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Introduction – Professionalism, Incivility, and Social Media: Educational Foundations in Digital Times

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Introduction – Professionalism, Incivility, and Social Media: Educational Foundations in Digital Times

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Over just the past three months, mainstream news has reported on a range of controversies centred on the intersection of social media, academic freedom, and democratic discourse. For example, Columbia University recently placed restrictions on a faculty member for his posts on X (formerly Twitter) about Israel, Gaza, Hamas, and Palestine (Mangan, 2024). The appropriateness and acceptability of these measures, imposed by administrators, are part of ongoing discussions and conflicts about acceptable extramural speech by academic staff in post-secondary institutions across the world. In this setting, educators ask, how do social media venues expand the range of opportunities for academic freedom and dissent? Similarly, educators wonder how chairs, deans, principals, superintendents, school boards, and other educational stakeholders legitimately control and restrict such

expression. How do we define academic freedom and free speech in extramural venues such as X, Instagram, and Facebook? Notably, there is a shift in thinking where some scholars support the notion of a theory of learning that stems from the connections students and teachers cultivate in online social spaces: connectivism (Siemens, 2005). However, recent events, from labour disputes to pandemics to wars, highlight the urgency of examining how digital engagement influences both educational practices and professional identities, especially, from the disciplines in the foundations of education (notably, history, philosophy, and sociology). By applying a foundations lens, we can situate these contemporary challenges within broader historical, philosophical, and sociocultural contexts, enabling a deeper understanding of their implications on educational and professional practices.

Similarly, in the public education sphere, teachers are navigating the limits of their expression in online spaces. When Saskatchewan's Bill 137 passed in October 2023, mandating parental or legal guardian consent or restrictions on students' rights to identify their pronouns, educators quickly mobilized online. By November, a group of Regina-based educators circulated a petition calling on districts to ignore the law, based on implications for student well-being and rights (Underwood, 2024). Such recent instances illustrate how teachers' and faculty members' online presence is central to educational and public policy debates yet remains fraught with professional risk.

Despite increasing attention to educational technology and social media, research in this area is limited; only a fraction of studies address these pivotal intersections (Barrot, 2021). This special issue brings together scholars across educational foundations to address these gaps. Contributors from Canada and the United States explore foundational questions across history, philosophy, sociology, and adjacent fields that probe the essential nature and evolving practices of education. Educational foundations scholars, with their capacity to foster "habits of mind" and foundational learning (Christou & Bullock, 2013), offer critical insights into the nuanced roles that social media plays in shaping educational spaces, ethical standards, and professional practices. This issue thus aims to equip practitioners,
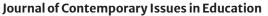
academics, and policymakers with perspectives that navigate the complex digital landscape shaping education today.

Contributions from each of the scholars help support the knowledge gap in social media and education research. While there is significant literature that focuses on social media and education, most studies focus on the impact of social media on student motivation, learning outcomes, experiences and skills, and relationships between students and teachers. Furthermore, these studies are most often undertaken at the level of higher education and were designed as single case studies (Barrot, 2021). While studies such as Barrot's provide insight into the pedagogical and relationship implications of social media usage in education, this issue brings together scholars interested in exploring how social media is redefining some of the very theories, assumptions, and values that underpin current and past answers to what it means to teach and learn. More specifically, each paper attempts to interrogate and uncover the role of social media in shaping and reshaping our notions of student, teacher, and professional identities, classroom discourse, critical media literacy, and professional advocacy.

The pervasive use of social media around the globe[1] (Kemp, 2021) indicates that these issues are highly relevant in the global context. While distinct regional features and policies derive from educators and institutions with unique lived experiences, the extent to which social media has become part of so many educators' everyday lives in a personal and professional capacity (Carpenter et al., 2020; Damico & Krutka, 2018; Donelan, 2016; Fox & Bird, 2017; Greenhalgh et al., 2021; Kelly & Antonio, 2016; Mackenzie, 2016; Robson, 2018; Schroeder et al., 2019; Staudt Willet & Carpenter, 2020; Veletsianos, 2013; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2016;

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[1] According to Kemp (2021), there are now 4.2 billion social media users around the world, showing a growth rate of 13% in 2020. This statistic means that in 2020, the number of social media users was equivalent to more than 53 percent of the world's total population.

Xing & Gao, 2018) means that there are immutable connections within those digital spaces. Even educators who find themselves in contexts with lower rates of social media usage and still lower instances of regular use in educational institutions (Kemp, 2021; Koeze & Popper, 2020) will be interested in such studies in terms of support for emerging policies. Although theoretically dense in terms of the connections between social media and deeply rooted sociological, philosophical, and ideological considerations, each paper is united in the effort to support such educators, as well as reform efforts where social media policies are already well established.

In this special issue, Christine Greenhow, Aisel Akhmedova, Jennifer Sutcliffe, Marisa Fisher, and Connie Sung explore issues relating to students with or without disabilities identities and social media usage. Their research provides an essential examination of how interactions in social media spaces are shaped within and by social constructs about ableness. This article demonstrates how a sociological framing can illuminate how student interactions with social media can help educators to conceptualize ways to support inclusive educational experiences for students with and without disabilities. Their research extends these intersections among learning, inclusion, and social media by examining the avenues of learning that are opened by social media. As teachers and academics navigate the increasingly diverse nature of their classrooms, this work brings attention to conversations and research that is just beginning to examine the potential of social media to provide new learning outlets for students, especially those with disabilities.

Just as social media is intertwined with student identity and learning contexts, professional identities, whether constructed, internalized, perceived, or all the above, have been significantly affected by the pervasive presence of social media. Teachers in both K-12 and post-secondary contexts face the pressures of accepting their role as public intellectuals. Ee-Seul Yoon and Shannon Moore's contribution explores how universities have developed policies that have effectively reshaped how academic freedom is conceived and practised. Heavily influenced by

neoliberalism, these social media guidelines for academics illustrate the ethical dilemmas many academics face in participating in the virtual arenas of public discourse.

While the public role of professors is more often connected with intellectual insights and knowledge sharing via social media, educators in the K-12 context are more likely to think about the moral and ethical implications of their social media usage. While expectations of teacher conduct and representations of teachers as bastions of morality date to the beginning of formalized public education in Canada and the United States, social media has redefined the way teachers think about reconciling their private and public lives. Even though social media has become a reality of everyday life for many teachers, teacher organizations fail to offer little more than cautionary tales of teacher dismissal and rigid policies to guide teachers in navigating this delicate balancing act. Gemma Porter questions how teacher identity has been affected by social media, which is a point that needs to be addressed by teacher organizations in their development of social media guidelines.

Closely connected to notions of professional identities in individual professional contexts, teachers and their professional organizations in the K-12 context are often in a position where the public perception of teaching and teachers is paramount in collective bargaining negotiations. Although the importance of public perception in collective bargaining negotiations between teachers' organizations and provincial governments predates the proliferation of social media, the weight of public perception operates in significantly different ways. Teachers and teachers' organizations alike now frequently use social media platforms to elicit support from the public during collective bargaining negotiations. Employing the same ideological frame as Yoon and Moore and Porter to think about policy development, Rachel Brickner contends that the rise of social media has provided teachers themselves with increased opportunities to be professional advocates. According to Brickner (2016), teachers who feel disillusioned and disconnected from their organizations have turned to social media as a tool to resist neoliberal policies and developments in contract negotiations. In her contribution to this special issue,

which builds on the context and data sources from her 2016 study, Brickner argues that union communication strategies must incorporate bargaining approaches that emphasize the common good and amplify teacher experiences and voices. In the 21st century, this requires adapting to the evolving landscape of public media, including the strategic use of social media platforms.

In addition to relationships between social media and identities, papers from Jonathan Anuik and Erika Smith explore how social media has reshaped assumptions about classroom discourse and critical digital literacies. Building on the theoretical insights of the preceding articles, Anuik and Smith each engage readers in interrogative processes that provide concrete conceptual examples of the role of social media in shifting the nature and our understanding of phenomena. For example, Anuik uses Boice's (1996, 2000) concepts of classroom incivility to examine student behaviours outside the in-person classrooms, while Smith applies Stommel's (2014) conceptualization of critical digital pedagogy (CDP) to support the development of critical engagement with social media.

As a collective, these papers offer a dynamic set of perspectives into the nature of the relationship among educators, education, and social media. The papers have been sequenced to support readers in following the threads of inquiry that position these papers as a collection. First, Anuik's exploration of the shifting discourse of classroom civility in new(ish) digital spaces provides a foundational thread for thinking about the implications of social media for classroom interactions, questioning essentially what it means to cultivate classroom culture in the context of digital dynamics. Yoon and Moore's work on the intersection of social media guidelines and academic freedom then invites readers to consider how digital dynamics of interaction intersect with notions of power and authority in a climate dominated by neoliberal politics and policies in post-secondary institutions. Here, the impact of social media on ideological contexts provides a broader frame for examining the challenges faced by academics in the digital age, as introduced by Anuik. These challenges faced by academics in post-secondary settings flow into an examination of policy guidelines but this time for public school teachers. After this
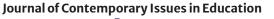
contribution, Porter intersects with Yoon and Moore's examination of academic freedom. Together, both emphasize the need for organizational policies that reflect the pervasive presence of social media and its implications for expression.

This notion of public perception and digital dynamics follows into Brickner's exploration of the political dimension of social media as a platform for union advocacy. Brickner offers depth to the examination of the relationship between public perception and social media and introduces readers to the ways that social media can support advocacy for publicly funded public education, which is an issue that has been evolving as we write in the context of contract negotiations for teachers in the province of Saskatchewan.[2]

Implications that are ultimately pedagogical in nature are taken up in the papers that follow. The exploration of online behaviours first introduced by Anuik and developed further in varying contexts by Yoon and Moore, Brickner, and Porter are taken up by Greenhow et al. and Smith. This time there is a focus on student perspectives and perceptions. Student perspectives and perceptions become the entry point for the exploration of the ways that digital dynamics can support students, especially among students with disabilities and their well-being in the study by Greenhow et al..

In presenting this collection of papers in a special issue, we aim to illuminate the complex and evolving relationship between education and social media. This issue addresses the profound impact of digital dynamics on key areas such as classroom civility, academic freedom, teacher identity, political advocacy, and student learning and well-being. Together, these papers bridge an important gap,

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[2] In Canada, the British North America Act (1867) and subsequent Constitution Act (1982) grant provinces exclusive authority over K-12 and post-secondary education, giving them responsibility for funding and regulatory oversight of K-12 schools and higher education institutions.

connecting social media to fundamental questions about the nature of teaching and learning and what digital engagement means for those committed to advancing educational practices.

While the dynamic nature of this collection leaves ample room for multiple thematic interpretations, we hope that readers walk away with a better sense of the transformative potential of social media engagement. As academics and teachers navigate the increasing presence of social media in their own and their students' lives, they are faced with both challenges and opportunities for cultivating inclusive educational spaces and developing authentic professional identities. From the difficulties that emerge for post-secondary instructors to the real opportunities offered by the cultivation of digital literacies with pre-service teachers to the potential political gains for teachers' unions, these authors all highlight the complex interplay that exists, and will likely continue to exist, between social media and educational spaces.

In addition to underscoring the transformative potential of social media, this collection also draws attention to the need for policy development and organizational guidelines. As educators and academics attempt to come to terms with their own engagement with social media and the broader implications of social media usage on student well-being, advocacy, and classroom interactions, there is a pressing need for the development of robust frameworks that account for pedagogical, ethical, professional, and political dimensions.

Ultimately, we hope this collection helps address gaps in research by offering nuanced, foundations-oriented perspectives on the intersection of education and social media. Examining this intersection through a foundations lens reveals how social media is reshaping core assumptions and frameworks around teaching and learning, both today and in the future. Finally, we invite our colleagues in the foundations of education to explore these questions from their unique vantage points, deepening the dialogue on social media engagement within the field.

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