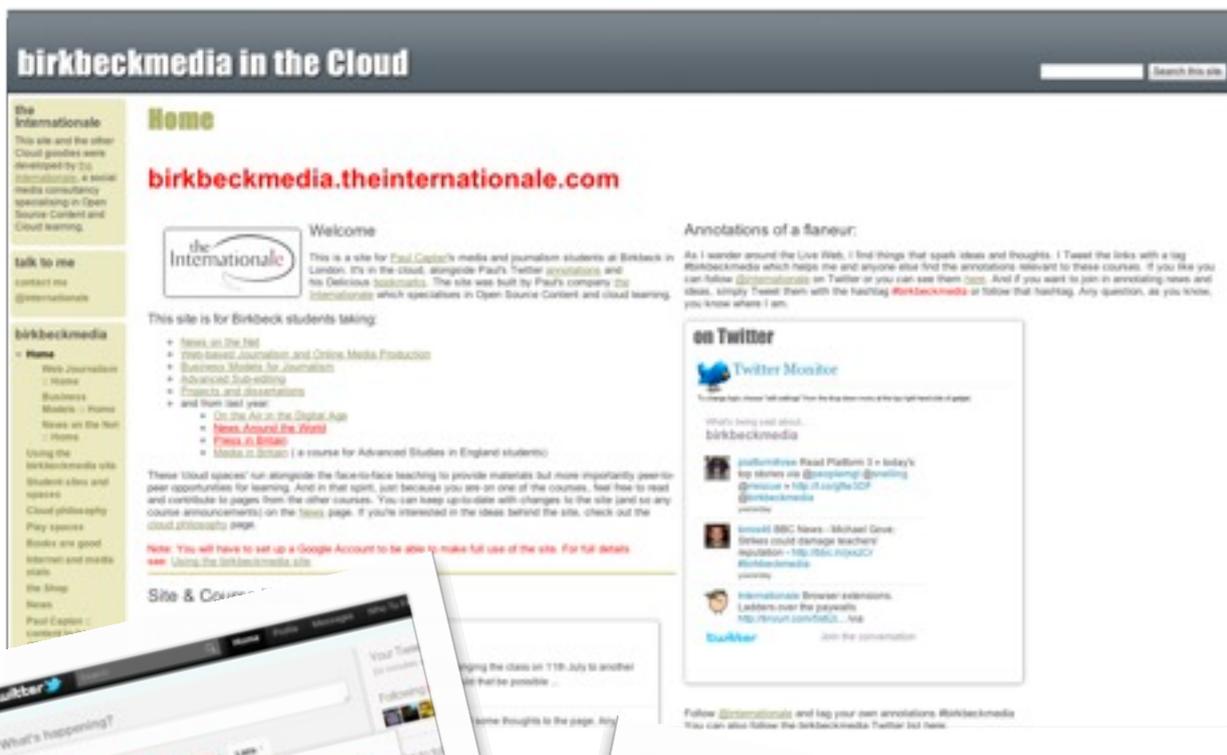


Birkbeckmedia

a report on a Social Media teaching and learning project



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Introduction

The Birkbeckmedia project is about teaching and learning. In essence it is designed to facilitate my teaching and empower the students' learning. Harnessing the power of social media it aims to explore social media and journalism (my particular teaching and research interests) but more widely to provide a model for an always-on, always available teaching and learning space with few barriers to entry, measurable results, potential for expansion, oh... and no cost.

This report is designed to explain what I did, provide and discuss examples of its work as well as present a clear model that colleagues can roll out in their own work.

Context and academic rationale

My background is as a professional journalist and internet consultant. I have advised Government and public sector/third sector organisations on how to use social media for campaigning, education and engagement. The heart of that message has been the power of conversation and crowd-sourcing.

My teaching and research are around the Live Web and how this new media space works via network effects to disintermediate as well as open up new space for journalism, publishing and photography. Building on the analysis of the Live Web presented by Clay Shirky, Jeff Jarvis, Charles Leadbetter, Jeff Howe and Don Tapscott and Anthony Williams, I look to understand that read/write space and new content relationships as a threat but also an opportunity. The threat is to top-down models and fixed subjectivities and discourses. The opportunities lie in crowd-sourcing and what Shirky calls 'cognitive surplus'.

Rather than addressing e-learning as an issue of content delivery or even simply content access, where the e-space offers a chance for the teacher to deliver and the student consume content in an always-on, always-available 'virtual learning environment', my perspective sees the Live Web as a flat space of conversation. This draws on my research interest in object-oriented philosophy.

In object-oriented philosophy, complex assemblages of actants, human and non-human, are addressed within a flat ontology. Here me, my students, the news I link to, the content they create as well as the software platforms and service I use are all addressed at the same ontological level. From this perspective, research, teaching and learning are a matter of connecting objects. My aim in teaching is to enable students to connect those objects. my aim in building *Birkbeckmedia* is to make that easier for them.

This academic and theoretical focus runs alongside a more prosaic driver for *Birkbeckmedia*. The Live Web, social media, technology, media and journalism are changing at such a speed that the normal life-cycle of information and academic analysis is not able to keep up. The lead-time for a journal article, let alone a book is so long that new services have launched (and often failed), new business models tried, new practices emerged even new legal and political contexts developed before the information or analysis is available for students or before an academic can fill in a library request form.

In my field (object-oriented philosophy and media), the debates are happening on blogs as well as in journals and books (notably open-access publishing initiatives).

This has its advantages in terms of availability but also its challenges in terms of information overload. *Birkbeckmedia* was designed to solve that problem.

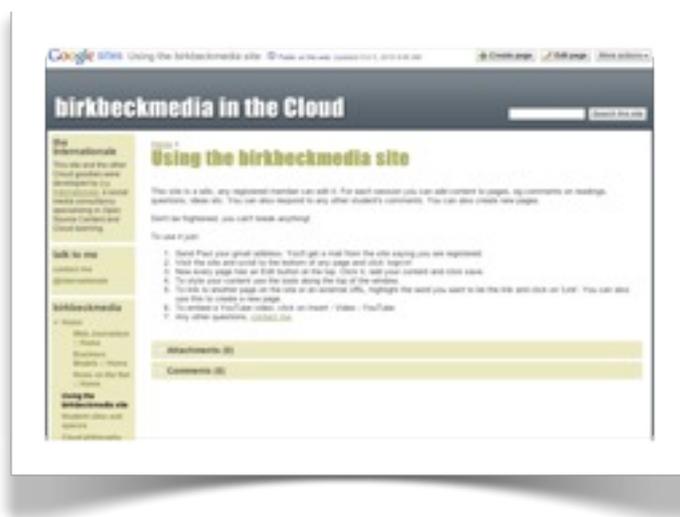
Project Structure

My project was based around building an object-oriented social media web presence to facilitate teaching and learning.

Birkbeckmedia is based around a website, a service, a stream and a tag.

The *Birkbeckmedia* site

Firstly I built a Wiki site (<http://birkbeckmedia.theinternationale.com>). The site is built in Google Sites, a free service offered by Google. Clearly Blackboard (on the Birkbeck site) and Moodle (software I have used on my own server) offer Wiki facilities as well as other social media tools. they also offer a very structured way in which teachers can provide resources for students. I chose to use Google for a number of reasons:



- Ease of deployment - I could get a site live within a matter of moments
- Ease of use - Students could learn to use the site very easily. Familiarity with Google meant the site was non-threatening
- Ease of integration - I could point students towards other Google tools (Reader, Docs, Search, Scholar) as part of an integrated site for their work
- Control - I could easily manage access, direction, expansion and development.

I use the site as a content repository. I post:

- audio versions of my lectures (hosted on The Internet Archive)
 - course syllabi
 - course assessment details, cover sheets, guidance etc.
 - course new, e.g. room changes, deadlines etc.
 - a contact-me form
 - links to other services that may be useful
 - an Amazon bookshop featuring my reading lists.

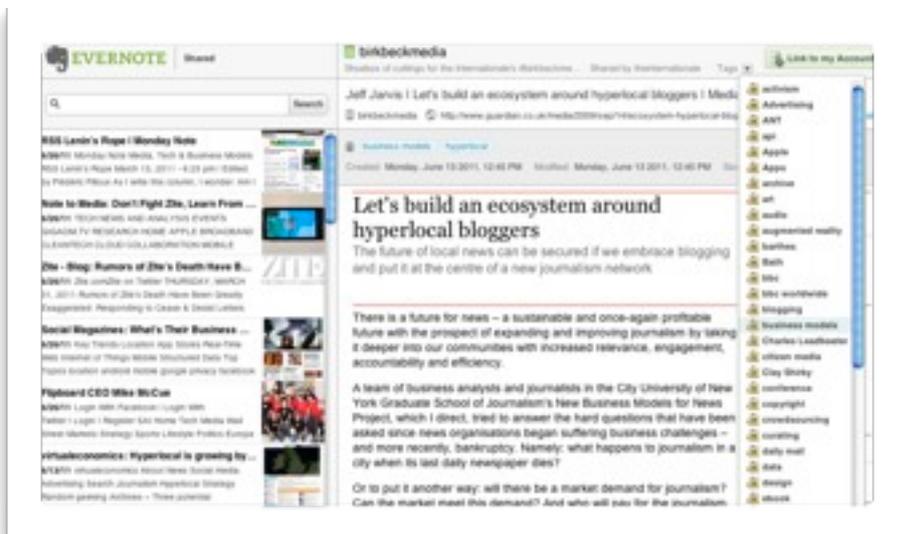


I create:

- a page for each session with my lecture in Google Docs presentation format or a mindmap
- a collection of stimulus material for each

crowd-sourced student contributions, I chose Evernote for a number of reasons:

- ease of use. The notebook metaphor makes it very easy for students to not only use my notebook but also develop their own
- free. Basic service is free so students can develop their own notebooks
- tagging. Evernote allows tags to be added to entries for search and organisation
- web clipping. Browser plugins make it very easy to clip or screengrab a webpage directly into a notebook.
- mobile. Users can add, edit and view their notebooks from mobile devices
- collaboration. Notebooks can be made public, shared on a read or read/write basis and linked to other notebooks. This allows my notebook to work effectively with any the students choose to create and share.
- search. Evernote has very powerful search facilities including the ability to search text inside PDFs and images.



I often describe my *Birkbeckmedia* notebook as an intelligent shoebox. I throw in materials (web pages¹, library listings, bibliographic entries, quotes, statistics etc - all of which automatically include their source URL, time and date of capture and even GPS location) and add relevant tags. These tags e.g. 'statistics' or 'business models' enable me and my students to find materials relevant to a particular course, session, assignment or area of interest. I or a student can go into the notebook and request all notes with the tags (or the text) 'Google', 'Facebook' and 'business models' that are 'webpages' clipped in the last week. I can provide a link to that search on the session or assignment webpage and so create a dynamically updating reading list.

The *Birkbeckmedia* stream

As noted above, a key learning point for my students is the speed of change in the industry. I begin every session with a discussion of what has been happening during the week and I use this as a way of consolidating that learning point but also enabling students to make new connections between

¹ Clearly I could include PDFs of journal articles but because of obvious copyright issues, I do not. Instead I include the reference and instructions on how to access via the eLibrary.

the course themes and what is actually happening. Discussing the complex issue of network effects every week through different topical news stories helps to give the students multiple ways into the issues and ideas as well as new material for assignments.

While my Evernote notebook/dynamic reading list - maybe even library - is useful in that regard, I decided I needed an even simpler way of streaming material, news, ideas, provocations and questions to the students. I use

Twitter. I tweet as part of my research and consultancy work but when I find information, notice anything or want to provoke the students into thinking about something I Tweet with the hashtag *#birkbeckmedia*. The students are encouraged to follow me or that hashtag. They then have access to a stream of Tweets which they can follow up and clip to their (or the class') Evernote notebook. The Tweets take different forms:

- a link to a news story, piece of information or comment
- a link with a comment from me
- a link with a question from me
- a (necessarily short) observation from me

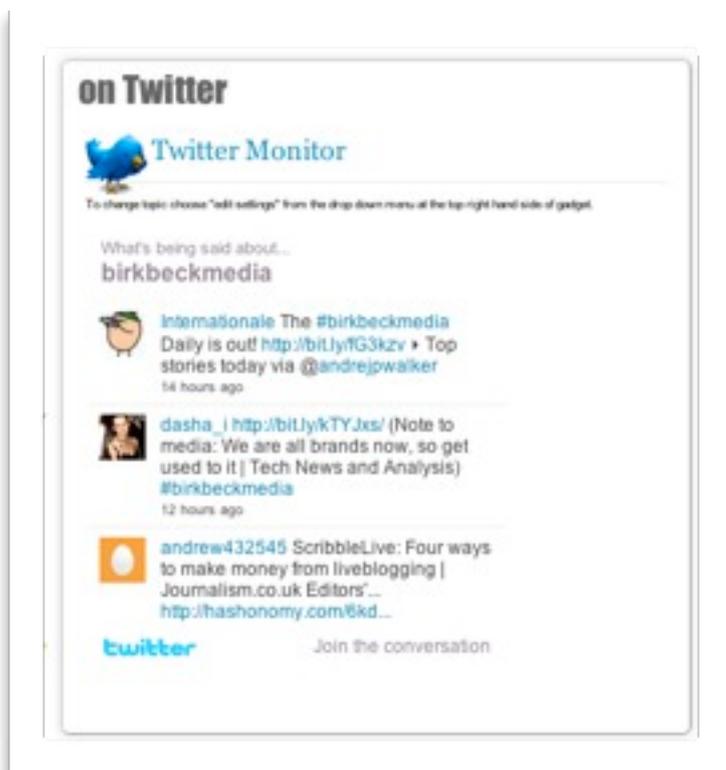
In addition, I have created a *Birkbeckmedia* Twitter list (<https://twitter.com/#!/list/Internationale/birkbeckmedia>) to provide a 'curated' collection of Twitter users (academics,

journalist, commentators) that I think the students would find useful. As a new Twitter user, they can subscribe to that list and so get a ready made set of people to follow.

As we shall see in the next section, I use the power of tagging to crowdsource this stream of news/analysis.

The *Birkbeckmedia* tag

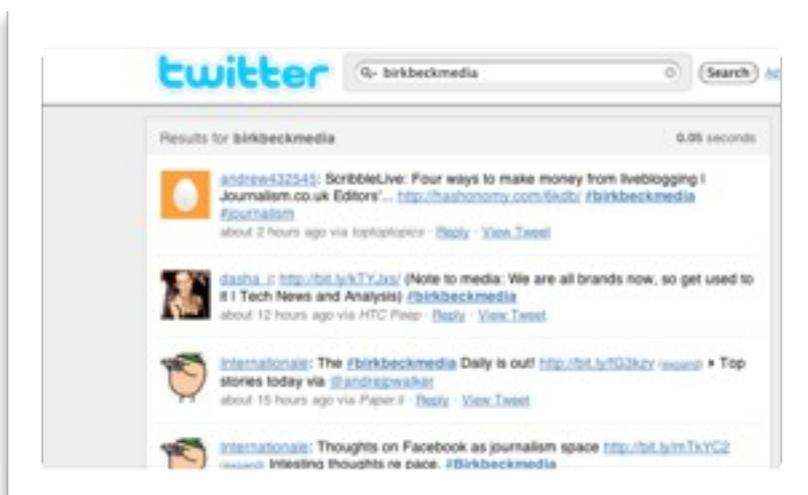
While all of these services are valuable resources for my teaching and the students learning they are still overwhelmingly top-down. Of course this is at the heart of any course and, frankly what the students are paying for. As I discuss above however, I see the power of peer-to-peer (p2p) learning as not only a way of exploring the new network cultures and media spaces, but also as a valuable pedagogic method. The *Birkbeckmedia* tag provides a simple and effective way for the students to engage in that p2p teaching and learning



while also building up the resources above for others (whether on the course this year, next year or even outside).

In essence I encourage all the students to add any information, ideas, questions, observations or anything else to their favourite social media sites and spaces: Twitter, Blogs, Delicious, Digg, YouTube, Flickr even Facebook². The only request is that they include the tag *Birkbeckmedia* or on Twitter the hashtag *#Birkbeckmedia*.

The addition of this keyword or metatag allows me or anyone else to search for that tag, and so material that the students have thought worth others in the *Birkbeckmedia* community knowing about, and bring it together via RSS feeds or widgets on the site or anywhere else.



There are a number of advantages of using tagging as part of the broader *Birkbeckmedia* projects:

- ease of use. Even the most technophobic students can and do engage
- integration. It allows me to pull together engagement from many different spaces so allowing students to work wherever they feel comfortable - eg on their Blog, on Twitter etc.
- legacy. That tag will continue to work, the material tagged will continue to be available and connected, long after the student has finished the course. In effect this adds to the store of material available as each year passes.
- continuity. Students can continue to engage with *Birkbeckmedia* after finishing their courses with me or indeed after leaving Birkbeck, this continuing their relationship as well as their learning and their contribution to the wider Birkbeck community
- expansion. The possibility of developing a family of tags, see below.

Project Outcomes

Although I have not done any formal evaluation of the project, I have certainly noticed a number of effects on my students' learning as well as my own teaching.

² Facebook is a little different because of the difficulties of searching within and exporting data from the service. I reason that if students are happy and comfortable networking there, then that should be where they share.

Learning outcomes

I would draw attention to two sets of outcomes: those around class discussion and participation and those around the assessment.

In terms of classroom engagement, *Birkbeckmedia* has involved all the students in the contemporary focus of the course as well as with each other. The introduction to every session where we discuss what we have all Tweeted with the hashtag *#Birkbeckmedia* not only raises and reinforces course themes but also provides an opportunity for each student to present work, ideas and questions, if they have Tweeted; or to consider whether they are fully engaging and making the most of the course, if they have not.

The site and notebook also ensure that face-to-face time is not wasted. Again this is a personal reflection but I have certainly noticed that more students come to class having engaged with some reading or at least viewing. Often they tell me that a YouTube video (e.g. an embedded TED lecture), or a clipped webpage is more easily digested and fitted into their day so that at least they have something to bring to class.

The wiki and crowd-sourcing elements of *Birkbeckmedia* has also impacted on how the core learning themes have developed. On a number of occasions students have found material that I have

not and that adds real value to the course, sometimes contrary statistics or theories, sometimes case studies. These have sometime led to new discussions and even new or alternative themes.

The fact that I ask students to add their responses to the session task on the session page before class has also increased engagement (among some students). It has also, on occasion, led to student-student debates.

In terms of assessment, I have noticed a clear increase in the amount and range of material cited in essays. While some may argue about the validity of bibliographies of blog posting, journalistic interviews and reports as well as think-tank statistics for instance, I would argue not only that any reading is good reading if done critically, but also that the issues and debates I am asking them to deal with are developing in precisely those spaces. It is no longer unusual to see an essay with references from 2011 alongside seminal texts.

Teaching outcomes

The *Birkbeckmedia* project has also impacted on my work. As noted, I have had to be a lot more flexible in terms of how individual session develop, but



even in terms of adapting the syllabus to take on board new developments (often discovered by the students).

My focus on always-on connection with *Birkbeckmedia* and indeed the students has changed the teacher-student relationship. The weekly session is, for me and them, not the sole focus. It is an opportunity to pause and take a critical look at what has been happening within the broader context of the course but it is not the only moment of learning or teaching.

A key teaching benefit of crowdsourcing is that the *Birkbeckmedia* projects builds strong relationships. There are still a number of former students contributing to the project and staying in touch with me (and the College) as well as deriving value from *#Birkbeckmedia*. This means that when I am explaining an assessment or exercise to a class, I can point at what previous cohorts have done. Students can also look at comments they have made giving yet more material to debate.



It might be argued that Tweeting and Evernote-notebooking every day as well as replying to student Tweets would increase my workload. Perhaps it does but it also decreases it in valuable ways. I spend less time developing 'lectures' or manually creating reading lists and handouts. I spend less time correcting and annotating scripts because the quality is often higher and I can always point the student towards a tag that will bring together key themes and arguments around an issue that she may have missed.

It is obviously for the students to say but informal feedback from them has suggested that this more discussion, debate and contemporary and open format of teaching works well.

Looking forward

While my *Birkbeckmedia* project was designed for my students and my courses, I believe the philosophy and practice are replicable across the College and, I would argue, could have real benefits for teachers, students and the college as a whole.

Rolling out *Birkbeckmedia*

As a personal initiative, the *Birkbeckmedia* project was designed to be:

- effective
- manageable

- no-cost

This has meant that the project is easily replicated. Any academic could establish their own similar project with some basic training in Google Sites, Evernote and Twitter. This training could be developed as a training session with support materials with parallel sessions and materials for students.

Most importantly, these projects could be linked together creating a family of parallel projects that current, former and potential students could access (particularly if they are taking courses across the College) and the College could use as part of its marketing and alumni relations.

Imagine...

John is doing a Film Studies course together with a course in French. In preparation for that evening's Film lecture he logs onto the *Birkbeckfilm* site and embeds a YouTube video he found of an archive interview with Goddard together with his response to the class task. Jane has already added a couple of sentences and he responds to her point about the steadycam shot (having watched the bit she was talking about on the link she's included).

He searches in the *BirkbeckFrench* Evernote notebook for an article his French tutor had added to and adds it to the page on Goddard. The session isn't for two weeks but might as well do it now.

Later, as he's checking his Twitter feed, John reTweets a posting from a journalist in Australia, remembering to add *#Birkbeckfilm* to the end of the Tweet. As the Film Tutor sees it appearing in his Twitter feed, he makes a note to himself to clarify the issue tonight. The journalist raises an interesting point but he seems to be misreading the legislation.

On his way to class, John Tweets a question about tonight's film. He'll forget otherwise. As the bus grinds to a halt in the traffic jam, he Tweets another *#Birkbeckfilm* post saying he's going to be late. As the class starts the Tutor glances at the live updating feed and decides to save the comment about legislation until John arrives. He turns instead to Jane's link...

Imagine again...

Clare is thinking of taking a course in law. She's not studied for a long time and has heard tales of how intensive and often intimidating law can be. The Tutor at the Open Evening had been reassuring and while the syllabus looked overwhelming, he had said the course was designed to support students like her. Clare wanted to believe her but...

The Tutor had given her a link to the class site *Birkbecklaw*. When Clare visited the site she saw the syllabus again but this time it was almost like it had been annotated. Each session had comments from students, questions and answers from the Tutor and from other students. When she clicked on Kathy's name, she found Kathy had a page where she was drafting an assessment report in collaboration with another student. Like a Word

document with track changes, it was clearly a work in progress. The Tutor had even given some feedback.

On another page for a session on copyright, someone had embedded a TED lecture on remix culture together with a link which went to a *Birkbecklaw* notebook in Evernote. She clicked on the *copyright* tag and dozens of webpage clippings, references and links to examples came up. She clicked on a second tag, *remix* and the collection of notes narrowed to four notes. One of them linked back to a page on the *Birkbecklaw* site.

When she returned to the site, she found the Twitter feed on the Home page had updated. Someone, presumably a student had Tweeted a link to a story in the New York Times with the tag *#Birkbecklaw*. She followed the link to a story about an anti-trust case. She quickly checked the Twitter user's profile: "Alan now lives and works in New York, lawyer and former Birkbeck student"...