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Managing Your Digital Footprint - Nicola Osborne and Louise Connelly

Introduction

Over the last year a team at the University of Edinburgh have been undertaking a project on the impact of personal tracks and traces online.

The "Managing Your Digital Footprint" campaign aimed to raise awareness as well as support students to make informed choices to manage and reflect on the tracks and traces that they leave online. A parallel research project has also been investigating students' understanding, experience and attitudes towards their own digital footprints and online presences.

Here we will discuss the project and highlight some of the most relevant initial findings and recommendations for information professionals.

Why undertake this campaign?

Like other higher education institutions, the University of Edinburgh has witnessed a steady increase in the use of social media by students and staff for a range of purposes, including teaching and learning.

Students frequently arrive at university with well established and sophisticated online presences, and there is an argument, often clustered around the "Digital Native" concept (Prensky 2001), that they are therefore exhibiting their comfort and understanding of digital spaces and information management. Despite the appeal of this idea, there is very mixed evidence on the actual digital literacy of young people, with Prensky's work superseded by more nuanced concepts such as "Digital Residents" and "Digital Visitors" (White and Le Cornu 2011), an idea which proposes a continuum of comfort, knowledge, and experience with digital spaces.

The popularity of the idea that young people are using technology, and are therefore well informed in how to use it *effectively*, may be familiar to ALISS readers. Research on information seeking behaviours of the so-called "Google Generation" or "Researchers of the Future" (CIBER 2008) have similarly found that frequent use and familiarity with technology may indicate better basic knowledge (e.g. Ofcom 2014), but does not necessarily indicate sophisticated critical and reflective skills that are required for effective use of that technology (Helsper 2014). Young people's use of social media and online spaces may also be sophisticated (e.g. boyd 2014) but their personal strategies may not necessarily align with expectations and requirements of academic or professional contexts.

Whilst many of our current students have grown up with the internet, and may be confident in their skills, it is less clear how critically minded they are when it comes to their personal online presence. We were therefore keen to better understand our students' perspectives and experiences of their own tracks and traces, privacy and security, opportunities and risks online, and their reflections on how they present themselves, and on how they connect and engage with others online.

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What is a “Digital Footprint”?

As this project arose from a desire to help students curate their online presence, it includes but is not limited to the use of social media. For this reason the definition of "digital footprint" we use encompasses a wide range of tracks and traces:

“It's the data you leave behind when you go online. It's what you've said, what others have said about you, where you've been, images you're tagged in, personal information, social media profiles, and much more.”

The inclusion of “what others say about you” in our definition is intentional but also tricky: much of what forms a person’s digital identity comes from posts and images shared by others, but these may often be beyond the control of the individual being talked about (boyd 2014). The Managing Your Digital Footprint campaign focused on encouraging individual students to gain a better understanding of the opportunities and risks of different social media (Brake 2014), including practical advice such as limiting the risk of others’ posts (e.g. through privacy settings); and raising awareness of how to report or get local support for issues if they occur.

Raising Awareness and Engagement Across the University

The awareness raising campaign began in September 2014 and was delivered by the Digital Footprints team working in partnership with academic departments, support services (including the library, Student Information Points, and Careers) and EUSA, the students association. Digital Footprint posters, digital display content, competitions, postcards, emails, articles, and a promotional video were distributed around physical campuses, online teaching and learning spaces, and social media. To maximise the impact and to ensure staff were aware of the campaign, a briefing document and wiki page were created and highlighted to all staff.

This publicity was designed to encourage students to engage with the campaign in more depth, via a substantial programme of workshops on digital identity, personal branding online, and managing online tracks and traces, via the website (University of Edinburgh 2015) or discussions in the campaign’s social media spaces.

A survey (total responses: 587), distributed to around two thirds of all University of Edinburgh students in September 2014, also helped to raise awareness for the campaign, set a benchmark for student awareness, and fed into the associated research project. A follow up survey took place in May 2015 (total responses: 870).

The research project, funded by the University of Edinburgh’s Principal’s Teaching Award Scheme, is analysing the data from these surveys, which were also used to identify volunteers to be part of lab sessions on digital identity; and to attract participants for an intensive ethnographic tracing process. This work is enabling the team to gain an in-depth understanding of the ways in which students - at undergraduate, postgraduate and PhD levels and including online

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distance students - think about and manage their own online identity. The analysis of the research data is still underway at the time of writing.

Personal Safety and Wellbeing

Part of enabling students to take personal control of their digital identities is to ensure they feel safe and confident in using social media and other online spaces. Students therefore need to have some understanding of the affordances of these spaces, including privacy settings, security precautions, and reporting processes should problems be encountered.

Particular issues that have been addressed in workshops, blog posts and a podcast, and have also been investigated in the research, include negative experiences of digital footprints and engagement, such as bullying and trolling. In the two surveys students have also been asked to reflect on their own experiences of this type of issue, enabling the team to understand how common these negative experiences may be, the impact they may have and how the University can better support our students when they face these types of issues. Initial analysis of the survey data indicates that negative experiences are commonplace: 4.4% (112 respondents) reported being bullied online, 11% (280 respondents) had experienced unwanted tagging of photographs online, and 17.9% (455 respondents) reported seeing someone sharing something that they did not think was appropriate.

Understanding Opportunities and Risks for Teaching and Learning

Whilst students do use social media primarily for socializing or personal use, it is also increasingly part of the formal teaching and learning process, or the informal peer learning and support structure that evolves alongside a programme of study (e.g. student led Facebook groups).

During the Digital Footprint campaign the project team have worked with colleagues across academic departments to ensure that students are aware of specific risks, opportunities and expectations in their field, as these can vary in seriousness and scope. For instance, in nursing, students may be considered para professionals from their first day at University, and therefore require a nuanced understanding of their profession's social media and online conduct policies and expectations in order to ensure their behaviour as a student - and any lasting digital footprints arising from it - do not jeopardise future employment prospects.

The Digital Footprint research data and analysis are now enabling the project team to better understand what implications current student usage, experiences, and attitudes towards digital footprints have for learning and teaching practices. Initial analysis indicates that online presences and engagement are providing students with new opportunities to learn, develop relationships, and find employment. However, we have already identified some specific considerations

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for teaching and learning, for example concern from some international students about the safety and accessibility of some of the best known and most widely used social media tools – and the risk of missing out when peer support activities led by students largely occurs in these inaccessible spaces.

Students indicate that they seek support for using social media and online tools from their peers, through student handbooks, from University libraries and Student Information Points across campus. The team is currently in discussion with schools and support services to ensure staff being asked for support, are themselves able to access the types of advice and information that students will be requesting.

Future plans

The initial Digital Footprints campaign has come to an end and is now being mainstreamed in the University of Edinburgh. Workshops to develop skills and encourage reflection on participants' online presence will run throughout the current academic year, with support available for both students and staff. The Digital Footprint team are also putting together a range of resources for educators which will be available this autumn, including workshop resources, activity sheets, information on social media and the kinds of questions and approaches that can trigger reflective discussion and practice around online presence. These are aimed at teaching staff in Higher Education but should also be useful for the wider community of teachers and informational professionals. As research analysis progresses we will also be sharing findings in presentations, publications and reports. We are interested in hearing from other organisations interested in getting involved in future research, or who may be interested in using our approaches in their own context.

Recommendations for Information Professionals

To conclude we wanted to offer some specific practical tips and questions, based on our experience of running the awareness campaign over the past year, which may be useful for information professionals in their own use of social media, or supporting students and colleagues to curate their digital footprints.

1. Think about what your digital footprints already look like. Try searching on Google or DuckDuckGo, use a tool like QuillConnect to explore tweets, etc. Reflect upon what you find .
2. Consider how you want to represent yourself online. Do you have a specific audience and purpose in mind? Are there goals you want to achieve? Thinking about how this can help guide curation and/or creation of your online presence.
3. Have you checked your privacy settings lately? Almost all social media sites provide quite fine grained privacy settings around posting, audience, tagging, commenting, etc. We recommend regular checking of these to minimise the risk of sharing more widely than intended, and to ensure others' posts have minimal negative impact on your digital footprints.

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4. Change passwords, deleted old accounts, check connected apps, etc. as these will help you ensure that you have secure access to the spaces that matter and minimize the risk of hacking, data loss, etc.

To find out more about the project please take a look at the website, where you will also find contact details for the team:

<http://www.ed.ac.uk/iad/digitalfootprint/>.

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