

Social media, health care, and social networking

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People are afraid of the future, of the unknown. If a man faces up to it, and takes the dare of the future, he can have some control over his destiny. That's an exciting idea to me, better than waiting with everybody else to see what's going to happen.

John H. Glenn¹

Social media is where the future is, and most importantly, that's where our patients are going to be.

Kevin Pho, MD²

Merriam-Webster defines social media as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos).” This seems a million miles from hot snaring off a difficult polyp in the endoscopy suite, and yet in its own way, it is as powerful a tool as any that we will use. Social media is here to stay, and it won't be going away for a long while. It will never completely replace a physical consultation, but in our roles as trusted physicians as well as consumers, it is important for us to understand its impact, strengths, and weaknesses. The power of social media is also far more significant than a means of simply raising your profile on the Internet. Recent revolutions in Northern Africa and the Middle East were in part attributed to the power of the Internet along with social media and are often referred to as the Facebook Revolution. From a GI clinician's point of view, it is about maximizing the relationships among patients, health care providers, and the pharmaceutical and medical device industries as a whole. Social media can be used to increase compliance with medications, patient support, and education, and links with patient support

groups; encourage institutional loyalty; and enhance the overall physician-patient interaction, which itself can often be time restricted. In light of the broad range of credible and otherwise less-credible information available on the Web, it is an important responsibility for us as valued specialists to take the lead and ensure that the majority of GI health information that patients will access on the World Wide Web can be of a high standard. There is also a wonderful opportunity by using social media to find a pool of motivated patients with chronic GI disease states or rare diseases to create a national research registry that could otherwise be difficult and expensive to organize. Fundraising efforts can also be enhanced. Social media can also provide endoscopists with a forum to network, collaborate, and share clinical experiences and challenges with their peers.

Take Facebook³ as an example. It has been around since 2004 with a mission statement “to make the world more open and connected. People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what is going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them.” By June 2012, Facebook reported that they had 955 million monthly active users (bearing in mind that the population of the United States is roughly 314 million!). Approximately 20% of their monthly active users were in the United States and Canada. There were 552 million daily active users on average and 543 million monthly active users using Facebook mobile products, and it was available in more than 70 languages. This phenomenon is not exclusive to Facebook, however. Twitter⁴ is equally impressive in bringing people together, even on an individual level. The Healthcare Hashtag Project⁵ analyzes the group influence and growing role of Twitter in health care, which has resulted in a captured conversation that is now over the 100-million tweet threshold, which equates to 100 million individual pieces of health care information shared. These numbers are staggering, and it is hard to ignore the momentum of this form of medium.

The concept of the “e-patient” also represents a fundamental change in the role that a number of patients wish to play in managing their health care, reflecting more proactivity with less hierarchical health care delivery, signaling more collaboration. E-patients will retrieve information as opposed to receiving it, and their contribution is more hands on rather than simply accepting a paternalistic viewpoint. Frequently, patients will come to their GI outpatient

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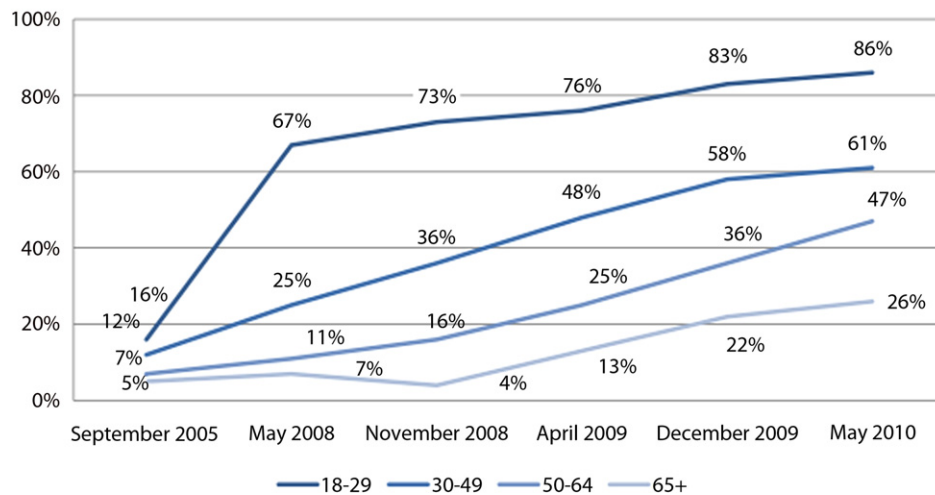
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The percentage of adult internet users who use social networking sites in each age group



Source: Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project Surveys, September 2005-May, 2010. All surveys are of adults 18 and older.

Figure 1. Social networking use continues to grow among older users.

follow-up appointment fully armed with the latest information on their condition. In fact, there are a number of organizations such as the Society for Participatory Medicine⁶ in which the emphasis is on allowing patients to shift from being mere passengers to responsible drivers of their health and are encouraged to become full partners in this relationship. The change from personal computer to increased mobile smartphone use has also led to the upsurge in opportunities to use social media to engage both health care providers and patients. Creating a digital social media platform for GI health care providers thus represents a great opportunity. However, it is important to control the distribution of information that is disseminated via social media. In this regard, the analogy of considering social media interactions as similar to having a conversation in an elevator is very helpful—anything you say will likely be heard and may well be used in evidence against you!

So, how can we gauge the impact of the Internet on the search for general and health-related information as well as social media use? The Pew Internet and American Life Project was set up by the Pew Research Center and assessed the Social Life of Health Information in 2011.⁷ Over the years from 2000 to 2010, 79% of all adults aged 18 years and older surveyed reported an increase in overall Internet use. As one would expect, this was high at 95% in the 18- to 29-year age group and was 87% in the 30- to 49-year age group. Equally impressive were the 78% increase in the 50- to 64-year age group and the 42% increase in the adults aged 65 years and older. Social networking continues to grow among all age groups including older users. Between September 2005 and May 2010, the percentage of adult Internet users using social networking sites increased from 16% to 86% in the 18-

29-year age group, 12% to 61% in the 30- to 49-year age group, 7% to 47% in the 50- to 64-year age group, and 5% to 26% in the 65 years and older age group (Fig. 1).

The important questions from a GI health care provider point of view include how to engage patients with social media, understanding patients' Internet and social media habits, their GI search patterns, the dominant online health and nonhealth communities that they use, and the mechanisms by which they access other sources of information for their digestive health care. Understanding the electronic patient journey will allow us to increase patients' use of the Internet and social media in a targeted manner, potentially leading to better quality patient education and therefore allowing patients greater understanding of their disease process and their therapeutic options. Examples of how social media can be helpful include podcast guidance to explain bowel prep before colonoscopy, complying with gluten-free diets, or helping with weight loss. Highlighting the latest treatment, equipment, or facilities in an organization can also be undertaken. Some may rightly argue that taking advantage of this may well create a fine line between patient education and overt marketing of a GI health care provider or institution, although one could argue that objective, evidence-based, and authoritative electronic patient information from a trusted GI or endoscopic resource is a good thing and can frequently be an excellent marketing tool in itself.

So how does the general public use the Internet in a way that may be of benefit to us as clinicians? In a survey of 2252 adult Internet users 18 years of age and older,⁸ 55% of adults aged 65 or older already sent e-mails on a daily basis, 34% read the news online, 19% banked online, 13% used a social networking site, 5% used online classifieds,

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