Review:

Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, and Pedagogies
Eds. Douglas M. Walls & Stephanie Vie

Megan Von Bergen,
*The University of
Tennessee, Knoxville*

Increasingly, academics across the disciplines rely on Twitter to share their research. Scholars in fields ranging from climate science (Katharine Hayhoe) to history (Kevin Kruse) use the platform to make their work available beyond "classrooms, journals, and the occasional book" (Pettit 2018). Yet the uptick in academic tweeting has received pushback from other scholars. Gordon Fraser (2019) writes that academic discourse requires sustained attention to the research and writing norms mastered in graduate school and is diluted when made widely available via Twitter. Justin E.H. Smith (2019) concurs that "crackling, clickbaity Twitter thread[s]" may "circumvent the channels that have long ensured" the quality of academic discourse. Other scholars disagree: Jason S. Farr and Travis Chi Wing Lau (2019) respond to Fraser that the "informal conversations" sparked on Twitter enable "more people to participate in scholarly conversations," widening the scope of who can read, write, or engage with

academic discourse. The debate is ongoing, but at its heart is a need to (re)consider how the availability that characterizes social media discourse changes our work as researchers and teachers inhabiting a networked world.

Questions of availability foreground the recent edited collection, *Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, Pedagogies* (Walls and Vie 2017). Focused on social media rhetoric in both public and academic spheres, the collection situates itself in the context of social media's power to make rhetoric "available . . . across vast distances, (almost) instantaneously" (Hart-Davidson, x). This availability, especially given social media's visible impact on civic, personal, and academic discourses, makes the volume "timely and compelling" (Walls and Vie 2017, 5). Citing substantial research on digital and multimodal composing, such as Ball & Kalmbach (2010), Delagrange (2011), Journet, Ball, & Trauman (2012), and Palmeri (2012) as the basis for its work, *Social Writing/Social Media* provides a critical, wide-angle look at the previously "undertheorized" (Walls and Vie 2017, 5) subject of social media writing. The collection names, explores, and evaluates a range of rhetorical and writing practices within social media. Leaving "social media writing" (Hart-Davidson xiii) loosely defined as "the acts of composing that occur specifically in social media spaces" (Walls and Vie 5), the collection expands to include work on niche sites such as Etsy stores themed around the cult TV show *Firefly* (Potts) alongside fresh looks at behemoths like Instagram (Alexander and Hahner) and Facebook (Arola). Organized into three sections, the collection delves more particularly into the purpose and potential value(s) of social media writing in 1) public, activist discourses (Dadas, Beck, Adkins, Bullinger and Vie, Colombini and Hall, Potts), 2) self-presentation and cultural expressions (Williams, Walls, Buck, Hutchinson, Arola, Alexander and Hahner), and 3) writing pedagogies (Portanova, Mina, Faris, Anson). Overall, this collection's broad look at diverse social media rhetorics is key in "help[ing] rhetorical scholars engage in an informed dialogue about the material conditions of network writing where they are most readily observable: in social networks" (x, Hart-Davidson). For scholars and teachers interested in how the availability of social media shapes writing and rhetoric, *Social Writing/Social Media* moves the conversation forward by correcting assumptions about social

media writing, naming emerging research on social media rhetorics, and critiquing the implicit biases of social media interfaces.

Learning theory suggests that the first step towards mastering new concepts is naming incomplete, flawed mental models of the concept (Bain 2011), so the attention *Social Writing/Social Media* gives to challenging prevailing assumptions about social media writing is noteworthy: it invites readers to shift their mental models of what it means to compose on social media and how social media interacts with public discourse and writing education. In "Hashtag Activism: The Promise and Risk of 'Attention'," Caroline Dadas complicates the stereotype of digital activism as "slacktivism" (29). Defining "hashtag activism" as the "use [of] hashtags for directing attention to social and political causes" (17), Dadas traces the "considerable consequences" (30) of hashtags in public discourse, from glossing over cultural complexities in troubling, "imperialis[t]" (24) ways to amplifying marginalized voices. Likewise, Chris Anson pushes back on the too-common assumption among writing professors that students' "use of social media . . . 'degrades' writing ability (Hansen, 2013)" (310). Through analysis of YouTube comments, Anson shows how social media platforms make "serious intellectual work" possible, from "the negotiation of alternate views" to "the sharing of further material through eyewitness accounts or links to deeper and more extensive background reading" (324). Effectively rewriting assumptions about social media composition, these chapters and others provide an accurate, holistic framework that sheds light on ongoing research on digital rhetorics and communication and suggests creative pedagogical strategies that make full use of social media writing resources.

Social Writing/Social Media also highlights new lines of research emerging from social media rhetorical practices. One of the most interesting chapters along this theme is Kara Poe Alexander's and Leslie A. Hahner's, "The Intimate Screen: Revisualizing Understandings of Down Syndrome through Digital Activism on Instagram." A twist on the public screens of mass media (DeLuca and Peeples 2002, as cited in Alexander and Hahner), the "intimate screen," Alexander and Hahner theorize, takes advantage of the "individualized screens" (227) of social media and mobile composing

to "cultivate an intimate"—and likely receptive—"public" (227). Alexander and Hahner point to an Instagram account advocating for children with Down Syndrome as an example of the intimate screen. The account's owner, Christy, shares photos of her two daughters (one adoptive), both of whom have Downs, to destigmatize and nuance Downs and promote special-needs adoptions. Social media writing, Alexander and Hahner conclude, does not simply reproduce familiar discourses (Henning 2013) but forges new ones adapted to a networked environment. Their work and others' emphasize the innovative, locally-situated rhetorical work generated out of social media spaces, opening fresh areas for study and invigorating research into and production of digital rhetorics.

Yet *Social Media/Social Writing* is not uniformly positive. The final theme is one of critique: the failure of social media (composing) to account for the rhetorics of diverse cultures and communities. Kristin Arola's "Indigenous Interfaces" contributes to this theme. Drawing on interviews and (auto)ethnographic research among Native American communities, Arola contrasts Facebook's familiar "blue-and-white interface" (212) with an imagined Native American version of Facebook, "something that" gives voice to "indigenous ways of being and doing" (221). While Arola concludes that agentive indigenous social media writing is possible on Facebook, her work raises important questions about the bias(es) implicit in social media interfaces and the importance of reimagining social media composing as inclusive of diverse rhetorics and cultures. Unfortunately, as Arola's chapter is one of only two in the collection (Hutchinson's is the other) which gives sustained attention to questions of ethnic or gender identity in social media writing, the collection's social critique is limited; it is unable to fully address the ways that civic discourse on social media is jeopardized by instances of bias, from gender-motivated trolling to the uneven enforcement of hate speech policies. Further work is clearly needed on questions of how diversity and sociocultural difference(s) are navigated within social media writing to better account for the interactions of social media rhetoric with questions of justice and human flourishing.

In the forward, William Hart-Davidson notes that social media writing is too rarely recognized as a serious form of public discourse.

Social Writing/Social Media is an attempt to change that. In turning a scholarly lens to social media writing, the collection legitimizes it. *Social Writing/Social Media* is an exciting expansion of the digital rhetoric landscape, opening new horizons for research into social media composing. Ultimately, the wide-ranging analysis of *Social Writing/Social Media* may help us to better understand the writing practices and ideologies at work in social media and to navigate the role of social media composing in public discourses, our own ongoing research, and our classrooms.

REFERENCES

Bain, Ken. 2011. *What the Best College Teachers Do*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Farr, Jordan S., and Travis Chi Wing Lau. 2019. "Twitter Helps us Build a More Inclusive Academy." Letter to the Editor, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. April 4, 2019. https://www.chronicle.com/blogs/letters/twitter-helps-us-build-a-more-inclusive-academy/.

Fraser, Gordon. 2019. "The Twitterization of the Academic Mind." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 22, 2019. https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Twitterization-of-the/245965.

Hart-Davidson, William, 2017. "Forward: Availability Matters (And So Does this Book." In *Social Writing/Social Media: Publics Presentations, and Pedagogies*, edited by Douglas M. Walls and Stephanie Vie, ix-xiv. The WAC Clearinghouse.

Herring, Susan. 2013. "Discourse in Web 2.0: Familiar, Reconfigured, and Emergent." In *Discourse 2.0: Language and New Media*, edited by Deborah Tannen and Anne-Marie Trester, 1-26. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Pettit, Emma. 2018. "How Kevin Kruse Became History's Attack Dog." *The Chronicle*, December 16, 2018. https://www.chronicle.com/article/How-Kevin-Kruse-Became/245321.

Smith, Justin E.H.. 2019. "How Social Media Imperils Scholarship," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 2, 2019, https://www-chronicle-com.proxy.lib.utk.edu/interactives/20190602-smith.

Walls, Douglas M., and Stephanie Vie, editors. 2017. *Social Writing/Social Media: Publics, Presentations, and Pedagogies*. The WAC Clearinghouse. https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/social/.