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Web, Social Media and Online Communities for those Studying for Professions: Embraced or Tolerated?

Managing Information Online at The City Law School

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Abstract—At a time of much debate on the subject of legal education within the UK, universities are having to look carefully at the content of their courses, their methods of delivery and ultimately whether this process is meaningfully shaping and future-proofing legal professionals or leaving them ill-prepared for practice. This paper seeks broadly to gain an understanding of the online tools law students use to support their studies and career progression. It focuses in on the use of social media tools like Facebook and Twitter, alongside the ways in which law students both seek and manage their information for learning. The online community aspect also formed a part of this research. Observations were made on the basis of two focus groups at The City Law School, City University London with students on academic law programmes. Students at City University have access to a custom-built online law portal: Lawbore, which acts as a one-stop shop, with community and social media elements as well as learning objects and multimedia guides. Lawbore has been in existence since 2002, and although constantly evolving it has never been formally evaluated; this research was prompted by needing to dig deeper into what students require from a resource such as this.

Keywords—social media; online communities; portal; content generation; information retrieval; legal education

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher Education institutions who teach those aiming for a career in a profession – whether law, medicine or engineering, are facing challenging times. The cost of education is increasing; all undergraduates in the UK must now pay at least £9000 per year and they want to see tangible benefits from this investment. Of course, universities use many strategies to market their worth; glamorous estates, publicising successful alumni, cutting-edge research, prestigious academic staff and close links with employers amongst these. In addition, digital technology, including social media is increasingly being employed to attract and retain students.

This study focuses on the students of The City Law School and their use of the Internet and associated tools to support their learning of Law. The research, based on small focus groups, looked specifically at how students use technology independently, rather than in an organised way under the guidance of the Law School. However, the Law

School's own portal for students, *Lawbore* [1], formed part of the discussions which comprise the findings in this paper. As a resource custom-built for our students, we were keen to gain some insight into which features the students felt had most impact on their learning. This would then help to inform future developments of the site and perhaps give some indication of which tools we should be promoting to our students.

The paper includes a methodology, detailing the focus groups and participants. We will go on to give a brief overview of both the legal education system in the UK and the use of technology within those Law Schools.

II. METHODOLOGY

Data has been collected informally (via unprompted student comments) as well as formally via focus groups and basic website statistics (within a university recognised ethical approval process). The focus groups were small - eleven students across two groups, and they included students from each of our academic law programmes. These are the three-year undergraduate degree (known as the 'LLB'), the two-year degree for graduate entry students (the 'GELLB') and the one-year law conversion course – the Graduate Diploma in Law (the 'GDL'). Different years of those courses were also represented so we had the views of first, second and third year undergraduates. Students volunteered to take part after receiving an all-school email invitation. Some element of bias could be evident as by definition more enthusiastic students would be more likely to put themselves forward. The composition of the groups was as follows:

Group 1:

A total of 7 students made up this group: four female and three male. Three GDL students, a second-year GELLB student and one student was present to represent each of the three years of the LLB.

Group 2:

A total of five students made up this group: four female and one male. Two first-year LLB students, one second year LLB student, one third year LLB student and a first-year GELLB student.

Both groups included international students – three in Group 1 and 2 in the second.

The focus group sessions were very detailed and lasted between 90 minutes and 2 hours, with views flowing easily. They were filmed in their entirety in order to be able to pinpoint in the analysis which type of student was responsible for which comment. Questions posed covered two key areas: content generation tools like Facebook and Twitter and content consumption tools.

In terms of content generation, discussion ranged from social media tools like Facebook and Twitter to the perceptions and views on online communities. Questions focused on collaboration, portals and digital technologies; blogs and publisher resources. For consumption, we were keen to learn more about digital literacy in Law: the types of information students needed, how they researched, how they kept up to date, managed their findings and decided what was important.

As useful background, this paper will briefly introduce legal education in the UK as well as giving some insights into how technology has been used formally within Law Schools.

III. LEGAL EDUCATION IN THE UK

For students contemplating joining a profession, the commitment required both in terms of cost and duration is significant. For a law student, even once the academic element is completed, there is still the one-year professional element (£12,500 for solicitors and £16,000 for barristers).

Within Law, there is fierce competition for the 'apprentice' stage that follows; the training contract for solicitors and pupillage for barristers. Without this, a student career path stalls and can go no further. In 2013, there were 1700 students called to the Bar and fewer than 400 pupillages on offer [2].

Against this backdrop, law schools and universities in the UK are also undergoing a wholesale review: the *Legal Education and Training Review (LETR)* [3], which questions whether the academic stage of law remains fit-for-purpose.

The view of the employers – the law firms and the chambers – is that they have concerns about the quality of trainees: noting the lack of understanding about the commercial world, a canyon between their academic achievements and real-world business acumen. LETR articulates this: 'there are areas of cognitive expertise that are not adequately captured by conventional notions of the core. Key examples are professional ethics and values and 'commercial awareness' [4].

IV. TECHNOLOGY IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND LAW SCHOOLS

In terms of technology, universities are keen to exploit the tools available: in order to streamline their offerings, support students outside of core hours and enhance the learning experience. Technology is 'one of the most significant mechanisms currently transforming the learning process' [5]; at a basic level, most institutions have a virtual

learning environment which would offer students a place to find materials for their courses (handbooks, reading lists) and the facility to submit assessments. The more adventurous uses may facilitate the use of more interactive options - wikis, reflective blogs, peer feedback and quizzes in order to engage their students more actively.

With so much discussion around whether legal education is fit for purpose: what do law students really want from their institution in terms of support online? What tools do they use to assist them? More importantly perhaps, research is required around how students work to see what technological solutions are most useful.

Education for the professions has in the past been largely delivered via lectures and tutorials, but the rise in multimedia has altered the landscape. In Medicine, video how-tos are now commonplace – there have been many apps developed to assist medical students with directories of clinical information and virtual anatomy tours such as *3D Brain*, *Radiology 2.0* and *Muscle and Bone Anatomy 3D*. This is also becoming more familiar within Law, although progress is much slower. Some years ago, Paul Maharg pioneered the use of simulations by designing a virtual town (Ardcalloch) where his Strathclyde students could become solicitors at virtual law firms acting for virtual clients [6]. More recently, The University of Law took the decision that all its lectures were online only, saving its lecturers for the more interactive tutorials, now known as the flipped classroom model.

At City Law School we have developed a custom-built portal to support our students (est. 2000). The *Lawbore* and *Learnmore* [7] websites run alongside and complement Moodle, the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). *Learnmore* offers law students nationwide open access to legal skills materials, integrating video clips and guidance materials in which students and alumni feature.

Lawbore offers a gateway to supporting resources for different modules in Law, a hub for accessing and understanding e-resources, a careers blog, *Learnmore* (the skills wiki mentioned above) and many community elements; news, events calendar, Twitter integration, legal feeds and small ads. The blog and *Learnmore* invite contributions from students, which could be articles about a pro bono experience, advice on how to come across well in interview, tips on networking, an interview with a prominent lawyer or a write-up of an event. The website has received much recognition from both the Higher Education and Law communities [8], and students from all over the UK value it. The website receives in excess of 2000 visitors a day and its popularity is best summed up by this email received from a student on returning from the National Law Student Forum in 2012: "...when the students knew I was representing City University they couldn't stop talking about Lawbore. Words can't describe how happy I was to see students outside our university talk about it and use it. I couldn't but explain to you how thankful I am of you, and all that effort we see you put-in, pays off". Students use it as

a starting point for research; a support network and a place to check-in and find out what's going on within the Law School or in the wider legal world. We hope that it adds value to their studies, but had only ad hoc unprompted feedback as a basis for this.

V. LAW STUDENTS AND CONTENT GENERATION TOOLS

Lawbore isn't interactive in the sense that students can create content instantaneously, but it does encourage students to get involved. The blog invites contributions from students and they submit content from event reviews to accounts of work experience. *Lawbore* has a Twitter account which features on the hub part of the site; students using Twitter do frequently ask questions and advice as well as mention content featured here:

@lawbore: *Studying Equity & Trusts this yr? Check out free issue of Trusts & Trustees jnl for inspiration! Ow.ly/oWltg (via roxanneselby)*

@D_Taylr: @lawbore *Some great articles in there relevant to my dissertation! Thanks Emily, hope all's well!*

Learnmore is loosely built using a wiki structure and also features content which the Law School and students have collaborated on. Examples include guides co-written with students, video clips starring students demonstrating practical legal skills like mooting and articles from our alumni offering tips based on their experience.

A. Social Media

Recent years have seen many success stories around the use of social media in teaching, but we were more interested by how students used such tools self-sufficiently. Selwyn [9] notes how Facebook's role seems to be more about social support – a place to go to sound off about your study, your lecturers and how badly an essay is going, than as a place for learning collaboration. It is seen as a place to seek clarification when official channels are not clear or unavailable. The perception is that most students will use social media regularly, but it is not as clear how it is used for study-related purposes. In Hrastinski and Aghae's [10] 2012 study, all but one of the students used social media daily but "they perceive that their use is not related with their studies".

The professions in general have a mixed relationship with social media, balancing the benefits (networking, current awareness, promotion) with the risks (professional integrity compromised). Law websites, like the gossipy *Legal Cheek* [11] thrive on exposing lawyers who have used social networking sites ill advisedly. Professional standards are an essential part of ensuring public trust in a profession and students of that discipline are expected to abide by these also. Social media has meant that the world in which these standards apply has extended vastly. Codes of practice will normally specify that members will maintain professional integrity at all times, which would encompass guidance on confidentiality and appropriate boundaries, e.g. between

doctor-patient or lawyer-client. Mansfield et al. [12] note that in the medical world students are not expected to develop quite the same professional ethics as doctors. This is despite 60% of deans of US medical schools reporting unprofessional postings from students online [13], however some of these incidences did result in official warnings and dismissal.

'Experiences that were once ephemeral in nature are now being captured and archived by social media technologies, allowing such experiences to be re-examined in the future, when they may be seen in a different light'. This has the potential to not only erode the public's trust in the medical profession, but also to mar the professional reputation of individuals' [14].

UK Professional bodies like the British Medical Association [15], Chartered Society of Physiotherapy [16] and The Law Society [17] have all compiled their own guidance and toolkits on using social media. The Web is alive with tales of social media bloopers, particularly in the legal world – but this is no new thing. Employees sending out emails to their whole firm rather than one individual, boasting of the previous night's exploits or detailing their views of the company, have been commonplace for many years:

"I'm busy doing jack shit. Went to a nice 2hr sushi lunch today at Sushi Zen. Nice place. Spent the rest of the day typing e-mails and bullshitting with people." [18]

Pitfalls aside, increase in users of social media is steep. Research from 2012 showed that 47% of staff from the Top 50 law firms had profiles on LinkedIn, nearly double the number than in 2010 [19]. Similarly, many lawyers are now blogging; many with the intention of making law more accessible to the general public, others to raise their profiles. David Allen Green, Head of Media at law firm Preiskel & Co has seen his profile rocket – becoming perhaps the leading UK lawyer on social media after championing the underdog by taking on the *R v Paul Chambers* case (the 'Twitter Joke Trial') and writing about the law on his blog, *Jack of Kent* [20]. Green now writes for the Financial Times in addition to his media practice, and has a significant Twitter follower count. Law students are also blogging, although some Law Schools in the US are warning students off such mediums [21].

With all this in mind, and no ready data, it was desirable to investigate via the focus groups what social media tools law students are making use of. What emerged very strongly from these groups is that these students were consumers rather than creators "*I don't tweet but I like to use it to search for information*"; but social media was far from being an essential tool for them, even as users. The undergraduates showed more enthusiasm for Twitter and Facebook than the postgraduates.

Facebook proved unpopular ("*too much of a procrastination tool*"); and those who were members mainly limited use to the purely social. Sets of barrister's

chambers who used Facebook were flagged up by one student as being useful for *“getting a feel for the set which doesn't come across on their website as they are trying to sell themselves to potential clients”*. Likewise, law firms who used their Facebook pages for more interactive dynamic content were praised; particularly those who shared blogs from their trainees.

Students seem protective of their own space on social media; Jones et al. (2010) speak of the divide between ‘life’ and ‘studying’ [22] and how students don’t want the two to crossover via social media, and the focus groups backed this up. There was some discussion amongst undergraduates about a programme director who had tried to join their Facebook group but who had been blocked.

Twitter fared a little better, but with only three enthusiastic users. However, students listening to the individual speak about the benefits in Group One were really interested. Comments included *“if you have questions, best way to get answers”* and *“I've found Twitter really helpful. Just for a quick snapshot I can check it daily. Obviously you have to go further for a little more depth. Depending on who you follow it's been really useful”*.

Students liked the Lawbore Twitter feed; *“really important that it's there...as our librarian it makes you a bit more human. Someone you could go and talk to”*.

They liked it when academic staff tweeted too (although this was not a common occurrence), with lecturers recommending others to follow and blog posts of interest: *“they give you a look at what your professor's opinion is on the latest news, they would respond to articles – interesting to see where they're looking for their information”*.

Surprisingly, few students noted blogs as a worthwhile academic source, tending to stick to print books and legal databases to find their commentary within academic journals. One student noted: *“I used blogs when studying for exams especially for constitutional law – much debate over topics – constantly changing. In exams where you know they will be heavily based on essays. Nice to get different opinions. All written by professors or scholars – not just joe schmo writing about...”* Many highly regarded law professors are now blogging, so this is another very useful source for students [23].

The comment above shows that, despite long-standing perceptions about students not being able to judge the quality of sources, these students seemed very canny – discussing when they would use google as a search engine or look something up in Wikipedia [24]: *“First port of call is a Wikipedia article to get a broad overview. If I need more information I'll go to Westlaw [25] or Lexis [26]”*.

One student mentioned the use of podcasts online where they had caught up with an episode of the Radio 4 Law in Action programme and one of the subjects covered had come up in a scholarship interview. The students were all very complimentary about the video resources available in Learnmore, particularly the mooted section.

B. Online Communities

Lawbore plays an important role in creating a ‘community feel’ for the law school; inviting contributions from users and providing all-round information relevant to the students. Students really liked that it links up academics, current students and alumni: *“really liked how in the piece about national essay competitions you linked to the work of City students who had won it in previous years – this bolstered my confidence to enter”*.

Law students are often seen as very competitive; *The Princeton Review* in the US surveys students and ranks law schools. Competitiveness is part of this, with students asked about the number of hours they sleep per night, hours spent studying, how many hours they think their peers are studying and competitiveness [27].

In the UK, we were keen to see whether this was true in relation to their study and career progression and the groups were asked how readily they shared information with their peers. Surprisingly, the postgraduate students were far more open with their work; they used Dropbox to set up shared folders in their tutorial groups for people to add their 70%+ essays and revision notes. One GDL student noted: *“the only way you are going to get through the GDL is by making friends. No way you're going to do all the work and know everything...we've all done a degree before we're not so competitive about it...we just need to get the commendation as a minimum and you'll be ok. Didn't really matter if we're going to share our notes. You didn't really feel like it was going to have much impact on the rest of your life”*. There was a clear imperative to collaborate just to get the work done.

This wasn’t always the case for the undergraduates – several students were against sharing any information *“if it's for coursework and you found an article that was brilliant– I'm sorry I don't mean it in a horrible way but I'm selfish like that. My coursework is being compared to someone else's. If we all put the same thing we're not going to get a good grade”* (LLB2). A third year LLB student mentioned that amongst her small group of friends they would share assignments and work out together where they may have been able to improve.

This echoes Selwyn's findings [28] (2009, p.167) in whose study “it was noticeable that students were generally unwilling to offer extensive assistance to each other”.

When securing paid employment is so tough, we were curious whether their views on sharing information altered when it concerned opportunities. This was mixed, with some stating that they alerted each other to application deadlines and even recommended their friends to firms or chambers they'd had work experience at. Others hadn't been as lucky: *“...sometimes competitiveness will get in the way of that - I had a couple of times where people I was reasonably good friends with were like 'oh the deadline for that just passed did you apply for that?' They hadn't applied either but had engineered it so that I wouldn't apply. You*

could just tell. I think competitiveness does come into it, word of mouth not always effective."

VI. LAW STUDENTS AND CONSUMPTION

A. Seeking Information

Locating information is an essential part of life at any higher education institution; students need to learn new tools (databases) and also gain an understanding of the required sources, as well as how to distinguish between authoritative and untrustworthy information. Taking our law and medicine disciplines again; obviously using the wrong information goes far further than just failing an essay – using a case or medical procedure that is out of date can have significant consequences. Ethics and accountability are integral to these courses from Day One.

What kinds of information were our law students looking for?

Legal materials for study (cases, journal articles, legislation, practitioner commentary)

Information about future employers – law firms, barrister's chambers

Information about work experience – pro bono, internships, mini pupillages, vacation schemes

Research materials to prepare for interviews/applications

Upcoming events

How they found these types of materials varied hugely; they understood the need to be up to date and used strategies from the basic ("*checked noticeboards outside careers centre*") to the academic ("*I've been using the Student Law Review recently as it gives roundups of all the latest case law in different practice areas*") and did use technological solutions available ("*I get the Guardian Law newspaper bundle into my email. I'm generally quite lazy so it's good if something comes to me*"). They liked the various legal news feeds on Lawbore.

Interestingly, this group was far more convinced by the power of word of mouth than any technology solutions. Does this tie into the perceived 'exclusivity' of Law – a world where only contacts count? They sought information from their peers "*I spoke with students from year above in terms of what courses I might want to do in year 3*" and from practising lawyers where possible. Finding work experience was definitely an area they felt this was particularly true; "*Word of mouth has probably been responsible for 75-80% of anything I've ever done*". They saw no shortcuts to this kind of information but strongly believed in networking but not that of the virtual kind. This again resonates with Hrastinski whose students felt social media lacked efficiency when compared with face-to-face contact [29].

Law apps in the UK are few and far between – in discussion, just one student mentioned a legal dictionary and the others more general scheduling and flashcard tools for exam revision purposes.

B. Organisation

As mentioned already, students used file-hosting services like Dropbox [30] or Google Drive [31] to store and share essays, revision notes and useful legal materials they discovered in database searches. They found this useful because of portability: being able to access from any device. Many students however, still printed out any useful sources they found.

C. Print v Online

Law more than other subjects is reliant upon students having expertise in both types of materials; e-books had a mixed reception "*...with an e-book I might miss something because I can't flick through it like a book*". Searching for specific keywords quickly within a big text was seen as a benefit however. One GDL student tried to explain using print and online was a physical representation of what law students are doing mentally: "*Take lots of information and form it into a cohesive argument*".

D. Authority

Asking whether they used Google resulted in a resounding 'yes'. Students noted that they'd found lots of useful information, and found it especially helpful if searching for something really simple or to find "*a couple of different explanations so you can pick and choose*". They showed awareness of its limitations however: "*I wouldn't use it in an academic essay*" and "*You have to be careful. Like if it's reputable or not*". Undergraduates at City receive guidance on this in compulsory legal research classes in Year One.

They had picked up that certain authors were more influential than others "*if you see Martin Dixon you know it's authoritative*", detailing the various methods used to find materials "*looking at footnotes in practitioner texts – might be obscure but useful*". They also set themselves high standards, asking themselves whether they'd be happy to use a reference in Court before using it in an essay.

VII. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN THE PROFESSIONS

Nationally, the *Legal Education and Training Review* pushed for greater cohesion between the profession and academia – more flexible (and affordable) routes to entry and for an academic stage with an increased practice-base.

Those in the legal profession are using social media and other digital tools extensively, but on the basis of this limited study it would seem a long way off before law students embrace social media tools and online communities in the same way. They have a good understanding of sources and traditional tools but their use of the collaborative tools is more limited. This may go some way to explaining why the Lawbore portal has achieved some success – as a bridge between these two worlds – allowing users to keep up to date with what's going on at City and the wider legal world but not demanding interaction.

The intensity of the Law courses doesn't leave students with a great deal of time to experiment with new tools, but it does seem that there is a case to be made for academics and other university staff to promote the use of such tools more extensively. The students knew about the various tools available, and the advantages they offered but just hadn't integrated them into their research practice. As we saw with the Twitter example, when they saw their lecturers using the tools they were inspired to do so too.

Universities need to take steps to encourage student use of the tools that can make their lives more efficient; in legal practice, steps forward in technology have meant that the ways lawyers work have changed. Professor Richard Susskind, IT Adviser to the Lord Chief Justice of England and Wales called for law schools to start preparing students to be 'Tomorrow's Lawyers' (also the title of his latest book) and equipping them with the skills to carry out these jobs of the future. Included in his list are roles such as: enhanced practitioner, legal knowledge engineer, legal technologist, legal hybrid, legal process analyst, legal project manager, online dispute resolution practitioner, legal management consultant and legal risk manager [32]. Exciting worldwide initiatives are underway which link law and technology – *Law Without Walls* [33] is an innovative legal and commercial education project started at the University of Miami. Students from 26 universities around the world team up and develop business plans to tackle real-world challenges within legal education and practice, whilst being mentored by academics, lawyers and entrepreneurs. *LWOW X* [34], an all-virtual pilot version was launched, aimed at spreading the opportunities more widely.

Open Law Lab [35] seeks to link creativity and Law – with creator Margaret Hagan working on several themes in which she envisages interdisciplinary teams collaborating. Her ideas around visual law link in with the work done on *Learnmore* via illustrations, video and talking slideshows – helping bring text-heavy legal resources alive.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This is a small-scale qualitative study, which has attempted to explore some of the values and attitudes that students bring to their use of digital technologies in pursuit of their law studies. A wider survey could include both qualitative and quantitative data collection.

However, the study does offer key observations around the somewhat 'take it or leave it' approach to social media displayed by the students. This was unexpected, as was the real disparity around sharing of information between undergraduates and postgraduates. It was encouraging to see how quality of information is important to them and forms a part of the decision-making process in deciding which source to use within their studies. Similarly reassuring was the professional focus that the participants had throughout, with tools assessed not just in terms of their value for learning, but also with an eye on their long-term usefulness for their future career path.

There is some hint that Lawbore seems to offer a halfway house between the institutional VLE, Moodle, and the students' personal use of social media tools. This bifurcation could perhaps be a result of tensions around 'enforced' institutional participation in VLEs.

We intend to report further on this research, the preliminary results of which are discussed here. Future evaluations will be on a more ambitious scale and will seek to bring further clarity to the information gathering habits and social media use of law students. We will also seek to extend the reach of the research by doing some comparison work with trainee solicitors and pupil barristers, and place this within the wider sphere of other professions.

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