The People's Republic of Yik Yak

Lindsay Niedringhaus '07
The Furman Scholars program coupled with a music scholarship lured Pardo to South Carolina, but she discovered she did not like music as much as she thought right around the time she found out math wasn’t so bad after all.

“I liked math a lot when I was little, and I stopped liking it kind of around middle school because of really bad teachers,” Pardo said. “I was in Dr. (John) Harris’s 160 class, which is a class you need for your physics major, and I realized that I actually did like math. He was just so good and he’s such a nice person and he was so happy to teach this stuff.”

“I’ve known her since she came as a freshman, and she was special from the beginning,” Harris says. “She has always been the kind of student that you really like to have in class because she’s engaged in the classroom and outside of the classroom, too. She’s bright and she’s motivated and she’s interested in lots of different things.”

“I’m interested in cosmology, the history of the universe, but I don’t know what I’m going to end up doing,” she said. “I definitely want to do theoretical work, work with math and computers basically. Not too much actual practical stuff. I tend to break things.”

—Ron Wagner ’93

THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF YIKYAK

In The Republic, Plato argues that a utopian society emerges out of specialization: The producers create the goods, the warriors protect the society, and the rulers are the well-educated, thoughtful philosophers whose voices are heard above all others. But Brooks Buffington ’13 and Tyler Droll ’13 created Yik Yak, a new social media app, because they believe just the opposite.

“When we were at Furman, there were those few students on campus whose voices were always heard,” says Buffington. “They were the popular ones—usually athletes or students who were involved in a lot. They had the most followers on Facebook and Twitter, so their postings got the most views.”

“We wanted to create something that would allow an equal playing field for everyone,” explains Droll. “We realized the only way to do this was if the users were all anonymous. That’s the whole idea behind the app.”

With Yik Yak, users post up to 200 characters without signing in or creating any sort of profile or avatar. Their observations are visible within a 1.5-mile radius of the reader, making the app function as a hyper-local “bulletin board.” But it has also been criticized for acting as a hyper-local gossip mill where anonymity fosters hostility.

At Boston College, Yik Yak was taken on task for racist comments posted by users. A student group at the college protested the app and drew national attention.

At another school, a student sent a bomb threat through the app.

These types of controversies are not exclusive to Yik Yak. With an increase in social media outlets, the possibilities for more unfiltered—and faceless—speech increase as well.

In many ways, social media is reframing old debates about human nature: Does anonymity allow for greater candor or greater incivility; does it produce more authenticity or more misinformation? And does the inventor bear responsibility for how the invention is used?

“Anonymity is good in that it provides protection, which hopefully fosters honesty in social discourse,” says Furman associate professor of philosophy Aaron Simmons. “Yet social repercussion is a valuable tool for promoting good social behavior, as it leads to moral self-transformation in line with community expectations. Anonymity might then, work against the very discourse one is trying to encourage.”

According to Simmons, in a successful society, everyone—from the user to the inventor—shares responsibility for discourse and the media from which it emanates.

“With innovation, responsibility trickles down through a community,” he says. “In the effort to be a responsible citizen of a global community, I would hope that inventors often return to the technology to assess its usage and continually improve it for its users.”

With Yik Yak, Buffington and Droll have never stopped trying to improve it. Since its launch in January, the two have blocked the use of Yik Yak on high school and middle school grounds through geo-fencing techniques.

And now users may “upvote” or “downvote” posts to mark approval or disapproval. When a post has many more downvotes than upvotes, it is automatically removed.
Of course, such improvements prompt their own philosophical questions: What happens if popularity obscures truth? In other words, what if a “downvoted” and then removed post is not omitted for reasons of discourtesy but because it carries a truth some may not wish to hear? Does social media then become an echo chamber of self-fulfilling ideology, or even censorship?

Buffington and Droll argue the media has its own tendencies for selective storytelling. For as many negative posts the media highlights, the two say they have witnessed just as many positive posts.

“My favorite is a story from Vanderbilt,” says Buffington. “A guy’s brother had cancer and was in dire need of a full-body blood transfusion, so the student was looking for a match. His fraternity was having a drive where students could show up and get their mouths swabbed to see if they were a match. He posted on Facebook and Twitter and didn’t get much feedback, as he was limited to only those in his social circle. Then he posted a plea on Yik Yak. The next thing he knew, 1,200 people showed up to get their mouths swabbed, and they found a match for his brother.”

“There are also the mundane postings that are still helpful,” adds Droll. “I know people at Furman who have found their keys or bikes through Yik Yak. It’s useful for all kinds of purposes.”

Yik Yak’s usage on college campuses has grown organically, currently at more than 250 universities across the United States. The company recently reported a $10.5 million investment, allowing them to hire five new employees and four interns.

Says Simmons, “We have to wrestle as a society with whether the anonymity provided by technology is valuable for the conversations that take place within a community. There can be a tension between the attempt to ensure an equality of voices on the one hand, and an attempt to encourage that one uses one’s voice to seek truth, goodness, and beauty on the other hand.”

Such a tension recalls those for, say, whistleblowers, who may depend on anonymity to correct an injustice. Then again, one person’s whistleblower may be another person’s “leak.”

Buffington says it’s the “community’s responsibility to police themselves.” And according to Simmons, we can learn a great deal about our society from that policing.

“We need to examine our actions and think better about who we take ourselves to be. Such reflection allows us to be maximally likely to educate each other toward virtue.”

—Lindsay Niedringhaus ’07

A HEALTHY PARTNERSHIP

One of the most invoked assets to a liberal arts education is the opportunity it provides to explore a range of subjects, and in the process unearth those passions that help define our professional pursuits. Testing those passions outside the classroom, however, is a lesser known but no less fundamental aspect of the four years that define such an education.

On the Quad

A glimpse at Furman fashion

—WILLIAM CROOKS ’14

Fall signals the beginning of a new semester at Furman, and with it comes a newfound sense of curiosity and vital questions in need of answering. Why is it so hot? What is a Moodle? What should I wear to class today? Although students may well be struggling with the first two questions, they seem to have the last one figured out.