"Don't affect the share price": social media policy in higher education as reputation management

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The last 5 years have seen a growing number of universities use social media services such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube to engage with past, present and prospective students. More recently still, a number of universities have published policy or guidance documents on the use of social media for a range of university-related purposes including learning, teaching and assessment. This study considers the social media policies of 14 universities in the United Kingdom (UK) that are currently in the public domain. It addresses some of the ways in which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are responding to both the positive potential of social media as well as its perceived threats. Drawing inspiration, if not actual method, from critical discourse analysis, this study argues that marketisation has been the main policy driver with many social media policies being developed to promote university "brands" as well as protect institutional reputation. The creation and implementation of social media policies are therefore playing a role in helping universities manage both the risks and the benefits of social media in the context of an increasingly marketised Higher Education (HE) environment in which protecting institutional reputation has become a priority. However, in the defence of the metaphorical institutional "share price", some policies constrain both academic autonomy and the possibilities for innovation and risk-taking.

Keywords: policy; social media; openness; sharing; academic autonomy; research; thought piece

Introduction

The study offers an analysis of the social media policies of 14 universities in the UK (see Appendix for list). It is not a study of implementation and does not draw on interview data from those responsible for devising policy. Its focus is primarily on policy texts and what the discourse of those texts might be said to reveal about the state of higher education in the UK. I will argue that, starting from around 2009, a number of universities have developed social media policies that, whilst providing some level of staff guidance, are mainly about enhancing university "brands" and protecting institutional reputation. I will argue that social media policy appears to be less informed by an awareness of the implications for learning made possible by new forms of digital culture and is more informed by the discourse of marketisation and "new managerialism". Although many of the social media policies are appropriate for the purposes of corporate communication, they are, at best, problematic when

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applied to the messier business of learning, teaching and assessment. At worst, some of the social media policies analysed place serious constraints on academic autonomy and the possibilities for innovation, openness and sharing.

Researcher positionality

I am currently Principal Lecturer in Learning Technology at a medium-sized post-'92 university in the south of England. I am based, not in a faculty, but in a central department dedicated to academic staff development and to the making and implementation of the University's Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategy. Although, I have not been directly involved in developing institutional social media policy, I am in regular contact with colleagues – notably those from both Information Services and Marketing – who are. As such, I might be said to enjoy something of the epistemological privilege of being an "insider" researcher and am therefore able to gain insights which, as Lankshear and Knobel (2006) remind us, "are *sights* from the *in*side" (pp. 247–248).

I should also add that I am, for primarily professional purposes, a regular user of social media. However, when I use social media am I representing myself or my institution? My initial answer is, of course, myself. However, is it really possible to blog or to tweet, for example, in a wholly individual capacity that does not invoke in any way one's institutional affiliation? When I post an uncomplimentary tweet about current HE policy (see Figure 1), I do so as an individual academic expressing a personal opinion to those who follow me.

However, might my tweet be perceived to be representing an institutional or possibly departmental viewpoint? In using social media to articulate a position hostile to a government policy that I may later have to help implement, am I not undermining the work of my department or institution? It is an ambiguous area that, as I will argue, clearly defined social media policies seek to address.

My research for this study proceeds from the hunch that the making of social media policy in higher education is a response to the perceived threat of reputational damage to institutions caused by unregulated and unsupervised social media use by both staff and students. Although, I will also argue that advising staff of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), copyright, liability, data protection issues and general good practice are an important part of social media policy, for many institutions the main – but often hidden – purpose is to protect universities' reputation in the context of a competitive HE market in which "brand value" is key. Derek Morrison, associate head of e-learning at the Higher Education Academy, in an exchange quoted in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*, offers the following advice to

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Robust critique of Dep of BIS's dishonest, spivvy HE policy from Stefan Collini in the #LRB: lrb.co.uk/v33/n16/stefan... via @LondonReview

30 Aug via Tweet Button

Figure 1.   Tweet articulating personal opinion.

academics considering using social media: "[t]he simple rule for everyone should be 'don't affect the share price', no matter what technology you are using" (Corbyn 2008). As I will argue in more detail later, it is the metaphorical "share price" or reputation that enables universities to recruit students and, in the context of differential tuition fees, to charge the maximum possible. This is why the reputation or "brand" needs to be carefully managed.

What is social media and why does it matter to HE?

Social media is the term used to designate online services characterised by a high degree of collaboration, interaction and content sharing. Social media tends now to be the term used in preference to Web 2.0 and encompasses such varied technologies as blogs, wikis, social networking sites such as Facebook, as well as media sharing services such as YouTube and Flickr.

Social media has lowered the threshold technological barriers to creating online spaces, facilitating conversation and sharing information. However, this greater ease brings with it potential threats. Might online spaces and digital communication tools allow academic staff to articulate statements or publish media at variance with institutional policy or in some way detrimental to institutional reputation? There have certainly been high-profile cases (Ringmar 2007) in recent years. Of equal concern is the possibility that social media sites might become spaces in which staff and students – past, present and potential – post defamatory or inflammatory comments that are harmful to a university's reputation?

Although social media offer many great opportunities to connect and engage with a range of users, it is also regarded by many with a degree of caution. This is because blogs or Facebook pages, for example, tend not to be hosted on institutional systems such as the university intranet, the institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or official web sites. Social media therefore fall outside of the institutional policies and management control mechanisms. Staff use of social media might be perceived to be circumventing university controls in ways that may present themselves, their students and their institution with unacceptable levels of risk. The need to manage the risks attendant upon such uncontrolled and decentralised uses of social media services informs, to a degree, the making of social media policy in higher education. Although other policies relating to the use of internet-based technologies exist – around university computing and telecommunications facilities, data protection, intellectual property rights and staff and student disciplinary policies to name just a few examples – some institutions have responded to both the new challenges and the new threats by developing explicit social media policies for staff and, in some the cases, for students as well.

Marketisation as the key policy driver

Shattock (2006) has argued that from the late 1970s onwards, higher education policy has been driven exclusively from the "outside inwards" with internally generated policy-making being increasingly sidelined as the state takes over the lion's share of its development. He argues that "the state has taken over policy making because the insider organs that once generated policies have been weakened or no longer exist" (p. 138). The context of higher education policy-making in the UK then is very much driven by the priorities of government; its drivers are external rather than internal.

The main driver behind the development of a range of policies in UK HEIs has been successive governments' commitment to restructure higher education provision along market principles (Brown 2011; Levidow 2002; Lynch 2006). The principal national HE policy driver informing policy – including "micro" policies such as an institution's social media policy – is, therefore, the marketisation of higher education.

I am using the term "marketisation" to designate the movement towards the commodification of academic education, a movement that seek to refashion the relationship between academics and students along the lines of a service provider and a consumer. Marketisation is, as Furedi (2011) points out, "as much a political/ideological process as an economic phenomenon" (p. 2) in so far as it is symptomatic of the neo-liberal weakening of the state and the concomitant stress on the value of higher education to the individual as consumer who expects a "return" on his/her time and financial. The knowledge developed or acquired at university is now less a public good and more a commodity to be capitalised on or traded in on the employment market.

The marketisation of HE has highlighted the need for universities to stand out from their competitors by offering a distinctive "brand proposition" (Chapleo 2005, 2006; Nguyen and LeBlanc 2001). Brown (2011) argues that "the growth of marketing functions is inevitable and essential" (p. 36) and that, over the last decade or so marketing and communications departments have seen their influence grow. In this context it is clear why the use of social media too might need to be professionally managed in order to protect and enhance institutional reputation.

Literature review

To date, there has been no research conducted on the production and implementation of social media policy in higher education either nationally or internationally. The blogosphere is full of posts – mainly from the USA – on how to create social media policy but there has so far been no analysis of what is admittedly an emergent genre of policy text. However, since the early 1990s some academics have began to study the both the marketisation of higher education as well as the degree to which the discourse of marketisation had begun to inflect the language used in university texts. For example, Fairclough (1993) has analysed the "colonisation of discourse by promotion" (p. 142) in university job advertisements; Pearce (2004) the marketisation of discourse about education in general election manifestos; Askehave (2007) the language of international prospectuses and Quinn (2012) staff resistance to the discourse of academic staff development. It is within the intellectual context of the critique of the discourse of marketisation that I locate this study.

Methods and methodology

This study of social media policy documents broadly adopts the analytical approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA views the use of language as a form of social practice. All forms of social practice are tied to specific historical contexts and are the means by which existing social relations are reproduced or contested. CDA seeks to make visible the ways in which institutions and their discourse shape our identities. As Fairclough (1992) has written, "'critical' implies showing connections and causes that are hidden" (p. 9). CDA therefore attends to the ways in which language serves different interests. When "doing" CDA one might, for example,

interrogate whose interests are being served by a particular text. My starting hunch – that policy was a response to senior management's anxiety about unregulated social media use that sought to manage or control academic freedoms – drew me towards this type of analytical approach.

Sampling method

My sample corpus is derived from the 14 social media policies available online that I was able to locate between early October 2011 and late May 2012. My search involved typing in a number of search strings – e.g. "social media policy HE", "Web 2.0 policy HE", "social networking policy HE" – into the Google search engine and following up the relevant search results. I also used my main Twitter account to tweet a request for information on and links to social media policy documents from UK-based HEIs. I found 13 of the 14 policies as a result of using a search engine and just one additional new policy (in addition to two duplicates) as a result of the tweeted request.

By chance rather than by design, my convenience sampling has the appearance of purposive, non-probability sampling (Ritchie and Lewis 2003, pp. 77–108) in so far as the 14 institutions with publicly accessible policy documents represent a broad cross-section of the different types of university in the UK: those chartered in the nineteenth century (e.g. University of Durham) through to "red brick" (e.g. University of Bristol), plate glass (e.g. University of Essex) and "new" or "post-'92" universities (e.g. University of Central Lancashire). I was not able to locate any social media policy documents from an "ancient" university such as the University of Oxford or the University of Edinburgh so the sample cannot be said to be wholly representative of the HE sector in the UK. Although it may be the case that these institutions have social media policies that are accessible only to staff, it would be interesting to conduct further research into the apparent absence of social media policies from "ancient" universities – in the main elite institutions – with a view to exploring the degree to which they feel they do not require the sort of "brand management" other universities do.

Having selected a corpus of texts, I was interested in discovering which department had responsibility for producing the policy, what the stated purposes of the policy were, whose interests were being protected and the degree to which policy had been "colonised", as it were, by the discourse of marketisation.

The location of policy-making

A key question I wished to consider when analysing policy was the location of that policy-making. Which department or unit has primary responsibility for creating policy? With the exception of four universities, most policies were accessed from either the human resources pages or the marketing pages of the universities' web sites (Figure 2).

The location of policy is a clear indicator of which department has the strongest strategic interest in developing social media policy. What is obvious from the admittedly small sample is that the marketing and communications teams currently have the largest stake in developing social media policy. This is because these teams are more actively engaged in protecting or enhancing institutional reputation. Moreover, marketing and communications services appear to have a better grasp of

Marketing (7/14)	HR (3/14)	Other (4/14)
Aberystwyth University	University of Central Lancashire	Heriot Watt University
University College London	Durham University	University of Essex
University of Glamorgan	University of Surrey	Open University
University of Huddersfield		Robert Gordon University
University of Leicester		
Liverpool John Moores University		
Oxford Brookes University		

Figure 2.   The location of social media policy.

how to use social media as it is now plays an important role in how private-sector companies develop their brand.

Where policy was produced by marketing and communications departments, the influence of marketing discourse was, predictably, most prevalent. For example, the University of Leicester's social media policy states that:

> Social media presents an opportunity but also a challenge for *brand and reputation management.* [emphasis mine]

Moreover, a sidebar to the left of the policy text links to a page on the "University's Brand Proposition" which explains to readers the "need for an underpinning market proposition" to differentiate the University of Leicester from other institutions in a competitive marketplace. The Open University's social media position paper develops this idea by arguing that brand identity is constructed, at least in part, by public "conversations" on social media services:

> An organisation's brand is moving from being what it says it is on its website or in its adverts and brochures to being what its customers (or those who have experienced the company) say it is and tell other people it is. Frequently the arena for these conversations comprises the social media tools and technologies identified above.

Many of the policies adopt the explicit language of the market by describing students as "customers" and the institution as a "service provider". The social media guidance from Liverpool John Moore's University (LJMU) provides one example of this:

> It is important to be mindful that we may attract negative as well as positive comments. Correct handling of such comments can serve to promote LJMU as a responsive, helpful organisation that aims for *high levels of customer service*. [emphasis mine]

We can discern then, in these policy documents, use of a discursive repertoire drawn from marketing and the underpinning concepts of the university as both brand as well as service provider.

Equally interesting are the three institutions whose human resources departments were responsible for policy-making. Unlike marketing departments, it is less clear to me what claim to expertise HR departments might have in the area of social media. However, HR departments are generally the originating source for disciplinary policies and, as such, tend to contextualise social media use in terms of potential misconduct. There's a stress in the policies emanating from HR departments, therefore, on compliance and on managerial structures.

content disciplinary employees employment manager networking personal policy services site sites social staff

university working

Figure 3. University of Surrey social media policy word cloud.

For example, the University of Surrey's social media policy is a two-page PDF document that adopts a defensive stance and stresses reputational risks. This policy is clearly about defining acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and offers – in contrast to most of the other policies – little advice to staff on what might constitute good practice:

> ... serious misuse of Social Networking sites that has a negative impact on the University may be regarded as a disciplinary offence. An individual is free to talk about the University. However instances where the University is brought into disrepute may constitute misconduct or gross misconduct and disciplinary action will be applied.

Using an online concordancing tool (http://www.spaceless.com/concordancer.php) and setting it to remove the 1000 most common words and to display only words which appear on four or more occasions produced the following word cloud – a frequency-weighted list or textual histogram – of the University of Surrey's social media policy (Figure 3).

The dominant word is "university", suggestive of a document whose purpose is to protect institutional interests above all else. Moreover, other frequently used terms invoke institutional hierarchies – "employees" and "manager" – and also contractual obligations ("employment" and "disciplinary"). This is a document redolent of the discourse of the "new manageralism" (Deem 1998; Deem and Brehony 2005): there is a stress on compliance with policy, following the necessary procedures and seeking permission from those with appropriate managerial authority.

Social media policy as reputation management

In nine policy documents, explicit reference was made to the importance of institutional reputation at or near the very beginning of the text:

> This guidance is designed to bring your attention to the measures within the University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) which are designed to protect you from abuse by a colleague via a social networking site and to protect the *reputation* [emphasis mine] of your employer.

> The purpose of this guidance is to protect the *reputation* [emphasis mine] of employees of Durham University and the University as a whole from abuse via staff usage of social networking and personal internet sites.

Other policies avoid direct use of the term "reputation", preferring instead alternatives (e.g. "interests") or near synonyms (e.g. "integrity") as in the example below:

> The purpose of the social media policy is to promote the *interests* [emphasis mine] of the University of Glamorgan within the realms of social media whilst protecting the *integrity* [emphasis mine] of the University and maintaining a consistently high standard of communication with internal and external users.

The idea of institutional reputation is something invoked by the perceived threat of social media being used in ways which bring the university into "disrepute" as in the following example from the University of Huddersfield:

> Anybody is free to talk about the University on social media sites. However, please be aware that disparaging or untrue remarks which may bring the University, its staff or students into *disrepute* [emphasis mine] may constitute misconduct and disciplinary action may be applied.

Three policies – from Oxford Brookes University, University College London and the University of Essex – do not refer to reputation as such although the concept is implicit in the verbs used. For example, the Oxford Brookes University social media policy begins:

> The university is keen to encourage its staff to actively engage in the use of social networking to *promote* [emphasis mine] and communicate on behalf of Oxford Brookes.

The verb "promote" invokes the marketing possibilities of social media use and therefore may be interpreted as strengthening or enhancing the Oxford Brookes "brand". In the "general usage policy" section there is explicit reference to the "[u]se of the Oxford Brookes Brand" and to staff requirement to "comply with the corporate branding guidelines". There is very clear evidence in this policy, therefore, of marketing discourse.

The University of Essex's social media policy uses another verb in its opening paragraph:

> The purpose of these social media guidelines is as follows:

- to encourage good practice
- to *protect* [emphasis mine] the University, its staff and students
- to clarify where and how existing policies and guidelines apply to social media
- to promote effective and innovative use of social media as part of the University's activities

The University of Essex's social media policy is much less inflected by marketing discourse than that of Oxford Brookes. However, what is less clear are the threats from which the university needs protecting. The reader is left to infer meaning and my interpretation is that the threats are both legal but also reputational. Damage to reputation then, is the tacit threat from which the University requires protection.

Policy levers

The term "policy lever" refers to the potential actions an organisation might take to influence behaviour. In the cases of some, although certainly not all of the social media policies, the lever is potential disciplinary action in cases of infringement or breach of policy (e.g. University of Glamorgan, Heriot-Watt University, University of Huddersfield, University of Surrey). Two examples will suffice to give a sense of the register used and sanctions invoked:

> Staff whose use of Web 2.0 services, whether for work or private use, exposes the University to risk of legal liability, operational, financial or reputational loss may be subject to disciplinary sanctions. (Heriot-Watt University)

> Unless there are specific concerns about the nature of your job, you are free to talk about UCLan on your site. However, you must avoid bringing the University into disrepute in any way, as this may constitute gross misconduct as listed in the Disciplinary Procedure in the staff handbook. (UCLan)

Those institutional whose policies invoke formal disciplinary action, I would argue, exercise what Trow (1994) calls "hard managerialism" characterised by more authoritarian language and by systems of rewards and sanctions accorded to staff based on their compliance or non-compliance with policy.

Another feature of these policies is the requirement to register social media use with either one's line manager or a central department (marketing, web team or information services) as in the following example from the University of Central Lancashire:

> If you already have a social networking site or intend to initiate one which indicates in any way that you work at UCLan you should inform your manager.

Such rules place social media use under strict managerial control or else under supervision of a specialist department. Aberystwyth University, for example, requires all proposals for the use of social media for learning and teaching purposes with an anticipated life-span of over four months to be submitted to the Social Media Officer and, if required, reviewed by the Social Media Group. The Open University justifies a similar requirement in its policy by claiming that engagement with different "communities" is "undertaken with a common voice and does not contribute a plurality of, or conflicting, messages".

In some universities, a more collegial tone is taken with colleagues encouraged to register their social media use with a central university department as an option rewarded by advice and regular updates as in the following example from University College, London:

> **Get in touch with us!** Let us know what you've set up: we'll add you to the list of UCL social media users on this site, and also try to keep you up to date with central social media developments.

These policies might be seen as exemplifying what Trow (1994) terms "soft managerialism" insofar as they seek the agreement and consent of colleagues and are therefore more compatible with collegiality than "hard managerialist" approaches. Although the more collegial tone comes as something of a relief when compared to the more authoritarian discourse of other policy texts, the underlying aims are to influence the nature of staff interactions and to create a centralised list of social media use that may be monitored and could, potentially, be required to close down.

Conclusion

An alternative title to this study might have been "the presentation of universities in everyday life". The allusion to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory is deliberate: his argument that individuals are engaged in what they hope to be a flawless and convincing performance to audiences whilst keeping the messy business of contradiction firmly back stage seems relevant to the ways universities seek to present themselves in the best possible light to a diverse audience including potential applicants, alumni, on-course students and employers. Social media – for better or

worse – has the potential to trouble institutions' attempts to project a unified and controlled image of themselves to the world. Therefore, many social media policies are about seizing control of what Goffman calls "impression management" imposing from the top-down as it were a repertoire of preferred presentational strategies (use of corporate branding, tone, disclaimers, etc.).

I have not wanted to argue that producing social media policy is a "bad thing" *per se*. Indeed, I have learnt much from reading the documents, some of which have been full of constructive advice that I will share with interested colleagues. Also, it is unfair to present all social media policies as a homogeneous monolithic bloc; some adopt a more collegial register and offer support and advice whilst others wrest control of social media away from academic staff and wield the threat of disciplinary action. Rather, I have wanted to draw attention to the ways in which even a micro-policy is informed by a dominant policy driver such as the marketisation of higher education.

Finally – and, for me, most importantly – I have wanted to highlight the potential tensions between the academic ideals of openness and the freedom to act and to write as we see fit with social media policies that limit our academic autonomy. I have attempted to argue that policies constrain as much as they enable our possibilities for action. Is perhaps the greatest risk posed by the more restrictive of the social media policies analysed that, in the name of maintaining the metaphorical university share price, they also inhibit innovation?

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Appendix: List of publicly-accessible social media policies and their locations

Aberystwyth University. http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/media/social-media-policy-by-Russ.pdf

University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN). http://www.uclan.ac.uk/information/services/hr/hr_guidance_employees/social_networking.php

University College London (UCL). http://www.ucl.ac.uk/social-media/

Durham University. http://www.dur.ac.uk/hr/policies/social/

University of Essex. http://www.essex.ac.uk/digital_media/policy.aspx

University of Glamorgan. http://msr.glam.ac.uk/documents/download/52/

Heriot Watt University. http://www.hw.ac.uk/webteam/about/service/social-media.htm

University of Huddersfield. http://www2.hud.ac.uk/shared/shared_vcowg/docs/policies/Social_Networking_Policy.pdf

University of Leicester. http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/marketing/marcomms/communications/social

Liverpool John Moores University. http://www.ljmu.ac.uk/corporatecommunications/102249.htm

Open University. http://www8.open.ac.uk/about/ebusiness/files/ebusiness/file/ecms/web-content/ou-social-media-position.pdf

Oxford Brookes University. http://www.brookes.ac.uk/staff/marketing/web/socialmedia/policy

Robert Gordon University. http://www.rgu.ac.uk/staff/administration-and-professional-departments/livewire/social-media-toolkit

University of Surrey. http://www.surrey.ac.uk/about/corporate/policies/social_network_policy.pdf