

“I have 100 reads therefore I am”: ‘Academic’ social media

This post explores academics’ relationships with ‘academic social media’; specifically with regards to the marketization of HE in the UK, audit culture, gamification, and open access. Academic social media can be defined as social media sites aimed at academic staff working in higher education, particularly in research. These sites encourage their users to share work (mainly in the form of research papers) and connect with other academics and researchers. There are currently two sites dominating the academic social media sector; [ResearchGate](#) and [Academia.edu](#). These sites have been criticised for various reasons, but many academics still prefer to use them to disseminate research instead of using their own institution’s repositories. This paper will examine some of these criticisms and look at reasons why researchers choose to use academic social media platforms despite their serious ethical flaws and potentially detrimental effect on open access to research.

The market-driven HE system and academic self-promotion

Over recent years, the HE system in the UK has become more and more market-driven. The language of capitalism and commerce has crept steadily into our everyday speech, thoughts and actions – we have become used to auditing and quantifying our time and our work. Even the phrase ‘research outputs’ has a commercial ring to it. Added to this is the increasing “casualization of the academic workforce” (Pooley and Duffy), characterised by short-term contracts and a lack of job security for many academics across the sector.

Working in this environment of market-driven values, academic staff have themselves been encouraged to promote themselves as ‘brands’, and think of themselves as branded commodities (Pooley and Duffy). Relating to this, is the idea of the “curated self”, where individuals carefully craft and nurture their online presence, and the “[quantified self](#)”, where a person identifies her/himself in terms of measurable inputs and outputs.

In terms of academic social media, platforms such as Academic.edu and ResearchGate intensify the idea of self-promotion as a good, precisely because of/through the fact that they are (among other things) social media tools: Like other forms of social media, they employ interactive feedback, dashboard analytics, and user-generated content (in this case,

scholarship) (Pooley and Duffy). As with Facebook, platforms such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate “start to exemplify normative, idealized behaviour” (Adema) – the “everyone” factor (the idea that “everyone” is on Facebook). Self-promotion in this way is [considered] normal and if you don’t do it your career, and by extension you, will suffer. Added to this, not creating one’s own online self incurs the risk of losing control of this self (Barbour & Marshall (2012) in Hammarfelt et al.).

Some argue that use of academic social media is a means by which academics can take (back) some control over their scholarship and even their standing in academic circles. These platforms offer services that give the user a “sense of autonomy and empowerment” (Hammarfelt et al.). For example, self-tracking could be seen as a means of taking control, making academics’ contributions visible on their own terms or to contest alternative auditing.

Academics and their work as commodities

Focusing on Academia.edu, AKA “Facebook for academics” this company utilises users’ content and labour under the guise of “sharing” (Pooley and Duffy). Not only this, but, as with mainstream social networks, the people who use the site may soon become its products. Its founder, [Richard Price](#), has said that he plans to charge “for-profit companies for access to data and insights on which research and researchers are gaining traction” (Cutler, 2013 and Shema, 2012 in Pooley and Duffy). The financial model of companies such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate relies on their ability to exploit the data generated by their users. At the moment, the companies are concerned with exploiting the content that they add to their sites, but Adema believes that we can “see a move here from exploiting our content to exploiting the relationships around this content”. Furthermore, it is likely that in the future platforms such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate will sell our own data back to us so that we can use it in our own work.

Mirowski (2013) has argued that Facebook “teaches its users to become ‘entrepreneurs of themselves’” and trains us in “market-like transactions to advance many of our professional

and personal aims” (Hammarfelt et al.). This commodification of academic selves links back to neoliberal ideas about marketization, as described above.

Quantification/audit culture/metrics

Hammarfelt et al. propose the idea of the “quantified academic self” (2016). This is a narrowing of the concept of the quantified self, which was first proposed by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly and refers to “an effort to increase self-knowledge through tracking devices” ([Lupton 2013](#)). The quantified academic self focuses on achievement, reputation and influence in terms of professional accomplishment (Hammarfelt et al.). This feeds into, and is in turn encouraged by the all-pervading quantification inherent on sites such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate. According to Pooley and Duffy, this quantification is the main way in which Academia.edu differs from mainstream social media sites.

This idea fits into the now ubiquitous audit culture of UK HE, where all outputs, even research must be quantified as “measurable deliverables” (Pooley and Duffy), which in turn fits into neoliberal ideas about free markets and free trade. Hence we now have the concepts of researchers as entrepreneurs, publications as products (outputs) and academia as a global marketplace (Hammarfelt et al.). Looking at the wider context, it can be seen that, from the mid-20th century onwards, there has been a tendency for people in secularized societies to replace religious motivations with goal setting and meaning making through “sports, art, science and other challenging endeavours”: Sloterdijk’s ‘doctrine of upward propagation’ (2014, in Hammarfelt et al.).

The [ResearchGate Score](#) purports to “[take] all of your research and [turn] it into a source of reputation”. Hammarfelt et al. see this as a “magical manoeuvre”: it is magical in the sense that the points are seen as valuable even though their worth is actually unknown, and also in the sense that it is very hard to see or understand how the score is calculated. Most people *like* quantification (whether they admit it or not) because it provides easy answers, or at least easy data they can use to compare themselves with other people. Added to this, numbers, once gained, are self-reinforcing. For example, the more contacts you have the more valuable you become, because more people think you are popular and want to link to you (van Dijck 2013 in Pooley and Duffy). It is really just a different version of playground

popularity and again, this follows the general trend of self-quantification in society (Hammarfelt et al.). As Adema says, “we feel an urgent need to quantify ourselves”.

Gamification

Related to the idea of quantification is the concept of [gamification](#), “the practice of applying game features, including aesthetics, in non-game contexts”. Most social media sites, including those for academics, include game features such as point scoring, reaching new levels of attainment, and claiming of new territories (Hammarfelt et al.). Gamification can be an effective way to influence people’s behaviour due to the positive feedback aspect, but Hammarfelt et al. argue that it comes at a price: total surveillance. Gamification, like quantification, is also just another way of “bureaucratising everyday life” using IT infrastructures. We are always ‘on’, always connected, measuring, auditing ourselves, analysing scores, imputing data. We are feeding the machine and integrating ourselves more and more into the system – we are the bureaucracy.

On the other hand, some, such as [Dragona \(2014\)](#) have argued that gaming features can help create meaning in everyday life: people have needs and like goals so games can be used to help people develop in a positive way. They could even be seen as a “rational and uncomplicated alternative to a highly complex world” (Hammarfelt et al.), relating back to the idea of academics using social media platforms to attempt to take back some control over their environments.

Academic social media and open access

It is notable that Academia.edu and ResearchGate in particular makes an effort to advertise themselves as a place where academics can upload their papers. Academia.edu’s front page states:

Join 54,226,674 Academics

Academia is the easiest way to share papers with millions of people across the world for free. A [study](#) recently published in PLOS ONE found that papers uploaded to Academia receive a 69% boost in citations over 5 years.

Open access is not specifically mentioned by name, but the idea is there – sharing papers for free. There is even reference to an academic study, which *does* mention the phrase ‘open access’. However, legally and ethically uploading papers to Academia.edu or ResearchGate is not the same as putting them on a genuinely open access repository. (As an aside, it should be pointed out that the study mentioned on Academia.edu’s front page was carried out by, among other people, Richard Price, CEO of Academia.edu.)

From a legal and ethical point of view, many of the articles posted on Academia.edu and ResearchGate are not compliant with copyright law or journal publishers’ open access policies and permissions. These sites place the onus for copyright compliance on their users (see the AE copyright statement). As Pooley and Duffy point out “[these sites] are peer-to-peer PDF-sharing repositories, akin to Napster circa 1994 [...] Academia.edu is like Sci-Hub, but with venture backing (and a carefully-written, liability-dodging “Copyright Policy””. Open access (or a version of it) is part of a business model made to “serve the need for further commercialization of knowledge and research” (Adema).

Apart from anything else, putting one’s research papers on to an academic social media site does not meet the conditions for the [HEFCE mandate regarding open access or funder policy](#). Academic social media sites may seem to be advocates of open access, but it is ‘open access’ on their terms. They are not repositories, and offer no guarantee of indefinite, continued access to the research papers they hold. As Fitzpatrick says, at some point “[Academia.edu] will be required to turn a profit, or it will be sold for parts, or it will shut down.” The ‘free’ access could cease without warning, either by the site itself, or because of litigation from publishers (Pooley and Duffy).

Academia.edu has a parasitical relationship to the public education system, in that these academics are labouring for it for free to help build its privately-owned for-profit platform by providing the aggregated input, data and attention value. We can thus see that posting on Academia.edu is not ethically and politically equivalent to making research available using an institutional open access repository at all.

[Gary Hall](#)

Just as pertinent are the potential negative effects sites such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate could have on true open access. Hall warns that the open access movement is “in danger of being outflanked, if not rendered irrelevant” by Academia.edu. From personal experience, it is disheartening to note that academics are more likely to upload their papers to Academic.edu or ResearchGate than they are to deposit them in the institutional repository. Perhaps this proves Hall’s hypothesis that, for many researchers, “the priority may not be so much making their work openly available free of charge [...] as building their careers and reputations in an individualistic, self-promoting, self-quantifying, self-marketing fashion.”

Conclusion

Such self-promotion is understandable in today’s current climate of the marketization of higher education (see above), but surely we as academics should resist this trend as much as possible? If academics are really interested in academic freedom, disseminating research, and access to knowledge for all then they/we are not going to help matters by playing into the hands of people motivated by money rather than the public good. (Even if Price et al. really believe they are doing good, their venture capitalist funders are only looking for return on their investment: that is what they exist for). The scholarly communications ecosystem is already dominated by big corporations that control our publishing industry. The open access movement was founded as an alternative to this, but, in using commercial social media sites to share research, we risk trading “one set of revenue-hungry companies for another.” (Pooley and Duffy)

So what are the alternatives? In terms of sharing research and making it genuine open access, permitted versions of papers should be uploaded to academics’ institutional repositories. The burden for a change in attitudes towards repositories when compared with social media sites does not rest solely on academic staff: software developers working on repositories need to at least try to recreate the look and feel, especially the intuitive ease of use, of social media sites if they are going to win over researchers and ensure that genuine open access does not get side-lined by (often illegal) paper sharing on academic social media. Also, advocates of open access working in HE (myself included) need to ensure

that researchers are aware of all its benefits – not just in terms of funder compliance, but wider societal advantages – and try to make using repository software as easy as possible. There are also not-for-profit disciplinary repositories that can be used – many, if not all, of these can be accessed via [OpenDOAR](#) (Directory of Open Access Repositories).

In terms of the ‘social’ aspect of academic social media, scholarly societies may be one way to meet this need. For example, the [MLA](#)’s office for scholarly communication has set up [Humanities Commons](#), as an alternative academic social network.

Whether or not researchers continue to use academic social networks, it is important that they are aware of the financial rationales and ethical standpoints of the companies that created them, so at least they can make informed choices about where they are putting their research and investing their energies and time. It is particularly important that academics are aware of the potential implications for genuine open access, and for the privacy of their own data. As Adema says “to give up privacy for access is not a form of ‘open access’ I can endorse.”

*Hammarfelt et al.

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