

# Social media's politics of circulation have profound implications for how academic knowledge is discovered and produced.

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/07/29/academic-knowledge-and-the-politics-of-circulation/](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/07/29/academic-knowledge-and-the-politics-of-circulation/)

7/29/2013

*As social media and other new forms of media emerge as influential ways to communicate academic knowledge, **David Beer** argues academics may need to pay more attention to the politics of circulation that increasingly define how academic knowledge is discovered and transmitted. If we don't understand the politics of data circulations that define contemporary media cultures then we may also find that academic practice is reshaped without sufficient reflection and reaction.*



What I would like to suggest is that this blog post, like other social media content, will be subject to the politics of circulation that defines contemporary media. The data that is produced as a by-product of contemporary cultural life does not just stop when it is produced, rather data fold-back into our everyday lives in variegated and often unseen ways. Similarly the destiny of this blog post will be shaped by the material infrastructures that it has been placed within. In this sense, academic knowledge is being opened up to social media's politics of circulation. As such, these transformations in the communication of research are likely to have profound implications for the way that we encounter and discover knowledge. All of which will then, in turn, implicate the knowledge that we go on to produce. There is the potential then for social media's politics of circulation to influence both the communication *and* production of knowledge.

Using social media to communicate academic knowledge is not a problem in itself, it actually opens up vast new possibilities, but it forces us to ask what will happen as more and more researchers use social media and other open-access outlets for their work. How will we cope with the din? And, most importantly, who will get heard? If we don't understand the politics of data circulations that define contemporary media cultures then we may also find that academic practice is reshaped without sufficient reflection and reaction. Social media is likely to lead to uneven patterns of influence, amplification, visibility and, to borrow the discourse of contemporary web cultures, Klout. It is important that we are alert to this, particularly as social media come to define the circulation of our ideas.



Image credit: Chris Potter (CC BY)

The politics of circulation that underpins social media may serve to give the impression of democratisation and decentralisation, whilst actually working to obscure and silence some important visions of the social world. Some ideas will gain visibility, others will be lost. These outcomes are unlikely to be a product of the value of these ideas, instead they are likely to be a product of the infrastructures and data circulations of which they are a part. As well as the problems of voice within such a din, we need to give some thought to the way that algorithms are filtering knowledge and directing it towards audiences. We need to think about how these algorithms shape the knowledge that we (and our audiences) might encounter. However convenient and revealing they may be, we certainly don't want to leave it solely to the sorting and filtering power of algorithms to decide what knowledge 'finds us'. Similarly, we might need to think about how our research is tagged. Metadata classifications inevitably shape the way that material is found, they shape search outcomes and the associations between different types of content. Tagging is already coming to order and organise academic knowledge. This is not about the keywords that we think should classify our work and that sit comfortably underneath our abstract. Rather, this is a ground-up classification of our work, with the audience participating in

tagging our outputs themselves and thus shaping how they will be found (or lost) and interpreted. We could continue, we might imagine the impact of being retweeted and reblogged, and how this might open-up or close-down new networks of actors. We might then also begin to think about how our work is captured in audio or video form, and how the subsequent Youtube clips are shared and commented upon. We might think about how our blog posts are responded to and where these responses might lead. We might think about the way our ideas will be played with, cut-up and pasted into new constellations of ideas on Tumblr, Pinterest, Instagram, Bundlr or any of the other sites within which cultural odds-and-ends might be grouped and stored. This is really only the beginning of the remediation of academic knowledge and its communication.

It should be made clear that the types of new media infrastructures outlined here are far from neutral or passive, they are actually extremely active and thoughtful. We can no longer imagine that we are communicating research in an environment in which our ideas, or data, amble continually forward in a slow linear stroll. Rather our findings, even those published in old fashioned journals – which now have blogs and Twitter feeds attached and whose publishers are looking to increase impact factors through predictive recommendation and the like – are also being introduced to the chaotic maelstrom of contemporary media. The result is that our research will take on this vitality and will be caught in the currents, which might be simultaneously unnerving and invigorating. Some ideas will be washed away, unnoticed, others will find a significant audience, others may have a profound and surprising journey through networks. The outcomes will be unpredictable, but all will be a product of the politics of circulation that defines contemporary media forms.

We need to pay some attention to the circulation of academic knowledge in this setting, and we need to develop an awareness of how encounters with this knowledge are already being shaped by the new media infrastructures that are remediating academic life. Just because it looks like we are able to communicate our ideas directly to a potential audience doesn't mean that it will ultimately be heard. Academics may need to turn towards those working with new media forms in order to understand their own working conditions and the potential implications of this remediation. We might need to start with the materiality of new media infrastructures and then try to understand exactly how the politics of circulation is shaping the communication and dissemination of our knowledge and ideas. At least then we will have a better sense of the context in which we are attempting to forge new types of dialogue with the social world.

*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.*

## About the Author

**David Beer** is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of York, UK. You can read more about the themes covered in this piece in his recent book [Popular Culture and New Media: The Politics of Circulation](#). The arguments of this book have also been developed in the short article 'Public Geographies and the Politics of Circulation'. You can find his blog at [thinkingculture.wordpress.com](http://thinkingculture.wordpress.com)

- Copyright © The Author (or The Authors) - Unless otherwise stated, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Unported 3.0 License.