Teaching Case
Congratulations! …to the World? One Person's Experience with Social Media

Eric C. Larson

Teaching Case
Congratulations! …to the World?
One Person's Experience with Social Media

Eric C. Larson
Gies College of Business
University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign
Champaign, IL 61820, USA
ecl@illinois.edu

ABSTRACT

Social media has quickly garnered the attention and interaction of users of all ages from around the world. The growth in popularity of social media platforms raises important issues for individuals and organizations regarding how to interact with the relatively new technology. This teaching case describes the experience of an information systems Ph.D. graduate whose confidential notification regarding her employment went public on Facebook. The case highlights four key learning objectives relevant for students learning about social media in the context of business: 1) identifying changes that come with the advent of social media including the speed, scope, and structure of communication in a social network, 2) understanding the variety of stakeholders who control the message in social media, 3) evaluating the positive and negative impacts of confidential information being released publicly, and 4) discussing how reactions to the scenario may differ among unique segments of the population. The case is designed as an introductory case for an undergraduate or graduate course pertaining to the topics of social media, Web 2.0, and internet-enabled technologies in business.

Keywords: Social media, Network effects, Privacy, Stakeholder analysis, Teaching case

1. SETTING

Wow! It was March of 2012, and it was a great time for Christine Adams. She had successfully defended her doctoral dissertation in Information Systems (IS) at Honeycrisp University, a major U.S. research university, just one month earlier and would graduate with a Ph.D. in May. She had recently been invited by Allerton University, a highly regarded research university, to present a "job-talk" (an interview in which a faculty job candidate presents their research). Christine felt the interview had gone well – there was a clear need at Allerton, and she seemed to be a good fit for the position. The faculty at Allerton with whom she interviewed indicated enthusiasm about her research and seemed quite favorable about how Christine might fit into their future plans. Meanwhile, Christine busily traveled to present her job-talk at other universities as well. As with almost any employment situation, uncertainty is part of the process. Although optimistic, Christine remained anxious about her professional future. Then, she received the good news for which she had been waiting in the form of an email. The email came from the department chair at Allerton University indicating that a job offer would soon be coming as an Assistant Professor. The job was one that she wanted in an ideal geographic location and at a desirable institution.

Generally, human resource organizations and specific departments within universities maintain confidentiality throughout the process of accepting applications, reviewing applications, making job offers, and alerting candidates not offered a position. Candidates for a position may become publicly known during an on-campus interview process in which candidates present their research, provide a demonstration of their teaching capabilities, and detail their service background. To comply with equal opportunity standards, universities publicize job openings broadly on their own websites, with academic associations, on job boards, and in various publications. However, once a candidate makes an application, the details of the specific application are held in confidence. As with hiring processes in businesses, the traditional expectation is that both the candidate and the hiring university will hold private the details of the candidate's application, deliberations by hiring teams, and terms of employment.

Christine worked tirelessly, as most doctoral students do, for the previous five years to complete her doctoral dissertation at a world-class university of Honeycrisp's caliber. The five-year period required a significant financial and emotional investment by Christine and her family. In addition, the market for graduating students was particularly tight. Enrollments in undergraduate information systems majors had declined and colleges and universities had "tightened their belts" as a

response to the "Great Recession" of the preceding years. The result was that very few information systems faculty positions were available, and competition for those few spots was stout. Given the extremely competitive nature of the job market and the uncertainty that accompanied it for Christine, the news of a forthcoming job offer was a welcome relief and cause for celebration. A job from a university such as Allerton with such a high reputation was a big win.

2. SOCIAL MEDIA GROWTH

While this was a wonderful time for Christine, it was an even more amazing time for social media. Facebook, the world's largest social network, had surpassed 1 billion users, and was fast approaching a May 18, 2012, IPO that valued the company at over $100 billion. Meanwhile, the founding story and financial success of CEO and Founder Mark Zuckerberg were portrayed in the 2010 Hollywood feature film, "The Social Network." Facebook was not the only beneficiary of this wave of growth in social media. The world communicated on Twitter with short 140 character tweets about 350 million times per day in 2012. Even LinkedIn, the professional/job seeker social network platform, had approximately 175 million active users.

All three platforms are considered social networks, but there are important distinctions in the platforms with strategic implications. Twitter is primarily focused on the concept of micro-blogging – users sharing short messages with their network and the broader user community. Though Twitter has added some features such as video, direct messaging, and curated news stories, Twitter's scope remains relatively limited compared to Facebook. The Facebook platform includes games, payment systems, event scheduling, live streaming, and more. This diverse feature set fuels the growth as these complementary products (e.g., Shankar and Bayus, 2003) encourage users to join and stay on the platform. Twitter and Facebook depend heavily on advertising for the bulk of their revenues (Facebook, 2016; Twitter, 2016). In contrast, LinkedIn has a diverse revenue stream including human resource talent solutions and premium subscriptions (LinkedIn, 2016). LinkedIn's revenue diversification mitigates the risk associated with a single revenue source. The target audience of business professionals means that LinkedIn faces a smaller population of potential users, but also benefits from a highly valuable and relevant user community for advertisers and human resource organizations.

Rapid growth among all these social media platforms has continued through today. Since 2012, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn showed impressive growth rates in terms of user interaction, measured by monthly average users for Facebook and Twitter or unique visiting members for LinkedIn. Table 1 shows strong compound annual growth rates in user activity across the three platforms. The same table also shows how the companies have increasingly monetized that user activity primarily through advertising. Compound annual revenue growth rates in the period were astounding: 52.7%, 67.7%, and 45.5% for Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, respectively. Such high growth still disappoints some investors – Twitter's stock price suffered as expenses increased, and the company was unable to meet overly optimistic profit expectations (Gottfried, 2017).

	2012	**2013**	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**Annual Growth Rate**
Facebook						
Number of Monthly Active Users (millions)[1]	1,056	1,228	1,393	1,591	1,860	15.2%
Revenue ($US Billion) [2]	5.09	7.87	12.47	17.93	27.64	52.7%
Twitter						
Number of Monthly Active Users (millions)	185	241	288	305	319	14.6%
Revenue ($US Billion)	0.32	0.66	1.40	2.22	2.53	67.7%
LinkedIn						
Number of Unique Visiting Members (millions)	58	76	93	100	106 [3]	17.4%
Revenue ($US Billion)	0.97	1.53	2.22	2.99	N/A	45.5% [4]

[1] Monthly active users or unique visiting members as compiled by Statistica:
   https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/
   https://www.statista.com/statistics/282087/number-of-monthly-active-twitter-users/
   https://www.statista.com/statistics/274052/number-of-unique-visitors-to-linkedin/

[2] Revenue figures as reported in company annual reports to the Security and Exchange Commission (SEC) and compiled from the SEC's EDGAR online system (https://www.sec.gov/edgar/searchedgar/companysearch.html)

[3] LinkedIn unique visitor numbers reported from last quarter in which LinkedIn publicly disclosed said numbers (prior to their acquisition by Microsoft in June 2016)

[4] LinkedIn revenue was not reported publicly after the Microsoft acquisition. Growth rate determined from available years.

Table 1. Social Media Usage Metrics and Company Equity Valuations

3. SHARING THE GOOD NEWS

Christine had purposefully stayed away from Facebook as she neared the end of her Ph.D. program and while she was searching for a job. She wanted to avoid any potentially controversial stories or compromising photos that might impact her reputation and dissuade future employers. Rather than chasing "likes" on Facebook, Christine decided that she should be judged on her own merits, and she did not log in to her Facebook account for a period of approximately two years.

Christine shared the good news of the forthcoming offer from Allerton that spring day with her advisor and major professor, Robert Norman. Professor Norman was in his 40th year at Honeycrisp University and was both relieved and excited to learn that the last doctoral student of his long and prosperous academic career had landed a job. He knew that landing a job at the prestigious Allerton University was not only a perfect fit for Christine, but also a mark of success for the entire IS program at Honeycrisp University. In Professor Norman's office, Christine shared all that she knew about the offer, which was only that Allerton planned to make a formal offer and that Christine's main contact at Allerton had sent her the good news by email. At that point, Christine knew nothing about the compensation package or any other details of the forthcoming offer; she had received only the email indicating the offer would be sent soon. The email was not a formal offer of employment.

Christine left Professor Norman's office and was immediately met in the hall by two senior Honeycrisp faculty members, Professor Michael Park and Professor Vijay Singh. The two professors hold chaired positions at Honeycrisp and are well-respected internationally in the IS field. Both Professor Park and Professor Singh are active researchers with high reputations among their colleagues in the IS academic community. Christine and Professor Norman were happy to report the good news of the forthcoming offer from Allerton University, and both Professor Park and Professor Singh were clearly excited about the news. The four individuals shared a very happy moment reflecting on the accomplishment. They were of course happy for Christine, but, similar to Professor Norman, they also recognized the value of a strong placement to the reputation of their department's Ph.D. program. One of the most widely used measures of success for a Ph.D. program is the successful placement of its graduates. So, the news was reason to celebrate all around. After a brief conversation, the four of them disbanded and went about their usual daily routine.

4. THE FACEBOOK POST

About three hours later, one of Christine's fellow Ph.D. students, Julie Evans, who had recently accepted a position at University of the Plains, stopped Christine in the hallway and congratulated her on the new position. Christine was a little surprised that Julie even knew about the offer, but after a brief pause, she politely thanked her friend for the kind wishes. Obviously, she was very excited about the news as well. Then, Christine explained that it was just an email promise of an offer, a formal offer was forthcoming, and that she had not accepted employment yet. Being curious, Christine asked Julie, "How do you even know about the job offer?" Julie responded that she had seen the news posted on Facebook by Professor Park, a very active and well-connected Facebook user.

Julie then showed Christine the post from Professor Park (Figure 1).
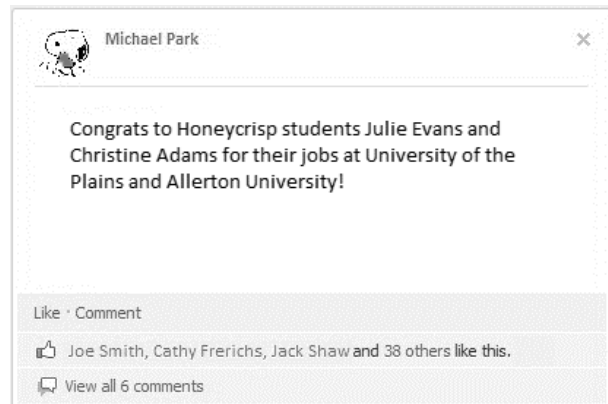
Figure 1. Professor Park's Facebook Post

OMG!

On the surface, the message posted by Professor Park was extremely positive. Professor Park simply shared the good news with his friends and colleagues. However, Christine grew deeply concerned about the multitude of implications that this message might have. The word was out among people in the IS field. A simple "water cooler" conversation was now available to the world. She was hopeful that it would not matter in the long term, but it made her think about how different the world was than just ten short years earlier and how social media had fueled this dramatic transformation.

Christine wondered if she was seeing the glass as half empty. She considered the positive ramifications of the post as well. News of her job offer had certainly become widely known, especially in her field of information systems. How might this help her standing with colleagues, Allerton University, and other universities still considering her applications for employment? The post had already been "Liked" by two potential fellow colleagues at Allerton University. The initial message was entirely positive and subsequent comments regarding the post were all quite positive. Christine began to wonder if the post actually might help her reputation among colleagues in her field.

For the next three weeks, she anxiously waited for official word from Allerton University and hoped that the well-meaning post of congratulations would not change her career options.

5. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who are the stakeholders in this case?
2. In what way does the presence of social media change this story as compared to a similar story just ten years prior (in 2002 for example)?
3. Who controls the content and the destination of messages via social media?
4. How might Christine be impacted positively by this Facebook post being released to her potential employer and the world?
5. How might Christine be impacted adversely by this Facebook post being released to her potential employer and the world?

6. What stakeholders not mentioned in the case might be impacted by the congratulatory post?

7. Do Generation Y (commonly known as Millennials, born in the 1980s or 1990s) and Generation Z (individuals born after 2000) respond differently to this story than Generation X (roughly born in the 1960s and 1970s) and Baby-Boomers (born after World War II) might respond? If so, how?

8. Explain what differences you might expect in the case if the same congratulatory post had been made on LinkedIn or Twitter instead of Facebook. Why?

6. ENDNOTES

This narrative is based on a real-life case; however, names and institutions have been modified.

7. REFERENCES

Facebook. (2016). Facebook Annual Report 2016. Retrieved October 2, 2017, from https://s21.q4cdn.com/399680738/files/doc_financials/annual_reports/FB_AR_2016_FINAL.pdf.

Gottfried, M. (2017, July 27). Investors Don't Believe in Twitter's Turnaround. *Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from https://www.wsj.com/articles/twitter-results-disappoint-again-1501179632.

LinkedIn. (2016). LinkedIn Announces Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2015 Results. Retrieved October 2, 2017, from https://news.linkedin.com/2016/linkedin-announces-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-2015-results.

Shankar, V. & Bayus, B. L. (2003). Network Effects and Competition: An Empirical Analysis of the Home Video Game Industry. *Strategic Management Journal*, 24(4), 375-384.

Twitter. (2016). Twitter Annual Report 2016. Retrieved October 2, 2017, from https://investor.twitterinc.com/annuals-proxies.cfm.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Eric C. Larson is an Assistant Professor of Information Systems in the Gies College of Business at the University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign where he teaches undergraduate and graduate students in information systems strategy, social media, and operations management. His research interests include organization of IT, top management team structure, and effective classroom techniques in the management of technology. Professor Larson has published articles in the *Journal of Management*, *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, and *Journal of Information Systems Education*. He earned a Ph.D. in Business Administration from the Carlson School of Management at the University of Minnesota.

Information Systems & Computing
Academic Professionals

STATEMENT OF PEER REVIEW INTEGRITY

All papers published in the Journal of Information Systems Education have undergone rigorous peer review. This includes an initial editor screening and double-blind refereeing by three or more expert referees.