

Strategic digital engagement for impact: Building your academic presence online

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Strategic digital engagement for impact: Building your academic presence online

In today's digital environments online engagement is a critical component of achieving successful, sustainable impact. Building an online presence that extends beyond the walls of academia is therefore an essential part of developing as a scholar during any stage of the career-span. In this chapter we discuss career-wide approaches for establishing yourself as a "networked scholar" (Goodier & Czerniewicz, 2015) to build connections and foster communication. We also explore ways to engage your audience through open, public outputs (publications, graphics, websites, profile tools, etc.). Using the key strategies presented, scholars can build an online academic presence and increase their scholarly visibility on the web or through social media. At the core of this chapter is an exploration of how academics can develop and communicate about themselves and their research interests, to achieve their goals both in the near-term and across their career-span. While the approaches presented are not prescriptive, they are intended to encourage the reader to generate a plan for online engagement that helps establish their scholarly identity. These tried and tested activities can be leveraged for engaging different audiences in research in ways that promote networked scholarship and create pathways to impact.

Keywords:

Networked scholarship; Digital engagement; Social media; Academic development; Scholarly communication; Knowledge mobilization; Academic communities

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Introduction

In our work with academics, we often hear that people are either too busy, or just plain uncomfortable, to engage with the idea of being an impactful academic and promoting meaningful use of their work as a networked scholar. But researchers put a lot of time and energy into scholarship, from project design to data analysis, to reporting and publishing findings. Shouldn't some of that time and energy also be spent sharing this work in ways that interested audiences can find and make use of it? We want our scholarship to be impactful, and we want people to engage with the new knowledge created, so it is surely worth the effort to ensure that others can easily find and connect with us and our work.

Of course, making an impact doesn't simply mean publishing or otherwise sharing our work. We can see impact in action when people understand, experience, or do things differently based on their interactions with academics and their outputs (University of York, n.d.).

Today, the ever-evolving academic job market and the research funding landscape means there are increased expectations to show impacts tangibly. Greater emphasis is now placed not only on demonstrating the quality and scholarly significance of your research, but also on mobilizing and translating your work for a variety of audiences, and across a diversity of contexts, including online environments.

Effective use of digital engagement strategies can help researchers to promote prospective and actual use of their work and capture impactful examples of how their contributions foster positive change for individuals, partners, and communities. By interactively sharing your work more widely across audiences within and beyond academia, you can develop your expertise and reputation while at the same time fostering impact in a broader context.

Engaging online: Creating pathways to impact

Digital engagement has become essential for cultivating, understanding, and defining the impact of your work. Online environments are now a necessary part of extending your expertise through different networks, increasing the findability of publications and other outputs, and connecting with relevant users and audiences – all of which are necessary pathways to impact.

Whether you're an early career researcher or a senior scholar, establishing your presence and engaging online is now part of being an academic. When done intentionally and strategically, time spent on these efforts can be a useful investment in yourself and your career. Developing your online presence and meaningfully engaging as a networked scholar can foster worthwhile and rewarding interactions that create the conditions for impact to occur across your career span.

Being (or Becoming) a Networked Scholar

What does it mean to be a networked scholar? Social media researcher Veletsianos (2016) describes these scholars as those “who make use of participatory technologies and online social networks to share, improve, validate, and further their scholarship” (p. 2). Many forms of

research and scholarship today require this engagement with online networks, especially for those concerned with broadening their impact.

At the heart of this idea of networked scholarship is the importance of building new online connections and relationships. For many scholars, those online networks are (or will soon become) a critical part of their academic profile and are inherently involved in mobilizing and translating their work.

Building blocks of a networked scholar

So how can you develop as (or become) a networked scholar? Consider your own work in the context of the seven interconnected facets shown in the building blocks below:

Figure 1

Building blocks of the networked scholar



Note: Seven interconnected facets of being a networked scholar. The original image appears on page 6 of Goodier, S. & Czerniewicz, L. (2015). *Academics' online presence: A four-step guide to taking control of your visibility* (3rd ed.). University of Cape Town.

<http://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/2652>

The building blocks provide a useful framework for developing and extending your academic work through web and social networks. While there isn't a prescriptive way to achieve all these elements, below we describe key approaches to identity, presence, and reputation through pathways to visibility and by developing your academic profile. We also outline approaches involving groups, conversations, connections, and sharing in our sections on digital engagement and using social media.

For each of the building blocks, ask yourself: where are your strengths and where are the opportunities for growth? You may find that you're a novice in one block but have existing strengths in another. Leverage these strengths while working on those areas that need improvement.

Making Yourself Visible

Engagement begins by forging connections yourself and being open and available to connections and invitations from others. Your online academic presence is the primary way that other academics will discover your teaching, research, and scholarly interests and expertise. While publications might be a main source for this, when it comes specifically to engagement, the information others can find about you on web pages, social media sites, digital publication venues, and other platforms is fundamental. It's important to know what this looks like currently and where you'd like it to grow.

Evaluate your current online presence

Before starting to actively develop your academic presence, the first step is to determine how visible you are online currently by doing a simple online search. Yes, this means you need to search for yourself online and take a good look at what you find.

Exercise: Search yourself

Google yourself: Enter your name in a search engine to find out how you appear online. Then ask:

- Do the top search results show you and your academic (or professional) work?
 - If not, why not? What do you like, and what would you like to change?
 - Discuss the search results with a trusted friend or colleague (ideally one from outside your discipline). What input or suggestions do they have?
- Can people from within and outside of academia, including media outlets and potential partners, easily find clear information about your areas of expertise and contributions?
 - Is your contact information up-to-date and easily viewable?
 - Is there a way to connect with you on a social media platform?

- Can people see examples of your research, teaching, or speaking?
- Where do you see any opportunities to improve or enhance the results?
- Does searching for yourself online showcase you, your interests, and your research in the ways that you want to appear?

This simple search exercise should give you a good idea of why it might be valuable to focus on building your online presence. Use this exercise to make a plan that prioritizes areas where you want to increase visibility and engage in relevant scholarly networks (Goodier & Czerniewicz, 2015; La Trobe University Research Education and Development Team, n.d.).

Developing Your Academic Profiles

Now that you have an idea of how you already appear online, it's time to consider how you want to expand this presence and define your identity. We always recommend developing a couple of online academic profiles that can serve as a foundation for engaging in a broader range of other networked scholarly activities. You can then develop and connect these profile tools, like ORCID or Google Scholar, to other online engagement spaces, such as your web and social media presence.

Visibility and findability, with a focus on you

First and foremost, your online presence should reflect you and your work in the ways that you want to be known. Ultimately, this approach recognizes that you are the best person to define how you and your research appear online. Goodier and Czerniewicz (2015) remind us that you may not be in full control of your *digital shadow*, or the “content about you posted and uploaded by others, or even created by you inadvertently” (p. 5), but the exercise above asking you to search for yourself online should provide some critical awareness of your existing digital footprint. This will hopefully lead you to some informed decisions about how you can shape that presence going forward.

This focus-on-you approach also means you get to decide what accomplishments to highlight. For instance, you might want to focus on profiling yourself as comprehensively and completely as possible, likely by showcasing your career progression and contributions over time. Or, you might decide to take a more selective approach, perhaps by highlighting specific periods of your career or by focusing on key projects or publications.

When it comes to your approach, do what's comfortable, keeping your career stage in mind. Arguably, early career academics have an advantage here, since at this point you may not have a lifetime of contributions to highlight, or much of a digital shadow to reshape. Your initial online presence might start small, but with regular care and maintenance, it will grow throughout your whole career.

Recommended strategies for online visibility

Whenever we work with researchers interested in enhancing their online presence, we recommend establishing two key academic profiles before anything else: your Google Scholar profile (GSP), and your ORCID identity record. While there are many online scholarly profile tools to choose from, we recommend networked scholars explore these options first. These two tools will form the backbone of your online presence and how easily others will find you. The following is not a how-to guide for setup – instructions are readily found online – but rather a brief overview of key features and reasons why we recommend these tools first.

Google Scholar Profiles

Creating your GSP is our go-to recommendation for those looking to establish their online presence. If nothing else, it's free and costs nothing but a bit of time, while being the easiest and fastest way to enhance your online visibility. Having a Google Scholar profile makes it much easier for others to find you and your research due to the indexing and search features of Google. You can keep your profile private while you complete the initial setup to your tastes, and make it public once you're ready to share. Those who view your public GSP profile will see your research interests, affiliations, and links to your publications. Plus, future updates to your profile can be automated entirely, or you can activate notifications to receive a message when Google Scholar finds possible works to add to your profile.

Since it's drawing on works indexed by Google Scholar, the coverage is comprehensive and will find your publications appearing in journals, as monographs, book chapters, theses or dissertations, conference proceedings, and occasional grey literature (such as your contributions to reports, to government or policy documents, or to other expert, non-academic publications). It can also be used for identifying your presentations and workshops. You can automate this search, or manually add research outputs. Because it's Google, these sources will link out to an online version of your work and generally provide better coverage than you would find in one of the more traditional (paid) citation tools (e.g., Scopus or Web of Science).

Tip: Automation is useful, but requires checks

If you decide to fully automate the process of adding artifacts to any of your scholarly profiles, plan to periodically review and clean up the additions. The automation tools aren't perfect and may add artifacts that aren't actually your contributions. You'll want to ensure that these false hits weren't added incorrectly, and that nothing is missing from your profile.

Your GSP shows traditional impact measures of your works through citations, including total (known) citations to all artifacts captured in your profile, the h-index for those publications, and also the i10-index. All of these are important measures since they are citation counts at the *author level*, meaning they directly reflect that your work has been cited and thus impacted other research in some way. In addition, GSP focuses on the last five years, so that you can see your recent impact. These measures are easily verifiable, since the citation counts link to the known

citing articles for each artifact. This is a quick window on your impact though traditional research metrics. We talk about other metrics later.

Finally, as a networked scholar you will want to take advantage of features of your profile that create connections to other researchers. There's an option to verify your email address officially connected to an academic institution or research organization, options to link to your personal website or other preferred site, and the ability to tag your co-authors and collaborators, immediately connecting to their Scholar profiles (if they have one). Finally, if you use keywords to define your areas of interest, these will become hyperlinked searches that will connect you with other researchers interested in the same topics.

Open Researcher & Contributor ID (ORCID)

Claiming your ORCID profile is also free and easy to setup. Importantly, ORCID helps address possible confusion around identifying authorship through name disambiguation. Consider: is your name truly unique? Academia is no exception to the problem of common and shared names, and so it's worth ensuring that your contributions are always connected to you.

ORCID helps address this problem through *authority control*, simply by organizing contributions made by a single entity (you, the creator) and assigning and collecting them under a specific and unique identifier (a persistent URL). This persistent identifier leads to an online profile that you control and maintain, ensuring you remain the authoritative voice on your research profile.



ORCID is particularly useful if some of your contributions appeared under a different name than your current or preferred moniker, such as after a name change due to marital status, gender expression, a cultural or religious preference, or a myriad of other reasons. ORCID also helps in cases where even the correct display of your name isn't fully under your control, such as when publications use name variants (e.g., full names versus initials) and you want to be sure these permutations all still identify you.

Additional benefits of ORCID include enriched profile options where you can authoritatively highlight other contributions around your research career. Rather than just focusing on publications, you can include your grants, significant awards and distinctions, and indicate your education and employment history. Plus, the ORCID privacy settings are quite granular, such that you can control how much information in each category is visible. As a networked scholar you will also want to explore the options for linking to your other online profiles; to make sure people can easily find and distinguish your social media accounts; and to easily find your website and connect to your other academic profiles.

Finally, your ORCID can save you time, thanks to the ORCID organization's commitment to interoperability and standardization. Many journal publishers, funding bodies, university

systems, and other research dissemination and support tools now require you to provide your ORCID as part of the submission or application process. These platforms will connect to and read basic information from your ORCID profile, meaning you don't have to spend the effort to populate forms and metadata repeatedly – maintain it all in your ORCID profile and let it do the work of completing those forms for you.

Top 5 academic profile options

When considering what profiles to develop, here are our recommendations for where to start:

- Google Scholar = <https://scholar.google.ca/citations>
- ORCID = <https://orcid.org/>
- ResearchGate = <https://www.researchgate.net/>
- LinkedIn = <https://www.linkedin.com/>
- Publons/ResearcherID = <https://publons.com/about/home/>

You don't have to develop a profile in every space. In fact, profile fatigue is real (Allen, 2017), and we recommend *against* trying to be present in all of them.

Sharing: Let's talk about access

After you have established your online profile and made progress toward building your online connections, it's time to give some consideration to sharing, especially the ways that others will access your published research and other information about the projects you want to promote. More specifically, we recommend making your artifacts as open and publicly accessible as possible.

Can your intended audience access the full publication you promoted with a Tweet, or added to your Google Scholar profile? Remember that subscriptions, paywalls, and many other factors can affect the accessibility of valuable research findings. These can pose major barriers for a variety of information users inside and beyond academia, and are particularly challenging for communities, organizations, and members of the public.

In other words, ensuring that those who need, want, or might otherwise benefit from the research can access it is part of being a networked scholar, and making your work widely accessible for the long term is part of catalyzing impact. Not only will your research be available to more people, but considerable research shows that open publications (e.g., open access, open data, and open education resources) are read and cited more often than their subscription-locked counterparts. So, it's also in your best interest to make sure your outputs are freely and openly available whenever it's feasible to do so.

Creating a Roadmap for Digital Engagement

Most of the time, engagement doesn't just happen – it requires some intentional effort and planning. Drafting a brief roadmap where you identify strategies for using web and social media

platforms, and allocating time for achieving your goals, will help to focus your efforts on engagement that's of the greatest value. We recommend that your roadmap for digital engagement consider the following.

Focus on what's most valuable

Who are the individuals and groups that can use, benefit from, and inform your work? How do *you* want *your research* and expertise to be adopted? What is the value of your work for audiences within and outside of academia? How you find value in focusing your time and efforts online should directly relate to how you want to define yourself as an impactful academic. The more specific you can be in visioning what engagement and impact looks like for you, the better. Focusing on what's most valuable – from your perspective and in the eyes of your audience – will help you not only to extend your own profile, but also to find and engage with interested colleagues, stakeholders, and partners online in strategic ways.

Set achievable goals

What do you want to achieve with your online presence? For instance, do you want to increase the visibility of your profile as a researcher? Or to have your work in a particular area reach new audiences? Start by creating one or two goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-based (SMART) to guide your digital engagement plan. Revisit these goals to check your progress on a regular basis.

Identify key audiences and spaces

The vast number of online spaces means it's impossible to effectively engage in all of them, so aim for quality over quantity. Begin dedicating your efforts in one or two key digital spaces by identifying who your main audience is and understanding what online platforms they use. For example, you might create an infographic that mobilizes and translates key research findings, then invite key stakeholders or potential future partners to discuss it on Twitter or LinkedIn.

Remember that long-form content created for a blog, e-newsletter, or website should be formatted and presented differently on social platforms that focus on brevity and audiovisuals, such as Instagram, Twitter, or TikTok. Be sure to align your engagement goals with content strategies that ensure your use of text and media are effective for your audience and the specific online environment.

Allocate time for updates and communication

Being findable online means ensuring your profile on university and professional websites, and on social media sites, is current. Schedule regular “tune-up” times to refresh your online academic profiles, even by setting a recurring calendar reminder.

Distributing too much one-way content can turn people off. Remember that meaningful online engagement requires responsive, two-way interaction about not only your own work, but also the work of others. Your audience will usually be looking for timely, authentic back-and-forth

communication, so plan time for engaging in discussions and posting comments or responses when using social platforms.

Being selective and strategic by focusing your efforts on your top goals will help to make your online engagement more effective and manageable.

Did you know?

Many post-secondary institutions have media experts who can consult on communication strategies and recommend effective approaches, including web and social media strategies. Consider reaching out to your university's communications team to gain feedback on your digital engagement plan.

Using Social Media

As with social media generally, academic use of social media comes with many pros and cons. For example, some scholars are surprised when their work goes viral, while others work in areas that can be a lightning rod for trolls and controversy (see Carrigan, 2019). Choosing whether and how to use social media as a networked scholar is ultimately up to you. However, just as with the online platforms above, it is our belief that there is value in being an active part of the conversation on social media, rather than passively allowing others to shape these conversations for you.

Social media is a useful way to extend your reach in academic networks. Beyond the individual reputational benefit, as Carrigan and Fatsis aptly note in a recent interview (University of Cambridge, 2021), it is important to foster rich engagement by using social media for the public good, instead of using it to simply broadcast information passively to a public audience. With this very kind of rich engagement in mind, the following three steps provide recommendations for ways to start interacting through groups, conversations, connections, and sharing on social media.

Three steps for social media engagement

Choose

Choose *one or two* social media platforms that can best reach your audience, where you can see yourself being active and engaged. Examples of popular social platforms for networked academics include Twitter, LinkedIn, ResearchGate, Facebook, and Instagram.

When creating your accounts, be sure to complete all the relevant fields, especially your bio line and profile picture. Decide if you want to focus on your academic persona distinct from any personal accounts you might have (usually a good idea). Ask a trusted friend to review things and give you constructive feedback before you go live.

Observing different social media habits of colleagues and partners on your chosen platform can be useful. What works well and gains traction? Such examples will help you determine which social media practices you might want to emulate, and those to avoid.

Connect

Connect by “following” or “friending” individuals or organizations with similar interests and areas of expertise on each platform you join. This will help you find and curate content that relates to your academic identity. Make note of relevant accounts, groups, pages, or lists that you could follow, comment on, post about, or redistribute – especially ones that share easily consumed media-rich links, images, and videos that engage people with added auditory or visual elements.

Learn the format or “anatomy” of posts on your social media spaces to increase findability and engagement through mentions (often using the @ symbol) and hashtags (typically using #).

Interact

Share and promote timely information with your network on a regular basis, ideally in ways that invite discussion. It’s okay to shine a light on your own valuable work, as well as the excellent work of others.

An account that has been abandoned is a liability because it can give the wrong impression that your work has been discontinued, or increase your risk of missing messages, mentions, and other notifications. Commit to being active on a regular basis (weekly, daily, etc.). Knowing what you want to share and when will help you plan. It’s better to not be on a social media service than to present yourself poorly or partly.

Being consistent in your messaging in ways that reinforce your expertise and interests will let your audience know what to expect by following you and what you bring. As you establish your voice and reputation, your messages and interactions should be consistent with your desired online academic profile more often than not, at least initially.

The type and quality of interactions matter. Have an engagement strategy that fosters interaction through chats, discussions, questions, or polls and adds interest by using links, attachments, or visuals. If you know an output (article, report, etc.) will be published soon, plan ahead for ways to promote and build engagement with it on social media.

Timing is a critical part of social media engagement. Set aside refresh time, such as regularly scheduling social media “tune-up Tuesdays.” Some systems (e.g., HootSuite) can post content on preset dates and times, but use these with caution: the immediate, up-to-the-minute nature of social media still requires you to make time for prompt interactions and responses.

There isn’t one recipe for success with social media. The choices you make in becoming a networked scholar are ultimately up to you. Be strategic about where you focus your engagement efforts and do what works for you in authentically achieving your goals.

Capturing Engagement and Impact

To know if you're on the right track to achieving your goals, it's important to keep track of how your digital engagement is developing to both see your progress over time and have meaningful examples at your fingertips.

Capturing engagement and impact can be as simple as keeping a living document listing a running tally of examples of your contributions being discussed or used via links or screenshots. If these are difficult to find, consider asking for testimonials, recommendations, or impact stories from the communities you've connected with in your scholarly networks. As you're applying for jobs, funding, or awards, you'll be surprised how helpful it is to refer to illustrative use cases that present a clear picture of how you interact and promote change with different audiences.

Engagement Metrics

You can track digital engagement over time through *alternative metrics*, commonly known as altmetrics. To be clear, altmetrics are not citations. Instead, they are quantitative and qualitative measures of how others have engaged with and used your research outputs and ideas outside of traditional academic venues. Altmetrics track online engagement, including social media attention (e.g., sharing and mentions of your work on Twitter or Facebook), online views and downloads of your publications, or when your work has been added to or bookmarked in certain reference managers (e.g., Mendeley). And like traditional metrics, altmetrics are cumulative and show development over time.

Capturing these metrics on social and web engagement makes it clear when someone has found, shared, or discussed your work. Considering that use of your research by community groups, policy makers, and government reports typically are not shown in traditional impact measures, altmetrics can be particularly important for capturing engagement beyond academic contexts. If someone is Tweeting about your work, that's engagement! Use this as a starting place to join the conversation.

Some options for altmetrics

Several platforms can be used for altmetrics. Here are some free and paid options.

- Impact Story (free) = <https://impactstory.org/>
- Kudos (free) = <https://info.growkudos.com/>
- Altmetric (paid/subscription) = <https://www.altmetric.com/>
- Plum Analytics (paid/subscription) = <http://www.plumanalytics.com/>
- Overture (paid/subscription) = <https://www.overture.io/>

Individually and together, traditional and alternative metrics can help you to get a sense of the trends and interest around a particular research output or set of ideas, so it's worthwhile to be aware of these throughout your career. Also, important to keep in mind is that all metrics have limitations and may only tell part of your engagement story. Any information detailing how

people are engaging with and using your work is more important than how many might have simply seen it.

Conclusion

Being online is now an essential part of any academic career, especially for those interested in generating impact through their work across their career span. But while we may be required to be online, the amount of energy and effort spent on these activities – and the types of digital engagement that take priority – are up to us.

Creating pathways to impact is about more than the number of downloads, followers, likes, or shares. It's about using our capabilities as networked scholars for connecting people within and beyond academia to build new understandings, experiences, and approaches in ways that lead to positive changes in the world around us.

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