

COMPUTER SCIENCE

# Social-Media Scholars

FACEBOOK AND TWITTER are the kinds of social media sites that students use to distract themselves from coursework. But in the case of CS114, The Socio-Technological Web, they are the coursework. “These kids are coming with a lot of experience in these media, but as a matter of fact, they are using them without really understanding how they work,” says Takis Metaxas, professor of computer science.

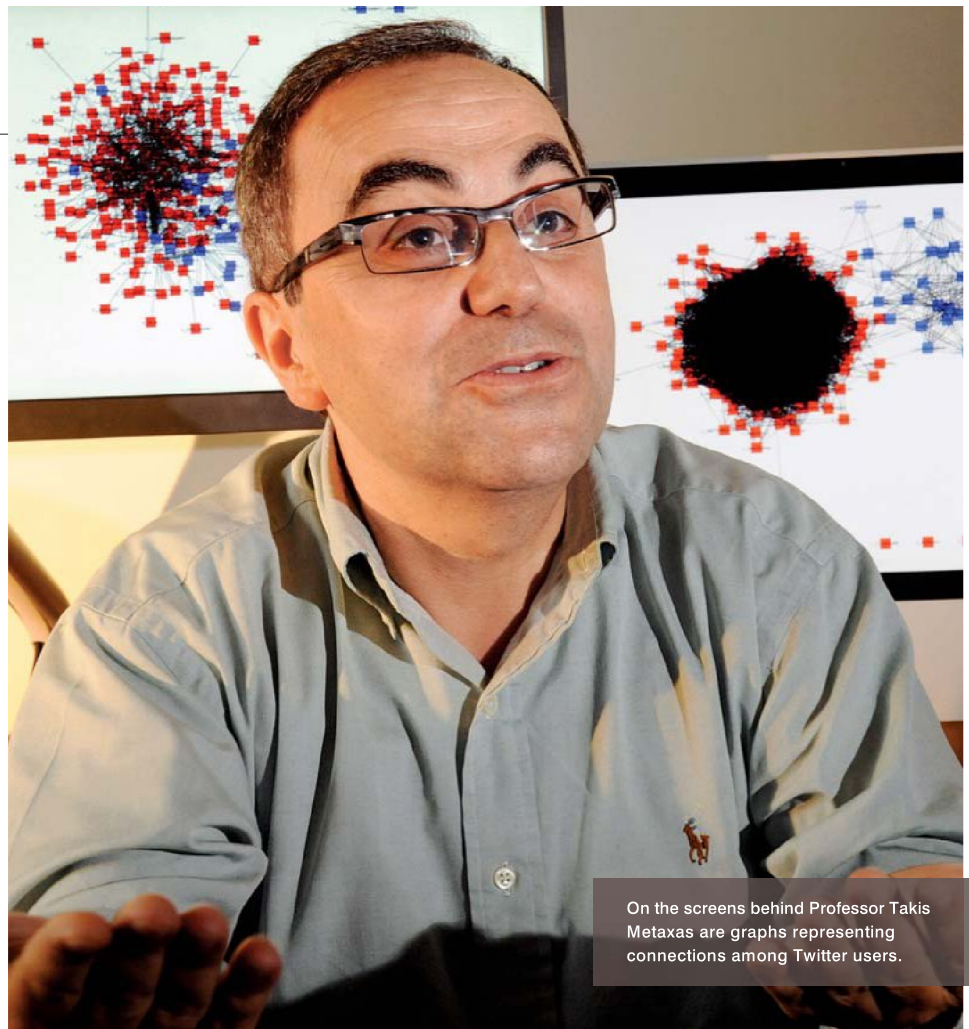
To illustrate the point, Metaxas begins the popular course with a deceptively simple question: If you post a picture on Facebook, but then five minutes later have second thoughts and delete it, will that picture show up in a Google search a year later? “What happens to a picture when you upload it? Where has it been stored? If you delete it, is it really deleted? . . . It has to do with how the search engines work and how our privacy settings are set. Younger generations don’t think very deeply about privacy,” says Metaxas.

Metaxas hopes that CS114, which won the College’s Apgar Award for teaching innovation last year, will make students think more carefully about thorny issues such as security, digital-rights ownership, and privacy. “I think they have several ‘wow moments’ in the class, when they start realizing what happens with information and how hard it is to forget the past,” he says.

There’s also plenty of programming. Students learn HTML and CSS, as well as the nuts and bolts of how search engines work. In addition, last year, the students used Android smart phones to create mobile applications. “One of my favorite apps was one where you can walk around campus and take a picture with your phone of a building, and information will appear about the location

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—Takis Metaxas



On the screens behind Professor Takis Metaxas are graphs representing connections among Twitter users.

of the building, a map, and the history of the building,” says Metaxas. Many students who described themselves as “technophobes” at the beginning of the class wound up creating very fancy social applications, he adds.

Metaxas also devotes time to studying social media like Twitter outside of the classroom. He and Eni Mustafaraj, a fellow in the computer-science department, monitored the flow of tweets just before the Massachusetts special elections in January. There was a small group of Democrats and a large group of Republicans who were tweeting frequently. But they also noticed a group of heavy users of Twitter that had no connections to the Republicans. “We found out that actually this was a robot that was sending tweets directly to

people who were interested in the elections, and they were sent by an organization that was not signing their actions,” says Metaxas. “They were spreading false rumors that [candidate] Martha Coakley is against the Catholics, and that she says that Catholics should not practice medicine. It was an interesting thing that you can just use technology to actually unveil these kinds of groups and their behavior.”

Metaxas is an enthusiastic user of social media himself, particularly of Twitter. (“Facebook is mostly uninteresting chitter chatter,” he says.) He finds that Twitter is a great way to hear about news or research that he otherwise would have missed. For example, he follows one of his former students, Betsy Masiello ’03, who now works in public policy at Google. “[She] spoke at a conference about the privacy settings in Google. And I would have completely missed it if she had not said on Twitter, here is the link to a video of my talk,” Metaxas says. Metaxas sums up his experience of Twitter by saying, “Social media makes you have less free time, but at the same time, it makes your life much more interesting.”

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➔ Follow Professor Takis Metaxas on Twitter: @takis\_metaxas.

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