Channelling academic audiences: proposal for a social network for film studies researchers

Citation: Sandra Martorell; Fernando Canet; Lluís Codina. "Channelling academic audiences: proposal for a social network for film studies researchers." *Hipertext.net* [online], 2014. Núm. 12 .
http://raco.cat/index.php/Hipertext/article/view/274217/364519

DOI: 10.2436/20.8050.01.12

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Keywords: Academic social networks, Film studies, Active audiences, Research, ResearchGate.

Abstract: After suggesting a network devoted to film studies and a series of analyses on related networks, this study aims at specifying both the idiosyncrasy and the architectural and conceptual development of this kind of platforms, in order to revitalize the interactions of highly participative audiences as are those of researchers.

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1. Introduction

One of the characteristics defining Internet audiences is that they can both receivers and transmitters. Thus, these audiences might use virtual spaces to obtain information in a very selective way, but also to produce and disseminate their own content and to share it with users with similar interests.

Thus, we can refer to the members of these audiences as prosumers, a concept which comes from putting the words “producers” and “consumers” together. As is well known, this neologism was suggested by Alvin Toffler in *The Third Wave* (1980), and although it initially served to describe another phenomenon, today it is used to refer to the new forms of network communication characterized by a permanent combination of information consumption and production of new resources (Tajer, 2009).

This phenomenon happens in very diverse online areas, but social networks are the ones generating most of the movement. Undoubtedly, the most popular ones are those born out of the mission of connecting individuals within a personal exchange framework. However, because these networks have become increasingly specific, we have witnessed the beginning of those aimed at connecting groups by affinities or concrete interests. We are particularly interested for this article in those created by and for academic researchers.

These kinds of networks in particular facilitate the collaboration between scholars from all over the world. Thus, academic social networks have become one of the tools to change the paradigm in regard to the forms of knowledge dissemination, a movement which goes from individual to collective and from a certain institutional endogamy to a diaspora of the academic production.

This article presents the proposal for a possible conceptual design of an academic social network focused on the field of film studies and with the emphasis on audience interaction, which is a key feature for the network to work. This is the reason why audiences have been our starting point, already in a previous research. This prior research led us to the current proposal, based on the experience of suggesting a specialized network on film studies which tackles elements such as resources and tools to consider and design or services to offer. These aspects might influence user involvement in the use and exchange of experiences and knowledge or, in the worst case scenario, in the abandonment of the network because of the lack of stimuli regarding both the container and its contents.

2. Academic social networks

Social networks aimed at researchers groups are known by several names, such as research networks, knowledge networks, or, as we prefer to call them, academic social networks.

Regardless of the term they have been called, these networks have been studied by authors such as Sañudo (2012), García-Aretio (2007) or Salinas, Pérez and De Benito (2008). Also regardless of the particular notes of each author, they all agree that they are participation and knowledge building spaces, and this aspect is already expressed in how these networks present themselves. We can see an example of that in ResearchGate, which summarizes through a graphic its reason to be: the mission to communicate, collaborate and discover.

Previously we already presented a definition to appeal to them (Martorell and Canet, 2013ab):

Social knowledge networks of an academic nature are the meeting point between researchers from all over the world. These researchers join efforts in an attempt to make their studies progress considering three basic principles**: to communicate, to collaborate and to share** their knowledge in a virtual and democratic environment which is ideal for dissemination, provided there is a participation and loyalty engagement to academic rigor.

Regarding the scope of the field of the action, academic social networks might be of two kinds: general and specialized. General networks are those within the academic framework that gather several disciplines together, going from experimental sciences to arts and humanities. On the contrary, and as its name suggests, specialized networks are focused on a specific topic. Depending on our needs, we might be more interested in one kind or another; sometimes the debate or treatment of a same topic from different disciplines might benefit our work; other times this transversality might become too diffuse or superficial, so that we would look for a specialized network where our topic was thoroughly discussed, a network reaching a more specific level.

When tackling film studies we see there is a lot of research coming from other fields; however, this discipline lacks a cross-border meeting point for theoreticians with specific, varied and quality work materials which allow thoroughly delving into it. Although some networks include film researchers, we still have not found an ideal structure for them, meaning a network presenting the characteristics we consider it should have to revitalize production and debate as much as possible, to encourage new memberships and to offer content so that potential users feel the need to sign up for it, such as being free of charge, having a repository with high quality documents and presenting incentives to participation.

Given this situation, and after conducting a series of analyses on networks of the same kind which revealed both their weak points and the keys to success in creating and managing them, we decided to suggest the network ourselves. Thus, our network would be remarkable for exclusively gathering together groups of experts and other users interested in the theoretical aspects of film studies, for having quality documents, for encouraging debates and exchanges on the related topics through an accessible and

comfortable interface, and, with all that, for encouraging (through incentives to collective participation) the advancement of this discipline which currently requires new focuses and new ways of study.

Considering this idea, we have developed a sort of action protocol we have intended to extrapolate to any other kind of academic social network, and we are presenting it in this article.

3. Methodology

The work system prior to suggesting the guidelines to create an academic social network has lay in analysing other successful networks, with the purpose of extracting their elements and resources which might be more useful considering our field of study.

This first step took place as an analytic research in which we studied both general and specialized networks. To that end, we established a methodology (detailed in Martorell and Canet, 2013ab) that allowed us to conduct a thorough examination based on seventy variables distributed into four essential categories: general parameters, user record, services and resources, and content.

From the analysis of these variables, we managed to establish an account of the characteristics and resources that any academic social network should contemplate when encouraging the active participation of the users. We have articulated these elements within a double system divided into two large parts we call “Functions” and “Resources”. The next two tables show the components for each part:

Functions
Participation
Communication with users
Communication between users
Global scope
Possibility of following/ being followed
Open Access
Subscription to interest profiles
To publish documents
To download documents
To create work groups
To share links
Recommendations
Job openings
Information on calls and events
Event management

Table 1. Functions

Resources
Chat
Forum
Internal IM
Feed system
Repository
Calendar of calls and events
Citation management software
Statistics
News
Social bookmarking
Internal search engine

Table 2. Resources

4. Design of an academic social network

As happens with other information systems, we consider that the creation of an academic social network encompasses three essential work phases: to analyse networks of the same kind, to prepare the structural design and to implement it.

As indicated in the previous section, this article tackles the stage of conceptual design, which involves several subphases that represent the different tasks to perform in order to obtain a solid structure from which bring the network to life in the future. Our previous studies have allowed the detection of such subphases consisting in delimiting the following elements:

- User profile
- Content
- Participation schemes
- Information architecture

Next we are going through each of these points to understand how important it is to take them into account when preparing the design. On the one hand, this will allow establishing certain bases to optimize the network for its future users; on the other hand, this will serve as a work model in case there is willingness to create a similar network regardless of the discipline it tackles.

4.1 Double profile of the users

In the case of film studies, the network would not be so much focused on questions related to the film (professional) praxis but on the (academic) analysis and theory of cinema. Considering this specification, we can establish the potential users on the basis of a double profile: demographic and of network use.

Specifically, because it is a network aimed at an academic community and not at the professional universe, and considering it concentrates on a theoretical field of study, we should focus on three profiles: professors, researchers and university students (mainly graduate students).

But despite these would be the three primordial demographic segments of potential users, we know from other networks that each segment would not necessarily behave in the same way, meaning that when they become real users we could at least classify four fundamental aspects regarding how they use the network:

- Time. The time they spend in the network: frequent users, habitual users or occasional users.
- Participation. The degree of active participation (in forums, debates and other social actions): very participative, moderately participative, slightly participative and non-participative.
- Use. The use they make of the network's content: readings, downloads and/or their own contributions to that content.
- Influence. The degree of influence they have on the network (this will depend on the quality of the material they provide, their active participation or gathered

citations): very influential, moderately influential, slightly influential, non-influential.

The last aspect is very important because the reputation of the network will also depend on the type of users it has and their weight within the expertise area, thus the need to prioritize the invitations to influential researchers to join the network (how they will be selected will be explained subsequently in this article).

Besides, users would interact with each other according to their affinities and through work groups. The network would offer this option to foster collaboration between users, since these groups could directly share content or conduct studies together, as if they were clusters. This is why it is also advisable to create a taxonomy which includes the different possible areas of study and how they could be divided into more specific sections. In our case, we have divided film studies into eight categories which are also divided, resulting in a total of 141 subcategories.

4.2 Content

One of the main reasons why these networks have increased their number of followers is because they allow the users the possibility of sharing content. Thus, many users initially turn to them to obtain study materials from other researchers or just the opposite, that is to say, to upload their own content in order to be more visible, so that they can gather citations because other researchers have used their studies, and therefore increase their academic reputation.

This is why our network has to present a repository where content can be uploaded and downloaded: repositories are essentially storage units. It would be a virtual space where users can leave their studies at the disposal of their peers in order to collaborate with each other.

The first thing we have to do when setting up ours is to delimit which characteristics do we want it to fulfil, which materials is it going to host, and which ones already exist related to our research discipline.

Regarding the first question, we have chosen the following aspects:

- It has to be online.
- It has to be open access, following what authors like Harnad and others (2004) call the "green road": to that end, it is convenient to develop the metadata recollection protocol Open Archives Initiative – Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH).
- It has to be thematic.
- It has to establish a series of cataloguing protocols and policies in order to provide order and formal coherence among all the documents being added.
- It has to specify the policies of authorship management rights.

Once these aspects have been defined, we have analysed the already existing repositories related to film studies by querying a DOAR (directory of open access repositories), where we obtained a total of twenty four repositories from the areas of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, so that we have become familiarised with their

workings and idiosyncrasy. This process has revealed that feeding content to a repository from user participation only can take years, so that it would be essential to upload materials before the network is operational.

This element would be part of our strategy to recruit new users, since the network would provide them with materials they would not be able to access any other way. However, we must not forget that the pillars supporting academic social networks are not exclusively limited to communicate and share (this last aspect being the one which is mostly influenced by the use of repositories), but collaboration is also key. However, this collaboration is currently developed to a lesser extent, so that we aim at encouraging it as we show in several proposals of the following section.

4.3 Participation schemes

The power of audiences in the social web makes us conceive an ideal wherein audiences themselves would naturally self-regulate the network, and although it is true that in time popularity could compel users to get involved with it, a series of strategies should be activated beforehand to encourage said participation, as the previous example of the repositories has already advanced.

Some of the options we suggest at this point have been taken from the analysis of the experience in similar social networks. One of the references could be the ECREA (European Communication Research and Education Association) network, which beyond being a meeting point offers highly interesting services to the users and motivations to participate. Examples that could be extrapolated when establishing a new network are the calls for papers in congresses and the various activities and job openings. Considering how important these matters are when developing an academic career, this service provides great value to the users, so it could be adapted to being a part of our network. In a way, the point is to take those resources useful to researchers, whether they originate in classic forms of communications such notice boards or in virtual media, and to gather them together in our network so that they become available in one platform, thus speeding up the researchers' work.

Another option which could foster participation and is also based on academic traditional dynamics is the creation of congresses. Following with ECREA, this network is aware of the need to foster meetings and debates among its participants, so that it annually organises a congress which has quite an impact. The same happens with NECS, another academic social network which has been analysed. Although these two networks organise physical events, considering our virtual platform the organisation of an annual online congress could be suggested, like the one being organised by the Sociedad Española de Estudios de la Comunicación (SEECI). This event has eliminated all physical barriers to be fully developed on the Internet, thanks to the new online communications applications available. The call for this type of events would follow the same patterns as when we create an event in social networks such as Facebook, where the users are invited offering them the necessary information as well as the option to say whether they will participate or not.

This kind of conferences or congresses can also present the incentive of publishing the proceedings or other types of materials, which might motivate scholars (whose career is

closely linked to the dissemination of their work), as well as the participation of reference scholars to lead those meetings.

Influential theoreticians should be considered for this last aspect. These scholars should be decided beforehand, and the selection criteria to choose them might vary. In our case, we narrowed it down by sifting through the Web of Knowledge(WOK from now on), because this database is the most acknowledged regarding scientific publications. The selection is possible thanks to filtering by area of knowledge, type of material, the individual evaluation of each publication, and finally by authors. At the end all these criteria produce a list of the most relevant hundred scholars.

This list can be very useful in the strategy of user recruitment and to encourage their active participation, since the academic personalities recruited would act as influencers, which would have repercussions both in the use and reputation of the network.

Besides being registered users like any other member, and as previously commented, academic personalities can also act as speakers in the congresses organised or at other possible events such as debates with them as expert guests. This last option would consist in sessions wherein a relevant personality from the field of study would be invited to have debates with the rest of participations, in order to foster dialogue and an enriching and significant knowledge exchange within the network itself.

Besides these proposals with prestigious scholars, another group dynamics could consist in launching debate topics on a regular basis, or on the possibility to comment the works of the repository in groups, both the published ones and the pre-prints. Regarding this suggestion, it would be advisable to reward users who made contributions, meaning establishing a reward system with the more active users, not only as commentators but also as uploaders of documents to the repository or as participants in any of the activities available at the network.

Reward systems can be of various kinds and they would be framed within what is known as gamification, a very popular tactic in the current digital universe based on game mechanics and dynamics which allows to encourage specific behaviours and to increase the motivation and engagement of the audiences (Hsin-Yuan Huang and Soman, 2013).

Some networks which are already familiar with the efficacy of group gamification have already put this strategy into practice, as is the case of the generalist network ResearchGate. To that end, this network has created the RG Score, an indicator to measure the scientific reputation of its users.

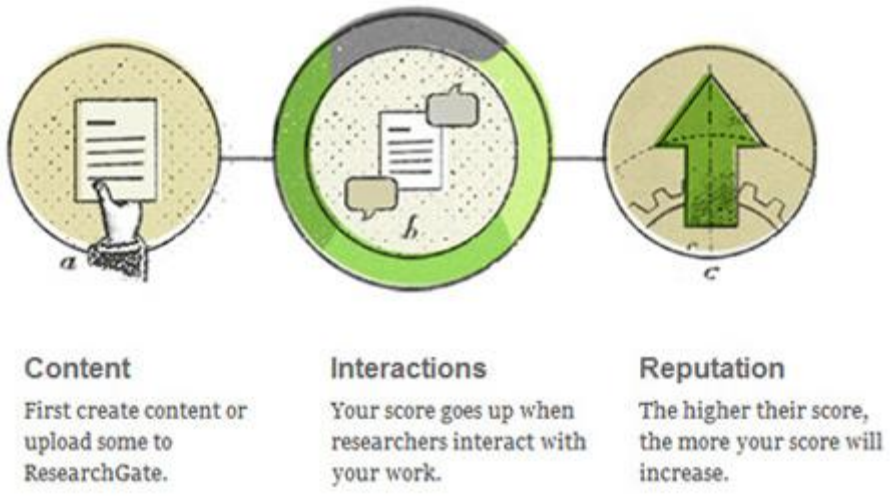

Figure 1

This graphic suggested by the network itself explains the procedure to achieve a good position. The first step consists in creating and uploading content so that other users interact with it, which makes the mark grow and so the scientific reputation.

The RG Score is estimated considering the interactions of other users with our content and how often do they interact, as well as considering who those users are.

Next we see an example of how this measure is expressed. This measure is public access, which incentivizes even more the challenge between users:

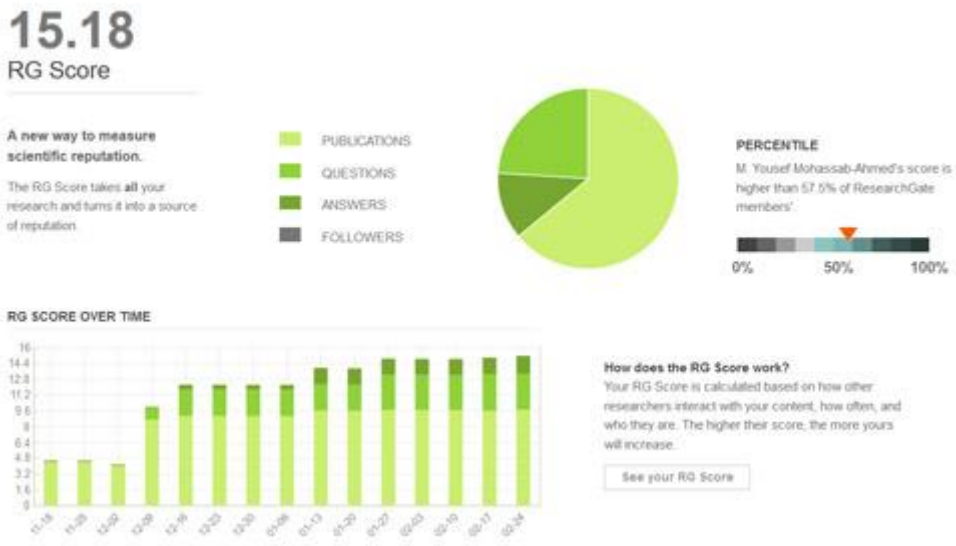

Figure 2

Thus, through gamification proposals we see that our predisposal to participate in games and competitions is used to achieve specific goals, in our case to increase interest and the active participation in an academic social network.

Besides positioning our user into the network, participation contributes to improve their place considering other measurements as the H index (suggested by Hirsch, 2005), which many institutions take into account when assessing their scholars. Thus, we see that incentivizing participation within a network might also benefit users outside of it, because they become better known, the citations of their works increase, and all in all they are granted more visibility and impact.

4.4 Information architecture

We are conceptually suggesting a platform whose structure should be quite complex given the social and content framework it is going to host. Thus, one of the essential questions is to ensure that accessibility and usability are implemented through information architecture and interface design.
To that end, the essential premise is to create a structure which is both simple and effective. We are thinking consistency, "both in content and visual format as well as in the layout of elements in the pages, offering homogeneous environments which help foster an effective communication of the message, and also help the user to conceive a mental model of the site" (Maniega, 2006).

In this section, the different guidelines which should be observed are at least the following:

- To define the different sections that the network should contemplate (preferably going from the most general to the most specific ones).
- To establish the hierarchy of those sections.
- To determine which content, resources or functions will be present in each section (and in order to do that, we will use the list of characteristics and resources obtained in prior analyses that we have previously mentioned).
- To establish the global and local navigation of the site, meaning the different ways of accessing each and every section and the webpages it hosts.

These guidelines will help us build a practical and intuitive architecture, with a distribution which is clear and simple to understand by the user (Nielsen, 2000) and showing its charm after a quick look (Krug, 2006). Thus, we might manage to make the user feel comfortable and receptive to actively participate in the several possibilities the network offers.

With that said, and once the phases of analysis on similar networks and the preparation of the design have been developed, a third one could be tackled as suggested at the beginning of this section 4: that of implementation. This is actually a macrophase, since it also involves several phases or subphases. It is beyond the scope of this research, but it can be tentatively pointed out that once we have an initial information architecture proposal, an interface structure could be suggested, first through a wireframe-type design.

These initial phases could also involve the first user studies through card sorting, in order to put the navigation design to the test.

Some principles to contemplate could consist in observing four key aspects such as (1) composition (correspondingly establishing hot spots which are visualized more quickly); (2) use of colour (which allows correctly viewing texts as well as associating and mentally connecting the different areas and types of information); (3) typography (in order to visually distinguish groups of text and to determine their importance) and (4) adaptability, focusing on Responsive Web Design, meaning a design which adapts to different devices.

5. Conclusions

Social networks are meeting points between online communities whose members connect and interact with each other, reaching levels of participation and decision power which were unconceivable several lustri before, so that they become active audiences.

With the evolution of this new social culture on the Internet and the increasing tendency to content customisation, appears the phenomenon of specific social networks aimed at specific groups as are academic networks, and among these academic networks there are those whose mission is to gather scholars around a specific topic such as the possible network on film studies we suggest.

This pretext has served to trace the guidelines to consider when developing a platform of this kind, which might become a referent in case we want to create a network of this sort. These guidelines derive from the study and analysis of other networks (considering potential audiences all the time) and they are essentially the characteristics we have already described: specification of user profiles, creation of a repository as a resource to store content, establishment of participation incentives and development of an intuitive and consistent architecture which is able to motivate the user. Thus, through a structure and a good specialization methodology the goal is to create an ideal environment for these audiences to be increasingly participative, since it is participation what gives meaning to these networks.

Thus, the growth of the network and its continuous evolution will be dependent on such interactions: users themselves are those who will feed and adapt the network to their changing needs. Although we can set the network in motion, we should not forget that users would be its true demiurges, able to model it at their will from a participative and collective engagement stance.

6. Acknowledgments

The research to write this article was conducted with the support of the research projects: «Estudio y análisis para el desarrollo de una red de conocimiento sobre estudios fílmicos a través de plataformas web 2.0» (Study and analysis to develop a knowledge network on film studies through web 2.0. platforms", funded by the Spanish R + D+ i Plan Nacional of the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (code HAR2010-18648) and «Audiencias activas y periodismo. Interactividad, integración en la web y buscabilidad de la información periodística» (Active audiences and journalism:

interactivity, web integration and searchability of journalistic information), funded by the Spanish R+D+i Plan Nacional of the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad (code CSO2012-39518-C04-02).

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