

Scholarly Practices in the Age of Online Social Media

Abstract: Online social media tools are becoming further integrated into the lives of academics. However, there is very little hard data on why and how scholars are using them. The paper presents the results of our ongoing study on how academics are adopting these new tools for communication and information dissemination.

Résumé : Les outils de médias sociaux en ligne s'intègrent de plus en plus dans la vie des professeurs-chercheurs. Cependant, il existe peu de données sur les raisons et les façons pour lesquelles on les utilise. Cette communication présente les résultats d'une analyse en cours sur les modes d'adoption, par les professeurs-chercheurs, de ces nouveaux outils de communication et de diffusion de l'information.

1 Introduction

Online social media (OSM) tools such as blogs, wikis and social networking websites have only largely emerged within the last few years. Since the appearance of these tools, their use has skyrocketed and they are continually becoming more integrated into our daily lives. OSM tools are virtual, social, intellectual, organizational and documentary; thus, studies of their use greatly fit the general theme of the CAIS conference on Exploring Interactions of People, Places and Information.

The current paper presents our ongoing efforts to study how academics are adopting these new tools for communication and information dissemination purposes. Despite the increased importance of OSM tools to academics in collaborating, gathering and disseminating information, little research has been conducted on this subject. This study fills the gap in our understanding of knowledge and information dissemination by academics in this age of social media.

2 Methodology

To gain a comprehensive understanding of online social media use by academics, we conducted 51 semi-structured interviews with scholars in Library and Information Science. Interviews were first conducted at the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T) conference in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania from October 22-27, 2010. After this, phone interviews were carried out from Dalhousie University.

We have also conducted an extensive literature review to complement and compare it to our findings which will appear in the full paper.

3 Highlights of Findings

Below is a brief summary of our content analysis of the interview transcripts. Our results are divided into the following sections: (1) benefits of using OSM, (2) problems associated with OSM and (3) academic recognition of OSM use.

3.1 Benefits of using OSM

Study participants identified many benefits of using OSM for academic purposes. Some respondents felt that tools like Twitter, a popular microblogging platform, allowed them to stay current and identify emerging trends in their fields. One stated: *“Twitter is really useful. In terms of knowing what’s going on, what the trends are...so it’s also a way to aggregate what’s going on...without necessarily having to read all the journals, follow all the conferences, things like that”*. Others highlighted OSM’s usefulness in both collaborating and communicating with team members, sharing ideas, and making writing both easier and faster, especially with team members who are geographically distributed. One person said: *“I have a friend [and], we’ve done presentations together, and she’s in New Mexico. So rather than sending an email back and forth, we find it’s easier to do it on Google docs...”*.

Interestingly, although many said they had made or maintained connections using OSM, few actually identified making new connections as a benefit associated with using online social media. This may imply that although connections are made or strengthened through using OSM, academics do not identify this as one of its primary strengths or as a reason they are using online social media tools. A number of more senior scholars also mentioned that they already have an established network, implying there is a less of a need for them to create new connections. Nevertheless, many scholars reported that unfamiliar scholars, members of the public, and even representatives from the private sector contacted them as a direct result of their presence and usage of OSM.

3.2 Problems with OSM

Almost everyone said that using OSM tools was too time consuming, and constantly trying to keep up with posts became too stressful and resulted in information overload. For example, one respondent stated on Twitter: *“You couldn’t keep up with it, you didn’t know what people were talking about if you weren’t constantly on it, because if you weren’t following the threads of what was happening you just kind of got lost”*.

Privacy was another big concern keeping academics from using or actively using OSM tools. Specifically, many were concerned with who had access to the information about them on OSM websites and how it is being (mis)used. Emphasizing this, one respondent stated about Facebook: *“It’s awkward. You know, people can post pictures and tag you in it, I’m very mindful of what I’m tagged in, I’ll often have to untag myself [in] some family photos, you know photos at the beach, not really relevant”*.

Many also identified that using OSM was perilous because it could result in a loss of control of their academic property. This is because they do not know where the information will end up, they are afraid they may misspeak and be unable to delete what has been posted, or their ideas may be stolen by others.

Some scholars stated that learning how to use new tools could be difficult, and they were unsure where they could turn to learn about using these new technologies. Lastly, it was identified that OSM tools were

only of use when colleagues were already using them, and that there was no reason to start using OSM tools unless colleagues already were.

3.3 Academic Recognition of OSM Tools

None of the scholars interviewed worked for an institution that currently recognizes OSM use or publications as part of their tenure review and promotion process. The majority of interviewees agreed that OSM publications should eventually be considered as long as there is a way to ensure that they are relevant, peer-reviewed, scholarly contributions. Of the respondents who believe that OSM publications should be considered, most raised concerns about how and to what degree they should be considered and whether they should count toward the research component or the service component of the tenure/promotion process (leaning towards considering it as the service component). Finally, some pointed out that academic use of OSM creates many indirect benefits that could result in promotion or tenure. For example, it allows people to build connections with potential reviewers for the tenure application, and make connections with potential research partners.

4 Looking into the Future

It was identified that online social media tools are not merely a fad that will fade away in time, but rather represent a shift in the way scholars communicate, collaborate, access, share and disseminate knowledge and information. Study participants identified many problems with OSM tools, and emphasized that social media use was not being given academic recognition. Yet, almost all interview respondents felt that in the future these tools would continue to become even more important and engrained in our daily and academic lives. As stated by one respondent: *“I don't think it's going to go away. Some people thought the internet might go away, but it never happened”*. Interview data also indicated that OSM would continue to evolve, and while doing so eradicate many current problems associated with these tools. One of the main challenges however, that will need to be addressed in the future for OSM to be given more academic recognition, is how to assess the quality, credibility and influence of OSM use and publications in academic settings.