

Should you #DeleteAcademiaEdu? On the role of commercial services in scholarly communication.

*Reflecting on the recent surge of criticism about the commercial motives of scholarly social media platform Academia.edu, **Paolo Mangiafico** argues this is now an ideal opportunity for scholars to make informed choices about their work. If you are comfortable with the trade-offs and risks, and willing to exchange those for the service provided, then don't #DeleteAcademiaEdu. But consider whether alternatives exist that will meet your needs while also preserving your ability to keep control of your work.*



Last week a kerfuffle arose on Twitter about Academia.edu, a social networking site for academics, where many academic authors have profiles, share their publications, and connect with other scholars. You can read about the beginning of the controversy in [this article the Chronicle of Higher Education posted on Friday](#).

The ensuing tweetstorm followed a fairly typical trajectory – moral outrage, call to action, [a hashtag](#), and then of course the inevitable backlash, with each side calling into question the integrity of each other's motivations, or at least the consistency of their actions. The chief concern, or at least the one that appears to have caused the most heated debate initially, was whether paying for promotion of one's scholarly work was equivalent to “vanity publishing”, but the discussion evolved into the broader issue of whether the fact that Academia.edu is a commercial service meant academics should avoid it, with several people on Twitter calling that out as hypocrisy, given the many other commercial transactions that academic life is entangled with.



Image credit: [Kate Ter Haar](#) CC BY

My own opinion is that this is a straw man argument, and it misses an opportunity to have a more nuanced discussion about what's really at stake here. This isn't a morality play, and it's not about whether charging for “monetizing” something is in itself a bad thing – for me it's about choices, and making informed choices about keeping or ceding

control to one's own work. It's also about being open vs being closed. Despite the impression that #DeleteAcademiaEdu is just railing against capitalism, I'd argue that it's really about promoting a more competitive marketplace, one where the data is open for any number of potential services (consortial, member-supported, or even commercial) to do interesting and useful things with it – may the best service win, or may many complementary services thrive.

The challenge with sites like Academia.edu is that this is not possible. By most accounts, Academia.edu is a fine service, and clearly it's meeting a need, as the number of academics who have profiles in it shows. They are doing very well at motivating academics to put their profile data and publications there. But what happens to that information once it's there? By my read of the site's terms of service, no other uses can be made of what you've put there – it's up to Academia.edu to decide what you can and can't do with the information you've given them, and they're not likely to make it easy for alternative methods of access (why would they?). There doesn't appear to be a public API, and you need to be logged in to do most of the useful things on the site (even as a casual reader). They were among the first to create enough value for academics to encourage them to sign up, and kudos to them for that, but does that mean your profile data and publications should be exclusively available via their platform? This is what's called "vendor lock-in" – it's very good for the vendor, not so good for the users.

While it's understandable that companies will try to recoup their investments through such approaches, it nonetheless goes against the ethos of academia, and of how the Internet functions best. A few years ago at a conference I heard a speaker say

"On the Internet the opposite of 'open' is not 'closed' – the opposite of 'open' is 'broken' " – (If I remember correctly, it was [John Wilbanks](#))

So when I first started reading some tweets about people deleting their Academia.edu accounts, I tweeted:

VIVO is an open source, open access, community-based, member-supported profile system for academics. It has been [implemented by many universities and research organizations](#), and makes linked open data available for access and integration across implementations. In some institutions, [like my own](#), it is connected to our [open access institutional repository](#), so Duke researchers can easily make the full text of their publications be linked directly from their profile – open to anyone, no login required, always in the author's control. And the custodians of the system and the data are the researcher's home institution, as well as... well, here I'll quote from [an article](#) Kevin Smith and I wrote a couple of years ago:

"this brings us to a discussion of another major player in this ecosystem that we have not yet addressed—a set of organizations that are mission driven, rather than market driven; that are widely distributed and independently operated, and therefore less vulnerable to single points of failure, and that were designed to be stable over long periods of time; that are catholic in their scope, strong supporters of intellectual freedom, and opponents of censorship and other restrictions on access to knowledge; and that are in full alignment with the mission of learning, teaching, and research that constitutes the primary reason why authors write academic articles. We are, of course, talking about libraries."

This, ultimately, is why I think scholars will be better served by having the core data for their profiles and their research tied to open systems like VIVO, and to their universities and their libraries. Sure, the interfaces might not be as elegant, and we might move more slowly than a commercial service, but we're in it for the long haul, we share your values, and we're not going to try to lock in your data.

If someone wants to harvest the data from VIVO and our repository and layer on a better social networking or indexing service, that's great – the data is available for that, and we have an open API. Do you want to charge for the service? No problem, as long as the people you're charging know that they're paying for your service add-ons, and not the data itself, which remains open and free to anyone else to use it outside the paid service. Do you have a service (like Academia.edu) that's really good at convincing authors to enter their CV and upload their articles? Wonderful – make the data available unencumbered, and we might be willing to pay you to do the collecting for us (especially since institutional repositories haven't been as successful in doing so).



The key reasons why authors should choose first to work with their scholarly communities rather than purely commercial enterprises isn't that making money is bad – we all have to earn a living – but that the goals and values aren't necessarily in alignment. I've used a lot of words to say something that [Katie Fortney and Justin Gonder](#) said in December (in "[A social networking site is not an open access repository](#)") and [Kathleen Fitzpatrick](#) said a few months before that (in "[Academia, Not Edu](#)"), but the Twitter discussion sparked has made many more people aware of this issue, so I wanted to underline these ideas, and say a bit more about it than would fit in my tweets last week.

You have a choice, and the choice I hope you will think more about is whether you feel more comfortable investing your time and efforts with your home institution and your library, whose incentives and values presumably align with your own, and who will contribute to an open ecosystem, or with a service whose incentives and values and life span are unknown, and whose business model relies on being closed. If you're comfortable with the trade-offs and risks, and willing to exchange those for the service provided, then don't #DeleteAcademiaEdu. But I hope you will use this opportunity to look into whether alternatives exist that will meet your needs while keeping your options open and your data open, and preserving your ability to keep control of your work and make sure it's not helping sustain an ecosystem that's broken.

If you've read this far, I hope you'll also tolerate this shameless plug for an upcoming event that will be a forum for addressing many of the issues discussed above – the [Scholarly Communication Institute](#). The theme of [SCI 2016](#), to be held in Chapel Hill, NC, in October, is "[Incentives, Economics, and Values: Changing the Political Economy of Scholarly Publishing](#)." We invite teams to [submit proposals](#) of projects they'd like to work on that fit this theme, and to build a dream team of participants they'd like to spend 4 days with working on it. For proposals that are selected, we pay expenses (thanks to a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation) for the team to come to the [North Carolina Research Triangle](#) and work on their project alongside several other similar teams, in an institute that's part retreat, part seminar, part unconference, and part development sprint. You can find out more about the institute at [trianglesci.org](#) –[proposals are due March 14](#), so if you're interested, start putting together your team soon.

This piece originally appeared on the [Scholarly Communications @ Duke blog](#) and is reposted under CC BY-NC-SA

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Paolo Mangiafico serves as Coordinator of Scholarly Communication Technologies at Duke University Libraries, and as lead organizer for the Mellon-funded [Scholarly Communication Institute](#). His current work focuses on how new

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