

Media Review

Social Media Trends in Medical History

Historical Personalities: Tweeting Standard Narratives in the History of Science

During the Annual History of Science Society 2013 meeting, a round table on social media, ‘The Pleasures and Dangers of *Social Media*’, was organised as a part of a continuing conversation about the role that social media plays in providing leads for research, in constructing course syllabi, and even for opening conversations about the role of archives in historical research and what that could look like, going forward. Of course, the particular social media of greatest interest is Twitter, due to its flexibility in public outreach and academic networking.¹

However, personally, what I find most interesting about Twitter has to do with its capability for the reproduction of archival material, in a manner not unlike the *Wunderkammer*; Twitter can function as placeholders of time capsules where less well-known historical narratives can be foregrounded into other users’ immediate consciousness. Unlike Facebook, Twitter is relatively less demanding in terms of its rules and regulations pertaining to who or what is entitled to a personal profile. As one does not have to follow an unlocked public profile to track what they tweet about, celebrities and public figures have taken advantage of this feature to engage in a form of ‘selfies’, whereby memento-mori-like events are captured in their Twitter updates.

Taking advantage of such capability, certain enterprising individuals have decided to make use of the narrative immediacy of Twitter to set up profiles of famous intellectuals and tweet 140-word aphorisms from the latter’s corpus of writings. This is particularly the case for historical figures, and the number of them ‘joining’ Twittersverse can only increase with time. Twitter encourages narrative continuity, regardless of the gap between the posts, and is suitable for philosophical musings, existential soliloquies, newsbytes and flash fiction. In fact, the juxtaposition of multiple timelines that interlace and interpenetrate between the layers of your personal tweets can conjure an atmosphere that heightens the punch of the tweet even if it were to be drawn from observations that are centuries old.

One such example is Samuel Pepys, or more precisely, his diary. Whoever is behind the profile has been dropping choice selections from Pepys’s diary on the latter’s Twitter updates. Ever an artful gossip, Pepys had a taste for scandal and was not above documenting some of his personal improprieties, bringing archaic, but highly identifiable, humour into the flow of more contemporary tales of scandals and bizarre behaviours. If one is interested enough, one can do a search for history of science personalities with tongue-in-cheek handles (Sir Isaac Newton is known as @MasterofPhysick). However, for others such as Charles Darwin (@cdarwin) and Humphry Davy (@sir_humphry_davy), the choices of handles are unsurprising.

Some of these profiles are given a more personable aspect in that the individual(s) managing the handles engage in contemporary rapport with other ‘normal’ Twitter users in contemporary dialect, or, in the period-based language of the historical personality. Some of the historical handles are merely conduits for publicising the works of the figure. Some of these figures perform Twitter parodies of ‘autobiographical’ updates on

¹ This essay, and those that follow, are Part II of the Social Media Series, a collection of essays published in Media Reviews and organised by Nathaniel Comfort. Earlier essays in the series appeared in *Medical History*, 58, 3 (2014), 469–74.

personal achievements and milestones, though unfortunately, their handlers cannot change the automatic manner in which dates are listed on Twitter (Twitter's interface builders either wanted to avoid, or had not considered, historical manipulations).

While one of the more positive use of Twitter has been the highlighting of the lesser known contributions of women in the history of science, through the use of hashtags such as #womeninscience, the focus tends to be more on contemporary women in the STEM fields. In fact, a search reveals that there are not as many historical female figures on Twitter, and this in effect mirrors the standard narratives in the history of science. Of course, there are a number of Twitter handles that take their inspiration from historical female icons, and these handles are usually part of a project or program set up to respond to urgent issues on gender and science. However, it is not as common to find a dedicated handle that is about the life and work of a particular female icon in the history of science. An investigation into these absences becomes more critical given the discussion of the under-representation of women as public intellectuals. Moreover, historically, women's contributions are often submerged under that of their male counterparts because of women's lack of institutional affiliation and access to formal scientific publication. However, women are not only under-represented as a demographic, whether in present time or historically: the whole history of science is presented as a largely masculine affair.

This brings us to the question of why the dominant narratives of history are still the ones to dominate social media: why are we allowing social media to merely amplify social and intellectual preoccupations rather than bring about new ways of thinking? However, this need not be the case, as social media, and Twitter in particular, have the capacity to generate attention towards often-ignored archives that inscribe the voices of the subalterns in the margins: the archives of women and other under-represented people.

Social media can be part of the digital humanities project for performing voices that have been silenced for so long. Histories that were never formally recorded or were buried under the deluge of dominant narratives can now achieve a much-needed visibility. Even as creative writers imagine the multiple ways in which one can put historical figures in conversations with each other, Twitter allows such historical conversations to have urgent immediacy, therefore emphasising how histories are often reiterated merely with changes of circumstance and actors.

Finally, we should ask ourselves what sort of archives of knowledge do we want to build with social media: do we desire to redraw the lines of the history of science or merely echo the products of better-known archives? How can social media be used as a supplementary tool for showcasing research on marginal figures and historical narratives (after all, we can now attach videos, photos and instagrammed visuals to our Twitter updates), and as a form of outreach on the history of science at the margins?

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Dialogues on Disability: Social Media as Platforms for Scholarship

The past five years have seen a new discussion emerging about the benefits and pitfalls of social media for/as academic scholarship. Without a doubt, blogging, tweeting, facebooking and other forms of social media are, as Amber Regis explains, 'online