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INTERNET CONNECTION

ResearchGate and Academia.edu: Academic Social Networks

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Social networking sites can seem frivolous and pointless to academics, but specialized academic social networking sites are gaining popularity in certain disciplines and with certain faculty. These academic social networks were briefly discussed in a previous column, as was the new intersection between social media and scholarly publishing, but academic social networks are an interesting online space that merit their own discussion (Ovadia 2013). This column looks at ResearchGate (https://www.researchgate.net) and Academia.edu, two of the more popular academic social networks. Social networking functionality is increasingly common in all kinds of tools, though. Citation management products, like Mendeley, Zotero, and CiteU-Like, in addition to managing citations for users, also have social media features, allowing users to find and follow each other. However, those three tools are primarily citation managers that also have social networking functionality. ResearchGate and Academia.edu are primarily social networking sites.

Online social networks exist along a continuum. Something like Facebook, while used for a multitude of purposes, is probably most frequently used for informal communication between friends of some degree. Something like LinkedIn is used for professional communication and career networking. Academic social networks are even more specific, catering to those associated with academic institutions and specializing in academic activities like sharing papers and data sets. They also provide publication analytics and facilitate the exchange of information. Both ResearchGate and Academia.edu allow users to post public questions to the community, much like Quora, another online question-and-answer site. Both networks group users by

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institution, allowing users to see colleagues. Academia.edu takes affiliation a step further than ResearchGate, using a subdomain to indicate the institution. For example, all LaGuardia Community College Academia.edu profiles begin with laguardia.academia.edu. Both sites use a following model, where users can follow the network activity of other users, seeing things like papers added, questions answered and asked, and, in the case of ResearchGate, endorsements from other users. ResearchGate has an area for intra-institutional collaboration on projects. This collaboration area allows for commenting and file sharing; collaborators must be invited to see these areas, though. ResearchGate also has a job section, which is one of the ways the site plans to make money (Grose 2012). Both sites are free of charge to use.

When confronted with two similar services, the immediate question is which should be chosen. One important factor is where one's colleagues are. If an institution seems to prefer one network to the other, that creates an argument for joining that network. Similarly, users might see which of their disciplinary colleagues are using a given network, although the reality is that it is not very difficult to maintain accounts across multiple networks. There is a certain time investment in initially configuring an account, but that is a one-time time expenditure (although it can be a longer time expenditure inputting or importing all of one's scholarship). There does not seem to be a consensus on which academic social network is the most important. Beech (2014) mentions using accounts for both in her discussion of sharing scholarly research online. Conversely, Sigma Xi, the Scientific Research Society, said ResearchGate is its "preferred networking platform" (Crawford 2011). Choosing which of the two to join is ultimately an individual decision revolving around personal variables.

Another question that often comes up around the issue of social networks is, "What is the point?" Academics tend to be busy and social networking does not always seem to be the best use of a limited resource. However, there are some arguments to be made for at least exploring some of these academic social networks. One is reputation management. Academia.edu tracks various metrics, showing users how many times their profile has been viewed, how many times documents have been viewed, and even the searches that led people to the profile (Academia.edu also regularly e-mails users about this kind of activity, a functionality some members might eventually decide to disable). Like ResearchGate's RG Score, these analytics are new and could be considered part of the alt-metrics movement that tracks nontraditional bibliographic metrics. Academia.edu does not factor in questions and answers in its metrics, although presumably asking and answering questions might increase profile views.

As mentioned earlier, ResearchGate has its own measurement, called RG Score, that assigns members a score based upon content interactions and the score of the members interacting with the content. Content contributed to ResearchGate, like profile information and answered or asked questions,

influences the RG score, in addition to publication information, like views, downloads, and citations. The RG score is not a standard bibliographic measurement, like the h-index, so its acceptance can vary from institution to institution. But it is worth noting ResearchGate seems interested in site-wide reputation as well as traditional publication (Curry 2013). It is also worth noting that because these metrics are new, institutional culture and policies need to be considered when deciding whether to include them as part of a tenure and promotion package or job application.

ResearchGate's question-and-answer area can be an important and interesting feature. Given the large number of members, it can present a way to crowd-source problems ("The Scientific Social Network" 2011). One potential challenge is that not all researchers are used to helping colleagues in the way that these kinds of social network sites engender: "Science is not only about collaboration but also about competition. This limits what people are willing to share" ("Professor Facebook" 2012). This same sense of competition also exists outside of science.

Academic social networking sites allow a certain responsiveness and informality that is not possible with the formal publishing process. This became apparent when Kenneth Lee, a professor at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, used ResearchGate to publish a critique of a Japanese stem-cell study (Naik 2014). The two *Nature* papers challenged by Lee's findings are now being investigated (Martin 2014). This type of process certainly would have been possible without an academic social network like ResearchGate, but it probably would have taken longer. In this example, the power of a greatly amplified and accelerated peer-review process that is external to the publication can be seen. ResearchGate now also has a process called Open Review, which lets users post reviews of articles, focusing on the reproducibility of the research.

Another advantage to academic social networks is that they allow work to be shared, with both ResearchGate and Academia.edu giving members the ability to upload their own papers. Of course, there are many copyright considerations that go along with this ability, and while librarians are probably more attuned to the challenges and legalities of making one's published work publicly accessible, that awareness might not be as common across all disciplines. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that Elsevier, the academic publisher, was sending take-down notices to Academia.edu members who were republishing their work on the site (Howard 2013). One workaround to this issue is that Academia.edu encourages authors to post either their prepublication work or the author copy, which many publication contracts allow (Rao 2013). Part of the rationale for the founding of Academia.edu was the sharing of papers (Mangan 2012). Phelps speculated that one benefit to academic social networks like Academia.edu is that they could allow greater access to academic work for a potentially nonacademic audience (2013). Users interested in understanding what can

be done with their publications are advised to consult their own contracts and SHERPA/RoMEO (http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo), a database of publisher copyright policies.

The ability to publicly share work, or at least to attempt to share work, once again brings up the idea of Open Access, academic work that is publicly and freely available. This type of work is, by its nature, very easy to share across networks like Academia.edu and ResearchGate. The issue becomes whether academics are better served professionally by Open Access work that is easily shared across these kinds of channels and whether the reach of their work is expanded as a result, or whether they are better served by traditional journals, which are often more familiar to many but can be much more challenging to share across social media due to their subscription-based nature. The answer is complicated and will vary across disciplines, institutions, and departments. But it is certainly worth considering—especially for junior, tenure-track faculty.

Many faculty members feel pulled in different directions, wondering where, in addition to service, publication, and teaching/library responsibilities, they are supposed to focus time and attention. Like anything else, the utility of these social networks will depend upon the individual. Similarly, the time commitment will also vary. Some users, especially librarians, might find themselves drawn into the question-and-answer parts of those sites. Anyone even remotely curious about these spaces would be advised to create a simple account in one or both and spend some time seeing whether there's any benefit. Some users might find it a helpful way to keep abreast of the literature, while others might find it a helpful way to keep tabs on former and current colleagues. Some users might find the publication metrics helpful. And some users might realize that these networks are not the best use of their time. The convenient thing about online communities is that if one is not a good fit, there is almost always a new one in the pipeline.

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