

From hermits to celebrities – How social media is reshaping academic hierarchies and what we can do about it.

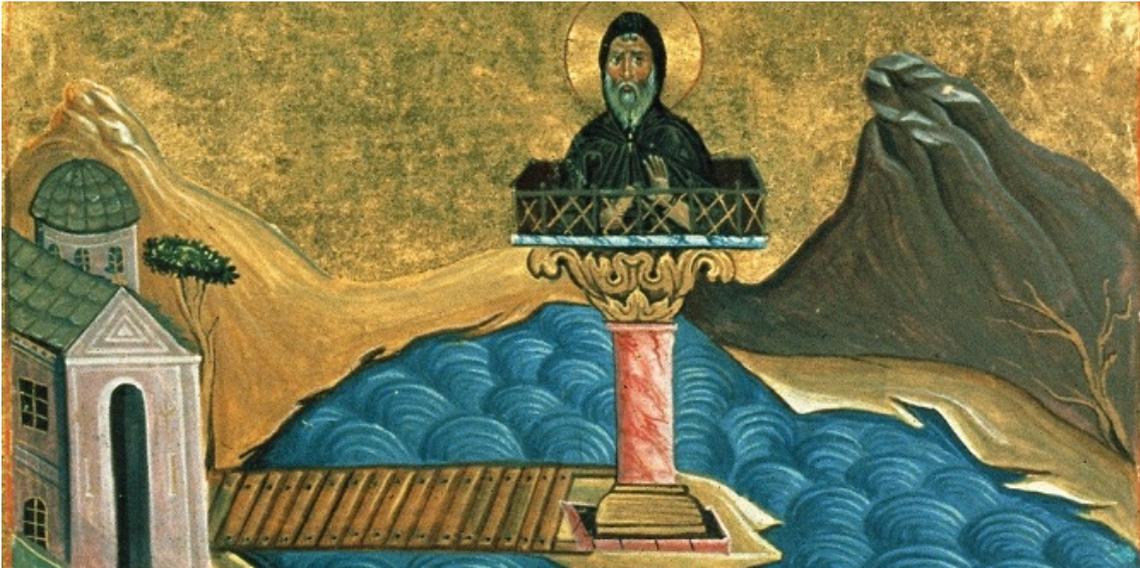


*By adopting social media in increasing numbers, academics have also bought into the dynamics of social media celebrity. In this post **Mark Carrigan** reflects on the impact of the attention economy on academia and how attention is often unfairly concentrated on a small number of individuals. Taking this into account, he argues that well edited multi-author outlets can play an important role in distributing online attention in a more equitable fashion.*

To type the word ‘scholar’ into Google Image search leaves you immediately presented with images of bearded white men toiling away in obscurity. It has often struck me how apt this is in terms of the cultural connotations which remain attached to the idea of scholarship, even if most people realise these stereotypes aren’t representations of the modern academy. But the reclusive scholar so easily stereotyped by this image and memorably described by Patrick Dunleavy as the [academic hermit](#) “sitting alone on top of a pillar somewhere in academia and doing their level best to not communicate in any way with the outside world, or let any information about their work leak out”, risks being replaced by an equally extreme character: the celebrity academic.

Social media hasn’t created the celebrity academic, but it has made it a category to which a greater number and range of people might aspire. It can be a gateway to the familiar markers of esteem associated with being a well-known scholar: paid speaking invitations, opportunities for media collaboration, requests for endorsements, extensive publication opportunities, paid reviewing work, invitations to join working groups, etc. These might be supplemented by requests which reflect popularity, while nonetheless being less welcome, such as endless requests to peer review papers, assess monograph proposals, or review grant applications. How these reinforce other forms of hierarchy remains to be established, but we can speculate that they are unlikely to make the academy a more equal place. Even if social media expands the pool of celebrity academics, potentially making it more diverse than would otherwise be the case, it does so through the entrenchment of hierarchy: rewards flow to those who are known, valued and heard while those who are unknown, unvalued and unheard struggle to increase their standing.

If we see social media platforms as democratic spaces, then we miss how unevenly attention is distributed across them. For instance, as [George Veletsianos](#) found in a study of educational tweeters, the top 1% of scholars had an average follower count of 700 times scholars in the bottom 50% and 100 times scholars in the other 99%. If this online popularity can be converted into offline rewards in the manner suggested, it doesn’t matter whether these are established academics who leverage their existing prestige to build a following, or new entrants who have accumulated visibility through their social media activity alone. Both are beneficiaries of a new hierarchy that supplements the existing hierarchies of academic life. Social media can play an important role in allowing more diverse voices to rise to prominence within academic life and this should be celebrated. But we should not confuse this with platforms making the academy less hierarchical. It is certainly true that social media allows everyone to have a voice, as its cheerleaders are prone to pointing out. However, it does so at the cost of making it much more difficult for people to be heard, something which is crucial to grasp if we want to get to grips with the long-term effects of social media on higher education.



Publishing projects creating platforms for academics to have access to established audiences have a crucial role to play here. There are examples which cross disciplines such as *The Conversation* and the group of [LSE blogs](#). But perhaps the most interesting examples have a smaller audience and/or a narrower focus than this. Examples from my own discipline include [The Sociological Review](#), [Discover Society](#), [Everyday Sociology](#) and [The Society Pages](#). I read blogs like [The Disorder of Things](#) and [Critical Legal Thinking](#) from adjacent disciplines. There will be examples from your own disciplines which I am unfamiliar with. These multi-author spaces have different intentions and different audiences, reaching out beyond a narrowly academic readership to varying degrees. But they are examples of a proliferation of outlets which enable academics to publish online and ensure a readership.

The fact these projects have built up their own readership, accessible to academics, who want to write occasionally, or even on a single occasion, means they can perform the function of redistributing visibility. This might not in itself mitigate the attention economy unfolding in academic life but it can nonetheless provide a corrective to it, as long as editors of projects like this recognise the important role they play as gatekeepers to online audiences and the implications for who gets heard and who doesn't in an academy where social media is increasingly ubiquitous. These projects also have an important role to play in addressing the parochialism which pervades social media. The [Global Social Theory](#) project founded by Gurminder K. Bhambra is an inspiring example of the form this can take. It seeks to correct the narrow focus on European male authors which characterises many reading lists on social theory, building a library which profiles theorists from around the world and guides people about how to engage with their work and use it on reading lists. In this sense, it uses the affordances of social media to find ways to amplify voices outside of American and European intellectual currents. The site itself was created in WordPress and it was promoted, as well as contributions solicited, through Twitter and Facebook. The [Global Dialogues](#) newsletter produced by the International Sociological Association addresses parochialism in a slightly different way, with each newsletter being translated in 16 languages so updates from around the world can be read by people from around the world.

Both projects feature contributions from around the world with the range of their contributors and the scope of their readership enhanced by social media even if their operations are not strictly dependent upon these platforms. They highlight the potential which social media offers for overcoming parochialism, if it is approached in the form of a practical project. Their necessity helps illustrate how social media can entrench Anglophone bias if unopposed, as multilingual academics find themselves nudged into engaging online in English if they want access to international audiences. Collective projects of this sort have a crucial role to play in mitigating the inequalities of visibility which social media is generating. But they can also play a role in ensuring that we can respond collectively to the problems of online harassment and political polarisation which increasingly pervade social media.

This post is an abridged section of Mark's revised edition of [Social Media for Academics](#).

About the author

Mark Carrigan is a sociologist in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. His research explores how the proliferation of digital platforms is reshaping education systems, with a particular focus on knowledge production within universities. He is the author of [Social Media for Academics](#), the second edition of which was published in October 2019.

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