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THE DARK SIDE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

This chapter will:

- Help you understand the 'post-truth' environment and what it means for academics engaging online
- Ensure you are aware of how social media platforms seek to influence your behaviour and how to protect yourself from such control
- Explain the threats which academics encounter on social media and equip you to respond to them

Much has changed since the first edition of this book. Whereas once social media was greeted with great enthusiasm, it has begun to be regarded with suspicion by many, as the influence of these companies became more threatening in a post-Snowden era (Harding 2014). Their business model has been blamed for the waves of populism sweeping the globe and the new era of 'post-truth', which many commentators claim we have entered (Neiwert 2018). The problems created by social media have risen to the top of the political agenda at a national and international level, as we increasingly see signs of shadow wars being perpetually waged through the mechanisms of influence that social media offers (Carrigan 2018a, Tufekci 2017). The platforms greeted with boundless enthusiasm by cyber-optimists like Shirky (2008, 2011) are increasingly coming to be framed as part of an emerging complex of *Big Tech* which demands urgent regulation (Fourier 2018, Zuboff 2019). As Helen Margetts (2017), director of the Oxford Internet Institute, succinctly observed, 'social media has gotten a bad press recently'. In this chapter, I untangle this bad press in order to analyse the underlying reality and explore what it means for academics using social media. These platforms have become darker and more polarised spaces since I wrote the first edition of this book from 2014 to 2015, and so has the wider social world which they reflect and encourage. The hatred and hostility which can be found on social media have now become a matter of widespread awareness, as have the sexist and racist forms which this abuse reliably takes. It is not an attractive prospect for academics who are contemplating whether to engage with social media for the first time and it can make those who are already engaged question whether this is how they wish to spend their time.

I suggest we should be cautious about claims that social media *caused* the social problems we see around us but it has nonetheless played a role in incubating trends which it would be irresponsible to ignore. There are three issues I focus on:

- 'The great twittering machine'[1] and the risks it creates for busy academics primed to be sucked in
- The inequalities of visibility that social media opens up and what they mean for academic life
- Online harassment and the context of political polarisation in which it happens

[1]This is Richard Seymour's (2017, 2018, 2019) term, developed in a number of blog posts and a forthcoming book. I have cited the former but the latter had not been released at the time of writing

There are overlaps between these issues but they raise distinct problems for academics, unfortunately not ones which permit solutions in any straightforward sense. For this reason my focus is on understanding the problems and offering strategies to address them, even if these might be little more than an exercise in risk management. But even doing this requires putting these issues in a broader perspective, one which the modish term 'post-truth' is helpful for establishing in spite of its many deficiencies as a social scientific concept.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND 'POST-TRUTH'

I have a lot of sympathy for people who roll their eyes when they hear the phrase 'post-truth'. It's a faddish and often facile term, invoked to make sense of political events such as Britain's vote to leave the EU and Donald Trump's election in the United States, but often doing more to obscure them. Invoking 'post-truth' is often used to identify some nefarious element which has entered the stage and now threatens democracy: social media, populism, Russia, Cambridge Analytica or all of the above. It has also spawned a cottage industry, with an ever increasing number of books being published which opine about post-truth. Or at the very least include it in the title at a publisher's insistence to make it seem current. See for instance d'Ancona (2017), Ball (2017) and Davis (2017). If I'm honest though, I find it a fun epithet to use. Try adding '*in an age of post-truth*' to the next title you write. It adds a sense of urgency and melodrama to an academic undertaking. It captures the attention, even if it might lead people to conclude you're being a bit silly. I resisted the urge to try and persuade SAGE to let me rename the book *Social Media for Academics in an Age of Post-truth* (insert dramatic sound effect) but part of me wanted to. It probably isn't the best part of me.

I find it hard to take 'post-truth' seriously. So why am I talking about it? Partly because it fascinates me as a cliché, inviting explanation as to why this has resonated with so many high profile people at such a specific moment in time, suddenly lending visibility to questions of *expertise* and *objectivity* which have been lurking beneath the surface for years. Partly because it can be an effective short hand, introducing these issues with an immediacy that would be difficult to match with less melodramatic terminology. But mostly because a meaningful discussion of how social media can be used for scholarly purposes must surely face up to the grim reality of @realDonaldTrump. My impression is that the dismal spectacle of the Trump presidency has done more than anything else to animate contemporary discussions of 'post-truth', whether it is Trump's patent disregard for established facts, his self-serving contempt for the

institutions which produce them or his open appeal to the worst instincts of his followers. In consequence it has become difficult to have a serious conversation about social media which doesn't eventually lead to the question of the 45th president of the United States. Trump regularly uses his Twitter feed to attack his enemies, distract from his failings and put the world to rights. What is remarkable is not so much the uninhibited way in which this world leader now uses a social media platform, the evolution of which has been painstakingly tracked by Oborne and Roberts (2017), but rather the conscious development of his disturbing and abrupt style as he became more familiar with the platform. While the voice Trump found through Twitter will surely inspire political imitation, it is so peculiarly *his* and so obviously reflects his strange trajectory into politics that direct replication is unlikely. Here are some examples reported in Oborne and Roberts (2017), tweeted over less than a year, as Trump became enamoured with the reach the platform gave him long before he exhibited serious signs of political ambition:

> *My twitter account is now reaching more people than the New York Times-not bad. And we're only going to get better! 11:14 AM – 4 Apr 2012*
>
> *With almost 1.3 million followers and rising really fast, everyone is asking me to critique things(and people). Finally, I will be a critic. 11:41 AM – 11 Jun 2012*
>
> *Happy to have just passed 1.3M Twitter followers. Love communicating with everyone daily. 3:51 PM – 2 Jul 2012*
>
> *Today we just passed 1.4 million twitter followers. 11:09 AM – 23 Aug 2012*
>
> *Happy to have just passed 1.5M followers on twitter. We picked up over 14,000 yesterday alone. It's great to speak to everyone daily. 10:31 AM – 4 Oct*
>
> *My twitter followers will soon be over 2 million-& all the 'biggies.' It's like having your own newspaper. 10:07 AM – 17 Oct 2012*
>
> *Wow, I have just exceeded 2 million followers-and in such a short time! 10:38 AM – 14 Jan 2013*

This selection of tweets shows Trump preoccupied by the accumulation of followers and the influence he believes they will grant him. He reports on his progress, celebrates his achievement and reflects on what works and what doesn't. For a man long obsessed by his own fame, it is easy to imagine how alluring this must be. He can watch his fame grow in real time, refining his strategy in a way which benefits from immediate feedback. However, what makes this scary is not that

a man with such influence can be so enthralled by the incentives of a platform but rather the real world effects which *now* ensue from what he does using that platform. For instance *Bloomberg* (2019) have created a data visualisation which linked Trump's tweets to the Dow Jones Industrial Average, tracking the stock market performance of 30 large corporations in public ownership based in the United States. While the President's statements having impact on markets isn't new, those statements being sent out in 280 character units without the intervention of a press apparatus is something we have never seen before. Furthermore, not only is diplomacy conducted through Twitter with increasing regularity, Trump has even gone as far as to threaten nuclear war through the platform. In fact it was only the intervention of senior advisors which prevented him from tweeting his plan to evacuate US service personnel and their families from the Korean peninsula, with the likelihood this would have been seen as a preliminary to military action and provoked a response in kind from North Korea (Woodward 2018: loc 4133). The platform once dismissed for its apparent ephemerality now frequently finds itself at the centre of world events. The role it is playing can often appear terrifying to the casual observer. It might be overstating the case to say perceptions of Twitter are now bound up with existential threats but it would be just as implausible to imagine the platform could remain unchanged in the face of these associations. The figure of Trump increasingly dominates our imagination of social media, looming large over a growing sense of where these technologies might be leading us.

However, I would argue that @realDonaldTrump is best understood as a cautionary tale, illustrating what can be called forth by the incentives of social media. This behaviour is not only encouraged but rewarded with visibility, recognition and influence. My suggestion is that social media has the potential to bring out the Trump *in all of us*. He exposes the worst of what the political theorist Richard Seymour (2017) describes as the *great twittering machine*: the platforms, their influence on the behaviour of users and the culture emerging under these conditions. Understanding how social media works is the best way to avoid having the worst brought out in you as well. My suggestion is that much of what makes Trump significant for present purposes is not the man himself. At risk of stating the obvious, it is unlikely an academic reading this book is going to be the object of one of Trump's tirades. His behaviour embodies and intensifies what the journalist Peter Oborne (2018) describes as 'a new and disturbing coarseness in modern political and media discourse', facilitating his rise through exploiting this coarseness while deepening its entrenchment each time his remarks push back the frontiers of perceived decency. But what really matters is the great Twittering machine and how it seeks to influence our behaviour.

THE GREAT TWITTERING MACHINE AND THE RISK OF BEING SUCKED IN

There's a limit to how seriously we can take the analysis of Trump's tweets but it's hard to read Oborne and Roberts (2017) without being left with a sense of Trump being sucked in, beguiled by the apparent power of the platform and left keen to master it in his pursuit of influence and visibility. However, Trump is far from alone in this and the pursuit of celebrity pervades social media, ranging from the few who achieve through it through to the many who more or less actively pursue it (Abidin 2018). It is obviously the case that yearning for celebrity precedes social media and exists independently of it (Turner 2010). Nonetheless, the pursuit of popularity is ubiquitous on social media platforms, even if it often stops short of an aspiration for celebrity as such. Why does popularity matter to so many users of these platforms? An easy answer would be to say that it's because popularity matters to people more generally, with social media simply being one forum in which status can be pursued. There is some truth to this but it misses something important. These platforms have been designed around the pursuit of popularity, something which the media scholar Jose van Dijck (2013) describes as the *popularity principle*: people are sorted into hierarchies based on how many users have chosen to follow them and how many engage with what they post and share. Popularity in this sense is a proxy for value. The more popular you are, the more valuable a platforms regards you as being. It sounds like an implausible proposition when stated so crudely but it has a practical purpose underlying it. Placing people into hierarchies like this helps make social media tractable for users, filtering the clutter by pointing people more or less directly towards accounts and content which they might be interested in.

These numbers signal to us that what we've stumbled across has been deemed worthy of response by other people, even if it might not live up to expectations upon closer inspection. In many cases those responses might be anything other than positive, but what matters is that people have *reacted*. From the platform's point of view, it's less a matter of *what people hope for* and more a matter of *keeping them clicking*. If people keep reading, scrolling and responding then things seem positive to the firms running these platforms, as their overarching concern is to monetise this attention through the sale of adverts and/or demonstrate to their investors that their engagement rates are continually increasing. It doesn't matter if it's edifying, educational or earnest. What matters is the capacity to command attention and the popularity principle means that those who can command the attention of others, sharing content which provokes other people to engage more

and spend longer on the platform, find themselves rewarded with visibility and influence.

In recent years, we've seen the category of the *influencer* break through into everyday consciousness, with online celebrity being something which some are able to leverage into financial reward, even if the rhetoric rarely lives up to the reality (Abidin 2018). The promise is often more diffuse than this, with online visibility being something sought after across increasing numbers of professional fields, even if the exact nature of the expected payoff remains unclear. But the more people care about their online popularity, the more time and energy they spend on the platforms which enable it to be achieved. The more they rely on measures like follower counts, retweets and shares to assess their progress. In the process unprecedented quantities of data are produced, capturing every aspect of the activity which takes place through social media; a resource used by platforms to modulate their service in subtle yet significant ways to encourage users to engage more, for longer and to return more frequently. Not only do they learn more about us but they have more opportunities to leverage that knowledge and present us with adverts it is hoped we will engage with. If this sounds conspiratorial, it is worth observing how this behavioural data was originally used by firms like Google to *improve* services but the pressure to make a profit meant this improvement rapidly expanded to making money out of the 'raw material' which the users generated through their interaction with the platform (Zuboff 2019).

It's important to stress what matters here is the business model rather than the technology itself. This is built around *encouraging us to engage* and a remarkably sophisticated apparatus of applied behavioural science is being deployed to that end. As an early Facebook employee Jeff Hammerbacher infamously put it, 'The best minds of my generation are thinking about how to make people click ads'. What Seymour (2017) calls the *twittering machine* is the pattern of social interaction which ensues when rewards are offered to those most able to generate a response from other people and careers can be made from little more than strategic provocation. A new class of provocateur has emerged through these platforms, in some cases becoming internationally renowned in spite of being held in contempt by vast audiences who are familiar with their work. The most infamous example is Milo Yiannopoulos who rose to prominence as a result of Gamergate, deftly using this culture war to position himself as a voice for the legions of self-defined anti-Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) who made up this putative movement. He went from tech journalist and unsuccessful entrepreneur to internet celebrity in a matter of months, using his new position at Breitbart News to style himself as a leading figure in the emerging alt-right movement.

This trajectory was marked by countless provocations, each more outrageous than the last. Far from being threats to his rise, these actions facilitated it. Outrage drives attention, ensuring the prominence of the person being condemned and offering them an opportunity to sustain their rise through the ranks of online celebrity. While Milo has been one of the most prominent examples of this tendency, even if his apparent downfall points to the risks inherent in such a strategy, he was far from alone in how he sought to thrive within the attention economy. We can see a rather different example in the seduction coach Julien Blanc, ejected from Australia before being denied entry to a whole succession of countries. During this controversy he was the subject of widespread media attention, going viral as his sheer odiousness constituted an engaging story for media across these countries. This led *Time* magazine to ask if he was the most hated man in the world (Gibson 2014). Only a year after this controversy erupted, he was once more touring many of these countries and had adopted the *Time* headline as a slogan, except without the question mark which originally qualified it (O'Neill 2018: 161–162). The problem is that, as O'Neill (2018: 162) observes, 'constantly reacting to every infraction only serves to feed the attention economy of the contemporary mediascape, where outrage of all kinds is cynically channelled in capital's interests'. Her point applies much more broadly, across a whole range of fields in which visibility is a necessary but insufficient condition for success. For those who feel the necessity of becoming *well known*, social media can be an enticing prospect with vast audiences only a click away and demonstrable cases of people becoming famous through their online activity alone. However, exactly what it entices can be an open-ended question, as some find controversy to be the most effective self-elevation strategy available, leading to the behaviour discussed here.

Where is this going in the long term? Seymour (2018) cautions that each irate response to online provocation entrenches the organisation of information and attention responsible for the spread of the material we found problematic in the first place. Even though it might feel as if social media gives us voice in the face of unfolding events, our exercise of that voice is what (collectively) keeps the machine running. Imagine if the response of Twitter users to Donald Trump's obnoxious self-promotion had been to largely ignore him. Maybe a comparable figure would have been elected through other means, but it helps illustrate the role that social media has played in bringing about a world which leaves so many of us inclined to take issue with it *using* social media. My point is not that we should refrain from using social media, nor do I deny the fact that it can provide important opportunities to increase the visibility of causes, promote actions and win people over. I simply want to offer a note of caution about how our responses to

social media can actually fuel the things we object to, ensuring the visibility of the objectionable and the influence of the absurd. Not only does the twittering machine have the capacity to suck us in, in the process it can leave us contributing to those features of it which we most object to.

When I spoke to the social psychologist Petra Boynton, she described to me how organisations which had once been suspicious of social media or seen it as a waste of time have increasingly accepted it as a fact of life which ought to be encouraged. But this has created a pressure for *everyone* to engage *all the time*, which creates many problems. Framing digital engagement as an unambiguously positive thing, defined by clear guidelines for how to behave, obscures the problems and makes them difficult to deal with. For instance she explained to me how her current work on pregnancy loss created difficulties online, as it's a subject which is unavoidably upsetting by its nature. Where's the boundary between something being (legitimately) upsetting and being (illegitimately) offensive? These are questions which can be hard to address from inside the twittering machine, as those confronting the problems are so immersed in what they are doing that it can be hard to step back in order to reflect on potential solutions. If everyone is competing to be heard above the din, it's hard for us to step back and reflect on *how* we are talking to each other. The problem is made worse if there are aspiring provocateurs, monopolising attention by dealing in controversy and provoking outrage. But a creeping culture of digital boosterism in certain sections of the academy also makes it difficult to approach digital engagement in a nuanced way, instead leading us to a situation where universities take credit for the successes and individuals are blamed for the problems (McMillan Cottom 2015a).

It would be surprising if people were not put off by this. In a post-Snowden age, where the revelations about Cambridge Analytica have laid bare what we all suspected, surely it is a mistake to entangle our professional futures with these social media platforms? There is a growing chorus of voices calling for people more broadly to quit social media. The computer scientist Cal Newport (2017) makes this case in a TEDx talk, arguing people tend to gain little and lose lots through their use of social media. The technologist Jaron Lanier (2018) published a book length argument, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, offering a powerful account of a business model predicated upon manipulation which has become endemic across providers of these services. The public intellectual Andrew Sullivan (2016), one of the most influential figures in establishing the ecosystem of content we now find through social media, holds up his own experience of information addiction as an outlier elucidating a tendency which is becoming ubiquitous:

> For a decade and a half, I'd been a web obsessive, publishing blog posts multiple times a day, seven days a week, and ultimately corralling a team that curated the web every 20 minutes during peak hours. Each morning began with a full immersion in the stream of internet consciousness and news, jumping from site to site, tweet to tweet, breaking news story to hottest take, scanning countless images and videos, catching up with multiple memes. Throughout the day, I'd cough up an insight or an argument or a joke about what had just occurred or what was happening right now. And at times, as events took over, I'd spend weeks manically grabbing every tiny scrap of a developing story in order to fuse them into a narrative in real time. I was in an unending dialogue with readers who were caviling, praising, booing, correcting. My brain had never been so occupied so insistently by so many different subjects and in so public a way for so long.

He argues that this once fringe experience is becoming the norm for regular uses of social media who own smartphones, 'connecting them instantly to a deluge of febrile content, forcing them to cull and absorb and assimilate the online torrent as relentlessly as I had once'. His argument is reflected by a whole range of intellectuals who in different ways hold social media responsible for a crisis of distraction, undermining our shared life and robbing us of the capacity to sit with our thoughts and know ourselves (Carr 2011, Turkle 2016). The argument I'm making about the twittering machine might seem to be in agreement with these critics, reflecting a shared concern that social media is changing our behaviour in undesirable ways. But my problem with what they are arguing is twofold. Firstly, it ignores the range of ways in which we can use these platforms and how the balance of benefits and costs shifts as a consequence. Secondly, each of these people has been able to make this case because of the visibility they already enjoy. Each has an extensive platform already, in the older publishing industry sense of 'the position from which an author speaks – a combination of their credentials, visibility and promotability, especially through the media' (Thompson 2010: 86). In the case of Cal Newport it includes digital platforms as well, with his parallel career as a thinker on productivity being established through a popular blog, which we can assume has built an audience through social media even if the author did not explicitly seek this himself. These critics are already thriving in the attention economy while lecturing others about the dangers of using the means available to them to participate. Rather than lecture people about the risks of social media, I want to help them find concrete steps which will enable them to take advantage of the opportunities these platforms offer while mitigating the risks. There are limits to how far we can address these as individuals but responding to this by framing users as passive

victims of social media is unhelpful, if people still want to use these platforms in their personal and professional lives.

To approach the issue in this way does not entail a denial of the issue these critics are raising. In fact the many problems generated by the twittering machine have created a pressure for the platforms to respond. In some cases, these responses seem well judged, introducing rules and regulations which many would suggest are long overdue. For instance Twitter has introduced new rules on spam in pursuit of healthier conversations, threatening accounts which repeatedly share the same content or regularly repost links without commentary. These promise to help mitigate the escalation dynamics which have characterised the platform, ensuring people focus on quality over quantity. In other cases, it's less clear these moves will help solve the underlying problems. For instance, Facebook has introduced a range of new initiatives after the public backlash over Cambridge Analytica and the growing outcry over 'fake news'. There are limits to the voluntary reforms we can expect from platforms because as many critics have pointed out, these problems are a direct consequence of their business model rather than being the unwelcome intrusion of external factors (Lanier 2018, Zuboff 2019). But if we take the agency of users seriously in the way I am suggesting then we can see a range of ways in which platforms can ameliorate these problems even within their existing business model, as well as techniques which users can adopt to defend themselves against the more insidious impacts of platform culture. This matters because it is possible to extricate ourselves from the twittering machine, as well as avoid getting drawn into it in the first place. We should learn, as Mark Fisher puts it, to use social media but not live inside it. If we want to develop a 'more instrumental relationship with it' as a 'means of dissemination, communication and distribution' then we need to understand how platforms seek to influence our behaviour, as well as how others act in ways shaped by these influences (Ambrose 2018). Being wary of the *amplification obsession* which the twittering machine can give rise to is a crucial first step. In its most extreme forms this encourages strategic provocation of the kind we've discussed, but in its milder variants it simply means that the pursuit of popularity comes to substitute for other goals. If you find yourself framing the accumulation of followers as your overarching goal then it's crucial to ask what purpose this actually serves. Articulating a sense of what you are using social media for can help guard against a creeping preoccupation of this sort. What are you trying to do? There are many answers to this question and they may change over time. But having them to hand can provide a touch stone which you can return to if you find yourself getting sucked in. In the next two sections we consider other trends which create problems for academics before turning to practical responses in the final section.

INEQUALITIES OF VISIBILITY AND THE FUTURE OF ACADEMIC LIFE

What does it mean for the academy if increasing numbers of academics become ensnared within the twittering machine? Many people have experienced social media in a way which suggests it overturns existing hierarchies, eliminating the status distinctions that we continually encounter in academic life. There is a superficial plausibility to this claim. As Drezner (2018: 91) notes, 'Senior scholars who join social media to advertise their scholarly work must confront the reality that despite their hard-earned academic prestige, there will be graduate students with more Twitter followers'. Furthermore, the platforms themselves make it easier to interact across these status distinctions, lessening the anxiety involved in approaching a senior scholar that might be felt if this were being done at a conference. However, it would be a mistake to infer from this that social media is making the academy a less hierarchical place. I suggest that two things are happening here. Firstly, the culture encouraged by social media platforms is increasing the informality of interaction between academics, at least when this takes place online. Secondly, social media is introducing *new* hierarchies into academic life, with social media popularity supplementing the established hierarchies of *standing amongst your colleagues* and *measurement of your publication record*. The relationship between these forms of standing is far from straightforward. As we have seen, standing amongst your colleagues doesn't automatically translate to social media popularity. But social media popularity *can* translate into measurement of your publication record, at least if it is deployed for the promotion of your papers, by making it more likely that others will download, read and cite them.

There are many questions here which ought to be a focus of research over the coming years. If increasing numbers of academics pursue social media popularity, as a consequence of *internalising the popularity principle through the habits they build up as platform users* and/or *pursuing the career benefits taken to ensue from social media popularity*, it seems likely to create a number of problems. Firstly, the popularity principle fuels a competitive escalation in social media activity, making it necessary for people to shout more loudly and more often in order to be heard (Beer 2013, 2014a). As Veletsianos (2016: loc 839) puts it, 'remaining visible on a social networking and fast-moving platform such as Twitter means that one has to share often and frequently, or else one's voice and presence are diluted in the sea of information that is already present'. If *posting more frequently* or *posting more provocatively* are discernible as techniques through which a user can make their voice heard, as opposed to fading into the background cacophony, others will be encouraged to do the same because the platform will become *faster moving* and

more provocative as a consequence of users following this logic. Secondly, the popularity principle risks having unwelcome effects on academic culture because what happens online is unlike to stay online. The form which these effects take is likely to vary between disciplines. For instance consider Dean's (2017) worries about political science: 'the emergence of short term punditry as a benchmark of one's status within the profession' leaves political scientists pursuing 'hot takes' in response to breaking news in a manner which risks squeezing out slower and more reflective forms of analysis.

My concern is that pursuit of social media popularity is liable to have all manner of effects, both in terms of who gets heard and how they speak. The key question here is how what van Dijck (2013) calls the popularity principle might influence the behaviour and practices of academics as they embrace social media. As she defines it, the popularity principle holds that 'the more contacts you have and make, the more valuable you become, because more people think you are popular and hence want to connect with you' (van Dijck 2013: loc 310). This concept is coded into the architecture of social media platforms in a way that is impossible to avoid, reflecting the broader attention economy in which 'attention means eyeballs or (unconscious) exposure, and this value is an important part of Internet advertising in the form of banners, pop-ups, and paid ad space on websites'. There's money to be made from popularity, or rather turning popularity (often, as van Dijck points out, equated with values of truth, trust and objectivity) into a quantifiable commodity (van Dijck 2013: loc 1281). It might feel like you would be immune to this, but if you encounter a popular Twitter feed, previously unknown to you, how does the high follower count influence your perceptions of it in the absence of any other information? At the very least, it's likely to factor into a sense that there's something authoritative or valuable about the account. After all, surely those followers must have arrived for a reason? The popularity principle is insidious and it is built into social media platforms themselves. Value comes to be quantified in terms of the accumulation of followers, likes, retweets and reblogs. Yet as van Dijck (2013: loc 1360) notes, the 'concept of "liking" pushes popular ideas or things with a high degree of emotional value … "difficult but important" is not a judgement prompted by social media sites'. In using social media, academics are entering into an attention economy heavily structured around the popularity principle.

What are the implications of this attention economy for scholarship? The risk is that, as the political blogger Ezra Klein (2015) puts it, '[t]he incentives of the social web make it a threat to the conversational web'. The increasing reliance on social media to drive traffic to blogs encourages certain ways of writing posts. The most obvious manifestation of this can be seen in the rise of viral content websites

but there are more subtle manifestations as well. Klein's point is that 'the social web' encourages an atomisation of content because individual posts circulate on their own rather than relying on readers' repeated visits to the author's blog. He presents this as a negative thing because it mitigates against the intensely conversational style that used to characterise the political blogosphere in which arguments were developed through mutual engagement across whole sequences of blog posts (Rosenberg 2010). While he may be undervaluing the conversations which emerge on social media in response to blog posts, he nonetheless makes an important point about the implications of content needing to 'travel' in a way that was not formerly the case. Obviously these pressures aren't inexorable but their influence can be surprisingly effective, as the obvious desire of bloggers to gain an audience for their posts gradually chips away at a principled opposition to changing how they write in order to better solicit a readership. The growing reliance upon social media to drive traffic to blogs, something which is compounded by Facebook's desire to be 'a gateway to social content, a toll road to a data infrastructure that facilitates all forms of online commercialized sociality', only adds to the pressures inherent in the popularity principle around which social media platforms are structured (van Dijck 2013: loc 1391).

The centrality of the popularity principle may be most pronounced in the case of Facebook but it's far from being unique to it. One of Amazon's most groundbreaking innovations was the extension of their initial Hot 100 bestseller list to encompass everything on the site, drawing authors into a neurotic fixation with where they ranked on this all-encompassing list (Stone 2013: 75). The choices YouTube users make are heavily guided by selection mechanisms, including search engines and ranking algorithms, which inevitably favour some producers over others. Selection of the 'most popular' videos is the most pronounced manifestation of this but the guiding of user choices is built into the interface of the platform itself (van Dijck 2013: loc 2328). In part this can be fairly attributed to the practical challenge of dealing with the sheer scale of the content uploaded to YouTube. Without filtering it would be difficult to find relevant content in the 3,000 hours of video that have been uploaded in the ten minutes or so I've been writing this paragraph, let alone the entire content of the site's archive (YouTube 2015). But contrary to the rhetorical focus on the blurring of boundaries between viewers and producers, evidence suggests that the site's architecture is designed to favour their official partners, allowing some professionalised amateurs to make a living out of the system and entrenching a sense of possibility that one will be 'discovered' through YouTube (van Dijck 2013: loc 2396–2610). The most obvious example, however, is the ranking facilitated by Google, a service which has sought to identify the most popular content from the outset. As Vaidhyanathan (2012) asks,

'Does anything (or anyone) matter if it (or she) does not show up on the first page of a Google search?'. The simplicity of the interface and the objectivity of its ordering belie the biases ('valuing popularity over accuracy, established sites over new, and rough rankings over more fluid or multidimensional models of presentation') that are built into it (Vaidhyanathan 2012: loc 211). To seek popularity is the most reliable way to ensure you will be seen online.

The problem arises because, as van Dijck (2013: loc 1569) notes, users 'quickly learned how to play the system and accumulate a lot of clout on Twitter'. In some cases this might involve straightforwardly copying and pasting content that can be seen to be popular – a judgement that's easy to make because each tweet has its metrics incorporated into its own presentation. But the more subtle aspect of this concerns the manner in which popularity accumulates in a winner-takes-all-manner: 'the more people follow someone, the trendier he or she becomes; the more people retweet a quote, the more impact it has in the twitterverse' (van Dijck 2013: loc 3227). It's in the interests of social media platforms to ensure the prominence of those users with a proven capacity to generate engagement on their site. After all, this amounts to more traffic for advertising, more buzz to draw users into the site, and higher statistics with which to appeal to the markets for more capital. These incentives, and the ease with which they can be accommodated within algorithms which serve other more immediately practical purposes, leave some users objectively positioned as more valuable than others within the platform (van Dijck 2013: loc 2353).

This doesn't mean that all roads inevitably lead to BuzzFeed. It also doesn't mean that academics using social media will inevitably lead to the deterioration of scholarly standards, due to a neurotic preoccupation with the accumulation of influence (as measured in follower counts and retweets) increasingly encourages simple communication likely to prove popular at the expense of complex ideas which may not thrive because of their difficulty and ambiguity. Using social media doesn't mean academics will *inevitably* come to talk in TED soundbites and forego activities of intellectual worth. But the risk of a drift in this direction exists and that's why it's important to be aware of this at the outset, not least of all in order to reflect on your motivations if you find yourself engaging online with some regularity. It also helps us to be critical of the rhetoric of democratisation, such that it is assumed social media will 'disrupt' the hierarchies of academia. It won't. It might, however, make them more complex, as influence and esteem accumulate through a more diverse set of mechanisms than was formerly the case. But, as I discuss later in this chapter, it's easy to see how academics might get drawn into the logic of self-evaluation through metrics: if your h-index can be understood as tracking success then is it really a stretch to imagine the same being true of your

quantity of Twitter followers? More worryingly, it's easy to imagine managers embracing such measures as an attempt to evaluate a capacity for impact and engagement.

Morozov (2013) sees evidence of this trend in the popularity of sites like Google Scholar and Mendeley, worrying that they will further entrench an existing dependence upon 'the ability to get published and quoted by others' as the driver of career success by offering an ever-expanding array of metrics in terms of which academics will be expected to perform. Metrics are used in different ways across higher education systems internationally and this vast topic could easily constitute a book in its own right (Jump 2015). But if academic use of social media continues to expand, it seems inevitable that what Lupton (2014c) calls the 'Academic Quantified Self' will be shaped by this trend, as all manner of new metrics come to supplement those already used within higher education (Burrows 2012). The optimism of people like Clay Shirky (2008) needs to be countered with a reassertion of the distinction between systems of measurement and the value of what they measure, as well as recognition of how biases are woven into the very fabric of the social media platforms that might be drawn upon to provide new metrics. We need to avoid a 'wisdom of crowds' rhetoric in which popularity on social media comes to function as a cypher of value (Surowiecki 2005). There are many ways in which social media popularity could become an influential force within academic life, with few of them seeming positive in their consequences. To understand what this might look like, it's worth considering the figure of the superstar professor.

Social media hasn't created the celebrity academic but it has made it a category to which a greater number and range of people might aspire. It can be a gateway to the familiar markers of esteem associated with being a well-known scholar: paid speaking invitations, opportunities for media collaboration, requests for endorsements, extensive publication opportunities, paid reviewing work, invitations to join working groups, etc. These might be supplemented by requests which reflect popularity while nonetheless being less welcome, such as endless requests to peer review papers, assess monograph proposals or review grant applications. How these reinforce other forms of hierarchy remains to be established but we can speculate that they are unlikely to make the academy a more equal place. Even if social media expands the pool of celebrity academics, potentially making it more diverse than would otherwise be the case, it does so through the entrenchment of hierarchy: rewards flow to those who are known, valued and heard while those who are unknown, unvalued and unheard struggle to increase their standing. If we see social media platforms as democratic spaces then we miss how unevenly attention is distributed across them. For instance as Veletsianos

(2016: loc 1162–1708) found in a study of educational tweeters, the top 1% of scholars had an average follower count 700 times larger than scholars in the bottom 50% and 100 times larger than scholars in the other 99%. If this online popularity can be converted into offline rewards in the manner suggested, it doesn't matter whether these are established academics who leverage their existing prestige to build a following or new entrants who have accumulated visibility through their social media activity alone. Both are beneficiaries of a new hierarchy which supplements the existing hierarchies of academic life. Social media can play an important role in allowing more diverse voices to rise to prominence within academic life and this should be celebrated. But we should not confuse this with platforms making the academy less hierarchical. It is certainly true that social media allows everyone to have a voice, as its cheerleaders are prone to pointing it out. However, it does so at the cost of making it much more difficult for people to be heard, something which is crucial to grasp if we want to get to grips with the long-term effects of social media on higher education. Publishing projects creating platforms for academics to have access to established audiences have a crucial role to play here. There are examples which cross disciplines such as *The Conversation* and the group of LSE blogs. But perhaps the most interesting examples have a smaller audience and/or a narrower focus than this. Examples from my own discipline include *The Sociological Review, Discover Society, Everyday Sociology* and *The Society Pages* (a disclaimer: I work for the first and am on the editorial board of the second). I read blogs like *The Disorder of Things* and *Critical Legal Thinking* from adjacent disciplines. There will be examples from your own disciplines which I am unfamiliar with. These multi-author spaces have different intentions and different audiences, reaching out beyond a narrowly academic readership to varying degrees. But they are examples of a proliferation of outlets which enable academics to publish online and *ensure a readership*.

The fact these projects have built up their own readership, accessible to academics who want to write occasionally or even on a single occasion, means they can perform the function of *redistributing visibility*. This might not in itself mitigate the attention economy unfolding in academic life but it can nonetheless provide a corrective to it, as long as editors of projects like this recognise the important role they play as gatekeepers to online audiences and the implications for who gets heard and who doesn't in an academy where social media is increasingly ubiquitous. These projects also have an important role to play in addressing the parochialism which pervades social media. The Global Social Theory project founded by Gurminder K. Bhambra is an inspiring example of the form this can take. It seeks to correct the narrow focus on European male authors which characterises many reading lists on social theory, building a library which profiles

theorists from around the globe and guides people about how to engage with their work and use it on reading lists. In this sense, it uses the affordances of social media to find ways to amplify voices outside of American and European intellectual currents. The site itself was created in WordPress and it was promoted, as well as contributions solicited, through Twitter and Facebook. The *Global Dialogues* newsletter produced by the International Sociological Association addresses parochialism in a slightly different way, with each newsletter being translated in 16 languages facilitating a genuinely global dialogue. Both projects feature contributions from around the world with the range of their contributors and the scope of their readership enhanced by social media even if their operations are not strictly dependent upon these platforms. They highlight the potential which social media offers for overcoming parochialism, if it is approached in the form of a practical project. Their necessity helps illustrate how social media can entrench Anglophone bias if unopposed, as multilingual academics find themselves nudged into engaging online in English if they want access to international audiences. Collective projects of this sort have a crucial role to play in mitigating the inequalities of visibility which social media is generating. But they can also play a role in ensuring that we can respond collectively to the problems of online harassment and political polarisation which increasingly pervade social media.

ONLINE HARASSMENT AND THE CONTEXT OF POLITICAL POLARISATION

One of the features of the last edition which seemed most important in retrospect was the discussion of cases in which academics had faced harassment online and/or their university had responded in a punitive way to their online engagement. However, it struck me when reading the book again that these cases could easily be regarded as exceptions, outliers which operate as cautionary tales. If we frame them in this way then we obscure what they might teach us about the online environment which we all face, even if most people do not encounter them so directly or with such consequences. This section reflects on two features of platform culture which it is increasingly urgent to understand, *online harassment* and *political polarisation*, before reflecting on what they mean for academics who want to use social media in a safe and sustainable way. In many cases these features are interconnected in practice but distinguishing them in principle can help us recognise how these risks are confronted by academics in ways which reflect and reinforce inequalities within the academy and across wider society (McMillan

Cottom 2015b). The discussion then turns to the implications of these trends for universities, particularly the risk of institutional over-reaction and what this means for academic freedom.

In recent years online harassment has come to figure prominently in public perceptions of social media, as platforms which were once greeted with utopian glee have increasingly been framed as lawless spaces in which harassment is the norm. The data we have available suggests there is some truth to this perception. A Pew Internet study found that 73% of adult internet users had seen someone be harassed in some way online and 40% had personally experienced it. The survey identified two categories of online harassment. The first category related to the experiences of name calling and embarrassment, while the second involved physical threats, stalking, sexual harassment and sustained harassment over time. Young adults were more likely to experience either category of harassment but young women were overwhelmingly the target of the more extreme behaviours (Duggan 2014). As the educational technologist Audrey Watters (2014: loc 1677) put it, 'Harassment – of women, people of color, and other marginalized groups – is pervasive online' in ways which reflect offline harassment but are made worse by the 'mechanics of the Internet – its architecture, affordances, infrastructure, its culture', which change 'what that harassment looks like and how it is experienced'. But this is compounded by the microaggressions which women and people of colour face online, as patronising assumptions, the impulse to mansplain and aggression when it is challenged produce a wearying environment in which those on the receiving end might already be worn down when they confront harassment of the sort the Pew study investigates (Watters 2014: loc 1771).

One of the most disturbing illustrations of the form this harassment takes in the academy is offered by religious studies professor Anthea Butler, who created a Tumblr site, *The Things People Say*, collating the racist abuse she receives online (Butler 2015). As McMillan Cottom (2015a) notes, Butler has close to 30,000 Twitter followers, suggesting a degree of visibility which many institutions would claim to admire and value immensely. It's worth noting that McMillan Cottom (2015a) herself has 'received 11 death threats' and '19 threats of what could be considered general bodily harm'. Grollman (2015b) points out that we can see countless instances in which 'scholars, particularly women and people of color, have been harassed, been subject to hate mail, or, worse, have received death threats in response to op-eds, blog posts, tweets, and other media appearances', concluding that there is little real institutional support for people attacked in these circumstances. In another piece McMillan Cottom (2015b) writes incisively of the potential for communications departments to over-react in the face of what may seem in the moment to be overwhelming public outrage:

> In academia, where twenty readers is a big deal, 200 angry emails can feel like a tsunami of public opinion (it isn't). When three members of a committee can constitute a quorum, seeing 142 retweets of a negative opinion about your new assistant professor can feel like politics (it isn't). Five whole think pieces at the online verticals of legacy media organizations can feel like the powers-that-be are censuring your institution (they aren't; as my grandma would say, they ain't studdin' you except that right now you're filling empty space on a website). Basically, the scale of current media is so beyond anything academia can grasp that those with agendas get a leg up on pulling the levers of universities' inherent conservativism. (McMillan Cottom 2015b)

The novelty of such controversies compounds the underlying problem Grollman (2015b) diagnoses of what is often called 'academic freedom' being in fact a matter of 'academic tolerance', something which 'appears to be quite low for scholars of color who dare to critique racism and white privilege'. As Gregory and Singh (2018: 182) put it, 'the very experience of building a media presence is shot through with the politics of race and gender'. This is why it's so important to recognise, written as a white middle-class man whose worst fate online has been people being rude to me, the *targeted* nature of online harassment, as well as what it means for inequality within the academy. This also makes the suggestions I can offer seem rather facile to me because encouraging people to block and mute in the way I suggest in Chapter 8 doesn't really get to grips with the problem. Apps like Block Together provide access to *communal block lists* which renders the issue less individualised than it would otherwise be. Projects like those mentioned in the previous section can provide a bulwark against some of these problems, mediating online reaction through collective accounts staffed by people who accumulate experience of dealing with the pathologies of social media. But these remain surface level responses to the toxicity which platforms are generating, as well as to the wider social currents these are expressions of. This means that within the academy there are risks inherent in digital engagement which are confronted in profoundly unequal ways. In the rest of this section, we consider what it means for academic freedom when universities are liable to over-react to online events which are seen to bring the university brand into disrepute. But before we do so it's crucial to consider the other trend which is driving these problems, political polarisation and the online strategies it is giving rise to.

Political polarisation figures heavily in discussions of post-truth. For instance Roberts (2017) writes about *epistemic tribes* and what it mean for the future of democracy when '[i]nformation is evaluated based not on conformity to common standards of evidence or correspondence to a common understanding of the

world, but on whether it supports the tribe's values and goals and is vouchsafed by tribal leaders'. The journalist Evan Davis (2017) suggests there are a cluster of worries which coalesce under the umbrella of 'post-truth' such as calculated deception, fake news stories, conspiracy theories, wilful provocation and scepticism of experts. What they share is their contribution to a politics which is more polarised than ever. These discussions took on new life when the *Oxford Dictionaries* selected post-truth as its word of the year in 2016, defining it as an adjective 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'. It was a year in which the term went 'from being a peripheral term to being a mainstay in political commentary, now often being used by major publications without the need for clarification or definition in their headlines' (*Oxford Dictionaries* 2016). It might not be that post-truth has acquired the status of common sense but it is striking how quickly it came to be something most people understood when they encountered it in a headline.

Despite being framed as a hostility towards truth, it is perhaps more accurate to describe these trends as *post-factual*. Facts have long been used to build consensus around what is true and experts have played a crucial role in this process. Their authority in doing so has been grounded in a perception of neutrality which is now being called into question (Davies 2018). It remains a matter for philosophical debate whether the Trump administration's spokeswoman Kellyanne Conway's infamous invocation of 'alternative facts' counts as a denial of factuality itself or a rejection of the facts offered by establishment journalists. If we accept that facts are accurate descriptions of the world then there's certainly a case for the former, which is exactly why I would argue we need to take the notion of post-truth seriously even if it has inspired a lot of vacuous commentary. But what's important to grasp for our purposes is the role that *hostility to expertise* is playing here, as facts are seen to be weapons deployed by experts to further their own interests. The notion that facts can be politicised seems incontestable to me, as can be seen in the increasingly rich scholarship exploring how doubt has been deliberately cultivated in what might otherwise have become uncontested matters of fact when commercial interests were in question. However, what should be contested is *who* is doing this politicising and *whose interests* are served by it. But in casting doubt back upon the motivations of those crying 'fake news' we entrench the cycle of doubt in which we all become decreasingly willing to accept that those we disagree with might have benign intentions. In the terms of the political philosopher Chantal Mouffe (2000, 2005), we go from seeing our opponents as *legitimate* adversaries to be opposed, to seeing them as *illegitimate* enemies to be defeated. As the span of Mouffe's own work makes clear, this process neither began with social

media nor will it end with it. But it provokes fuel for the fire which is driving this polarisation, with experts caught in the middle as those who have traditionally been tasked with establishing facts and underwriting consensus. Bemoaning this outcome doesn't entail a naive defence of expertise but it does mean we see it as a problem when we can't reach agreement on facts of the matter while the category of *things we all believe* continues to shrink with each passing year.

If the problem is faced by experts in general, it is particularly pronounced for academics. The norms of civility we now find within the academy have their roots in the concerns of early scientists to depersonalise disagreement, making it a factual matter to be resolved objectively without recourse to the character or inclinations of the individuals concerned (Davies 2018: loc 1080–1101). There's nothing which says that social media *must* personalise scholarship in a way that leads people away from these longstanding norms. But many of the approaches I've considered in this book will contribute to bringing this about in ways that ought to give us pause for thought. For instance, if we talk about the backstage aspects of our work in public then it draws attention to the messy and contingent reality underlying pristine and powerful claims to knowledge. The much repeated truism that social media rewards 'authenticity' is a platitude but it is accurate to say that social media encourages *personalisation*. Platforms are designed to encourage people to share themselves, rewarding users when they provoke reactions and taking the ensuing reactions of other users as a sign of their deeper preferences. If we take an individual user, it is easy to imagine how one could engage on social media in a detached and depersonalised way. But if we consider academics as a whole, then it seems likely social media will exercise an influence over scholarly norms, as competition and insecurity combine to leave academics wanting to take every opportunity they encounter (Müller 2014). If Weller (2011) is right that scholarship is changing, what it means to be *scholarly* must be changing as well. The cases we have seen of academic speech being contested online represent the bleeding edge of a process which will constitute common sense in the coming years (Bacevic 2018). What might seem to be an obscure issue of how academics comport themselves online is a key vector through which this change is unfolding.

There are some people who see this personalisation as a positive thing, rendering scholars more approachable and removing the veil which surrounds the rarefied world of the academy. However, I worry there is a degree of naivety to this position, as well as a tendency to reduce problems to a lack of public understanding of what scholarship entails. We can see the problems that might be confronted here by looking to the example of the natural sciences. Not only has scepticism about science grown over time, it has coalesced with political identities

in a worrying way. This tendency is most pronounced when it comes to online subcultures organised around a shared opposition to vaccination, fluoridation or even the fact the planet is a sphere (Paolillo 2018). However, it is at its most worrying in the widespread association of climate change denial with a right-wing position, as once fringe ideas are coming to enter the political mainstream. The idea that more exposure to science and scientists will necessarily reverse this trend seems naive, failing to recognise the many forms which hostility to science takes and the many ways in which it might be unintentionally entrenched (Mirowski 2018). But the problem is not just one faced by science and scientists. There is a broader trend unfolding in which academics are coming to be seen as elites, with their expertise being something which cannot be trusted (Davies 2018). To increasing numbers universities come to look like the places where these elites become what they are, even if this suspicion takes different forms on the political left and the political right.

Hostility to expertise hasn't been created by platforms but it has been *incubated* by them. The twittering machine ensures the perfect environment for these attitudes to grow, facilitating encounters with experts while making it difficult for those encounters to proceed in a productive way. In many cases, academics are interacting so rarely with non-academics online that it is unlikely to pose a problem but it might become a problem by leaving them unprepared for an unexpected encounter. However, it is obviously a problem if the academics concerned believe they are talking to the public while in reality they are conversing with peers. I suspect the prevailing framing of social media as useful for 'getting your research out there' risks making it more likely people might misread their activity in this way but it's hard to know for certain in the absence of empirical research. My argument is not that the 'general public' are monsters waiting to seize upon earnest academics opening themselves up online in order to viciously attack them. It is rather that the character of the public is changing faster than academic conceptions of audience, leaving us underprepared for the possibility that members of the public not only might not be interested in our work but might be actively hostile to it and *us* (Bacevic 2017a, 2017c). Political polarisation makes this more likely than ever. As Petra Boynton put it when we discussed this issue:

> For academics we're always used to being right so it's quite a shock when people online make equally good arguments. Some academics can embrace that and find it interesting. But others can't. While nobody has to endure abusive feedback, if you can't engage politely when people are sharing ideas with you, then it may be better to step back and reconsider how you use social media.

Targeted harassment is a huge and growing problem on social media, but a post-truth climate also creates a trap for experts who face criticism when they engage online (Davies 2018: loc 639–660). The two things *often* go hand-in-hand so they can be difficult to unpick but this is far from always the case and there are challenges which academics face when they meet criticism of their actions or their work, particularly if this is animated by the underlying assumption that experts cannot be trusted. Do they show passion and face accusations of lacking objectivity? Or do they express that objectivity while perpetuating the populist caricature of experts as arrogant and distant? Expertise has been justified by experts setting aside their personal concerns to act in a disinterested way. The problem is that the performance of *disinterestedness* is increasingly difficult to sustain. Not only does social media encourage the expression of personal details which erode this expert distance, what boyd (2014) describes as their *persistence* and *searchability* means 'private whims and foibles' remain accessible and ripe for exploitation at a later date (Davies 2018: loc 639). There are constant possibilities for *weaponisation* online: taking remarks out of their initial context and deploying them to serve a prior agenda. As Boynton put it, 'The longer you have the trail, the more things people can pick up on' and it is difficult to convey how unpleasant this is if you have not been on the receiving end of it. Not only are experts now called to account for things they have done which pertain to their expertise, such as where their funding comes from or public roles they fulfil, decidedly personal aspects of their lives are liable to get dragged into these disputes. This is one route by which online disagreement can lead to online harassment.

It is a problem most pronounced for people working on contentious and polarised topics such as climate change or Brexit but the problem is a much broader one which is pertinent to expertise as such. If your *primary* focus is on engaging with external audiences, it's important to be strategic from the outset in the way suggested at the end of the previous chapter. When it comes to issues which are contentious or polarising, it's important to prepare for the reactions your engagement might generate. Why might people object to what you're saying? How might they take it out of context? What attacks might they make upon yourself or your project? It might be dispiriting to run through these questions but it's important to prepare yourself for the worst even as you might hope for the best. This should include how you would react to possible attacks. There's a risk of being drawn into elaborate justifications in the face of criticism which then become a spectacle in their own right. The initial criticisms might not cause a problem, in fact they might not be seen by anyone, but if you're not careful the ensuing exchanges can draw attention and ensure the initial complaints circulate much more widely than they otherwise would.

The fact of complaint isn't necessarily an issue, in the same way that individuals privately objecting to what you're doing wouldn't have been concerning prior to social media. What's changed is that you're more likely to *see* these private objections, as well as the capacity they have to circulate widely if they generate contention and produce a spectacle. Establish criteria for what you will and won't respond to. Furthermore, these responses don't have to be directed at the individuals making the complaint. If you find yourself subject to accusations or grievances that have a common pattern then consider releasing a *general* rebuttal, for instance defending the methodology of your project or making the starting assumptions clear, as opposed to responding to individuals. It might be that none of these tactics are necessary but at least if you prepare for the worst then you can be pleasantly surprised when it doesn't come. But it's possible you might also have to prepare for a backlash from your institution.

It's easy to see how universities would be increasingly sensitive to these reputational risks in a climate in which demonstrable success at student recruitment and defending a positive and unique corporate brand are increasingly seen as central to the institution's mission. As Helena Webb from the Digital Wild Fire project observed to me, social media is a potent source of stories for journalists. For instance, the profanity-laden tweets of an Australian journalism professor were published on the website of a national newspaper by a right-wing journalist, provoking disciplinary action and a public apology (Davey 2014). Grievances published online by students or staff can be seized upon, either as stories in their own right or as illustrative asides accompanying other higher education stories. In some cases, students have surreptitiously recorded staff in a way that has provoked widespread media attention (Reichman 2015). In one particularly worrying case, a student at another university who had founded what was intended to be a BuzzFeed for conservatives provoked a right-wing outcry over the allegedly racist analysis of white privilege offered by the incoming Boston University professor Saida Grundy (Hetter 2015). Social media can be used by students to abuse and harass each other, as well as staff, often with complete anonymity (Mahler 2015). Systems like Rate Your Lecturer represent alternative evaluation frameworks that are feral and public, with the possibility of 'public scolding' this entails (Morgan 2013). Students at many universities have created 'Overheard At' Facebook groups, seen by some as harmless fun (see for instance Datoo, 2014), but which can be forums for sexism and harassment. YouTube videos showing often deeply offensive student misbehaviour risk going viral, providing a justification for mainstream media to report on these videos and in turn contributing to further circulation, as ever more people see the video in question. Sites like the Professor Watchlist have ratcheted this up yet further in their encouragement that students inform on

professors who are deemed to be showing political bias, inviting them to attach evidence to support the allegation.

The risks are everywhere. It's a wonder therefore that university communications offices don't try and clamp down on social media use entirely. Having not undertaken a comprehensive review of social media policies across universities (though having read enough to this end to be sure that it's a massive undertaking, not least of all because of the extent to which these practices are still in their earliest stages), I'm reluctant to generalise. There are also important questions to be asked of the degree to which policies are enforced: to what extent are powers being reserved for purposes of crisis management, as opposed to representing an intention to manage the day-to-day communications of academics? One of the most controversial and widely debated social media policies was introduced by Kansas University, following anti-NRA tweets by the journalism professor David Guth after a shooting at the Washington Navy Yard. As well as being inundated with threats and abuse, he was suspended to 'avoid disruption'. The incident provoked the introduction of a social media policy that threatened suspension or dismissal for 'improper use of social media', a category defined in terms so broad they could easily be applied to any imaginable act of communication which the university management found troublesome or problematic (Reichman 2015). The policy was later rescinded in the face of the outrage it provoked, but it nonetheless indicates the potential direction that institutions might take when over-reacting to threats and risks, which could prove deeply detrimental to academic freedom. Bacevic (2018) offers an insightful analysis of the Steven Salaita and George Ciccariello-Maher cases where politicised objections to the speech of these academics led to a backlash against them at their universities. What she frames as boundary disputes are becoming more common and perhaps more consequential, raising the question of how universities might try to reign in their staff in a proactive way.

When I discussed this with her, Helena Webb made the astute observation that the logistical challenge of active monitoring, even with the use of tools like Google Alerts, probably militates against the possibility of active scrutiny and enforcement. But will these policies encourage students to avoid being critical of their university online? Will the notion of 'inappropriate' content inflate over time, encompassing ever more what might once have been seen as legitimate critique? A sequence of events at my own university (a policing incident on campus, an outcry over the university's new brand, and the attempted creation of a new agency to administer casual teaching) certainly provoked widespread criticism of university management by staff and students on social media. To their credit, there was no attempt whatsoever to suppress this online criticism and in fact management was extremely

responsive in the face of it, but will this freedom of expression for staff and students be preserved in confrontation with the many risks social media poses in higher education and the obvious interest of communications offices in preventing these from coming to pass? As Reichman (2014) notes, 'Some politicians and university leaders now act as though the principles of academic freedom should not be applied when it comes to social media'.

My broader fear here is that a concern for managing corporate identity sits uneasily with the potentially radical possibilities for communication and collaboration afforded by social media. In saying this, I'm not attacking people who work in communications. Far from it. On many occasions my social media work has brought me into close contact with them: I like many of the people I've met and I've learnt a lot from them. But I nonetheless think it's necessary to recognise that this is a very different orientation to the possibilities opened up by social media from those which we might loosely group under the catch-all concept of digital scholarship (Weller 2011). There's a real need to introduce the concept of academic freedom into this debate, clarifying the status of social media as a public forum in which academic opinion has a social and political value. The impulse to manage controversy and regulate the online sphere risks stifling academic freedom, even discounting for the additional risks tied up in the impulse to protect the university brand. Thomas Docherty, a professor at my university who was himself subject to disciplinary action which many saw as a violation of academic freedom, suggests that under these circumstances, 'If one speaks in a tone that stands out from the brand … then, by definition, one is in danger of bringing the branded university into disrepute' (Docherty 2015).

Nonetheless, there's a real need for some governance. Reichman (2014, 2015), vice president of the American Association of University Professors, stresses the need for management and faculty to work together to formulate appropriate policy. This is a commendable goal but it's important to recognise the inequality which would likely characterise such a collaborative endeavour. As the University and College Union make clear, the security of employment in a profession is a crucial safeguard of academic freedom (UCU 2015). Its absence, for instance in the case of fixed term staff or those otherwise precariously employed, makes it difficult to see how any seat at a negotiating table would be offered on fair terms. Could contentious opinion imperil future employment? Might academics concerned about their job security in a fiscally challenged climate fail to exercise their academic freedom in order to avoid potential conflict? If the increasing centrality of the university brand is recognised throughout the institution, might academics come to pre-emptively censor themselves to avoid a conflict with management? Daniel Nehring (2015) makes the worrying suggestion that we are already

approaching a tipping point. Once lost, it's unlikely that academic freedom will be regained because each new cohort of academics will have internalised the new-found constraints of the job. It's possible he is overstating this case. I certainly hope he is. But avoiding such an outcome is precisely why we need to attend to these issues which are emerging with what seems like ever greater frequency on social media. Each one inevitably generates a petition, debate and backlash. It's possible over time this might give rise to a general fatigue and growing disinterest. But they're important and will become ever more so with time. The future of academic freedom is being negotiated on each occasion. It's an issue that extends far beyond social media but this is nonetheless a crucial terrain on which issues of significance for the whole of the academy are being played out.

A perceptive review of the first edition suggested it could be read as if I thought that freedom of speech meant that academics should be able to say whatever they like online without consequence (Marsh 2016). My personal view is certainly on the libertarian end of the spectrum, with the caveat that freedom of speech should come with the expectation that others will freely tell you if what you said offended them. But I realise my reticence is more specific because I don't think my view on this is of much significance. I certainly mean this in the trivial sense that I don't see why you should pay more attention to my outlook on this than anyone else's, as it lacks the grounding in research and practice which my broader claims about social media have. However, I also mean it in the more abstract sense that individual attempts to specify the boundaries of acceptable speech have little significance when the university is undergoing a profound transformation that is calling our current assumptions about these issues into question (Bacevic 2018). What matters is *who* is contributing to the process, *how* they are doing so and whether they are *accountable* for their influence. The problem I see at the moment is not that boundaries are being established for what constitutes legitimate speech by academics but rather that these are mainly being established by university managers often acting in ad hoc, unilateral and ill-informed ways.

There are other groups which have an important role to play in this process, one which could make the establishment of these boundaries a much fairer process than is otherwise the case. The American Association of University Professors offers a powerful example which ought to inspire other professional associations, leading the way in pushing for policies which regulate this emerging sphere of academic speech. Without such pressure, policies are liable to be formulated in a way that reflects managerial concerns without a corresponding focus on the perspectives of faculty. Professional associations have an important role to play here but it should involve establishing professional standards about what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour online: *collegial* regulation taking place horizontally as

a bulwark against *managerial* regulation taking place hierarchically. At present these platforms are normatively chaotic environments, with little agreement about the 'right' and 'wrong' way to use them, not least of all because so many people make claims about what is proper and improper. Professional associations have the authority to begin to establish standards, leading conversations about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour by academics online. Without a background of agreement, accusations of impropriety merely add to the cacophony, provoking more argument rather than helping establish agreement about what it means to use these platforms in a professional way. There are no easy answers to the problems which social media offers in a post-truth environment, but what seems clear to me is that we need *collective* responses, even as we try to find ways to help individuals cope with the day-to-day difficulties which they create.

FURTHER READING

- *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* by Whitney Phillips (2015) is an insightful study of online trolling and its relationship to mainstream culture.
- *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World* by William Davies (2018) is a thoughtful reflection on how our experience of the world is changing in an era of political populism and ubiquitous digital technology.
- *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* by Jaron Lanier (2018) is an engaging account by a tech insider of the business model which has emerged for social media platforms and the problems it creates for their users.
- *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* by Shoshana Zuboff (2019) is a groundbreaking analysis of the business model of technology giants and what it means for the future of democracy.