Scholarly Networking Services – Does Your Research Need Likes?

Scholarly networking services such as ResearchGate, Academia.edu, and Mendeley provide a Facebook-type experience for scholars and researchers. Members of these services can use them to upload and share their research, track downloads and citations of their work, and network and collaborate with fellow scholars.

In early February, Academia.edu stated it had nearly 48 million user accounts, while ResearchGate and Mendeley reported user accounts of 11 million and 5 million, respectively. Scholars in the humanities and social sciences favor Academia.edu for networking, while those in STEM fields tend to prefer ResearchGate. Mendeley, which started as a citation management service and still retains that feature, gets most of its membership from researchers in natural resources and physical sciences.

While these services are popular with many researchers, some scholars are questioning these services’ business practices. Both are commercial companies (and Academia.edu is a commercial site not affiliated with an educational institution) currently funded by venture capital. At some point the services will need to be profitable, or they will be sold or shut down. While the leadership at both companies have announced plans to fund the services through advertisements and job postings, critics fear that membership fees and charges for added services may be necessary for the services to survive.

Critics are concerned that researchers mistakenly believe that placing their research on one of these scholarly networking sites and making the work freely available to all fulfills mandates for open access. Funders and most publishers do not consider scholarly networking services to be
open access platforms, and several commercial publishers prohibit authors from sharing their published work on them.

Researchers who want to keep their ResearchGate, Academica.edu, or Mendeley accounts are encouraged to upload their work to an open access repository, such as DigitalCommons@EMU or a disciplinary repository (see Open Doar – their Directory of Open Access Repositories - http://www.opendoar.org/), and then point to their work in their scholarly networking accounts.

~Julia Nims, Scholarly Communications Librarian