

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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### **Social Media Trends in Medical History**

#### **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

tools that enable users to create, connect and communicate, to produce and disseminate content'.<sup>1</sup> I offer my narrative to this ongoing discussion, on my experience as a graduate student using social media and on how it has shaped certain aspects of my dissertation research.

In 2011, I began blogging extracts from my dissertation on the history of nineteenth-century British aural surgery, which narrates the outlandish claims of some practitioners and documents their varied attempts at finding a cure for aural diseases. I catered my posts for a general audience, though I wrote in typical academic prose. A small subset of my research covered the social history of deafness, a topic that I came to examine through the lens of a medical historian. That is, I approached the subject of deafness only as the medical practitioners in my story viewed it: as a medical condition to be cured not as a cultural or linguistic minority.<sup>2</sup> This was the focus of my dissertation, but it was also evidence that I belonged in a particular academic community that could be reached online.

I initially used Twitter only to promote my work to other historians of science in the blogosphere, using the hashtags #histsci, #histmed and later, #earsurgery #deafness or #signlanguage. Twitter eventually became an engaging platform for me to share comments, quotes, images or facts that I came across during my research trips and wanted to share. Steadily increasing followers made me aware that I was neglecting a tremendous portion of my audience who were interested in my work and its implications: scholars of disability history and d/Deaf individuals. Conversations with these scholars forced me to address pivotal historical narratives that I otherwise might have ignored. For instance, following a Twitter remark on whether the concept of 'deafness' historically existed as a problem to be addressed, I wrote a longer post covering different scholarly positions on the issue. A reader wrote a comment disagreeing with my view, expressing that 'the challenge with [my] project is going to be separating out the medicalisation of deafness with the culture of Deafness and the different tendrils that expand out – and overlap – from each'. The kinds of discourse on deafness – and disability in general – that followed forced me to readdress how certain historical concepts informed my engagement with sources.

My blog and Twitter exchange slowly transformed through these dialogues on disability. As I continued posting on topics related to my research on aural surgery, I was also exploring what Beth Linker terms the 'borderland' between medical and disability history.<sup>3</sup> These explorations led to more frequent blog posts, tweets and dialogues on the history of deafness as I shared everything from photographs of Alexander Graham Bell caught watching two people use sign language in 1896; an illustration of an ear operation; photographs of silver ninth-century ear pickers; and most frequently, a tremendous variety of photographs and advertisements for all sorts of hearing devices. Rather than being a distraction to my dissertation, these topics actually helped me to broaden my scope and familiarity with the literature.

<sup>1</sup> A.K. Regis, 'Early Career Victorianists and Social Media: Impact, Audience and Online Identities', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 17, 3 (2012), 355–62: 356.

<sup>2</sup> Disability historians have outlined two different models for assessing the history of disabilities. The first, the 'social', or 'minority', model, defines disability as a social construct, with impairment to be historically examined through the prejudices, limitations and marginalisation faced by individuals with disabilities. This model was advocated by disability scholars as a response to the dominant 'medical' model, which, since the early twentieth century, classified disability as a pathology and categorised any impairment against the 'normal body'. Under this model, every aspect of an individual's life with a disability is constructed as abnormal, requiring intervention at the level of experts, institutions, and even government.

<sup>3</sup> B. Linker, 'On the Borderland of Medical and Disability History: A Survey of the Fields', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, 87, 4 (2013). See also the commentaries on Linker's paper by Daniel J. Wilson, Catherine Kudlick and Julie Livingston in the same volume.

More importantly, dialogues on social media not only gave me a platform for showcasing my expertise on a particular historical topic and connecting with a broader network, but it also helped others to find me. I received tweets, comments on my blog, and even emails, with requests to write guest blog posts, address scholarship issues, provide further information on materials related to my research, or even assist in helping a child's application for admission to a school for the Deaf. Readers contacted me for assistance in locating research records.

Some even kindly shared their own findings; which were pivotal in helping me shape the first chapter of my dissertation on the London Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb (est. 1792). This mutual exchange of records and sources with the broader public was much faster than standard practices of academic networks. Through social media, I was meeting individuals searching for the same historical records as I was, looking for clues into their own pasts, while I was interested in shaping the stories around these records.

This kind of mutual exchange certainly raises important questions about engagement with different types of audiences through social media, which can blur the boundaries between specialist and non-specialist knowledge. I'm not saying that the historian must passively accept all exchanges with the public in order to shape his or her work; rather, one should be cautious. For instance, one of the most notable exchanges I underwent involved a descendant of one of the historical figures in my dissertation. The correspondence and exchange of sources between us led to a much more detailed chapter, allowing me to construct a richly detailed narrative of a historical figure that initially I had paid little attention to.

Using social media as a platform for exchanging ideas and sources with the broader public can add an interesting dimension to dissertation research. But it can also help with networking outside your own discipline, forcing you to consider important implications of your research findings. I received an invitation from a scholar to present my work at a large conference on Victorian disability, which I did nervously. This was the first time I had interacted with disability studies scholars. Lunchtime conversations with these scholars were crucial in helping me frame how I wanted to construct an interdisciplinary framework for my dissertation, but without taking away from the central narrative: the history of a surgical specialty. The same conference not only expanded my network, both online and offline: it gave me new options for graduate funding, two publication invitations, membership in new networks (especially the British Deaf Society), and collaborations for future conferences and monographs.

There's another element below the surface that I hardly talked about on Twitter or my blog, which is how social media has helped me around disability barriers, especially at conferences. Being hard of hearing means there are occasions I miss important points raised at a conference talk or a plenary session. Or, sometimes, the live conversation goes far too quickly for me to follow, effectively creating a form of social exclusion for me. Twitter invites two types of interaction through conversations: (1) standard conversations with other users, either in the audience, in different sessions, or elsewhere, and (2) conversations between the speaker and the audience. The second is supremely beneficial for the graduate student: it allows you to recognise what your presentation's take-away message was. Assessing these tweets helped me reconfigure some of the main elements of my argument. And when tweeted well, I could also follow along or check afterwards what I missed while listening or tweeting at a talk. Twitter, can, in other words, provide a condensed form of closed-captioning.

My experiences with social media for scholarship research and networking were certainly positive. Social media allowed me to form dialogues with scholars and readers outside my own field of expertise and create a mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge. Having a presence in social media essentially meant I had a public platform that made my work accessible to a wider range of scholars – some I never would have come across in conferences simply because of disciplinary barriers.

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### **Social Media Trends in Medical History**

#### **My Own Private Ishkabibble**

The community of experts of which we are a part has contributed, ironically, to what looks a lot like the decline of expertise. In recent decades, post-modern relativism in the humanities has coincided with cultural trends ranging from left-wing identity politics to right-wing Fox News: thus, even experts derogate expertise as ‘elitism’ and persist in the mistaken view that everyone’s opinion is as good as any other’s.<sup>1</sup> Social media are both cause and effect of this trend. Blogs blur the line separating expert from ignoramus. Many of us get our daily news not from the *New York Times* or *Washington Post* that once smacked our front doors, but from Facebook or Twitter, where links to *Times* and *Post* articles show up in our feeds, filtered by friends and followers and interspersed with photos of cats doing funny things. Cranks and cuckoos abound on the internet, of course, and what passes for discourse is often less like a stimulating dinner party than like a bar-room fight. Such foolishness is antithetical to sober intellectual institutions such as peer review or the academic conference, is it not?

Yes and no. Historians of biomedicine will know of the International Society for the History, Philosophy, and Social Studies of Biology – known to initiates as ‘Ishkabibble’. That unwieldy name actually understates its constituency, because a small but vocal contingent of actual biologists always attends as well. I have a love/hate relationship with Ish. Like the internet, it has its flame wars. A session gets hijacked by two scholars dominating the Q&A with their personal argument. Scientists tell the historians, ‘You’re wrong; I was there’; the historians reply that that is precisely the problem. At one memorable Ishkabibble meeting, in Vienna, two philosophers got into a drunken brawl. But when it works, Ish can be brilliant: smart people with a broad range of training and experience, discussing and debating substantive issues of common interest. At its best, Ishkabibble is a meeting where everyone brings a unique perspective, speaks in a common language, and opens each others’ minds.

My Twitter feed is like Ish on steroids. It is the International Society of Historians, Philosophers, Sociologists, Journalists, Scientists, Physicians, Genetic Counselors, Biotech Executives, Novelists, Motorcycle Mechanics, Tattoo Artists and, for some reason I still do not completely understand, the City of Los Gatos, CA. My following is modest

<sup>1</sup> Similar views have been expressed by trenchant curmudgeons for years and continue today. See, e.g., Paul Forman, ‘In the Era of the Earmark: The Postmodern Pejoration of Meritocracy – and of Peer Review’, *Recent Science Newsletter*, 2, 3 (2001), 1: 10–12; Tom Nichols, ‘The Death of Expertise’, posted 17 Jan. 2014 (<http://thefederalist.com/2014/01/17/the-death-of-expertise/>).