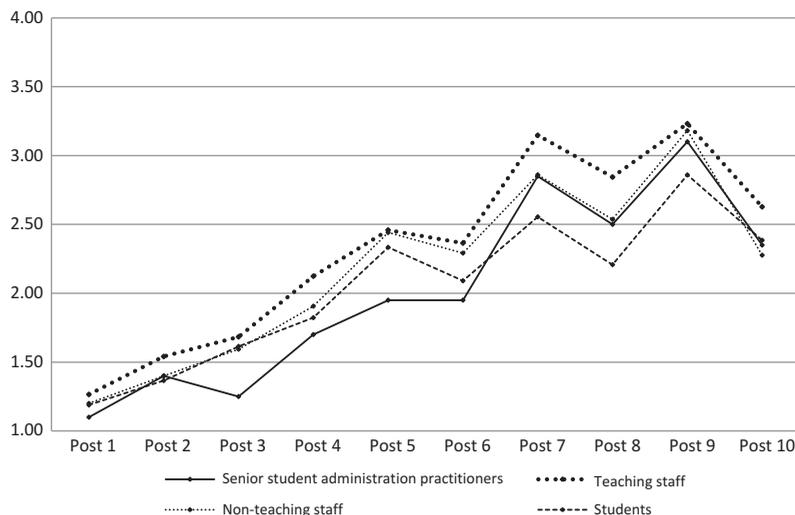


Figure 2. Average ratings of sample posts.

comments were considered more serious if made about staff than students. Student administration practitioners reversed this order, but ratings on both were very similar. The most serious sample post was considered to be the ‘threat’ to a staff member (whether meant seriously or not), followed by examples of racist comments about other students and staff. In the sample post ratings, the racist comments about students were considered more serious than the racist comments about staff, but this is explained by the different examples provided.

Are academic staff over-sensitive to criticism?

The ratings of the posts used in the surveys show a high degree of alignment between the views of students overall and staff overall. While teaching staff generally rated posts more seriously than the other survey groups, the difference in most cases was small. On the categorised posts, teaching staff and non-teaching staff rated the posts almost identically. There was greater separation between teaching staff and non-teaching staff on the sample post ratings, but the relativity of ratings was consistent. Overall, senior student administration practitioners, and therefore staff dealing more directly with student discipline issues, generally had a more relaxed attitude towards the more benign posts. The conclusion that can be reached is that although academic staff are slightly more sensitive to general criticism of this nature, the difference is not significant. In general, teaching staff appear to be no more sensitive to comments than non-teaching staff. There is a high level of sensitivity from both staff and students about comments regarding academic misconduct (plagiarism and cheating).

Should universities actively monitor non-university student-run sites?

Based on the survey responses, the answer is a definitive ‘no’ from students and, to a lesser extent, teaching staff. Many students and staff responding to the survey expressed disquiet about the possibility of the university more actively entering the ‘private’ social

Table 4. Should universities actively monitor and seek out inappropriate student comments in non-university student-run Facebook groups?

Category	<i>n</i>	Yes (%)	No (%)	Unsure (%)
Teaching staff	110	30	54	16
Non-teaching staff	116	46	42	12
Students	314	19	72	9

spaces of students and monitoring student-run sites for comments. The results are set out in Table 4.

Students are significantly more sensitive to this issue than staff. Seventy-two per cent of students emphatically see student-run sites as ‘no-go’ zones compared to 54 per cent of teaching staff and 42 per cent of non-teaching staff. Typical comments from students were:

People use Facebook and other social media sites for their own personal use and I wouldn't want to feel that I have to watch what I have to say because the University is monitoring my actions. Comments should only be identifiable by friends and groups members.

If I had wanted the University to be involved I would have contacted them directly. I believe people should be freely allowed to express their views without fear of being watched.

Social media is a way for students to connect outside of the University. Just as I would happily discuss a tutor I wasn't pleased with friends at a coffee shop, modern communication makes it so that I can communicate these issues with friends on the Internet. My personal communication outside the University is my own and I would feel incredibly intruded upon if the University contacted me about something I said online when venting frustrations about a unit or a tutor or University program. It would be in the best interest of Universities to stay out of the affairs of students in social media settings UNLESS there were some absolutely defamatory comments made (this means going over and above ‘venting’ and saying things that are untrue or slanderous about a staff member or bullying another student online).

From a student perspective, while there appears to be a high degree of recognition that certain types of comments posted on student-run forums *may* warrant intervention and action by a university (in particular, threats of violence, racist and sexist comments, admissions of cheating or offers to cheat on academic work), there is also a very strong view that student-run sites are private spaces and not the domain of universities. Students feel uncomfortable about universities entering these spaces and actively monitoring them for what the university may perceive are ‘inappropriate comments’. Students feel very strongly that this is an invasion of privacy. Interestingly, non-teaching staff were more inclined than teaching staff to view monitoring of university-related student-run sites as appropriate. It is clear from these results that there is a very high degree of sensitivity about ‘monitoring’ and ‘Big Brother’ type behaviour from both students and staff. Any perception of active monitoring of student-run sites will almost certainly generate concerns from students.

Another concern is that active monitoring of non-university student-run sites could create the impression that all university-related but student-run sites might be monitored. This is potentially dangerous ground for universities as it could lead to individuals believing that the university will react to and deal with negative comments on all university-related but student-run sites when this clearly cannot be guaranteed. This raises possible liability issues for the university if illegal or particularly damaging comments on

such sites are not dealt with. There is also the potential that actively monitoring and reacting to comments on unofficial sites could undermine the value and effectiveness of formal feedback mechanisms.

Should universities take action regarding offensive and inappropriate comments discovered on non-university student-run sites?

Where posts are particularly offensive or inappropriate, both staff and students have a similar view on this point. The answer is clearly ‘yes’. However, while both staff and students believe it is warranted for universities to take action in relation to these types of posts, there is also a view that responsibility for taking action could equally be left with the police or with service providers. Students do not necessarily see it as the university’s role to be dealing with these matters but appreciate that universities may need to get involved in order to ensure that quick action is taken to protect another student or staff member’s well-being.

Do universities have an obligation to protect their staff?

A high proportion of staff believe that their employer has an obligation to take action regarding negative posts, particularly those that are derogatory or personally insulting, in order to protect the health, well-being and reputation of staff. Interestingly, a higher proportion of non-teaching staff than teaching staff support such action being taken. There is a very clear view that certain types of comments by students – for example, personal attacks that adversely impact on a staff member’s health and well-being or unjustified comments that significantly harm a staff member’s reputation and standing with their peers – should be dealt with by the university as potential student disciplinary matters, as shown in [Table 5](#).

There is no doubt that individuals have different levels of sensitivity to comments. What is considered harmful and damaging to one individual may be considered relatively trivial to another. This study revealed a surprising degree of pragmatism by teaching staff regarding criticism from students. Many staff indicated that they understood the need for students to vent and that they, as individuals, and the university should be ‘big enough’ to tolerate a fairly high level of criticism without intervening in any way. A number of staff commented that they felt some of the criticisms about facilities or teaching quality posted

Table 5. The university should take action against a student if they.

Category	<i>n</i>	Yes (%)	No (%)	Unsure (%)
Criticise my teaching ability or decisions ¹				
Teaching staff	102	41	44	15
Non-teaching staff	106	45	44	10
Make a derogatory or insulting comment about me ²				
Teaching staff	101	49	37	15
Non-teaching staff	103	53	35	12

Notes: ¹Full question: Assume you are the subject of a post on a non-university student-run site criticising your teaching ability or a decision that you have made. Do you believe the university has an obligation to take action against the student?

²Full question: Assume you are the subject of a derogatory or personally insulting post on a non-university student-run site. Do you believe the university has an obligation to take action against the student?

by students on non-university student-run sites were justified. The general feeling was that universities should not try to stifle these outlets. Following are some of the comments from teaching staff supporting the need for action to be taken:

As an employer, the University is morally and legally obligated to provide a safe and ethically sound working environment. If derogatory comments about me are placed in any public domain, either e-space or by other means, the University must provide personal protection as my employer.

The reputation of an academic is their most important asset. An attack on integrity is an attack on the person and should be dealt with.

It is reasonably foreseeable that a staff member who is the subject of published ridicule from a student for carrying out their duties may get very upset, stressed and unable to continue their duties. Students are required to observe a certain code of conduct while undertaking their studies. The university is entitled to take action against a student who has breached the code and created harm. The university is vicariously liable if it fails to act.

Students need to realise that comments that they make on social media influence the opinion of others and may have far reaching implications for both themselves and the object of their criticism. For example, written negative comments amount to slander and can carry legal consequences if pursued. In addition, employers now use Facebook and other social media as part of their vetting process when selecting new employees and so a negative Facebook profile also hinders the student's own chances of success in the future.

Conversely, other teaching staff had this to say:

They are students expressing an opinion. I think we should all just get over ourselves. I am not some important person. So what if someone expresses a negative opinion about me on some online chat.

What people do in their personal, private lives has no relevance to the university. If it's on a university provided forum, sure, take action, but interfering in their private lives is wrong. Functionally it's the same as monitoring what they say in their lounge room, because we don't provide that resource either.

It is not the University's role to monitor every person's Facebook and social media site; it is an invasion of privacy and civil rights. Social media sites have their own way of dealing with inappropriate comment; it is easy to shut down an offensive site. Curtin University is not the police and nor should it be ... Nanny State going overboard! We are here to teach students, not monitor their social media interactions.

Are posts on non-university student-run sites a valid form of feedback?

While a large number of non-teaching staff believe that comments posted on student-run sites are a valid form of feedback, the number of students and teaching staff who felt this way was less than half. Interestingly, students place less value on the comments they post on non-university student-run sites than do many non-teaching staff and senior student administration practitioners (see [Table 6](#)).

Many of the comments provided in the survey responses indicate that universities need to be very careful about placing too much weight on posts in non-university student-run student sites. Certainly they can provide useful information and indicate when there are particular issues or problems affecting students (providing a crude sort of student barometer), but many students admit to using these sites to vent and gain attention and do not feel that their comments should be taken seriously. It is also not necessarily the case

Table 6. Questions relating to the validity of feedback provided on non-university student-run sites, whether universities should contact students regarding negative comments, and the suitability of the categorisation model.

Category	<i>n</i>	Yes (%)	No (%)	Unsure (%)
Do you think comments posted on non-university student-run sites are a valid form of feedback and therefore something that universities should pay attention to?				
Senior student administration practitioners	68	48	26	26
Teaching staff	110	41	35	24
Non-teaching staff	116	69	22	9
Students	314	45	41	14
A negative comment is posted in a non-university student-run Facebook group about some aspect of the university. For example, a comment about the poor quality of facilities or the poor quality of teaching in a particular unit. In this situation, should the university attempt to contact the student to discuss their concerns?				
Senior student administration practitioners	68	22	65	13
Teaching staff	94	34	47	19
Non-teaching staff	114	46	42	12
Students	312	31	54	15
Do you think this categorisation model adequately covers all likely situations?				
Senior student administration practitioners	68	86	5	10
Teaching staff	101	61	25	14
Non-teaching staff	100	77	13	10
Students	276	69	18	12

that comments posted on these sites reflect the views of the majority of students. These sites can be vehicles for the most outspoken and outrageous, or those with a particular agenda. Typical comments from students were:

On social networking sites, people often say things simply to agree with their peers, not necessarily to reflect their own views and opinions.

Responding to petty whining on the Internet only encourages petty whining. Sometimes these things are just vents.

Venting on a Facebook page is different to providing thorough balanced feedback.

Concerns posted are not usually true. They are written as a way to get sympathy from close friends.

The value of social networking feedback versus formal feedback mechanisms

Most students appear to value the formal feedback mechanisms provided by universities and believe universities should rely on these as the vehicle for formal comments and feedback, not social networking sites, whether set up by the university or student-run. This view is based on a feeling that social networking sites such as Facebook encourage spur of the moment, stream of consciousness types of comments. It is felt that many comments posted on Facebook are not well thought out or are made with a view to a wider audience than just the university – for example, a student may make a more outrageous or provocative comment on Facebook, even on an official Facebook page, than they would in a formal feedback mechanism because they know it will also

be seen by friends and peers and it is an opportunity to gain attention and notoriety. The message in this for universities is that the use of social networking services such as Facebook to run university-sponsored or -administered groups, while useful in many respects, can also generate a different style of comment than would be obtained through a formal feedback mechanism. The posts on social networking sites are likely to be less considered and thoughtful and may not have the same value as feedback obtained through formal mechanisms. This needs to be taken into account when reacting to feedback provided through such forums. Another factor is the potentially high cost of constantly monitoring such sites and reacting to comments and questions posted on the sites.

Would students welcome ‘constructive’ approaches from universities regarding their comments and criticisms on non-university student-run sites?

The majority view of students is that they would *not* welcome contact from universities, even constructive contact, regarding comments they had posted on student-run sites. See [Table 6](#). This particular question in the surveys generated a large number of comments from students, many of whom expressed strong concerns that the university would be monitoring student-run sites or would consider taking this sort of action. The following comments sum up the feelings of the majority of students on this issue.

It is a privacy issue. I would be very concerned if Curtin was monitoring my personal social media accounts.

Actively contacting students who have posted negative comments or feedback feels like ‘big brother is watching’, a little bit creepy.

I would feel like the university had been ‘spying’ on me.

Being monitored on a forum such as Facebook is frankly creepy. Although this is a semi-public forum, messages posted on it are generally intended for a limited audience only (i.e., members of the group). Unless it is made very clear that a university representative is a member of the group, all comments made in such a forum are intended to ‘blow off steam’ not as honest feedback. Thus, the best course of action for a university is not to read them, but to make other valid avenues available for students to give feedback (such as end of semester teaching quality surveys).

I don’t like the idea that the University is monitoring me or being a ‘Big Brother’ scenario. I give feedback to the university via the end of the semester surveys.

It would be awkward and unexpected. Also I would question how the university knows about the comment and contact the admin of the Facebook group to find out who it is and kick the person, as is common practice in current uni Facebook groups I am a part of.

Is the proposed categorisation model useful?

There was a high degree of support for the proposed model from all categories of respondent as shown in [Table 6](#). This is encouraging, particularly the high degree of support from senior student administration practitioners involved in handling student misconduct. Eighty-six per cent of these respondents thought the model was useful. Teaching staff saw less value in the proposed model than non-teaching staff. The reasons for this will be explored further in an effort to refine the model.

Conclusions

There appears to be a high degree of consensus that comments posted on official university forums are clearly within the rights of the university to monitor and react to. However, the threshold for taking action needs to be carefully considered to avoid negative reactions from students. There is no doubt that racial vilification and sexist or homophobic comments, highly offensive insults or ridiculing comments, threats of violence or admissions of cheating or offering to cheat, if made on official sites, should be acted upon. More benign criticisms, however, even of individual staff teaching ability, may not warrant intervention. In some cases, it may be considered appropriate to contact the student to remind them of their obligations to act with respect to others (most universities have a student charter or code of conduct that requires students to show respect and act constructively in the learning environment). In other cases, it may be appropriate to contact the student, not overtly to caution them, but to suggest that there are better ways to provide feedback that will have a higher chance of being acted on and result in a productive outcome for students. However, universities need to be careful not to overstep the mark and display too much sensitivity to student criticism. If action is taken, universities run the risk that this will drive these types of comments from the official site to non-university student-run sites, diluting the value of the feedback provided through formal mechanisms.

Universities need to be even more careful about taking action in regard to comments posted on non-university student-run sites. The results of the survey show that there is a very clear view that universities should not be actively monitoring non-university student-run sites or actively seeking out offensive or inappropriate comments on student-run sites.

It is accepted that if an offensive or inappropriate comment is reported on a student-run site, universities may need to take action, but this should only be as a response to a complaint or report, not the result of detection via active monitoring, and universities should get involved only in the most extreme cases.

If a complaint or report concerning an offensive or inappropriate post on a student-run site is lodged with the university, for example, by a staff member, a student or a member of the public, universities should be very careful about getting involved in an official capacity. In most cases, the preferred option is to advise the complainant to approach the relevant group administrator or social networking provider direct to have the post removed and, where appropriate, the offending site or user account de-activated. Facebook has a set of rights and responsibilities that require users to commit to not bully, intimidate or harass any other user, post content, that is, hate speech or threatening, or do anything unlawful, misleading, malicious or discriminatory. If these responsibilities are breached, the offending post can be removed and the users account deactivated.

Generally, reporting offending posts to the administrator or service provider of the site will be the appropriate action to take. If, however, the post is particularly offensive (e.g., an extreme racist or sexist comment about a staff member or another student) or involves a possible threat to the safety of an individual, more direct action on behalf of the complainant may be appropriate and necessary in order to have the matter dealt with quickly and to show support for the complainant or victim of the post.

References

- Ardia, D. S. (2010). Reputation in a networked world: Revisiting the foundations of defamation law. *Harvard Civil Rights Civil Liberties Law Review*, 45, 261–328.
- Chelliah, J., & Clarke, E. (2011). Collaborative teaching and learning: Overcoming the digital divide? *On the Horizon*, 19, 276–285.

- Collin, P., Rahilly, K., Richardson, I., & Third, A. (2011). *The benefits of social networking services – literature review*. Melbourne: Cooperative Research Centre for Young People, Technology and Wellbeing, Inspire Foundation, University of Western Sydney and Murdoch University.
- Graham, J. M., Faix, A., & Hartman, L. (2009). Crashing the Facebook party – One library's experiences in the students' domain. *Library Review*, 58, 228–236.
- Livingstone, S. (2008). Taking risky opportunities in youthful content creation: Teenagers' use of social networking sites for intimacy, privacy and self-expression. London School of Economics and Political Science, UK. *New Media and Society*, 10, 393–411.
- Rosen, C. (2005). The age of egocasting. *The New Atlantis*, 7, Fall 2004/Winter 2005, 51–72. Retrieved from <http://www.thenewatlantis.com/publications/the-age-of-egocasting>
- Tulgan, B. (2009). *Not everyone gets a trophy: How to manage Generation Y*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Vilhena da Cunha, M. I. (2007). The egocasting phenomenon and the identity issue. Universidade Catolica Portuguesa. Mestrado em Comunicacao e Gestao Cultural – Industrias Culturais. Retrieved from <http://www.bocc.ubi.pt/pag/cunha-ines-egocasting-phenomenon.pdf>
- Wheeldon, E. (2010). *A social society: The positive effects of communicating through social networking sites*. Online Conference on Networks and Communities, Department of Internet Studies, Curtin University, 25 April 2010. Retrieved from <http://mitcher.yolasite.com/resources/A%20Social%20Society.pdf>

Copyright of Journal of Higher Education Policy & Management is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.