

7-14-2016

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Recommended Citation

Walker, Leila, "Beyond Academic Twitter: Social Media and the Evolution of Scholarly Publication" (2016). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc_pubs/319

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Hybrid Pedagogy

Beyond Academic Twitter: Social Media and the Evolution of Scholarly Publication



Published on July 14, 2016 / Written by [Leila Walker](#) / Reviewed by Daniel Lynds and Kathryn Wright / “[Conversation](#)” by Annabelle Shemer; CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 / 1

The Scholarly and the Digital

This article is part of a series addressing the issue of scholarly and academic recognition of digital work. The goal is to investigate how digital work is regarded and produced in today’s academy. The discussion is ongoing — see [all articles in this series](#) or [the original call for papers that prompted them](#) and consider [adding your voice](#) to the conversation.

“What should academics do on Twitter?”

At a recent roundtable workshop on developing a professional academic digital identity, I heard the first four speakers address that question which I have heard so many times before. I listened to these speakers describe how faculty at St. Lawrence University can use Twitter, Facebook, and personal blogs to create an academic “brand” and bring attention to their own scholarship. Overwhelmingly,

my colleagues emphasized what kind of content academics should put on the Internet and what kind of character academics should cultivate, as if an online presence is a performance that we put on for a passive audience and all we want in return is a good review.

My colleagues are not unusual in approaching academic Twitter as another skill to be mastered with a set of rules not unlike the rules we establish for productive conversation in our classroom — see, for example, Katrina Gulliver’s “[10 Commandments of Twitter for Academics](#).” Even Dorothy Kim’s substantial analysis of the informal ethics of the tweeting public is framed as “[The Rules of Twitter](#).” And I should hasten to add that my colleagues’ advice, particularly Stephen Barnard’s [tips for professional networking in the digital age](#), provides a pretty decent set of guidelines for academics just dipping their toes into the world of digital communication.

But these how-to guides miss a deeper opportunity to discuss how digital media, including Twitter, has opened up new methods for researching, creating, reviewing, publishing, and disseminating scholarship. Ten years after Twitter’s launch, we need to stop asking what academics should do on Twitter and start asking what Twitter has done to academics.

For most of us, the academic standard remains the scholarly monograph or peer-reviewed article, but what that looks like — and how we get there — is changing as new possibilities and new forms become available. What these forms all have in common is an orientation toward *open, public scholarship* that *creates dialogue* and emphasizes the *ongoing process* of scholarly production.

Let’s start with Twitter, by now the most familiar site of academic microblogging. On a day-to-day basis, I (and many like me) use Twitter or blogs to communicate with other scholars, ask research questions, keep up-to-date with others’ scholarship as it unfolds, float new avenues of thought or new ideas for research projects, promote new work, and get feedback on new ideas. And talk a lot about [running](#). And [cats](#). And [Beyoncé](#). In essence, what we’re (mostly) doing is producing *open, public scholarship* in or beyond our areas of expertise, and we’re *creating dialogue* in Twitter conversations or blog comments. We are publicly generating, reviewing, and revising the raw stuff of academic work. And it’s affecting how we publish. On an individual level, it means that more and more articles develop through multiple forms before finally culminating in an academic article: Tressie McMillan Cottom’s [recent publication in *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media & Technology*, for example](#), “began with a discussion on Twitter, transitioned to [a blog post](#), morphed into an empirical question in comment sections and finally became what it is presently, i.e. a paper about academic capitalism + attention economies + structural marginality.” On an institutional level, it means that more and more publishing platforms are absorbing the dialogic process of scholarly creation — those transitional forms that invite casual intervention and interjection on social media — into the published product itself.

An increasing number of respected journals are using online platforms to expand the boundaries of academic scholarship, not only by incorporating multimedia elements that would be unavailable to print publications, but also by restructuring the ways in which authors and readers engage with scholarship. These journals are too numerous to list at length, but a small sample should illustrate my point here: Take, for instance, [Medicine Anthropology Theory](#), the digital continuation of the print publication [Medische Anthropologie](#), which foregrounds the work of non-American scholars and aims to engage a broader community — particularly “applied” anthropologists, who often work on public health issues in the Global South — in “[theoretical and political debates](#).” Or take [The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship](#), which published its first born-digital article in 2011 and promoted “[peer-](#)

[reviewed academic blogging](#)” for two years before transitioning to a more traditional (but still born-digital) journal format in 2013. And of course digital humanities scholarship tends to be published in digital journals such as [Digital Humanities Quarterly](#) and [The Journal of Interactive Technology and Pedagogy](#) (full disclosure: I am a peer reviewer at *DHQ* and was a founding member and managing editor at *JITP*). I am particularly excited for the imminent launch of two new journals, [Art History Pedagogy & Practice](#) and [Thresholds](#), both of which promise to make use of the unique opportunities afforded by online publishing to expand the possibilities of academic scholarship.

These journals vary widely in subject and, to a lesser extent, structure. But they share several distinguishing characteristics that have come to define the genre of digital publishing almost as much as its medium. They are often composed of a blend of traditional scholarly articles, short-form blog posts, and practical advice, sometimes separated into distinct content areas and sometimes all in one place. They tend to be interdisciplinary or to cross disciplinary boundaries, opening up the field of inquiry beyond its traditional confines. They are all *open access journals* that are widely available to people without access to library subscriptions, broadening their readership beyond the gates of academia to welcome interested lay-people, independent scholars, and the general public. Every article published in these journals can be readily shared on social media to *generate conversation* (and all but *DHQ* include a “share” button on all content to encourage this practice). And although all of these journals are peer-reviewed, the addition of real-time comments on the sites and in social media has created a new form of *post-publication peer review*.

The post-publication review facilitated by these journals is informal, and in many cases likely an accidental byproduct of using blogging platforms for journal creation. (A counterexample, [Romantic Circles](#), which does not allow comments except in its relatively new blog, was originally created in 1996 in hand-coded HTML; the vestigial remains of its earlier form, largely retained in its 2011 revamp, demonstrate how significantly the growth of platforms like WordPress and Twitter has shifted our expectations of digital publishing.) But increasingly, experimental digital publications and publication platforms are being developed to formalize the public, post-publication peer review structure in the creation of digital edited collections. [Digital Pedagogy in the Humanities](#), for example, posts contributions to its “curated collection of reusable and remixable pedagogical artifacts” as they are submitted; the community is then invited to publicly comment on the text itself, at the paragraph level, on the author’s clarity, selection and presentation of artifacts, and applicability of the contribution. The comments are retained with the final text at the end of the review period, when comments are closed. (An advisory board contributes to and gives additional weight to this public peer review.) Similarly, [Debates in the Digital Humanities](#) invites readers to double as reviewers, marking up the text as they go. While there are drawbacks to public peer review — the format tends to privilege short, granular responses rather than the thorough, thoughtful, and holistic approach we aim for in traditional peer review — the process allows input from a broader range of perspectives, and the publish-before-peer-review model gets scholarship out in the world and generating conversation right away. In this sense, it allows scholars to be more responsive to changes in the field as they arise.

The real-time responsiveness of digital publication that facilitates a tendency toward public peer-review, whether formal or informal, similarly facilitates a tendency toward *iterative production*: new editions are easier to produce so scholarship in rapidly advancing fields (like the digital humanities) can stay up-to-date. In 2013, [Debates in the Digital Humanities](#) moved “from a single printed edition of collected essays to an expanded, ongoing digital publication stream that the Press plans to draw upon to publish both future editions of collection and other publications on more focused DH topics.” Although there are distinct first and second editions of the print text, the digital text evolves

through more fluid iterations. This iterative approach, as Steven E. Jones noted in [The Emergence of the Digital Humanities](#), allows for the development of scholarly texts “as more or less collaborative objects, and more or less fluid works-in-progress, with publication conceived of as more a process than a product.” A new academic press, [Manifold Scholarship](#), an imprint of the University of Minnesota Press, is currently in development, with the aim of producing a platform for “iterative, networked monographs.” While this model adds to concerns for the “[long-term preservation of digital monographs](#),” it also offers the potential to archive something often lost in the preservation of standard scholarly monographs: the interaction and engagement of reader and author over time.

Most of us will never produce digital scholarship as ambitious as an iterative monograph or a [digital scholarly edition](#). But for the rest of us, what’s exciting about these new forms of publication is that they are changing what it means to be involved in academia. They make the labor and practice of academic scholarship visible, understandable, and approachable to early career scholars and to the public. (Just imagine if we could all see our academic heroes struggle through peer review — our own reader reports might be less intimidating.) As Kathleen Fitzpatrick noted in the acknowledgments to [Planned Obsolescence](#) (which went through public peer review on [CommentPress](#)), collaboration in the digital humanities has come to extend “beyond coauthorship to include a host of reading, reviewing, and project-development practices.” I would argue that emerging forms of publication, including the informal pre-publication conversations happening on social media, have advanced scholarly collaboration beyond the borders of the digital humanities. These new forms of publication create opportunities for us to participate collaboratively *beyond* authorship as we engage in open, public dialogue that contributes to the ongoing process of scholarly production — through and beyond publication.

The movement of scholarly conversations beyond the traditional confines of private peer review on the one hand and polished public response on the other has the potential to radically transform how we evaluate scholarship and scholarly impact, and [many valuable guidelines have already begun](#) to define expertise and develop rubrics for evaluating digital scholarship. These guidelines, like the work they were developed to assess, have iterated; they have generated responses and remixes and public conversations and peer-reviewed scholarship. The guidelines themselves indicate the continued importance of rigorous standards for expertise as academic publishing and scholarship evolves. But the process through which they are being generated and revised indicates what’s at stake: these public discussions allow us to consider *what we value* in evaluative frameworks, and question, [as one of the peer reviewers of this article did](#), what might be lost as those frameworks change. Public peer review, as [Renee McGarry](#) and [the editors of Hybrid Pedagogy](#) have argued, can be used to reframe the goals of the review in terms of pedagogy rather than gatekeeping, as reviewers contribute to the development of the article at hand while modeling standards for the genre of the peer review itself. These public reviews, and public conversations *about* reviews, provide guidelines not only for what constitutes valuable scholarly publication, but what constitutes valuable participation in scholarship *beyond* publication.

As we work to ensure that public scholarship doesn’t mean the end of expertise, we must confront what Bethany Nowviskie calls “[the ends of expertise](#)” — that is, “its purpose, its goal, its ethic.” So maybe we *should* be asking, “What should academics do on Twitter?” But we need to modify the question, give it purpose. Let me ask you instead, “What should academics do on Twitter *in order to...*?” How we end that question, and answer it, tells us not only what we expect of ourselves as academics, but what we expect of our scholarly communities.

We are still developing these standards and expectations for how — and why — academics generate public scholarship and engage in collaborative participation. But the importance of *community* in this process is evident in the rise of scholarly hubs known as Commons, which are increasingly taking the place of academia.edu (without the infowall). The best-known of these is the [MLA Commons](#), which builds on the MLA membership base to create digital communities. Offering discussion groups on a variety of topics, hosting websites created by members, and providing repositories for open-access scholarship, the MLA Commons is both a social media site for academics and a resource for finding and disseminating recent scholarship. Other disciplines will soon have access to similar communities: the [Digital Archaeology Commons](#) is in development, and the MLA was recently awarded a \$225,000 Mellon grant to expand its interdisciplinary reach with the [Humanities Commons](#). These sites might not be “Twitter for academics,” but they are premised on the idea that social, participatory media have fundamentally altered our needs and expectations for academic collaboration and publication.

Digital platforms, from Twitter and personal blogs to e-journals and iterative monographs, are creating new ways to publish and new publishing opportunities. In this new model of academic publishing, Twitter interactions exist on the same spectrum of activity as peer-review and scholarly editing. But more importantly, new models for scholarly publication are creating new ways to engage in public scholarship beyond traditional publication, fundamentally blurring the boundaries between publication, conversation, and community.