

Media Reviews

Social Media Trends in Medical History

Introduction

Each week, historians of science and medicine enter the Twittersphere. They write blogs and explore new media. They crowd-source research questions and mine tweets as primary sources. They live-tweet our conferences, more every year. Is this move toward social media a sign of the decline of traditional scholarship, or the cutting edge of a new approach to research, collaboration and the dissemination of scholarly knowledge?

Both, of course, and threshing the grain from this rock-strewn field is challenging and sometimes disheartening. But is an axiom of scholarship that discussion and reflection help us avoid the traps and reap the rewards of any complex phenomenon. And so, with jaundiced eye and callused thumbs, I tweeted a 140-character call for abstracts on the pleasures and dangers of social media for historians of science and medicine. Fortified by the sponsorship of the Committee on Research and the Profession, we presented a lunchtime roundtable at the 2013 History of Science Society meeting, in Boston. The resulting panel beautifully captured the balanced tone, mixed emotions and wide range of themes I envisioned.

Afterward, the editors at *Medical History* graciously offered to translate our presentations into traditional media. Edited versions will appear over the next four issues. We made one substitution: one participant withdrew his paper because he is an editor here; in his place Clarissa Lee, an especially thoughtful audience member from the session, will offer her reflections. Thanks go to the editors, the participants and to John Lynch, whose commentary on the papers will conclude this print mini-symposium.

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Kickstarting Scholarship: Crowdsourcing as a Historical Tool

‘Crowdsourcing’ history, in other words, using social media to collaboratively raise and address historical questions, is taking place across many online venues, from private Facebook pages to popular news websites. Professional scholars pose questions that attract input from amateur historians and specialists in other fields; conversely, journalists, scientists and other interested laypeople use social media to solicit the expertise of historians. As Leslie Madsen-Brooks observes, new digital platforms ‘not only are democratizing historical practice, but also providing professional historians with new opportunities and modes for expanding historical literacy.’¹

¹ Leslie Madsen-Brooks, “‘I nevertheless am a historian’: Digital historical practice and malpractice around black confederate soldiers”, in Jack Dougherty and Kristen Nawrotzki (eds), *Writing History in the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012), <http://writinghistory.trincoll.edu/crowdsourcing/madsen-brooks-2012-spring/>, accessed 3 February 2014.