An experiment in form and content, its aim is to be a guide and map of some of the opportunities to develop more open and networked practices while navigating the potential downsides of social media, including perceived loss of privacy and amplification of disadvantage and abuse. It is an excellent and accessible starting point for, as well as route to, a deeper understanding and a more sophisticated use of social media.

—Prof. Shân Wareing, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, London South Bank University

How does social media affect working life in Higher Education? How are universities harnessing its power to aid student learning? This innovative collection brings together academics and those working in professional services to examine these questions and more. The diverse and expert contributors analyse the many ways social media can be used to enhance teaching and learning, research, professional practice, leadership, networking and career development. The impact of social media is evaluated critically, with an eye both to the benefits and the problems of using these new forms of digital communication.

This is the first volume to give such detailed attention to this area of high interest. Its innovative approach extends to its creation, with contributors found via their presence on Twitter. The short and impactful chapters are accessible while retaining an academic focus through their application of relevant learning theories and educational context.

Social Media and Higher Education is essential reading for any professional working in higher education, including lecturers teaching education courses. It is also significant for researchers looking at more recent developments in the field and what it means to work in a modern higher education environment.

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher's website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

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CHRIS ROWELL (ED.)

Social Media in Higher Education

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SOCIAL MEDIA IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Case Studies, Reflections and Analysis

EDITED BY CHRIS ROWELL
Introduction

Communication is highlighted as an essential leadership skill, yet relatively few senior leaders in UK universities seem to make use of an active social media account. While universities have embraced social media and especially Twitter for marketing purposes, university leaders seem to be more nervous about it than leaders in other spheres. This seems at odds with university missions linked to public engagement, knowledge exchange, and thought leadership. Yet perhaps this reluctance reflects a sense that a social media presence can be tricky. As Bonnie Stewart (2017) says “‘the digital’ is increasingly a delivery system for surveillance and spectacle and amplified uncertainty.’ This chapter outlines some of reasons why university leaders might use social media, despite the challenges, and explores some challenges, especially for women.

Use It to Understand the Time Travellers and Body Shifters with Whom We Are Teaching and Working

Many of our colleagues and our students are with us in the 3D world of offices, seminars, lectures, tables and chairs, while also having a life © Julie Hall, CC BY 4.0 https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0162.12
in the 4D of digital space. They are the gamers and the social media residents. Research (Davies S. et al., 2017) indicates that many students are finding it difficult to engage with higher education in the traditional ways which are often taken for granted. 4D identities contrast with their university lives and intersect with race, class, gender and religion. This is potentially a large group in our universities, and I believe we must pay them attention and model some of the practices we are encouraging academics to adopt.

Laurence Scott, in his book *The Four Dimensional Human* (2015), explains how early experiences of the Internet involved the notion of travelling to other worlds through aptly named search engines called Explorer and Safari. This 4th dimension doesn’t sit beside real life; it has become a full part of the lives of many students and colleagues. It is no longer a space travelled to via phone lines. People are in our lecture halls, offices and classrooms and simultaneously, often secretly, via powerful mobile phones on their laps, elsewhere in their 4D spaces. The world has taken on extra dimensions and all aspects of our lives are up for digitisation — a building we notice, a meal we eat, a view from a window, a thought, our alternative personas, new adventures, new perspectives. Many of our students exist in multiple places at once, honing skills of communication, leadership, strategy, and dexterity, but then we trap them in lecture halls and tell them things that they could find out themselves. University leaders must recognise the challenges this brings and aid their universities in understanding the multi-dimensional worlds of many students and colleagues.

The digital world is also one of connectedness and gratification with feedback loops that keep a person hooked. This isn’t about young students as in Prensky’s (2001) ‘digital natives’, and those in leadership roles as older digital tourists. While students are often confident travellers we can’t assume discernment; with unfettered access to everything, it is a challenge to make critical distinctions. Yet familiarity with feedback loops and the associated affirmations of progress or connections mean that work or study can easily feel isolating and alienated when feedback is less forthcoming or less personalised. This can have an effect on motivation and engagement that leaders must take notice of. It is clear that, for many of our students and colleagues, gaming and social media can provide a sense of community, a social
experience of cooperation, motivation, problem-based learning and team work, often at an international level. The contrast with the hyper individualism of work in large institutions such as universities is stark. Ironically, it is the digital world that is providing opportunities for communities of learning, metacognition, self-regulation, and for many of the transferable skills universities and employers cite as critical.

Yet while what it means to be physically present has changed, the pressures of ‘everywhereness’ can produce a sense of absenteeism — despite occupying many places at once and being different people at once, perhaps none of them are fully inhabited. In universities this can take a worrying turn when students or our colleagues are here in the seminar room and there in the digital world at the same time — or more worryingly, they are actually there while only pretending to be here with us in the old confines of 3D. If what Laurence Scott (2015) calls ‘intermittent elsewhereness’ is their reality, is it not a violent — or at the very least an uncomfortable — act to trap them in 3D? Can we offer something more in the HE classroom, perhaps something that harnesses technology and which is co-produced, building on the motivations of online mastery — something which is worth physically coming to university for? For me, this is a question that university leaders must be engage with.

Use It to Raise the Profile of the University Internally and Externally

Many leaders use Twitter as a simple way to broadcast information to their followers. A number of university leaders have Twitter accounts organised by their PR teams, resulting in tweets congratulating students, highlighting good news such as successful research bids, retweeting university messages, and welcoming people back after the holidays. Often associated with corporate photographs, such tweets are a PR vehicle rather than a personal position or comment. Following such accounts can be dull without a sense of the person behind them or an invitation to engage. Such accounts often ignore trending hashtags and fail to follow others back, relying on a one way production of news rather than the dialogue that social media offers.
Yet such accounts can also be helpful in indicating that someone in a senior position has noticed a conference or a student’s achievements. Such posts can become even more powerful with the addition of a personal comment or video clip, communicating a sense of pride or admiration for work conducted. In this sense, the tweets are as much about recognising colleagues as promoting the university. With lack of recognition regularly cited as a reason for leaving an organisation, this can be a good use of social media.

However, for me, too much pre-planned material can be a barrier to collaboration, public engagement, and co-creation. Corporate messages rarely invite participation. To make the most of social media, leaders need to embrace openness and the authentic — even the unpolished — traits that may not be normally espoused by university leaders. Getting the balance right can be a challenge, especially with followers connected in the past because of a shared research interest, which a new leadership role might allow little time for. While being wary of the kind of Twitter storms created by the current American president’s regular tweets, I would like to see more university leaders going beyond the corporate and engaging with university policy changes and debates through social media. While requiring extreme care, this can be achieved by linking a post to a hashtag and thereby connecting it with something beyond the university, and also by carefully retweeting and replying to others who have tweeted on a similar issue.

Use it to Connect — to Build Relationships and a Personal Profile

For university leaders, an effective social media presence can build networks of external and internal relationships. It can play a critical role in the public engagement or civic mission of the University. When used sensitively it can align a leader with particular campaigns. In 2016, President Dr Santa Ono at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver chose to share his own experience of attempted suicide with his 70,000 Twitter followers, garnering much praise for his honesty. This kind of use offers an insight into the ethical stance of a leader and may or may not accord with the stance of the University. Bonnie Stewart (2016) describes such disclosures as ‘the political act of putting
their face and voice behind an issue — important and strategic forms of awareness-raising.’ Like Stewart, I believe this is good for higher education because in sharing our vulnerability we challenge stigma and align ourselves authentically to the things we care about. However, particularly as a woman, it can sometimes be a challenge to provide a glimpse into the causes that inspire, upset, and anger me, my authentic self, while maintaining a responsible leadership profile that represents the university. A leader has a responsibility for the strategic direction, mission, and values of the university; but may also have been appointed because of a commitment to a particular stance on university education or a research background in a particular area. Representing a particular stance in social media can be a way of making leadership values visible, and encouraging commitment and support across a university.

It is not difficult to point to leaders who do not understand their duty to communicate in a way that recognizes the gravity of their words and the positions they take on world events. This isn’t an issue linked to the use of new technology, it is about inappropriate communication and, occasionally, the abuse of power. A leader needs to be trusted, and a social media presence, perhaps particularly for a woman who may be in a minority, must demonstrate awareness of power relations and the public nature of the role. Consequently, some kinds of public dialogue may have to be curtailed.

While authenticity is praised as a leadership trait, the inherent risks of engaging so publicly can create reluctance, uncertainty, and unease. Social media fractures the more traditional vertical communication in organizations and opens up channels for spontaneous dialogue across management levels. It can therefore cut across established power dynamics and traditional lines of communication. In contrast with traditional leadership communication, leaders are unable to control a message once it enters the social media system. Yet just because the platform is digital, we can’t assume that we are creating a commons — a healthy democratic, decent social space. Twitter, for example, can also accentuate the worst examples of leadership: pronouncements rather than listening, manipulating the visible, garnering acknowledgements in particular spaces. Yet perhaps as a leader we can also model our best intentions — encouraging collaboration, cooperation, creating challenge and engagement, and valuing others.
We must understand how a message might go viral and even how it might be adapted and re-created. This has been described as ‘distribution competence’ — the ability to influence the way messages move through complex organisations. It is arguably as important as the skill of creating compelling content. When the higher education context changes so rapidly and our students’ experiences can be shared, debated, and criticised within a few seconds through media channels, social media literacy can be a critical skill for leadership.

Roland Deiser and Sylvain Newton (2013) argue that ‘the dynamics of social media amplify the need for qualities that have long been a staple of effective leadership, such as strategic creativity, authentic communication, and the ability to deal with an organization’s social and political dynamics and to design an agile and responsive organization’. The ultimate challenge as a university leader is to balance openness with responsibility: to embrace the opportunity of sharing stories, achievements, and opinions simultaneously with the organization, the public, family, friends, and stakeholders around the world — all while being responsible for the university’s standards of integrity. This results in an internal dialogue about the professional and personal. As a female leader, I am keenly aware of the kinds of criticisms we can receive for being outspoken, not so that we temper our presence, but so that we consider any unintended consequences and are prepared, as many female politicians have had to be, for backlash or even attack. Women are particularly vulnerable to attacks from those who imagine we should have a carefully defined role. As Sarah Ahmed (2015) warns, ‘When you slip out of what or who you are supposed to be, you slip into trouble’.

For me, social media and Twitter in particular, is a valuable filtered feed of information and news, when the role requires fast decisions and up-to-date news and opinion. Choosing who to follow on Twitter, for example, can result in a complex daily picture of pressing issues, campaigns, opinions, news and good practice which can be shared with others very quickly. In such a responsible role, the provenance of such information is important before retweeting or commenting. In taking a responsible approach we take a proactive role in raising the social media literacy of the organisation.
As a leader I am committed to encouraging academic colleagues to use Twitter and other social media to connect and share their work and ideas. Wider conversations and connections develop and new audiences for research and teaching are located or even created. Interdisciplinarity abounds across social media, and some this can lead to the kind of impact measures universities encourage — requests for collaborative research, invited keynotes, opportunities to bid for grants. What counts online, however, goes beyond research metrics and institutional status; it is the capacity to contribute to the conversation and this is incredibly liberating whether we are university leaders, students, or in the early stages of academic careers.

References


