Mindful Networks? Navigating and Negotiating Life and Work in Academia

Katy Vigurs
University of Derby
Derby, UK
k.vigurs@derby.ac.uk

Abstract

In this chapter I unpack my use of social networks (and social media) as a means of being more mindful about the role of research and scholarship in the construction of my academic identity. I have found it to be a restless, shifting identity that has to be carefully and continually navigated and negotiated. On the one hand, I explain how participation in social networks has actively shaped my sense of academic community and also the scholarly relationships that contribute strongly to my academic health and wellbeing. On the other hand, I question the extent to which social networking and the use of social media in academia allow truly mindful practices to be enacted. For example, I sometimes worry that social networking for academic purposes through social media contributes to the acceleration of higher education practice – never switching off, always being connected – potentially further exacerbating academics' levels of labour, stress and pressure. By reflecting upon and analysing my scholarly use of Twitter and Instagram I explore how this practice (usually) keeps me acting mindfully as an academic and evaluate the extent to which it enables me to engage better in the complex cognitive and emotional demands of working in higher education. Finally, I reflect upon my recent change of both role and institution, which saw me unexpectedly and temporarily suspend my regular use of social media for academic purposes.

Introduction

It is widely recognised that a large proportion of academics in higher education are working increasingly long hours (over 50 hours a week), often intensively and quickly

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(Kinman and Wray, 2013; Tight, 2010; Tytherleigh et al., 2005). Avoiding academic burnout and stress as a member of staff in universities is a strong discourse in higher education at present. There are increasing examples of institutional interventions being trialled which are designed to reduce stress in academic settings, such as the provision of once-weekly yoga sessions for 10 weeks (Brems, 2015) and six-week mindfulness-based stress-release programme (Koncz, 2016). This chapter, however, critically reflects upon my individual attempts over the past five years to enact self-care in academia by using social networks to create more mindful approaches to researching, teaching, leadership and writing. Looking back, my attitude to social networks has been hugely influenced by the literature I engaged with during my doctoral study (Vigurs, 2010), which has allowed me to engage conceptually as well as practically in social networking.

Since 2012, I have been employed in two higher education institutions in the UK. Both are newer universities (Post-1992 institutions), which may be significant since Tight (2010) found that research has a less significant position in newer UK universities than in older ones (Pre-1992) and Darabi et al. (2016) found that working as an academic in newer universities was experienced as more stressful than in older ones. In my previous university, I was a senior lecturer employed on a full, academic contract (i.e. teaching and research), with programme responsibility for two postgraduate courses. I was later promoted to Associate Professor at the same institution, which did not significantly decrease my teaching workload, though it did increase the ways in which my academic performance would be judged. I then moved to another university for an Associate Professorship in an applied research centre, which is where I am currently based. Here I do not have responsibility for any taught programmes, instead I am involved in the leadership of the research centre, which primarily means generating research income, leading and managing a number of research projects and researchers, writing for academic publication and supporting others to write and publish too. What I found in my first university was that I became increasingly pulled in different directions by different senior members of staff according to where *their* accountabilities lay and where they thought that I could support them. Of course, in principle, it is not unreasonable that I assist senior managers and academics with their work. However, I found that this contributed to my experiencing of a gradual splitting or diluting of my own academic identity, which

left me feeling, at best, spread very thin and, at worst, taken advantage of by others. In 2012, following a conversation with Helen Kara, I decided to join Twitter with the explicit aim of creating a set of academic social connections to help me better craft and communicate my academic identity on my own terms.

Literature: Introducing the analytical dimensions of social networks

In the UK, academics are likely to be experiencing increased levels of pressure and stress due to changes in the university sector over the last 25 years. For example, UK universities are now expected to compete for students, research income and national and international rankings, which has resulted 'in more pressure on, and tracking of, academics' performance (Guthrie et al., 2017: 7). Moreover, Shin and Jung (2014) found that UK higher education reforms have brought increased demands on academic staff, including more entrepreneurial activities, more teaching and more bureaucratic paperwork. Their study found that academic life in the UK is categorised by low levels of autonomy, pressure to perform in both research and teaching and the highest workplace stress among the 19 countries studied. More recently, Guthrie et al. (2017) conducted a literature review for the Royal Society and Wellcome Trust to develop understanding of the mental health and wellbeing needs of academics. They identify six key factors in the workplace that can influence people's levels of stress (p32):

1. Demands (workload and work patterns);
2. Control (the extent to which a worker can control how they work);
3. Support (provided by the organisation, manager and colleagues);
4. Relationships (and promotion of acceptable behaviour in the workplace);
5. Role (workers' understanding of their role; having conflicting roles); and
6. Change (how changes in the organisation are managed and communicated to staff).

This context is important as it has shaped (and continues to shape) my everyday practices as an academic. The main thing I want to reflect upon in this chapter is my approach to networking for academic and research purposes (both within and beyond whichever higher education institution is employing me) as an antidote to working in an increasingly accelerated and pressurised system. This section explores some of the

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theoretical concepts that inform my need for networks and my approach to networking in academia.

Let's begin by defining what a network is. It is a 'flat', informal model for social co-ordination that comprises lateral rather than vertical connections between people (Thompson, 2003). Networks can exist *within* and *beyond* organisations. Whereas hierarchies usually rely on 'top-down' communication flows, operating as a network often avoids bureaucratic structures and relies instead upon reciprocal flows of information and interaction between people in the network (Hannah et al., 2006). Being part of a network can lead to more fluid, dynamic and creative working practices than can often be achieved in a bureaucratic, hierarchical organisation. Participating in a social network can create bridging social capital by putting people in contact with others who are potentially different in outlook, interests, education and social circles (Granovetter, 1973; Taylor, 2003) and therefore can create access to different ideas as well as resources.

For networks to function social connections must be developed between people, and in practice these connections will vary in strength, directionality and density (Gilchrist, 2004). Indeed, network theorists see value in being able to analyse social connections in order to describe the quality of relationships within a network or social group (Wellman, 1999; Burt, 2005; Lin, 2005). 'Intensity' describes the extent to which members of a network are strongly connected to one another. Multi-stranded social connections are thought to be more intense because the individuals know and interact with one another frequently in multiple social contexts (Wellman and Potter, 1999). 'Reciprocity' refers to social connections that involve exchanges or transactions, which can be seen as being directed from one person to another (Misztal, 2000). These can be analysed in terms of the extent to which the exchange is reciprocated (Scott, 2000). In terms of 'durability', some social connections are highly durable and long term, whilst others are more transient and short term. Connections that are regularly being activated are more likely to have a high level of durability. Frequent contact can foster shared values, encourage reciprocal exchanges and facilitate the delivery of support (Homans, 1961). 'Reachability' is a measure of accessibility, referring to how easy it is for members of a network to contact one another (Scott, 2000). Finally, 'density' describes the 'mesh' and 'connectedness' of

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social connections within a network (Mitchell, 1969). High-density networks have a large proportion of members who are directly connected to one another. Low-density networks include members who are not directly connected but are linked indirectly through other members (Jewson, 2007). Analysing the density of social connections within a network can allow you identify clusters of social connections and also 'structural holes' within the network (Burt, 2005).

I will draw on these five dimensions of social networks throughout the chapter to help me explain the process and value of participating in academic networks beyond the organisation that employs me and how this contributes to my becoming a more mindful academic.

Performance: Joining Twitter for Academic Purposes

Shin and Jung (2014) conducted research with university staff in 19 countries and found that academics working in higher education systems where they were expected to balance teaching and research reported lower levels of job satisfaction than those where the focus was either on teaching or research. As raised in the introduction to this chapter, I was looking for a way to deal with the splitting of my academic identity that I was experiencing as a senior lecturer in my previous institution. I began by looking at where my support was coming from at the time. Moeller and Chung-Yan (2013) identify different types of support: emotional, instrumental, informational and appraisal support. In 2012, I felt that my institution was providing useful instrumental support in the form of competitive internal funds for research-informed teaching projects, opportunities to become teaching excellence fellows, and the chance to take part in European exchange visits to other universities. However, at the time, I found there to be a lack of emotional, informational and appraisal support. I was keen to start engaging with peers both outside of the small department I belonged to and also beyond my employing institution in a bid to locate wider forms of academic interaction and support. Opstrup and Pihl-Thingvad (2016) found that receiving recognition from peers appeared to alleviate stress among academics.

Elsewhere in their study, Opstrup and Pihl-Thingvad (2016) found that undertaking interesting research activities often validated academics' professional identity.

However, as I suggest above, higher education reform in the UK, and specifically the marketisation of the sector, is putting increasing demands and pressure on senior managers, which is then directly passed down to other academic staff. Therefore, in the UK, and I suspect in newer universities in particular, there is often less time during the working week to spend on 'interesting research activities', which means that activities like academic reading, writing for publication and conferences and the development of research proposals for external funding has to be completed during evenings and weekends. Torp et al. (2016) concluded that academic institutions need to ensure that researchers can focus on what they consider to be their central activities, rather than increasing time spent on tasks seen as 'illegitimate' such as administration. In 2012, this was not easily observable in my institution; in fact, cost-saving measures and institutional restructuring meant that administrative activities increased significantly for academics with course leadership responsibilities. Elsewhere in their studies Opstrup and Pihl-Thingvad (2016) and Torp et al. (2016) both identify that the opportunity for personal and professional development is seen as important for researchers' wellbeing. In 2012, I decided that I needed to create my own approach to professional learning. I wanted to find a way to get involved in outward-facing professional conversations on a regular and less formal basis. My learning from my PhD suggested that I needed to find a way to create bridging social capital with other researchers and academics beyond my small department. I suppose I saw Twitter as a social media platform that might enable such external academic connections to be made, which could lead to a visible concentration of my academic interests, skills and aspirations. I hoped that using Twitter daily in this way would help me to be more mindful about research and scholarship as a core part of my professional identity, even if the academic day job seemed to be diminishing space for this.

Setting: Let the Informal Professional Learning Begin

As introduced above, I am an academic who has primarily worked in newer universities in the UK. In my previous institution, I worked predominantly on leading programmes with part-time, professional postgraduate students (Vigurs, 2016) and in my new role at a different institution I work as part of a team of researchers who conduct educational research projects for external clients. In my previous role, I

worked hard to craft my professional identity around two key areas: doctoral education and researcher development, and equity in higher education. This identity work included making decisions (where possible) within the institution to align my everyday practice to these two areas, but it also saw me actively seek out and participate in a range of external networks in these same areas of academia. The deliberate resolution to join Twitter as a step towards activating wider, external networks in these fields was my way of attempting to disrupt the anxiety I was increasingly experiencing due to cultures of micro-management and managerial panic.

I desired to see another way of being in academia, but to do this I first needed some props. The props that made a difference were primarily switching to a smart phone and a mobile phone contract with an unlimited data package (i.e. unlimited uploads and downloads). Prior to 2012 any social media activity of mine was completed only when connected to the Internet on a desktop computer. This now feels like a lifetime ago. Armed with a smart phone and having set up a Twitter profile and downloaded the Twitter app to my phone, I now began to navigate the app during the liminal spaces of my academic day. For example, in 2012 I was delivering MA Education seminars to lecturers in a further education college in Manchester, which involved a 40-minute train ride each way. I used this time each week to think about the two main research areas I wanted to construct my identity around and to then find people on Twitter who identified an interest and practice in one or both of these fields of scholarship. Then I clicked 'follow' and waited to see what sorts of things they communicated on Twitter. I can remember how alien yet exciting this form of academic connection felt. For months, I concentrated on just following a range of interesting and relevant individuals and analysed what they tweeted, when, how often, whom they interacted with on Twitter, how they interacted and so on. This was a form of learning via digital lurking and was vital to working out how I would use Twitter to enable social networking for the curation of academic identity and community.

Appearance: Enacting Online and Offline Identities

In terms of starting to establish an online academic identity, I was reminded of the social network theory drawn upon in my PhD thesis and I began to carefully consider

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how I could build dimensions of reciprocity, durability and reachability into my nascent social networking on Twitter. These concepts became useful thinking tools for my practice and emboldened me to tweet for the first time and to interact with other academic Twitter users. In terms of demonstrating reciprocity I began by 'liking' other people's tweets to silently indicate that I had read and engaged with their message. Five years on this remains a key way for me to build initial reciprocity with other Twitter users, and to date I have 'liked' 38.8K tweets, which means that I have on average 'liked' 20 tweets per day. Other ways for me to build presence and reciprocity was to 'retweet' others' tweets so as to share them with my followers. I also began to comment on tweets that asked questions in my field of interest or shared common challenges of working in academia. My comments usually involved the sharing of resources and knowledge or showing moral support. I think the fact that these acts of academic reciprocity were taking place regularly meant that it wasn't long before people were following me back and reciprocating in similar ways to my own tweets. Finally, my response to thinking about social networking practice that could be characterised as being both durable and reachable saw me endeavouring to be visible and active on Twitter on a daily basis and to be receptive and responsive when people communicated with me.

One of the ways I continued to reflect upon my online academic 'appearance' was by looking at how others appeared to be enacting their research identities on Twitter. About a year into my use of social media, I had found a number of role models whose digital practices I respected and admired. These included @DrHelenKara, @CelebYouthUK, @ThomsonPat, @RFMacDonald, @thesiswhisperer, @rellypops, @Sharon_McD and @profcolinclark. I think what I particularly related to in the online scholarly practices of these academics was their openness, humour, willingness to publically engage with others and their use of images as well as text. I also appreciated their honesty and transparency in communicating how they juggle the demands of research and academic writing, including the real-life challenges shared in real time. This was refreshing and gave me the confidence to start making publically visible some of my everyday academic practices in a bid to contribute to the demystification of research labour in academia. This included sharing daily images of my scholarly work, such as what I was reading at different points in the day, handwritten mind maps of the structure of a paper, the front page of a thesis I

was examining, the blank form of a peer review to be completed, or the flyer for a conference I had submitted an abstract to. I felt committed to communicating some of the practices of academia that are often hidden from early career researchers. At times, I found I could more easily shape and control my online identity than I could my offline academic identity. This often created frustration, as the academic I felt I could be on Twitter frequently did not match the academic I was expected to be (at that time) in my institution. In fact, in the early days, I think my institutional colleagues thought my perceived dalliance with social media was a distraction from the day job (and in a sense, it was) and that it was without substance or academic merit. However, the underpinning concepts of social network theory gave me the conviction to continue.

Manner: From online connections to offline connections and back again

One of the positive outcomes of using social media to curate academic social networks across the globe has been the development of genuine, reciprocal relationships with researchers from different disciplines and who I respect for their honesty, generosity, openness and integrity. The connections I have developed with these people feel alive and real. It is worth noting that I had not met many of these people in person when I joined Twitter and yet these online webs of academic connections created networks that pulsed with ideas, knowledge, resources, questions and support. They were intellectually and emotionally sustaining and created academic stimulation, motivation and encouragement. Despite the online nature of the relationships, it felt refreshing to be around these people, to get to know them, and to interact with them. What then started to happen was that some of these initial online connections developed into offline connections. Often the development into offline connections happened in serendipitous ways, usually because of the information we were sharing online. For example, a few years ago one of my online connections @profcolinclark, a sociologist at the University of the West of Scotland, tweeted that he was flying to Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam. I happened to be traveling to Denmark for work via Schiphol on the same day and responded to his tweet to see if our timings might coincide. We ended up meeting for a cup of coffee in the airport and had our first face-to-face conversation about academic life. This was repeated a year

later; again due to sharing work visit locations on Twitter, but this time we met to discuss academia in the café at Sheffield train station.

Other examples where online academic connections have developed into deeper offline professional relationships include those with @rellypops (Narelle Lemon) and @Siobhan_ODwyer. I ended up meeting Narelle Lemon for the first time in Chicago during a large international education conference. We had been following each other on Twitter for some time and we could see that we were both at the same conference from what we were sharing on Twitter. Narelle tweeted from the session I presented at but I was unable to go over and say hello as - despite knowing each other quite well on social media - I didn't know what she looked like (she wasn't using an image of herself on her Twitter profile at the time)! So, we arranged to meet up in person later that day in a café near the Cloud Gate sculpture. When I mentioned this to colleagues they asked "Weren't you nervous?" but the thing about meeting up with people that you've known for a long time in an online capacity is that you don't feel like strangers. You already know each other's academic backstory and where your shared interests lie. So, when Narelle and I met up in person we were able to quickly get around to discussing potential areas of academic collaboration. This resulted in me contributing a paper to a special issue of a journal she was co-editing (Vigurs, 2016) and then I hosted Narelle on a research visit to the UK, which led to us developing a book proposal together with @DrHelenKara. My online academic connections haven't just developed through Twitter. For example, I met Siobhan O'Dwyer on Instagram (an image sharing social media platform). I really enjoyed following Siobhan's Insta-stories in a more passive fashion to begin with. She has a great story to tell as an academic working in the field of ageing and family care, who has emigrated from Australia to the UK. Our online connection became more interactive and reciprocal when she opened up about a specific academic challenge she was facing at the time; I was compelled to get in touch to offer moral support. Our online interactions became more reciprocal and frequent, which meant that when Siobhan was giving a keynote lecture at a university near to where I live, I was able to offer to host her at mine and give her a personalised tour of the city, whilst we discussed all things academia. Reflecting on these online-offline-online academic relationships it is clear to me that these social connections can lead to strong, durable social networks. This is not only because the individual connections between two people are

characterised by reciprocity and reachability, but also because they are part of larger webs of social ties where many network members are directly connected to one another, thus creating a higher-density network (Jewson, 2007).

Front: Challenges that have arisen

Over the past five years my social networking practices have certainly contributed to an active sense of mindfulness in relation to the role of research and scholarship as a core part of my academic identity. I am now connected on a weekly basis to hundreds (and sometimes thousands) of researchers, and this increased number of connections means increased opportunities. In one sense, I welcome this as it provides a constant source of 'interesting research activities' (Opstrup and Pihl-Thingvad, 2016), but at times I have also allowed opportunities through my social networks to double my workload, which then affects my capacity to be mindful in other areas of my life (as a parent, partner, friend, sister and daughter). As will be discussed in the next section, this has led more recently to a need and desire to unplug and switch off from social media at particular times. However, when I moved institutions in 2017 (also changing academic role), I had anticipated consciously using social media and my social networks to help me make a positive professional transition. I envisaged sharing snatched glimpses in real time through Twitter of what I was learning in my new post and also using Instagram to document images of both aspects of my role and the campus as I explored my new academic environment. But in reality, I found myself surprised by needing to adjust quietly and privately away from my social networks for a few weeks. I think this was partly because segments of my social networks at that point somewhat mirrored my research interests that I would subsequently be losing in my new post (i.e. the leadership of doctoral education programmes) and I worried that both they and I would experience slight cognitive dissonance if I suddenly started behaving differently on social media, so I retreated from social media for a short while during which I thought carefully about how to align my social media use with my new academic role in a new institution.

Front Stage, Back Stage, and Off Stage: Attempting work/life balance

I've alluded above to the difficulty of achieving a healthy and sustainable work/life balance. When I started out using social media I had clear boundaries, so Facebook was only for 'real' friends and family (no work colleagues or students) and Twitter was only for professional purposes (no sharing personal events or interests) and I have only started using Instagram relatively recently (my boundary rules on social media had shifted by then). In the early days of using social media, I was also only connected when sitting at my desktop computer, never on the move. Over time, as connecting has become more mobile (any time, any place), and as connections have developed and deepened through online and offline interactions, what counts as front stage, back stage and off stage has become less distinct to me. This reflects a situation where some of my academic social networks are now marked by social connections that have increased in intensity and density. This is positive for these sets of relationships. Some of us now interact on both personal and professional levels across a number of social media platforms (namely Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) on a weekly, sometimes daily basis. This frequency and quality of contact makes you feel closely bonded and invested in one another despite being physically miles apart. I value these academic relationships immensely. I am able to be front stage, back stage and off stage with these people. However, it is important to acknowledge that my social networks don't only contain such connections. Over 4000 people currently follow me on Twitter. Many of these connections at the present time are less intense, less multistranded, and if I'm honest I'm not sure that I will be able to foster many more clusters of connections that are high in density and intensity. The high number of heterogeneous connections that I have on social media means that I now often experience Twitter (and Faceboook) as noisy, sometimes unruly and overwhelming spaces. As a result when I go on holiday I choose to delete the Twitter and Facebook apps from my phone to ensure that I have some weeks of the year when I am unplugged from my social networks. It is probably time to review whether my practice on these social media platforms is still helping me to be mindful in relation to some aspects of academia. This may be one of the reasons I am particularly enjoying Instagram as an online social space for visually sharing experiences and ideas. I am only following 178 people on Instagram – a mix of personal and professional connections – many of these I knew first on Twitter, but I have got to know them in more multi-faceted ways through Instagram. For me Instagram is a space where I can currently share more of the back stage and off stage parts of my life, rather than

focusing solely on what front stage (my academic identity) looks like. It allows a more holistic representation of myself across my different identities, which I have begun to crave.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have attempted to unpack my use of social networks and social media as a means of being more mindful about the role of research and scholarship in the ongoing construction of my academic identity. My participation in social networks has been fundamental in allowing me to actively shape my sense of academic community and the scholarly relationships that contribute daily to my academic health and wellbeing. However, after five years of using social media in academia it is probably time for me to review my practice to check whether it is still allowing mindful scholarly work to be enacted. I'm aware that my digital practice has shifted over time, sometimes quickly, and with increasing numbers of connections, and an increasing number of platforms (e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram), I worry that I'm at risk of becoming digitally disoriented. I sometimes feel that my growing digital practice solved one initial problem but now threatens to create others, such as contributing to an accelerated higher education system that is always connected and that never sleeps. Having said that, my more recent use of Instagram is currently allowing me to be more mindful in my higher education practice, because I mainly follow academics here who are explicitly engaged in mindful academic practices themselves. Currently, I would say it is my use of academic networks on Instagram that is helping me to engage better in the complex cognitive and emotional demands of working in higher education. But for how long that will be the case, I cannot say.

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