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# Social Scholarship? Academic Communications in the Digital Age

Steven Weiland, Professor, Michigan State University

## Introduction

Those who write articles and books, and those who organize and manage their use, know that the technological transformation of scholarship can be experienced in personal ways, marking recognition of new professional possibilities. Thus, composition scholar James Porter (2002) tells the story of his progress in becoming a cyberwriter with the evolution of personal computers, and historian David Bell (2005) recorded his initial experience with access to newly digitized online resources.

We are mastering our machines in the production of texts as refinements continue (e.g., in enhanced e-books [Wright, 2014]), and we are increasingly adept online searchers with high expectations (Nicholas & Clark, 2015). Inevitably, for some observers, scholarly identity itself must now be organized around technology, particularly the digital transformation of professional communications.

## *Scholarship Reconsidered, Once More*

According to Martin Weller (2011) of the British Open University, we are well on our way to becoming digital scholars. He found a platform for the change in influential work late in the last century by Ernest Boyer (1990), at the time president of the Carnegie Endowment for the Advancement of Teaching and thus an important voice in higher education. Uneasy about the priority given to research at American universities (and to a degree at leading liberal arts colleges), Boyer reasserted from inside faculty work the significance of teaching. That is, it wasn't institutional reforms that would stay growing preoccupation with research but a new description of scholarship itself, presumably the animating force in academic lives, featuring its role in all that professors do.

Thus, Boyer named traditional research as the "scholarship of discovery." It was complemented by the "scholarship of integration," representing the new trend of interdisciplinary work. The scholarship of application recognized what has always been called service, or expanding the reach and uses of

research, and the scholarship of teaching, which became the best-known innovation in Boyer's scheme, generated a new field of inquiry, now with its own organization and publications (issotl.com).

Weller found in Boyer's proposals another possibility, far from the analog roots of *Scholarship Reconsidered*, in what faculty work reflects of the digital transformation of higher education. Thus, he applies it to each of the four categories, or what is changing with ubiquitous electronic connectivity. Indeed, for Weller and for others following the evolution of the academic professions, what scholars make of new digital opportunities in the social dimension of their work will determine its future (Lupton, 2015; Daniels & Thistlewaite, 2016).

## "Digital Dispositions" and the Social Scholar

In another adaptation of Boyer's formulation, also reflecting Weller's adaptation of it, Cristina Costa (2013) found new "digital dispositions" among the faculty. They represent loosening of the hold of tradition on how digital scholars, or those who fully embrace technology, see their professional worlds. Thus, control of knowledge production and dissemination is starting to shift from the institution to the individual and from official to more informal sources and platforms.

Three new conditions of scholarship, as Weller identified them, reflect the priority of the participatory Web: Digital media for presenting content, social networks for interaction among peers and others, and the values of openness as in the open access movement in publishing. Costa favors calling the digital academic habitus, or new patterns of thought and behavior, a "system of dispositions," terms she borrows from the sociological theorist Pierre Bourdieu. Scholars are reinventing themselves, abandoning conventions of practice for configurations of academic work featuring their online social components.

A social scholar uses Web 2.0 tools to communicate about scholarly work, at all stages of it, and develops and sustains networked identities (Veletsianos,

2013). Thus, “An Introduction to Social Media for Scientists” appearing in an open access journal from the influential Public Library of Science (PLOS) focuses on the benefits of “public visibility and constructive conversation” (Bik & Goldstein, 2013), but scientists are hardly alone in turning to social media. Thus, the prestigious London School of Economics offers its faculty a detailed guide to using Twitter, part of its ambitious social impact blog ([les.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences](http://les.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences)). The authors claim that social media can meet a scholar’s “full range of academic interests” (Mollett, Moran, & Dunleavy, 2011).

“Academia Goes Facebook?” is the way an account of the place of social networking in scholarship expressed what some observers hope for in academic communications (Nentwich & König, 2014). Plainly, the faculty is adopting social media for professional communications and, after a period of indifference, also using pandisciplinary global repositories such as ResearchGate and academia.edu for dissemination of research and communications about it (Rowlands et al., 2011; Jordan, 2014; Borrego, 2016; Veletsianos, 2016).

Scholarly participation in social media may be in an early stage, but Michael Nentwich and Rene König (2014, p. 113) say there is enough to classify “activity levels and usage intensities.” In other words, scientists and scholars are online or express their digital dispositions, in a practical hierarchy of identities:

- *Me-Too Presence*, or a low level of activity limited to occasional appearances.
- *Digital Calling Card*, or beyond the rudimentary, perhaps like a modest personal website.
- *Passive Networking*, or sporadic searching and responding to automated suggestions to contact others.
- *Active Networking*, or regular online activity such as participation in group forums and searching for potential networking partners.
- *Cyberentrepreneurship*, or particularly active participation including organizing others’ participation in the network

These may be seen as products of Costa’s digital dispositions applied to making scholarship social or, as others name the trend, adopting an electronic

persona for self-representation as a feature of academic work (Barbour & Marshall, 2012; Veletsianos, 2013; McDonald, 2015).

We can ask if we are approaching the point when the scale of participation in social media means that scholars and scientists wishing to keep pace with their field and with colleagues can’t afford not to use digital networking to advance their work (Van Noorden, 2014). As Nentwich and König (2014, p. 115) put it, “Networks are only attractive with users, but users only come when they are attractive.” They assert as well that if universities begin to acknowledge what can be learned about research impact from altmetrics (as discussed later), that too will prompt scholars and scientists to use social media.

### The Arrival of Altmetrics

How far can the interactive or social world of scholarship extend? According to Nentwich and König (2014, p. 121), if “academia goes Facebook,” it will produce a world “characterized by massive, ubiquitous, micro communications.” They see appealing features of a future of this kind, in what they named “Cyberscience 2.0.” Thus, “Other researchers from various fields and positions, even students and laypeople, might participate in these interactions. This tendency of lowering status-based communication hurdles might be regarded as the democratization of science.” Moreover, inventive scholarship “may be checked by more peers in an ongoing process that is much faster than the regular circles of peer reviewing.”

Systematic acknowledgment of the quickening pace of recognition of scholarly work outside the routines of journal citation is what lies behind the movement for altmetrics, or how digital and social scholars, and increasingly institutions as well, follow and demonstrate their impact. There are a host of new practices, some specified in the *San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment* (Bladek, 2013), a sign of hopes for revising current systems for measuring the impact of scholarship and displaying achievement along a career.

Altmetrics (or alternative metrics) represents the most effective challenge to date to the slow pace of traditional bibliometrics, which are also seen to favor experienced authors and scientists. The new

system identifies recognition beyond academic journals, or what is made visible in varieties of social networking (an authoritative library-oriented guide to altmetrics is Roemer & Borhardt, 2015). According to its widely cited “Manifesto,” altmetrics is “the creation and study of new metrics based on the Social Web for analyzing and informing scholarship” (Priem et al., 2010). The new data, derived from practices of social scholarship, would complement or even, in the view of many advocates, replace conventional metrics like a journal’s impact factor and presumably what it conveys about the reach and thus the value of a scholarly or scientific article. The goal is uncovering scholarly impact or utility that would otherwise go unrecorded.

Thus, recognition of published work is changing to reflect the new digital and social conditions of research dissemination, or how scholars make their work known to others and, in turn, how it is circulated. Inevitably altmetrics has brought fresh attention to the uses of data (via metrics) for evaluation or judgment (Crotty, 2014; Hicks et al., 2015). Skeptics insist on stricter standards for defining metrics, data quality, indicator reliability, and representation of social media contexts before altmetrics can be fully accepted in research assessment and faculty evaluation (Liu & Adie, 2013), but altmetrics’ chief theorist and advocate says that the traditional system based on citations is too remote from the realities of science, “where ideas are born, nursed, and raised in messy, fast moving informal invisible colleges” (Priem, 2014, p. 264; see also Lapinski, Piwowar, & Priem, 2013).

Nentwich and König (2014) acknowledge that despite growing use of social networks for communications, e-teaching, self-marketing, and job searching, regular interaction of this kind is “not yet part of the academic mainstream.” Mindful of the power of social media in the culture at large (Perrin, 2015) and the ways that digital routines are now part of all scholarly and scientific work, they ask this question: “Will future communication among scholars take place predominantly on social networking sites?”

Of course, to the degree that any particular platform succeeds (such as Facebook), it can consume lots of time for users. In registering how academic use of social media is a many sided phenomenon, scientist and editor David Crotty (2010) wonders if more academic digital conversation is really useful, at least

for scientists. “Communication is an important part of being a scientist. It is not, however, the top priority for most.” Social media only add to the workload: “Even without new online technologies, scientists already spend a substantial portion of their time communicating. They share results with peers, plan future experiments with collaborators, give talks, write papers, teach, etc. New social media endeavors ask scientists to devote even more time to communication, but it’s unclear where participants are supposed to find the time.”

Mark Carrigan’s (2016, pp. 131–148, 165) candid account of making time for social media features first having sound reasons for the practice and then cultivating the habits of mind that can sustain what is still a novel professional activity (see also Neal, 2012 and Veletsianos, 2016), but the payoff, in a “new collegiality,” is a sign of how faculty work can “exhibit the characteristics of a networked public.” That certainly sounds optimistic, but Nentwich and König suggest that assumptions such as these are “farfetched given the current state of affairs.” What may change things in the future is demography. Younger scholars and scientists, having grown up with social media, will ultimately bring their habits of everyday communication into their professional lives.

## **A Social Scholar at Work or Impact Activism**

The vocabulary of Silicon Valley—in entrepreneurship—may suggest more than what most scholars are seeking. Or, does “The Start-Up of You,” as LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman (2012) put it in his popular book of career development advice, now describe the keenest of academic social media users, or those at work on what is recommended as reputation management” for scholars (Greenhow & Gleason, 2014)?

What happens when a scholar sets out to gain recognition according to the new methods of social scholarship? A recent case offers a view of how the open access movement, an institutional repository, social media, and the reconfiguration of academic careers can come together in what might be called “impact activism.”

Melissa Terras (2012) had been a faculty member at highly regarded University College London (UCL), a pioneer in the field of digital humanities, when she

conducted an experiment in probing what a digital presence can mean for a scholar. She capitalized on the repository launched by UCL and its mandate that all faculty contribute copies of their work. Once she had a way to make her articles easily accessible online, it took only a steady effort using social media (mainly Twitter) to boost significantly the number of times they were downloaded. The figures are impressive, as is Terras' belief that what she did is possible for anyone else, provided they have a digital presence or are inclined to build one (via a blog or Twitter) and a repository (institutional, disciplinary, or commercial) to house their work.

Gaining an audience can come from the deliberate effort to do so, even if the goal is something short of a "Klout Score," the online service (klout.com) that declares itself "The Standard for Influence" with its software measuring the extent and activity of a user's social media networks. In fact, Terras had academic ideals in mind. Her tale, built from her blog posts, is appealing in its modesty, and the surprise is she found in the success of her experiment. In her view, the lesson for scholarly communications is simple: If you let enough people know about your work, you will have more readers than you might otherwise expect. As she says, "If you tell people about your research, they look at it. Your research will get looked at more than papers which are not promoted via social media."

### **The Library as Guide and Gadfly**

The digital scholar and social scholarship are features of the academic share in the impact of technology on our culture, and they appear now to be built into the services of campus libraries. Most now offer guidance to the faculty in entering social scholarship, particularly in the context of mastering altmetrics (Suiter & Moulaison, 2015), but there is a complementary role for libraries, where the stance of the gadfly can complement that of the guide. It is why there is the question mark after "social scholarship" in my title. A gadfly is someone who provokes others, often with unwelcome criticism. A gadfly librarian, being still collegial in spirit, would invite the faculty to consider what it means to be a digital scholar and claims for social scholarship:

- What must be recognized as durable about the traditional scholarly workflow? While the digital tide is strong, a multiyear study of seven disciplines showed considerable

indifference and even resistance to the electronic transformation of scholarly communications (Harley et al., 2010; Harley, 2013). Limits to faculty enthusiasm for the style of the digital scholar, particularly what it demands in screen time, are also visible in recent ethnographic accounts of academic work, which is still often analog and solitary (Hillesund, 2010; Bussert et al., 2011; Antonijevic & Cahoy, 2014).

- To what degree does uncritical attention to altmetrics contribute to what has been named the "audit culture" in postsecondary education? Quantitative approaches to academic performance and productivity reflect data-driven methods of evaluation, often favored by institutions instead of qualitative peer-based evaluation. Is the newest manifestation of bibliometrics "alternative" mainly in the sense that what it counts is different from conventional systems? Questions remain about the relation of visibility to quality (Shore, 2008; Burrows, 2012; Gingras, 2016).
- Can valorization of the digital scholar, social scholarship, and altmetrics obscure the debate about the impact of technology more broadly on postsecondary education and what it represents in matters of digital information behavior (e.g., in relations of print and screens for students and faculty), communications in knowledge production, and the organization of institutions around technological innovation (Carr, 2011; Turkle, 2011; Selwyn, 2016; Poritz & Rees, 2016)?

In effect, by recognizing the complementary roles of guide and gadfly, I've proposed a format for the library's role in technological change in higher education. Postsecondary institutions already contribute to learning about how to use technology, as in the new ACRL "Framework for Information Literacy," faculty-oriented events on applications of data and citation management, and more. Today's digital scholars look back to Ernest Boyer. An allied effort might reflect the late 20th century work of education gadfly Neil Postman (1995). He acknowledged the suitability of institutional attention to how to use educational technology, but

he insisted on the allied project of education *about* technology. It would be worldly (or mindful of its benefits) and skeptical of trends that make digital tools into culture with insufficient attention to what is lost as well as what is gained with innovation.

### **Conclusion: “Intellectual energy”**

When he retired in 2015 as Harvard librarian, the historian Robert Darnton said that he was more convinced than ever that the library was the heart and soul of the research university. It is a pervasive force that needs to be understood by anyone with a

stake in postsecondary education: “The library still pumps intellectual energy into every corner of campus” (Ireland, 2015). Darnton himself offers an image of the digital scholar in the post retirement online project that extends his lifelong study of the French and European book trade (robertdarnton.org). Still, intellectual energy has always featured the critical disposition, or what might now be applied, with recognition of their benefits to what is new in scholarly communications (e.g., Burbules, 2016). It is a task well suited to research libraries as they determine their roles in the digital age.

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