Developing a scholarly digital profile

Although the process of research can sometimes seem a lonely one, there are many reasons for having a public profile as a researcher, and not only to advance your career (though of course this is important). You may also want to:

- connect globally with people who share your research interests
- make your research more visible to stakeholders, funders, and anyone with an interest
- allow students and colleagues to understand your work

Traditional routes to reputation

Journal articles and conference papers are still the most influential ways of communicating about your research and developing your profile as a researcher. Even these traditional routes, however, are changing. Print-based journals are increasingly available online, and in many subject areas there are now highly-ranked peer-reviewed journals that only appear in an online edition. As an early-career researcher you may be interested in making your research available in an open access journal or via other forms of open scholarship (see the briefing paper on Open Data Management).

Online conferences are increasingly popular, and many face-to-face conferences provide streamed presentations and amplification to the outside world through twitter, blogs, and online rapporteurs. Engaging in conferences, even if you are not presenting a paper, will present many opportunities to join digital networks (some conferences establish special groups and forums for this purpose), and to extend the contacts you make.

If you are studying for a research degree, consider how you will make your dissertation and ideally also your results openly available, for example through OpenThesis or DART, or an open institutional repository.

Researchers are increasingly using metrics to keep track of their research impact and profile. Google Scholar lets you track publications that cite you; ResearcherID assigns you a unique identifier that you can use to manage publication lists and track citations; Web of Knowledge runs a data citation index.
An actively managed public profile

Making your work publicly available is only the first step. You must make sure that it all points back to you, and the only way to do that is to actively manage a profile – or several profiles – on academically credible web sites or networks. This is meant to be a public profile, so your security settings are likely to be more open than on your private / personal networks. Make sure the ‘about you’ sections are relevant and interesting, the sections about your work are up to date, and the photograph is appropriate (not an avatar or a pet).

• Other suggestions:
  • make sure you keep your departmental web page up to date and provide links to any published work
  • maintain a separate profile on a public network (you may not always be at the same department) or start a blog – see below
  • find out if you can publish a draft or ‘grey’ version of an article or book chapter on your blog or linked to your profile – many publishers are happy to allow this
  • uploading presentations and papers to e.g. slideshare with a link from your blog/profile page can be more practical than hosting them all locally (but DO file your own copies)
  • find out about your university’s policy on open research and consider making a personal commitment to it – you will be furthering access to knowledge and joining a powerful movement
  • rather than having several different profiles to update, consider using something like Google Profile (linked to your gmail account) which you can use for all your social networks

Which networks?

It depends on your subject area and what you want to achieve. It’s always worth asking other research students and members of staff where they hang out online. Popular places for researchers to maintain an online presence include the following.

• Facebook: world’s largest social network: researchers find their niches (and of course use it to keep in touch with friends/family like everyone else!)
• Academia.edu: The specialist academic network: allows upload of articles and presentations and is essentially your online academic CV
• LinkedIn: More commercial/business oriented but still used by many, especially if looking for consultancy or contracts
• Google+: More ‘exclusive’ than Facebook, more substance than twitter – you need an invitation to join (but you’ll know someone who’s already on board)
• ResearchGate: Mainly for scientists but gaining ground among researchers generally.
• Twitter: Unique social messaging network or ‘microblog’ which allows you to post 160-character messages, follow and gain followers, track topics
• File sharing sites: Don’t forget that when you are uploading research outcomes to sharing sites such as slideshare, youtube, vimeo, flickr, you are creating a public profile. You can follow others and attract followers of your own.
• Bookmarking/referencing networks: Delicious, digg, reddit and Pinterest are sharing sites for bookmarks; mendeley, zotero, cite-u-like allow sharing of academic references; all allow you to maintain a profile and connect with others through shared references.
• Other: Discipline-specific networks can be more valuable to your research career than all of the above: look for community repositories, journals or conferences with social networks attached, forums run by funders/special interest groups, and jiscmail discussion lists.

About twitter

Twitter has become almost indispensable for researchers. It can be used to keep up to date with your field, find like-minded colleagues around the globe, and follow key thinkers and publications. Key ways of building your twitter profile are to:

• find and follow people you already know in your subject area
• retweet things that you have found useful – this is also a good way to pick up followers
• include links to blog posts and other media (bitly.com is useful for shortening them) so people find you a source of information
• use hashtags (#) to make sure your tweets are included in topic searches; generate your own to start new conversations
• post research-related questions – people love feeling that they can help
• If you get serious about twitter you will find a management tool such as Tweetdeck or HootSuite makes it easier to track what’s going on.

Some networking tips

Different networks have different conventions so these are not hard and fast rules but generally:

• Don’t claim someone is a friend or contact if they aren’t. Contact them directly first with a specific question or introduction, then ask if they mind connecting online.
• Always use the option to make a contact request personal e.g. ‘I really enjoyed meeting you at...’
• Lurk first is a good rule – pick up the conventions, the language, the topics that are in currency before launching in on your own.
• Comment on other people’s threads and posts if you expect them to comment on yours.
• Asking a question is a good way to make an intro to a research community, just make sure it’s a good (i.e. both genuine and intelligent) question, then collate answers and post them back with thanks.
• Do not introduce yourself with a lengthy CV – nobody cares (yet).
• Everyone likes followers. So follow everyone. Then if you do have an opportunity to meet/connect with someone more directly you will have something to talk about.
• Be interesting, but not for the sake of it.
• If you really can’t be interesting, be useful. Some people gain enormous networks just by acting as a community filter, summariser and reminder service.
• Always credit other people’s ideas. Apart from being the stuff that makes communities go round, acknowledgement will come back and bite you if you neglect it.
About blogs and blogging

Other researchers’ and research organisations’ blogs can be useful places to have conversations and build connections. You may well be encouraged – and sometimes required by funders/supervisors/heads of dept – to contribute to blogs that are not your own, and this is good experience. But there is nothing like your own blog for giving you control over your public profile. You can use a blog as a research notebook, a draft of your thesis, a space to store links, ideas and resources, an online CV, or a branding tool. A useful set of slides from Helen Steele explores the basics of setting up a blog and why you should bother. As with twitter, expect a certain amount of reciprocity as you build your reputation – you ‘like’ my post, I’ll link to yours – but that is no different to off-line networking.

Most researchers use wordpress, typepad or blogger to manage their blog. Alternatives are posterous and tumblr which allow you to collate a range of online material and might be a good choice if (for example) you want to post a lot of images or short posts on different topics.

Blog posts should not be pages of text. Use short posts linked to longer articles or reports, and try to include images and video wherever relevant. Links to other relevant research and to background information are helpful to readers and also net you more connections and potential followers.

Keeping track and rationalising your time online

Some people tend to be ‘integrators’ (one identity that everyone meets) or ‘segregators’ (different identities for friends and family, work, and possibly other areas of life). Think hard about whether you want to mix your personal and academic/professional lives or keep them apart. You can always create two profiles on the same network or use different networks for different parts of your life. Once you have established where your ‘primary’ academic profile resides (ideally your blog), link to this from other networks to save time updating. Include your key online identities in your email signature. Promote your blog posts on twitter and display your facebook updates on your blog. Subscribe to RSS feeds or email alerts from blogs and websites that are useful to your research, e.g. tables of contents from journals, news from funders. Many researchers find it helpful to set aside a time each week when they update their blog, review saved emails and feeds, and post to networks that may have been neglected.

Finally, if the social network you need does not exist, consider setting up your own. Specialist sites such as ning and elgg make this relatively easy.
Further information

Useful briefing on twitter and blogs from the postgraduate toolbox (US)

Great guide to using twitter in research and teaching from the LSE

Many of the 23 Things for Research collated by digital researchers at the University of Oxford relate to managing a research profile.

Resources produced by the Exeter Cascade project in collaboration with Careers: building a professional digital identity (for undergraduate students)