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## Negotiating tensions around new forms of academic writing

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## ABSTRACT

Almost every aspect of an academic's role involves specialised forms of writing, and the range of digital platforms used to produce this has increased. Core genres such as the journal article and monograph remain central, but the ways they are now commonly produced via file-sharing software and online submission systems are changing them. Digital media also allows academics to stay up to date with their field, connect with others, and share research with wider audiences. Furthermore, academics are increasingly expected to maintain online identities via academic networking sites, and to create and disseminate knowledge via hybrid genres such as tweets and blogs. However, these platforms also represent a potential threat to academics' values and sense of identity.

This paper reports on an ESRC funded research project investigating the writing practices of academics across different disciplines at three English universities. Through academics' accounts of their experience with and feelings about the role of digital media in their professional writing, this paper explores the factors that complicate their engagement with new genres of writing. The findings reveal a tension between the values of social media, which see knowledge as user-generated and decentralised, and the forms of knowledge creation that are rewarded in academia.

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## 1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the role of changing technologies in academics' writing and their complex relation to broader change in universities in England. It is part of a larger project entitled The Dynamics of Knowledge Creation: Academics' Writing Practices in the Contemporary University Workplace, funded by the UK ESRC. The project has been examining contemporary changes in academics' writing practices, viewing the contemporary university in England as a work place where the production of knowledge is central, and much of this is through writing.

Researching academics' writing as a social practice, the main approaches informing the project are a sociomaterial perspective and a literacy studies perspective. The former means that we are particularly focused on understanding how social and material resources are networked together to construct writing practices (Fenwick et al., 2011), while the latter means that we are interested in writing as shaped by social contexts, life histories, resources and experiences, all of which are situated within historical dynamics and power relationships (Barton, 2007; Barton and Hamilton, 2000).

The sociomaterial aspect enables us to understand how social and material resources shape academics' writing practices, and the role that digital resources in particular play. Satchwell et al. (2013) studied UK academics in arts and social sciences departments, to investigate the effect of material changes such as use of both physical and digital space on academics' lives, and found that many of their participants talked extensively about the need to set boundaries, such as between work and non-work, partly because the affordances of digital technologies enable work to be done more or less anytime and anywhere. Digital technologies can bring more work into the home sphere by allowing academics to access work files and shared folders from home, to answer emails from home, upload teaching materials to VLEs from home, and even to meet with students or colleagues from home via Skype. Looking specifically at technology in academic life, Weller (2011), who referred to "the digital scholar" when comparing the process of writing a book in 2010 with writing one in 2004, and found that every step of the process had changed. For example, in 2010, he accessed electronic books and journals without leaving home, set up Google alerts to track online conversations about his topic, and bookmarked sources using Mendeley, while few of these platforms were available in 2004. This experience of change appears to apply to almost every aspect of academic life, but little is known about how technological shifts might influence academics' writing practices.

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In order to place the interaction between technological changes and writing within its social and historical context, it is important to take into account other changes in the field of higher education. In England, where this study is located, relationships between students and staff have changed partly as a result of a shift since the mid 1980s from an elite system of access to higher education to one with a broader intake of students (Hodgson and Spours, 1999). This now includes many more students from overseas, particularly at postgraduate level, thanks to a policy of internationalisation (Warwick, 2014). The greater 'cultural distance' travelled by students from other countries can mean that academics need to mediate between different pedagogic norms and expectations with regard to, for instance, how information is presented in lectures, or the amount or clarity of written feedback. University students in England now pay tuition fees, which tends to position them as customers whose level of satisfaction is monitored through mechanisms such as the UK's National Student Survey, which in turn feeds into league tables. The combination of digital technology and consumer culture in higher education may mean that students prefer to email their tutors with questions about assignments rather than attending a designated office hour in person, with the implication that academics are inundated with multiple versions of the same query. Students may also expect unreasonably quick responses to their emails, which can lead to academics feeling overwhelmed by volume of emails to deal with.

There have also been a number of changes in English higher education that directly affect academics' research writing. Research activity has been monitored and assessed for some time and the non-academic impact of research is also measured, bringing new audiences for their writing. Along with the more marketised presentation of themselves adopted by English universities, academics are encouraged to take an increasingly entrepreneurial approach to their own research careers, maintaining a searchable online presence and marketing themselves and their work to potential readers (Etzkowitz, 2014; Greenhow and Gleason, 2014).

All of these changes interact with technological developments, and serve to influence the writing that academics do. In order to understand how this complex social context is affecting knowledge production and academics' sense of agency in their own writing lives, it is important to see writing *in situ*; to observe what people actually do with reading and writing, and interview them to understand their perspectives and experiences.

There has been a considerable amount of work in the field of academic writing focusing on students' writing and learning to be an academic (such as Lillis and Scott, 2007; Street, 1995), and this is often what is meant by 'academic literacies'. There is also an important strand of work which analyses the linguistic aspects of academic texts such as the genres associated with particular disciplines, or the structure of academic articles (as in Hyland, 2004; Myers, 1990; Swales, 1990). However, the current study takes a new look at academics writing by focusing on writing done by academics as part of their professional role.

We do this by approaching academic writing as a workplace practice (Lea and Stierer, 2009; Lillis and Curry, 2010), shaped by the particularities of the contemporary context. This includes scholarly writing, but rather than privileging scholarly writing, we view knowledge production in academia as including writing for teaching and administration along with impact activities, such as writing for public audiences. We explore the relationships between these different purposes and examine a wider range of texts than the traditional research genres of monograph and journal article. However, we have not included creative writing done by academics, nor diary keeping and other personal writing. In this paper we focus on what academics said about their technologies of writing, specifically:

1. How are their different sorts of writing shaped by the ways they utilize available technologies?
2. What do their likes and dislikes reveal about agency and the production of knowledge?

The structure of this paper is firstly to describe the context against which the study is set, and the interviewees themselves. The methods of data collection and analysis are then described. The main part of this paper consists of quotes from academics talking about the tools and resources in their writing and how these have changed their practices. Through academics' accounts of their experience with and feelings about the role of digital media in their professional writing, the paper also explores the factors that complicate their engagement with new genres of writing.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Context and participants

This paper reports on part of a wider project examining how academics' writing practices are shaped by the sociomaterial aspects of their situation, including the tools, resources, space and place, time, social networks and how managerial practices are shaping writing work (McCulloch, 2017; Tusting and Barton, 2016). The data in this paper are drawn from interviews conducted with academics across three different disciplines at three English universities. The universities consisted of a large nineteenth century city-based, research-intensive university, a smaller campus based, research-intensive university dating from the 1960s and a teaching-intensive urban university. The three disciplines, namely, mathematics, history and marketing, were chosen to include what can broadly be described as a STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) discipline,<sup>1</sup> a humanities discipline and a professional/applied discipline (Becher and Trowler, 2001). We also carried out piloting work in social science departments as the area in which the project team is located.

In choosing these disciplines, we are aware that, although much existing research tends to use rather generic understandings of a prototypical undergraduate essay in social science and or a research article in the humanities, it is impossible to view these disciplines as each representing a single approach. Different subject areas within these groupings have much in common, but also many unique and contrasting features. One could argue, for example, that mathematics is a marginal 'science' discipline, since, unlike some other STEM subjects such as engineering, it is less concerned with practical application. Likewise, Kuteeva and McGrath (2015) have found that the rhetorical patterns in pure maths research articles differ from those in many others in hard science disciplines, as described by Hyland (2005). We have tried to use the academic department as a working unit, but we found a complex relationship between departments and disciplines. The notion of discipline entails an allegiance to a shared set of values or traditions beyond one's department, including links to scholars at universities all over the world, often maintained through professional associations and participations in themed conferences, but, as Trowler (2014) points out, many other factors affect academic culture, including forces such as technology, the marketization of higher education, and evaluation regimes (Page et al., 2014). We found that, in many cases, academics working in different disciplines experienced similar challenges relating to these forces.

<sup>1</sup> The term STEM refers to the educational category of teaching and learning in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.

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