

The moral baseline of social media policies: Institutions and scholars need to examine practices with a critical eye

Although scholars are often encouraged to promote their research online, institutional recognition of networked scholarship often appears to be as much about control and surveillance as about integrating public scholarship into academic criteria for success. [George Veletsianos](#) argues staff members, faculty, and administrators need to work together to devise forward-thinking policies that take into account the complex realities present in networked spaces.



What does a relevant, useful, compassionate, and effective social media policy look like? For one, such a policy needs to be transparent. That's the topic behind a [conversation](#) that brewed on the Research Whisperer blog a few days prior to the end of 2015. In that blog post, a colleague describes how "[e]ach day, the boundaries of appropriate social media usage shift a little." This environment leaves academics that use social media exposed to accusations of defamation and incivility. It also enables individuals in positions of power to regulate and restrain social media activity.

We can, and should, do better.

Policing Scholars' Voices

The unfettered policing of scholars' voices needs to end. The moral baseline* of universities that aim to improve society needs to be the cultivation of a scholarly and educational environment that is anti-oppressive. Such an environment shuns the marginalization of peoples and practices that aren't dominant or mainstream.



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The realities of social media use raise significant issues for institutions and individual academics in the contemporary academy. Although scholars are often [encouraged](#) to promote their research online, institutional recognition of

networked scholarship often appears to be as much about control and surveillance, as about integrating public scholarship into academic criteria for success. The capacity of networked activities to reach large audiences, particularly if they are in some way controversial, is an uncomfortable reality for institutions in an age of carefully-controlled branding.

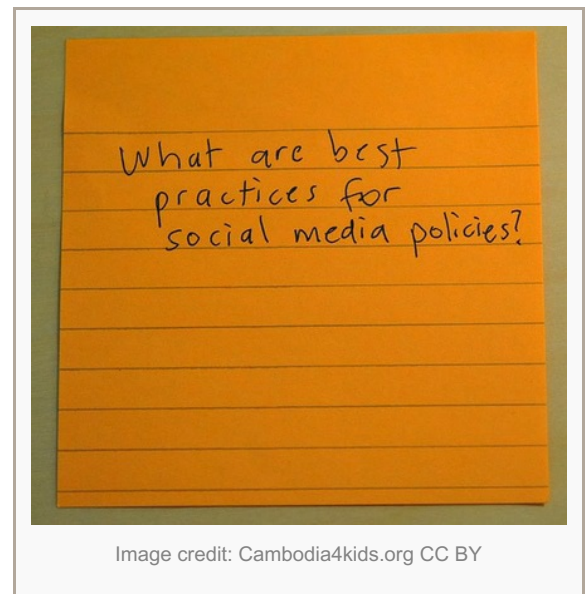
In 2014, the Kansas Board of Regents instituted a policy governing faculty and staff “improper use of social media” that was somewhat vague and was [seen by many as encroaching upon the values of academic freedom](#). The policy allowed administrators to discipline or terminate faculty members whose social media activities were seen to be “contrary to the best interest[s] of the university.”

Creating Social Media Policies Together

Staff members, faculty, and administrators need to [work together](#) to devise social media policies that take into account the complex realities present in networked spaces. My own institution is working on [developing such a policy](#) with the help of a diverse group of stakeholders. Such policies can oversee, but also support, scholars’ use of social media. For instance, social media policies should recognize that scholarship may question social, political, and economic interests, and when amplified online in social media contexts, it may reach and threaten audiences with vested interests.

Stakeholders need to work together in developing such policies because a parallel scholarly environment has arisen. In 2013, Siemens [argued](#) that a shadow education system has developed; one in which individuals use the Internet to learn without the support of educational institutions. He argued that this has occurred as a result of universities failing to recognize the demand for the unique needs of complex contemporary societies. His argument focused on learners, but a similar situation has arisen in terms of scholarly practice. The shadow education system that Siemens sees arising encompasses a scholarly environment that runs parallel to the one that centers on a few select journals and conferences.

My colleagues and I have been studying this environment under the label of [Networked Scholarship](#). This environment, facilitated and encouraged by online social networks, serves scholarly functions and features. It supports the development, sharing, negotiation, and evaluation of knowledge. It also questions norms of academic practice and envisions alternatives. In this parallel environment, scholars selectively and intentionally – not naively as [others have argued](#) – use blogs, microblogging platforms, media-sharing sites, and other emerging technologies. Scholars have:



- supported peers and students regardless of hierarchy and institutional affiliation;
- provided advice and care in time of need;
- commented on peers’ in-progress manuscripts;
- delivered guest lectures or have taught open courses, and
- performed activism and outreach.

Many of these activities have occurred with little or no institutional support and in many instances with little or no institutional oversight. My conversations with many scholars lead me to believe that the general feeling is that many of these valued activities would not have occurred had institutions been more involved. While such a critique of the institution is damning, the feeling is often expressed in a somber way, in a way that demonstrates scholars’ desires

for institutions to support these endeavors.

Networked freedoms?

Institutions will have to consider how the concept of academic freedom aligns networked scholarship. At a very basic level, institutions will have to grapple with the drafting of useful and person-centered social media policies. The need is urgent, as the values of “openness” and “transparency” that are often imbued in this emerging scholarly environment appear to be in conflict with prevailing policies governing faculty members’ social media use. As reported by [Lough and Samek](#) for instance, the current trend in social media policies in the Canadian post-secondary sector is to inspect, control, and manage digital activity. Of course this trend is not limited to Canada, as illustrated by the description of the Kansas Board of Regents social media policy described above.

While social media policies must support a variety of needs, they also ought to recognize the increasingly integral role digital participation plays in scholars’ lives; the complexity of online social networks as places where teaching, learning, and research occur; the role of social media as places where the personal and the professional intersect; and the reality that social media platforms often serve as places of debate and spirited exchange of ideas.

At the very least, institutions should clarify their stance on whether social media speech is protected by academic freedom. Such a stance should be taken *ex ante*, and not *ex post facto*. Other scholars have recently been supportive of this perspective. For instance, Daniels [noted](#) that institutions should “reimagine a wider definition of academic freedom as explicitly tied to the faculty member who may communicate in a variety of ways, including digitally mediated ones” and argued that “it is possible to simultaneously expand academic freedom in a digitally networked era *and* stand for values that reject racism” (emphasis mine). Further, fruitfully, Murphy [argued](#) that institutions should introduce “protective social media policies that explicitly recognize the application of academic freedom to the social media context.”

Conclusion

To cultivate a scholarly environment that is anti-oppressive and shuns the marginalization of peoples and practices that aren’t dominant or mainstream, institutions and scholars need to examine their practices with a critical eye. This is what scholars do. This time though, we need to shine the light on ourselves.

This article is an edited excerpt from the author’s book, [Social Media in Academia: Networked Scholars](#) published by Routledge.

* The term “moral baseline” was first used in Feinberg J. (1986). *Harm to Self*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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