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Rhetoric & Composition

2 December 2015

Yikety Yak (Don’t Talk Back?) -The Powers & Consequences of Modern Anonymity

Freedom of speech – what could be more American than this? Hot dogs, maybe, or bald eagles, but what happens when someone’s words threaten other people or defame another person’s character under the pretense of anonymity? In modern American society, the internet and social media play such a gigantic role in our lives that it has become infinitely easier for an individual to express his or herself in any part of the world and to be heard by the masses. The extent of the power of communication is, without a doubt, on the rise, but there is a dark side. Serious social issues creating terms to the likes of “cyberbullying” have garnered a significant amount of attention from the media over the past several years, with racial slurs and terroristic threats running rampant and being broadcasted across the expanse of the internet into our once secure homes. This recent disturbance has reached a pinnacle in the harmlessly titled Yik Yak, a popular social media application that can be found on smartphones all across the continent. In this essay, both the positive and negative aspects of anonymity will be identified and addressed through the examination of this controversial application, along with the influence that social media has over mass communication and the possible impact that it could have on society as a whole.

Yik Yak may be shrouded in controversy, but its intentions have always been pure. It was developed and launched in the November of 2013 by college friends Brooks Buffington and Tyler Droll, both of whom were graduates of Furman University in South Carolina. The duo noticed that the small amount of popular Twitter accounts from their local college were monopolized by a small faction of well-known students and athletes, so it became their goal to create an opportunity for anyone’s voice, popular or not, to be heard with the exact same impact. This idea would quickly escalate into becoming Yik Yak, a location-oriented message board that successfully levels the playing field through granting the power of anonymity to its users. By using a smartphone’s GPS, people using the application can write comments that can be read and read posts that extend to a 1.5 mile radius. The app achieved an instant success, with college students downloading it on a national scale, and then spreading the word across other college communities.

This rapid increase in popularity of Yik Yak resulted in hundreds of millions of dollars in investments; however, it also resulted in copious amounts of controversy and overwhelmingly negative attention from the media. And while Yik Yak can and often does serve many positive roles in a college community, it also serves the more sinister role of a platform that is frequently used for cyberbullying, or bullying through internet and digital technology. While there are safeguards and restrictions that were put in place to discourage unethical and harmful activities on Yik Yak, both proponents and opponents of anonymous communication online and through social media should stop to think about the ways in which the application reflects upon society in general. What are the implications of enacting censorship upon a facility that appears to promote and celebrate the use of free speech? Who or what is it that determines the ethics of an anonymous group of people? And what is so enticing about the premise of speaking anonymously, and why does it have the potential to grant the people that use it to communicate so much power?

When determining the implications and influences that an app like Yik Yak could potentially have on a community, it is important to consider the psychology behind its users. In a recent survey taken on the app, I asked USAO’s campus community why they used Yik Yak. The responses were varied, but most the users seemed to have positive things to say about it. A person represented by an orange shovel received the most likes, or “upvotes” (11) with the following comment: “[It] helps me figure out what the heck is happening on campus. And to spread encouragement to others when they need it.” This response sounds pretty similar to what the developers of Yik Yak intended it to be, a helpful and positive communal message board through which people can post their thoughts anonymously. Another user responded with “it shows me that I’m not alone when I feel down and depressed from school,” which received 7 “upvotes.” The replies were honest, insightful, and, at times, hilarious. A yellow mushroom said they used the app to talk about hot guys, while a gray compass uses it “to fuck with you every single day.” On the other hand, a self-conscious green shovel uses it to see if other people talk about them, while a forlorn yellow paw print uses it to pretend that they actually have friends to talk to.

Whether the application is being used to vent, get information about local events, or to simply pass time, most users are attracted to Yik Yak because of the premise of anonymity. This much sought-after freedom of speech has become quite the commodity in today’s world, with the leaking of the NSA’s controversial surveillance programs and data storage reminding us that there is always someone listening, but it turns out that Yik Yak isn’t really all that anonymous. There have been a number of incidents during which the company has turned over user account information to the police in cases of emergency. According to the app’s legal page, “Yik Yak may disclose user account information to law enforcement - without a subpoena, court order, or search warrant - in response to a valid emergency when [they] believe that doing so is necessary to prevent death or serious physical harm to someone…” This means that posts are constantly being monitored and interpreted for harmful and threatening material, and that you can’t truly say anything you want to on Yik Yak without expecting some possible amount of consequence. So how does this type of pseudo-anonymity reflect upon the ways we communicate through contemporary American society?

Before we get too far into attempting to answer the big question, let’s expand upon what makes the concept of anonymity such a powerful thing. It can be a little confusing that a word which means to be lacking in individuality or uniqueness would be such an appealing quality in a society that is so fixated on originality and distinction, but when it comes to an individual speaking his or her true opinion, anonymity can be the greatest means through which to do so. In his article “The Dark Web and the Power of Anonymity,” Huffington Post journalist Joe Ross describes the power of anonymity through the internet. He asserts that “there is no doubt that anonymity – or even perceived anonymity – is an incredibly powerful tool” of communication. This quote does not only relate to the internet, but it applies to politics, business, and the American way of life as a whole.

First of all, let’s take a look at the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States. Freedom of speech is a right that every American citizen feels entitled to, but what happens when that very freedom is turned and used against them? The federal government has constantly been struggling with the problem of determining what sort of speech should or should not be limited in America. While addressing this issue, it must take extra care and tread lightly so as to avoid making any drastic changes to the legislation that could potentially disrupt its functionality. That being said, there are many laws that are in place that limit obscene speech and prohibit the defamation and slander of other citizens.

In a way that parallels how the American government controls and sustains the freedom of speech for its citizens, Yik Yak itself has developed and established its own set of rules and regulations that are intended to discourage users from making threatening or defamatory comments on its feeds. For example, there are filters that are set in place that pick up on key words that may have dangerous or offensive connotations to them, or that may be interpreted as a threat. The application also prohibits the use of full names in its posts and will automatically warn its users that it will in fact cooperate with the authorities if a perceived threat that could indicate an emergency situation is posted through Yik Yak. As mentioned before, there have been several occasions during which Yik Yak has been involved in the disclosure of user account information to the police. According to Tami Abdollah’s Huffington Post article, “Yik Yak Isn’t So Anonymous, Turns Data Over to Police,” law enforcement officers in Missouri arrested a college student within just a couple of hours of his posting of a racial threat on the local college’s Yik Yak feed. Abdollah claims that the timing of the arrests in cases that are related to Yik Yak seem to indicate “swift responses by Yik Yak to requests from police.”

Even with the threat of legal action, it appears that this type of warning isn’t quite enough to keep Yik Yakers from violating its set of rules. When determining the ethicality of posts and comments, Yik Yak also relies heavily upon the opinions and responsibility of its users themselves. The application includes a system of “upvotes” and “downvotes,” similar to the “like” system on Facebook that is intended to encourage communities to, in a way, police themselves against hateful comments and threats. Once a post reaches negative five votes, it is automatically removed from a community’s feed. This grants Yik Yak users the power to remove explicit and harmful content from the feed and to control what type of behavior is or isn’t acceptable in the community. Another way that Yik Yak discourage its users from posting distasteful comments is its implementation of a system called “Yakarma,” which is intended to reward the applications users for posting positive and helpful posts that receive a lot of likes and comments. But are these precautions enough to sustain a safe and secure community message board?

Upon Yik Yak’s successful release, it’s popularity drastically increased in middle schools and high schools across America. The activity of this specific age group spawned a large amount of backlash from the media and had a negative impact on educational communities, with numerous incidents regarding cyberbullying beginning to occur. Since the application’s initially targeted age group was college students, its developers decided to alter its policies to limit the issue of cyberbullying through the Yik Yak. According to Kirsten Winkler’s article on gettingsmart.com, “Yik Yak, Geofencing and the Future of BYOD,” the developers of Yik Yak eventually decided to create digital barriers known as “geofences” around middle schools and high schools all across America after recognizing the immensity of the issue of cyberbullying through social media had among adolescents. These virtual fences altogether prohibit the use of Yik Yak on school grounds to deter students from posting offensive threats and comments about fellow students and school faculty members alike. To further combat this misuse of Yik Yak, the company also elected to increase the user rating to 17 and over in app stores, discouraging the type of harmful behavior exhibited by middle schoolers and high schoolers.

It’s safe to say that bullying is a problem in America, but while the abolition of Yik Yak in certain communities and age groups may limit the amount of bullying in the area to some degree, how effective could the removal of one digital method of communication truly be? According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance,” 19.6 percent of students attending high school were bullied at school during 2014, while 14.8 percent were bullied online. It’s easy to attribute the bullying problem to Yik Yak and similar forms of social media when they are constantly being labeled by the media as a tools through which bullying is encouraged, but how does this condemnation and discretization of communicating through social media apps actually address the issue? The problem seems to be stemming more from the school systems and the maturity of the teenagers involved in the bullying, rather than the technology that is being used to do it. And research also suggests that bullying doesn’t just magically stop once kids graduate high school – it often continues through college and into adulthood. In an article by Jennifer Sicking, the associate director of media relations at Indiana State University, entitled “Bullying still occurs in college, professors find,” a 2011 study by Christine MacDonald and Bridget Roberts-Pittman found that 15 percent of college students were still being bullied in some way at school, while 22 percent reported that they were being cyberbullied. Since this study took place before Yik Yak ever existed, one can infer that the application itself isn’t what is solely responsible for increases in bullying in the American school system. Maybe instead of being defined as the main cause for bullying, it should be defined as a form of communication that, like speech itself, has the potential to be misused by immature teenagers and young adults. I’m not saying that applications like Yik Yak and Twitter don’t contribute in any way to the problem, I’m saying that they aren’t the reason in the first place.

So what exactly is the cause of all this bullying? Is it technology’s fault, or is it an older, more inherent problem in our society? Over the past few decades, advancements in technology have shaped the way we live and communicate in several way. They’ve made the world a smaller place by connecting millions all across the globe. In a matter of seconds, you can communicate with another person on the other side of the world. It is the digital age, a time in which any citizen can become seen or heard in an instant – all they need is a camera. On March 7, 2015, members of a fraternity at the University of Oklahoma were recorded chanting racial slurs on a bus. The incident blew up across social media, gaining it attention on a national level. While the incident itself was terrible, it did cause national debates regarding race relations and college culture. In a world that relies so heavily on social media, it is a valid question to ask whether or not the massively negative reaction would have occurred in such an impactful way if the response on social media hadn’t been so prominent. And people have yet to blame the camera through which these hateful words were recorded for the crime itself. So is it seeing the people responsible for the offensive comments that makes the difference, this lack of anonymity that ensures our society that justice will be served?

While social media apps can be used as a means for cyberbullying, they also bring attention to the issue of bullying itself. It would be foolish to blame an anonymous social media application like Yik Yak for causing a problem that has existed since long before its conceptualization. It is without a doubt that the translucent shield of anonymity that it offers increases the likelihood for harmful and threatening comments to be made. But when these things are said under the pretense of anonymity, it reflects what the concept of freedom of speech truly means. When people have the opportunity to speak their mind, they will tend to do so, especially under the terms of anonymity. But all the while, the freedom of speech is an illusion, and it is foolish for an individual to think they can speak of anything they want without expecting consequences.

Yik Yak should be taken seriously, not only as a source of entertainment and information, but also as a tool of communication. It successfully serves its purpose as an anonymous community message board, and while it can be compared to a toilet stall wall, it should not be to blame for the graffiti that covers it. Ever since language has existed as a form of communication it has been misused, but more good has come of it than bad. Yik Yak represents that language, the freedom to speak, but with consequences. It is the people that have misused it and the society that has taught them to misuse language in the first place that should to blame for cyberbullying.

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