Digital Graffiti

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Digital Graffiti
A Look at the Role of Yik Yak at the University of Richmond

BY DYLAN MCAULEY
A COLLEGE STUDENT sits down to start their homework, but before they do so, they take out their phone and check Yik Yak, an anonymous smartphone app that allows users to share their thoughts, and has rapidly taken over college campuses across the nation, including the University of Richmond.

Yik Yak allows users to post anonymous Yaks, short posts limited to 200 characters, to local feeds that cover a radius of 1.5 miles. Readers then have the option to upvote a post, and thus increase its rank on the hot list, or they may downvote it until it receives a score of -5 and is deleted.

University of Richmond students recently voted Yik Yak the third most popular mobile app, behind only Instagram and Snapchat, in Forum Magazine’s “Best of UR” poll. Everywhere around campus, students can be seen using the app to share what are usually funny or observational thoughts, but on many campuses across the country, Yik Yak has taken a dark turn.

According to the Huffington Post, at least 11 Yik Yak users were arrested and charged for threatening violent crimes on college campuses in the past six months. At Michigan State University, a freshman named Matthew Mullen posted “I’m gonna [gun emoji] the school” on his campus’ Yik Yak feed. After causing lockdowns on several nearby campuses, Mullen was found and arrested.

Regardless of the fact that his post was a joke, and that he had no intention of doing anything of the kind, Mullen plead guilty to terrorism on January 15, 2015, and will be sentenced in February. While this is an extreme case, situations like it are becoming a more frequent problem on campuses throughout the United States.

Yik Yak also has tremendous potential to be used for anonymous bullying and hate speech, a reason for which the app has been banned on all high school campuses. In September 2014, The Colgate Maroon-News reported that an unknown user posted to Colgate University’s feed “White people won life, Africa lost, sorry we were so much better than you that we were literally able to enslave you to our will.” This Yak sparked mass protests across the university’s campus and resulted in the condemnation of Yik Yak by the Colgate president and the administration.

This behavior could be seen again at the University of Maryland where The Hoy reported that a guest speaker was met with several rape threats during her visit. This disturbing pattern is appearing at a majority of colleges around the nation; however, the University of Richmond seems to be trending in a different direction.

Richmond’s Yik Yak feed typically consists of funny observations and clever jokes, and to most it seems unimaginable that someone would post something so hateful or violent. Though offensive comments do appear occasionally on the campus’ feed, they are almost always voted down within seconds.

“I have seen some pretty offensive and racist posts on UR’s feed, but they almost never catch on and tend to get voted down pretty quickly,” said a sophomore who wished to remain anonymous.

Richmond seems to have almost entirely refrained from making Yaks extremely personal, while on other campuses people are often called out and harassed by name. Given the option between hate and humor, University of Richmond students have overwhelmingly chosen the latter.

In Forum Magazine’s “Best of UR” poll, students were asked to vote for their favorite Yik Yak posts. The most popular Yak on campus was “I love Triceragoose.” The second most popular was “Trying to find the library bathroom sink’s hand sensor is harder than finding the g-spot.” And rounding out the top three was “This is Jake from VCU.” “What are you wearing, Jake from VCU?” “Uhh... cargos.” These types of Yaks are common on UR’s feed and, as one can see, they are far more innocent and funny than what has become expected at other schools.

Why is it that while other colleges are attempting to ban Yik Yak, if they have not done so already, Richmond students are maintaining a relatively clean and open feed? When asked why she thought Richmond had a better Yik Yak, freshman Angela Lam said, “Richmond has less tolerance for sexual assault and violence. I think that’s because of the environment set up by the school that encourages students to be inclusive, considerate, and respectful of others. Most schools don’t pay much attention to the sense of community but Richmond does.”

The result of this sense of community contributes significantly to the content of Richmond’s Yik Yak because, even in an anonymous forum, Richmond students still maintain a level of discourse since they know that their peers will be the ones viewing their thoughts.

In fact, Richmond students have even fostered a sense of community on the app. When asked about her thoughts on Yik Yak, L. Elizabeth Crawford, a UR psychology professor, said, “I have checked out Yik Yak due to the press about it, and I noticed that somebody had posted about depression and got supportive replies. I was pleasantly surprised because I had heard about the situation on other campuses. I think we should remember that this app has many purposes.” These comments echo the opinion of many Richmond students that although Yik Yak has potential to be used for bad, it has great potential for good as well.

In the wake of the devastating terrorist attacks in Paris, both the United States and the world are having conversations about the limitations and potential dangers of free speech. Regardless of what it is that makes Richmond students maintain a cleaner and safer Yik Yak, they should be commended for it. Our campus’ Yik Yak is by no means perfect, but for the most part, it is significantly better than most. Richmond has thus far avoided any major discussions about the role of Yik Yak on campus, including potential bans, and hopefully will avoid the need for one in the future.

In a time of uncertainty over the limits of free speech, the fact that Richmond can maintain a totally open forum truly represents the best of UR.