"Is it like academia.edu?": Faculty perceptions and usage of academic social networking sites and implications for librarians and institutional repositories

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Abstract: This paper explores the ways in which academic librarians can harness faculty familiarity with and curiosity about academic social networking sites (ASNS) in order to promote engagement with the institutional repository (IR). Highlighting significant similarities and differences between the IR and the popular ASNS Academia.edu – specifically in the areas of open access and discoverability, business model, user experience, and support – the paper then presents the key findings of a questionnaire administered to faculty at a single institution asking about their usage habits of ASNS and the IR and their motivation for engaging (or not) with each. Faculty who use ASNS identified accessing, reading, and sharing work as their primary motivations; those who do not use the sites attributed their nonuse to a lack of awareness and time. The top reported reasons for using the IR were downloading work and arranging for the deposit of student work, while skepticism and misconceptions about its benefits prevent others from interacting with the IR. The paper concludes by outlining ways in which librarians can work with faculty to create greater understanding of and engagement with the IR.

Though slowly growing, to date there is little scholarly discourse on the ways in which the higher education community is using academic social networking sites (ASNS) and the ramifications for scholarly communication (Thelwall & Kousha, 2014, p. 721; Williams & Woodacre, 2016, p. 283, 286). Instead, what does exist are numerous blog posts and magazine pieces, with a sprinkling of academic articles from the fields of communication or technology, often from outside the United States. The few articles from the library literature primarily address the features of different platforms. One important area that requires attention is the implications for librarians — certainly for those working within the realm of scholarly communication, digital initiatives, and institutional repositories (IRs), but also reference, liaison, and departmental librarians -- as they interact with classroom/teaching faculty at their institutions. In his article from 2013, "When Social Media Meets Scholarly Publishing," Steven Ovadia argues that librarians have long served as guides for faculty through the process of scholarly communication; in the new information landscape, he sees this role extending to the realm of social media and altmetrics (p.196). Yet the opportunities for librarian involvement go beyond these parameters. As Borrego (2017) discovered in a research study comparing the rates of deposit of scientific publications by researchers in ResearchGate versus IRs, academics more readily post their work to an ASNS (54.8%) than to their own IR (11.1%), often due to unawareness of the IR and its benefits (p. 1). This finding is significant for academic librarians who seek to engage their faculty in fruitful dialogue about the value of library-led IRs. How can they leverage the existence and complications of ASNS as they talk with faculty about authors' rights, scholarly communication, copyright, and open access? Might these conversations begin to transform understanding and usage of ASNS into more critical, nuanced reflection and engagement with the IR?

As a digital initiatives librarian, one of the most common questions I receive from faculty, when I introduce them to our IR, is this: "Is it like Academia.edu?" In many cases, Academia.edu is the online system for sharing scholarly work with which they are familiar. If they do not already use it themselves, they have heard about it from colleagues or have been invited to join. As of this writing, Academia.edu has surpassed 50 million users (https://www.academia.edu/), primarily humanists and social scientists (Ortega, 2015, p. 532; Thelwall & Kousha, 2014, p. 723). The site is a point of reference for many academics, a backdrop against which to compare other platforms for sharing their work, including IRs. Capitalizing on faculty familiarity with and curiosity about Academia.edu and its counterparts is a great way for librarians to initiate a conversation. More specifically, outlining some of the major similarities

and differences between these sites and IRs helps users distinguish the advantages and disadvantages of each, and assists them in making informed choices.

Open access and discoverability

Like IRs, Academia.edu offers openly accessible content. The company touts the high discoverability of its content and claims that articles posted to the site enjoy a 58% citation advantage over articles posted elsewhere online (Niyazov et al., 2016, p. 31). Yet IR systems, such as bepress' Digital Commons, work closely with search engines like Google to promote discoverability (bepress, n.d., Search engine); communicating this ability of the IR to faculty is crucial. Within the site itself, Academia.edu offers only the ability to browse by title, not subject, and a basic (not advanced) search mechanism that provides no guidance on how to conduct an effective inquiry. Dingemanse (2016) notes that the majority of work posted on Academia.edu lacks robust metadata, making it difficult for citation management systems and human users alike to generate accurate bibliographic information for referencing, indexing, and discoverability purposes. This is problematic: "peer-reviewed publications are still the main vehicle for advancing scientific results, and citations are still the main currency of cumulative science. So getting bibliographic metadata right is key to promoting science as a cumulative enterprise" (para. 8). Conversely, Digital Commons includes an advanced searching mechanism and the ability to add (and customize) a wide variety of metadata. These are areas where the IR really shines, benefitting from the expertise of librarians who know how to curate information.

Of course, faculty want to know that others can not only find their work, but are reading it. While Academia.edu tracks paper and profile views (Dingemanse, 2016, para. 10) and sends notifications to an author when her work is viewed (Wagman, 2016, para. 9), Digital Commons counts downloads (and displays this number on the metadata record) and notifies authors of activity with monthly readership reports and a "dashboard" showcasing more granular data (bepress, n.d., Author dashboard).

Business model

A prominent distinction between ASNS and IRs is the business model upon which they are founded. As Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Associate Executive Director and Director of Scholarly Communication at the Modern Language Association (2015), elucidates: "Academia.edu is not an

educationally-affiliated organization, but a dot-com . . . [thus] at some point, it will be required to turn a profit, or it will be sold for parts, or it will shut down" (para. 3). This need to profit is increasingly evident. In early 2016, Academia.edu rolled out an option in which authors could pay for their work to receive "recommended" status; then, at the end of the year, it offered to disclose — again, for a fee— readers' ranks (Bond, 2017, paras. 5 & 6). Perhaps, as Adema (2016) suggests, Academia.edu may turn its back on the open access model altogether and instead require users to pay for content, or sell information about them (para. 2). Gary Hall, Professor of Media and Performing Arts and Director of the Centre for Disruptive Media at Coventry University (U.K.) (2015), asserts that the site's "financial rationale rests . . . on the ability . . . to exploit the data flows generated by the academics who use the platform as an intermediary for sharing and discovering research" (para 6).

In my experience, these complications resonate deeply with faculty. Once, following a presentation about the differences between Academia.edu and the IR, a faculty member approached me, visibly distressed, and exclaimed, "I had no idea it was a commercial site!" Faculty are understandably reluctant to share their work with a for-profit entity that declares ownership of the content it receives ("You acknowledge and agree that the Site, Services and Collective Content, including all associated intellectual property rights, are the exclusive property of Academia.edu and its licensors") (Academia.edu, 2017, Ownership); harvests (and may sell) information about users and how they use the site (Academia.edu, n.d.); and does not guarantee permanent preservation and stewardship of the scholarship it receives ("Academia.edu reserves the right, at its sole discretion, to discontinue or terminate the Site and Services") (Academia.edu, 2017, Termination). IRs, on the other hand, allow authors to retain their copyright, do not collect or profit from authors' information, and provide a home for the scholarship in perpetuity.

User experience

While its major competitor, ResearchGate, requires a user to prove her academic status by signing up with an institutional email address, anyone can join Academia.edu (Van Noorden, 2014, p. 127). Unquestionably more social in nature than IRs, Academia.edu, collectively with other ASNS, is often compared to Facebook (Williams and Woodacre, 2016, p. 284). Users can create profiles, check news feeds to alert them to new activity among others in their field, comment on others' work, and receive feedback on their own (McKenna, 2015, para. 8). Academia.edu invites users to transcend

physical separation and collaborate in an instantaneous virtual space, and this may be attractive to academics, for whom research is often a solitary activity. For those outside the U.S., where it can be even more difficult and expensive to network and to access American scholarship, Academia.edu can be particularly appealing (McKenna, 2015, para. 9; Wecker, 2014, para. 30).

But using the site presents other drawbacks. Beall (2015)[1] found instances on Academia.edu of "predatory" publishers, who join the site to market their name and exploit the "invite" feature in order to bait and appear credible to their targets (paras. 4 & 5). There are also advertisements and frequent emails and prompts from the site to encourage your activity with it. Another distressing aspect of using the site is the potential for violating copyright: when, as authors, site users post content (intentionally or ignorantly) that legally belongs to publishers, or when, as readers, they access and use content that legally belongs behind a paywall or subscription. Van Noorden (2014) demonstrates how pervasive these practices are when he quotes an anonymous researcher: "I hardly know any scientists who don't violate copyright laws. We just fly below the radar and hope that the publishers don't notice" (p. 128). Sometimes the publishers *do* notice. Academia.edu received 3000 takedown notices in 2013 from the publisher Elsevier, who asserted its rights under the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA); Academia.edu complied with the mandate and notified the authors involved (Clarke, 2013; Van Noorden, 2014; Wecker, 2014). Because librarians typically mediate the deposit of faculty works into the IR, including checking publisher permissions, the possibility of publisher-copyrighted material going into the IR and resulting in a takedown notice is much lower than it is with ASNS.

Support

Ultimately, the greatest difference between ASNS and the IR is the support that faculty receive when they choose the latter. Faculty who post their work to an IR benefit from librarian expertise in assigning metadata; they have an ally who can help them navigate questions of copyright and creative commons licensing. The IR is more than a platform; it is a service. The value that librarians bring to the table is a critical point when talking with faculty about the distinctions between ASNS and the IR.

In addition to experimenting with ASNS and keeping up with the literature, another way to understand how best to engage faculty in conversations about ASNS and the IR is to ask for and listen

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[1] Jeffrey Beall (Scholarly Communications Librarian, Auraria Library, University of Colorado, Denver) long maintained a list of predatory publishers. The content of his blog, Scholarly Open Access, recently disappeared without explanation. Editor's note: Additional information from Beall may be found at: https://doi.org/10.11613/BM.2017.029

to their experiences. I worked with the library at a small (enrollment <5000), private, undergraduate institution, whose IR had launched approximately eighteen months previously and included roughly 1600 total items at the time. The librarians wanted to understand their faculty members' usage of and opinions about ASNS and the IR in order to provide better service and education about the two systems. To that end, I devised a voluntary, anonymous questionnaire, hosted by SurveyMonkey and distributed to the institution's faculty members via an email link.[2]

Forty-eight (of approximately 200) faculty members responded to the survey, yielding a 24% response rate. Of the 44 respondents who reported their discipline, over half came from one of two areas: the natural sciences (14) or languages / literatures (10). When asked, "If you use an academic social networking site, why/how do you use it?" the most frequently selected options were "Access and read the work of others" (15) and "Share my work with others" (14) (Fig. 1.) This is striking because the IR performs these same functions; this is a perfect opportunity to promote it. On the other hand, features that distinguish ASNS from the IR, such as the ability to "engage in discussions with other academics" and "gain feedback on my work" were the least often selected responses, with only four and three responses respectively. This finding supports Meishar-Tal and Pieterse's 2017 research study investigating motivations behind faculty use of ASNS, which concluded that, "They [faculty] use the sites mainly for consumption of information, slightly less for sharing of information, and very scantily for interaction with others" (p. 17), and it suggests an opening for librarians to make the case for the IR.

When faculty who do not use ASNS were asked to identify reasons why not, the leading reasons were "I don't know enough about them" (23) and "I don't have time" (18). Surprisingly, only four selected, "I have concerns about the terms of use" (Fig. 1). Even so, when given the chance to comment, some voiced misgivings. Three identified Academia.edu as a for-profit company, one used the phrase "exploitative site," and another wrote, "I don't want to share scholarly work with a for-profit company, who can then data mine it or make weird requirements of people who see and use it."

The second part of the survey asked faculty specifically about the IR. Of the 26 people who indicated that they had used the IR, ten said that they had done so in order to download work for personal or professional purposes, followed by nine who had arranged for students to add their work. At the bottom, only two respondents indicated that they had used the IR to share work with academics from other institutions (Fig. 2).

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[2] (See Appendix for this instrument.)

Perhaps most illuminating – and most important for its implications for librarians – was the part of the survey that asked faculty why they had not used the IR. The top explanation they chose: "I don't see any benefits" (14) (Fig. 2.) Asking faculty "What question or comments do you have about the IR?" revealed a variety of hesitations, including:

- "What's the purpose?"

- "I think students can gain the benefits of [the IR] using free programs such as Researchgate."

- "I do not want my research students to publish their work in [the IR] as if [sic] would interfere with publication in a peer-reviewed journal."

- "I am wondering if the budget cuts of the library are going to affect [the IR]. I planned to store the database of a project there assuming it would be a stable repository . . . This would only make sense if there is a commitment from the administration to preserve this for the future."

- "Would like to know more about how I can build its use into my courses. Students still have concerns about posting work there."
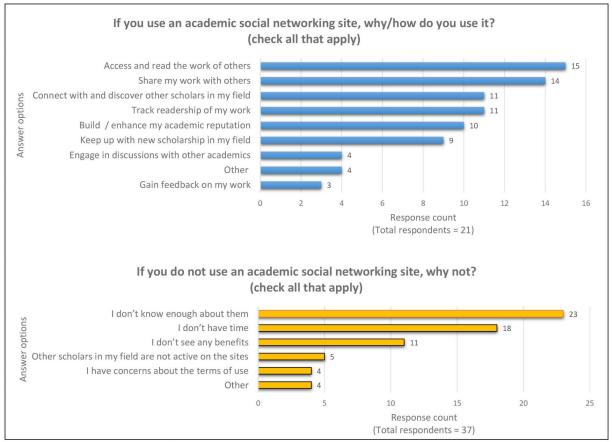

Figure 1. Faculty indicate why they do / do not use an academic social networking site.

Have you used the institutional repository?
If Yes, please specify how below:
(check all that apply)

Answer options:
- I have downloaded work from [the IR] — 10
- I have arranged for my student(s) to publish work in [the IR] — 9
- I have posted my own work in [the IR] — 8
- Other — 6
- I have shared work in [the IR] with academics from other institutions — 2

Response count
(Total respondents = 20)

Have you used the institutional repository?
If No, please specify why not below:
(check all that apply)

Answer options:
- I don't see any benefits — 14
- I don't have time — 7
- Other — 7
- I don't know enough about it — 5
- I have concerns about the terms of use — 3

Response count
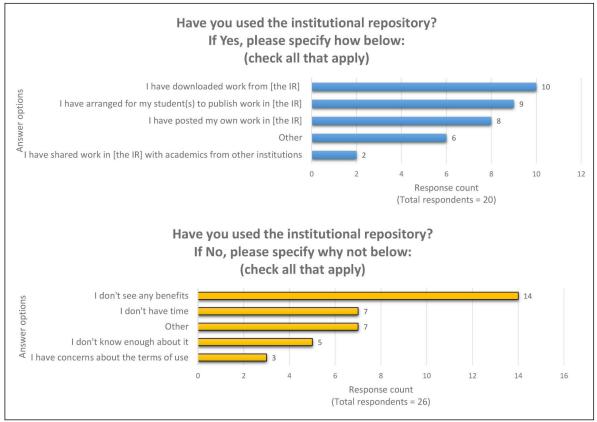(Total respondents = 26)

Figure 2. Faculty indicate why they do / do not use the institutional repository.

These responses suggest that librarians (and administrators) need to do more to educate faculty about what the IR is, to outline how it differs from ASNS and why it is a better choice, and to address specific concerns, such as institutional commitment and future peer-reviewed publication. In these efforts, librarians can capitalize on "success stories" with faculty who already champion the IR, such as the respondent who eloquently commented, "The main reason to use something like [the IR] is that it's actually opening up scholarship to people beyond paywalls without benefiting a for-profit company." What, then, might this outreach look like? There are a number of possibilities, the selection/implementation of which may depend on the culture at your institution. Here are some examples:

- Invite faculty at your institution to complete a survey about their perceptions and usage of ASNS and/or the IR. Even if they do not participate, they will have seen an invitation to learn more about the intersection of the library with changes in scholarly communication; this can plant the seeds for future involvement.

- Organize a meeting or event in which to share and discuss the results. The librarians at the institution described in this paper invited faculty to an open forum to talk about the issues surrounding ASNS and how/why they can use the IR instead.

- Offer a workshop on the similarities and differences between ASNS and the IR. As part of Open Access Week 2017, Rebecca Stuhr of the University of Pennsylvania Libraries presented "Sharing Your Work Through Academic Social Media Sites and ScholarlyCommons" (http://repository.upenn.edu/penn_oa_events/2017/fluencies/3/) and deposited her slides afterward in the IR.

- Contribute a piece to your library's newsletter about ASNS and the IR.

- Make a LibGuide or other document on the topic. See the excellent "Comparison of other systems with Digital Commons and SelectedWorks" web guide from the Thomas G. Carpenter Library at the University of North Florida and "A social networking site is not an open access repository" by Katie Fortney and Justin Gonder from the Office of Scholarly Communication at the University of California.
  http://libguides.unf.edu/c.php?g=177025&p=3224144 and
  http://osc.universityofcalifornia.edu/2015/12/a-social-networking-site-is-not-an-open-access-repository/

- Be creative with branding. "Repository" is library jargon that at best means little to our users and at worst connotes a staid dumping ground. At my institution, we have taken to referring to the IR only by its name ("Digital USD"), rather than "the institutional repository."

- If your institution has a technology fair, ask to host a booth to showcase the IR, as Wichita State University and the University at Buffalo of SUNY have done.
  http://webs.wichita.edu/depttools/depttoolsmemberfiles/upsenate/learnmore/2015%20Tech%20Fair%20Booths.pdf and https://www.buffalo.edu/digitalchallenges/events/past-events/ub-instructional-technology-fair-2015.html

- If a faculty member is a devoted user of ASNS, suggest that she host her work in the IR instead and link out to it from her ASNS profile (Kelly & Delasalle, 2012; Clarke, 2013, para. 18).

- Work with faculty to add their work to the IR, narrating your steps along the way (e.g., checking permissions in SHERPA/ROMEO, customizing the metadata, etc.) and how they can be involved (e.g., logging into the system to access readership reports, sharing the link to their work with

colleagues and other scholars in the field, etc.). When they have a positive experience, they will tell others.

Amid rapid changes in scholarly communication and problematic, commercial ASNS, today's academic librarians must do more than promote the IR. Starting a discussion with faculty about the ways in which the IR behaves similarly to and differently from ASNS provides a context with which faculty are likely familiar, and increases the likelihood that they will be receptive. Instead of asking faculty to speak the language of libraries, this approach meets faculty where they are already (on ASNS, or thinking about joining), and it helps take conversations about open access, authors' rights, copyright, and other issues in the realm of scholarly communication from ideological and theoretical to concrete and applied. When librarians seek to understand the reasons for faculty participation with ASNS and non-engagement with the IR, they can better anticipate reservations, more effectively tailor their message, think creatively about reaching faculty at their institution, and – ultimately – influence attitudes and behavior.

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