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Book review: Social media for academics: a practical guide (2012; Diane Rasmussen Neal; Chandos Publishing)

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Social media for academics: a practical guide

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There is an ever growing number of texts that are billed as the latest definitive guides to teaching social media techniques today. With their grandiose claims of being the best, the latest, the easiest to understand, social media education texts are more often than not met with suspicion. The suspicion social media texts are met with has a lot to do with the fluidity and dynamic nature of the field of social media and the simple fact that the definitional boundaries of social media are anything but well defined making it an entrepreneurial goldmine.

In *Social Media for Academics* Diane Rasmussen Neal has, with great acumen, assembled a capable group of contributors to walk the experienced and novice academic alike, through the maze of social media tools and more importantly offer suggestions on how to apply an array of social media applications in an academic setting.

What distinguishes this book from others is that it doesn't pretend to be something it is not. Neal is very clear, from the outset, that by the time the reader opens this book for the first time, it will be out of date. With the handicap of working with dated material what Neal has done, very skillfully, is shed a very focused light on the world of new digital media for a very particular group of users, academics. Too often texts purporting to expand, explain and explore new digital and social media try to do too much for too wide of an audience, being of little practical use to anyone; this is not the case here.

As an academic herself, Neal is cognisant that there is a significant divide in both the understanding and use of social media tools by education professionals. Neal attempts to speak to a broad academic audience, and for the most part she is successful. Neal's success with this book is grounded in her focus and early definition of what she sees social media as, simply a set of tools that allows for interaction to happen that otherwise might not.

While social media is indeed a collection of programmed tools, the design and programming of these tools is not what the text is about. If the reader is hoping for insights into HTML or app creation this is not the text for them. What this book does do is provide a very comprehensive starting point for academics, of all technical aptitudes, to begin incorporating social media into their courses, research and general careers.

Neal is suggesting that the crux of the challenge when embracing social media in academia is that social media is not about technology, although that is what we tend to get caught up in as we think about iPad integration, BYOD solutions, iBook creation or even app development. What Neal and her contributors suggest we should really be talking about is the ability to *create meaningful connections of knowledge*.

Neal exemplifies the connection aspects of social media with an anecdotal discussion of the writing of the text itself, using social media and in particular the cloud based Google Doc service. By using social media to produce this very text Neal is demonstrating, in practical terms, how connections and collaboration can happen and lead to a favorable outcome.

The issue continually returned to in this text is how to take technology enabled connections into the classroom as well as apply them to research agendas and general academic life. An issue Neal and her collaborators struggle with is how to bridge academic comfort zones (which are diverse) and outright misconceptions about social media tools.

This book starts by attempting to create a general understanding of available social media tools attempting to provide a basis for users to discern which are good for an academic's particular purposes, and concludes by offering the academic a blueprint of sorts on how to incorporate new digital media into their activities.

The text is divided into 2 parts: the nuts and bolts of social media for academics, such as some of the more common sharing platforms; and the practical tools for putting social media into practice, like the practical example of using a Google Doc or other sharing tools such as Evernote. While both parts 1 and 2 of the book are of use, part 1 offers more connection to core concepts and broad tools while part 2 attempts to apply what was discussed in part 1 in a more general manner , which can make it harder to relate to in specific academic contexts.

There are four clear 'take homes' from part 1. First was the underscoring of the need to create an understanding of the line between academic and personal social media usage. While new media technologies have become commonplace in everyday life, the sharing of what we are eating or watching is rather different than a sharing of documents, research interests or potential sources. What links the personal and academic sides of new digital media is *sharing*, with the differentiation being what is being shared and the context of the sharing. One of the most attractive elements of social media as embodied is the organic, seemingly unstructured in the now way it is created, disseminated and delivered. The messy nature of social media, while tolerable from a personal point of view, leads to issues when dealing with academic content and goals. Even social media tools like Facebook are responding to the need for more organized sharing outlets by facilitating the creation and administration of both public and private groups. But even the sharing that is facilitated via Facebook doesn't match tools such as www.academia.edu, which allow users a more focused and particular sharing experience around more specific topics with a specific group. While much of the social media we interact with personally is general in nature there are such options, which allow us to focus on the issues of teaching, research and service as they relate to a particular academics situation. Of particular interest in chapter 2 was the discussion of academic and non-academic social networking sites. The introduction to Google+ and how it incorporates Twitter- and Facebook-like features allowing users to be organised according to relationships is particularly useful to academics as they weigh the use of social media in their classes, professional and personal lives. There is also a brief discussion of sites for academic communities which was brief and not exhaustive but did offer a jumping off point for further exploration. Sites such as www.academia.edu, www.researchgate.net, www.facultyrow.com, and even www.linkedin.com all offer a means for academics to connect with an audience via new digital tools in a more focused manner.

The second take home, as discussed in chapter 3, is that social media can allow research, particularly on public domain issues, to happen in real-time. For instance, maybe an academic wants to look at the public reaction to fracking as it is being presented to the public. In the past, collecting public reaction would mean preparing a survey, going to a particular local and delivering a survey. Today getting valuable and immediate reaction to fracking is as easy as going to twitter and doing a search on the term

'fracking' (see Figure 1). While there are many methodological boundaries to be resolved, the collection of varied data is made very easy.
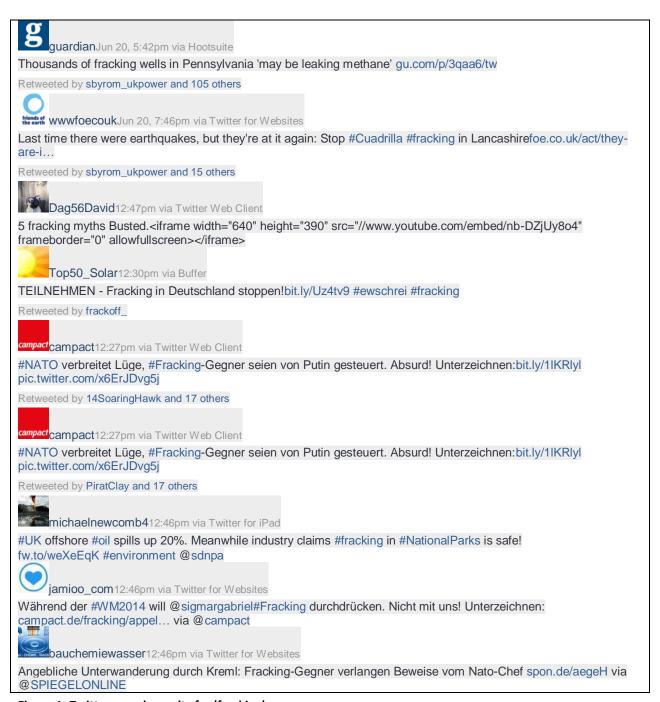

Figure 1: Twitter search results for 'fracking'.

The third take home is that online distribution of content is increasingly becoming acceptable academically, and using social media and new media tools may be a viable way of finding and distributing scholarly resources today. The CIA, World Food Program, IATA and many other organizations

that both commission and comment on research are increasingly turning to Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and even Google+ to make documents available by posting relevant links.

The fourth take home comes from chapter 7, where mobile media are the focus. Mobile media are without question an emerging teaching tool that needs to be considered as it can effectively circumvent the limitations of traditional teaching environments. In this case the classroom is no longer rooted in a room or specific geographic location: students can access documents and resources in context. For instance a student could be creating a video and watching a YouTube tutorial at the same time or accessing a Google Doc that is being updated by the group as content is being presented.

Part 2 of *Social Media for Academics* is the 'do-It-yourself' portion of the text, offering a more practical guide on how to take the concepts of part 1 and make them a reality. While the chapters of part 2 are interesting, for the most part they only scratch the surface, leaving the reader wanting more.

The one exception in part 2 is chapter 8, *Incorporating web-based engagement and participatory interactions in your classroom,* where the nuts and bolts of incorporating online interaction into a classroom is discussed. The real treasure of chapter 8 are the 3 mini case studies that help to contextualize the issues associated with web-based engagement.

Part 2 finishes talking about virtual presence, strategies for getting work to go viral and how it all fits into the not so traditional library, which could be a book unto itself.

There is no question that this is a useful text that does exactly what it claims, providing the necessary background and some examples of academic applications of social media to facilitate academics beginning to embrace or master social media in academia; a book well worth reading.