

Chapter 7

Exploring Digital Scholarship: A Study on Use of Social Media for Scholarly Communication among Italian Academics

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ABSTRACT

Social media are increasingly perceived as powerful drivers of change for research practices, in terms of openness, sharing and sociability. Numerous studies have reported benefits and factors affecting the progressive adoption of these sites especially for scholarly communication. However, extensive studies that are carried out with large samples at a national level are still rare. This chapter reports the results of a survey addressed to Italian academic scholars, the purpose of which was to identify frequency and way of use of a number of social media tools (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, YouTube, Vimeo, SlideShare, Blogs, and Wikis). The study aims at providing evidence on how academic scholars are using social media for scholarly purposes, also by taking into account a number of factors such as gender, age, years of teaching, academic title, and field of knowledge. It also investigates the most valuable tools and the main reasons for use in academic practices. Results of quantitative and qualitative analysis are provided along with considerations for further research.

INTRODUCTION

Social media refers to a wide range of applications that enable users to create, exchange, comment on and discuss digital contents with peers. They are usually depicted as ‘dynamic’, ‘interactive’, ‘democratic’, ‘people centric’, ‘volatile’, ‘social’ and ‘adaptive’ (Brown, 2012). In academia, these tools are frequently associated with the broad themes of digital scholarship (Goodfellow, 2013a; Nentwick & König, 2012; Veletsianos, 2016; Weller, 2011) and of Open Science (Bartling & Friesike, 2014).

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The purpose of digital scholarship that exploits the potentials of social media is, indeed, to reconsider seminal conceptualization of the different dimensions of scholarship (i.e. discovery, integration, teaching and application) in light of widespread social media adoption and trends in scholars' usage of these tools (Al-Aufi & Fulton, 2015; Costa, 2015; Donelan, 2016; Esposito, 2013; Gu & Widén-Wulff, 2011; Harley, Acord, Earl-Novell, Lawrence, & King, 2010; Jamali, Nicholas, & Herman, 2016; Jordan, 2014; Nández & Borrego, 2013; Pearce, Weller, Scanlon, & Ashleigh, 2010; Procter, Williams, Stewart, Poschen, Snee, Voss, & Asgari-Targhi, 2010; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012a). Recent studies have pointed out that frequency of social media use for personal and scholarly reasons exceeds the frequency of use in teaching (Manca & Ranieri, 2016b). Scholars are showing a generally more favourable attitude towards personal use and professional practices through social media rather than integrating these devices into teaching practices for several reasons, such as cultural resistance, pedagogical issues or institutional constraints (Manca & Ranieri, 2016a). However, despite these limitations in teaching use, the aim of this study is to report how academics use social media in their scholarly communication practices.

Studies on scholars' use of social media suggest that academics are using these services in their professional lives to enhance scholarly communication, with the aim of strengthening relationships, facilitating research collaboration also across institutional boundaries, keeping up with research trends, publishing and reflecting on ideas, disseminating information, and discussing issues in an open and public format (Greenhow & Gleason, 2014; Greenhow & Gleason, 2015; Procter, Williams, Stewart, Poschen, Snee, Voss, & Asgari-Targhi, 2010). The numerous capabilities offered by online networking services to build, maintain and showcase scholars' reputations have also recently been stressed in two studies funded by the European Commission (Nicholas, Herman, & Jamali, 2015; Vuorikari & Punie, 2015). These studies explored emerging drivers for Open Science among which Web 2.0 platforms and applications are also presented as alternative funding for scientific research and emerging reputation mechanisms for scholars. Moreover, social media offer an abundance of resources that can provide potential for online reputation, self-marketing techniques, as well as developing professional identity (Veletsianos, 2013; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2013).

Along with professional and academic social networking sites such as LinkedIn, ResearchGate and Academia.edu, general social networking tools and microblogging services such as Twitter or Facebook are also gaining appreciation among scholars as digital environments through which to disseminate the results of research activities, to extend personal networks for professional purposes, or to expand participation in academic events (Li & Greenhow, 2015; Nentwick & König, 2014; Stewart, 2015b). As stated by some authors (Stewart, 2015a), not only does networked engagement both align with and exceed Boyer's model for scholarship (Boyer, 1990), but networked scholarship may enact Boyer's initial aim of broadening scholarship itself through fostering extensive cross-disciplinary, public ties and rewarding connection, collaboration, and curation between individuals.

Despite a few large-scale based surveys that explored academics' use of and attitudes towards social media for scholarly reasons (Donelan, 2016; Lupton, 2014; Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2011; Moran, Seaman, & Tinti-Kane, 2012; Procter, Williams, Stewart, Poschen, Snee, Voss, & Asgari-Targhi, 2010; Rowlands, Nicholas, Russell, Canty, & Watkinson, 2011; Seaman & Tinti-Kane, 2013), surveys that investigate current use of these sites in Italy are missing. Focused attention on how Italian academic staff use social media for scholarly communication would contribute to widening the framework of knowledge related to social media use among academics in different countries.

The chapter first introduces the related literature and the methodological framework of the research, and then it describes and discusses the results with some implications for further research.

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