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Framing impact in the digital university: Representational affordances of the websites and blogs of Early Career Researchers (0252)

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In the context of the global financial crisis and with new competition from emerging players in the global knowledge economy, academics in the social sciences are coming under heightened pressure to demonstrate the academic, economic and social impact of the research they produce (LSE Public Policy Group 2008; HEFCE 2011). At the same time, global transformations in digital technologies are eroding the traditional boundaries of the university and facilitating new levels of mobility, openness and participation at all stages of the research process with implications for public engagement and impact in and beyond academia (Weller 2011; Lea and Stierer 2011).

The pressure to demonstrate high-impact research is a particular concern for Early Career Researchers (ECRs) many of whom inhabit precarious fixed-term and often part-time positions while pursuing permanent posts (Horta 2009; Kinman and Court 2010; McAlpine 2010). At the same time, with advances in doctoral training programmes and staff development, it is this group of newer researchers who are arguably making most use of the transformative potential of digital technologies in their teaching and research. And yet, just a handful of studies (e.g. Archer 2008; McApline 2010; Gale 2011; Smith 2012) focus on the ECR group, despite the contribution they will make to the construction of academia in the future (Archer 2008).

This paper draws on data collected for the first phase of a small study on the representational texts of ECRs as part of an SRHE Newer Researcher's Award. The study employs a mixed-method approach to generate three complementary datasets: first, semi-structured interviews with six ECRs' from three British universities (a traditional research-teaching university, a research-focused university and a teaching-focused university) on their understandings of impact; second, longitudinal data based on multimodal journaling through iPod Touches by the six ECRs to chart their framings of impact in their research practices; and third, systematic functional multimodal discourse analysis (O'Halloran 2008) of the blogs, websites and staff profile pages of the six ECRs as well as a selection of staff profile pages from a random sample of UK-based universities to explore the representational affordances of these resources in framing impact.

After reviewing different conceptualisations of impact (as knowledge transfer/translation and co-production) this paper presents two case studies based on the blogs and websites of ECRs from two British universities to address the question: how is academic, economic and social impact framed by the blogs and websites of ECRs and what are the implications for the development of the researchers' academic profiles? Guided by a theoretical framework based on social-material semiotics (Law 2004; van Leeuwen 2005) the paper argues that impact is framed not just through the *interests* of the researcher and their understandings of impact, but also by the social-material *affordances* of the media through which research is represented. A staff profile page, for example, is likely to highlight academic indicators of impact that can be standardised across the institution (e.g. publications and conference presentations,

consultancies and titles of funded projects.) It is fixed temporally in line with institutional conventions and updated at standardised intervals. Conversely, a personal academic website may provide further details of the researcher and research and may even *translate* its relevance for policy-makers, practitioners and the general public. The timing and nature of updates are personal rather than institutional and the researcher has control of the layout and style. However, like the profile page, it is also relatively static and generally used to broadcast findings and fix research as complete and definitive. Finally, unlike the profile page and personal website, an academic blog is dynamic, unfolding over time and space in response to other blogs as well as within its own discourse. It is therefore capable of framing impact within the research process as well as the research findings, with archives potentially cataloguing the development of ideas, drafts and re-drafts of research texts and reflexive commentaries on the research. A blog is also by nature interactive, allowing comments and discussion from readers as well as links to other resources. For this reason, blogs are often collaborative with multiple authors.

By analysing the social-material affordances of these digital texts against the ECRs' understandings of impact in the context of their own research practices, this paper shows that all representational media is framed both socially (according to institutional genres and discourses whether those of academia, media or national policy) and materially (according to its multimodal make-up). This has implications for the framing of impact with some media more aligned with a conceptualisation of impact as the unidirectional transmission of a singular, static knowledge and others facilitating a conceptualisation of impact as the dynamic co-production of multiple knowledges. The paper concludes by arguing that many ECRs identify with the latter conceptualisation and embrace the digital resources which might accommodate it. At the same time, however, pressure to consolidate their research profiles and market themselves and their research within rigid institutional frameworks (Archer 2008; Smith 2012) has a strong influence on their use of media and the implicit framing of impact within it.

As well as proposing a reconceptualization of impact with implications for academic practice and policy, this paper also contributes to research into academic identity (from a social-material semiotic perspective); understandings of the research practices of ECRs and understandings of the affordances of different representational media in research. Further research might explore the affordances of other types of digital text and their influence in shaping research and positioning researchers.

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