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Using social media to build your network



Chapter themes

This chapter will:

- Explore how you can use social media to build and expand an academic network
- Discuss how Twitter chats work and the value they offer
- Examine the possibilities and challenges of live tweeting at conferences
- Consider how online connections can develop into face-to-face meetings

Much as the previous chapter reluctantly adopted the word ‘publicise’, in this chapter we turn to ‘networking’. It’s a horrible term with unwelcome connotations. It nonetheless designates something important for which social media provide uniquely potent resources. There’s also the real possibility that social media will bring about profound changes in how academic networks function. As Weller (2011) notes, it has usually been through meetings at conferences and comparable events that academics meet and extend their network of peers. Academic networks tended to be limited to those with whom one interacted recurrently,

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if not necessarily regularly. Yet as he explains, '[o]nline social networks allow interaction with a wide group of peers ... often through relatively light touch mechanisms' and so '[w]ithout having to attend every conference in their field, it is possible for scholars to build up networks of peers who perform the same role in their scholarly activity as the networks founded on face-to-face contact' (Weller 2011: loc 172–179).

This has certainly been my own experience, and as this chapter will explain, social media make it easy to build and develop international connections within and beyond your field of a breadth and quality that would have formerly required vigorous participation in the 'conference circuit' over many years (with all the time, energy and funding that would require). But it would be mistaken to cast this in either/or terms, as if face-to-face meetings are being *replaced* by digital networks. It would also obscure the intersection between them, for instance the way in which institutional affiliation serves as a marker of privilege online (Nickel 2011).

Arguably the most prominent manifestation of social media within higher education in recent years has been the role of Twitter at conferences, but influences extend much more widely than this. In this chapter, we discuss academic networks in general and how these can be integrated with social networks. Then we discuss the ways in which social media can help you discover things through your networks, as well as how they can facilitate collaboration. The second half of the chapter focuses upon how social media can help you expand your networks and enhance your existing connections. Much of the focus here is on Twitter, simply because the way in which it is rapidly becoming mainstream at events has radical consequences for academic networking, many of them hugely exciting, but this is also creating numerous problems which remain contentious and have the potential to become ever more so.

So what is 'networking'?

To talk of 'networking' raises the inevitable question of what your 'network' is and why it matters. This is a theme which cuts through the book given that the network is so crucial to social media: without a certain critical mass of users, it's difficult for social media platforms to be useful to anyone. What's the point of sending 140-character messages, sharing audio clips or self-publishing articles if no one is going to find them? Social media offer endless opportunities

to communicate with your network and expand it in the process. But this doesn't really answer the question of what the value of this actually is. In part, it can simply be a matter of the enjoyment of sharing things you've produced, something which the media scholar David Gauntlett (2011) conveys powerfully in his book on creative production, *Making is Connecting*, which situated this aspect of contemporary digital culture in terms of a much longer history of *craft*.

One of the difficulties with the notion of 'networking' is that it can seem to imply that such an activity is extrinsic to scholarly activity, such that one does one's real work and then (reluctantly) looks outwards towards their connections. What this leaves out is the vast majority of academic work that involves collaboration in one form or another. Gauntlett expresses this nicely, suggesting three ways in which 'making is connecting':

- Making is connecting because you have to connect things together (materials, ideas, or both) to make something new
- Making is connecting because acts of creativity usually involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with other people
- Making is connecting because through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environment

While Gauntlett is talking about creative production in general, the same points can be extended to scholarship. In fact his discussion of 'craft', a term not often used to apply to the work that goes on within the academy, offers a useful reminder of the genuinely creative work that is undertaken by academics (albeit frequently within conditions which frustrate that creativity or at least make it difficult to experience it as such). By this he means a process of discovery, often involving new ideas which emerge through acts of creation. This helps bring people together through their shared acts of creation, consolidating bonds between collaborators which take on a life of their own in the outcomes of this work together. This language of craft, which Sennett (2008) talks about in terms of *doing things well for their own sake*, provides a nice counterweight to some of the instrumentalising tendencies which the contemporary academy can give rise to.

Talk of 'networks' and 'networking' can be off-putting. I like Gauntlett's account because it captures how networks are integral to creative work: *making*

is connecting. It follows from this that *connecting* can be a preliminary to *making*. As Weller (2011: loc 172) puts it, '[n]etworks of peers are important in scholarship – they represent the people who scholars share ideas with, collaborate with on research projects, review papers for, discuss ideas with and get feedback from'. Networks are integral to scholarship. The possibilities which social media open up for networking can have hugely important implications for your scholarship, though they also pose challenges which we'll discuss. But first, it's important not to forget your existing network when you begin to engage with social media.

How can I integrate social media into my existing networks?

One of the most obvious ways in which social media can be used by academics is simply to communicate with people they already know. This is so simple, it feels slightly silly to point it out. But if you want to enjoy using social media, ensure you connect with people you already know. For social networking sites, particularly those designed specifically for academics, identifying these existing connections can be a quick and easy way to get started. It will often give you immediate access to the archived publications of people you're interested in. In the case of Academia.edu, the platform has been designed to be very effective in helping people connect automatically to others within their institutions. If you're new to Twitter, following those people you already know can be a way of getting the hang of a notoriously confusing service: the point of Twitter becomes obvious as you begin to use it. But it might be time consuming to do all this manually. Some services are able to use your social graph, as described in the last chapter, in order to automatically invite your existing contacts to follow you on a network. This can of course be a rather blunt instrument: it doesn't follow that because someone once e-mailed you that you want to connect with them on social media. It's also easy to forget the effectiveness of an e-mail signature as a way of communicating information to people you're in contact with. If you're using a social media platform in a wholly or partially professional capacity then why not add these details to your e-mail signature?

There are lots of perhaps rather obvious ways of ensuring you integrate social media into your existing networks. But it's possible that the character of these relationships will change through being incorporated into your network in this way:

Twitter has enabled its users to become more aware of certain everyday aspects of fellow users' lives. For example, when someone follows the tweets of people met at conferences, s/he will most likely be exposed to some combination of their daily music listening habits, sports interests, current location, and shopping wish lists, amongst other things. (Murthy 2012: 16)

Murthy suggests that many people see this as a way to get to know others in a more 'multi-dimensional' way. However for some it might be uncomfortable. It's certainly a change. Twitter is changing conferences but it is also changing existing professional relationships within the academy as well as new relationships which form *through* conferences, in ways which could have surprising consequences in the long term, at least if current trends continue. I discuss these possibilities in the final chapter, suggesting that we might see a *new collegiality* arise in this way, beginning with diminishing the pluralistic ignorance which leads many in higher education to underestimate the difficulties peers face, simply because they do not discuss them (Becker 2008). My experience has been that what at points appears to be 'shop talk' – an inevitable function of intensive interaction within professional worlds – can on occasion come to look more like consciousness-raising, or something surprisingly close to it (Boden and Epstein 2011).

How can my networks help me discover relevant things?

The value of social media networks isn't just a matter of getting some of the upsides of regular conference going without the crushing costs. My own enthusiasm comes in part from the seemingly endless array of things I discover through social media that are personally and professionally relevant: I can, without fail, find any number of interesting items in a few minutes spent browsing my Twitter feed. This follows quite naturally from what scholars actually *do* on Twitter: perhaps unsurprisingly, they tend to be scholarly things (Veletsianos 2012). I'm certainly not alone in the extent to which Twitter has broadened my horizons as a scholar through the sheer range and diversity of material I've discovered through it (Stewart 2015). This obviously raises problems of what to do with the things you discover, something we'll come to in a later chapter. But the key thing is to *follow people who interest you in some way*. If you do this, perhaps rather indiscriminately as I do, you'll inevitably find that people who interest you tend to post things that interest you. They might also post things that don't interest you. Or even offend you. Alternatively, it might be that the stream becomes too

fast, making it so impossible to keep up that it deprives Twitter of any enjoyment. In which case, it might be time to try and carefully reduce the number of people you're following. The point is that it's possible to exercise control over the quality of the material you encounter in this way, modulating your social networks in order to facilitate better discovery (Johnson 2012).

But discovery isn't something confined to Twitter. As Gregg (2006) suggests, we can see blogging as a form of 'conversational scholarship': opening up a space of interest-driven exchange that can often no longer be found in a stressed and stressful academy. Blogging in the style of Stuart Elden, who runs the popular *Progressive Geographies* blog, builds an audience through sharing interesting discoveries with readers, a dynamic which has been integral to blogging from its inception (Rosenberg 2010). If you encounter blogs that are pertinent to your work then seek out the bloggers themselves, who will usually link to their other social media accounts if they use them, as well as signing up to their blogs using RSS readers. There's a broader social aspect of blogging, sometimes overlooked, which can be helpful here as well. Many blogging platforms provide a place to link to other blogs. Following the success of Tumblr, WordPress introduced a 'follow' and 'reblog' function, allowing you to view updates from other people's blogs via the dashboard and automatically link to posts you liked via your own blog. This offers an easy way to begin to build a network around your blog. If you're a WordPress user then try to get into the habit of following other WordPress blogs you like when you come across them. These are all ways of building useful connections with people whose work is relevant to you. Other networks have the same potential. For instance, Ele Belfiore explained to me how she had regularly found the work of people who weren't on her radar by following research categories on Academia.edu.

How can social media help me expand my networks?

Earlier in this chapter, we discussed how social media can be integrated into your existing network. If you find yourself looking at Twitter, wondering 'who do I know?', it's inevitable that you'll look towards the people you already know well – friends, collaborators and colleagues. But your existing network will be broader than this, encompassing those you dimly recall having met, with whom it was formerly difficult to build connections unless you happened to meet again. Marwick (2014: 217) offers a helpful account of how social networks 'have created a semi-permanent address book of former co-workers, high

school friends, ex-boyfriends and girlfriends, distant family members, and other acquaintances whom users may rarely see'. How you relate to your school friends and ex-partners is thankfully beyond the purview of this book. But your acquaintances, at least your academic ones, represent a group of people with whom you might develop very rewarding relationships. What makes Twitter such an effective tool for professional networking is how readily it lends itself to registering these sorts of connections, with no social constraint upon who you follow. To 'friend' someone on Facebook implies some degree of familiarity, but no such connection is implied by 'following' someone on Twitter (Murthy 2012). To follow someone in this sense is a minimal unit of social connection, implying nothing more than *some* degree of interest or concern with the other and what they are doing. In other words, follow everyone you know who you find at all interesting. The interactive character of Twitter discussed earlier, in which all manner of ephemera tend to get aggregated together into a stream, means you sometimes get better acquainted with someone through a process that is almost osmotic: picking up details not only about *what* they're doing but also about *who* they are, without making any effort to seek this information out. Charlotte Mathieson told me how positively this had impacted upon her experience of conferences, allowing networks to coalesce that might otherwise have developed very slowly between people who only saw each other at an annual conference. As Ele Belfiore described it, 'Once you start a conversation, you realise there's a lot more in common than you thought'. It's much easier to interact professionally with people, for instance inviting them to speak at an event, after interacting on Twitter.

Potential Pitfalls

There are many services which claim to address this problem by offering to sell you Twitter followers. Though this might prove superficially appealing, it's actually a rather pointless transaction that not only leaves you out of pocket but also might damage your reputation. Buying followers is generally frowned upon and, crucially, it's usually easy to see when someone has done this. Depending on the service in question, the followers acquired for your account will be conspicuous by their artificiality. They will have no profile

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photo, no tweets, and little to no description. Even the more sophisticated services will have few tweets for each of these accounts and a window dressing for the profile which won't withstand even a moment's scrutiny. It might be that no one happens to skim through your Twitter followers, but it's possible to check this in other ways. Tools such as fakers.statuspeople.com offer an audit of any Twitter account to estimate a percentage of fake followers. For anyone familiar with Twitter, it's also possible to get a sense of this from the *follower to followed* ratio for a given account.

What's more important than this is that it's effectively pointless. The only outcome from handing over your money will be a superficial appearance of online popularity of a sort that will reflect extremely badly on you if anyone sees through the facade. The meaningful benefits of Twitter – the ability to communicate material quickly and effectively to an international audience – don't kick in if your followers are all fake accounts that you've purchased. They won't retweet or favourite your tweets. They won't care about your work. The only purpose they'll serve is to entrench you in a view of Twitter which misses the opportunities it offers for scholarly communication.

However the best way to extend your network is to help other people. To some this can be seen as an academic gift economy. To others it might look like free labour. No matter what your view is, written as someone who flips between the two, it undoubtedly works. Academic bloggers like Stuart Elden have accumulated what are vast audiences, at least in academic terms, through finding interesting material online and sharing it via their networks. As we'll see in later chapters, activity of this sort doesn't necessarily entail the time commitment which many would expect. But simply engaging, sharing your ideas and responding to those shared by others will inevitably help networks coalesce around you. I liked how Dave O'Brien phrased this in our discussion: 'It's just me having conversations about stuff that I find interesting'. Do this and the characteristics of social media described by boyd (2014) will mean people who share those interests will tend to congregate around you online, at least over time.

Nonetheless, there are some more structured activities which can help extend your network through social media. In the rest of this section, we'll discuss *Twitter chats* and *live tweeting*.

Twitter chats

Twitter chats are regular online ‘meetings’ at a specific time using a particular hashtag. For those familiar with the pre-social media internet, it’s effectively using Twitter to host a chat room. For instance #phdchat meets every Wednesday evening GMT with participants voting in advance on which topic relevant to PhD students to discuss. When a hashtag chat becomes very well established, it can often encourage participants to post messages using the relevant hashtag outside of the agreed meeting time. So for instance I intermittently found myself tagging tweets about writing my thesis with #phdchat during the final stages, even though I wasn’t a regular participant in the Twitter chat itself. I’d also occasionally tweet frustrations during what was, in the closing few months, an extremely frustrating process. Established hashtags such as this can be useful because they indicate a relevant audience which has gathered around a specific theme. For this very reason, it’s important not to use a hashtag too indiscriminately and instead to think carefully about the relevance of what you’re posting to the hashtag community. If you merely use that community for advertising, without participating in it or contributing to it, it’s likely the people involved will soon become frustrated and start screening out your tweets.

There are established Twitter chats for a surprisingly diverse range of topics. This perhaps reflects their usefulness in helping to build networks online: connecting with others who share an interest with you and establishing yourself as someone who can offer insights about it. Perhaps for the same reason they seem particularly conducive to professional use, possibly because these are the people most inclined to use Twitter in order to build a relevant network online. There’s no comprehensive and authoritative listing of Twitter chats that I know of, partly because they cover such a diverse range of topics and partly because it can be difficult to establish one to such a degree that it would merit inclusion on such a list. While it’s possible to find them via Google, for instance searching for “Twitter chat” + your specialism (retaining the quotation marks around the former term to search for the exact phrase because there’s an awful lot of pages on the internet which use the words ‘Twitter’ and ‘chat’), it’s also something you’ll likely stumble across through reading your timeline if you are following people who work in the same area as you. If you stumble across interesting conversations that are marked with a hashtag, click on that hashtag in order to check out other tweets marked with it. If you encounter people talking about a Twitter chat that sounds interesting but are unsure of the details then just ask

them for more information: it's inherent in the project of establishing a Twitter chat that you will be amenable to potential participants asking questions.

It's also possible to establish your own Twitter chat. Choosing an adequate hashtag is crucial and many of the same points apply here as when choosing one for an event: not too long, reasonably informative, and not already in use. It's also important to get the scope of the chat right: too narrow and it'll be hard to gather an audience, too diffuse and it'll be hard to get the chat established. It might be wise to recruit others at an early stage, at least if this is something you're considering in isolation rather than as part of a group, for instance by writing a blog post in which you put forward an idea for the chat and ask for potential collaborators to get in touch. If you're willing to expand a lot of energy on a project that is far from guaranteed to succeed, it may even be worth setting up a web page for the planned chat. This could also include points for discussion which you could draw upon to help you facilitate initial scheduled chats.

The challenge here is to ensure that enough people participate for the Twitter chat to have a purpose. This might take time and it's worth persisting even if the initial scheduled chats prove to be slightly dispiriting. After all, it'll only take a few participants to potentially get something off the ground because with each additional participant the visibility of the Twitter chat increases, and with it the potential draw for further participants. As well as carefully refining the intended topic and scope, it's worthwhile announcing the chat through as many channels as you have available to you: on a blog, Facebook, through your email signature, or even face to face! If you can ensure that those for whom the chat is potentially relevant both know about it and remember when it takes place, it's possible that numbers will increase over time through on-and-off participants who 'drop in' on occasion. Encouraging participation, for instance by polling to decide each week's topic in the manner of #phdchat, helps establish a community and a sense of belonging around the Twitter chat.

Live tweeting

While the discussion has been predominately about what you do *online*, many of the most exciting aspects of social media relate to how they are changing face-to-face interaction within the academy, as well as the relations that flow from it. The most conspicuous aspect of this is Twitter use at conferences. In some areas of the academy, live tweeting is becoming an increasingly significant aspect of conference culture. But what do we mean by 'live tweeting'?

In the most straightforward sense, it means participants at an event tweeting about it while that event is taking place. But there are a number of forms which this can take.

- Live tweeting can be an intermittent commentary or discussion about an event that is taking place. This ‘back channel’ might simply be friends or colleagues, already known to each other, using Twitter to discuss what is taking place without causing an interruption. Some events use ‘Twitter walls’ to bring this ‘back channel’ more into public view, though this is not without its problems, as discussed below.
- Live tweeting can be an attempt to summarise or offer an ongoing commentary upon an event, using Twitter to provide a running commentary of what is taking place. Increasingly, given the ubiquity of smartphones with high quality cameras, this might include taking pictures of the event. Some conferences now have designated live tweeters, representing the event in an official capacity, who aim to thoroughly summarise talks, often while avoiding personal commentary upon their content or quality.
- One of the more unexpected aspects of live tweeting can often be the meaningful participation of those who are not physically present at the event itself. It can be safely taken as a sign of successful live tweeting if those not in the room are able to indicate that they’re watching the hashtag with interest (‘Interesting stuff happening at #conference’) or even discuss some of the material summarised on it.

It’s important to recognise how contested this activity still is. For instance, Murthy (2012: 61–62) cites the example of the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory (CSHL) Biology of Genomes conference which ‘amended their conference rules and regulation to prohibit tweeting, blogging, and other Internet-based reporting during conferences unless express permission was obtained from the presenter being talked about’. As Murthy explains, all manner of concerns were expressed here: intellectual property, privacy, attacks upon presenters, dismissals of presentations. A few months before writing this, I found myself at a conference where having been happily tweeting away all morning, leading among other things to me meeting a political philosopher I had much in common with at the coffee break, the room was told at the start of an afternoon session that the speakers had requested there be no live tweeting for their roundtable. I found this slightly jarring, though this in turn gave me cause to recognise how rapidly live tweeting at conferences had become normalised to me to the extent that it didn’t even

occur to me for a second that anyone involved might have an objection to it. To have one person live tweeting inevitably encourages others to do so, even if there isn't an officially designated hashtag.

This is why it's becoming increasingly necessary for anyone organising an event to clarify their stance on Twitter in advance, including consulting with those presenting if necessary. After all, you'd presumably do this if you wanted to record their talks (at least I hope you would) so why is Twitter any different? But things can go wrong with Twitter at conferences. A few years ago this was the subject of an intense discussion on the #TwitterGate hashtag which has been helpfully archived using Storify (Koh 2012). Kolowich (2012) summarises these concerns:

Scholars often present unpublished work at conferences. But while they may be willing to expose an unpolished set of ideas to a group of peers academics may be less eager to have those peers turn around and broadcast those ideas to the world.

It was once possible for conference organisers to exercise a degree of control over what leaves the room. This was *far* from absolute, something which can risk being forgotten in concerns about the ethics of live tweeting. How did you know what people did after they left the room? How did you know what they were *really* doing while they were in the room? Pursuing these questions too far would be silly. My only point is to stress that this is a matter of *degree*, or rather the likelihood of something inopportune taking place, rather than a sudden injection of risk into what was previously a risk-free environment. But what exactly *is* the risk here? In some circles, it might be a matter of corporate confidentiality. In others, a sense of provisional findings been circulated too early or data unsuitable for publication being exposed to a much wider audience than was intended. The more diffuse concern is that, as Fullick (2012) summarises, 'academics "use" other people's work in social media venues like blogs and Twitter to build their own reputation and academic "brand", and ultimately to benefit their own academic careers (ostensibly at the expense of others)'. As she goes on to note, many (including myself) would make the opposing argument – that live tweeting in fact brings exposure to other scholars and to what is being said. Furthermore, as MJ Barker put it to me, this issue can be seen in terms of accessibility: live tweeting allows those who cannot attend the event, for instance if they are unable to travel for financial or physical reasons, to nonetheless participate remotely.

But what form should live tweeting take? A useful perspective on this question comes from the eLearning team at the London School of Economics (Lingard 2010), who conducted an interesting analysis of hashtag contents at the LSE

Teaching Day 2010 for which they heavily promoted live tweeting. Twitter was still at an early stage in 2010 and 249 tweets were made on the hashtag, including 29 people: 17 LSE staff and students and 13 non-LSE participants. They found 43% of tweets to be descriptive reports of what was taking place in the room, 29% were evaluating the event and presentations, 16% introduced additional information which provided a context or background to the presentations that were taking place, 7% were assistance tweets providing announcements or answers to questions, and 6% of tweets were people asking questions (Lingard 2010). Though the activity on hashtags at many conferences now vastly outstrips that which occurred at the teaching day, this gives a really useful overview of the composition of a hashtag. The best way to gain a sense of what it might look like in practice though is to actually view a hashtag for an event, if you haven't already.

Underlying all this is the thorny question of consent. Should speakers at an event be asked to consent to live tweeting? If so what form should that take? These are extremely difficult questions which have, as yet, no clear answers. The most pressing aspect of them is the dissemination of the work being presented: should live tweeters ask for permission before tweeting material from a talk? The potential problems here are rather obvious. The activity of a live tweeter can radically change the proposition involved in speaking, with a talk to a room full of people expanding into a potentially global audience, sometimes even without the knowledge of the speaker. Obviously it's unlikely that live tweets from an academic conference would 'go viral', though the possibility of wide circulation should not be discounted, but the point is that a speaker has a right to know the potential scope of the audience they're addressing. These difficulties become particularly pronounced when you consider the possibility of misinterpretation and misattribution: it takes a lot of care to ensure you attribute ideas correctly when live tweeting, not least of all because of how easy it is to forget that most people will have no context for the tweet. While it's certainly possible, perhaps even likely, that the interpretation made by audience members of a talk might diverge from the intention of the speaker, live tweeting makes these misunderstandings peculiarly public, fixing in text an interpretation of a talk that the speaker might object to.

These are key issues but the risk is that we come to frame Twitter at conferences as a problem to be solved, whereas it offers some enormously exciting opportunities for expanding and transforming what participation entails (McGeeney 2015). This is why it is so important that those organising academic events take the lead in establishing ground rules. Given the proliferation of tweeting within higher education, it is becoming problematic for event organisers to

avoid engaging with these questions. In doing so they leave the door open to problematic applications of this exciting though challenging technology, with the risk of detracting (potentially seriously) from the enjoyment of their participants. If the event in question is a ‘work in progress’ event where people are likely to be sharing material that they would wish to avoid being disseminated widely, then this is something with obvious implications for rules relating to live tweeting. So too if the event in question is a major event within a field, one in which participants are likely to be networking, in which case encouraging the use of Twitter is likely to be welcome. These are questions which can only be answered in response to the specific aims and objectives of a given event. It’s important that organisers think about the practical steps they could take to establish guidelines for Twitter use which are appropriate to their event and will either encourage certain forms of use or discourage others. These might include:

- Providing delegates with guidelines for attribution, for example including a speaker’s name in each tweet
- Circulating Twitter handles in a delegate pack, in the same way as many events include the e-mail addresses of delegates
- Curating Twitter lists (on the platform itself) for delegates and speakers, perhaps including both in the same list or separating them

In this sense encouraging Twitter use at a conference can be extremely inclusive, at least for those who are using it. An intriguing way of including those who don’t use the service themselves is to include a *Twitter wall* – a visual display collecting the contents of the event’s hashtag. The appeal of such tools is that they bring the ‘back channel’ out into the open, facilitating a kind of participation which has the potential to feel significantly more engaged than simply watching a talk. In a sense the commentary can then become part of the talk itself, given that a wall will presumably be visible to the audience. But will it be visible to the speaker? If so then it might prove distracting, or even distressing, in the event that, say, criticism or even rude comments were to be posted on the wall while they were speaking. If it is not visible then it creates the risk that the speaker will be subjected to potentially hostile commentary while they are speaking which they will not be able to see. Certainly it could be argued that this is inherent in live tweeting itself (and even that speakers have always been subject to criticism, it’s just that Twitter makes this newly visible), but the point is that discomfort on the part of a speaker is perfectly reasonable. The issue here

becomes even more pronounced when we consider the ways that things like gender, class and ethnicity can shape interaction and be the basis of prejudice, even if a commentator may not understand their own comment in this way. For this reason it is important that the ethics of the Twitter wall be seriously considered. Ronson (2015) cites the example of popular science journalist Jonah Lehrer's public apology lecture after his recurrent plagiarism came to light. The organisers of this live streamed event had, as Ronson describes it, 'decided to erect a giant screen live Twitter feed behind his head' and so '[a]nyone watching at home could tweet their ongoing opinions of Jonah's request for forgiveness using the hashtag #infoneeds and their comment would automatically appear, in real time and in gigantic letters, right next to Jonah's face' (Ronson 2015: 42–45). I won't repeat the tweets here but some of them were pretty unpleasant. Then again Lehrer's past actions had provoked widespread outrage and there were legitimate questions to be asked about how substantive his apology for them was. The fact he'd been paid \$20,000 by a charity to give this speech didn't help either. This is obviously a rather extreme case. Even so, it's a story that sticks in my mind as an example of what can go wrong at conferences with Twitter walls.

Beyond the conference circuit

We've discussed using social networks to expand upon connections that you've made at conferences. But an inevitable corollary of engaging online like this is that you're going to end up meeting people with whom your connection had been purely digital up until that point of meeting. It can often be slightly strange meeting people from Twitter for the first time. Obviously in some cases on Twitter those with whom you communicate will be people you previously met face to face. But in many, if not most, cases they won't be, and this lends a certain strangeness to meeting in the flesh. Given how new such encounters are, there's a lack of any well-established norms about how to approach such an interaction, and these are circumstances under which awkwardness thrives. Perhaps as Twitter becomes an ever more integral part of the conference experience, at least for those who are attending a conference and already tweeting, this awkwardness will cease to be such a frequent occurrence. But until then, the best thing to do is to be friendly but treat the encounter as a meeting with someone new who you happen to know some things about in advance. Be approachable but don't make too many assumptions. Don't assume that someone's 'offline' self-presentation will cohere with their 'online' self-presentation. Don't assume that they

interpreted your online interactions in the same way or have the same memory of these that you do. Don't assume also that just because you've talked on Twitter and are attending the same conference that they are necessarily keen to meet up. Try and signpost your attendance at a conference in advance (for example 'Looking forward to #BritSoc15, who else from my feed is going?') and see who responds, rather than inferring attendance from someone's tweets or simply recognising them from their profile picture at the event itself.

It's also necessary to remember here that no matter how engaging these connections can be at times they are constituted through interactions of 140 characters or less and don't translate into offline relationships in a straightforward way. Nonetheless, it's important not to dismiss them because it's such a powerful way of finding people who share your interests. Engaging on Twitter can make higher education feel more friendly and collegial, particularly when it comes to negotiating vast conferences that might otherwise feel faceless and impersonal. As Daniels and Feagin (2011) put it, 'While in another era, scholars may have identified strongly with their PhD-granting university, the college or university, or the academic department in which they are currently employed, the rise of social media allows for a new arrangement of colleagues'. Do this well and you can have the 'ideal academic department' that has been 'tailored to your interests'.

Further reading

- *Twitter: Social Communication in the Twitter Age* by Dhiraj Murthy (2012) is a really comprehensive study of Twitter that conveys a rich understanding of its social dimension, its technical dimension, and the relationship between the two.
- *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* by Nancy K. Baym (2010) is an immensely readable overview of how social relations are being reconfigured by digital technology, offering a lot of novel insights while also summarising research across a range of topics.
- *Networked: The New Social Operating System* by Lee Rainie and Barry Wellman (2014) is an impressive account of how social networks are being transformed in the digital age.