

WI-FI IN THE IVORY TOWER: REDUCING ISOLATION OF THE LAW PHD STUDENT THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS

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Research students no longer need to spend long hours on campus under the gaze of their supervisors. Ubiquitous access to online databases and communication tools means that many PhD students operate in splendid isolation, away from the bustle and distractions of campus life. But this freedom may also bring with it strong feelings of isolation from academic community and peer support. The authors of this study have commenced an inquiry into whether the connectivity and interactivity of social media can provide a vital social lifeline for research students (particularly law students who work largely independently and are not frequently part of large research teams) in order to address these feelings of isolation. The role of social media in shaping academic identity and voice is also addressed. It considers a number of significant UK studies of higher degree by research students and their relevance for Australia and outlines the results of a small pilot survey conducted in an Australian law school.

I INTRODUCTION

The PhD student can be likened to Rapunzel, they sit in splendid isolation in a self-constructed ivory tower, occasionally shouting out to the world but for the most part left to their own devices, working quietly away at their research and observing the world from afar. It may be carrying the analogy too far to liken the supervisor to the wicked witch who visits with sustenance and news from the outside world occasionally (though some students may well view this as an apt analogy), but it is fair to say that it is the supervisor that provides the somewhat tenuous and intermittent link to the external scholarly world. The key point here is the isolation of the PhD student who is, ironically, engaged in a discourse: with the literature, the body of specialist knowledge and the supervisor. Yet the writing of a PhD is a solitary and lonely undertaking. The PhD student spends hours alone, reading, writing and thinking. This can, potentially, cause harm to the student and present one of the greatest challenges to a personally and

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professionally successful completion. If the sense of isolation could be reduced and the student provided with a support network, then the experience would be enriched both personally and academically.

In addressing this issue we cannot hope to solve the isolation of the PhD student nor can we address broader institutional, economic and policy questions that arise around the appropriateness of this isolation. These issues are well beyond the scope of this paper. The discussion here is based upon the reality of that isolation and seeks to address one possible avenue of support, social media.

The aim of this paper is to present a preliminary exploration of the role of social media in adding a new dimension to the PhD discourse, providing a support network to the student and embedding the student in the language and links of their discipline.¹ The adoption of good social media practises in the scholarly environment may help the PhD student connect with other students, more senior scholars in their field, and encourage them to build a scholarly identity. The approach that this discussion will take is to begin with an overview of some of the research conducted around the role of social networking in the research and higher degree landscape, this review will then be supported by evidence from a series of large scale surveys exploring current practices of students recently completed in the UK² and a small pilot study in an Australian law school, and will conclude with some recommendations (and examples) of how social media can enhance the research student experience. We stipulate here that this, perhaps like social media itself, represents the first step of a much broader and more complex research journey. Before taking this step however, it is important to provide context and define what it is that we mean when we use the term “social media”.

II DEFINING SOCIAL MEDIA

Social Media, in the context of this study, encompasses internet based services that enable the user to generate some aspect of the content, ranging from a simple comment to a full blog post.³ These services are also described in the literature as Web 2.0 and participatory media.⁴ The key characteristics that we are concerned with are: the content is posted to and hosted on the internet; users may interact with that content in some way (if they choose to); and the content is open to people beyond the researcher’s closed supervisor-student relationship (ie, it is not

¹ The significance of social media to the PhD student is broadly accepted, see for example a recent piece in the *Conversation*, ‘Doing a PhD can be a lonely business but it doesn’t have to be’, Hamza Bendemra, Doctral Candidate, ANU <<http://theconversation.com/doing-a-phd-can-be-a-lonely-business-but-it-doesnt-have-to-be-19192>> and the comprehensive report M Moran, J Seaman and H Tinti-Kane, ‘Teaching, learning and sharing: how today’s higher education faculty use social media’, (April 2011), Pearson Learning Solutions, <<http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED535130.pdf>>.

² See discussion below.

³ RIN, *Social Media: A Guide for Researchers*, 2011, 7. User-generated content is in turn a defining characteristic of Web 2.0 platforms.

⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: media education for the 21st century*, (MIT Press, 2009); Glen Bull, Ann Thompson, Mike Searson, Joe Garofalo, John Park, Carl Young, and John Lee ‘Connecting informal and formal learning experiences in the age of participatory media’ (2008) 8(2) *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education* 100-107; Sarah Lewis, Roy Pea, and Joseph Rosen ‘Beyond participation to co-creation of meaning: mobile social media in generative learning communities’ (2010) 49(3) *Social Science Information* 351-369.

intended to encompass email). Contributions may consist of a 140 character post to *Twitter*, a lengthy blog post, an amendment to a *Wikipedia* entry, a status update on *Facebook*, or a comment on a blog post. Social media shifts the relationship of the user from an information consumer to a co-creator of meaning, and thus facilitates a global conversation and collaboration which may compliment and facilitate the emerging identity of the doctoral researcher.⁵

Social media can also provide tools to navigate through and to structure this growing wealth of information and help the researcher to sort, identify and organise key information. Platforms such as *LinkedIn* and *Facebook* can be used to link together groups of people interested in a particular topic or discipline, developing networks which are very often global. In the researcher context, networking is a key element of the development of the researcher's professional identity. Thus social media involves elements of creation, sharing and networking.⁶

Social media includes:

- Communication**
 - Blogging:** Blogger, LiveJournal, TypePad, WordPress, Tumblr
 - Microblogging:** Twitter, Yammer, Google Buzz
 - Location:** Foursquare, Gowalla, Facebook Places
 - Social networking:** Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace
 - Aggregators:** Google Reader, Netvibes, Pageflakes, iGoogle

- Collaboration**
 - Conferencing:** Adobe Connect, GoToMeeting, Skype
 - Wikis:** PBworks, Wetpaint, Wikia
 - Social bookmarking:** Delicious, Diigo, BibSonomy
 - Social bibliography:** CiteULike, Mendeley
 - Social news:** Digg, Reddit, Newsvine
 - Social documents:** Google Docs, Dropbox, Zoho
 - Project management:** Bamboo, Basecamp, Huddle

- Multimedia:**
 - Photographs:** Flickr, Picasa, SmugMug
 - Video:** Viddler, Vimeo, YouTube
 - Live streaming:** Justin.tv, Livestream, Ustream
 - Presentation sharing:** Scribd, SlideShare, Sliderocket
 - Virtual worlds:** OpenSim, Second Life, World of Warcraft⁷

III BACKGROUND

A number of studies have been conducted recently in the UK looking at the research practices of higher degree students and other academic researchers, including a significant longitudinal study of Generation Y doctoral students,

⁵ James Grimmelman 'Saving Facebook' (2009) 94 *Iowa Law Review* 1137. Grimmelman suggests that the defining characteristics of social media include: identity, relationship and community.

⁶ Danah boyd and Nicole Ellison 'Social networking sites: definition, history and scholarship' (2007) 13(1) *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 11.

⁷ Above n 3, at 7. This list changes on a daily basis as new tools and applications emerge and are picked up by user communities.

comparing their study habits with those of other cohorts.⁸ These studies will form the basis for the further recommendations and observations made in this paper and the broader project to follow.⁹ Following the 2010 study, the Research Information Network (RIN) commissioned the development of *Social Media: A Guide for Researchers*, which was released in February 2011.¹⁰ The recommendations of that Guide will be considered below. Further work will need to be done assessing the effectiveness of these recommendations for the Australian context which presents unique challenges given the smaller and geographically isolated academic landscape in which PhD students operate. We have conducted a preliminary study to inform further investigation and the outcomes of this study are presented below.

The concept of wellbeing has received little attention in the context of PhD students.¹¹ However it is recognized that wellbeing is closely linked to an increase in retention and completion rates. Stubb et al conclude that those 'students who perceived their scholarly community as a source of empowerment also scored higher in self-reported well-being.'¹² However, the isolation of PhD students in Australia can result in a 'mismatch between the individual students and the scholarly community' and where such a mismatch exists, stress and disillusionment with the research project will follow.¹³ Effective use of social media may help to address this sense of isolation and provide the student with the means to reach out to others in similar situations. This study considers if and how social media may be utilized to address the risk of isolation and reduce the threats to health and wellbeing of students and as a result, have a positive impact on retention and completion rates.

Our initial findings support further study and suggest that the question of whether social media use may operate to reduce the isolation of law PhD students warrants further analysis. This assertion is based upon two key factors: first, the solitary nature of law research projects (ie, legal academic researchers tend to work on solitary projects rather than in teams). Further, many of the existing projects have focused around empirical research, thus there has been little interaction with research subjects. Second, the relatively small size of law schools (or faculties) in

⁸ *Researchers of Tomorrow*, June 2012, was a three year project commissioned by the British Library and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), which focused on the information seeking and research behaviour of Generation Y doctoral students (those born between 1982 and 1994). Over 17,000 doctoral students from more than 70 higher education institutions participated in at least one of three annual surveys. The project also involved a more detailed study of 60 full time doctoral students recruited from a number of institutions. For an overview of the study see, JISC, *Researchers of Tomorrow: the research behaviour of Generation Y doctoral students*, 2012, 11. See also CIBER, *Social Media and Research Workflow*, December 2010. The CIBER study focused on a sample of academics who self-identified as social media users.

⁹ Research Information Network, *If you build it, will they come? How researchers perceive and use web 2.0*, July 2012; see also Rob Proctor, Robin Williams, James Stewart, Meik Poschen, Helene Snee, Alex Voss and Marzieh Asgari-Targhi, 'Adoption and use of Web 2.0 in scholarly communications' (2010) 368 *Philosophical Transactions of The Royal Society*, 4039.

¹⁰ Above n 3.

¹¹ J Stubb, K Pyhalto and M Lonka 'Balancing between inspiration and exhaustion: PhD students' experienced socio-psychological well-being' (2011) 33(1) *Studies in Continuing Education*, 33 at 45.

¹² *Ibid*, at 42.

¹³ *Ibid*, at 34.

Australia further contributes to the sense of isolation and lack of opportunity to share experiences with a large cohort of other Higher Degree Research (HDR) students. For example, the Adelaide Law School currently hosts 14 full-time and six part-time HDR candidates, although this number is steadily growing.¹⁴ Therefore it is timely that we take stock of the current climate, interact with the actual stakeholders (the PhD students) and critically evaluate the role of social media in the PhD context.

IV WHAT IS THE NEED?

This study will explore the hypothesis that social media is a valuable tool available to the PhD student and serves to enhance their PhD 'journey'. We will argue that it is not just another potential distraction but is a valuable addition to the PhD toolbox. But what is the need? What gap do we see social media as bridging? As identified at the outset, there is the significant issue of isolation.¹⁵ The writing of a PhD has been described as a journey, a 'long, demanding and often draining journey'¹⁶ and the person who embarks on this journey is essentially alone. They are to spend many hours focussing on their concise area of expertise working towards emerging as a specialist in this very narrow, very particular field of knowledge. In larger institutions the fortunate student may be surrounded by others working in allied areas but in smaller institutions they are likely to be on their own. There may also be particular problems of isolation and lack of communication for part-time candidates. For many part-time research students the issue of disconnection from research culture and a resulting sense of isolation can act as barriers to their progress.¹⁷ Social media may help to address this sense of isolation and provide the student with the means to reach out to others in similar situations. Thus social media extends the potential range of supportive communications well beyond the scope of the supervisor and a handful of family, friends and peers.

There is also the question of academic identity. Individual academic identity is becoming increasingly complex as 'academics no longer work in a bounded space.'¹⁸ Research is global in scale and impact and many students work remotely, by distance and part-time. Despite undertaking a major piece of research, doctoral students are often taking the first small step towards

¹⁴ As at January 2013.

¹⁵ The theme of the isolation of a PhD student is the subject of a body of literature, see, for example, David Lake 'Reducing isolation for distance students: an online initiative' (1999) 14(3) *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning* 14; Azad Ali and Frederick Kohun 'Dealing with isolation feelings in IS doctoral programs' (2006) 1 *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* 21; and will not be explored further here, rather, this discussion will accept isolation as a reality and focus on ways in which that isolation can be combated. It should be noted that feelings of isolation may be related to different issues and aspects of the student's experiences during the course of their study, so a range of approaches is needed, see Ali and Kohun, at 25-27.

¹⁶ E Cervini, 'Lonely Ph.D student? Just log in', *The Age*, 16th August 2011, <<http://www.theage.com.au/national/education/lonely-phd-student-just-log-in-20110808-liixu.html>>.

¹⁷ Jacqueline Watts 'Challenges of supervising part-time PhD students: towards student-centred practice' (2008) 13(3) *Teaching in Higher Education* 369 at 370.

¹⁸ Mary Henkel 'Academic identity and autonomy in a changing policy environment' (2005) 49 *Higher Education* 155 at 173.

professional scholarship. They are entering an unknown world and are yet to carve out a scholarly profile. It is often difficult to break into the potentially closed world of scholarly research and social media can provide a platform for the student researcher to work on their 'academic identity' and assemble their 'scholarly self'.¹⁹

Within each faculty there is usually only a small group of scholars, both senior and junior, working in a particular area. Indeed, in some instances the PhD student may be the only one focussing on a specific area of knowledge, with the supervisor acting as a guide rather than a font of specialist knowledge. In our pilot study we had students from areas as diverse as medical law and riparian rights, with there generally being only one student working in that particular topic area. In the past the only way to broaden networks and meet other scholars in the same area was the occasional conference, which can present significant financial difficulties to many students. Indeed, it may well be that established scholars in a particular field are not only in another institution but in another country. PhD students can be tethered to their geographic location and miss the opportunity to interact with other like-minded researchers and establish important network connections. Social media can serve to 'de-territorialise researchers' and place them more firmly within a global research community.²⁰ It is important to recognise that 'the globalized landscape ... is creating new patterns of incentives and disincentives, new opportunities and dangers, new structures and constraints.'²¹ Social media may assist the geographically isolated research student.

The gap that social media is bridging is therefore a communication and identity gap. It can provide the link between the researcher and the broader global community, empowering them as an emerging researcher. Of course, as with all tools there are both risks and benefits involved with the adoption of social media as a researcher's companion. Before we consider what is actually occurring and recommending a way forward with regards to the role of social media in the research student's world, it is important to address these risks and benefits.

V WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

It would be naive to embrace social media as a tool for researchers without acknowledging that there are risks of careless adoption. At the top of the list is the potential for distraction. As the well-known Australian PhD blogger 'Thesis Whisperer' points out, when doing a PhD 'your first and best friend is your computer and you have to spend years with it'²² and the computer is the portal to

¹⁹ Inger Mewburn 'Troubling Talk: assembling the Ph.D candidate' (2011) 33 *Studies in Continuing Education* 321, 322 and 327.

²⁰ Richard Edwards and Robin Usher, 'Globalisation and a pedagogy of (dis)location' (27th SCUTREA Conference Proceedings 1997). See further, Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen *The New Digital Age: Reshaping the Future of People, Nations and Business*, (John Murray, London, 2013) 20-23.

²¹ Tony Becher and Paul Towler, *Academic Tribes and Territories* (SHRE and the Open University Press, Buckingham, 2nd ed, 2001) at 13.

²² *Thesis Whisperer*, 'What to say when someone asks you: "Should I do a PhD?"', <<http://thesiswhisperer.com/2011/11/07/should-i-do-a-phd/>>.

social media. When research and writing becomes tedious or difficult it is all too easy to simply open another window and spend time online.²³

Social media is not limited to conversations with other researchers, it can (and does) spill over into the sharing of ideas and research findings on personal or departmental blogs. This potentially exposes the student to premature presentation of ideas and findings and may mean that 'original ideas, concepts methodologies or findings may not be properly accredited as intellectual property' and this of course may compromise formal publication opportunities.²⁴ There is also the risk of others taking original work from a student and claiming it as their own,²⁵ but it must be acknowledged that the risk of academic plagiarism has existed in one form or another as long as academic discourse has existed. It is, however, an issue that needs to be acknowledged and addressed with care.

There is also the risk of a lack of academic rigour²⁶ with inexperienced researchers sharing ideas and thoughts when they are in their infancy. No scholar would submit an article for publication without revising, reviewing, rethinking and agonising over appropriate use of words (or even careful placement of punctuation marks). Yet the immediacy of publication on a shared website or a blog means that work may not be subject to the same review processes. There is always the risk that research students overlook the truly public nature of publishing on the internet and do not take as much care as they would with other forms of dissemination of their work.

Further, the speed and scale of internet publication carries with it the risk of reputational harms. The internet has given rise to many examples of defamation, identity theft and scams which may affect the academic user as much as anyone else. Thus the user must be alert to laws and risks relating to defamation, privacy and scams.²⁷

Underlying each of these risks is the consistent theme of either not understanding or not respecting the medium. The majority of the risks outlined here can be addressed through understanding of the medium and making it work with the researcher and their interests rather than against them. With knowledge, understanding and respect for the medium there are many benefits of active engagement with social media.

²³ 'The United States spent 121 billion minutes on social media sites in July 2012 alone, according to Nielsen's annual Social Media report. That's 388 minutes — or 6-1/2 hours — per person (if every person in the U.S. used social media).' Helen Popkin 'We spent 230,060 years on social media in one month' *NBC Technology News*, 4 December 2012, <<http://www.cnbc.com/id/100275798>>.

²⁴ Andy Coverdale 'The benefits of social media for doctoral researchers' (Paper presented at *SHRE Annual Research Conference*, December 2012).

²⁵ See for example a recent *Guardian* commentary, Lucy Williams, 'Academic blogging: a risk worth taking?' 4th Dec 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/dec/04/academic-blogging-newspaper-research-plagiarism?et_cid=53284&et_rid=9525972&Linkid=http%3a%2f%2fwww.theguardian.com%2fhigher-education-network%2fblog%2f2013%2fdec%2f04%2facademic-blogging-newspaper-research-plagiarism.

²⁶ Above n.24.

²⁷ Melissa de Zwart, David Lindsay, Michael Henderson and Michael Phillips, *Teenagers, Legal Risks and Social Networking Sites*, Monash University, 2011, 64-81.

VI WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

This discussion has touched upon the most significant benefit of social media use which is the combating of student isolation. Social media enables the student to step outside of institutional bounds and reach out to others who are either active researchers in similar fields or, on a more basic level, experiencing the same trials and tribulations that they are. Mewburn has discussed the role of ‘troubles talk’,²⁸ which is the process of sharing troubles with others, comparing different realities and working through problems in company with others. This is not a negative process of denigrating one’s experience as a PhD student, rather it is a sharing of experiences, arousing some empathy and working towards a positive attitude.

There are a number of different, well established social media communities which are able to provide support to PhD students. These include the #Acwri and #shutupandwrite communities, the *Thesis Whisperer* website and twitter-feed and *Phdcomics.com*.²⁹ They are active and thriving communities of scholars who come from different backgrounds and disciplines. They provide students with a sense of community that is often absent from their individual institutions and overcome the tyranny of distance experienced by students in similar disciplines who are located in different geographic locations.³⁰

When a student first comes to their PhD there are more questions than answers available to them. At that point in their research career they have limited knowledge about their individual scholarly voice, the role of the supervisor and basic information regarding reputable journals, the process of review and even how long an abstract might be. The student has entered an unfamiliar world, peopled by research ‘locals’ who know (or appear to know) all of these ‘secrets’ and more. Whilst the supervisor may be well intentioned and supportive, the new PhD student is unlikely to be comfortable approaching them with what may be interpreted as ‘foolish’ questions. The community of PhD students which is available through active engagement with social media provides scope for these questions to be asked. Students can talk about the process of writing and share tips and tricks. It does not need to be about sharing substantive information and ideas, the fundamental goal is support from others in a similar situation.

²⁸ Inger Mewburn, ‘Troubling talk: assembling the Ph.D candidate’ (2011) 33 *Studies in Continuing Education* 321.

²⁹ #Acwri is an online discussion and peer support group for all those with an interest in academic writing hosted on *Twitter* by a group of interested academics. Originating in the UK, it now has a specific Pacific/Australian section to ensure that live chat sharing sessions suit the different time zone. #shutupandwrite reflects a diverse group of people who have an interest in writing (of various kinds) who meet locally and online, derived from the concept that a group of people who want (and need) to write can sit together and write for an agreed period of time, using the theory of peer group support to sustain a writing exercise within a confined time and space. *The Thesis Whisperer* website and twitter-feed <<http://thesiswhisperer.com/>> is a blog dedicated to the topic of doing a thesis and is edited by Dr Inger Mewburn, Director of Research Training at the Australian National University. Phdcomics.com, <<http://www.phdcomics.com/comics.php>>, takes a lighthearted look at the PhD journey through comics (and merchandise).

³⁰ On the role of community, see Gina Marsullo Chen ‘Tweet this: a uses and gratifications perspective on how active Twitter use gratifies a need to connect with others’ (2011) 27 *Computers in Human Behaviour* 755, and the role of the social media in combating physical isolation, see John Bargh and Katelyn McKenna, ‘The internet and social life’ (2004) 55 *Annual Review of Psychology* 573.

Then there is the emergence of a unique scholarly voice.³¹ This is a complex process and can be supported by more senior researchers through the forum of a departmental blog.³² With appropriate departmental support a junior researcher can 'publish' with a safety net. Others within the department can help with the review process and support the student to find their own voice and style. This will then expose the individual student's work to the broader community of researchers in their given area and will help to establish them as an acknowledged researcher in the field.

Finally then, there is the establishment of professional networks. Active participants in the online community are able to make links with more senior members of their chosen field. They are able to comment on the work and ideas of others and also, have their work critiqued in a supportive atmosphere. It empowers the emerging researcher to carefully wave their hand and let others know that they are there.

It is clear therefore that there are both risks and benefits associated with the use of social media by PhD students. But what is really happening out there in the research community? Are these opportunities being taken up by PhD students and are the benefits being realised? There have been some extensive surveys conducted in the UK on the uptake of social media amongst the postgraduate community and it is to these that we now turn.

VII UK STUDIES

The RIN report *If you build it, will they come?* was based upon a study commissioned to investigate whether the aspirations for social media or web 2.0 tools to provide rapid and widespread communication of research findings were in fact being realised.³³ The study comprised an online survey intended to gather data regarding researchers' attitudes towards and use of web 2.0 for gathering and disseminating information.³⁴ This was followed up with in-depth semi-structured interviews of a sample of survey respondents, focussing on drivers and obstacles to use of web 2.0. The study concluded with case studies of five web 2.0 services looking at their use across different communities.

This study concluded that:

- A majority of researchers are making at least occasional use of one or more web 2.0 tools for communicating their research, developing and maintaining networks, and for investigating what others are doing. However, frequent use is rare, with some researchers regarding such use as time wasting or risky.³⁵

³¹ Mewburn above 28, 321, refers to this as 'academic identity work'.

³² Above 24.

³³ RIN above 9.

³⁴ Ph D candidates comprised 27% of the sample.

³⁵ The RIN study defined scholarly communications, and therefore the scope of its enquiries, quite broadly, as 'covering all the activities involved in:

- Conducting research, developing ideas and informal communications;
- Preparing, shaping and communicating what will become formal research outputs;

- Use of one form of web 2.0 tool does not translate to use of a number of such tools.
- Web 2.0 is not a substitute for more formal means of publication or communication. Social media tools have their own distinctive roles and uses at different stages of the research process.

In 2012 the findings of the major joint JISC/ British Library study *Researchers of Tomorrow* were released.³⁶ This study focused specifically on Generation Y researchers (ie, those born between 1982 and 1994, and therefore not considered to be ‘digital natives’), plus a smaller sample group of older students to enable a comparison of outcomes. The study involved 17,000+ doctoral students from more than 70 higher education institutions, who participated in three annual surveys. In addition, the study involved a longitudinal student cohort study of sixty full-time doctoral students from a diversity of backgrounds, locations and fields of study.

The key findings of that study in the context of social media use by researchers were:

- There is an ‘overall lack of understanding about the networked information and scholarly communications environment in which the students work.’³⁷ Significantly, there are also problems of misconceptions regarding the rules affecting open access and copyright, and therefore there is a need to give guidance regarding legitimacy and authority of certain tools. This fear and lack of understanding is an impediment to efficient uptake of online tools: users are concerned that disclosures made through social media and other platforms may prevent or inhibit publication of their research in peer reviewed journals.
- A related concern reflects the possibility of inappropriate use of social platforms (ie, whilst the study identifies significant use of *Facebook*, research students would not use it for research as this would constitute a blurring of social and professional boundaries, and they did not feel confident sharing research results in this way).
- Although Generation Y students are competent users of information technology, they are not early adopters and will only use tools if those tools fit within established work practices.
- Research students take their lead from their supervisors in making use of technology and new platforms, therefore they need guidance, although fellow students and peers are a significant influence and source of help regarding uptake of new tools.

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- Disseminating formal outputs;
 - Managing personal careers, and research teams and programmes;
 - Communicating scholarly ideas to broader communities.’ RIN, above n 9, 13.

³⁶ JISC, above n 8.

³⁷ Ibid, at 6.

- There is evidence that use may increase over time as the student's confidence as a researcher improved: 'This increased use of technologies also seemed to be associated with the growing confidence of the cohort students in having some real research outputs and results to talk about, since they were nearing the end of their studies.'³⁸
- In arts, humanities, and social sciences over 90 percent of students work on their research alone and became increasingly isolated. Also many arts and humanities students work from home, thus increasing the likelihood of isolation.
- Use of social networking for peer advice and support and to reduce sense of isolation does not translate into broader use of social networking for research collaboration or communication. This suggests that, potentially, social media is good for socialisation and reducing loneliness, however it is not used for serious research collaboration.

VIII ADELAIDE PILOT STUDY

A small scale study was conducted at the University of Adelaide Law School in 2013. That study asked current and recently completed law PhD students a number of questions regarding their use of and attitudes towards social media in the context of their study. Questions focused on whether the student used social media for personal or research related purposes, which social media tools they used, the perceived risks and benefits of such use, and whether they had discussed social media use with their supervisors. It must be stipulated here that this study is only a pilot and is, by necessity small scale³⁹ but it serves to highlight the issues, demonstrate the points made in this paper, and support further research.

Seventy-seven percent of respondents used social media for personal purposes, with 62 percent stating they used social media for research purposes.⁴⁰ The major benefits of social media were listed as 'enables me to network with people I would not otherwise meet' (80%); 'allows me to share ideas and concepts in an informal manner' (40%); and 'allows me to discuss issues with my peers' (20%).

With respect to discussing social media use with their supervisor, 15 percent said they had done so, meaning the vast majority (85%) had not. However, it was reassuring to note that 92 percent said they would feel comfortable discussing social media use with their supervisor. This suggests that there is an important gap in supervisor/student communication.

Responses to the question 'what benefits do you think use of social media might bring to your research?' were varied and included: 'more connection pathways with people abroad'; 'to share ideas in an informal manner'; 'possible networking opportunities, links to other research undertaken by scholars in similar fields';

³⁸ Ibid, at 38.

³⁹ Given the small amount of PhD students at Adelaide (20 in total).

⁴⁰ Notably 100% of users for personal purposes used *Facebook*, along with a number of other platforms. *Facebook* was also the leading platform for research purposes (37.5%), however, it was more closely followed in this category by a number of other tools including, *Wikipedia*, *Twitter* and *Word Press*.

'new and breaking news, exposure to different ideas'; 'insight into groups related to research topic, forums'; 'social media allows for faster, more current dissemination of research than published media (esp. peer-reviewed), and allows for live discussions'; 'connections with other students, information on the PhD process, sharing concerns about the PhD, substantive research'; 'contact with people from other institutions'; 'I just use it to connect with a group of researchers working on a similar topic - not for any data collection or other purposes. I think social media could be used to conduct surveys to obtain an idea of how people feel about certain topics or their experiences with certain areas of the law'; as well as several people who noted 'none'. In line with the outcomes of the UK study discussed above, ease and immediacy of connectedness with a broad group of people (particularly outside of the student's own institution) is the key benefit flagged by users. The sense of (and implicit desire for) connectedness is strong in this context.

Asked about 'what risks do you think use of social media might bring to your research?' students responded: 'accuracy of information'; 'not of itself authoritative for research purposes'; 'distraction and procrastination'; 'timewasting'; 'this depends on what you are doing with the social media - if just browsing there's no real risk involved'; and 'maintaining intellectual property over ideas discussed in social media could be an issue and if topics are discussed on a public forum, you would need to consider whether the site will be moderated and how that can occur, particularly if people write nasty or inflammatory comments'. These comments clearly reflect the key concerns outlined in the UK studies regarding timewasting, lack of academic rigour, and potential theft of ideas.

IX WHAT CAN SUPERVISORS DO?

If social media is to have any impact in reducing the isolation of research students, careful guidance will need to be provided by the supervisor and by the institution. In their review of the use of social media in the scholarly context Proctor et al concluded:

In the process of adoption of innovations, local support and encouragement are usually crucial in the shaping of attitudes, in learning processes and in creating a critical mass of users ... local support and encouragement (informal as well as formal) within departments, research groups and networks seem to be crucial in identifying relevant tools, in demonstrating their utility, in reducing learning and start-up costs and other adoption barriers, and in creating a critical mass of users.⁴¹

Discrepancies in uptake were attributed largely to the level of local support given to users.⁴² Thus institutions will need to review how support and information is provided, and by whom. As noted above, age is not determinative of ability and awareness of appropriate social media use and training should be provided to all students and their supervisors.⁴³ It should also take account of the likelihood of

⁴¹ Proctor et al, above n 9, at 4052.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ilana Snyder, Michael Henderson, and Denise Beale, *Social Media for Social Learning, A horizon Scan Prepared for the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development*, 2012.

different uses of social media across various stages of the research project. Consideration should be given to providing research supervisors with some training in this area, such as providing an overview of the benefits and limitations of current technologies and applications, and including social media guidelines in researcher training and induction. However, it is not just the academic supervisor who should be responsible for social media training. RIN also recommended that IT support services would need to be engaged in awareness raising projects: including demonstration and support of appropriate and effective social networking tools and services; publicising examples of successful use and good practice; providing guidance and training and setting standards for the preservation of electronic resources (such as blog posts).⁴⁴ Further, any induction and training should take account of the role of social media in developing academic identity and fostering research networks.

X CONCLUSIONS

As a community of scholars we are moving into new and uncharted terrain. The global research landscape presents a new set of risks and challenges to our research students. Therefore wellbeing initiatives have to take account of this changed environment. There is a need for a larger Australian study to consider whether the outcomes highlighted in the major UK studies regarding social media use would be the same in the Australian context, given the more significant issue of geographical isolation and smaller student numbers in Australia. We will now expand the modest pilot study and will further explore the nature of support and training which can be provided to PhD candidates and their supervisors in order to combat loneliness and isolation through appropriate use of social media. This study will include completion of surveys around the country and a series of focus groups. It is our position that social media will play an important role in the research lives of current and future PhD students. As our lives increasingly move online, so too should the support networks for the fostering of our wellbeing within this changed environment. In the meantime, supervisors are reminded to at least flag social media as a topic of discussion with their students and institutional support should be provided to these discussions through appropriate tools and training.

⁴⁴ RIN, above n 3, at 9.