

Chapter 6

Visibility of Scholarly Research and Changing Research Communication Practices: A Case Study from Namibia

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ABSTRACT

Scholars globally are increasingly required to account for the visibility and impact of their research, and visibility and impact are increasingly digitally-mediated through the platforms and practices associated with Web 2.0. Traditional prestige-based metrics of visibility (ISI/WoS Impact Factor) measure only scholar-to-scholar outputs like journals and books. In many African universities with nascent research cultures, legacies of colonialism and imperatives of national development, these measures present scholars with particular challenges. At the same time, in the North, moves towards Open Access, along with the potential of Web 2.0 technologies for increasing visibility of research, offer the potential for changes to traditional measures of assessing impact and visibility. Using a framework whereby the extent of change in research communication practices at all stages of the research process can be analysed, this paper reveals the pressures shaping African research communication practices and the visibility of research, using data from a case study at the University of Namibia.

INTRODUCTION

Research by higher education and communications scholars is providing growing evidence of the changes taking place in the field of scholarly communication, both as the result of changes in research activity in higher education systems globally (Etzkowitz 2004; Cooper 2009, 2011) as well as those offered by the affordances of Web 2.0 technologies (Tenopir 2003; Palmer 2005; Thorin 2006; Procter, Williams,

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Stewart, Paschen, Snee, Voss & Asgari-Targhi, 2010; Weller 2011). While attention has been paid to how scholarly communication is changing systemically, it is less clear how the changing scholarly communication ecosystem plays out in actual research practices, as scholars go about their academic work. It is important that research into academics' research communication practices is undertaken to complement system approaches (see Esposito, 2013; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012).

Scholars in universities across Africa face particular pressures and possibilities as they seek to improve their scholarship and increase the visibility and impact of their research, drawing on digital technologies to do so. While there are few systemic frameworks in place to encourage scholars in universities in African countries to use digital technologies in research and its communication, there is evidence that digitally-mediated practices are emerging at the personal and individual level, despite difficulties and constraints (Trotter, Kell, Willmers, Grey & King, 2014a). This chapter presents, firstly, a framework for examining change in academics' research communication practices. The framework has two parts – one is a *typology* of six types of research projects, which were evident in a sample of 72 research projects drawn from a study of four universities in southern Africa (Czerniewicz & Kell, 2014a and 2014b). The other is a *heuristic* which can be used to assess the emergence of digital research communication amongst academics and the degrees of openness to a wider range of research communication practices amongst scholars (Czerniewicz & Kell, 2014a, 2014b). Secondly, the chapter applies the framework to data from a case study of academics in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) at the University of Namibia, and with reference to the specific experiences of one mid-career academic.

The Namibia case study was part of a wider research and implementation project, called the Scholarly Communication in Africa Programme (SCAP) which was founded on the assumption that open, collaborative approaches to conducting research, open access models of publishing, and open, trans-national and digitally-mediated pooling of resources are essential for African research to flourish locally and globally (Trotter *et al.*, 2014a). In addition, there are special pressures amongst scholars in southern African universities to make their research relevant to local development concerns, and SCAP viewed openness as a prerequisite for African research reaching the audiences that can best leverage it for the sake of national development (Chan, Kirsop, & Arunachalam, 2011). Web 2.0 and social media platforms provide opportunities for increased openness, but little is known about systemic initiatives or individual practices in the Web 2.0 era in African universities.

The SCAP project was established to help raise the visibility of African scholarship by mapping current research and communication practices in four southern African universities and recommending technical and administrative innovations based on experiences gained in implementation initiatives piloted at these universities. At the University of Botswana (UB) the case study was conducted in the Department of Library and Information Studies; at the University of Cape Town (UCT) the case study site was largely the Economics Department with a special focus on a research Centre linked to that Department the South African Labour and Development Research Unit (SALDRU); at the University of Namibia (UNAM) the site was the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences and at the University of Mauritius it was the Faculty of Science.

One of the research strands focused on the research communication practices of academics in each of these sites, and clearly these varied across this range of departments and disciplines. It included quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and aimed to produce 'thick descriptions' of research communication practices in each of the study sites. Methods of data collection aimed at producing

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