

Professional digital practice in academia: From online networking to building apps

by Blog Admin

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An understanding of how to present knowledge and promote learning in digital formats will soon be integral to academic practice. [Deborah Lupton](#) gives a tour of the not-to-be-missed academic digital tools available online.



In my [previous post](#), I explained the concept of digital sociology and presented four aspects I considered integral to this sub-discipline: professional digital practice, sociological analyses of digital use, digital data analysis and critical digital sociology. In this post I focus on professional digital practice, or using digital media tools for professional purposes: to build networks, facilitate public engagement, receive feedback, establish an e-profile, curate and share content and instruct students.

It is clear that a revolution in how tertiary education is offered is on its way, as demonstrated by the recent decision of elite universities such as Princeton and Stanford to invest significant sums of money in massive open online courses which at the moment are provided free of charge to anyone who wishes to enrol (including, I note, an 'Introduction to Sociology' subject). The move towards open access and e-publishing of scholarly work also seems inevitable. Furthermore, creating an 'e-profile' is becoming an important part of academic work. Judicious use of social media allows you to exercise better control and manage the content of your online persona in a context in which search engines are constantly collating information about you.

For all these reasons, an understanding of how to present knowledge and promote learning in digital formats will soon become a vital part of academic practice. Here's some specific ways in which academics can use some of the digital tools now available:

Building networks

Using platforms such as Twitter and Facebook can be a highly efficient way of connecting with other academics working in a similar area as well as interested people from outside academia. These platforms allow participants to join networks arranged around topic or discipline areas and to contribute in discussions and sharing information within these networks.

Facilitating public engagement

Blogging sites such as WordPress and micro-blogging platforms such as Twitter can be used as easily accessible forums in which academics can communicate their ideas in short form. Unlike traditional journal articles that are locked behind paywalls, these platforms are free to access and material can be instantly published, allowing academics to share some of their research findings quickly. They therefore allow academics to promote their research and share it with a far greater audience than they would usually find in the traditional forums for publication. Links can be provided to journal articles so that longer academic pieces can be followed up by readers.

Receiving feedback

Blogs and microblogging platforms also allow interested readers to comment and engage with authors, thus facilitating public engagement. You can ask a question in a blog or Twitter post and receive responses, or readers may simply choose to use the comments box to make remarks on something you have published. Quora is a social media platform designed specifically to ask questions of anyone who uses it. Once you have set up an account you can publish a question or answer other people's questions, as well as follow others' questions to see what the responses are. You can also follow topics or people.

Establishing an e-profile

Sites such as Academia.edu and LinkedIn, as well as your university profile webpage are ways of providing information about yourself. In Academia.edu, designed specifically for academics, you can list and upload your articles, conference papers and books and you can follow other individuals and topic areas and be followed in turn.

Curation and sharing of content

Curation and sharing platforms such as Delicious, [SlideShare](#), [Pinterest](#), [Scoop.it](#), [Pearltrees](#), [Bundlr](#), [Paper.li](#) and [Storify](#), as well as referencing tools such as Mendeley, Citeulike and Zotero, allow academics to easily gather and present information and, importantly, to then make the information public and share it with others online. On SlideShare you can share your Powerpoint presentations and the referencing tools allow you to gather lists of references on specific topics and then share these with others. Several of these tools, including Pinterest, Bundlr and Storify, allow you to insert your own comments or analysis on the material you have gathered.

Teaching

The platforms listed above can also be used as teaching tools, providing new ways of engaging students both through classroom teaching and in student assignments, where students can use the tools themselves to collect, curate and present information. Students in any area of study need to be trained in using social media and other digital technologies as part of preparing them for their future careers, as these technologies are increasingly becoming part of the working world.

Some examples of using digital and social media in sociology

This blog post itself is an example of professional digital practice in action. It is an edited version of a longer Storify presentation, and I was first inspired to write on this topic by an exchange I had on Twitter (for the Storify presentation, which contains additional information on digital sociology including weblinks to relevant courses, books, articles and blog posts, [click here](#)).

Digital media are being increasingly used as part of academic conferences. For example, academics often tweet about the content of the presentations they attend, providing a 'back-channel' of communication that can be shared with both those participating and those who cannot attend. These tweets can then be presented and preserved in Storify as a record of the conference to which anyone can have access.

I have previously written in detail about how Pinterest can be used for sociological research (see my previous post on '[How sociologists and other social scientists can use Pinterest](#)'). As I commented in this post, this curation platform is a wonderful way of collecting images related to one's research interests. It also offers various possibilities for teaching, allowing students to curate and comment on their own image collections.

Paper.li provides a platform to create online newsletters by collating material downloaded from other sites. It can be used by academics to collect recent blog posts, the abstracts from newly published journal articles or online news articles relevant to a specific topic which they then share with their social networks on a daily or weekly basis.

Sociologists may also like to think about making their own apps for teaching purposes. It is possible to access app maker wizards online that are easy to use and inexpensive. See here for my account of how I made [my own app](#) explaining key concepts in medical sociology.

Note: This article gives the views of the author(s), and not the position of the Impact of Social Sciences blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

This post was originally published on Deborah Lupton's own blog, '[This Sociological Life](#)'.

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2. Digital scholarship will not be funded by the toothfairy: it is now time for academics online to tackle the economics of the digital field.
3. The advent of online dissemination techniques allow academics to focus just on developing great ideas, without needlessly trying to play the system.
4. Aiming to create impacts on societies in 14 countries, the collaborative MYPLACE project partners traditional journal publishing with a continuous online presence.
5. As scholars undertake a great migration to online publishing, altmetrics stands to provide an academic measurement of twitter and other online activity