

Chapter 10

Power and Pitfalls of Social Media



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10.1 What Is Social Media?

The genesis of social media was to enable and encourage social interactions and connections while being geographically distanced [1]. Over the past few years, the “social” types of interactions on social media have grown from simply messaging to sharing images, videos and headlines, and live interactive sessions. It appears that much of our lives occur online, and what used to be an outlet for creativity and entertainment has morphed into an all-encompassing world that touches on almost all aspects of life. It is not surprising then that once the power of the reach of social media was appreciated, an increasing number of individuals and businesses seized the opportunity to disseminate information and appeal to a much larger audience than otherwise possible.

To maximize the full potential of social media, it is important to understand the different platforms, the demographics of the user, and the intended use. It is also important to realize that target audiences, uses, and interactions change over time largely driven by the launch of the newest, latest, and greatest platform. In 2015, 71% of individuals aged 13–17 in the United States said they used Facebook; this number decreased to 51% in 2018 [2, 3]. This change attributed to the increasing use of Instagram, SnapChat, and TikTok [4]. As the demographics change, so will the desired content and formatting. This means continually adapting to an evolving market in order to maintain an engaged audience. The users of social media do not have a loyalty to one platform for long, neither should you.

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10.2 Why Engage in Social Media?

Social media can be leveraged to reach a large audience. The sheer number of individuals using these platforms allows for dissemination of information to a large number of people very quickly. For physicians who usually engage with a small group of colleagues or patients, this presents an opportunity to address and interact with a much larger audience to educate and inform.

Educating Patients: At some point during your training, you have undoubtedly had someone come up to you and say “when I googled it.”. Before patients would have consulted directly with a physician or looked up symptoms in a textbook, they now have Dr. Google at their fingertips – literally. Type any symptom or disease into the search box and links will appear leading you to websites ranging from the reputable to questionable to straight dangerous. With the large amount of information (and misinformation) comes the need for healthcare providers to educate and guide patients. The power of correcting misinformation using a social media tool has been evident throughout the COVID pandemic [5]. With more and more physicians posting on social media, the general public is able to get a glimpse of what it really looks like in hospitals and how serious the pandemic is. Images of exhausted healthcare providers covered (sometimes makeshift) protective gear have flooded social media platforms and provided a more personal and raw view – something conventional media outlets cannot provide. More and more physicians have embraced social media as the easiest way to counter the lack of adequate information and abundance of misinformation. The educational aspect of social media is not only limited to potential patients but can also be used to educate college students, medical students, and trainees. Current education trend is toward more interactive, active methods of learning. Social media platforms afford the opportunity to develop a personal connection with the audience as well as to educate. This might be through a “Facebook/Instagram live” Q+A session, a YouTube video, or even an Instagram Reel.

10.3 Promoting Your Practice

In addition to creating awareness for medical conditions and treatments, these platforms can also be used to promote small practices and even very well-established healthcare systems. Most if not all larger health systems and universities have social media accounts on multiple platforms at this time to be able to share information quickly and engage with an audience.

This can serve to document life as a physician, share health information in their respective specialties, provide a more accurate view of health care and medicine, or promote a practice. There is also a growing trend of smaller practices to feature their services on social media to be more accessible to the population they aim to serve.

Finally, individual practitioners have also found it helpful to post on social media about their own specialty and engage with their existing patient population as well as attract new patients.

10.4 Social Media to Promote Research

The power of social media with regard to research, education, and teaching is not only limited to physician–patient interactions but also includes discussions between physicians at various stages in their careers. For example, Twitter, the microblogging platform that allows users to send out messages or *tweets* limited to 280 characters, is often used by medical professionals to share new clinical findings or treatments to educate and encourage discussion, collaboration, and potentially lead to advances in medicine [6]. Given the limitation of the tweets, Twitter makes it difficult to provide a lot of in-depth information to serve as an educational platform on its own. Instead, it allows users to disseminate information quickly, and therefore start a conversation on specific subject matter. The fact that anyone with a Twitter account is able to join the conversation results in greater connectivity and a lower barrier for collaboration, which is invaluable for medical research.

10.5 Blurred Lines of Personal and Professional on Social Media

The importance and power of physician presence in social media on education, awareness, and public health has not gone unnoticed. In 2018, Jefferson Health in Philadelphia appointed the first chief medical social media officer to promote effective use of social media among clinicians, trainees, and medical students. Since that first appointment, many medical schools and hospitals have done the same. Hand in hand with using social media as a powerful tool, institutions have also developed very specific social media policies and guidelines for employees posting on different platforms. These guidelines often include clear instructions not to use the institution's identity (e.g., color, emblem, and name) on your profile. It also enforces making it clear that you are NOT posting on behalf of the institution or represent the institution's views. Finally, whatever the code of conduct of the institution is in person will often also apply to your social media presence. Therefore, it is very important that you familiarize yourself with the guidelines prior to posting on social media – even if your aim is not to use your account for educational or research purposes.

10.6 Social Media and Professionalism

Posting on a social media is a very solitary action, and it is easy to forget how far-reaching and irrefutable social media can be. The factors that draw you into social media can also be the ones that get you in trouble. It is important to remember that public profiles are just that – public.

That means anyone is able to look at them, which includes but is not limited to the intended audience. So, your family, friends, classmates, colleagues, your program director, your boss, your potential future boss, any admissions committee or selection committee, and potential future or current patients will have access to what you post, including pictures, links, memes, and whatever else is under your profile. Everyone will have access to everything you post. Why does that matter? It matters because we are often not as vigilant on our social media accounts as we may be in person. We may post content that seemed funny or interesting at the time, without fully understanding the implications and how it may be interpreted. Making the same comment in person is immediately checked by the social cues of the person or group you are interacting with. You have an engaged audience and you can immediately explain what you mean; it is a very contained exchange. This becomes infinitely more complicated with social media posts. Not only is the post immediately accessible to everyone on your contact list, but also by the time you realize your mistake and decide to take the post down, it may have been reposted or otherwise captured and the damage has already been done. It will be far more difficult to explain yourself; it is not easily contained. One of the authors of this book, JGBU, can attest to a young doctor having the contract he/she signed with a practice got withdrawn. The reason was that the partners did not like what the person had posted on Facebook. So be warned.

How do I know what is OK to share? A good rule of thumb is that if you would not say it to someone in person, you should probably not post it. Another way to ensure that your content will not affect you in the future is to pause and think whether you would be embarrassed if your program director, colleague, boss, patients, or even your 10-year-old self saw it. If the answer is yes, then posting it may not be a good idea and you should refrain if possible. It is quite common (and legal) for present and future employers to scan through your social media; how they chose to act on it may or may not be legal. JGBU also feels like they say in the Armed forces: You are talking, but who is listening, so if there is something you should not say, you should certainly not write it.

10.7 Social Media and Legal Implications

Being a physician also brings an extra layer of complexity. In addition to just being embarrassed by a post or potentially not getting a job you applied for, you may encounter serious legal consequences, incur substantial fines, and/or lose your job if

protected health information (PHI) is revealed on social media, thereby clearly violating the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA). A common incorrect assumption is that only information (pictures, date of birth, or medical record number) constitutes a HIPAA violation; the HIPAA privacy rule states that PHI is “individually identifiable health information” (that) is information, including demographic data, that relates to the individual’s past, present, or future physical or mental health or condition; the provision of health care to the individual; and the past, present, or future payment for the provision of health care to the individual and that identifies the individual or for which there is a reasonable basis to believe it can be used to identify the individual [7]. Any information that could identify an individual is technically PHI. In 2018, a nurse at Texas Children’s Hospital posted about a patient who had measles. The post was in an anti-vaxxer Facebook group. It did not mention the name, date of birth, or any other specific information about the toddler. However, her place of employment was listed in her profile, and she noted the child’s diagnosis and admission to the ICU. A parent who had a child in the same hospital shared screenshots of the post to the hospital’s page, prompting the hospital to issue an immediate statement and firing the nurse for HIPAA violation [8]. This story brings up two very important points. First, PHI covers a wide range of information and pertains to anything that could result in identification of a patient, including hospital name, date of admission, disease status, and a wide variety of other pieces of information that could narrow it down to the specific patient. Secondly, “closed” Facebook groups are really not as private as you may think. All groups are closely monitored by Facebook itself to ensure adherence to the rules, meaning that anything you post is already being viewed by someone outside of the group. In case of a lawsuit, there is no guarantee that the privacy settings on your account will be honored during the fact gathering period, and therefore your posts could be discoverable and subpoenaed. In addition, anyone in the group can easily take a screenshot and forward your post to others or on their own page. Therefore, while it seems that these groups provide some protection, the information is still reportable and any HIPAA violation discoverable. Using “hypothetical” when describing a case may give you (often false) sense of security. If the details are still unique and specific enough to be linked back to a patient, one could still argue that this is a HIPAA violation.

10.8 Social Media as a Distraction

While HIPAA violations may be an obvious no-no, most people are not aware of other possible legal consequences when posting on social media. In 2014, an anesthesiologist was sued for being distracted during a case, which may have led to the death of the patient several hours later [9]. During the trial, the anesthesiologist was questioned on his social media habits, including posting during cases and posting about patients. While neither of those events occurred during the case, they likely weakened his defense by describing him as a distracted and unprofessional

physician. As laws around social media are still evolving and social media activity is being scrutinized more and more, it is important to understand these implications and act – and post – accordingly. Also, do not forget that all posts are timestamped and can easily be linked to time you on clinical duty [10].

10.9 Social Media and Privacy

It seems odd to expect privacy from platforms that we are so willingly providing with the most private pieces of information about ourselves. Over its lifespan, Facebook alone has endured multiple privacy issues ranging from tracking user's buying habits to allowing third-party applications to harvest the users data. One look at the advertisements that are presented to you through either social media or even elsewhere on the Internet to even your email inbox makes it clear that everything you do online is being tracked, recorded, and used to curate content to your specific interests. Most recently, the new app TikTok came under fire because it allowed the developers access to users' personal information, including their location and email addresses. Before using an application, it is important to familiarize yourself with the privacy rules (read the fine print) and ensure that you protect your privacy as much as possible, which may mean not posting your personal information such as birthday or current location on your profile.

10.10 In Conclusion

No matter how we look at it, social media is here to stay and its presence will likely increase in our day-to-day lives, but it is a double-edged sword. It is impractical, foolish, and misguided to say that all healthcare providers should stay off social media for fear of consequences. On the contrary, it is imperative that more physicians become involved in these interactive platforms and utilize its many features to engage directly with colleagues, trainees, and the public alike; disseminate accurate information, advocate for yourself and our profession, be a leader of change. But also respect the potential downsides; understand the proper use and challenges of social media. Nothing is truly private on social media. What started as a simple means to connect with friends has evolved into a very powerful and far-reaching tool. A simple well-timed post has the ability to advance your career, and a misunderstood post has the legal ability to end it.

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