

Scholarly Publications in the 21st Century: The Need for Creativity and Flexibility

(Publicațiile academice în secolul 21: Nevoia de creativitate
și flexibilitate)

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Rezumat: *Prezentarea explorează provocările cu care se confruntă savanții în secolul XXI în ceea ce privește difuzarea cunoștințelor. Restricțiile legate de COVID-19 și constrângerile bugetare impun cercetătorilor să fie creativi în ceea ce privește modul în care își împărtășesc cercetările. Conferințele academice virtuale și hibride au devenit mai degrabă norma decât excepția, iar utilizarea rețelelor sociale pentru dialogul academic a crescut, de asemenea. Ne propunem să explorăm cum platforme precum researchgate.net și academia.edu au devenit centre de activitate în plină expansiune pentru o rețea globală de comunități epistemice care transcend granițele și limbile.*

Cuvinte cheie: COVID-19, publicare, cercetare, social media

Abstract: *The presentation explores the challenges faced by scholars in the 21st century in terms of the diffusion of knowledge. COVID-19 related restrictions and budgetary constraints require scholars to be creative on how they share their research. Virtual and hybrid academic conferences have become the norm rather than the exception and the use of social media for scholarly dialogue has also increased. Platforms such as researchgate.net and academia.edu have become booming hubs of activity for a global network of epistemic communities transcending borders and languages.*

Keywords: COVID-19, Publishing, Research, Social Media

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1. Introduction

COVID-19 has had a profound disruptive effect on how societies function ("Coronavirus (COVID-19)," 2020; von Feigenblatt, 2020, 2021b, 2021e). The production and dissemination of knowledge is a central to the sustainable development of nations (Banyai, 2010; Bayulgen, 2008). As one of the oldest professions in the world, scholars have had to adapt to serious disruptions in the way they conduct their "trade". Scholars are a product of the work of their predecessors and thus have inherited a range of rituals, traditions, and mores limiting the spectrum of what is considered to be "proper" academic conduct (Schiller & Liefner, 2007; Villarreal, 2014). Traditions include rules regarding interaction with other scholars and with the public at large. Moreover tradition also regulates the dissemination of knowledge and the format in which the research is presented.

The primacy of face to face lectures, scientific academic articles, and the ritualized exchanges of the traditional academic conference have had to adapt to the challenges brought about by COVID-19 related restrictions. Challenges transcend the obvious travel restrictions and include societal and economic disruptions. There is also a psycho-social aspect to the changes brought about by COVID-19, a sense of discontinuity with the past, which has opened space for the contestation of age-old norms and traditions in academia. The slow reaction of many institutions of higher learning to the COVID-19 learning crisis brought about considerable criticism from the general public (von Feigenblatt, 2021a, 2021c, 2021e; Kamenetz, 2021). A certain degree of detachment and indifference exacerbated by a perceived callousness in terms of a lack of a sense of urgency on the part of scholars sheltering in place in their ivory towers; has been the perception of the public at large (Rivera, 2021).

The initial reaction of many academic institutions was to cease all operations in the hopes of a return to normalcy (von Feigenblatt, Acuña, & Cardoso-Pulido, 2022). Academic conferences were cancelled, National Academies stopped meeting, and usual academic activities slowed down to a standstill. Nevertheless after a few months of very little activity, voices started to be heard both from within and from outside academia about needed changes in order for academic activities to resume. Recommended changes included a wide range of measures such as videoconferencing, an increase of the integration of new collaboration technologies in the research process, and flexibility in terms of venue and media for conferences. Change was not even and certain institutions realized that changes in their internal statutes were required in order to allow even the most minor of accommodations in terms of format and venue (von Feigenblatt et al., 2022). Even though it is difficult to generalize the

pace of change spans a wide continuum starting with reactionary rejection of any accommodations by many National Academies to innovative universities ready to take the digital leap. It should be noted the membership of the institution, availability of resources, and internal structure were also factors having a crucial effect on the pace of adaptation.

2. Hybrid and Virtual Conferences

The magisterial lecture is considered to be the gold standard in terms of academic conferences (von Feigenblatt, 2021d). Face to face presentations are encouraged as the preferred way for scholars to present their research and to receive feedback in a highly ritualized format. Young scholars are socialized from an early stage to be able to participate in this type of academic activity (Guinier, Fine, Balin, Bartow, & Stachel, 1994; Lueddeke, 2008; Wellin & Fine, 2007). Thesis and dissertation defenses follow similar rituals. The tradition of holders of “doctorates” asking questions in dissertation defenses is part of a tradition of peer-review. At the same time it is important to note that other members of the audience are not allowed to question the candidate. Traditional academic conferences tend to be more open in terms of who is allowed to ask questions but norms and traditions limit the range of acceptable questions to focus on traditional academic concerns such as methodology, data analysis, and recommendations for research (Eldridge & Cranston, 2009; Kimball, 2013; Waugh & Ketusiri, 2009).

The practice of including poster presentations still survives in some conferences with a focus on providing opportunities to younger scholars without having to devote plenary time to their research. Many journals are still only printed on paper and universities tend to favor formal scientific articles published in peer-reviewed journals over other types of publications (Thapa & von Feigenblatt, 2017). Traditional journals take over six months to publish a paper because of the complexity of the process of peer-review. The publication of scientific articles in academic journals is at the center of the academic endeavor and will continue to play an important role in the development of the sciences and the humanities for the foreseeable future. Nevertheless the immediacy of the socio-political, sanitary, and educational crisis brought about by the COVID-19 Pandemic has brought to the fore the need for a greater range of media and formats for the dissemination of knowledge (von Feigenblatt, 2021e).

The rise of virtual and hybrid conferences as the “new normal” is one of the results of the restrictions and challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. International cooperation became more important in order to tackle the complex phenomena related to the global crisis, and the traditional format of the strictly face

to face synchronous academic conference was simply not feasible due to travel restrictions and intermittent lockdowns. Moreover, even the synchronicity of presentations was challenged, as more conferences allowed the inclusion of pre-recorded presentations. While the result of the aforementioned trends was an increase in terms of cooperation and to a certain extent, in a flattening of the playing field for scholars based in the developing world, the new breed of academic conferences continued to emulate the format of the traditional conferences in terms of output. Information technology was used as a way to transcend geographical barriers but the technology did not have an effect on the essence of the process. The intended audience for hybrid and virtual conferences continued to be fellow academics and the review process for the acceptance of presentations remained constant. A more radical change in terms of academic collaboration and the dissemination of knowledge was the proliferation of social media platforms as a way to share preliminary results, working papers, and even raw data, and to receive feedback from scholars, practitioners, and even students, from all over the world.

3. Social Media

Academically focused social media is not new however their centrality as a means of promoting collaboration both between and within epistemic communities has increased (von Feigenblatt, 2021e). Platforms such as academia.edu, researchgate.net, the social science research network, and OpenScholar have become well known names in the academic community. The previously mentioned platforms have advantages and disadvantages and their missions and visions differ, but they all provide new and innovative ways of interacting with fellow scholars and of sharing research directly with the consumer/reader.

Academia.edu and researchgate.net are direct competitors in terms of social media platforms for scholars (von Feigenblatt, 2021d). The former is based in the United States and the later is based in Europe. Both platforms allow scholars to share various forms of publications such journal articles, book chapters, and moreover there is also the possibility to provide and to receive feedback on both published and working papers. Another interesting characteristic of both platforms is that it allows scholars to contact each other directly and to see who is reading their papers. Both platforms allow videos of conference presentations and provide useful statistics about readers and impact. One important difference between the statistics provided by academia.edu and researchgate.net to those provided by SCOPUS and google scholar is that the emphasis is that in addition to traditional metrics such as citations, the number of reads and recommendations are also provided. Citations only tell part of the story in terms of the impact of a particular scholar. The number of reads may

reflect that a paper has considerable influence over students and practitioners while maybe not as high in terms of citations. Another advantage is that both academia.edu and researchgate.net provide demographic information regarding readers. A highly cited paper may have considerable influence in university centers in the developed world, and very little impact in the developing world. Thus, having information about the geographical distribution of readers is also very useful in order to assess impact. Both platforms also provide information about the academic ranks of the readers which may also provide valuable insights regarding the degree of seniority of consumers of knowledge. Reserearchgate.net has a unique feature, it allows scholars to provide paper and book recommendations and that is included in a composite index known as the RG score. The score includes several variables such as the number of citations, the number of followers, and even the number of questions asked by member of the community. RG scores are then compared to those of the rest of the membership of researchgate.net. Thus, it is possible for a scholar to have a holistic idea of how he or she compares to other scholars. The H-index provided by SCOPUS and google scholar is provided out of context and it is difficult to determine what constitutes a good H-index. On the other hand academia.edu simply provides an overall percentile based on the number of reads and mentions (citations). In academia.edu scholars in the top 5 percent or higher receive a badge indicating their achievement.

Thus both academia.edu and researchgate.net provide new avenues for cooperation and bring some transparency to the research process. Moreover they provide a more holistic assessment of the possible impact of a scholar; venturing to include factors previously ignored by traditional scholarly metrics, such as the number of readers. The platforms also provide a relatively level playing field for scholars from the developing world and non-elite universities to share their research findings with fellow researchers and practitioners. It should be noted that both platforms are free to use, with academia.edu offering some extra features at a small cost. Therefore, scholars can do some of the same things that were previously done during academic conferences on the previously mentioned platforms. Providing feedback to early drafts of papers and sharing research with the rest of the scholarly community.

Two other platforms are also important in terms of their contribution to the diffusion of research online. OpenScholar provides a powerful platform to host academic profiles and research. While it allows individual scholars to purchase a subscription independently, it is more common for universities to purchase institutional subscriptions and to provide the service to graduate students and faculty members. OpenScholar provides easy to use templates for scholars to develop simple profiles to share their academic accomplishments and their research with the rest of

the world. It should be noted that OpenScholar more closely resembles an official personal webpage than a social media page. Nevertheless it makes it easy for scholars to update their profiles in real time and to post and share new research. Another great tool is zenodo.org. This platform is a free academic depository funded in part by the European Union (von Feigenblatt, 2021e). One of the challenges faced by many scholars in the developing world in non-elite institutions is that they lack access to an institutional depository (Brown, 2014). Moreover, some publications do not provide DOI numbers for their publications because of the cost involved. Zenodo.org provides both services for free and it is seamlessly integrated with OpenAir, the open access index developed with European Union funds.

3. Conclusions

COVID-19 has disrupted academic norms and traditions. The challenges brought about by the initial lockdowns and travel restrictions provided a once in a lifetime opportunity for scholars to seek alternative venues for scholarly interaction. While academia.edu, researchgate.net, and virtual conferences are not new, their use became main-stream during the prolonged crisis. It can be asserted that academia underwent a long-awaited globalization process. Asynchronous presentations, networking with scholars from all over the world, and access to powerful tools to share various forms of scholarly work, and in the process circumventing traditional centers of academic orthodoxy, have ushered into what Thomas Kuhn would call a veritable “scientific revolution” (Kuhn, 1996; Lueddeke, 2008) . It is too early to provide a definitive assessment of the effects of the previously mentioned disruptions, however it is clear that the changes and increasing use of social media platforms for the sharing and dissemination of knowledge could have deep emancipatory effects for young scholars and also lead into an accelerated rate of inter and intra-disciplinary contestation.

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