Educational Networking: Must Students’ Health & Safety be Compromised to Attain the Benefits of Social Networking in the Classroom?

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I. INTRODUCTION

“Educational Networking” is the use of social networking technologies for educational purposes.¹ Recent research suggests vast benefits inside classrooms where educators employ educational networking.² However, with these benefits comes privacy and safety concerns, including, but not limited to, exposure to inappropriate online content, sexual predators and online student harassment.³ As this approach becomes more popular throughout the nation, parents, educators, administrators and policy-makers are forced to consider whether the benefits of such concept outweigh potential negative effects.

In this Article, I will show that educational networking can be used in U.S. public schools safely, and should be seriously considered as valuable teaching methodology. To do so, I review literatures in education, pediatrics and behavioral sciences. Part II will provide an overview of educational networking and how it has came into existence. Part III will consider the benefits that social network websites can have on students. Part IV will note and dispel certain harms that social networking is believed to provoke, including online victimization. Further, it will briefly review speech in school protected by the First Amendment, and detail why encouraging social networking in schools may further complicate this relationship. Part V will, in short, examine the reception and response to social network websites by schools, legislators, experts of

³ Holcomb et al., supra note 1.
and advocates for social network websites, non-commercial entities, and commercial social
network websites themselves. In Part VI, I argue that students’ social networking usage will only
continue to increase. Therefore, educators should embrace usage of such websites in classrooms.
At the same time, educators can reduce risks posed to students’ health and safety by working
alongside parents, administrators, legislators, and the designers of social network websites.

II. THE ARRIVAL OF EDUCATIONAL NETWORKING

Social network websites are web-based tools that allow users to electronically
communicate with other users whom they share a connection with.4 These websites allow for
users to view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.5
Social network websites such as MySpace, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn have become
increasingly popular in recent years, especially among young persons.6 As of March 2012,
Facebook alone recorded 901 million monthly active users.7 Access to such websites is no
longer exclusive to a certain socio-economic demographic of students. A recent University of
Minnesota study found that students from families whose incomes were at or below $25,000 per
year, are in many ways just as technologically proficient as middle- and upper-income students.8
This same study of 16-18 year old students, from urban schools throughout the Midwest, showed
that 94 percent of them used the Internet, 82 percent go online at home, and 77 percent had a
profile on a social networking website.9 As students’ ability and willingness to access social
network websites have increased, educators have begun employing lesson plans which utilize

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4 Holcomb et al., supra note 1.
5 danah m. boyd & Nicole B. Ellison, Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship, 13 J. COMPUTER
  MEDiated COMM., 210, 211 (2008).
6 Holcomb et al., supra note 1.
8 University of Minnesota, supra note 2.
9 University of Minnesota, supra note 2.
these websites. Researchers believe that by understanding how students use such technologies in their daily lives, schools will become more relevant, connected and meaningful to students.\textsuperscript{10}

However, due to privacy and safety concerns, many educators and administrators have been less receptive to allowing social network websites into classrooms, let alone on school premises. Educators advocating for the use of social network websites in schools claim that in their rush to safeguard students, educators equally ignore the educational and technological benefits associated with social network websites for students who will be working in the technologically-rich and globalized workplace of the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{11}

III. THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL NETWORK WEBSITES

Administrators, policy-makers, and researchers generally agree that critical problems facing education today include increasing students’ educational attainment, learning of math and science, technological fluencies, communication skills, civic engagement and preparation for the twenty-first century workplace.\textsuperscript{12} Social network websites may be a solution to such problems in education. Research has found that students who regularly use social network websites indicate that enhanced technological skills, creativity, receptivity to new and diverse views, and communication skills were educational benefits associated with the use of such websites.\textsuperscript{13} Further, social networking allows students to develop positive attitudes toward using technology systems, editing and customizing content, and thinking about online design and layout.\textsuperscript{14} These

\textsuperscript{10} Id.
\textsuperscript{11} Holcomb et al., \textit{supra} note 1.
\textsuperscript{13} Holcomb et al., \textit{supra} note 1.
\textsuperscript{14} University of Minnesota, \textit{supra} note 2.
skills students are practicing and developing, sometimes unknowingly, may prove vital to success in the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{15}

Further, the use of social network websites is the dominant out-of-school, leisure-time computer-using activity among U.S. adolescents.\textsuperscript{16} Therefore, it logically follows that using these websites in classrooms will be well-received by students as they are already familiar with them. A social network website fosters discussion between students and facilitates the sharing of information, personal and otherwise.\textsuperscript{17} This, in turn, creates intimacy among students.\textsuperscript{18} Students use these websites to fulfill social learning functions within and across informal and formal learning spheres of activity.\textsuperscript{19} These functions include peer/alumni support, obtaining validation of creative work through feedback, and help with school-related tasks.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, learners do better in educational settings where they feel a strong sense of connectedness and social belonging.\textsuperscript{21} Social network websites can provide these exact social benefits.\textsuperscript{22} Students claim that websites, like Myspace, facilitate emotional support, relational maintenance with friends and family, and provide a platform for multidimensional self-presentation.\textsuperscript{23}

Finally, social network websites can be used to engage students in discourse concerning their futures. A recent study showed that 70 percent of surveyed teens reported discussing education-related topics, including pre-college planning and careers online.\textsuperscript{24} Further, 50 percent

\textsuperscript{15} Id.
\textsuperscript{16} Greenhow, supra note 12, at 5.
\textsuperscript{17} Holcomb et al., supra note 1.
\textsuperscript{18} Id.
\textsuperscript{19} Greenhow, supra note 12, at 7.
\textsuperscript{20} Id.
\textsuperscript{21} Id. at 8.
\textsuperscript{22} Id.
\textsuperscript{24} Holcomb et al., supra note 1.
of students discussed issues directly related to schoolwork while using social network websites.\textsuperscript{25} In addition to this pre-professional planning, social network websites can be used to create student-advocates. Social network websites, and the applications within them, often facilitate information-sharing about certain issues, like environmental science concerns.\textsuperscript{26} They encourage commentary, debate, and offline activities such as writing letters to editors, signing petitions, or volunteering.\textsuperscript{27} Further, these websites may prove beneficial in the educational context as they can be used to foster preferred learning and teaching behaviors, role modeling, civic engagement, and foster participation in education and democracy.\textsuperscript{28}

**IV. THE HARMS OF SOCIAL NETWORK WEBSITES**

**A. Online Victimization: Exploitation, Harassment, and Cyberbullying**

Current research reveals that the three most commonly cited reasons for banning students from using social network websites in schools include preconceptions associated with student-exposure to inappropriate online content, fears of online sexual predators, and student-based online student harassment.\textsuperscript{29} However, research also reveals that the majority of online youth are not targeted for unwanted sexual solicitation or Internet harassment.\textsuperscript{30} Further, the majority of youth who are targeted do not report it occurring through use of social network websites.\textsuperscript{31}

Unwanted sexual solicitation occurs when youth are asked to engage in sexual talk or behavior, or to provide personal sexual information when they do not want to.\textsuperscript{32} It is true that

\textsuperscript{25} Id.
\textsuperscript{26} Greenhow, supra note 12, at 9.
\textsuperscript{27} Id.
\textsuperscript{28} Id.
\textsuperscript{29} Holcomb et al., supra note 1.
\textsuperscript{31} Id.
\textsuperscript{32} Id. at 352.
social network websites have been manipulated by sexual predators, stalkers, child molesters, and pornographers to get in contact with minors.\textsuperscript{33} However, offline consequences stemming from contact with such predators suggests that users may not exercise in the virtual world the same, routine common sense that they would exercise in the real world.\textsuperscript{34} This mistaken belief of relative safety causes an over-sharing of personal and private information by students, thus allowing predators to track them down.\textsuperscript{35}

Internet harassment is defined by aggressive or embarrassing comments made to or posted about a youth online.\textsuperscript{36} Such Internet harassment includes cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place using electronic technology, including social network websites.\textsuperscript{37} Cyberbullying can happen 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and sources of the bullying can be sometimes impossible to trace on the Internet.\textsuperscript{38} This online victimization is associated with emotional distress, concurrent psychosocial problems, and even offline victimization including physical assault by peers.\textsuperscript{39} A recent study found that although 33 percent of the 10-15 year olds surveyed reported being harassed online, they were more likely to be harassed through instant messaging or chatrooms than through social network websites.\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{33} DAVID ROSENBLUM, WHAT ANYONE CAN KNOW: THE PRIVACY RISKS OF SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES 47 (IEEE Computer Society 2007).
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{36} Ybarra & Mitchell, \textit{supra} note 30, at 352.
\textsuperscript{38} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{39} Ybarra & Mitchell, \textit{supra} note 30, at 352.
\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Id.} at 355.
B. Internet Speech and The First Amendment

Another harm with using social network websites in schools may be the difficulty in determining which speech is protected by the First Amendment. The relationship between students’ speech and the schools is already tenuous.41 By voluntarily bringing social network websites into schools, the relationship between speech and the First Amendment may be complicated further. In 1943, the Supreme Court held that schools cannot require students to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance.42 In three cases decided between 1969 and 1998, the Supreme Court produced a body of First Amendment law applicable to students in public schools.43

In Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, the Court established that “conduct by the student, in class or out of it, which for any reason . . . materially disrupts classwork or involves substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others is . . . not immunized” by the First Amendment.44 In Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser, the Court determined that students’ rights in public schools are not automatically coextensive with the rights of adults in other settings.45 Then in Hazelwood School District v. Kulmeier, the Court further limited the protection of student speech by ruling that schools “do not offend the First Amendment by exercising editorial control over the style and content of student speech in school-sponsored expressive activities so long as their actions are reasonably related to legitimate pedagogical concerns.”46

43 Williams, supra note 41, at 710.
44 Id. (citing Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District, 393 U.S. 503, 503 (1969)).
45 Williams, supra note 41, at 711 (citing Bethel School District No. 403 v. Fraser, 478 U.S. 675, 682 (1986)).
46 Williams, supra note 41, at 711 (citing Hazelwood School District v. Kulmeier, 484 U.S. 260, 273 (1988)).
To apply these standards set forth by the Supreme Court, lower courts first consider whether the speech occurred on- or off-campus.\textsuperscript{47} The speech at issue in \textit{Tinker, Fraser,} and \textit{Hazelwood} occurred on-campus; therefore, any of these cases may be applied should the speech in question occur on-campus.\textsuperscript{48} However, if the speech occurs off-campus, \textit{Tinker} is likely the only case that may be applied as the Court explicitly referenced speech occurring “in class or out of it.”\textsuperscript{49} When applying this standard, a court will determine whether the speech “materially disrupt[ed] classwork or involve[d] substantial disorder or invasion of the rights of others.”\textsuperscript{50} If this is the case, the speech is not protected by the First Amendment.\textsuperscript{51}

This exact framework has been used to resolve cases involving students’ Internet speech, but results have varied.\textsuperscript{52} These varied results occur because courts interpret this framework for evaluating student speech differently, thus reaching different conclusions.\textsuperscript{53} Further, the Supreme Court has never addressed student Internet speech specifically, so guidance to schools addressing this type of speech is limited.\textsuperscript{54} Additionally, it has proven difficult for courts to distinguish on-campus from off-campus speech as the Internet allows students to speak from anywhere easily.\textsuperscript{55} To add to this complication, social network websites offer an artificial sense of anonymity in communication, leading users to lower their inhibitions and feel protected from the consequences of their speech.\textsuperscript{56} Regardless of the whether educational networking becomes

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47}Williams, supra note 41, at 712.
\item \textsuperscript{48}Id.
\item \textsuperscript{49}Williams, supra note 41, at 712 (citing \textit{Tinker}, 393 U.S. at 513).
\item \textsuperscript{50}Id.
\item \textsuperscript{51}Williams, supra note 41, at 712.
\item \textsuperscript{52}Id.
\item \textsuperscript{53}Id. at 719.
\item \textsuperscript{54}Id.
\item \textsuperscript{55}Id. at 720.
\item \textsuperscript{56}ROSENBLUM, supra note 33, at 45.
\end{itemize}
prominent throughout the nation, future courts will have to address the issue of Internet speech. Therefore, simply banning use of social network websites in schools altogether may only deprive students of the benefits associated with them.

V. EDUCATIONAL NETWORKING: RECEPTION AND RESPONSE

In recent years, there has been a movement to restrict access to social network websites in schools. Over the course of one month in 2006, Congress held four hearings on the subject of sexual predators online, and many resulted in calls for greater regulation and/or oversight. Further, some states, including Georgia, Illinois, and North Carolina, have introduced legislation to completely ban or significantly restrict access to social network websites in their respective state’s public schools. However, banning the use of such websites in schools altogether to protect students from the risks associated with them may be irrational.

A recent study showed that social network websites do not increase one’s likelihood of unwanted sexual solicitation or Internet harassment over and above other places online. Therefore, social networking advocates argue that time and money spent on proposed legislation and legal action aimed at these websites may have greater impact if focused on other areas of prevention. This includes funding for online youth outreach programs, school anti-bullying programs, and online mental health services. Further, pediatricians can help parents understand that it is less the technology and more a child’s psychosocial profile and general online behavior that is influential in explaining the likelihood of online victimization.

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57 Ybarra & Mitchell, supra note 30, at 350.
58 Holcomb et al., supra note 1.
59 Ybarra & Mitchell, supra note 30, at 356.
60 Id.
61 Id.
62 Id.
There are also alternatives to the commercial social network websites that may provide similar benefits in an educational setting. There has been a growing and innovative collection of non-commercial, education-based social network websites that offer educators and students greater levels of user privacy and safety protections compared to existing commercial social network websites.63 Such websites, like Elgg and Ning in Education, create this unique community online and allow for collaboration between students. However, the administrator of a network has the ability to make the network private or public as needed to minimize existing concerns related to the protection of student privacy and safety.64 These new websites capitalize on the popularity of online social networking, yet provide greater security and regulation.65

Finally, commercial social network websites have taken part in reducing the risks associated with student-users. In 2009, both Facebook and MySpace worked to make their websites safer.66 These social network websites implemented numerous safeguards, including finding better ways to verify users’ ages, banning convicted sex offenders from using the websites, and limiting the ability of older users to search for users under 18 years old.67 MySpace, in these efforts, identified and removed from its website 90,000 sex offenders in 2009.68 Further, at the 2011 White House Conference for Bullying Prevention, Facebook announced new safety features it would employ to prevent bullying and create a culture of respect among Facebook users.69

63 Holcomb et al., supra note 1.
64 Id.
65 Id.
67 Id.
68 Id.
VI. CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, social networking will continue to develop, evolve and grow in the number of student-users who will readily access such websites to communicate and discuss. Evidenced in this Article are the immense benefits and skills that social network websites provide students. Employing these websites in classrooms can reach students in a creative way, and on a whole new level. There certainly are risks associated with social networking, including harassment, exposure to harmful content, violent behavior, and encouragement of self-harm. However, there are methods to reduce these risks, including the development of safety features and alternative educational networking websites designed with student safety in mind.

Most importantly, teaching students at first exposure to social network websites how to take precautions and behave in online forums is the first step in reducing such risks. Rather than simply restricting access to online communication tools, parents, educators and legislators must develop approaches and proposals that focus on children’s behaviors online and their general psychosocial profile, like aggression problems. It is without question that ensuring students’ health and safety should remain a priority. This certainly requires a team-effort on the part of parents, educators, administrators, policy-makers, and the designers of social network websites themselves. Students will inevitably access these websites, therefore we must teach them how to use the online platforms appropriately. This starts by showing students how to exercise self-limiting common sense online. There may be no better forum to achieve this than inside U.S. classrooms, while educators employ educational networking in their future lesson plans.

71 Ybarra & Mitchell, supra note 30, at 356.
72 ROSENBLUM, supra note 33, at 48.