PAPER (EXTENDED ABSTRACT)

Under the Hood of Academia.edu: Benefits and Concerns of Creating an Online Scholarly Identity

Keywords: Scholarly Identity, Academia.edu, Social Networks for Academics

# Introduction

Academia.edu is like Facebook for academics. In October 2017, I joined Academia.edu as a premium member, which allows me access to all of its features. I created a profile page, uploaded some manuscripts, then sat back to see what Academia.edu would generate for me. I did not actively engage with the site. I did not use it to follow other researchers or to search for manuscripts. I wanted to find out what Academia.edu would generate on its own, regardless of my own interaction with it.

# Theoretical Framework

I created this profile because academics are making increasing use of online platforms such as Academia.edu to create, maintain, and communicate a scholarly identity to their academic colleagues. Brigham (2016) notes that these efforts are often intended to establish or improve a person’s academic reputation through promotion of his or her “brand.” Metrics generated from sites such as Academia.edu have also been used in tenure and promotion applications and decisions (Duffy and Pooley, 2017; Thelwall and Kousha, 2014). Nández and Borrego (2012) found that such sites heightened competition among academics because of their ability to generate quantitative measures to define accomplishments, including “impact” (Hammarfelt, de Rijcke, and Rushforth, 2016).

# Research Questions

The literature certainly suggests that Academia.edu is an important tool, at least for some scholars. But what exactly is Acadmia.edu? What can it offer to both aspiring and established scholars? And what are the potential conflicts of interest that a user could potentially face?

# Methodology

This presentation will show the results of what an Academia.edu profile will generate over approximately 30 months. It will show what messages the site sends to the author to encourage them to visit the site. It will show the many types of information and metrics that Academia.edu generates from the profile. These metrics include information about:

a) The demographic and institutional, profiles of users of Academic.edu who have accessed your papers

b) Identifying papers that mention you and the papers you have uploaded to the site.

c) Various analytics which purport to show the “impact” of your work. These include:

1) The number of unique visitors who look at your papers

2) How many times your papers have been downloaded

3) How many times your papers have been viewed

4) Demographic information identifying the location of countries, cities, and universities of unique visitors to your site

5) The research fields of users viewing or downloading your work

6) The number of pages of each paper that have been accessed and read.

# Discussion

While Academia.edu is quick to tout the benefits of its services and analytics to its users, one must also be wary that Academia.edu does not exist for altruistic reasons. Academia.edu procured its domain name before the edu designation became exclusive to educational institutions, even though it is an unabashedly for-profit venture. The analytics generated over this 30-month period have also become an intrinsic part of a huge global dataset of information inputted, with no compensation, by scholars from all over the world. This allows the curators of this information to mine the data for connections, interests, and patterns in academic discourse which can be used to further their own aims as a private company as well as those of industry partners and the venture capitalists that provide the necessary money to create and maintain the site (Bond, 2017; Fitzpatrick, 2015; Ruff, 2016; Wexler, 2015). Hall (2015) notes, “academics are laboring for it for free to help build its privately-owned for-profit platform by providing the aggregated input, data, and attention value” (n. p.). While the opportunity to create a scholarly profile and generate analytics reflecting the impact of their work within the Academia.edu universe, these conflicts of interest need to be borne in mind too.

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