Fast scholarship is not always good scholarship: relevant research requires more than an online presence.

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2013/10/11/fast-scholarship-is-not-always-good-scholarship/

10/11/2013

Blogging and social media are tools to facilitate engagement, but are they in danger of being treated as ends in themselves? **Catherine Durose** *and* **Katherine Tonkiss** *argue for more awareness on how the research process can democratise knowledge. Rather than quickly responding to recent events, scholars should look towards sustained engagement with the participants of research and those affected by it.*

The feminist pop culture magazine, Bitch, recently signposted its Facebook readers to the excellent post 'Against Efficiency Machines' by Mimi Thi Nguyen on her blog, Threads and Circuits. In the post, Thi Nguyen describes her growing 'ambivalence' towards blogging as a means of building the public relevance of academic practice. That we were provoked by a blog post, which we found through social media and we are choosing to respond to it via a post on a different blog, shows that we share a belief that social media can make important interventions and facilitate dialogue within and beyond the academy. But, as blogging and tweeting become more established, and indeed expected, as ways of demonstrating our relevance and sharing our research, it is worth taking a more critical perspective on what it really delivers and what this means for how we understand our role as scholars and potentially as public intellectuals.

Filling the relevance gap

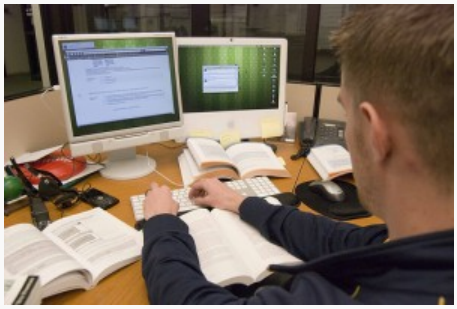

Image credit: Mr Stein (CC BY-NC-SA)

Academic research has long been challenged by a perception of a 'relevance gap'; that is, it fails to prioritise and engage issues of social importance and communicate research in a way that the wider public feel is relevant to their lives. Such challenges, together with the demands of demonstrating 'impact' in the latest Research Excellent Framework (REF) exercise, have begun to revitalise debate within the academy about how to democratise knowledge (and its production).

Matthew Flinders' idea of 'triple writing' has gained some traction. He argues for distilling academic research into more digestible and accessible forms; for example, through blogging, as a way of demonstrating relevance and broadening reach. In parallel, tweeting is increasingly expected as a way of demonstrating engagement with current affairs, in order to show that academics can quickly respond to moving events. Being conversant in these mediums is now an expected component of an academic profile. However, doing research in the same way but then writing it up differently does not necessarily deal with the challenge of relevance. The research agenda, the questions asked and how they are answered remains solely determined by the academic, not those informing or who may be affected by the research. Being relevant perhaps presents a more fundamental challenge to our research practice.

Often academic use of social media is about 'broadcasting' rather than listening or engaging in dialogue. Too often we are concerned by the number of hits our blog posts receive, rather than utilising blogs and social media as platforms for discussion of research beyond the ivory tower. Online presence is utilised as evidence of relevance in itself, rather than a tool to facilitate that relevance through sustained engagement. As Thi Nguyen notes in her post, this increasing emphasis on how often we blog and how many hits we get assumes that public relevance is achieved by a commitment to *form* rather the *content*, which reduces 'our creative and imaginative possibilities to the *performance* of claims to relevance'. Does blogging, then, too often mean a continued absence of the research

participant from research practice? Is it less a process of democratising knowledge than talking into the void?

Time to be relevant

The demand for rapid response, or what the Manifesto for Slow Scholarship has labelled 'fast scholarship' – 'quick, off the cuff – fresh – but not the product of much cogitation, comparison or contextualisation' – has implications for the kind of scholarship which we demonstrate to be valuable, and for our roles as scholars.

Nguyen links her doubts about blogging 'as imperative for scholarly relevance' to neoliberal demands for 'flexible subjects, immaterial labour, round-the-clock consumption and the commodification of the self'. Does the expectation to be continuously relevant undermine or inhibit our ability to be able to cogitate, compare and contextualise? The author of the Manifesto for Slow Scholarship, John Lutz, recounts 'taking 17 years from the start of a PhD to the publication of the book which had its origins in the dissertation', the book went on to win the Harold Adams Innis prize for the best book in the Social Sciences in Canada.

The ability of academics to devote long periods of time to the production of scholarly works is not the only potential problem associated with the demand for relevance. Research conducted by the Universities and Colleges Union in 2012 suggests that stress levels amongst academics are growing. Indeed, levels are considerably higher for academics than those of the general working population, 'as a result of heavy workloads, management issues and a long-hours culture'. Maintaining continuous online presence may not only fail to address the issue of relevance in academia, it may also be adding to already increasing workplace pressures.

So, if blogging and tweeting are only part of the answer to the challenge of relevance, and can be a distraction rather than a demonstration of relevance, what's the alternative?

Generating relevance

This post isn't intended as a call for pulling up the drawbridge to the ivory tower, but rather to recognise that 'fast scholarship' is not always good scholarship. Time is not only important to producing highly esteemed academic work. It is also crucial to building trust and relationships which are at the core of a more engaged form of scholarship and more participatory approaches to research. To conclude, we want to start a conversation about how we can deliver relevance by transforming our research practice and using social media:

1. Relevance is generative

Claims to relevance through blogging and tweeting are often reactive – they discuss events that have passed or present research which has already been completed and published. However, greater relevance may be achieved through thinking about our engagement beyond academia as generative. Rather than simply disseminating our findings to a wider audience and risking talking into the void, a genuine democratisation of knowledge could be developed by thinking innovatively about how to engage the participants of research and those affected by it in our research practice as it happens.

2. Slogs and sleets

The goal of blogging and tweeting at a pace with moving events may be unsustainable and undesirable. In his manifesto, Lutz argues that if current academic engagement with social media often consists of 'quick, gut responses', then 'slogs' – short thoughtful essays, perhaps a few times a year – rather than 'blogs'; and 'sleets' – carefully crafted sentences or thoughts, which capture a complex thought and inspire others, akin to a haiku – rather than 'tweets', may be other ways forward.

3. Shaping the conditions of our own practice

The time is particularly right at the moment because, with the REF exercise now drawing to a close, there is an

opportunity for academics to shape the conditions of the next round. This is an opportunity to reflect on the value that we place on substantive contributions and slow scholarship.

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 Authors

Catherine Durose *is Director of Research in the Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) at the University of Birmingham. Catherine is interested in challenging research practice through using co-productive and participatory approaches. Her research in this area has been funded by the AHRC's Connected Communities programme and published in Community Development Journal and Environment and Planning C (forthcoming).*

Katherine Tonkiss *is a Research Fellow in the School of Government and Society at the University of Birmingham. Her research interests are focused on the study of citizenship and democracy in diverse societies. Her first monograph, Migration and Identity in a Post-National World, was published recently by Palgrave Macmillan.*