An Informal Discussion: New Knowledge at the Interface of Social Media and Global Health

Social media is an expanding worldwide phenomenon, shaping health through rapid information transfer, image crafting, and a tremendous contribution to the interconnectivity of today’s world. New and emerging social media modalities are empowering citizens to influence policy decisions, affect the direction of philanthropic aid, and alter individual health behaviors like never before. While social media can contribute to poor health decisions and behavior (through, for example, the rapid spread of incomplete or misguided information), it can also provide incredible opportunities to strengthen more traditional methods of public and global health messaging.

One question that arises for health researchers and practitioners, then, is what are the new knowledge opportunities at the intersection of social media and global health? In an effort to explore this multifaceted and multidisciplinary topic, the Harvard Global Health Institute hosted an exploratory discussion that drew faculty and scholars representing ten schools and centers from across the University. Co-sponsored by the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard, the May 1, 2014 event convened leaders from the fields of journalism, public health, education, policy, communication science, media and the internet, health decision science, dentistry, and medicine.

Event organizer and HGHI Fellow, Dr. Brittany Seymour, also an Instructor at Harvard School of Dental Medicine, initiated the discussion with case demonstrations of how rapidly information flows through digital social networks, including sobering accounts of the abundant disinformation regarding health and wellness—the most dramatic examples being the latest iterations of the anti-vaccine and anti-fluoride movements that have public health experts both worried and frustrated. Dr. Seymour observed that social media can also be a positive tool for the health field, noting that a blog was recently used to help to identify a rare genetic disorder in children. In this case, the social forum ultimately united parents of affected children by surfacing a cluster of shared symptoms in these children (including the inability to cry); the discovery allowed for greater attention from researchers and new treatments are now under development. “What used to be private, independent, isolated experiences are now public,” Dr. Seymour added, remarking on the way social media brings people together and amplifies important issues. However, if today’s technology ensures unprecedented access to
information, why don’t we see a stronger corresponding improvement in health decisions and behaviors by individuals who are engaging with this information?

David Weinberger, Senior Researcher at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society and author of Too Big to Know, suggested that the social nature of platforms like Twitter means that those networks often function as a way to make a statement about the user rather than to simply deliver information. “Tweeting,” Dr. Weinberger declared, “is a social act. When I retweet something, I’m primarily saying, ‘I’m the sort of person who retweets this!’ The informational content is actually entirely secondary. It’s really about the sociology of networks.” Dr. Eve Wittenberg, Senior Research Scientist at the Center for Health Decision Science, agreed, asserting that social media “has less to do with messaging and more to do with connecting.” Echoing this growing consensus, Tina Grotzer of the Graduate School of Education and Joseph Blatt, Director of the Technology, Innovation, and Education Program, reinforced that the information spreading across digital platforms is perhaps only part of the equation, while the framing of both the message and the messengers themselves as “influencers” is the real driver of the health outcomes. “Peer to peer communication is the most powerful,” emphasized Blatt. This is where social media becomes influential.

Thus one particular challenge stood out. The problem, summarized by Professor Kasisomayajula Viswanath, Harvard School of Public Health, is “How do you take it from the amplification of information and message exposure to actually changing beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors: getting that vaccination, eating well, engaging in physical activity—very specific outcomes.” When these problems are examined together, the challenge becomes clear: how can health experts effectively use social networks to not only inject accurate information into the online discussion, but also translate that discussion into optimal health outcomes for themselves, their children, and their communities?

John Wihbey, Managing Editor of the Journalist’s Resource at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics, and Public Policy, remarked, “Most information cascades that flow across social media, as far as we know, are very short and shallow. It turns out that only once in a million times will any piece of content reach a thousand people or more.” Contrary to the perception that messaging online can easily go “viral,” then, is the fact that information is still largely controlled by traditional media authorities. Stefanie Friedhoff, Assistant Director for Programming and Special Projects at the Nieman Foundation for Journalism, noted that there are increasingly blurred lines between journalism and advocacy, especially with the rise of citizen journalism and social media. The role that traditional and popular media play in sparking complex online interactions among individuals remains a significant piece of this puzzle.

Global health is moving into an era where, in order to effectively share important, empirically supported public health information through online networks, our digital messaging strategies demand corresponding social strategies that integrate a nuanced understanding of how and why people and communities use those networks. As the discussion concluded, participants were left with perhaps more questions than answers, but all agreed that the conversation was long overdue. Next steps for the group are currently under consideration, and include actionable strategies for innovation, research, and intervention. At a minimum, this unique event brought together a refreshingly diverse
group of scholars who began a conversation as individual experts and concluded as an alliance collaborating for the betterment of health for our global society. That outcome alone is worth a “like.”

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