

Chapter 9

The Hook, Woo, and Spin: Academics Creating Relations on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Academics using social media in the university are now a significant issue as it is being used to influence outcomes of research and teaching. Academics are conducting their scholarly lives on social media in ways that make relations with others, and their university visible. Academics create hooks for others to be interested in the work, woo them with scholarly identity work and ways of being on social media, and spin the stories of their research. In the Academics Who Tweet project the authors focused on how academics used Twitter as a research tool, developed and maintained research networks, and for professional development. This chapter draws on findings from one interview to attend to the multiple ways academics use, think about, and research with social media. This research is significant as it is focused on academics' conceptualizations of social media use and how they think it supports their professional practices.

INTRODUCTION

Social media “provides a platform for scholarly public engagement” (Pearce, 2015, p.1) and is now a significant issue in the academy because of the ways it is being used by academics. “People assume a lot about what others do with social media” (Pearce, 2015, p.2) and this chapter aims to reveal how academics use the platform of Twitter to engage in their work, specifically research. As more academics use social media in a variety of visible and public ways there is a conscious reveal of how use may conflict with social media policies and their place, values and behavioral expectations of the university. In this chapter we focus on a case study of an academic from a wider study of why academics and scholars

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employed within a variety of international universities think that they use Twitter (Lemon, McPherson & Budge, 2015). We discuss findings from a small study of academics using Twitter and draw on ethnographic methodology in order to show that there are many reasons why they participate professionally in this medium. This multitude of reasons conflates simple readings of what role Twitter plays in their connected lives, identity, and their academic agency within the academy.

The narrative data shared throughout the chapter highlights our relationship as academics that also engage with Twitter. We used a snowball selection technique to identify and then invite participants, which thus has meant that they are linked in some way to us as the researchers. As researchers we *see* their tweets and we “know” them by what they tweet. The project set out to “get to know” the academics further to understand their use of Twitter professionally through semi formal interviews where participants *discussed* and shared thoughts, ideas and experience. Our academic colleagues gave us their insights about the ways that they use Twitter, which in turn informs this research and our own practices. Throughout the research process we are thinking about the social practices of academics in order to examine how the notion of being an academic and the ways in which localised discipline repertoires (Trowler et al., 2012) are challenged by the visibility of social academic practice on social media. Influential networks, interconnectivity and visible networks are informing this stance.

We investigate one academic story as a way to “get to know” a practice of using Twitter to understand how this is an important part of their idea of how an academic works in the contemporary university. Grace joined Twitter in mid 2009, which was the time when half of the 34 participants of this study joined the social media platform. She identified herself as a researcher, and her employment in the university is primarily concerned with the training of PhD scholars to understand how to be a researcher. She teaches academic practices. Her story is not discipline based, as her student cohort in the university stretches the entire university. Her twitter profile is atypical with over 20 thousand followers. We choose this interview as its rich textural dialogue spoke to the operations of the university in producing academic ways of being. We can identify themes concurrent in other participant discourses that make visible relations to the university, with others and themselves. With this closer examination of one person’s practice of using Twitter in this study we do not want to centre this practice as a role model rather as a partial account of a way through academic in order to give varied narratives of lives lived in academia.

In this chapter we explore the analysis of the findings that shows that there are a variety of interconnected reasons why academics used Twitter. Our interviewed participants discussed a range of issues and we have themed some of these as: transforming academia; new identities; networks; changing in enacting scholarly work; communication; ways of use; academic identity; branding; engagement and reflective/reflexive practice; inquiry; and (non) strategic. We concentrate on these emerging themes that are transforming ways of being an academic in the current contemporary context. We do this to give a rich textual reading of the data contextualizing this discussion in our connected lives, identity, and academic agency. We argue that Twitter is a powerful connection between networks of academics that adds elements of porosity to academic life. It entangles academic disciplines together in unforeseen ways. For the individual academic, the multiple roles of being and becoming researcher, educator, and academic administrator allowed by Twitter enables a different view of what an academic life is in the contemporary university. We conclude by suggesting that social media plays a role in the university as a space for the influential building of academic networks that enable different kinds of academics to become. The significance of this research is that we investigate the role of Twitter in a small network of academics documenting their views of their experiences rather than quantitatively looking at how they

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