

Chapter 17

The Impact of Social Media on Scholarly Practices in Higher Education: Online Engagement and ICTs Appropriation in Senior, Young, and Doctoral Researchers

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports selected findings from a small-scale, exploratory study aiming to provide a snapshot of actual modes of uptaking new digital tools for research purposes. The study consists in an interview project, carried out in a large Italian university and constituted by semi-structured interviews to 14 senior, young, and doctoral researchers, working in humanities, social sciences, medicine, and physics subject areas. Whereas the most popular attitude is a pragmatic and efficiency-driven approach in selecting and using old and new tools, a few isolated profiles of digital scholars emerge, championing the construction of their digital identity along with networked modes of knowledge production and distribution, despite the lack of legitimation of their own research context.

INTRODUCTION

New technologies are challenging “cultures in higher education” (Elhers & Schnekenberg 2010), that is the way academics and students research, learn and teach at the university. The growing

complexity of the current digital landscape is producing an increasing overlap of modes of working and learning in university (Weller, 2011) and is affecting academic ‘scholarship’, that is faculty’s expertise and practice of discovery, engagement and teaching. Indeed in the last two

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decades researchers have increasingly build their expertise and conducted their inquiries in digital environments, enabling an increasing convergence between scientific and humanistic research work, based on data- and information-intensive, distributed scholarship, as well as on a more collaborative, interdisciplinary approach (Borgman, 2007). However, in recent times, discussions about forms and legitimation of digital scholarship's practices (e.g. Pearce, Weller, Scanlon et al., 2010) – have been informed by reflections on the disruptive action of Web 2.0 approach (Anderson, 2007) or social Web (Boulos & Wheeler, 2007) and related tools - and its impact on the traditional assets of academic scholarship and scholarly communication practices. The new relationship between participatory media and scholarly practices is developing a form of digital scholarship that some define as 'networked participatory scholarship', referring to "scholars' participation in online social networks to share, reflect upon, critique, improve, validate, and otherwise develop their scholarship". (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012)

Indeed, in the literature focusing on changing scholarly practices, opinions seem to be polarised on the one side on an ideological take on innovative potentialities of digital tools towards a more extended culture of sharing (Weller, 2011) and a participatory approach in teaching and learning (Veletsianos, 2010); on the other side on a range of empirical findings (e.g. Schonfeld & Housewright, 2010; Harley, Acord, Earl-Novell et al., 2010; Procter, Williams & Stewart, 2010) that show how cautious and minority is the approach to new technologies among researchers and how resilient is their attitude to change the current scholarly communication asset. On the one hand emergent profiles of "digital, networked, open" (Weller, 2011) researchers are drawn from a range of individual pioneering cases scattered in the academic world; on the other hand, capacity and opportunity for 'digital' doctoral and young researchers to revolutionize current research practices are proven to be highly controversial

(James, Norman, De Baets et al., 2009; Harley et al., 2010; British Library/JISC, 2011). Here it seems to occur the same discrepancy between the discourse on the "state-of-the art" and that on the "state-of-the-actual", recently argued by Neil Selwyn (2011), referring to educational technologists' accounts of revolutionary use of digital tools and actual evidence on technology adoption from educational settings. In fact it is worth recalling that also issues of Web 2.0 impact on teaching and learning are largely treated with an "essentialist view" (Brown, 2012), that is focusing on general potentialities of new technologies, without considering how academics perceive social media in their own contexts and with respect to their beliefs about teaching.

The proposed chapter is located within this gap and intends to add to empirical knowledge in the field of current and emerging digital scholarship's practices, by illustrating first hand accounts from a non probabilistic sample of individual university scholars, working in specific disciplinary fields and communities and coping with an increasingly complex digital landscape.

Drawn from an unpublished MRes dissertation study¹, the chapter aims to report selected findings from semi-structured interviews to 14 senior, young and doctoral researchers, working in Humanities, Social Sciences, Medicine and Physics areas, in a large Italian university. This small-scale, exploratory study considers the viewpoint of digital scholarship's practices, that is research practices - such as information access, authoring, sharing, networking, publishing - mediated by 'old' and 'new' technologies. The goal is to draw a 'snapshot' of actual modes of uptake of new digital tools for research purposes, highlighting emergent profiles of 'digital scholars' and new demands from faculty for institutional support and training. In particular, the chapter intends to shed light on changing research practices in higher education, probing comparable behaviours of technology use in different subject areas and highlighting relations with teaching and learning approach. Interviews'

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