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Now Professors Get Their Star Rankings, Too

By [NOAM COHEN](#)  
Published: June 9, 2008

FIRST came the [Amazon](#) book rankings, and word leaked out that perhaps some vaunted writers spent more time than you would think checking how popular they were, hour by hour. Then newspapers started tracking the most popular articles on their sites and journalists, it was said, spent more time than you would think watching their rankings, hour by hour.

But would you believe that academics could become caught up in such petty, vain competition? Of course, you say. Still, short of hanging out in the stacks at the library and peeking over shoulders, the pursuit of that particular vanity had to wait for the Internet, and the creation of the Social Science Research Network, an increasingly influential site that now offers nearly 150,000 full-text documents for downloading.

The network is a business set up in 1994 by five people who saw a niche in online academic research. They pooled their money and began building relationships and the infrastructure to post so much material. All but one comes from the world of economic and legal scholarship, and it is in those areas that the network is strongest, adding an estimated 45,000 articles or so a year.

Actually, articles may be too strong a word for what you can find on the site — the texts include pensées, abstracts, informal arguments, outlines, rough drafts and working papers, up to the finished products you might find in academic journals. So far, more than 550,000 users have registered to download documents.

And with a precision common to the digital age, its rankings of downloads can be sliced and diced in many ways with only a click: most downloads over all or most downloads in the last 12 months, either by article, by author or by institution.

The network was not created to be a Top 40 list for academics, said Michael C. Jensen, its chairman and one of its founders, but it has turned out that way.

“We are interested in creating a site that would allow authors and papers to get a reputation and give information to readers on what to devote their scarce time to,” he said.

The research network raises the same big questions about what is lost and what is

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The Research Network raises the same big questions about what is lost and what is gained by removing the barriers to being heard in the public square. Is music distributed on [MySpace](#), without benefit of a record label's guiding hand, better or worse? Is journalism helped by the wide reach of bloggers, or hurt as professionalism disappears? Is it good that research that has not been reviewed by peers can be found so easily and looks just the same as gold-star approved work?

Glenn H. Reynolds, a law professor at the [University of Tennessee](#) who publishes the popular blog Instapundit, said he had not looked at his S.S.R.N. rankings for months, though he grudgingly obliged when a reporter called.

"I am behind Cass Sunstein," he announced, referring to a professor at the [University of Chicago](#), whose papers' total downloads in the past year make him fourth among authors. Mr. Reynolds is fifth. "I was ahead. I knew I didn't deserve to be ahead of him, but that made it all the more sweeter, if that makes sense."

But he quickly added, "On the other hand, I had more downloads, so maybe I did."

Bloggers like Mr. Reynolds tend to do well on the site, since they can promote their work and offer links to their articles. But Mr. Reynolds, a constitutional law scholar, said, "If I could pick a certain 20 people to read my article, that would mean more to me than 20,000 others who read it." The chosen 20 would include appellate court judges in his district, he said.

Access to the general reading public is not necessarily a bad thing for law professors, Mr. Reynolds added. "One of the things they say is that our work is too insular," he said. "To the extent that people do start chasing download numbers, it is an incentive to careerist legal scholars to write in a way that is accessible. In the past, the incentive has been to write in a way that is impenetrable."

Time was that if you were a professor at a prestigious university you were, by definition, among the most read authors on a particular subject. And you would play a similar gatekeeper role through reviews of who else should be read on that subject.

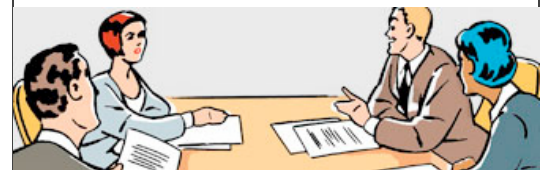
Compare that with the Social Science Research Network's principles, as explained by Mr. Jensen. Anybody, anywhere in the world can put up a paper, he said.

"We do go through it to make sure it is not pornography, curse words," he said. "There is a cursory review. It could be dead wrong, but let a thousand flowers bloom."

Yet, one of the most celebrated working papers on the site is a detailed examination of one particular curse word in the law; it's the working paper's plain four-letter title, as well. Even though it was originally posted in 2006, that paper is still among the Top 20 downloaded in the last year. Over all, its 22,000 downloads make it No. 11.

Mr. Jensen said that venture capitalists have come knocking, but the company has said no. "If we had taken the venture capitalist money, no doubt S.S.R.N. would have been destroyed," he said. "We would have been under enormous pressure to change S.S.R.N. to improve cash flow, and that would have destroyed it."

Instead of charging per download or plastering the site with ads, the network makes the bulk of its revenue by selling subscriptions to e-mail updates of scholarship, organized by research area or institution. Its staff includes about 15 people in the central office in Rochester, the chief executive, Gregg Gordon, said in an interview, and about 35 people who work from home processing the submissions and making cursory reviews. About 135 unpaid editors do more detailed reviews to decide what belongs in the e-mail updates.

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Some argue that amid this storm of information, traditional gatekeepers (top-20 law schools, nationally known newspapers, academic journals) become even more important, drawing attention to the work that comes with the best credentials.

But Mr. Sunstein begged to differ. “The gatekeepers matter,” he said, “but don’t have the enormous power to deny people a large audience.”

And Mr. Sunstein should be listened to: he’s No. 4. With a bullet.

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