

# Media Studies and the Pitfalls of Publicity

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## Abstract

For many academics, using social media has both drawbacks and advantages. Social media may allow connection with colleagues, scholarly promotion, and public engagement, and may also open researchers up to criticism and even possible harassment. This essay argues that we must think critically about logics of self-branding and attention-seeking given these two sides of the coin of social media publicity. First, publicity can easily be weaponized against scholars engaging in projects that may be socially or politically controversial by individuals or organizations who disagree with their premises. Universities are often unprepared to deal with this negative publicity and fail to protect researchers from the consequence. Second, self-branding may undermine one's ability to be viewed as a serious scholar and requires rigorous self-censorship, particularly for those far from the white, male ideal of the professoriate. I conclude with some recommendations for academic social media use at different career stages.

## Keywords

networked harassment, social media, publicity, self-branding, micro-celebrity, media studies

## Introduction

For many academics, using social media is a double, perhaps triple, edged sword. Many of us take to social media—particularly Twitter—to connect with potential colleagues, learn about works in progress, and promote our scholarship. Facebook, which feels safer and more private than Twitter, can be a good resource for advice or informal support. I'm in several Facebook groups, two for academic parents (one has 2,500

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members and the other 17,000), a fantastic writing support group, and a few quiet groups associated with professional organizations. But Twitter has been my bread-and-butter since I joined twelve years ago. I wrote my first book and my most-cited paper about Twitter; I've turned strangers into acquaintances and acquaintances into friends after reading years of their tweets. Nowadays Twitter is full of horrible news, "hot takes" about complicated subjects, and constant cycles of outrage. But I can't deny it's been good for my career.

In a profession where metrics such as citation counts and journal impact factors are often used as stand-ins for quality, other metrics, such as the ability to attract attention, can be a considerable advantage. The star system of academia, in which a rarified few receive a disproportionate share of attention while many deserving others toil in precarity (Shumway 1997), is reinforced by the neoliberal logics of social media which facilitate the creation of micro-celebrities in every niche and subculture. Social media is also an ideal space in which to seek publicity, whether to engage in public scholarship and potentially increase the impact of one's research, or simply to establish significance, with the goal of high-status signifiers such as press attention and keynote invitations. However, as sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom (2015) writes, seeking attention for attention's sake emphasizes "brand building as opposed to consciousness-raising; brand awareness as opposed to co-creation of knowledge." It also often engenders suspicion in one's colleagues, as there's a sense that time spent talking to reporters and prepping TED talks is time that's not spent doing difficult, mentally taxing research. (Duke and NYU Press aren't giving out book contracts to every PhD with 10,000 followers on Twitter.)

On the contrary, for more than a decade, digital humanities scholars have fought to have unconventional digital projects such as blogs, open-source software development, archives, podcasts, or open-access journals recognized as forms of scholarship (Fitzpatrick 2011). This effort has been only partially successful. Even universities which explicitly include "public scholarship" in their tenure and promotion guidelines still emphasize traditional forms of scholarship over public impact, or even over publicly accessible scholarship, such as open-access books or journal articles (Alperin et al. 2018). However, the value of this scholarship is undeniable. Our Twitter accounts, YouTube videos, or free, publicly available white papers may reach far more people, and have much more impact, than any type of scholarly output, no matter how rigorous (Stein and Daniels 2017). This is especially true when some of our best work is siloed in chapters in books that cost upward of a hundred dollars or journals that charge thirty-five dollars for a single article, which are inaccessible to anyone outside the academy and many inside it as well. (The exorbitant rates for journal subscriptions have led even enormous research institutions like the University of California to end their agreements with publishers like Elsevier, and this trend is likely to continue.) Still, the ability to translate aforementioned difficult, mentally taxing research into easily digestible soundbites, tweets, or simply editorials is by no means universal. Ideally, social media offers a way to bring academic ideas to people with the ability to translate them into impact such as policymakers, activists, and technologists. But ideals often fall short.

As logics of self-branding and attention-seeking continue to trickle down the academic job ladder, there are two significant implications for media studies. First, publicity can easily be weaponized against anyone engaging in what we call “risky research” (Marwick et al. 2016). A project on the alt-right, or climate change, or trans issues, or critical race theory, can easily be removed from its disciplinary context and held up for ridicule or harassment by individuals or organizations who disagree with its premises. Universities are often unprepared to deal with such negative publicity and fail to protect researchers, especially graduate students and junior faculty, from these kinds of attacks.

Second, although many junior scholars are advised to engage in self-branding given the uncertainties of the job market, this can undermine one’s ability to be viewed as a serious scholar. It may also require rigorous self-censorship in order to uphold an acceptable academic persona. This is especially true the further one falls from the white, male ideal of the professoriate. Publicity has upsides, but it also has significant risks—and these risks are unequally distributed.

## Risky Research

While most academics go into research with the desire to make concrete changes—increasing representation of historically marginalized populations, say, or pressuring news agencies to stop covering “both sides” of climate change—this requires putting your work in front of a much larger audience than your dissertation advisor and tenure committee, thus opening you up to criticism. And while most researchers welcome reasoned critique, this is quite different from the systematic use of weaponized publicity to shut down specific viewpoints and voices (Citron 2014; Jane 2014; Sobieraj 2018). Unfortunately, public harassment of academics has become increasingly common, and few universities are equipped to handle it.

Networked harassment is a technique used by groups across the political spectrum in which coordinated attacks against individuals are amplified through social media (Marwick and Caplan 2018). However, networked harassment of academics is particularly encouraged by a number of watchdog groups who have taken up the idea that universities discriminate against conservative students or spread radical liberal beliefs (Ferber 2018). Conservative groups maintain websites listing the names of professors they believe are too liberal, such as Professor Watch and Rate My Racist Professor (the latter focuses on racial discrimination against white people). Groups like Film Your Marxist Professor encourage students to film lectures using their mobile phones and post them online for critique. The wildly popular conservative University of Toronto professor Jordan Peterson has called for students to target “Marxist” classes in gender studies, ethnic studies, sociology, anthropology, English literature and education, labeling them “indoctrination cults” (CBC Radio 2017). Professors who fall afoul of such sites are often subjected to networked harassment on social media, in which organized groups bombard them with abuse and threats. In other cases, academics may come under fire for the topic of their research, such as the alt-right (Massanari 2018) or representation in video games (Chess and Shaw 2015). Regardless, across disciplines and professions, the targets of networked harassment are disproportionately women (Chen et al. 2018; Madden et al. 2018; Sobieraj 2018).

The effects of harassment are myriad. People who experience harassment may experience depression, anxiety, emotional distress, suicidal ideation, self-harm, stress, and increased fear (Hill and Johnson 2019; Veletsianos et al. 2018). Others have lost their jobs, social or economic status, personal relationships, and professional opportunities due to harassment (Sobieraj 2018). But the primary impact of online harassment is exactly what is intended by its perpetrators: to decrease the target's participation in the public sphere. Just as street harassment serves to discourage women's use of public space (Gardner 1995), fear of networked harassment may have a chilling effect that is threefold: discouraging vulnerable scholars from engaging in public scholarship; dissuading scholars from pursuing certain research topics; and diminishing the ability of individual scholars to conduct important work.

Given that this problem is systemic across the academy, colleges and universities need to institute policies to support faculty who experience targeted harassment. Unfortunately, in many cases, university responses are disorganized, or focus on protecting the institution from legal action, rather than strongly supporting the scholar. In some cases, the victim is blamed for inciting harassment or talking publicly in the first place (Ferber 2018). This is especially problematic if the person experiencing harassment is a student, adjunct, or non-tenured employee. Administrators must proactively plan for such incidents rather than scrambling to address them as they occur. In an ideal situation, universities would appoint a point person with a deep knowledge of online harassment to serve as a resource for faculty and students. While the risks of harassment are small, they are very real, and their impact must be acknowledged.

## The Visibility Trap

Self-branding, deliberately creating and managing one's public identity and self-presentation to further strategic goals, is an omnipresent, if somewhat threadbare, element of modern career advice (Marwick 2013a). The idea underpinning self-branding is that a strong and consistent image helps a candidate stand out in a crowded marketplace. In academia, where scholars operate as independent entities whose careers are somewhat separate from their institutional affiliation, opportunities like jobs, talks, and workshop invitations are often extended through professional networks. In addition to conferences and associations, social media is a primary place where academic connections are made and reinforced. Informal bantering on Twitter, chats on Discord, or advice-seeking on the Academic Mamas Facebook group can build connections and friendship, support networks, and collaborations. While I think self-branding is generally a bunch of hooey which encourages people to see themselves as products and encourages surface over substance, I also believe that a strong social media presence can help build social capital, which impacts everything from job market success to citation metrics. (Of course, reputation is not wrought by Twitter alone; being awesome at Instagram does not outweigh a weak publication record or dismal teaching evaluations.)

But what is a "strong social media presence"? If your account is completely banal—retweeting CFPs, job advertisements, or new article announcements—it will, quite

frankly, probably be boring and nobody will follow it. The delicate balance of being “good at social media” without falling afoul of professional norms is extremely tricky. Even I, a deeply privileged scholar of media who partially built her reputation on social media, have to check myself to make sure I don’t sound too frivolous when I’m tweeting about Beyoncé, makeup, RuPaul’s Drag Race, or one of my other myriad pop culture obsessions. (The fact that few people bat an eye at even extensive online chat about sports and political trivia may be, shall we say, lightly gendered.) Generally, social media rewards self-presentation that comes off as “authentic” rather than that which seems heavily managed or edited. A successful practitioner must alternate between overt self-promotion and glimpses of intimacy, humor, or honesty. The most successful do this very intentionally.

As many fine scholars of micro-celebrity have shown, even “authentic” content shared online is itself a performance and successful online celebrities and influencers must be very careful not to reveal anything that punctures their public image (Abidin 2017; Duffy 2017; García-Rapp 2017; Marwick 2013b). For example, Florencia García-Rapp studied YouTube beauty guru BubzBeauty. She found that Bubz had to successfully navigate the professional world of online influence, courting sponsorships, reviewing products, and purposefully building an audience while simultaneously building affective relationships and fostering a sense of closeness with her followers, which requires honesty and self-disclosure (García-Rapp 2017, 121). The norms of her fan community denounced overt commercialization, so Bubz had to emphasize participating for the *right* reasons (passion, inspiration, and sharing) while concealing overtly commercial practice (sponsorship or gifting). Adhering to norms of authenticity thus functioned as an ethical check which ensured that gurus performed a trustworthy editorial function rather than simply promoting every product they were paid for. Similarly, Crystal Abidin distinguishes between “anchor content” and “filler content” created by influencers; the latter is often carefully calibrated to seem amateur and off-the-cuff although it may be just as professionally produced as the core content that is key to an influencer’s brand (Abidin 2017). What this scholarship shows is that one cannot simply be authentic online. One must perform an authenticity which fits within the norms of your community, which may require you to tamp down *any* self-expression that comes off as less than “professional.”

## Conclusion

The public engagement of academics contributes to greater dissemination of knowledge and a robust public sphere and can have great professional advantages (Stein and Daniels 2017). However, the downsides of public scholarship are important to acknowledge. Simply communicating on social media can be a minefield. Generally, academic norms privilege upper-middle-class self-presentation, scholarly language, and research skills. However, the norms of the profession may differ from the norms of the discipline, which may be subtly different from the norms of your department, and certainly the norms of your subfield. Navigating all of these is by no means easy. And the further these norms are from your community of origin, the more difficult

they are to traverse. The difficulties that, say, feminist scholars, scholars from low-income backgrounds, or scholars of color face throughout the academy are well-chronicled. But social media makes code-switching very difficult as large sites like Twitter and Facebook collapse multiple social contexts into one. For instance, an African American faculty member who engages with the humor and activism ubiquitous on Black Twitter may use language or imagery on social media that resonates with their own life experience but is alien to their white coworkers or university administration. They may also be more vulnerable when engaging in larger-scale public scholarship; as Tressie McMillan Cottom (2015) writes, claims to knowledge or expertise coming from women of color often meet heavy resistance.

As a result, scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds may feel that they have to heavily self-censor online in order to be palatable to a professional audience, or to avoid harassment, thus infringing on the possibility of “authentic” public engagement. This is especially true for young scholars who may worry that a lively social media presence will put off a more conservative search committee or lead to possible retaliation, a legitimate worry given several high-profile incidents in which professors were disciplined or job offers rescinded for fiery remarks about the NRA, Israel, or the Republican Party (Jadon and LoMonte 2018). This visibility trap, in which a strong push to communicate publicly exists alongside the equally strong possibilities of backlash, harassment, and negative effects, is deeply acute for people of color, women, queer folks, and other vulnerable populations (Duffy and Hund 2019). A blanket exhortation to engage in public scholarship or even social media engagement without acknowledging this unequal distribution of risk is, frankly, irresponsible.

(There are, of course, numerous reasons why faculty may eschew use of social media. But for those who do not, please see the supplementary material available online for social media engagement tips.)

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