There is little debate on the influence that social media has on our lives. In June 2017, Facebook reached two billion subscribers and continues to grow. It is but one of many social media platforms that allow people to connect and network across the globe like never before. Universities are using social media to reach and engage with prospective international students and international students are increasingly turning to social media before making an inquiry to a school of interest.

Beyond using social media to select schools, international students want to remain connected to and feel welcome on their new home campuses. Seeing welcome messages from their schools on social media brings a sense of belonging and security for international students in an increasingly challenging time for international students across the globe.

Much of our focus in the field is understanding how to engage and connect with prospective international students and how they engage with our institutions when selecting schools on social media networks. We know less about how international students use social media both during and after their studies. More and more universities are enhancing their international alumni engagement through social media networks and international alumni are actively engaging back and giving back to their former institutions. There is also an emerging role for social media as a tool for public influence and diplomacy, which this paper aims to investigate.
Public diplomacy 2.0

Public diplomacy has long been valued by governments and understood to be an important and strategic foreign policy tool. However, with the rise and rapid growth of social media, and the increased reach and power of the internet, a new focus emerged during the final year of the George W. Bush presidency. With the appointment of James Glassman as Under Secretary, Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs in June 2008, came a new approach to global engagement for the United States that he referred to as Public Diplomacy 2.0. As Glassman explained in his 1 December 2008 remarks to the New American Foundation:

“This project is an example of how we see public diplomacy changing. We have arrived at the view that the best way to achieve our goals in public diplomacy is through a new approach to communicating, an approach that is made far easier because of the emergence of Web 2.0, or social networking, technologies. We call our new approach Public Diplomacy 2.0. PD 2.0 is an approach, not a technology. But new technology is absolutely necessary to its success ... tried-and-true traditional methods of public diplomacy – such as exchanges, where we spend most of our money – must be maintained and augmented, while always searching for new ways to do the job better.”

The United States continues to fund international educational and cultural exchange programs and remains active on numerous social media platforms in an effort to engage and influence a variety stakeholders. Unfortunately, it appears that support for these public diplomacy tools is waning during these first nine months with Donald Trump as President of the United States. To be sure, consistent hardline immigration stance in public comments and tweets from President Trump, as well as his three travel ban executive orders, are cause for alarm in many international education and public diplomacy circles and increasingly cast the United States as an unwelcoming destination for many across the globe.

The long-term impact that President Trump’s rhetoric will have on relations between the United States and other countries is yet to be understood, but it appears that mutual understanding and cooperation are no longer priorities of United States foreign policy as they once were.

It is also unknown what the immediate and long-term impact that President Trump’s messages will have on current and prospective international students to the United States. Despite a growing concern in the field of international education in the United States, glimmers of public diplomacy hope shine through the social media clouds.

For instance, on 16 August 2017, Jason Greenblatt who is Assistant to President Donald Trump and Special Representative for International Negotiation posted four tweets with photos highlighting 12 students from Gaza who are participating on the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study Program1 to spend the next year studying at high schools in the United States and their visit to the White House. In one of the tweets, the students from Gaza are posing for a photo while bowling in the White House. In another tweeted group photo, Greenblatt thanks the Government of Israel for helping his office secure travel permits for these students. Two days later on 18 August 2017, the United States Department of State live streamed remarks given by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to international student fellowship participants in the United States. The Department of State has subsequently made the recording of Secretary Tillerson’s remarks available on the Department of State website.

Diplomacy down under

Australia has also long understood the importance of public diplomacy as part of its overall global engagement strategy and has direct experience on the value social media provides in public influence. Lessons learned from 2009 (when news of several attacks on Indian students studying in Australia2 began to spread rapidly via social media, followed by traditional media networks throughout India) were rapidly and effectively put in motion in April 2012 when two Chinese students were assaulted on a train in Sydney. Almost immediately after the train attack, one of the students posted a message to Weibo (a Chinese microblogging social media platform) which quickly went viral with over 10,000 reposts by other users.

1 The Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study Program is a scholarship program funded by the United States Department of State and directed towards secondary school students (age 15–17) from countries with significant Muslim populations so they can spend one year studying at a high school in the United States.
2 In 2009, students from India were the second largest international student population comprising 19.1 per cent of that market.
This time, Australia took swift action to counter the impact this attack could have on prospective students from China (which was the largest international student population in 2012 comprising 29 per cent of the total market). In response, then Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd, who is fluent in Mandarin, posted a personal message to Weibo in which he rejected racism and highlighted that Chinese students were not the sole targets in the attack. He also invited Chinese students to share their experiences studying in Australia directly with him.

In the United States we see a different (lack of) social media response to violence against international students. On 9 June 2017, a visiting Chinese scholar at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign disappeared and is believed to have been kidnapped and murdered. News of the student disappearances quickly spread across Weibo and other social media platforms raising fear among students considering the United States as a study destination about their safety when studying in the United States. Much like the Sydney train attack response, police and the FBI treated the student’s disappearance with a sense of urgency and made an arrest in the still unsolved case. Unlike the Sydney attack response, neither the President of the United States nor the Secretaries of State and Education have taken any open diplomatic steps via social media platforms to reach a Chinese and international student audience to influence their perceptions about remaining safe while studying in the United States.

Australia has demonstrated over the past several years that they take social media networks seriously as part of their public diplomacy efforts and they continue to assess and evaluate their current and future strategies in this area. As highlighted by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) in their Public Diplomacy Strategy 2014–16, DFAT “will advance targeted public diplomacy initiatives which promote our economic, creative and cultural, sporting, innovation and science, and education assets to underline Australia’s credentials as a destination for innovation, business, investment, tourism and study, and emphasise Australia’s engagement with the Indo-Pacific region.” While DFAT did incorporate and support social media use as part of this overall public diplomacy strategy we see a significant and enhanced focus on social media use for diplomacy efforts with the launch of DFAT’s Digital Media Strategy 2016–18 by Foreign Minister Julie Bishop in December 2016.

Social media allows governments to be more interactive in their public diplomacy efforts and can counter in real-time misinformation or interpretations that have gone viral and negatively impact the perception that international students may have. Lines of communication are more direct and allow for conversations. Social media allows for individuals, organisations and institutions to participate in public diplomacy efforts or to advocate for policies that are friendly to international students and scholars. Social media provides an opportunity for international educators to engage local communities in new and strategic ways. There are many examples of the international education community using social media to stimulate discussion and to send messages of support to international students and scholars.

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#WeAreInternational

The first examples to highlight are two sister campaigns located in the United Kingdom and the United States. #WeAreInternational was started in 2013 by the Students’ Union at the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom to show support for and the importance of their diverse international student and staff populations. Due to concerns of international students (predominately in India) and their negative perceptions about changes to immigration policy in the United Kingdom, the #WeAreInternational campaign collaborated with the Home Office 3 to produce two short films. The videos showed students in India and China successfully navigating and applying to become international students in the United Kingdom. The #WeAreInternational campaign is now supported by over 160 universities and organisations in the United Kingdom.

3 Of note is that the Home Office film collaboration with the #WeAreInternational campaign was approved by then Home Office Minister and current Prime Minister Theresa May.
On 27 June 2017, Mark Zuckerberg posted the following Facebook status update: “As of this morning, the Facebook community is now officially 2 billion people! We’re making progress connecting the world, and now let’s bring the world closer together.”

Facebook has grown immensely in the 13 years since Zuckerberg launched “Thefacebook” on 4 February 2004 to the student community at Harvard University. While it is now the largest and most popular social network in the world, there are several others that have a significant and active subscriber base that must command attention from the international higher education community. The chart below from Statista lists the top 15 most popular social network sites worldwide ranked by active users (in millions) as of August 2017.

Given the number of active users of these and other social networks across the globe, it’s important to understand just how much activity occurs across these platforms. Every 60 seconds there are 46,200 posts uploaded to Instagram, 342,000 apps are downloaded from the Apple App Store and Google Play, 452,000 tweets are posted to Twitter, 1.8 million snaps are created on Snapchat, 4.1 million videos are viewed on YouTube, 16 million text messages are sent and 156 million email messages are sent. While these metrics are staggering, they are not practical data points when examining social media and its influence and impact within international education.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Network</th>
<th>Active Users (in millions)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>2,047</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YouTube</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WhatsApp</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messenger</td>
<td>1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WeChat</td>
<td>938</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QQ</td>
<td>861</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instagram</td>
<td>700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QZone</td>
<td>638</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sina Weibo</td>
<td>313</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baidu Tieba</td>
<td>300</td>
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<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viber</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapchat</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*While Facebook holds the number one spot with over two billion active users, it’s worth noting that it also owns three of the other top ranked social networks with WhatsApp ranked #3, Facebook Messenger ranked #4 and Instagram ranked #7.*
#YouAreWelcomeHere

A sister hashtag campaign created to welcome international students to campuses across the United States grew out of a November 2016 video by Study Group. In this video featuring six of its clients in the United States the #YouAreWelcomeHere hashtag was first used.

Inspired by the #YouAreWelcomeHere hashtag and the power this simple statement could have on current and prospective international students for her campus, Jessica Sandberg, Director of International Admissions at Temple University, created a highly successful video for Temple later in November 2016. Sandberg then advanced the #YouAreWelcomeHere into a national campaign and began promoting her idea across various social media networks and within the international higher education community across the United States. Currently, more than 300 institutions of higher education and organisations across the United States are participating in the #YouAreWelcomeHere campaign.

Both the #WeAreInternational and the #YouAreWelcomeHere campaigns allow institutions of higher education, organisations and interested stakeholders to use social media to connect directly with international student populations and convey a welcome message. Social media campaigns such as #WeAreInternational and #YouAreWelcomeHere allow institutions and communities to take public diplomacy efforts into their own hands. These campaigns, while used as international student and scholar recruitment tools, serve a public diplomacy role at the institutional and community levels. Social media tools now allow citizens and communities to actively share their voice. The real questions are, who are these campaigns reaching and are they having any influence on current or prospective international students and scholars? Are they reaching local communities in an effort to influence their views of international students?

#IntlEDNow

A second recent social media campaign worth noting is the #IntlEDNow “tweet chat” launched by World Education Services and World Education News & Reviews on 20 June 2017. Influential thought leaders in the field of international education were invited to participate in an open discussion on Twitter focusing on the topic of international education in a shifting geopolitical climate. The goal of the tweet chat was for a nonpartisan conversation about the effect that increased nationalism has on international higher education as well as to share insights and resources with international admissions and enrolment managers and international higher education administrators across the globe.

Metrics from the 45-minute tweet chat show that there were a total of 540 tweets sent by 75 users from 54 locations across the globe with a potential reach of 1,417,139 which is the estimated number of followers of people using the hashtag. These are strong numbers and World Education Services and World Education News & Reviews have already started planning a series of upcoming tweet chats using the #IntlEDNow hashtag. These future tweet chats will no doubt be engaging (as much as discussions can be in 140 characters) but the participants and audience will not be international students or scholars nor will they be members of our local communities. A majority of the participants and audience of the #IntlEDNow tweet chats will come from the higher education sector and many with a professional stake in international education.
International educators have a responsibility to engage in critical and positive dialogue with those in our communities who fear others simply based on what country they come from or the languages they speak.

Research conducted on social media and public influence is plentiful but does it have any relevance to the field of international education? The answer to this question is unknown. We can speculate that our social media use and engagement does influence our communities and the international student and scholar populations with whom we work, but can we say for certain? A robust and coordinated research effort is necessary if we are to better understand the impact that social media has on public influence. This, of course, is easier said than done. We need international educators who are not only interested in the rise of social media and public influence and international education advocacy, but are willing to ask challenging and thought provoking questions and to take the lead in this area of investigation.

ieaa.org.au/research
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