

Tweeting to the Choir: Online Performance and Academic Identity

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Abstract

New academic practices supported by platforms like Twitter give scholars the opportunity to carve out professional identities at a time when the expectations of them in an increasingly competitive academic marketplace have never been higher. Networked academic communities magnify the reach and impact of scholarly work, as well as support professional connections. Propagating publications – both traditional and non-traditional – via Twitter and creating platform-specific artifacts like “storified” conversations are things scholars seeking to legitimize alternative forms of scholarship do to give voice to their dissatisfactions. While ostensibly fostering a climate of openness that has the potential to disrupt the status quo in academia, these practices run the risk of creating insular groups of scholars – an outcome contrary to the very things such scholars profess to be trying to achieve.

Keywords

twitter; scholarship; social media; academia

Introduction

Becoming a member of academia as a student, professor, or alternative academic has never been easier – or harder. Social networking services like Twitter, for instance, spread job announcements that once were limited to word of mouth or closed listservs. These sites also allow academics to forge and maintain connections. But all these things mean that more people are applying for fewer jobs, expectations are higher, and a greater range of proficiencies is desired. And while new digital scholarly practices affect academia as a whole, early-adopter, early-career scholars may be disproportionately affected.

Many scholars have taken to the internet to create and build academic identities that demonstrate their skill and mastery of technology – desirable traits in an increasingly technologized academia. Some of this gets referred to as “digital scholarship”. Many scholars today are conducting their work more openly via different platforms. As Baym & boyd (2012) note, “There are more layers of publicness available to those using networked media than ever before; as a result, people’s relationship to public life is shifting in ways we have barely begun to understand.” (p. 321) Participatory technology is making us reexamine what “scholarship” looks like and in so doing calls into question some of the norms of academia itself. Acceptance of digital practices as “academic” practices is growing, but it may take time for these practices to be considered legitimate within academia because old forms of scholarship still hold sway.

Participatory Scholarly Networks

Twitter provides a space for people to create identities and enact them for an imagined audience, or even a networked audience (Marwick & boyd, 2010). As users build their networks on Twitter, they build strong weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) – connections that grow over time into professional or personal relationships. Rainie & Wellman (2012) refer to this as “networked individualism” within the paradigm of an emergent “social operating system”. They explain,

The networked operating system gives people new ways to solve problems and meet social needs. It offers more freedom to individuals than people experienced in the past

because now they have more room to maneuver and more capacity to act on their own. (Rainie & Wellman, 2012, p. 9).

Acknowledging the role of social media in academia, Greenhow, Robelia, & Hughes (2009) spoke of the rise of “social scholarship” aided by Web 2.0 technologies. Veletsianos’ (2012) study of scholars’ use of Twitter revealed practices that seem to push at what “scholarship” means. For example, scholars elicit feedback on their work from their networks – a practice that many scholars balk at for fear their ideas will be appropriated by others. In taking to this new platform, “...scholars have capitalized on the ease with which they can connect with others, traverse networks and communities of interest, and engage in conversations to further their work.” (p. 11). Veletsianos & Kimmons (2011) refer to the ways scholars are using participatory online technologies to both support existing scholarly practices and bring them into the 21st century as “networked participatory scholarship”. They assert that the movement of scholarly practice into a more techno-cultural space is influenced by the change from a passive culture to a more participatory one as noted by Jenkins et al (2009), leading to more collaboration and crowd-sourcing.

While building scholarly networks, users learn to recognize valuable connections and weed out ‘noise’ or unwanted information and people. Donath (2007) likens this to signaling theory – originally from economics and biology – which talks about the “relationship between signals and qualities, showing why certain signals are more reliable and others are not.” (p. 3). On Twitter, users develop different ways of verifying the legitimacy of information and people ranging from looking at how much information a user reveals in their profile to a Google search of a person’s name. Reputation and ‘followability’, paradoxically, often depend on who a person follows and/or is followed by. As Donath & boyd (2004) note, social networking sites let us publicly display our connections – signaling reliability and trustworthiness.

Professionalizing Non-Traditional Scholarly Practice

The flip side of building networked communities of scholars is that we run the risk of creating echo chambers on Twitter, using them only to propagate the things we deem important. Eli Pariser (2011) calls it a “filter bubble,” except instead of algorithms doing the filtering for us, we create our own incestuous pockets of information.

Within these bubbles, new practices are taking root among academics. For example, someone asks a question on Twitter (with or without a hashtag), storifies the responses that come from their network, blogs about the Storify, tweets about the blog post about the Storify of the tweets, and then members of this person's network propagate this blog post about the Storify of the tweets with a tweet or retweet of their own. This cyclical behavior is supported by the bubble and “the media” at large and has become an accepted and expected behavior among a certain class of academics. Another example is citation practices on Twitter, as Priem & Costello (2010) report, in which scholars promote their own and their peers’ articles, making them more accessible and visible, and thus, theoretically, increasing their scholarly impact. Acknowledging that Twitter, blogs, and other web-based, social channels are conduits for spreading scholarly work, Priem, Tarabolrelli, Groth, & Neylon (2010) started altmetrics (<http://altmetrics.org/manifesto/>) in an effort to track and report scholarly impact outside of the traditional citation models.

Practices like this are even becoming part of academic professionalization – the things a grad student or early-career scholar must do to develop a reputation as a scholar and academic. Akin to the “teams” that Erving Goffman (1959/1990) speaks of made up of individuals who “cooperate in staging a single routine,” practices that academics partake in are evocative of Goffman's definition of a team and its behavior:

A team is a grouping, but it is a grouping not in relation to a social structure or a social organization, but rather in relation to an interaction or series of interactions in

which the relevant definition of the situation is maintained. (Goffman, 1959/1990, p. 104.)

By engaging in practices like tweet-storify-blog-tweet-retweet loops and quantifying citation, academics lend legitimacy to them and make them a form of professional display.

Conclusion

The implications of legitimizing non-traditional scholarly practices are profound at a time when Twitter is a place where graduate students and early-career academics find community while dissertating and job-hunting. Eager to create online portfolios and career-enhancing connections, they use services like Twitter to develop desirable professional personas and makes themselves more attractive in an increasingly competitive job market.

It is obvious that Twitter, along with other social media platforms, is helping challenge the closed nature of many current academic practices. There is dissatisfaction among scholars, especially younger ones, seeking to upend the academic status quo and redefine our understandings of scholarly work, and Twitter is giving them voice. The up-sides and down-sides of such practices can impact one's academic identity and chances on the job market. It is important that we as internet scholars step out of our filter bubbles in order to make sense of and critically examine the emerging, and possibly dominant and exclusionary, rituals that many academics on Twitter engage in today.

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