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► **To cite this version:**

Julie Giovacchini. Academic and Social Media in the Humanities: Guest lecture, MoHu Center, University of Padova, 04/05/2022. MoHu Guest Lecture, May 2022, Padova, Italy. hal-04002281

HAL Id: hal-04002281

<https://hal.science/hal-04002281>

Submitted on 6 Mar 2023

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Academic and Social Media in the Humanities

Julie Giovacchini

Conférence (guest lecture) donnée au MoHu Center, Université de Padoue, 4 mai 2022

I am not a historian. As a specialist in ancient philosophy and digital humanities, I deal in my work either with technical questions, or with authors or texts of a very abstract topicality. It is therefore exceptional for me to find myself in a situation where history in the making catches up with me - but it does happen, Elon Musk wants to buy Twitter, and thus the world I am going to talk about may be living its last moments, - and I have therefore tried to adapt my remarks, probably with too much haste; I hope that my good knowledge of this subject will prevent me from making too many inaccuracies - and as for my pessimistic assessment, I sincerely hope to be disproved.

In the last part of this presentation, I will come back to the reflections that this power grab by a libertarian billionaire inspires me, and to the consequences that it may have on our own strategies of appropriation and implantation in the media and social networks. I would like to point out that since last week there has been a spectacular mass exodus of academics from Twitter, either temporarily or permanently. Here (slide 3) you see a drawing, taken up last week on the alternative network Mastodon (which I'll talk about later); it's an interesting drawing because it has an history. It was first created during the first lockdown in March 2020, within the association Framasoft. Framasoft promotes free software alternatives to "de-google the internet" and the services carried by Framasoft were taken over and thus endangered by a too brutal influx of requests, while workers in general and teachers in particular were looking for ways to adapt their work to this unprecedented situation, without having to pay for licenses or submit to too noisily proprietary environments, without going through the giant multinationals of the net, the GAFAM.

I am an Open Science activist, having been an activist for more than ten years, for professional and personal reasons. I am very strongly convinced that for the sake of scientific practice itself, but also for ethical and political reasons, it is essential to improve the dissemination of results but also of scientific methods, and that the Open Access model is the best to fulfil this function. This activism is not limited to issues of pure scientific publication, although this is an area in which I am personally heavily involved. Yes, we need to fight against predatory publishers, yes we need to promote healthy peer review publishing methods, free of both financial rackets and the sterile race for impact factor; but Open Science goes far beyond these issues, which are internal to our circles and our disciplines.

In its very first and most important meaning, Open Science covers all the means implemented to put science, all science, at the heart of society. Open Science is a conception of scientific activity that sees it as producing a common good for humanity. This particular branch of Open Science is sometimes called Citizen Science: it aims to involve communities and citizens in general in scientific activity, whether by disseminating results that are then exploitable by the communities themselves for their benefit, or by involving communities and citizens in research, data collection, crowdsourcing, etc

I don't think I need, after two years of a global pandemic and in the context of an extreme climate emergency, to explain why it is vital to involve citizens in the science being done. My position is that it is no less essential and urgent in areas that are at first sight less interesting to the general audience. My experience as a philologist and digital humanist has shown me over the years that even the most austere ecdotic issue plays a very important social role, and that it is not so difficult to get the public interested in it - I will give a few famous examples.

I will try to show you how generalist social networks, and in particular Twitter, are today an essential tool for fulfilling these two functions of dissemination and collective action. But I will start by taking a small step to the side, by showing very briefly how what I call scholarly conversation, which is neither the presentation nor the publication nor the professional exercise of knowledge, has always been an essential component of scientific activity - and how social networks simply take up and improve on a centuries-old tendency for us to chatter.

Here (slide 5) are two covers corresponding to more or less recent editions of two very famous scholarly correspondences: that of Descartes with the mathematician Mersenne, and that of the same Descartes with Elizabeth of the Palatinate. The first is a correspondence between peers: Descartes and Mersenne questioned each other and practised a quite identifiable form of co-working. Mersenne and Descartes had received the same education at the college in La Flèche, had a mutual admiration for each other and were interested in the same subjects. Mersenne devoted himself to mathematics and natural philosophy, and shared with Descartes the ambition to spread the results of science, both ancient and modern, to the general educated public: his work as a translator and the information he sent on all recent publications to all his correspondents made it a sort of scientific journal before the time. These exchanges are sometimes lively, and it often happens that the correspondents disagree; but the disagreement is then a pretext for very pointed and very nourished discussions to try to convince each other.

The correspondence between Descartes and the Princess Elizabeth is very different in tone and spirit. Elizabeth takes the initiative to question the French philosopher on a point of his doctrine which she does not understand - and which is, in fact, incomprehensible, since it concerns the painful question of the union of the soul and the body. Elizabeth is highly educated and very clever, but she is not a professional philosopher - and above all, she is a woman, so it is impossible for her to claim intellectual equality with Descartes. However, after an initial, somewhat hasty response from the thinker, she asks again, she insists, and he is forced to develop this precise and highly controversial aspect of his doctrine in a very serious manner, as he had never done before. Here, the epistolary conversation becomes so intense that it inflects the exposition of the scientific doctrine; without the nourishment provided by Elizabeth's curiosity and wit, Cartesian metaphysics would undoubtedly have taken on a completely different shape.

Let's take a brief look at this painting (slide 6), a sort of photoshopped hoax created by Nils Forsberg from several period paintings. The various protagonists of Descartes' correspondence are gathered around a table, under the presidency of Queen Christina of Sweden: political figures, scholars or the merely curious, they form the constellation of what can easily be identified as an archaic social network formed around a scientist.

Let's go back in time (slide 7): here we are in the academic world of the 1980s, the small world depicted by David Lodge, where scholars are like new knights errant who travel the world from conference to conference, and whose conferences are only pretexts justifying a very intense and sometimes very unacademic social life. What interests David Lodge is what happens before and after the conference itself: the mundanity in which we discuss, we get to know each other - we create the network that will be both the working space for future collaborations, but also sometimes

the space for friendships or more futile relationships. We rightly speak of a scholarly community, because nowadays we do live in communities. The ideal model, or at least the fantasy model, which permeates our representations of our work and ourselves, is that of the campus, a closed world, subject to rules and procedures which are sometimes very difficult to explain to the outside world. But as David Lodge already showed in the 1980s, today the campus is global and relations are multilingual: scholarly conversation takes place with all the other scholars on the planet, and the standardisation of our ways of life is such that everyone, whatever their country, knows what a tenure, a phd, a conference or an A-rank journal is.

Indeed, one of the most important elements of this globalized academic life is publication. Publication is the alpha and omega of our careers, it decides our evaluations, it occupies a considerable part of our academic lives. The most recognised traditional media, those to which we devote all our efforts, because they are the ones that are taken into account by the institutions on which we depend, are journals and proceedings. Here (slide 8) is an example of a particularly important (and expensive) publisher in my own original disciplinary field, ancient philosophy. One can easily identify on the website of this publisher the markers that are worth as labels of quality in our scholarly environment. One of the most important markers is the allusion, directly or indirectly, to the submission and validation system used for these publications, which is peer review - more precisely, here, double blind peer review.

Peer review is the backbone of scientific evaluation. It is what (at least in theory) guarantees the quality of what we publish; more concretely, it is in most cases the most objective criterion for distinguishing a scientific publication from an other kind of publication. Moving away from peer review is a freedom, but it is also a considerable risk. It actually means taking off the toga that identifies us as scholars and losing, at least potentially, a significant part of the academic shield that confers a form of authority on us. Without anticipating too much, I think I can say that researchers on social networks are permanently grappling with a double injunction: to renounce the authority conferred by traditional academic markers and to try to create new markers for that authority.

If there is a risk involved, it is that the abandonment of this academic shield is taking place in an arena that is far more lively and populated than the already fierce little world of David Lodge. We write to be evaluated, but even our most insane impact factors will never reach the audience potential of a general social network. What's more, if we speak not as institutions but as individuals, and if we master the codes of digital presentation. In this respect, Twitter, which allows a lot of things as I will show in terms of staging and rhetorical effects, can make a publication go viral very quickly - for good or not so good reasons.

I am now going to take a closer look at that particular generalist network, Twitter. Twitter allows academics to engage in all kinds of scholarly conversations, from the most formal and institutional to the most intimate and less serious. It's a universe that has its codes, which, if used properly, can do very good things, and which therefore deserves to be seized. But the scholarly conversation on twitter also has its dark side, which I will also present, after a brief overview of the material and technical conditions that make this ecosystem possible - and especially, the tool at the base of any modern social network: the CMS.

A CMS is a set of software designed for quick and easy web publishing. It is a very easy to use tool for the writer, reader and publisher, because it is designed for that. Twitter's social features are also helped by specific algorithms that allow us to target what we read and find what interests us (or what, according to the algorithm, is likely to interest us), but also by a very particular design that is made to increase the time of presence and capture the attention - notably the scrolling, this

function that transforms our phone screen into an infinite papyrus scroll that we can unroll without ever stopping.

But if the CMS interface is designed to make our lives easier, it hides the technical side from us. Because a CMS, even if it is not obvious, is always, like all web content, based on a database. When we publish online, we integrate more or less well-structured data into a database to which we do not have access most of the time. This is because the CMS is based on a division of labour between the world of the back end and that of the front end.

In a CMS, everything is done to ensure that the back end is forgotten, whether it is on the side of the server that hosts the data (because the web, as is too often forgotten, is based on very material realities which are servers and cables, i.e. objects that have to be taken care of and which have to be somewhere), or on the side of the database which structures and makes accessible (or not accessible) all the elements of information, content data or metadata. This division of labour is what has made the web usable by everyone, not just for reading content but for producing it. I used to say that the CMS represents a revolution in the distribution of written content that is broadly comparable to the printing revolution in the 15 e s. So we have an impression of ease and total immediacy, because all the difficult technical aspects that condition our presence on the web have been displaced. They have not disappeared, but they have been entrusted to others who take care of them.

It's a kind of global magic trick that has made us collectively forget about the technical; we have the illusion that we write on the web as we write on a notebook. But it's very different. It would be the same if someone stood under our desk and materialized the pages of our notebook as we wrote, and owned the notebook for us - and if we were only allowed to write in the notebook without knowing exactly what page we were on - and if a layer of information was created underneath what we were writing, as we wrote, without us actually being able to access it. Every digital humanities scholar is aware of this, and knows to be very wary of promises of ease and miraculous tools that allow you to create a site with a click: there is a cost to be paid, and the important thing is to be aware of it, because the work we no longer do, someone somewhere is doing it for us. As scientists, our first duty is probably to be aware of this hidden work, and to work seriously to make ourselves less technically naive - if only to have some notion of the concrete and material reality of the tool we use.

But let's get back to Twitter itself, the generalist CMS of choice for the academic world. Twitter is a micro blogging tool, with some particularities, which depend largely on its history: in 2004, the creators of twitter first had the ambition to create a messaging system on the model of text messages on phones, but improved (it is a model that will last until 2020, when the functionality that allowed to receive and send tweets by text messages directly is permanently deactivated.) The turning point in the history of twitter takes place in 2010, when the network goes from a kind of fun experiment to a publicly traded player, and acquires a real financial model, based on promoted tweets and the publicity they generate; twitter progressively goes from a niche start-up to a social network behemoth.

All the characteristics of Twitter favour virality and lead users to produce a form of performance which in our case will be an academic performance: we play a role on twitter, which is that of the scholar. A difficult and sometimes dangerous role.

The costume we put on often has recognisable elements: the desire to appear serious, the choice of biographical elements or user names revealing our activity or interests, often a link to a more complete profile, online CV, personal website, etc. If I show you my own profile, you see

something that can only be fully understood by users of the network: the addition of a Dr. that might seem pretentious in the user name goes back to a storm like social networks have the secret of, when many women scientists were attacked and denied their titles by masculinists; in retaliation a large part of the women's scientific community decided to collectively display this title in support of these colleagues. Twitter creates the evil (harassment) but the Twitter community creates the cure: the massive support of its members under attack. This is one of the many examples of resilience offered by a social network that has created a supportive community.

This storm was for many the occasion to touch the massive and almost insoluble problem of the posture of authority on a generalist social network. A professional presence on Twitter makes us navigate between two postures: that of the professional scholar, and that of the expert. These two postures are not exactly the same. As a specialist, a scholar, I regularly express myself online on what I consider to be my areas of competence: ancient philosophy, digital humanities, open science; certain internal issues specific to my country or my institution. I authorise myself to speak out, by putting forward what authorises me to do so: my place in a knowledge economy, a place that is a priori recognised by a title and a status (research engineer at the CNRS). The posture of the expert is a little different: it emerges when other people, in view of my previous speeches or my profile, ask me for an opinion on various questions. These issues may or may not be entirely within my remit.

While I am well versed in some parts of the history of ancient philosophy, I am certainly not as competent on all. I am a specialist in Epicurus, not Plato or Plotinus. But it is very tempting, when addressing people who are ignorant of this kind of subtlety, to assume the posture of the expert in a somewhat abusive way. Conversely, it can be extremely unpleasant for a true expert to see lesser experts expressing an uninformed opinion on certain issues, and one will then allow oneself to attempt a correction. But then, in the eyes of the general public in front of whom this discussion is taking place, how do you separate the opinions? How can we make it clear, without exclusively using an argument of authority which, as we can see, easily turns against itself, who has the most right to speak on a subject? These kinds of questions are a daily occurrence and seriously jeopardise the ideal of Open Science, as they regularly cause the scholar's discourse to fall into authoritarianism rather than authority.

I will give just one recent example, and one of sad memory, particularly in France: the case of Professor Raoult. From an external perspective, but also from within the academic world, Didier Raoult offers absolutely and to the point of caricature the guarantees of good scientific credibility: he offers guarantees that can be identified by the academics themselves (status, publications) but also guarantees that conform to collective representations and prejudices on what a scientist should look like, both in terms of appearance and rhetoric.

In order to uncover the problematic and dangerous aspects of his discourse, solid technical expertise is already required, which is virtually inaccessible to the general audience. On a broader scale, as an open science activist I have personally been absolutely heartbroken by the use that has been made over the last two years of this wonderful thing called the preprint; we collectively realised that qualitative boundaries that were very clear within our community, between what was peer reviewed and what was not, were not clear at all outside our walls - and that for a legitimately curious citizen hungry for reliable information, it was not possible to distinguish between a preprint server and a scientific journal producing verified content.

We also experienced that the adversarial debate is not a valid form of scientific dissemination. The scientist in society is not there to fuel debates, but to help form a critical and methodical consciousness. This is an urgent question to be resolved for covid, it is also for global warming; the scientific consensus is not a subject of contradictory debates or should not be - and I consider that the place of researchers on social networks is neither that of participants in debates, nor that of debate leaders.

It is difficult to find, the chair is often uncomfortable, but it is nevertheless essential, of paramount importance: the researcher brings, within the honest and clearly fixed limits of his or her expertise, information on the current and verified state of science. It is also desirable that the open discussion may lead to a revision of one's own judgement or to new research paths; but no, we are not on twitter to debate our results - but we will be asked to do it and it will be difficult to decline.

But Twitter is not just an arena: it is also a place where a community is at work and showing its work. Here's (slide 21) an example that I love, and which is particularly pleasing: the so-called "help paleography" community - those two little words being used regularly to ask for help in deciphering a particularly difficult passage. These are tweets that don't have a very large audience, but that's not their purpose: they are addressed to a small group of interested people, and the first person who comes along and can help is often the only person in the exchange. But these confidential exchanges, by their mere presence on the network, actually have a considerable global impact, because they give public exposure to a very underground, unknown work, and thus do a lot for the promotion of a discipline. During the lockdowns, these bubbles of collective work did a great deal of good, both for the researchers who found there the local mutual aid to which they no longer had access, and for the neophytes who greatly appreciated this entertainment.

This demonstration of the researcher's work sometimes takes on a whole new dimension; we must absolutely mention the extraordinary performance of the translator of the Odyssey, Emily Wilson, who documented her entire translation work for months on Twitter, who showed her doubts, her dilemmas as a translator, and who thus did a formidable job of disseminating the reality of classical philology - but also of gender studies, since she is the first woman to translate the Odyssey.

Twitter is also a privileged place for active communication actions, often more collective. This communication can take various forms; I would mention the En Direct du Labo initiative, which, in the French community, puts a researcher in the spotlight for a week by allowing him or her to describe his or her work in detail, with considerable editorial freedom. The # system is also very much used to communicate on a specific event - here you have the example of the # of DH2022, the upcoming session of the annual global digital humanities conference. And of course there are the institutional accounts, and here I show an example of the graph that can be obtained by exploring the recent interactions of the MoHu account.

This graph is also an opportunity for me to show another aspect of the academic presence on Twitter: the possibility of studying Twitter as a database - thus not only being a researcher using twitter, but a researcher on twitter. Because if the twitter database is not easily accessible, there is nevertheless a searchable API - and the possibility to apply for access to the archives of this API as a researcher, therefore by applying for it with a research project. Twitter is a very exciting pool of data, and one of my next projects is to use this API to try and track the activity of the classicist community.

It is time to conclude - my conclusion will be a little long, but current events oblige me to do so. Why fear the takeover of a social network of this kind by a libertarian billionaire whose stated aim is to suppress its moderation? It seems to me that in order to answer this question, we need to tackle head on the thorny issue of the monopoly and centralisation of online communication tools - the famous CMS.

An attempt like Musk's is one more stone in the already threatened garden of Net Neutrality. It shows very clearly how what started out as a very technical question of equal access to a network, is

now also a question of access to data and services, which one person or a small group of people can now decide to misuse, to regulate access to - or to remove altogether. To put it another way, if everyone uses the same well and only one person owns the well and the lake below it, that person can poison the water, ration it or cut it off.

Net Neutrality is a concept that goes back to the early decades of the internet, and the original idea of a network connecting units in a federal, not centralized, model. In the early internet, one instance was not supposed to override the others, and the notion of the resilience of the network rests in large part on its deeply horizontal and decentralised nature. This is probably why researchers aware of this problem are currently leaving Twitter, and are seeking refuge in Mastodon, which is the decentralised alternative to Twitter.

Mastodon is a micro-blogging service based on the principle of autonomous instances linked together in what is called the Fediverse. When you register on Mastodon, you choose to join one of these instances, which functions as a specific community, with its own moderation rules and constraints - some only accept a small number of members, others are larger. It is also possible to host an instance on your own server. Instances can talk to each other, so you can exchange within your instance or outside in the Fediverse, just as you can send a mail from a gmail address to a hotmail or wanadoo or unipd address! History will tell if this model proves robust and attractive – and what Elon Musk will do with twitter. In the meantime, it is up to us more generally to invest in generalist social networks, with caution and humility, to keep open science alive.