



Trustworthiness and role of social media in scholarly communications

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Trust and authority in scholarly communications: the issues

- In today's crowded, dynamic, diverse and **dis-intermediated** digital scholarly environment more difficult to establish trustworthiness
- More sources, channels, platforms, players muddying the water.
Difficult to know whose information it is anymore
- Very challenging behaviour from the **Google Generation**, the born digital, who are arriving at universities/workplaces as I speak.
Skittering and poor evaluation skills; different trust perceptions.
- Trust, authority and quality matters everywhere but are the very watchwords of scholarly communication, built upon quality assurance
- So great place to research change and identify new shoots, especially in light of challenges from **social media juggernaut**; muscling in on very long-established trust practices (largely, the peer review journal)



Background: the project

Funding: Alfred P Sloan Foundation (2013). Research questions:

1. How researchers assign and calibrate authority and trustworthiness to scholarly sources and channels used, cited and to disseminate their research; **scholars as consumers and producers**
2. Whether Google, **social media** and open access are having an impact on conventional practices of establishing authority and trustworthiness
3. Differences by age, nationality, type of institution, gender, subject

Methods: threw the lot at the topic – computer logs, focus groups, critical incident interviews and questionnaire. Big and robust evidence base on behaviour of thousands of researchers.

Scope: focus on US and UK, but international questionnaire.

Main focus on social media today all the information at: http://ciber-research.eu/download/20140115-Trust_Final_Report.pdf



Personas

Researchers function as authors, editors, reviewers, citers and users of the literature. **Different trust judgments employed for each function.**

Editors thinking dominated by picture of themselves as information providers, people offering trustworthy content for others to trust. Police the system and largely like the way it works.

Citation behaviour much stricter, more focussed and more 'political' than user behaviour.

Researchers have **more freedom as to what they use** - can use blogs, OA etc. to their heart's content, but not cite them (thus place to look for chinks in the armour of established system).

Publishing is where the traditional system is whipping researcher into order – ranked peer reviewed journals for career progression



Metrics and trust proxies (Impact Factors etc.) – a major force

- In a competitive academic world, where scholars are increasingly subjected to performance metrics (**algorithms**) consequence creativity and new ideas driven out by metric-driven culture.
- **Scientists unquestioning about merits** of metrics; social scientists **uneasy** but felt had no choice; humanities scholars felt **culturally uncomfortable** and alienated, but were part of it.
- However, early career researchers in social sciences/humanities thought themselves '**slaves**' to a **metric-based/journal focussed system**; adhere to rules to climb academic ladder but thought ladder broken. In marked contrast journals a manifestation of all that was wrong with scholarly communications (**a chink?**).
- **Altmetrics.** Making little headway with researchers. Most ignorant; and those with knowledge view them as dubious popularity indices that have little bearing on research. Social media mentions thought to be less an indicator of quality and credibility than usage metrics.



Impact and role of social media: the basics

- Many researchers are engaged at least occasionally and occasionally very much the keyword.
- Role mostly in usage, rarely in citing and publishing.
- More critical and hesitant about trusting social media.
- Use the same standards to judge quality of social media as used for traditional sources.
- Benefited most informal scholarly communication and treated as such.
- Personal networks and circles of trust are central to formal scholarly communication and made much easier to maintain by social media.



Social media – the negatives

Only a minority – early career mainly, thought social media was more than a **side-show**

Lack of interest explained by **validity problems** but also other reasons:

1. Many researchers novices and antagonistic towards SM as a result;
2. No time to try out;
3. Put off by current HE climate, which favours peer review, journals and citation indices;
4. Informal language of social media unsuitable for scholarly discourse;
5. No measures by which content could be evaluated; altmetrics unfamiliar and seen as popularity, not quality, indices;
6. No benefits to it – it didn't help their career;
7. Intrinsic openness of social media carried with it the possibility that non-experts would be involved: this represented “noise”.



Social media – the positives

Some researchers, mainly young and in social sciences, more positive and saw social media **valuable for**:

- a) Obtaining new ideas, stimulation and starting new ‘conversations’;
- b) Self-promotion of research and articles, books and conferences, which presented that research; especially in regard to public engagement;
- c) Passing around references (Twitter good at this);
- d) Increases citation counts (even the negatives were interested in this!).



Citing social media

Pressure from supervisors to cite peer-reviewed articles. *You see interesting things elsewhere (i.e. social media) but you cannot use/cited them.*

twitter not used as an information source: it would be like citing a conversation in the bar.

Cited social media sources as ‘personal communications’

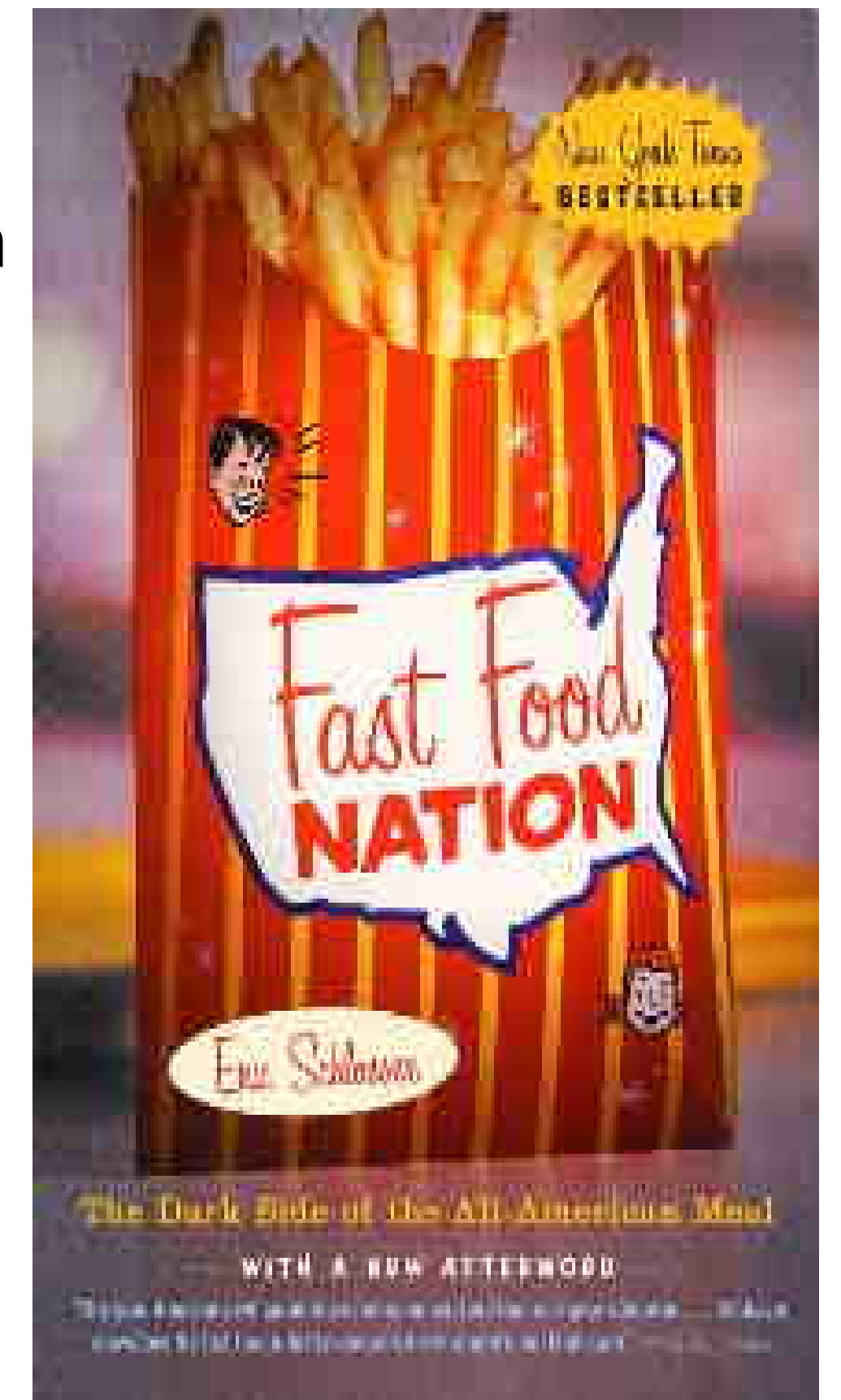
Blogs not to be sourced: many blogs ‘*were just streams of consciousness stuff*’.



Publishing/Dissemination in the social media

Researchers under 30 much more likely to agree with these statements:

1. Mandates should encourage people to write a blog and/or tweet about your research
2. I use social media (e.g. Twitter, blogs, social networks) to get out information about my research because it is a reliable way to reach my target audiences..
3. I tend to blog about the findings of my research, which is a good way to test the veracity of my ideas.



Diversity (age/seniority)

Early career researchers made more use of social media but scared to embrace it fully and camouflaged use. For them the benefits were:

- a) Fast track the development of a personal network;
- b) Facilitates collaboration among researchers;
- c) Finding researchers to work with (in real-time);
- d) Staying in touch with events;
- e) Stalking authors
- f) Taking full advantage of 'dissemination plus world' they were part of.

Relates closely to the need for researchers to build up their own circle of trust, relationships with people they confidently share their findings with, and keep up to date with changes in specialism



Diversity (age/seniority) cont.

Despite aforementioned advantages young were reticent to contribute too much to the social media, largely because they did not want to let themselves down/show immaturity.

Worried use of social media could have a negative impact on career development. *It is so easy to comment today and in the digital world the record it always there. So, say you said something premature or immature twenty years ago, it could come back and bite you at a crucial time in your career development.*

Acknowledged social media was open to ‘grandstanding’, self-publishing and promotion, but, is this not all part of climbing the academic ladder.

Older social science researchers used social media to derive new/fresh ideas and for outreach — to connect to the public and practitioners.



Diversity (country, subject)

- Researchers from less developed countries were more positive in their opinions towards altmetrics and social media, perhaps because more difficult for them to excel in traditional world of scholarly communications
- Surprisingly few differences by subject, but social scientists and humanities researchers slightly more likely to use social media and talk of it positively
- Humanities scholars were more likely to use social media to disseminate research.



Change: trust/quality better/worse than a decade ago?

More bad/mediocre stuff around because;

a) more accessible; b) more opportunities to publish

But quality risen over the years. Rise in quality meant could live with bad/boring stuff and overload

'There is a massive sea of mediocrity now because it is just easier to publish, but at the higher end the quality is better because of better training, greater competition and rewards for publishing'

But didn't want any changes, they liked disintermediation (DIY) and didn't really blame social media



Conclusions

What problem?

- Played down difficulties of establishing trustworthiness in virtual world, not because none (in fact more rubbish around), but because have well-developed methods of establishing trust (personal trust communities built up over the years).
- Researchers had moved from a print-based system to a digital system, but it has not significantly changed the way they decide what to trust. The digital transition has not led to a digital transformation.

Parallel universes or clash of the Titans?

- Traditional scholarly system being enforced and reinforced by increased competition, career considerations, established metrics and institutional policies. Peer reviewed journal more dominant and spreading its influence.
- Yet social media has established a (growing) foothold. Increasingly useful for new ideas, references, publicity and outreach (communicating with practitioners), which made the whole process easier and faster. Even those who didn't use it – the majority, thought it was the future.

Conclusions (cont.)

Surprises?

- Small discipline differences, but scientists happier with existing system.
- While early career researchers (in social sciences and humanities) have to conform to traditional system, they actually think differently. Is this the first sighting of the tsunami?

Back to the question posted by the conference:

Will social media change research and publication processes?

On the basis of the evidence of our research the answer has to be:

slowly, selectively, patchily but surely as the young and early career researchers move up the academic ladder

More information at

http://ciber-research.eu/download/20140115-Trust_Final_Report.pdf