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Social Media and the Politics of Collegiality: An Interview with Steven Salaita

Karrieann Soto Vega and Vani Kannan

Abstract

This article considers the rhetorical affordances and constraints of translating scholarly work for social media platforms. Drawing from an interview with Steven Salaita conducted on Syracuse University's campus during the fall of 2014, we consider the public-private sphere tensions at play in his case, the temporal and contextual nature of writing for social media, and the larger context of US media reporting. The rhetorical affordances and constraints of writing for social media as an extension of academic work suggest that temporality and context could play a more central role in assessing "collegiality" on online platforms. Collegiality should not be confused with expressions that adhere to hegemonic views on controversial geopolitical subject matter, whether these views are publicized through academic venues or in social media communication.

Introduction

Constraints on academic freedom precede Salaita; his case revealed what was already true. As Piya Chatterjee and Sunaina Maira argue in *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent*, in many of these instances of scholarly repression "what is really at work in these attacks are the logics of racism, warfare, and nationalism that undergird US imperialism and also the architecture of the US academy . . . these logics shape

a systemic structure of repression of academic knowledge that counters the imperial, nation-building project.”

¹ This repression is particularly acute when scholars are working to counter Islamophobia, anti-Arab racism, and post/9-11 “war on terror” discourses, and when they engage with the call for academic boycott of Israel. Specifically, as Thomas Abowd notes, administrators “have been made keenly aware of the dangers that these political views present in scaring away wealthy donors and alumni,” and as a result, there is a “rank hypocrisy that many schools—in their claims to racial equality and academic freedom—display when racism toward Muslims and Arabs comes to the fore.”² Indeed, there have been numerous cases illustrating repression of scholars who confront “the most taboo of topics, such as indigenous critiques of genocide and settler colonialism or the question of Palestine,” including—but not limited to—Ward Churchill, Norman Finkelstein, David Graeber, Joel Kovel, Terri Ginsberg, Marc Ellis, Margo Nanlal-Rankoe, Wadie Said, and Sami Al-Arian.³

Any analysis of the “post-Salaita era,” then, must contend with the reality that critiques of state power, and particularly critiques of Zionism, have long been treated with open hostility inside and outside the academy. For this reason, using academic freedom as a rhetorical framework for discussing Salaita’s case has both benefits and risks. The benefits, as articulated by Salaita during an interview at Syracuse University’s campus in fall 2014, are that academic freedom circulates a critique of Israel’s military occupation of Palestine into contexts in which it might not otherwise appear. However, this rhetorical move decenters the aforementioned crackdown on dissident academics doing work around Palestine and settler colonialism, the Palestinian liberation struggle, and Palestinian civil society’s boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement—a global call for solidarity that has been in place since 2005—and subordinates it to a discussion about academic freedom. As the BDS movement gains traction on campuses across the United States, particularly via student chapters of Students for Justice in Palestine—and as it faces increased repression through prosecution,⁴ websites like Canary Mission, and state-level legislation⁵—the questions raised by Salaita’s case will take on increasing salience. In other words, Salaita’s case is very specific, and arguments seeking to situate it within larger debates around academic freedom or writing for social media risk displacing the particular geopolitical critiques and implications of his writing in both scholarly and popular contexts.

That being said, the case does open up crucial questions about the ways in which academic commonplaces of civility—and AAUP guidelines on collegiality—manifest in social media contexts, particularly around critiques of state power. Social media demands a different set of rhetorical considerations than writing for scholarly publications, and these considerations become complicated when attempting to circulate complex academic critiques via popular online platforms. In this article we draw from an interview with Salaita to consider the ramifications of academic constructions of civility in public/private,

scholarly/social media contexts, and delineate the complexity of extending academic freedom to social media, given the rhetorical affordances and constraints of writing for social media, and Salaita's observation that academic freedom is not a resource that is distributed equally.⁶

Social Media and Collegiality

Interpretations of the AAUP's guidelines on collegiality formed the foundation of the University of Illinois's case against Salaita. In Chancellor Phyllis Wise's statement, which was released following his de-hiring, she asserts that "personal and disrespectful words or actions that demean and abuse either viewpoints themselves or those who express them" would not be allowed on her campus. As Wilson points out, this accusation neglects to note that Salaita's tweets did not assert a personal attack, but a condemnation of the actions of the Israeli military and state.⁷ Although Wise cites international human rights in her statement, the United Nations' Universal Declaration on Human Rights never invokes "civility."⁸ In support of Wise, the University of Illinois Board of Trustees declared "collective and unwavering support of Chancellor Wise and her philosophy of academic freedom and free speech tempered in respect for human rights" and further declared that they want a "university community that values civility as much as scholarship."⁹

These statements indicate that in social media contexts, AAUP guidelines on collegiality are interpreted alongside larger questions of free speech and human rights, and the subjective categories of "respect" and "civility" take on particular meanings depending on the political investments of those who are making the hiring decisions. Furthermore, these statements reveal that when academics are critiquing state power on social media platforms, these critiques are interpreted as directed not at military or state structures, but potentially at individual students or colleagues. In other words, a systemic critique is interpreted as having individual ramifications in teacher-student or other institutional relationships.

In our interview with Salaita, he attributed this phenomenon to a "certain set of conceits around academic freedom that limit its functionality and its practice, and those conceits often have to do with critiques of state power, critiques of colonization, critiques of structural violence."¹⁰ The dominant paradigms cited by Salaita relate closely to the tendency for mainstream media in the United States to refrain from any discourse that challenges the state of Israel. For example, *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting* put out several comprehensive critiques of mainstream reportage of Operation Protective Edge, noting in one article that mainstream media strives for a "deceptive balance" that obscures the "lopsided" death toll.¹¹ Salaita's current lawsuit against the University of Illinois specifically notes that in the United States, "criticisms of Israeli state policy are infrequently heard from American politicians or presented in the mainstream national media."¹² In other words, Wise's interpretations of the limits of academic freedom protections must be understood within a political context where Salaita's tweets and US mainstream media were diametrically opposed. Salaita

identified these limits as “inherent” to academic freedom, “as long as academic freedom remains tethered to dominant paradigms.” Positioning academic freedom as a “resource,” he noted that “like any other resource in a capitalist system,” academic freedom is fundamentally unequally distributed.¹³

In sum, the geopolitics of mainstream media have major effects on what is read as “collegial” in social media platforms, and there is an explicit danger in circulating political stances or critiques that are not aligned with US mainstream media, particularly when writers are critical of US-Israeli state policies and/or in solidarity with the BDS movement. In what follows, we begin by situating this specific context within larger debates about the public/private sphere divide, and consider Salaita’s reflections on the particular constraints and affordances of sites like Twitter as a platform for anti-imperial, decolonial writing.

The Public. The Private. The Academic.

The relationship between academic writing and academic collegiality is both context-specific and constrained by genre conventions. This relationship is further complicated by the liminal space that social media inhabits as simultaneously public and private. To consider how commonplaces of civility manifest in social media contexts, then, we want to begin by situating this question within larger debates around public/private sphere divides and how they apply to academics—as in the blurring of the public and private spheres in Chancellor Wise’s statements above. Wise’s comments thus reveal the tension between academic freedom and personal social media commentary, and raise questions around the extent to which principles of academic freedom apply in social media contexts.¹⁴ The AAUP’s recently revised recommendations regarding electronic communications and the use of social media note: “With the advent of social media such concerns about the widespread circulation and compromised integrity of communications that in print might have been essentially private have only multiplied further.”¹⁵ In August 2015, a court ruled that 1,100 pages of personal e-mails between Chancellor Wise and the University of Illinois Board of Trustees would be released.¹⁶ Social media thus extend private communications into the big unknown, but the consequences of “widespread circulation” of communications differ depending on the content.

This may sound like an obvious assertion, but it is relevant to discussions of Steven Salaita’s case. The public statement made by AAUP in regards to Salaita’s case demonstrates its application of distinctions between public and private communications:

Recently we argued in a policy statement on "Academic Freedom and Electronic Communications," that faculty comments made on social media, including Twitter, are largely extramural statements of personal views that should be protected by academic freedom. While Professor Salaita's scholarship does appear to deal with the topic of Palestine, his posts were arguably not intended as scholarly

statements but as expressions of personal viewpoint. Whether one finds these views attractive or repulsive is irrelevant to the right of a faculty member to express them.¹⁷

The AAUP's report indeed recognizes that professors should not have to indicate when and where they are speaking for themselves, and not as a hired body of a public institution.¹⁸ This principle, however, still applies to more than the tweets that scholars write, as professors within disciplinary fields hold a wide array of political beliefs that often clash with one another, and which shape the scholarly and public work that they think is necessary. Ironically, Salaita has already explored the complexities of gaining tenure in a university system that openly condemns "political" work—specifically, work that is critical of imperialism and settler colonialism.¹⁹ In other words, online media's affordance for rapid dissemination of dissenting public opinion can be understood as an extension of the kinds of clashes that scholarly writing can (and does) produce. In Salaita's case, his tweets can be understood as an extension of the geopolitical concerns raised in his academic work. But this extension is not simple. It is mediated through the major rhetorical and generic differences between the kinds of writing that occur in academic journals and social media contexts like Twitter.

Indeed, the "politics of respectability" that rhetorically constrain academic writing can be traced back to the origins of academic freedom. Tracing academic freedom's limits as far back as John Dewey's efforts to "arbitrate disputes over, and to protest against abridgements of, academic freedom," Louis Menand posits in "The Limits of Academic Freedom" that "freedom is always at the expense of something."²⁰ Therefore, in academic contexts wherein a number of perspectives engage in dialectic attempts to produce knowledge, the academic self-regulation that occurs in scholarly environments is restricted to carefully orchestrated expressions of detachment in a negotiation of objectivity claims that require a certain set of hedging practices. In his "Normatizing State Power," Salaita also connects the "myth of untainted knowledge" to "archaic ethics of scholarship, which were created during an era of colonization in twentieth century United States and in an atmosphere of near-total Eurocentrism."²¹ The origins of a "disinterested methodology" prevailing in contemporary academe result in negotiations of epistemological expressions of personal interest in order to successfully navigate through an academia in which dissent from dominant views can result in the termination of faculty positions.

Following this view on academic writing, Salaita's tweets must be understood in the context of the rhetorical affordances and constraints of writing for social media. As he explained, this "disinterested methodology" is antithetical to the rhetorical project of writing for social media platforms. To reiterate, AAUP's updated report on electronic communications already questions the possibility of maintaining the public and the private, the academic and the personal, in neatly compartmentalized spheres:

The 2004 report essentially assumed that electronic communications were either personal, as with e-mail messages, or public, as with websites, blogs, or faculty home pages. The growth of social media

calls such a distinction into question, because social-media sites blur the distinction between private and public communications in new ways.²²

As increasing numbers of scholars turn to social media both for professional networking and personal expression, this blurring becomes increasingly important. What do scholars gain from writing for social media platforms, particularly when they are disseminating critiques and analyses that are aligned with their academic research? As Salaita suggested in our interview, there are a certain set of rhetorical affordances provided by writing that occurs online—to which we turn next.

Rhetorical Affordances of Social Media Communication

The fact that Salaita has already published on the perils of engaging in what is sometimes dismissively called “political” work in academia suggests why he, and many others, rely on social media to more directly express what he terms “justice-oriented scholarship.”²³ As he expressed in our interview, “Social media platforms allow us a space for organizing and for provoking and for being thoughtful in a different way . . . to go into spaces and onto platforms where you can state things directly and you can engage in a debate without all the baggage that comes along with academic debate.”²⁴ Referring back to the restrictions of academic conventions—the self-regulation and the freedom of one scholar at the expense of another—we posit that social media provides a much-needed set of rhetorical affordances for scholars.

Perhaps because of the aforementioned constraints of academic writing conventions—what Salaita refers to as the “lingua franca of academic writing,” he suggested that online platforms provide room for a “rhetorical creativity,” which is evident in his many publications via online magazines such as *Salon*.²⁵ Salaita has used online venues to offer critical interventions in debates surrounding issues like the mascot of Washington State’s football team. In doing so, however, he takes advantage of the genre to engage in a kind of creative nonfiction that is part historical reflection and part anticolonial rhetoric. Reading through his pieces on the *Salon* website with a scholarly eye, we can see that there seem to be academic writing conventions missing: a references page and the verbose theoretical contextualization of the events in question, for example. A closer examination, however, reveals that these common components of academic writing are still present, but to a lesser extent, as they take the shape of hyperlinks to the work of other scholars who address similar issues. The generic conventions of online publication—and the broad circulation of writing on these platforms—offer academics a platform for making their critiques more accessible beyond the readership of academic books and journals.

Besides the affordances of a wide-reaching public writing that occurs online, scholars can find new possibilities for community building that are afforded by online communication. In our interview, Salaita

remarked, “As difficult as this era of higher education can be, one benefit to it is tons of organizations exist than maybe was the case in the predigital age. . . . There are online communities. There are, if you’re a graduate student, scholars in your field, that you might not even necessarily know and that you’ve never met, who will absolutely be responsive and who will plug you into supportive and sustaining communities.”²⁶ In other words, the networks that one can find in conferences that are specific to what can be called smaller scholarly areas can now be more readily found online; and the kinds of support systems that could, at one point, only be created in person, through mail, or via phone conversations, can now be created virtually immediately. This is particularly important for marginalized disciplines that engage with politically charged subject matter, including ethnic studies, women’s and gender studies, and indigenous studies.

Scholars including Dan Colson and Louis Menand argue that the two “freedoms” (as abstract as they are) should be differentiated—that is, academic freedom should not be enveloped under freedom of speech. Nonetheless, because of the blurry line between private and public communication in online media, Salaita’s court case appealed to freedom of speech, alleging that the University of Illinois violated his constitutional rights to free speech and due process, and engaged in breach of contract. Moreover, as the recent court ruling releasing 1,100 pages of emails shows, although writing and social media can become sites of repression, they can also be mobilized in legal settings to defend academic freedom.

Even if public writing provides a sort of rhetorical creativity that is hindered in academic writing conventions, and although there are more possibilities for the community building that online platforms facilitate, there are still a number of limitations that online communications can bring up—among them the complicity of higher education in the sanction of state violence manifested in the suppression of political dissent. In the next section, we discuss the rhetorical constraints of online communication, including its generic differences from academic writing and the particular ways in which civility and collegiality manifest on social media.

Rhetorical Constraints of Social Media

Social media platforms like Twitter have an entirely different set of rhetorical constraints than a scholarly publication or online essay—and a much broader audience. In our interview, Salaita reflected on how difficult it is to take an argument that can comprise up to five thousand words in an academic journal article and condense it into a pithy 140-character statement. As stated above, the AAUP’s report on electronic communications anticipated this constraint. Moreover, the report also emphasized the dangerous possibility of decontextualizing electronic communications. In the specific rhetorical situation under scrutiny in Salaita’s case, the temporal context of his tweets needs to be reemphasized because they were a result of, and a reaction to, Israel’s Operation Protective Edge. In our interview, Salaita elaborated on the difficulties of

translating academic work—which is beholden to politics of respectability that limit “rhetorical creativity”—for a social media context.

One difficulty that Salaita noted is that on Twitter or on any other social media platform, there may not be a shared understanding of salient theoretical terms. Furthermore, he noted the temporal considerations of writing for Twitter as key to understanding the contextual meaning of tweets:

[Tweets] happen in real time, so there’s always an implicit context, always. So you can’t just read a tweet like it’s an aphorism, right? It always exists in a context, and there’s always a set of shared assumptions that has to be maintained in order for conversation on that platform to happen. That’s not always the case in academic writing where, quite rightly, we’re meant to invoke and to draw out and to justify with evidence, our assumptions.²⁷

Salaita’s quote draws attention to the fact that the rhetorical considerations of writing for social media platforms are an important factor in understanding the public/private divide and how it affects academics, particularly in discussion of Palestine. In Salaita’s case, one cannot be separated from the other.

Indeed, scholars have made links between the rhetorical constraints of writing for social media and Salaita’s statements about Palestine that counter admonitions on civility and collegiality. Using an MLA online forum to propose a defense of Steven Salaita’s rehiring, Cheryl A. Higashida, associate professor of English at the University of Colorado Boulder, called for a reconsideration of the immediate context of his tweets: “His anger must moreover be understood as a response to the horrific violence of Israel’s latest attacks on Gaza, US public support of them, and the long history of colonialism, dispossession, and occupation giving rise to them.”²⁸ It is difficult to articulate the complexity of the rhetorical ecology (with references to a variety of contexts and distinct histories) invoked in Salaita’s tweets, one that is surely blurring the lines between private and public spheres, as he considers his work as a public intellectual (a view shared by many others). Another avid Twitter user, Roopika Risam, who describes herself as a postcolonial digital humanist, has written on the implications of Steven Salaita’s case for the role that Twitter plays in contemporary scholarship. In “A Love Letter to Twitter” Risam writes about the backlash that Salaita has received most notably from former AAUP president Cary Nelson, and suggests Nelson should read Salaita’s tweets as texts: texts that portray Salaita’s ethos as a scholar who is “outspoken on Israel’s status as a settler colony.”²⁹ Being critical of state policies should not be equated with being uncivil, or not collegial enough.

Critiques of state power challenge academic freedom on other fronts as well; for example, in her “A Love Letter to Twitter,” Risam analyzes the role of Twitter in academia in Kansas, where the Kansas Board of Regents (KBOR) passed legislation circumscribing state critiques on university professors’ online communications. As Dan Colson suggests, this type of legislation suggests that the KBOR incident reflects a

broader divestment from education that does not comply with the “entrepreneurship and job preparation” that conservative politics is trying to impose on higher education.³⁰ There seems to be a discrepant surveillance of education that aims for critical understandings of state power, and a preference for pedagogies and scholarly endeavors that aim to train for complacency around the established status quo. Contemporary controversies about social media use by professors such as Salaita thus illuminate a broader manipulation of public education practices that don’t follow the purported goals of corporate-driven universities.

As both Salaita’s case and the recent ruling in Kansas suggest, the rhetorical constraints of Twitter are only as important as the politics that are being professed through the medium. Twitter thus extends concerns about expressing political views that are dissimilar from those of dominant authorities; but it exacerbates the possibilities of misunderstanding, because of the limited space for providing genealogical justifications for each tweet. Although the platform affords scholars a venue in which to disseminate theoretical work to audiences larger than those in academe, it also enables easy surveillance of dissident political views.

Conclusion

As graduate students in the “post-Salaita era,” we want to be hopeful about the affordances of academic freedom in cases like Salaita’s. The reality, though, is that he had to leave the country for an academic job at American University of Beirut. We are left thinking about the temporal and contextual nature of social media writing; the desire to make academic work public on platforms other than academic journals with very small, narrow readerships; and the politics of academic versus social media writing. Anti-imperial, decolonial arguments seem to take on a different kind of danger when they are translated into the conventions of writing for social media, and disseminated in the public sphere as part of a conversation on current events, rather than as theoretically and historically situated academic analysis.

In an academic climate where scholars frequently interact with each other on social media platforms, the web offers an opportunity to connect with scholarly communities and public audiences that we might not otherwise know about. Even though print was the established medium through which academics expressed their views at the time when the AAUP was founded, the motivations behind the establishment of an organization that is meant to negotiate divergent views in a wide array of subjects are still deeply relevant in these contexts.

As more and more scholars interact on digital platforms, as Twitter becomes a site of surveillance and repression of public intellectuals, as public/private divides are further blurred, and as geopolitical considerations shift, nuanced readings and analyses of digital media have become increasingly salient. Because we do not advocate silencing political beliefs to remain “safer” in an academic context, and bearing in mind Salaita’s remark that “a tweet is not an aphorism,” we do advocate nuanced, context-specific, temporally

aware interactions with (and analyses of) social media writing, with particular attention to the unequal distribution of academic freedom.

Karriann Soto Vega is a doctoral candidate in composition and cultural rhetoric at Syracuse University. Her research focuses on representations of Puerto Rican nationalist women and sovereignty struggles, transnational movements in the American hemisphere, and the use of multimodal media pedagogies. Her published work appears in Journal of Global Literacies, Technologies, and Emerging Pedagogies and in podcast episodes for This Rhetorical Life.

Vani Kannan is a doctoral candidate in composition and cultural rhetoric at Syracuse University. Her research interests include Asian American studies, transnational, postcolonial, and decolonial feminisms, and embodied rhetorics. Her published work appears in Studies on Asia, Literacy in Composition Studies, and Reflections: Public Rhetoric, Civic Writing, and Service Learning.

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¹³. Soto and Kannan, "Conversations about Academic Labor, Academic Freedom, and Palestine," 3–4.

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- ¹⁴. On August 6, 2015 a federal court upheld Salaita's lawsuit on free speech grounds, ruling that the professor's tweets "implicate every 'central concern' of the First Amendment." Julie Wurth, "Updated: Judge Rules Salaita's Employment Lawsuit against UI Can Proceed," *The News-Gazette*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.news-gazette.com/news/local/2015-08-06/updated-judge-rules-salaita%E2%80%99s-employment-lawsuit-against-ui-can-proceed.html>.
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- ¹⁸. "A statement made by a faculty member on a website or through e-mail or social media may be recirculated broadly, and any disclaimer that the institution bears no responsibility for the statement may be lost. What about statements made on Twitter, which limits communications to a mere 140 characters? It is hardly reasonable to expect a faculty member to indicate on every tweet that she or he is not speaking for the institution." *Ibid.*, 49.
- ¹⁹. Steven Salaita, "Normalizing State Power," in Maira and Chatterjee, *The Imperial University*, 217–235.
- ²⁰. Louis Menand, "The Limits of Academic Freedom," in *The Future of Academic Freedom*, ed. Louis Menand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7.
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