

# Cultivating Your Academic Online Presence

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Volume 12, Number 2, 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1105412ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18438/B89S9W>

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### Publisher(s)

University of Alberta Library

### ISSN

1715-720X (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this document

Lucky, S. & Rubin, J. (2017). Cultivating Your Academic Online Presence. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice*, 12(2), 59–64.  
<https://doi.org/10.18438/B89S9W>

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*Commentary*

**Cultivating Your Academic Online Presence**

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**Received:** 13 Jan. 2017

**Accepted:** 13 May 2017

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**Introduction**

You have an online presence whether you acknowledge it or not. It might align positively with who you are in your professional life but, unless you have been attending to it, chances are it will disappoint you. Googling your name and institution will instantly reveal what you look like to colleagues and the public online. Try searching your primary research area - do you or your work show up? While cultivating your online scholarly identity will take some time and attention, ignoring it could be damaging if you appear nonexistent or dramatically out of date

in your field. There are a few easy things you can do to take control of your online identity with the goal of making sure you show up where it matters, and that the information is curated and relevant to your professional identity.

The pressure on academics to produce research, teach, and engage in professional service and administrative tasks is considerable and we do not advocate dedicating hours of your week to blogging or monitoring your Twitter account. We are both pre-tenure academics working in different scholarly fields and environments, but

we share a common interest in how we can use online platforms to further our careers. Joe is a microbiologist and assistant professor in the department of Veterinary Microbiology at the University of Saskatchewan (U of S) where he teaches, supervises multiple graduate students, and heads a lab that focuses on antimicrobial resistance research. Shannon is an assistant librarian at the U of S in library systems and information technology where she splits her time between professional practice and research into digital archiving for non-expert communities. Our academic lives represent two very different modes of scholarship; Joe leads a research group closely connected to his teaching portfolio, while Shannon's research is largely independent of her professional practice and is more solitary. Regardless, there are benefits for all kinds of scholars in actively managing some aspects of your online identity.

You may see our advice as just one more task that sounds like a good idea, but one you really don't have time for. We argue that if you are clear about your goals and how you will spend your time and energy, there are significant benefits for your research career. Neither of us has extensive online footprints, but we are both tenure-track faculty who aspire (and have struggled) to make our online presence something that benefits our careers yet doesn't eat up all our productive time. While we cannot speak to the best way to become a scholarly internet celebrity, in this article we will share what we have learned through the process of choosing online platforms, populating them with content, and maintaining them once the novelty wears off.

### **Why Should I Worry About my Online Presence?**

The internet and internet users will not automatically differentiate between your personal and professional activities. A Google search might bring up your profile from your institution's website next to one of your publications, next to your vacation photos on

Facebook. It doesn't mean that you can't have both personal and professional lives online. Making conscious choices about how you craft your online presence can keep these areas distinct and help focus your professional audience on the content you want them to see. For some researchers, this can involve crafting distinct online identities for your personal and professional lives. For others, their research might be so tightly enmeshed with their everyday lives that having a split personality online doesn't make sense. Either way, the important thing to remember is to look at your online identity through the eyes of a future colleague, collaborator, student, or manager. The level of online exposure you choose is personal and it is worth thinking carefully about setting guidelines for yourself before expanding your digital footprint.

### **Define Your Goals**

The most important first step is to articulate what your goals are for building your online presence. It can be as simple as wanting something accurate, professional, and concise to show up when people search for you online, or it could be as ambitious as wanting to attract collaborators for a large project. Building a website or being on Snapchat should not be a goal in itself - think critically about what you want to get out of the time and effort you will put into this project.

When we began thinking about our own online presences we asked ourselves three essential questions: Who is this for? What do I want to say? Why am I doing this?

Joe had been planning to create a lab website for several years and already had some goals for the project. Here, he articulates how his needs as a researcher guided his planning process.

As a researcher, I see my online presence as essential for student recruitment and defining my professional interests and research

expertise. The creation of a clear and concise description of my research program and area of specialization was important for me to create to have a resource for external persons (e.g. media, prospective students, granting agencies, and others) who might be interested in contacting me.

As a junior faculty member, I remember how frustrating it was to try to learn about prospective graduate or post-doctoral supervisors from poorly maintained institutional profiles or fragmented and non-curated sources such as PubMed, Google Scholar, or LinkedIn. For prospective trainees (primarily undergraduate or graduate students), it is very important to be able to identify faculty members whose research programs are current, productive, and align with the trainee's goals.

Joe's specific goals for curating his online presence are:

1. To maintain an up to date list of publications including linked articles
2. To briefly describe current research areas
3. To describe the research group, including current lab members and their interests
4. To publish high-quality scientific images under a Creative Commons license to facilitate the development of teaching materials by other educators
5. To demonstrate a dynamic, engaged, and positive laboratory culture by maintaining an up to date blog of lab activities

Joe's goals are clear, directly related to success criteria for his scholarly career, and in line with

his professional values and interest in supporting open educational resources and celebrating the success of his lab members. In the next section, we will talk about how you choose where to begin building.

### **Choose a Platform**

There is no shortage of online platforms to invest your time in and share your information on. It can be overwhelming to consider every site you could end up maintaining - your institutional profile, LinkedIn, ORCID, Twitter, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, Mendeley, Facebook, blogs, websites, and more. Many researchers, particularly early-career academics, feel pressure to engage in any and all platforms that will improve the visibility of their work. While this can be beneficial, maintaining an online presence is time-consuming and can distract from other duties. Taking time to choose your platform(s) with purpose will help you realize the greatest benefit from your investment.

If building your research network or getting your work seen by others in your field is a primary goal, the best place to begin is to look at where leaders and colleagues in your field are and join in. The same advice applies to researchers who want to connect with the public or the media. Take some time to research where your audience already looks for information online and go there too. It's critical to balance your level of interest with the investment required for the platform options. If you cringe to think about spending time on Twitter every day, then it's not the choice for you, even if you fear what that looks like to your contemporaries. Don't rush to set up many different profiles to fill up that first page of Google results. Many sparsely populated profiles doesn't look any better than one or two platforms that were clearly intentionally set up. Map out a strategy to connect the purpose of each platform you use to one or more of your goals.

### *Meeting Joe's Five Goals: The Case for a Personal Website*

If we look at Joe's five goals, most of them involve sharing information in a place where it can be easily discovered and accessed by anyone, and that allows a high level of personalization, frequent updates, and the sharing of images. For him, conversations with colleagues and making new connections typically occur via email or in person, so social networking sites like LinkedIn or Twitter don't address a real need. Instead, we decided to focus on building a website ([www.therubinlab.com](http://www.therubinlab.com)) to highlight the work of Joe's research group. We chose the website creation tool Wix that allows you to customize existing templates, register a custom domain, and make major changes to the site content and structure. However, the website would not address his fourth goal to publish Creative Commons licensed microbiological images for teaching. To address this gap, we decided to invest in a profile on the photo sharing website Flickr because it allows him to create a profile for The Rubin Lab (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/therubinlab/>), upload descriptive metadata, easily apply a Creative Commons licence, and track how many times his images have been accessed. Uploading images to Flickr also made them easier to embed in his website. This was an ambitious plan to implement, but one that could be done in stages and continue to be built up over time. Creating a website was time-consuming, but it was the right choice to meet these goals and the balance between cost and reward was worth it for Joe. A scalable alternative to an entire website is to create a landing page or researcher profile.

#### *Profile Landing Page*

A landing page is simply a single-page website that lists contact information, a brief description of the author and their research interests, and may link to their institution or other sites.

Shannon currently maintains a landing page at [www.shannonlucky.com/](http://www.shannonlucky.com/) that lists her current position and research interests, contact information, and links to her academic CV, ORCID account, Google Scholar profile, profile on the U of S website, LinkedIn, and Twitter. This design rarely needs to be updated and creates a centralized hub for her professional information, making it clear that these are the platforms to look for her on. This still requires some customization of a website building tool, but you may be able to achieve the same result using an institutionally supported researcher profile.

#### *Researcher Profiles*

Researcher profiles are becoming more common at post-secondary institutions. If your institution offers them, they are a great tool to build your online identity. Researcher profiles are typically web pages that list your contact information, essential CV information (grants, publications, awards), and descriptions of your research and scholarly experience. They may link to your publications and scholarly output held in an institutional repository as well. Researcher profiles are usually part of the institution's website and their connection to an official, highly trafficked website translates to a higher ranking in Google search results. Depending on the level of control you have over your personal profile, you may be able to link to your other online profiles, boosting their visibility in search results as well.

While an institutional researcher profile is a great resource, there are reasons why you might want to create an independent website or profile. Researcher profiles and institutional websites tend to have limited flexibility of both content and style. Additionally, these pages belong to the institution. If you leave your position, that profile will likely disappear. Maintaining a separate website maximizes both portability and the level of personal control over the content you share.

## **Create Great Content**

Now that you have decided where you will cultivate your online presence, you need to populate that space with information. High-quality content is critical for the development of an online presence that will effectively meet your goals. Fortunately, in Joe's case, he had been planning to put together a website for several years and was diligent about taking interesting photos of his work, and had lay summaries of his research on hand. You may have already done some of this writing and not realize it. Grant applications, research summaries, abstracts, CV updates, and tenure and promotion packages are great sources to work from. Remember to modify text borrowed from these sources for a general audience; look for information on writing for the web, which is very different than for an academic audience.

Creating quality text and images will go a long way to making your online presence useful, engaging, and authoritative. Start by deciding what ideas you want to share, and then map out how you want to present it online. Take inspiration from other websites and profiles. Replicating the same types of pages (contact, publications, projects) or layouts you find useful on other researchers' sites is a good way to anticipate what is important to include, and what may not be worth your time to maintain. Don't get hung up on a particular platform or stylistic elements. If something you try isn't working, don't be afraid to change direction.

While developing your online presence, consider the shareability of the content you create. Most online sharing uses social media, and designing your message to be easily contextualized in a few sentences, an image or infographic, or a short video dramatically increases the odds that someone will tweet it, share it on Facebook, or otherwise pass it along to their online community.

## **How do I Know This is Worth it?**

Remember to periodically return to your goals and critically assess whether what you are doing is working for you. For Joe, the creative process of writing content for his site ended up being beneficial in itself, becoming a generative process to define his program of research. Now he has a place where his entire research enterprise is summarized with writing and visual/multimedia elements creating something more holistic, illustrative, and engaging than a traditional CV. The website and Flickr account now represent the breadth of the things he does in efficient and creative ways, and he can see how it has helped define and demonstrate the research culture of his lab. In addition to these goals being met, he describes some of the objective results he has seen.

In the first four months of my website, I have already reaped some rewards from this project. Using Google Analytics, I have been able to track views and see where visitors are coming from. My website has already had over 1,400 views from more than 850 unique users originating from 34 countries. I was particularly interested to see that 36 unique users were referred to my website from my institutional profile, suggesting that people were looking for more information than was provided on my department's site. Having a description of my research program online led to an invitation to speak at an international conference. In this case, the conference organizer was referred to my website by a colleague, but the information he found there helped him decide that my research would be a good fit for the program. The site has also facilitated information sharing with my colleagues. Requests for teaching materials, project abstracts, or my academic bio can now be referred to the website, saving time composing new

text or hunting for the information on my computer.

Finally, I've found that blog posts on my website are easily shared on social media. Between my department's Facebook page, and those of my lab members and students, my website has acquired almost 600 page views. Notably, one post described a bonus assignment I gave to an undergraduate class asking them to rewrite lyrics for a song using information they learned in my course. I linked to YouTube videos of their performances and it attracted hundreds of views through Facebook. This post was also seen by a local radio host, leading to a broadcast interview on CBC Radio and the opportunity to share some fun teaching moments with the public.

Joe has already experienced some concrete outcomes from investing time in his online presence. Not everyone will have the time to engage so deeply in developing a fully realized website, but the reward is likely to be commensurate with effort. For an early-career researcher, making your information easy to find and professional in appearance may create opportunities you could not have predicted.

## **Keep it Current**

Once you have your strategy defined and your online presence set up and working for you, the work is not done. Your research is always progressing and so should your online presence. It is critical to regularly revisit your online profiles and sites to keep them up to date. Keeping a list of all of your profiles is the first step, then schedule time into your calendar to review them. You can use tools like a Google Scholar profile to automate some things like a list of your publications, but any site more complex than the most basic landing page requires some attention from time to time.

## **Future Directions**

The process of developing our respective online profiles as researchers has been a learning process and we have had to negotiate how much we are willing to invest. Joe has had great success taking the time to keep his site up to date with content that is accessible and interesting to a range of audiences. More importantly, he enjoys working on the site and directly benefits from those efforts. Our experiences have been entirely anecdotal and our advice comes from our own conversations, trial, and error. In the future, we would like to take an evidence based approach to understanding the value that maintaining an online presence has for scholarly researchers, why academics do or do not choose to use online platforms, and if institutions can support researcher success by providing infrastructure or services for developing a strong online presence.