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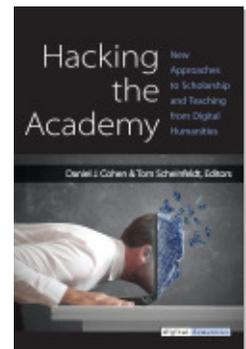
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Uninvited Guests

TWITTER AT INVITATION-ONLY EVENTS

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Invitation-only gatherings are often designed as specific interventions in a certain scene or subdiscipline, and therefore a lot of care goes into identifying and recruiting participants who are either positioned to make a desired intellectual contribution to the immediate proceedings, or to synthesize and take the work of a group forward after the lights go out in the auditorium. Other events are imagined as learning experiences or sites for advanced training, and participants may be identified—and excluded—based on level of need, or on the relative merit of their applications to attend.

Organizers know—and generally regret—that pragmatic concerns and financial constraints result in the exclusion of a multitude of interesting people and perspectives. Closed events are not crafted with the goal of keeping "the wrong people" out, but of bringing enough—or, more accurately, a manageable number—of the right people in. These things need to be worth the investments they require, both of funds—often quite scarce for humanities undertakings—and other "costs of opportunity," including the work the organizing group is therefore not engaged in, and the invaluable time and energy of all participants.

But goal-oriented, laser-like focus and a predetermined guest list naturally put an event in danger of over-determined—predictable, excessively conservative, even tedious—conversations and outcomes. This is a risk of which good organizers are conscious, and against which they press. The most common way to work within attendance constraints and still leave a crack in the door is to think of invited participants as ambassadors of certain communities. Many symposium attendees will adopt a representative stance even without being asked to, as soon as they realize that they are the only—whatever: literary theorist/material-culture expert/digital historian/etc.—in the room. And some moderators will make desired personae

explicit. (I use that word deliberately, because this kind of representation is necessarily masquerade, and no one seriously thinks it compensates for absence—however, ritual and performative aspects of academic interaction are often particularly highlighted at smallish events.)

At the same time, there's room elsewhere to ramble, and ways to include a broader set of voices. Traditional professional-society meetings are rarely closed, but typically finance "openness" through membership and conference fees and—often—by sacrificing the degree of attention to product and coherence that can be paid at a smaller, more carefully crafted gathering. Or you could build your own conference, on the fly. In our *DIY U*, Edupunk era, we're experiencing an explosion of "unconferences." The premier model in the humanities is THATCamp (The Humanities and Technology Camp), which originated at the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. This is a do-it-yourself digital humanities conference, at which a hat is passed for donations, only the loosest practicable vetting of attendees is done, and participants collaboratively set the discussion and demonstration agenda at an opening session and "vote with their feet" thereafter; that is to say, they take continual responsibility for their own conference experience by freely floating—at any point—to other scheduled sessions or spontaneously creating new sessions that strike them as more useful. (Some of my most productive and stimulating professional experiences of the past few years have taken place at unconferences.) Many events are now streaming passive audio and video live, and experimenting with venues like Second Life as substitutes for the expense of physical presence and embodied interaction. In the past year, I have even unexpectedly "attended" an event or two that combined live streaming with the DIY sensibility, when a local participant realized the proceedings would be of interest to a larger group, called out, "Anybody mind if I broadcast this?," and set up a spontaneous Ustream.

And then there's the pervasiveness of Twitter. The litany of invitation-only gatherings in my second paragraph had associated Twitter hashtags, which are themselves a public invitation to aggregate perspectives and join in conversation. A hashtag is a small piece of metadata, agreed upon by Twitter users informally—by virtue of collective use—as an appropriate marker for a particular concept or moment. Some hashtags are jokes, some are prayer beads, some are signifiers for emerging perspectives and nascent online communities (see #alt-ac, the hashtag for discussions of alternative academic careers), and some mark Twitter messages as relevant to the

discussion at a conference or other event.[1] Twitter has played an important and occasionally transformative role at every academic gathering I have attended since early 2008. It has provided useful—and sometimes surprising—demonstrations, for conference and meeting participants, of the engagement of broad and underrepresented communities with issues under debate. It has brought divergent perspectives helpfully into play, sharpening discussion, and leading to proposals with broader reach and impact. In a time of dwindling travel budgets, it has allowed key, already well-networked community members to participate in meetings from afar, with little technical overhead and less disruption to their working lives than formal, virtual participation would require through an interface like Second Life.

Twitter also allows invited conference goers to spread a wealth of ideas being voiced behind closed doors. These ideas are shared with established but evolving networks, which—at the conferences I attend, but each one is different—largely consist of students and colleagues in higher education, and in the worlds of academic publishing; libraries; museums and archives; information technology; and humanities centers, labs, and institutes. I have seen Twitter use at academic conferences promote valuable exchange among university and K–12 educators, and contribute to and demonstrate value in the public humanities in an immediate and tangible way. If Twitter itself—as commonly used by academics—operates as a gift economy, then conference hashtags are little beacons of that generosity.

But it's not all sunny in closed-conference-open-Twitter land.

There are two conflicting tensions, which are commonly expressed by both sets of my interlocutors—sometimes even simultaneously—in online and face-to-face communications during private conferences. The voice from Twitter cries: "Elitism! Hypocrisy! How can you be discussing—pick your poison: the public humanities, the future of scholarly communication, the changing nature of the disciplines—in a cloister? Who are these privileged few? And why weren't we all invited to attend?" To be fair: in my experience, messages of thanks to those who have tweeted, for broadcasting the ideas of the gathering to a wider audience, far outweigh any complaints—but a strident complaint or two, often from colleagues from sadly under-funded institutions, is invariably present. It is to the complaining Twitterati that I have addressed my long preamble on the aims and necessary limitations of smaller gatherings. Sorry, guys—really. It's usually about the money and the focus, but sometimes it's even because they couldn't manage to book a larger room.

And of course my lengthy disquisition on Twitter was meant to level the playing field for those senior colleagues—yes, this divide is largely generational—who have not engaged with Twitter, and who have indicated to me how troubling they find its use in academic settings. For it is the anti-Twitter reproach from within the conference room that I most want to address.

I suspect conference followers and participants on Twitter—whose presence Margaret Atwood likens to "having fairies at the bottom of your garden"—have no idea how magically disruptive they are. If they sense it, they may still be surprised at the character of that disruption. Several times now, I have heard the technology the Twitter community embraces and explicitly figures as democratizing and personalizing described in terms of alienation, invasion, and exclusion. These face-to-face conversations about Twitter are so fraught that delicacy cannot accord with 140-character limitations, and therefore they do not make it into the online record. Sometimes, indeed, they only come in a private, kindly meant word over drinks, or in shared taxicabs after the tweeting has ceased. Other times, it gets heated and publicly awkward.

Five problems with Twitter use at closed gatherings have been expressed to me.

The first is dismay that its application was not evident to everyone from the outset of the event. A small group of us deliberately heightened this response at a recent gathering, when we decided to "pull the curtain" on a hashtagged Twitter conversation that had been going on unnoticed by the majority of the fairly traditional scholarly crowd. The criticism is fair; that Twitter changes a conference dynamic in ways that may be invisible to some participants. The possibility of its presence probably should be addressed at the outset of closed conferences for a little while, in order that any requested ground rules can be discussed and agreed upon, and to make participants aware of the option to engage. Some professional societies, such as the Modern Language Association, and membership organizations, such as the Coalition for Networked Information, have begun promoting Twitter hashtags or even publicizing them well ahead of a conference event. Regardless, you can basically assume that if people have open laptops or handheld devices at a gathering, and still seem alert, they're note-taking or tweeting—not reading email or playing games. At least, not much.

The second issue is related: a feeling that Twitter use is exclusionary. At the outset of a closed conference, some people may have access to it,

and others may not. I have figured Twitter as a democratizing medium; however, participation in it is not universal. For most people in academic settings, this is a choice. Because accounts are free and easy to set up, the only reason you can't rapidly remedy the problem, if you wish to, is that you may lack a laptop or smartphone. When you first set up your account—especially if you do so in the middle of a rapid-fire exchange— you are likely to be a little inept and lost. This is a sinking feeling you might recall from your early days of graduate school, or your first academic conference. It passes quickly, as you learn the lingo and cultural codes.

Next comes the concern that Twitter damages one's ability to engage and converse in the room, or that it lowers the level of discourse. Attentional demands may be a problem for some, as Twitter use is a learned skill. As to the latter issue, I will address only deliberate rudeness, because I worry that statements about lowered discourse are simply code for "discourse with people not like me," and suspect that no arguments of mine will shake the foundations of that view. New-media scholar danah boyd and others have exposed rudeness in backchannel chatter as a real concern, with immediate and dreadful implications for speakers at popular conferences.[2] However, it is important to say that Twitter use does not inherently promote inattention or bad behavior.

I've never witnessed a nasty backchannel in an academic setting— where we generally do share notions of fairness and propriety. More frequently, there's a little lag between the themes expressed in a Twitter conversation and the topics being discussed in the room, which can cause participants to divide their attention, but which can also evolve as an interesting counterpoint to later discussions.

Privacy concerns related to Twitter use at closed gatherings are a real issue. Often the greatest virtue of an invitation-only event, for participants who represent administrative units or high-profile organizations, is the opportunity to speak a little more candidly than they can in public. In my experience, Twitter users are sensitive to these moments and either moderate their observations and reportage accordingly or refrain from tweeting at all. If, as it seems, we are moving into a period in which always-on, networked communication becomes the norm, even at private academic events, it is the responsibility of participants to remain sensitive to desires for confidentiality or discretion—and, in the moment, speakers may need to make these desires a little more plain.

Finally, the need for privacy is not the same as a wish for control. I am fairly unsympathetic to an ownership frustration I have heard from a

small number of scholars, manifesting as a desire that ideas they express at conferences—even well attributed—not be circulated via Twitter. I have come to understand that this concern stems less from a kind of proprietary interest over the ideas—that is to say, it is less a matter akin to copyright—than from a sensation of the loss of control. The level of control we used to feel over the distribution and reception of scholarly statements was only ever an illusion made possible by the small scale and relative snail's pace of print publication. It was also enabled by authority systems that—while they have performed a salutary function of filtering and quality assurance—are under scrutiny in an age of electronic text, because of their incongruence, economic instability, and cumulatively stifling effect.

One manifestation of this lack of control is the acknowledged "telephone game" of Twitter—the degree to which repetition with a difference can lead to partial or missed understandings. Sometimes, offhand, minor points that slip right past the sanctioned, face-to-face conversation can make it big online: that's human interaction for you. The Twittering fingers tweet, and having tweeted, twitter on; or live blog, or take notes in wikis, et cetera. Although it can be helpful when speakers are plugged in enough to be able to influence conversation in both offline and online streams—not even necessarily simultaneously—it is simply folly to think that we can control what's being said about us on the Internet. That was never what scholarly communication was about, anyway.

I'd offer three strategies to address concerns about the immediacy of web publishing of conference proceedings via Twitter.

The first is something we're always doing anyway: simply working to express our ideas as clearly as possible in the room, and to listen actively for feedback that may suggest misunderstanding or lack of conveyed nuance. Good luck with that (sincerely!).

Perhaps a more implementable suggestion for speakers and conference participants concerned about these matters is that they publicly request their names not be attached to tweets or blog posts. This strikes me as most valid when it touches on issues of privacy and confidentiality—but be aware that when your name is used on Twitter, it is likely done in an innocent spirit of attribution. If your ideas are cited, chances are good that the writer approves of them and wishes to lend you a microphone—or at least that he or she thought your statements interesting and worthy of further discussion. If, on the other hand, your perspective is represented in a critical way and you are cited as its source, it's probably because you are known to be on Twitter and presumed to be as able to defend yourself

there as elsewhere. In other words, I have heard some anxiety expressed about personal attack, but—while contentious conversations have been opened up on Twitter in a familiar spirit of academic debate—I cannot recall ever seeing a specific, much less ad hominem, hostile response to a colleague who lacks a presence on Twitter, or might be thought defenseless in that medium. There's not a lot of passive aggression in an environment that trades on professional identity, necessarily precise language, clear attribution, and open exchange.

Most of what I've said is relevant to public as well as invitation-only academic events—but the turmoil around conference use of Twitter over the past year has seemed most acute at private gatherings. It clearly relates to the ethos of the academic Twitter demographic—mostly consisting of tech-savvy, early-career scholars or #alt-ac professionals—and the expectations and longstanding traditions that inhere in private events. Invitation-only meetings often involve more established scholars and administrators who have put in their dues under a very different set of academic protocols and for whom networked communication is important, but not necessarily ever-present.

These groups need to find ways to move forward together within the new norms of scholarly communication, and in a way that enhances shared work and promotes meaningful interconnectedness. Which brings me to the final strategy I'd suggest we all adopt: simply to—or continue to—participate.

Notes

1. http://www.twapperkeeper.com/hashtag/alt-ac. Also see http://www.twapper keeper.com/hashtag/reenx and http://tagdef.com/uvashape. Each of these references will—depending on the ebb and flow of networked conversation—lead you to current or archived tweets stemming from a referenced gathering, or maybe even indicate to you that nobody has been chatting under a particular rubric lately. I've taken a variety of approaches in these references to demonstrate a few ways of accessing Twitter conversations and highlight the degree to which tweets are both ephemeral in that they are part of a fairly volatile landscape of protocols and interfaces, and capturable, as part of our cultural record. Whatever you see when going to those links is unlikely to be what I saw when I chose to publish them here— and it's not unlikely that a link or two will break. However, the Twitter back-channel conversation for at least one of those conferences (#uvashape) is to be published by Rice University Press. Also, the Library of Congress has announced

an initiative to archive the entire Twitter corpus—an amazing resource for future scholars. *Library of Congress Blog*, "How Tweet It Is!: Library Acquires Entire Twitter Archive," blog entry by Matt Raymond, April 4, 2010, http://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2010/04/how-tweet-it-is-library-acquires-entire-twitter-archive/.

2. *danah boyd: apophenia*, "Spectacle at Web2.0 Expo . . . from My Perspective," blog entry by danah boyd, November 24, 2009, http://www.zephoria.org/thoughts/archives/2009/11/24/spectacle_at_we.html.