

3-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Huggett, Sarah (2010) "Social networking in academia," *Research Trends*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 16 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://www.researchtrends.com/researchtrends/vol1/iss16/9>

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Research trends



Social networking in academia

SARAH HUGGETT

During the past few years, the internet has taken a new, more interactive direction. With the advent of Web 2.0, users have increasingly become creators, and recently, social networking sites have mushroomed and their user base has grown. Indeed, a 2006 study by Nielsen/NetRatings estimated their annual growth at 47% and their reach at 45% of web users (1).

Interest in social networking as a research topic has also risen in recent years (see Figure 1). Since 2004, the annual growth of academic publications on the subject has surpassed 21%, but how has this scholarly interest matched actual social-networking interest among academics?

Demand for social networking tools

Social networking as a tool to enhance one's career has proved popular in almost all sectors. In May last year, LinkedIn celebrated its sixth birthday by welcoming its 40 millionth member to the LinkedIn network, underscoring the growing importance of networking in today's world. As research becomes more multidisciplinary and global, collaboration is becoming more important, and social networking in the academic community can present leads and collaboration opportunities that you might never have found by other means.

Preliminary results of a recent survey of more than 3,000 researchers by a leading publishing house reveal that more than 55% of researchers would find a social-networking site targeted at researchers useful; unsurprisingly, this propor-

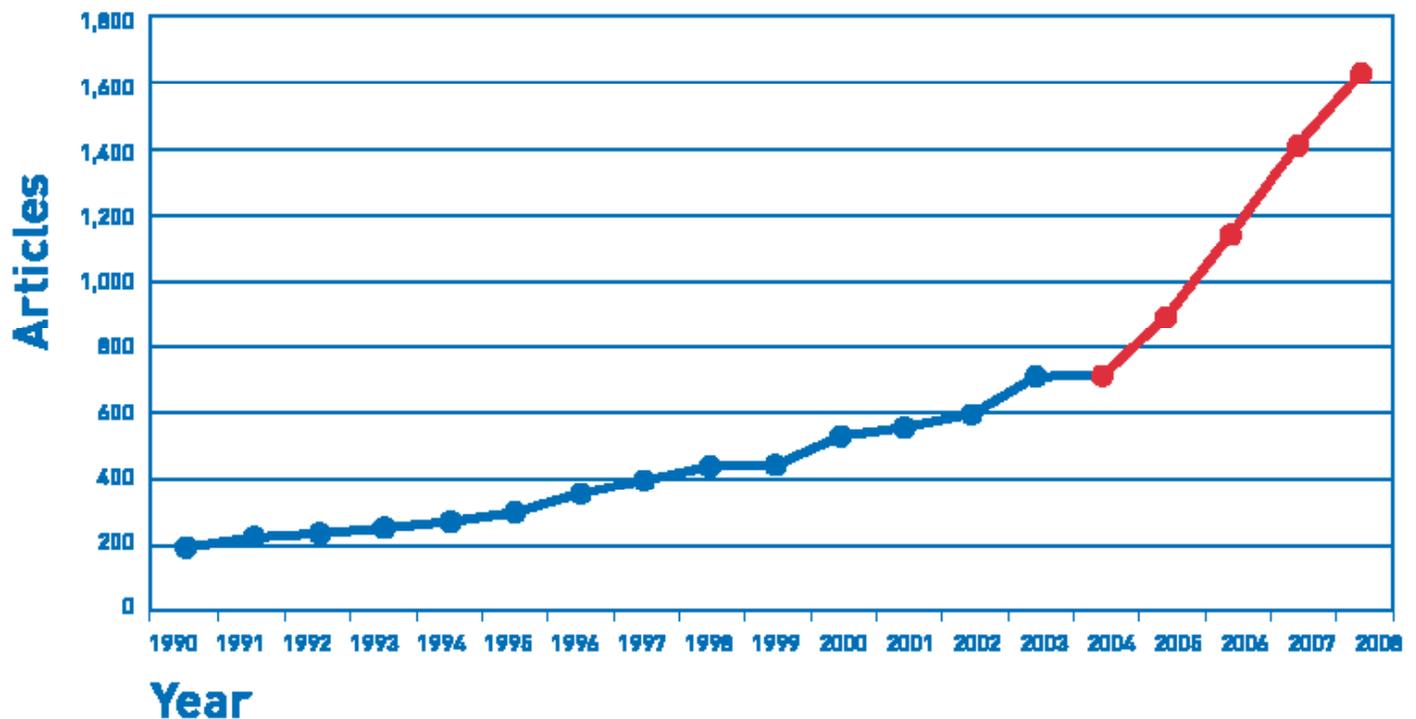


Figure 1 – After steady growth for more than a decade (blue line), scientific literature (articles, reviews and conference papers) with “social network*” in their title, abstract or keywords began climbing rapidly in 2004 (red line).

Source: Scopus

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tion rises to nearly 64% for early-career researchers (2). According to Cathelijn Waaijer at the Centre for Science and Technology Studies, Social and Behavioural Sciences, University of Leiden: "I would use social networking sites specifically for scientists mostly because I like to have a personal connection to the people I work with. I also think that if they have the same connection to you, it might actually help you if you need any information from them."

The same study (2) shows that more than 37% use social networking sites personally, but only 12% professionally; for early career researchers, these figures are 56% and 13% respectively. Interestingly, while early-career researchers use social networking sites significantly more on a personal basis, the difference is negligible for professional use (2).

These results seem to suggest a community-wide need for academic-oriented social networking sites, a need acknowledged by the academic world. And in fact, several social-networking sites specifically for scientists already exist (see box).

Lonely pursuit?

However, none of these sites yet seems to have captured the interest of a significant proportion of the scientific community, although this could also be because researchers are unwilling to discuss their work openly. Research in progress is less likely to be publicly discussed, regardless of how useful input could be, for fear of having ideas and results stolen by other research teams. It may also be a simple matter of time; as younger researchers who have grown up using the internet rise up the ranks, usage is likely to grow.

Perhaps academics will be more impressed by upcoming project VIVO, an open-source software platform developed at Cornell in 2003. VIVO is a research-discovery tool that delivers public data about topics and researchers, and aims to bridge the gap between social networking and science. Time will tell if these types of initiatives will eventually manage to fill the gap in the academic social-networking market.

Where scientists network

- [Academia.edu](#): nicknamed the "FaceBook for scientists" and claiming to help academics answer the question: who's researching what?
- [BioMedExperts.com](#): an online community for biomedical researchers which claims to analyze the profiles of more than 1.8 million scientists.
- [Epernicus](#): founded in 2008, Epernicus claims to be "The shortest path to people and expertise in your scientific network".
- [Laboratree](#): developed by Indiana University, Laboratree is both a social-networking site for scientists and a research-management tool.
- [ResearchGate](#): launched nearly two years ago, it now claims to have more than 250,000 members.
- [ResearchPages](#): a project-focused site for researchers, which has been live for a few years.
- [Scilink](#): dubbed the "LinkedIn for scientists", Scilink is said to have mined over 104 million relationships from the literature, and to have more than 40,000 users.

References

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- (3) Brynko, B. (2010) "Viva VIVO: Let the Networking Begin", *Information Today - Medford*.