

Social Media Scholarship and Alternative Metrics for Academic Promotion and Tenure

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Abstract

Traditionally, scholars focused their efforts in the domains of clinical care, research, and education; however, the last decade has witnessed the rise of novel areas of development such as innovation, quality improvement, informatics, and recently, digital scholarship. Academic institutions adapted and began considering these fields for academic promotion and tenure. Social media has become a critical space for the dissemination of knowledge and outreach to community and policy makers and also for the creation of communities of practice. This new realm brings multiple challenges, such as the appraisal of the quality and appropriateness of the content, the evaluation of impact on the academe and general populations, coupled to the creation of a system to reward scholars engaged in this novel endeavor. In this article, we describe the current state of academic promotion and the definition, nature, and merit of digital scholarship. We outline new strategies and tools for the assessment of dissemination and impact of these works, such as altmetrics, and finally, we reference innovative concepts on how to organize and use this digital academia on career promotion and tenure.

Key Words: Social media, tenure, promotion, academia, altmetrics

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INTRODUCTION

The role of academic physicians and the academe is to make an impact in the world around the domains of patient care, research, education, public policy, and advocacy, along with benefiting the sick and preventing harm and injustice [1-4]. Scholars have typically focused their work on clinical or basic research, bedside teaching, and direct patient care in a world enclosed by the walls of traditional publication systems and Flexnerian style of education [5,6]. During the last decade, novel disciplines such as quality improvement, informatics, and innovation have emerged, redefining the scope and nature of scholarly work [7-9]. Following these trends,

many Academic Promotion and Tenure Committees (APTCs) in the United States have adapted and modified their appraisal systems to reflect the changes in paradigms [10].

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE ACADEME

The emergence of the Internet as a complex adaptive system for the distribution of information has transformed the way we interact with information and society during the current century [11-13]. Within this realm, social media (SM) has unfolded as a central way for the vast majority of the population to engage with and around digital content. SM is operationally defined as the compendium of electronic platforms allowing the creation, curation, and exchange of information in multiple formats (text, video, images, forums) and with varying degrees of connectedness, privacy, and accessibility [14].

These digital tools allow for fast and powerful distribution of data as well as engagement of users and communities, while providing rich metrics about connections and transfer of data. This model offers a democratization of information management, where single users with

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relatively limited resources can create, share, and negotiate knowledge [15]. Probably the single most important trait of SM tools is their capacity to increase the speed and reach of knowledge translation, not only within the walls of academia but also among the general public [16].

As the scope and reach of SM have rapidly increased, medical centers and academic institutions have begun to embrace the use of these new technologies for multiple applications such as dissemination, branding, advertisement, advocacy, research, and education [17-21]; for example, SM analytics have been used as a powerful screening tool [22] for suicide risk and also an effective intervention method for smoking reduction and cessation [23]. Simultaneous to this rapid adoption by institutions, individual scholars have pioneered the use of these tools for education and research. Multiple examples of meritorious scholarly activity exist, such as the creation of online SM-based journal clubs [24,25] and the appearance of a 50,000-member strong community of practice based on the idea of Free Open Access Medical Education [26,27] as well as several instances of research dissemination and advocacy using these channels [28-31].

The novel use of SM for scholarly purposes revolutionized the academe in terms of breadth and scope of what can be achieved using novel digital tools as a complement to traditional activities [32-36]. Foreseeing the potential of these products to transform the academic landscape, multiple voices have raised the issue of academic merit, quality, and overall value recognition of digital scholarly work for academic advancement [37]. Despite some early adopters [38] of the concept of SM scholarship's potential role in tenure and promotion, numerous critiques [39] of this exist, delaying more widespread consideration of SM in such decisions. However, a framework for how SM scholarship can be considered by APTCs has been recently published [40].

SM SCHOLARSHIP AND THE APPRAISAL OF QUALITY AND IMPACT

One of the greatest challenges faced by APTCs is measuring the quality of scholarly work produced by their faculty members. Institutions aim to reward scholars who consistently produce excellent work and whose impact is recognized nationally or internationally. This analysis is a difficult issue regardless of the publication format (ie, the assessment of quality and impact of academic products is challenging for both traditional and

digital media-based scholarship) [41,42]. For example, highly cited retracted publications [43,44] may achieve a measurable impact, both before and after their merit has been discredited. Promotions committees have traditionally focused on basic and clinical scientific investigation and its derivatives such as grants and publications, characterized by the “publish or perish” concept, in considering the impact of a faculty member's body of work [45]. Increasingly, educational research activities, an integral part of the academic mission, and their accompanying scholarship are being viewed as equally meritorious and worthy of recognition by promotions committees. This is welcome news, especially for the large group of academic faculty who devote their time to medical and graduate education [46].

Despite quality and impact being the two established domains considered for promotion, no universal appraisal guidelines or methods exist for their assessment, except for a few surrogates such as the Thompson Reuters Research Index [47,48] score and others like peer-review assessment and direct observations and learners feedback, all of which—to one degree or another—are subject to manipulation [49,50]. Several of the traditional journal-based metrics can also be used for SM scholarship appraisal, because many platforms (eg, The Winnower) offer digital object identifiers and make alternative activities functionally undistinguishable from conventional publications in terms of their impact on traditional indexes such as Thompson Reuters Research Index or other surrogate markers and downloads.

Interestingly, one of the key characteristics of digital scholarship is the ability to provide robust and almost real-time metrics about the distribution, dissemination, and impact of content created and shared within these platforms. Indicators such as page views, impressions, sharing, and other measures of connectedness provide clear data for assessment [33]. This can potentially facilitate the job of APTCs because the data necessary for appraisal can be obtained more easily in SM compared with traditional media.

Although SM-based scholarship is unique in its ability to provide rich distribution and consumption data of academic work, the key and far most important characteristic is the potential of this platform to reach new audiences as well as create completely new spaces of academic deliberation [35], such as virtual communities of practice and online learning networks [51]. This new and expanded reach as well as the advent of new forums constitute a new asset for academics, particularly

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