**Social Media Explosion**

By Marcia Clemmitt

Randi Zuckerberg — Facebook's former marketing director and sister of Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg — should have known better. After she posted a family photo for her Facebook friends, the picture popped up in the Twitter feed of someone not on Ms. Zuckerberg's “friend” list. “Not sure where you got this photo,” she tweeted angrily. “I posted it only to friends. You reposting it on Twitter is way uncool.” But the error was Zuckerberg's. Even though she had guided Facebook's marketing, she hadn't remembered one of the company's complex rules for figuring out which postings are private. The person who tweeted the picture was a Facebook friend of a different Zuckerberg sister in the photo. Because that sister was named — “tagged,” in Facebook parlance — as one of the photo's subjects, the picture was visible to all her Facebook friends as well, despite sister Randi's intention to only share it privately.

It's a typical confusion of the social media era, when mushrooming numbers of photos and other personal information are being placed online with no consensus about whether any of it should remain private or viewable by only a few, and, if so, how to accomplish that. The Internet has been a haven for socializing since its earliest days, but beginning about a decade ago technology developers have focused like a laser on “social media” — software designed primarily to facilitate social interaction — as the key to drawing the public online. Today, social media include social networks such as Facebook that allow people to reach out to friends of friends; the photo-sharing site Pinterest; the collaboratively written Wikipedia encyclopedia; the “user review” sections at retail websites such as Amazon; “virtual worlds” such as “World of Warcraft” where people from around the world meet, compete, collaborate and play adventure games together, and many more.

Software that helps people meet, converse, work and play with others is king of the online universe, and its popularity keeps growing. As of July 2011, nearly 164 million Americans were using social media, according to the New York City-based media-research company Nielsen, and by July 2012 the number had risen 5 percent, to about 172 million.

While research is in its earliest stages, some analysts believe that because young people, especially, have shifted so much social energy online, social media may end up having profound effects not just on privacy but on both individual human relationships and how people relate to their communities.

Facebook CEO Zuckerberg has famously said that, because of social networks, privacy is no longer a “social norm.” “People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people,” said Zuckerberg. That new social norm is “just something that has evolved over time,” he said.

However, some analysts argue that privacy protections are crucial. “The No. 1 problem is that the United States doesn't have data-protection” requirements, says Alice Marwick, an assistant professor in communication and media studies at Fordham University in New York City. “The No. 2 problem,” she says, “is that the market impulse goes in the opposite direction” from privacy protection, promising huge financial rewards to social media companies that sell users' information for targeted marketing efforts and the like.

Little is known about how social media may be affecting human relationships. However, some analysts fear that social media are being seen as a replacement for face-to-face conversation. In a survey on favored communication modes, people born between 1990 and 1999 said they prefer texting above all other forms of communication, but in second place — tied with instant messaging and phone calls — is communicating via Facebook. Strikingly, face-to-face conversation is the least favored form of communication for the digital generation. That's a stark reversal of the survey preferences voiced by each generational cohort born between 1946 and 1989. All those groups put face-to-face conversation as their preferred conversational mode, and none even listed a social media technology.

“Many kids say they prefer not to talk face to face,” notes Larry Rosen, a professor of psychology at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Instead, he says, they rely on written communication only, mainly via text or social media sites, especially when communicating with adults. That choice might damage young people's communication skills for years to come, Rosen says. When people rely entirely on written messages “where you don't have access to [nonverbal] cues, things are ripe for miscommunication,” he says. Furthermore, without enough practice observing how people communicate through tone and gesture, it becomes difficult to accurately read face-to-face conversations that do take place, he says.

Some worry that a preference for social media over face-to-face meetings may make it easier and more tempting to commit identity fraud and hoaxes. For example, although exactly who was involved in the elaborate hoax is not yet clear, it was recently revealed that star Notre Dame linebacker Manti Te'o engaged in a two-year online relationship with a non-existent young woman who Te'o said died of cancer. He says he did not know it was a hoax. The situation constitutes “a terrible statement about where we are today and how social media is a tool in some really bad stuff,” said Notre Dame athletic director Jack Swarbrick.

Others see little reason for worry. Most “digital natives” — the generation that has grown up online — do not appear to be living their personal lives much differently than older generations, says Kaveri Subrahmanyam, a professor of psychology at California State University, Los Angeles. Most use social media mainly “to connect to people already in their lives” and “do the things they'd do anyway” in the physical world, she says. “Socially, I don't think that we need to be too concerned,” at least about the average person.

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