**A Beginner’s Guide to Establishing a Professional Online Presence**

While it may seem like everyone is connected with all the “musts” of online networking and social media, there are plenty of stragglers who are not there yet. I know, because I recently was one of them.

At GradHacker, we’ve written about digital identity and online presence many times (linked throughout this article) and even held a[bootcamp](http://www.gradhacker.org/2011/06/01/gradhackers-first-bootcamp/) on the topic, because it’s that important! I’ve put together an overview of some of the most popular social networks used by academics and other ways for establishing an online presence—and if you aren’t sure why you should even be creating an online identity, start[here](http://www.gradhacker.org/2013/03/20/manage-your-digital-identity/).

**Twitter**

My naïve impression of Twitter was that it existed as a minute-by-minute record of people’s everyday lives. While it can be that for some, it can also be a lot more. Somehow I thought that by not joining, I was resisting the urge of our digital culture’s desire to be ever-connected. For anyone who has been turned off by Facebook and thinks Twitter is just more of the same—trust me, it’s so much better! When I finally joined a couple months ago I realized that, by refusing to join, I was missing out on being a part of an online community that was talking about interesting ideas, asking questions, and sharing awesome research. GradHacker has written previously about a lot of[great uses for Twitter](http://www.gradhacker.org/2011/06/13/twitter-literate/) in grad school. Once you sign up (because you really should), read this[previous GradHacker post](http://www.gradhacker.org/2012/03/07/your-academic-twidentity-or-more-about-twiter-and-academic-identity/) on how you can use Twitter to increase your online presence and interact with others in your field. If you aren’t crazy about the idea of sending your thoughts out to the Twitterverse, that’s ok. Follow the accounts of colleagues, leaders in your field, and news sources as a great way to keep up with current trends in media and stay connected with what others are talking about.

**LinkedIn**

[LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/) is another site that I am new to in the past few months. I’d heard of it, but didn’t figure that anyone actually used it. After going to two different career workshops within a week of each other where the panelists recommended LinkedIn, I figured I’d finally see what it was all about. Like Twitter, once I finally connected I realized there was a lot more to it than I had previously assumed. If you aren’t sure what the website is, your profile is basically an online resume. LinkedIn is geared toward all professions, but is mostly business-oriented. You can connect with others to build a network, join groups of common interests, and also follow organizations or institutions to keep up with job postings or events. I have searched for people on the site and been surprised to find we have a common connection in our networks that could facilitate an introduction. People have differing opinions on how generous to be with your network as far as accepting or sending invites to individuals you don’t personally know—read about tips for when to[accept](https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/article/20140506113910-43645946-why-you-should-connect-with-people-you-don-t-know-on-linkedin) or[send](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/andrea-smith/5-tips-for-connecting-linkedin_b_4890867.html) invites to strangers. But remember that LinkedIn is not Facebook (remember bragging rights for the biggest friends list?), and who you are connected to may reflect on you professionally.

**ResearchGate**

[ResearchGate](http://www.researchgate.net/) is a network specifically created for scientists—it was actually referred to as “Facebook for scientists” in a recent Science Careers[article](http://sciencecareers.sciencemag.org/career_magazine/previous_issues/articles/2014_08_25/caredit.a1400214). Its goal is to help researchers connect with each other, share publications, and ask questions. The website boasts over 5 million members, so chances are your colleagues are already using it. You must have an active university email account to sign up, so it is limited to active researchers. One of the great things about ResearchGate is its Q&A forums. Users can post questions about techniques, theory, ethics, or anything else science related and get input from other researchers from around the world. Members on ResearchGate are fairly active and engage in the online discussions, and I have used tips from the forums in my own research in the past. Also useful, ResearchGate provides you with profile stats—it lets you know who has looked at and cited your papers, and how many times your publications have been downloaded.

**Academia.edu**

With over 17 million users,[Academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu/) is one of the largest academic social networks. It allows anyone to join, unlike ResearchGate, and is more popular for the humanities. Its goal is to create a way for academics to share their work—to seek peer review for manuscript drafts, and to provide the paper for others once it’s published. It also lets you track profile views, downloads, and learn what search terms landed someone on your profile. Academia.edu also offers the ability to post questions on the site, though it isn’t as active as the ResearchGate forums. While the goal of the website is to offer free, open-access publications, you do have to sign up before you can download any files.

**Mendeley**

[Mendeley](http://www.mendeley.com/) shouldn’t be mistaken for just a reference manager—it is one of the world’s largest research databases and is also a social network for scientists. Its simple profile page lets you list publications, grants, and info from your CV. Similar to the other sites, Mendeley lets you upload papers, and follow and connect with people in your field. It also suggests papers that might interest you based on your own library. Mendeley is a great way to stay up-to-date on research trends in your field—by joining a topic group, you can get updates on interesting papers and discuss them with other academics.

**Personal website/blog**

Personal websites or blogs can also be great tools for establishing a professional presence online[for both faculty and grad students](https://labandfield.wordpress.com/2013/06/19/personal-academic-websites-for-faculty-grad-students-the-why-what-and-how/). The flexibility of designing it yourself allows you to decide what information you would like to share. Having your own website can also improve your chances of being found by employers searching for you online, which seems to be happening more and more. It lets you create a space where you can provide a biography, a professional objective statement, links to papers, and other resources to supplement and personalize your CV or resume. It can also be a central source for links to all of your other online networks such as those listed above. This can be a static (but up-to-date) website, but a blog can also be a great way to show active engagement in your scientific community or with the rest of the public.

Of course, it’s not necessary to have a profile on every possible website. It’s much more effective to have a couple updated and active networks than a bunch of neglected ones. Combine a couple to make the most of their different tools. The best sites will likely differ depending on what field you are in. A recent[Nature news article](http://www.nature.com/news/online-collaboration-scientists-and-the-social-network-1.15711) explored how each of these sites are used by scientists and how their popularity differs across fields.

There are a few things to keep in mind regardless of which networking tools you use:

1.       **Be professional** – You may already have a Twitter account for personal use, but what impression would it give to a potential grad school or post-doc mentor?

2.       **Follow copyright laws** – Many of these sites allow you to upload publications, but it is up to you to be aware of whether or not this violates rules of your publisher.

3.       **Be consistent** – With so many options for building your online presence, it is important to be consistent across sites. Learn more about branding yourself online in a previous GradHacker[post](http://www.gradhacker.org/2012/01/20/branding-yourself-not-as-painful-as-you-think/).

4.       **Maintain control**– Once you establish your online identity, make sure you[keep it protected](http://www.gradhacker.org/2014/02/24/reassessing-my-digital-identity/).

How do you use the websites above to maintain a professional presence online?