

“Living Your Professional Life Online”

Wednesday, February 11, 2015

Speakers:

Archon Fung, Ford Foundation Professor of Democracy and Citizenship, Harvard Kennedy School

Perry Hewitt, Chief Digital Officer, Harvard University

Jonathan Zittrain, George Bemis Professor of Law, Harvard Law School, Professor of Computer Science, Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, and Faculty Director, Berkman Center for Internet and Society

Archon Fung

Archon said that the greatest professional advantage of the Internet is to make your work easily findable to the people who would be interested in it. So a personal website is the most valuable part of your presence (not least because people can cite what’s on it!), whatever your activity on other social media.

Self-presentation is something one needs to think consciously about, since lots more people will meet you digitally than personally. What’s your “Internet persona”? He said he could think of four possibilities.

1. The self-promoter—the person whose Twitter posts are entirely focused on himself. Archon suggested that as a general rule you should keep your self-referential posts to 1 in 3.
2. The jester – the person famous for snark. This is a tempting but dangerous persona to adopt.
3. The archivist—the person who gathers up the range of what’s been published/said, so that his or her Twitter feed ends up giving you a great bibliography.
4. The curator—the person who points others to the most interesting sites, stories, and developments in a field or topic area.
5. The expert-- the person with a distinctive take on events and scholarship, whose judgments you’re curious about even if you don’t necessarily agree.

Archon also touched on digital collaborative scholarship. It’s not yet clear how such projects will count for promotion or review, but they will soon, probably in the next few years. For the time being, you do this kind of work for...

- (a) Its intrinsic value, as a labor of love

- (b) Second-order advantage and indirect positioning, to make yourself known as the go-to person on some topic

Perry Hewitt

As Harvard's Chief Digital Officer, Perry works with Harvard Public Affairs & Communications, Alumni Affairs & Development, and online learning. She's an avid blogger and also active on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter.

She looks at how the University shares knowledge through its faculty and research, and the ways outreach can humanize the Harvard brand in the digital world where so many people live. The changing role of digital, mobile, and social behaviors requires a coherent strategy.

She agreed with Archon's classifications of digital personas, and added another:

6. The connector—who at Harvard, for instance, would be someone who knows people across the University, who don't necessarily run into each other, and helps find leaders among the faculty. Social technology can flatten hierarchy and facilitate introductions in a helpful way.

One of the things that she has seen repeatedly is that gender turns out to be as salient and powerful in the digital world as in the non-digital. Whatever they are saying, women are read and responded to as women. So her advice to women is...

*own your own domain

*show your own work

*control your own narrative as much as you can

(which, Archon added, includes creating your own domain with your own name).

Jonathan Zittrain

A question that comes up in the case of the digital world is, when do you get your work out? Do you wait until it's polished and perfect, or not? The answer is that it turns out that you have to say what you have to say early and often, which improves impact.

The advantage of this is that you get to review and improve what you have to say with every repetition. In this way your research and ideas can become "less and less something to worry about and more and more something to DO."

You also have to cultivate the skill of conversing online. You learn the most, and get the most attention, if you don't just tweet a series of announcements, but engage in give and take.

It can be hard to decide when to intercede and correct news or misattribution to you. It's also hard to maintain academic values of nuance, judgment, respect for evidence—but these are absolutely essential in the public sphere, as in the academy.

Open Access is increasingly valued. Use Creative Commons and DASH, the Harvard digital archive, for your work. There's increasing interest and favor for OA journals in some fields. Some even make it possible to link not just to general references, but to specific pages in articles/books that you are writing or citing.

In all of this, how do you solve the problem of too many questions, of information overload? You could put a section of FAQs on your website, to which you could refer at least some of your correspondents.

In the question period...

In response to a question about whom to write for, Archon recommended being deliberate about whom you want to address, and where to find them; go to their regular sites. You can't really write for everyone, or "readers of the New York Times": that's too big and diffuse. If you don't want to write to an identifiable professional group, then figure out who the user group is, and what (or who) the nodes are of the network you want to address.

Perry said that the platforms like Facebook and Twitter tend to break down the professional and role boundaries that pre-electronic communications and professional lives made it easier to maintain. The future is one of "hopeless blurring," for better or for worse. It's maddening, but true, that it's less risky for men than for women to blur their personal and professional roles.

Jonathan said that it's dangerous to your time and sanity to be too responsive to quick hits. Some forms of group communication are more protected than blogging—e.g., Tiny Letters, an email-circulation site. All at Harvard "have bright red H's around our necks and people love the takedown."

In response to a concern about privacy, Jonathan said that it is worrisome that "we all have bulbs planted underground, so that if a malicious 12-year-old somewhere wants to make you feel terrible, he can."

In response to a question about combining or balancing the roles of scholar and activist, Archon said that it was a fascinating question but that the digital component doesn't really change it. Tenure is intended for the protection of unorthodox views. It strikes him sometimes that he sees junior colleagues who are now "so carefully groomed and aware of the lines of respectability and permissibility that by the time they get tenure they no longer care to have an unorthodox thought."

Jonathan said that "if you are consistently a jerk (and some fields seem to have a higher tolerance than others for extremely abrasive behavior), no matter how smart you are, you will get less consideration from your community when the knives are out for you. But many of us underestimate how much credit people will give you just for not being a jerk."

