Introduction: Face/Book/Net/Work: Social Networking and the Humanities

Michael O'Driscoll, Editor University of Alberta

As I WRITE THIS, MY FACULTY'S EMAIL SERVER has just recovered from a day-long outage that sent my immediate network of colleagues into more than a bit of a tizzy. In the midst of a hectic teaching term, with grant applications and reference letters due, not to mention the usual busyness of academic life, most of us found it pretty hard to cope with even a brief interruption in our lines of communication. For many, the immediate recourse—not surprisingly—was to Facebook, where we could not only commiserate (and commiserate we did!) but could also share important bits of information that would allow us to get on with our day. That almost automatic recourse to Facebook suggests just how ubiquitous social networking technology has become in the academic world, but it also invites speculation about the kind of work that gets done in such spaces, or at least the kind of work that *might* get done in such spaces, to our collective advantage.

Humanities researchers and educators have long recognized the value of social networking: conferences, disciplinary associations, and face-to-face collaborative enterprise of all sorts have given shape to a field of knowledge production and dissemination that relies heavily on forms of exchange that exceed the limited boundaries of the journal article or

monograph. Sociability, furthermore, is recognized as an important counterpoint to the often solitary life of scholarly endeavour. In recent years, digital technologies have made way for a new range of practices (such as blogs, wikis, crowd-sourced review, open access journals, self-archiving, podcasting, remote conferencing, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Academia. edu, LinkedIn, and more localized online research consortiums) that might be seen to have dramatically altered the dynamics of intellectual activity in the humanities. For better or for worse, the social parameters of scholarship have shifted.

Or have they? The following commentators are by no means in agreement on that point. ESC invited five accomplished scholars, from different stages of career and from various disciplinary vantage points, to consider not only the personal and professional benefits and costs of such technological innovations, but also the fundamental principles that inform how humanities scholars interact with each other and to what end. How, we asked, do digital technologies reconfigure the social dimension of academic relationships, and how do traditional practices find their analogues in an online environment? What have we gained, and what might we happily anticipate? What have we lost, and what are we in danger of losing? While there was some agreement that humanities scholarship has always been about social networking, at least one of our contributors maintains a hard line that the social parameters of scholarship have changed not at all under the sway of new technologies, although academics might well benefit from such change. Another contends that, indeed, scholarship has yet to be socialized in a way that new media technologies might dramatically make possible, while a third notes the ways in which incremental, halting shifts are very much underway. Another marks the discrepancy between the real conditions and the ideal promises of digital networking, noting that, in the meantime, there are serious and perhaps damaging matters of academic labour that go unrecognized.

What does become apparent on the reading of these contributions is the fact that we really have yet to fully engage or integrate the potential of social media as a technology of research generation, collaboration, and exchange. Whether that is because of social media's first generation status, because of their generic rather than specific applicability, or because of certain forms of institutional or cultural resistance, are some of the considerations here. But what is also clear is that there is extraordinary

¹ That invitation resulted not only in this forum but also in a fabulous ACCUTE roundtable that can been viewed online at http://vimeo.com/24403809.

potential underfoot: if there is a will, there is also certainly now a way to begin to reimagine the conduct of research and dissemination, as well as the modes of teaching and learning, that we employ. If such considerations invite us to consider the matter of technological determinism alongside theories of how technology might be usefully mobilized, shifting discourse networks also necessarily provoke us to ask fundamental questions about the nature and purpose of humanities scholarship, and the relationship of that scholarly research to the social.

If we begin with Diana Brydon asking how the humanities might be reimagined on a transnational level, beyond their current limitations, we find a very trenchant answer in the concluding piece by Max Haiven that contends that the dynamics of social networking have always been the primary concern of the humanities and that distinctive competence might well push toward "new modes of affinity and possibility." On the way there, Susan Brown invites us to consider revised practices and policies that might successfully enact the "fundamental sociality of scholarship," Aimée Morrison suggests that social media should allow scholars to reach out to other communities, new audiences, and in the process rethink the fundamentals of what scholarly activity might be, and Marc Fortin stresses the potentially transformational, and the problematically transitional, status of digital technologies that open on to a vista of a wholly reconceptualized system of education. As such keen insights emphasize, giving second thought to what might seem the rather trivial acts of posting and poking, tweeting and friending, leads to a whole host of anything but minor concerns. Indeed, it appears to be time for a status update.