



*Pressure to publish in traditional outlets, reinforced by the REF, conflicts with the needs of universities and scholars to make their work accessible online. [Martin Weller](#) writes that recognising digital scholarship sends a strong message about the values of its author and their institution but requires robust mechanisms to reward such a rapidly growing medium*

Whenever the subject of digital scholarship comes up in discussion amongst academics, the topic almost inevitably turns to its recognition and reward. I am using digital scholarship here as a shorthand for changes in all aspects of academic practice which arise as a result of digital, networked and open technologies.

While universities are keen to gain an online profile and like to parade their star bloggers or podcasters, there is also a conflicting message, sometimes implicit and other times more explicit, to many researchers that it is publication in traditional journals that is what really matters. This message seems to be consistent across all sectors. As [Harley et al state](#):

“The advice given to pre-tenure scholars was consistent across all fields: focus on publishing in the right venues and avoid spending too much time on public engagement, committee work, writing op-ed pieces, developing websites, blogging, and other non-traditional forms of electronic dissemination”.

This focus on traditional publishing outlets is reinforced by exercises such as the REF, which have a clear bias towards these kinds of outputs. As money flows as a result of the REF, this inevitably has a tendency to concentrate efforts in these outlets.

But there is momentum growing behind the idea of digital scholarship as a viable alternative to the monopoly of previous practice. A big factor in this is the idea of impact. The work of open access publishers has demonstrated that articles made freely available under open access tend to have a bigger readership and are cited more frequently. This led to a number of research funders mandating that any outcomes of their research should be made openly available. But funders are now looking beyond the standard citation metrics to broader webometrics to measure impact. If a blog post, YouTube video or podcast is the output that is really achieving impact, then research funders want to encourage and reward this.

Similarly, universities are realising that their online reputation is their main brand, that the glossy brochure is not how they attract students now. Being recognised as a university that has online savvy staff is the new equivalent of having TV celebrity academics.

Recognising digital scholarship is not unproblematic however. The peer-review process of publication has allowed universities to effectively outsource the evaluation of research quality. Promotion committees don't need to judge the quality of research or articles, they can take publication in high impact journal factors as a proxy for this. The task is not as easy for many digital scholarship type activities. The very thing that makes them interesting is the removal of the filter and the variety possible. Therefore judging a good quality blog is a much more difficult task. However a number of universities have begun to draw up guidelines for doing so.

The recognition of digital scholarship presents many universities with a quandary: on the one hand they want to encourage it, because they realise this sends a strong message about their own values; on the other hand they are concerned about maintaining quality and are struggling with establishing robust mechanisms for rewarding a diverse and rapidly changing set of practices.

Martin has recently authored the book *The Digital Scholar*, which is published by Bloomsbury and [available as open access](#). He blogs at [edtechie.net](#)

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