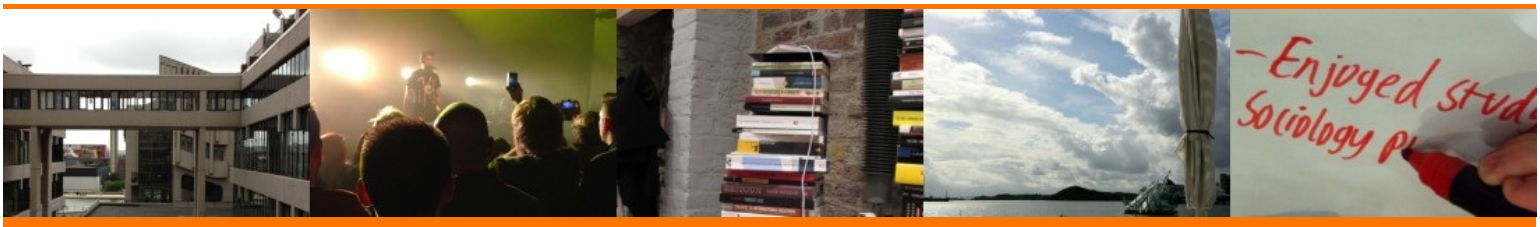

To understand social media for academics, we have to kill the idea of social media for academics

BY MARK CARRIGAN ON MARCH 25, 2017 • (0)

In the 30+ talks I have done about social media in the last year, I have discussed many things. But the one theme that has been most prominent is the extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, complexity of the subject matter. There is nothing inherently challenging about how to use social media. Any practical or technical difficulties are well within the realm of what has become habitual for most within late modernity. What creates the challenge is negotiating the novelty of its enablements and constraints within a particular context.

However it is this novelty which also makes it difficult to exercise our reflexivity in the way we would about any comparable matter. This novelty gives rise to a species of what **Jacob Silverman describes as 'internet exceptionalism':**

> *What we call the Internet—and what web writers so lazily draw on for their work—is less a hive mind or a throng or a gathering place and more a personalized set of online maneuvers guided by algorithmic recommendations. When we look at our browser windows, we see our own particular interests, social networks, and purchasing histories scrambled up to stare back at us. But because we haven't found a shared discourse to talk about this complex arrangement of competing influences and relationships, we reach for a term to contain it all. Enter "the Internet."*
>
> *The Internet is a linguistic trope but also an ideology and even a business plan. If your job is to create content out of (mostly) nothing, then you can always turn to something/someone that "the Internet" is mad or excited about. And you don't have to worry about alienating readers because "the Internet" is so general, so vast and all-encompassing, that it always has room. This form of writing is widely adaptable. Now it's common to see stories where "Facebook" or "Twitter" stands in for the Internet, offering approval or judgment on the latest viral schlock. Choose your (anec)data carefully, and Twitter can tell any story you want.*

Much as "the Internet" gives us "a rhetorical life raft to hang onto" when discussing a subject that is vastly overhyped and invested with all manner of hopes and fears, so too does "social media" become a semantic crutch when making sense of the complex changes being brought about by digital communications within a particular institutional sphere. It's similarly "easy, a convenient reference point" through which we gloss a complex set of changes in which technological possibilities are only one causal factor. By exceptionalising social media in this way, we "fail to relate this communication system, and everything that happens through it, to the society around us".

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This tendency seems even more pronounced when we talk about something as specific as the academy. The more we talk about "social media" as something which all academics should (or shouldn't do) the more we obscure the changes it entails for academic labour and the organisations which academics work within. My ambition as someone who has written a book called *Social Media for Academics*? To get academics to stop talking about social media.

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