Can't tweet or won't tweet? What are the reasons behind low adoption of web 2.0 tools by researchers?

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Evidence from the Research Information Network suggests many UK academics are reluctant to adopt web 2.0 tools for their work, worried that such tools are not seen as credible or useful. Cheryl Brown discusses how researchers in developing countries face additional barriers such as poor infrastructure, and concludes that design and an understanding of the barriers are key ways to help increase the likelihood of success.

Anything that can help increase knowledge-sharing and collaboration between researchers trying to address some of the most urgent issues in development must surely be a good thing. Blogs, wikis, social networking sites and other web 2.0 tools have the potential to transform how researchers can connect with peers across disciplines and countries and communicate their research. Sadly these tools are often announced to the academic community with great enthusiasm but with little thought about the realities of the people they are intended to be used by. Like a digital hydra, for every social networking site for academics that is cut down, two new ones spring up in its place, but adoption rates of these and other web 2.0 tools are disappointingly low among researchers compared to those working in civil society, for example.

Evidence from the Research Information Network suggests that many UK academics are reluctant to adopt web 2.0 tools for their work. In reviewing what is known about adoption by researchers globally for a study commissioned by the development program GDNet, I learned that this is not a British phenomenon and researchers in developing countries often face additional barriers to adoption such as poor infrastructure. Quite apart from technical issues or lack of awareness, for which there are obvious solutions, researchers have their own set of reasons for being reluctant to adopt web 2.0 tools. Understanding these and responding to them in the design of any new platforms or social media channels aimed at researchers is essential if any kind of success is to be enjoyed.

GDNet is a DFID-funded program that supports researchers in developing and transition countries to access and communicate research, and has started to include web 2.0 tools within its activities such as piloting online collaborative spaces for groups of researchers. The study was commissioned to help GDNet understand what it needs to do in terms of design and providing support, to help researchers use web 2.0 tools for research collaboration and knowledge-sharing. In carrying out the study, I looked at published reports, GDNet's own survey data of researchers in Africa andLatin America and research institutes'

evaluations of using web 2.0 tools. Due to the scarcity of relevant data available I later cast my net wider to monitor chatter on blogs and discussion forums. Inevitably, no sooner was the study finished, but more material became available and it's reassuring to see that this aspect of research communication and collaboration is getting more attention.

So why aren't researchers using web 2.0 tools more? Broadly speaking, the reasons fall under three categories: researchers don't know that the tools exist, researchers are unable to use them, or researchers choose not to use them. In this last category, the reluctance can spring from:

- lack of time to try new tools and lack of institutional incentives to make time to use them;
- their value not being made clear or the tools not being seen as credible;
- concerns around sharing ideas and data online;

For researchers in developing countries there are also serious legal, cultural, technological, and language barriers to adopting web 2.0 tools for collaboration and knowledge-sharing.

As I am also a part-time marketing lecturer, I often look to consumer behaviour and decision-making theories to see if they throw any light on research communication problems, and in this case found they put an interesting spin on understanding why researchers might be reluctant to adopt web 2.0 tools. The three explored in the study are Perceived Risk, Diffusion of Innovation, and Perceived Attributes of Innovations and they each helped generate ideas for how to support and motivate researchers to make more use of blogs, Twitter, and other social media.

For example, several authors have looked at how perceived risks create barriers for individuals to adopt technology. In this case, a social risk for a researcher could be loss of status from using the tool, of being seen in a poor light and lacking in credibility as a result, perhaps through the lack of control over removing comments and images once they are shared online. This risk could be reduced by including a clearly-worded privacy statement when researchers register and reassuring them that they can ask to remove any material they have posted online.

Organisations and projects face numerous challenges if they are want to encourage adoption of web 2.0 tools among the academic community for collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Several prominent online academic networks have already closed or are under-used, including those with the backing of significant organisational resources and external funding (like 2collab which shut up shop between the first and final drafts of the GDNet study). However, basing the choice of web 2.0 tools on a richer understanding of the barriers to adoption that researchers may experience, and designing them to make the existing working practices of researchers easier and more effective, are two key ways to help increase the likelihood of success.

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