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Social media experiments: scholarly practice and collegiality

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Abstract
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Keywords
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Keywords: social media, academic labour, knowledge production, public engagement, core/periphery, impact

Social media has indeed, as argued in this welcome essay by Kitchin et al., ‘transformed the channels through which information is disseminated and consumed’. But perhaps more notably, it has the potential to transform the practice of knowledge production. And beyond this, it may just present glimmers of a distinct vision of academic collegiality. In this response, we concur with Kitchin et al., and reflect on our recent experiences of social media. Notwithstanding limitations and concerns, we argue that it is worth pursuing social media experiments within a more hopeful vision of scholarly practice and collegiality.

New conversations and possibilities

Our experience with social media shares much with that of Kitchin et al., though ours has been arguably more decentred and without a tight rationale. Geographers in the Australian Centre for Cultural Environmental Research (AUSCCER) ‘discovered’ social media in 2012 after some of our postgraduate students gently suggested we take it more seriously to connect with various ‘publics’. On advice from social media experts in our university’s education development unit, we began a Facebook site in February 2012 and a blog, ‘Conversations with AUSCCER’ (http://uowblogs.com/ausccer/), in April. One-by-one staff and graduate students opened Twitter accounts in the months that followed¹. We have actively explored related Web 2.0 possibilities including non-profit, advertising-free, academic-controlled online news sites (especially theconversation.edu.au).

We have been energised by possibilities of social media ‘cutting through’ to new and unknown audiences. Many of our new connections are likeminded geographers (and thus there is an element of ‘talking to ourselves’), but nevertheless, new kinds of rhizomatic connections with heterodox publics have been forged. We are also finding opportunities to embed relationships with agencies, interested individuals, policy-makers and other academics as research is seeded and developed, not
only after it is published. Anna de Jong, a postgraduate student working on mega-events and young people, has developed links with event organisers and gained legitimacy with participants as her research evolves. She describes people being able to ‘learn more about me and the research—stalk me—before they meet me and agree to participate... upon meeting face to face it always seems more comfortable and less confronting when we’ve already been chatting through social media’. Christine Eriksen, a Postdoctoral Fellow, has become an active commentator on wildfire management, uses social media to recruit participants and collaborators, and is ‘followed’ by several professional agencies. Christine says ‘recent sole use of social media to advertise a nation-wide online survey was incredibly positive—the best response rate I have ever had’. Michael Adams has used the blog to communicate ‘postcards from the field’ while working in India on traditional knowledge, tribal rights and environmental conservation. He reports:

Before I went to India, I think there were about a dozen or less hits from India... After posting three blogs, and letting a few people know about them, there are now 81 visitors to the blog from India... Those visitors are from 15 different Indian states, and my Indian trips were to only two. So while I made personal contact with a particular group of researchers in India, a much wider group are now aware.

Unquestionably, social media is engaging networked, multiple publics. More meaningful connections are developing too, beyond total numbers of comments or retweets: invitations to visit or present elsewhere; more regular correspondence with newly found scholars; applications from high quality PhD candidates who have found us through social media.

Public interest and new research

We strongly agree with Kitchin et al. on two key arguments: using social media can inject a geographical perspective into debates of public interest; and engaging with social media on such topics can trigger further research. Our optimistic sense is that the world is thirsty for a geographical perspective—for something other than headline responses or dogmatic market economics. Important are the geographer’s abilities to ‘ground’ debates, connect otherwise disparate fields of knowledge, test and unsettle assumptions, and provide alternative analytical frameworks. The social media landscape appears more open for geographical contributions than some television and broadsheet media (cf. Peet 2011)—at least in this early, expansionary phase. Should we therefore take social media more seriously, not just as avenue to reach new publics, but as platform to promote the intellectual capital of the discipline to broader national and international audiences?

Three inchoate debates to which AUSCCER researchers have contributed via social media are the future of Australian manufacturing, gendered dimensions of academic work, and management of human-shark encounters. Each has involved writing blog posts and online commentaries followed by Tweeting and Facebook sharing. Commentaries in theconversation.edu.au in particular have attracted many thousands of readers, and have led to invitations to comment in other media that would not have otherwise occurred. Our geographical perspectives on the manufacturing debate were quoted at length in parliament (Primrose 2012). Klocker and Drozdzewski’s (2012) intervention on the gendering of promotions and academic career development stimulated remarkable Twitter traffic, driven by a simple, provocative title. Early critique of government response to five tragic human fatalities from shark ‘attack’ (Gibbs & Warren 2012) attracted public and media attention,
and seeded new relationships with industry and public institutions. Interactivity between platforms seems key to building audience and influence.

As Kitchin et al. state, we are seeing growing emphasis on impact and engagement, through processes such as REF (and our variant, ERA: ‘Excellence for Research in Australia’). We agree on the benefits of social media for wrestling control over terms of such engagement. Blogging and Twitter especially may circumvent the current model. But we wish to push this further: given the neoliberal aridity of university research quality assessment exercises, is it too idealistic to suggest that social media presents opportunities for scholars to shape new means of assessment? Social media certainly provides a vehicle for discussing it. Social media cannot replace well-organised unions, but it does provide an additional space for debating the rapidly shifting terrain of academic work, across national boundaries.

**How and where scholarship is practised**

This ultimately brings us to the circumstances of knowledge production. The transition to Web 2.0 has transformed information dissemination and consumption. But perhaps more significantly, it has shifted how knowledge is produced (as Kitchin et al. discuss), and critically, how and where scholarship is practised. Working in the Antipodes stretches and warps the already uneven landscape of knowledge production (Wray et al. 2013). We benefit from English as *lingua franca*, yet remain disconcerted by the persistence of an Anglo-American hegemony. To physically attend the ‘standard’ conferences (IBG, AAG) is expensive, and for many academics—even in this wealthy South Pacific country—exceptional. Frictions of distance are materially and viscerally experienced.

Given this, our experiments with social media have an added aspirational dimension: to overcome geographical marginality, improve (virtual) proximity to other academic hubs, and generate new and different kinds of political and intellectual allegiances. We were advised to try a range of fora with multiple audiences and functions; to accept that social media generates irregular pathways of information flow and exchange; to convey personality as well as ‘formal’ content; and to let go of a desire to control or strategise everything. International connections would come but could not be ‘forced’. The result has been a notable increase in our international presence (measured by such things as maps of visits to our blog), achieved through an amalgam of people, content and media presences, with activity coming in peaks and troughs. Jane Bennett’s (2010) congregational understanding of agency helps here. The social media assemblage certainly has no central head. Viewed from the Antipodes, that in itself is a positive shift. But what are also important are the coming together of things, the forming and reforming of relations, the shifts over time. Isolation and anonymity feel negotiable, if not altogether overcome.

**Collegiality and scholarship**

Kitchin et al. also raise the important question of group dynamics. Enthusiasm for social media will vary within a group. In ours, some are ‘converts’ using social media to network before a conference, building vast lists of Facebook friends and Twitter followers. Some tweet to announce a new article, and nothing more. Others write blog posts that digest key project insights; the post ‘travelling’ further than the academic paper itself. More than one of us has found the intensity of Twitter too much. These platforms are invasive and demanding of attention beyond working hours (cf. Gregg 2011). Yet Twitter’s informal support groups (especially #PhDChat, #ECRChat, #acwri) help younger
staff in career development. Some enjoy Facebook’s blurring of personal and professional; others detest its dubious news feed algorithm, and the fact that it is corporate owned. We have found ‘allies’ in unlikely or unknown places, with whom exchanges, retweets and blog posts are shared. And for early career researchers, social media presents one means of making international academia more 'human'; for getting to know scholars at all career stages; a less high-pressure option for interaction with more established professors than the conference coffee cart or cold-sent email. Different workings of multiple platforms seem to function best across a group, with minimal preordained strategy. The focus is less on the efforts of the individual, or on everybody jumping on board equally, and more around a network of colleagues making diverse contributions.

It seems a simple point worth emphasising (as Kitchin et al. do, in passing), that social media efforts can generate a stronger sense of collegiality in a research group. In AUSCCER the influence on the group has been largely positive – a collective effort with no hierarchical leadership, in which most have participated. Importantly, younger members of the group have the knowledge to lead the way, shifting often-entrenched notions of ‘authority’. Many of us have a stronger sense of an emerging group identity or ‘flavour’. We increasingly point external enquirers to our blog rather than our web page. Lesley Head describes ‘it has more of our personality in it, but is no less scholarly’. And although, as Kitchin et al. note, there are significant obligations in keeping blogs going, in our experience any risk of burnout or concentration in the hands of a few has been offset by the simple need to share the workload. A couple of blog posts each annually has not felt too onerous, and there is usually someone with a ‘bee in their bonnet’ ready to post when a gap arises.

Finally, while these experiments continue to unfurl, the academic world around us is evolving too. Academic life is being reconfigured by the rise of online teaching and fundamental challenges to publishing presented by digital distribution. It seems worth getting on the front foot and asking: in the face of an increasingly competitive, metric-driven agenda in higher education, can social media provide an opportunity to promote a vision for academic collegiality? Social media could easily become another space where the evils of competitive individualism, university corporatism, metrics micro-management and bullying are amplified. The alternative is that we proactively craft a space in which to practise a more communitarian vision of academic life, a mode of knowledge production that is generous, supportive, and engages at multiple points in the development of ideas (cf. Participatory Geographies Research Group 2012). Social media has the capacity to become a hyper-competitive form of academic enterprise. But it also has the capacity to generate new forms of collegiality, through everyday practices and interactions. The choice is both personal and political: social media as space in which to enact prosaic forms of solidarity.

Note

1. Credit is owed to Christine Eriksen and Ben Gallan for seeding the idea that AUSCCER should take social media seriously; to Michael Adams for following this up; and to Sarah Lambert and Wendy Meyers (CEDIR, UOW) for expert advice. Although this paper has only two authors, several contributed ideas in emails (and we directly quote them here). AUSCCER’s social media experiment has been very much a team effort, and we wish to acknowledge other active contributors: Chris Brennan-Horley, Chantel Carr, Anna de Jong, Eliza de Vet, Nick Gill, Theresa Harada, Lesley Head, Natascha Klocker, Emily O’Gorman, Catherine Phillips, Elyse Stanes, Gordon
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