

*Special Paper*

## **Social media for Academics and Early Career Researchers: An Interview with Dr Mark Carrigan**

Maria Tsapali & Tanya M. Paes  
Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, UK  
corerj@educ.cam.ac.uk

Social media is becoming an integral part of academic life and more academics utilise platforms such as Twitter to communicate about their work. But how can social media platforms be used most effectively and what are some of the common pitfalls? How can early career researchers develop an academic narrative through social media? In this special paper, Dr Mark Carrigan, author of Social Media for Academics, will outline how academics and early career researchers can use social media to create an academic identity, promote their work, generate impact, and engage the public with their research.

*Mark Carrigan is a digital sociologist at the University of Cambridge and The Sociological Review Foundation. His research explores how the proliferation of platforms is reshaping social life, particularly in relation to the social sciences and their role within and beyond the university. He is internationally recognised as a leading expert on the role of social media within higher education. He is social media editor of the International Journal of Social Research Methodology and associate editor of Civic Sociology. He is a member of the editorial boards of Discover Society, Applied Social Theory and Social Research Practice. He is a trustee of the Social Research Association, a research associate at the LSE's Public Policy Group and a member of the Centre for Social Ontology.*

### **INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL MEDIA**

*In this section Mark introduces the audience to social media, gives examples of commercial and non-commercial social media platforms designed for academics and talks about their rapidly evolving role in academic life.*

#### **Given your experience in social media and the second edition release of your book Social Media for Academics, how would you define social media?**

It is one of those phrases that everyone uses, and most people know what is meant when they encounter its use, yet it's quite a difficult term to define. If media are something which mediates between people in some way, then how could media be anything other than social? It is also often used in a way that loses sight of predecessors to what we now call "social media" such as bulletin boards and mailing lists which are still popular and prominent within the academy. I would like to define social media in a way that can encompass all that. However, in terms of how 'social media' tends to be used, it is typically restricted to a certain cluster of commercial platforms which all intend to facilitate the transmission, circulation and reception of content. There are some non-commercial alternatives, such as Mastodon and Humanities Commons, which have been developed in part and in response to these mass commercial platforms. But the commercial platforms largely define the common understanding of social media.

#### **What are the current main social media platforms that academia can use?**

There are the popular platforms which are intended for a general audience and many academics might use in a private capacity. For instance, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Pinterest or Instagram. When they use them in a more professional way, it tends to be a specific use of a

service designed to be used in different ways by different kinds of people. There are also specifically academic social networking platforms like academia.edu, and Research Gate, Mendeley to a lesser extent and, as mentioned, Humanities Commons, a non-commercial social media platform. There are three subtypes of social media platforms: (i) non-commercial platforms designed specifically for academics; (ii) commercial platforms designed for academics; and (iii) commercial platforms designed for everyone.

### **What is the evolving role of social media in higher education?**

The evolving role of social media is very interesting because when I started a PhD in 2008, it was still in its infancy and was largely invisible within universities, beyond interaction in peer networks. Now it is increasingly prominent. I am very interested in how we utilize it at events such as conferences where there are numerous ways in which we see social media in a room, even if indirectly. Increasingly, particularly in some fields and disciplines in UK universities and more widely, people feel expected to engage on social media and that is an interesting change from when it was something people had to advocate for in the face of mass scepticism. Increasingly it is coming to be seen as, if not something that everyone does, the kind of thing that scholars *should* do.

### **WHY SHOULD ACADEMICS USE SOCIAL MEDIA?**

*In this section Mark outlines how social media can be used by academics to publicise their work, build networks, manage information and demonstrate impact.*

### **How can social media be beneficial for academics?**

There are lots of ways in which social media can be beneficial for academics. It can help increase your visibility within your field, encourage people to read your publications, keep up to date with developments, build wider professional networks and collaborate with groups outside the academy. But it also makes a more open, collaborative and interdisciplinary form of scholarship possible by empowering scholarly networks and leaving them less dependent on the traditional gatekeepers of academic life. Therefore, I think we need to strike a balance between focusing on how individual academics might benefit from using these channels and how it might enhance scholarly culture as a whole.

### **How can academics use social media to promote their work?**

The most obvious way to use social media to promote your work is simply to use it to *tell* people about your work. The problem is this often is not very interesting. For instance, when more senior academics take to social media for the first time – this is very common with Twitter, for instance – you will see people announcing events which they are going to be keynoting at or loudly informing people about their new book which is coming out. There is nothing wrong with that, but it misses something significant about the character of the conversations on these platforms, which is that they reward substance. If you are talking solely about something you have already done, it doesn't have that substance. Social media can certainly be used by academics as a way of increasing the flow of information. You are helping ensure that people know that you have done this thing they might be interested in. However, there is a huge layer of potential activity beyond that, which is much more interesting and involves sharing what you are doing, putting it in context, sharing the evolving story of the work you are engaged in and why it matters to you. Rather than simply saying, "I have done this, you should look at it".

**How can social media be utilised to build networks and get in touch with colleagues or people who are interested in your work?**

Many academics have a distaste for self-publicising, in the same way they do for the notion of networking. I understand this, and I share it. One of the exciting things about social media is that it allows you to ‘network’ without being creepy or inauthentic. The term ‘networking’ often has the connotation of seeking out people who are *useful* to you, standing at a party while looking over the shoulder of the people you are talking to in case someone more useful to you walks into the room. For all the problems there are about how social media platforms are designed, one valuable feature is the way in which it encourages convergence between people who share similar interests. I have always found that the best way to build an audience on social media is to talk in whatever format fits the platform (style, tone, length etc) about what you are doing and why it matters to you. If you are talking through social media about what matters to you, all other things being equal, you will start to find other people to whom these things also matter. Certainly, there are many issues about the attention economy which condition who gets heard and by how many people, but I maintain the underlying trend is nonetheless real. This is really interesting because I think it quite easily opens up a kind of networking that is based on shared concerns and commitments rather than reciprocal usefulness. In a very instrumentalised and metricised academy this can be a powerful bulwark against competitive individualism. It helps foreground the things that we share, the reason we get up in the morning, and the reason we do our research. In some ways, it is the opposite of networking in the aforementioned sense of self-interested manipulation.

**Do you think social media can also be used by teachers and educators to engage the public?**

The potential is there, and this is one of the reasons why social media is being encouraged in many universities. There is the necessity of being seen to produce societal impact through research, and then quantify and demonstrate that impact. Many people see that social media has some role to play there but the question is what is that role? It is often overstated, and I am concerned that people have excessive expectations that will inevitably be dashed by the mundane reality of using social media as an academic. Social media can be used effectively to engage with publics if you have a very concretely defined audience, with a clear sense of why they would be interested, and what you are trying to do with them. It’s necessary to have a strategic plan about the way in which you are using it to build a connection with them over time. Crucially, it will likely be more powerful when used to support face-to-face engagement rather than being an end in itself. I worry that some people see themselves as using social media to be a public intellectual; using social media to write a blog post or send out tweets and imagining themselves to be talking to the public at large. That is problematic because it is inaccurate – you are not talking to the public at large, you are talking to a subset of a subset of the people you are connected to on a given platform. It also inculcates a certain way of approaching social media, that we are intellectuals offering opinions from on high. It is rarely an effective strategy for building a following on a platform because it is often not very interesting to see people do this.

**WHAT TO BE CAUTIOUS OF WHEN USING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS**

*In this section Mark illustrates the common risks and pitfalls associated with the use of social media by academics including pressure to use them, lack of commonly agreed standards for their use, potential lack of public engagement and navigating their professional identity and busy schedules.*

**Have you identified any pitfalls or risks when using social media platforms?**

The one that I was preoccupied by for a long time was simply that people are overly enthusiastic and have expectations of what they will get out of it which are unlikely to be met; or, conversely, that people feel pressured into doing it thinking that this is what everyone is doing. Social media platforms are often presented as vast, fast-moving, vibrant spaces and this helps construct them as something which academics need to do in order to keep up to date. Over-enthusiasm is a problem but so is a false sense of digital engagement as something necessary and unavoidable. The way we talk about social media is important for these reasons, as it often contributes to these unhelpful understandings of how academics should approach them. We also need scholarly standards, and this will help address the second pitfall, which is a sense of normlessness. We often oscillate between assuming there is a right and a wrong way to use these platforms and that everyone knows it other than us. There is a recognition of chaos that emerges when we see that actually there are not any commonly agreed upon standards, whereas there is almost a universal consensus on something like peer review within the academy. There is nothing akin to that although there are competing views about what is appropriate for social media.

That ties into the third pitfall which is the risk that as academics embrace social media, particularly with a view to public engagement, they may find that actually the public not only might not be interested in what they are doing, but actually might be actively hostile to it. This might be a response to *who* academics are rather than what they are doing. The risks here are faced much more by some than others; as a middle-class white male, I very rarely get trolled online. Women and people of colour engaging online are much more likely to, at the very least, have to deal with a barrage of implicit requests to justify their status and attempts to explain to them things which they already know. This can escalate into really obscene forms of abuse, which are in some cases, straightforwardly criminal. If we see social media in an individualised way, then individual academics bear these risks themselves. We need scaffolding to support and surround this kind of activity. The way in which social media tends to be talked about isn't helpful for this at all.

**How do academics maintain their professional identity if they use social media? Is it an easy thing to navigate?**

I have never found it easy to navigate simply because the dichotomy between personal and professional has never completely made sense to me. I have always tended to see it more as a case of different zones of my life. There are some I'm inclined to talk about online, there are some I am willing to talk about if it is relevant and there are some that just are not things I want to share. In some ways this cuts *across* the boundary between public and private. When people do try to enforce that distinction, they often do it by using different platforms with different purposes. A platform like Facebook is often seen as obviously private, whereas Twitter is regarded as more public-facing. The danger in this is that it multiplies the platforms that we try to engage on and diminishes the time we have available for it. It is also quite tricky in practice and this points to an interesting sociological shift in how personal life works. As personal networks become more diffuse, particularly as we work in different contexts and we move around a lot, the boundary between someone who is a colleague or a friend, for instance, can be tricky to maintain in practice. It is not that it cannot be enforced, it is that it takes work to enforce it and if you want to do it, you have to think from the outset about the categories, who fits in them, under what conditions will you allow someone to follow you or not. The more prepared you are to answer these questions, the easier it is to enforce this distinction.

**Given time constraints, how can social media be built into an academic's professional schedule?**

If it becomes something you to add to a to do list, you are unlikely to enjoy using it and you are unlikely to sustain it. The more it can be part of what it is you do, the more it can be built into activities themselves, the easier it is use it in a sustainable way and it can often save your time. Two of my favourite examples are organising events, and the kind of prewriting processes that involves reflecting on things that you are reading. For organising events, if you build a social media following with plenty of people who are interested in the topic of the events you are organising, it can save enormous amount of time. For pre-writing, reflective writing through blogging that precedes more formal writing, I find that the more immediately I do this the quicker it becomes. This is often the most enjoyable writing I do. It is really quick, because when you have that idea in your mind, you can often just knock it out, externalise your thoughts onto the page in an almost automatic fashion. It lays the groundwork for longer form writing and gives concrete form to what would otherwise be a diffuse process of thinking things through.

In both cases, social media has saved me time rather than taken it up. This is a combination of the properties of the platforms and how they've become routine parts of my working life. Nonetheless I became very interested in the question of when in the day academics use social media because I often find it intrusive when writing. The fact that it is there, and it is accessible means you can always find yourself drifting towards it. It can be something that encourages distraction and procrastination and a lot depends on how you control the use of it. The more you can ensure you use it at times that work for you and you do not fall into using it at time that are getting in the way of what you are trying to do, the more likely is that you will enjoy it over time and it will not cause problems. That is a difficult balance to strike particularly because these platforms were designed to encourage us to use them more. They are intended to be rewarding, they are measuring the extent of our engagement, the ups and downs over time, and in many ways, we are working against the system if we are trying to be cautious about the time we spend on these platforms. Tools like Freedom and Moment can be exceptionally helpful if you're struggling with this. But unless you understand your own habits, it's hard to use them effectively.

**ADVICE FOR YOUNG RESEARCHERS**

*This section is dedicated to graduate students and early career researchers who want to start utilising social media to promote their academic identity. Mark gives practical advice on how to cultivate an online presence by building a personal website.*

**Let us think about young researchers now and imagine someone who wants to start using social media as an outlet for academic scholarship. What are the first steps or which platform would you recommend early researchers start with?**

It is easy to forget the importance of university webpages in this kind of discussions. One of the powerful features of university websites is that it has a very high Google ranking. This could be a base where you lay out something about yourself and you link to social media profiles. This is an important way to ensure that if someone searched for your name, they will be able to find you. However, there are problems with university websites because they are often very restrictive. In some places you cannot do the updates yourself, so it is good to have your own website as well. In the creative industries, this has been common practise for a long time. You know any aspiring artist, photographer, film maker will have their own website and it is strange that the practice is still relatively rare amongst early career researchers in academia.

To have your own website with your own domain name can be very powerful. There are a whole range of ways of doing this. Google Sites is something straightforward but aesthetically not so pleasing. Services such as Squarespace or Wix allow you to quickly build your own website that can be very attractive. Wordpress is an immensely flexible option, even if you don't want to use the site as a blog.

**What content would you include in a personal website of an early career researcher who may not have many publications?**

You can talk about what you are doing, why you are working on this topic rather than others. You have to create a narrative about yourself that works for you. It can be a trial and error process to do this. Have a go at telling a story about your research for the first time and you'll get a sense of whether this story feels right to you. Does it feel inauthentic to you? If so, you can have another go until you construct a narrative which feels like it conveys something of what motivates you as a researcher. This kind of writing often feels new to people who do it but it's not. Your CV is a kind of a biography, as is the publications list you build up, albeit an alienated one conveying *what* you have done but not *why* you have done it. What's key to developing a sense of professional identity is how you locate yourself in relation to disciplines and fields, in relation to intellectual movements, in relation to objects of research. It is going to change over time but the more you can practise writing this kind of narrative, the better. It can be the bedrock of a website which you supplement over time with things you do publicly that you can point to as you do them. If you are a senior professor, it might make sense for the website to be full of content. For instance, if someone was looking at the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander's website, they would find an enormous list of publications and links to downloadable PDFs for almost all of them. If you're going to Jeffrey Alexander's site, you likely already know who he is, and you are looking because you want something from it so that focus on the content is very useful. The more junior you are, the more important the narrative becomes, and the narrative becomes the context in which you can add in this content as you produce it.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

*In this section Mark offers the final pieces of advice to academics about how they can incorporate social media in their research and find further resources, as well as stresses the importance of reflecting on their aims of using social media.*

**What other resources can academics consult should they want to develop their social media presence and learn more about it?**

There is a small literature opening up in this area. My former colleagues at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Amy Mollett, Cheryl Brumley, Chris Gilson, and Sierra Williams wrote a book called Communicating your Research for Social Media, which has a particular focus on research communication. Arlene Stein and Jessie Daniels wrote a book called Going Public for Social Scientists which extends beyond social media. I also recommend a book called The Public Professor: How to Use Your Research to Change the World by Mary Virginia Lee Badgett. There are also other books that offer a lot of insight in this area. The Ideas Industry by Daniel W. Drezner refers to how what the author terms the 'marketplace of ideas' is being transformed and throughout the book there are some very useful insights that are applicable to academics using social media. The Research Impact Handbook by Mark S. Reed is specifically about research impact, with a useful section on social media. As well as books, the LSE Impact Blog has many resources that are new and interesting. There are two blogs called ProfHacker and GradHacker that have a lot of useful ideas. Conditionally

Accepted is a blog about inequality in higher education, and regularly has some really important information about social media. Two more blogs that have a more doctoral focus and extends beyond social media would be Pat Thomson's blog Patter, and The Thesis Whisperer edited by Inger Mewburn. In both blogs social media is not the main focus but they often have wonderful insights into social media and sometimes write directly about the topic.

**If you had to give one and only one piece of advice to academics about their use of social media, what would you say?**

Reflect on what you are doing. If you are not clear about why you are doing what you are doing, then the risk is it will be a waste of your time. This is quite significant and the clearer you can be about what it is you want to achieve, the more likely it is you're going to achieve it. The most mundane risk of social media for academics is simply getting drawn into activity which does not really help you in any way and which you do not get much out of. In other words, it might all prove to be a waste of your time if you're not careful.