

# The Social Parameters of Scholarship

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WILLARD MCCARTY SAYS—well, *said*, a long time ago, actually—that what used to be called humanities computing had the salutary effect of asking scholars to be more explicit about what the *humanities* full-stop held as its core values and practices. And so it is with this latest generation of more deliberately social digital media. Which core values of the humanities are revealed in this new blue light social media cast over our texts and our practices? Earlier digital media—giving rise to hypertext collections and to multimedia scholarship, for example—pushed us to question what an edition or an archive might mean in the age of (virtual) abundance, or whether or not our text-based methodologies could engage with hypertextual cultural artifacts. Newer digital media drag the para- or meta-academic values into the interrogation room: how do we interact with one another and with the broader public, and to what end? In the “age of Facebook,” have the *social* parameters of scholarship shifted?

I think we don’t take the social very seriously at all in the humanities, except perhaps as a research topic. Fundamentally, most of us understand academic work as essentially solitary: it is, if anything, *anti*-social. Social aspects of scholarship are valued in either a very pragmatic, meta-work way (as “networking”), or practised in purely personal, blowing-off-steam

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ways. But social networking as a serious scholarly practice? I don't think so. We should reconsider this dismissal. Perhaps sociability need no longer be, as this forum's abstract placed it, a "counterpoint to ... scholarly endeavour," no matter how "important" a counterpoint it is.

Along with Heather Zwicker and Erin Wunker, I have a blog. It's called Hook & Eye, with the tagline "fast feminism, slow academe." It might well have been subtitled "fast thinking, slow profession," or "fast writing, slow publication," or "fast living, slow society." It is pretty much everything that the rest of my research is not, in ways that might be useful to think about here.

For starters, it mingles the personal and the professional in ways that are very common to the format and practices of blogging, and social media generally, but that are very unusual in academic or even more informal professorial public discourse. The blog forcefully conjoins, in my case, what it means to raise a child, overcome academic imposter syndrome, build a marriage, go up for tenure and promotion, get the flu, wonder why students hate textbooks, and critique on-campus events through a feminist lens. Or rather, the blog allows me to sidestep the forced separation of those topics into matters dealt with in strictly personal, small-scale ways at the bar with my friends or in very public, peer-reviewed ways through the medium of print publication with colleagues who assess my work purely intellectually and anonymously. That separation has its problems, a fact that even institutions recognize as they grapple with ways, as at my institution, to fairly and equitably assess merit for faculty who have lives outside the library, the lab, and the classroom.

Along with my co-authors, I am a fully fleshed out human being online and I aim at demystifying the profession and modeling academic womanhood online in ways that can be more effective to produce real change than any number of equity reports from blue-ribbon task forces. We bring—in real time—our ideas and issues to an audience that can speak up and join the conversation or remain silent and not feel exposed, as they wish. People keep spontaneously telling us how meaningful they find the writing and community building we do on the site. In this case, I feel that instead of researching or writing about public feminism and equity issues, I am doing them.

## How We Interact with One Another

Maybe, also, we're too focused on how we interact *with other academics*: we've always been focused on interacting with each other, through peer

review and coursework and doctoral supervision and conference papers and scholarly books and academic library catalogues.

We still need to do that. But can we do more, now that we all know how to type and so much of the grunt work of scholarship (paper library catalogues, photocopying journal articles, marching through the stacks, writing notes longhand, doing bibliographies manually, sending stuff through the paper mail ad infinitum)? Maybe we've taken all that new, freed-up time and used it to do more of the same, producing all those scholarly books that presses can't handle and few will read (I'm thinking particularly of the American tenure book and its ilk). Maybe our research intensivity in those ways is already optimized. Can we do something else now?

I'm taking on an evangelist position, I become aware: it seems a rhetorical mode particularly easy to slip into when we talk about technology. But I'm really evangelizing a social practice, a personal and professional practice. The first generation of computers in the humanities altered our existing workflows to create more time (computerized catalogues, PDF journal articles, bibliographic software like EndNote, email). The second, arguably, removes friction points that kept us from communicating with one another—and others—as easily as we can now (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Academia.edu).

We can continue to use our freed-up time to produce more of exactly the same kinds of things we used to before; we can, at the same time, understand social media to be disconnected from our real academic labours (that is, the solitary ones at the keyboard with our novels propped open on our laps and our scribbled-over secondary sources stacked up next to our cold coffee), a kind of keep-in-touch-with-buddies-from-grad-school or find-out-about-conferences or see-the-latest-TOC-from-*Biography* kind of way.

Or we can do something different: we could perform a new kind of scholarship and assess new kinds of excellence. Reframe our research for different audiences. Reach out to scholars in other fields, students at different institutions, NGOs, activist groups, political organizations, cultural organizations, government. Technically, it's easy to do. But we have to think about our work and ourselves—about our roles as scholars—very differently, actually.

So instead of standing at the photocopier for hours on end, flipping pages on bound copies of *Science Fiction Studies* from 1977, I'm writing blog posts about being a professor mom, or writing up conference summaries on another blog, or building a broader network on Twitter than I can hold together offline, or reaching out to media to share my research a new way.

I take seriously the call to be a public intellectual, and if I want my public to be more than six people big I'm going to read and write blogs, send out tweets with links to news articles, and leave comments on those news articles, to boot.

## Conclusion

The fundamental challenge of social media, I think, is that of *publicity*. And with it, of audience, and outreach, and the links between academic work and the rest of the world. Social media can be a corrective—if such we need—to the isolation and insularity of the ivory tower. You know, that old joke about how we're publishing for six people, but they're really influential people? Social media challenge us to push our work further outward, to more people, more audiences.

This forum was organized around the idea of a revolution in practice, but we really haven't "dramatically altered the dynamics of intellectual activity in the humanities," have we? Because we don't actually value what social media makes possible. Social media, ultimately, remove some of the constraints and provide some startling new affordances by which we could, as scholars, profoundly expand both the practices and the results of our scholarship in new ways, if we want to.