Chapter 8

Self-Organizing the Scholarly Practices:
How the PhD Researchers Use Web 2.0 and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the self-organized activities undertaken across Web 2.0 and social media services by individual PhD researchers in their doctoral journey. It aims to add to the emergent body of knowledge reporting the doctoral students' experience in the digital venues for scholarly purposes. This chapter is based upon an international and multi-method research carried out to canvass the variety of social media practices characterizing the PhD researchers' digital engagement. The findings offer a detailed and unprecedented repertoire of individual experiments in taming social media to scholarly tasks. The results suggest that complex negotiations occur between technology and practice, where the tension between the need for supporting existing tasks and the attempt for expanding opportunities for personal development is always at work and prefigures an approach to digital engagement always on the move. Furthermore, the research sparks questions about any institution-led initiatives to support the sort of 'do-it-yourself' PhD emerging from the participants' narratives.

INTRODUCTION

Concerns are expressed by scholars about the weak approach of doctoral education regarding the challenges faced by the 21st century newer researchers, and produced by a range of pressures such as knowledge economy, globalization process and policy recommendations. However, the digital factor is generally not explicitly thematized in these reflections, in favour of issues of diversification of types of doctorates (e.g. academic vs professional doctorates); the need for more collaborative and interdisciplinary research approaches; the progressive emergence of the 'mature student' beside the traditional profile of doctoral student who seamlessly access a doctoral program after being awarded a graduate degree.

Such changes are interwoven with policy recommendations for promoting a greater 'individual researcher development' (EUA, 2010). In particular, the PhD students "engage in creative mixes of education, training, research, work and career development" (Cummings, 2010, p. 26) in their doctoral experience, that is increasingly characterized by relationships with a range of stakeholders. This is likely to produced new forms of "negotiated agency" (Javzac-Martek, Chen & McAlpine, 2011, p. 18) that go beyond the core, traditional relationship between the apprentice researcher and the supervisor(s) (Shulman, 2004). Moreover, university is seen as changing its own nature from being the source of progressive knowledge in a nation state towards being a network of services and research bonds (Cornelissen, Simons, & Masschelein, 2007, p. 132). In this evolving context, also the type of engagement expected by the PhD researchers is subject to changes:

Doctoral students are asked to take responsibility for their own learning processes. They need to maintain their own research businesses and define their own projects. This suggests that is up to them to establish the norm and to define their own destinations. (Cornelissen et al., 2007, p. 132)

Such a picture references what Neil Selwyn calls "individualization of practice and action" (2011, p. 13) occurring across the various levels of the current digital education and requiring "increased levels of self-dependence and entrepreneurial thinking on the part of the individual" (p. 13). It can be said that PhD candidates are increasingly expected to be 'doctoral researchers' rather than 'doctoral students', where a greater autonomy is required to produce knowledge in a network of research bonds and resources. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the the 'digital' has currently a relevant impact on the textual academic practices, challenging the same format of the dissertations (Andrews, Borg, Boyd Davis et al., 2012). Accounting for the UK higher education context, Andrews and his associates discuss the occurring shift towards an idea of dissertation as a process rather than as a product. This practice is being enabled by the use of social networking sites to publish rough ideas and early findings and seems to be aligned with the dire need for early building an academic identity (and the related career development) by the newer researchers. Alongside, the empirical investigations about the actual adoption of Web 2.0 and social media services among the PhD researchers are still scant and scattered, although growing (James, Norman, De Baets et al., 2009; British Library/JISC, 2012; Zhu & Procter, 2012; Esposito, Sangrà & Maina, 2013).

This exploratory study is particularly concerned with the PhD students' efforts in 'taming' the Web 2.0 applications to carry out any scholarly tasks they are expected to perform, such as searching materials about emergent topics, doing networking with new experts, disseminating one's own publications, practicing scholarly writing and research dialogues and building an online academic profile. The current PhD students are in fact provided with unprecedented opportunities to draw advantages from a personalized uptake of the open Web in their doctoral journey, building on the individualization and ownership of the information, production and communication technologies enabled by the trend named Web 2.0. Such trend stems from a concept of the Web as "an artifact evolving according to shifting user engagement" (Brown, 2012, p. 50), that shapes and is shaped by 'personal ecologies' (Andrews & Haythornthwaithe, 2011) of software applications, contexts of use and value-laden practices activated by individual adopters.

For the purposes of this study, the author understands digital technologies as "assemblages of practices and components" (Arthur, 2009, p. 28), where focus is on the complex entanglements among technologies and social practices, in a socio-cultural approach, rather than on the socio-technical relationships between tools and individuals. In particular, social media applications (also indicated as social software or social network sites) are here considered as a subset of Web 2.0 services (Dabbagh & Reo, 2010),

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