



# To blog or not to blog...

**Charlie Beckett** says universities should not be afraid of social media, but should learn to distinguish their “hashtags” from their “likes” and engage online.

The internet is a vast space full of stupidity, malice and falsehood. Social media platforms such as Twitter, blogs, Facebook and even mobile phone texting spread misinformation and distract us from intelligent debate about the real world. This is precisely why universities need to make a much bigger effort to be online.

Of course, the digital environment is also packed full of wonders. A resource like Wikipedia might not be perfect but it is an extraordinary achievement and a powerful (free!) resource that would simply have been impossible before Tim Berners-Lee's creation of the world wide web. Every hour of every day I thank the internet for making my life easier and more interesting. But I want it to be much better.

So there are positive and negative reasons for digital engagement. Look at the recent democratic uprisings in the Arab world. Then consider the recent riots in England. They are both examples of the power and pleasure of social media.

Underlying both were profound social and economic causes and contexts. People don't revolt or riot because of a tweet or a “like” on Facebook. But it was clear that the digital communications tools – combined with traditional media such as radio and new mainstream players like Al Jazeera – had a decisive effect in catalysing and then spreading the discontent.

In Tunisia and Egypt we welcomed the use of social media to bypass the censors and give voice to millions of individuals who connected their anger to others to create a diffuse but effective movement. The images of protest that appeared on YouTube gave visibility to the dissent. It told protesters that they were not alone and it signalled to the army and government that they were facing a genuine popular opposition.

In England, as the summer boiled over into unprecedented scenes of arson and looting, social media also added to the speed and efficacy of the perpetrators. These young criminals used Twitter, Facebook and Blackberry Messenger to organise and celebrate their appalling actions.

There were also people who were using the same platforms to call for calm and to help organise campaigns to heal the communities damaged by the violence. The Twitter @riotcleanup account accumulated nearly 100,000 followers within days. It helped generate a whole series of positive real-world actions.

What all these examples have in common is that they tell us where people are communicating. If you want to be part of people's conversations then you have to be on social networks. If you want to influence people's actions then you have to be part of social media. That is where the people are.

It is risky. In fact, the evidence I have from using social media to engage with different groups of people is that social media are by their very nature experimental. This is a relationship that needs to evolve. It is inevitable that you will make mistakes, but the great thing about the digital world – as opposed to, say, a book – is that you can and should correct after publication.

Social media platforms have a different etiquette. Some of this is concerned with the often-confusing jargon and “text speak”. What is a hashtag? How do I “like” something? The language and the manners are fairly easily learnt. Anyone intelligent enough to work at a university who can't manage it really hasn't tried. The bigger issue is the attitudinal shift.

At universities we are used to preaching – sorry, teaching. We expect to be listened to and for people to value our insight and learning.

We have created spaces such as lecture halls and academic journals where

our values and knowledge are in authority. That all changes online.

The internet is a vast space full of clever people saying profound things. If you are going to be part of the conversation you have to listen as well as speak. Social media work so well because they allow interactivity. People want to comment on and question what they consume. They also want to be able to share and add to what they view. If you don't facilitate that, then people will move on rapidly to somewhere else. It is easily done online.

This does not mean abandoning traditional practices. It certainly does not mean diluting standards. Social media are in addition to current work. But it will have an exponential effect. POLIS attracts about 4,000 people to its events every year. But we multiply that interaction thanks to our Twitter Account (7,000 followers), blog (3,000 views per week) and podcasts (12,000 downloads for one lecture alone), plus the Facebook page, website and email newsletter.

But the numbers tell only part of the impact story. We are about quality not quantity. The great thing about social media is that they directly reach the various individuals and groups who are interested in different aspects of our research and events. And then those people pass on the links to their networks – again in a very targeted way. And all automatically and at very low marginal cost.

The quality of the interaction can also be high. A tweet of 140 characters might not have the complexity of an academic essay, but it might contain a link to an article that will inform your work. Likewise, publishing something on Facebook may not have the kudos of an Oxford University Press hardback but it allows you to be topical, relevant and responsive. Suddenly, your research can be part of the debate and the policymaking process today.

You should not engage with social media if you don't have the time or something to say. If you don't want to have impact and you don't enjoy interaction then it is not the place to go. It requires commitment, time and investment in skills and properly designed and maintained platforms. It also needs a shift in thinking. But surely this is what universities are all about? My experience is that there are vast numbers of people on the internet looking for exactly the kind of intelligence that universities possess. We look into the causes of things, but we also want to change the world as well as interpret it. For good and ill, that world is now online and using social media. So should we. ■



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## Social media at LSE

LSE has sought to be a leader in the field of social media, whether through podcasts, blogs, Twitter or Facebook.

Podcasts of the public events programme attracted millions of hits. The podcasts can now be found on both iTunes U ([apple.com/education/itunes-u](http://apple.com/education/itunes-u)) and YouTube, as well as on the LSE website. In addition, LSE's audio and video pages carry online research videos from our in-house producer Dr Jon Adams, as well as the Stories from LSE videos.

Our Facebook site now has nearly 35,000 followers and can be found at [facebook.com/lseps](http://facebook.com/lseps). The Alumni Association Facebook group has 6,492 members, and 7,456 alumni have joined the LSE Alumni LinkedIn group. In addition, the alumni and press offices tweet, as does the events office – recently found to be

the most popular of all UK universities' Twitter accounts.

LSE's growing number of blogs are also proving hugely influential. As well as the POLIS blog ([blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis)), the British politics and policy blog ([blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/tag/blogs](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/tag/blogs)) attracted nearly 120,000 visits from May to October and has 317 contributors. The Impact of social sciences blog ([blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences)) currently receives around 3,000 hits a week.

Africa at LSE ([blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/africaatlse)) was set up in June 2011 to promote African research from LSE. It also features opinion pieces from LSE academics and students and all African-related activity taking place at the School. It had almost 20,000 hits in its first three months and has around 400 followers on Twitter.

## ALUMNI VIEWPOINT



### Rachel Witalec on social media

Twitter just hit 100 million active users, connecting users in over 17

languages around the globe. Facebook has over 800 million users – an amount well over twice that of the population of the United States. There's over a day's worth of YouTube content uploaded every single minute.

The pace of the growth of digital communication is stunning and so is the scale: the number of internet users, the number of mobile subscribers, the sheer amount of digital information is exploding. We have moved into a digital revolution that we have been leading up to for 15 years. In the first phase of the internet we learned how to read. Google (and Yahoo, and others) taught us how to see and absorb information online. It was brand new, but still a one-way, mostly passive form of interacting.

The second phase kicked in soon after – we learned how to spend. Sites like Amazon, Expedia and eBay made us comfortable handing over our credit card details, buying online. The third phase came more recently, where we learned how to talk, genuinely to communicate. Skype, Facebook, YouTube and others taught us that two-way communication is possible online.

There are obvious positive and negative implications of giving the entire world a stage. Take the Egyptian Revolution, for example, or, at the other end of the spectrum, the riots in the UK. Just because something has social media stamped all over it, does not mean it's cheap. In reality, it's accessible, powerful and should not be underestimated. This is where universities have the ability to get in the driver's seat and allow their students to connect, engage and provoke in a way they never have before. It should be encouraged – but be careful. If the world has learned anything from social media, it is that it's unbelievable what one person can start with just a few clicks in the digital world.

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