

Title: Developing a distinctive digital profile and network

Overview

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” It’s a common question and one that you have probably not heard of since your formative years. However, in a world increasingly disrupted by **digital technologies**, experienced academics are (or at least should be) asking themselves how do they adapt to the new **digital landscape**. Whilst early career academics will be looking at the opportunities that digital technology can offer them to develop their **profile**, access new **networks** and extend the reach and **impact of their research** outputs. So the question is not so much about “What do you want to be when you grow up?” as “What type of academic do you want to be in the digital world?”

In this chapter, we will be looking at some of the key questions that academics of all ages need to address, before focusing on how they can develop a distinctive **academic profile** that will enable them to connect with, and make the most of, the **network opportunities** that are available to them in a digital landscape. To paraphrase Ahmed & Olander (2012) in a world gone digital, it doesn’t matter who you were or how good you were yesterday, the digital world means that you need to recalibrate, set a new direction, understand the metrics that matter and multiply your contribution to academic knowledge and practice.

Recalibrating and setting the direction

There is an old adage. If you fail to plan, then you plan to fail. In setting the broad context for this discussion, researchers need to consider several strategic questions about their long term objectives and the resources and capabilities required to meet those objectives. Put simply, you need a plan. If this all sounds too prescriptive, then think again, the digitally agile researcher cannot afford to sit back and wait for things to happen. The competition for jobs, funding applications and access to internal training funds is fierce and looks set to only intensify in an age of market driven higher education where phrases like ‘return on investment’ are increasingly being used in academic circles. So if you want to create a strong digital presence and network, taking the time to think things through and making a plan is an essential part of the career development process.

For the most part, an academic career offers a lot of variety and there will be opportunities at certain points to evaluate what you want to do for the next few years going forward. So whether you are an experienced academic, or new to the field, answering four important strategic questions will provide you with a platform on which to develop the next phrase of your career:

- What type of academic career do you want?
- Will your career be as an academic-researcher, academic-administrator, or academic-consultant?
- What do *you value* in an academic career?
- What do the *institutions* you work for, or plan to work for, value?

The answers to these questions will help you to recalibrate, plan and set the direction for the next phase of your career. As a consequence, this process will also help you to develop the right type of digital profile and engage effectively with the right networks. For example, if you decide that the academic-consultant route is for you, then your digital profile needs to emphasize the *relevance and currency* of your research to both academic and professional practice networks to ensure that you have something to ‘sell’. That something is *new knowledge* that has the potential to create instrumental impact by influencing organisational practice or industry bodies and policymakers.

It is also fair to say that the type of academic career you have, will undoubtedly change over time and be influenced by a number of internal and external factors like what motivates you, family, salary, career development opportunities and location amongst other things. It is also worth remembering that the university sector in many countries is changing, and increasingly academics are being asked to do more in the same amount of time. The consequence of this could be that *your values* become diluted to a certain extent, but it is important to stay true to what you believe in and what differentiates you in a competitive market place.

Developing a Distinctive Digital Research Profile

The key message here is focus. Hopefully, your self-analysis and answer to the first strategic question ‘*What type of academic career do you want?*’ will have helped you set your objectives for the next phase of your career. This self-analysis will also have identified your values, strengths, weaknesses, beliefs and values as an academic, and it is at this point that you need to think about yourself as a ‘brand’. Hood, Robles & Hopkins (2014, p.34) noted the importance of this concept by arguing that creating a compelling personal brand is an issue of strategic importance and one that as helps you to build your online reputation and to effectively position you and your research in the minds of your audiences. Another way of looking at personal branding is to consider how *you* and *your* work would want to be remembered in years to come; your legacy. This may seem an odd thing to do at the start of your career, or indeed at the start of the next phase of your career, but this type of reflective self-analysis will really help you to think about your personal brand. Poeppelman & Blacksmith (2012, p.112) drew an interesting personal branding parallel with industrial-organizational psychology, arguing that:

“It’s natural to trust what you know. When you walk into a store, you tend to gravitate towards the brands you are familiar with. You know what they provide and you trust what you will get. In the modern global digital world standing out is a tall order”.

In order to consider yourself as a brand, you need to think about your values and beliefs and set about creating a narrative about who you are and then telling the digital world about it. Remember, creating a strong personal brand enables you to connect with like minded researchers and will enable you to situate yourself not only in the right networks, but also in a way that differentiates you within those networks. Poeppelman & Blacksmith (2012, p.113) concluded, “personal branding can benefit each one of us by advancing our own personal growth, career movement, and self-awareness”. So the rewards gained from a strong personal brand and digital presence are certainly worth the effort.

People with strong personal brands tend to specialise in one area of inquiry for a considerable amount of time. Again, it comes back to focus. So how do you create a strong personal brand? When creating your brand, you need to think about the

following questions and make sure that you create an identity and narrative about you and your research:

- What is your objective?
- What differentiates you from other people in your research field?
- What do you have to say that's interesting?
- What new knowledge do you have or are interested in gaining?

If you want a strong personal brand, then you need to create a core message and point of differentiation between you and the rest of your academic peers. So what is the next step in the personal branding process? Well, we have already considered the strategic importance of self analysis and considering the type of academic you would like to be and created a narrative around your brand. The next step is to evaluate your current web presence and positioning online. This may sound like a difficult process, but actually it's quite straight forward and doesn't take too long to complete. One way to do this is to type in *your name* in Google images and see what comes up in the search results. Do you feature on the first page of results, or indeed any page? Then type in the name of your subject field, and then do another search on your specific research area. So in three easy steps you will have identified the extent of your online presence, how you are positioned in your subject field and how much of an impact you and your research is making in the digital landscape. If the results are depressing, then don't despair. This type of 'brand audit' will reveal who the major academic players are in your subject field and how much of an impact their work is having on the subject domain and society in general. These people now need to be considered as *role models*, and you need to think about how you can develop a similar type of digital profile. If on the other hand, your search results indicate that you do have a web presence, then the thing you now need to do is consider how 'consistent' your profile is across the plethora of digital platforms that are available to researchers. Poepelman & Blacksmith (2012, p.115) noted that importance of having a consistent digital profile when they said that a contradictory messages about your personal brand will lead "people to start questioning the authenticity of your brand promise" and be less inclined to trust and connect with you in the future. In the digital world this can prove to be time consuming since there are many platforms ranging from organisational staff profile pages to academic social

networks like Academia.edu, Research Gate, Social Science Research Network and Google Scholar amongst many others. It is also worth noting that this consistency in digital profile is important since online profile descriptions, photographs and your general appearance often provide the basis for ‘social comparisons’ (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011) and can dictate whether or not you will be accepted into some online networks.

Now that you have established your personal brand and set about creating a consistent online personal brand identity, you now need to think about your audiences. Who are they and why should they listen to what you have to say? Wetsch (2012, p.30) noted the importance of “crafting the correct message” to right target audience, so when you blog or tweet on an issue, make sure that what you say is consistent with your brand and that it reinforces your reputation and point of differentiation. For example, if you are communicating with an academic research community, then you need to make sure that you use subject specific terminology, set your work within existing knowledge and emphasize that your findings and conclusions are based on a rigorous methodological approach. Alternatively, if you are communicating with a business community, then the language should be clear and concise with the information that you are disseminating presented as a series of actionable points. So, the message here is that your research outputs need to be tailored for the target audience. One size does not fit all in this case.

Connecting with online networks and disseminating your research to a range of global audiences.

So now that you have identified your objectives, developed a narrative around your personal brand, it is now a case of deciding how far to extend your digital footprint. North & Oliver (2014, p.1) argued that your profile needs to be “on numerous digital platforms in order to be seen as contemporary and relevant” to stakeholders. There is no doubt that the digital world offers an array of opportunities to extend your digital footprint, but, it can be confusing and having so many digital platforms makes it difficult to evaluate which platform you should be on. So, you need to think clearly about the reasons for extending your digital footprint across many platforms, because ultimately, being on as many platforms as possible will only end up diluting your core message and add to the time spent on maintaining your profile across these different platforms.

A digital platform is the same as any other medium and for it to be effective you need to think about your audiences first and then the digital platform. As North & Oliver (2014, p.1) noted, you need to think about how you can best communicate with and serve your audiences, and “don’t forget what works for your brand, its values and assets. This should be an equally important voice in deciding the digital platform that will help you meet your objective”.

Once you have generated your digital profile and considered the appropriate online platforms that you want to be seen on, you need to think about how you engage with users on these platforms. In their recent work ‘Learning to Love Networking’, Casciaro, Gino & Kouchaki (2016, p.104) provided a lucid discussion on the stereotypical views on networking saying that some people believe that it:

“makes them feel uncomfortable and phony—even dirty. Although some people have a natural passion for it—namely, the extroverts who love and thrive on social interaction—many understandably see it as brown-nosing, exploitative, and inauthentic”.

However, they go on to point out that there is a substantial amount of evidence to suggest that those people that actively engage in networking activities are far more likely to produce more innovative research and advance their career at the same time. What is interesting about their paper is that they argue that researchers who have a natural aversion to networking can overcome this problem by thinking about it differently. Indeed, by creating a mind-set that focuses on identifying other researchers who have the same common goal and shared interests as you, the ‘chore’ of networking becomes an activity that will make it “feel more authentic and meaningful” (Casciaro et al, 2016, p.107) to you. Uzzi & Dunlap (2005) also noted that these shared interests can create powerful networks that have the potential to create “high-stakes activities that connect you” with influential players in your subject field.

In the digital world a lot of networking activity is informal. You can connect, and develop a relationship using different digital tools and platforms. However, the key to effective networking is to think about it as a ‘systematic process’ (Byham, 2009) in terms of structure, composition and engagement. In terms of *structure*, this point is illustrated extremely well by Ibarra & Hunter (2007) in their article ‘How Leaders Create and Use Networks’. They argue that your networks need to be configured in three ways in order for it to be effective for you and the other people in your network.

Don't forget, these are social networks, so reciprocal exchange and a win-win for both parties will maximise the benefits in that network. Ibarra & Hunter (2007) argued that the structure of your network needs to be:

- Operational – where you should build good working relationships with the people that you work most closely with on a day to day basis.
- Personal – where you identify like-minded people inside and outside of your organisation who can provide you with a stimulus for personal growth and development.
- Strategic – where you develop both horizontal and vertical relationships with people outside of your operational network. These people can provide big picture views and strategic direction on important issues that you face in your operational role and career development.

In terms of network *composition*, you need to consider the people in each of your operational, personal and strategic networks. Far too often, people consider an effective network to be a numbers game, believing that having 500+ connections on LinkedIn is a sign of their effective networking activity. Wrong. It's far better to have 25 network connections that are structured, composed and engaged with you and that will deliver effectively on your needs and goals. So don't be afraid to decline a request to 'connect' and think about how every new request will add or dilute your personal brand and core message. Cross & Thomas (2011) argued this point well by saying that you need to think about the composition of your networks by analyzing it, delayering it when necessary and capitalizing on it to produce rewarding and productive relationships.

In terms of network *engagement* activity you need to ensure that you continually engage with your stakeholders, users and followers. North and Oliver (2014, p.3) argued that your audiences "will expect a continuous delivery of content through digital platforms. You can't just use a digital platform when it suits you". Once you have given the audiences in your network a taste of what you can deliver as a researcher, they will want more and if you don't provide this on a regular basis, they will quickly desert you for other researchers on other platforms. So, rather than simply placing a conference or peer reviewed paper on a digital platform and leaving it, you need to

think about how you engage with the people that view and download your paper. For example, you could set up a Google Scholar Alert so that every time one of your papers is downloaded, you can contact that person and ask for critical feedback, or suggest that they read another related paper that you have had published or perhaps send them a lecture presentation associated with your paper. Some platforms like Academia.edu allow you get critical feedback on a working paper from within your network. Again, this will help you not only to get feedback, it will also allow you to keep up your communication and engagement levels with people within your networks. You may consider this type of on-going engagement to be a drain on your time, but it is really needs to be considered as an investment in the relationship with the people in your networks. As Ibarra & Hunter (2007, p.44) argued, the “word ‘work’ is part of networking, and it is not easy work, because it involves reaching outside the borders of a manager’s comfort zone”. Indeed, this engagement activity will keep the people within your network engaged and interested in your research and it will be you that reaps the benefits of increased citations and the resultant H and I indices score in the long-term. It is also worth remembering that this type of ongoing engagement with your audiences helps you to build and develop your online reputation. Indeed Madden & Smith (2010) found that online reputation management is becoming increasingly important and is evidenced by an increasing number of recruiters scanning a range of digital platforms when assessing the strengths and weaknesses of potential job candidates.

Box: Opportunities and challenges

- The digital world means that you need to recalibrate, plan, set a new direction, and understand the metrics that matter.
- Develop a distinctive academic profile by identifying a set of values, a core message and point of differentiation.
- Build and develop your online reputation with the right networks.
- Think of networking as a systematic process that focusses on structure, composition and engagement.

Conclusion

Much of the previous discussion has been framed around the need to think strategically about what you do as an academic researcher and how you can stand out in the crowd. The digital landscape has undeniably created a vast array of opportunities for researchers to develop their digital profile, access new networks and extend the reach and impact of their research outputs. The trouble is that these opportunities are available to all researchers, and so the real question is how do you stand out in a crowded market place?

As we have seen, it all starts with the big strategic questions about the type of academic career you want. Assuming you do want a career as an academic researcher, then you need to *start planning*. Planning and developing your personal brand and point of differentiation and making sure that you choose the right digital platforms to get your work recognized. Planning your network structure, composition and engagement activities in order to deliver tangible results for you in terms of career progression, or working on interesting projects with like-minded people.

In a world that has gone digital, Ahmed and Olander (2012) concluded that a Smith & Wesson will always beat four aces. What they mean by this is that new digital technologies have changed the nature of the game and the old rules don't apply any more. What was once considered a winning hand, now looks ridiculous in the face of a powerful new technology. The digitally agile researcher needs to forget about their previous assumptions about how research is conducted and disseminated and take advantage of the new rules that are shaping the digital landscape.

Box: Further reading

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