Social Media and blogging has always been an integral part of my career – I found my PhD scholarship via twitter, and blogged about that on the thesiswhisperer blog very early on in my candidature. I have since moved up to holding a few paid academic social media positions.

I don’t have all the answers for you today, but I would like to share why SM is integral to my identity as an academic – and why it is connectivity that drives me.

It is intangible in so many ways, but invaluable.
If you would like to connect with me, I am mostly over on Twitter @shereebekker – and if you are tweeting today please use #acaconnectivity

All my blogs and other social media platforms can be found over on my website www.shereebekker.com

And feel free to email me if you have any questions
Firstly, let’s have a look at the vast reach of social media

Socialnomics video
As academics, I am sure we have all been told by our universities, bosses, and peers that we should be on social media.

As researchers, we often join SM for research communication purposes. We have been told we need to share our work, to broadcast our efforts, to, ultimately, garner citations. Research has even been conducted which shows that social media shares and views may positively influence citation rates.

For academics, this broadcasting of our work is often encouraged and applauded by universities. But: this broadcasting also often sits uncomfortably with academics – we prefer that our work speaks for itself.

Today we will talk about not only what makes us join social media in the first place, but also the deeper and more authentic reason for participating in social media: what makes us stay.

This will not be a social media 101. Social media and blog developers have set up their platforms so that it is super-easy for anyone to join them – these platforms are intuitive and easy to use. I will not talk about the different platforms and what each is for. Today I will instead talk about how to harness the true power of being an academic and a human on social media.
How to engage and connect with others interested in your academic work.

We will talk less about information broadcasting, and more about sharing, relevance, voice, authenticity and – most importantly – connection.
So, having said that, why *do* academics use social media? These are some reasons that you may have heard before...as I have said, we join social media to post work content, to discover peers and papers, and probably mostly out of curiosity!

But let’s be honest....
These are the reasons why we REALLY use social media...

To legitimize our web surfing, to procrastinate, or to give us something to do during boring seminars – you might have a few social media platforms open right now!
Now, I often get asked “do I need to be on social media?” “Do I have to be on social media?”

Social media and blogging can indeed be a divisive topic amongst academics. Should you or shouldn’t you?
My point of view is that, just as with *that dress*, there is no right or wrong answer here…it IS personal

For the record, I still see white and gold!
There are two kinds of people in this world, those who say “there are two kinds” and those who don’t

Gloria Steinem

The thing is, engaging with and on SM is not an issue of should or shouldn’t, but rather how and why (or: to what extent, and why)

Today I will share my reasons why I see SM and blogging as valuable, moving beyond increasing citations and towards the benefits of connection.
Even though many people see SM and blogs as frivolous, shallow and trivial – as something teenagers do – it can be and is more than that.

Social media is a tool to forge connections with.

Teenagers are often scolded for being tied to their screens – when there are, in fact, real people in and behind those screens.

Social media allows for deep connections that span the globe – it is not all frivolity and selfies.


http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2013/oct/05/teens-social-networking-good-for-them
Speaking of selfies: the selfie has become a genre in and of itself, and the subject of Tumblr pages such as this one (Spectacular displays of questionable judgement) in which academics post selfies and, typically, over-analyse them.

Selfies have also become the subject of serious academic research – in my field of injury prevention the selfie has become a danger in and of itself with people unknowingly taking selfies right before their own tragic deaths. The deadly selfie game - the thrill to end all thrills

Social media has itself become a modern medium of connection that is deeply compelling in all sorts of interesting ways.
So yes, social media and blogging has been called frivolous, and a distraction from ‘real’ work by some – whilst others such as Katie Mack and I wax lyrically that it is the real work.

Why is this the real work?

Let’s first look at the role of sm and blogging in research communication: a friend of mine, Ross Tucker, recently shared a series of tweets on the importance of research communication...
Scientists need to take more ownership of the wider communication & translation of knowledge

Otherwise they’re doing only half their job

Ross Tucker
This means they must pay attention to, & work on understanding how people want to receive complex messages, & learn how to deliver them

Ross Tucker
It’s difficult only because research is often not purpose-driven enough, with a clear need

Communicating without relevance is impossible

Ross Tucker
Why hope that your life’s work will make a broader impact thanks to someone else (assuming you want this), when you can own it yourself?

Ross Tucker
Failing to do this leaves doors open for the misrepresentation of science

Ross Tucker
That said, we aren’t marketers or salespeople, balance between accuracy & appeal is tricky

Being relevant does not trump being right

Ross Tucker
Find even 1 way to make your important work understandable or “sticky”

You won’t be selling your soul, you’ll just expand your influence

Ross Tucker
After all:

Science is a special kind of storytelling, with no right or wrong answers, just better and better stories ~ Mary Budd Rowe

SM and blogging gives us a tool to bring our academic work off the page and into real life.
So maybe communication is more important than technology.

Conversation is more important than the platform.

SM and blogging allows us to participate in conversations with people we might not otherwise have the opportunity to interact with.

To get new and different views outside of our traditional spaces.

To break down hierarchies.
And so, everything is a remix. Social media has enriched rather than impoverished academia.

I often hear academics say that they now find more relevant information via their social media networks than they do via traditional academic platforms.

This is a wonderfully authentic effect of the power of social media, and a testament to the sharing economy that is thriving.

The sharing of tacit knowledge is especially valuable. An example of this is Pat Thompson and Inger Mewburn’s current open writing practice where they have made their paper that they are in the process of writing Open on google docs for all to see. This provides a wonderful opportunity for tacit learning, both for emerging and established researchers.

As academics we are particularly risk averse when it comes to sharing ideas, we have come to believe that our research and ideas will be scooped if we share too much. This is simply not the case, in fact sharing early and sharing openly protects your ideas as they become associated with you.
We need to remember that attention will be on our work through social media - _whether we want it to or not_

Further, if you don’t share your work on SM, someone else will do so for you.

Universities, journals, and our peers are already talking about our work on social media, if we are not part of this conversation we cannot know what people are saying about our work, and you cannot contribute to that conversation.
Academics are no longer ensconced behind closed office doors, anonymously plugging away at our work and dealing with successes and struggles alone and with quiet determination.

The academics on social media have evolved into a community that is having an open-and-honest conversation. Academia is a thriving international society, and, for the first time, we can candidly share our research and our experiences of life as modern academics through social media.
There is magic in that overlap.

The divide between personal and professional is a false dichotomy

Owning and curating your online presence does not mean creating a ‘professional persona’, but rather being very clear on who you are and what value you have to add to the conversation.

The vast majority of academics are drawn to their life’s work through the intrinsic motivation that drives their passion, rather than fame or fortune.

Twitter and blogs are not add-ons to academic work, but a simple reflection of the passion that underpins it ~ Hitchcock
In fact, if we do try to divide personal from professional too much it can backfire.

Stories of assistants tweeting on behalf of people abound – this does not engage or connect with people.

Authenticity is lost when the divide between personal and professional is too rigid.

Academics are humans too, and it is okay to be a human on social media.
Neoliberal values do not play well in the world of social media. Social media is not traditional media.

Connection, voice, and authenticity are more important than broadcasting.

Use social media to not only share your work, but also to share the work of others. To debate respectfully, to champion great work, to share tacit knowledge.

Social media and blogs are dynamic. This is not a one-way impartation of knowledge, but rather a two way conversation.

The key is to always add value, and never to add to the sea of white noise just for the sake of it.

Listening, sharing, and contributing is vital.
Because everything is connected.

It is always an exchange.

Social media provides no perfection narrative. No impostor syndrome. No competency narrative. No hierarchy. No gatekeeping.

Just humans with a deep engagement and passion for the work itself, for our life’s work.

The promotional narrative of “use social media! It’ll increase your citations!” has some truth to it, but tends to miss the point or the value that long-term embedded users express...which is that SM enables and enriches their engagement and experience as scholars.
Social media is a form of networking without the obligatory small talk at conferences

The converse of disengagement
isn’t mere engagement,
it’s connectivity

This is, then, about so much more than research communication

Research communication gets us to join SM and start blogging,

Connectivity makes us stay.
Social media is not a threat to our human connection – social media IS connection.
Thinking today of academic connectivity. What is this? What is the state of feeling this connection and of being taken out of ourselves?

In some ways, when I read of the zombification of higher education, of disengagement and self interest - I see a lack of connectivity at the heart of this. We have forgotten to truly and authentically connect with ideas, with values and – most importantly - with other people. If we don’t connect we lose something special. When we are too self-focused or busy, we don’t allow ourselves that space and time to connect. And we are too busy not to connect.

Often researchers early in their careers still allow themselves to become immersed and connected with what is around them. As we travel our academic roads, we intellectualize, label, critique and self categorize….this gets in the way of our connectivity.

We fool ourselves into thinking connectivity is about surrender and submission. Yet, connectivity is not about the self - it is about other and about allowing the self to be open to the other. This actually requires confidence. Connectivity is then about strength.

From this place of strength, connectivity is also about vulnerability - to be open to be challenged and to travel to places we don’t yet know. Connectivity is essential and valuable to ourselves and our ideas.
Like wifi - I am not sure I can manage without this anymore.

Connectivity means we are linked, not ranked ~ Gloria Steinem
For most of human history, musicians and artists have been part of the community – connectors and openers, not untouchable stars

Amanda Palmer

It is not that academics seek fame and fortune via social media – rather, as with most musicians, it is the intimacy of small gigs that we crave.

It is that feeling of being part of something that is greater than ourselves, part of a community, part of a conversation. We all crave connection.
Academics are human too.

When we armour up we lose our capacity for connection. Social media, contrary to popular belief, has created a safe space where our vulnerability and humanness can shine through.

The most compelling conversations on social media are those which hold space for us to be unapologetically human.
What does connectivity look like?

Meet the 90 year old reddit guru.

Ron is a Reddit AMA (ask me anything) regular who answers questions from all over the world.
Questions such as:
What was the worst day of your life?
What does it feel like to grow old?

The thing is, Ron:
is not just an older person using a computer in an adequate fashion, he’s creating something people use and appreciate and connect with

You can do this too. Be more like Ron.

It’s no longer enough to be stuck up in our ivory towers, we need to go to our community and invite them in.

How do we do this? How do we go to them and forge connection?
Amanda Palmer, a crowdfunding musician and connector wrote a gorgeous piece about how to forge connection in her book “the art of asking”:
The piece is about artists and musicians and being up in the garret, but is just as true for academics in the ivory tower, and I would like to share it with you now:

the garrett.
the one in the attic.
i’ve thought about it before when asked about the music business.
the garrett belongs to that set of romantic notions we all had or have, painters, writers, musicians, and how they work.
“up there.”
with a pen, a paintbrush, a piano. by candlelight. alone. the space is isolated and fraught with artistic tension. drunk. chainsmoking. agonizing. creating. up here. in the garrett. separate.
then....

down to the ground floor, out the front door: you have the marketplace. loud. the stalls of exchange. the sound of bargaining and bartering and changing cash registers. it’s crass.
it’s mundane.
literally mundane compared to the garrett. it’s on and of the earth.
i give you goats, you give me bread.
i give you a handful of coins, you give me a paperback.
i give you an amex, you give me a best buy giftcard.

the marketplace is NOT “artistic”. it’s “commerce”....
it is the WILD WEST down there in the marketplace of the internet.

carrying your fragile newborn work wrapped in a blanket through the stalls can be agonizing. the marketplace is dangerous. it’s dirty, it’s loud and filled with disease and pickpockets and naysayers and critics. it’s easier NOT to do it.

but there is another option, which is:

to YELL from your window.
to call to your friends below, your comrades in art and metaphor, and invite them up to a private party in your garrett.

this is the essence of social media.

finding your people, your listeners, your readers, and making art for and with them. not for the masses, not for the marketplace or the critics, but for your hopefully ever-widening circle of friends. and you aren’t totally protected from criticism. the minute you lean out that window and try to find your friends, you might get hit with a rock (or a book), and if you look down, you’ll see a lot of this from down there (*raises middle finger up to the sky*). you’ve got to learn to ignore that.

but you’ll also see people quietly heading to your door and knocking.

let them in. and tell them to bring their friends up.

and if possible: provide wine.
There is a difference between wanting to be looked at, and wanting to be seen...

One is exhibitionism, the other is connection

Not everybody wants to be looked at

*Everybody wants to be seen*

Amanda Palmer
When you’re afraid of someone’s judgement, you can’t connect with them. You’re too preoccupied with the task of impressing them.

Amanda Palmer

What is important is to invite your people in to your garrett, into your conversation, into your safe space: to absorb, listen, talk, connect, help, and share.

Constantly.

Don’t give any thought to the critics and the naysayers – rather build your net of wonderful people who will support and champion you, as you do them in return.

Constantly.
Instead of trying to fit into the marketplace of modern academia, or into the marketplace of this world...use social media to find your network, your friends, and invite them up in to your garrett, your world. Your network may not work in the same field as you – this is a strength.

Each of us will and can do this in our own unique way. Those of us who identify as introverts can find power in the conversation that is social media, it gives us the breathing space to fully be present when we engage – others will prefer a raucous party in their garrett.

They thing is, there is no right or wrong way.

All that matters is authenticity and connection.

Invite people in.

Social media, as we have seen, is a conversation, not a press release.
Authenticity is key. Authentic caring inherently underpins why we all chose to work in this space, as academics.

Approaching social media as a public relations-type platform is missing the point.

Social media gives us the amplification to reach more people with the credible information and ideas that we have.
Don’t look for credit, don’t focus on reach and impact and metrics – rather invite people in.

Connect.

Harness connectivity.
And so, social media is not frivolous. And it is not about me, the individual. It is about more, it IS more than that. It is a carefully curated community.

I learn so much more from my community than they will ever learn from me: mostly I enjoy listening and learning always all ways.

There is no right or wrong way to do social media. It is not a matter of should I or shouldn’t I. Rather, it is about deep connectivity.

More people are now feeling brave enough to get their ideas, opinions and stories out into the big wide world. And more people are reading more widely and thinking more deeply than ever before. We have a hunger to consume stories, connect with others and create our own work.

Human nature has not changed, technology has only provided a new tool.

My academic experience would not be the same without it.

Pick a format, any format and I hope to see you out there.
Start sharing, keep connecting.
Let’s connect!

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#AcaConnectivity