

Safety, Schools, and Social Media Monitoring

By Mike Richez

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It seems like almost every day the media reports incidents of school lockdowns and violence that threaten young people. None of us can forget the horrific tragedy that befell the elementary school in Newtown, CT, in 2012 that resulted in the deaths of 20 children and 6 school personnel.

GREAT IDEAS ISSUE

**STOP SEPARATING.
START COLLABORATING.**

**RETHINK EVERYTHING:
SPARKING TRANSFORMATIONAL
CONVERSATIONS IN YOUR SCHOOL**

Violence in our education system is, of course, of great concern among parents and school administrators. However, there are other incidents and events that are also important and occur much more frequently in schools. These include bullying, drug use, harassment, and children who are driven to suicide. According to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide is the second highest cause of death among children between the ages of 12 and 18 and there are 5,400 attempted suicides by children between the seventh and twelfth grades in the U.S. every day. Drug use also remains a big problem: according to the National Institute of Drug Abuse, 27.2 percent of teenagers used illicit drugs in 2014.

Another important fact is that social media is the way young people largely interact with each other. According to a report by the Pew Research Center in 2015, 92 percent of teens say they are online daily and 24 percent say they are logged in “almost constantly.”

With so many new and emerging challenges for communities and school districts, solutions are needed to address them. Technology, including social media in some cases, has exacerbated these problems. However, the social media technology and the sites themselves offer part of the solution.

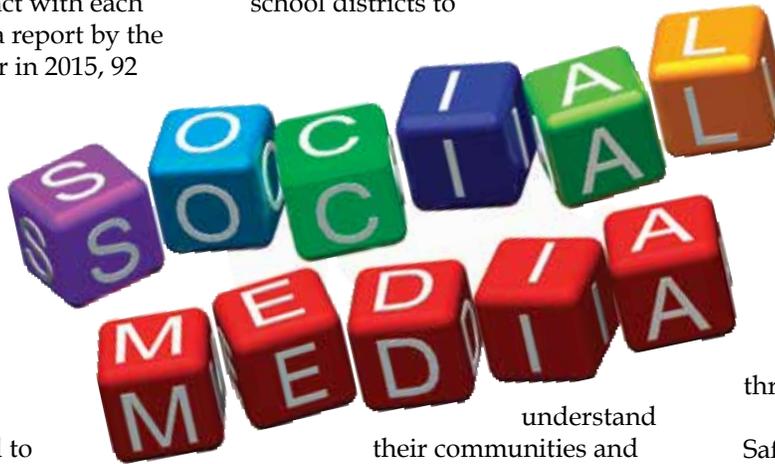
With each incidence of school violence, police hold press conferences and often say their investigations will focus on social media. The damage has been done and the lesson of the day is “look first.” If school shootings and other violent acts have become the new normal, then the mission is clear – stop it from being the norm. Social media monitoring is an emerging part of the solution and it is already making an impact.

Online bullying is also a very big issue facing parents and educators. According to the Cyberbullying Research Center, in studies conducted from 2007 to 2015, an average of 26.3

percent of young people reported they were victims of bullying via social media.

Social media is a permanent feature of life and for children who have grown up entirely in the digital world. They live their lives online and share many of their thoughts, concerns, struggles and troubles. Those impacted by loneliness, depression, taunts from bullies or troubled by sociopathic thoughts are posting online. All too often, news media report that troubled youth or adult members of communities who pose a threat take to social media before they act.

One way schools can prevent harm to their students is through a new area of security – social media monitoring. It is critical for school districts to



understand their communities and students. Social media opens a public window that was previously unavailable. Until a few years ago, the impact and value of social media were focused more on marketing and understanding “consumer” behaviors. Marketers and the social media sites themselves (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and others) have looked for ways to better understand users. They needed to develop strategies to make these platforms profitable and attractive to advertisers. The ability to focus messages and attract attention is critical for success in the new media landscape. We also must remember that for most social media users these sites are at the center of their social and personal lives. The ability to share and interact has made them popular and has also opened up these platforms for individuals to make disturbing and

potentially dangerous posts.

In 2016 we are at a crossroads. Freely shared public social media posts may contain warning signs and information that cannot and should not be ignored. It is this access to social media information that many school administrators as well as law enforcement are interested in as well as concerned about.

In response to the growing need and desire for social media monitoring, several companies are offering platforms and software that allow for specific geographic areas to be monitored. The amount of data is huge, so it is necessary to collect information from specific and relatively small geographic areas. Geofencing of areas allows for a more refined method of monitoring and searching for specific phrases and keywords. Using sophisticated filters and software, those who monitor specific areas can set up alerts and notifications that can assist in the protection of students and property. Filters are tailored specifically to school districts that want to combat violence, cyberbullying, suicidal thoughts and other threats to their students’ well-being.

According to National School Safety and Security Services, violent threats increased 158 percent in the first half of 2014 over the previous year and almost 40 percent of them were made via social media. In all, 812 threats were tracked from August 1 through Dec. 31, 2014, and the threats were identified in 46 states.

Here is an example of how geofenced data can be collected and reviewed: On Twitter, every tweet that is sent through a mobile device or computer is mapped to a specific location. This is the case with all social media unless privacy settings have been turned on. In the case of a school interested in social media, activity in a specific ten-square-mile perimeter is searched. Filters are set up to review posts that contain words or text related to drugs, violence, or suicidal thoughts. Reports and alerts are then generated based on the user’s criteria. The ability to archive this data is also

proving helpful with investigations and for forensic analysis of incidents.

Twitter's technology is different from that of Facebook and Instagram. In the case of Facebook and Instagram, public information must be filtered and reviewed using different methodologies tied to Facebook time lines and Instagram likes or shares. The point here is that school districts and communities have the ability to proactively keep an eye out for potentially harmful or destructive behavior. This is a powerful tool that can reduce violence, prevent bullying and, in the case of suicide, even save lives.

In terms of suicide, one incident stands out: recently a student in a district being monitored was found making concerning posts relating to suicide. The school district was notified and they contacted the parents. The parents quickly addressed the issue with the middle school student. Unaware of the problem, the parents were very appreciative of the school district's proactivity.

The other side of what is happening in this space is the review of social media in smaller geographic areas to understand the larger picture and community sentiment. Similar to traditional market research, social media content is reviewed to determine community views, interests and concerns. School districts and the law enforcement community are aided by having a greater understanding of their communities. This will allow for more attention to be paid to issues and potentially more resources allocated to address concerns.

Privacy is a concern among parents, students, and school officials. However, social media by its nature takes place largely in a public domain. Social media posts are like standing on a corner and yelling to someone across the street where everyone can hear you. In terms of social media, the "street" is the entire Internet. It is clear that privacy protections must be put in place. For schools and communities, strict rules and policies must be established to ensure that this technology is used properly and for its intended purpose of protecting students,



schools and communities. Individuals must also recognize that social media by its nature and design is not private. Once an individual steps into the social media world they are stepping out in public for all to see. The current state of social media monitoring does not allow for social media sites that are set up as private to be included in searches.

The fact is that we live in a new digital reality. Monitoring of social media is here and is still in its infancy. Education sector professionals must recognize this and strike a balance as well as determine how monitoring will be implemented and used to ensure the safety of students, staff and communities.

In addition to the example

provided earlier, it is clear that digital reviews and alerts work. Look at the example of Georgia's Dekalb County. The school scanned social media sites using filters for words like "guns" and "explosives." This alerted them to a University of Georgia student who was later arrested for threatening to show up at a school with an AK-47. Georgia is a state that has good reason to worry; there have been nine school shootings since January 2013.

It is clear that our culture has embraced social media. Many of us and many students live their lives in both the digital and real worlds. Unfortunately, threats are real and no school district is immune. Maintaining privacy is important; however, it is vital to listen and observe and not to ignore. Social media monitoring is another tool that must be recognized for its value and its positive impact on lives and communities.

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