Episode 42: Dr. George Veletsianos

KL: Katie Linder

GV: George Veletsianos

KL: You’re listening to *Research in Action*: episode forty-two.

*[intro music]*

# Segment 1:

**KL:** Welcome to *Research in Action*, a weekly podcast where you can hear about topics and issues related to research in higher education from experts across a range of disciplines. I’m your host, Dr. Katie Linder, director of research at Oregon State University Ecampus.

On this episode, I am joined by Dr. George Veletsianos, who holds a Canada Research Chair in Innovative Learning and Technology and is an Associate Professor at Royal Roads University. George is a former Fulbright scholar and early-career fellow of the Network of Excellence in Technology Enhanced Learning, a European Union Initiative. His research has been dedicated to understanding the practices and experiences of learners, educators, and scholars in emerging digital environments. In particular, he studies online social networks, open scholarship/education, and emerging technologies. He is the author of [*Social Media in Academia:* *Networked Scholars*](https://www.routledge.com/products/9781138822757) (Routledge, 2016), *Online learning:* *Emerging Technologies and Emerging Practices* (Athabasca University Press, in press), *Emerging Technologies in Distance Education* (Athabasca University Press, 2010), and *Learner Experiences in MOOCs and Open Online Learning* (Hybrid Pedagogy, 2013). Individually and collaboratively, he has also published more than 50 peer-reviewed manuscripts and book chapters and given more than 100 talks at conferences and events worldwide. His research has been funded by the Canada Research Chairs Program, the National Science Foundation, the European Union, National Geographic, and the Swedish Knowledge Foundation.

Thanks so much for joining me today, George.

**GV:** Thanks for having me.

**KL:** So, I’m so excited to talk with you, because I did have a chance to read your most recent book on networked scholars, and I thought it was really fascinating, so I thought that we could start with that and talk a little bit just about academics in social media. So, I’d love to hear just about how your book on networked scholars came to be. What led you to focus on that?

**GV:** Well, first of all, thanks for making time to read my book. Network scholarship is essentially the idea that people, or scholars in particular, come together, and how they come together to use social networks to kind of share, reflect, critique, improve, validate their scholarship. And when I talk about “scholars,” I’m referring to both students and academics, and when I refer to scholarship, I refer to both research and teaching. I’m been studying this topic since around 2010, and initially, I was trying to understand how technology was impacting the ways that academics were sharing their work, but over time, I became interested in all sorts of different issues around this relationship between technology and practice. So, as I’ve been studying this topic over the years, I thought that it would be a good idea to compile all of that work in a book for those who aren’t actively researching the topic but want to make sense of social media in faculty’s life. It’s not a how-to book , but talk about people’s experiences and practices and really questions that faculty may have, questions like, “Well, what might be some challenges that I might face if I were to use some of these tools in my teaching?” “How are other colleagues using some of these tools?” So that’s essentially how the final product came to be. It started with one research paper and over time it just culminated to multiple ones, which then turned into a book.

**KL:** I think this concept of how academics and higher-ed professionals are working with technology is really fascinating. I mean, clearly, there’s new platforms, features coming about, and we’re going to talk a little bit later in the episode about translating scholarship to those different formats. I’m wondering, as you were researching that book and kind of pulling it together, what were some of the things that were most interesting to you? And maybe even thinking about your own social media practices and how you’re engaging in technology as a scholar.

**GV:** Yeah. There were two topics, really, that grabbed my attention. I mean, the whole topic is interesting, of course, otherwise I wouldn’t have written a book about it, but there were two topics that caught my attention. The first one was learning about the day-to-day realities and experiences of faculty members with social media, and the second one was how the personal and the professional world overlap, and how that might be, at times, a cause for conflict or concern, and at other times it might be an active way that individuals blend those two worlds together to make something happen or to bring attention to a topic. So I’m going to just give you a couple of examples. So, for the first idea, around learning more about the day-to-day experiences of faculty members, there’s lots of advice columns out there suggesting how to use social media, giving input on what are the best ways to do A, B, C, you know, what issues faculty might be concerned about, etc. There’s really an interesting article in the Chronicle of Higher Ed that basically says, “Watch out, if you use social media, it’s a minefield,” right? And in many ways it is, but when you take time to look at the day-to-day experience of faculty members, you see lots of tensions, you see lots of struggles with social media, concerns around how these tools are impacting our day-to-day life, our classroom interactions, and so on, but you also see excitement, and you see a kind of desire to use technologies to create, perhaps, more equitable spaces and places for learning, right? So that tension, to me, it’s really interesting, and to the activities or the strategies that academics take to manage some of those tensions. So, in many ways, academics are not uninformed about social media. They have a good understanding of it, but they’re very cautious about some of these tensions.

**KL:** I’m so glad you raised that. I mean, I think that that’s an important piece, that as academics are thinking about how they want to engage in social media and how much they want to engage in social media, I think all of those tensions are raised, but I also think about—you know, the last couple weeks I was traveling at conferences and met a lot of people in real life that I had only talked to on social media and had made connections and relationships with on social media. I’m also reminded of a piece that came out this summer—actually two pieces—I think it was in Times Higher Education in the UK where someone basically said, “Don’t be on social media because it’s just narcissistic engagement,” and then someone else said, “*Do* be on social media because it is a democratizing platform.” And I can link to both of those pieces in the show notes for folks who might be interested. Clearly this debate is alive and well, and I think that it’s something that many people are talking about. I am curious, as you were working on this book, if it changed your own social media practices and how you chose to engage in certain platforms or the kinds of information that you were choosing to share.

**GV:** Yeah, that’s a really interesting question, and I was reflecting on that a little bit over these past couple weeks, and I’ll explain why, but it’s been an ongoing learning process for me, right? Obviously I’ve been studying this topic for a while. I think that in the ways that I’m engaging and using social media has been changing. And even in our research, a lot of faculty have told us that they have come to learn how to use social media by looking at what other colleagues do.

**KL:** Mm-hmm.

**GV:** And, I guess, personally for me, over time I’ve become much more critical and concerned about the ways that the design of particular tools is impacting our scholarship and the types of things that we aspire to do when we use some of these tools. Granting, the relationship between practice and technology is a bit complicated, right? Technology impacts how we use the tools, but we come in with specific aims and goals and wrestle with technology to make it do what we want it to do. But over I’m been impacted by the ways, for example, that algorithms impact us, impact the types of information that we see. I’ve been concerned about whether these spaces are spaces where we can have deep, democratic debates about scholarship or whether we should be looking at different spaces, and so on.

**KL:** Well, I think it’s really interesting to talk with someone who has clearly been so thoughtful about, you know, your own engagement on social media and has written about it so deeply, as well.

We’re going to take a brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more from George about translating scholarship into different formats. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 2:

**KL:** George, one of the areas that I first came across your work was through videos that you create to share out some of the information from articles that you write, and we will definitely link to some of these in the show notes so that listeners can take a look if they’re interested. But I would love to know what made you decide to do that. What made you decide to think about creating these videos to help share your work more broadly?

**GV:** Absolutely. So, in creating a plan for my research, one of the aspects of that plan was the dissemination of that research to people and communities that might not necessarily be reading the journal in which we publish our work, and, you know, we try to write op-eds every now and then and use my blog as a way to share out that knowledge, but we thought that another way to reach out to people might be through the creation of videos. And, you know, we had conversations around what those videos should look like. Should they be videos of George just lecturing about this topic? Should they be cartoons, or should they be something else? And we eventually landed on this idea of animated videos, and others have done them in the past, like RSA, for example, had this series, and there’s a few out there that are quite professionally done, and we thought that that might be a good way to explore how we can translate our research into something that’s interesting, that’s quite short, faculty and students might find use for, but also other communities as well.

**KL:** So, what is the process of creating these videos? I mean, I can imagine someone who’s watching this and maybe just has not considered this as an avenue to share their work thinking, “How does this happen?” I mean, like, who’s involved with creating these videos, how long does it take? Can you just tell us a little bit more?

**GV:** Absolutely. So, when I say “we,” I should clarify that right now, there’s three people working on these videos. It’s myself; a post-doctoral associate, Laura Pasquini, who’s at the University of North Texas; and Ashley Shaw, who’s at the University of British Columbia, who’s a Ph.D. student. So, the process starts by—so, let’s say we have a paper done, right? And we now want to create one of these videos for one of these papers. One of us will write a script, or we’ll co-write a script, and that script will end up being around two pages long in 14-point font and so on, and we found that a two-pager, when spoken, is about four to five minutes, and that’s what we wanted to limit our videos to. So, one or two people write a script, I edit, I really look at it, revise it, refine it. We have kind of a template to make sure that it starts with an interesting story, perhaps, and end by asking individuals to share the work with others if they found it interesting. And once we finalize that script, Laura takes that script and animates it into the video that you see. She uses a tool called VideoScribe. Sorry, I should mention that right before that, I record the audio for that, so I basically read out the script, make myself smile when I am reading the script to make sure that I’m enunciating my words, do all of that. And Laura takes the audio file, the transcript, and using this tool creates a video. Then I review it, I offer comments and feedback and so on, we revise it, and then it gets published on YouTube. The software generates a video, and it directly links to YouTube, and it gets posted on there. At that time, I also take the audio file that I created and post it on SoundCloud, so we have just the audio on SoundCloud and the video and the transcript on YouTube.

**KL:** And how many of these videos have you created thus far?

**GV:** We’ve created 12 of them.

**KL:** Okay.

**GV:** And that’s been on our research over the past three to four years. We have two more to create. So far, these have focused on our research, on the papers that we’re written. We are considering creating videos for research that we believe should be shared more broadly, for research that we’ve read, so we might be starting to create some of these videos for other people as well.

**KL:** Mm-hmm. I love that idea. I’m curious what has been the reaction to these videos. I mean, you’re posting them on YouTube. Are you getting comments from people? Do you know how they’re being used? Are they being used in the classroom?

**GV:** We don’t know yet how they’re being used. We’ve had a number of emails from people, and in conversations people have expressed that they like them, that they think it’s a good way to translate what’s in the papers, they think that it’s fun and interesting, but beyond that, we don’t have much more. We’ve seen people retweet them, we can see how many times some videos are viewed. Obviously some are viewed more than others. But we haven’t had much in terms of comments on YouTube yet.

**KL:** Hmm.

**GV:** Hopefully with time.

**KL:** So you’d mentioned earlier this idea of having a dissemination plan for your scholarship, and clearly this is a really creative way to think about disseminating your work. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about other ways that you’re sharing and promoting your scholarship, and I just think dissemination plans are something that we kind of think about not necessarily up front—I mean, like, we’re so focused on the research that by the time we get to the dissemination stage, we’re not necessarily prepared to think about all the different ways we might share out our research, and it can be kind of anticlimactic when something comes out, especially if you’ve been working on it for a number of years. So I’m wondering if you could just share a little bit about that. How do you think about promoting your work, sharing it out? I mean, I think these videos are a great example. Are there other ways that you’re thinking about that as well?

**GV:** Absolutely. So, in writing grants for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council in Canada, there’s a segment of the application that asks about your dissemination plans, right? So that’s when I first encountered it, about three or four years ago, and I was writing one of these. And that’s when I really started to think about the different ways that we might use media to share research. Obviously, as we’ve talked, I’ve used social media in my work, and that’s one aspect of this, right? Being on social media, having conversations about the topic, not necessarily with the idea of just promoting your work, but having conversations about your topic with other people. I think it’s valuable to consider it a dissemination plan from the very beginning, because it also supports the research. Just to give you a few examples of how a dissemination plan has informed our work: We don’t wait to publish a paper to then share it on a blog. We start talking about the paper, we start talking about our plan and what we’re planning on studying. So, we’re basically thinking out loud about a project that we’re doing, right? And some disciplines might be more forgiving on that than others, right? Some disciplines, people might be worried about talking about a project that they want to engage with until the very end, but we’ve found that the community that we’re in is quite supportive of our sharing, of giving us feedback as we’re going along. There’s been a number of times where our interview questions, for example, were changed and refined because of feedback that we’ve got from people on social media.

**KL:** Mm-hmm.

**GV:** Or, you know, done similar things with syllabi that I’m creating, for example, I’ve posted them on my site, and gotten feedback from people saying “Oh, did you consider this reading?” or “Did you consider this activity?” and so on, and that’s really helpful. Had we waited to do that ‘til the very end, had I just published the finished syllabus, it might have been reused, or it might have been shared, and somebody might have informed someone else, which is a great outcome, but I think it’s stronger because it was shared early and because it was refined in the process.

**KL:** Hmm. Thank you so much for sharing about that.

We’re going to take another brief break. When we come back, we’ll hear a little bit more from George. Back in a moment.

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# Segment 3:

**KL:** George, I know that some of your current research is about the student experience, and specifically online students, and of course, as the Research Director of Ecampus here at Oregon State, that’s very interesting to me. I’m wondering if you can share a little bit about that current work and what are some of the things that you’re looking at, what are some of your research questions.

**GV:** Absolutely. So, we have always been interested in people’s experiences. As you heard in segment 1, faculty experiences with social media were at the heart of that book. One of the threads—so it’s been a thread in my research, this idea of experiences, and recently we’ve been looking more and more into the student experience and what it is like to be a student in an online course, what is it like to be a student in a massive open online course. How do students structure their work time, how does their private life impact their student life, and so on. So, over the past year, we’ve been interviewing a number of students throughout the world. Originally that project started by looking into the MOOC student experience, so we interviewed 100 people that had taken open online courses, just trying to make sense of what is it like to be a student in these courses. That research has spilled over into kind of the general online learned experience, not that there’s a general student, the typical student, but there are typical experiences that we’d like to share with people. And again, the projects are always out of a concern that we had about the research in the field, and about academics’ excitement about the role of big data in education. There’s a lot of research and a lot of writing and talking about how the data trails that students leave behind in our learning platforms are going to tell us everything that we need to know about improving education, about improving the learning experience, and we know that that’s not truly accurate. We know that there are things that students do that are invisible to platforms, that are invisible to algorithms, right?

**KL:** Mm-hmm.

**GV:** The literature on distance education has talked about lurking for a long time, right? Reading a paper and talking to a colleague on the phone is not going to be captured on the platform, so we started looking more into that with the idea of informing people that there are significant experiences that students have that impact their learning, the experience in the course, their social interactions, that don’t happen on those platforms. And here are, you know, some strategies that we can take to help them, to support them, to help create a more engaging and more novel experience in online courses.

**KL:** You know, I like the—kind of, the spin that you’re putting on this that seems a little bit more positive, that there are things that students are engaging in that we can’t track, but we know they’re positive. I’ve always heard the opposite end of that, which is that data is so noisy, you know, we don’t know if, when a student is watching a video, they’re gotten up to reheat their piece of pizza and they aren’t really paying attention. *[both laugh]* And so I see here more of the negative side of, we can’t assume anything, really, about some of the data that we have and the analytics that are available to us. But I think that’s really interesting, that you’re thinking about, like you mentioned, a phone conversation that happens that’s not going to be tracked but is certainly impacting the student learning experience. I’m wondering, just, what are the kinds of data that you’re collecting? You mentioned interviews. Are there other kinds of things that you’re looking at for this particular research to get at some of these questions?

**GV:** We’ve done lots of interviews. That is mostly what our research is based on. We have asked people to share artifacts with us, you know, notes they might have taken, and so on. But that’s essentially what this has been based on. Some aspects of our work have involved asking individuals to share with us their social media account. We’ve talked to a group of people that use social media outside of the course context in their studies, so they have a blog, and they keep a journal of what it is that they’re reading or what it is that they’re doing, so we’ve asked them to share some of stuff with us. And that’s what we’ve been looking at.

**KL:** I’ll also refer listeners to a recent episode that we posted with Janet Salmons, who talked about e-research. If this is something that’s interesting to you, you might also want to check out that episode as well if you have not yet listened to it. Okay, so George, I want to switch gears a little bit, because there’s something you do that I love the idea of—I certainly don’t do it enough myself. And that is, I think you’re working into your schedule what some people might call a “digital sabbatical,” which is, you know, creating space away from social media, these digital spaces. I’m wondering if you can talk a little bit about how you’re doing that, why you’re choosing to do it, and just for people who may have never heard of it, what are some of the benefits for you?

**GV:** Sure, and to be perfectly honest, the idea of a digital sabbatical is new to me. But I make sure that there’s time in my day where I’m away from the screen, where I’m away from work, where I’m away from distractions, and so on. And there’s a number of strategies that I use, I guess, toward that. The most aggressive one, I guess*, [laughs]* is this app that I have on my computer called Self Control, [**KL:** “Mm-hmm.”] and it’s essentially an app that blocks the Internet. It prevents me from going on my email account, it prevents me from going to a social media tool, and it helps me manage my bad habits, right?

**KL:** Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

**GV:** So, if I want to work on a paper for an hour and a half, I will set it for 90 minutes, and it will only allow me to work on whatever is on my computer. So that’s one way that I keep myself away from those things that I find to be distractions. I have particular days during the week that I dedicate to no work, no web participation, and there’s a time after which I will just stop being online, right? I’ll print papers and read them if I need to, I’ll read graphic novels—I’ve fallen back in love with graphic novels recently, and I spend a lot of time with those—but even at that time, I think of, hey, well how this be applied to work, or how could this be applied to my scholarship. I think if you spend a lot of time with your scholarship, it never really leaves you, but taking that active break, I think, frees me up to think about it in creative ways, perhaps.

**KL:** I love that idea of creating that additional brain space for yourself, and some people may be listening to this and thinking, “Well, I could not do that. I need to be engaging with social media.” Clearly, George, your world has not fallen apart *[laughs]* from building in these shorter digital sabbaticals or screen sabbaticals. I’m wondering if you can just talk about, you know, you’ve mentioned some of the benefits for your intellectual life, but have you seen a difference in terms of people not engaging with you as much? People, I think, would have concerns that this could really impact who they are online, but it sounds like maybe that hasn’t happened for you.

**GV:** I think there are those concerns, right? I think in many ways people might be concerned, because, as I mentioned, I’ve deleted my Facebook account. People that I used to have frequent interactions with might say, “Well, what’s happened? Why did George disappear?” And in retrospect, maybe I should have posted a note about that, about why I was doing it, and maybe I will, now. I’m thinking about it. But, yeah, I think it’s a balance. It’s something that people individually will have to evaluate the pros and cons and see what they are getting out of participating currently and what they might get by not participating as much. But it becomes an individual choice with an evaluation of what they might be getting out of taking some time off.

**KL:** I love that idea of encouraging a critical evaluation and just asking yourself, what are the benefits, what are the challenges of what you’re currently experiencing. Well, George, this has been such a pleasure. We will make sure to link to, in the show notes, where people *can* find you online, both your blog and your Twitter account and all these other things of where you are, your YouTube channel. But I want to thank you so much for taking the time to come on the show and share a little bit about your work, your research, and how you are putting out your scholarship in multiple different ways. So thanks so much!

**GV:** Well, thanks so much, and thanks for making the time. It was a really interesting discussion, and I look forward to seeing the episode and seeing the future of the show, because it’s been great, it’s been great to follow along. You’re doing awesome work.

**KL:** Oh, thank you so much. And thanks also to our listeners of *Research in Action*. I’m Katie Linder, and we’ll be back next week with another episode.

*[music]*

# Bonus Clip:

*[music]*

**KL:** In this bonus clip for episode 42 of the *Research in Action* podcast, Dr. George Veletsianos shares how he chooses to engage in social media. Take a listen.

**GV:** And then, the last couple weeks, I’ve kind of withdrawn from a lot of the tools that I’ve been using. I’ve deleted my Facebook account, partly because of the election season and all that has been happening. For me, these technologies used to be spaces where I could go and find community and talk to people and do all of that, maybe share some cat pictures and share a few jokes with colleagues, and so on. But recently it’s just not being a positive experience, and I’m trying to understand why, in many ways. Is it just the election season? Is there something more—is there something deeper there that’s happening? So, I might return to Facebook one day, but at this point in time, I’m quite comfortable being off of it. And I had an interesting conversation with a colleague who’s left Facebook many, many years ago, Royce Kimmons. This is my colleague that I’ve been studying this topic for a while, and he left Facebook maybe about five or six years ago, and we were chatting about this, and I said, “Royce, I finally did it. I finally deleted my Facebook account.” He said, “So, now what?” *[laughs]* Like, I don’t know! I don’t know where I’m going to go.

**KL:** Yeah. No, that’s so interesting, because—so a few years ago, I joined Facebook after about five years away, and I rejoined in part because of some podcasting communities that are only available on Facebook that I wanted to engage with and learn from, but also because I’m also working on a book that I thought it was relevant to be part of that social media platform, and it has been very interesting, especially to join it, as you have mentioned, in this election season, in terms of the kinds of tone of what’s being discussed these. But yes, I would love to chat with you more about this at some other point, because I think that it leads into my next question, which is how are you choosing to engage on social media, because I think that this is a big question for academics—is which platforms do you choose and why, and for me, I’m most active on Twitter, also active on Instagram, and as I mentioned, I’ve just recently rejoined Facebook, but I’m curious what are kind of your platforms of choice, and maybe what led you to them?

**GV:** Yeah, umm.... So, it’s mostly been Twitter and Facebook for the places where I have interactions with people, conversations, chit-chat, share my work, stay updated on other people’s work, and so on. And through that—well, I have a blog, as well, which I don’t post as often these days, so I’m hoping that I will get back to it pretty soon, but whatever I post on there gets pushed out to other places, so, for example, a blog post gets cross-posted on Twitter. I have all my papers on academia.edu and ResearchGate and on my personal blog. I have a YouTube channel where I post some of the work that we’ll be chatting about in segment 2. And those are the main spaces that I use. But again, Twitter and Facebook (in the past) were the places where I would have conversations. The rest of the places, where I would essentially post media just for dissemination.

*[music]*

**KL:** You’ve just heard a bonus clip from episode 42 from the *Research in Action* podcast with Dr. George Veletsianos sharing how he chooses to engage in social media. Thanks for listening!

Show notes with information regarding topics discussed in each episode, as well as the transcript for each episode, can be found at the *Research in Action* website at [ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast](http://www.ecampus.oregonstate.edu/podcast).

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