

FEATURES

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13

TECHNOLOGY

Social media can control your life, college finds

Students said they were less stressed out and had improved interpersonal relationships after a week without Facebook, Twitter and instant messaging

BY JON HURDLE
REUTERS, PHILADELPHIA

Being perpetually connected through social media can increase stress, weaken personal relationships, and even cause sleep loss, according to a US university.

After imposing a weeklong blackout in the use of Facebook, Twitter, instant messaging and other media, Harrisburg University of Science and Technology in central Pennsylvania found that the pervasive technology had hidden pitfalls.

"Students realized that social media, especially Facebook and instant messaging, if not managed properly, can take over their lives," said Eric Darr, the college provost.

The 800-student college called for the ban to see how the technology affects the lives of students and faculty.

Most students complied with the weeklong experiment earlier this month and some discovered that the technology could rule their lives.

Darr cited one student who felt compelled to check Facebook 21 hours a day and blocked posts between 2am and 5am to get some sleep.

"It sounds like an addiction to me," said Darr, who initiated the blackout, which was implemented by blocking social media access to the college's IP address.

Darr acknowledged that students or faculty who felt forced to feed their social media addiction could do so via smartphones, but he said most complied, and some were pleasantly surprised by what they found.

"The majority of students behaved much like smokers who sneak cigarettes after class," he said. "They would sneak off to check things on their smart phones."

But some discovered that they were less stressed because they were not able to constantly check their friends' Facebook status and found more time to do other things.

Other students found themselves more likely to have face-to-face meetings with students or faculty who normally communicate exclusively by social media.

Student Amanda Zuck said she isn't a heavy user of Facebook but was "a little irritated" at first by being unable to use the site.

Zuck wrote in an e-mail that she didn't see much advantage in the project for herself but she added that it had probably helped a friend whom she said is addicted to Facebook.

"She decided to call it quits for a few weeks while she catches up on school, and I think this blackout helped her stick with it," Zuck wrote.

The project allowed all members of the college community to reflect on how social media tools affect their lives.

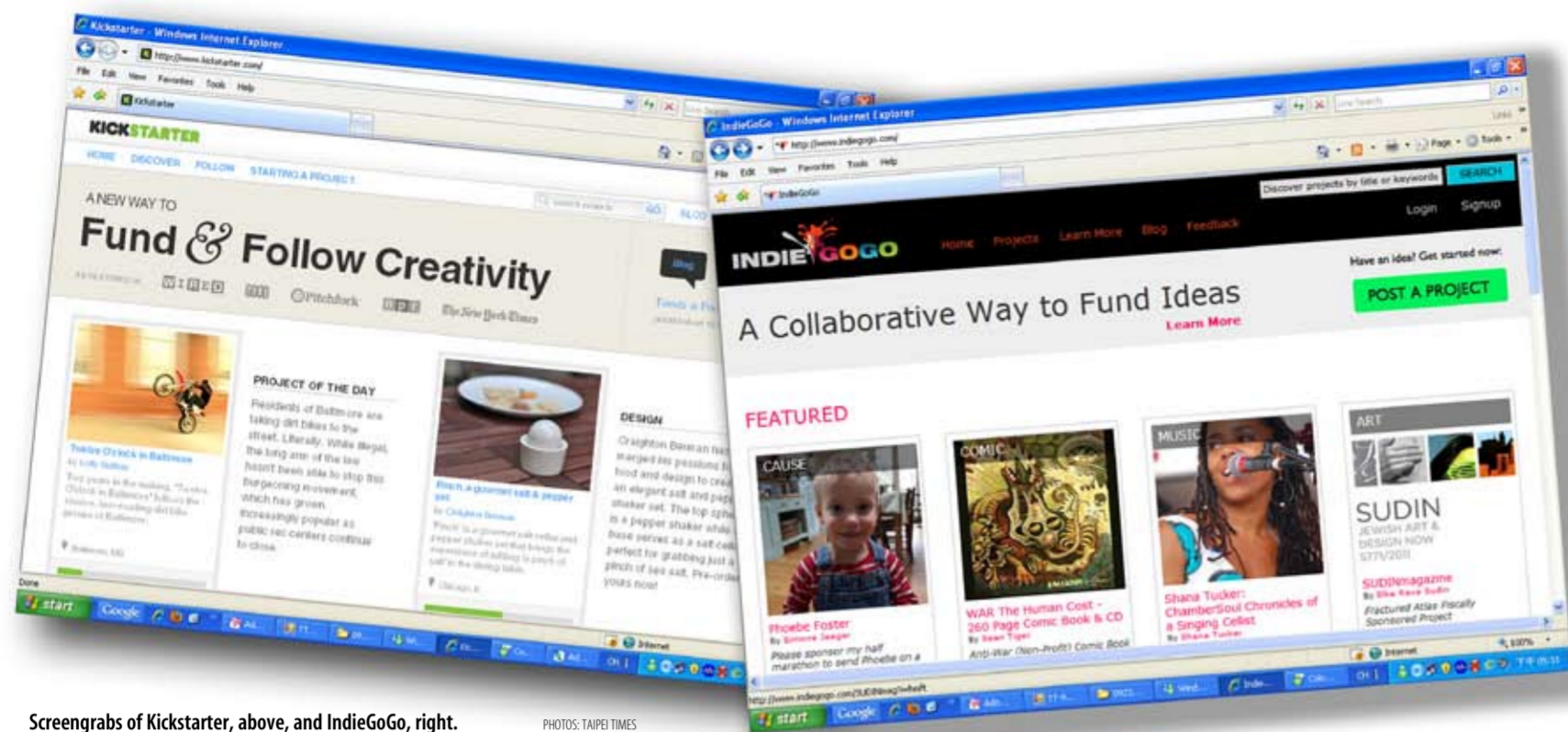
"Only by stopping and paying attention can we understand," Darr said. "We may not even be aware that social media plays a big part in what we do and how we do it."

Harrisburg appears to be the first US college to conduct such an experiment, which probably would not have been possible in larger academic institutions with more complex infrastructure, Darr said.

The project prompted protests from some people who sent e-mails arguing it infringed their freedom of speech, he said.

While the results are still being analyzed, the conclusions seem to be that social media should be used alongside old-fashioned personal communication.

"Face-to-face meetings and relating through Facebook is probably the way to go," Darr said.



Screenshots of Kickstarter, above, and IndieGoGo, right.

PHOTOS: TAIPEI TIMES

Crowd-fundraising can mean big money

Web sites like Kickstarter and IndieGoGo allow users to raise funding for projects and build communities of active supporters on the Internet

BY BARBARA ORTUTAY
AP, NEW YORK

One project strapped dozens of digital cameras to kites and balloons and sent them above the Gulf of Mexico to document the oil spill. Another is planned to fly a smart phone into the upper reaches of the atmosphere so it can send photos and video back down. Then there is the young woman from California who has set sail around the world, without the backing of corporate sponsors.

These projects cost anywhere from a few hundred to tens of thousands of US dollars. And to help pay for them, their creators are turning not to deep-pocketed investors but to friends and strangers online. Through Web sites including Kickstarter and IndieGoGo, these people pledge as little as US\$1 in exchange for "I knew them back then" bragging rights and thank-you gifts such as limited-run CDs and books.

"This is widening the scope of who is getting funded," said Tiffany Shlain, filmmaker and founder of the Webby Awards, for which IndieGoGo was nominated this year.

Many independent filmmakers and musicians turn to the sites because this way they can retain creative control over their projects. Others, such as 24-year-old Emily Richmond, are using them to help realize childhood dreams.

"To be a long-distance sailor in this day and age you either have to go the route of trying to break a record, in pursuit of attracting major corporate sponsorship, or you have to save your whole life, finance your own trip but not get to do it [until] you're up there in years," Richmond said by e-mail recently while sailing off the coast of Acapulco, Mexico.

So, she turned to Kickstarter. Last year she raised US\$8,141.80 to get her two-year voyage started. Expenses included buying food and outfitting her vessel for long-distance sailing. In a second round of fundraising this spring, she got US\$7,251 for safety equipment such as a GPS tracker, a satellite phone and a medical kit. She calls the site a "real live dream-machine." Kickstarter, based in New York City, lets people set a budget and make a pitch, usually in a self-shot video. Many backers, though not all, have some connection to the projects they are contributing to.

They come from all kinds of backgrounds: professors, techies, students and filmmakers, dreamers and doers. Many first-timers find the sites through a project they are somehow connected to, and stay when they discover others they like.

Creators put a lot of work into displaying their projects on the sites to show, not just tell. There are photos, videos, blogs and links to Facebook and Twitter, along with detailed descriptions of the rewards offered to backers. In addition, a project's initial backers tend to be people who are somehow connected

to it, effectively vouching for their authenticity. IndieGoGo co-founder Slava Rubin said strangers do not tend to fund projects that have not already raised money. Kickstarter's small staff, meanwhile, vets projects before they go up on the site. The sites also have various fraud-prevention measures in place.

Jeffrey Warren's oil-spill mapping project raised US\$8,285 from 145 people. Rewards include photos and your name written on the balloons and the kites sent above the Gulf. Warren, a fellow at MIT's Center for Future Civic Media, said he did not personally know most of the project's backers.

"Backers become advocates for your cause; they hit the blogs, newspapers, etc., and it's the wider network that seems to contribute most, not your immediate friends," he said. "Probably your immediate friends contribute more directly, for example with their time and support." The Web sites make money by taking a small cut of the money raised. On Kickstarter, which takes 5 percent, only projects that meet their full budget get their money. If they do not, no money is exchanged. Backers pledge using Amazon's online payment service, and credit cards are charged only if the project meets its funding goal by a set deadline.

IndieGoGo, by contrast, lets projects keep the money even if they do not meet their full funding goal, although in that case it takes a larger cut.

The idea behind IndieGoGo was to democratize fundraising, to take it out of the "few people in suits" who have traditionally decided what movie, music album or charity gets funded, Rubin said. The San Francisco-based site's three founders all had background in fundraising; Rubin, whose father died of cancer when he was a child, had started a cancer charity.

GETTING THE WORD OUT

The ease with which projects can be shared by Facebook and other channels, along with the comfort many Internet users now have with online transactions, means the time is ripe for crowd-funding.

Getting the word out about the projects, would have been difficult even a few years ago, before Facebook opened to the public and before YouTube made it easy for anyone to upload a video online.

It is not just altruism that gets people pledging. Perry Chen, Kickstarter's 34-year-old co-founder, said projects offer "bragging rights of being involved early," especially if the band, film or comic book later becomes successful.

There are tangible benefits, too. Richmond, the sailor, is mailing anyone who pledged at least US\$15 a Polaroid photo from her travels. For those who gave US\$75, she is sending a coconut.

"When I saw Emily's project I couldn't even imagine what it would be like to be on your own on the water like that for such a long time," said Mike Ambs, a Los Angeles filmmaker who has backed

Richmond's project along with 18 others. He said he is looking forward to getting a photo from Richmond's adventures. But the feeling of playing a part in something ambitious is also a source of inspiration.

"It's exciting to be a part of it and see how far a little bit can go," he said.

He also has used Kickstarter to help fund *For Thousands of Miles*, his planned documentary about a man riding a bicycle across the US.

NOT JUST ONLINE TIP JARS

On Kickstarter, the average contribution is US\$25. On IndieGoGo, it is US\$84. Some projects have received as much as US\$10,000 from a single backer, but those cases are rare. The highest-grossing project to date is *Diaspora*, an anti-Facebook of sorts that would let users keep control over their photos, videos and status updates while sharing them with friends. The four New York University students behind it raised US\$200,641 on Kickstarter.

Although the sites are reminiscent of single-project online tip jars that popped up early in the decade, they work better because they create persistent communities behind the projects.

"Those were predicated on a passive involvement," said Yancey Strickler, Kickstarter's co-founder. "Kickstarter is much more structured and active. Projects are focused on specific things, they have finite deadlines, they establish relationships, and they clearly communicate what someone gets in exchange." About 2,500 projects have been funded by about 200,000 people through Kickstarter since the site launched in April 2009. About the same number have failed to meet their funding goals.

Danny Pier's "Astronaut" was among the ones that reached their goals. The 25-year-old software engineer said he is disappointed with the looming end of NASA's space shuttle program and wanted to do something about it.

"I was thinking what could I do to make space more accessible for the everyday Joe?" he said.

The answer: Send a Droid smart phone to the stratosphere, using a weather balloon. Running an application built by Pier, the phone, if it makes it, will send photos and video back to Earth through a Web site. (Other amateurs have strapped digital cameras to weather balloons for high-altitude shots.)

Pier, who lives in Denver, Colorado, estimated that his project would cost US\$1,800, enough for a few phones in case the Astronaut does not take off on the first try. He raised US\$2,050 on Kickstarter, from 66 people.

"I wouldn't have been able to raise the money without it," he said. "As it is my friends think I'm crazy, I wouldn't be able to get any money out of them."

On the Net: www.indiegogo.com, www.kickstarter.com



Top: Mark Zuckerberg, founder and chief executive officer of Facebook, and coworkers ring a gong during the launch of the Places feature at the company's headquarters in Palo Alto, California last month. The service, which has raised concerns among privacy advocates, makes it easier for users to share their whereabouts with other people. Above: People pass a scribble board wall at Facebook headquarters last month.

PHOTOS: BLOOMBERG