Social Media in Education with Mark Carrigan

Good Practice in Teaching SEED Podcast, recorded March 2023

Transcript

Jonny Crook (JC): Hello and welcome to the latest episode in the SEED podcast series. For this episode, we're joined by Mark Carrigan, who is a lecturer in Education and programme director for the DTCE: Digital Technologies Communication and Education MA course. We are also joined by my colleague Hannah Bratley an eLearning Support Officer. I'm Jonny crook, a Learning Technologist and myself and Hannah provide elearning support across SEED. Hello Mark and Hannah, how are you both?

Mark Carrigan (MC): I'm good thank you.

Hannah Bratley (HB): Hi Jonny. I'm good thanks.

JC: Hi, thanks for joining for this podcast. So Mark, I thought we could start with you just giving a brief background to your work and your kind of work area please, if that's ok.

MC: Yeah. I had a very strange route into digital education really. So I'm a philosopher an sociologist by training, and I came to social media as a freelancer really, during a part-time PhD, because I was doing that PhD while social media was taking off from universities. So I started getting involved in podcasting, blogging and it became this strange parallel career which eventually consumed by research career and you know, the ultimate objective was my research became understanding social media in the universities. And so that was the topic of my post-doc in the Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge. And then I joined University of Manchester in September 2021, which feels like a long time ago now, but it's actually less than two years.

JC: OK, thanks Mark that's really interesting. So we're going to base the discussion around the use of social media in education, and I think just to clarify, we're going to, this is all about social media in terms of use for academics to promote their work and their profile, is that right?

MC: Yeah, that that has been the main focus of my work for quite a long time. But I think this is a really interesting time to talk about social media, because there are a lot of changes taking place and Elon Musk's take over at Twitter that has really solidified a sense that the assumptions people had about social media in the early 2010s when there was a lot of enthusiasm. We're now in a slightly different climate and so there's a lot of questions to be asked about whether we should use social media as academics; what we should use it for; how we engage with the risks involved in doing it and the responsibilities of the universities to protect and support academics if they're expecting us to use these tools.

JC: Yeah, so myself and Hannah both have been listening to some of your past work on talking about social media and education, and I guess, you mentioned Elon Musk there and the takeover of Twitter. And I suppose that's changed your view on how you see some of the social media tools - I guess at first you were quite enthusiastic about using social media, but now your views have changed?

MC: Yeah. So early on, I mean, kind of in the early 2010s, you know there are lots of people who were enthusiastic, but there was an even bigger cadre of people who were very sceptical. And you know, I remember, being greeted with, you know, disinterest at best, cynicism at worst. If you

argued that it's legitimate for academics to use social media and it's occurred to me over that time that actually over the last decade the pendulum's almost swinging too far in the other direction. Well, particularly for early career researchers, there's an assumption that we have to use social media, because otherwise will be left behind and a lot of the things that brought people to social media in the first place, I think have now started to be eroded in this environment where universities tacitly expect it and platforms are trying to develop new business model because the advertising model has been unsustainable overtime. So there was an assumption that it was very easy to be heard on social media, it was very easy to get your work out there, but now that's much more difficult, and unless you're doing it in a very determined, time consuming way the footprint you have is an academic using social media is actually relatively small and so I think there are questions to be asked about how much time is spent in social media and how that time can be spent elsewhere. But you know, if you come to this as someone who spent ten years writing books about how academics can use social media, doing workshops, training people so you know, I come to this from a position of the past enthusiast who has now become somewhat concerned about how this is now played out in practice.

JC: OK, yeah. And for academics who are listening, who might not use social media, what kind of tools are we talking about? What kind of social media tools?

MC: Well, social media is a really broad category that I think people find hard to pin down. And so I mean, there's a kind of standard definition in the literature which is 'a platform for the making and sharing and consuming content'. But I think in practise it's helpful to cast the net quite widely so the obvious ones are things like Twitter, which I think to some extent did become the norm within British higher education in 2010s: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn. But you know, there are platforms which academics are using some success, such as TikTok, which is more difficult for an academic to access, but there's some really interesting use cases.

But I think during the same time we've had collaboration platforms like Slack and Discord, Teams. You know, there's a sense in which we could say that Zoom is social media in the sense it's media that we're using to socially interact. And there are things like Google Docs, Evernote, OneNote that have grown as part of the same ecosystem. So if we define the social media quite narrowly, I think effectively the ones academics need to know about and understanding of are Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and Instagram. But, I think it's useful to think more widely than that. So it's kind of a catch all phrase that we refer to digital creation and networking tools, platforms that have become part of working life.

HB: That's really interesting actually, when you, I guess when you immediately think of social media, you do think of those companies, you think Twitter, you know, TikTok, Facebook, LinkedIn, all those, but also the, what you mentioned there in relation to, actually the communication and the way we collaborate. Yeah, it's really interesting. But it's like a broader scope than just those companies and systems.

MC: And I think it's those communications tools that might be the most useful for academia in the 2020s, so Discord for example, I'm really interested in how that can be used to build and sustain research communities and how for example Mastodon instances could be used for the same purpose. I think for Higher Education we maybe need some more closed social media or you know, less global, less public because there are some functions we want to use them for, which I think something like Twitter just isn't very good for anymore, even though I believe it was, you know, 10 years ago.

JC: I was thinking—just talking about Twitter there—people usually put a phrase on their Twitter profile saying: 'These are my own views.' And I was just wondering whether that's, is that still kind of relevant when if you're working for an institution, whether you can have, a controversial opinion.

MC: I've always thought that phrase is not enormously substantial because you know ultimately who else's views would they be?

JC: Yeah.

MC: You know, it's maybe a good way of indicating you're re-Tweeting lots of things that you might have an interest in but 'a retweet doesn't necessarily imply an endorsement', and I've often thought that's the more substantive thing to put on your profile. But there's a much broader question though, which I think is really hard to negotiate. So I mean, there are lots of discussions about social media policy at the University of Manchester that have been happening over the last year. And it's a really difficult issue because on the one hand, I think academics do need to realise that, particularly if they're publicly identified as a member of the institution, they are trading off the institution's profile to some extent and they're gaining authority from that connection. But conversely, the institution needs to recognise their own social media, you know, academics who are doing this, particularly if they have high profiles are kind of like roving brand ambassadors. And I thought for a long time that for PGT and PGR recruitment, actually there's a huge positive influence that active, visible academics have, which universities are not quantifying. And so, you know, I think it's a trade off. It's a reciprocally beneficial relationship and when it comes to issues that are seem to be controversial or someone is offended, it becomes much more difficult at that stage. But given universities are encouraging us to be publicly engaged through digital means, the fact that can sometimes go wrong means that there is something that into the duty of care I'd suggest, because if we're being encouraged to do this then, sometimes it might not work out in practise and we know from the academic literature that if you're a white middle class male like me, you're much less likely to be attacked or abused online. And so I think there's an EDI issue there as well, about the risks attached to this being disproportionately faced by some groups of academics and not by others. Which is not to say that there aren't issues with academics saying offensive, unpleasant, hateful things online. I'm just suggesting that we need to see that as part of a much broader context, and there's something here which I think has yet to be adequately discussed, about how, what academic freedom means. How it relates to ideas of freedom of speech, because I don't think they are the same thing. How this is being changed by the new sort of media system in society that social media represents, and these are really complex issues. But in my work, I'm really interested in how we link up, you know, big philosophical questions with quite practical questions of training policy support on the ground.

JC: Yeah. I just wanted to ask Hannah. Hannah, you've worked for some companies in the past, haven't you and you've been involved in communication plans, I think around like launching of a VLE. Do you want to talk about your kind of experiences?

HB: Yeah, I mean, I'd say it was kind of on the side really because I worked with a marketing and social media team. So essentially my last role I worked for a charity and we implemented a new online learning platform. It was as a service, so it was for carers and school professionals who could access, so in the launch of it, I worked alongside this whole social media team to, yeah, promote that service as such. But Mark, you mentioned a little bit earlier in terms of time and the time it takes for academics and that sort of related to that, because you know, I worked on the team that developed and implemented this online learning platform and then there was a whole separate team that we worked with to do all the social promotion of it. It's almost like, God, that's almost like another role

in itself for academics to use social media alongside their own work as it is, but also to promote their own work in this space. And the time that it takes to do that in the confines of paid adverting and stuff as, as you mentioned earlier on. And so, yeah, I'd say I'm not a social media expert, I've never worked with social media team. But yeah, I have a little bit of a side for you in terms of how it's used to promote online learning as such.

MC: Yeah, I think what you're saying is really spot on, and my concern is that that's going to be the kind of crucial point where changes are happening at the moment. So, because the new kind of Twitter business model involves subscriptions, the engagement rates and the visibility of tweets of non-Twitter new subscribers are going down and down and down. That's been happening, I think for quite a while. Facebook are moving to the same sort of model, and I think we're going to see this across all platforms where you subscribe in order to ensure the visibility of what you do. So like, effectively it's 'pay for play'. And I think the work of teams like the one you're describing gets much more difficult under those circumstances, because you have to do more in order to achieve the same or even achieve less. And the signal to noise ratio of it all is just going to get much worse, I think, and that's why I'm a bit cautious about expecting academics to do the self-promotional work. You know, we need mechanisms to kind of ensure the visibility of things that academics do but treating this as an individual responsibility is just not a good use of institutional personal time. Because you know the more everyone shouts, the more loudly people shout, the more likely everyone else has to shout. And it's just not effective, I think anymore for communications, and it might become much less so overtime.

JC: I think the University has guidelines, doesn't it on the use of social media. How far do you think institutions, well, for example, in higher education, should go in terms of not restricting people using social media, but making sure they're using it in the, in the right way?

MC: I think there needs to be some kind of formalisation of expectations that those expectations need to be informed by a sense of the potential value that can be created by academics using these platforms, rather than the idea there's a right and wrong way. Because I think particularly given that the academic audience and Twitter is fragmenting, you know, some people have gone to Mastodon, some people have gone to LinkedIn. Some people, like myself, have just started using social media much less. It means that what is the right and wrong way to use it will look a bit different across each of these platforms and if you have a policy that covers every platform, the policy isn't going to really be a policy anymore, it's going to be a huge rulebook that no one will read.

I think there are some weaknesses in our institutional social media policy, but there is a point of it that I really like, which is, at the start, it does talk about a vision of positive use, and that's something that is rarely true of academic social media policies. And I think that's something to build on. So rather than, say, a right or wrong way of using, offering what is the good that can be achieved here? And then use that to interpret academic behaviour online. Because, you know, there are clearly academic uses of social media that legitimately would constitute disciplinary issues, but it's where those boundaries are drawn and the assumption that academic speech online is entirely subject to oversight by the University in every aspect, I think is problematic. So, you know, we think about where private speech and public speech begins. So you know, there were very bad uses of social media where an academic might imagine that Twitter is a relatively private network, and clearly it isn't. But say if a WhatsApp message someone sends to the group of friends gets forwarded and becomes public unintentionally, that is a more complex issue, and I think we need social media policies that recognise that nuance and have fine grained procedures that enable us to think through what to do in those situations. I'm doing research with Katy Jordan from the University of Cambridge at the moment about social media policies across the sector, and I wouldn't say ours is the best, but I

think ours is definitely towards the top. There are some very bad social media policies I've read during this research.

JC: Yeah, that's good to hear then. Ok, so I just wondering whether you've seen any best practise examples where you've seen social media being used successfully by academics?

MC: It's a bit of a get out, but I think that's the question that people have to answer for themselves. So use successfully depends on what you're trying to achieve and the advice I've always given about this is that the best way to develop confidence in the use of social media, is to start using it in a kind of careful, exploratory way. Think about how it feels to you, but also see what other people are doing, because almost everyone will find they have intuitions about the behaviour of other academics and social media. If you like what someone doing, you find of exciting or interesting or engaging, then try and articulate what it is about that that you like and it can often be even more constructive to if you don't like what someone's doing—if you find it annoying—try and articulate that. You can get your sense of what is the right or wrong way to comport yourself. And you know there's some overlaps because for all their differences, academics obviously have a lot of similarities in terms of what they do and the outlook they have. But I think the variability is something really important and we have a good social media culture when people have their own sense of 'what is the correct way to use it', 'what is the incorrect way to use it', rather than kind of sector wide guidelines about academic uses. Because for some people it might just be to use it occasionally to lurk on that as a way of gathering information and seeing what's going on in their field. For others, it might be a more specialised use of, you know, being a digital engagement practitioner, using it for kind of sustained high-profile science or humanities communication. What this looks like is going to be very different from person to person.

JC: My use of social media has changed over the past few years. Certainly with Twitter I've used Twitter a lot less than I did previously. We have a Twitter account for our Humanities eLearning Team, which we use for kind of promoting our services and our support. But yeah, on my personal account I found myself not using it that much at all, which is quite interesting and is maybe kind of that, that fear of well, but not tweeting anything that I wouldn't want people to hear my views. But yeah, there's a lot of negative posts that get put on to Twitter and you can go down a whole rabbit hole, you know, getting involved in Twitter conversations or reading things which I think have a kind of, quite a negative effect.

HB: I think LinkedIn, I think from a professional standpoint, and if I wanted to go and learn what's going on in the industry and that sort of stuff, I do use LinkedIn for that and follow people in the instructional design and the elearning industry. Yeah, I tend to use more LinkedIn for professional and then for like social, I don't particularly use Twitter. I tend to use mainly like Facebook and Instagram, but not in a professional capacity. But I'm again, I'm not an academic so.

MC: I used to use Twitter a lot, so by the end of my PhD I think I was the most followed sociologist in the UK. And I started to find that incredibly tiring because it took a lot of my time and because I was freelancing part-time as well, it was a really important source of work so I felt like I had to keep doing it. And then one day I just had enough of it and deleted it and felt a lot better, but then the pandemic hit six months later, and if I'd known we would be confined to our houses, I might not have deleted that kind of important lifeline. When I started here and it was my first full-time academic job, I thought I'd set up a new one to use in a more narrowly professional way. But I just find it a bit insidious, possibly because I've used it so much in the past. I identify what you say, Jonny. I really get sucked into it very quickly and I deleted that Twitter account about three months ago and feel much better for it. I've got a project account that I sometimes use to share stuff but because it's

not really in my name, there's a bit more distance and that's really good. And since Musk took over, actually, I think LinkedIn has become really interesting. The quality of the conversations and the level of engagement on there seems to have gone up a lot. And I really like LinkedIn in some ways, increasingly, because it is such a kind of sterile platform in some ways. It's very hard to imagine getting sucked into it. But you can use it to have a conversation or see what's going on, and then it's very easy to just step back from it. Whereas, for at least personally, I find Twitter that quite hard to step back from when I get started.

HB: Yeah, it sort of takes over almost, doesn't it? Like you kind of need to take that break away. Yeah.

MC: Completely, I don't get that urge half an hour later to check it, 'Oh, someone's responded to my LinkedIn post', whereas when I tweet, my experience is being that, you get that kind of tick that starts going. It's like, 'Oh, I wonder what's on there?'

JC: So just related to that, do you have any top tips for listeners on using social media or maybe some kind of 'dos and don'ts'.

MC: Well, one of them is what I mentioned previously, which is when you get started, try and see who you're engaging with and you know, reflect on how you feel about what you're seeing and try and articulate what you think and feel about that from your own understanding of how you want to use social media and what you want to get out of it. In general, a lot of training in universities tended to and to a certain extent still tends to be about how to do it. But if you can use Microsoft Excel, which most academics can, you can certainly use, you know, kind of any social media platform and like technically how to do it is not a big question. It's more why you're doing it and what you want to achieve. And one of my problems, one of the problems that I see with this culture where it's expected of academics, is that we're less likely to be articulate about what we're trying to use it for, and this might be very different for different people. So a big chunk of what I used to do with it was public engagement with a particular group who were involved in my research. And if you're using social media for that purpose, you're going to need to take a very different approach, to if you have a kind of generalised sense of, 'Oh, I want people to read my papers'. Or if you're using it to network with a particular research community. These will all mean very different things in practise and it's going to be much easier to work out the right approach if you're clear at the outset about what you want to achieve. And it also makes it easier to keep track of what you're doing. So if you are wanting to increase the visibility of your work within your research community, then it lets you think about, 'Well, is this working?' And if it's not working are there other strategies I can adopt online, or are there other forms of engagement I can do. Should I go to more conferences? Should I take part in more networks. You know, it's not the only way of doing any of these things. It should be one tool in a in a kind of professional toolbox. And I think it's gone from being a tool that people are very sceptical of to a tool that sometimes is seen as the only modern tool, the one we want to use if we're modern academics and it kind of needs to be put in its place to a certain extent. And so in that sense, I guess the final tip would be have realistic expectations. Social media can be very powerful for a whole range of professional purposes, but there are massive limits and there are also significant risks involved. And to get a sense of those, I think it's very important and you get a sense of that through trying and experimenting and particularly talking to colleagues, talking to friends, talking to people you meet online to see how they see things and kind of compare your experiences. And podcasts like this help I think as well.

JC: OK. Thanks, Mark. There's some really good advice there. I think from this I'm going to go away and have a look at my LinkedIn profile and I haven't been active on LinkedIn for quite a while.

HB: I find it quite a good community space to network and share ideas and share work as well.

MC: I find increasingly that it's a really nice space to share very short bits of text. So you know something that might be a Twitter thread. I'll be writing those in LinkedIn instead, and it's a really nice forum for it and you get really good discussions and in some ways it increasingly feels kind of more constructive space than Twitter to me.

JC: Ok, so in terms of key takeaways from this podcast, what would you like listeners to get from listening to this topic?

MC: I'd like people to be aware that social media and the kind of technology sector as a whole is undergoing a really significant shift. So there's a economic crisis in Silicon Valley at the moment and that's shaping how these companies think about their future and how they're redefining their business models. And I think it's important people realise that the move towards subscription is something that is likely to be here to stay and it's part of a broader trend that's been going on over a long period of time of trying to encourage ordinary individuals to use advertising, suppressing the reach of accounts that aren't using advertising and generally trying to find new ways of monetizing social media. So if you're not using social media already, and you're not kind of embedded in networks, this might not be the best time to start. And secondly, I think it's important people are realistic as mentioned previously about what they're going to achieve and recognise that a lot of promotion in social media tends to revolve around academic celebrities or people having academic content that goes viral or creating significant collaborations through social media, and this has happened, like I personally experienced it myself on a number of occasions. But these experiences, all outliers and for the reasons I said about the change, they're becoming less common. And so the reality of using social media and academic is much more mundane. And finally, I'd suggest there are two areas where social media is very powerful for academics. One is building and sustaining research communities, the other is doing public engagement and in terms of how we see social media in UK universities, those two things have often been a bit conflated. And while what you're doing might cover both boxes, it's important to think at the start about are you trying to build and sustain an external audience, or are you trying to engage primarily with other academics? Because if you're trying to engage primarily with other academics, it's a much more limited undertaking with much smaller numbers. And if you're trying to build an external audience, that's a very different undertaking that involves thinking very strategically. And in the trainings that I do and in my writing, I try to increasingly give very different advice for these two groups. If you want to be part of the research communities, social media is just a way of keeping conversations going after in between conferences. If you want to build external audiences, social media is something that carries a significant risk but potential rewards, and you need specialised training and ideally you need support from media and comms services at the University to do it affectively.

HB: I was wondering if I can add on to that, just in terms of advice to academics in the use of social media. I saw on Turnitin's LinkedIn profile and they posted a blog about citing social media for students and I just wondered your take on that in terms of, you know, students using social media and the citing of that in their work.

JC: Yeah, that's a really interesting question. I mean if they're using it they should definitely cite it. And it's something I've encouraged my own students, particularly when I'm teaching them on things like the education technology industry and so much social change happens through social media that these are really important documents. So one of the exercises that I do with my students is a kind of provenance exercise where we research the history of an edtech company. We research the founder, we look at their public statements over time. So for things like this it can be really useful

and I think there are some incredible resources like on YouTube for example. The problem I have found and I've got better at warning them about this over the time, is that occasionally people have submitted to an essay that uses just social media sources. And that's when you need to remind yourself to really stress to them that these sources need to be secondary or at least specialised sources relative to more traditional academic sources. So I think there's a place for them and they can be a very important place depending on the topic so it shouldn't displace, you know, kind of more traditional academic stuff.

HB: Yeah, oh brill, thank you.

JC: Ok, so yeah, it's been a really interesting conversation. There's lots to take away and think about from this podcast. So thank you for joining us, Mark. And thanks, Hannah.

MC: Yeah, brilliant to be here. A really enjoyable conversation. Thank you both.

HB: Thank you.

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