Emerging trends in social media

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Who knows what's hot in social media? Here at MIT, Chris Peterson can tell you a thing or two (or three). As Senior Counselor for Web Communications in MIT's Undergraduate Admissions Office, Peterson oversees the MIT Admissions Blog. He also co-teaches CMS.400, Media Systems and Texts (a.k.a. "Credit for Reddit"), with department head Ed Schiappa.

At a recent meeting of MIT's Social Media Working Group, Peterson discussed three major trends in [social media](#): the liquid self and ephemeral media; algorithmic anxiety; and the redistribution of risks and rewards.

The liquid self and ephemeral media

Facebook has defined the social media experience for the last 10 years. But more recently there's been a move away from the "unified self"—that you are who you are to everyone you know across every social context. The corresponding shift has been toward apps that let you represent yourself to different people in different ways at different times: the liquid self.

The mobile app Snapchat is a great example of this. It lets you send photos and short videos—which you can annotate and draw on—to chosen recipients. These "snaps" disappear after a specified number of seconds. While largely covered in the media as the hot new app for sexting, Snapchat has in fact almost completely replaced text messaging among younger people. It's a way to make a silly face or show how sweaty you are after a run without having that image associated with your profile forever.

Nathan Jurgenson, a researcher at Snapchat, argues that this ephemerality is a natural reaction to the permanence of sites like Facebook. Individuals may still use Facebook because it's useful for getting messages circulated to large numbers of people (the network effect). But apps like Snapchat fill a different need: spontaneous sharing without concern for consequences down the road.

WhatsApp—recently bought by Facebook for $16 billion—is another app that facilitates a more liquid self. This cross-platform mobile messaging app lets you send text, video, images, and audio to one person

or to a group. It's also popular as a way to avoid high international rates when messaging across borders.

MIT alum and Internet researcher danah boyd argues that [the era of Facebook is an anomaly.](#) There's now strong interest in services that let people talk with one another in contextual environments—friends from college, friends from home, family members, and so on. These services let you communicate using the norms, expectations and relationships you have with different groups. It's a big trend that matters a lot.

Conversely, if you communicate for an organization, it's important not to overstep bounds and become too familiar. In the Admissions context, prospective students can be turned off if Admissions counselors try to engage them too much ("I'm being surveilled by these old people, what's going on?"). Prefrosh may then create separate, alternate groups that are closed, simply to regain a sense of context and control.

Says Peterson, "It boils down to knowing your audience and understanding the relationship you have with them, what they expect to hear from you, where they expect to hear from you, and how you can not offend or subvert expectations they may have."

Algorithmic anxiety

Facebook recently—and controversially—tweaked their news feed algorithm for promotional Facebook Pages. Unless an individual, organization or company pays to promote Page content, fewer people see posts than in the past. This type of maneuver creates algorithmic anxiety: concern over who's able to see what you post.

Across social media channels, it's never been clear how algorithms sort and rank content. So part of the anxiety stems from not knowing how these algorithms work: How much do you have to pay to get seen by

what number of people, and if you pay for a Facebook ad or Page promotion, will your content be seen by your intended audience?

Adding to this anxiety is the concern that these algorithms may not be all that effective. As Eric Gilbert suggests in [Widespread Underprovision on Reddit](), voting markets (thumbs up or down; the so-called "wisdom of the crowd") can be inefficient. Factors like time of day and the caption associated with a link can have more impact on voting than the content itself. A post that's now riding a big wave of popularity may have received little notice the first few times it was first posted. There's also evidence that sites like Reddit can be gamed or manipulated.

It all adds up to a lot of uncertainty.

Redistribution of risks and rewards

Research shows that one wished-for reward in the social media realm hasn't panned out: if a blog post or video on your website goes viral, don't expect that to translate into increased views across the site. Today's visitors are hit and run.

To deal with this, some sites now opt for a bifurcated strateg: sending out multiple posts while also aiming for viral hits. Peterson suggests that this strategy will likely be the optimal practice for the next five years, pointing to Gawker as a successful role model.

Some bloggers become their own brand (Nate Silver, Ezra Klein, etc.) in part by taking risks. But for every blogger who develops a known brand, many others don't succeed but do end up with publicly viewable material that may hurt them later on. It's a tough dynamic that would-be bloggers are wrestling with.

Another trend related to fame and pain is privilege backlash (for

example, #cancelColbert or #hasjustinelandedyet). While Peterson thinks utopian, democratizing narratives about social media are overblown, there's some truth to the notion that people who previously had no voice in traditional media can now be heard when large numbers of them tweet about an issue and it becomes public enough to have consequences.

These backlash cases get the most notice when they're directed at people who are famous or privileged. Referencing Teju Cole's "Seven thoughts on the banality of sentimentality," Peterson says it's important to be wary of sentimental narratives and to develop empathy for how others might understand a story.

Too much of a good thing?

Peterson closed his talk by referring to a thought piece by The Atlantic Monthly editor Alexis Madrigal, "2013: The Year 'the Stream' Crested." Is social media's relentless "More! Faster!" spinning out of control? Will new tools make the unending flow more manageable—and meaningful? With the rise of the liquid self, pundits are betting that the next big thing will be apps that simplify access to social media based on one's communities of interest.

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