

# If you don't have social media, you are no one: How social media enriches conferences for some but risks isolating others

by Blog Admin

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*13,000 tweets, 430 photos and over 2,000 video views later, [Dr Lisa Harris](#) and [Nicole Beale](#) have plenty of data to investigate how social networking can change the conversation at an academic conference. Here, they report that while social media opens a new dimension to academic discussion, there are still challenges that must be addressed with its use.*



The impact of social networking activity on an intended 'real world' outcome has been difficult to measure, but one of our Social Media in Supporting Live Events ([SMiLE](#)) action project objectives is to investigate how recent developments in social network visualisation and analysis can enable valuable insights to be generated for the benefit of event organisers and community developers. We want to explore the dynamics of the relationship between 'real' and 'virtual' communities; we want to know whether people who meet at events do so as a result of an online introduction, or if they skip event sessions and choose to follow what they want on a live stream or Twitter backchannel.

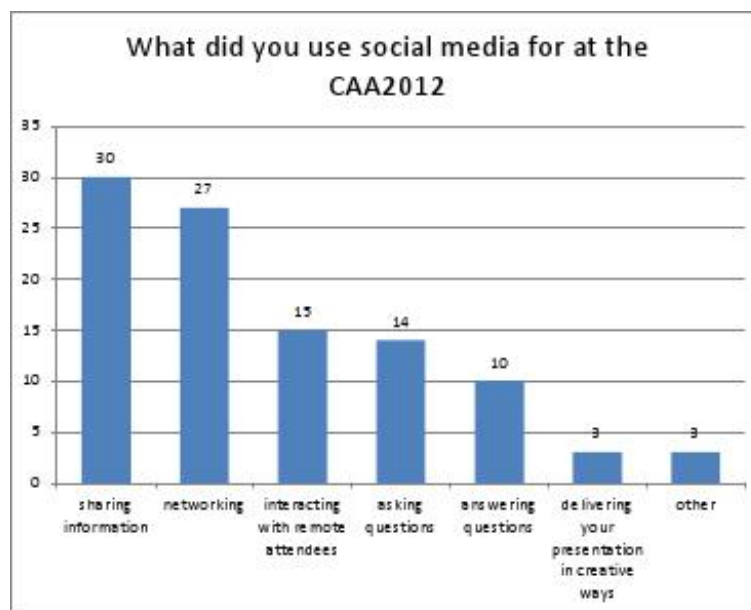


We monitored the use of a range of established and experimental social media tools to track how they were utilised by both 'real' and 'virtual' delegates before, during and after an event. We expected that this activity would include information recording and sharing, network building, profile raising and also hopefully help to develop a sustainable community of practice. During the event, we carried out a number of interviews with conference participants about their individual experiences and interactions via [Twitter](#), [Storify](#), [Flickr](#), [Vimeo](#), and groups on LinkedIn and Facebook. We used tools such as the [#caasoton WordPress site](#) to share information with delegates, and used many other platforms, including Corkboard, to reflect real world activities at the conference, including a drive to collect delegates' memories of past events.

During the event, we used platforms such as [del.icio.us](#) to automatically collect URLs to resources, and saved tweets to an online archive to curate and then share in the future. We also set up projects to extend beyond the conference including a Wikiathon event and a blogging competition, organised as part of the international [Day of Digital Humanities](#) event.

So how did it go? We have been overwhelmed by the continuing use post-event of the social media set in place during the conference. There are so far over 13,000 tweets that have used the [#caasoton](#) hashtag, with more discussions continuing on Twitter. To date, over 430 photos have been uploaded to the [#caasoton Flickr](#) group and our [Vimeo](#) videos have been viewed over 2,100 times, with viewers from 47 countries. Nearly half of the 450 conference delegates used [#caasoton](#) on Twitter before, during, or after the event, and there were many new converts to the tool. There was an active group of 'virtual' contributors (over 70 people registered with the event as 'virtual attendees') on Twitter, with some 20 additional users joining in the conversations from elsewhere.

The chart below taken from our post event survey highlights what people were mainly using social media for:



From the specific comments delegates made about the value of social media at the event, we observed that tweeting during sessions allowed people to make connections and curate what was going on in different rooms, in real time. Some of these discussions could even be considered as defining new online 'sessions' or themes, as delegates' comments from the post-conference survey show:

*"The virtual interaction across sessions was interesting and added to the sense of the conference as a single event. Often 'themes' are fragmented with little cross pollination...this was reduced at CAA12 by social media."*

*"It was great to be able to follow a discussion taking place during the paper being delivered"*

*"It was possible to follow something of the interesting parallel sessions you could not attend and to pick up interesting urls and so on."*

*"I felt the comments enriched the discussion and help bond some delegates more quickly than by happenstance in the social events"*

*"It was extraordinary. It helped me gauge the general response to papers I was attending and not attending. Fantastic."*

And from real-time Twitter comments:

*"Almost everyone in this session has tweetdeck open or is tapping away on a phone. And it's totally appropriate **#caasoton**"*

*"Amazing use of social media, accessibility, connectivity. Set the bar VERY high for all future conferences **#caasoton**"*

A number of challenges were also highlighted that need to be considered for the future. Some people who were not active social media users felt excluded from the conversations that were happening within the online platforms that delegates were using:

*"If you have no social media account you are no one."*

And of course the opinions expressed online can only reflect the views of one segment of the total population, which is not necessarily representative of the community as whole:

*"I think just looking at the twitter stream gives a skewed idea of what people really think is interesting or noteworthy."*

There were also concerns expressed about the public nature of the activity and the extent to which photos

or comments were being shared without specific permission, for example in blog posts or via Storify. While there was significant enthusiasm to archive the whole collection of online materials for the benefit of researchers or the organisers of future CAA events, other delegates felt that the data should first be anonymised, or indeed not kept at all. This dilemma is being addressed in ongoing discussions about the development of a code of conduct for the collecting and then archiving of social media data in an appropriate way.

So what next? We have **much more** data than we expected, but this is a nice problem to have! People have been tweeting ideas about how best to archive and reuse it, as well as curating data from various sources such as Foursquare to provide an extra layer of value. We plan to devise a toolkit for other organisers of live events, for collection and archiving of the huge archive that is created through the use of the many online social media networks available to delegates. For instance, many #caasoton presenters have been uploading their presentations onto platforms such as [Slideshare](#), and we will be working closely with them to plan how to safeguard and further disseminate their work. The team collected interviews from delegates throughout the event which we will be sharing with the CAA community.

We will be experimenting with different ways of integrating and visualising the data, and also exploring the possibilities of network analyses and data mining over the next few weeks. We will be sharing the lessons learned in future posts.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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2. [Becoming a Networked Researcher – using social media for research and researcher development](#)
3. [Five minutes with The Incidental Economist Austin Frakt: “Only 0.04% of published papers in health are reported on by the media, so blogs and other social media can help.”](#)
4. [Altmetrics, a guide to Twitter for academics, and increasing your academic footprint: our round-up of social media blogs in 2011](#)
5. [By leveraging social media for impact, academics can create broader support for our intellectual work and profession.](#)