

Communication Function of Social Networks in Media Education: The Case of Georgia

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Technology has a significant role in today's educational process, especially online Social Networks which facilitate communication between professors and students. This current study seeks to analyze the role of Facebook closed groups that are created specifically for educational purposes, as well as the impact they have on developing competency-based education (communication skills in particular) and to answer questions such as: what are the educational benefits of teaching methods adapted for digital audiences and how a digital audience develops in terms of competency-based education. The study was conducted in Georgia, which is a Post-Soviet Republic undergoing rapid democratic development while having the best indicators in terms of the South Caucasus Media Sustainability Index (IREX, 2016). According to a Freedom House country report (Cecire, 2016), the country's scope of democracy is 4.61 (with a transitional government and hybrid regime). Journalism and mass communication teaching courses at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University were focus points for our research observation. The study has confirmed that by using new technologies with physical and cyber audiences (by implementing online social networking tools) it is possible to develop various competencies and to successfully achieve learning goals. Utilizing new technologies in the teaching process is also very effective for enhancing communication skills. Furthermore, an open platform based on online Social Networks (even through closed groups) can stimulate the democratization of the educational system in young democracies, such as Georgian general. Students and professors express themselves more naturally in such an open platform - closed groups (which might seem more appropriate for societies in transitions).

Keywords: communication skills, Facebook, Georgia, journalism education, social networks.

Introduction and Literature Review

Because of Social Networks' (SN) growing popularity in Georgia, from the beginning of the fall academic term of 2012 to the present term 2016, professors usually suggest that graduate and undergraduate students create closed groups for specific teaching courses in journalism and mass communication on Facebook. At that time (2012) our empirical observation, now backed by research, was optimistic and indicated that students might become more involved in the learning process, monitor online Q&A about course updates and receive feedback from professors on a regular basis. It should be noted that joining these groups is voluntary and should be used only as a supplemental learning tool (in addition to an e-learning platform). Up to now, some of the closed groups on Facebook have had self-regulatory norms for closed groups e.g. (no hate speech, trolling, posts not related to group purposes, restriction of adding friends not taking the course, etc.).

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According to a report about "Global Internet Access," the number of internet users is increasing rapidly and about 3.2 billion people were online at the end of 2015 (State of Connectivity, 2016). Two main reasons could explain this rise of internet usage: an easier access to networks and a rise in global incomes. Based on State of Connectivity report's (2016), internet users have increased by approximately 300 million people per year, over the past decade. According to the survey conducted for Transparency International (TI) - Georgia, internet users were at 35% in 2015. In 2016 that number increased to 40%. According to this research about 40% of Georgian adults use the social media on a regular basis. In term of popularity, Facebook is by far the most popular Social Network in Georgia - with 79% of the average Internet users accessing it at least once a week (The Caucasus Research Resource Centers, 2015). According to the survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI) the most popular Social Network in Georgia is Facebook (71% of internet users most often use Facebook) (International Republican Institute., n.d.).

By January 2015, there were 1,500,000 potential Facebook advert-viewers (Facebook users) in Georgia and the most Georgian young people are on Facebook (Pearce, 2015). 31.65% of them are over 14 years old. Among the female population, 94.54% are 18-24 years old and 79.63% are men, the research shows. According to this data, we can suggest that students make up the majority of Facebook users. Based on studies conducted by Georgian researchers, in academia, 46.4% of research workers use the Internet for academic and educational purposes (Tsuladze et al., 2013, p. 137).

It is worth mentioning that before Facebook, educational closed groups in Tbilisi State University functioned within another online platform "Moodle: e-learning" which was created for educational purposes only. At present, Facebook is operating as a tool in learning management systems and is even mentioned in syllabi. Dali Osepashvili suggests that several courses in journalism and mass communication (J&MC) programs at TSU operating on the LMS (Moodle platform) were prepared based on blogs and Facebook groups. The scholar highlights that Facebook groups are more popular among students than the Moodle platform (Osepashvili, 2013, p. 29). We suggest that the main advantage Social Networks have in the learning process compared to LMS is based on the fact that Facebook, for example is multifunctional and students visit FB for entertainment and social-interaction aside from educational purposes.

Focusing on improving competence-based education that incorporates Social Network tools has become a researchable topic in academia. The development of communication skills is one of the basic competencies for students of all educational levels of Higher Education. In the document, titled Dublin Descriptors (National Framework of Qualifications, n.d.) communication skills are highlighted as one of the learning outcomes. We can find the indicators of these learning outcomes in the accreditation standards, as well (National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement, n.d.). Description of the journalism programs specify that after completing the academic courses; students are able to communicate with relevant sources, focus on an audience, use information technologies to communicate on a professional level, use multimedia techniques, work in a team,

etc. Ventura, and Quero (2013, p. 1033) observed that "The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) has resulted in new study plans orientated towards the acquisition of a set of skills by students." Authors mention that educators should take into consideration more current technologies to shape the teaching-learning process. Naturally, Freshmen Students are familiar with Social Networks. Therefore, incorporating this platform into the learning process is a smooth transition. Findings of Nicki Dabner's (2012) study support and mention Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield's (2008) suggestion that students are positive to the Facebook and that it has been done a necessity in their everyday life.

In Malaga University (Spain), Rafael Ventura and Mariam Jose Quero (2013) have conducted research about the role of Social Networks and specifically Facebook, in the teaching process. It is mentioned in their study that Facebook gives teachers an opportunity to have two-way or multi-channel communication with students, and students can take an active role in this process. Authors equate this experience gained in digital classrooms to improved levels of competences (Ventura, and Quero, 2013). According to Falahah and Rosmala (2012) Social Networks (specifically Facebook) are platforms for academic activity and serve to more efficiently disseminate/share information between students and teachers. They also acknowledge the potential for some minor negative factors such as distraction from the learning process due to its inherent nature – to entertain (Falahah, and Rosmala, 2012). Moreover, other authors state that social networks became more efficient by offering and supporting educational functions (Tadeu, and Lucas, 2013).

Olga Ortega (2013, p. 1668) analyses the impact of using Social Networks in team building within a group and concludes that "students who used Social Media tools participated 11 times more in the discussion and obtained better learning outcomes than those who did not ... Social Media technology is a fairly recent tool that offers new educational possibilities, many of them are still to be discovered, but it also generates new perils."

In their study, Paul Amador and Julie Amador (2014) point out the role of Social Networks in the Academic advising process/purposes. This is expressed in different ways and needs. For example, students message their advisors, write on their walls and read their posts. Current studies examine the students' usage of Facebook for academic purposes. According to a case study by Huseyin Bicen, and Nadire Cavus (2011) students establish lines of communications by spending a significant amount of their time using Facebook. As for communication skills and competencies, the study has revealed that students improve their communication skills by activities on Facebook (Bicen, and Cavus, 2011). While discussing the involvement of the students in SN and the effect on Academic life, the authors highlight that "Future studies should concentrate on integrating Facebook into education and teaching, which is important for students' everyday working lives" (Bicen, and Cavus, 2011, p. 946).

According to Olga Delgado Ortega (2013), the use of Facebook helped to improve learning achievements and has a positive impact on teambuilding processes. According to the study, *Social Networking Usage in a Higher Education Environment* by Falahah and Dewi Rosmala, some Universities limit

access to Social Networks, but the study has revealed the positive aspects of SN usage. As authors conclude from the results, educators should find effective ways of using Social Networks in Higher Education (Falahah, and Rosmala, 2012).

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Upon the completion of the literature review, the research questions and hypothesis revealed themselves. By answering the following research questions and hypothesis we might find out what the communication function of Social Networking and its role in the development of competence based education are. Research questions and hypothesis are as follows:

RQ1: What are the educational benefits of teaching methods adapted to digital audiences (particularly in Facebook closed groups)?

RQ2: Does teaching to digital audiences develop competency-based education, communication skills in particular?

RQ3: How are the roles between students and professors in educational closed groups distributed?

H1: Students and Lecturers positively evaluate using Social Networks in the learning process.

Methodology

Research Phases

After formulating the research questions and hypothesis, the methodological approach was selected. In particular, we have combined the quantitative (analytical or explanatory survey) and qualitative (observation) for statistical and text analysis to see the larger frame of the results.

The comparative analysis was conducted in two research periods from 2013-14 and 2015-16 academic years. The survey instrument (a questionnaire) for qualitative research was created and tested in 2013. The research sample was selected for the 2013-14 academic year and then, for comparison in 2015-16. Data collection by personal and telephone interviews with students and professors was conducted in the 2013-14 and 2015-16 academic years. In the next research phase, the online observation of Facebook "closed groups" was conducted (period: 2013-14 and 2015-16). The data was analyzed, interpreted and integrated for results.

Research Tools

Because most methods have their limitations, we used mixed methods and strategies by triangulating data sources. In this regard, we used concurrent mixed methods; we collected data and then integrated it into the interpretation of the results.

After testing the survey instrument open-ended, close-ended and checklist questions were specified. Following the samples election, individual interviews with students and telephone interviews with professors and lecturers were conducted.

Analyzing their answers made it possible to map the patterns in the digital educational process, which reflected the individual/group perception of Facebook function in improving communication skills.

As to the quantitative approach, we used a survey analysis to get information about certain groups. As qualitative researchers are using Facebook as a source of data (Wimmer and Dominick, 2014, p. 151), we used Netnography, a new qualitative research method that studies communities linked together via computer-mediated communication (Kozinets, 2002). In the online world of Facebook, "observation usually means viewing text and images on a computer screen" (Wimmer, Dominick, 2014, p. 135) and the advantage of online qualitative research was that "the online behavior of large groups (for example Facebook users) can be observed" (Wimmer, Dominick, 2014, p. 127). We used a participant observation and got involved in the group to observe the online behavior of people and reveal the communication patterns of the closed groups. Observation of closed groups was useful for the quantitative survey as well, because observations of the shared information within the closed groups between the professors and students helped to formulate questions for interviews, and then validated the results by the actual experience itself. From this point of view, we focused on analyzing why Georgian professors and students prefer Facebook closed groups as an educational platform for communication.

Observation of the group and the individual differ from each other, but is an integral part of the closed group's picture. This observation of online activities revealed the process in its entirety (by observing discussions, context and content, time, topics, etc.) which was not detectable by participants themselves in the interviews, ultimately being confirmed during telephone interviews.

We have split the Facebook groups for observation in to two categories: 1) a researcher was an observer and did not participate as a lecturer; 2) a lecturer was participating and not observing. In this way, all selected (N=25) groups were observed and/or participated in by one researcher. To obtain information from other Facebook groups, telephone interviews with participant lecturers were conducted and some additional questions were focused on what lecturers benefit from by utilizing "closed groups" (Q: In your opinion for what purposes do other lecturers use Social Networks in the teaching process?)

Research Sample

We have selected students and professors/lecturers from the journalism and mass communication department (almost all lecturers of mandatory and electives courses focused on media education) at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. All the lecturers of the core courses (N=22) involved in the above-mentioned programs were asked to answer the questions. In total, 65 students and 22 Lecturers (from journalism and mass communication graduate and

undergraduate levels) were interviewed in 2013-14 and then the same number in 2015-16 academic years. Participant observations were made on some closed groups we had access to (N=25). The sampling of students was taken from the same classes which was the "closed groups." Descriptive data of the sample:

- **Lecturers interviewed in 2013-14:** Gender: Female 77%, Male 23%; Age: under 35 27%; 36-45 years old 36%; 46-55 years old 32%; 56-65 years old 5%; Academic Degree: Doctor 68%; Master 32%.
- **Lecturers interviewed in 2015-16:** Gender: Female 77%, Male 23%; Age: under 35 23%; 36-45 years old 45%; 46-55 years old 23%; 56-65 years old 9%; Academic Degree: Doctor 77 %; Master 23%.
- **Students interviewed in 2013-14:** Gender: Female 66%, Male 29%, refused to answer 5%; Age: 17-21 years old 58%, 22 years old and above 34%, refused to answer 8%; Level of education: Undergraduate 67%, Graduate students 20%, refused to answer 13%.
- **Students interviewed in 2015-16:** Gender: Female 89%, Male 11%; Age: 17-21 years old 58%, 22 years old and above 42%; Level of education: Undergraduate 74%, Graduate 26%.

Data Analysis

In 2013-2014: All lecturers involved in the journalism and mass communication programs use social networks actively for teaching purposes (92%: daily or at least once a week) all respondents use Facebook for teaching purposes, 64% use YouTube as well. In 2013-2014: all 65 students use Social Networks. 97% of respondents use SN in the learning process.

To the question: "Are Social Networks helpful for you in the learning process?" most students find them "very helpful" or "helpful" in the educational process (Table 1). All the lecturers responded similarly - Social Networks are "very helpful" or "helpful" in the teaching process (Table 2).

Table 1. Students' Responses on Usefulness of Social Networks in the Learning Process

Comparative data	2013-2014 (%)	2015-2016 (%)
Very helpful	51	48
Helpful	37	40
More helpful than not	8	12
More not helpful than Yes	3	0
Not helpful at all	0	0
Do not know	0	0
Refuse to answer	1	0
Total	100 % (N=65)	(N=65)

Table 2. Lecturers' Responses on Usefulness of Social Networks in the Learning Process

Comparative data	2013-14 (%)	2015-2016 (%)
Very helpful	59	82
Helpful	41	18
More helpful than not	0	0
More not helpful than Yes	0	0
Not helpful at all	0	0
Do not know	0	0
Refuse to answer	0	0
Total	100 % (N=65)	(N=65)

86% of the students responded positively that FB's closed groups (CG) promote the study of the training courses (in journalism), are useful for achieving the goals of the course (from 78% to 75%), FB's CG help develop communication skills (74%). However, only 42% in 2015-16 and 55% in 2013-14 said that "FB's closed groups (CG) have a positive impact on students' motivation" and 50% said they "do not know" in 2015-16 (Table 3).

Table 3. Students' Responses on Impact of Social Networks and Facebook Close Groups in the Learning Process

Comparative data	"Yes" (%)		"No" (%)		"Do not know" (%)		"Refuse to answer" (%)	
	2013-2014	2015-2016	2013-2014	2015-2016	2013-2014	2015-2016	2013-2014	2015-2016
FB's closed groups (CGs) promotes the study of the training courses	86	86	6	8	8	6	0	0
FB's CGs have a positive impact on students' motivation	55	42	19	6	26	50	0	2
Student involvement level in FB's CGs is satisfactory	61	69	11	9	28	20	0	2
FB's CGs are useful for achieving the goals of the course	78	75	8	8	14	17	0	0
FB's CGs help develop communication skills	74	74	11	11	14	12	0	3

According to the analysis, the majority of students think that Facebook closed groups develop team working skills (80%), an increasing number of students think that it helps in providing information (88%<94%), in socialization (71%<80%). In comparison with previous years, 11% more students think, that it helps develop the ability to communicate with sources, colleagues, the public and other interested parties (from 74% to 95%). The number of students increased in 2015-16 (compared with data from 2013-14) who think that SNs are useful for providing information, using ICTs helps socialization and improves skills to communicate with sources, colleagues, the public and other interested parties (Table 4).

Table 4. Students' Responses on Developing Skill-Based Competences via Closed Groups

Comparative data	"Yes" (%)		"No" (%)		"Do not know" (%)		"Refuse to answer" (%)	
	2013-2014	2015-2016	2013-2014	2015-2016	2013-2014	2015-2016	2013-2014	2015-2016
Use of ICTs	75	89	8	9	9	2	8	0
Individual work while doing practical tasks	43	38	41	35	14	26	2	1
Team work while doing practical tasks	80	80	12	12	5	8	3	0
Time Management	59	54	23	29	15	17	3	0
Providing information	88	94	8	3	3	3	1	0
Gaining Information and analysis	82	82	12	8	5	10	3	0
Critical Thinking	49	37	29	29	19	34	3	0
Socialization	71	80	20	14	6	5	3	1
The ability to communicate with sources, colleagues, the public and other interested parties	74	95	14	3	8	2	4	0

More than 50% of the selected lecturers each year was the same and the comparative analysis that shows some dynamics in that group as well e.g. (using alternative social networks in addition to Facebook, frequency of using social networks and closed groups in educational processes, etc.) (Table 5).

According to the comparative data analysis, from year to year, the intensity of using Social Networks in teaching processes has been increased (Table 6).

Lecturers answered the question: "Do you use 'closed groups' in the teaching process?" In comparison with the previous years, the number of lecturers who use Facebook closed groups for educational purposes increased from 64% in 2012-13 up to 91% in 2013-14 and reached 100% in 2015-16 (Table 7).

Table 5. Teachers' Responses on Using Social Networks in Teaching Processes

Social Networks/Media	2012-2013 (%) N=30	2013-2014 (%) N=22	2015-2016 (%) N=22
Facebook	100	100	100
YouTube	3	64	50
Twitter	0	14	14
Google+	0	23	27
Tumblr	0	14	9
LinkedIn	0	9	4

Table 6. Teachers' Responses on Frequency of Using Social Networks in the Teaching Process

Intensity	2012-2013 (%)	2013-2014 (%)	2015-2016 (%)
Daily	36	68	82
Weekly	23	23	18
Monthly	40	9	0

Table 7. Number of Interviewed Educators who Use FB Closed Groups in the Teaching Process

	2012-2013 (%)	2013-2014 (%)	2015-2016 (%)
Closed groups	64	91	100

Lecturers answered the question: "For what specific educational purposes do lecturers use social networks?" In comparison with the previous years, the number of lecturers who think that social networks help in communication, consultation, discussion and interaction, as well as in mobilizing students in the educational process has been increased (Table 8).

Table 8. Teachers' Responses on Benefits of Social Networks for Achieving Specific Educational Purposes

Educational Goals	2013-2014 (%)	2015-2016 (%)
Communication, consultation, discussion and interaction (Inc. answering questions, online brainstorming, debates)	30	37
Receiving and distributing information, receiving and giving the assignments, uploading teaching materials	48	45
Solving organizational issues	6	5
Mobilizing students in the educational process (reminder of deadlines, time management)	4	9
Other	12	4

Conclusions and Discussion

Learning outcomes in journalism and mass communication programs include knowledge and skill based competencies. All these competencies are developed not only in the physical but in digital audiences. In the process of developing competence based education and communication skills, the usage of Social Networks has already been noticeable in the program descriptions and syllabi. Proposed research questions are being answered here under:

RQ1: *What are the educational benefits of teaching methods adapted to digital audiences (particularly in Facebook closed groups)?*

- Most students and professors find social networks in the learning process very helpful or helpful. In their opinion, digital classrooms are useful for achieving course goals, useful for providing information (mostly for receiving and distributing information, receiving and giving assignments, uploading teaching materials, deadlines, etc.).
- Most lecturers use Social Networks for numerous teaching purposes and various teaching methods are implemented (e.g. online brainstorming). In the lecturer's opinions, the educational environment adapted for a Social Network is useful for assessment (it is possible to identify the students). In addition, the function "seen" on the posts indicates wherever the student has been informed about the updates on Facebook.
- Observations have revealed that students and lecturers, as members of a digital audience, have mutual educational goals. Facebook has its own communication climate, which is spread through educational closed groups (like participants express their emotions with a "like button," send private messages, stickers to each other, use polls when a decision must be made, etc.). In closed groups professors and students can build team relations.

RQ2: *Does teaching to digital audiences develop competency-based education, communication skills in particular?*

- Students and professors agree that the communication function of such groups is important and useful in teaching. In students' opinions, closed groups help develop communication skills. Most lecturers use the digital classrooms for communication, consultation, discussion and interaction (Inc. answering questions, online brainstorming, debates).
- Most students think that Facebook closed groups that develop team working skills, help in providing information, socialization, to develop the ability to communicate with sources, colleagues, the public and other interested parties and improve IT skills. They say that closed groups make it possible to have non-stop discussions: the students have an opportunity to voice opinions fully at any given time.

RQ3: *How are the roles between students and professors in educational closed groups distributed?*

- Professors use Facebook for educational purposes (e.g. uploading material, tasks, deadlines, etc.) and communications (e.g. asking and answering questions, solving organizational problems).
- Students often combine the "tutor's role" and peer support with each other and within the closed groups, participate in the process of consulting each other constantly. This also helps the team building process among students. Cases of trolling are extremely rare.
- Students and professors are ethical. Some groups already have self-regulatory standards determined by professors.
- The hypothesis (students and lecturers positively evaluate using social networks in the learning process) has been confirmed: students and lecturers have given positive evaluations to using social networks in the learning process (backed with a questionnaire analysis from 2012 to 2016).

However, some questions for discussions are still current, like: what happens to the closed groups after the course is over? Can social networks be used in universities (with weakly developed administrative resources) as an opportunity to contact graduates/alumni?

The technology enhanced learning process on Facebook relies on self-regulated instruments where admins of closed groups have some privileges (for example: the function of deleting the group). It is worth mentioning that this is a place where students and professors use the public platform (even using closed groups) not always for educational purposes, but they transfer information from such groups to public walls and mention some personal data from time to time. Observation shows that students use them periodically for spreading news and their own media products, services, post their ideas, questions, etc. Professors say that after completing the teaching course, such groups still have a networking function from time to time.

From this perspective, there are still some boundaries to be strengthened between personal and public interactions, the usage of personal data, enhancing ethical frames and time management regulations. Nevertheless, we can suggest that such transparency of communication channels in the educational process and the increased interaction between students and teachers might have a positive effect on the democratization of the educational system.

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