HOW TO BE A DIGITALLY SAVVY RESEARCHER

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It is easier than ever for researchers to disseminate and report their findings once the job of collecting data and formulating a conclusion is complete. The process of research, scholarship, and publication is central to higher education (Mason et al., 2021). However, the existing model of research dissemination is far from adequate, as it does not meet the demands of the more competitive side of academia; journal publications and conference participation are no longer sufficient to build and establish professional reputations (Relojo-Howell, 2021a). Both your academic colleagues and the broader lay audience of those seeking to learn more about your specific area of study now have significantly more tools at their disposal to find the information they are looking for. As a result, researchers need to work harder at establishing themselves as respected professionals in their respective fields through a broader range of networking activities, including creating an online presence where their work can be found quickly and efficiently.

Getting Started

Often, those that have dedicated their lives to scholarly endeavours spend years laser-focused on furthering their education and conducting arduous research projects to establish themselves as an expert in their field (Relojo & Pilao, 2018). This often comes at the expense of learning other essential skills and processes that are necessary to further one's career. Once all of the work of obtaining an advanced degree is complete, it may be time to learn other necessary tools of the trade that will ensure that your work and level of expertise are as visible as possible to others. The social media platforms that have emerged over the past decade have changed how we all communicate and have also expanded how students, staff and faculty learn, interact, teach, and conduct research. Undoubtedly, the trend towards a largely digital life has also affected our professional lives, particularly for those working in higher education (Kuha et al., 2018). In essence, the way you portray yourself digitally is likely how you will be viewed professionally within the academic community (Jensen Schau & Gilly, 2003).

Expand Your Online Presence

Making an effort to expand your academic online presence means taking the time and effort to learn how to connect and engage professionally with the online community of students and

academics in an ever-expanding digital space (Bautista et al., 2018). Let us make sure that you know how to navigate these waters and review the necessary steps to take in digitally establishing yourself as a savvy scholar.

Create an online home for your professional endeavours with a dedicated website. Establishing a dedicated academic website of your own is an important and frequently overlooked first step in starting your path towards a professional online presence (Relojo & Pilao, 2016). Your website serves as your online home and the central nexus through which all of your other online efforts should flow. Having a website entirely under your creative control means acquiring a custom URL address that will serve as a consistent location to which you can refer colleagues and students to find your work, even if you change institutions. Additionally, your website affords the opportunity to consistently create content in the form of blogposts, which will help harness the power of search engines so that interested parties can find you and your work more efficiently. An academic website provides a way for you to thoroughly display your educational background, experience, and credentials in an organised manner. It also functions as a hub to link to all of the other online areas where you and your work can be found, including your social media accounts. Developing a personal academic website is a significant undertaking, but the potential benefits are substantial. Moreover, it is, perhaps, the best way to manage your online presence on a macro, long-term basis. Any visitor to your site will have instant access to a plethora of information on your academic career and accomplishments – all in one central location.

The benefits of a personal academic website include easily displaying the following information: (a) educational opportunities for students; (b) links and information on where to find your research; (c) your publication history, with links to relevant journals; (d) announcements of upcoming speaking engagements; (e) an updated overview of your professional accomplishments; (f) contact information; (g) information for current and potential research funders; (h) representative work for potential publishers; and (i) links to your public social media accounts. Creating a personal academic website produces a better public understanding of the impact of your work. However, it will require ongoing effort to maintain the accuracy of the site and consistently update it over the long-term.

Keep your academic profile on your departmental website up-to-date. The second area of importance is your departmental academic profile. If you are affiliated with an institution of higher education, you will want to keep all of your credentials and contact information as up-to-date as possible. You want to link your academic profile to your institutional web presence so your association and position at the university are clear, increasing your academic credibility.

Incorporate professional photos. The importance of a professional photo cannot be stressed enough. This may seem like a minor part of your academic online presence, but remember that your image is likely to be the first impression anyone will have of you in your digital professional life. If your profile photo is a low-resolution image and/or is out of focus, it immediately reflects poorly on you. On the other hand, a high-quality photo in which you are dressed professionally, demonstrating your academic background, can go a long way in instilling confidence in anyone that comes across your university, website, or social media profiles.

Taking the time, effort, and money to have professional photos taken is well worth it. If possible, try to incorporate the same professional photo of yourself across all platforms. This allows your network to quickly recognise you, regardless of what site they may find you on.

Determine your motivations and find your audience. Determining your goals for your personal website is a vital step before furthering your efforts to establish your digital presence and expand your network.

Are you focused on bringing more awareness to your publications? Or, is your purpose for expanding your digital presence and network to communicate more effectively with students and other professionals in your field? In particular, your goals will determine where and how you become involved in social media. First, decide what goals you want to achieve and how you want to portray yourself digitally. Then, most importantly, try to remain consistent with how you represent yourself across all platforms you decide to be active in.

Focus on Networking

Once you are armed with the tools to build the foundation of an online academic presence, turn your attention to taking things a step further to expand the visibility of your scholarly background through networking.

Networking through academic and traditional social media platforms is now an essential task for academics. It is a vital component in ensuring that your work is out there and available to anyone looking for it. Networking has always played an important role in business – and academia is no different. Researchers need to make strong connections to facilitate knowledge exchange. There will come a time when you need a trusted confidant to review your research findings or compare your results to theirs. This sharing of ideas and review of results is essential to the scientific, academic process.

Years ago, a simple business card and a contact list would suffice to meet these needs. However, today, it is rare for our network of contacts to develop solely as a result of in-person meetings at conferences or presentations. Learning the skills to curate a network of other academics online is essential to your success in any field of research.

Expand Your Network

Networking breaks down to growing your list of contacts and those you interact with regularly within a community of like-minded individuals. People you include in your network can be other professionals you respect, colleagues you work alongside in your research, or those looking to grow in your field under your mentorship. In each case, you can develop a dedicated following for your work on any number of networking platforms, both casual and professional.

Additionally, as a researcher, you have a responsibility to disseminate and share your findings. If your research is interesting, people are going to want to know about it. If you do not take the time to develop an extensive network, it is unlikely that your research will have the same impact as it would if you made an effort to ensure that your work reaches as many people as possible. Showing the ability to mobilise a network of contacts willing to collaborate with you in your research projects can also be a powerful asset for furthering your scholarly career. However, before jumping directly into academic and social media networking platforms, several other opportunities are worth consideration.

Consider the following networking methods: (i) join an association or society in your area of research; (ii) participate in academic conferences; (iii) contribute as a presenter at workshops or masterclass events; (iv) register for an Open Researcher and Contributor ID. ORCID is an alphanumeric code uniquely identifying scientific and other academic authors and contributors.

Social Media

Social media has evolved from a way to communicate with friends and family into a powerful tool to connect with others in higher education and research. Through networking and social media, researchers can spread the word about their work to an exponentially more expansive audience. Each social networking platform operates differently from the rest, and more recently, several networking ecosystems specifically tailored towards more professional and academic endeavours have gained traction (Pinto-Coelho & Relojo, 2017). Through these academic social networking sites, you are more likely to find an audience of individuals that are directly interested in connecting with others within the communities of academic research (Cain, 2008).

Academic Social Networking Sites

- *ResearchGate*. ResearchGate was founded in 2008 in Berlin, Germany. ResearchGate is a commercial social networking site for scientists and researchers to share papers, ask and answer questions, and find research collaborators. ResearchGate is one of the

best places to connect and communicate directly with highly educated and respected researchers.

- *Academia.edu*. Academia currently has over 1.5 million users and is a free, easy way to share research papers worldwide (Chavez Valdez et al., 2019; Matthews, 2016). Studies have shown that papers uploaded to Academia receive a 69% boost in citations over a five-year period. Suppose you are a researcher with a back catalogue of research papers. In that case, Academia would be an excellent opportunity to get more eyes on your work and to find other publications in your area of study.

- *Google Scholar*. Google Scholar was launched in 2004 and is a freely-accessible search engine that indexes the full text and metadata of scholarly literature across multiple publishing platforms and disciplines.

- *LinkedIn*. LinkedIn is perhaps the most well-known professional networking site on this list. The site went online in 2003 and has become the most popular and most used site for professional networking and career development (Relojo et al., 2016). LinkedIn includes features allowing users to submit resumes and list and apply for job openings. Over the years, the site has expanded to include a community of users who post primarily on topics related to their profession and connect and collaborate with others in the field.

These networking sites present an excellent way for academics to connect with a finely-tuned audience of individuals who are already looking for educational and research-based content. It is well worth the time and effort to become active in these communities and regularly contribute to them, as they are held in higher regard in academia. The perception is that users on these sites are intentionally seeking to connect with people on a professional, rather than a casual, level, resulting in a more targeted potential audience (Armstrong & McAdams, 2009).

Of course, these facts are not intended to dismiss the merits and usefulness of the more casual social sites. Despite having a user base with a broader scope of interests, sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram can be just as effective in expanding your network and disseminating your work to more and more people. Using strategies like hashtags, groups, and pages, these less-specialised social media sites can still offer a powerful way to improve your visibility as a scholar.

'Mass Market' Social Media Platforms

These social media platforms were initially intended to provide users with an easy way to connect and communicate with friends and family. While this remains a core service of these platforms, each has also evolved into a viable tool for academics to develop a following on their chosen topic.

Facebook. With over 2.89 billion users, this has emerged as the premier social media platform and is continuously adding new features to meet the demands of users looking to grow their network for a variety of reasons (We Are Social, 2021). When considering academic endeavours, Facebook groups and Facebook pages have become a fantastic way to connect with and provide value to your audience. A Facebook group is a highly niche, targeted audience based around any topic the group's administrator selects. Starting a Facebook group focused on your research is a viable way to grow your contacts list. Additionally, sharing valuable content to group members through posts or links to your research, with a call to action to encourage engagement, is a great strategy to get people talking and interacting with you about your work. Starting a Facebook page centred around your research is another viable way to engage followers. Additionally, both of these tools are excellent methods to ensure that people can find you. Facebook and Google are likely two of the first places people will search for you and your content, and these tools will ensure that your content shows up in Facebook search results.

Instagram. This site began primarily as an image-sharing social networking site. However, similar to Facebook, the platform has added several valuable features that are beneficial to networking professionals. Instagram has added hashtag functionality to allow users to more easily find content on common and popular topics and has also put an increased emphasis on video content

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(Na & Kim, 2019). These factors make the site a practical option for sharing your research-based information targeted towards hashtags where you might find your ideal audience.

Twitter. In many ways, Twitter has replaced the morning news in terms of how people consume information. Twitter may not elicit the same amount of engagement as Facebook or Instagram, but users are constantly scrolling their Twitter feeds, searching for the latest breaking news on topics that interest them. News reporters, politicians, and prominent business figures all use Twitter to quickly and succinctly share information on a plethora of different topics with their followers. With Twitter, much like Instagram, the key is in the use of hashtags (Bossetta, 2018). So, take some time to find the hashtags pertinent to your research and academic background and share exciting or engaging snippets of the latest happenings in your field.

YouTube There is no question that video is an effective means of presenting educational information. Although many viewers use YouTube primarily for entertainment purposes, more and more learners are turning to YouTube for education (Relojo-Howell, 2021b). YouTube is now considered one of the most used search engines on the internet, coming in second only to Google. Starting a YouTube channel and publishing content regularly can reach far more people than traditional in-person, academic presentations (Amarasekara & Grant, 2019). The power of your viewers being able to hear and see what you have to say cannot be underestimated. The simple fact that you can amass a large number of subscribers to your channel can lead to millions of views and grow your academic network at a rapid rate. A YouTube channel is an excellent option for establishing yourself as a scholarly research expert and a fantastic way to spread your wealth of knowledge much faster than traditional methods.

Comprehensive Networking Strategy

Considering that your research and academic responsibilities take up a large portion of your effort and energy, maintaining an online presence and networking can seem like a lot of work.

Of course, it is not necessary to utilise all of these strategies, and you are not required to be on each of the social media platforms discussed here. A viable strategy may be to start with the basics, establishing your academic website and ensuring that your institutional, professional profile is up to date. Then, choose one or two of the social media platforms you enjoy and are most comfortable with to expand your network and share your work. Each week, set aside time to create content centred around your research work, and share that content simultaneously across multiple platforms.

Professional Online Behaviour

One area that is not discussed nearly enough is the subject of your online behaviour. We have spent a lot of time talking about developing your network and creating an online persona while sharing your work with as many people as possible. These are all positive aspects of social networking for savvy scholars.

However, we all know that there are times that online interactions can take a negative turn. Of course, sharing your research and expertise is meant to spark interest and conversation. Nonetheless, these conversations can turn into a heated debate with a colleague who may disagree with you. Alternatively, you may get people you have never met making negative comments on your content. In these instances, it is sometimes easy to forget that you are still in a professional environment. The anonymity of the internet leaves the door open for some unprofessional, off-putting behaviour, and interactions can happen instantly (Regner & Reiner, 2017).

After putting in all of the effort to develop your online persona, it is important to remember to conduct yourself as professionally as you would at any brick-and-mortar institution. As we have established, you are now on a larger stage with many more eyes on your work and behaviour, and it is imperative as an academic that you take care to keep your reputation as a professional intact at all times.

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Summing-up

As we move forward with a generation of new learners whose lives are increasingly spent online, if you are to be a successful, savvy scholar, you will need to choose at least a few of these methods to ensure that you remain relevant. There is no question that the future is digital, and to ignore the curation of an online persona for your academic career could potentially be an error that negatively impacts your career. Maintain an online presence that accurately reflects your skills and expertise, leverage digital communities to expand the reach and impact of your work, and remember to carry yourself as professionally in your digital life as you would in person, and you will find a wider audience for your work than ever before.

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