

The Reality of Students in the Digital Age

If we could travel back in time ten years ago and survey the methods teenagers used to communicate ideas, we would see cliques of teenagers standing around and gossiping in the school hallways. In this digital age, the only items students need to express an opinion are two working thumbs and a smart phone. The internet serves as an outlet for students to vent their feelings and express their opinions. With just a few taps on a screen, a student can send a funny picture or a joke via Twitter or Instagram. It's all fun and jokes until a student posts something that others may cringe at. Although teens are known for messing around on the internet, instances show that some posts on social media can lead to expulsion, juvenile detention, or even death. It is the place of the school to intervene before students commit dangerous acts. While most of the time the items that students post on social media are harmless, schools should be allowed to discipline students for something they post on the internet if what the student posts breaks the school's rules, if what they say is not protected by the First Amendment, or if the school has reason that what the student posted is going to lead to dangerous situations.

For a start, schools should be allowed to discipline students if their online post violates a school rule. In the case of Amanda Tatro versus the University of Minnesota, the mortuary science student posted threatening and explicit statuses on Facebook about a cadaver she was dissecting as a part of her embalming session (Mullen). Charged by the University of Minnesota's corrective body, Tatro was accused of defying the university's law in prohibiting threatening conduct and the mortuary science department guidelines relating to confidentiality, responsibility, and courtesy for the cadaver. As a result, the University put her on probation for the remainder of her undergraduate career and gave her a failing grade in the lab course. The Minnesota Supreme Court and the Minnesota Court of Appeals agreed that the university had the

right to chasten Tatro because of the threats and inappropriate commentaries she posted about the corpse (Levine). Since Amanda posted information on social media that promoted violence and transgressed the university's code, the University of Minnesota was fair to punish her.

Just like Amanda Tatro, students often like to document their lives on social media websites like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Anything a student posts can be seen by anyone who has access to the internet, especially school administrators. Many schools have high standards regarding the behavior of the students in order to uphold the reputation of the school. For example, student Michael Guinn was expelled from John Brown University, a private Christian university, when he posted pictures of himself dressed in drag clothing. Previously, Guinn posted updates about partying and dating men despite recurrent warnings from the college. Guinn's behavior disregarded John Brown University's code of conduct, so therefore he was defrocked. In the same way, twenty students from TeWinkle Middle School were suspended for partaking in a Myspace group where one student supposedly threatened to murder another person. Not only did these students face punishment from the school because of the statements they displayed online, they were additionally likely to face criminal charges for suggesting homicide (Kornblum). In both cases, students were rightfully punished for breaking the school formalities. In order to stress the importance of students complying with school guidelines, it is the school's place to reprimand students who disobey the rules.

While schools have the right to punish students for postings on social media that violate school rulings, they can also discipline students if the online declarations are not protected by the First Amendment. The First Amendment ensures "freedom of expression by prohibiting Congress from restricting...the rights of individuals to speak freely" ("First Amendment"). Categories of speech that are not sheltered by the First Amendment include fighting words,

obscene proclamations, true threats, and “words which would likely make the person to whom they are addressed commit an act of violence”(“ Miller”). In 2002, the case of Justin Swindler versus the Bethlehem Area School District involved a student from Nitschmann Middle School who created a website that contained obscene and menacing statements about his principal and teacher (“Student Rights”). The school board voted to expel Swindler because the threats were aimed directly at specific people and the website harmfully affected the conveyance of teaching in the school (“J.S.”). Since the obscene criticisms and threats on the website fit the criteria to be in the category of speech not protected by the First Amendment, the school district had the right to punish Swindler.

School administrators need to undoubtedly recognize whether the online postings created by students are truly hazardous to the student or other people. For a thorough comprehension of the social media post, the school should communicate with the student to understand the full intentions behind the entry. On January 6th, 2015, a student from Central Union High School posted a warning on a social media application called Yik Yak about how he intended to bring a rifle to school for the purpose of murder. The police were contacted to examine the situation and on-call detectives worked on the case with the patrol staff. In the end, school was postponed and the student was taken into a juvenile hall for “felony violation of criminal threats” (Adami). Although necessary evidence was not found in regards to the student actually bringing a rifle to the school, the school methodically investigated the intentions and penalized the student for the threat. Threats posted on social media implying that a student will carry out acts of violence on school grounds are punishable by the school.

As has been noted, schools should be allowed to rebuke students for posting updates on social media that breach school regulations, are not protected by the First Amendment, or lead to

destructive situations. When school rules are broken, it is within the school's power to handle the student. High schools and colleges often want students who will represent their school in a respectable fashion, so they can reprimand the student if they feel that something a student posts on social media crosses a line. While the school can rebuke the student for breaking a rule, the school can furthermore ordain punishment if the student expresses speech online that is not protected by the First Amendment. Words that are threatening to the health of the student or people around him or her must be addressed by the school to ensure safety. Another way the school can guarantee security is to get a thorough understanding of the meaning behind the social media posts before they take direct action on the student. Once they have built a communication with the alleged student, there leaves little room for miscommunications and the school can chastise the student if they deem it necessary. It is the student's responsibility to think twice before sending out a tweet or status update that could affect their lives forever. While the school does not have to stalk every tweet or status update a student posts, it is important for the school to get involved before a "harmless" situation can escalate. When schools discipline students because of inappropriate posts on social media, it gives students a chance to learn from their mistakes and grow as young adults.

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