Social media:
Are the lines between professional and personal use blurring?

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Abstract

A key aspect of understanding communications in a global environment is understanding social media usage. With the recent dramatic increase in social media usage in the past decade, the incorporation of social media and online platforms into communication strategies of organizations has been intensively discussed and researched. This study investigates social media usage at a global manufacturer to understand how it is being used for business purposes. Are personal and professional lines blurring with social media use? With the increased use of social media in the workplace, our professional and personal lives are increasingly becoming intertwined. The literature suggests that social media interaction and managing the boundaries is more difficult online than offline. Social media is where the lines are blurred between our professional and private lives. It is where we share our food, music, movies, pictures, purchases, politics, and our every-day patterns, alongside our daily professions, on display for the entire world to see.

Keywords: social media, strategy, digital, issues, communication, professional

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Background

Around the world, billions of people use some form of social media every day and that number is continually increasing. In the last decade it has changed the landscape of our communications completely in business, government, and society. The increase in use has been staggering and in 2019, an estimated 2.95 billion people were using social media worldwide, a number projected to increase to almost 3.43 billion in 2023 (Statista Inc, 2019). Social network penetration is constantly increasing worldwide and as of 2019, stood at 49 percent (Chohan & D'Souza, 2020). From 970 million users in 2010 to 2.95 billion users today, that is a 204% increase.

For many of us social media is used in every part of our lives, personal relationships, entertainment, for fitness, as news sources, professionally, and academically. Across industries, social media is becoming an essential component of daily business function and of future strategies. Social media is re-imagining how we communicate in private and public industries, such as banking, healthcare, government, education, and social causes (World Economic Forum, 2016a).

Some of the major issues of this century, such as: tectonic shifts in the global economy, political upheaval, terrorism, global climate change, mass immigration, or the current global coronavirus pandemic, to name only a few, are challenging issues that affect the workplace today. We can consider that many corporations have never seen these issues all at one time. Social media is an added phenomenon to this recent decade. It is where we consume information for both professional and personal purposes and these interactions are blurring.

Fake news and dark social are the new difficult challenges facing the globalized digital world. Today, with the use of social media at the office and outside of the workplace, a blurring of our professional and personal personae is commonplace. In the same hour, we can be connected to colleagues, business partners, the company's CEO, our countries leaders (such as prime ministers and presidents), celebrities, and athletes, along with our own family members and personal friends. Ultimately, due to millennials' exposure to social media from early childhood, their communication toolkits are different than baby boomers and Generation X who were introduced to the new medium in their mid-to-late careers (Leung, 2013).

Our current coronavirus pandemic continues to highlight the blurring of our personal and professional persona as we are forced to lockdown and remain in our personal spaces and refrain from attending our physical environments. Our homes are now our offices, and as companies embrace new work from home policies brought on during COVID-19, our personal and professional lives are coalesced into one space. This trend may not end as many companies such as Twitter, Shopify, and Facebook are announcing that they will allow employees to permanently work remotely (Hepler, 2020).

Area of Focus

Nineteen professionals were interviewed from seven different countries working at different hierarchical levels in Communication and in other areas such as IT, Human Resources, Legal, and Marketing. These professionals were asked targeted questions regarding their viewpoint on social media and how the potential blurring of professional and personal use is occurring using in-depth interviews.

Literature Review

Personal and professional boundaries, how are these lines being blurred?

Social media has revolutionized modern life, and many young people in both the developing and developed world who are coming of age today can scarcely comprehend how the world must have worked before social media became so ubiquitous, infiltrating all spheres of human interaction at a level so deep and in a manner so broad. From workplace connections, to intimate family chat groups, as well as anonymous stalkers, and government surveillance programs a vast interplay between social actors is occurring in cyberspace through social media, often without the full realization of its consequences to the public (Chohan & D'Souza, 2020, p. 1).

When we go to school, we are students; at home, we are sons or daughters; at work, employees. It is interesting that online these different parts of our lives mix in the same "virtual" space of a social networking site. This does not happen to us physically, however, in our digital lives these two normally segregated spaces are meshed together (Humphries, 2016). People may show different selves for different places, but social media platforms can cause context collapse, situations in which two or more social worlds collide (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

Generally, social media is a web-based application and an interactive platform that facilitates the creation, discussion, modification, and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kietzmann et al., 2011). Social media is therefore not limited to social networks like Facebook but include blogs, business networks, collaborative projects, enterprise social networks, forums, microblogs, photo sharing, product/services reviews, social bookmarking, social gaming, video sharing, and virtual worlds (Aichner & Jacob, 2015).

Not all social media platforms are relevant for business. While social networks, video-sharing platforms and business networks are of high interest, other types of social media, such as photo sharing, social bookmarking, or social gaming, might be less important in absolute terms and of less interest to companies because the scope of application is limited (Aichner & Jacob, 2015).

In the article, "Blurred Boundaries: Social Media Privacy and the Twenty-First Century Employee," this dilemma is examined. Even though social media has become pervasive in the lives of employees, their use in the workplace remains legally ungoverned and unsettled. Employees bring to the shared workplace diverse and often paradoxical attitudes toward social media. Without legal or normative guidance, employers are set to position parameters of expectations through social media policies that reflect and honor the realities of the modern world (Sanchez Abril, Levin, & Del Riego, 2012, p. 118).

> In a professional environment, the blurring of boundaries between online personae is, to some extent, induced by the use of social media both at home and in the office, simultaneously connecting users to family members, coworkers, business partners, and friends. Furthermore, the practice of telework often alters the previously defined physical spaces of work and private life. This blurring of boundaries between work and private life, in turn, changes what individuals perceive to be public and private (Fieseler, Meckel, & Ranzini, 2014, p. 154).

According to the Arthur W. Page Society Report, "The CEO View: The Impact of Communications on Corporate Character in a 24x7 Digital World," social media is now mature.

> CEOs no longer perceive Twitter, the blogosphere or any other social media as emerging technologies, as experimental or as anything less than full-fledged communications channels that must be monitored, measured and interpreted in the same manner as the traditional ones. With this maturity and 24x7 use, the confines of using social media for professional and personal use are now overlapping and both digital natives and immigrants to the technology may find it difficult to keep the two separated (Page Society, 2013, p. 6).

Kapko (2014) in the website, CIO, discusses how social media gives business leaders a way to burnish their personal and corporate brand, as well as listen to the community at large and respond to the issues that matter most to their company and customers. It also gives them a powerful communications channel to share what's most important and drive understanding and alignment around key issues. CEOs who truly understand and appreciate the power of social media will have a significant competitive advantage in the future (Kapko, 2014). As corporations

combine Marketing and CSR on social media platforms, this may lead to additional confusion for the employee and the continuing blurring of boundaries when adopting digital strategies.

Leading in the Age of Super-Transparency author, Austin (2016) states that thanks to social media and an increasing flood of data, the capacity to generate causes and controversies almost instantly has become the new norm in today's super-transparent society. "Most business leaders have not yet come to grips with the new reality — and what it means for their organizations." We are acutely aware today that communicating in today's fast-paced environment has created an intricate web of information flow. According to Austin (2016):

> Today's controversies, by contrast, spring to life in myriad, overlapping online communities and get distributed via networks of unaccountable independent agents sharing information in real time. The capacity to generate causes and controversies almost instantly is perhaps the most salient aspect of what we call the "super-transparent society," which has rapidly become a new norm. This intricate data flow and overlap can spill into an individual's personal and professional communication on social networking sites. (p. 3)

Ryan (2015) found crucial information from a diverse panel of social media experts about how to navigate the ever-changing world of digital sales and market with over 60 CEO's, marketing directors, and social media professionals. He states that information leaks, copyright infringement, and negative communication are risks that accompany social media. To assess social media risk, companies should have staff members trained in media law, invest in Internet security, and train employees to use social media correctly. A well-prepared company can overcome risk and create a powerful social media presence (Ryan, 2015).

Austin (2016) presents an interesting analogy in his *MIT Sloan Management Review* article:

> In many ways, today's emerging super-transparent reality is the music industry's late – 1990's problem writ large. It will force changes in the way a broad set of companies operate. It goes beyond music flowing in surprising and uncontrollable ways and extends to the contents of our lives, captured by personal, portable digital data devices. In addition to smartphones, increasingly it includes an array of other devices (smart pens, watches, wearables, etc.) And just as the music business never regained its balance, we too will increasingly find our realities as individuals, organizations, and managers permanently changed. (p. 16)

Today's sharing economy, with the introduction of various new platforms reliant on crowd-based businesses such as Airbnb, Uber, Lyft, all utilize social media as a communication and business tool (Sundararajan, 2016). Sharing economies, sharing our homes as hotels, sharing our cars as taxis, imply that our personal platforms are being used for commerce, and confusing or eliminating traditional boundaries that have always existed. Blurring of our personal and physical spaces with commerce is not only happening on social media but in many different contexts.

Using many technologies has become a status symbol for some; others use or adopt technologies due to (potentially negative) social influence (French & Shim, 2016). The increased connectivity of all objects in our life also leads to a multitude of security and privacy concerns. Bringing connectivity to professional and personal tools may lead to simplifying daily interactions with colleagues, customers, and with personal exchanges (French & Shim, 2016).

One can see that the challenges of communicating in a global environment with social media are many, but not often that different from traditional communication methods. Historically, communication theorists such as Grunig provided frameworks defining the dialogue occurring in the boardroom, which is today transferring to cyberspace. The idea of a "two-way street" appears throughout the history of the field and that any communication should serve as a listening post for management, to help company leaders understand the problems and viewpoints of its employees, neighbors, and others (Grunig, 2000, p. 35).

It is apparent that a blurring of our personal and professional lives is occurring on social network sites, with increasing business transactions turning to digital sites which initially housed only our personal exchanges. Social media policies require attention by industry policy makers to ensure employees are aware of this new phenomenon. In industry, collaboration between Communications, HR, Legal, and IT will be essential to provide clear guidance and boundaries to address the dilemma of combining personal and professional data in one digital space.

Interview/Research Questions

Nineteen participants were interviewed in various roles and countries. Participants were chosen carefully based on position, location, and availability (McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB), 2017). Interviewees were from the following countries: Canada, USA, UK, Belgium, Spain, France, and Luxembourg. The positions ranged from roles directly in Communications to Global Research, IT Services, Legal, and Corporate Marketing.

The following interview questions were examined:

1. How has social media blurred the lines between professional and personal reputations and how does this impact business outcomes?
2. Are there guidelines developed for employees on how to navigate social media participation?
3. Are employee social media profiles being monitored?
4. What are the boundary crossing issues emerging?

Summary of Results

The following tables summarize the participant responses to the above questions regarding opinions on social media and the blurring of lines between professional and personal use:

Table 1

Survey Respondents to Question 1

Are professional and personal lines blurring ?		
	Yes	No
Response	68%	32%
Growing Concern	100%	0%
Company Monitoring of Profiles	53%	47%

Social media was initially used for personal purposes by many of the interviewees, and the perception of it not being a business tool was prevalent. However, the interviewees did acknowledge and voice their concern about how social media can be blurring the lines. Of the interviewees, 13 of the 19 participants, or 68%, voiced their concern about how social media can be blurring the lines between professional and personal reputations. One of the interviewees remarked it is in the very nature of social media that it occurs and that it is difficult to avoid. One hundred percent of respondents see the blurring of lines between professional and personal use as a sizeable concern for the future.

Most respondents are monitoring issues as they occur or surface, but not on a regular basis. Fifty-three percent of the interviewees were aware of the corporate guidelines and policies in existence regarding proper social media use. Problems with social media posts on corporate feeds quickly emerge and require immediate addressing by the internal communication areas. This was identified by all participants as difficult and a new area of concern. Most participants have great trust that employees will behave in a professional manner on both corporate and personal social media sites without the need for monitoring.

Table 2

Elements Affecting Business Outcomes

Elements	Affecting Business Outcomes
Productivity	100%
Guideline Clarity Required	100%
Unprofessionalism	70%
Brand Identity	30%
Security	25%
Ethical Issues	25%

The impact on productivity, both in terms of time and usage, was identified by all the interviewees to be a concern. Increased guideline clarity was mentioned as a requirement by all participants. Security issues were a concern regarding professional and personal use. Many kept distinctive uses of social media platforms for personal and professional. For example, a number

of interviewees did not connect with colleagues on Facebook but did connect with them on Twitter and LinkedIn.

Emerging Boundary Crossing Issues

No filters exist for employee discourse on social platforms and it is an open forum for all to address any opinions they may have. Some examples were provided by interviewees that resulted in negative dialogue on social media by employees. Relationship management and boundaries need to be understood in the digital atmosphere. HR will need to monitor and develop the policies to deal with these issues. Each employee is part of a brand, yet the company must allow freedom of speech to occur. Unprofessionalism needs to be dealt with by Human Resources with increased guidelines in this new domain. More issues are emerging on social media as these platforms are easy to use and are accessible to all. Additional guidance is required as current policies are just breaking the ice and not ingrained in employee behavior. Security, brand identity, and ethical issues were recurrent themes brought forward by the interviewees.

Discussion of Practical and Social implications

We can acknowledge there can be no escaping the rise of the use of social media tools in successful global communications and business interactions. Most social media platforms are not even 10 years old, but they are fundamentally woven into the fabric of everyday communications across the globe. These changes in communication are unprecedented. The established senior executive must come to terms with communication channels that are culturally diverse, fast paced, and abundant. In the past, business relationships were predominately face-to-face. Today, they exist virtually on an incredibly diverse number of platforms. This fundamental shift in human behavior has taken place at such a speed that human resource policies and legal frameworks are left catching up.

What started as social digital platforms for our personal use, have now evolved to be business tools with significant ramifications if used incorrectly, both personally and professionally. The 2016 "World Economic Report" outlook and call to action states that after a "wild childhood," it is now time for digital media's "coming of age." Industry, the public sector, and the individual must assume responsibility for fostering the opportunities offered by digital media, while helping to mitigate the negative effects on individuals, organizations, and society (World Economic Forum, 2016, p. 8).

Results and Conclusions

Both the research and literature review demonstrate that personal and professional boundaries are blurring and that new policy guidelines are important to navigate the large and confusing digital landscape. The rapid rise of newly emerging communications technologies signals a huge shift in how we find, consume, and interact with news, information, and people (O'Connor, 2012).

Many of the interviewees have lived through the change from a non-digital world to a digital landscape that includes social media. They have seen the transformative power of

technology. Thirteen of the nineteen people interviewed have been in the corporate environment for more than twenty-five years, and they have seen corporate communication change significantly during this evolutionary period.

Initially, email was the only digital method available. Subsequently, instant messaging became acceptable, along with texting if the industry didn't have regulatory barriers. Now, a multitude of social media platforms are the disruptors to the more linear forms of communication (Newman, 2014). One of the main challenges mentioned was the difference in velocity and pace of change. Most referred to the difficulty in dealing with the increased speed of information, along with the abundance of information now available. The culture and context of professional communication is changing at both an alarming and exhilarating rate. Traditional forms of communication have been supplemented by the speed and reach of new social media outlets (Sevigny & Flynn, 2011).

Many posed the question of information relevance. Interestingly, several of the senior executives interviewed did not use social media platforms for professional or personal reasons. The respondents commented that over the course of their careers the fundamentals of business had not changed but identified increased risk in communications. Transparency has improved substantially because of technology, and today's communicators are much more effective than they have been in the past (Anderson & Rainie, 2018).

Trust remains as both an important issue and the reason senior executives did not want to be on social media. They indicated they did not trust the very medium and did not want the personal exposure. Policy requirements for personal and professional social media use require enhancements as social media structures mature and become more commonplace in the company. As baby boomers retire and social-media native millennials mature, we will see the generational divide that is currently evident naturally disappear and the use of social media continue to grow. Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1994) who coined the phrase "the medium is the message" provides the following insight: It is technological determinism by which society shapes technology, but technology also shapes society (McLuhan, 1994).

The possibilities of billions of people connected by mobile devices, with unprecedented processing power, storage capacity, and access to knowledge, are unlimited. These possibilities will be multiplied by emerging technology breakthroughs in fields such as artificial intelligence, robotics, the Internet of Things, autonomous vehicles, 3-D printing, nanotechnology, biotechnology, materials science, energy storage, and quantum computing (World Economic Forum, 2016b). Organizations should remain in dialogue with employees regarding social media. Managers seem overly concerned with potential risks and forget the opportunities that can arise when employees operate as ambassadors (Opgenhaffen & Claeys, 2017). Conditions in social media are changing rapidly. Businesses must focus on tactics and strategies that are timely. In the near future, social media and the physical world will be converging. Keeping up requires being well verse in decentralized power, behavioural shifts, and guerilla marketing (Ryan 2015).

Research Limitations and Areas for Future Study

While conducting the research for the literature review on social media and the blurring of lines between professional and personal use, it is apparent that more knowledge is required about the use of social media tools in the field of communication. There is a lack of previous research which is related to the professional and private use of social media by public relations practitioners with their perception of social media (Moreno, 2015).

This research offers some insight into social media strategic communication in a global manufacturing environment, and also serves as an incentive to begin more research in this area. Expanding on this research from participants in the manufacturing sector and broadening the scope to other industries could lead to more conclusions on effective global communications using social media. As policy makers adjust, the rules and playbooks for professional users will be developed and be made readily available. There are plenty of directions for research and it will be important to continue further exploring the potential benefits that can be derived from social media and other communication technology, especially as technology continues to change rapidly. As researchers, we need to continue working with industry leaders to understand the world's technological changes and assist in leading the change positively.

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