

Chapter 4

‘Academics online’ - self-promotion, competition and celebrification

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Introduction

As discussed in the introduction, change has always been a fundamental and pervasive feature of higher education (HE), though few would dispute that the last two decades have been particularly characterised by an increase in both the speed and number of changes the sector has seen. Technological developments have, of course, been central to many of these changes, and one particular technological innovation relates to the proliferation and spread of academic social media - digital platforms that allow university researchers and lecturers to present themselves and their work online. Ubiquitous brands like Facebook, Twitter, Academia.Edu and ResearchGate are commonly and increasingly used by academics around the globe to curate an online presence (Lupton, 2014). A relatively small number of studies have examined this phenomenon of online academic self-presentation (OASP). Those that have tend to explore the extent of uptake and the perceived benefits and challenges entailed. Lupton’s (2014) study is in fact one of few to explore academics’ views on the varied affordances and problems associated with OASP. Key benefits identified by the participants included broadening their academic networks, disseminating and sharing research easily and quickly, and accessing and providing support to colleagues with similar interests. The challenges noted were equally wide-ranging, varying from concerns about privacy and the blurring of professional and personal boundaries, to the time-consuming nature of curating an online presence and the perception of obligation that was contributing to intensified work pressures, as digital public engagement becomes an additional professional expectation. Many of the participants echoed how these pressures may be felt more acutely by early career and temporary staff aware of the need to survive in an increasingly competitive domain. One participant acknowledged the role of the broader neo-liberal climate in this respect, and its effects:

We are the perfect neo-liberal subjects, eager to take on more work (i.e. work about work) to succeed. We have simply internalized labor, and social media propel that predatory, self-inflicted affliction. (p.27)

This chapter intends to offer a critical discussion of this less explored dimension – specifically, the ways in which broader socio-cultural factors articulate with pervasive neo-liberal influences on HE to explain and understand the expansion of online academic self-presentation. It begins with an exploration of the relationship between OASP and contemporary social trends, before moving on to examine how neo-liberal forms of competition in the academy become entwined with self-promotional tendencies influenced by celebrity culture.

Question for discussion

To what extent do you agree with the advantages and disadvantages identified above, and can you think of further ones?

OASP and social trends

As suggested, the increasing dominance of the internet (David Marshall, 2010) - and the proliferation of new social media technologies that afford increased means of presenting ourselves to the wider world - is an obvious part of the explanation for the growth in OASP. It is now almost twenty years since Castells first discussed the relationship between the internet and network society:

the internet is the fabric of our lives. If information technology is the present-day equivalent of electricity in the industrial era, in our age the internet could be linked to both the electrical grid and the electric engine because of its ability to distribute the power of information throughout the entire realm of human activity. Furthermore, as new technologies of energy generation and distribution made possible the factory and the large corporation as the organizational foundation of industrial society, the internet is the technological basis for the organizational form of the Information Age: the network (Castells, 2001:1).

Curating our network presence has thus become firmly embedded in broader social trends towards increased online self-presentation, as all of us engage more and more with connective technologies in all areas of our lives. Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, LinkedIn and the plethora of dating sites have normalised and increased our opportunities to present, perform and promote our professional, social, cultural and sexual identities online. David Marshall argues that we have in fact now reached the point where ‘the public self is

constantly worked upon and updated in its online form to both maintain its currency and to acknowledge its centrality to the individual's identity, which is dependent upon its network of connections to sustain the life of the on-line persona' (2010: 42). Van Dijck echoes this idea, pointing out that platforms such as Facebook and LinkedIn have 'pushed the art and science of mass self-communication to a new level' (2013:210). This idea of a new level is arguably reflected in the use of the term 'post-digital' by Jandrić *et al.* (2018:893) to imply a certain redundancy in continued binary divisions of on- and off-line realities:

We are increasingly no longer in a world where digital technology and media is separate, virtual, 'other' to a 'natural' human and social life. This has inspired the emergence of a new concept—the 'postdigital'—which is slowly but surely gaining traction in a wide range of disciplines.

In this sense, it could be argued that the internet has not simply enabled new means of self-presentation and promotion, but has begun to reshape these notions, and perhaps as importantly, to reshape social expectations of our behaviour in this domain. Several psychological studies see our online presentations and performances simply as extensions of basic human needs to make good impressions on other people 'by drawing others' attention to one's strengths, accomplishments and importance' (den Hartog *et al.*, 2018: 2). Den Hartog *et al.* and several other studies (e.g. Hart *et al.*, 2016) have pointed out that these needs will be experienced more acutely by certain personality types, with narcissists particularly inclined to engage in online self-promoting activities. Taylor and Strutton (2016) present evidence to support this, reporting a correlation between high Facebook usage and strong narcissistic traits, for example, with higher usage leading to amplified desires for online self-promotion. Stepping aside from the narcissistic angle, Goffman's theory of self-performance (1959) provides a useful lens for examining online self-presentation. His model highlights a tri-partite set of discursive needs – expressive, communicative and promotional, and it is easy to see how all of these needs can be as easily accommodated by our online presentations as through our face-to-face interactions.

As such, then, OASP can be located within a view of fundamental human needs that may naturally be stronger among certain individuals, and which may in general have been heightened by the widespread availability of new media technologies that encourage us to engage more in forms of online self-presentation. Given the focus of this chapter specifically on online *academic* self-presentation, however, it is worth considering what the literature

reveals about the extent to which HE itself may be partly responsible for promoting this growth.

The neo-liberalised university – competition, managerialism and performativity

With regard to understanding OASP, Barbour and Marshall (2012) offer a five-fold categorisation of online academic selves or performances. These are described as:

- the formal self
- the networked self
- the comprehensive self
- the teaching self and
- the uncontainable self.

The formal self concerns the non-interactive self-representation often displayed on institutional websites; the networked self is a more interactive performance often involving academic blogs, for example; the comprehensive self integrates both academic and more personal online self-presentations. Hammarfelt *et al.* (2016) comment that while these three 'selves' potentially reach a large and diverse audience, the presentation of teaching selves tends to be aimed specifically at pedagogic interactions with students. The final category relates to academics who choose not to engage with forms of OASP and thus run the risk of incurring 'an uncontainable self' as they exercise limited control over how their online academic identity is displayed. Hammarfelt *et al.* (2016:2-3) suggest an additional category which they term 'the quantified academic self':

This self-representation focuses on achievement, reputation and reach, and is interactive, extra-institutional, and primarily directed towards an academic audience (narrowcast). It focuses on professional accomplishment, which makes it different from the comprehensive self, and research is the main focus, not teaching. The construction of the quantified self is best described as semi-automated; profiles are usually, but not always, created by researchers themselves but algorithms automatically collect data on publications, citations, and social media mentions from several platforms.

This particular self-representation resonates throughout the literature, where it is frequently tethered to discussions of the neo-liberalised university, and the ways in which it creates a

climate that drives ever greater OASP. Various authors discuss the many and varied forms of competition pervading contemporary higher education. Naidoo (2018:1) suggests universities are now 'locked in a competition fetish,' as they struggle for positional advantage in a system characterised by status wars and competitive mechanisms. Though she acknowledges that academic rivalry is far from a novel concept, Naidoo argues that recent reforms and policies have elevated forms of competition to new heights - institutions compete for status and influence in a context where 'the transformation of HE into a global commodity has resulted in HE itself becoming an industry for revenue generation' (4). The rise of excellence policies and rankings has served further to intensify these competitive market pressures, and an audit culture has ensued to gauge and monitor influence and position. Lund (2018:1-2) sums up the effect of this situation:

The market-like dynamics shaping academic culture have, it would seem, instigated a form of perpetual competition where the aim is not to maximise human potential, but to gain advantage over others.

Such arguments highlight the central role of performativity in this audit culture. Ball (2012: 19) defines performativity as:

a powerful and insidious policy technology that is now at work at all levels and in all kinds of education and public service, a technology that links effort, values, purposes and self-understanding to measures and comparisons of output. Within the rigours and disciplines of performativity we are required to spend increasing amounts of our time in making ourselves accountable, reporting on what we do rather than doing it.

Duffy and Pooley (2017:1) discuss how increased labour market precarity in a progressively market-driven HE context only adds to these performative pressures, amplifying the needs of individual lecturers to engage in self-promotional practices. The authors discuss the sharp rise of academic social media and suggest that this expansion reflects and drives the self-branding imperatives many academics experience and engage in. Echoing Ball's analysis of performativity, they identify the articulation between the surrounding competitive climate and individual academic behaviour. Again, referring specifically to Academia.edu, they describe how:

the site's fixation on analytics reinforces a culture of incessant self-monitoring – one already encouraged by university policies to measure quantifiable impact. (1)

As suggested in the introduction, these pressures are potentially experienced more acutely by younger and less experienced academics who have not yet been able to build the reputational ballast required for cementing their ambitions in this fiercely competitive climate. However, as Jandrić (2014:299) comments, even more established professionals are rarely entirely safe in this environment:

In the world of global precarious academia, where obtaining a tenured university position is equal to winning a medium-prized lottery, there are hundreds of people hungry for my position. I know exactly who they are – up to very recently, I was one of them. I must tick more boxes than they do, or I will be replaced.

Pressure to demonstrate ‘impact’ has of course become a prominent theme in HE research, particularly in the UK, where it is one of the guiding principles behind the research assessment methodology employed in the national REF (Research Excellence Framework) evaluation. Naidoo (2018:4) explains how UK institutions are now required ‘to demonstrate the ‘impact’ of their research beyond academia’. The concept has thus firmly embedded itself within ‘the metric tide’ (Wilsdon *et al.*, 2015) that has overwhelmed the HE zeitgeist, and academic social media only ‘amplify and accelerate the logic of self-branding among scholars’ (Duffy and Pooley, 2017:2) – scholars who are ever more mindful of their need to demonstrate and measure their individual impact in a system which demands and defines output as ‘measurable deliverables’ (Luka *et al.*, 2015:181). In this sense, many academic social media sites offer sets of easily quantifiable features by displaying how many papers an academic has produced, how many times they have been read/downloaded/cited, and the number of fellow academics who follow their work. Such measures serve once again to embed ‘an economization of subjectivity where the self [...] becomes part of an entrepreneurial logic’ (Scharff, 2015: 110) – a logic which perhaps reinforces pressures towards self-promoting gaming in the political economy of academic popularity. Hammarfelt *et al.* (2016:1) discuss this gaming logic, noting again how the various points and score systems displayed on many academic platforms explicitly encourage ‘the gamification of quantified academic selves’, in the process intensifying and commodifying ‘the competitive nature of scholarship, [...]and academic outputs, ‘and potentially leading to ‘goal displacement and cheating’.

Lund’s work (2017:2) certainly supports the above accounts. She argues that the competitive context described above not only heightens the needs academics experience to present and

promote themselves and their work, but normalises academic boasting – ‘boasting can be considered a central driving force in neo-liberal universities [...] Boasting is an increasingly visible, encouraged and expected practice in contemporary academic life, shaping the ways in which academics present themselves and interact’.

These practices may be further promoted by what some commentators refer to as the network effect. Boudreau and Jeppesen (2015) discuss the concept of online networks as business platforms whose value increases in proportion to network size; in other words, the more users or ‘complementors’ (buyers and sellers) a network has, the greater its collective value for all, and the greater the incentives to assert an online presence. This conceptualisation is clearly anchored in a business ontology and resonates strongly with ideas which are central to this chapter. The authors acknowledge this in their own discussion of networks which may not be explicitly commercial. When considering motivations for network engagement outside of business environments, they explain that:

signaling and reputational motivations - as when individuals signal capabilities through their work activity, outputs, and accolades [...] are a plausible driver of mounting investments and development activity as platforms grow larger. This is because greater numbers of platform participants provide a larger audience to which complementors may signal, and potentially greater incentives to do so (1761).

However, they also recognise that network expansion may sometimes only further amplify challenges to ‘stand out’ in the already crowded market-place:

We theorize that [...] platform growth will face an opposing negative effect, as many independent, competing complementors will vie for limited attention and any one signal may degenerate with growing noise and confusion (1762).

Question for discussion

One of the key arguments above is that academic social media intensify the competitive climate in HE – is there a case for arguing that this is beneficial in any ways at all?

When competition and celebrity collide

The suggestion thus in much of the literature is that the current HE context is not only responsible for increasing OASP, but that it potentially – relating to Goffman’s theory of self-

presentation – elevates self-promotional needs over expressive and communicative. Fullick (2013:546) concurs, arguing that ‘self-presentation reinforces and re-inscribes the tendency toward promotionalism that permeates contemporary economic, cultural, and social life’. The literature suggests that these pressures to self-promote might be further increased by a convergence of the competitive turn and what might be described as the ‘celebrity turn’: individual needs to demonstrate professional impact driven by corporate esteem imperatives collide with increased socio-cultural appetites for individualised attention and ‘fame’. Cashmore (2006) identifies this close articulation between market and celebrity culture. Through this lens, the academic thus becomes a self-commoditising producer and product, hungry to demonstrate and publicise their professional worth and status. Several authors highlight how ‘these changes in the culture, economics and technologies of university life help to explain the new prominence of celebrity/academic co-mingling’ (Duffy and Pooley, 2017:3). Driessens (2013:3) suggests that this convergence is unsurprising since ‘celebrity has become a defining characteristic of our mediatized societies’. He discusses the concept of celebrification, a process which increasingly sees ordinary people transformed into celebrities. He uses the term ‘academostars’ (p.5) to denote this process among academics. This concept is reiterated widely across the reading – Smyth (2017) refers to the emergence of ‘academic rockstars’, for example, while Brøgger (2016) notes the thrill of fame academics experience from OASP. Furedi (2010:493) discusses the ascendancy of celebrity culture in highly critical terms, describing how ‘even the ivory tower of higher education has been brought into the frame. Universities are encouraged to embrace this culture and the shameless self-promoter has been rebranded as a celebrity academic’. David Marshall (2010:45) explains how online celebrity culture plays a particularly important role in fostering powerful representational regimes that ‘articulate a way of thinking about individuality and producing the self through the public world’ that have gained strong traction.

One aspect of this discussed to some degree in the reading concerns how this culture of academic self-promotion relates to issues of class and gender. Several studies suggest a strongly gendered dimension, with men more likely to engage in OASP. Duffy and Pooley (2017) suggest that this relates to broader social norms that mean men are more inclined to engage in self-promoting activities and self-aggrandisement. This is supported by Scharff’s (2015:109) study which found women much more reluctant to self-promote because it was perceived to ‘conflict with normative expectations that women are nice and modest and gives

rise to dilemmas in the performance of femininity'. Lund's (2018) work also suggests that self-promotion and boasting are connected to the performance of what she describes as a global masculinity – competitive, successful, dominant and institutionally desirable. From a class perspective, Reay's (2015:14) work raises interesting questions about the extent to which social background might also strengthen the need for assertive self-promotion:

Even if you are a supposedly middle-class academic, you are still having to guard against this devaluation. You risk being seen less of a scholar, and certainly less of an intellectual if you have tried to hold on to your working class habitus too overtly. For those of us uneasy hybrids who have ended up in academia, there is always hyper-vigilance, and a constant watching out for danger – we have become over-adrenalised academics.

Conclusion

Clearly, the discussion here will be challenged by some for taking a rather critical view of something that in many ways is of course a very positive technological advancement. I acknowledge this perspective and the many benefits offered by the online digital platforms mentioned throughout this chapter. I should also declare my personal enthusiasm for aspects of OASP, and recognise the ways in which I too have benefitted from sharing my own work online and accessing that of others. In short, the usefulness of OASP is not in question, and as a phenomenon, OASP is unquestionably here to stay, embedded within modern social practices that reinforce our online digital habits and enable our identity performances. As many studies have suggested, OASP enables us to fulfil basic human needs for self-expression, communication and connection. However, as this discussion has also illustrated, it is difficult to ignore a pressing need for further reflection and research on the ways in which OASP appears to be increasingly tethered to neo-liberal influences that position it – and indeed, us - within a potentially corrosive amalgam of individually and collectively competitive status pressures. In a sense, OASP risks becoming an arena that resembles a performative panopticon, with 'over-adrenalised players/actors' locked in an endlessly competitive cycle of mutual viewing, surveillance and display. As one of the participants in Lupton's (2014: 27) study suggested, it is important that we further scrutinise OASP to control its potential for becoming a 'predatory, self-inflicted affliction,' as individual gains become enmeshed in institutional status wars and game-playing. All the more so when, as

discussed above, issues of career stage, class, gender and potentially race may mean the playing field is decidedly uneven.

Summary points

- Recent years have seen the proliferation of academic social media - digital platforms that allow academics to present themselves and their work online.
- While they offer many benefits for individual academics and institutions, there are a number of more problematic issues associated with their use.
- Many studies suggest that growing pressure on academics to promote their work is heightened by the competitive nature of contemporary HE policy. These neo-liberal pressures may be further amplified by the nature of the mediatised societies we now live in.

Questions for discussion

What are your own views on the relationship between academic social media and issues of race, class and gender?

If you were to carry out some research on this topic, can you think of a suitable angle, title and set of underpinning research questions?

Recommended reading

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