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Social media in higher education: a new “collegiality” for students and researchers? The case of Italian LIS studies

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Abstract

In this poster the case of Italian Library and Information Science studies is analyzed to understand the level and nature of use of social networks in a small area of Social sciences and humanities. We explored the presence of ten Italian LIS tenured researchers and university professors on six different social platforms (Mendeley, Academia.edu, ResearchGate, Slideshare, LinkedIn, Twitter) selected according to the kind of tool, level of national use, relevance to academic field. The data collected in September 2016 and updated in March 2018 shows a limited presence of Italian LIS tenured researchers and university professors on social media.

Keywords: social networks, Higher Education in Italy, Library and Information Studies, research

Introduction

The development of the formal process of scientific communication is due to the need of scholars to contribute to knowledge and, at the same time, to set the stage for their career and academic reputation; sharing of research results with the scientific and professional community is closely linked to these objectives. There are various stakeholders of this process: first of all, authors, but also publishers, libraries, universities and research centers, each one with different tasks and purposes.

“Traditionally, most scholars have primarily disseminated their work through journal articles, books, book chapters and conference presentations. In line with this, the impact of a scholar’s work has often been assessed by, or with the aid of, the number of citations to their publications from other scientific publications, often extracted from the Web of Science (WoS) or Scopus. Nowadays, however, scientists may also disseminate their research through the web in various ways, for example by listing their publications, skills or achievements in the web or in social websites” (Mas-Bleda et al. 2014, p. 338).

Information technologies, particularly the Web 2.0, are changing the ways that scientists communicate; scholars have many ways to disseminate research findings quickly and there are some useful tools to strengthen academic reputation. Social media have become very popular in the last few years and even among scholars their adoption for professional and scientific purposes is increasing; they could be very useful for a widespread circulation of ideas, mainly in social sciences and humanities where several factors - the use of national language, the form of publications, etc. - delay the dissemination of research findings.

It has been shown that “social media attention increases article visit” (Wang et al. 2017); furthermore, perhaps social channels have “the potential to transform the practice of knowledge production” (Gibson & Gibbs 2013) by offering a new paradigm for communication in science and suggesting how digital media might bring new roles and functionalities to participants. Social networking should be considered as an ingredient of scholarly profession (Bonaiuti 2015).

The degree of use of social media platforms by researchers depends on various factors, such as disciplinary area, age, country.

In Italy the “culture” of social networks is not yet substantially permeated in academic life. From a recent study that investigated the reasons for using social media sites for scholarly communication among a large sample of Italian university scholars, it emerged that Italian tenured researchers and university professors prefer academic social tools and the influence of the scientific field on academic practices (Manca & Ranieri 2017).

The goal of this research is to analyze Italian Library and information science studies in order to understand the level and nature of use of social networks in a small area of Social sciences and humanities. We explored the presence of ten Italian LIS tenured researchers and university professors on six different social platforms (Mendeley, Academia.edu, ResearchGate, Slideshare, LinkedIn, Twitter) selected according to the kind of tool, level of national use, relevance to academic field. The data which we collected in September 2016 and updated in March 2018 showed a limited presence of Italian LIS tenured researchers and university professors on social media.

Table 1. Presence of a sample of Italian LIS tenured researchers and university professors on social platforms (March 2018)

	Mendeley	Academia.edu	Research Gate	Slideshare	LinkedIn	Twitter
Scholar 1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Scholar 2	0	1	1	0	0	0
Scholar 3	0	1	1	0	0	1
Scholar 4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scholar 5	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scholar 6	0	1	1	1	1	1
Scholar 7	0	1	0	0	0	0
Scholar 8	0	1	0	0	0	0
Scholar 9	0	0	0	0	0	0
Scholar 10	1	1	0	0	0	0
	2	7	4	2	2	3
	Mendeley	Academia.edu	Research Gate	Slideshare	LinkedIn	Twitter

The limited presence of Italian LIS tenured researchers and university professors on social media is apparent. The most used platform is Academia.edu (in 2018 seven accounts activated, among which two not active), followed by ResearchGate. Mendeley, Slideshare and LinkedIn are the social media less popular. In September 2016 only two scholars had a registered account on five out of six social media analysed and, in March 2018, one scholar has an account on all social platforms but not all profiles are really used. One of Italian scholars uses strongly Twitter, while others employ the academic social network Academia.edu as a repository of their scientific publications to increase the interdisciplinary circulation and spread of their output. As shown by the Table 2, Academia.edu is highly used by four scholars. The widely different patterns of social media use by the researchers in the sample may be, and

often appear, to be strongly related to the specific profile of their research interests: e.g., professors working on network communication and interaction may prefer quick media while others mainly interested in the more traditional paper sharing between colleagues may prefer other, more formal platforms.

Table 2. Detail of the presence of a sample of Italian LIS tenured researchers and university professors on Academia.edu and ResearchGate (March 2018)

	Academia.edu	ResearchGate
Scholar 1	337 followers 200 following 9 co-authors 3286 total views (top 2%) 66 works	59 followers 3 following 5 co-authors 419 reads, 72 citations 33 research items
Scholar 2	0 followers 1 following 0 co-authors 2 total views 0 works	14 followers 1 following 10 co-authors 103 reads, 1 citation 27 research items
Scholar 3	434 followers 186 following 11 co-authors 13564 total views (top 1%) 158 works	45 followers 13 following 3 co-authors 328 reads, 21 citations 12 research items
Scholar 4	0	0
Scholar 5	0	0
Scholar 6	1233 followers 744 following 3 co-authors 4541 total views 44 works	45 followers 8 following 7 co-authors 554 reads, 34 citations 21 research items
Scholar 7	0 followers 1 following 0 co-authors 1 total views 0 works	0
Scholar 8	36 followers 4 following 3 co-authors 462 total views 1 works	0
Scholar 9	0	0
Scholar 10	399 followers 278 following 10 co-authors 8397 total views (top 2%) 81 works	0
	Academia.edu	ResearchGate

Conclusion

Although the partial framework of Italian LIS scholars and despite all limitation of alternative metrics, it is possible to notice that scholars who use regularly one or more social networks have created a system

of relationships with other researchers that could be a valid way for a further openness between scientists. There are other interesting issues to consider, but it is not possible to go into in more depth here.

The positive influence of social media deals also with students. It would be important for teachers to develop social skills in Library and information science students both for future jobs and to encourage their participation in scholarly communication. Through social media students can get in touch with other young scholars from other countries, share their essays and set up a network of contacts for the future. Although the use of social tools among students seems to be limited to general and popular media with a lack of awareness of more specific platforms (Bibsonomy, CiteULike, Delicious, Mendeley, Zotero, or “Facebook for scientists”, as ResearchGate and Academia.edu) (Ashraf & Haneefa, 2016), academic social networks seem particularly suited for students to keep trace of new publications by the academic authors they follow and to leave a trace of their interest - and of their names - in the formal and controlled setting of those networks, as an alternative to the more informal and friendly relations established in general social networks such as Facebook.

The use of social media in higher education has, in our opinion, the potential to encourage exchanges between scholars and students of the same and different fields and facilitate the dissemination of research findings beyond geographical and cultural boundaries. But there is more.

Social media has the capacity to become a hypercompetitive form of academic enterprise. But it also has the capacity to generate new forms of collegiality, through everyday practices and interactions. The choice is both personal and political: social media as space in which to enact prosaic forms of solidarity (Gibson & Gibbs 2013, p. 90).

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