'Sharing', Selfhood, and Community in an Age of Academic Twitter

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ABSTRACT

We explore in this paper the impulse to share our academic work via social media as well as the impact this sharing has on our senses of self as scholars and persons. We argue that this sharing raises a number of important philosophical questions: In what way does the branding or profiling encouraged by X/Twitter impact on our personal identity? How does the publicness of this particular platform disrupt the intimacy that lies at the heart of all edifying human relationship? And to invoke the terms of critical theorist, Axel Honneth, can we as teachers and researchers *recognize* ourselves in the social media sphere? Writing from the perspective of philosophy of education, Conroy and Smith (2017: 706) have argued that the contemporary university has been taken over by 'Professor Lookatme' and 'Dr Loudmouth' – but we are interested in the extent to which these caricatured figures are necessarily representative of today's academy. While our paper draws attention to the dark side of social media, then, it still explores the possibilities for authentic selfhood as well as meaningful community in our increasingly digitized academic worlds.

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine the following scenario:

> *A prestigious journal emails an early career academic informing them that their latest article has been published online. The email encourages the academic to share the publication with their professional networks, linking to a variety of social media platforms with further tips on how the visibility of such a post might be optimized. Dutifully, the academic composes the relevant tweet: not too boastful, not too self-effacing, laced with just the right amount of enthusiasm and/or ironic detachment. The tweet is sent; the academic waits for reaction with equal parts trepidation and excitement. Likes and retweets are immediately received from the usual coterie of professional colleagues and personal friends. Some comment on the content of the article; others congratulate on the fact of its publication.*

We open with a recognizable scene from contemporary academic life. Over the past ten years, social media use in universities has imperceptibly moved from periphery to centre as the norms for communication and dissemination evolve and solidify (Carrigan 2020). Not all academics use X/Twitter but those who do engage with the platform in increasingly predictable and normalized ways. The expectation now is that once an article or book is published, it is tweeted – immediately – ideally with a link to an open access version or an explicit offer to make electronic versions available to those who might request them. The norms for responding to such tweets have also evolved. Professional colleagues are usually among the first to comment or perhaps to disseminate the research further by 'liking', 'retweeting', or 'quote tweeting'. Supportive friends or family members might also weigh in, highlighting Twitter's peculiarly weird territory between the personal and the professional, but this becomes less likely as the academic Twitter user refines a deliberately networked and professionalized profile.

But as these norms solidify so too does our ability to question, stand apart from, or push back against them. This is what social media scholar Mark Carrigan refers to as 'the siren song' of social media platforms: their ability 'to subtly lead you into behaviour which was not your original intention' (Carrigan 2020: xv). We are led into certain behaviour on X/Twitter and become disproportionately affected by the behaviour of others. Let us return to our early career academic, to examine how these tensions might play out:

> *Checking in on his tweet at regular – embarrassingly regular – intervals, our academic notes with a sharp intake of breath that a critical remark has been made by a user he does not follow. A quick check of the user's profile reveals that they work in a very different professional field. It is not clear that they have actually read the published piece; the tone of their comment is somewhere between bemusement and hostility. As the academic wonders how if at all he should engage with the criticism, the same remark is 'liked' by a departmental colleague.*

In the idealized world of digital scholarship, social media platforms provide the perfect tool to disseminate one's research well beyond a narrow if dedicated audience of specialized journal subscribers. X/Twitter can be a vibrant and intelligent space for discussion of scholarly work, usefully dismantling the fixed boundaries of geographical and disciplinary terrain as well the entrenched hierarchies of academia. In terms of information sharing, it is hard to critique the platform's exceptional power to disseminate and amplify – not just academic publications but specialized conferences, departmental initiatives, pedagogical innovations, and much more across the indefinable breadth of academic and university life. For the early career academic, in particular, X/Twitter can provide much-needed community, camaraderie, and solidarity, especially for those who struggle with the ableism of in-person conferences or other academic events. Many point to the *immediacy* of the platform as a revolutionary aspect of contemporary scholarly experience. Fledgling ideas can be articulated and shared in real time without the typical two-year wait between article writing and publication.

And yet, as many scholars have already pointed out, it is sometimes this very immediacy that can disrupt the defining practices and virtues of academia: the ability to pause, and think, and concentrate, and be compassionate, and pay attention to what really matters (Epstein 2022; Dumitrescu 2022). We all know that immediacy can be advantageous in certain ways

but damaging in others. It can destroy nuance, complexity, and self-reflection. It can hamper the researcher's ability to experiment with new ideas and to change their minds in public. And as history scholar Maurice Casey points out, the prioritization of immediacy over reflectiveness exerts a particular pressure on public-facing researchers who begin to feel that the limitless audiences of X/Twitter *need* to know the researcher's position on every latest development or discussion point. Writes Casey: 'The urgency of the newsfeed, its constant and unending scroll, made me feel as though I had a moral obligation to share my thoughts. Social media companies place vast resources into making timelines as addictive as possible precisely by fostering the idea that we simply must share' (Casey 2022).

Of course, *sharing* one's academic work has connotations of beneficence and generosity, laden with explicit assumptions of power and authority and the individual poster being entirely in control. But we are interested in this article in that original impulse to share as well as what this sharing actually does to our sense of self as scholars and persons. In what way does the branding or profiling encouraged by Twitter impact on our personal identity? How does the *publicness* of this particular platform disrupt the privacy or intimacy that lies at the heart of all edifying human relationship? To invoke the terms of critical theorist, Axel Honneth (1992), can we as teachers and researchers *recognize* ourselves in the social media sphere?

Our article is situated in the context of an increasing prevalence of social media in academic life, and in recognition of the escalating neoliberal demand that every contemporary scholar broadcast themselves and their research as widely as possible. We turn here to recent scholarship in the Philosophy of Education which troubles these key notions of 'dissemination', 'engagement', and 'impact'. We argue that it is these same discursive priorities that subtly drive personal and institutional impulses to *share* and that define and embody the goals of the neo-liberal university more broadly. Conroy and Smith (2017: 706) have argued that the contemporary university has been taken over by 'Professor Lookatme' and 'Dr Loudmouth' – but we are interested in the extent to which these caricatured figures are *necessarily* representative of today's academy. While our paper draws attention to the dark side of social media, then, it still explores the possibilities for authentic selfhood as well as meaningful community in our increasingly digitized academic worlds.

In recognising the subtle impact of X/Twitter on our professional behaviours – Carrigan's aptly-named 'siren song'– we nonetheless acknowledge the counteractive roles of individual agency and conscious choice. As pointed out by Archer, Maccarini and Maccarini (2013), human agency is a crucial aspect of any life in a technologically mediated world; and we always have the power to deliberate, discern, and follow conscious paths of action. In Archer et al.'s terms, we have the power to resist technological determinism and to consciously mediate the 'new world' of 'our times' (Archer, Maccarini & Maccarini 2013). With specific reference to the academic experience of X/Twitter, this means that individual users are more determining than determined; they can critically engage with the constraints and opportunities provided by the platform without being overwhelmed by them. With this important caveat regarding human agency in mind, we nonetheless wish to foreground in this article those moments or encounters where X/Twitter negatively impacts on our personal or professional lives. In so doing, we situate our discussion within the 'pessimistic turn' of scholarly and journalistic literature on online sociality (Dumitrescu 2022; Epstein 2022; Odell 2019; Dotson 2017; Turkle 2017; Turkle 2015), with the hope of continuing this conversation in the context of Higher Education in 2024 – in what Carrigan terms 'an increasingly fragmented social media landscape' (Carrigan 2023).

In terms of methodology, this article takes an unorthodox approach. It follows Gert Biesta's recent call to query the 'common sense' understanding of educational research (Biesta 2020: 1) – not to discredit such 'common sense' approaches, as Biesta himself makes clear, but to offer a critical perspective on them. Explicitly, we develop a fictional scenario that is outlined over three separate extracts. These extracts combine to create an imagined individual situation which is not intended to be generalisable. To be clear, this scenario does not come from one specific interviewee but is a composite of multiple experiences. It is based firstly on core experiences of the paper's co-authors. We are both mid-career academics in a large Irish university who have been active on X/Twitter for over a decade. Both of us are based in a School of Education; one co-author has a background in Physics, and the other in Philosophy/Literary Studies. Our scenario is not limited to our experiences alone, however, but is based on ongoing

conversations with our colleagues and students in Ireland, the UK, and internationally – conversations about the nature and impact of X/Twitter in the lives of academics at various stages of their professional career.

This article, then, foregrounds fictional scenarios as a mode of arts-based educational enquiry. Fictional scenarios are increasingly recognised as a method with useful application to an educational context (Buck, Sobiechowska & Winter 1999; Clough 2002; Caulley 2008; Spindler 2008; Jordan 2021; Neenan 2022) and we take the meaning of the term 'fictional' from the influential writing of Buck, Sobiechowska and Winter. These authors draw attention to the Latin origins of the term – 'fingere' – which means 'to shape, to fashion, to mould'. Writing fictions, then, 'refers generally to the process of exploring and reflecting on the meanings of experience by representing it in forms of writing which have been shaped by the writer's imagination' (1999: 1). With this particular understanding of 'fictional' in mind, we underline the importance of integrating feeling and cognition (Spindler 2008). We suggest that the contribution of our fictional scenario lies in its particular ability to meld meaning and imagination, to open up 'new ways of seeing' (Clough 2002: 86), and to engage readers and researchers at an *affective* level (Gibson 2022).

SECTION I: FROM RESEARCH SELVES TO RESEARCH PROFILES

There has been a subtle but significant shift in academic life, one that is particularly visible in departments of philosophy, towards a self-presentation deliberately curated and controlled. Academics across the humanities and social sciences are increasingly encouraged to develop and maintain a research 'profile' – to produce a fixed narrative documenting their research and teaching interests to date. Typically, this involves presenting oneself as having X 'area of specialisation' or Y 'area of competence', ideally with a tidy history of how these areas developed over time and culminated in the current focal point of interest. Such profiles are developed for both departmental and personal websites. They are typically linked to from a professional email signature or a carefully curated social media account.

There are of course very practical reasons for this profiling. Contemporary academics who present as clearly as possible their areas of expertise are more easily identifiable, either by potential collaborators in their disciplinary field or by those working in media or policy domains. Aspiring masters and doctoral students, as well as postdoctoral fellows and visiting academics, need to know which researchers are potentially a good fit as supervisors, mentors, and collaborators. And for the academic themselves, an intelligible and reasonably linear research profile is both useful and essential when applying for academic roles. Profiling the academic self is a practice so embedded in academic life that it is now barely noticeable. As with similar rituals in the neoliberal academy, the 'set of migratory practices' in Ong's words (2007: 4) that define the behaviour of the professionalized subject, the practice of profiling is essential to career advancement and prestige.

But as we reflect on this practice, what is of particular interest to us is its encouragement of intelligibility – its subtle demand that the contemporary academic present to the world as a coherent, consistent, and orderly self. From the messiness of personal history and chance encounter, very particular details are gathered, sifted, chosen, and organized. The resulting narrative of a life is made to *make sense* for any external party. Academic X/Twitter plays its own significant part in this personal and professional branding. A limited number of characters on the home or profile page allow each user to highlight certain keywords or key autobiographical details; a 'Twitter for Professionals' option refines this summary even further. The purported objectives here, in the platform's own words, are 'to better connect with your audience, grow your brand, and increase your profits'.

Academics on Twitter may not be there for the profits but they *are* invested to lesser or greater extents in the finessing of their intellectual product, interdisciplinary and idiosyncratic as that might be. Again, the mingling of the personal and the professional goes all the way down but the impulse to attractively style oneself as a particular type of person with a particular set of intellectual and everyday interests is no less powerful for that (X/Twitter users in philosophy circles will recognise the following imaginary profile as typical: "Philosophy academic here. Follow me for rants on Sellars and Davidson and the over-use of 'epistemic' in journal article titles. Also: owls/burlesque/ethical people-watching").

Odell has written compellingly of Twitter's ability 'to create brands rather than people' (Odell 2019: 163) and the resulting impact on its users' capacities for reflection and relationship. For Odell, what is particularly worrying in this context is the platform's subtle encouragement that we *avoid altering our perspectives or personae* or that we choose consistent marketing over inconsistent humanity. Twitter norms and conventions compel us, rather, to maintain a set of distinctive characteristics establishing a recognizable identity over time. 'It's completely normal and human to change our minds, even about big things', Odell writes. 'Friends, family and acquaintances can see a person who lives and grows in space and time, but the crowd can only see a figure who is expected to be as monolithic and timeless as a brand' (2019: 163).

Twitter, in other words, discourages a fluid and complex self. It prioritizes stability over self-creation. And, given the potentially limitless nature of the audience that one might reach with any one tweet or set of tweets, X/Twitter subtly cultivates a set of internalized pressures keeping one's communications (both in terms of content and in terms of tone) as consistent as possible over time. The impact on academic users is as unfortunate as it is considerable. It becomes difficult to try on new identities or new ideas. It becomes difficult to express a view seemingly inconsistent with one expressed before. The natural progressions of thinking and then re-thinking – of thesis and antithesis coexisting in productive tension – are no longer seen as the cornerstones of a reflective life but as unnecessary complications to any cohesive personal brand. This is what Kerrigan and Hart have termed 'the construction of the self as content' where public and private identities blur and the individual becomes 'more hermeneutically sealed as a piece of data' (2016: 1707). Far from allowing us to share our authentic selves with the world, then, social media platforms can to a large extent alienate, depersonalize, and dehumanize.

Much is at stake here philosophically. We might pause to consider that a considerable portion of twentieth century philosophy has been preoccupied with exploring the complexity and inconsistency of the individual self. Across analytic and continental traditions, 'the self' is rarely figured as a stable and essential entity but rather is understood in intersubjective and mutable terms. In Richard Rorty's anti-foundationalist pragmatism, to take one representative case, the very idea of fixed personhood is troubled. Rorty draws an important distinction between 'self-knowledge' and 'self-creation', arguing that it is the latter – encompassing 'our accidental idiosyncrasies', 'our irrational components', 'our incompatible sets of beliefs and desires' (Rorty 1991: 148) – that should be celebrated and brought to the fore. Fixing or defining any individual is for Rorty an impossible task as we all contain within ourselves 'a number of inconsistent selves, of *unharmonized dispositions*' (Rorty 1998: 78). We have all been irked by that college friend from twenty years ago who passively aggressively comments 'oh, I didn't think you were into yoga?' (to whom we might reasonably want to scream 'people change, Barbara!!') but on a philosophical level, such seeming inconsistency is not a problem to be solved but a liberation to be welcomed. At least for Rorty, there is no essential self, no essential brand or profile, and the resulting freedom to improvise is nothing short of intoxicating. What Iris Murdoch refers to as 'the alarmingly formless rubble of a life' (Murdoch 1978) presents endless opportunity to experiment and to self-create.

It is Rorty's argument, as it is the argument of many of his postmodernist contemporaries, that we need others (be they other texts or other people) to call us forward to newer or better versions of ourselves. We need others to really *see us* in all our complexity and inconsistency, and to encourage us to articulate ourselves in ways that we might struggle to do in isolation. Here we might think also of the 'desire for recognition' that Axel Honneth has made central to his critical theory. For Honneth, every self demands recognition from another. Every self demands to be acknowledged as complex and worthy of respect, and the denial of this recognition is tantamount not only to denial but actual erasure (Honneth 1992). This is 'the scandal of skepticism' (Cavell 2005: 151), in Stanley Cavell's terms, where the failure to receive acknowledgment from another wounds or otherwise inflicts irreparable damage on our always vulnerable identities.

One of the problems with the Twittersphere, of course, is the characteristic absence of an authentic otherness. The audience that we are faced with on X/Twitter is completely limitless and completely contextless. It is without the necessary intimacy that is foundational for any genuinely human exchange. This is what social-media scholar, danah boyd, has referred to as 'context collapse': the phenomenon whereby individuals from endlessly disparate locations,

cultures, and socio-economic backgrounds find themselves interacting in a novel online situation (Marwick & boyd 2010). In such a collapsed environment – with friends, colleagues, family members, and strangers all popping up in a nightmarish whack-a-mole – it can be challenging to decide which mallet to use. In more straightforward terms, it can be challenging to decide which self to actually *be*.

Consider again our early career academic who is encouraged to share their recent publication online. When composing the accompanying tweet, they have to consider their actual as well as their intended audience. Their tweet will be seen not only by professional colleagues in their discipline who will have a nuanced understanding of the nature and contribution of their work but also by personal friends and family members who have limited knowledge or interest in the area. The tweet will be seen by potential employers on whom the early career academic will be keen to make a positive impression. It will be seen also, of course, by the usual social media smorgasbord – a wide-ranging and heterogenous mix of people that the academic knows, semi-knows, and does not know at all. Of course, the nature of the platform is such that tweets can be directed or hyper-localized to a specific intended audience (e.g. #PhDChat, #EdChatIE etc.) but they are visible also to users beyond these target communities.

What draws our interest here is the presentation of self that thereby ensues. Our early career academic cannot be expected to personally address all of these people at the same time and so they address all and none of them. As Marwick and boyd describe this phenomenon, context collapse creates 'a lowest-common-denominator philosophy of sharing [that] limits users to topics that are safe for all possible readers' (Marwick & boyd 2010: 126). We would push this description further to suggest that context collapse limits not only the topics that are tweeted about but the rich and various personalities of the tweeter. When the intended recipient is at once everyone and no one, we perform a certain *flattening* or even *unselfing* in order to make ourselves intelligible. Thus to tweet is to perform a version of the subjective completely unmoored from intersubjectivity. To tweet is to present an atomized self immediately vulnerable to feelings of insecurity, inauthenticity, and loneliness.

We do not want to suggest in this paper that online interactions *necessarily* have the character of the isolating or the inauthentic. As Osler has argued, it is entirely possible to authentically 'encounter the other' when we are no longer face-to-face but are rather negotiating relationship via laptop or smartphone screen. Osler draws on the example of Skype calls in addition to WhatsApp messaging to establish how empathy can indeed develop in an online environment. Foregrounding the phenomenological distinction between the 'objective' and the 'lived' body (if we experience the 'objective' body as a physical object existing in space and time, we experience the 'lived' body more intimately and expressively, as something at the very core of agency and experience), she argues that disembodied communication can still allow for characteristically human exchange. In her own words, 'the lived body can enter online space and is empathetically available to others there' (Osler 2021: 1). Osler has also argued in a separate paper that 'spaces of intimacy' are possible online, even if a certain digital literacy is required to use and negotiate them (Osler 2022). Thus, for Osler the internet (especially with reference to video calling, instant messaging, and online gaming) might plausibly play a role in alleviating loneliness.

Whether Osler's arguments regarding online intersubjectivity can fruitfully apply to the social media sphere is, however, more difficult to establish. Again, the key problem here is the absence of a formative and dynamic intersubjectivity. What is constructed in the performative space of Twitter is a stable brand rather than a mutable self. And in the same performative space, to invoke Rorty once more, there is little room for a liberating self-creation founded on authentic interaction with others. When brand management overrides honest expression, or when academic profiles subsume academic selves, there is little room for 'accidental idiosyncrasies' or 'irrational components'. This is not to say that academics cannot be vulnerable or honest online – indeed, the drive to respond, to comment, and to constantly *share* encourages an increasingly confessional and vulnerable voice to find expression – but this vulnerability is still performed for a theoretical and abstract audience, for a 'public' we will never meet and to whom we owe little if anything at all.

SECTION II: ACADEMIC COMMUNITY AFTER COVID

Let us return to our early career academic. Recall that they have posted their research article online and that a critical remark has been 'liked' by a departmental colleague:

> *Later that morning, feeling decidedly **worn out** even though it is barely eleven o'clock, our early career academic removes the X/Twitter app from the home-screen of their phone. They turn again to their work emails, joylessly and inefficiently working their way through them. Distracted, demotivated, and unmistakably **negative** but in ways that are difficult to define, they find themselves fixating on their colleague's potential motivations for 'liking' that critical comment. They wonder whether they might have done something to offend them. They re-read their own published article and look again at their colleague's university profile. They have not seen or talked to this person in nine months.*

This fictionalized scenario will certainly not resonate with everyone. One might argue that it presents an overly-determined view of social media's impact on its users. Extensive scholarly research has documented a significantly adverse association between online networking and overall subjective well-being, particularly among young people (Webster, Dunne & Hunter 2021), but the impact on adult users is less definitive. Still, in keeping with this paper's focus on the *darker sides* of social media use, we present this scenario as a provocative fictionalisation regarding the potentially harmful impacts of X/Twitter. In so doing, we follow the so-called 'pessimistic turn' (Osler 2021: 2) that has emerged in recent critical writing regarding online sociality.

In terms of how to respond, an obvious reaction to a scenario like the above is to rehearse the toxicity of X/Twitter and suggest that our early career colleague take a break from the platform, remove the app from their smartphone, or delete their account entirely. The action of 'deleting', in particular, can feel deeply empowering for it is at once a gesture of social refusal as well as a reclamation of personal control. Liberated from the energy-sapping and mood-altering social media scroll, our early career academic has gifted to themselves much more headspace to think about and work on what matters, much more time to engage with family and friends, and much more opportunity to rest and recover.

But as Carrigan and Odell have both pointed out, a thoughtful response to the role of Twitter in our professional lives cannot simply be captured by a straightforward gesture of leaving. The roots and branches of academic life and academic Twitter are now so confusingly intertwined that *leaving* the latter in actual fact involves denying the former or, at very least, participating to a much less meaningful extent in its range of core activities (reading new articles, voicing tentative ideas, staying up to date with conference and event announcements, hearing about colleagues' work, discovering newly-hired colleagues, making oneself visible to hiring or promotion committees, participating in important conversations about the future of Higher Education, to mention only a few). Moreover, the gesture of leaving is only a real option for those who already enjoy a highly privileged and settled position in their careers; not all academics can leave Twitter without penalty. As Portwood-Stacer makes this point:

> It may be that refusal is only available as a tactic to people who already possess a great deal of social capital, people whose social standing will endure [...] and people whose livelihoods don't require them to be constantly plugged in and reachable ... These are people who have what [Kathleen] Noonan calls 'the power to switch off'. (Portwood-Stacer 2012: 1054).

The simplicity of *just leaving* is certainly attractive. But what we are more interested in exploring in this paper are those aspects of contemporary academic life that make it increasingly difficult to leave. It is a truism at this point to state that Higher Education globally has become irreversibly corporatized. This corporate or neoliberal university is characterized by its valorisation of efficiency and productivity, and its encouragement of competition over collegiality (Hall 2020; Smyth 2017; Wright & Shore 2017). Mounting institutional pressure to expand the student market and scale university ranking tables has led to an increased offering of online/blended learning environments and extended periods of 'working from home'. Here the very absence of physical community is seen as an efficient use of one's time which leads, in turn, to even more productivity.

While the locus of academic life had been moving from the physical to the virtual for some time, the necessary individualisation associated with the Covid-19 pandemic took these remote working/learning practices to the extreme. The seismic impact on the contemporary university has yet to be fully understood. But in this post-pandemic or post-coronial isolation we would worry about the resulting impact on our offline selves. We would worry about the loss of community. For the university department in 2024, whose corridors remain quiet save for isolated pockets of in-person teaching or monthly managerial meetings, there is a swelling sense of atrophy, an uneasy feeling that something very important is missing, 'a growing recognition that we are losing a sense of collegiality and an uncertainty about how to bring it back' (Berg & Seeber 2016: 76).

One way to move beyond this uncertainty is to pose the question: what do we lose as academics on Twitter? What aspects of human life come under threat when we relate to each other via social media rather than in-person community? No doubt there are multiple likely responses to this question but here we foreground three in particular:

> (1) Intimacy (2) Vulnerability and (3) Acknowledgement

(1) INTIMACY

One of the defining features of social media communication is its public nature. Content can be widely circulated among intended as well as unintended audiences. Limitless publics can be reached quickly and easily. In this unruly arena, it is not always possible to know what sort of attention or reaction one's tweets might receive, and such endless visibility can lead to a marked reserve in terms of ideas shared as well as tone taken. There is an urge to protect or to insulate oneself from criticism or backlash; there is a corresponding hedging or *fencing* of one's expression.

Contrast this urge towards protection, insulation, or restraint with the characteristics of a typical in-person encounter – perhaps with a single colleague or a small group of colleagues in a departmental kitchen or seminar room during a conference tea-and-coffee break. In these more comfortable scenarios, we are freed from the paranoia that our ideas might be misunderstood, taken out of context, or even weaponized for ideological agenda. Consequently, we are far more likely to express ideas that are risky or initial. We are far more likely to open ourselves up to dialogue when our thoughts are still tentative rather than fully-formed. Smaller spaces such as these can foster feelings of affinity, affection, and trust – over time – as we meet our colleagues and students as complex and contradictory selves. Here we are not posturing or performing for a public but being truthful in private.

Community can be formed in these truthful spaces as they provide all the gentle opportunities necessary for understanding and trust to take hold. We can ease our way into conversations with others. We can listen, change our minds, and see our own colleagues as vulnerable and human. We are different people within the many professional communities we are part of but this difference is not an inconsistency to be ironed out but an indication, rather, that our selves are importantly responsive and plural. The person we are with students is different, and necessarily so, from how we appear with departmental or university colleagues and it is different again to how we might express ourselves and our work to a broader public. But in all of these expressions and relations, there is the possibility to develop significant trust and connection. Thus, *intimacy* can thrive when our every utterance isn't 'persistent, visible, spreadable, or searchable' (boyd 2014: 237).

(2) VULNERABILITY

If the intimacy of real-life encounter can promote an honesty or authenticity of expression, that over time can consolidate into trusting friendships or communities, such contexts are more welcoming also to the hesitant or the vulnerable. Our expressions in these spaces are not intended for the public forum of judgment or critique and so we can worry less about exposing ourselves as less-than-ideal teachers and researchers: 'I'm not entirely sure about using small-group presentations with my second-year undergraduates. It seemed to work well last semester but this semester I'm not so sure. Maybe the students aren't as engaged? Maybe

I've lost my own confidence as a teacher? It's been a bruising year. I do sometimes wonder whether academia is the place for me'.

It is possible to venture sensitivities such as these in a real-world context when we are assured that they will not be shared beyond the publics for whom they are meant. We are not offering up such sensitivities for public appraisal or feedback or for the likely dopamine hit of likes and retweets. We are simply offering them. Such gestures have the character of a plea or a claim, what Stanley Cavell will term an ongoing *appeal* to each other's 'friendship' (Cavell 1996: 12).

In such appeals or claims, of course, our venturing of personal experience is fragile and delicate until it is accepted by another; indeed, whether my take on the world might be *taken on* by you depends on a complex initiation of acknowledgment between us. It depends, as Naomi Scheman has argued, 'not just on the content of what I say but crucially, on the relationship between us, on whether we can meet each other, be each other's companion, whether you can – or should – trust me, and me you' (Scheman 2011: 104–105). There is a kind of epistemic vulnerability to these encounters which for Cavell captures the very essence of the human. It is possible of course to meet each other online but whether we can truly foster trust and companionability in these instances is a very different prospect. Without the expressed vulnerability that allows us all to *really see* each other, we remain at a distance – not fully understood, not fully taken in.

(3) ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Indeed, Cavell has urged throughout his philosophical career that it is a human tendency not to embrace intimacy but to stay at a safe distance, to close our eyes to other human persons in all their separateness and in all their complexity. This tendency is understood in his work as the very essence of philosophical scepticism and it is defined by the moral hypocrisies carried in our everyday exchanges with each other. On Cavell's reading, such hypocrisies mark not only an ignorance but an outright annihilation of the other person; moreover, it is in the undramatic and the daily that these tragedies are most frequently and most damagingly played out. As Cavell writes:

> in the everyday ways in which denial occurs in my life with the other – in a momentary irritation, or a recurrent grudge, in an unexpected rush of resentment, in a hard glance, in a dishonest attestation, in the telling of a tale, in the believing of a tale, in a false silence, in a fear of engulfment, in a fantasy of solitude or of self-destruction – the problem is to *recognize* myself as denying another, to understand that I carry chaos in myself. Here is the scandal of scepticism with respect to the existence of others; I am the scandal. (Cavell 2005: 151).

Cavell's writings move from Shakespearean tragedy to Beckettian farce and from Romantic poetry to Hollywood film. He has never written about social media, to our knowledge, but it is not hard to see how his arguments regarding human avoidance and acknowledgment might find traction in this context. There are all kinds of denials and dishonest attestations through which we interact on Twitter. There are plenty of false silences, irritations, and resentments too. We 'like' a colleague's tweet sharing that they have been nominated for a teaching award, while secretly thinking (and perhaps expressing to others) that they are a rubbish teacher. We fail to affirm or platform a young postdoc's work while knowing that our affirmation would be meaningful for them. We are 'thrilled to share' that we have recently been promoted to Associate Professor but do not fully consider how this announcement might impact on a precarious and close colleague. Again, we are conscious as we develop this argument that our focus here is trained on the darker side of social media interaction. There are, of course, much brighter sides; and it bears repeating that the scenario outlined above relates to potential pitfalls rather than necessary outcomes. But in retaining our critical focus on the potential negatives, what we wish to foreground are those hyper-visible interactive modes that encourage surface over depth and denial over acknowledgment, where our dealings with each other are facilitated by X/Twitter's very distinctive brand of manic self-absorption. Social media has gifted us all entirely new forms of madness, as Paul Standish has phrased it, 'in which a respectful and decent politics of recognition has turned into a kind of inflamed narcissism' (Standish 2022).

CONCLUSION

In 1991, urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg put forward the idea of a 'third space' (Oldenburg 1991). A third space is neither one's home nor one's work; rather, it is any informal gathering place (e.g. a coffee shop, a park, a library) where conversation can meaningfully happen. For Oldenburg, these places are essential to local community and democracy. They have the edifying character of what Jürgen Habermas has termed 'the public sphere' (Habermas 1989) or what Hannah Arendt has explored in her writings as 'the space of appearance' (Arendt 1958). In an ideal world, we might venture, the university itself might operate as a third space along the lines that Oldenburg proposes. Such a space would be open, equal, and democratic. It would foster rational, deliberative, and informed decision making. It would create meaningful bonds between members of the public and institutions of democracy.

Might academic Twitter achieve something similar? Odell has persuasively argued that Twitter can never function as a space of appearance for the simple fact that its users will always remain abstract to each other. The limitless nature of the social media audience means that genuine connection struggles to take hold. In Odell's words:

> [The] space of appearance is my 'ideal audience' in that it is a place where I'm addressed, understood, and challenged – thus providing a known context for what I say and I hear in this space. In this form of encounter, neither I nor anyone else has to waste time or energy on wrangling context, or packaging our messages for the lowest common denominator of public opinion. We gather, we say what we mean, and we act. (2019: 177)

Certainly, to build on Odell's point, we would see connections formed via Twitter as more network than relational. While the diversity of that network can be staggering, it is still limited in its function and possibility; we may 'follow' fellow Twitter users who share our values but we lack effective opportunity to build shared practices and form meaningful relationships. Instead of developing ideas though tentative conversations with trusted students or colleagues, tweets on a topic are presented as fully formed positions. There is little room for nuance or risk. The sender must choose a formula of words that somehow strikes the impossible balance of engaging student, colleague, and wider world. If, then, it is so challenging to foster a genuine 'space of appearance' on Twitter, and if it is correspondingly challenging to rehabilitate our engagements with social media from modes of narcissism, resentment, or spiralling self-doubt – are we simply back again to ideas of departure and protest? Is there no option but to leave?

Carrigan, for one, has counselled academics to stay but to do so with a sharp awareness about how and why (and when) we use social media. We need to slay the enemy of 'technological determinism' (Carrigan 2020: 25), he writes; this is the idea that our behaviour in particular digital worlds is unavoidable. Rather, we need to recover our senses of agency and control and to regularly check in on our social media habits. 'So much of what it means to use these platforms successfully rests upon being mindful of their use' he urges, 'as opposed to being forgetful as they fade into the background and become taken for granted parts of our working lives' (2020: 12). In a similar vein, Odell has sidestepped the simple binary of staying versus leaving to recommend a more hybrid reaction. On this understanding, we contemplate *and* participate; we 'stand apart' from Twitter. In her own words: 'To stand apart is to take the view of the outsider without leaving, always oriented toward what you would have left. It means not fleeing your enemy but knowing your enemy, which turns out not to be the world but the channels through which you encounter it day by day. It also means giving yourself the critical break that media cycles and narratives will not' (Odell 2019: 62).

Being mindful about our use of social media requires us also to consider the importance in our lives of real as well as digital spaces. We all know that student loneliness and disconnection is a huge problem at undergraduate and postgraduate level (Vaterlaus 2022; O'Brien 2022) but what we don't often face up to is the loneliness that seeps into our professional academic lives. This is a point made compellingly in Berg and Seeber's *The Slow Professor* which is in many ways a manifesto for a more considered academic life. In 2016, Berg and Seeber pointed out that the ability to find any kind of social support in the academy is becoming more and more difficult.

They wrote of empty hallways, closed doors, busy colleagues, and how there never seemed to be anybody to turn to for advice. Their idea that faculty departments are on the verge of becoming 'ghost places' has even greater resonance eight years later as we contemplate the university of 2024. Such workplace loneliness is not just an unfortunate by-product of the increase in remote working but has thoroughgoing consequences for our personal and professional lives post-Covid: 'workplace loneliness affects our well-being, interferes with professional development and makes us more vulnerable to burnout' (Berg & Seeber 2016: 83).

In reflecting on our relationship with social media, then, one action we might take as academics is to re-direct our attention to the *concrete* nature of the university – to the university as a lived space where we encounter each other and where place-making and dwelling are allowed and welcomed. Nørgård and Bengtsen refer to this vision as 'the ethics of the placeful university' – which draws people together, which fosters dwelling, and which invites care and connectedness (2016: 11). This is a home for accidental conversations or collisions – for intimacy, vulnerability, and acknowledgment, to cite the earlier terms of this paper – for those conversations that can only flourish when people feel entirely at ease. On this understanding, the university is not just an imaginary yet limitless network with whom we share outputs and achievements. It is a bounded but welcoming space that calls for our thoughtfulness, our responsiveness, and our participation.

In the introductory section of this article, we highlighted that our approach would not be a standardly empirical one. Rather, we described our methodology as 'unorthodox', 'affective', and 'arts-based'. Such an approach would begin from speculative or fictional scenarios; it would move from there to generate further philosophical exploration of particular phenomena in the educational arena. In taking this unorthodox approach, we are of course not claiming reliability, validity, or replicability. We are certainly not claiming that the fictional experience of our composite user is one to be generalized. Rather, what we have been offering throughout our discussion is one interpretation among many, an interpretation expressly designed to illuminate the darker side of social media use in Higher Education. There are brighter sides too, of course, but these have not been the focus of this paper. In his influential book, *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research*, Clough argues for fictional writing as 'a wholly legitimate educational and social science inquiry' (Clough 2002: 87) and cites the work of Neil Postman (American educator, media theorist and cultural critic) in building on this claim:

> both a social scientist and a novelist give unique interpretations to a set of human events and support their interpretations with examples in various forms. Their interpretations cannot be proved or disproved, but will draw their appeal from the power of their language, the depth of their explanations, the relevance of their examples, and the credibility of their themes. And all this has, in both cases, an identifiable moral purpose. (Clough 2002: 87).

In this paper, we have followed both Clough and Postman in their advocacy for a research approach that is premised on narrative power rather than generalisable data. We hope that our fictionalised scenario has offered human insight with emotive force and, in so doing, that it has provided new ways of understanding the complex ethical phenomenon of how academics might experience social media.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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