Character and . . . Social Media

Volume 1 / 2015

WENDT CHARACTER INITIATIVE

UNIVERSITY *of* DUBUQUE

The faculty essays presented here emerge from a semester-long process of reading and writing together in an environment of critique and review. Nevertheless, this invited journal of essays represents the authors' views and not necessarily the views of the Wendt Center for Character Education or the University of Dubuque.

Ethics and Social Media: Responses to Panetta, Schlimm, and Supple Bartels

John Stewart

Sometimes academic research contributes to the understanding that a few specialists have of gene manipulation, ancient history, or theories about the beginning of the universe. Other times, scholars focus their well-developed knowledge and analytic skills on topics that almost everybody can relate to; and the three essays in this journal are an example of this kind of work. Gary Panetta, Matthew Schlimm, and Jenn Supple Bartels look carefully and closely at social media— blogs, fantasy football, Twitter, and especially Facebook—so those of us who read their work can better understand some of what we're doing online almost every day.

Most people are aware that social media consumes much of the interest, time, and energy of literally billions of humans world-wide. But, partly because these activities are so common, many of us miss their significance. These three authors demonstrate that important human work is done using social media: Public policy is shaped; religious beliefs are asserted and challenged; friendships

are established, developed, and destroyed; personal and role identities are negotiated; and most importantly, character is shaped—sometimes for better, and sometimes for worse.

Social Media and Citizenship

Gary Panetta uses the ethical construct of stewardship to examine two social media events: the Facebook publication of a satirical cartoon spoofing Islam, and the use of blog technology to create the Ushahidi map—a visualization of government corruption and human rights abuses.

One strength of Panetta's discussion is that he makes it virtually impossible to think of "stewardship" as an abstract, academic label for who-knows-what. Panetta shows that stewardship is a common, even everyday, part of each of our lives. Any time we are managing or taking care of something that has been entrusted to us, whether it's a pet fish, a house, or a car, we are practicing stewardship. *And* Panetta effectively shows how Reformed Christianity teaches us that creation itself is held in trust by human beings, which makes stewardship both an everyday concern and a profound, life-defining challenge for every human being. He also uses the ecological construct of "the upstream-downstream problem" to underscore how social and digital webs make our stewardship actions consequential for not only those close to us, but potentially, to everyone with access to the internet.

Panetta does not try to lay out a list of rules for ethical use of social media, because he knows there are too many variables and differences to enable any one set of standards to apply universally. Instead, he makes a case for "a basic orientation, a way of asking questions in any given context that can help up make good choices about our use of social media—or, at least, avoid disastrous ones." Why do we need this basic ethical

orientation? Because although we might think that our puny contributions to social media sites are only fly-swatters, the widespread impact of these media means that "each of us has been given a sledge hammer."

He uses the *Charlie Hebdo* case to show how stewardship helps us reflect on the importance of responsibility and relationships. Every time we contribute to social media—*every time*—we're potentially affecting a world-wide web, and stewardship demands that we stay aware of this level of influence. Social media acts may be local, but they can and often do have global impact. In Panetta's words, "Stewardship requires recognizing that our individual acts—especially when amplified by technology—can have far-flung consequences." He argues that we need to be guided by a general ethical orientation like the one offered by Howard Gardner. It should include a series of questions about one's own identity, rights, obligations, and responsibilities: what I owe others, what harms and goods I might be contributing to, and what kind of common world I am helping construct.

The Ushahidi map case study reinforces these conclusions. The woman who helped create it, Ory Okolloh, demonstrates concretely what it means to have an ethical orientation. She thought beyond herself—in global terms, rather than just exercising freedom for freedom's sake. Panetta emphasizes how she learned to "count the consequences . . . see through the eyes of others . . . pay attention . . . in short, to practice good stewardship of the world."

When Panetta writes about stewardship as an opportunity to apply the Golden Rule, he enters a conversation among people who affirm this standard, and others who urge consideration of what they call "the Platinum Rule." Panetta writes that stewardship "involves taking care of this thing that has been

entrusted to us as if we ourselves were the owners," which is an admirable standard. *And* in the global world Panetta addresses, it can be important to understand that this standard can often be helpfully enhanced by thinking not about what I would do as owner, but what the *other* person might prefer. This is the key feature of what some call "The Platinum Rule." Panetta's essay implies that Ory Okolloh and her helpers were thinking this way when they created the Ushahidi map, and this kind of thinking escapes the ethnocentrism that thinking only from my perspective can engender.

Panetta's essay also prompts me to think about how power figures into the topics he addresses. The sheer number of people on Facebook today makes this topic important. One needs only consider the advice in Genesis to "be fruitful and multiply. . .and subdue the earth" to recognize that one challenge of what Panetta calls "holding creation in trust" is to balance the enormous power humans are given with equally strong humility and awareness of the needs of others. Locally, changing a Facebook profile picture and sharing multiple posts about drinking events can affect an entire friendship network's perceptions of a person's character; and globally, when a political organization posts a video of a violent execution, the impact is felt in capitals on every continent. Social media postings potentially have this kind of power.

Overall, Panetta's essay demonstrates how stewardship is a quality of excellent moral character, and how the connection between stewardship and moral character can enhance his readers' understanding of their uses of social media.

Fantasy Football and Friendship

Matthew Schlimm maintains Panetta's ethical focus but shifts it to a very different use of social media: fantasy football. In an

unusually courageous move, Schlimm puts his identity as a scholar at risk to analyze an activity that almost nobody would believe, at first glance, warrants serious reflection. Fantasy football is just seasonal, digital fun, right? What could be serious about this pastime?

Not only does Schlimm answer this question, he engages Aristotle in the process. He shows how Aristotle's understanding of three kinds of friendship can be used to display what is often actually happening when friends or media acquaintances play fantasy football together.

One contribution of Schlimm's essay is his inventory of the dangers of activities like fantasy football. I suspect that few of those who are fielding teams have considered how the activity might lead them to fall into greed, pride, envy, gluttony, wrath, and sloth. Schlimm argues that even playful activities can have serious consequences.

However, the bulk of Schlimm's essay connects fantasy football to elements of friendship and to the biblical extensions of Aristotle's three-part depiction. He discusses the equality humans have in God's eyes as one example. He also balances his analysis by noting how "fantasy football has the potential to bring out the worst in people. . . ." He offers vivid examples that demonstrate how his own league successfully resisted this temptation by emphasizing playfulness rather than "stiff-necked competition and degrading trash-talk."

Clarifying what Aristotle means by "useful friendships," Schlimm notes that fantasy football "does relatively little to enhance" such friendships. His references to Nicholas Carr's book, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* reinforces this point.

Schlimm's treatment of Aristotle's third category of friendship argues that fantasy football may be a starting point for the development of a virtuous bond. As he summarizes, "fantasy football can provide fertile ground for growing these deeper relationships."

In the end, Schlimm accomplishes his goal of showing that "Fantasy can play a valuable role in the moral life," and fantasy football can be one practice that does this. He clearly shows that there's more to fantasy football than meets the eye; and through this, he encourages its participants to be more reflective about this part of their engagement with social media.

Parents' Growing Pains

Jenn Supple Bartels obviously has both a keen eye for what's going on behind the scenes of many parents' Facebook postings about their children and the courage to turn her sharp analytic skills on her own practices. She focuses on the identity work that is done in these postings, asking such questions as, "What does it mean to parent with integrity in an. . . online environment?" and "Where is the ethical line in creating a digital footprint for others?"

Supple Bartels' main analytic constructs are "authenticity" in relation to "the other"—that is, how parents' Facebook postings about their children often serve to shape a flattering image of them as parents, sometimes at the expense of their children. ". . . disclosing about one's children on social media," she notes, "is sometimes more about the parent than the child." Her examples show how many postings that seem to be simple reports about children are actually doing what Robert B. Cialdini, John F. Finch, and Maralou E. De Nicholas call "facework" for the parents. Other critics have pointed out, online and in print, the frequency and inappropriateness of what one author calls "The Jaw-Droppingly,

Self-Indulgent, and Occasionally Rage-Inducing World of Parent Overshare."

These postings manipulate children, Supple Bartels notes, at a time in their lives when they can't make their own decisions about how personally public they want to be. This is an abuse of parental power. It doesn't help that these kinds of posts often occur when parents are especially in need of shoring up their own self-confidence. Bartels offers an example of her own Facebook activity when she was a newly-divorced mother to support this point.

Her analysis of "humblebragging" is also astute. She keenly illustrates how posts like, "I'm such a boring mom. All we do is stay around the house and craft" are thinly-disguised efforts to polish mom's image while appearing to be self-critical. The ethical problem here is that children are serving parents' impression management goals "as props," not as people.

Like Panetta and Schlimm, Supple Bartels emphasizes that social media creates ethical challenges partly by conflating the personal and the public. Posts are often personal, even intimate, and yet they are made available to billions. When a post publicizes a child's unfortunate and uncommon mistake, it produces a permanent record of an incident that, in a more reflective and humane world, would have been kept private.

I thoroughly appreciate Supple Bartels' engaging and insightful analysis of social media use. She effectively helps Facebooking parents take "the first step in parenting with integrity online, [which] is awareness. . . ." The next step might be to locate some online examples of the ways parents can post about their children with both authenticity and care for others. Reflection on these examples might even lead to some guidelines for parental posting

with integrity. Most parents, especially new ones, would welcome suggestions about how to share the joys and even the memorable frustrations in ways that honor their children's personhood while supporting, encouraging, and giving joy to other parents. Like Panetta and Schlimm, Supple Bartels has performed a real service by helping readers understand that it's *not* "just Facebook/Twitter/Snapchat/blogging."

Conclusion

What we post online matters. It makes a difference. It can enhance or damage the character-development of our own lives and the lives of the people we post about. For something as powerful and far-reaching as social media, ethical use is reflective use. We should remember that millions, even billions may read what we write. We should consider the possible effects of our comments on all the "Others" it implicates. We should adopt an ethical orientation that emphasizes stewardship, caring, authenticity, and integrity. We should think before we post.

John Stewart, a communications scholar and author of several books, is the former Vice President of Academic Affairs at the University of Dubuque. He currently serves as Special Assistant to the President at the University.

Works Cited

Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. Trans. H. Rackham. Rev. ed. Loeb Classical Library 73. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. Print.

Cialdini, Robert B., John F. Finch, and Maralou E. De Nicholas. "Strategic Self-Presentation: The Indirect Route." *The Psychology of Tactical Communication*. Ed. M.J. Cody and M.L. McLaughlin. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters, 1990. 194-203. Print.

Koenig, Blair. "Birth Junkies and Sanctimamas Have Some Things to Say." *STFU, Parents*.STFUParentsBlog, 20 Sept. 2013. Web. 1 Mar. 2014.

Wittels, Harris. *Humblebrag: The Art of False Modesty*. New York: Grand Central Pub., 2012. Print.