

2015

Opportunities and challenges in researching social networks: One scholar's perspective

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/illuminations>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Illuminations by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact STARS@ucf.edu.

Recommended Citation

(2015) "Opportunities and challenges in researching social networks: One scholar's perspective,"
Illuminations: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/illuminations/vol3/iss1/4>



Illuminations

NEWSLETTER FOR NEW FACULTY

(<https://illuminations.library.ucf.edu/>)

Opportunities and challenges in researching social networks: One scholar's perspective

March 9, 2015



*Stephanie Vie is an Associate Professor of Writing and Rhetoric at the University of Central Florida. Her research focuses on social media's impact on literate practices and the composition classroom. She is currently conducting several grant-funded national surveys of faculty members' attitudes toward social media use in composition pedagogy, the results of which will form a portion of a monograph tentatively titled *Literate Acts in Social Networking Sites*. She maintains active social media accounts on Twitter ([@digirhet](https://twitter.com/digirhet) (<https://twitter.com/digirhet>)), Facebook, and *Academia.edu* (<https://ucf.academia.edu/StephanieVie>), among others.*

*She is a Reviews Co-Editor for *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy* (<http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/>) and a Project Director with the *Computers and Composition Digital Press* (<http://ccdigitalpress.org/>). Her work has appeared in such journals as *First Monday* (<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/4961/3868>), *Computers and Composition* (<http://portableclassroom.pbworks.com/f/1sdarticle.pdf>), *e-Learning and Digital Media* (http://www.wwwords.co.uk/pdf/freetoview.asp?j=elea&vol=5&issue=2&year=2008&article=3_Vie_ELEA_5_2_web), and *Computers and Composition Online* (http://www2.bgsu.edu/departments/english/cconline/gaming_issue_2008/Vie_Second_Life/), and her textbook *E-Identity* (<http://www.fountainheadpress.com/edentity.html>) (Fountainhead Press, 2011) examines the impact of social media on twenty-first century literacies and has been adopted by over fifty composition programs nationally.*

By Stephanie Vie

I've always been drawn to technology and writing. Some of my favorite childhood memories involve me writing poetry and short stories on my uncle's typewriter as well as my father showing me how to program my own playable computer games in BASIC on our Apple IIe. I played around with HyperCard and learned about programming databases at a young age. Writing, too, always played a role in my early development. I would write and "sell" newsletters to my (very patient and supportive) older brothers and sister, and would fill notebooks full of my writing, which I still have and treasure. These early experiences helped propel me to focus on a field of study named computers and writing, a field that has grown out of rhetoric and composition (where I hold my doctoral degree) and that pays attention to the impact of digital technologies on writing and the writing process. It's there that my research finds its center—in the

intersection of digital technologies, writing, and the composing processes we engage in online—and it has even inspired my Twitter handle, @digirhet (short for “digital rhetoric”).

Within computers and writing, my attention has been held most frequently by social media technologies and particularly social networks. Looking back, I’ve always been interested in chatting with others online and sharing my writing in virtual spaces. Chatting with friends and making new acquaintances in college happened largely through IRC, or Instant Relay Chat, and then later in AOL Instant Messenger and ICQ, standalone chat programs popular in the late nineties. Later, as a graduate student at the University of Arizona in Tucson, I held many of my writing classes in OldPuebloMOO; MOOs, popular chatting environments at the time, are a kind of “multi-user dungeon” or dimension where players can create and textually manipulate objects—thus a MOO, or Multi-User Dungeon, Object-Oriented. I blogged before blogging was really cool and I jumped to create a SixDegrees.com account in the late nineties, followed by accounts on Friendster, LiveJournal, MySpace, and Facebook.

As I began to consider what I wanted to focus on in my dissertation research, I thought about the advice I had been given by a friend: “Study what interests you, because you’re going to be writing about this for a long time.” At the time, my interests had been turning more and more to social networking sites—many of my friends had accounts on sites like Facebook and MySpace, and nearly all of my undergraduate students at the University of Arizona had joined (and were quietly panicking about the growing threat of their teachers joining and watching them, a phenomenon that led to the coinage of the term “[creepy treehouse](http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/when-professors-create-social-networks-for-classes-some-students-see-a-creepy-treehouse/4176)” (<http://chronicle.com/blogs/wiredcampus/when-professors-create-social-networks-for-classes-some-students-see-a-creepy-treehouse/4176>)” to describe students’ responses to faculty members’ use of particular technologies). But social networking sites seemed to me to be poised to really make an impact in our daily lives as well as in our scholarly work. And indeed, today you’ll find a host of scholars who study social networking sites, who bring it into their pedagogy, and in many cases do both.

But who would have guessed in 2004 when Facebook first started that it would still be popular over a decade later? With **1.39 billion monthly active users** (<http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>) in December 2014, it’s one of the largest social networking technologies available today. It helped change the word “friend” from a noun to a verb not just in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (<http://theweek.com/articles/461713/16-words-that-are-much-older-than-seem>) but in common parlance as well. Sadly, some of the other social networks that were once widespread are now nearly desolate wastelands. LiveJournal, where I once blogged and followed other friends’ journals, now only has **10 million monthly unique visitors** (<http://www.fastcompany.com/1809674/return-livejournal>) (as of 2014), a precipitous drop from its height of popularity. MySpace, too, was once the hottest social networking site in town. In 2008, it attracted **75.9 million monthly unique visitors** (http://www.bloomberg.com/bw/magazine/content/11_27/b4235053917570.htm) but today it only claims **50.6 million users** (<http://blogs.wsj.com/cmo/2015/01/14/myspace-still-reaches-50-million-people-each-month/>) monthly (many driven there to find their old pictures to post on other social networks with the hashtag #TBT—Throwback Thursday). Others no longer exist as social networking sites: Friendster.com, once a rapid success that spawned multiple spin-off sites like Petster, Dogster, Catster, and Elfster, operates as a gaming site today. SixDegrees.com, one of the earliest social networking sites in the vein of Facebook, shuttered in 2001.

What I mean to illustrate with these numbers and stories of once-prized networks that have fallen is the precarious nature of researching technology. As exciting as it can be to be on the cusp of something impactful, like social networking technologies’ impact on our daily lives, it can also be nerve-wracking. Sites go down, offline forever (sometimes along with your personal data, as when MySpace rebooted and deleted all users’ personal messages and blog posts, including mine). URLs change and **404 errors** (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HTTP_404) are common. If an academic writes about a particular technology, later on if it falls out of use, that research can be read as dated; some of my previous work on the virtual environment **Second Life** (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S8755461508000388>) fits this description as the site is undergoing a **massive overhaul** (<http://thenextweb.com/dd/2014/06/24/linden-labs-building-new-second-life-scratch-woo-new-users/>) in 2015.

At the same time, though, I find the constant sweep of change exhilarating. Much like my teaching, my research sites are frequently new each year. Other than Facebook (around since 2004) and Twitter (since 2006), many of the technologies I research change rapidly. Just recently, I wrapped up a co-authored piece on commenting practices in social media technologies like Reddit and Jezebel, which will be published soon in the online journal *Technoculture*; I wrote with a graduate student a book chapter on microblogging and its role in corporate controversy, which will appear in the edited collection *Maximizing Commerce and Marketing Strategies through Micro-Blogging* (<http://www.igi-global.com/book/maximizing-commerce-marketing-strategies-through/123128>); and I am at work currently with two other co-authors on several pieces related to digital badging in socially networked environments—what motivates people to strive for virtual badges and how might they be incorporated into pedagogical environments?

Throughout it all, my overarching research questions are the same. How do social networking technologies impact our composing and writing practices? How do the designers of these technologies make assumptions about “ideal” users when they craft documents like terms of service and privacy policies? How do users craft their online profiles through images, text, avatars, music, and other multimodal elements? And how do users help shape the limits of these social technologies through their **resistance to terms and conditions that are unfairly restrictive** (https://www.academia.edu/4935080/I_Gave_My_Rights_Away_for_a_Song_How_Billy_Bragg_Persuaded_MySpace_to_Change_its_Tune_on_Owner_of_artists_rights_for_example_or_their_desire_for_gender_descriptors_that_go_beyond) or their desire for **gender descriptors that go beyond** (http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2014/02/21/gender_facebook_now_has_56_categories_to_choose_from_including_cisgender.html) male/female/“other”?

et al.: Opportunities and challenges in researching social networks

As more and more of our students interact with each other and, more importantly, compose a great deal of writing within socially mediated technologies, our scholarly interests in studying these technologies will need to move beyond just a niche field like computers and writing and instead become embedded into pedagogical considerations spanning multiple fields and through multiple approaches. Through my research funded by the Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC (<http://www.cptsc.org/>)) and a University of Central Florida College of Arts and Humanities Research Incentive grant, I will be studying the pedagogical application of social networking technologies in professional, technical, and scientific programs as well as by individual faculty members in writing and rhetoric. I hope someday to be able to expand this research beyond the borders of my own field and discover more about social networking use in the university system more broadly.