Why I Don't Do Academic Social Media… or Do I?

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A communications scholar at our university asked me recently whether I would take part in a debate about academic social media services such as ResearchGate. Yes, I responded, as long as I don't have to argue the affirmative – that such online systems are necessarily a good thing. Personally I do not count myself as a user of academic social media, but I can easily understand why others could make an opposite decision. Academic social media can provide a way to get copies of full-length published articles, to pose questions to other researchers, to get various questions answered, and in general to foster relationships with well-networked and possibly influential people within one's academic field. Or, like me, you might just enjoy having something mildly annoying that is fun to complain about.

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Mildly Annoyed

Like a lot of scientists I know, I don't do social media. At least I say that I don't. For instance, I don't actively use LinkedIn. I figure that it will be a time-waster. I figure that if someone really wants my attention, they will just e-mail me. Or they could call. I do not tweet, and I don't use Facebook – though I will look over my wife's shoulder if she wants to show me something on Facebook. Somehow my life seems hurried enough without placing further demands on my time, having to pay attention and to respond to incoming messages from an online social network.

And then along comes ResearchGate, which might be regarded as a social media system designed just for me, an academic. I never log into ResearchGate now, though I did way back in the beginning. It was probably about two years ago when, at the urging of a colleague, I initiated an account. And yet, every week ResearchGate sends me a dozen or so messages. Martin, you have one new follower on ResearchGate. Martin, we have found 1 more citation of your work. Martin, a researcher just read your publication. Alexander Koukoulas thinks you're the author of this publication. Researchers with updated publications: … Martin, you had 41% more reads last week. Congratulations, Martin, you reached a milestone (50 reads). Mathias Hobisch requested your publication. New feedback added to your research. Wei Zhang published new research. A lot of these messages refer to names I have never heard of before.

These messages – due to their persistence and quantity – can be mildly annoying. They seem aimed at promoting a competitive attitude: "If only you engage yourself more actively with the network, then maybe your research could become more visible and better recognized than in your present "un-networked" situation. It's hard not to be taken in, at least a little bit, by the persistent and varied email messages, which proclaim one's ascendancy in one's academic field. But upon reflection, is this why I do this work – just to increase my ResearchGate score? Tell me it ain't so. Surely it is the love of science

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alone that motivates me to publish and to engage with other researchers. Or can I be permitted to bask in the glory that ResearchGate so persistently shines upon each of us?

As I said, I don't actively participate in ResearchGate, but on the other hand I have not taken steps to "opt out". It has been reported that something like half of the participants in ResearchGate are like me – having Engagement Index scores near to zero. A few people take the opposite approach, pouring a lot of time and attention into the service, continually reaching out and maximizing their active contact with others who are likewise attentive to the online networking opportunities. While it appears that the people who are well plugged in to ResearchGate are still a minority – especially in such places as China and Iran – one has to be suspicious that maybe all the "cool people" are the networked people.

Here to Stay

ResearchGate, which was started in 2008, now has over 9 million participants. It allows scientists having overlapping interests to find each other and to share files. The number of documents tabulated by the ResearchGate system is exceeded only by Google Scholar and Web of Science. The algorithm that is used to calculate the "RG Score" has not been disclosed. In rough terms, the score is based not only on one's peer-reviewed publications, but also on how other researchers interact with your content within the ResearchGate environment. In other words, if is partly a measure of one's popularity and influence within the network. Points can be gained for one's publications, by providing answers to other ResearchGate users, by posing questions, and by having followers. In fact, participants are extremely diverse with respect to the proportions of the contributions just listed.

Annoyed? Amused? Accepting of an inevitable trend? Though I don't actively participate in ResearchGate, the service appears to have established itself as a way that researchers get copies of published articles, make contacts, and receive some validation for their efforts – both in publishing and in networking. Maybe when I retire I'll have enough time to become active. For now, I mostly publish my work in an open-source journal, so I am not too worried about needing to actively share files with others.

My Top Ten

Speaking of annoyances, I am particularly annoyed at people who put together "top ten" lists. Here's mine:

10. Too many meaningless milestones (most reads, times cited, followers, *etc.*
9. Bias in favor of team players, not introverts or revolutionaries
8. Copyright issues are handled in a sloppy manner, not helping to resolve such questions
7. Inaccurate matches of "similar researchers you might like to follow…"
6. Use of an undisclosed algorithm to compute a person's RG Score
5. The fact that a person's score can be manipulated
4. The fact that I can improve my score by being more involved in the system itself
3. Me, me, me! The focus is on "me winning"
2. Who has time for all this?
1. Emails, emails, every day more ResearchGate emails