Our Digital Footprint:
Protecting the Next Generation of Field Personnel

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Abstract

We live in a global community that continues to become exceedingly smaller. As universities and colleges face the challenges of preparing students to “go to the ends of the earth” it has become evident that providing outstanding curriculum is not the only aspect of preparation they must consider. The specific language used to promote their programs must be adjusted since their audience has expanded well beyond their perspective or current students.

Internet access has allowed the global community to visit universities and their program offerings online. As degree programs seek to neutralize their language a further element that must be addressed is the extracurricular programs that supplement student learning. The issue more precisely is the digital footprint that is left by the university and students themselves through social media, not limited to the university’s website. This digital footprint, if not properly neutralized, can have ramifications in the future for a student whose heart is for the mission field.

This paper seeks to address the need to consider changes in the language used to describe extracurricular programs as well as the use of social media and its potentially damaging digital footprint on the future of the next generation of field personnel.

Introduction

“The Internet is at once a world-wide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers without regard for geographic location” (Leiner et al. 2001, 1). The revolution of the ability to communicate via the Internet has made it possible for the establishment of a global community. From the late 1960's with the onset of the Internet to the early 1990's with the launching of the World Wide Web, communication to a larger global audience has become a reality.
The ability to communicate to the global community has not been lost on the church as it has seen the potential “to go to the ends of the earth” without ever leaving the comforts of home. The challenge faced in being able to communicate freely in this global environment is that one cannot always control the audience. The explosion of technological advancement and the ability of people the church perceives as their audience to now engage in the global dialogue has forced universities and colleges to consider the language they use to promote their programs and course offerings. In addition, these institutions must consider how they will neutralize the language of extracurricular programs that supplement student learning including the use of social media. The issue more precisely is the digital footprint that is left by the university and students themselves, which if not properly neutralized, can have ramifications on the future of a student who desires to work outside of this country.

This paper seeks to address the need to consider changes in the language used to describe extracurricular programs and the resulting digital footprint, and will conclude with suggestions programs can incorporate to reduce a potentially damaging digital footprint on the next generation of field personal.

Our Digital Footprint

The Internet has provided the world with rapid access to information. This ability has been seen as a great advantage to declare the good news as it “enables new forms of social relations, new ways of networking, and new ways of organizing social, cultural, and political life” (Cheong et al. 2012, vii–viii). The new missiological strategy that emerges is one that specializes in online media that would allow Christians to evangelize and “to do mission without having to leave their full-time job or relocate” (Vu 2011). Walter Wilson, the CEO for Global Media Outreach, stated in 2011 that

1 Cf. Acts 1:18
by 2015 there would be WiFi everywhere and “we are the first generation in all of human history to hold within our hands the technology to reach every man, woman and child on the earth by 2020. . . Our generation has within its grasp everything that is required to fulfill the Great Commission” (Vu 2011). This seems to be good news when considering the Great Imbalance of field personal working among the unreached people groups versus reached people groups (Winter and Hawthorne 2009, 543). Thus it makes sense where countries have limited access and minimal personnel to use the potential of technological advances to reach them.

From this perspective the new mission field is a virtual one where online missionaries interact with people around the globe. Social media sites are the “tools to spread the Gospel like never before” (Young 2013, ii). Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and blogging are all vehicles used for the creation of a virtual community in which one can be invited by you or ask you to be their friend or they become a follower. Your success as a member in the virtual community is based on the number of friends or followers you have. But one must be cautious with regards to who is following or becoming your friend in your network. This produces challenges for students participating in short-term cross-cultural experiences called mission teams. The way they stay in touch with friends they made on their trips is to friend them on Facebook. All friends and followers are not always what they appear to be.

Christians are not the only ones who see the Internet, and in particular social media, as a vehicle for revival or revolution in the global community. Uprisings referred to as the Arab Spring were driven not with rifles and weapons but iPhones linked to social media sites. “The medium that carries the message shapes and defines as well as the message itself. The instantaneous nature of how social media communicate self-broadcast ideas . . . explains in part the speed at which these revolutions have unraveled, their almost viral spread across a region” (Beaumont 2011, 3). Since governments tightly control and censor Internet use, and thus social media sites, they have the ability to block their usage. However, in the case of the uprisings of Spring 2009, it was the ability of Facebook to share video and images and “users were able to transmit news bites that would otherwise never make it to mainstream news media” (Beaumont 2011, 7). As a result, those around the globe could express solidarity by their likes on a Facebook page.

This prediction has proven to be true as students studying abroad around the world with Life Pacific College are able to access classes in an online format using WiFi.
It is clear that many groups capitalize on the interconnectivity of a globalized world. The question is what information should be listed on their sites. For programs sending teams from colleges and universities in relationship to field personnel it would be difficult “to survive without the Internet and electronic interconnectivity, but they are also limited by it. Opposition has been mounted against Christian workers based on what anti-Christian extremists have learned about the plans of agencies from the agencies’ websites” (Pocock, Van Rheenen, and McConnell 2005, 26). Institutions cannot be naïve in terms of their programs or the development of students via experiential learning opportunities. Not only must those who oversee departments which supplement a student’s educational experience with learning opportunities around the globe be aware of necessary security measures for the student, but also take into consideration the ramifications student teams and their global interconnectivity could have on the long term field worker.

**Beginnings of Security Measures**

Issues of security are not new. Wycliffe Bible Translators (WBT) and Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) are a good example of the early strategies to protect those on the field. The sister organizations were “two parts of one focus—providing Scripture in mother tongues to people without God’s Word” (Franklin 2003, 7). WBT is the home organization, organized around the country of origin, which provides for the care of its members and voice in the local church. SIL members are assigned to field branches in specific countries. SIL, which began in 1934 as a summer training program, was not seen as a mission organization whose focus was evangelism but a “non-profit, scientific educational organization of Christian volunteers that specializes in serving lesser-known language communities around the world. . . [seeking] to understand their culture and learn their language” (Franklin 2003, 9). Membership in SIL provided a more acceptable explanation in non-Christian environments.

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3 My husband and I were translators with WBT/SIL from 1984-1994 working among the Eastern Keres Pueblo Indians in New Mexico.

4 WBT has a number of supportive departments to aid those serving on the field. Its structure provides aid to the field personal by reducing some administrative tasks (Franklin 2003, 7-8).
Christian colleges and universities have made name changes to their institutions as well as specific programs. Much of the logic for these changes in nomenclature is similar to that of WBT and SIL, which is to protect their graduates. Fuller Theological Seminary changed the name of one of their schools after receiving reports from their graduates “working in Muslim contexts...that they could not get visas or appointed to positions that required governmental approval as soon as it was known they had degrees from a school of mission” (Kraft 2005, 237). Fuller, following the lead of Biola University\(^5\), chose a “secular-sounding label for missiology instruction [and] in 2003 the School of World Mission officially became the School of Intercultural Studies” (Kraft 2005, 238).

L.I.F.E.\(^6\) Bible College changed their name in 2002 to Life Pacific College. The president, Dick Scott, noted several reasons for a name change, one specifically being the “present mission realities which would allow greater access for graduates wishing to work and study abroad [as well as] denial of entrance to Muslim countries and excessive interrogation to enter [limited access countries] (Primrose 2015). This name change was met with some resistance from the college’s stakeholders. After a presidential change in 2009, the new president remarked that the college’s constituency would like to return to the historic name of the college. However, in discussing this with the president, he had not been aware of the layer of protection offered to LPC graduates whose goal upon graduation was long term field service\(^7\) that the new college name provided.

Such changes in nomenclature do aid in supporting the security of graduates either returning to their home countries or those wishing to deploy after graduation. However, there are some challenges faced when these nomenclature changes occur, many of which can be attributed to histories which are no longer remembered. Many of these schools were

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5 Biola University made changes in the 1980’s regarding the name of the college as well as one of its programs Cook School of Intercultural Studies (History and Heritage).

6 L.I.F.E stands for Lighthouse of International Foursquare Evangelism.

7 This was a private conversation with the president of Life Pacific College after I had been asked to give oversight to the mission program on campus. The college was facing a variety of issues related to a lack of connection with the constituency within the Foursquare denomination. Thus it was suggested to reconnect with the constituency that the college return to a time where there was a strong connection which was prior to the name change.
founded as Bible institutions that were a result of a reaction against the established theological training schools in the early 1900’s. As Bible institutions transitioned to accredited colleges and universities in the late 1940’s the shift in focus was from training lay people to “standardizing academic programs . . . with an emphasis on training career pastors and missionaries” (Thigpen 2015, 3). When institutions begin making adjustments in their programs via changes in nomenclature the problems which emerge are issues with the constituency as suggested by the president at Life Pacific College. Charles Kraft echoes these concerns in relationship to Fuller’s name changes:

We anticipated a difficult time with our constituency if we adopted a secular name. We deemed it unlikely that the more conservative of our supporters would really understand the seriousness of the plight of certain of our students and how sympathetic we were with their problem. Indeed, we suspected that they would feel that a change of name, especially if the new name sounded “secular,” betokened a move on our part toward liberalism and a loss of missionary zeal.” (Kraft 2005, 237-238)

Thus as colleges and universities make adjustments in nomenclature for the protection of their graduates’ future service, their historical foundations as Bible institutes may be seen in the value placed on experiential learning via the promotion of short term mission trips. The language of mission trips and mission teams is deeply embedded in the culture of Christian colleges as an important value and contribution to the mission and vision of these institutions. The challenge for this new generation of graduates is that national governments look beyond the neutrality of the student’s program to the digital footprint of the institution’s website as well as that of the student. This results in a need to help the constituency and supporters of colleges and universities understand that training the next generation of field personnel is still valued and students will continue to deploy to the field upon graduation. However, to protect them, it will be necessary to neutralize the language of programs that provide mission experiences.
“Unlike George Orwell’s novel 1984 in which only Big Brother controlled the cameras, in 2015 cheap, mobile technology has turned everyone into a watcher” (Lien and Dave 2015, A1). In a world where education abroad in any format, two weeks to a semester, is a career booster, experiential learning programs must coach their students how to share their experience (West 2014, 54). Students’ ability to share their story is not only about issues of debriefing and re-entry but also the integration of their experiences into the flow of their lives in the United States upon their return. It is vital to engage students prior to departure for briefing and training on what of their experiences to share and how best to do so before, and after, as well as during their time abroad. No longer do students travel with cameras to capture the moments of their cross-cultural trips to enjoy upon their return to share with family and friends. Rather they use their mobile phones to connect to the WiFi and instantaneously post experiences on social media formats complete with their geographical location.

It is clear that technology is a double-edged sword. “Easy and inexpensive access to mobile services in the poorest parts of the world is now commonplace. Study-abroad administrators generally see this as a positive development for health and safety reasons” (Huesca 2013, 4). No one would suggest that for the protection of our students the use of a mobile phone is a bad idea. I make sure all my teams have mobile phone capability. However, the down side to this capability is the lack of discernment on the part of students (and faculty) with regards to their actions as they access the Internet.

8 NAFSA: Association of International Educators creates opportunities for Americans to study abroad, participate in scholarly exchange programs, and study foreign areas and languages and supports the perspective that study outside of the country are valid items to include in one’s resume.

9 Although not the purpose of this paper, the accessibility of the Internet to entertainment comes at a cost to the student’s cross-cultural immersion. It is difficult to resist the temptation to check Facebook or instant message your BFF back home. Students are not present in their cross-cultural environment because they are consumed with being present in their

First Fruits

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In looking at these issues one must acknowledge that the next generation of field personnel are digital natives. They have grown up in the midst of an information revolution and are masters at manipulating all manner of devices. However, they have not begun to understand the global implications and frankly nor have we as leaders. Changes have occurred in the way we “shop, bank, and go about our daily business—changes that have resulted in an unprecedented proliferation of records and data . . . preserved forever in the digital minds of computers, in vast databases with fertile fields of personal data” (Solove 2004, 1). Thus whether one is aware of it or not, and regardless of how adept one is at utilizing the technology at hand, one is being watched and what is seen becomes a digital footprint.

It is important to understand how information is gathered to see the ramifications a digital footprint could have on potential field personnel. A digital footprint “is a collection of detailed data about an individual [and] dossiers [footprints] are being constructed about all of us” (Solove 2004, 2). Three types of information flow, or the movement of data, are used to construct digital footprints.

First, information often flows between large computer databases of private-sector companies. Second, data flows from government public record systems to a variety of businesses in the private sector. Third, information flows from the private sector to government agencies and law enforcement officials . . . [which has resulted in] an elaborate lattice of information networking, where information is being stored, analyzed, and used in ways that have profound implications for society.” (Solove 2004, 3)

A student is often unaware that their digital footprint, which they assume to be private, increasingly flows to the government. Their footprint provides detailed records of their “reading material, purchases, diseases, and website activity [that] enable the government to assemble a profile of an individual’s finances, health, psychology, beliefs, politics, interests, and lifestyle” (Solove 2004, 5). Many students communicate over the Internet using an avatar or a screen name which they feel provides anonymity, but the data in their digital footprint “can unveil their identities as well as expose all of the people with whom they associate or do business” (Solove virtual community. They often stay up late into the night to engage with those in a different time zone while robbing themselves and others of an opportunity to experience and apply their education in another setting.
2004, 5). One can surmise that when relating to field personnel in limited access countries one’s digital footprint could have major ramifications. Thus there is a need to help students who feel called to long term service to neutralize their footprint and for colleges and universities to use neutral language in providing opportunities for exposure and training.

These issues challenge how one understands the meaning of privacy. Up until recently an individual’s personal information was kept relatively private due to its inaccessibility. With the onset of the Information Age this perspective became no longer accurate. The concern is not so much the exposure of secrets and the loss of reputation, but how information flow allows for more “increased access and aggregation of data” (Solove 2004, 149). The threat that programs must take into consideration for their students who desire to serve in limited access countries is “not in isolated pieces of information, but in increased access and aggregation, the construction of digital dossiers [footprints] and the uses to which they are put” (Solove 2004, 161).

Disclosure of government surveillance programs became something the public needed to grapple with after the former contractor with the National Security Agency, Edward Snowden, leaked their activity. The concern of this paper is not the ethical nature of government surveillance as it relates to one’s privacy but more so what is being monitored—“phone use and internet use” (Rainie and Madden 2015, 1). Pew Research found “most Americans believe it is acceptable to monitor others, except U.S. citizens” (Rainie and Madden 2015, 3). But the government has the capacity to monitor the digital behavior of those found within their borders regardless of whether they are citizens or not. Communication and online activities such as, “[use of] search engines, email messages, cell phone use, activity on social media sites, [and] mobile apps” are what come under surveillance which are all aspects of what makes up a student’s digital footprint (Rainie and Madden 2015, 4).

Within the United States such issues of surveillance are perceived within the notion of our overall safety and security as a nation. But what institutions must wrestle with is that the countries in which we
take students have similar capabilities to monitor digital activity. It therefore becomes crucial to implement changes in programs that support experiential learning.

**Simple Changes**

There are three simple changes all programs can make. The first is one many colleges and universities have already made by neutralizing the name of their programs. As already stated, sending students out in mission teams is a historical value for most Christian academic institutions. LPC, from its founding in 1923, has sent students out in summer mission teams with the goal of long term deployment upon graduation. The college has maintained this practice, but in 2010 created a more neutralized name for the oversight of these programs called Global Life and also ceased calling summer teams short-term mission teams and replaced it with short-term cross-cultural experiences.

A second change is to place all mission trips under the umbrella of study abroad as Global Life did in this academic year. This decision was made because study abroad is an academic program that is understood around the world. Thus, students participating in Global Life Study Abroad programs can choose from short-term cross-cultural experiences, summer internships, and semester programs which vary in length from a long weekend to an entire semester. Using the neutral and well understood language of study abroad protects an institution’s digital footprint as well as that of students. It allows for some use of social media because students are connected to an academic program. A further benefit is the protection of existing field personnel who often help with teams and have to answer questions regarding why students are in the country.

The connection to field personnel is of particular significance in all Global Life programs. All experiences are set-up in relationship with global and national leaders within the Foursquare denomination. One might think that simply being a Christian college would produce red flags in limited access countries; however, this is not the case. Some terms used in

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10 Suggestions are based on conversations over the past four years with the college as well as field personnel.
programs prove to be more problematic. Because of our close connection with the field, Global Life is thoughtful in how the interconnectivity of the college, students, and study abroad experiences has implications not only on our digital footprint but on that of field personnel, too. A simple Google search can provide an ample explanation for why a group of students are in a country and can be damaging to the reputation of long term field personnel as well as the student whose goal is to deploy after graduation.

Academic institutions might do an excellent job in maintaining neutrality and thus protecting the connections with field personnel, however early briefing and training is important with students to ensure the link to their digital footprint is neutral as well. Therefore, a third change programs can make is related to security briefing.

It is common practice, for the security of students in experiential learning programs, to register their students with STEP. However, during the briefing or preparation for study abroad experiences additional training should be added relating to digital security. Students who feel “called to the nations” often experience that call at camps when they are teenagers. As digital natives, they are not considering their digital footprint at this point in their life. Posts on social media sites are unlikely to consist of neutralized language. Consequently it is important as a part of briefing or training for all study abroad experiences to include best practices for digital security and how to maintain a neutral identity in their own digital footprint.

It is not the goal of preparing students to create fear as they travel outside of the country, but it is necessary to help them be wise in what they say and what they post online. In training students at LPC, all security measures are placed in a metaphorical “box”. A box contains a script for explaining why a student is in a country as well as helping students to create an online profile that extends beyond their short-term trips. Part of the script is a description of who a student is, why they are in the country, and what is presented regarding their identity on social networking sites. It is vital that students understand the risks of posting online as well as

11 Terms like “mission trip”, “mission or evangelistic outreach”, and “missionaries” among others create red flags.

12 STEP (Smart Traveler Enrollment Program) is a free service for U.S. citizens traveling abroad which allows them to register with local U.S Embassy or Consulates.
“accessing their personal accounts from public computers or through public WiFi spots” (Justice, 1). According to the U.S. Department of Justice, “once information is posted to a social networking site, it is no longer private. The more information you post the more vulnerable you may become. Even when using high security settings, friends or websites may inadvertently leak your information” (Justice, 2). It is important for students to avoid making critical comparisons or political statements regarding the countries they are visiting especially if they are posting those statements with a picture and have not disabled the GPS on their phones. Recently, students I was traveling with wanted to post all their pictures on a variety of social media sites and link them together with the hashtag of the name of the country and the word gangster. Although they viewed this as funny and it was innocent in nature, it did reveal their naivety regarding the security risks related to social media.

Students on short-term trips are asked to leave their laptops and tablets at home since it is very easy to access personal and confidential information from these devices. For students who are spending the summer as interns or in a semester study program, this does create a challenge. It is important for these students to encrypt communications with websites and in particular social media sites. They all must learn to use a variety of discreet communication tools to protect their digital footprint and those they are in contact with. Virtual Private Network (VPN) and Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) secures a computer’s internet connection to help guarantee that all data one is sending or receiving is encrypted and secured from prying eyes. When using these tools it is necessary to use them on all devices including a student’s mobile phone.

In a perfect world students and leaders would travel with a dedicated phone and tablet that contained no personal or private information. However, as a part of their box this information can be removed and stored in a password protected, encrypted, cloud storage where VPN connections can be made. Alternatively, a student can get a password protected, encrypted USB stick to carry personal or confidential documents. It is also helpful to use a pen name or avatar that cannot be linked to you except by those you chose to disclose your identity to. When students return home whether from a short term or extended summer or semester trip, it is important for them to check all their devices for malware and change their passwords.
The creation of a secure box when coupled with a neutralized program name under the umbrella of study abroad will help minimize the digital footprint of colleges and universities as well as that of students.

Conclusion

The interconnectivity of the world today has presented colleges and universities with challenges that have implications on their digital footprint as well as students who participate in experiential learning programs, traditionally called mission trips. With the greatest need for field personnel in limited access countries, it is vital that considerations and changes be made in programs to protect their digital footprints as well as those of students who would deploy after graduation.

The Internet does provide creative access opportunities in a virtual community in which one can share the good news, but this strategy does not eliminate the mandate to also physically “go to all the nations”. Issues of security are not new to those who are called to the field but with the advent of the Internet it has become necessary to reassess our training for current security issues. Initial security measures have been made by many schools as they have neutralized the names of their degree programs and classes. However, security must go beyond formal learning and encompass the experiential learning opportunities in which students participate. Such simple changes as changing the name of their experiential learning programs, placing all aspects of these programs under the academic umbrella of study abroad, and helping students integrate security protocol within a secure box as they travel outside the country will aid in the reduction of a digital footprint that potentially could limit the next generation of field personnel.
Beaumont, Peter  

Cheong, Pauline Hope, Peter Fischer-Nielsen, Stefan Gelfgren, and Charles Ess  

Franklin, Joice A.  


Huesca, Robert  

Justice, U.S. Department of.  

Kraft, Charles H.  

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