

Social media is a ticking time bomb for universities with an outdated web presence.

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*There are pressing questions academic institutions will need to address over the next couple of years regarding their expanding participation in social media streams. **Andy Tattersall** argues that with such blurred boundaries of ownership, access and support, what is needed is wide-scale demystification to help academics dovetail a few choice tools to bring how they work into a modern setting. Social Media, Altmetrics and Web 2.0 all afford academia a wealth of possibilities if they take it, but there is a risk that the important messages will get lost as we produce even more social data than we can imagine.*



A substantial issue at hand in the higher education community is the tricky balancing act academics and their institutions face in managing their traditional websites and the growing number of individual and group Social Media presences. Compared to other large scale organisations, universities have been slow on the uptake of Social Media and are only now realising (partially thanks to their students and a growing requirement to be more open and accountable to fundholders and society) that they need to get out there and be 'Liked'.

Back in the 1990s universities not only understood the importance of having a Web identity but many had the in-house know-how to build them. By the dawn of Web 2.0 in 2005 many had grown to large organisational monsters, unwieldy and hard to navigate. My own institution in Sheffield moved to a content management system that allowed each and every member of staff to create and alter content on their own part of the website. In theory it seemed a good idea, that you could democratise your website, yet in reality it was very uneven. Many of those trained in the technology to update their pages soon forgot how to do the trickier updates whilst others picked up the slack. In time the website grew to tens thousands of pages, every little project, resource and list being compiled online. The ever-decreasing cost of bandwidth and web space afforded institutions that democracy. Yet with it came a price, most pages needed updating and managing and that was all before Social Media started to take off about five years ago.



Drowning in social media. Image credit: mkhmarketing.com (CC BY)

The problem academic institutions now face in this second wave of outward facing content is determining who is behind its creation, what does it say and is it consistent? I'm all in favour of the things that Tim Berner's Lee gave us from his lab in CERN 25 years ago. [Net Neutrality, democracy and the Web 2.0](#) way of everyone having ownership. It allowed us all to be artists, writers, librarians, journalists, learners and teachers. Nevertheless there is an underlying concern of mine as an information specialist that somewhere down the line we might be heading for a fall.

Of course Social Media is very different from traditional Web presences, anyone can set up a profile on Twitter, Facebook, ResearchGate, Google Scholar, Mendeley, LinkedIn, Google+, start a blog, make a YouTube video. Add to that the great possibilities of sharing research thanks to ImpactStory, Figshare and Altmetric.com to name but a few. So with that comes the rub, there is a high number of resources to chose from, not just for the individual, but the academy, and this list will grow and grow. My role is to engage with my colleagues, peers and students to encourage them how to best make use of technology, whether it is to learn, teach or collaborate. It can be very fragmented and being fractious is not something best suited to academics, after all the majority of the really good ones got to where they are by being focused on two or three things and doing it well. [Dunbar's Number](#) informs us people can only

maintain 150 stable social relationships, whilst Statistic Brain released data earlier this year saying [the average Facebook user has 130 friends](#).

Can the same be applied to technologies that an organisation or academic can successfully manage? I have countless professional Social Media accounts amongst dozens if not hundreds of other, invariably free Web accounts. Yet that is part and parcel of my role, to look and assess these technologies. I saw the promise in Mendeley, Google Apps and Prezi to name but a few, by using them. For academics and their support teams the situation is different, they are focused on either researching, teaching or support first and foremost, often the tools to facilitate this come later on. As we know many academics now acknowledge that Twitter will benefit their networks and knowledge gathering and sharing. Facebook can help engage with students and videos can translate and disseminate research much better than words can in our ever-diminishing attention spans facilitated by the likes of the [Journal of Visualised Experiments](#). Whilst most of the tools I mentioned previously have benefits, it can be a case of horses for courses. For example, if you are a social scientist it is unlikely you would use Mendeley APIs like [Plasmid](#) or [openSNP](#).

There are several questions academics and organisations will need to address over the next couple of years, that of legacy: who is behind your institutional and project Social Media streams? Are they personal accounts and do you risk having your own [HMV Twitter incident](#). Have they been set up by individuals with good intentions to promote your research output or because they use Facebook a bit? Or are they secretaries and administrators who have been told to set up a Twitter account or Blog and post items as and when? I once heard the previous President of the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, [Phil Bradley](#) announce that; “Web 2.0 is a state of mind”. He wasn’t far wrong, and so is Social Media, in that you have to some extent immerse yourself in it, understand it, understand why you are using it, the pitfalls and benefits and most of all, the opportunities. Social Media, Altmetrics and the now much less mentioned Web 2.0 all afford academia a wealth of possibilities if they take it. What is needed is wide-scale demystification of it all, and systems to help academics dovetail a few choice tools to help bring how they work into a modern setting in the same way MOOCs have made us think about out-dated teaching models. There needs to be greater digital literacy and frameworks to help orchestrate online content in the future. Science Daily reported last year that [90% of the world’s data was generated over the previous two years](#). The amount of academics engaging with Social Media and Web technologies still remain in the minority, you only have to attend a conference or look for academic discussion on Twitter and Google+ to see this. Tools like Mendeley and ResearchGate are changing that balance as more and more PhD students and early career researchers look to the tools for building networks, but we are still some way from critical mass.

Social Media and Altmetrics by their very nature are the more relaxed and informal forms of communication, some of these tools are transient, short-lived or just too niche, so trying to formulate processes for some of them are impractical. There is no silver bullet fix as we are not too sure what is broken yet, but as with the ever growing academic websites of the 1990s and their content there is a risk that the important messages will get lost as we produce even more social data than we can imagine.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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