

Social Media's Research Potential

Diana Brydon
University of Manitoba

IN HER 2006 NOVEL, *Dreams of Speaking*, Australian writer Gail Jones introduces a character, Alice Black, who is planning a book on “the unremarked beauty of modern things, of telephones, aeroplanes, computer screens and electric lights, of television, cars and underground transportation” (18), even as another character reminds her that “the difficulty with celebrating modernity ... is that we live with so many persistently unmodern things. Dreams, love, babies. Illness. Memory. Death” (21). How we negotiate between and across what Alice thinks of as the modes of yesterday and today is the persistent task of the humanities. How we accomplish that task is being revolutionized by the new tools available to us for developing stronger, transnational research communities and for sharing our work in progress across previously closed borders. But as some borders become more porous, others are erected. Our task, as always, is to remain both open and vigilant as we explore the research potential afforded by new social media.

Dreams of Speaking is a novel in which words provide an anchor (132) in a continuously “buzzing world” (61, 65), where books provide an ordered refuge from the “galaxies of information” available in an internet café (136). Her friend wonders how she could both love technology yet “hate the

internet” (138). What is it about the Web, and social media in particular, that makes some humanists cautious about embracing its potential for advancing our research, learning, and teaching? Where is caution justified, and where are opportunities we are missing for advancing our work and extending its reach?

The chief worry, I think, is that social media were created neither to facilitate research nor to advance the work of genuine knowledge creation. We make them work for us, at least for now, but they will only serve our needs imperfectly until we get more involved in designing systems better suited to our work. Google and Amazon are not usually seen as “social media,” but to the extent that they track preferences and compile customer profiles, I argue that they should be seen as such. Social media are designed to deliver consumers to the businesses that seek their custom. They can be used against the grain, but we need to remember how they work and why. A 2010 CIBER Report on “Social Media and Research Workflow” lists fourteen key findings that provide a useful picture of the current state of affairs. Number 8 is important for members of ACCUTE in this regard: “The most popular tools used in a professional research context tend to be mainstream anchor technologies or ‘household brands,’ like Skype, Google Docs, Twitter and YouTube. Researchers seem to be largely appropriating generic tools rather than using specialist or custom-built solutions and both publishers and librarians need to adapt to this reality.” They conclude by asking, “Is this a sign, perhaps, that there may be a gap in the market for simple bespoke tools?” (2).

Those of you working more centrally in the digital humanities may be best placed to consider this question and meet this challenge, but we all need to think about it more carefully. Susan Brown makes this case well in her chapter in Daniel Coleman and Smaro Kamboureli’s 2011 book, *Retooling the Humanities*. She argues, “What we need is to distinguish our particular user communities and test the tenets of usability studies to figure out how to design systems that will really work for and with us” (223). If your user community values its local perspectives on the world and if it is also transnational, interdisciplinary, multilingual, and inter-generational, then such interactions can create tremendous energy and new ways of thinking about problems old and new. The UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity represents one response to the evolving global information infrastructure.

Siva Vaidyanathan, in *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)*, picks up on issues first noted by Jean-Noel Jeanneney (2005; 2007). Vaidyanathan notes the downside of relying on Google and

DIANA BRYDON is Canada Research Chair and Director of the Centre for Globalization and Cultural Studies at the University of Manitoba. Her SSHRC-funded partnership development project, Brazil/Canada Knowledge Exchange: Developing Transnational Literacies, is experimenting with using social media for research sharing, collaboration, and network building.

similar instruments rather than creating search engines better designed to meet knowledge worker needs and taking a leadership position on knowledge dissemination. In the face of the fracturing of knowledge encouraged by Google and social media, he concludes there is a need for scholars to conceive of a “Human Knowledge Project” that can reclaim knowledge dissemination from Google’s digitization initiatives, redirecting it toward creating a more vital public sphere. Although he draws a parallel with the collaborative Human Genome Project, I see a more appropriate parallel to be drawn with John Willinsky’s Public Knowledge Project; this, however, is not cited in Vaidyanathan’s text.

My own use of social media somewhat fits the academic profile cited in the CIBER Report earlier. I use my personal and Research Centre Facebook pages against the grain, along with Twitter, to share research information and act as a news aggregator and distribution centre for research publications and news related to the key words of my individual and collaborative research. I post links to new academic publications and reports in the Diigo groups associated with the centre, photographs of workshops on Flickr, and videos of workshop presentations and interviews on YouTube and Vimeo. I use my Kindle to read newspapers, academic books, and novels and also to carry conference programs and academic articles I want to read while traveling. I appreciate its convenience while recognizing that Kindle is a “tethered appliance.” It shows me how many other people have underlined a particular passage in a text and records what I read, underline, and bookmark. This makes me part of a virtual community of readers who communicate only indirectly through the mediation of Amazon. Ted Striphas notes that this tethering raises many new questions, including “information repurposing,” “the afterlife of digital data,” and “privacy drift” (307) through which the theorizing of new rights and the regulation appropriate to protecting them may need to be developed. These questions become urgent with the advent of the Cloud.

My experience confirms the CIBER Report’s finding number 9: “Social media are helping to fulfill the demand for cheap, instant communication between researchers fueled by the growth of collaborative and interdisciplinary research” (2). For me, this is where the real breakthroughs are occurring, helping to make me part of a global research community. Our motto at the Centre for Globalization and Cultural Studies is “don’t broadcast; collaborate,” but we are still figuring out how to make this shift. These new tools make research sharing easier and a more natural part of one’s daily life. It’s a far cry from when our SSHRC-funded Major Collaborative Research Initiative on Globalization and Autonomy first

attempted to brainstorm our research questions on a segregated listserv with decidedly mixed results. Everyone found the experience intimidating and was fearful of writing comments without extensive preparation and editing. The result was stilted commentary from which most collaborators abstained. Social media seem to release such inhibitions, at least for some. Putting images, photographs, and videos alongside text helps to humanize the environment, shifting the focus toward the pleasures of shared experimentation and away from the fears of being judged lacking by one's peers. Not everyone wants an image publicized, but the image-rich environment contributes to the multimodality of the exchange. This kind of engagement is no substitute for the time intensive and solitary work that our profession demands, but it opens a wider community to aid in its production and consider its results. The CIBER Report found that "time-poor researchers are still unclear about the benefits of social media and this represents a major barrier to their take up" (Finding 10, 3). From my experience, the benefits far outweigh the risks.

There is a cartoon by Australian Patrick Cook that maps our choices as we engage these new challenges. Two statues represent two types of public figure. One is a soldier labeled, "Died for his country" and the other, of the Greek god Bacchus, titled "Fun to be with." Social media have been used to further both these causes. We should not underestimate their value for reinventing the humanities for global times.

Works Cited

- Brown, Susan. "Don't Mind the Gap: Evolving Digital Modes of Scholarly Production across the Digital-Humanities Divide." In Daniel Coleman and Smaro Kamboureli, eds., *Retooling the Humanities: The Culture of Research in Canadian Universities*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2011. 203–32.
- CIBER. "Social Media and Research Workflow." University College London: Emerald Group Publishing, 2010. www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/ciber/social-media-report.pdf.
- Jeanneney, Jean-Noel. *Quand Google defie l'Europe: Plaidoyer pour un sursaut*. Mille et une nuits, department de la Librarie Artheme Fayard. 2005; trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan. *Google and the Myth of Universal Knowledge*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007.
- Jones, Gail. *Dreams of Speaking*. Sydney: Vintage, 2006.

Public Knowledge Project. <http://pkp.sfu.ca>.

Striphas, Ted. "The Abuses of Literacy: Amazon Kindle and the Right to Read." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 7.3 (2010): 297–317.

UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001271/127160m.pdf>.

Vaidhyanathan, Siva. *The Googlization of Everything (And Why We Should Worry)*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011.