6
The Digital Scholar as Networker: Re-thinking why and how we ‘network’

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In this chapter we focus on

- What a social network really entails, and how social network analysis can help us better understand the key features of social networks.
- The necessary shift in thinking about scholarly networking: from self-promotion (of the individual) to service (of a network’s purpose).
- Practical networking tools for the digital age.
- Networking for teaching, scholarship and service.

Keywords: Professional networking; social networks; academic networking; social networking sites; academic conferences; virtual conferences.
6.1 Introduction: Considering networking and social networks

In the context of contemporary scholarship, the term ‘networking’ is typically associated with digital or in-person events that are explicitly organised to enable knowledge-sharing and expanded professional networks. Typically, such events – conferences, seminars or even workshops – allow those in attendance to inhabit the same place (or virtual space) at the same time, to allow for some form of social engagement and professional relationship-building. These professional acquaintances (or so-called ‘connections’) are expected to enable academic career advancement, to spark research collaborations, or even lead to future employment. Networking has, of course, extended to the asynchronous virtual space, where a social media profile page is now the digital equivalent of a business card, allowing us at any moment in time to connect with a global network of individuals that can potentially serve our professional interests. Both in-person and online networking can further be supplemented with less intentional endeavours, involving more serendipitous, informal engagement that can eventually lead to professional relationship-building.

Wherever and however networking occurs, the reason scholars (or any other type of professionals) engage in career-related networking tends to be informed by their individual, vested interests. The Cambridge dictionary defines networking as “to meet people who might be useful to know, especially in your job”, whereas the Merriam Webster explains it as “the exchange of information or services among individuals, groups, or institutions. specifically: the cultivation of productive relationships for employment or business”. Based on these definitions and our common understanding of the term, networking involves the pursuit of new acquaintance and deepening of existing relationships as a means to serve professional objectives.

Such an understanding of networking as an activity primarily related to individual progression is somewhat at odds with our still evolving understanding of how complex social networks grow and sustain themselves. In order for an individual to network, one would assume their point of departure would be to understand the underlying goal of the social network they intend to participate in. This understanding aligns with research showing that our professional identity in academia is inextricably linked to an ever-evolving understanding of both the professional and social networks we occupy, and our sense of connection to our place within them (Heidari et al., 2020).

So, before delving into how scholars can best navigate social networks in an increasingly digital world, it is useful first to consider what constitutes a
social network. One way to do this is to draw from social network analysis (SNA). Neither a methodology nor a theory, SNA provides a useful perspective for better understanding the nature of the social systems that all humans form part of. The starting point of SNA is that our social lives are fundamentally subject to relations between individuals or groups (Marin & Wellman, 2016). Although this may seem a glaringly obvious premise, it does challenge many of our intuitive assumptions about our role in the social world. It highlights that we tend to infer causal relationships between the individual attributes of actors within a network (such as ourselves) and the behaviour of the entire network. For example, we may assume that one colleague’s personal attributes (e.g., skills or knowledge) are somehow directly responsible for the achievements of a much larger social network they participate in. A structural perspective of social networks, however, shifts the focus from individual attributes to the linkages between individuals. These linkages – whether they are communication channels or personal relationships – are treated as the primary clues to understanding social behaviour, as opposed to studying the traits and skillsets of separate individuals (Freeman, 2004).

To illustrate how social networks can be understood, we can consider a hypothetical scenario:

Scenario: Illustration of how social networks can be understood

An innovative initiative was launched at a South African university. It involved a highly successful new mentorship programme that connected young researchers, seasoned scholars and industry leaders in their field. The initiative evolved into what was widely deemed a regional and later international success. It was shown to enable productive collaboration between emerging researchers and practitioners, whilst advancing the professional profile of the established scholars and mentors involved.

To understand why the scheme was so effective, one approach would be to investigate the characteristics and skills of selected individuals who played a critical role in mobilising the programme. Another approach could be to focus on the academic departments or administrative centres involved at the relevant universities.

A social network analyst decides to apply another approach in her investigation:

1.) She focuses on the links between those involved in the programme, e.g. the nature of their professional or personal relationships, and how information flowed between relevant individuals (Marin & Wellman, 2016).

2.) She cautions not to limit her understanding of networks to encompass only easily identifiable groups (such as departments, organisations or other groups that are typically defined by membership). Rather, she seeks to understand sub-net-
works in the programme that evolved more organically, around a shared purpose or common interest (Davis & Sumara, 2009).

Her approach leads her to identify a social network of well-acquainted scholars, spanning different academic departments. She finds that, in the early stages of the initiative, they actively shared their common interest in supporting the programme amongst one another. As a result, they played an essential, yet not apparently obvious role in the pilot phase, as they encouraged one another to reach out to private-sector contacts that eventually provided crucial funding sources to sustain the programme through its initial grassroots phase. They further offered informal mentoring to early-career scholars involved in the programme. Their unstructured network may be less easily identifiable than a dedicated team or well-established organisational unit, but the boundary-crossing nature of their network made it a key enabling factor in the establishment of the programme. The information they exchanged (as opposed to the sum of their individual parts in terms of their traits and skills) allowed new opportunities to emerge.

To summarise, social networks are not necessarily limited to groups with clearly articulated agendas, formal titles or any form of membership. Rather, social networks emerge beyond and across the boundaries we tend to intuitively recognise. Fields such as SNA further suggest that these networks are products of human interactions – digital or otherwise – as opposed to an aggregation of a group of individuals. As such, the relationships between people within a network can tell us more about how the network will behave than the sum of their individual attributes could (Fetterman, 2014; Freeman, 2004; Marin & Wellman, 2016; Pierpaolo, 2011). Finally, social networks allow broader, more complex systems to evolve and sustain themselves – offering essential mechanisms for information exchange, often referred to as feedback loops (Koopmans, 2017; Mccool et al., 2015; Scott et al., 2018).

This perspective of social networks can serve to guide one's understanding of professional networking. The dictionary definitions of ‘networking’ signal the importance of information exchange, but they also suggest a stronger focus on the personal objectives of the individual, independent of the purpose of the social system they occupy. For the digital scholar, there certainly is much individual-level personal and professional reward to be gained from networking, as the rest of this chapter will outline. However, these benefits will always be the result of our ability to serve the underlying purposes of the social systems we navigate in the process. If the basis of networking is a genuine curiosity about others within the network, an openness to learn, to collaborate and to engage in dialogue, then the individual rewards associated with networking activities – such as academic career progression and research accolades – could follow as a result.
6.2 A shift in thinking about networking

As referred to throughout this book, digital scholarship is concerned with the exploration and application of emerging technologies to transform scholarly practices in an increasingly hyper-connected society (Jordan & Weller, 2018; Weller et al., 2013). This includes the ability to creatively apply digital tools (software, applications, smart devices and online platforms) to engage with social networks that will help to evolve their scholarly and/or teaching praxis. Academic social networking sites (ASNS), for instance, have become more widely used by academics in recent years, and it was initially expected that these platforms would lead to more active and widespread research collaborations (Jordan & Weller, 2017). Research has shown, however, that academics’ motivations to engage in online networking are more related to promoting themselves professionally, promoting their own research outputs, searching for and accessing resources and advancing their careers (Jordan & Weller, 2018). Similarly, academic conferences – virtual or otherwise – tend to be approached more as a platform for self-promotion than for fostering collaboration (see the section on ‘conferences’, later in this chapter). This is not to say that self-promotion is problematic per se. In fact, the potential reach and visibility that digital networking tools allow is a valuable affordance in the context of academia:

“In a world where academic faculty members are judged by the number of works that they publish and the number of citations that the works receive, an instrument that allows them to influence the extent of their exposure and increase the likelihood of citation delivers much power and utility” (Meishar-Tal & Pieterse, 2017, p. 17).

Exposure and influence are, of course, attractive benefits in this context. However, these gains are not automatically realised simply through using online networking tools. We know (as shown earlier in this chapter) that social networks evolve and grow as their members actively participate within them, with the goal of adding value to the broader network before expecting professional benefits to themselves. Veletsianos and Kimmons (2012) term such synergy between the individual scholar and their online networking tools and social practice as networked participatory scholarship. It involves not only sharing professional profiles and research outputs online, but also reflecting upon, critiquing, validating and continually developing one’s scholarship (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012). It can be argued that this participatory approach would add more value to the entire network as opposed
to limiting the expected value-addition only to the individual. As earlier dis-
cussed, social networks evolve through dialogue and relationships, and we
can safely assume that human relationship-building relies on participation,
synergy and acts that lead to mutual gain.

So, let us consider the various motivations of professional networking in
the context of scholarship, teaching and service in order to identify a more
participatory approach to networking in the digital age.

6.2.1 Networking for scholarship
6.2.1.1 Academic Social Networking Sites
One of the most popular ways for academics to network online is the use
of academic social-networking sites (ASNSs). Prominent examples include
ResearchGate, Mendeley, Academia.edu, CiteULike, Penprofile, Bibson-
omy, Zotera and Epernicus. These sites are designed in a similar way to
more generic social networking sites, as they allow users to upload content
and follow other users’ profiles or communicate with them, but they are also
more intentionally designed to meet the needs of scholars (Asmi & Mad-
husudhan, 2015). In addition to these common functionalities (which one
would find on a social networking site such as Facebook, or a professional
one such as LinkedIn), ASNSs typically include features such as citation
count, altmetrics, reference management and collaborative document pro-
cessing (Espinoza Vasquez & Caicedo Bastidas, 2015). Some of these sites,
such as ResearchGate, CiteULike and Mendeley, also allow for users to cre-
ate and share their own profiles, so that they can ‘follow’ other scholars with
similar research interests and gain access to their related networks and their
publications (Thelwall & Koucha, 2014).

Given the social features of these sites, one would expect a key drawing
card for users would be the potential for interactions between individuals
with mutual scholarly interests. However, researchers tend to use ASNSs
mainly to consume information, to a lesser degree to share information and
very rarely to interact with other site users (Meishar-Tal & Pieterse, 2017).
Another key motivating factor at play when it comes to how ASNSs are used
is the career stage of each individual subscriber. Seasoned academics tend
to use online social networking sites primarily to raise the profile of their
work in a research community, whilst junior academics and early-career
researchers tend to be interested in ASNS to foster relationships that can
lead to research collaboration in their field, or for future career prospects
(Jordan & Weller, 2018).

Although these sites are continually integrating more social engagement
functionalities, the platforms are still primarily used to upload articles and
track citations (Ovadia, 2014). Fittingly, self-promotion, ego-bolstering and the acquisition of knowledge are shown to be the most enticing affordances for academics that make use of these sites (Meishar-Tal & Pieterse, 2017). As such, academic online platforms tend to be designed primarily to satisfy the scholarly community’s needs for information-sharing, with social engagement as a secondary objective (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). These sites’ discussion boards or direct-messaging capabilities may not be as visible or seamlessly integrated as one would find on a non-academic SME, such as Twitter or LinkedIn – platforms designed for communication and networking as a primary advantage. A number of ASNSs, such as Academia.edu and ResearchGate were intentionally developed to facilitate connection between users with profiles. A myriad of other platforms such as Mendeley were initially designed for sharing academic content, and social networking functionalities were added at a later stage (Jordan, 2019). Longer-time users of these academic sites may not have explored their more recent social networking capabilities simply because they have learned to use the platforms with their primary function, i.e., the dissemination of academic content, in mind.

The information-sharing function of ASNSs still remains a key networking affordance. As mentioned earlier, the starting point for productive networking should be the question: how can I add value to the broader network, in terms of a shared goal or common interest? ASNSs can circumvent the model of official academic publishing that – after a lengthy publishing timeline that can exceed a year (for refereed academic journals) – tends to limit access to online academic databases (Thelwall & Koucha, 2014). Most ASNSs allow authors to upload full texts of their published work, their conference presentations and even drafts for public consumption and comment.

In terms of online communication, however, it is fair to assume that scholars using ASNSs also have other social media accounts, and that they may find engaging in online discussions on all these platforms too time intensive. While scholars also appropriate non-academic SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter for professional purposes (Jordan & Weller, 2018), the challenge of time and capacity, especially for those balancing their research endeavours and a high teaching load, still remains. Using various SNSs for both professional and personal purposes, to disseminate and find resources but also actively to communicate with others, will invariably impact on any scholar’s (assumingly already limited) capacity and time. At the end of this section we share suggestion on how this can be addressed.
6.2.1.2 Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites (SNSs) that have not been designed for academic purposes, such as Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, are increasingly becoming part of the scholarly community’s online networking toolset (Faucher, 2018; El-Shall, 2014). These social sites can be used as a complementary tool for academic SNSs – becoming a means for academics to establish professional relationships beyond their circle of social contacts. The very social design of these sites that focus more on profiles and people than on academic content allows scholars to gain insights into their field in the context of public discourse and the lived experiences of those outside academia. Even so, non-academic SNSs or related smart device applications are often regarded as trivial or even inappropriate by the scholarly community. Researchers in the field of complexity thinking have warned against this, arguing that without the capacity to constructively engage with social networks, scholars limit the impact of their work (Mccool et al., 2015):

“By taking the time to understand who within a given network seems to be connected to everybody else, and investing in relationships with those individuals, we can not only learn considerable lessons about what the people they know think, we also have an increased opportunity to influence the system we are embedded within.” (Mccool et al., 2015, p. 315)

For the digital scholar, the mix of professional and personal observations on SNSs can be a productive and highly effective approach to understanding their audience better. The informal and personal nature of engagement on these platforms can function as hooks for establishing connections with individuals relevant to their field, and can help scholars to better communicate their research to a broader public (Weller, 2011). The broader reach of these social platforms can also influence how the professional identity of the scholar is formed as they learn to understand the values, views and personal contexts of those beyond their academic circles, i.e. the rich mixture of practitioners and scholars from a range of fields which may benefit from their work (Heidari et al., 2020). In the digital humanities, for instance, scholars found Twitter to be an essential tool for raising awareness of trends in the field, and to invite insights from both scholarly peers and interested members of the public (Quan-Haase et al., 2015).

For scholars that want to focus on the emerging – perhaps still informal – discourses forming around their work and field, blogs pose a useful opportunity for open, yet structured online engagement. Academic blogs that welcome productive debate can help to establish scholars as public intellectuals,
as they allow them to share and log their formal research outputs whilst the blog authors can share and welcome more personal (often light-hearted) reflections about the scholarly experience (Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012).

The following table (Table 6.1) provides practical suggestions for using social networking sites for digital scholarship.

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<tr>
<th>Academic SNSs</th>
<th>Non-academic SNSs</th>
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<tr>
<td>✓ <strong>Subscribe and create a well-rounded profile</strong> on a popular and well-established ASNS to gain access to a broader network of fellow scholars. Your online profile should include essential background on your professional expertise, discipline, interest for collaboration and, potentially, links to your institution and relevant social networking sites.</td>
<td>✓ <strong>Approach social media as a source of enjoyment, rather than a chore.</strong> Although applications such as Hootsuite allow for pre-scheduling posts and managing content on various platforms, managing too many profiles can start to feel like a menial task. Approaching social media as a source of gratification and curiosity, rather than dedicating a set time to it each day or week, is shown to be more effective for academic users (Britton et al., 2019; Tsapali &amp; Paes, 2018).</td>
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<td>✓ <strong>Consider your unique needs and whether they align with the site’s affordances.</strong> For example, research-related networking can be facilitated on ResearchGate.net, Academia.edu, OrcID, Publons and Scopus, whilst the popularity of Mendeley is largely due to its automated bibliography features. A quick Google search on ‘best academic social networking sites’ will lead to an array of useful blog posts or discussion forums summarising and comparing key features of prominent ASNSs. These typically include tools for impact measurement, citation tracking and other forms of aggregated data on how often content is viewed or downloaded. Be sure to look for more recent articles, as the functions of ASNSs continually evolve.</td>
<td>✓ <strong>Remember that networking is a two-way street.</strong> Your choice of social network site should be informed by i.) your professional needs, and ii.) what value you can add to social networks on the site. First consider the central function of the platform, and whether you can (or want to) contribute to it. For example, Twitter allows for quick dissemination of information, via re-tweets, link sharing and hashtags. It is actively used as a source of breaking news, and as a mechanism for spreading viral news, which involves news stories that reach a wider audience at a much more rapid pace than other news stories (Al Rawi, 2019). Other platforms such as Facebook allow for more blog-like posts and are popular for setting up and advertising centrally managed collaboration pages. This will be elaborated on later in this chapter. Career-focused platforms such as LinkedIn allow for recruitment opportunities and career-related achievements to be shared, with profiles set up to function as digital resumés.</td>
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<td>✓ <strong>Keep in mind that establishing connections via these sites requires adding value to the network.</strong> Regular information-sharing can spur productive dialogue and even collaboration with others. The resources you upload can range from published texts to conference papers and even drafts. For the latter, be sure to indicate clearly that they are in draft format, and update them once published.</td>
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Seek quality engagement above quantity of ‘likes’ or ‘shares’. The size of your network should be a secondary objective, whilst high-quality information exchange and productive engagement should be the primary goal. Choose a smaller number of channels (such as one ANS and one SNS for professional networking), where you can disseminate high-quality, thought-provoking content that aligns with your scholarly interests, but possibly also invites dialogue with others. Whilst SNSs are designed to provide you with quantitative metrics on engagement (e.g. the number of ‘likes’, ‘shares’ or followers), a large network is not necessarily a reflection of the value it can add to you, and vice versa (Mainka et al., 2015).

Find a balance between generating your own and sharing others’ content. This will simplify and sustain the information-sharing process. For sharing your own content, consider linking from the SNS (e.g., Twitter or LinkedIn) to the academic platform (e.g., ResearchGate), where you upload your research outputs or the blog where you engage in more in-depth discussions. When you re-post hyperlinks to interesting resources you find on the Internet, contextualise and enrich the posts by adding your own thoughts along with the link, and invite others to share their thoughts on it.

Practise online etiquette (often referred to as ‘netiquette’). This includes giving credit to someone online – even if you are re-posting a direct link to their work – by either linking to their relevant online profile (e.g., ‘Twitter handle’) or their institutional contact page. In terms of online discussions, constructive disagreement can lead to valuable new insights, but engaging in public disagreements without practising sound netiquette carries a high risk. Online communication tends to be more visible and logged more permanently than in-person discussions (see below).

Remain cognisant of the risks associated with social media. Social media accounts, whether for personal or professional use (or a mix of the two), are public and therefore always carry a reputational risk. Even posts on direct messages or private discussion boards can by law, in most countries, become the subject of your employer’s scrutiny. Online discussions related to teaching material or research findings can also be shared out of context, or invite abusive comments from what are now commonly known as ‘online trolls’ (Britton et al., 2019). There is no single solution to these risks. It is advisable, however, to treat the virtual space as a transparent one, where one can expect at some stage to weather (and hopefully ignore or delete, as opposed to indulge in) bullying behaviour.

Table 6.1: Practical suggestions for using social networking sites for digital scholarship.

6.2.1.3 Conferences
Much has been written about the value of oral presentations of conference papers in terms of enriching and complementing the written research article. Presenters have the opportunity to relay their ideas in a more dynamic way by communicating with listeners through their physical gestures, facial expressions, variations in tone of voice, and (often) the use of multimedia to emphasise key points (Lynch, 2011). In addition to the opportunity to listen to the research presentations of their peers, face-to-face conference participants have multiple opportunities socially engage with their scholarly community. This typically include poster presentations, question-and-answer slots, roundtable discussions, social ‘mixer’ events and ICT-enabled ‘backchannels’ such as conference-specific Twitter accounts or hashtags (Brusilovsky et al., 2017). Despite the common perception that academic
conferences are ideal networking hubs, research suggests that there are a number of issues inhibiting the potential for interpersonal engagement and rich dialogue at these in-person events. According to the extensive research conducted by Rowe (2018), these issues include (but are not limited to):

- the large scale and high-paced programme of these events, which inhibit small-group and personal interaction,
- a reliance on uni-directional podium presentations and limited platforms for audience interaction,
- place and time restrictions which lead to a high number of concurrent events, and
- limited or no access to information about presentations that delegates may have missed as a result of time and place restrictions.

The virtual conference model addresses some of these issues in apparent ways. Abstracts can be accessed online; presentation can be recorded and live-streamed (or replayed at a later stage) to a wider audience. Virtual sessions allow for larger group participation, and more diverse panel members can participate as they do not face travel restrictions (Lessing et al., 2020).

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced academic conferences to move online in 2020, the change in delivery mode was welcomed by sectors of the scientific community that, long before the global crisis struck, made the case for decarbonising conference travel. As commented in *Nature*, the sum of travel for all delegates to attend a single, large face-to-face academic conference can release as much CO$_2$ as an entire city would in a week (Klöwer et al., 2020). For many delegates that could not afford the travel costs associated with conference attendance, the 2020 shift to virtual conferences would also have been welcomed. A study analysing conference attendance numbers showed that higher education institution/scholarly society conferences incur annual costs of between 8.9 and 39.9 billion US Dollars, at the minimum level (Rowe, 2018). Delegates’ international travel and high registration fees contribute significantly to this sum (Niner et al., 2020).

Given that digital scholarship is concerned with open information exchange, accessibility issues associated with in-person conferences should also be critically considered. Especially young researchers can be adversely affected by the in-person conference model, not only in terms of the personal or institutional costs involved, but by the networking challenges they experience during the conferences themselves. Without the guidance or facilitation of more established peers in the relevant academic community,
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young researchers tend to find it difficult to establish relationships with more seasoned scholars or potential collaborators at conferences (Camedda et al., 2017). A virtual conference model that offers higher and more equitable participation, along with environmental benefits, is therefore quite attractive. This does not mean there is no place for the in-person conference. The sense of scholarly community that emerges from sharing a physical space with peers, the richness of face-to-face communication (which allows for more nuanced cues conveyed by body language and tone of voice), the welcome informal engagement that can occur during intervals between presentations, and the sheer joy of travelling to interesting conference sites are certainly features that the virtual conference can hardly imitate. However, the virtual conference, seminar or workshop can also form an essential part of the digital scholar’s networking toolkit. The following table (Table 6.2) gives some practical suggestions relating to virtual conferences or online events.

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<tr>
<th>Attending or participating in virtual events (conferences, workshops or seminars)</th>
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<td><strong>Do (even more) preparation work beforehand.</strong> Whilst in-person events will allow you to network with peers in interim social spaces (e.g., during refreshment breaks), opportunities for interaction during virtual events tend to be subject to a more structured programme. To ensure that you do not miss the opportunity to engage, be sure to prepare questions around the topic. Text-based questions can even be pre-typed, to be copied and pasted in a chat forum.</td>
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<td><strong>Be intentional about expressing encouragement and thanks.</strong> As virtual events are devoid of cues of appreciation such as applause, speakers will likely welcome a word of thanks after their presentation – whether typed in a chat forum or sent as a brief email after the event.</td>
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<td><strong>Consider how you can best engage using text-based chat functions.</strong> Whereas you will not necessarily be required to use your webcam as a participant, text-based channels are a staple feature of online conferences, workshops and seminars (Levy et al., 2016; Niner et al., 2020). When other participants cannot see or hear you, the chat pane may be the only space to establish your presence. If you are allowed to post comments before formal proceedings start, consider treating the chat as a conference lobby where you greet the group and introduce yourself, or acknowledge a contact you know. Active engagement in small-group discussions can also serve to establish new connections, but be careful about the typical pitfalls of computer-mediated communication, such as domineering online discussion or interrupting others (Vandergriff, 2013). Try to build upon others’ contributions, so that a generative ‘thread’ of inclusive, online dialogue can emerge.</td>
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<td><strong>Organising or facilitating online events</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Think creatively about how to leverage the vast affordances of remote events.</strong> Rather than attempting to replicate the format of an in-person conference, list the affordances of the virtual model that align with your audience’s needs (see below). Explore opportunities to invite more diverse panel members, emerging researchers, practitioners or even interested members of the public. Identify which expert/panel presentations can be pre-recorded and shared in advance to prepare the participants for discussion, and what would be best to present in a synchronous (‘real time’) modality.</td>
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Avoid applying the face-to-face event programme to a virtual event. Participants may not be willing to spend sustained periods of time passively viewing their computer or tablet screen. The temptation to multi-task is also larger when the participant is in front of their work device or at home. So, approach the event as a mix of online, offline, individual and group activities. A workshop can be facilitated as a number of short, focused sessions over a more extended period, interspersed by or preceded with pre-recorded videos, audio podcasts or text-based resources. Participants can then engage with activities in their own time in order to prepare for the live engagements. If a single, full day event is necessary, schedule sufficient breaks in between presentation slots, breakout group engagements (e.g., using Zoom or Microsoft Teams) and include moments for informal interactions near the start, middle and end. ‘Ice breaker’ exercises to socialise the group could be considered.

Before you start your planning, consider your audience’s needs:

 ✓ **Identify a unique topic that will spark active engagement.** With the low financial barrier to organising an online conference there is no limit to the number (and variation in quality) of such events. To add value to your professional network, spend enough time investigating the niche focus or current relevancy of the event theme. Keep in mind that the purpose of synchronous online events is interactive engagement, not passive observation. Including topics that will invite debate or active contribution in small group discussions will lead to productive networking during the event.

 ✓ **Consider the participants’ time zone.** If the participants will engage remotely from regions in different time zones, you will have to find a timeslot that will suit the majority, even if this falls outside their typical workday hours (Niner et al., 2020). For smaller groups you can send an online survey beforehand with options to vote for the most suitable timeslot. Before the event, ensure that those that cannot attend know where and when recorded resources will be disseminated.

 ✓ **Consider their Internet access.** The COVID-19 pandemic adversely affected the ability of scholarly communities in emerging countries to participate in virtual conferences. If a large portion of the audience does not have access to reliable, high-speed Internet, consider replacing online models with a hybrid programme, e.g., sending delegates pre-recorded video resources, followed by shorter online sessions with the option to engage with the presenters and delegates via asynchronous (self-paced), text-based discussion forums.

 ✓ **Plan the start (introduction) and the end (‘next steps’) carefully.** Choose the conference platform wisely. Consider your needs (e.g., live streaming to large groups via YouTube or other public platforms, managing Q&A and chat functions, and enabling breakout discussions). Videoconferencing platforms add new features regularly and can be challenging (for you and the participants) to stay abreast of new features. So, choose a platform that is freely accessible, widely used and that offers sufficient onboarding material (i.e., technical ‘how to’ guidelines for new users) that you can share with participants beforehand. Ensure your event programme includes active hyperlinks for quick navigation to the relevant virtual spaces, and ensure you have a colleague that can assist you during the event, in case you experience any technical difficulties yourself.

Table 6.2: Practical suggestions relating to virtual conferences or online events.

### 6.2.2 Networking for teaching

The positive correlation between online teaching communities and the professional development of teaching praxis is well recorded (Jordan & Weller, 2018; Veletsianos & Kimmons, 2012). Whereas online networking in the context of scholarship is more closely related to professional collaboration and career advancement, online networking activities related to teaching and learning are more related to information-seeking and skills develop-
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ment (Thelwall & Koucha, 2014). A survey of academics about how they use social networking tools related to teaching showed that digital networking spaces were primarily used as a teaching tool to facilitate and organise student learning. To a lesser extent, SNSs and blogs were used to establish communities of practice and to discover new resources related to pedagogy (Gruzd et al., 2018).

The tendency for online professional networks to have a strong resource-sharing focus makes sense, given that teaching is a practical, often individual endeavour. Scholarly networking, as illustrated earlier in this chapter, is strongly focused on seeking research collaborations, career advancement opportunities and means to gain access to the most up-to-date research findings in a particular field. Teaching-related professional networks, on the other hand, also reflect a prominent need for advice from more experienced teachers, examples of how learning can be facilitated in a particular field and accessible teaching resources that can be reapplied in different contexts (Viskovic, 2006).

Social networks that develop around a shared interest in teaching often form in a departmental or institutional context. Colleagues that experience similar teaching challenges – often related to online learning – are shown to find each other’s context-specific resources and reflections on relatable experiences an enabling factor in their professional development (Davis et al., 2019). In some cases, these social networks evolve into more organised teaching communities of practice (e.g., aimed at helping teachers to navigate policies, evolve their scholarly approach to teaching and seek formal mentorship), whilst other networks are more unstructured in nature, involving ad hoc information-sharing and informal social engagement as means of professional and emotional support (Baker-Doyle, 2011). In both cases, digital networking is proving an invaluable mechanism for establishing and sustaining teacher networks. Social communication platforms offer a sense of social connection and support that is less hindered by geographic boundaries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, virtual coffee-breaks between fellow teachers became a popular mechanism for professional support (Pepe et al., 2020). Another powerful benefit of online teaching networks is the ease of sharing examples and tools with others. This practice of sharing and copying resources within human networks is shown to strengthen the network itself, by increasing the capacity of the people within it, and helping them to navigate the complexity they face (Mccool et al., 2015).
6.2.3 Networking for service

In the introduction to this chapter we considered the notions of social networks as phenomena best understood based on the nature and strength of the relationships between people. This perspective of professional networking allows us to shift our focus to mutually beneficial exchanges. This means any personal gains are welcome, yet indirect outcomes of our efforts to contribute to the system as a whole. To network, in this sense, is essentially an act of service to our community – professional, scholarly, or beyond.

Serving the purposes of a social network need not be costly in terms of time or finances. Consider which academics or public figures you follow online. You will note that the most interesting of these individuals are not displaying the type of ‘networking’ behaviour that suggest a primary concern with career progression or ego-bolstering. The literature tells us that these individuals are interested in social networks as platforms to ask questions of their peers, to draw from the expertise of a wider community, and – by following profiles or scholars they admire professionally – to determine what research to read (Jordan & Weller, 2018).

Given that digital scholarship is underpinned by a spirit of open collegiality and active engagement (Kaltenbrunner, 2015; Quan-Haase et al., 2015; Weller, 2011), responding to such needs in our social networks should be not only intuitive but also personally rewarding.
For example, consider how networking as a service can occur on various levels – from the small-team or departmental-level to the scale of global networks:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Networking as service (primary goal)</th>
<th>Potential benefits for the individual (secondary goal)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open-source resource sharing on ASNSs or blogs</td>
<td>Improving your research profile visibility, increase your citations and/or establish your role as public intellectual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaging in productive online discussion with global social networks on social media</td>
<td>Connecting with potential international research collaborators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinating and facilitating virtual conferences/seminars/workshops for a broader network.</td>
<td>Advancing the public profile of your department (and by proxy, yourself).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering public seminars or lectures for non-profit networks, or free consultations for initiatives whose goals you support</td>
<td>Expanding your résumé to include non-profit, governmental or private sector work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participating in a mentoring scheme for emerging researchers or new graduates in your field.</td>
<td>Professional advancement or promotion for supporting institutional priorities such as teaching and service.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using social media to introduce colleagues and contacts with shared scholarly interests</td>
<td>Establishing a social network of colleagues that can offer professional advice, emotional support, share resources, collaborate on teaching initiatives and/or research.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indirect benefits from networking for service meeting more individual professional needs*

Figure 6.1 The relationship between networking as a service and personal benefit.

The few examples above illustrate our understanding of how social networks are essentially dependent on linkages, relationships and information-sharing, and personal gains are a result thereof. Using tools such as social media platforms can allow valuable information to flow through the network and, in the process, enhance the reach and impact of research (Jordan, 2019). This form of networked participatory scholarship is further shown to enable the type of cross-disciplinary collaborations that reward scholars beyond their institutional roles (Stewart, 2015).
For digital scholars in leadership positions, such an understanding of social networking – with service and relationship-building as starting points – is also essential. It broadens their focus so that they can contextualise problems, draw from and contribute to broader bodies of knowledge, actively invest in relationships (more than relying on individual attributes) and continually learn from those beyond their apparent professional circle (Mccool et al., 2015). Unfortunately, many online social networks form organically to mirror pre-existing connections, rather than to seek engagement with new ones (Jordan, 2019). Those in leadership or other positions of power and influence can play an essential role in modelling an approach to networking that is open to a greater number of diverse voices.

### 6.3. Suggestions for next steps

- Start by considering the networks that share your values and professional objectives. Ask yourself what you can contribute to the network, in terms of your participation or sharing of resources.
- Once you have a better sense of the professional or social networks you want to engage with, find the relevant platforms to do so. This can include subscribing to a popular and well-established academic social networking site (ASNS), as well as to a non-academic, professional social networking (SNS) site.
- Create a well-rounded profile on each site. (For more details, refer to Table 6.1 ‘Practical suggestions for using social networking sites for digital scholarship’.)
- Try to find a balance between generating your own and sharing others’ content. For sharing your own content, consider linking from the SNS to the ASNS where you upload your research outputs.
- If you are planning on hosting a synchronous (real-time) event such as a webinar, online workshop or conference, first attend a few of these sessions yourself. Note what kind of online activities, programme pacing and technical tools work, and what distracts from your networking experience. Refer to Table 6.2: Practical suggestions relating to virtual conferences or online events for more tips.
6.4 Conclusion

There is still much we do not understand about our networked practices in an increasingly digital and globalised society. The evolution of digital networking platforms is accompanied by ever-emerging needs for academics, such as on-demand and remote teaching, technical skills development, resource creation and technical support. There is a growing demand for academic content to be shared at an accelerated pace, and for teaching professionals and researchers to spend a larger portion of their working time online. While this chapter has predominantly focused on how digital networking can support the open and collaborative values of the digital scholar, we should also acknowledge that online networked practices have practical implications, and that they can in no way replace in-person social engagement.

Yet, the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown (and is still showing) that we cannot afford to ‘disconnect’ from our scholarly communities and social networks. We are more interconnected and interdependent than ever, and we cannot address scientific, political or social issues without the collective action of rich and diverse global networks (Pepe et al., 2020). In previous chapters we discussed approaches for applying digital technologies in a variety of ways, related to our teaching, research and collaborative practices. Networking, as articulated in this chapter, calls for these activities to be connected to and to serve others within our institution, society or across global networks. Our networked practices may support our personal aspirations, but it will be most gratifying to see how, as we establish and strengthen relationships, our digital social networks become mechanisms for positive change.

References


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