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Exploring the utility of Academia.edu: a SWOT analysis

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to analyze the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the academic social networking, Academia.edu.

Design/methodology/approach – SWOT analysis is performed to evaluate the platform.

Findings – Academia.edu provides resources that enable scholars to heighten the impact and reach of their research within a digitally networked environment.

Originality/value – This is one of the first studies to evaluate the scholarly merits of Academia.edu.

Keywords Altmetrics, Research networks, Academic social networks, Open access publishing, Academia.edu, Information technology

Paper type Viewpoint

Academia.edu is a social media platform developed for academic researchers to share scholarly works with a public audience. Since its inception in 2008, the site has experienced rapid growth and is now one of the largest and most commonly used academic social networking sites (Cutler, 2012; Cutler, 2013a, 2013b; Davis, 2015; Gannes, 2011; Kincaid, 2011; Knowles, 2012; Ovadia, 2014; Niyazov *et al.*, 2016; Parr, 2014; Shema, 2012; Thelwall and Kousha, 2014; Tweney, 2014; Williams and Woodacre, 2016; Williams, 2017a). As the popularity of the site continues to expand, increasing scholarly study is warranted. To such ends, this report offers a SWOT analysis of the site's primary strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (for an overview of the SWOT analytic framework, see Pickton and Wright, 1998; Helms and Nixon, 2010).

Some of the strengths and weaknesses of Academia.edu are offered below.

Strengths

(1) Altmetrics promoted through Academia.edu include new article postings, viewership statistics and researcher rankings. These measures are increasingly common and popular tools used by researchers to showcase the public significance and impact of their work (Williams, 2017a).

(2) Academia.edu provides a means for publication accessibility and openness that is not afforded by formal publishing processes.

(3) Academia.edu allows work to be shared by inviting audiences from both within and outside the academic world to engage with research literature (Ovadia, 2014). In doing so, the site increases audience size.

(4) Academia.edu informs the authors posting work to the site when an article is cited as well who is accessing and/or citing the article.

(5) Free and open access to articles posted on Academia.edu yield more citations than articles that users have to pay for. The citation advantage of articles posted to Academia.edu reflects a 50 to 69 per cent increase over traditional publication modes within five years of sharing on the site (Niyazov *et al.*, 2016).

(6) The site houses an analytics dashboard that provides data scholars can use to illustrate the impact of their work to hiring committees, promotion and tenure reviewers, and funding organizations (Shema, 2012).

(7) Academia.edu has features that make it easier for articles to be discovered, including:

- user notification when a new article of interest is posted;
- the networked capacity to share articles with followers; and
- options to tag articles with additional subject lines that reach people outside a researcher's immediate network (Niyazov *et al.*, 2016).

Weaknesses

- Articles appearing on Academia.edu cannot be assumed to have been vetted via traditional peer review processes. Some of the papers posted to the site are pre-prints of works that have not been published in peer-reviewed outlets. Absence of peer review can, in turn, influence readers' acceptance of the quality of scholarly work (Williams, 2017b).
- Traditional forms of peer review used to assess research quality, including flaws in logic and lack of appropriate citations, are not found within the Academia.edu system.
- During the traditional publication process, journal editors commonly address grammatical errors, issues in clarity and organizational problems. Academia.edu does not provide a rigorous line editing service for pre-prints, as some other publishing venues do (Williams, 2017b).
- Innovation and integration to existing theory, which can prevent publication in more traditional vehicles (Neuman *et al.*, 2008), may be missing from research published on Academia.edu.
- While Academia.edu may expand audience reach to include scholars from various disciplines and public audiences at-large, new audiences, particularly those outside of academia, may not have the expertise or background needed to fully understand the content and/or to review articles for quality and accuracy (Williams, 2017c).
- Academia.edu can speed research to publication, however, traditional journals may refuse to publish work has been previously disseminated via Academia.edu prior to peer review (Williams and Woodacre, 2016).
- Uncertainty remains as to how universities, colleges and academic departments will use and respond to data generated via Academia.edu, including how viewership and impact of articles shared via the site may be assessed as metrics for faculty hiring, evaluation, tenure and promotion.

As Academia.edu continues to grow and develop, it becomes essential to consider the opportunities and threats that the site may face in the future. Some of the primary opportunities and threats currently on the horizon are presented below.

Opportunities

- Academia.edu has an opportunity to merge with traditional publishers' peer review processes; and, in doing so, has the potential to be a more robust and useful platform for scholars.

- In the future, Academia.edu can challenge existing publication norms that often drastically slow time to publication.

- Academia.edu can be leveraged by scholars to build their scholarly brands and strengthen their scholarly identities (Williams and Woodacre, 2016).

- In the future, Academia.edu may opt to have open and continuous peer review of articles housed on the site, which could benefit communication and discussion; and, in turn, lead to the advancement of academic disciplines.

- By bringing additional peer reviewers to the field, Academia.edu may be able to speed up the lengthy process of review in traditional publishing while affording more researchers the benefit of experiencing the peer review process.

- Academia.edu has the ability to offer new and innovative altmetrics that capture the significance and reach of articles housed and distributed via the site (i.e. the site currently indicates how many times an article is read, shared and cited but this could be expanded to include other metrics, such as the altmetric ranking).

- Academia.edu can heighten the impact of scholars' work by harnessing the power of networked scholarship (Shema, 2012).

Threats

- Copyright infringement threatens users' ability to share published documents on Academia.edu (Ovadia, 2014).

- Traditional publication is still viewed as the most credible source for quality work. According to Cale Guthrie Weissman (2013), "While it is hard to get one's foot in the door, academia has been meritocratic for centuries with reason. Speed and democratization shouldn't necessarily be reasons to completely uproot the system".

- Researchers using this site may be seen as having less rigorous standards than those pursuing publication in traditional outlets.

- Academia.edu faces competition from open academic sites that post peer-reviewed papers, like the Public Library of Science, which hosts similar features and may be seen by academics (both authors and readers) as a more credible platform (Tweney, 2014).

- Academia.edu faces competition from other large open access academic social networking sites, like ResearchGate, which had 4 million users in 2014 and 15 million by 2018, and Mendeley, which had 3 million users in 2014 and over 6.5 million by 2018 (Parr, 2014; Mendeley, 2018).

- Open access publishers seek to engage many of the same audiences as Academia. edu. For example, ArXiv.org, which serves researchers in the natural and social sciences, published 940,000 papers in 2014. A choice between platforms may confuse authors and audiences about where best to search for information (Tweney, 2014).

- Research posted via Academia.edu can be co-opted by competitors seeking publication, grant funding or financial gains.

Conclusion

As new media continue to evolve and create new types of data that can be collected not only more quickly but also can capture different, varied and nuanced information, academia should not only be aware of these new platforms but should also look to evaluate, improve and embrace change.

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