Chapter 8
Functions of Social Media in Higher Education: A Case Study

Violeta Maria Șerbu
The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, Romania

ABSTRACT
This chapter aims to explore some critical functions that social media is playing for the internal processes included in an alternative higher education model – The Alternative University, developed in Romania, since 2007. This case study highlights the challenges and opportunities associated with using these new communication as well as information technologies in order to generate effective learning environments. The collaborative and student-centered traits of higher education models using social media for learning activities are mainly dealt with in this study. Functions such as connecting people, sharing knowledge, collaboratively generating knowledge, community building, management platform, accumulation and construction of knowledge, knowledge assessment, raising learning motivation, personal branding, and networking are identified as important assets of social media for their use in a higher education setting.

INTRODUCTION
The reality augmentation with the new information and communication technologies became more obvious with the birth of Web 2.0 and the Social Media phenomenon.

Web 2.0, defining the second wave of evolution of the Internet, which came after the dot-com bubble (O’Reilly, 2005) is perceived as the social web, or as Tim O’Reilly and John Battelle explained it in 2009, “is all about harnessing collective intelligence” because involves “building
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applications that literally get better the more people
use them” (O’Reilly & Battelle, 2009, p. 1).

The exponentially growth of technology also
increased the social change rhythm: we are more
mobile and the scale of participation has increased
by orders of magnitude, thus the Web is becoming
the world itself (O’Reilly & Battelle, 2009). In this
perspective, Social Media is just the way people
communicate in this wide connected world, this
communication is now easier to carry, faster and
more reachable than the traditional one (Asur &
Huberman, 2010).

This communication-driven revolution, the so
called Social Media, “touches nearly every facet
of our personal and business lives” (Qualman,
2010, p. xiii). Higher education is no exception.

Higher education - perceived as a space for
creating and sharing the most cutting-edge knowl-
dge into society, is more and more influenced by
this new media, either creating alternative models
of higher education or transforming the old ones
(Kamenetz, 2009). Social Media is blending stu-
dents’ learning environments and their knowledge
“in one virtual world” (Robbins-Bell, 2008).

Initially regarded with skepticism, Social
Media is now more and more integrated into
the academic world, fulfilling a wide range of
functions – from performing citations tools to
academic community building instruments or
learning platforms for students and also for the
teaching staff (Junco & Cole-Avent, 2008; Haz-
ari, North & Moreland, 2009; Li & Pitts, 2009;
Violino, 2009).

Nevertheless, the traditional academic world
is still reserved about using social media with
profound educational purposes (Selwyn, 2009)
and underestimates its potential in transforming
the higher education landscape (Hazari, North &
Moreland, 2009; Ras & Rech, 2009).

By choosing to research the uses of social
media in the Alternative University case, we aim
to explore its potential, analyzing the advantages
that it brings - ease of use, availability, individual
affordability and network effect, (Alexander &
Levine, 2008) but also its characteristics, such
as “persistence, multiuser, avatars, and wide area
network” (Robbins-Bell, 2008) and the bigger
context of “new culture of learning” (Thomas &
Brown, 2011).

Last but not least, we will present a case study
of a non-traditional university that developed its
own way of integrating social media in the educa-
tional model it had experimentally developed.
The case study will focus on the main functions of
social media (educational and non-educational),
the principles that influenced the integration pro-
cess, the limits of its use and also on the aspects
relevant for future research.

ON SOCIAL MEDIA AND
HIGHER EDUCATION

A New Way of Communicating
and the Education Revolution

In a wider context, Social Media is regarded as the
latest trend in education, (Violino, 2009) chang-
ing not only the way we consume information,
but also the way we interact with each other and
relate with information and knowledge (Kamenetz,
2009; Selwyn, 2011). New types of communica-
tion require new types of human behaviors and
enact different kinds of needs.

The Internet has changed the way we think
about technology and information, by “becom-
ing a participatory medium, giving rise to an
environment that is constantly being changed and
reshaped by the participation itself” (Thomas &
Brown, 2011, p. 42). Douglas Thomas and John
Seely Brown (2011) speak about “a new culture
of learning”, facilitated by a “growing digital,
networked infrastructure” that “is amplifying our
ability to access and use nearly unlimited resources
and incredible instruments while connecting with
one another at the same time” (p. 18). This new
type of learning is based on “potent tools” as
Wikipedia, Facebook, YouTube, and online games
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