Professionally Social: Using Social Media for Professional (Research) Communication

As researchers, we are at the beginning of the 2010's forced to navigate in a world, in which our public visibility is intricately linked to our online presence and presentation. Presenting oneself on the internet as a researcher is therefore, I would argue, no longer just an optional choice, but an unavoidable fact of academic life. We might not like it, but it is a fact that students use commercial search engines such as Google to find articles about the subjects or people they are writing about (Griffiths and Brophy 2005, Van Scoyoc 2006, Head 2007, Hampton-Reeves et al 2009, Weller et al 2010), journalists google for interviewees when they need an expert for an article; and colleagues google for inspiration, as part of their research, and perhaps also, to check out the competition when applying for tenure or a new job. Even if formally, it is still peer-reviewed publications that count inside the walls of the ivory tower, on the outside, academic status is also linked to one's online "findability" and with it, availability, in the eyes of both peers and the public.

The awareness of the need to be present online for competitive purposes has also gained foothold inside the universities, at least in the institutional communication departments. As a minimum, most university communication departments today will ask that you, as researcher at the institution, present yourself within the framework of the local content management system. In addition, the more forward looking universities might even encourage you to start a blog, participate as talking head in a video to be launched on YouTube, join a group on Facebook or engage in other forms of dialogically oriented online communication formats known as "social media" as part of your communication activities. If these communication activities continue to proliferate, navigating and using social media formats as part of one's online presence will increasingly become part of the communicative practices of professional academics, whether one chooses to perform online within an institutional framework or independent of it. Using social media is not only an alternative method to reach a public, but also a

strategic way to increase both accessibility and findability (Google, for instance, often ranks Facebook profiles and blog posts high in their searches).

In this short article, I will discuss what I consider the important characteristics, opportunities and challenges offered by social media when used for professional communication purposes. The insights – or perhaps rather points of discussion - put forth here are based on my own experiences as practicing social media communicator and Danish research blogger, as well as on my general research into the use of social media for professional communication purposes, by for instance Danish politicians (see Klastrup and Svejgaard Pedersen 2005, Klastrup 2007).

Social media - a hybrid of branding and networking

To understand how to communicate with and within social media in particular, it is important to consider the general characteristics of social media as a digital mode of communication. No commonly agreed upon academic definition seems to exist yet, so in the context of this article, I will define social media as online media services or sites which allow users to publish content without any editor involved, and after publication allows the publisher and other users to interact around this content. The "texts" (in a broad sense) published on social media are often associated with a personal, immediate, aesthetically unpolished, and relatively brief style of communication.[i] However, I would like to emphasise that social media communication is a hybrid of, on the one hand traditional monologic web communication (such as company homepages) in which the sender communicates to an audience without any interest in engaging this audience in a conversation; and on the other hand "social interaction" genres like newsgroups or discussion fora, in which everybody present in the group discuss a common topic of interest on equal footing, in so-called "threads" following a topic. The "social media" genre can be considered a hybrid of these two established web communication formats, because they provide the possibility of personal sender-based publishing combined with the activity of social networking with an "audience" of readers, most often but not always based on interaction around the content that the social media communicator has introduced.[ii] Though the name "social media" draws attention to the social aspect of the genre, the personal publication possibility – and with it – also the possibility of using social media for "personal branding" purposes is equally important and equally dominant, if not predominant, when we look at how people in fact use social media. Notably, Nardi et al in their article on why people blog, emphasise that "bloggers value that

they can post and share their thoughts without the intensive feedback associated with other forms of communication" (Nardi et al, 2004, p. 46), and likewise they note that many of the bloggers they talked to "liked the interaction-at-one-remove provided by the blog" (ibid). This observation, I surmise, are valid for other social media formats as well. If social media are designed to enable social interaction, it is not an open and egalitarian social dialogue in which all voices matter equally. It is the person, who writes and posts the content that gets the discussion going, and who, at least initially, decides what is on the (social) agenda. I believe, that this possibility to be the voice at the top of the hierarchy is part of the attraction of the genre, and one that should perhaps be recognised more openly.

Rather than seeing the monological and dialogical communication forms as two completely different online communication formats, I believe it makes more sense to see them as opposite end points on a common scale, on which individual social media communicators can be placed according to their style and purposes of use, thus allowing us to differentiate between a variety of social media uses. On one end of the scale we find the communicator who mainly uses social media as an outlet for diary-like personal thoughts or column-like opinion statements without (seemingly) caring much for responses or readership; on the other end of the scale we find the social media communicator whose foremost interest is to solicit feedback and engage his or her readers/users in discussion. If one is new to this form of communication, it might be worthwhile considering where on the scale one wants to place oneself, depending on what the subject of communication is, and on what the general intentions with the social media activities are. Some social media formats might also be more suited for one's purposes and academic temper than others. The short form of Facebook and Twitter is suited for the quick call for responses or opinions on a subject and playful verbal retorts, whereas the blog, by virtue of the lack of limits on the length of posts, might be better suited for longer, reflective pieces of writing in which one tries to present and reflect on a more complicated argument (of one's own) or text (by others, f.i. in the form of a review), and for which immediate "audience response" is not necessarily the goal.

That social media is a hybrid mode of communication, and not "just social" should also be taken into account when evaluating or analysing social media. Even if social media professionals seem to be in agreement that a social media communicator must foster responses and user engagement in order to be successful, one should be careful applying normative evaluations based on the preferred mode of address (monologic or dialogic) of a particular

social media communicator, when we discuss whether this person is able to use the format adequately. A dialogically-oriented communicator is not necessarily a better or inherently more successful communicator than the communicator who prefers a monological style, to the contrary, a monologically-oriented communicator who draws only few comments with his or her posts might have more impact or be more read than the communicator who always draw comments from the faithful same 20 readers. In my research on political blogs, I have repeatedly observed that well-known politicians (with whom, judging from the comments made to their postings, people clearly feel they have a relationship), do not need to post much, be very dialogically oriented or be very present in the comment discussion following a post in order to be embraced by readers/users. As long as the politician acknowledges the existence of her readers by strategically (in a comment or a post) occasionally telling the users that "I'm listening", thereby, in rhetorical terms, displaying that she has "eunoia", goodwill towards her readers, they appear to be satisfied just to have the possibility to either "listen to" or "talk to" rather than "talk with" the politician in question, as long as they know they are being taken seriously.

Indeed, one of the advantages of social media is clearly that they can be used as "speakers' corners". Returning once again to the example of politicians, by virtue of the celebrity status a known politician brings with her to for instance a blog or a Twitter profile, and dependant on the type of readership they have (journalists for instance!), politicians might well be able to set an agenda by using social media, communicating viewpoints or news that makes it into the headlines of mainstream media, if they break a story on a social media site at the right point in time. In a Danish context, an example of this strategy is the Danish politician Villy Søvndal who in February 2008, announced a radical shift in his party's political position on immigrants on his blog, a statement which received massive amount of comments (+600) and lots of air time in other media. This is a good example of, how in social media, the lack of gatekeepers (editors) can allow you to say exactly what you want, without intervention. In a sense, one could say this is a case of an extreme monological discourse, made possible both by the media format and the celebrity status of the writer. While the activity of politicians provides a good example of how to use social media as a "speaker's corner", well-known academics can also partake of this opportunity. For instance, Henry Jenkins, an American Professor whose work has focused on digital media use and fan culture, uses his blog Confessions of an Aca-Fan (www.henryjenkins.org) to consistently advertise to the work done by himself and his students, and interview academics and media professionals whose work he finds deserves further interest by a broader public. I have also seen

examples of a Danish research blogger within the natural sciences who occasionally uses his blog to correct and comment on presentations in the news of developments in the natural sciences that he finds misleading or wrong.

In terms of comments, it is my experience that the focus on the many or few active commentators commenting on a blog, SNS fanpage or profile, draws the attention from the fact that behind all the vocal users, a large silent majority lurks, some of whom might feel that their own viewpoints are adequately represented in the comments already made (see f. i. Preece, Nonneke and Andrews 2004, Nielsen 2006). What little quantitative research has been done in the area seems to indicate that it is still only a minority of users who are actively "doing" something online (Van Dijck, 2009). One should not be daunted by the fact that as a social media communicator, one might not draw a lot of comments, especially in the early days of writing. It is important to keep in mind that using social media is as much about building and maintaining a relationship with users, as it is a question about making readers/users manifest themselves "onsite". If an integral part of social media is to network, networking should be understood as much a process of maintaining and strengthening relationships, as it is the process of making new connections and expanding one's network (for a further discussion of relationship maintenance and ethos building in social media, see Hoff-Clausen 2008). However, at this point in time (2010) to my knowledge hardly any research has been carried out with the objective of examining the long-term effects of perceived relationships with social media communicators, in terms of for instance persuasive intentions, branding efforts etc.

Ultimately, however, the personal publication and network(ing) efforts that drive a social media presence should not be considered as separate aspects but as interwoven. One also becomes a person "worth" knowing if you are already known by several others. Social media affords what Donath and Boyd (2004) in their analysis of Friendster and LinkedIn has described "the public display of connection", and it is also these connections which define the social media communicator. The social media communicator is her network of links and relations. These connections, it should be noted, are not just apparent in the number of comments or activity on one's profile or blog - which, as I have pointed out, might be misleading if we consider them as representative of the overall readership - but are also apparent in the number of friends or fans displayed on a social network site, in the number of trackbacks and links to one's blogposts and appearances on other bloggers' blogroll, in one's ranking on portals or in search engines etc.

A known audience

Another important characteristic of social media is that you are communicating to an audience which is at least partly known to you. On a blog, you might not know all readers, since as discussed above, most are likely "blurkers" (blog lurkers), but on social network sites, today most people only allow friends to see their status updates: the latest numbers from the Danish Telecommunications Agency indicate that in 2009 only 23% of Danes with a profile on a social network site (Facebook in casu) allowed non-friends to see their profiles, down 9% from a similar survey the year before, which means that in principle a huge majority of Danish social media users know exactly who they are talking to. Similarly, a service like Twitter will inform you every time someone starts to follow your updates, which in return allows you to check out every new reader of your Tweets. Thus, in general, when communicating in a social media context, the social media communicator will at least initially know who some of her readers/users are, if not all. This will allow one to write more directed posts or updates, perhaps even occasionally to target the communication explicitly to a sub-set of readers that are likely to find what one is writing about that day particularly interesting. For instance, when I blog or post a status update on Twitter, I mostly either direct my posts to my international and Danish colleagues and peers, in which case, I write them in English and f.i. include commentary on academic life. Or I direct them to my network of friends and network connections working in the (social) media industry, in which case I write them in Danish and often include information about research findings or websites that I estimate will also be of interest to people working professionally with social media. Accordingly, if I get any responses to my posts, it is mostly from the group of people, who were my intended target group.

Why use the social media "professionally" as researcher?

Having outlined some of the main perspectives and considerations to be made regarding the use of social media for professional communication purposes, in this last part of the article, I would like to discuss more specifically why researchers might engage in using social media to communicate and disseminate their research. I present and discuss four reasons for this: the possibility to disseminate research to a broader public; the possibility to draw on the collective intelligence of one's network; the possibility of giving outsiders access to the inside of the ivory tower; and the possibility

to "term squat" important concepts and ideas.

1) Disseminating research to a broader public (reaching a new "audience")

In an article on scholarly blogging, Alex Halavais, an American Internet researcher and blogger, compares the research blog to three former modes of scholarly communication: the notebook, the coffee house and the editorial page (Halavais, 2006). Whereas he sees all three modes reflected in what he calls the "scholarly blog" as genre, one could, applying the hybrid perspective discussed earlier in the article, also argue that some professional academic blogs are more like notebooks (monologic reflections on work in progress) and others are more like coffee houses, trying to create atmosphere that will encourage lively discussion. These genre formats are of course also reflected in the style of writing – the notebook reflections being more introvert compared to the more extrovert style of the coffee house writers, who explicitly try to engage users through their writing, by for instance being overly provocative or addressing readers directly: "what do you think?". In general, when planning what and how to write, it might be fruitful to think of one's social media postings as an editorial page. Social media posts are, as more or less public writing, contrary to the traditional research article, intended to reach a broader public than the critical readership of peers who engage with our academic article. Professional communication in social media should therefore force us to communicate about research, rather than having us argue for the validity of research, the latter a communicative strategy which, as Carolyn Milles has pointed out, is one of defining rhetorical trademarks of scientific writing in general (Miller, 1992). The success criteria allowing the researcher to judge the effects of this broad dissemination should not only be considered user responses, but, drawing on my own personal experience, the understanding and engagement with ones work that one might suddenly experience when meeting people who have "read you" at conferences, seminars and lectures; or in the form of invitations to talks both outside and inside the academic institutions; or in calls from journalists who liked what they saw on your blog and so forth, i.e. a lot of unforeseeable activity outside the social media sphere. In this way, the "social networking" aspect of social media extends far beyond the social media sites or services themselves, and the network that a social media presence can help build, will hopefully not just consist of peer connections, but of amateur professionals, students, people working in industry, research subjects, journalists, friends and family (yes, perhaps even your mother).

2) "Harnessing the hive" (using the collective intelligence of the network)

 One of the challenges of being a researcher is that so much research is being published, and amidst the demands of academic life in general (which sometimes leave precious little time for research), it can be difficult to keep afoot in the field, or catch up with new developments in for instance user behavior, cultural customs etc. Having access to and calling for input from a network of people working in institutions other than one's own or acting in completely different spheres of living, enables the social media communicator to obtain and gather invaluable information and insight into what is happening "out there". However, it is important to recognise that to make this so-called "collective intelligence" work, you yourself need to be part of the collective too: "resharing" what others have shared with you is essential to make the communicational ethics of the network work.

3) Opening the fourth wall of the ivory tower

 In one of the very first academic articles on research blogging, Torill Mortensen and Jill Walker made an important contribution to the understanding of what professional social media communication at least in a research context is all about: it shifts the focus from being all about the finished work to the telling of the story of the process of producing the work. Being a researcher, a scholar, a scientist is living a life in which one is constantly involved in processes of experimentation and gradual discovery. As Mortensen and Walker (2004) wrote in their article: "In contrast to the logical and topical organization usual in academic writing and note-taking, blogs are chronologically ordered. Writing in a medium – or perhaps, better, an element – which encourages a different way of structuring though can enable us to see differently" (p. 267). To this, one might add, that not alone do the social media form of writing allow the communicator to discover new perspectives along the way, it also enables others to see "us", the academics, differently. Communicating in social media about life as a researcher will reveal that the process of discovery contains insecurity, impreciseness, a struggle for terms and concepts, or in other words, that the production of scholarly knowledge is (also) hard work. However, the process of forcing oneself to verbalise the struggle as it unfolds in short, accessible language might also in the end help provide clarity and help sharpen arguments, disregarding whether one as communicator has a monological or dialogical

orientation.

4) Term squatting

Finally, once you as a researcher are at the end of the process, having reached that hopefully worthwhile experience of having everything fall into place and having found the right words and concepts with which to describe what one is doing, social media can be used for what I find could aptly be called "term squatting". That is, if one as a researcher blog, post or tweet about the new concept or idea that one has come up with, it can function as a subtle way of "pre-copyrighting" the use of the concept while attaching it to one's persona. So even if the peer-reviewed article about concept X is not published yet, writing about and briefly describing concept X in a social media post can function as a form of time-stamping which make it clear to posterity that you were the first to use and write about X. It might also have the side-effect (if posted it in a searchable context), that when people later search for a definition of concept X, it will be your definition that pops up first (as an example, try googling "social narratology", a term I have personally tried to squat). "Term squatting" can therefore also be regarded as another form of academic search-engine optimisation. As I pointed out in the introduction to this article, professional communication online is not just a question of, in rhetorical terms, providing the right content at the right time, but also of making sure that it is possible for a future user to easily navigate her way to it!

Professionally Social

This article has taken its point of departure in the fact, that online visibility is becoming integral to the professional communication of researchers and scholars. Strategically communicating with and through social media is, I would argue, one way to successfully augment one's public visibility at the same time as it provides a unique opportunity to engage with a broad audience of both passive readers and active users. As social media communication as professional practice becomes more widespread, I am sure, we will also see the development of an inherently more social language: narrative formats and modes of addresses that seek to engage those that we reach out to and those, who expect to "use" us rather than read us.

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[i] Evan Williams, one of the creators of the Blogger software and now CEO of Twitter, has been quoted in many other texts, for defining the blog's essential characteristics as being "frequency, brevity and personality" (stated in an interview with Giles Turnbull in 2001, still available as blogpost at: http://web.archive.org/web/20030312163030/http://writetheweb.com/Members/gilest/old/106/view). Similarly, blog researcher Jill Walker, in an encyclopedia entry, described the content of the blog as "… published by individuals and their style is personal and informal" (http://jilltxt.net/archives/blog_theorising/final_version_of_weblog_definition.html)

[ii] I am here also inspired by Herring et al (2005), who, in their early seminal article on blogs, points to the fact that the blog is essentially a *hybrid* genre which incorporate traits from both previous analogic and digital media formats, such as the diary, the homepage and the electronic newsletter.