Sometimes things shift when you’re not looking. One morning, I woke up and discovered I was in style. Or, at least, what I do was in style: digital and networked scholarship had suddenly been discovered by higher ed media. For this fifteen minutes of fame, practically every *Chronicle of Higher Education* link on my Twitter feed was about some aspect of online identity or networked scholarship.¹ The LSE blog and *Inside Higher Ed*, too.

I peered about, waiting for the punch line. I am accustomed, when I get up in front of fellow educators and academics and say “I study scholarship and... Twitter,” to getting the reception of a failed stand-up comic. “Really? Twitter?” people communicate with their eyebrows. I am becoming a great student of arched eyebrows.

Yet recently, casual readers of mainstream academic publications—and their eyebrows—would be hard-pressed not to come away with the impression that academic identities in social media are actually Something to Care About, as a profession.

The sense of critical mass is energizing to me. The work of research that is not legible to others always feels, rhetorically, like lifting stones uphill: constantly establishing premises rather than moving on to the deep exploration of that one particular thing. No matter how important a conversation may be, people cannot engage it if there are no shared premises.

The more the conversation about networks and identities and academia grows and pervades people’s consciousness, the less of that Sisyphean phase of the lifting I need to do. Still, I recognize the backlash already burbling. People’s eyebrows generally do not like to be beaten about the head with the idea they should care about something just because suddenly it’s the Flavor of the Month. Nor should they. I feel you, eyebrows of the world. But networked scholarship’s surge of visibility doesn’t mean you have to use Twitter. Or any other social networking platforms. Nor do you need to get personal online if you don’t want to. But your concepts of academic identity and academic reputation do need to expand: Twitter and social media and digital platforms are now a part of scholarship, as modes of communication and of scholarly practice. So if I tell you I’m exploring the part they now play in academic influence… try not to arch so hard you hurt yourself.

Because this is not a Flavor of the Month, folks. This is a cultural shift, one part of the sea change in contemporary higher education. The once institutionally centered prestige economy of academia has a shadow sibling, now; an alternate yet intersecting prestige economy of its own that does not adhere to the terms most scholars agreed to play by. Thus, the premises surrounding what counts as academic influence need to be renegotiated, waggling eyebrows or not.
The math of influence

Academic influence has never been a simple measure, even long before scholars began building names for themselves on extra-institutional platforms. Influence is a complex, messy, slightly socially discomfiting, catch-all equation for how people determine the reputation and credibility and essentially the status of a scholar. There are two ways influence tends to get assessed, in scholarship: there's the teensy little group of people who actually understand what your work really means… and then there's everybody else, from different fields, who piece together the picture from external signals: what journals you publish in, what school you went to, your citation count, your h-index, your last grant. It's credibility math, gatekeeping math. It's founded in names and organizations people recognize and trust, with a running caveat of Your Mileage May Vary.

And now, in the mix, there's Twitter. And blogs. And measures like alt-metrics. How can something that the general population is convinced about, such as what people had for lunch be a factor in changing what counts as academic influence? By generating a parallel prestige economy that the academy can neither subsume nor ignore, that's how.

Beyond gatekeeping: Networked influence signals

Networked scholarship, at its core, is the social, public, relational practice of engaging online as a scholarly identity, about issues of scholarly as well as personal interest. Going online and talking to people you may not know about areas of shared scholarly interest opens up your reach and reputation for what you do, as your name becomes associated with the conversations you contribute to. These contributions, in turn, open up your capacity to build communities of practice around those areas of interest, enriching your own knowledge and networks in those fields. And over time, sustained engagement opens up the possibility that when people in the academy — the people reviewing your panel or on your next granting committee or looking for a key-
note on a given topic — hear your name, it will be one of those they already recognize and trust. Maybe. There’s a lot of Your Mileage that May Vary here. Think of a Venn diagram — one circle is how scholars traditionally share their work, the other is what people had for lunch — and in the middle there are scholarly ideas that circulate according to the open, self-published, non-gate-kept logics of social media. This emergent prestige economy values many of the ideals that scholarship purports to hold dear — new knowledge, open debate, public dissemination — but the terms and processes on which it is premised are the antithesis of the carefully credentialed, hierarchical operations of the academy.

And yet that doesn’t mean they’re a free-for-all; there are patterns and commonalities in how scholars use Twitter, particularly to build influence. The oft-touted “social media increases your dissemination and citations!” factor is important in shaping scholars’ practices, but in my research, most active networked scholars reported the citation bump more as a side effect of networked participation than a reason in itself. Community and connection and space to address marginalities on many fronts factored more powerfully in participants’ accounts of their reasons for networked practice, particularly for those who used Twitter for more than broadcast purposes. And when I asked networked scholars to assess each other’s influence based on the signals they read from Twitter profiles and participation, this is what I found:

1. **The conversation is what counts.** A concept of “The Conversation” — meaning discussions of import both in their particular fields and across higher ed — circulates widely amongst active Twitter scholars. All participants in the study were engaged in curating and contributing resources to a broader conversation in their field or area of interest.

Academic Influence

It was capacity for contribution to this larger conversation that counted most in participants’ assessments of others’ influence.

2. **Assessments of influence in networks are individually centered, rather than institutionally centered.** This may be an interim or transitional feature of networked scholarly influence, while the platforms and their place in scholarship emerge and mature, but while the signals on which actively networked scholars base their judgements are still quick proxies for quality, they are proxies interpreted against individual understandings of “The Conversation,” rather than generic and hierarchical ideals of scholarly role.

3. **Metrics matter, but not that much.** Participants in the study tended to assess size of account — over 10,000 followers, in particular — as a general signal of influence, but perception of capacity for contribution was far more important to scholars’ assessments of who they would follow, and why. Number of tweets —understood to indicate longevity and thus likelihood of ongoing contribution — mattered more in participants’ estimation of an account’s influence and value than number of followers.

4. **Commonalities are key.** The perception of a scholar’s credibility and capacity for contribution is created and amplified by common interests, disciplines, and share ties and peers. Participants were most likely to assess accounts as credible and likely to make a contribution if they were followed by users the participant already knew and respected. Professional and personal commonalities were also central to perceptions of others’ capacity to contribute, but less visible in assessments of credibility.

5. **Institutional signals and affiliations aren’t that important.** Except in the case of one profile with an Oxford university affiliation, institutional status signals were not accorded significant value in assessments of networked influence. Though all participants were institutionally affiliated and well aware of the prestige of academic ranks, journal titles, and institutional brands, these were not interpreted as intersecting
meaningfully with capacity to contribute to the networked conversation. In fact, profiles that emphasized institutional status were understood by a number of participants as signaling their lack of interest in participatory engagement.

6. **Automated signals indicate low influence.** Automated daily tweets and link aggregators such as paper.li were seen as indicators of low engagement and low networked influence, in part because these services are seen as violating implicit social contracts of active, personal curation and direct citation within academic Twitter.

What these findings suggest, all together, is that scholars assess the networked profiles and behaviors of peers through a logic of influence that is—at least as yet—neither codified nor especially numeric. Instead, while academic Twitter’s concept of influence recognizes status, standing, and scale, it appears to focus primarily on contribution and capacity to build and disseminate knowledge. This suggests that so long as senior scholars and administrators and tenure committees think Twitter is what people had for lunch, there’s a gap in our understanding of how new ideas are actually spreading through academe, especially in fields that are changing rapidly.

**Enter capitalism**

At the same time, networked participation and its non-institutional logics also bring more fraught elements overtly into play in the influence equation. Let’s not pretend that academic institutions are not capitalist institutions. They are, and increasingly so: capital equations of scarcity and commodity are very much a part of the institutionalized and gate-kept versions of academic influence signals that have gained traction over recent generations. But the individual scholar in these equations, except in superstar instances, plays an institutional role rather than operates as an economic entity unto him or herself. In networks, individual identity operates more like a brand, particularly as the scale of attention on an individual grows.
This allows junior scholars and adjuncts and grad students and otherwise institutionally marginalized identities to build voices and audiences even with minimal institutional status or sanction. It allows people to join the conversation about what’s happening in their field or in higher ed in general; to make contributions for which channels do not exist at the local level. Networked platforms act as hosts for public resistance to the irreconcilable contradictions of contemporary academia, as well as society more broadly. But networked platforms are still corporate platforms, and cannot be seen as neutral identity playgrounds. Rather, like institutions, they are complex sites of entrenched power relations. They operate on logics of media and attention rather than academic hierarchy, thus creating alternative channels for the emergence of voices that may not find amplification in institutional prestige economies. But in both spheres, participation and contribution must still be legible to dominant conversations and interests in order to be taken up and validated by peers. Thus, while the tenor of academic Twitter may differ from the formal outputs of academia — and conversations certainly emerge in social networks more quickly than the publication cycle allows — in both spaces, cultivation of identity and influence is constrained by what already counts to those who are established in that space.

Power in networks

Being visible in networks can create access to visibility and voice in broadcast media, which sometimes lends perceived credibility to the way a scholar’s work is taken up… or at least amplifies his or her name recognition. The power relations of scale are complex, though: the racism and sexism and heterosexism and able-ism and Anglo-centrism of our contemporary world are in many ways replicated in the way voices get heard, online, and the backlash for women and people of color who

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Jaime Nesbitt-Golden, “Why I’m Masquerading as a White, Bearded Hipster Guy on Twitter (Despite being a Black Woman),” XOFane, 4 April 2014.
disrupting the digital humanities
dare to speak can be vicious. The constant identity positioning
and lack of transparency and understanding about how vis-
ibility works can also make the world of academic Twitter into
mean streets.

The biggest factor in building influence in networks—one
that should assuage some of the arched eyebrows—is that it
tends to take, like all scholarship, a great deal of time and work.
Twitter is not a magical path to fame, or to celebrity academic
status. In fact, on its own, it’s created few superstars: the tradi-
tional, institutional halls of power and high status still do far
more to thrust scholars into influential circles of attention and
public regard. Noam Chomsky’s speaking fees are not especially
under threat from Twitter upstarts, and Twitter and blogging
alone do not often result in New York Times gigs. But they are,
now, indubitably a part of that picture, in ever-expanding circles.

I see the networked version of academic influence as what
Audrey Watters calls “a cyborg tactic”: the illegitimate offspring
of complex totalizing equations, and yet potentially subversive
to them. This potential lies, as Haraway would put it, in the fact
that illegitimate offspring are often “exceedingly unfaithful to
their origins.” According to Costa, digital scholarship is often
perceived within the academy as a trajectory of deviance; from
this perspective, networked scholars can be seen as cyborg schol-
ars, deviants within the academy whose networked participation
exceeds institutional boundaries. But academia is no longer an
ivory tower, if it ever was; it recognizes visibility and public-
ity—in the right venues—with its own accolades. Thus, cyborg
engagement beyond the boundaries of institutional scholar-
ship can enable the development of footholds that span the two
worlds. Case in point: I blog sporadically about my research, as

4 Audrey Watters, “Beneath the Cobblestones...A Domain of One’s Own,”
5 Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-
feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in Simians, Cyborgs and Women:
6 Christina Costa, “Outcasts on the Inside: Academics Reinventing Them-
well as publishing in more conventional peer-reviewed venues. Awhile back, *The Atlantic* published an article based in large part on a year-old speculative blog post I’d shared on Twitter,7 which had been seen by a writer for the magazine. His piece came out on a Monday. By Friday, I’d been offered two invited talks at leading Canadian universities as well as an appearance on public radio and a consulting gig; all opportunities that otherwise might not have emerged within the increasingly circumscribed professional horizons of contemporary higher ed.

This cyborg version of influence, then, comes with both potential advantages and with risks. In a higher ed landscape familiar with the stories of Steven Salaita and Saida Grundy, wherein scholars can find casual, conversational tweets taken up by institutional and public audiences as if they were professional communications, the cultivation of a networked identity remains less safe than that of a conventional academic identity, except where networked influence may open doors that would otherwise remain shut. As a development in how scholars understand each other’s signals of credibility and reputation, then, networked influence is neither good nor bad, and certainly not neutral. But it exists, and it is only growing, and if we are to steer the ship of higher ed towards a future where neither the logics of gatekeeping and tradition nor business and media dominate it entirely, network influence is important for all of us to try to understand.

And to those who would raise their eyebrows at this assertion, I say: sometimes, folks, things shift when you’re not looking.

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Bibliography


