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A review of *Education and Social Media* using functionalist and conflict theories of educational purposes

Heidi Cian[1] · **Holly Amann**[2]

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Abstract *Education and Social Media: Toward a Digital Future* (2016), edited by Christine Greenhow, Julia Sonnevend, and Colin Agur, is a compilation of essays by leading contributors to the digital and social media movement in education. The chapters within this volume provide a granular look at the current landscape of how digital media is utilized across educational levels, fields of study, and geographic areas. The book is divided into three sections discussing the emerging use of social media in education, challenges in its implementation, and potential directions as tech-based education continues to evolve. In this review, we situate the ideas presented in *Education and Social Media* in the functionalist and conflict theories of educational perspective to further illuminate the potential of digital learning in supporting increased access to education for marginalized student populations. We discuss how these competing views are both given voice in *Education and Social Media*, prompting the reader to critically reflect on advantages and dangers presented by increased use of technological platforms in educational settings. Topics discussed include online universities, peer-developed curriculum, and differential use of technology based on school socioeconomic demographics. We also suggest areas that have emerged in need of further discussion since the book's publication.

Keywords Social media · Technology in education · Functionalist theory · Conflict theory

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✉ Heidi Cian
hdcian@g.clemson.edu

Holly Amann
hollyamann1@gmail.com

1 Eugene T. Moore School of Education, Clemson University, Clemson, SC, USA

2 Asheville-Buncombe Technical College, Asheville, NC, USA

Education and Social Media: Toward a Digital Future (2016) is a recent MIT Press installment in the MacArthur Foundation Series on Digital Media and Learning, a series promoting the idea that digital interaction facilitates learning. The collection, edited by Christine Greenhow, Julia Sonnevend, and Colin Agur, takes an analytical approach to social media and education, focusing on questions related to larger-scale implementation of technology and digital media in school curricula. Although essays in the book examine case studies of technology use either in the classroom or in place of the classroom, they do not offer suggestions for implementing social media or technology into a lesson plan and thus the book appears more appropriate for policymakers, administrators, and educators seeking to learn more about how structures of technology and social media could affect a student's' ability to learn or their access to education. In particular, the editors of the book seek to link considerations of culture with the logistics of moving educational practice into the social media age and address the question: What challenges do educators and administrators face in adapting to new cultural norms and constraints brought on by the greater role that social media and technology is often already playing in the lives of students?

The editors bring to the project backgrounds in education, mass communications, and social media. Christine Greenhow is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education at Michigan State University, and she earned her doctorate at Harvard University, where she was named a Larson Fellow. She served as a 2009–2010 visiting fellow at Yale University and has previously worked on research relating to social media, youth, and education. Julia Sonnevend, an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan, has a background of interdisciplinary research in history, culture, and media—primary focuses of this text. She earned a Ph. D. in Communications from the University of Columbia, a Master of Laws from Yale Law School, and a Juris Doctorate from Eötvös Loránd University. Colin Agur is an Assistant Professor at the University of Minnesota—Twin Cities, where he teaches in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications and where his research focuses primarily on the effects of mass telecommunications and network development on developing economies and on the United States. Together, these editors are able to tackle questions about social media implementation in education from a selection of works offering perspectives that consider the cultural and historical implications of shifts in media usage, digital communication, and classroom practice.

By narrowing their focus on understanding the cultural and logistical implications of social media's increased effect on curriculum, classroom infrastructure, and peer-to-peer sharing of information, the editors are acknowledging that digital media and technology can in fact increase access to education around the world. However, one of the most intriguing—and alarming—questions for social media education advocates is whether technology use in schools could accentuate and perpetuate inequalities rather than reduce or eradicate them, and this text seeks in part to answer that question. Examining essays within *Education and Social Media* from the perspectives of the functional and conflict perspectives, further detailed below, can help educators and administrators better understand the role social media may have in facilitating or hindering efforts toward a more just educational system.

In several essays within *Education and Social Media,* the reader can detect nuances of the Functionalist view of educative purposes. This perspective insists that social order is connected (Pope 1975) and thus the purposes of education should be considered with respect to what outcomes are most mutually beneficial—including preparation for work and socialization to engender acceptance of and respect for the established way of life (Bennett and LeCompte 1990). Functionalist educational theorists endorse the meritocratic

purpose of education—although inequalities will exist in any society, the role of education is to provide equal opportunity such that individuals who are most meritorious will be most successful, regardless of factors such as ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status (Sadovnik 2007). Thus, this perspective views education as an institution that distinguishes "equality of opportunity and equality of results" (Sadovnik 2007 p. 5), forwarding the notion that education is tasked with providing opportunity but merit dictates the results, which would never be equal.

Viewed from the functionalist lens, technology could broaden access to education, which equates to providing equal opportunity, thus achieving the task of education (Sadovnik 2007). However, Randall Collins (1971), speaking from the conflict theory side, would argue that the expanse of access would only result in those of higher status finding new ways to maintain their position of power. Collins argues in 1979s *The Credential Society* that the "Technocracy story," or the idea of rising in economic class and status through education in science and technology, is little more than a myth designed to disguise the inequality of opportunity that remains in society. Instead, he writes that a system obsessed with educational credentials "has provided the means of building specialized professional and technical enclaves" and "in general has served to monopolize jobs for specialized groups of workers" (p. 90). If the primary factor of workplace productivity is vocational skill, Collins asks, why does the level of education one has attained seem to have a greater effect on social and economic success? Although other essays in the text acknowledge the existence of a pattern wherein a perceived ease of access to education and the flexibility enabled by online degrees could encourage employers to seek out more highly credentialed employees. In such a pattern, the very people that online and social media-enabled education is supposed to help may remain marginalized.

The focus of *Education and Social Media* asks how educational policy and practice can adapt to enable use of digital media in formal learning, and in doing so, the editors tend to imply that such policy changes will facilitate not only greater access to education and greater flexibility in providing education, but greater opportunities for economic and social mobility for our most marginalized students as well. Following an introductory chapter on the way that digital media is transforming not only the field of education but the formal and informal learning communities in which we take all part, the text is divided into three sections. In the first section, essays focus on the potential for social media and education in K-12 school districts, news organizations, and universities across the world. The overarching point is that proper professional development and permission to creatively implement social media usage in the classroom are both essential to the successful implementation of technology in a curriculum, whether the class be fully online, hybrid, or a traditional seated course where technology is used primarily to aid in lecture and to complete assignments. In chapter two, for example, Mark Warschaeur argues that without additional tutoring and support, students often fail to move beyond using digital media for casual use or what he refers to as the "geeking out" stage (Ito et al. 2009, p. 65). Warschaeur concludes that "providing the right kind of social support for meaningful learning experiences with technology is far more important than simply providing access to the technology itself" (p. 39). The importance of such support structures and the recognition of a changing cultural landscape that will inevitably affect the way that we approach education is echoed throughout the first section. In chapter 4, for example, Colin Agur describes the implementation of educational programs using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in India school systems as well as the regulation and oversight of ICT use through bodies such as the National Knowledge Commission, the National Institute of Open Schooling, and the National Open School Program.

Technology in education is often taken for granted as “good” for students, so it is worth considering who benefits from the model of education enabled by online learning and how marginalized students could find themselves at a further disadvantage. It is in the book’s second section that the editors begin to choose essays which focus more heavily on challenges that K-12 institutions and online universities may face when integrating social media use into the overall curriculum. There is perhaps no better example to view this debate between the functionalist and conflict theorist perspectives of technology’s potential for education than through the discussion of online learning, which occurs through several of the chapters in the book. In their chapter, Nicholas Bramble and Yite John Lu discuss the need to rethink antiquated accreditation requirements and processes with the online university model in mind. This reconstruction will help students for whom the online model makes sense distinguish between quality and fraudulent options. However, accreditation is a small component of the online university conversation. The critical theory of education states that privileged populations will find ways to retain their status in response to measures developed to minimize inequalities. Bramble and Lu acknowledge this possibility, citing that students at brick-and-mortar schools worry that online affiliation will “cheapen the quality and value of a degree” (p. 135) at their institution. At this point, the text’s focus remains on the larger scale implementation of social media in university and K-12 curricula, including the idea that universities may need to move away from the traditional degree system towards more flexible certification and course credit systems to benefit online students.

Several essays in the book also raise concerns about current trajectories of technology-based learning and what populations are actually being served by heightening its status and prominence in education. In the K-12 setting, contributors caution that differential use of technology may heighten inequalities, with creative learning through technology taking place in schools serving higher income students and more drill-and-practice use in lower income schools, a phenomenon that would further distance these students from their peers. In higher education communities, online education advocates face additional challenges; students who use online education may be placed at a disadvantage when competing with their peers attending brick-and-mortar institutions as a consequence of poor regulation and lower status of online university options. Viewed from the conflict perspective, the availability of online education may prove detrimental to marginalized groups if their degree is still devalued compared to peers who attend universities on a physical campus. Peer-driven curriculum sounds attractive in theory, but as Lisa Delpit (1993) notes

> Many liberal educators hold that the primary goal for education is for children to become autonomous, to develop fully who they are in the classroom setting without having arbitrary, outside standards forced upon them. This is a very reasonable goal for people whose children are already participants in the culture of power and who already have internalized its codes. (p. 125)

The concern raised by Delpit is that students who are not members of the culture of power will not have the opportunities to learn the norms of that culture if their learning is self-directed. She notes that students engaged in such a curriculum will be at a disadvantage in future competition for access to college or employment because ultimately they still need to demonstrate familiarity with the knowledge and values expected by members of the dominant culture. An interesting example is the Waldorf school in Silicon Valley to which many employees of tech companies send their children. The school does not allow any computer use and boasts a high college entrance rate for its graduates (Richtel 2011). However, the success of the Waldorf school model should be considered alongside the

population it serves—students who have access to innovative technology and technological expertise at home. In this example, students who are immersed in the culture of power and have opportunities outside of school to acquire proficiency with advanced digital programs do not need exposure in school, yet such access is critical for students who lack these resources away from the classroom.

It is not until the final section of the text, titled "Social Media and Education in the Coming Decade," that the essays primarily begin to detail case studies of social media use in the classroom. It is in these essays that readers are able to more fully glean some of the issues that may arise unwittingly through a shift towards more digital-based learning in educational policy. In the section's first chapter, David Buckingham echoes Warschaeur's earlier concern, noting that research "suggests that there are some striking social differences in levels of participation" (p. 174). In many schools, particularly those serving students who are most likely to have limited access to technology at home, social networking sites are blocked. Buckingham states "If online participation is as socially, culturally, and politically important as the enthusiasts suggest, it seems likely that, far from liquidating social inequalities, it might actually accentuate it" (p. 176). In addition, Buckingham points out that although students may generally have greater access to technology now than they have in the past, many web users are still not creators of content, thus limiting the overall democratizing effect of technology access. Using models of online institutions such as the University of the People, as Shai Reshef describes in chapter 11, technology is supposed to enable education to further equalize people across the globe. Reshef even describes education as "the road to world peace" (187), the implication being that more equal access to education through technology sets society further along the path to peace and understanding. Reshef makes bold claims about the equalizing potential of education and technology, asserting "Education helps eradicate prejudices" (p. 188) and the "Internet has in some ways served as an equalizer" (p. 189). Reshef's description of an open-access university, much like the description of massive open online courses (MOOCs) that utilize social media, peer to peer sharing, and interactive feedback in place of a traditional classroom in a later chapter, reiterates the already-accepted notion that courses that can be accessed on a student's own time in remote locations across the world increase student access to education.

The editors are clear, however, that access to open universities or a more flexible system of online schooling are not enough on their own to propel today's students into a technologically-advantaged future. One apparent emphasis of this collection is that the approach to using technology and social media as a learning tool needs to evolve beyond its use in the traditional model of education. Here is where the editors and authors may begin to recognize some of the issues that even access to education has not been able to solve. Programs such as World's Fair 2064 and Mouse, presented as a positive example of social media collaboration and learning by Daniel Gleason in the book's final chapter, demonstrate innovative ways that social media is already being used by teens in New York to solve problems in their own communities. By allowing students to use social media to communicate with one another about solving problems, students are learning about technology and gaining real-world experience in team-building and virtual collaboration. As the case studies and issues discussed in *Education and Social Media* reveal, technology affects neither culture nor education in a vacuum; however, it is dangerous to assume that adjusting the way that we approach social media use in education is enough to provide guidance to students who are not in traditional seated classrooms or reverse the trend wherein marginalized students ultimately remain at a disadvantage when more privileged students are able to access more expensive, and thus more "prestigious," educational tools.

Several contributors note the lack of access and use of technology for education by the most vulnerable populations. Advocates of social media use in education should be aware of these concerns going forward. A dose of optimism and excitement can be found in the awareness that the field is still nascent. Its youth implies that the trajectory for development is still in flux; technology-based educators should consider these concerns about potential for exacerbating inequities offered by viewing its potential from both the functionalist and conflict theories, as undertaken in the essays in this book, though without referring to the perspectives directly. Further research continues to be needed to consider the importance of social media in education. As school choice movements continue to garner political support, it is reasonable to suppose that virtual charters and other online platforms will proliferate, educating a more sizable portion of the student population over time. Relationships between social media educational researchers and developers of these programs could be instrumental in ensuring their success. As is the nature of the rapidly developing tech climate, new areas in need of further study have emerged in the few months since *Education and Social Media*'s publication. For instance, online media has faced new scrutiny with the emerging conversation around "fake news" stories and their perpetuation through digital social networks. These developments strengthen the argument for a need of a digitally literate population, which for many students, particularly from the most vulnerable and marginalized groups, needs to be fostered through their classroom experiences. As the political landscape continues to favor school choice and charters—including those offered through online platforms—educational researchers have a responsibility to acknowledge their existence and advise their development. We look forward to future collections that will continue to explore these and other emerging issues.

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Heidi Cian is a second-year PhD student in Clemson University's Curriculum and Instruction science education program. She taught science for 6 years in Simpsonville, SC.

Holly Amann studied Mass Communications at the College of Charleston and holds an M.A. in English Literature at Western Carolina University, where she taught in the Writing, Rhetoric, and Critical Studies program.