Is there a link between social media and health behavior? If so, how might health practitioners use social media to better the health of individuals in their communities? These were some of the questions that shaped the experience of six Harvard undergraduate students this summer, as part of the Global Health and Social Media (GHSM) Fellowship. The Fellowship is funded by the President’s Innovation Fund for International Experiences (PIFIE) and codirected by economics Professor David M. Cutler, Dr. Brittany Seymour of the Harvard School of Dental Medicine, and Rebekah Getman, Senior Program Manager for Education at the Harvard Global Health Institute.

Social media as a technological and cultural phenomenon has revolutionized information sharing across the globe. The students explored some of the results of this trend through research and program development related to the intersection of social media and health in South Africa, Uganda, Rwanda, and the United States. In June, Getman and Seymour visited the three international sites, leading workshops and coordinating with on-site partners. All three workshops focused on framing the issue and developing specific projects within local cultural context.

Social media’s power to connect was a common theme throughout the workshops, one that participants in South Africa likened to Ubuntu, a cultural worldview of relatedness often expressed as “I am because we are.” Given social media’s transformative potential, it is important that health workers and policy makers who use web messaging go beyond just producing and pushing out health information. To successfully influence positive health behavior, they must understand the networks involved in spreading health information—including who the key influencers and target audiences are, and whether messages change in their transmission between individuals and groups. Such an analysis relies on a keen awareness of in-person networks and social structures which are dependent—like social media platforms—on content, time, and community. All workshop participants explored tips for effective social strategies; two recent and influential books, Wharton Professor Jonah Berger’s Contagious: Why Things Catch On and Mikolaj Jan Piskorski’s A Social Strategy: How We Profit from Social Media, informed the Uganda and Rwanda discussion on concepts of social currency, triggers, and emotional response.

Student projects addressed a range of issues. In South Africa, Social Media Fellow Bessie Zhang helped with the creation of a program that uses a social platform to connect HIV-positive teens from South Africa
with those in the United States. In Uganda, Social Media Fellow Ebba Mark supported the rebranding efforts of the Massachusetts General Hospital’s Center for Global Health, using social media to strengthen the local community voice and increase visibility and organizational support. In Rwanda, Social Media Fellows Stephen Turban and Hai-Li Kong partnered with Rwanda College of Medicine and Health Sciences students and designed a radio show to use innovative approaches to disseminate health awareness and disease prevention information. And back in Cambridge, Avinash Saraf and Lily Zhang, based at the Harvard Global Health Institute, conducted research to improve understanding of how social networks pertaining to health-related topics evolve over time, and to determine whether there is a significant link between social media and health behavior. Ethical considerations were discussed throughout group conversations at all the sites, and included thinking about issues such as the confidentiality of social media participants and the representational accuracy of those involved.

Together the students’ projects are contributing to a meaningful body of knowledge about the emerging intersection of social media and global health. Fellows will share their experiences with faculty and students at a reflection workshop in early October, as the Institute continues to push innovation and research in this exciting new field.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Brittany Seymour and Rebekah Getman