Socialized Scholarship: It Starts with Us

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Of social scholarship—admittedly a more specific concept than that of social networking—I would like to say what Mahatma Gandhi allegedly replied when asked what he thought about Western civilization: I think it would be a good idea. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter facilitate modes of digital sociality that, for all the press they are generating, don't really represent a major shift in the way we do scholarship per se.

In the interests of full disclosure, I must admit that my sense that current social networking platforms haven't substantially impacted on modes of scholarship may be because I just don't *get* them. I'm a lousy Facebooker, though I recognize that it works for hordes of folks. Likewise with Twitter I am sporadic, though I find it an effective mode both of circulating scholarly news and of creating a distributed virtual conference in dialogue with the conventional one it annotates. Nevertheless, I think I have some insights to offer into where social scholarship might take us, given that for the last two decades I've been spending most of my time as a scholar working digitally and collaboratively. And collaboration is ineluctably, for better or for worse, social.

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Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and other social networking platforms clearly do a lot for academics, not to mention for millions of other people on the planet. They connect people, allow them to exchange information, broadcast news, and keep up to date. They collapse the globe, countering to some extent the differences between those in more connected academic locations, institutionally and geographically, and those who are more marginal. They are a new medium for a crucial aspect of scholarly life, and, in the words of the organizers' provocation for this exchange on social networking, they offer "an important counterpoint to the often solitary life of scholarly endeavour."

And yet in relationship to scholarship per se, these are first-generation digital activities. Just like the word processor didn't really transform what the typewriter did, but allowed us to do it with less whiteout and more paper consumption, and the Online Public Access Catalogue opened up access to library collections without really troubling ideas of the record, the collection, or the index, these activities are better, stronger, faster versions of their analog precursors. They flow pretty directly from social interactions that we once had through letters, phone calls, newsletters, association journals, conferences, coffee breaks, lunch breaks, drinks at the faculty club or in the beer tent at Congress, and face-to-face encounters in libraries and archives. In many ways, in fact, digital networking compensates for the emptying of our hallways that digital tools have themselves produced by allowing us to do much of what we do from home offices.

My point is not to disparage social networking, some aspects of which have real potential. One is the public-facing nature of some of these new mediums of sociality. The "broadcast yourself" element of one-to-many or many-to-many communication offers the possibility of dissemination and exchange beyond the academy, although we are by and large still talking to ourselves. But I'd still contend that what is involved is more of a scaling up and enhancement than a fundamental change. Scholarship has always already been fundamentally social, and not just in terms of the social networks that have surrounded, aided, and abetted it. Scholarship simply is socially embedded. It has always reflected social currents, concerns, and values. And it has always been a conversation, continuing down through history, and often engaged heatedly with our contemporaries.

I'd like us to imagine what might be involved in a truly social or perhaps "socialized" scholarship that takes on board the radical potential of digital tools. In so doing, we need to avoid technological determinism: we're not waiting for the right tools to come along. Wikipedia effected revolution in the way that knowledge was generated and circulated via the Web not

because the software was innovative. The software was mundane, in many respects archaic, but how it was mobilized by a community nevertheless generated massive change. Our tools are socially embedded and in a dialectical relationship to our practices. Thus while some potential for transforming how we do scholarship with digital tools is evident in embryonic form in Facebooking, tweeting, and the like, some major changes need to take place in scholarly culture and practices for that potential to come to fruition.

For a start, we could go a lot further in leveraging just-in-time modes of communication to engage in new ways within and beyond the academy. What holds us back? We might have learned the limits, theoretically, of mastery and closure, but we still report our scholarly findings very much in the masterful, closed rhetorical forms developed in the heyday of print publication. If you think I'm wrong, try to get most scholars to make a guest contribution to a blog. It's like pulling teeth. (Kudos to blogs like Hook & Eye for not only keeping up a religiously regular publishing schedule but also attracting guest bloggers.) It's not just a matter of busyness, I am convinced, but the fact that we're as a community terrified of the premature circulation of our ideas in recordable form. We report our work in beautifully polished impermeable argumentative shells. I am guilty, myself, of failing to put something out in a blog, when invited to do so with a somewhat polemical paper right after delivering it, because I wanted to take the time to "tidy it up a bit" or in other words make it a bit stronger, smoother, more defensible. In the meantime, its currency deteriorates and the opportunity to extend the moment of scholarly engagement into a broader public conversation has been lost.

The question of how to integrate into scholarly practice new forms of representing work in process is not a trivial one, given not only our changing culture but also the need to represent scholarship in ways that serve the interests of the contested and embattled academic community. It's a huge, multi-dimensional question whose multiple answers will emerge through experimentation in dialogue with changing social and technological conditions.

A relatively modest place to start, though, is to try to harness the potential of the Internet for scholarly sharing at the level of research materials. The Web now hosts many petabytes of information that are great for our work in some ways but lousy in others. One reason they are lousy is because we as scholars have habits of hoarding. The Web contains a fraction of the amount of digital information in existence, which is estimated at around 1.2 zettabytes (a zettabyte is about a million petabytes, a petabyte

is a million gigabytes). As scholars, much of what we could benefit from in our research is on hard drives—our own, but also others'. What if we broke down the distinction between personal and public research archives and worked toward collaborative research spaces?

Imagine if, in working on a new topic, you could draw not just on the published arguments of people who had worked most recently on the material but on their bibliographies, notes, and scans of archival materials. Scholarly generosity certainly exists, and has heretofore operated one-to-one, but what if we broadcast the raw materials of our research, the processes, and the results? What if the public could see the depth of research, detail, and careful consideration that goes into the production of a scholarly argument? To be clear, I'm not suggesting that people share the entire contents of hard drives right down to the cranky notes about a book that they don't like. However, there are lots of components of the research process, such as annotations that identify elusive allusions or quotations, which would contribute to both scholarly and public knowledge, and lots of ways that scholars working on overlapping materials could benefit from the exchange of materials and, indeed, dialogue in the pre-publication stages of their work. Furthermore, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council that funds most scholarship in Canada requires the sharing of such materials. Council policy stipulates that we archive, publicly, all research data collected with SSRHC funds within two years of the completion of a project. As literary scholars, our "data" is the sum of our bibliographies, our notes and annotations, our scans, and we're making poor use of it when it could immensely increase the impact and efficiency of individual scholarly labour, collectively advance knowledge, and raise our public profile.

This is just one small example of how we might rethink, or rather redo, scholarship in a digital environment. However, to move in the direction of more fundamentally social scholarship means huge transformations: it requires shifting individual and collective practices, shifting institutions and infrastructure, revamping systems of credit, evaluation, and reward, and devising a technological and social support system that can sustain a new, truly socialized, environment for scholarship. But the good news is that these are changes that can be effected by us as a community. Let's use social networking as the thin edge of a wedge with which to push for online enactment of the fundamental sociality of scholarship. That would be something worth tweeting about.

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