

Gina Siple  
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# Building an alternative to academic twitter relies on centring the experiences of lurkers

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As Twitter, now X, the preferred social media platform for academics, undergoes a period of change, Gina Siple argues that part of what made the platform and may make new social media platforms attractive to academics, were the benefits it afforded to those who didn't publicly engage with the platform, or 'lurkers':

Like many around the globe, I am grieving the demise of the platform formerly known as Twitter. When I first joined in 2011, four years after its initial launch, I was a middle school teacher. My colleagues and I were creating a middle school digital humanities program for our students and Twitter was the place where all of the most tech savvy teachers were hanging out. We could easily chat with like-minded peers about pedagogy, edtech tools, and share teaching resources. It was an inexpensive and accessible way to network and build community. Twitter's original broadcast design afforded us the opportunity to connect beyond our immediate contacts and professionally catapult.

When I pivoted to higher education in 2014, Twitter became the place where I could gather with academics beyond my institution and discipline, a kind of **invisible college**. While I continued to engage in conversations and share resources, I also spent more than a fair amount of time lurking, often defined as reading, but not publicly commenting, liking, or retweeting. Where some are lamenting Twitter's **rebrand to X**, and others are **eulogising** what was once the golden age of Twitter for academics, many former/soon-to-be-former twitterers are searching for their next **social media perch**. As a scholar, I've spent the last five years studying **lurking as literacy practice**, utilising print based reading research to examine the sociocultural contexts for why people lurk and the kinds of online and offline activities they engage in while lurking. Lurking, plays a vital role in building, maintaining, and scaling online communities. Therefore, the possibility of replicating the relaxed academic communities that emerged on Twitter depends, in part, upon finding the most lurker friendly platform.



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Lurking is a valuable and participatory social media act that all people engage in from time to time. One of several important dimensions of the practice of lurking I have identified, is sensemaking, whereby a person reads to better understand their relationship to others. For academics, particularly graduate students and early career scholars, sensemaking is a is a vital part of learning the **hidden curriculum of academia**. Twitter threads filed under #AcademicTwitter, #PhDVoice, #AcademicChatter (among others) allow for easy access to both formal tips (ex: how to write a fundable grant) and informal banter (ex: snarky remarks in response to the ridiculous comments made by Peer Reviewer #2). The latter provides both reflexive entertainment and insights into what was once a private sphere of academic life. Access to this kind of information is essential for people who are not legacy academics (#FirstGen), who are BIPOC, disabled, and/or live outside of the U.S. or Western Europe. Where roughly 90% of people reading a given tweet do not compose a reply tweet or tap the heart to like a tweet, they do engage in a variety of offline literacy practices. Some of these practices include cross-posting on alternate social media sites, screenshotting content for text message communication, and AFK (away from the keyboard) offline discussions. These practices extend the offline influence of the discussion threads. There is a vibrant offline academic community discussing what has been posted online.

Whether they realise it or not, part of what folks are lamenting in the transition from Twitter to X is the way many of Musk's recent policies have increased barriers to not just posting, but lurking as well. Before Musk acquired Twitter, the platform had already begun to limit the number of tweets one could read before being prompted to either login or create an account. Although researchers are locked out of the specific backend proprietary platform data, lurking is a lucrative form of social media participation for platforms, *if* the lurker is logged in and the micrometrics of their reading history can be tracked. Content creators and influencers want their tweets to be seen by the largest possible audience; putting restrictions on lurking benefits the platform, not the creator.

After Musk acquired Twitter, the rollout of subscription-based Twitter Blue in 2021 created a two-tiered hierarchy for account holders. This ignited several noteworthy barriers to lurking for those who cannot or choose not to subscribe to a premium account. It is also part of a larger trend toward **platform monetisation**, or what Inger Mewburn describes as the "**enshittification**" of academic social media.



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Twitter Blue subscribers have access to a reader mode, which declutters the reading experience by displaying fewer ads. By enhancing the reading experience one can more leisurely lurk. However, the cost of subscribing to Twitter Blue reinforces the privileged position of the lurker. Without a subscription to Twitter Blue, lurking is a less enjoyable experience. Initially, Twitter Blue was only available on iOS and limited to people in the U.S., U.K., Canada, New Zealand, and Australia at an initial fee of \$2.99 per month. Subscribers would receive priority ranking in conversations. With a disproportionate number of initial blue check verified accounts located primarily in the U.S., Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the UK, lurking became a prescribed position within the networked audience. The thoughts and ideas of the Anglophone West had the compulsory attention of account holders in Latin America, the Middle East, Asia, and continental Europe.

Twitter Blue has recently begun to offer worldwide service, but its price has jumped to \$8 per month. This is a prohibitive price point for academics, many of whom are underemployed. Moreover the rollout to global Twitter Blue service also came with **further restrictions on reading**. Without a Twitter Blue subscription, a current Twitter account holder could only read 600 posts per day; a new Twitter account holder could only read 300. That number has recently been lifted to 1000 posts for current account holders, but a limit of any kind creates a geography of exclusion to lurking. Attempting to read more than the daily allotted posts, will result in a locked account. Although Musk asserts that the restrictions are temporary, no end date has yet to be announced.

Further, TweetDeck, a tool that made it easy to manage and read the tweets of multiple accounts, is **no longer a free service** and can only be accessed through what is now called X-premium. **Twitter's API library is also no longer open access**. For over a decade, academic researchers have relied on this free service to gather both quantitative and qualitative data on human behavior. Although researchers do not necessarily identify with the label of lurker, their research is essentially conducted through lurking. The current monthly cost of being a professional lurker: \$1000-\$42,000 depending on the membership tier.

As Twitter seeks to monetise and enclose the practice of lurking, the future of academic social media likely depends on finding a platform where lurking can freely and easily be a central part of the online community.

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### About the author



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Gina Siple, PhD is the author of the forthcoming book, Just Here For The Comments: Lurking as Literacy Practice (Bristol University Press, 2024). She is a tenured Assistant Professor of English at the State University of New York at Nassau Community College where she is the English Program Coordinator and Vice Chair of the Creative Writing Program.

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