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Hacking the Academy

Cohen, Dan , Scheinfeldt, Joseph T

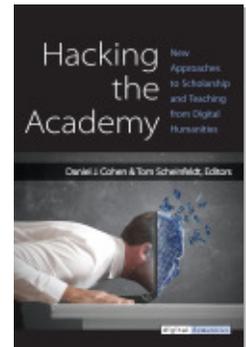
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Voices

TWITTER AT CONFERENCES

Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Jason B. Jones,
Matthew G. Kirschenbaum, Amanda French

Buried within the sense that the 140-character form trivializes our work—a complaint about condensation that might not be so far removed from faulting poetry for its failure to present extended realist narratives—is an implied concern about who it is that sees us being trivial. This is a concern that has dogged public scholarly work for eons, from those scholars who have written crossover books, to those who have written editorials for major publications, to those who have developed blogs and other online presences. Yes, Twitter is the most elliptical of these, but it's a key form of outreach not just to our colleagues but to the broader intellectual public, and to those whom we need to support higher education. All of these public forms of writing have the potential to demonstrate what it is that we as scholars do, and why the broader culture should care about it—and until we get over our fears of talking with the broader culture, in the forms that we share with them, we'll never manage to convince them that what we do is important.

—KATHLEEN FITZPATRICK

Twitter is one way to explain to graduate students what you do at big conferences. In addition to the actual intellectual conversation, the critical mass of faculty on Twitter means that you can see what faculty do: how often people go to panels, when they visit the book exhibit, when they need downtime, whether they're still working on papers, and more. There's a comfort in seeing the different ways in which faculty and graduate students inhabit the conference: There's not just one way of participating in a conference, and so you should feel empowered to make the event

as meaningful/productive for you as possible, without worrying too much about whether you're "doing it right."

—JASON B. JONES

Twitter is an invaluable ready-made network, particularly for newbies and junior scholars for whom the convention often looms like an orbital Death Star poised to suck every ion of individuality and intellectual self-worth into its all-consuming tractor beam. Twitter, by contrast, is the cantina in Mos Eisley spaceport. The "tweet-ups" are a great example of this: if you need a break, need a drink, or just need some time to turn off and chill out, you know when and where to go without the pressure and hang-ups of "Am I really invited?" "Will anyone talk to me?" Nothing in an institutionalized world is ever purely democratic or transparent of course, but I think it's fair to say that academic rank and status are markedly less important than if, say, you try sidling up to someone at the New Literary History cash bar. Most of all what I think Twitter does at a conference is create a common narrative; or better, it's a kind of communal narrative to which all can write simply by virtue of opening an account and invoking the hashtag. Retweets and replies define the plot and tempo. The narrative is not complete or comprehensive, but that's not the point. Narratives are enabling precisely because they are partial representations. Who knows this better than scholars?

—MATTHEW G. KIRSCHENBAUM

The lesson digital humanists learn, especially by using Twitter, is that scholarly conversations move quickly now, because they can; therefore, one had better be as quick as possible to join in that conversation. Monthly or quarterly journals and annual conferences used to be the way that scholars wrote among themselves, but now it's e-mail listservs—yes, still—and, better, the much more public blogosphere and Twittersphere.

—AMANDA FRENCH