

Citation:

Guy Geltner: Upon Leaving Academia.edu, in: *Mittelalter. Interdisziplinäre Forschung und Rezeptionsgeschichte*, 7. December 2015, <http://mittelalter.hypotheses.org/7123>.



Upon Leaving Academia.edu

by Guy Geltner

(University of Amsterdam)

Early last week I uploaded to my Academia.edu homepage [a brief note](#) signaling and explaining my decision to close my account on that site. As a medieval historian, I had been an active and enthusiastic member since 2010, with moderately high exposure, and while “On leaving Academia.edu” was meant as a provocative goodbye, I hadn’t expected it to draw much attention. In the four days that elapsed between uploading my note and closing my account, however, the text was accessed more than 22,000 times and the critical discussion board accompanying it (known as a Session) was still going strong, attracting some 2,000 active followers making numerous contributions, including from the site’s founder and CEO, its Product VP, and of course hundreds of engaged scholars and academics from around the world. A flurry of tweets and emails ensued, and colleagues at my home institution accosted me about it around town. At some point someone even created a counter-Session, “On staying with Academia.edu.”

The screenshot shows the Academia.edu interface. At the top, there is a search bar and navigation links for HOME, ANALYTICS, SESSIONS, and an UPLOAD button. The main content area displays the article "On leaving Academia.edu" by G. Geltner (UvA), dated 23 November 2015. The article text discusses the author's decision to leave the platform and critiques its quantitative focus. To the right, a "Session" discussion board is visible, featuring comments from Michele Campogiani and Amanda Power. Michele's comment expresses agreement with the author's critique, while Amanda's comment discusses the site's status as a university tool.

Discussion on Guy Geltner’s text, “On leaving Academia.edu,” started 23 November 2015. Source: Academia.edu

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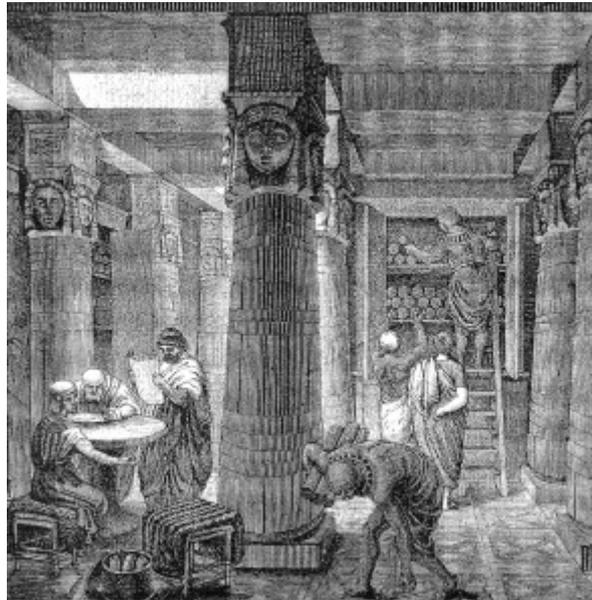


My intervention touched a nerve, and as you would expect, discussions throughout the Session spiraled beyond debating my own reasons for departure, from the highly theoretical to the truly minute. Regardless of their stance, most contributors provided fresh insight into how diverse Academia.edu subscribers are and how differently they use the site, the largest of its kind by far. They also gave important feedback on various features of the site (existing, concretely proposed, or merely insinuated), with repeated criticism of the non-optional metrics being added to each user's profile and papers. Above all, however, comments exposed the complacency of users regarding the portal's financial horizons, its plans to monetize, and the political implications thereof, be it for professional academics or the freedom of scholarship in general. The latter—more than any specific feature of the site—was the root cause of my decision to close my account. It is a position I have been invited to explain in the current blog post, using the example of Academia.edu and last week's discussions. In many ways, however, it illuminates the challenges academia and the free exchange of ideas is facing, especially if scholars remain uncritical users of new digital technologies.

Academia.edu's stated goal is to facilitate and accelerate the sharing of research. It does so, [sometimes relying on legal loopholes](#), by encouraging scholars to upload their published and unpublished papers to their personal homepages, tag them, get feedback on them, and make them available for others to view and download—all (still) for free. These features, arranged within a very simple interface, have made the site extremely popular among various scholars, ranging from undergraduate and graduate students, to professional academics of all ranks, to independent researchers, teachers, ad hoc visitors, institutions, projects, and NGOs. These, moreover, are spread across numerous disciplines and fields, a far broader range than that of the site's main for-profit competitors, ResearchGate, Mendeley, and SSRN, whose main focus so far has been on medical and social sciences. Small wonder that Academia.edu's reported tally exceeds 36 million members, as compared with ResearchGate's 8 million, Mendeley's 2.5 million, and SSRN's 1.7 million. I was pleased to be one of them, also as a means to overcome pay walls denying access to my publicly funded research and that of others. Indeed, even some of my staunchest supporters in the recent discussion have stated (sometimes only to me in person) their intention to keep their homepages on the portal, at least until it begins charging them for certain services.

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“When we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full” (Exodus 16, 3): Academia.edu claims to be a modern version of the Library of Alexandria – knowledge accessible to all. The parallel may also lie in both institutions’ mysterious Terms of Use. Source: [Wikimedia commons](#), public domain.

The latter contingency is important. In stressing it, many users acknowledged that Academia.edu’s financial future can take many shapes, and contributions to the Session routinely imagined and responded to such eventualities. For instance, academic job ads are currently the site’s only revenue source, according to a comment made by Richard Price, its founder and CEO, on one of the discussion threads. It does not (and contrary to my mistaken assumption) sell users’ meta-data, although it hasn’t committed to not doing so in the future. Interestingly, no one during the discussion expressed themselves against selling ads or more ads, or even the potentially related sale of meta-data, which most people assume is an inevitable price to pay for surfing the web or using a free service these days (“You are the product”). To my knowledge, no survey on these funding sources’ acceptability has been conducted among Academia.edu members, but neither seems to raise too many eyebrows.

On the other hand, charging money for new and/or existing services did emerge as a more contentious issue. Will accessing the site cost money, who will pay, and how much, appeared to be central concerns. My own position on this was that the site should become a non-profit learned society, in which members contribute annual fees according to a sliding scale of their rank and income. “Pay-to-play” predicaments would be avoided by standard waivers for persons of limited means, and once you’re in, you’re in: any and all members will have

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unlimited use of all the site's contents and services, at least within reason. Before, during, and after the Session, the only active resistance to this idea came from Academia.edu's CEO and Product VP, but based at least in part on a misunderstanding of my proposal as advocating "freemium" accounts. Their fear was that users faced with fees would run to the competition, or else contended that this would not be financially viable. Real or estimated figures were not discussed, but according to my calculator, if 10 million current users (that is, less than a third of registered subscribers) commit to paying an average of \$5 a year (and many are willing to pay more, to judge by the discussion), Academia.edu would get off to a great new start. And that is even before considering ad revenues and meta-data sales, which could help reduce fees even further.

Barring that, the main monetization scheme Academia.edu seems to be currently developing is related to its plans of becoming an academic publisher, with peer-review capacity, both pre- and post-publication, and an elaborate system to rank contributions and contributors, reviewers and commentators. (Some of these features have already been creeping into the site, such as Recommendations, Author Rank, and Paper Rank). For a while now, I have been involved in several conversations related to these features with Academia.edu staff, and I am basing my observations in part on these exchanges, which were free and always friendly, despite obvious disagreements. Given its simple interface and enormous user cadre, Academia.edu stands a good chance of becoming a popular venue for publishing original research, at least in some fields, and especially if it is able to overcome two obstacles. The first is a staunch (and mostly unjustified) bias against online, open-access journals in some quarters of traditional academe. The other challenge are the heavy costs of maintaining the site, a burden that will only increase once it begins to publish research with the minimal requisite features of editing, peer reviewing, copy editing, indexing, and of course archiving. Branding and marketing publications (as journals or in other formats) may also augment these costs.

So far as I am aware, Academia.edu has yet to turn a profit. If it is to meet extra financial needs, it must increase its funding, either by securing more venture capital backing, raising donations, generating new sources of revenue, or a combination thereof. The site's choice, at least in the first instance, seems to be monetization of some products, having rejected

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(assuming they have seriously considered) membership fees, be it on the lines I have proposed above or in other forms. I got a glimpse of this strategy a few months ago when I uploaded an already published article and then received the option to have it sent to my personal “followers,” for free, or to all those following the tags I placed on the text (“medieval history,” “mendicant orders,” etc.), for \$40. I sincerely hope that my immediate choice for the former was typical and that similar reactions collectively led the product’s designers presently to scrap the feature. The “experiment,” as it was dubbed by Price during last week’s Session, was indeed discontinued, but to my knowledge it was never announced in advance or publicly dealt with in retrospect until I mentioned it, and came as a real surprise to many of those following the discussion. For some contributors this raised issues of transparency regarding the site’s policies, which is ironic given its commitment to promoting open access.

The near future may well bring fresh experiments, however. The venture capitalists behind Academia.edu, like [those backing ResearchGate](#), did not invest in a charity. (Mendeley is now owned by the publicly traded Elsevier and SSRN is produced by a privately held corporation; incidentally, its advisory board appears to be [all male](#)). As such, they are steering it towards an Initial Public Offering or IPO, as I was told in no uncertain terms by Price. Their working and very plausible assumption is that an enterprise needs to be profitable or show much promise of profit, for its IPO to be an attractive option, and they are presumably pressuring Price and his team to prepare the ground for it before a new round of fundraising. I speculate that under these circumstances, new publishing-related services offered by the site will likely begin to cost money, especially in the form of Article Processing Charges or APCs. An APC is a fee that many (but by no means all) academic publishers collect to help meet the costs of the services mentioned above (copy editing, archiving, marketing, etc.). Publishers sometimes charge *additional* fees to make articles freely accessible online, offsetting a projected loss of income from subscriptions and ad hoc purchases. Debates on how to calculate an APC (especially the second kind) are ongoing, and estimations vary, from a low of several hundred dollars in the humanities to a high of around \$5,000, mostly in the natural sciences.

Historically, APCs are uncommon. This is especially true for the humanities and social sciences, where learned societies, academic departments, centers, and university presses underwrite journals’ costs. In nearly fifteen years of academic publishing, I have never been

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asked to pay or contribute towards one when an article of mine was accepted to a journal or as a book chapter. Nor would I consider paying one to accelerate publication. But I am likely to be asked do so in the near future since academic publishers (above all for-profit conglomerates like Elsevier, Taylor & Francis, Wiley, Sage, and others) are seeking to protect their income streams under growing pressure to make publicly funded research, of which they often hold the copyright, freely accessible at least to those who funded it. To these publishers, Open Access (OA) is not an ideology but a business model meant to keep profits as high as possible. It is more than likely therefore that their way to calculate APCs does not reflect out-of-pocket costs but desired revenues (Elsevier's 2014 overall revenues, for instance, were [just over \\$2 billion](#), a slight *decrease* from 2013). Among several things for-profit publishers care little about, especially when they are publicly traded, is where the money to meet APCs comes from (foundations, governments, institutions, authors), as long as it keeps their coffers full and investors happy. Putting aside the ongoing absurdity of asking publicly funded scientists to purchase their own work back through [extortionate institutional subscriptions](#), APCs and a publisher's financial performance are unrelated to the scientific quality of publications funded this way. It is this club that Academia.edu would join should it begin to charge fees rather than question the very model allowing them to thrive.

To be sure, Academia.edu will not necessarily be more expensive or greedy about these fees. But for a portal that prides itself on innovation and on promoting and accelerating the dissemination of research, a policy that is exploitative and discriminates between have's and have not's doesn't promise moving scholarship in a truly new direction, one that a not-for-profit learned society for instance could. We would simply get a friendlier version of existing publishing procedures, made more attractive (according to the site's captains, not me) by a very quick transition of papers into peer-approved articles. Certainly, there are non-profit publishers such as Public Library of Science (PLOS) that do have author-facing APCs, although a new humanities portal, the Open Library of Humanities (OLH) announced [it will not](#) (I have recently joined its board for that very reason). In both cases, the publishers are relying on the direct and indirect support of charities (such as the Wellcome Trust, the Open Society Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) and institutional and consortium subscriptions that will help offset their costs without a commitment to show profit or admit sub-par scholarship to meet "output

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benchmarks.” To me, the advantage of these publishing environments is that they help promote excellent scholarship and keep it away from its two most dangerous enemies: the market’s “invisible hand” and populist governments (including the EU) that stifle intellectual creativity in the name of societal relevance. If I am to donate my free or tax-funded labor and my reputation as a scholar, and whatever modest prestige my work can lend to a publishing endeavor, I would rather do so to fight against these forces, not blow wind in their sails. Supporting Academia.edu while being aware of their concrete plans to monetize through APCs and while other options remain viable, strikes me as myopic.

Higher education cannot be expected to heal all the injustices it inherits, yet it should try to avoid exacerbating them. During the discussion of my post, for instance, many raised concerns about what the failure of sites such as Academia.edu could bring to the millions of scholars who are not (or no longer, or not yet) professional academics, especially those without private means to access expensive (and usually privately owned) databases and libraries. That is an important point. Academia.edu certainly cannot be held responsible for these people’s predicament. Indeed, the latter is mainly the fault of populist governments, funders’ desire to show quick results, academic institutions’ and scholars’ obsession with prestige, and greedy publishing conglomerates fighting tooth and nail to secure their huge profit streams. But changing this state of affairs will not follow from supporting yet another portal transitioning into a “pay-to-play” academic publisher, and whose planned IPO is unlikely to stimulate scholarly diversity and autonomy. To repeat, Academia.edu is hardly unique in wanting to grow and bite a large chunk of the APC pie, but since it will likely exacerbate unequal access to academic publishing in the process, those without institutional backing or independent means will suffer more, not less, from its envisaged new direction.

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Towards a promised land of Open Access publishing for the Humanities? (*Hortus Deliciarum*, by Herrad von Landsberg . Public Domain, [Wikimedia Commons](#)).

What should we do then? There is no solution that fits the needs of all those millions who currently use for-profit portals like Academia.edu. If the lively discussion we had last week drove any point home, it is that the site's membership is enormously diverse and serves different people in very different ways. So people will have to make choices. For instance, it is certainly possible to piece together a combination of a free and/or institutional homepage, linked on the one hand to social media and on the other to freely accessible depositories, including Wikipedia. At the organization level, Academia.edu itself can undergo a reorientation, either becoming (as I suggested above) a not-for-profit learned society or get bought or underwritten by a consortium of non-profits, including universities, research centers, and ad-hoc collaborations. Other existing depositories or publishers, such as [arXiv.org](#) or [Self Journal of Science](#) can step into the fray by expanding and developing social-media tools. Or someone may succeed in convincing major donors (be it libraries or charities or a combination thereof) to establish an entirely new service that will offer a comprehensive alternative to the current portal, without plans to abandon it to the greed of speculators on the stock market or the constrictions of populist politics.

Whatever your choice on the matter, it would mean overcoming or reorienting the path of least resistance paved by Academia.edu, ResearchGate, Mendeley, SSRN and their likes. Scholarly activism would be a welcome change to the laziness that has characterized our *modus operandi* on this front. It may be unpleasant news, but Academia.edu's success is

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based on our woeful tendency to search for information (including scholarly articles) on Google, and almost nowhere else; a tragic irony given that our role in society is to find an independent voice, not blindly sail down the stream. With every intervention or publicly funded article we give to those who will eventually trade it (or leverage it to turn a profit), we are contributing to the subordination of science to the whims of financial or political elites. The recent [sale of Ashgate Publishing](#) to Informa, the parent company of Taylor & Francis, is only the most recent case in point. (I do accept that university presses *can* be an exception to this rule, at least in the sense that they are meant to support their institutions, and by extension underwrite independent research). It is time to stop being naïve, and do something for the freedom of scholarship. Open access to scholarship should be a human right, not a business model.